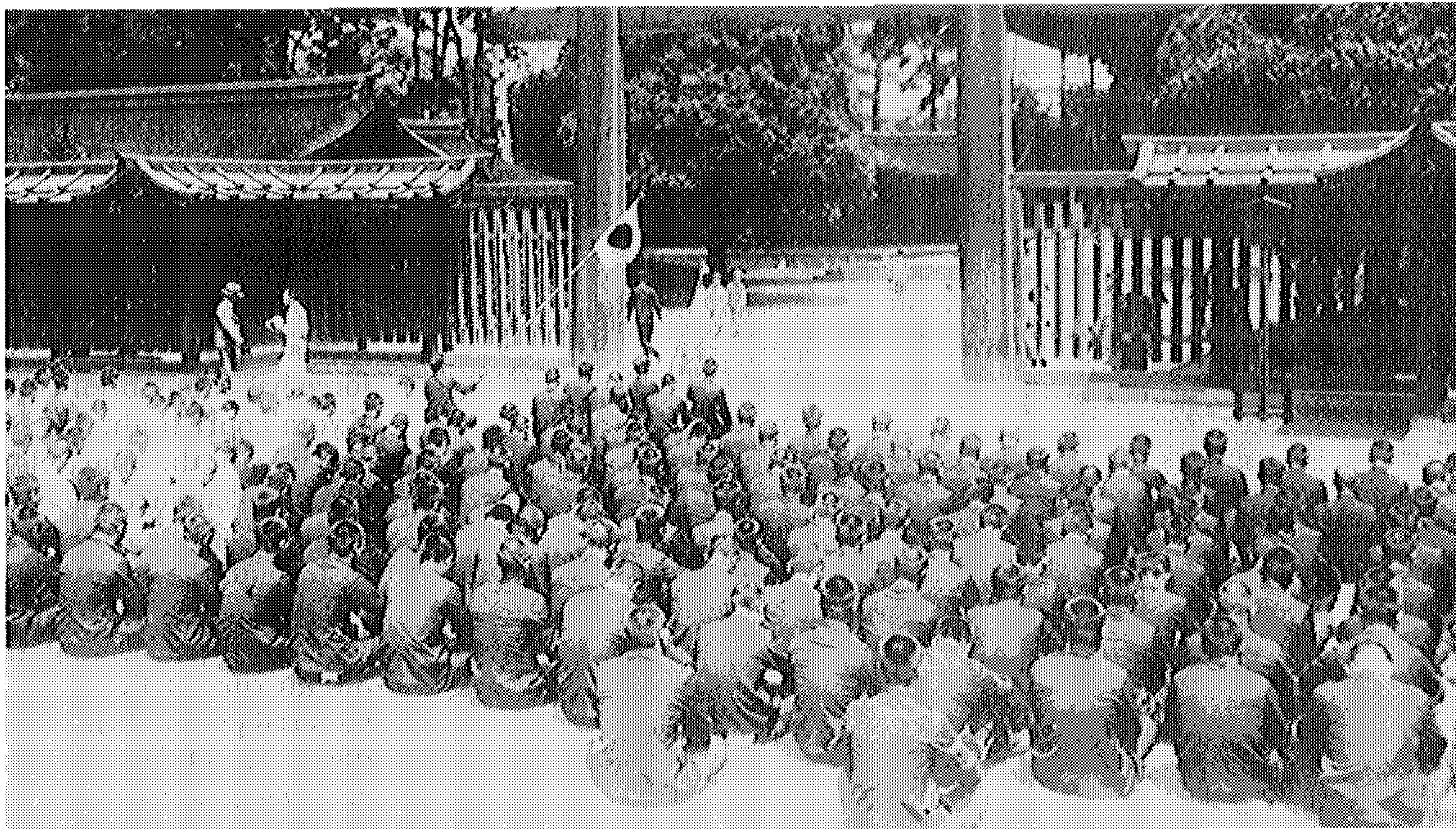
JAPANESE FASCISM



Members of the Black Dragon Society pray before a temple. The society of radical right-wingers numbered military extremists and students among their members and was formed 'for defending and emancipating the nation.'

Richard Sims

THE 1930s WERE THE MOST EVENTFUL and turbulent decade in Japanese history since the 1860s. Its early years witnessed the assassination or fatal wounding of two prime ministers, the murder of two other prominent public figures, the plotting of two abortive military coups, and the ending of governments headed by party politicians. In foreign policy there was a decisive rejection of international co-operation as the Japanese army engineered the seizure of Manchuria and Japan withdrew from the League of Nations. In 1936 radical discontent among young army officers burst forth dramatically in the February 26th Incident, an attempted coup in which more establishment leaders were killed. This marked the peak of violence, but when Japan stumbled into war with China in 1937, the trend towards totalitarianism quickened pace. Trade unions were suppressed, with an Industrial Association for Service to Country taking their place, while in 1940 the political parties were dissolved to make way for the Imperial Rule Assistance Association. As Japan entered into alliance with Germany and Italy in 1940 and then slid towards war with America and Britain, there were, unsurprisingly, no open voices of dissent.

Until recently very few Japanese historians hesitated to describe the Japanese experience in the 1930s as fascist. Most interpreted it in Marxist terms as a last-ditch defence by monopoly capitalism, while also stressing that fascism had special characteristics in Japan. As Abe Hirozumi puts it, 'it goes without saying that fascism is the special form of preventive counter-revolution in the general crisis of capitalism,' adding, however, the significant gloss that 'the role of fascism is not just the negative role of suppressing the revolutionary movement and shutting off the growth of anti-establishment forces, but also that of positively drawing off the nation's energy and turning it towards foreign aggression. In Japan, because party cabinets had already carried out the negative role in part, the role of fascism was mainly oriented towards the latter.' In support of such assertions, Japanese historians have pointed to features, such as terrorist violence, fierce opposition to communism, authoritarian government, totalitarian ambitions, and virulent nationalism, which Japan shared with Germany and Italy in the 1930s.

Since the early 1960s Western historians of Japan have generally been reluctant to accept this interpretation, and in recent years Japanese scholars have also been turning away from it. While most are willing to accept that there was a fascist movement of sorts, they deny that Japan had a fascist regime, even in the special form of 'fascism from above', that is, a change to fascist methods of government without a revolutionary change in leadership. In the words of G.M. Wilson, 'Instead of a "metamorphosis" to a fascist or communist movement-regime, the bureaucratic, political-party and military élites who had emerged from the Meiji state composed their differences as best they could and acted as a conservative coalition to maintain the system they had inherited'.

A major reason for the lack of consensus over the validity of the term 'Japanese fascism' is the difficulty of defining fascism in general. Historians and polit-

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cal scientists have been unable to agree whether fascism is primarily revolutionary or conservative, modern or traditional; whether it was essentially a product of the First World War or of the general process of social modernisation; whether it belongs to a particular stage of capitalism or whether it depends on the nature of the adjustment of agriculture to economic modernisation; whether it was above all a form of ultranationalism or whether it was most concerned with maintaining or restoring the status structure. In particular they have differed over whether the concept applies only to Italy and Germany or whether different categories of fascism can be distinguished. Some go so far as to apply it to all modern developmental dictatorships, and one recent comparative study even states that 'Japan was fascist before the word was invented'.

In the absence of an accepted theoretical definition of fascism, the most logical approach to the question of 'Japanese fascism' is to examine the parallels and differences which existed between Japan and Italy and Germany. Before doing so, however, the extent of direct influence or imitation needs to be considered. In 1932 Yoshino Sakuzo, in an article entitled 'Fascism in Japan', pointed to the 'feeling among the Japanese that if democracy is not quite good enough for those who invented it, then Japan, who has always slightly mistrusted it, has no particular reason for keeping it going'. This sense of the trend of the times being opposed to democracy can be detected in other Japanese writers. Nevertheless, when Japanese books on fascism first began to appear in 1929, the tone was usually hostile, and even in the 1930s it was difficult for sympathisers to see how the role of the leader, the most obvious feature of European fascist movements, could be made compatible with the position of the emperor. As a result, the label of fascism was not attractive. Among political groups only the unimportant Japan Fascism League (*Nippon Fascism Remmei*) adopted it formally, and among significant political figures only Nakano Seigo looked openly towards Europe.

Although Germany and Italy had little direct influence on Japan, Japan's economic and social situation in the early 1930s was rather closer to those of Italy and Germany than was Spain's or Rumania's or Hungary's. Not only had Japanese industry far surpassed agriculture in value of output, but the post-war decade had also been a period of dislocation and relative stagnation. Moreover, unemployment rose to unprecedented heights between 1929 and 1932, and the peasantry were reduced to desperation as agricultural prices plummeted. But although dissatisfaction with government policies and political and economic institutions was rife, Japan was not on the verge of a revolution. While disputes involving labour unions did indeed rise from 393 in 1928 to 998 in 1931, the number of strikers never exceeded 80,000, only slightly more than in 1919. Similarly, although tenant disputes with landlords, rose to over 3,000 in 1931, the numbers involved dropped to 80,000, only half of the 1926 total. The comparatively low level of political organisation and consciousness of the Japanese masses is further indicated by the fact that only a handful of proletarian party candidates were successful in the general elections of 1928, 1930 and 1932.

Loyal army troops manning a machine-gun post in Tokyo during the military uprising and riots of February 1936.

If the immediate threat from the left was less than in Italy and Germany, it nevertheless is apparent that the establishment was alarmed by it. After 1918, when spontaneous riots over the rocketing price of rice had spread over much of Japan, many conservatives and reactionaries formed or joined associations pledged to the maintenance or revival of Japanese traditional values. Some top leaders gave surreptitious support, not only to crude strike-breaking organisations, but also to the much more radical nationalist societies which now began to emerge. In this respect the situation in Japan, though less critical, was not unlike that in post-First World War Italy.

Another parallel between Japan, Germany and Italy can be found in the discontent of lower middle-class elements and the frustration and dissatisfaction of the young. The expansion of the *zaibatsu* – the huge financial/industrial combines – had adversely affected many small enterprises, while in Tokyo the growth of department stores cut the sales of ordinary retailers by over a third between 1922 and 1932. The resentment and frustration of small businessmen were reflected not only in the increasing public critisism of *zaibatsu*, but also in the formation of new political parties with such names as All-Japan Commerce and Industry Party, or Association of Friends of Commerce and Industry. It seems likely that such elements were also an important component of the hundreds of nationalist societies which sprang up in the 1930s, together with primary school teachers, petty officials, Buddhist and Shinto priests, and small landowners. The social problem most commented on by contemporary newspapers, however, was that of the 'interi-lumpen' (intelligentsia-lumpenproletariat). The number of university and college graduates had risen from 9,208 in 1925 to 22,959 in 1929, but their chances of employment diminished in the same period from 66.6 per cent to 50.2 per cent, further slumping to 37 per cent in 1931. Although most radical students still turned to the left, the number of right-wing student groups rose by 1933 to nearly a hundred. More than half the members of the Blood Brotherhood Band, which was responsible for two of the assassinations of 1932, were university students.

Even more than her economic and social situation, Japan's international position had much in common with Italy's and Germany's. She too felt aggrieved at her treatment at the Versailles peace conference (and at the Washington naval limitation conference of 1921-22) and could consider herself a 'have-not' nation. Concern about international status led to concern about internal conflict and division, for one of the lessons of the First World War was the importance of national solidarity. As

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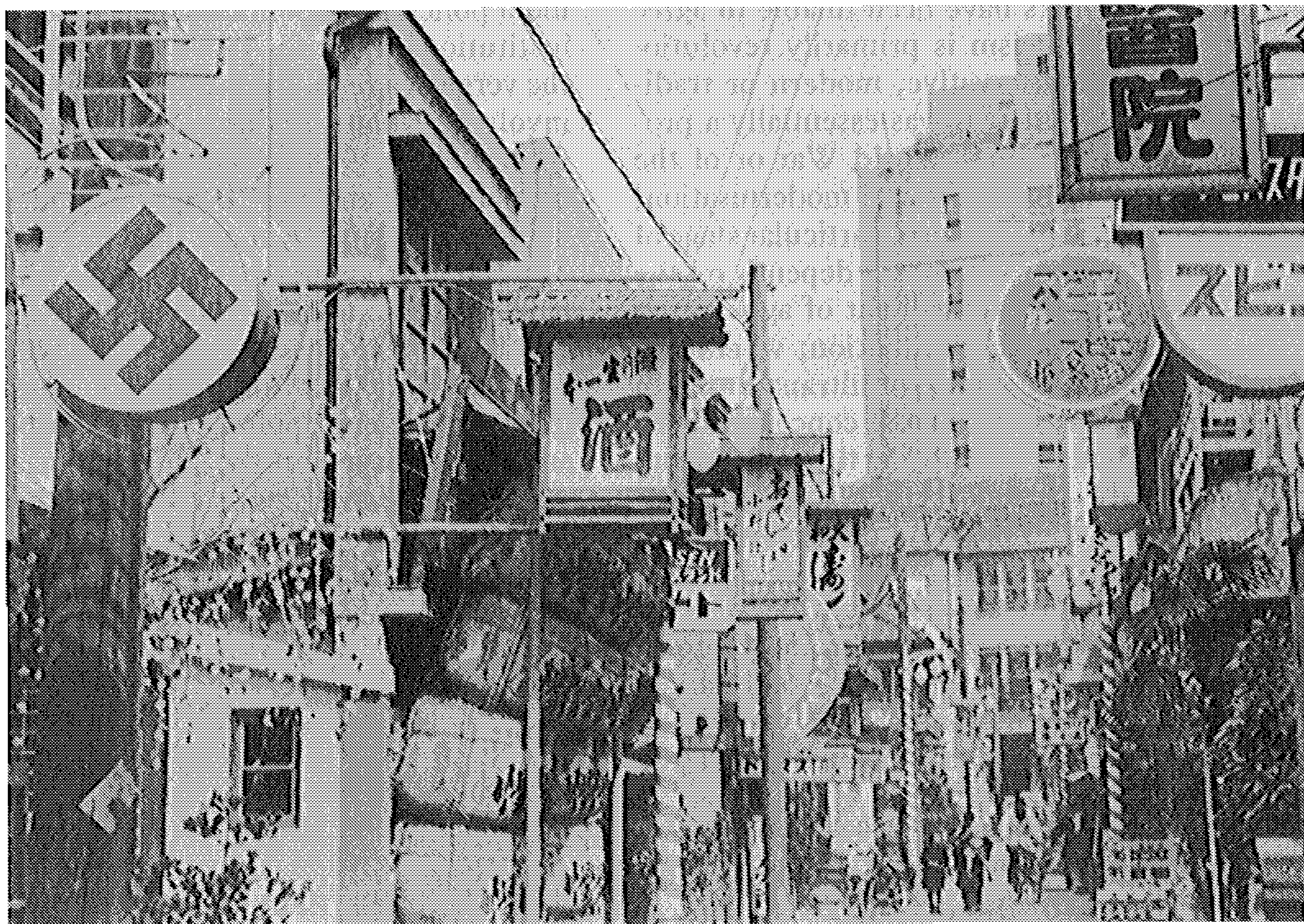
early as 1917 Major Koiso Kuniaki produced a report calling for the preparation, during peacetime, of a war economy, supported by reform of the organisation of enterprise and finance, harmonisation of labour and capital, and improvements in educational facilities and social policy. This approach was shared by other officers and by the more radical civilian nationalists. When, in the 1930s, Japan's foreign relations deteriorated, hostility towards vested interests which seemed to impede national strengthening grew more intense and more widespread. If W.S. Allen is correct in judging that the broad appeal of Hitler and Mussolini lay in their proposal 'to exalt national power by building a dictatorially integrated national community on the model of methods and moods familiar from World War I', then this is a particularly important common factor, though with the difference that in Japan it favoured the military rather than any demagogic leader.



Nazi propoganda in the Far East. A German club and restaurant in Tokyo.

When one turns to ideology, other similarities are immediately obvious. A particularly notable one is the almost tribalistic rejection of internal divisions, and acute sense of separateness from other races, conjured up by the oft-used term, 'national community'. There was, it is true, the difference that Japanese official propaganda depicted the Japanese people as an extended family, a doctrine which helps explain the efforts made by Justice Ministry officials, quite often with success, to bring arrested communists back into the fold. There were similar national differences, but fundamental similarity, between the nazi theoretical emphasis on the primacy of the rural community and its Japanese counterpart of *Nohonshugi*. However, the pull of the past was much stronger in Japan. Not only did propagandists constantly refer to the spirit of the mythical national foundation by the emperor's ancestors, but virtually every nationalist called for a *Showa Ishin* (Showa-period Renovation) which would renew the Japan of the 1930s as the Meiji Ishin had the Japan of seventy years earlier.

Not only were Japanese nationalists exceptionally oriented towards the past, many of them were strongly influenced by particular Japanese intellectual or religious traditions. Kita Ikki, for instance, who combined socialism with radical nationalism and whose writing was a major influence on the young officer movement, was devoted to Nichiren Buddhism, the most nationalistic of all Japan's religious sects. Like the Oyomei school of Confucianism, Nichiren tended to be associated with radical forms of the *Showa Ishin* mentality and to be more influential in the outer and less urban regions of Japan. Where Shinto, a much less intellectual religion, had an influence, it too was usually linked with the radical right. Orthodox Confucianism, in contrast, was promoted by the establishment as a support of conservative authoritarianism. Among the urban educated élites, liberal values continued to be held, though often in muted form. However, it should be noted that many of the Japanese ultranationalists who most closely resembled European fascists also had a predominantly Western-style education. Such was also the case with the 'revisionist' or 'renovationist' bureaucrats, who favoured government reorganisation and the extension of government controls over the economy. Younger bureaucrats, moreover, were likely to have received some impression from Marxism during their time at university, and that could easily lead in a national socialist direction.

Where Japan differed most obviously from Italy and Germany was in the absence of an effective movement led by a charismatic leader and of any dramatic change in the political process. After the failure of the February 26th Incident only one further attempt was made to achieve a major reorganisation of power. Stimulated by the failure of successive Japanese governments to bring the China Incident to a satisfactory conclusion, army officers at central headquarters, backed by radical civilian nationalists, renovationist bureaucrats and leaders of the main socialist party, mounted a campaign for a new structure. In July

Social discontent in the Japan of the 1930s. Japanese women protest against the starvation wage received by women factory workers.

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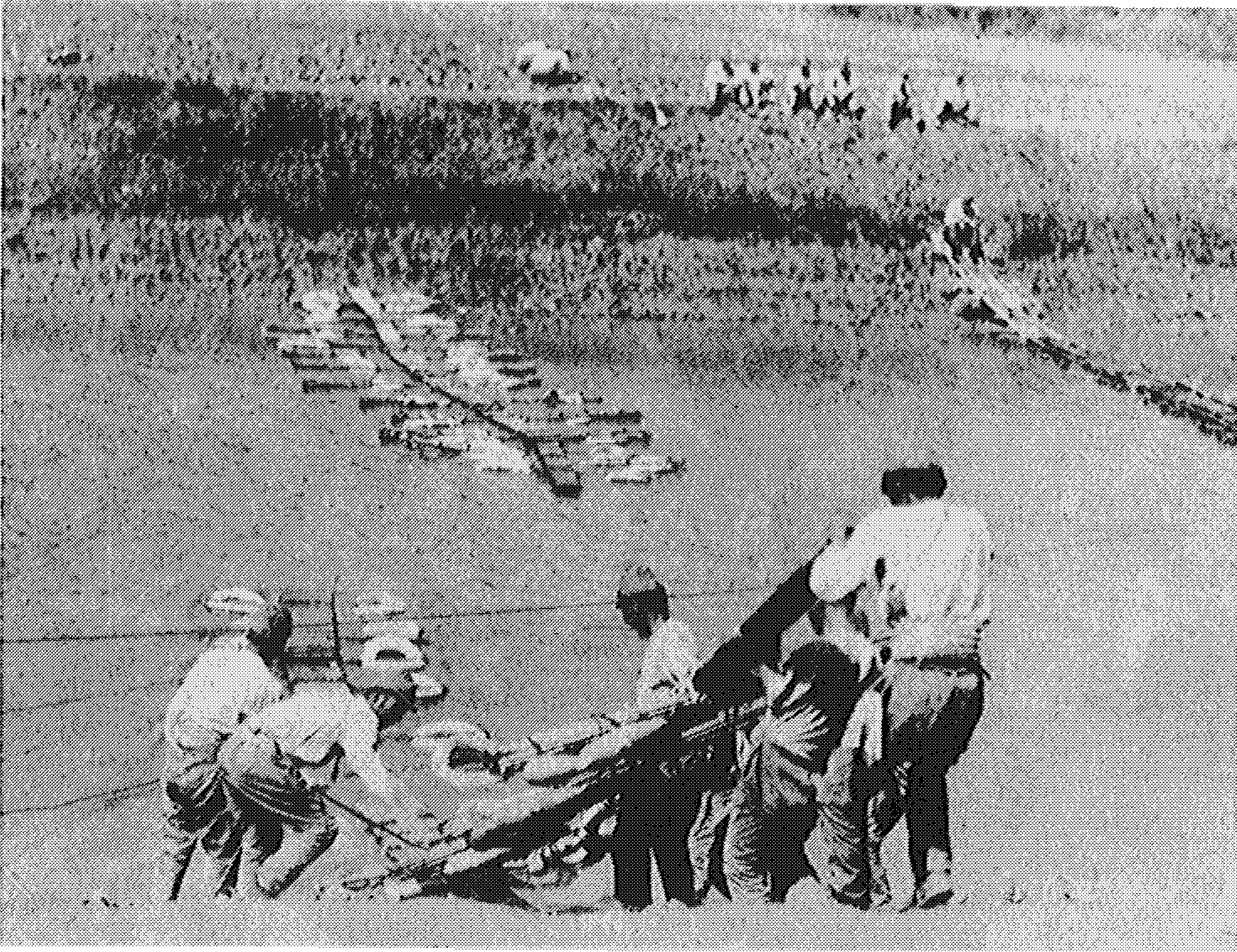

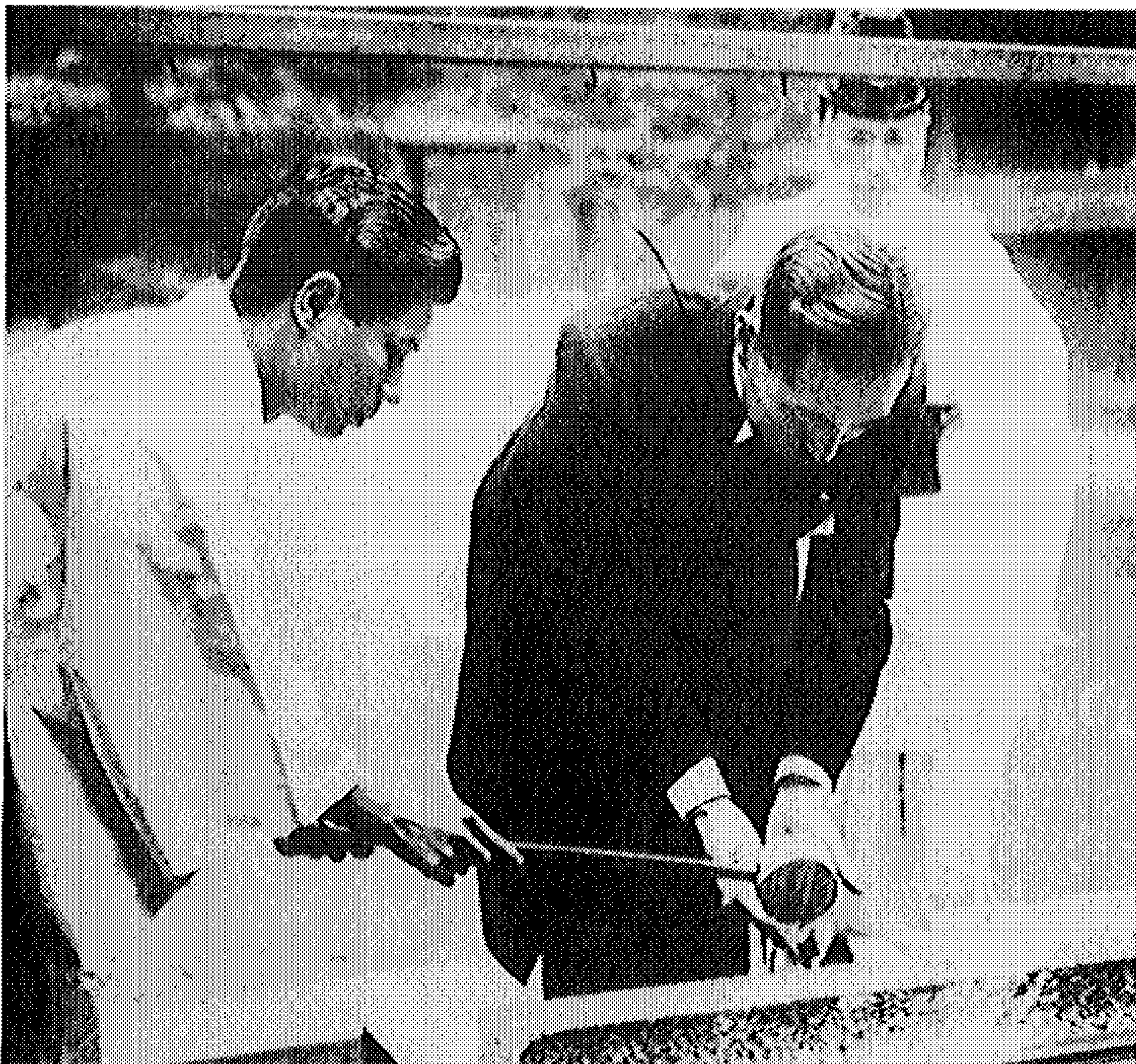

(Above) The background to the rise of fascism: the Sino-Japanese war in 1937.

(Left) Prince Konoe, aristocrat and ultranationalist who became prime minister of Japan in July 1940.

1940 the army engineered the fall of a relatively moderate cabinet, and when Prince Konoe, an aristocrat with ultranationalist connections, became prime minister, it seemed that the plan might succeed. But at this juncture, the politicians and the *zaibatsu* combined with the more traditionalist conservatives, including some retired generals, as well as with mainstream bureaucrats in the Home and Justice Ministries to frustrate what they variously criticised as communistic or dictatorial or an attempt to establish a new shogunate. Although the Imperial Rule Assistance Association was set up, it was emasculated and soon came under the control of the Home Ministry.

The failure of the new structure movement has recently been much stressed by scholars who argue that the main outcome of the turmoil of the 1930s was a conservative reaffirmation. There is an obvious truth in this, but certain other political trends fit the interpretation less neatly. In particular, the preparations for gearing the country for war which were embodied in the 1938 National General Mobilisation Law, together with the enormous increase in military expenditure, point rather to the expansion of the power of the military. Behind the scenes, too, the Military Affairs Bureau of the army frequently interfered in politics, often by intimidation. Above all, the army was mainly responsible for the uncompromising foreign policy which placed such a premium on national integration and greater state control within Japan. This was more than simple militarism. As Vagts noted in 1937, Japan had the most political army in the world. It was the army which produced the 1934 pamphlet which began with the Mussolini-style declaration, 'War is the father of creation and the mother of culture'. From 1910 it had attempted to spread its ideas among the population, especially in the villages, through its reservists' and young men's organisations, and in the 1930s this paid dividends. In so far as the army was the dynamic force which drove Japan towards its New Order in East Asia, it is easy to understand why some Japanese historians write of *'gun-fuashizumu'* (military fascism).

Nevertheless, 'military fascism' is a limiting expression which conveys only part of the character of the 1930s. Though less precise, 'Japanese fascism' may be preferable in that it draws attention to the similarities of anti-communism, anti-liberalism, ambivalence towards capitalism, emphasis on national community, and aggressive and ambitious foreign policy, which Japan shared with Germany and Italy. It is, as some have argued, true that these attributes are all to be found in the Japanese nationalism of earlier decades, but they were never so dominant nor pursued so intensely. Nor were Western ideas and values rejected as they were in the 1930s.

A case then exists for 'Japanese fascism'. However, as with most labels, there is a danger of its distorting historians' perspectives. It has, for example, tended to obscure the fact that, in 1936-37, following Japan's economic recovery, political parties and the *zaibatsu* began to reassert themselves against the army and the bureaucracy, until the outbreak of the China Incident again created a war atmosphere. Moreover, it also suggests that Japan was more totalitarian than was actually the case. Who, for instance, would suspect that more candidates stood in 1942, in wartime, than in any of the pre-war elections? Because it is easy to cite such divergences from the pattern suggested by European fascist experience, 'Japanese fascism' is likely to remain a disputed term.

NOTES ON FURTHER READING

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