

## Militarism in Japan

### Read to Find Out

- what democratic practices were introduced in Japan after World War I
- how the structure of Japanese government enabled military influence to grow
- how economic problems further increased military influence
- how the seizure of Manchuria led to military control of the government

During the reign of the Meiji emperor from 1868 to 1912, Japan was being transformed from a feudal farming society into a modern industrial state. Japan then sided with the Allies during World War I, hoping to win territory in China that was held by Germany. By the end of the war, Japan had become the most powerful nation in East Asia. Japanese delegates participated in the peace treaty negotiations along with Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States. In addition, Japan joined the League of Nations.

Post war developments in Japan, however, followed a somewhat similar course to those in Germany and Italy. Once again a fragile democratic system subject to economic and political stress gave way to authoritarian, militarist forces.

### Liberal Democracy in the 1920s

The postwar period saw a new liberal spirit in Japan. Political changes introduced before the war during the Meiji Restoration seemed to be leading toward a broader democracy. Most Japanese had become literate under new education programs. New technologies led to the greatly increased spread of information through radio, movies, and high-circulation newspapers and magazines. Increasingly, the Japanese saw, hear, and read about the political ideas and fashions of the West. The Japanese also formed new political parties – democratic, socialist, communist, and anarchist – modeled on those of the West.

In 1918, Hara Kei (hah-rah ki) became prime minister. He was the first Japanese head of government who did not come from the military or the noble class, a sign that democracy was advancing in Japan. In 1925, most men received the right to vote, increasing Japan's voting population from 3.5 million to 14 million.

Young people in cities began to adopt Western styles of dress and music. Baseball became popular, as did movies. More important, young Japanese began to resist centuries-old traditions of family authority, such as marriages arranged by their parents.

Even Japan's foreign relations in the early 1920s seemed marked by a spirit of liberal, international cooperation. This attitude was demonstrated by Japan's participation in the Washington Naval Conference and by its respect for the "Open Door" policy that the conference

supported in China. Japan also agreed to withdraw its troops from China's Shantung province.

### Signs of Reaction

Despite the signs of liberal change in the 1920s, many Japanese were not content with the new shape their nation was taking. Industrialization and Western influence had produced rising expectations for improved standards of living, yet few Japanese felt that the changes of the past few decades had benefited them directly. Discontent among workers, youths, and intellectuals increased during the 1920s, fueling tensions between those who wanted broader social changes and those who embraced traditional ways.

Many Japanese leaders reacted to this unrest with alarm. They believed social conflict within Japan would weaken the country and threaten its security.

Gradually, Japan began to turn away from liberal reform. Leaders emphasized tradition as a source of national strength. They suppressed protest by promoting tradition

Japanese respect for authority and strengthening feelings of nationalism.

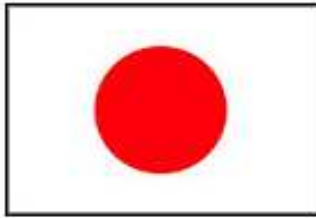
### The Rise of Militarism

As the Japanese government became more conservative, the military gained increased influence over the country and its civilian rulers. Japan moved toward a policy of militarism, and the liberalism of the early 1920s gave way to increasingly authoritarian rule.

The structure of Japanese government, with its roots in tradition, helped encourage military influence. Japanese government was set up as an oligarchy, in which power was in practice shared by an emperor, his unelected advisors, a prime minister, and military leaders.

Among these military leaders were cabinet ministers for the army and the navy, who could consult with the emperor directly rather than reporting to the prime minister. This practice, in some cases, let the military set government policy without the knowledge or approval of the prime minister.

Members of the government had close ties to the zaibatsu – the huge corporations that ran most of Japan's industry and business. Zaibatsu families were often active in politics and regularly contributed large sums to political leaders. In the 1930s, these business leaders also generally agreed with the policies of military leaders and often worked to increase the power to the latter.



Warning of militarism in Japan – A soldier's boot is smashing the Diet Building in Japan; in other words, militarism is crushing parliamentary politics, and therefore democracy in Japan

Economic problems in the late 1920s also brought the country closer to military rule. A financial panic gripped the nation in 1927, followed by depression in 1929. By 1930, one million Japanese were out of work. Many of them returned to their home villages, only to face famine as crops failed. Many Japanese threw their support behind the military because military leaders made clear their sympathy with suffering peasants and because military ideas for territorial expansion seemed to offer a solution to economic problems.

**Changes in foreign policy.** While military leaders gained more power within Japan, increasing discrimination against Asians by Western nations in the 1920s fed the fires of militarism and turned the Japanese away from international cooperation. For instance, the United States Congress had passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which forbade Japanese immigration to the United States. After the worldwide depression began in 1929, the Japanese lost Western markets for silk and other goods, as many nations imposed high tariffs to protect their own industries.

In the face of such policies, the Japanese felt less obligation to cooperate internationally. Expansionist and militarist groups inside and outside of government began to have stronger voices. If the Japanese could not emigrate and if other nations' tariffs limited Japanese export income, they said, then the nation had only one alternative: territorial expansion.

### The Seizure of Manchuria

Those in Japan who favored territorial expansion looked first to Manchuria, a province of northern China. Manchuria had mineral resources Japan lacked, as well as rich farmland and new markets for Japanese products.

In September 1931, a group of Japanese officers stationed in a part of Manchuria under lease to Japan blew up a section of railroad near the city of Mukden, then blamed the act on troops of the Chinese warlord who controlled the area. Using this "Mukden Incident" as an excuse, the Japanese officers directed their



"Mukden Incident", 1931

soldiers to attack the warlord's army and "restore order." Japanese forces quickly took over much of Manchuria.

When the League of Nations condemned Japan's seizure of Manchuria, Japan withdrew from the organization. Within Japan, extreme nationalists began to call moderate leaders who disapproved of the army's action "enemies of the state." In 1932, these nationalists began a campaign of terror at home. Moderate political and business leaders were wounded or killed. Press censorship was imposed. Socialists and Communists were suppressed.

Political unrest and violence at home caused even more Japanese to support strong military rule, while protests from other countries increased nationalist fervor. Military leaders quickly gained effective control over the government, setting up an authoritarian rule. Although the government was neither fascist nor fully totalitarian, its leaders expected citizens to commit themselves to the state.

Meanwhile, expansionism seemed to pay off economically. The production of arms for military expansion and an increase in production of export materials helped bring Japan out of depression and put people back to work.

To many Japanese, nationalism took on an almost spiritual quality. Radical nationalists believed the use of force was necessary to return Japan to its former glory. "Heaven," they said, had "chosen Japan as champion of the East."

### Section Review

1. What signs of liberal reforms could be found in Japanese society after World War I?
2. How did the structure of Japanese government encourage military influence?
3. How did economic crises strengthen the power and influence of the military?
4. Explain the effects of the seizure of Manchuria on Japanese politics

**Evaluation.** How could the liberal democratic trends of the 1920s have been preserved in Japan? What events or factors would have had to be different?

### History in Focus

During the 1920s and 1930s, forms of totalitarian rule arose in four separate nations with very different histories, cultures, and circumstances. The root causes of totalitarian rule, therefore, seem to lie not in these individual nations, but in worldwide forces. Industrialized nations all over the globe were subject to the same forces of social conflict, economic crisis, and political instability. Democracy in nations such as the United States and Great Britain survived only because of the strength of their democratic traditions.

Where totalitarianism did take root, it was not brought on single-handedly by unusually strong, evil leaders, nor by the characteristics of a particular culture or people. The complete domination of individuals by powerful states would not have been possible without the development of mass communications technology, without the international rivalry caused by imperialist expansion, and without the social conflict caused by both industrialization and rapid social change.

Totalitarian rule arose in nations most dissatisfied with the results of World War I, and where governments were least successful in dealing with the pressures and strains that followed the war. In Germany, Italy, Russia, and Japan, those who preached the destruction of their nations' unsuccessful governments rose to power. These leaders' methods of dealing with internal and global crises gained them support; however, they would bring the world to the point of violent confrontation once again.