

On Second Thoughts...

RE-THINKING JAPAN, 1937-45

Irrational chauvinists or fearful protectionists?
Gordon Daniels looks at the new research and
arguments reshaping our view of Japan's rulers
before and after Pearl Harbour.

At the height of the Second World War a young official in the United States Department of State analysed Japanese expansion with surprising detachment. In a paper designed to sketch the outlines of a more peaceful world Robert Fearey attributed Japan's attacks upon China, America, Britain and Holland to structural economic causes. Among these causes Fearey listed Western protectionism, which had obstructed Japan's commercial development, and Japan's lack of secure supplies of food and raw materials. Even more perceptive was Fearey's suggestion that Japan would soon face Asian competition and needed to develop more varied and sophisticated export products.

Not surprisingly such objectivity and logic had little place in Western historical writing in the aftermath of four years of total war. Memories of casualties, atrocities and devastation soon produced a historiography which was preoccupied with issues of conspiracy, guilt and political delinquency. These moralistic concepts also dominated the allied trials of Japan's wartime leaders, which in turn shaped the sources and assumptions of many historians. The writings of postwar scholars were also coloured by the strident messages of Japanese wartime propaganda. These had proclaimed the uniqueness of Japan's imperial state, the antiquity of her martial tradition and the divine

origins of her ruler and people. Thus the first generation of post-war historians often saw Japan's guilt as the product of a feudal military tradition which had overcome more modern forces of internationalism, democracy and cultural pluralism. Early studies of the emperor system, nationalism and ultranationalism all reflected these basic assumptions as did Robert Scala-

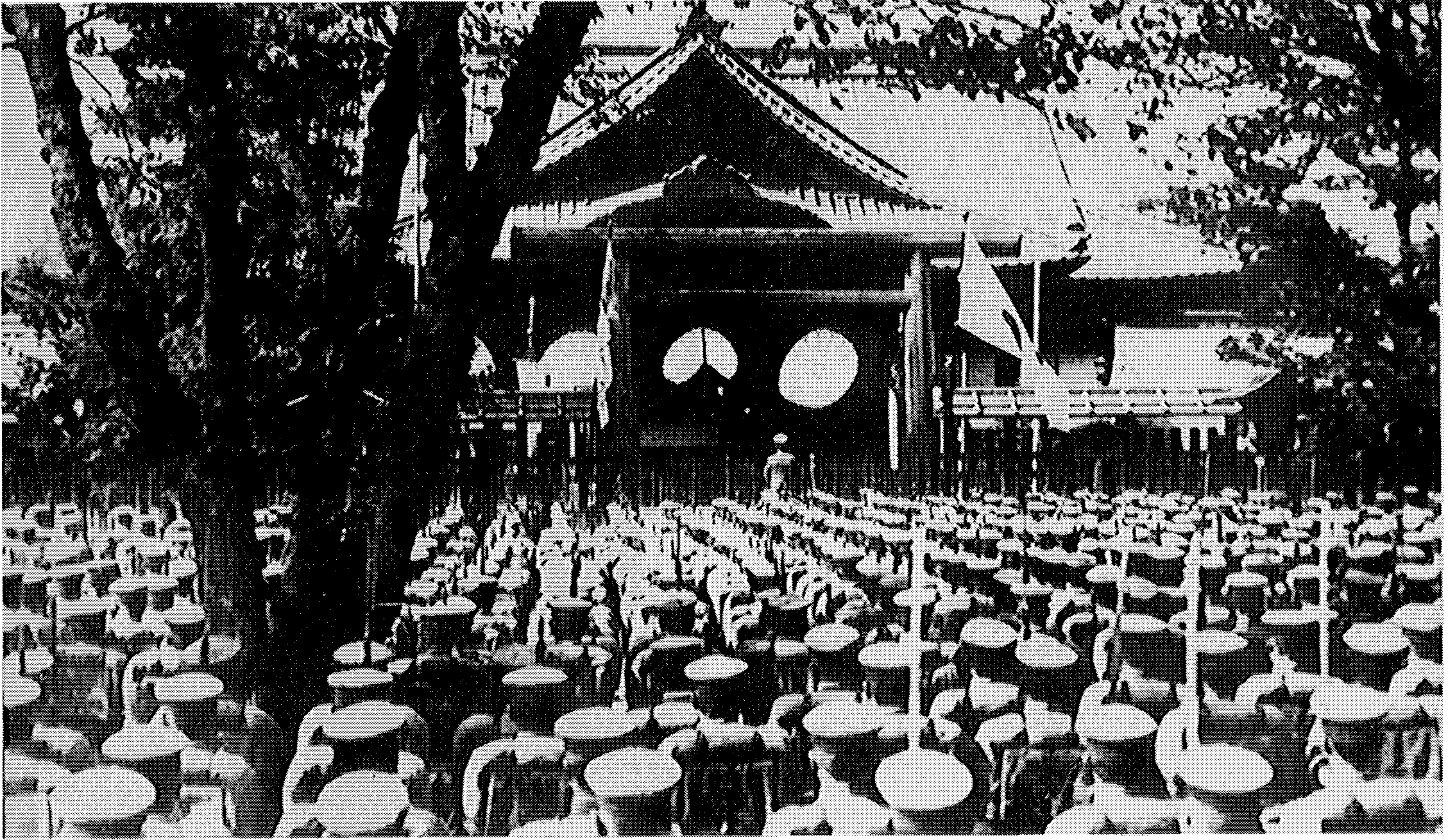
pino's pioneering study of pre-war political parties which was aptly subtitled 'the failure of the first attempt'.

By the early 1960s a received view of pre-war and wartime Japanese history was clearly established in Anglo-American academic circles.

This perpetuated the conspiracy theories of the Tokyo trials and depicted ultranationalists, particularly

Government officials checking quality of cotton goods for export; state direction of economic life was already a characteristic feature of pre-war Japan.





Church and state; soldiers at a temple service in Tokyo for comrades killed in China. The Shinto religion buttressed both national identity and nationalism.

young army officers, as the decisive actors in recent history. According to this interpretation junior officers from impoverished rural areas had used threats, plots and assassinations to gain influence over their superiors. From this position of strength these fanatical patriots had forced commanders, ministers and industrialists into an expansionist war which had ended in national disaster.

By the mid-1960s Japan's economic recovery, America's intervention in Vietnam and advances in historical scholarship had combined to produce a wave of revisionist writing which viewed pre-war Japan in more sympathetic and complex terms. A group of largely American scholars began to study Japan's 'modernisation' for clues to successful development, and concluded that nineteenth-century Japan had been a remarkably advanced society. In fact the final volume of the 'modernisation series' suggested that Japan's rapid development, rather than her backwardness, had precipitated the pre-war crisis. Development had brought an unprecedented dependence on international markets, and the Wall Street crash and its aftermath had undermined economic and political stability.

In 1966 James Crowley's *Japan's Quest for Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930-1938* confirmed this shifting trend in Western

historiography. This American scholar argued that the economic and military crises which Japan had faced rendered her attempt to create a self-sufficient East Asian bloc an understandable strategem, rather than an irrational raid on the impossible. This work made no overt reference to America's war in Vietnam but its suggestion that Japanese expansion had been motivated by traditional *raison d'état* was perhaps an unconscious by-product of America's own global concept of national security.

Crowley not only reassessed the motives of Japanese leaders but also questioned previous analyses of domestic politics. Whereas earlier scholars had seen the attempted military coup of February 22nd, 1936, as evidence of ultranationalist influence, Crowley dwelt upon its ultimate failure and the continued capacity of the high command to determine policy. This writer challenged the view that virtuous civilians had been overwhelmed by an unprincipled military and demonstrated that important civilian leaders had been committed to the cause of overseas expansionism. Crowley also condemned early analyses of army factionalism as naive and unhistorical and asserted that support for overseas adventures had been widespread among Japan's army and navy leaders. This iconoclastic work was a major historiographical landmark. It

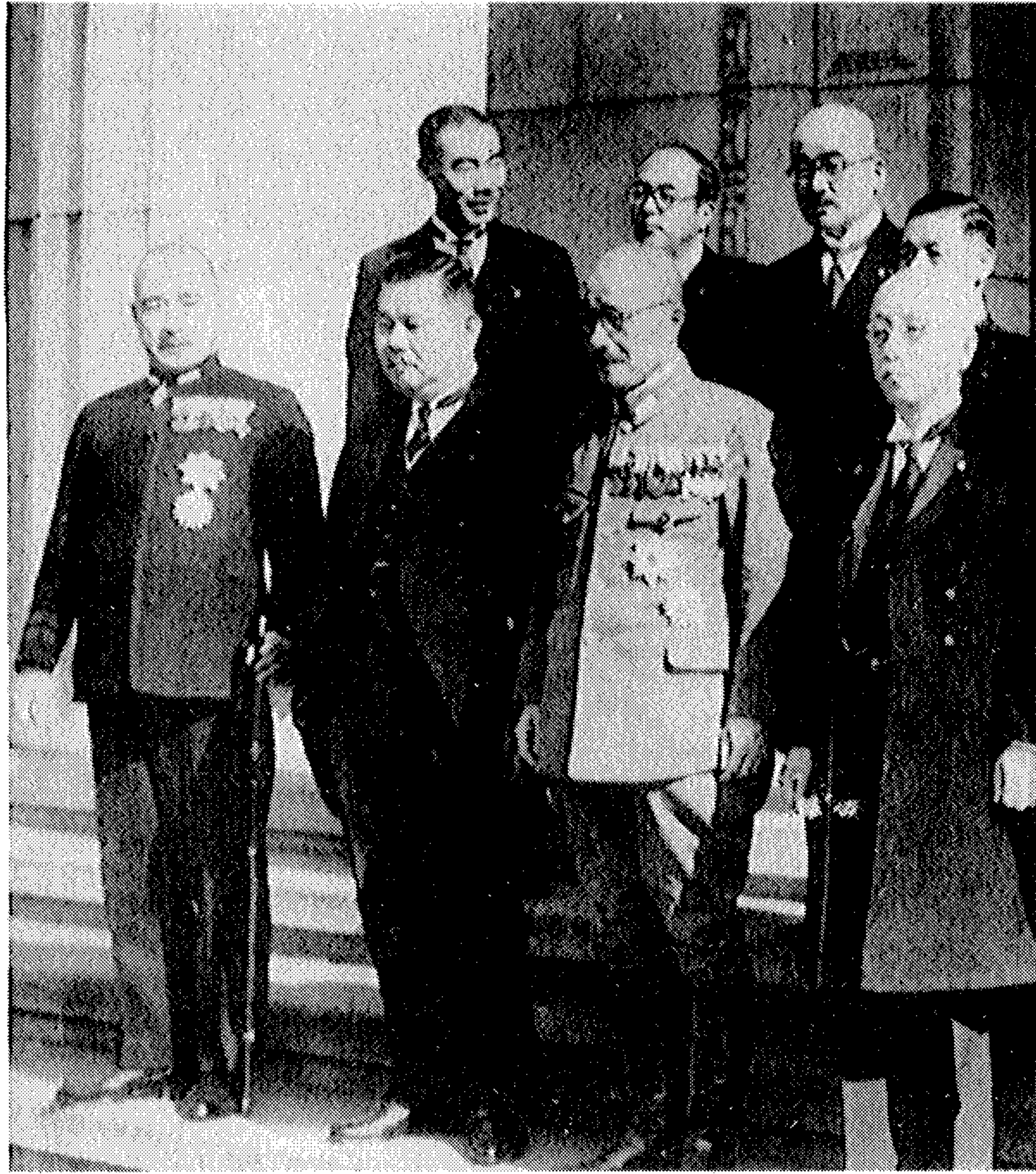
was the first Western monograph to distance itself from the spirit and documents of the Tokyo trials and the first to make extensive use of a new multi-volume Japanese work (*Taiheiyo Senso e no Michi* - 'The Road to the Pacific War') which was grounded in the detached analysis of contemporary sources.

The interpretive link between America's war in Vietnam and Japan's pre-war and wartime expansion was only implicit in Crowley's monograph. It was clear and explicit in Richard Minear's *Victor's Justice: The Tokyo War Crimes Trial* which appeared in 1971. This radical polemic supported the Indian judge Pal's criticisms of the legal and ethical basis of the trial and concluded that most allied judges had been biased and inconsistent in their conduct and verdicts. Some prosecutions had been launched to avert friction with the Soviet Union, while the notion of Japanese aggression appeared far less clear-cut in the light of America's undeclared war in South East Asia.

Both Crowley and Minear had focused attention on the motives and mechanisms of Japanese foreign policy but the next major revisionist work Gordon Berger's *Parties Out of Power in Japan, 1931-41* concentrated on the pattern of her domestic politics. Unlike many writers who had begun their analyses with the events of the Manchurian crisis Berger delved into the



The untouchable? A pre-war photograph of the emperor Hirohito on his almost mythological white horse.



Prime Minister Tojo (centre in uniform) with his 1941 cabinet: but was he the real power in the land, or the military?

earlier events of the 1920s. By investigating the ideas of a variety of civilian and military leaders Berger extended Crowley's notion of *realpolitik* to the shaping of domestic politics. According to this interpretation the notion of a national defence state with a planned economy and centralized political structure was not the product of pre-modern fanaticism but an intellectual response to European concepts of total war. Berger also traced the impact of such ideas on the shaping of Japan's wartime polity, and concluded that disunity rather than dictatorship was the hallmark of Japan's 'new order'. In a fascinating discussion of the ideas and personalities which contributed to the creation of a single political organ, the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, Berger demonstrated that unbridgeable gulfs separated many of Japan's ruling élites. The themes of inter- and intra-service rivalry had already been a familiar element in the testimony and memoirs of army and navy leaders but Berger's work clarified a less familiar series of civil-military and inter-civilian disputes. Groups as diverse as the owners of Japan's electric power companies and the powerful home ministry had successfully defeated attempts to subdue and control them. Consequently there was little that was new or orderly in Japan's wartime regime.

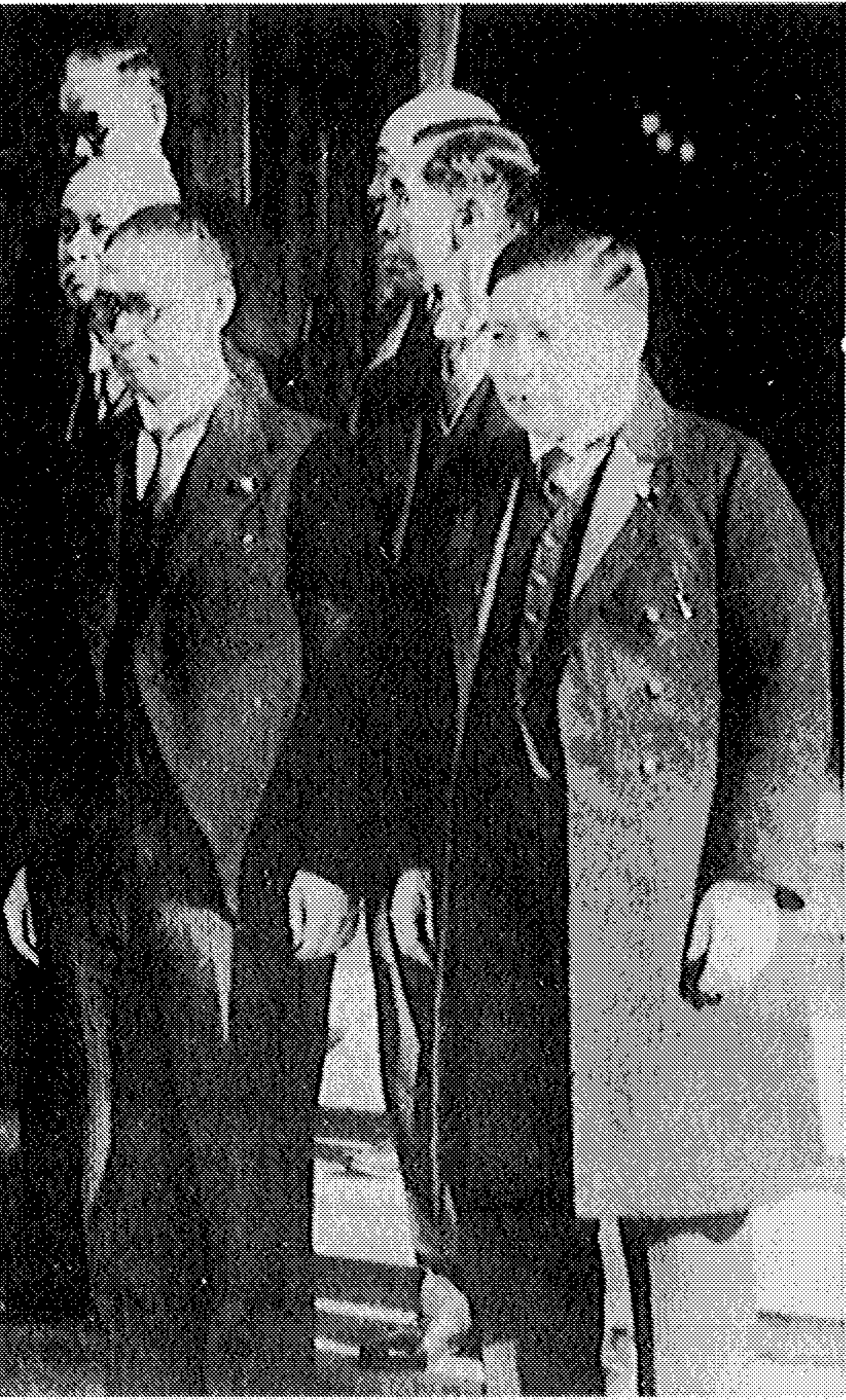
In the late 1970s and early 1980s

broader comparative analyses and new lines of research produced more detailed reappraisals of Japan's wartime politics. Ben-Ami Shillony's *Politics and Culture in Wartime Japan* confirmed the narrow limits of the Emperor's political power and demonstrated that Prime Minister Tojo had possessed far less authority than Hitler, Stalin or Mao-tse Tung. Particularly striking was Shillony's account of the smoothness and formality of Tojo's ejection from office in 1944.

Although Shillony's political analysis suggested a more fragmented and less authoritarian state than the Third Reich his discussion of the Japanese intelligentsia emphasised conformity and political loyalty. In earlier years Japanese scholars had often claimed that intellectuals had refused to collaborate with the wartime regime, or had only done so following physical or psychological torture. In contrast Shillony revealed that many writers and academics had enthusiastically supported the war effort. The very success of Japan's cultural modernisation had made her intellectuals more independent of the West – thus war with Britain and the United States ignited an almost mystic enthusiasm among some distinguished men of letters; just as the Great War had aroused near ecstasy among English poets and pundits.

Shillony also demonstrated remarkable elements of continuity and normality in his discussion of such themes as Japan's judicial process, elections and political prisoners. Most law courts appear to have been little affected by wartime conditions, elections were remarkable for their general propriety, and Tojo, unlike Stalin or Hitler, imprisoned few political offenders.

The late 1970s also saw the appearance of a work which sought to extend the analysis of wartime Japan to embrace the whole of civilian society. Thomas Havens' *Valley of Darkness: The Japanese People and World War II* examined the half-forgotten realities of wartime life: food and clothing shortages and rationing, air raid precautions, mass evacuation and months of relentless bombing. Many of these themes evoked comparisons with European experience, and further eroded images of a bizarre feudalistic society. Havens also placed such emotional phenomena as 'spiritual mobilisation' and high-pitched propaganda in the context of modern, all-out total war. This work also described progressive social tendencies which closely paralleled British experience. The demands of wartime industry had removed personal servants from wealthy and middle-class households, and women had entered many occupations which were previously a male pre-



Japan's ministry of munitions was not established until 1943, and even then failed to integrate production as effectively as its British equivalent. Time after time industrialists resisted government and army intervention, and a shortage of technically qualified officials left ministers dependent on the goodwill or otherwise of private businessmen.

A more effective field of state control, the mass media, has also been re-assessed in contributions to Kenneth Short's *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II*. Essays and memoirs in this collection demonstrate that powerful modern elements dominated the organisation and execution of Japanese domestic propaganda. As in Germany and Britain state censorship, self-censorship and official objectives shaped radio, the press and film-making. Nevertheless Japanese broadcasters, journalists and film directors often responded to a changing war situation with remarkable flexibility and imagination. When listeners were war-weary, drama and entertainment broadcasts were increased. When air raids threatened documentary films

expounded air raid precautions, and Japanese studios provided surprising opportunities for Ozu and Kurosawa to make feature films with little or no political content. Similarly Japan's drastically reduced range of newspapers and magazines published important literary works, and occasionally reflected anti-government criticism.

These specialised and general re-evaluations of Japanese political culture and society suggest complex and contradictory interpretations. Much writing has suggested that wartime Japan was a more modern and less tradition-bound society than that depicted in her own late and desperate propaganda. However, recent writings may have been excessively influenced by Japan's post-war prosperity and political liberalism. Indeed scholars have often chosen to ignore or minimise less favourable aspects of Japan's wartime experience. The physical privation and sufferings of Japanese civilians, which were in part the consequence of government arrogance and incompetence are rarely discussed in detail. More often such themes have become the preserve of scholars of other academic

serve.

In later writings Ben-Ami Shillony also re-evaluated aspects of Japan's wartime education system. Many Japanese and American works had rightly emphasised the central position of military indoctrination and ultra-nationalism in the wartime school curriculum but Shillony explored less familiar areas of technical, scientific and higher education. In these important fields Japanese responses were modern rather than traditional, and differed little from those in other belligerent states. Between 1935 and 1945 the Japanese government founded new research institutes, colleges and universities and gave a major impetus to scientific and technical education. In this decade overall student numbers doubled, while the number of engineering students was increased fourfold. All these policies helped to compensate for Japan's isolation from American science and made an important contribution to war production.

Links between war and production were also the theme of Richard Rice's recent studies of wartime industrial administration. In discussions of government attempts to manage and organise military production this scholar, like Berger, highlighted the squabbles, inadequacies and rivalries which plagued major attempts at co-ordinating armaments production.



Japan's occupation of the Chinese province of Manchuria (Manchukuo) in 1931 was its first step towards creating a self-sufficient East Asian bloc. Here a propaganda poster promises the good life to would-be Japanese emigrants.

disciplines. Powerful accounts of the sufferings of the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki exist, but these are frequently literary works or products of research in the social sciences. The nationwide impact of incendiary bombing, the deterioration of health, housing and nutrition, the plight of Chinese and Korean forced labourers are all significant social themes that suffer oversight in the pursuit of excessive 're-interpretation'. Indeed the selective 'rehabilitation' of wartime Japan has at times been too clinical to be completely faithful to a mental and physical past which has become increasingly difficult to recreate.

Much recent academic discussion has focused upon the extent to which wartime Japan was or was not a fascist state. As Berger and Shillony have demonstrated Japan's regime lacked the personal dictatorship, unity and effective one party apparatus which characterised Nazi Germany. However, many of Japan's leaders manifestly sought to emulate aspects of Nazi politics, economic management and propaganda control. Similarly, the diplomatic and military successes which Germany and Italy achieved between 1933 and 1940 exerted a significant but unquantifiable influence upon Japanese civil and military opinion. Japan's 'New Order' may have been incomplete and ineffective but it was clearly an attempt to blend, authoritarianism, autarky and nationalism in ways which diverged from the more open politics of the 1920s.

In contrast, much press and media discussion has recently focused on the narrow issue of the emperor's political role, and his responsibility for war and its atrocities. Professional historians have rightly stated that the proponents of imperial guilt are almost invariably journalists with little or no knowledge of primary sources. Distinguished scholars have clarified the Emperor's role as a constitutional monarch and his known preference for peaceful rather than aggressive policies. But the context of wartime Japan the Emperor's greatest importance was as a symbol of modernity – who visited universities, research institutes or scenes of bomb damage – or of tradition who participated in Shinto ceremonies. The emotional and social power of this symbol is impossible to estimate but it was a crucial element in Japan's conduct of total war.

With the passing of Europe's colonial era and the emergence of new historians academic debate has often broadened to embrace Japan's role beyond her metropolitan territories. Such discussion has also been inspired



Women at war; air-raid practice by the Japanese Red Cross, as the threat of allied bombing raids on Japan grew. Earlier the pictures portrayed on the home front had been optimistic ones, like this still (below) of Pearl Harbour from a propaganda film. (Below) Japanese troops in Burma, 1943 – a drawing by Ronald Searle.





The aftermath – a Japanese family improvise a meal in the bombed-out ruins of Yokohama, 1945.

by the claims of Japanese historians that despite defeat Japan had liberated the colonial territories of South East Asia. In the immediate aftermath of war it was common for British scholars to dismiss Japanese occupation policies as no more than clumsy efforts to exploit Asian territories for labour, resources and strategic bases. Clearly such motives dominated Japanese plans, but behind this broad intent lay a wide variety of political and cultural policies. In Hong Kong, Singapore and the Chinese settlements of Malaya and Indonesia, Japanese policies were tyrannical and cruel, as all Chinese were viewed as potential supporters of China's anti-Japanese war. But in other colonial territories the destruction of European and American power and the employment of pan-Asian propaganda could evoke favourable responses.

Japanese behaviour in occupied territories was often shaped by the fortunes of war and the sensitivity or clumsiness of local commanders. The responses of the occupied were also influenced by the sins and virtues of their former colonial masters. Following the inflexible rule of Dutch administrators the population of Java and Sumatra showed considerable sympathy for the Japanese presence. In contrast, the inhabitants of the Philippines, who had already been promised independence, were far more hostile to Japanese rule. Nevertheless, many colonial subjects were at first enthused by Japan's destruction of colonial control. However this verdict does not amount to an acceptance of Japanese claims to have been virtuous liberators. Japan's concession of nominal independence to Burma and the Philippines, and her

belated encouragement of Indonesian independence were largely the product of her declining strength, and the need to rally Asian support against allied offensives. Even Japan's military decline did not always bring quasi-liberal responses. In Vietnam it brought the reverse – a consolidation of Japanese military authority and the final destruction of French influence.

Perhaps the most stimulating reappraisal of Japan's political role in East and South East Asia is provided by Akira Iriye's *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941-45*. This work goes beyond local analyses and examines the structural concepts of Japan's Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. According to Iriye, Japan's Asian policy was premised upon two fundamental concepts, Japanese power and a vision of a shared culture linking peoples as diverse as Mongols, Chinese, Malays and the inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent. In fact, harsh experience and Japan's prolonged war against Nationalist China demonstrated that notions of cultural compatibility had little substance. Indeed Iriye suggests that the barrenness of Pan-Asianism was already recognised by enlightened Japanese in 1943, when the East Asian Conference convened in Tokyo. In its policy declaration this pro-Japanese gathering advocated relations with a wider world – not simply with an inner brotherhood of Asian peoples.

Despite its inconsistencies the rhetoric of Japanese Asianism was not without lasting significance. It made a psychological contribution to the erosion of colonial authority and presaged much of the anti-colonial language of

the postwar years. Furthermore, as John Dower has shown in *War Without Mercy*, the Japanese were themselves the victims of virulent racial antipathy in Europe and the United States. In short, the alliance of Western powers which Japan sought to destroy was not simply a coalition which represented democracy, pluralism and international law. It was an alliance which was permeated by a variety of racial prejudices which were slowly undermined by the pressures of war.

Following four years of total war both Washington and Tokyo ultimately abandoned the excesses of economic nationalism. The liberal order which followed removed the economic roots of Japanese expansion which enlightened Americans had first perceived in the midst of the Pacific War.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Gordon M. Berger, *Parties Out of Power in Japan, 1931-1941* (Princeton University Press, 1977); James B. Crowley, *Japan's Quest for Autonomy, National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930-1938* (Princeton University Press, 1966); John Dower, *War Without Mercy* (Pantheon, 1986); Theodore Friend, *The Blue-Eyed Enemy: Japan Against the West in Java and Luzon, 1942-1945* (Princeton University Press, 1988); Thomas R.H. Havens, *Valley of Darkness: The Japanese People and World War Two* (W.W. Norton, 1978); Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture, The Japanese American War, 1941-1945* (Harvard University Press, 1981); Richard H. Minear, *Victors' Justice, The Tokyo War Crimes Trial* (Princeton University Press, 1971); Robert A. Scalapino, *Democracy and the Party Movement in Prewar Japan, The Failure of the First Attempt* (University of California Press, 1962); Ben-Ami Shillony, *Politics and Culture in Wartime Japan* (OUP, 1980); Kenneth R.M. Short, (ed) *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II* (Croom Helm, 1983).

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