Authoritarianism in Japan

By David Eacker

Japanese militarism built the foundation of state-centered authoritarianism during the interwar period.

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, Japan began building an empire to rival the powers of Europe, Russia, the United States, and China. Their empire survived World War I, continued into the 1920s and 1930s, but finally collapsed in defeat during World War II. This article considers how Japanese imperialism can be compared to fascism and authoritarianism during the interwar period.

Militarism in the Early Empire

Japan was pretty busy in the 1890s. They had no intention of being colonized like their neighbor, China, had been. But to grow an empire they had to do two things: deal with the internal reforms going on in Japan *and* catch up with industrialization. Only then would they become a global power.

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One result of this dual strategy was a close relationship between civilian and military authority. In the 1880s, the Japanese had looked to Germany as the Western power they most wanted to imitate. Under Bismarck's tough military leadership, Germany had crashed onto the world scene as a major power in a short period of time. If the Germans could do it, the reformers thought, why not the Japanese? Borrowing from German law, Japan did not put elected officials in charge of the military. Instead, they gave the emperor total control. This allowed the military to act without answering to a civilian government. Because the emperor had little actual political power in Japan, the army and navy were kind of on their own, free to conduct their affairs more or less as they saw fit. As we will see, these factors shaped imperial Japan's later history in important ways.

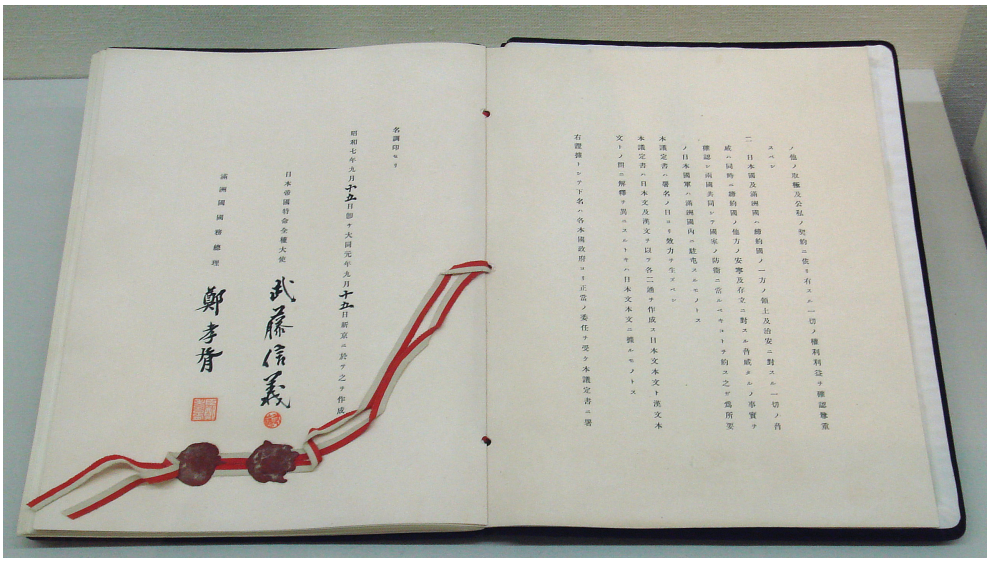
For those Japanese who wanted an empire, a military free from civil authority had its upsides.

- First, the military could inspire national pride by claiming decisive victory in wars. For example, Japan's conflict with China in 1894–1895 gained territories for the empire and in doing so stirred mass patriotic feelings at home. In this way, military success linked domestic national pride to imperial conquest abroad.
- Second, lack of civilian control meant that the military could determine colonial policy on its own. This gave the Japanese military the power to shape imperial politics and act like an authoritarian government of their own.

Together, these factors made up the fundamental beliefs of Japanese militarism: raising military power and using it for political gain. In the next section, we examine the case of Japanese Manchuria to see how militarism helped transform Japan into a fascist, authoritarian empire.

Militarism and the Rise of Fascist Imperialism

By 1930, Japanese leaders saw themselves as facing two potential enemies. One was the young Soviet Union. The other was any western liberal capitalist country, such as the United States. Facing these ideologically diverse soon-to-be foes, Japan realized they had something in common with two *other* insurgent regimes of the interwar period: Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. These countries also saw liberalism (U.S. and others) and communism (Soviets) as their political foes. Meanwhile, the Great Depression was wrecking economies everywhere on the map – and it was just getting started. As Japan entered the 1930s, the world was becoming more and more dangerous and unstable.



Japan-Manchukuo Protocol, Recognizing the State of Manchuria but also Allowing Japanese Occupation Troops to Remain Stationed There, 1932. By World Imaging, CC BY-SA 3.0.

It was in this environment that the Japanese army invaded the northeast Asian area of Manchuria in 1931. That event illustrates the role of military independence in Japanese imperialism during this period. Acting on its own, the army made up a false pretext that blamed the war on Chinese forces in Manchuria. They then set out to conquer the region. When all was said and done two years later, the army had placed a large amount of new territory under its direct control and turned the region into a puppet state of Japan. In purely military terms, the operation was a tremendous success. But the conquest of Manchuria had broader economic and political implications as well.

For one thing, the occupation brought many resources under the control of Japanese armed forces. This raised the difficult question of how they could run the new territory economically. They decided on an arrangement in which the military regime kept a tight grip on the region's economy to ensure its productivity. This "controlled economy," which used the state to place resources in the service of the empire, resembled Stalin's command economy in the Soviet Union. Both systems asserted state control over the economy in the name of national strength.

The controlled economy model started in Manchuria, but it did not remain limited to that region. It quickly spread throughout the empire, upending more than two decades of capitalist, free market economic policy along the way. This shift brought significant changes to the structure of the empire. One such change was that almost all of the resources of the empire were channeled into support for the war machinery of Japanese imperialism. Over time, the lines between state and military blurred until they nearly vanished. Functionally, the whole empire – including Japan itself – became a military state. At the same time, the state expanded into more and more areas of life, in order to direct the energies and resources of its subjects into a sprawling imperial war effort that never seemed to end.

Historian Louise Young sees these developments revealing two trends:

- The first was the military's rise as a political force that "connected the inside and the outside" of the empire. By taking over the state, the military was able to funnel domestic resources into its wars. It also used propaganda to sway Japanese public sentiment toward supporting the empire's overseas conflicts. In these ways, it linked the homeland to imperial conquests abroad.
- The second was the belief that the state alone could offer solutions to the problems of modern life. This belief was in practice deeply authoritarian. It considered obedience to the state to be the supreme virtue a person could have.

These two ideas formed two of the pillars of Japan's "fascist imperialism." Other pillars included a hatred of both communism and liberalism, and a belief in Japanese ethnic and racial superiority. Like the Italian Fascists, Japanese imperialists often depicted their conquests as part of a mission to "civilize" peoples seen as less advanced. But the grim realities of occupation in Manchuria and elsewhere in the empire were less civil, marked more by violence and economic exploitation.

75 Millimeter Mountain Gun Towed by Japanese Cavalry, Manchuria, 1939. Public domain.

Conclusion

On its way to becoming a world power in the late nineteenth century, Japan borrowed from the tenets of German militarism to design its imperial state. One effect of this was that the Japanese military gained a high degree of independence. Following the annexation of Manchuria, the military leadership adopted a controlled economy designed to funnel all resources into the war effort. This kind of controlled economy made its way from the overseas empire to the domestic homeland. There, it gave rise to an authoritarian and, ultimately, fascist system driven by a combination of military interests, radical statism, and racism. In these respects, imperial Japan between the wars has a lot of similarities to fascism in Europe in this era.

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