

Democracy and Empire between the World Wars

From Taisho to Showa

The Taisho Emperor

- Prince Yoshihito took the throne in 1912 at the age of 37.
- There was a spread belief that he was always sick and mentally disturbed.
- Maruyama Masao, a famous intellectual historian, reported rumors of the emperor's strange behavior:
 - *He rolled up the text of his proclamation to open a session of the Diet, and used it like a telescope to peer at the assembled dignitaries.*

Transition

- Admiral Yamamoto Gonnohyoe organized a cabinet in alliance with the Seiyukai party in 1913.
- Yamamoto resigned in disgrace over the Siemens scandal (Top navy officials received kickbacks from a German corporation) in 1914.
- Between 1913 and 1918, political parties increased power through negotiations and compromises.

The First Party Cabinet

- In 1918, Hara kei formed a cabinet composed almost entirely of party members, except for the army, navy, and foreign ministers.
- The Seiyukai remained in power for 4 years.
- In 1921, Hara was assassinated, and succeeded by Takahashi Korekiyo.
- Party cabinets were interrupted in 1922. After then the oligarch consecutively appointed two navy men and a president of the Privy Council.
- The non-party cabinets were called “transcendental cabinets.”

Call for “normal constitutional governments”

- Three parties won the election and formed a coalition to take office in 1924.
- Since then party cabinets continued until 1932.
- The elitist authors of the Meiji constitution did not expect for the Diet to play a dominant role in the nation’s politics.
- But people enthusiastically demanded “constitutional government,” based on elected diet representatives.

The Showa Emperor

- Prince Hirohito served as imperial regent during his father's illness from 1921 to 1926.
- He took the throne in 1926 and maintained it until 1989.
- Emperor Hirohito was regularly briefed by his ministers.
- He had a belief that the monarch should have a responsibility to indicate his views to the ministers.
- His opinions could have major political consequences.
 - The first example: Prime Minister Tanaka was reprimanded by the emperor for his handling of military affairs in China, and resigned in 1928.

Military and Bureaucracy

- Neither the military nor bureaucracy bore any accountability to the Diet.
- The constitution set forth the emperor's direct right to supreme command of the military.
- Military leaders could take this clause as a license to act independently of the cabinets.
- Although the laws and budgets had to be ratified by the Diet, they did not owe their jobs to the parliament. They served as appointees of the emperor.

The oligarch remained in power

- The members of the Privy Council had extraordinary legal powers, and were appointed for life by the emperor.
- The House of Peers served as a bastion of emperor-centered authoritarian politics.
- The last oligarch, Saionji, withdrew in early 1930s under the increasing influence of the military.
- The informal power of the oligarch (*genro*) was succeeded by a group of senior statesmen (*jushin*).

The oligarch and voters

- The oligarch did not always appoint the head of the majority party.
- In 1927, 1929, and 1931, Saionji appointed the leader of the opposition party as prime minister, because of a perceived failure of the incumbent majority party.
- Each time the new prime minister called an election, and his party won a majority.
- Japan's voters ratified changes of government *after the fact*, but did not bring them about.

Political Terror

- Prime Minister Hara was assassinated in 1921.
- Prince Hirohito was attacked by a leftist in 1923.
- Such attacks intimidated future party leaders, while public opinion often praised the purity of the attacker's motives.

Kita Ikki

- He was the most influential intellectual to promote a radical nationalist vision that would later inspire political terror.
- In 1923 he published his manifesto in *An Outline Plan for the Reorganization of Japan*.
- He called on a vanguard of young military officers to seize power, suspend constitution, and remake the political structure to unite the emperor and the people.
- He proposed a communist-like economic plan, while insisted on the traditional roles of women being mothers and wives.

Left-wing Movements

- Both elitist bureaucracy and party rulers were threatened by various and energetic left-wing movements, inspired by the Russian Revolution.
- Osugi Sakae, an influential anarchist, called for direct actions such as strikes, to bring about a more egalitarian society.
- Yamakawa Hitoshi and Arahata Kanson founded the Japan Communist Party (JCP) in 1922, financially supported by the Comintern.
- The communist party was never legal until 1945.

Yoshino Sakuzo

- He was a professor of law at Tokyo Imperial University, and a leading advocate of parliamentary liberalism.
- In 1916 he published a famous essay to put forward his vision of Japanese style of constitutional government.
- According to him, the government should protect people's welfare, and respect the emperor's sovereignty at the same time.
- He promoted a people-oriented political institution (*minpon-shugi*), not democracy itself.



Politics of divide and rule

- On one hand, voting rights were extended to universal male suffrage in 1925. All men over age 25 who were not on public assistance were granted the right to vote.
- On the other hand, the rulers took a zero-tolerance approach to left radicals. Police killed Osugi Sakae and his lover in 1923.
- In 1925 the Diet passed a Peace Preservation Law to punish any ideas to criticize “the system of private property.”
- In 1928 police arrested hundreds of people accused as communists.

Seeking equality with the imperial powers of the West

Major questions:

1. Should Japan cooperate with the West, or take unilateral actions in China?
2. Should Japan support China's struggling new government, or help local warlords resisting it?
3. Should Japan work with the Soviet Union, or destroy it?

Japan in China

- Japan joined WWI in accordance with the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, and took German possessions in Shandong Peninsula.
- Japan then addressed the notorious Twenty-One Demands to China, which was reacted by China's people with outrage.
- In 1917 Japan and the US signed the *Ishii-Lansing agreement*, which obligated Japan to respect China's independence, and US to recognize Japan's "special interests" in China.

Versailles Treaty

- Japan joined the WWI peace conference as one of the victorious allies.
- Japan wanted to confirm its control over Shandong, and called for racial equality to be included the founding principles of the League of Nations.
- The West recognized Japan's interests in Shandong, but refused to include the racial equality clause.

The Siberian Intervention

- Japan wanted to support anti-communist regimes in far eastern Russia.
- In 1918 the West finally decided to send troops to Russia and asked Japan to join them.
- Japan dispatched more than 12000 soldiers, and stayed in Russia after other powers withdrew their troops.
- This hopeless unilateral action received much of international criticism.
- Japan agreed with US and UK to keep their warship capacities to a ratio of 3:5:5 in 1922.

Japanese Immigrants in US

- The increasing presence of Japan in the world nurtured a sense of threat called “Yellow Peril” in the West.
- In 1922 the US supreme court ruled that no Japanese or other Asian immigrants could become naturalized American citizens.

Japan in Asia

- Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War initially flamed anti-colonial passions in Asia.
- Asian people viewed it as the first modern victory of a "yellow" race over the "whites".
- Thousands of youth sought education in Japan.
- But Japanese support for the youthful Asian dreams of liberation evaporated in the face of imperial realpolitik.
- (May Fourth Movement) In China, on May 4, several thousand students demonstrated against Japan.

Domestic Opinions on Imperialism

- A few intellectuals such as Yoshino Sakuzo, combined support for democracy at home with support for self-determination of colonial subjects, Koreans in particular.
- By 1921 public opinion turned against the Siberian Intervention, and supported the government effort to reduce military budget.
- Kita Ikki supported Japan's imperialism in the name of destroying the Anglo-American monopolies in Asia.