

Japanese Imperialism

I. Early Expansion

As an island nation, Japan faced many problems in trying to become an industrial power. Japan lacked many of the natural resources, such as coal, that were needed for industry. Gaining colonies would provide sources of raw materials. Colonies would also provide larger markets for Japanese goods. There was one additional roadblock. Although there are thousands of islands in the Japanese island chain, almost all the population lived on four islands. As Japan industrialized, the population grew. This meant more workers, but also a lack of living space. Moving some of the population to colonies would ease the strain of overpopulation.

In 1874, the Meiji made the decision to build an empire overseas. They seized the Ryukyu Islands off the coast of China. In 1895, Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War and added Taiwan to its territory. In 1905, Japan and Russia went to war. Western nations were shocked at Japan's easy victory over Russia. No Asian nation had defeated a Western power before. Each time Japan added territory to its empire. In 1910, Japan was bold enough to make Korea part of its nation. It attempted to do in Korea what Western nations were doing in other parts of the world. Japan took most of Korea's wealth for itself. It imposed the Japanese language on Koreans and tried to stamp out their culture. The result was the development of a nationalist movement similar to those growing in other colonies. By the time of World War I, Japan took advantage of the chaos of the war to further its own imperial interest. It seized German islands in the Pacific. These islands included the Marshalls, the Marianas, and Carolines. It took control of the German areas in China.

II. Expanding Into War

During the 1930s, Germany, Japan, and Italy prepared for war. Germany's Hitler and Italy's Mussolini were firmly in control of their nations. The emperor ruled Japan, but military leaders made most of the decisions. In each nation, these dictators wanted to build great empires. They were ready to use their armies and navies to do this.

Japan faced serious economic problems in the early 1930s. Like other industrial nations, it suffered from the Great Depression. But Japan had its own special problems. A small island nation, it lacked iron ore, oil, rubber, and other resources. It also needed markets beyond Japan for the goods it produced. The Japanese government decided to expand into Asia to get control of resources and to sell its goods.

In 1931, Japanese troops took control of Manchuria, a region in northeastern China. The Japanese claimed that Chinese troops had attacked their railroad in that region. The Japanese had actually staged the attack themselves. They dressed up in Chinese army uniforms and raided their own railroad.

Chiang Kai-shek, the head of China's government, tried to limit the spread of Japanese power in China. He agreed to let Japan govern parts of northern China. However, by 1937, China and Japan were fighting a full-scale war. In 1940, Japan moved farther south to the French colony of Indochina (Vietnam). The United States warned the Japanese that it would stop selling them oil and scrap iron if they did not retreat. Japan did not retreat. The League of Nations (the predecessor of the United Nations) had objected to each of Japan's invasions and seizures of territory. However, it had no power to force Japan to give up the territory.

1. What problems did Japan face while building a more modernized and industrialized country?
2. How did the Japanese respond to these problems?
3. How did the Japanese demonstrate their military strength and superiority?
4. How did the United States respond to Japanese militarism in the years before WWII?
5. Was the increase in militarism and Japanese imperialism a good way to solve the country's problems? Why/why not?