

# Planning for War: Elite Staff Officers in the Imperial Japanese Army and the Road to World War II

Richard J. Smethurst

**Abstract:** *The Japanese military was led throughout its history from the 1880s until the end of World War II in 1945 by a small group of elite officers who graduated from the Army War College and then served as staff officers and/or commanders in the Army Ministry, the General Staff headquarters, and in field armies in Manchuria, China proper, and elsewhere. These officers were trained to do careful research into the comparative militaries, economies and logistics of their own, their allies, and their potential enemies' strength for war. The point of this essay is to explore why highly-trained officers, who learned from their own observations and research about Japan's and its wartime allies' weaknesses vis-à-vis the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China, ignored what they learned and went to war between 1931 and 1945 with these larger and economically more advanced nations. That is, why did the brains of the Japanese army, with help from many staff officers in Japan's navy and civil bureaucracy, lead Japan into a war it could not win? Did they really believe, as they often said they did, that superior spirit could overcome superior technology and production, or were they motivated by the desire for advancement—wars brought promotions. Or what else may have motivated them? I believe that they knew they could not win the war, but went to war anyway.*

**Keywords:** *Nagata Tetsuzan, Staff College, Takahashi Korekiyo, military bureaucrats, Tanaka Giichi, Imperial Japanese Army, Tōjō*

*Hideki, Chōshū, Ishiwara Kanji, Manchuria, Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Takahashi Line, fixed bayonet charge, total war.*

Major (later Lieutenant General) Nagata Tetsuzan (widely believed to be the most brilliant staff officer in Japan, 1922-1935, and mentor of Tōjō Hideki), observed of future wars after he returned from seven years in Europe during and after World War I:

“Modern warfare is extremely aggressive, ferocious, serious and grave. We must commit every drop of our blood and every clod of our earth to preparing for and fighting wars. Modern war combines four kinds of warfare: scientific, economic, political and ideological. Modern warfare at its essence is between national peoples and we must use the term ‘wars of all of a nation’s power’ to describe it. Our country is behind the other powers in developing this.” (NHK 2011, 109-110.)

Seven-time Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo in 1920 on the lessons of World War I:

“The recent European war ended with the so-called Central Powers losing, and the Entente Powers winning. To put it in

different words, Germany and Austria, which were dedicated to militarism to secure world peace and believed ‘we can only reach the final verdict through force,’ suffered a defeat so great that they will never recover. They lost overwhelmingly to Great Britain, America, and France, countries committed to justice and humanity. In the future our country must walk the highway of the world together with Great Britain, America, France, and Italy...It is now time to put ‘new wine in new wine skins,’ that is, to use government policy and funds to raise people’s standards of living rather than to fight wars.” (Takahashi Korekiyo, *Naigai kokusaku shiken*, September 1920, in *Matsukata Masayoshi kankei monjo*, vol. 15)

The key planners in the Japanese Imperial Army from the 1880s until the end of World War II were a group of elite staff officers, who studied at a post-graduate school called the Army War College (*rikugun daigakkō*). Except in wartime, when reserve officers and soldiers were needed to increase rapidly the size of the Imperial Army, all officers graduated from the Army Military Academy (*shikan gakkō*), about 600-700 per year in the early twentieth century. A small percentage of these officers, about 30-35 per year, went on to the Army War College, the Japanese equivalent of the US Army War College. These officers, the brightest of the officer corps, took rigorous entrance examinations to enter the Army War College, opened under German influence in 1883. In fact, just as the Japanese government invited American and European instructors such as Ernest Fenolosa and Edward Morse to teach future civilian bureaucrats in Tokyo Imperial University, one of the first teachers at the Army War College was Major Klemens W. J. Meckel, later a major general in the German army, who taught future military strategists. The Army War College students, mostly newly minted

captains in the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA), studied tactics, strategy, military history, intelligence, planning and logistics while at the school. Each studied a foreign language and culture—after leaving the school, the graduates served as military attachés in their country of specialization. For example, General Tanaka Giichi, a graduate of the eighth class in 1892, who later became Army Minister and Prime Minister in the 1918-1928 decade, studied Russian and spent four years in St. Petersburg before the Russian Revolution. (Tanaka practiced his Russian by attending services at Nikolai-dō, the newly opened Russian Orthodox cathedral in Tokyo; 65 years later, the author, a Russian-language officer in an American army intelligence unit went on Sundays to the same church to practice his Russian.) Nagata Tetsuzan, a 1911 graduate and the army’s “brains” between World War I and his murder in 1935, studied German and spent seven years in Sweden, Denmark and Germany during and after World War I. Army War College graduates were not only the officers trained to do rational planning for war and wartime operations, but were also the most cosmopolitan officers in the Imperial Army. (Presseisen 1965, 114-115; Drea 2009, 58-65.)

From World War I until Japan’s defeat in 1945, almost all generals in the IJA were Army War College graduates. Officers who did not attend the Army War College could expect to retire at best at the rank of lieutenant colonel, creating a rift between the overwhelming majority of the officer corps, who spent their careers leading troops in training and in combat, and the elite, who wore a distinctive insignia similar to a late feudal era copper coin (thus the sobriquet for the insignia and the status of its wearer, *tenpōsen*, a round coin with a square hole in the middle) and who were trained to sit at their desks and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of potential enemies, allies, and potential allies, and to make well thought-out

plans for large scale operations and their concomitant logistics.

After graduation from the Army War College, the elite officers filled staff positions in the Army Ministry, the General Staff, and field army headquarters (often alternately, that is, these staff officers did not specialize in the ministry or the general staff or field commands), and did not lead troops again until they reached the rank of colonel and became regimental commanders (circa 2,500-3,000 men). The intermediate smaller units, that is companies and battalions, were led by the non-elite officers (taizuki or unit-connected) who spent hours training and leading their troops on the ground. The elite officers, the future generals, worked behind desks making plans and decisions about war and peace—they were the Japanese army's strategic planners and had few dealings with rank and file soldiers.

World War I had a great impact on the thinking of the Japanese army's tenpōsen elite. Tanaka Giichi, for example, who had taken the lead in 1910 in establishing the Imperial Army Reservist Association, a grassroots reservist organization to facilitate wartime mobilization, began from 1915 to reorganize it as a means of spreading military values to militarize farmers and urban workers. In the tradition of his Chōshū domain mentor, Field Marshal Yamagata Aritomo, who played an important role in the establishment of a conscription system in the 1870s (thus abolishing the samurai's monopoly on military service), Tanaka aimed at creating a Japan in which "all the people are soldiers." Tanaka came to believe during World War I that future Japanese wars would be "total wars," fought between nations, not armies, and thus that it was essential to enlist the whole nation, from governmental elite to poor tenant farmers and urban proletariat, in peacetime preparations

for war. Under his leadership, a system was created in which reservists led rural youth and women's groups in spreading military values to the countryside—that is, he worked to make the countryside "the army's electoral constituency." (Smethurst 1974, *passim*.) He also strove, in the tradition not only of Field Marshal Yamagata, but also of intermediate Chōshū mentors such as Generals Katsura Tarō and Terauchi Masatake, to increase military influence at the highest levels of government. All four served as prime minister in the years between 1889 and 1928. But unlike Nagata, Tōjō and other interwar and World War II staff officers, who wanted to establish direct military control over the Japanese government, the Chōshū types increased their political influence as individuals and eschewed attempting direct army control over government. Although Tanaka was the last Chōshū clique general, he worked closely with a non-Chōshū officer, General Ugaki Kazushige, who became Tanaka's "Chōshū" successor. If the tenpōsen elite's power angered the rank and file officers, the Chōshū clique's power also angered the non-Chōshū members of the tenpōsen elite.

In October 1921, three of the most highly regarded of these non-Chōshū elite middle level officers, Majors Nagata Tetsuzan, Obata Toshirō, and Okamura Yasuji, met at the Villa Stephanie Hotel in Baden Baden, Germany to discuss the lessons the Japanese army could learn from the European war of 1914-18. In their discussions, they committed themselves to two goals: breaking the power of the Yamagata/Chōshū "clique" and creating a nation mobilized for total war "by bringing the people and the army closer together." When they returned to Japan they organized a series of study groups that discussed these issues. (Humphreys 1995, 34-38.) Oddly, none of the many journalists and academics who have written about the military staff officers' activities in the post-World War I decade

mention what seems to me a basic contradiction. Nagata and his colleagues worked to break the control over the army of people such as Tanaka who were already attempting to do what Nagata et al. wanted, to create a total war state by bringing the people and the army closer together. One can only wonder if careerism, that is, the desire to rise to the top of the army, was a greater motivation for the non-Chōshū elite officers than their desire to reorganize Japan and its capacity to fight wars. Promotions were hard to come by between the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and the beginnings of World War II in the 1930s—although Tanaka from Chōshū went from Lieutenant Colonel to General in 1905-1920, non-Chōshū officers in general advanced more slowly.

Over the next decade, Nagata and his elite colleagues organized a series of “study” groups, which by 1930 included most of the Army War College graduates who would lead the Japanese army and Japan in World War II. The Issekikai, which was formed by a merger of several study groups in 1929, enrolled forty members, including men who would become prime minister, Tōjō Hideki; ministers of state, Obata Toshihirō and Suzuki Teiichi; full generals, Tōjō, Itagaki Seishirō, Doihara Kenji, Okamura Yasuji, Okabe Naosaburō, and Yamashita Tomoyuki; lieutenant generals (30), area army commanders (8), and field army commanding generals (14). The Issekikai enlisted Ishiwara Kanji, who together with Itagaki led the IJA in bringing Manchuria into Japan’s empire in 1931-32—Ishiwara, after Nagata’s murder in 1935 the army’s “brains,” was retired before he became a full general because of his opposition to the invasion of China in 1937. All served in key staff positions in the Army Ministry and Army General Staff in the interwar period. Five, including Tōjō, Itagaki and Yamashita, died as war criminals, four died as prisoners of war of the Russians or

Chinese, and four others served prison terms as war criminals. (Humphreys 1995, 112; NHK 2011, 108-112.)

These officers, while serving in key staff positions, met regularly in their study groups. Kawada Minoru, a Japanese historian who taught at Nagoya University, has analyzed the minutes of these meetings and found that Nagata and his peers, during the 1920s were working out a plan for mobilizing Japan for a preemptive war against the Soviet Union, and doing so independently of their superiors, successive army ministers and chiefs of the army general staff (Kawada 2011 and 2014-5, *passim*.) Japan, after Russia passed its leased territories in Manchuria to Japan in 1905, maintained an army there to protect its legitimate treaty rights—control over key port cities on the Liaodong Peninsula and railroads and their rights-of-way into the Manchurian interior. By the 1920s, Manchuria was essentially under Japanese economic control, and under the joint military control of the Japanese army and its Chinese “ally,” the warlord Zhang Zuolin.

This led in the 1920s to widespread discussion of what was known as the Manchuria-Mongolia Problem (Manmō mondai). Different groups advocated differing ideas of how Japan should deal with a northeast China under its economic (and to some extent, military) control. One group, led by the Minseitō party Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijūrō and the former Seiyūkai party leader Takahashi Korekiyo, viewed Manchuria as part of China—while the Japanese had treaty rights there much as the British and Americans did in Shanghai and Beijing—Manchuria was not Japan’s to govern directly. The Issekikai members viewed this approach as both wrong-headed, since they did not think Manchuria was historically part of China, and weak-kneed. Shidehara and

Takahashi feared that an overly aggressive approach to Manchuria would antagonize the Americans and British, that is, nations that were far more powerful than Japan economically and thus militarily, and on whom Japan relied for much of its own economic and military power. Japan to Shidehara and Takahashi was not rich and powerful enough to build an autarkic economy in a bloc that included Japan, Korea, and Manchuria. (The army and its civilian collaborators such as Kishi Nobusuke tried to create an autarkic Japan capable of rivaling the US and USSR industrially, but failed because Japan did not have the necessary capital to succeed. And as Takahashi pointed out more than once, the capital that Japan had was needed to buy raw materials, especially oil, from the US, so that the Manchurian enterprise made Japan economically and thus militarily weaker, not stronger.)

The Issekikai members advocated a Manchuria under complete Japanese control. They wanted to exploit its raw materials and establish factories and mines to produce weapons and the materials such as coal and steel needed to produce these weapons. Kawada writes about a Futabakai (one of the forerunners of the Issekikai) meeting on 1 March 1928, only three months before one of its members, Kōmoto Daisaku, had the Chinese warlord of Manchuria, Zhang Zuolin, assassinated, at which the participants discussed Japan's position in Manchuria. The discussion was summarized by Tōjō Hideki, who was present, as follows:

“The primary goal of army preparations is for war with the Soviet Union. This requires as our first goal complete political control of Manchuria. It is necessary to make defensive preparations for war with the United States in case it intervenes in

our war with the Russians. We do not have to make any preparations for war with China. China is important only as a place to acquire raw materials.”

Future wars, the participants stated, will be wars of national survival (国家生存) and the US, a continental size country, can exist on its domestically produced raw materials. So it has no need for military action in Asia. Tōjō when asked if Japan needed to take Manchuria for its resources; replied, “Exactly.” (然り) The conclusion to the meeting was short and sweet:

“In order to secure the Imperial Country's existence we must have complete political control over Manchuria. Thus our primary war preparations must be for war with Russia, and we don't have to worry much about China at all. But we must consider the possibility of American participation and develop a defensive plan for that war.” (Kawada 2011, 11-12.)

On 4 June 1928, Kōmoto engineered the assassination of Zhang, thus eliminating the Japanese army's rival for power in Manchuria, and three years later, on 18 September 1931, two other Issekikai members, Itagaki and Ishiwara, blew up their own railroad in Manchuria, blamed it on the Chinese, and used the incident as a pretext to bring all of Northeast China under Japanese control. In both cases, the military commanders in Manchuria and Tokyo, and of course the civilian leaders in Tokyo, were not informed of the incidents until after the fact. Subordinate officers, that is, staff officers who made plans for and otherwise served the commanders, carried out aggressive military actions on their own that began their nation's road to World War II.

Some have argued that Japan seized Manchuria only after the world economic depression, beginning in 1929, impoverished Japan and its trading partners, and forced all nations to eschew internationalism to save their own “sinking ships.” The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, signed into law by President Herbert Hoover in June 1930, for example, more than doubled US tariffs, raising them to 29.6% of the price of all covered imports, thus reducing the value of the exports to the US that the Japanese used to pay for the imports of raw materials and technology. (However, Japan’s most important export to the US, raw silk, 25-30% in value of all Japanese exports, faced no tariffs because it did not compete with goods made by Americans.) According to this view, the plan to conquer Manchuria and turn it into Japan’s military industrial workshop to prepare for the “1936 Crisis,” that is, for a preemptive war against the Soviet Union before it became too strong and dangerous to Japan, began only after Japan’s and its primary trading partners’ industrial bases shrank in the early years of the depression in 1929-1931. But Japanese scholars such as Kawada, Tobe Ryōichi and Katō Yōko have pointed out in recent books that the planning for Japanese control of Manchuria began among the elite staff officers almost a decade before the onset of the depression or the Manchurian Incident. When the staff officers acted on their plans, they did so, as we have seen, independently of the Army Minister or Chief of the Army General Staff, but they did so with the belief (and in some cases, with the tacit understanding) that these top ranking officers, themselves former staff officers, agreed with the general principles of their actions, even if they did not condone actions from below that threatened the army’s command structure. In every case, beginning with Zhang Zuolin’s murder in 1928 and the Manchurian Incident in 1931, the army’s brass gave in to the actions of their subordinates very quickly because they too thought Japan should

have direct control over Manchuria. These officers believed that the solution to the Manchuria-Mongolia problem should be in the hands of the army, not politicians like Shidehara and Takahashi. The army, and many outside of the army, resented the British and American’s highhanded policies toward Japan, and acted autonomously, overlooking, as Shidehara and Takahashi did not, the disparities between Japanese and Anglo-American economic power. Japan, either in prosperity or depression, and even after its recovery from the depression by 1936-1938 at least partly because of Takahashi’s “Keynesian” policies, had only one-ninth of America’s manufacturing production (the US manufacturing potential vis-a-vis Japan was even greater), which the elite army planners knew, but ignored in acting autonomously. (League of Nations 1945, 13)

The commanders in Tokyo found themselves in a difficult spot. On the one hand, like their subordinates in Manchuria and China, they believed that Manchuria could be a Japanese resource and industrial base that would make Japan less dependent on the United States for natural resources and technology. On the other hand, they believed it important to maintain a chain of command in which the Army Minister and Chief of the General Staff in Tokyo made decisions that would be binding on regional armies. But how to bridge this gap, especially when their subordinates in the ministry and general staff office in Tokyo also acted independently of their commanders, and often in coordination with their counterparts in the field army headquarters staffs. For example, Major General (少将) Tatekawa Yoshitsugu, a staff officer in the Army Ministry, who was sent by Army Minister General Minami Jirō to Manchuria on September 17, 1931 to stop the army command there from carrying out the railroad explosion that led to the subsequent seizure of Manchuria (I have yet to find out

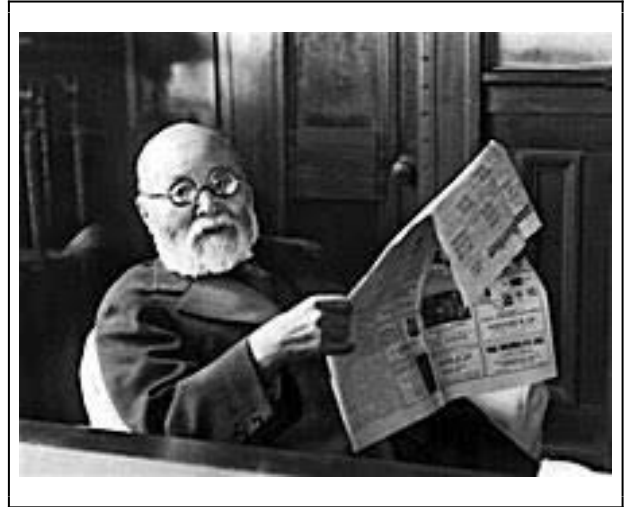
how Minami knew such an incident was about to occur), made sure he arrived after the incident so it could proceed unhindered. Although Tatekawa intentionally arrived at the Kwantung Army headquarters in Mukden after Itagaki and Ishiwara had sent the Kwantung Army into action (in fact, he spent the night of the incident with a geisha), he was neither reprimanded nor punished in any way for his “failure.”

The Tokyo military’s primary method for controlling the Kwantung Army, an army that was legally based in Manchuria to protect the treaty rights there that Japan won from Russia in 1905 (and Russia had “negotiated” with China ten years earlier), was not to issue orders from the Army Ministry or General Staff for Manchurian commanders to cease aggressive operations, but to build up Japan’s other mainland army, the Tianjin Army, to block the Kwantung Army’s movements into north China. The Tianjin Army was based in north China to protect Japan’s diplomatic representatives under the terms of the Boxer Protocol of 1901, which allowed all of the powers endangered by the Boxer uprising to station troops in the Beijing area to guard their legations/embassies. In the 1930s the Imperial Japanese Army increased the number of its troops there, according to the NHK book, “Why Did Japan Go to War,” written with essays by Tobe Ryōichi, Katō Yōko, and Mori Yasuo, all eminent Japanese scholars of World War II, not to protect Japanese diplomats, but to block the Kwantung Army. And, moreover, all of these actions in Manchuria and north China were carried out completely independent of successive prime ministers and foreign ministers, even when in several cases the prime ministers were retired military officers. Before 1937, subordinates in the Japanese army acted independently of their commanders, and both subordinates and commanders acted independently of the internationally recognized

government of Japan. Civilian leaders most easily influenced policy when they collaborated with the military.

While the Manchurian Incident of 1931 and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937 are the most famous of the army operations carried out without Tokyo orders or even official knowledge, other incidents took place as well. In May 1935, for example, a Japanese staff officer in Tianjin, Colonel Sakai Takashi, had several pro-Japanese Chinese newspaper editors assassinated, blamed it on Chinese extremists, and used the assassinations as an excuse to mobilize the Tianjin Army troops and negotiate an agreement that made the area along the Manchuria border a neutral zone, that is, a zone under joint Chinese and Japanese control. Sakai did this in the absence of his commanding officer, who was not on base at the time. Sakai’s punishment for his insubordination was to be promoted to the rank of major general. This led the Japanese consul in Tianjin at the time, Shigemitsu Mamoru (later the foreign minister who signed the surrender document for Japan on the deck of the USS Missouri), to write in his diary that the Tianjin Army types wanted to get into the action in China because they wanted promotions of the sort their colleagues in Manchuria were getting. Then in December of the same year, the Kwantung Army, under the command of General Itagaki Seishirō, who as a colonel in 1931 had helped organize the Manchurian Incident, crossed the border into China and set up a puppet government near Beijing. The central army’s response to this was to triple the number of troops in the Tianjin Army without informing the Chinese commanders in the region of this. Even before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937, the Japanese army had 15,000 men stationed in north China, far more than any of the other nations signatory to the Boxer Protocol of 1900.

The most famous of these uncontrolled incidents was the so-called Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937. On this evening, Colonel Mutaguchi Ren'ya, a regimental commander (thus not the highest-ranking officer in the Tianjin Army much less in Tokyo) and an Issekikai member, ordered his troops to conduct night maneuvers in the southwestern suburbs of Beijing, and to do so carrying rifles loaded with live ammunition. When a skirmish ensued between his troops and Chinese ones, Mutaguchi blamed the Chinese for instigating the encounter and used it as an excuse to mobilize his troops for further action. As is well-known, this incident led to an eight-year war in which "as many as ten million Chinese soldiers" (not to mention far more civilians) and at least 410,000 Japanese soldiers died. (Drea 2009, 245.) The war was later justified as a "holy war" to liberate Asia from Western imperialism, but the incident that began the war seems to have been more pedestrian in its origins. Not only was it carried out without the Prime Minister or even the Army Minister or Chief of the Army General Staff being informed, but once again even without the knowledge of the local commander. Mutaguchi later became a lieutenant general in the IJA. After the war he was tried and convicted as a war criminal. (See NHK 2011 for a discussion of the causes of, and people involved in, the 1928-1937 incidents.)



**Takahashi Korekiyo**

Historians and journalists writing about the rise of Japanese militarism, or in the usage of many of them, Japanese fascism, have advanced the "fascism from below," "fascism from above," or the "imperial way faction," "control faction" dichotomies to explain politics in the 1930s in Japan. In the early 1930s, younger officers, both the Army War College graduates discussed above and the next generation of elite officers, that is, future Army War College students (See Shillony in Wilson, 1970, 26-35, for an analysis of the elite status of the 2-26-1936 rebels), carried out the incidents described above and a number of domestic incidents in which these younger officers attempted to eliminate the political and industrial leaders that they saw as impediments to the creation of an emperor-centered, army-led national polity. These young officers viewed political leaders such as Hamaguchi Osachi, Inoue Junnosuke, Shidehara Kijūrō and Takahashi Korekiyo as people who put the interests of capitalist entrepreneurs and their own political parties before the needs of national unity and strength, and before the economic well-being of the Japanese people. When Finance Minister Takahashi stated on November 27, 1935, in a widely reported speech, "If the military continues to push for



larger budgets unreasonably, I think it will lose the trust of the people," he signed his own death warrant. The military assassins of February 26, 1936 rejected the idea that a finance minister, who in their minds was responsible only to big business and party politicians and not to emperor and nation, could think that the people trusted him more than they trusted the army. In fact, the rebel officers went so far as to blame Takahashi for urban unemployment and rural poverty at *the very time* that his "Keynesian" policies created full urban employment and brought about a two-third's growth in the real per capita value of agricultural production in four years, a recovery matched only by Sweden among industrialized or industrializing countries. (Skidelsky 1994, 488) Young military officers and rightwing nationalists killed three of the five men who served as prime minister between 1930 and 1936 (and the assassins missed a fourth only by killing his brother-in-law by mistake) and two of three finance ministers (the middle finance minister, Fujii Sanenobu, evaded murder by dying prematurely from job-related stress.) Their primary motive in these murders was eliminating the unpatriotic men who followed Western liberal and democratic ideas and did not work to create an emperor-centered system in which his key supporters served in the Japanese Imperial Army. (Takahashi was seen as anti-emperor even though, ironically, Takahashi's seaside villa in Hayama was near the emperor's, and on weekends the finance minister often visited Hirohito to brief him on economic matters.) These assassinations culminated in the February 26, 1936 Incident in which young army officers murdered Takahashi (the empress sent flowers to his funeral even though the army declared martial law after February 26 and forbade the Finance Ministry and the Takahashi family from having a public funeral), former Prime Minister Lord Privy Seal Admiral Saitō Makoto, and General Watanabe Jōtarō, the Director of Military Education who had the effrontery, as an army officer, to

advocate civilian control of the military, and missed Prime Minister Admiral Okada Keisuke only by accident. They also severely injured Admiral Grand Chamberlain Suzuki Kantarō, who later as prime minister engineered Japan's surrender in 1945. (Is it mere chance that three of the soldier assassins' five targets were high-level naval officers and only one was a civilian?) (Matsumoto Seichō 2005 Vol. 7.)



**Mutaguchi Renya**

The paradigm for the rise of militarism/fascism introduced above may oversimplify, as James Crowley pointed out some years ago, a more complicated story. But be that as it may, one finds that after Mutaguchi engineered the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937,

military adventurism and plots from below disappeared almost completely, and from the summer of 1937 the system worked more or less according to its blueprint (at least on the surface). That is, Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers (in 1941-45, the only civilian in the room), Army and Navy Ministers, and Chiefs of the military general staffs seemed to make the decisions to begin and expand wars. (Finance Ministers, who raised the money essential to fight the wars, were not included in this decision-making!) For example, after Mutaguchi's July 1937 incident in Beijing, the army debated at some length how to deal with China. A key staff officer in the Army Ministry, Lieutenant General Ishiwara Kanji, planner of the Manchurian Incident six years earlier, argued vociferously that Japan should not expand its commitment of troops to the mainland because Japan gained no benefits from China's conquest. China south and west of Beijing was a densely populated agricultural area with few natural resources to provide Japan. Since the Imperial Japanese Army already controlled northeast China (Manchuria) and was trying to build it as an industrial base for a future war with the Soviet Union, a war in the Beijing/Shanghai/Nanjing/Wuhan areas would only drain resources and men needed for a war with its potential enemy to the north. Ishiwara was overruled in this case not only by his army superiors, but also by two civilians, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro and Foreign Minister Hirota Kōki. In other words, the system worked as it was designed to work in the summer of 1937 and Japan, under the leadership of "reformist" bureaucrats began an eight-year war on the mainland of Asia. (NHK 2011, 126-131.)

The same happened as Japan moved toward war with the United States and Great Britain and its dominions. Leaders such as Prime Minister Konoe, and Foreign Ministers Matsuoka Yōsuke and Tōgō Shigenori in Tokyo,

in cooperation with both the army and navy, made decisions to advance into the northern part of French Indo-China in July 1940, to make an alliance with Germany and Italy in September 1940, to move into southern Indo-China in July 1941, and to go to war with the US and UK in fall-winter 1941—these moves were not instigated by lower level army staff officers, but by Japan's top political and military (often the same men) leaders. (Oddly however, the men who made the decision for war with the US and UK in 1941 decided on going to war, but not on how to start the war; that decision was made by the navy independently even of the army; I have no idea when Prime Minister General Tōjō learned about the navy's plan to attack Pearl Harbor to begin the war.)

Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the February 26, 1936 Incident eliminated either by assassination or fear of assassination the key *realistic* opponents of war with the United States, British Empire and the Soviet Union (by realistic I mean that men like Takahashi were not anti-empire, only anti-empire outside what was acceptable to the US/UK empire-builders because he thought Japan benefitted more from siding with, not confronting the world's most powerful nations)., and put in their place revisionist politicians and bureaucrats like Konoe, Matsuoka, Baba Eiichi, and Hiranuma Kiichirō, who seemed to believe that emperor-centered spirit could overcome superior weaponry, technology, and logistics—spirit over science! While we have no evidence that these revisionist politicians played a role in the 26 February 1936 Incident, we do know that some of the leading revisionist army commanders such as Araki Sadao and Masaki Jinzaburō gave more than tacit support to the rebels, who claimed to be acting to bring Araki and Masaki to power as the leaders both of the army and Japan.

The elimination of Admiral Saitō, General Watanabe, and Finance Minister Takahashi brought an end to efforts to stop Japan's road to World War II. Takahashi, as the Rikkyō University historian Matsuura Masatake has argued, was the primary figure in bringing Japan out of the depression and fighting militarism in the mid-1930s. Takahashi headed a force known as the "Takahashi Line," a coalition of business leaders, moderate party politicians and bureaucrats, and non-Marxist unions, whose primary goal was growing the Japanese economy and people's standards of living and blocking unproductive, that is, military spending. (Takahashi argued that military production was unproductive because its goods in peacetime had a much slower turnover than consumer goods, and thus did not lead to increased consumer spending and more production—a la Keynes, a wheel of greater consumption/demand and thus production, higher wages, more workers, more consumption, more production, many times over—the multiplier effect.) He argued for abolition of the army and navy general staffs, civilian control of the military, unionization even in defense factories, sharing the profits from higher industrial productivity with workers, decentralization of political power, abolition of the Ministry of Education and national universities, turning administration of the land tax over to local governments to pay for the decentralized schools, and to "listening to markets." Takahashi was, in the words of the journalist Baba Tsunego in 1933, "one old man fighting militarism by himself." The 26 February 1936 Incident eliminated Takahashi and others like him who believed that war with China, the United States, and Great Britain spelled disaster for Japan.

The Takahashi Line not only challenged the military, it also threatened the so-called

"revisionist bureaucrats," a group of middle-level bureaucrats in civilian ministries who even before February 26, 1936 had advocated a "national polity" centered on the imperial mystique in which civilian and military officials built a command economy under bureaucratic control, suppressed dissent through censorship and police arrests, and otherwise used their expertise to run Japan "efficiently" and "patriotically." Men like Konoe, Hiranuma, Kishi, and even Hoshino Naoki in Takahashi's own ministry fought to suppress the conservative liberalism of men like Takahashi. In fact, Matsuura argues that both Hiranuma's "prosecutorial fascism" in the alleged Teijin stock scandal of 1934, and the movement to suppress Minobe Tatsukichi's Emperor Organ Theory in 1935 were attempts to end the Takahashi Line before it was too late. That is, the revisionists wanted, as did the young February 26 assassins, to get rid of Takahashi before his economic policies were recognized as having brought prosperity back to Japan, thus discrediting the men who were attacking him for having failed to do what he actually did. Whatever they said about their motives, the young officer assassins of February 26, 1936 seemed more concerned with advancing the army's and thus their own political power and careers than in ending working class poverty. (Matsuura and Kitaoka 2010; Matsuura 2002, 127-133, 150-161; Smethurst 2007, 268-294.)

One of the striking aspects of Japan after the war in China began in earnest in late summer 1937 is how few people stood up in opposition to the government's and the military's steps toward total war. Although Hamaguchi, Inoue and Takahashi were all dead after February 1936, other men who had taken the lead in attempting to have Japan "go along" rather than "go alone," for example, former Prime Minister Wakatsuki Reijirō and Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijūrō, did not reappear on the political radar until after Japan's defeat.

There is no significant elite group that stood up to the revisionist politicians and military during the war. Revisionist politicians and bureaucrats like Konoe, Hiranuma, Baba Eiichi, and Matsuoka replaced middle-level staff officers like Itagaki, Tōjō, and Yamashita, in making decisions about foreign policy and war. But then, many of these middle-level staff officers who were forming policy as members of the Tokyo high command, Kwantung and Tianjin armies in 1928-1937 became army ministers, chiefs of the general staff and top-level field commanders after 1937 and continued to shape policy during the war. All three of these army officers are prime examples of men who segued from middle-level staff officers making decisions of war and peace before 1937 to high-level commanders making decisions of war and peace after 1937.

What is it that pulled all of these men together in leading Japan into wars it could not win in China and with the US/UK? First, clearly many Japanese at all levels of society, whether emperor-centric, top-down leaders like Konoe and Hiranuma, elite military officers of the sort discussed above, rank-and-file officers who trained soldiers for and then led them into battle, the soldiers and their families back home, advocates of a command economy like Kishi Nobusuke, and even anti-militarists like Takahashi resented the arrogance of the Western imperialist powers which ran the world as they saw fit because they had the power to do so. The difference between Takahashi and these other men was not in how they conceived the problem, but in how they planned to resolve it—Takahashi by diplomacy and by strengthening the Japanese economy and competing with the Anglo-Americans economically, the ultranationalists by taking a tough diplomatic stance and even by going to war with the two English-speaking powers if necessary, a war which Takahashi understood Japan would lose—and he said this repeatedly

before his murder in 1936.

Second, many Japanese, including the elite officers who had been trained in the Army War College to think analytically about planning, starting and fighting wars, seemingly misunderstood Japan's economic and thus military weakness as a "junior" world power. Most Japanese believed by the interwar period that Japan had become one of the world's great powers, when in fact compared to the US, UK, and the Soviet Union, its economy was still in the process of developing from an agrarian one (44% of the Japanese work force in 1936 farmed or fished compared to 20% in the US) into an industrial one. Some data to support my view of Japan's economic weakness: In 1930, Japan ranked last in GDP of the seven major World War II powers, US, USSR, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Japan in that order. US GDP was seven times Japan's. In 1936-1937, after the Japanese economy, under Takahashi's "Keynesian" lead, grew in real terms by 32.6% as the rest of the world wallowed in depression (the US economy grew by 4% in the same years), Japan's GDP had narrowly passed Italy's, but US GDP was still almost five times larger than Japan's. (Maddison 1995, 180-184.) Japan throughout this period depended on oil and refined aviation fuel imported from the United States. One of the ironies of World War II is that the petroleum that fueled the Japanese ships and planes that attacked the Americans and British at Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, Malaya and Singapore most likely came from Texas, California, and Oklahoma. Even after December 8, 1941, Japan's ships and planes ran to a great extent on petroleum from the US that had been stockpiled in Japan before summer 1941, and to a lesser extent on petroleum from the oil fields in its new territory, the Dutch East Indies. The elite staff officers in the army and navy understood Japan's economic weakness. Not only had Takahashi and others told them for

years Japan could not win a war against the United States, but at some level they knew this themselves—after all, they were trained at the Army War College to think strategically and economically. In fall 1941, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States, Admiral Nomura Kichisaburō, met with the US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Harold Stark, and told him “that the military in control of (Japan’s) government were highly provincial, with little knowledge of world affairs. He felt that the United States would win any war with Japan because it had virtually unlimited resources, but his government didn’t seem to understand Japan’s limitations.” (McCrea 2016, xxi) Many knew, but Japan went into an unwinnable war anyway. (See Makino 2016, especially 137-170, for economic study groups under the leadership of two army staff college graduates, Akimaru Jirō and Iwakuro Hideo, on the inferior size and quality of the economy of Japan vis a vis its potential enemies and allies in the final years before Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.)

Third, Japanese at all levels of society seem to have believed in Japanese emperor-centric superior bravery when compared to the soldiers of other nations. It is hard to judge to what extent Japan’s prewar civilian and military elite actually believed in emperor-centric nationalism and Japanese exceptionalism based on the bushido code, at least in all of its details, but they not only used it as a way to motivate their troops, they also *acted* as if they believed in it. Army staff officers wrote the close-order fixed bayonet charge in the face of any kind of enemy fire as the army’s primary *offensive and defensive* tactic into the army’s tactical manuals in 1909 and it stayed there until the Imperial Japanese Army was disbanded in 1945. (Drea 2009, 132-133.) These officers justified this kind of charge on the grounds that it was the Japanese way of fighting. They argued that Japanese soldiers were willing to

charge and die for their emperor and nation to the extent that Japan, even with inferior weaponry and logistics compared to its enemies, could win the wars it fought. They argued *ex post facto* that General Nogi Maresuke’s bayonet charges in 1904-5 had won Japan’s war against Russia, even though Nogi’s commanders at the time thought of him as a reckless leader who should be replaced. When General Nogi committed suicide to follow the Emperor Meiji to the grave in 1912, his and his tactics’ stock skyrocketed. A myth of Japanese willingness to die for their emperor was born and even influenced the decision-making of the men who took Japan into World War II. That is, even Japanese staff officers, who were trained to know better, seemed to believe that the courage of Japanese soldiers, not Anglo-American money, weapons, and diplomacy, and revolution in European Russia, had won the 1904-5 war, and they thus wrote the bayonet charge, based on Japanese patriotic sentiment, into their approach to subsequent wars. It is my view that belief in this Japanese “exceptionalism” colored the army leaders’ thinking as they led Japan to war in the 1930s. (There is a Nogi Shrine in Tokyo—that is, General Nogi has become a Shintō deity—but there is no Takahashi shrine, or Jacob Schiff shrine, or Rothschild shrine, even though their fund raising in London, Paris, and New York in 1904-7 was probably more responsible for Japan’s victory over Russia than Nogi’s butchery.)

Fourth, all of these men: the elite staff officers, their army superiors, bureaucrats in most ministries (generally, but not always excluding Foreign and Finance Ministry personnel, who tended to be more internationalist than other bureaucrats) and the revisionist bureaucrats and political leaders of the 1930s believed in the importance of a strong, top-down state. One could argue that one of the main tensions in Japanese government in the two decades

between the two world wars was between those who believed in some degree of decentralization and those who advocated central, bureaucratic control. Takahashi represented the mainstream politicians most committed to decentralization in these years. While serving as finance minister and prime minister after World War I, he called for the abolition of the Education Ministry (America, he wrote, had no education ministry, but still had education) and of national universities (scholars should be free, he wrote, to conduct research without bureaucratic intervention), turning the national land tax over to local communities to pay for decentralized schools, ending the government's vetting of textbooks, severely reducing the size and cost of Japan's military, and turning its control, a la America, over to civilians—and Takahashi believed in the efficacy of the market as a transmitter of economic information. On the other side, the army's elite staff officers advocated the military taking over Japan's government, not as Yamagata, Katsura and Tanaka tried, by becoming prime ministers in the existing political system, but by interpreting the army's constitutional right of serving the emperor, not the prime minister, in such a way as to allow the army to take control of the emperor's government. The February 26, 1936 Incident was an effort by elite junior army officers, with the encouragement of top-level generals, to give the army control of the Japanese government. Although the coup did not succeed in achieving its short-term goal, it had two results that allowed the creation of a top-down state. All of the major politicians who advocated decentralization, for example Takahashi, were quieted by murder or fear of murder, and the men who succeeded them in power, both military and civilian, were by and large the advocates of top-down government. (See Smethurst, 2007, especially 219-298.)

Fifth, Japanese elites gained a deep knowledge

of the West and its ideas after Commodore Perry visited Japan with his steamships in 1853. The shogunal authorities immediately set up government schools to learn about Western military and medical technology, and when Japan's new universities were established after the Meiji government came to power in 1868, they emphasized learning about European and North American political, economic, scientific and technological systems—in fact, most of the early teachers were either foreigners or Japanese trained abroad. For example, Takahashi's first job, at age 14, was to teach English in the elite Japanese school that later became Tokyo University. He was chosen because, although badly educated in a traditional sense, he was fluent in English, having studied with American missionaries in Yokohama and then in California for four years. His English-language ability as a child started him on a career that led to his becoming Governor of the Bank of Japan, seven-time Finance Minister, and even to serving briefly but significantly as Prime Minister in 1921-22.

Two changes in "Westernization" took place by the 1920s. To begin with, people no longer read only officially acceptable Western books—for example, all of John Maynard Keynes' books appeared in Japanese translation within two years of their English publications, Kurt Weill's and Berthold Brecht's *Three Penny Opera* appeared in Japanese-translation on the Japanese stage only four years after its Berlin premiere, the poetry of left poets like Langston Hughes (who visited Japan in 1933 and stayed at the Imperial Hotel) came out in translation within months of their original English editions, Itagaki Eitarō, a Japanese artist who helped paint the murals in the Harlem Court House (and who worked for the US government during World War II, but was deported to Japan in 1951 for being a Communist) lived 1915-1928 with the American sculptor Gertrude Boyle, who carved a bust of

Takahashi in 1936, and there is a photograph in a major Japanese newspaper in autumn 1935 of Finance Minister Takahashi reading Beatrice and Sidney Webb's laudatory book on the Soviet Union, published in a national newspaper. Second, by the interwar years, Japanese no longer learned "things Western," but learned "things modern." That is, Japan had become a member of the modern intellectual world and made major contributions to it. This is most clear in the arts—the Western modernism of William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright, for example, had a strong Japanese influence in its development. And Japanese engineers and scientists were among the world's best. For example, in 1941 the famous Mitsubishi Zero fighter plane was faster, had greater maneuverability, and a longer range than any of the American planes it went against, and the battleships Yamato and Musashi were the world's largest warships.

Japan's military elite emphasized the centrality of Japanese spirit to victory in war at the same time that it relied on Western military technology to build a world-class army and navy. But oddly, the officers who sought to use Western technology to build Japan's military power did not understand that as well as they had learned to create modern weapons, they had not yet caught up with the US, USSR and UK in the quality and quantity of military technology. In fact, while American pilots admired the Zero, they also called it a "flying cigarette lighter," because much of its speed, maneuverability and range came from lowering the plane's weight by reducing its protective armor, especially around the gas tanks. And the battleships Yamato and Musashi, powerful as they were, were built for the war before the one they fought in. Aircraft carriers to launch planes against enemy ships, carrier based planes that were as fast as the Zero but better protected, submarines to interdict Japanese

shipping, and B-29s not only to burn Japanese cities to the ground but also to drop mines in Japan's internal waters, took over control of the war. The US carried out "Operation Starvation" (a use of airplanes, submarines, and sea mines dropped from B-29s to cut off Japan's raw material and food supply and to destroy its housing in order to break its peoples' morale and induce them to pressure their government into surrender) in and around Japan in 1944-45 and the Japanese, in spite of their knowledge of Western military technology, could not resist it. Good as the Japanese were in learning about Western technology between 1853 and 1945, they were not as good at it as their Western models. Possibly the Imperial Japanese elite staff officers recognized Japan's economic weakness and thus chose "warrior spirit" as a way to make up the difference, albeit with disastrous results for Japan and its soldiers, sailors, and urban civilians. In addition to the war dead, by the time of Japan's surrender in 1945, one-quarter of its housing had been destroyed, and "Rice Stocks on Hand" were less than one-tenth of the 1937 level. (Cohen 1949, 367, 407) The war, blithely entered into, came home to roost.

#### Sources:

Cohen, Jerome B. 1949. *Japan's Economy in War and Reconstruction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Drea, Edward J. 2009. *The Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*. Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press.

Humphreys, Leonard A. 1995. *The Way of the Heavenly Sword*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

- Katō Yōko. 2001. *Sensō no ronri: Nichirō sensō kara taiheiyō sensō made* (The Logic of War: From the Russo-Japanese War to the Pacific War). Tokyo: Keisō shobō.
- Katō Yōko. 2009. *Soredemo, Nihonjin wa 'sensō' o eranda* (Yet, the Japanese Chose War). Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha.
- Kawada Minoru. 2011. *Shōwa rikugun no kiseki*. (Following the Shōwa Era Army). Tokyo: Chūō kōron shinsha.
- Kawada, Minoru. 2014-15. *Shōwa rikugun zenshi* (A Complete History of the Shōwa Period Army). Tokyo: Kōdansha gendai shinsho.
- Kitaoka Shin'ichi and Mikuriya Takashi, eds. 2010, *Sensō-fukkō-hatten: kenryoku to kōsō* (War, Revival, Development: Power and Planning). Tokyo: Tokyo University Press.
- League of Nations. 1945. *Industrialization and Foreign Trade*. New York: League of Nations.
- McCrea, John L. 2016. *Captain McCrea's War*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.
- Maddison, Angus. 1995. *Monitoring the World Economy: 1821-1992*. Paris: OECD.
- Makino Kuniaki. 2016. *Keizai gakushatachi no Nichibei kaisen* (Economists and the Japan-America War). Tokyo: Shinchōsha.
- Matsumoto Seichō. 2005. *Shōwashi hakkutsu* (Excavating Shōwa Era History). Vol. 7. Tokyo: Bunshun bunkōbunko.
- Matsuura Masataka. 2002. *Zaikai no seiji keizaishi* (A political economic history of financial circles). Tokyo: Tokyo University Press.
- Mori, Yasuo. 2011. *Nagata Tetsuzan: Heiwa iji wa gunjin no saidai sekimu nari* (Maintaining peace is a soldier's greatest duty) Kyoto: Mineruva shobō.
- NHK. 2011. *Nihonjin wa naze sensō e to mukatta no ka* (Why did the Japanese go to war?) 3 vols. Tokyo: NHK.
- Presseisen, Ernest L. 1965. *Before Aggression: Europeans Prepare the Japanese Army*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.
- Skidelsky, Robert. 1994. *John Maynard Keynes: The Economist as Saviour, 1920-1927*. London: Penguin.
- Smethurst, Richard J. 1974. *A Social Basis for Prewar Japanese Militarism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smethurst, Richard J. 2007. *From Foot Soldier to Finance Minister: Takahashi Korekiyo, Japan's Keynes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Smethurst, Richard J. 2010. *Takahashi Korekiyo: Nihon no Keinzu: Sono shōgai to shisō* (Takahashi Korekiyo, Japan's Keynes: His Life and Thought) Tokyo: Tōyō keizai shinpōsha.
- Smethurst, Richard J. 2012. "Japan, the United States, and the Road to World War II in the Pacific," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 10, Issue 37, September 10, 2012.
- Takahashi Korekiyo. 1920. *Naigai kokusaku shiken* (Personal Opinions on National Policy at Home and Abroad). Tokyo: 1920.
- Tobe Ryōichi. 1999. *Nihon rikugun to Chūgoku* (The Japanese Army and China). Tokyo: Kōdansha.
- Tobe Ryōichi 2017. *Jikai no byōri: Nihon guntai no soshiki bunseki* (A Pathology of Self-Destruction: An Analysis of the Structure of the Japanese Army.) Tokyo: Nihon keizai shuppansha.
- Warner, Malcolm, ed. 2017. *The Diffusion of Western Economic Ideas in East Asia*. Abingdon: Routledge.



**Richard J. Smethurst** is Professor Emeritus of Modern Japanese History at the University of Pittsburgh. He has written three books and many articles on modern Japan, and especially on the rise of, and Japanese opposition to the rise of, Japanese militarism. His current research is into Japanese industrial policy in the late nineteenth century, the military decision-making that led Japan into World War 2, and the woodblock prints of the nō theater by the artist [Tsukioka Kōgyo](#).