

Increasing militarism in Japan

Japan was already established on the Asian mainland: its victory over Russia in the war of 1905 had given Japan control over much of Manchuria, and in 1910 it had annexed Korea. Moreover, Japan emerged from the First World War as the most important power in Asia, acquiring colonies in the Pacific and control over German territories leased from China. Yet Japan was not satisfied by these gains for several reasons:

- Rapid population growth and industrial development meant that Japan had to import food and raw materials.
- The Allies' refusal to refer to racial equality in the peace treaties of 1919–20 was deeply offensive to the Japanese.
- The Japanese government had accepted an inferior position in the Washington Naval Agreements (1922), which permitted Japan only three ships to every five built by Britain and the USA. The Japanese military took this as a sign that they could not trust their politicians to protect Japan's interests.

Tension between the military, who wanted a policy of aggressive expansion in Asia, and the politicians, who were much more cautious, grew worse during the 1920s. The army began to act without government approval. In 1928 it had the local warlord in Manchuria, Chang Tso Lin, assassinated because it thought the government's policy of friendship towards Chang was wrong. The army simply wanted to take Manchuria over.

There were also increasing economic difficulties towards the end of the 1920s. The price of rice began to collapse because of over-production, and Japan's farmers saw their incomes fall sharply. Moreover, the export of silk, mostly to the USA, was seriously affected by the Depression. By 1932 the price was only one-fifth of what it had been a decade earlier. Japanese industry was also in a bad state – production and employment fell by 30 per cent between 1929 and 1931. While the government seemed unable to cope with these developments, the army's policy of territorial conquest and expansion seemed to offer the people some hope.

In September 1931 (see pages 75–6), the army staged the Mukden incident, which led to the seizure of Manchuria and the establishment of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. The government in Tokyo had advance warning of these plans, but did not intervene. Politicians needed great courage to stand up to the army, since assassinations were common. In May 1932 a group of soldiers murdered the prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi, in his own house. In February 1936 a full-scale military revolt in Tokyo was crushed only after many politicians and government officials had been murdered. Such events undermined normal political life. After 1932 Japan's governments were dominated by military men, and followed ever more aggressive policies, culminating in the invasion of China in 1937.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain how the Great Depression made the work of the League more difficult.
- 2 Why did militarism develop in
 - a Japan
 - b Italyduring the 1920s and 1930s?
- 3 Look at Source E. What was the cartoonist's opinion of Japanese actions in China?

Why did the League fail in Manchuria and Abyssinia?

Failure in Manchuria, 1931-3

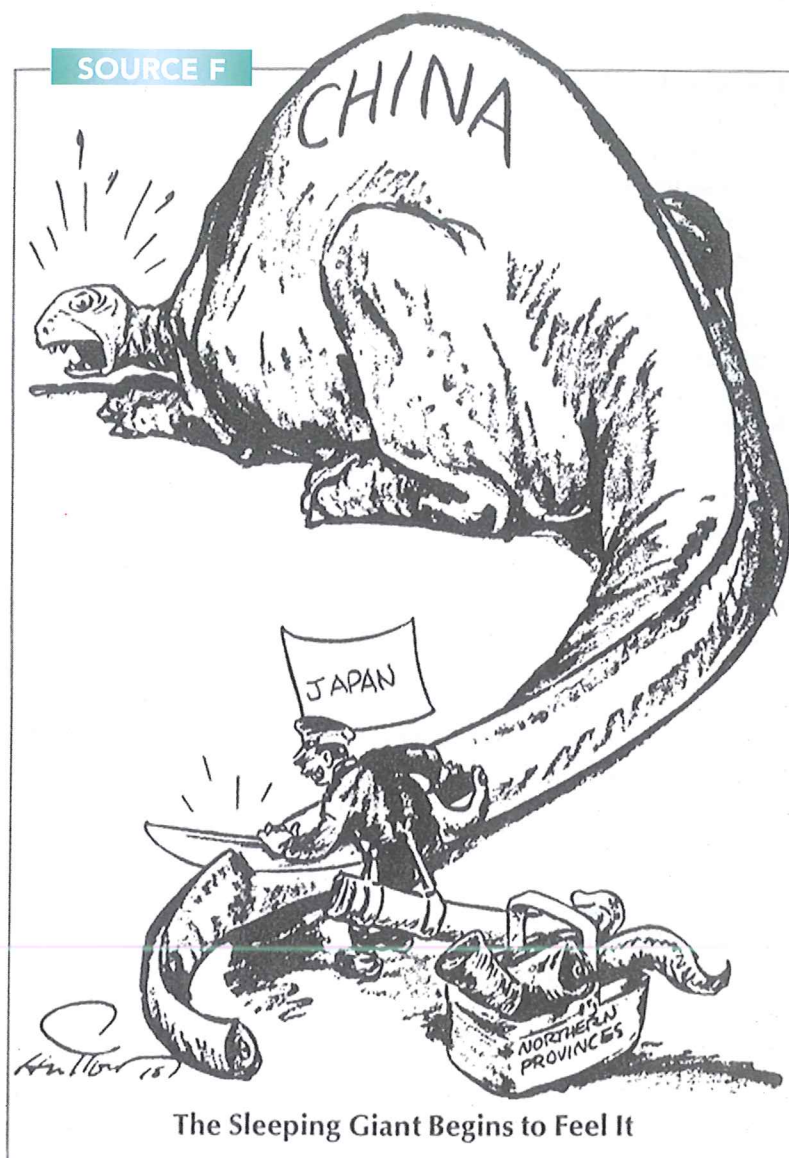
Manchuria is a part of northern China – fertile and rich in natural resources such as coal and iron ore. In the 1920s China was weak, and in many areas local leaders called warlords were more important than the national government. Japan took advantage of this weakness to expand its interests in Manchuria.

The Japanese already had an army (known as the Kwantung army) stationed in southern Manchuria to protect the territory gained from Russia in 1905. They also owned the South Manchurian Railway. The Chinese regarded the area as theirs, and claimed that they had been forced, first by Russia and later by Japan, to accept foreign domination of Manchuria. By the late 1920s many Chinese were moving into Manchuria to settle, attracted by the availability of land and work. At the same time, the Chinese government was beginning to stand up to the warlords, and the Japanese feared that the Chinese might soon be strong enough to challenge them in Manchuria.

Exasperated by what they believed was their own government's weakness in dealing with China, in September 1931 officers of the Kwantung army staged the Mukden incident. The exact sequence of events remains unclear. However, on the night of 18 September, there was an explosion on the South Manchurian Railway just outside the city of Mukden. The Japanese claimed that this was sabotage by the Chinese, who subsequently opened fire on Japanese railway guards. The Chinese denied this, claiming that all their soldiers in the area were in barracks at the time. Whatever the truth of the matter, the incident was very

convenient for the Kwantung army and gave it an excuse to begin the takeover of Manchuria.

There is no doubt that the Japanese government was appalled by these events, but as the invasion progressed successfully, an outburst of nationalism swept Japan, leaving the government no choice but to accept what had occurred. In 1932 Manchuria was renamed Manchukuo, and the last Chinese emperor, Pu Yi, swept from power in his own country in 1911, was installed by the Japanese as a puppet ruler.



An American cartoon of 1937, commenting on the Japanese invasion of China.

How would the League of Nations react? At first, the occupation of Manchuria looked like an obvious case of aggression by Japan. However, the Japanese had long-standing economic rights there, agreed by treaty with the Chinese. Most nations were inclined to regard Manchuria as a Japanese sphere of interest, and were not keen to get involved. In addition, the Japanese had successfully sown confusion about the true circumstances of the Mukden incident, and insisted that they were just defending themselves from Chinese attacks. Nevertheless, when China appealed for the League's help, it could not ignore what was going on. The League instructed Japanese forces to withdraw, but it was ignored, and the further advance of the Japanese into Manchuria left little doubt of their intentions.

In truth, there was little that the League could do if Japan remained determined to ignore its authority. For most League members, events in East Asia seemed very distant. China's internal turmoil was well known, and many League members secretly

sympathised with Japan's attempts to impose 'order' on the region. The League decided to set up a Commission of Inquiry under Lord Lytton, which was sent to the area to gather information and report on what had happened. When the report was published in late 1932, it condemned Japan's actions. The members of the League accepted Lytton's conclusions. The Japanese response was simple: they ignored the report and left the League.

The occupation of Manchuria did not end Japanese aggression in China. Early in 1932 Japanese and Chinese troops clashed in Shanghai, and during four weeks of fighting Japan bombed parts of the city. In February 1933 the Japanese occupied Jehol province, which bordered on to Manchuria. These actions were just a prelude to the full-scale invasion of the Chinese mainland that commenced in July 1937. In the months that followed, fighting spread through much of China, and by 1938 many of China's most important cities were under Japanese occupation. Many historians regard July 1937 as the true starting date of the Second World War.

SOURCE G



Japanese troops after a victory over Chinese forces in December 1931.

The League had been exposed as powerless to deal with Japanese aggression in Manchuria. However, because these events took place in East Asia and not in Europe, they were not too damaging to the League's authority. It was easy for the League's supporters to continue to believe that, if a similar crisis occurred in Europe, where vital interests of the great powers were at stake, the League would be able to cope with it.

SOURCE H

On arrival at the site of the explosion, the patrol was fired upon from the fields on the east side of the line. Lieutenant Kawamoto immediately ordered his men to deploy and to return the fire. The attacking body, estimated at five or six, then stopped firing and retreated northwards. The Japanese patrol at once started in pursuit and, having gone about 200 metres, were again fired upon by a larger body, estimated at between three and four hundred.

The Japanese account of events given to the Lytton Inquiry.

SOURCE J

An explosion undoubtedly occurred on or near the railroad between 10 and 10.30 p.m. but the damage was not sufficient to justify military action. The military operations of the Japanese during this night cannot be regarded as legitimate self-defence.

An extract from Lord Lytton's report, published in October 1932.

SOURCE I

Instructions had been received that special care was to be taken to avoid any clash with Japanese troops in the tense state of feeling which existed at the time. On the night of 18 September, all the soldiers of the 7th Brigade, numbering about 10,000, were in the North Barracks. The west gate in the mud wall surrounding the camp, which gave access to the railway, had been closed. At 10 p.m. the sound of a large explosion could be heard, immediately followed by rifle fire.

The Chinese version of events given to the Lytton Inquiry.

QUESTION

Read Sources H, I and J.

Did Lord Lytton believe either the Japanese or the Chinese? How can you tell?

Failure in Abyssinia, 1935–6

In October 1935, Italy, one of the founder members of the League of Nations, attacked Abyssinia, a poor, undeveloped state in north-east Africa. Most historians believe that the resulting crisis was a death-blow to the League, which found it impossible to take effective action to stop the Italian aggression.

Abyssinia was almost the only part of Africa not under European control and, being located next to the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, it was an obvious target for Mussolini's colonial

ambitions. Italy had attempted to conquer Abyssinia before, and one of Mussolini's aims was to avenge the humiliation suffered by the Italians at the Battle of Adowa (1896). Despite the Treaty of Friendship that Italy had signed with Abyssinia in 1928, it was clear by 1934 that Mussolini was planning war. In December 1934 a clash between Italian and Abyssinian troops at the oasis of Wal Wal gave Mussolini the excuse he needed. Although the League attempted to intervene in the dispute, tension increased and by September 1935 war seemed near.