

The 2006 World War II Essay Contest

Second Place

Colonialism in China The Beginning of Japanese Imperialism in World War II

Karen Wu
San Diego State University

Of the many military, economic, and diplomatic interactions shared between China and the Empire of Japan in World War II, few were as indicative or as far reaching in terms of Japanese imperialism in World War II era Asia as the events and motives surrounding the Mukden Incident of 1931. By examining the events that transpired during the Mukden Incident, the Japanese motives behind the actions taken in Manchuria, and the American response, one can understand why this event is of such key importance in the historical context of World War II.

While controversial even today in terms of factual background, the Mukden Incident” which took place on September 18, 1931 set a distinctive tone for Japanese foreign policy towards China in the ensuing years. On the evening of the 18th, Japanese troops, posing as parts of a

remote Chinese garrison, placed several explosive charges around the rails of a Japanese train track and detonated. While the explosives were placed in such a way as to leave the tracks perfectly in tact, the Japanese government (who knowingly ordered their soldiers to pose as Chinese renegades) used the explosion as justification to seize control of the surrounding northern Chinese territory of Manchuria. By framing Chinese troops, Japan claimed that its property (the railway) was not safe under Chinese control and that Japanese control would insure security. Thus, the Japanese took control, with no resistance, of the region on September 19, 1931 (Beasley, 173-198).

This invasion was one which was motivated by largely economic factors. As W.G. Beasley writes in his text Japanese Imperialism, 1894-1945, “there was...frequent talk in these years [1929-1931] of Manchuria being Japan's economic ‘lifeline’” (190). This was due to the fact that changing climates in world affairs had begun to exclude Japan from much of the major world market. Thus, the growth of Japanese interests in China reflected in certain respects the development of the Japanese economy (134). With the Mukden Incident, the Japanese

Empire had ceased talking and begun acting with clear economic motives in mind. Beasley notes that "...once the occupation of Manchuria had been completed the area would come under Japanese military administration, which would be directed towards developing the Manchurian economy in a manner complementary to that of Japan" (Beasley, 194). In other words, Japan would exercise her military might and exploit the passivity of the Chinese central government and the remoteness and abundance of Manchuria for its own benefit. The Japanese government, under a puppet state, thus set forward to colonize Manchuria or Manchukuo (as it was called under Japanese rule). This meant, according to Japanese mandate that Manchukuo would now bear the cost of Japanese units stationed there for its defense and maintenance of order; would entrust Japan to the management of railways, ports, and airfields needed for those purpose; and would obey the 'advice' of the Japanese commander-in-chief in the appointment of advisors (196). The assumption of these various functions by Japan concerning Manchukuo finally made tangible the trend of Japanese imperialism over economy in the area that had taken place in the last decade, more or less. The

strategy paid off for Japan. Beasley cites a statistic regarding increases in foreign investment rates to support this. He writes that the investment rate in the “United States increased, but was always very small. Japan’s grew enormously: from negligible amounts in 1902 to 1,136 million dollars in 1931, that is, to 35 per cent, which was only slight less than Britain’s at the time” (134). Japan’s imperialist ideology combined with its newly acquired economic girth, gave allied Western nations cause for worry in these pre-war days.

Indeed the cause for worry was well founded. General Ishiwara, one of the masterminds behind the Mukden Incident, had summed up the long term goals of the Japanese Empire when he proclaimed that “by bringing about Japanese -- Manchurian co-operation and Japanese -- Chinese friendship that the Japanese people can become rulers of Asia and be prepared to wage the final and decisive war against the white races” (196). In its invasion of Manchuria, Japan had set into motion the first act that would culminated in World War II about a decade later. However, just as China was unable to fight the invasion of the reason due to internal political and economic strife, the allied countries and the

League of Nations were virtually powerless, as well. World War II historian Robert Smith Thompson suggests that, while America was not prepared militarily to intervene and protect China, it issued “The Stimson Doctrine” which cemented the allied interest in China’s welfare. He writes that “by asserting the right to guarantee China's survival in the face of Japanese aggression, America acknowledged itself as a major player in the East Asian power game” (39). By this excerpt and the one made by General Ishiwara, it becomes clear that many of the pieces were in place for the Pacific War nearly a decade before the first shot was fired.

In conclusion, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria represented an imperialist action by the Empire to both display strength and boost its economy by exploiting the region. Under the guise of preventing internal instability within China, Japan framed Chinese dissidents for the 1931 explosion of the Mukden Incident and successfully assumed control of this northern region of China to great economic success. However, the invasion of Manchuria was recognized by top Japanese officials as a stepping stone to a major conflict with the Western powers

and the 'white race'. Likewise, this invasion provided America with the credence to step in and claim a genuine interest in East Asian policy.

Works Cited

Beasley, W.G. Japanese Imperialism, 1894-1945. Claredon Press, Oxford, 1987.

Thompson, Robert Smith. Empires on the Pacific: World War II and the Struggle for the

Mastery of Asia. Basic Books, New York, 2001.