

To what extent did domestic Japanese issues lead to its expansionism into Manchuria during 1920-1930?

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will explore the question: to what extent did domestic Japanese issues lead to its expansionism into Manchuria? The years 1920-1930 will be the focus of the investigation.

The first source is “*The Goal of Japanese Expansionism*”, a pamphlet. Its origin is Tatsuo Kawai, the director of the Information bureau in the Japanese foreign office and published in 1938. The purpose of the source is to justify and explain Japan’s case for expansionism by attributing it to various factors such as “cosmic principle” and ”social duty” (Kawai 39). The pamphlet is relevant in aiding a historian in assessing the genuine motives behind Japanese expansionism as Mr. Kawai, who served as a leader in the Kwantung territory in 1930, would have valuable firsthand knowledge of the incident and its associated causes. His role as the director of the Information Bureau allows him more in-depth knowledge of the Japanese government’s motivations. However, it is also limited because as a diplomat, Kawai has a duty to serve his country’s interests and therefore may not present a complete factual perspective of the events. Furthermore, the author is trying to “justify” instead of analyze information, which means some causes that may be detrimental to Japan’s reputation may be omitted and distorted.

The second source is the book “*Japan’s Feet of Clay*”, its origin is British Marxist historian Freda Utley written in 1937. The purpose of the source is to illustrate that the Japanese system of capitalism was so heavily dependent on Western markets that if the United Kingdom and United States both took a tougher policy against Japan, they would be able to check its advance into Manchuria. It is relevant because it analyzes the state of Japan’s economy, a chief factor in its expansionism, in detail. The book’s value lies in the qualifications of Utley, who received fellowships in economic research and a degree in history, indicating that she is knowledgeable on this subject. It is also valuable as it is written in retrospect to the incident, as Utley can benefit from hindsight. However, it is also limited as the Marxist framework is often too focused on social issues to accurately represent the actual problems. For example, Utley argued that social agitation was one of the causes of expansionism, which misrepresented

Japanese sentiment at the time—as Kaori Sugihara points out, “ few would go so far as to suggest that a social revolution was about to erupt” (Sugihara 227).

Section 2: Investigation

Japanese expansionism and aggression into Asia had largely been justified from its own government by domestic issues such as overpopulation, economic problems, and a lack of natural resources. Though statistics seemingly support this, the justification did not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation. Having investigated the actual impact of domestic political, economic and population issues on Japanese expansionism into Manchuria, there is indication that population issues held were of little consequence, while political and economic domestic issues held great significance in Japanese expansionist policy.

Population growth was certainly rapid in Japan but held little significance in its expansionist policy. Japanese academic perspectives tended to argue that territorial expansion was essential to a country facing mounting population pressure while possessing little land. Dr T. Senga, a notable intellectual, claimed that his country must expand rapidly into Asia to “absorb her surplus population” (Pollard 34). There is certainly ample evidence to support this claim - population grew from 50 million in 1909 to 60 million in 1923 while Japan proper only contained 392,111 square kilometers (Orchard 330). However, according to a post-war study by Japanese economist Ryouchi Ishii, no problems were found with food supply or insufficient employment opportunities, hence rendering the rapidly growing population statistics relatively inconsequential. Food supply was ample throughout the inter-war period and even during World War II. Unemployment did not constitute a problem either due to Japan’s industrialized society, which created new job opportunities for industrial work (Ishii 250). Given the evidence, it seems that population growth was notable but did not cause any significant negative impact on the Japanese population’s standard of living; consequently, it could not have reasonably motivated Japan’s aggressive expansion into Manchuria. Therefore, perspectives solely addressing the statistics of Japanese population growth alone fail to provide a justified understanding of the country’s motives as the factor held little significance. Generally speaking, demographics were largely used as a convenient pretext by the Japanese government rather than a genuine motive.

Domestic economic issues, however, significantly contributed to Japanese aggression in Manchuria. While Marxist historian Freda Utley downplays political matters, she emphasizes the

problem with Japan's domestic natural resources, which "formed the most important cause of expansionism" (Utley 130). Furthermore, she contends that Japanese industry heavily depended on natural resources such as iron and steel and had to attain these through colonialism. Her assertion is supported by Japan's economic policy, which relied completely on foreign trade to support local production. While initially successful, it failed at the time of the Great Depression as each country withdrew into a protectionist policy and imposed high tariffs, which led to local business failure and overproduction in Japan (Shizume 6). As trade failed, colonies which would provide Japan with both markets and resources became increasingly desirable to both the capitalists and the militarists (Pollard 30). Though some Japanese revisionist diplomats have insisted that Japan did not seek to attenuate its domestic economic issues through the Manchurian occupation and even bore "financial burdens through annexation", there is little evidence to support this (Kawai 16). Japan clearly acquired resources such as iron ore and cotton to solve its resource issues; the coal reserves of Manchuria provided Japan with needed resource for industrialization, and 1,700,000 tons of coal were exported to Japan proper in the year 1932 (Orchard 6). Japan also cultivated 7400 acres of cotton in the Kwantung Army's territories, which would be sufficient to replace about one fifth of raw cotton imported from the other foreign countries (Eldridge 101). Furthermore, resources were seized from Manchuria rather than legally bought, which indicates that the benefit to the colony was not considered (Orchard 11). It appears that domestic economic issues—mostly Japan's flawed economic policy -- were a significant factor in the Manchurian incident.

Domestic political issues were also a very significant factor in Japanese expansionism; it included the nationalistic tendencies of the militarists and their gradual replacement of parliamentary rule. Utley's perspective had cited socio-political issues as a cause of Manchurian expansion. According to her, "Japan was a seething cauldron of misery and injustice" resulting from class conflict; its government used expansionism as a distraction from problems at home (Utley 40). However, Utley's Marxist framework tends to overemphasize class factors over social issues and fails to consider the strong nationalism which served as a primary motivation of the militarists' expansionism. The militarist faction subscribed to a sense of state nationalism, which demanded conformity at home and military expansion abroad (Conroy 819). They felt insulted by the limitations imposed on Japan during the Washington Conference and thought that

only an aggressive policy which ended in the domination of China would solve the domestic issues in Japan. Manchuria would be a first step in the “New World Order”, which would place Japan as the primary power in the Asiatic region (Young 23). While the extremists in the military came into great conflict with the moderates in the Japanese parliamentary, the democratic government’s intervention was largely ineffective because of the nationalism of the Japanese population and the flawed nature of the Meiji constitution. Firstly, when democratic foreign policy which emphasized trade and diplomacy failed to solve the economic repercussions of the Great Depression, civilians placed their faith in the military. Consequently, parliamentary power was greatly reduced as it could not keep the military’s aggressive foreign policy in check (Gordon 186). Secondly, the Meiji constitution allowed the military to act virtually unhindered before and after the Manchurian incident. The Japanese civilian government was aware of the headstrong behavior of the Kwantung army prior to the incident and dispatched a general to “caution them against rash action”, but this was quite ineffectual because the military anticipated the move and undermined it. Even when the Tokyo commander knew of the invasion plot, he took no action to stop it, and the civilian cabinet had little power to check the conduct of the Kwantung army (Hsu 549). Due to the cabinet’s inability to deny reinforcements to Manchuria, the civilian government was effectively rendered a *fait accompli*. Essentially, the military acted with almost absolute power and the failure of the civilian government to take action prior to and after the Manchurian incident led to successful expansionism.

In conclusion, domestic issues did lead to Japanese expansionism in Manchuria to a large extent. While population pressure could hardly be a justified incentive, domestic economic issues and political issues led to an unchecked invasion into Manchuria. As Japan experienced domestic economic problems due to flawed policy, it sought to attenuate resource and market deficiencies by colonizing Manchuria. The military, in turn, was given too much power and the weakness of the civilian government resulted in a failure to keep expansionism in check. Evidence regarding the legitimacy of Japan’s population growth problem seems to suggest that this issue had little to no negative impact and thus did not serve as a motive.

Section 3: Reflection

In order to come to this investigation's conclusion, I used the method of reading multiple historians' conclusions and governmental memorandums while depending heavily on statistical evidence. This is due to my investigation's focus on economic factors. The above are all methods historians used to analyze evidence and come to a conclusion.

It was a challenge to strike the balance between the significantly different perspectives of each historian. For example, Freda Utley's Marxist perspective focused very heavily on the Japan's economic factors while dismissing all others, while more contemporary historians such as Young focused on historical and ideological factors leading to expansionism.

Although I did find it difficult to reach a conclusion initially, through the investigation I could understand the work of the historian better as I realized that history was not dependent on a single narrative. It instead involved a lot of weighing between the limitations and values of each source to produce a complex argument. For example, though I thought Utley's perspective was valuable, my argument was not solely based upon her points. This is because Marxist perspective presented an overly narrow focus on economic factors, which sometimes led to misrepresentation or omission of other factors. To make up for this lack, I also based the nationalist part of my argument on Young's source, which was more comprehensive overall. I assessed primary resources similarly. An example is Dr. T. Senga's argument for expansionism. Though it provided valuable insight into Japan's mentality, it was only partially valuable to my investigation due to the fact that it was a persuasive piece of writing intended to urge expansionism and the fact that it was written before the Manchurian Incident.

Throughout my investigation, I was not only acquainted with some historical methods but also was made aware of some limitations of information historians had to face. Firstly, the subject of my investigation was Japanese history, and many of these associated archives which could shed light on the mentality of certain governmental are still under protection. Secondly, the linguistic limitations of the historian will largely inhibit their ability to understand primary sources. In languages such as Japanese, what is left unsaid may be even more important than what is directly said. Furthermore, Japanese as a language is very culturally different from

English, and there may be specific connotations of a word that is difficult to carry across when translated. However, because I do not understand the intricacies of the language, I could not detect these hints.

In conclusion, this investigation allowed me to learn how to use historians' methods effectively, while addressing and sometimes acknowledging the limitations and challenges I faced.

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