

Handout

The Outbreak of World War II in East Asia Documents

Document 1

One Japanese soldier who served in World War II recounted the impact of his schooling during this period in an interview for the book *Evil Men*:

You know, public education, they drove loyalty and patriotism, that sort of ideology home. In other words, what does that mean? It means that the country of Japan is, well, the country of God. It is the absolute best country in the world—that idea was thoroughly planted into us. . . . If you turn it over, it means to despise other races. That is the sort of ideology it is. And from the time we were small, we called Chinese people dirty chinks—made fun of them. We called Russians Russkie pigs. We called Westerners hairy barbarians, you know? And so this meant that when the people of Japan joined the army and went to the front, no matter how many Chinese they killed, they didn't think of it as being much different than killing a dog or a cat.¹

Japan, of course, was not alone in having a culture that instilled the belief that groups of people could be ranked by racial characteristics. The idea of ranking people based on race was central to the pseudoscientific ideas of eugenics that were popular in the West during this time. Scientists today, however, understand that race as determined by skin color is not a meaningful way to understand differences between humans.

¹ James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 49.

Document 2

The League of Nations was an international organization composed of five Allied nations (France, Italy, Great Britain, the United States, and Japan) that was created after World War I to provide a forum for resolving international conflicts. While Japan was officially one of the five nations at the table, its influence was ultimately undermined by its allies, who wanted to keep Japan's regional power at bay. For Japanese nationalists, this was yet another piece of evidence that the Japanese were disrespected by Western nations.

In response, the Japanese delegation actively worked for the inclusion of a racial equality clause in the covenant of the League of Nations. This racial equality clause would abolish racial discrimination in all future international dealings. Makino Nobuaki, a leader of the Japanese delegation, advocated for the following clause to be included:

The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of States, members of the League, equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.¹

The proposal was ultimately rejected by the League of Nations. The clause was not adopted due to opposition led by the United States, even though 11 of the 17 delegates voted for the amendment. In the following years, Japan turned away from international cooperation and became a more insular and militaristic nation.

¹ Paul Gordon Lauren, "Human Rights in History: Diplomacy and Racial Equality at the Paris Peace Conference," *Diplomatic History* 2, no. 3 (1978): 257–58. The first draft of the proposed clause was presented to the League of Nations on February 13, 1919, as an amendment to Article 21 of the league's charter.

Document 3

A Japanese soldier described his schooling during this period:

[T]o give your life to the leader, His Majesty the Emperor, of what is absolutely the greatest country in the world, Japan, is a sacred duty and the highest honor. There's that ideology, you know. And this ideology, when you go into the military, is strengthened more and more, and your personality is taken away. . . . When it's time to go to battle—at those times, when you were ordered by a superior, you couldn't resist. So the humanitarian ideology I learned about in college just couldn't win out over the ideology of "loyalty and patriotism" that had been drilled into me from the time I was small.¹



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¹ James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 49.

Document 4

Map of Japanese Empire Building (1870–1942)



While China dealt with internal economic and political upheaval after the formation of the First Chinese Republic in 1911, Japan was emerging as a formidable imperial power. Following their victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japanese leaders sought more territories in the region. Gradually, Japan built a vast empire.

The invasion of Manchuria was a turning point in this history. Manchuria was a Chinese territory where Japan held substantial commercial and political interests. By 1928, Japan's prime minister, Tanaka, sent troops to China. To him and his followers, expanding into Manchuria made sense politically, as additional territory would help ease Japan's raw material shortage and offer a place to reside for the growing Japanese population. Japanese imperial forces successfully occupied the Manchurian city of Mukden (Shenyang) and the whole of Manchuria by 1931. This marked the beginning of nearly a decade and a half of Japan's territorial expansion into the Asian mainland.

Document 5

The following is an excerpt from a *New York Times* article from August 15, 1937.

Rich Land Is Goal of Japanese Army: Raw Materials of North China Are of Vast Importance to Both Tokyo and Nanking

Japan's new offensive in the [Beijing] region is her answer to the question upon which the future of Asia apparently hinges: Who is to use the abundant raw materials of the Chinese provinces which lie west of [Beijing]? Both China and Japan greatly desire these materials . . .

Japan's Ore Needs

There are the very commodities that Japan needs most desperately. If her steel industry is ever to become self-sufficient she must secure for herself the 300,000,000 tons of ore which lie in Shansi [in northern China] and its vicinity.

Japan's coal shortage is for the first time becoming dangerous. While her coal reserves are not as significant, they are of a low grade. The coal her smelting industries use must be imported, and again Shansi is the nearest source . . .

Tokyo Wool Shortage

The wool shortage has been even more troublesome; lack of the raw material has forced Japan's wool mills to run on part time for a protracted period . . .

It was to obtain command of the wealth of the [Shanxi] region, that Japan recently asked Nanking for permission to build a railroad link between Shihkiachwang [capital of Hebei Province] and Tsangchow [city in Hebei Province,] that is, between already existent roads blanketing the Northern provinces and the one which leads to the port of Tsingtao, a Japanese concession. Such a concession, if granted, would have given the Japanese a through route from the coast to their military base in Chahar [Province].

Steel Plant

Large modern steel works are to be constructed at Canton, and the Ministry of Railways is planning a central railway equipment plant. But these ambitious works will not be able to produce the materials the new China requires unless this new China is able to exercise sovereignty rights over the iron ore and coking coal lands of the north.¹

¹ Eliot Janeway, "Rich Land Is Goal of Japanese Army: Raw Materials of North China Are of Vast Importance to Both Tokyo and Nanking," *New York Times*, August 15, 1937, accessed January 1, 2014.