



Japanese Wartime Governance and the Question of Fascism,

1931-1945

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Abstract:

In terms of their involvement in World War II, Japan was one of the most misunderstood and complex nations. While the rise of fascism and communism in Europe dominate modern narratives about 1930s and 1940s politics, Japan's political shifts often go unnoticed, especially by Western historians. As a result, many label its government as fascist in the traditional sense because of its alliance with the Tripartite Pact. However, this label oversimplifies the unique political and military systems that shaped that nation. This paper examines Japan's government during the 1930s and 1940s, arguing that it was not strictly fascist but rather a distinctive combination of fascist state, an imperialist nation, and militaristic junta. To support this argument, this paper explores key events in modern Japanese history, including the Meiji Restoration, the Taisho Era, the Mukden Incident, the establishment of Manchukuo, the February 26th Incident, and the Second Sino-Japanese War. The Empire of Japan is indeed defined by these events, but on close examination, they do not align Japan with universally recognized fascist nations such as Nazi Germany, Italy, and Romania, nor do they totally fall into line with imperial powers like Britain. The paper also aims to illustrate the views of important Japanese leaders such as Emperor Hirohito, Ishiwara Kanji, Hideki Tojo, and Yosuke Matsuoka, to provide a better understanding of the ideological, political, and military forces that influenced Japan during this chaotic time.

Introduction

"Fascism in Japan was not imported; it grew out of the contradictions of our own political and spiritual traditions. It was a 'systemless fascism'—a fascism without a unified ideology, but all the more dangerous because of its ambiguity" (Maruyama 26-33). Here, Japanese political theorist Maruyama Masao argues that Japan's "fascism" was characterized by disorganization, major power vacuums, and various groups asserting overlapping responsibility (29-38). Maruyama's observations raise the following question: if Japan's supposed fascism had so many caveats, did the country truly experience fascism?

Before addressing that question, one might examine fascism through the words of its founders, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Mussolini believed that fascism glorifies the state and embraces war, authority, collective strength, and dedication to the cause (Nolte 1-30). Hitler defined fascism in *Mein Kampf* as a system to preserve racial purity, ensure obedience to the state, and maintain power within the hands of strong individuals (Hitler). Given these statements and their historical context, one can see that the core elements are a highly unified ideology with a strong and powerful leader, the expectation of putting the well-being of the state over self, ultra-nationalism, and the belief in the necessity of eradicating other races to allow for the

dominance of a singular “super race” (Hitler, *Mein Kampf*; Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism”). Lacking some of these qualifications, can it still be argued that Japan was entirely fascist?

In the 1920s and 1930s, Japan underwent dramatic political, social, and economic shifts, from an increasingly democratic nation to a totalitarian regime under the control of the military (Maruyama 20-50). After World War I, Japan emerged as a growing power, joining the League of Nations and expanding its influence in Asia, but the prosperity of the 1920s was short-lived. The global Great Depression of 1929 hit Japan hard, devastating farmers by decreasing the value of silk, a major export, and fueling resentment among rural communities that had supplied many recruits to the military. At the same time, frustration grew with the perceived weakness and corruption of party politics during the Taishō Era (1912-1926); many believed parliamentary leaders were unable to defend Japan’s interests abroad, resolve economic inequality at home, and were increasingly corrupt. Military officers and some right-wing individuals began promoting ideals of loyalty, sacrifice, and expansion, believing it was Japan’s destiny to create an empire in East Asia (30-60). The economic climate, as well as the loopholes in the Meiji Constitution, would grant members of the Imperial Japanese Army the power to act independently of the civilian government, thus paving the way for an eventual takeover. By the 1930s, that takeover materialized, and the military gained dominance in government, pushing Japan toward authoritarianism, expansionism, and war (Hofmann 100-140).

When studying the classification of the Japanese government in the 1930s and 40s, historians have presented two main arguments. The argument of the vast majority of western historians and the common approach to Japanese history in the West claims that Japan was strictly fascist like Germany and Italy. Some historians base their argument on their belief that Japanese actions in China were equal to, if not more severe, than those Hitler used in the Holocaust, so the government must, therefore, be fascist (van de Ven). Others claim that Japan had a dictator in Emperor Hirohito, and that the nation’s expansionist policies were predominantly motivated by the ideology of accommodating a superior race, thus making it a fascist nation (“China’s Resistance During WWII Significant”). These arguments are easy to make, especially since Japan signed the Tripartite Pact and aligned itself with the Axis power; however, such a conclusion examines Imperial Japan’s actions merely as part of the traditional narrative of World War II: that the conflict was strictly an ideological confrontation between Democracy and Fascism.

The other more nuanced and complicated argument was created primarily by Japanese scholars, most notably Maruyama Masao. While Masao argued Japan was fascist, he believed it did not fit the mold expressed by Hitler and Mussolini. Instead, he describes it as a system-less fascism or fascism from above. In other words, he believed that, contrary to the traditional belief that fascism is a civilian movement, Japan’s government evolved from the upper echelons of the military, making it distinct from traditional fascism. The defining characteristics of Japanese fascism were the lack of responsibility on the part of military leaders and the lack of a defining leader (Hofmann 100-140). These factors were also used to explain Japanese war crimes committed throughout World War II. Despite the differences he identifies, Masao believed that Japan’s traditional worship of its emperor was inherently fascist. Maruyama also identifies some divergences from fascism in Japan’s lack of a strong capable leader, its disorganized government, and its feudal system. In fact, both the liberal Maruyama and Marxist scholars



believe Japan's fascist state resulted from the nation's inability to modernize: retention of feudal values and economic structure with its social hierarchy mark two strong differences from Hitler's government, which sought to eradicate class distinction by emphasizing community over class (Volksgemeinschaft) (Hitler *Mein Kampf*, Maruyama 28-42).

Yet, disagreement of opinion in classifying Japan's fascism, even among historians, remains. Some, such as Ernst Nolte, view fascism as an "extremist response to the threat of communism;" others subject it to a checklist that includes militarism, authoritarianism, anti-communism, and racism (Nolte 1-30). A number of Western historians, including Hans van de Ven, therefore, hold that Japan was indeed fundamentally fascist because of its racism (primarily against its occupied subjects) and nationalism and more similar to Germany and Italy (van de Ven). Still, some scholars, including Jeremy Yellen, focused on Japan's imperialist ambitions, claiming Japan's expansionist policies, actions, and racial beliefs, especially those in Manchuria and later in China, emulate a Western imperial model rather than a fascist one. Imperialism can be defined as an ideology that pursues the invasion of other nations and exploitation of its people for economic gain (Yellen). Others make the argument that Japan's fascist model is different from Germany's or Italy's because of the presence of a military junta, or a Gunbatsu. A military junta is defined as a type of government under the control of that nation's armed forces. The term was popular amongst more critical Japanese journalists of the time to describe their government in the 1930s and 1940s. Historian John Dower later used the term to describe Japan in his book *War Without Mercy*, in which he called Japan a "military-bureaucratic regime" (Dower 50-90).

Drawn from the arguments of Masao, Yellen, and Dower, my argument pushes back against the narrative that Imperial Japan can be classified as simply one of three fascist nations aligned in an Axis. It asserts that Japan's wartime government diverges from "pure" fascism, especially when the characteristics of government types utilized in Japan are more strictly delineated. This paper will argue that the Japanese Empire, rather than influenced by a singular governmental ideology, was not entirely fascist in the traditional sense of Germany's or Italy's government; instead, it is a mixture of traditional fascism, Western imperialism, and military junta. This interpretation is significant for a number of reasons.

This paper will establish how Japan fit into a world order dominated by nationalism and fascist thinking by addressing the nuances and distinctions between Japan's governmental system and those of other nations. In addition, it will present the cultural elements distinct to Japanese society and history that make its actions leading up to and into World War II more understandable. It will then quash stereotypes and categorization of historical data that ultimately creates inaccuracy. Finally, in conferring significance to a clearer picture of Japanese motivations and their roots in historical events, this interpretation will affirm an important function of history: to accurately know the past is to ensure a greater understanding of our potential future.

The Meiji Restoration and the Pre-History of Japanese Fascism

Japanese fascist tendencies in the 1930s and 1940s can be traced directly back to the political framework established during the late Meiji period, which began in 1868, and the



economic and social upheaval of the Great Depression that began in 1927. The Meiji era created the structural loopholes and authoritarian traditions that empowered the military, while the Depression provided the spark — a crisis severe enough to convince many that only decisive, extra-constitutional action could save Japan's future (Marcon 50-60).

When the West, specifically the United States, first forced Japan to open its borders in 1853 and imposed unequal trade agreements, many low-ranking samurai in Japan felt humiliated and angered. They became convinced Japan would need to change drastically in order to survive (Gordon 150-190). Takasugi Shinsaku, a samurai from the Chōshū domain, echoed this sentiment when he wrote in 1862: "I was convinced that Japan must strengthen itself to avoid being colonized by the Western powers, or to suffer a similar fate as the Qing" (Takasugi Shinsaku Zenshu 40-60). At that time, Western powers, including Britain, France, Russia, and the United States, had spheres of influence across the Qing Empire and had forced China to sign unequal trade agreements similar to those of the Japanese (Cassel 40-75). Seeing the Tokugawa Shogunate as working with the West, the Chōshū and Satsuma domains, ruling families with their own personal armies, became hostile towards the Tokugawa Shogunate, which considered itself to be the true ruling military family of Japan. The domains backed the Meiji imperialist government, taking the first step toward independence in attempting to overthrow the Shogunate when it became vulnerable. The Meiji, with help, therefore was able to defeat the Tokugawa in the Boshin War of 1868 in the early years of its Restoration. The Meiji government then established the goal of modernizing Japan, which they saw as implementing Western ideas, government, industry, and army while maintaining Japanese culture. This sentiment was captured in the 1868 slogan *Fukoku Kyōhei* or "rich country, strong army" (Gordon 20-30). These goals, combined with growing interference from the United States, helped to make Japan more authoritarian, which allowed it to bear a resemblance to fascism.

The Social and Economic Roots of Japanese Fascism

The decline of the samurai after the Meiji Restoration played a paramount role in shaping Japanese politics in the 1930s and 1940s (Najita 100-140). Samurai of the Satsuma clan in particular were angry over the Meiji's destruction of the samurai class and the current feudal order. When the samurai found themselves with no place in the modern, Western-styled Japan the Meiji government hoped to create, they attempted an uprising in 1877 known as the Satsuma Rebellion. However, they were defeated by the newly formed Imperial Japanese Army, which consisted of conscripted soldiers (Gordon 230-250). Interestingly, many former, renowned samurai or their descendants, including Tojo, Yamamoto, Yamashita, and Ishiwaru, would go on to become influential military leaders within the Imperial Japanese Army, the same one that had defeated their ancestors in 1877 (Harries 50-100).

Like every industrial revolution, the one that occurred in Japan in the 1870s moved wealth and production from the countryside into major cities. Although successful for urban settings, the endeavor happened so quickly that the economy was adversely affected in rural areas (Gordon 230-250). With governmental emphasis on developing the cities, farmers struggled when the government raised their taxes based on land value. This outcome was a far cry from the period of the Tokugawa Shogunate, when taxes for the rural population had decreased. Due to exorbitant taxes, many had to become tenant farmers who cultivated silk, a

valued commodity for manufacturing in the industrial revolution. However, volatility in the markets left farmers even more vulnerable to a possible economic collapse. Already on the brink of ruin, the situation for rural Japan only worsened when the Great Depression hit in the early 1930s. Rural communities were most gravely impacted because of the already high taxes, limited resources, and U.S. tariffs, which translated into less demand for silk (Louise Young 45-75). The discontent set the stage for increased military power.

In the eyes of the military, who felt a special connection to rural Japan, the incompetence and greed of the civilian government and the West had directly caused this disaster (Hillis 100-130). Colonel Ishiwara Kanji stated, “The politicians in Tokyo are blind. They care nothing for national destiny, only their own petty interests. It is our duty as soldiers to act, for they will never understand the necessities of the age” (Louise Young 145-180). Another, General Araki Sadao, said, “Japan’s crisis cannot be solved by weak and selfish political parties. Only through the spirit of the sword, guided by the emperor’s will, can the nation be purified and reborn” (Tansman 140-180). Still others, especially the younger, more radical officers, looked to assassinate politicians and businessmen deemed responsible. Some assassins were even lionized by the military. In one situation, naval officers assassinated Japanese Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi in 1932 but received only light sentences. These actions demonstrated the lengths military leaders were willing to go to “fix” Japan through a fascist response (Hillis 280-320).

Despite the disapproval of conservative Japanese officers, the more liberal parties still dominated Japan in the 1910s and 1920s during the Taisho Era (Nishizawa). Yet, the military leaders circumvented restrictions, utilizing technicalities found in the Meiji Constitution, specifically, Article 11, which made the army answerable to the Emperor rather than the civilian government: “The emperor has the supreme command of the Army and Navy” (Constitution of the Empire of Japan). Because the Emperor was regarded as divine and therefore above political issues, he was reduced to a mere figurehead, thereby giving the military greater, more effective independence (Bix).

Religion & State: Enhancing Fascist Ideals

The combination of state and religion, later known as State Shinto, would become the most obvious and “clear-cut” aspect of Japanese fascism, unique because of its basis in the worship of its Emperor. During the Meiji Restoration, many scholars sought to merge state and religion to preserve Japanese culture and values from Western influence, create a national identity, and legitimize the rule of the emperor (Hardacre). Yokoi Shōnan summarized these feelings in his 1860 treatise, *Kokuze Sanron*: “Although Japan had Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism, it lacked a true national religion in the manner of western nations” (Yokoi 156-86). This lack was seen as disadvantageous for the Japanese. Focusing worship on the Emperor would address that problem. The Meiji government believed a national religion had allowed the West to be united morally, thus making it easier for the West to justify the creation of empires on an ethical level. An example of this justification would be the White Man’s Burden, which was tied to Christian religious ideology. As a result, the Meiji Constitution Articles 1 and 3 declared the Emperor to be a divine being who will forever govern Japan: “The Empire of Japan shall be

reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal” (Constitution of the Empire of Japan).

This perspective formed a basis for Japan to combine both the divinity of the emperor and Shintoism (with its belief that the Emperor derives from the Sun God) with Japanese culture and state, reinforcing the Emperor’s position. The 1906 Shrine Consolidation Policy began to integrate shrines into politics, which was done by cutting funding to less-obedient shrines to force them to join larger, more compliant ones, thus making them easier to control. Additionally, schools and media taught the importance of giving one’s life to protect the Emperor’s divinity. An example was the Imperial Rescript on Education (the Japanese Pledge of Allegiance) which stated: “Always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth” (“Imperial Rescript on Education” 673). The concept of the Emperor as the head of religious principle and state authority was further entrenched in the minds of Japan’s younger generation (Hardacre 150-220). Japanese generals were idolized for their religiosity: for example, Nogi Maresuke committed Seppuku, or traditional suicide, when Emperor Meiji died to follow the samurai ritual of junshi in following his master into death. The result was a young generation filled with ultra-nationalism and traditional religious belief, which would later be seen in the banzai charge and kamikaze strikes in World War II (Storry 350-420).

This aspect of Japanese culture was similar to traits of German fascism. The Nazi party also used religion to expand its influence and promote a willingness to give one’s life for the greater good of the state. While the Nazi takeover of Christian churches was much more forceful, the motives remained the same: to ensure the loyalty of the population. In Germany, the idea of Fuhrerprinzip stated that the will of a nation’s leader, in this case Hitler, was the will of the nation and authority to him was unquestionable (Bergen 114-128). Similarly, the Japanese were taught that they must protect the emperor’s divine and eternal rule, and that the emperor’s will was the will of Japan (Hardacre 600-650). Japan’s fanaticism was similar to Germany’s as members of the Waffen-SS were described by Heinz Guderian as having “fought with an almost fanatical determination” (Guderian). Still, Japan’s ultra-nationalism and culture was one of the only aspects of its government that was truly fascist.

Manchukuo: Imperialism and Military Junta

The South Manchurian Railway, or Mantetsu, established in 1906 by the Japanese government to manage the railway lines Japan had seized from Russia, became the agent and purveyor of industrialization and urban development, as well as a catalyst for spreading Japanese culture and political influence (Myers and Peattie 95-105). It was a tool of expansion to entrench Japanese interests across and beyond Manchuria. Its role might appear to mirror the fascist ideal of Germany's *Lebensraum*, but in reality, it bears an even closer resemblance to the functioning of the British East India Company (EIC). For context, *Lebensraum*, a defining idea of Nazi expansion, was a "living space" for the Aryan "super race" to expand. As a fascist ideal, it required Germany to invade its neighbors and purge undesirables to create more space (Mazower 20-40). While the Holocaust and the Barbarossa Decree were fascist, Japan's expansion into Manchukuo was more about seizure of resources and had little to do with ethnic cleansing (310-340).

In invading Manchuria, Japan was not trying to expand the Japanese race while eradicating other inferior ones; rather, its goal was to expand the economic interests of the semi-private, semi-government owned Mantetsu company (Mazower 30-40; Matsusaka 120-140). Both the EIC and Mantetsu focused on commerce and empire-building, reshaping local economies to serve the mother country. For Britain, the focus involved opium and spices. For Mantetsu, the goal was to expand agriculture and gain steel, oil, and other resources vital for the continued growth of Japan's economy (Louise Young 60-100). Mantetsu established numerous subsidiary companies and transformed Xinjing, along with Manchuria's economy, to serve Japan, much like the EIC had built Calcutta to become a centerpiece of British interests in India (Lawson 100-140). Yet, while the EIC was independent of the governmental military, Mantetsu, with prominent generals on its board, was intertwined with the Japanese military from the start. Those roots deepened with the creation of the Kwantung Army, a government army that served to protect the interests of the Mantetsu (Myers and Peattie 100-150). Thus, the EIC and Mantetsu differed in their relationship to the military, since Mantetsu had aspects of an imperialistic corporation and military junta, which complicated its ability to be defined as a strictly fascist government.

Despite the army's purpose in protecting the railway, Mantetsu did not maintain control of the army; instead, radical officers began overstepping their authority, and by 1931, the Kwantung Army had effectively taken charge of Mantetsu itself. This merger of military ambition, corporate interests, and weak civilian oversight became a model for Japan's unique type of fascism (Louise Young 130-160). The South Manchuria Railway, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and the function of Manchukuo as a puppet state indicate that imperialism and a military junta must be considered as aspects of Japan's government, in addition to its form of fascism.

Military Autonomy as a Marker of Japanese "Fascism"

The year 1931 marked a decisive turning point. Japan was reeling from a crushing economic depression. Hunger and joblessness had gripped the nation, especially in rural areas, and the civilian government seemed powerless to respond. Adding to these domestic crises

were international humiliations: the Washington Naval Treaty had capped Japan's naval power below that of Britain and the U.S., while the Treaty of Versailles had brushed aside Japan's proposed racial equality clause (Burkman 50-90). Many within the Kwantung Army, convinced that Western ideas and actions had weakened Japan and stripped it of its honor, decided to take action. Colonel Ishiwara Kanji stated, "By creating opportunities through stratagem, it is by no means impossible for the military to take the lead and push the state forward forcibly" (Peattie 130-140).

The so-called Mukden Incident on September 18, 1931, triggered Japan's full-scale invasion of Manchuria. Ishiwara and Itagaki Seishiro, another colonel, orchestrated a plot to justify the invasion of Manchuria by staging an explosion on a section of the Japanese-controlled Mantetsu. For the first time, Japanese armies abroad had launched a war on their own initiative while defying direct orders from Tokyo to halt operations. Since the army reported to the emperor rather than the civilian government, the officers involved were not punished (Louise Young 150-185). This precedent of military autonomy eroded civilian authority and laid the groundwork for Japan's subsequent wars in China and the Pacific. Some historians mark the incident as the beginning of Japanese fascism, comparable to the Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia, as they were both actions against weaker nations to expand their power. However, this precedent also effectively illustrates the start of a military junta, since the army had gone rogue, against the wishes of the civilian government (Myers and Peattie 130-160). The Italian invasion was more of a first step in Mussolini's fascist mission to restore the Roman Empire and restore Italy's former glory. Another comparison could be to Anschluss, Germany's 1938 annexation of Austria; however, this action was also not due to economic reasons, but rather to reunite the German people and to create a stepping stone for a "Greater German Reich." In comparison, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria was out of desperation due to an increasingly dire economic situation in Japan, rather than a step toward elevating the Japanese race.

The "Fascist" Puppet State of Manchukuo: A Colonial Tactic

As a military junta with fascist ideals, the Kwantung Army embarked on an ambitious program to modernize Manchukuo and promote Japanese culture. Though nominally independent, Manchukuo schools drilled loyalty to the Japanese emperor (Louise Young 100-130). The Kwantung Army envisioned this indoctrination as a proving ground for the society it hoped to build across all of Japan. This fascist vision was influenced by General Erich Ludendorff's *Der Totale Krieg*, which argued that the interests of an entire nation must be subordinated to military objectives (Marwick et al.).

However, despite these militarist and ultra-nationalist currents, viewing the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo as "fascist" in the European sense of the word risks oversimplification (Louise Young 274-296). Similar to Nazi models in Vichy, France, Manchukuo did indeed maintain the illusion of sovereignty while in reality functioning as a puppet state. It was also similar to the Reichskommissariat in Ukraine (one of Germany's occupied territories), in the sense that its resources were plundered to support the controlling country's needs and tied to the military (Mazower 310-340). Yet Manchukuo predated both of them, following, in part, the imperialist model used by the British in India. Similar to the EIC, Japan invaded Manchuria

to bolster their economy (though it would be later used to support the military). In exploiting the colony's natural resources, using private companies to expand their influence, claiming that the colony was independent, and using propaganda to justify their control over the colony, Japan seemed to copy the West with some fascist tendencies (Matsusaka 300-400).

Ultimately, Japan's imperial project in Manchukuo reveals a complexity that is belied by the term "fascist state." The Kwantung Army's seizure of near-total autonomy in defiance of Japan's civilian leadership resulted in the takeover of Manchukuo and its preparedness for war; however, for Japan, even within the military, there was no centralized leadership as exists in fascism. Rather than a single plan, there were massive power struggles between rival generals who disagreed on how Japan should be run (Louise Young 120-160). The Army's refusal to obey the directives of the civilian government was not necessarily fascist in nature, but, instead, characteristic of a military junta (120-160). In fact, Japan's invasion of Manchuria was a defiant response to the economic and military constraints created by the West and an assertion of Japanese ultra-nationalism. However, while Japan's governance and actions bear some resemblance to those of Italy and Germany, the differences reveal the Japanese Empire to be a much more complex system (280-320). It would eventually embrace militarism and the logic of total war, yet these elements stemmed from Western imperialist ideas similar to those of Britain, France, or any other colonial power (Osterhammel 151).

Japan's Unique Form of Fascism

Following the Mukden Incident and the Japanese takeover of Manchuria, the Imperial military seized increasingly greater control over civilian government. Although some might view those events as evidence of greater fascism, the February 26th Incident demonstrates that Japan's fascism was quite untraditional. The incident was an attempted coup by young Japanese officers and cadets of the imperial Way Faction (Kōdōha) that was originally meant to target officers of the rival, more moderate Control Faction (Tōseiha). The former wanted revenge for the latter's forced retirement of one of their leaders, General Araki. Like the Imperial Way Faction, The Control Faction also strongly disapproved of the civilian government, but it believed the military should work within the existing political system. The Imperial Way Faction, on the other hand, wanted to destroy the system and create a fascist state with the emperor at its head, to eliminate Western influences and corruption. The coup, led by Lt. Colonel Nishida Mitsugi, had three main goals: assassinate prominent cabinet members, assassinate Control Faction leaders, and capture the Imperial Palace to empower the Emperor, who, rather than actually having absolute power, was a figurehead. However, when the coup failed, officers of the February 26th Incident were tried and executed behind closed doors (Shillony 120-125).

This incident has been cited to support the claim that Hirohito had power and allowed Japanese generals to be blamed for his decisions during World War II (Kawamura 10-80). Yet, unlike a true fascist government in the sense that Germany and Italy would define, the military did not respond because Hirohito spoke out against the plotters. Rather they were already moving against the plotters before Hirohito spoke out, thus indicating the army was actually acting in its own interests. In other words, even if Hirohito did agree with the plot to restore greater power to the Emperor, the army would have most likely compelled him to condemn the rebels or at the very least stay quiet. This very situation nearly played out in 1945 at the end of

World War II, when extremist members of the Japanese Army, almost succeeded in destroying Hirohito's surrender broadcast and compelling him to continue to fight, but failed due to a lack of support from senior generals. Ultimately, the February 26th Incident was a convenient excuse for the Tosei-ha to eliminate political rivals, while weakening the civilian government. The plot heightened the military's power by giving it the opportunity to pass an edict that only current generals could serve as Ministers of the Navy and War. The military was thereby able to control the prime minister, because, if a minister resigned, the cabinet could not convene unless a replacement was named. Thus, the military controlled the prime minister and, by extension, the country. Even Emperor Hirohito was powerless as, by using the same techniques, the military was able to force him to name multiple army commanders as Japan's Prime Minister in the 1940s. Fascism in Japan, therefore, appeared to take the shape of a civilian government, but in practice its policies and authority would be dictated by the military (Bix 414-416, 518-520).

Power Dynamic: Japanese vs. Fascist Governments

Japan's dynamic of centralized power in the hands of the military also differed from that of Germany and Italy, whose fascist governments were run by civilian political parties, albeit ones that were extremely militarized. Japan's system is most akin to Legionary Romania, with a military dictator (Ion Antonescu) leading a civilian government controlled by the fascist party with a monarch as a figurehead. Yet, even there, an important difference emerged in Japan's lack of a singular ruler. Military leadership was split between the army and navy, whose fierce rivalry nearly erupted in violence. Within these two branches, multiple smaller factions argued over tactics, doctrines, and politics (Harries 220-225). The leadership was much different than that of a fascist leader like Antonescu, who ran both the Romanian government and military with an iron fist. Additionally, the leaders of all fascist governments maintained power until their removal by force or death (Deletant 3-10, 45-52; Mazower 112-115). Japan, on the other hand, saw multiple prime ministers throughout the period it was considered fascist. Finally, the military never officially allied themselves with the Japanese fascist party, known as the Tōhōkai (Society of the East) and was a small and insignificant faction in Japanese politics. These characteristics ultimately indicate that, rather than a fascist state, the Japanese government was a military junta, or Gunbatsu, that is, a government controlled by the military, resulting from a political takeover (Drea 250-260).

Fascist Treatment of Enemies Compared to Japanese Tenkō

During the time period that nationalism was on the rise, fascist governments ruthlessly rooted out political enemies, particularly communists. Throughout the rise of the Nazi party, communists were killed or sent to concentration camps; treated with disdain, they were not even regarded as Germans (Paxton 75-80). On the other hand, the Japanese used tenkō (literally, reorientation), which refers to coerced ideological-conversion, to handle communists following the 1925 passing of the Peace Preservation Law (chian iji hō). This law was supposedly designed to protect the national polity (kokutai) and private property, but, in reality, it outlawed communism. Yet, communists were not executed or sent to camps. Tenko was based on the belief that the Japanese people were one family, and Japanese communists were simply misled members, rather than outsiders or traitors (Maruyama 102-110). The treatment of communists in

the two scenarios shows a major cultural difference in Japan that separates it from other fascist nations.

Hitler and Hirohito: Fascist Power vs. Ineffective Figurehead

The contrast between Hirohito and Hitler is glaring. Unlike Hitler who wielded absolute power, Hirohito only held respect. For example, his condemnation of the military fell on deaf ears when he voiced his disapproval of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which initiated the Second Sino-Japanese War (Bix 96-98). In July of 1937, Japanese troops stationed near Beijing (Beiping, at the time) did a live fire exercise near Chinese troops defending the city. Unaware of the exercise, Chinese troops feared an attack and open fire, resulting in the second war between Japan and China. According to Koichi Kido, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, following the war in 1946, Hirohito recounted, "The Army's behavior has disgusted me from the start. Both at Liu-t'iao-kou in starting the Manchurian Incident, and at Marco Polo Bridge in starting this last China Incident, men at the front defied orders from central headquarters to employ despicable methods that disgrace Our imperial armed forces" (qtd. in Wakabayashi 85). This quote could be interpreted as showing that the army took action, despite the Emperor's supposed disgust; if so, the wording might also point to the emperor's ineffectuality. Moving forward, the military continued to act against his desires, provoking even another conflict after the China Incident, this time with the Soviet Union, with the Battle of Khalkhin Gol (Bix 115-120). He might have been worshiped as the embodiment of the nation, but his opinion did not matter to military leaders. In the case of Hitler, many generals thought he was tactically incompetent and too controlling; others looked down on his non-German ethnicity, nicknaming him the "Bavarian Corporal." Yet all obeyed him without question, even when it led to disaster (von Manstein 250-260). Therefore, while Hirohito, with a few stern words, could make a prime minister resign out of embarrassment, such action did not show his power, since the choice of a new prime minister would still be in the hands of the military.

Additionally, Hirohito was described as being a reserved leader by historians such as Herbert Bix and some Japanese court officials. Reasons as to why he chose not to wield the power traditionally assigned to him are speculative, since there are no official commentary or primary sources on the matter. To uphold his divine status, he only made ceremonial appearances and was otherwise removed from the Japanese public. The distance he maintained from his people and the hands-off approach he took with his own leaders is clearly demonstrated in the fact that the first time many Japanese heard his voice was in his surrender broadcast (the Jewel Voice Broadcast) in 1945, nineteen years into his reign: even then, his speech required an interpreter, since many could not understand the classical Japanese he used to address the nation (Bix 393-400). This cloud of secrecy obscures the extent of his political power and his actual stance on issues. It can only be assumed from his few quotes after the war that he disagreed with many of the military's actions in China, but lacked the power to stop the military agenda, a fact that only further separates him from fascist leaders like Mussolini, Hitler, and Antonescu (Bix 40-50).

The Second Sino-Japanese War: Definitional Differences in Fascism

Many historians consider the atrocities in the China Theatre of World War II to be as brutal as those of Germany. However, in reality, the Second Sino-Japanese War highlights the differences between Japanese “fascism” and that of its contemporaries, Germany and Italy (Frank 150-155). These differences include the reasoning behind the atrocities, the manner in which they were carried out, and even the politics and propaganda behind the war.

In starting the Second Sino-Japanese War, on July 7, 1937, Japan’s Battle of Beijing-Tianjin was actually a response to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. Unlike Germany’s motives in Operation Barbarossa, the Japanese never officially recognized the fact that they were at war with China, instead calling it the Shina Jihen, which translates to China Incident or China Affair. Additionally, the Japanese viewed themselves as the heroes who would rescue China from the corrupting influence of the West and Communism as well as reunify it under one banner (Paine 115-120). The sentiment behind the move was echoed by Japanese foreign minister Hirota Kōki, who claimed that the Japanese war with China was a “heroic surgery” to get rid of the “festering sore deep down in the bosom of Eastern Asia,” a term that referred to communism rather than to an ethnicity (“Hirota Sangensoku”). Additionally, the more tacit reason for war among the Japanese stemmed from a need to gain more raw material to support the Japanese economy and military (Paine 125-130). Unlike the Germans on the Eastern Front or the Italians in the Mediterranean, the Japanese did not view their conflict as a war of annihilation or a war purely for racial dominance; its purpose was not exclusively to rally nationalistic spirit, but rather to conquer more resources that would raise the status of its own nation. This perspective of the conflict, even as late as 1937, demonstrates that the Japanese were not on a fascist crusade based on ethnic cleansing or even racial superiority, per se, as Nazi Germany later embarked on (Stahel 220-225; Paine 135-140).

War Crimes: Divergence from Fascism

Citing Japanese fascism, some argue that the nation’s atrocities in China are comparable to those of the Holocaust in Europe. These historians believe both were racially motivated and ordered by high ranking commanders, thus confirming Japan as a strictly fascist state. Hans van de Ven remarked that “Japan’s invasion of China was carried out by a fascist regime that believed in racial superiority and pursued brutal military aggression...akin to those perpetrated by Nazi Germany, reflecting fascist ideology in both motive and method” (“China’s Resistance during WWII”). He supports this idea by stating that Japanese military ideology was rooted in racism, that war crimes were premeditated and deliberate, and that they were ordered by generals in mop-up operations (van de Ven). However, while there was racism within the Japanese military, the direct orders from Japanese generals facilitating war crimes were more often the result of taking extreme measures to defeat their enemy (Frank 100-155). One difference was seen in Germany’s proactively ordering the deaths of civilians, while the Japanese generals simply ignored whether the casualties would be military or civilian.

The most notable example of these orders was the “three alls” policy. The “three alls” policy, otherwise known as Jinmetsu Sakusen or Order Number 575, called for the death of all Chinese suspected communist rebels, the destruction of property and crops to give Chinese rebels fewer places to hide and eat, and the construction of fortifications in Japanese-occupied China. The order resulted in the deaths of an estimated 2.7 million Chinese and the destruction

of many Chinese villages (Mitter 136–140; Paine 320–340). While many argue that these figures indicate racial motivation, the mass casualties can also be viewed as an extreme response to the 100-regiment offensive launched by Communist China that damaged Japanese infrastructure, thus hurting the Japanese war effort. Certainly racism was at work in every nation's actions, but for the Japanese, the callousness still differed from Nazi war crimes such as the creation of Einsatzgruppen (mobile death groups that followed the army to kill all “undesirables” and those labeled subhuman by the Nazi regime). Nazis specifically targeted civilians in an attempt to wipe out a race; Japanese showed complete disregard for civilian life in favor of winning the war at all costs (Rees 85-110; Mitter 120-140). So, while the “three alls” policy was extreme, it was not rooted in racism and served a strategic, yet brutal, purpose, making it an illegitimate argument for Japanese fascism.

Additionally, the majority of well-known Japanese war crimes resulted from a combination of a lack of discipline by commanders and the unchecked emotions of individual soldiers. Ishikawa Tatsuzō's *Soldiers Alive*, a historical novel based on his experiences with the Shanghai Expeditionary Force, illustrates this distinction between Japanese conduct and that of other fascist powers. The novel illustrates the descent of ordinary soldiers during the Battles of Shanghai and Nanjing, showing how violence escalated from executing suspected spies and camp followers to killing surrendering soldiers, and finally to murdering civilians without cause, all the while Japanese commanders remained complacent. It becomes clear that Japanese soldiers were increasingly frustrated with Chinese resistance; the Japanese believed they were the “good guys,” helping a Chinese population that was unappreciative of this supposed salvation. This is supported by a quote from the book *Soldiers Alive*, which states, “Already dozens of army civilians employees ... bustled about its streets carrying out their postwar tasks: to build a cheerful North China, to make its inhabitants understand the justice of the Japanese cause, to grant them sanctuary for the pursue their peaceful lives” (Ishikawa 65). In earnest, these words convey the Japanese perception of what their actions meant for China, despite the opposite being the case. Additionally, Japanese soldiers in the book were more emotional and rash after the death of a comrade, whom they regarded as family, resulting in a need for retribution and blood (54-75). This is shown when examining the army priest, who does not pray for the Chinese dead because he grew to hate them when he thought of them as his comrades' enemies (110-120). By looking at Japanese atrocities through these lenses, it is clear that over-emotionality and lack of discipline played a larger role in Japanese atrocities, while Hitler's fascists were cold, calculated, and deliberate (Ishikawa 54-75; Mazower 120-150). In fact, the German government established multiple initiatives, such as the Wannsee Conference to plan the Holocaust. When German commanders ordered German soldiers to execute undesirables, it was done with deliberation and calculation. In fact, many SS officers after the war claimed they had no emotion when executing Jews en masse. One soldier, Hans Fredrich, said in an interview that he “felt nothing. My only thought was: aim carefully so you will hit them” (Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State). Should emotionality be taken into account in defining fascism or the lack thereof? It can be argued that the extremism characteristic of fascism is tied to its uncompromising nature. The additional motivations for Japanese atrocities, including anger toward the Chinese and loss of brother-soldiers, cloud the pure definition of fascism as demonstrated by the Germans. This difference in the mentality, evidenced in how the two nations dealt with executing enemies, is, therefore, further evidence that Japan's type of fascism differed from that of other nations.

Final Ideological Differences

Further evidence of disparate definitions of fascism can be seen in comparing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere with Lebensraum and the White Man's Burden. Some historians believe the Co-Prosperity Sphere was merely a Japanese version of Lebensraum, aligning Japanese fascism more closely with Germany's. However, Japan's expression of the ideology is actually closer to the White Man's Burden. Lebensraum asserts that the Aryan race needed to expand in order to survive; it feared "contamination" of its race if confined or exposed to other races. This belief system resulted in atrocities like the Holocaust, an all-out attack on perceived enemies that is compatible with fascism (Mazower 50-56). On the other hand, the White Man's Burden was a Western idea, rooted in economic profit as much as in racist ideology, used to justify European colonization and civilizing missions, especially in Africa. It claimed that less technologically-developed, less educated, less religiously-affiliated peoples were "savages" who needed to be "civilized." In reality, colonial powers only built infrastructure that helped support their colonial ambitions and eliminated attempts at independence with brute force, as was demonstrated during the Boer Wars (Osterhammel 32-36). Ideas rooted in racism therefore became a justification for the ruthless takeovers that disregarded native populations.

In terms of Japan, the propaganda associated with the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was nothing more than a modified version of the philosophy behind the White Man's Burden: it claimed that the Japanese had to civilize, modernize, and unite all of Asia to fight Western colonial oppressors (Paine 120-130). As in the White Man's Burden, racism was the justification for economic imperialism, rather than a call for eradication of the entire race, as was the case with the Nazis. Matsuoka Yōsuke articulated this goal in 1940, when he said, "The concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere promulgates the belief that Asia was meant for Asians...It envisions a unified East Asia free of Western colonial subjugation, with economic viability and self-sufficiency under Japanese leadership" ("First Announcement of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere"). In other words, despite the high numbers of Chinese who were ruthlessly killed by Japan, annihilation was never the goal. The real objective was to establish Asian hegemony under Japanese dominance and supremacy. Therefore, in reality, Japan's actions took the form of the brutal extraction of natural resources as well as exploitation of humans in conquered territories.

This mandate indicates why books like *Soldiers Alive* were banned: the Japanese hoped to portray themselves as saviors, rather than oppressors, in the Western tradition of conquest. In reality, Japan provoked a war with and later invaded China because China had the necessary resources to support Japan's economic growth. Also, as a disorganized state with multiple warlords and a communist insurgency, China was seen as ripe for a killing blow that would secure Japan's spot as the sole Asian superpower (Boyle 130-200). These reasons aligned with the expansionist goals of the *Zaibatsu* (large Japanese corporations) and the military. The manner in which the Japanese proceeded is not unlike how the West used the White Man's Burden to justify the scramble for Africa and Asia that bolstered economies at the expense of the local population (Osterhammel 32-36).

The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere also justified war with the West, specifically the attack on Pearl Harbor. Rather than a power grab, Japan saw its war with the West as a war

of survival. When the US demanded the Japanese leave China or face an oil embargo, the Japanese military felt both angered and scared. In 1940, since 80% of its oil came from the US, Japan could not support its economy and its war machine could not function without the oil. The Japanese pointed out what they saw as hypocrisy for being condemned for doing in China what the West had done in Africa and Asia (Paine 100-150). This sentiment was expressed by Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, who told the Diet, in 1941, “The United States’ actions in freezing our assets and cutting off vital materials leave Japan no choice but to defend herself. The nation’s very survival depends on securing the resources necessary to live and maintain sovereignty” (“Address to the Imperial Diet”). Matsuoka reiterated the sentiment when he said in a meeting, “If Japan accedes to the demands of the United States, she will surrender her independence and cease to exist as a sovereign nation. The embargoes and pressures leave us no alternative but to act decisively” (United States Department of State; Mazower 100–156; Osterhammel 50–100).

In contrast, Germany’s Lebensraum and the Eastern Front was a war of annihilation: Hitler intended to exterminate minorities and political enemies, especially communists. Even Mussolini’s desire to reunite the Roman Empire was much more of a race war. These differences indicate that Japan’s behavior was less fascist in nature and more akin to Western justifications for expansionism (Osterhammel 50-100). In conclusion, the Japanese saw its war with the West as a fight for its very survival and its war with China as a conquest for resources, while ignoring and actively denying the atrocities carried out by its soldiers in China using similar concepts as Imperialist powers (Yellen). Whether this was an accurate assessment or one used hypocritically in imitation of the White Man’s Burden will remain a contentious subject for historians. Yet, in the case of its war with China, Japan’s actions fit the mold of the imperialist White Man’s Burden more than it does the fascist Lebensraum.

Conclusion

History is always presented through the lens of winners and losers. From the American perspective, wartime Japan was a fascist state, due to its authoritarian leadership, its ties to Germany and Italy in World War II, its “feudal” social structure, its expansionist policies, and its racial superiority complex. However, as fascism dominated world events, it became too easy to classify Imperial Japan as fascist. Given its alliance with Germany and Italy, it was too easy to dismiss its complex and disorganized political structure, as well as its varied and sometimes internally antagonistic motivations and goals.

What must be considered historically is the Japanese point of view: the motivations of its soldiers and leaders, the ideology behind actions and atrocities, and Japanese perspectives on survival and subjugation; these elements provide invaluable insight because, at its core, history is always nuanced. This was especially true for the Imperial Japanese government. The goal of this paper was to highlight some of the nuances that confirm Japan’s fascism as distinct from that of Germany and Italy, allowing for greater precision by taking multiple perspectives into account.

The Japanese Empire was a complex entity that should not be labeled as practicing the type of fascism that Western nations adhered to. While it had some fascist elements, such as



the elevation of the state above self and family and the near godlike worship of its leader (in this case the Emperor), it also differed in many ways. The Japanese conquests were largely economically, rather than strictly racially, motivated. The atrocities that Japanese soldiers committed were callous but not conducted to exterminate an entire race, as Hitler sought to do to the Jews. Rather, they were the result of rash, emotionally-fueled actions of soldiers and an extreme indifference to the value of human lives on the part of the Japanese Army High Command. Even their supposed version of Lebensraum through the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere is more similar to the White Man's Burden and its definition of racism than it is to its Nazi counterpart, with its rejection of an entire race. Furthermore, the structure of the Japanese government resembled more of a military junta than a fascist dictatorship since the Emperor had little power. As a result, Japan practiced fascism under a different umbrella, combining Western colonization tactics, traditional aspects of fascism, a military junta-styled government, and imperialist ambitions.

Understanding why Japan is not entirely a fascist nation is crucial for two major reasons. One, by overusing the term "fascist," clarity is lost: it degenerates into a term for any authoritarian state that is not communist, rather than its own unique political phenomenon. Additionally, a more nuanced definition enhances our understanding of World War II, specifically that of the Asian theatres, as not simply a conflict pitting democracy against fascism, but a result of conflicting imperial interests, differing visions for the future, and a massive resource struggle.



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