

2.3 Causes of World War II: Japanese militarism

Fascist regimes in Germany and Italy would soon threaten world peace. However, peace was already threatened by **militarism** and extreme nationalism in Japan. World War II began in 1939, but for the Chinese people the war began with a Japanese invasion in 1931 and expanded with a further invasion in 1937. This was the beginning of Japan's attempt to create an Asia-Pacific empire.

Japanese imperialism

Since the late nineteenth century Japan had wanted to follow the European powers' example by creating an empire. In the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) Japan invaded Korea and took Formosa (modern Taiwan) and the Ryuku Islands from China. In the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) Japan gained control of much of Manchuria. Then, in 1910, Japan annexed Korea. During World War I Japan sided with the Allies to gain Germany's territorial rights in China and German colonies in the north Pacific.

Aggression in Manchuria

The Great Depression contributed to the rise of Japanese militarism, as economic hardship led to growing support for the military and nationalists who wanted Japan to gain colonies for raw materials and export markets.

Source 1 Locations of Japanese aggression in north-east Asia, 1894–1938



Did you know?



On 12 December 1937 Japanese aircraft deliberately sank a US gunboat that was escorting oil tankers in China. Japan apologised for this 'accident' and paid compensation. The US did not retaliate.

Japan's military soon had more power than its civilian government. When the Japanese prime minister opposed an aggressive foreign policy in 1930 he was shot by an extreme nationalist.

In the following year an explosion on the Japanese-owned South Manchurian railway line was used as a pretext for an invasion of Manchuria. By early 1932 the Japanese military, acting against instructions from Japan's government, had occupied all of Manchuria, changed its name to Manchukuo and claimed it was not part of China. In the same year, the Japanese bombed Shanghai and occupied parts of northern China. China protested to the League of Nations, but when it censured Japan in 1933 the Japanese withdrew from the League. Because they were more concerned with threats to peace in Europe, the Western powers and the League took no effective action.

Japanese fascism

Japanese ultra-nationalist societies had much in common with European fascists. They encouraged fanatical devotion to military values and to the emperor, who was considered to be divine. These societies were violently nationalist, racist, anti-communist



Jacaranda World History Atlas
Causes of World War II
pp. 226–7

Source 2 A Japanese soldier about to behead a Chinese prisoner during the massacre known as the 'Rape of Nanjing'. This photograph is one of several that were preserved by a Chinese employee of a photo studio.



and anti-democratic. They assassinated their political opponents or frightened them into silence. In 1932 a new Japanese prime minister was assassinated for speaking out against the military. By 1937 Japanese schoolchildren were being indoctrinated in fascist values and forced to take part in military training.

Alliances and the second Sino-Japanese War

Japan and Germany became allies through the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936. When Italy joined the pact in 1937, these three powers were united in the Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis.

Source 3 This photo, taken in Nanjing in 1937, shows Japanese soldiers watching as Chinese civilian prisoners are placed in a pit to be buried alive.



Source 4 From American journalist Edgar Snow's eye-witness description of Japanese atrocities in Nanjing in 1937

Mothers had to watch their babies beheaded then submit to raping . . . Thousands of men were lined up and machine gunned. Sometimes groups were used for bayonet exercises. When the [Japanese] victors grew bored . . . they tied their victims, poured kerosene on their heads and cremated them alive.

In July 1937 Japan launched a full-scale attack against China, quickly taking the cities of Beijing, Guangzhou and Nanjing. The Chinese Communists and Nationalists had been fighting a civil war since 1927, but in 1937 they agreed to an armistice to enable them to form a united front. For the next eight years they fought back against the Japanese from their country's vast interior.

The Rape of Nanjing

The most appalling Japanese atrocities took place in the Chinese city of Nanjing (formerly called Nanking). There, between December 1937 and January 1938, the Japanese slaughtered between 200 000 and 300 000 Chinese civilians and prisoners of war. There were mass rapes of Chinese women and other atrocities including burying or burning people alive and using prisoners for bayonet practice.

Activities



CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS

1 What did Japanese extreme nationalism have in common with European fascism?

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

2 Why did Japanese nationalists want an empire?

3 Why did the League of Nations fail to take effective action against Japanese aggression in China?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

4 For many decades after World War II, Japanese nationalists continued to deny that the Rape of Nanjing took place. Explain how the evidence in **Sources 2 to 4** provides proof of Japanese atrocities.

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

5 The Western powers condemned Japanese aggression but took no effective action against it. Imagine you are a Western newspaper journalist in 1937. Write an article supported by **Sources 1 to 3** to convince your readers that action should be taken.

militarism excessive influence of military values and pro-war ideas