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The Breakdown in Democracy in 1930s Japan

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Consensus wisdom holds that Japanese democracy has been stable across the past seventy years, since the occupation reforms undertook to “democratize and demilitarize” political structures in the wake of Japan’s defeat in World War II. Assessments of the political system prior to 1945 are more mixed. Early opinion was shaped by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal of 1946–1948, which passed judgment on the “deformed nature of prewar and wartime Japanese politics” that left the system susceptible to a “military seizure of power” in the 1930s, or as one influential study was titled, *Democracy and the Party Movement in Prewar Japan: The Failure of the First Attempt*.¹ Even as subsequent research took issue with the Tokyo Trial’s “military takeover thesis” and began to look to the rational underpinnings of decision-making in the 1930s, the supports for military leadership among elite constituencies, and continuities in the political system going back to the late nineteenth century, no one has claimed that wartime Japan represented a moment of vibrant democracy.² Indeed, the parliamentary system created with the founding of constitutional monarchy in 1889 underwent an extended stress test during the 1930s, as economic collapse, a wave of political violence, and geopolitical crisis led to the hollowing out of democratic institutions built up over the preceding decades, culminating in a de facto military dictatorship by the end of the decade.

While few scholars dispute the claim that democracy broke down in some fundamental sense, beyond this very little is agreed upon. I would like to explore the causes of democratic breakdown along several avenues of inquiry. The first is

¹ Mark Peattie’s characterization in his review of Gordon Berger, *Parties out of Power: Journal of Japanese Studies* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 199; Robert Scalapino, *Democracy and the Party Movement in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953).

² James B. Crowley, *Japan’s Quest for Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) and Gordon Berger, *Parties Out of Power in Japan, 1931–1941* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); for a more recent historiographic assessment, see Stephen Large, “Oligarchy, Democracy, and Fascism,” in *A Companion to Japanese History*, ed. William M. Tsutsui (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 156–171.

the nature of the constitutional system established in 1889. The founders created a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected national assembly. Yet the position of the emperor, the armed services, and the cabinet all anchored extraordinary powers in the executive branch. Did flaws in constitutional design create openings for the autocratic turn of the 1930s? Second, I will focus on the agents of democratic retreat—the antidemocratic actors who pushed to repurpose the state for authoritarian ends and the pro-democratic actors who sought to protect the status quo of party politics and freedom of expression. Who were the stakeholders in Japanese democracy? How committed were they to democratic rule? Why did key players turn against the system? Third, I will take up democracy as a process. We tend to think of democracy in linear terms, assuming that social and economic modernization bring about democratic progress. However, the devolution of Japanese democracy in the 1930s brings this formulation into doubt. What causes democratic institutions to evolve? What causes them to devolve? What are the ideas and norms, the social movements and organizations, and the political institutions that support democratic opening—and conversely promote democratic collapse?

This chapter answers these questions by tracing the longer arc of political history from the late nineteenth century through World War II. Examining the creation of a constitutional monarchy under the reign of the Meiji emperor (1868–1912), I argue that while by design the Meiji Constitution of 1889 created an asymmetry of power between the executive and legislative branches of government, it also provided the foundation for parliamentary democracy. Politics under the 1889 Constitution evolved to meet the pressures of an industrializing society, with the dramatic expansion of democratic institutions in the Taishō period (1912–1926). A concatenation of domestic and international crises in the late 1920s put Japanese democracy to a stress test. When parliamentary government proved incapable of responding effectively to the multifront crisis, the voting public lost faith in party politics during the early Shōwa period (1926–1989). Military leadership stepped into the political opening and carried out a slow-moving takeover of the state that culminated in *de facto* dictatorship by the end of the 1930s. However, the same susceptibility to legitimacy hazards that faced democracy also faced the wartime dictatorship. Having led the nation into a catastrophic war, military leadership, the armed services, and militarism in general were discredited, paving the way for their widespread rejection in the wake of World War II.³

³ I adopt two Japanese conventions in this essay: a periodization that follows Japanese reign names (Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa eras) and proper names listing family name first, personal name second (Young Louise).

Founding the Modern Constitutional Order, 1868–1889

Since the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1889, the Japanese political system operated as a constitutional monarchy, with strong executive power vested in the emperor, his advisory committees, and his cabinet. Political parties developed to represent male heads of propertied households who expressed the political will of the people via the lower house of a bicameral parliamentary system, in which an elected House of Representatives exercised limited powers and was held in check by an appointed House of Peers. This became known as the “transcendental cabinet system,” to reflect governance by a bureaucratic elite that stood above and apart from the parliament of commoners.⁴ Like founding moments in other democratic systems, the Meiji political and legal reforms created tensions in the meaning of democracy.

One aspect of this tension was the relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government. The Meiji constitutional system created a structure where political institutions and political power were defined by whether one was located inside or outside the formal vessel of government. Inside stood the cabinet, which constituted the critical decision-making body of government and controlled the levers of state power. Appointment to this body was determined by the small circle who advised the emperor—a group initially comprised of the founding generation of statesmen who built the modern state and was later made up of their designated protégés. Outside stood the people, who expressed their will through a national assembly, the Diet, meant to debate matters of political importance and serve in an advisory role to the cabinet and the government ministries. Significantly, there was no constitutional mechanism for the national assembly to nominate, elect, or approve members of the cabinet: the latter was explicitly sealed off from democratic control.

The Meiji Constitution embodied the vision of the activists who overthrew the feudal order in 1868—the event known as the Meiji Restoration. The reforms that followed established the modern Japanese nation-state. The restoration coalition represented specific interests from the previous Tokugawa governmental structure. Most were lower-ranking members of the former samurai, the bureaucratic-warrior elite that had occupied the top strata in a formal social hierarchy. Three centuries of peace under Tokugawa rule “tamed the samurai,” transforming them from mobile fighting forces into an urbanized intellectual and administrative caste.⁵ The twenty or so government leaders in the new Meiji

⁴ Scalapino, *Democracy and the Party Movement in Prewar Japan*, 153–154. See also Itō Hirobumi, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the Empire of Japan* (Tokyo: Igrisu-hōritsu Gakkō, 1889), published simultaneously in English and Japanese to explain the principles of constitutionalism to a foreign and domestic audience.

⁵ The phrase comes from the title of Eiko Ikegami’s book *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

government hailed from only four of Japan's 280 domains and from the imperial court in Kyoto. They joined with the emperor and a few members of his court in rebellion against the Tokugawa house that had ruled a federation of semi-autonomous domains from a seat of government in Edo. A vestige of an earlier era of monarchic rule, the imperial court exercised a ceremonial role under the Tokugawa order but held no political or administrative function. Together reform-minded activists in the court and in the domains of Chōshū, Satsuma, Tosa, and Hizen overthrew the Tokugawa regime and restored power into the hands of the emperor, initially modeling the new structures of government along the lines of the seventh-century monarchy, itself based on the example of the Chinese bureaucratic state. This history, as well as their elitism and numerical limits, is captured in the term “the Meiji oligarchs,” widely used to describe the founding generation of the modern state.⁶

Within a decade, the oligarchs abandoned East Asian statecraft for Western-style government, a course dictated in part by the threat of Western imperialism. Both the ongoing peril of gunboat diplomacy and the imperialism of free trade in East Asia triggered a program of self-strengthening and defensive modernization, carried out at breakneck pace in the 1870s and 1880s. High-speed state-building was necessitated as well by the economic and social instability of the 1870s, giving rise to a series of armed insurrections against the new government. The slogan “rich country strong military” captured the vision of economic and military modernization that inspired the oligarchs during the first two decades of the Meiji period. A core element of defensive modernization was the creation of a constitutional government and the rule of law recognizable to the great powers, in order to win entry of the Japanese state as an equal member of the Western-dominated interstate system.⁷

Political parties and the idea of a government opposition first emerged out of the factional struggles and breakup of the restoration coalition in the 1870s. Under the pressures of defensive modernization and the competing challenges of a comprehensive reform program, the oligarchs split into two irreconcilable groups. Unable to forge a compromise, the dissident faction resigned their positions to establish a base of political opposition outside the government and founded Japan's first political parties. Under the banner of the “people's rights

⁶ Oligarchs/oligarchy is the English term for *hanbatsu* (literally: domain cliques), an antigovernment description of government leadership that circulated and became established during the popular rights and party movements of the 1870s and 1880s, though the English term lacks the opprobrium attached to *hanbatsu*. The number of members of the oligarchy varies: Stephen Large, “Oligarchy, Democracy, and Fascism,” 156–171, identifies seven core members: Itō Hirobumi, Yamagata Aritomo, Inoue Kaoru, Matsukata Masayoshi, Kuroda Kiyotaka, Ōyama Iwao, and Saigō Tsugumichi.

⁷ Louise Young, “Rethinking Empire: Lessons from Imperial and Post-imperial Japan,” in *The Oxford Handbook on the Ends of Empire*, ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, Oxford Handbooks Online, 2017, 2–6, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.001.0001>.

movement,” they pressed for constitutional government and a national assembly to share power with the restoration state. With the breakup of the restoration coalition, oligarchic politics reorganized itself around those that remained inside and those leading the party movement on the outside. Insider government was dominated by old boy networks from Satsuma and Chōshū domains, derisively labeled “clique government,” while the outsiders used connections from Tosa and Hizen domains to forge a common agenda for the new parties. Shared identity as former samurai, shared participation in the founding of the modern state, and shared commitment to the overarching goals of the Meiji reform program bound these men together and tempered the sharpness of the divide between government insiders and party outsiders. This sense of esprit de corps between the Satsuma-Chōshū clique government and their loyal opposition of former confederates endured over the subsequent decades, shored up by defections back and forth between government insiders and party outsiders.⁸

In mapping this division between insiders and outsiders onto the executive and legislative branches of government, the Meiji Constitution laid the foundations for parliamentary politics to evolve along several tracks: the factional politics of government ministry insiders, political party activism within the national assembly, and the combat and compromise between the two. Political battles and negotiations often went on behind closed doors, but also spilled out into an evolving public sphere. The latter was delineated through a spirited political press and an expanding reading public, as well as meetings, organizations, and speechmaking devoted to concerns of the common weal.⁹ In this sense the determination of government policy involved not only cabinet officials and party men but also a vocal community of spectators who interpreted and commented on the political theater of the day.

The Meiji constitutional system represented the first political compromise between insiders and outsiders of modern politics. The insiders hewed to a vision of a bureaucratic authoritarian state that adapted Prussian-style government to indigenous traditions of rule; the outsiders sought to create a representative democracy that drew on French and British models, blending them with home-grown political philosophy. In spite of heated debates over the merits of these respective models, both “insiders” and “outsiders” agreed on the central tenets of defensive modernization: state-led industrialization, the creation of a competitive military force, and anchoring national loyalties to the emperor. These areas

⁸ On the development of the constitutional system, see George Beckmann, *The Making of the Meiji Constitution: The Oligarchs and the Constitutional Development of Japan, 1868–1891* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1957); Banno Junji, *The Establishment of the Japanese Constitutional System*, trans. J. A. A. Stockwin (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁹ Kyu Hyun Kim, *The Age of Visions and Arguments: Parliamentarianism and the National Public Sphere in Early Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2008).

of overlap were expressed in the two most distinctive features of Japan's constitutional design: the identification of the state with the imperial institution and its putative sacrality as well as the special and direct relationship of the armed services to the imperial commander-in-chief, circumventing executive branch control via the cabinet. Both of these features would be weaponized in the 1930s to create a de facto military dictatorship.

Out of the debate over the shape of the modern constitutional order a lexicon of democracy emerged. These ideas circulated through the world of literate elites, a social group that grew exponentially with the establishment of a modern school system in the 1870s and the development of a modern publishing industry of book translations, newspapers, and magazines from the same time. Upper-class activists in town and country joined in debates over the shape of the new political order and even designed their own constitutions.¹⁰ By the 1890s, the theater of politics had expanded beyond the world of male ex-samurai and rural landlords to include women and a wider stratum of commoners, where a robust public discussion trafficked terms such as “democracy,” “parliament,” “Dietman,” “cabinet,” “nation,” “the public,” “public speaking,” “national assembly,” “society,” “commerce,” and “constitution” that were composed both of neologisms and adaptations of indigenous concepts.¹¹ The Meiji political order thus signified the actions of government and party leaders, as well as the theater of cabinet pronouncements and Diet politics engaged by a wider reading public.

This became the foundation upon which Japan's political structure evolved. Over time the representation of “opposition” expanded out from an initial base of the men of samurai background from the restoration domains and traditional village leaders who were the prime beneficiaries of the privatization of land in the 1870s. By the turn of the twentieth century, opposition parties represented a more complex coalition of elite interests among industrialists, financiers, and the intelligentsia. Yet the restrictive vision of parliamentary politics that saturated the early debates on the movement for a national assembly in the 1870s carried through into the elitist character of mainstream parties.¹² In 1889 roughly 1% of the population held the right to vote, a figure that reflected the founders' vision of democracy for the upper classes. While the size of the electorate expanded in 1900 and 1919 with the lowering of the tax qualification, and universal manhood

¹⁰ Daikichi Irokawa, *Culture of the Meiji Period*, trans. Marius B. Jansen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹¹ For discussion of these terms, see Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and Douglas R. Howland, *Translating the West: Language and Political Reason in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

¹² For the debate on Itagaki Taisuke's 1874 Memorial calling for a National Assembly, see William R. Braisted, trans. and ed., *Meiroku Zasshi: Journal of the Japanese Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), xxxiii–xl.

suffrage was granted in 1925, the division between insiders and outsiders defined by proximity to political power continued to define parliamentary politics—as well as the larger fields of discourse and activism beyond the ballot box.

The Constitution of 1889 established a constitutional monarchy with some elements of democratic rule. Like constitutions more generally, this one represented a body of national law that set limits on the power of the state. Prior to 1889, there were no legal limits on state power in any area; now the government accepted certain limitations. In other words, the power of the state that was wielded in the name of the emperor was no longer absolute. Beyond this, the Meiji Constitution created deliberate ambiguities that permitted both the expansion of democratic institutions as well as the subsequent breakdown in democratic rule and the assertion of expansive state power in the name of the emperor. One source of ambiguity lay in the dueling constitutional principles of the transcendental cabinet system that constituted absolutist rule; another was the electoral democracy expressed through the Diet. The tensions between principles of absolutism and democracy in the Meiji Constitution gave rise to ongoing debate as different groups laid claim to the Constitution for their respective political purposes. Moreover, the Meiji Constitution left the question of sovereignty ambiguous, providing grounds for competing interpretations that were part of the constitutional debate. Was sovereignty vested in the emperor, who is identical with the state? Or was sovereignty vested more broadly in the nation and its people, with the emperor constituting an organ of the state?¹³

The ambiguities around the position of the emperor as well as the expansive powers of the executive branch of government in the Meiji Constitution handicapped Japan's democratic system from the outset. With so few avenues for public access, the bureaucratic state became the locus of politicking and gave rise to a pernicious factionalism. Moreover, the constitutional prerogatives of the armed services privileged military officials in the politics of the bureaucratic state. At the same time, the modern constitutional order replaced a feudal structure that contained no electoral mechanism for public input into state decision-making, with a democratic system whereby elected assemblies expressed the popular will. This represented an ideological and institutional paradigm shift and provided the foundation upon which democratic institutions and norms could expand. Constitutional design thus created the conditions of possibility for both bureaucratic/military authoritarianism and parliamentary democracy, and for each system to both flourish and falter.

¹³ On the position of the emperor, see John W. Hall, "A Monarch for Modern Japan," in *Political Development in Modern Japan*, ed. Robert E. Ward (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 11–64; Marius B. Jansen, "Monarchy and Modernization in Japan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 4 (1977): 611–622; David Anson Titus, *Palace and Politics in Prewar Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

Democracy from Above, 1890–1913

By the time of the Great War, twenty-five years of government under the Meiji Constitution had given rise to the expansion of the bureaucratic state and the political party system, as the oligarchs in the government and their loyal opposition in the Diet became fused into a new political inside. Over this period, some twenty ex-samurai insiders—the oligarchs—grew to number several hundred wealthy elites that included former samurai but also men of commoner background among business and landowning circles. This process opened the transcendent cabinet and its ministerial bureaucracies to new groups of elites; the state developed mechanisms to integrate this broader group of insiders as government institutions proliferated beyond the limits of oligarchic control. At the same time political parties established a base of support among elite interest groups and the rural upper class, and helped interpellate these groups as political subjects—the citizenry—through Diet representation. Finally, the interpenetration of government leaders and party politicians through deal-making created a new political establishment that included both Diet and cabinet. Because of these three developments, new tactics and norms of insider politics became the constituent elements of Japanese democracy. In what might be described as upper-class pluralism, parliamentary politics created procedures for political debate and vehicles for interest group representation that integrated an increasingly diverse elite and built democracy from above.¹⁴

Compromise between government leaders and party politicians was incentivized by the unworkability of a constitutional system expressly designed to seal off the executive branch from democratic control. In the first years of the Diet, the oligarchs quickly discovered the limitations of transcendental cabinets. The political parties in the lower house used their single lever of power by refusing to pass governmental budgets to great effect, frustrating the developmental initiatives of the oligarchs to build military and economic capacity. During the initial sessions of the Diet, the oligarchs traded off serving as prime minister, but none had much success in compelling the lower house to pass a budget or raise taxes on their landowning constituents—forcing a rapid sequence of Diet dissolutions and new elections as the oligarchs attempted to master the new political system. When their efforts to control the opposition parties through bribery and intimidation failed, government leaders responded by founding

¹⁴ Standard accounts of political developments include the following: Peter Duus, *Party Rivalry and Political Change in Taishō Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Tetsuo Najita, *Hara Kei and the Politics of Compromise, 1905–1915* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Mitani Taiichirō, “The Establishment of Party Cabinets, 1898–1932,” trans. Peter Duus, in *Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 6: *The Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Duus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 55–96.

their own pro-government parties and directing their protégés to join existing parties.¹⁵ In the process oligarchic rivalries and interministerial machinations spilled out into the Diet, adding to the political turbulence. For their part, party leaders sought to expand power and influence by insinuating themselves onto cabinet posts, which were used to direct government funds to pet projects of local elites and other constituents. Initially this included government funding for local schools and railways, and later expanded into road building, harbor works, and telephone and telegraph lines. This history of combat and compromise is recorded in the convoluted family tree of formations, dissolutions, and reformations, of splinters, offshoots, cross alliances, and mergers that constitutes the bloodline of Japanese political parties.

Civil and military services expanded in number and complexity to define the bureaucratic state. The cabinet system was created in 1885, with members overseeing nine government ministries of foreign affairs, home, finance, army, navy, justice, education, agriculture and commerce, and communication. New ministries were added to this core group, with a cabinet that ranged between ten and fifteen members for most of the prewar period. The ministries they oversaw grew rapidly: the upper ranks of the civil service (section and station chiefs, bureau chiefs, and cabinet ministers) numbered around four thousand in 1892, rising to thirteen thousand by 1928. The elite civil service and the officer corps became a prime channel for securing status through high salary, social connections, and other perks of office.¹⁶

During the Meiji period cabinet posts were monopolized by former samurai from the four domains of the restoration coalition; they were appointed by and among the oligarchs. As the bureaucracy of state expanded, the original oligarchs turned from direct operation of the machinery of government to wielding power via their protégés and patronage networks, and as “elder statesmen” they advised the throne. This structure lasted until the restoration generation of oligarchs died out around World War I. With the retreat of oligarchic control, an increasing fraction of cabinet ministers came from the imperial capital of Tokyo rather than the four domains of the restoration coalition. They were overwhelmingly Tokyo University Law School graduates, and included financiers and politicians in addition to the civil servants and military officers

¹⁵ The first few elections were notorious for political violence, with government officials employing thugs to harass voters. Twenty-five people were killed and hundreds injured in violence at the polls in the election of 1892. Even though the cabinet scaled down their strong-arm tactics, ruffians and gangsters became a fixture in Japanese politics, from elections and campaigns to legislative debates; see Eiko Maruko Siniawer, *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists: The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860–1960* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ On the bureaucracy, see Robert Spaulding, *Imperial Japan's Higher Civil Service Examinations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Bernard Silberman, “The Bureaucratic Role in Japan,” in *Japan in Crisis: Essays in Taishō Democracy*, ed. Bernard S. Silberman and H. D. Harootunian (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974).

that composed the first generation of cabinet members. Aside from cabinet ministers, who moved between ministries and other top-ranking posts, civil service and officer corps recruits stayed within their agencies and moved up the ranks under the patronage of their seniors. Over lifetime careers they developed intense sectional loyalties and a sense of rivalry with other ministries that competed for budgetary and other resources—the army ministry with the navy ministry, the home ministry with the justice ministry, and so forth. Moreover, different ministries developed networks of voluntary associations as an instrument of public policy: the army ministry with the reservist organizations, agriculture and commerce ministry with industrial cooperatives (*sangyō kumiai*), the ministry of finance with private banking associations. While voluntary organizations were conceived as a way to channel directives from the state to the people, to a modest extent they also operated as a mechanism for public opinion to reach government insiders.¹⁷

These patterns determined the trajectory of bureaucratic politics in the prewar and wartime period in several ways. First, while the oligarchs gradually lost the ability to manage the bureaucracy via personal networks, inter- and intraministerial patronage networks continued to define political fault lines within the bureaucratic state—and these multiplied over time. Second, as the social geography of power shifted from southwest Japan to the imperial capital, a new mechanism of integration replaced domain-based clique government with a Tokyo Imperial University old boys' network. The Tokyo-based power elite composed of professionals, academics, businessmen, and politicians were connected via common education at the faculty of law and the officers' school, connections cemented via recruitment channels to bureaucratic, company, newspaper, and university posts as well as family alliances sealed via arranged marriages. This social glue helped to patch over bureaucratic divisions, as common background and social connections provided both a reservoir of goodwill and a reserve of mediators to manage conflict.

Paralleling these developments within ministerial bureaucracies, Diet politics became more open to interest group organizing and coalition building among the expanding ranks of the upper class, which included owners of the publishing and entertainment industries, the big business groups known as *zaibatsu*, and wealthy landlords. Chambers of commerce organized in cities from the 1890s, representing commercial and manufacturing interests that were regional in character and that advocated for local development assistance to build railroads, ports, and schools. Later sectoral business organizations like the Japan Economic

¹⁷ For an illuminating study of these kinds of connections in a Tokyo neighborhood, bureaucrats reach down into neighborhoods to foster engagement with groups they manage: Sally A. Hastings, *Neighborhood and Nation in Tokyo, 1905–1937* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995).

Federation emerged as powerful lobbying organizations to weigh in on issues such as labor legislation and tariff policy.¹⁸

The political press, which had emerged as an organ of the people's rights movement in the 1870s with a small readership among political activists, began in the 1890s to develop mass circulations among a newly literate public. Local and national papers affiliated with the major parties demonstrated the capacity to shape and mobilize public opinion on political issues. Editors of the Osaka- and Tokyo-based mass circulation dailies could wield power among various classes of newspaper readers with calls to action on questions of domestic and foreign policy.¹⁹ Newspapers helped stir up periodic citizens' rallies in Tokyo and other urban centers that could turn violent, such as the "movement to protect the constitution" in 1912 and 1913 protesting the arrogance of the military high command in trying to dictate cabinet appointments. Newspaper editors and senior journalists on their staff were highly paid and occupied positions of public prominence; old-school ties and marriage alliances connected them to other segments of the upper class.

In the 1890s, political parties represented the interests of landlords almost exclusively, as they occupied the overwhelming share of the 1% entitled to vote because they paid the land tax. But even as landlord dominance of the parties thinned with the expansion of the franchise in 1900 and 1919, and with universal manhood suffrage in 1925, organizations like the Imperial Agricultural Association continued to represent the interests of large landlords with the Diet.²⁰ High-salaried public intellectuals were another constituency of political parties and shaped Diet politics from their perches at influential newspapers and magazines and in the universities.²¹ Indeed, seven Tokyo University professors managed to stir up a hornet's nest in the Diet with a public campaign demanding the annexation of large portions of Manchuria after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War—embarrassing the government and touching off nationwide protests against what were viewed as the humiliating terms of the peace treaty with Russia.²² Political parties came to represent the complex interests of the power elite: large landlords, business leaders, public intellectuals, the higher civil service, and the senior officer corps. By the 1910s these interests shook out into two so-called establishment parties, whose interparty rivalries tended to pit an

¹⁸ Miles Fletcher, *The Japanese Business Community and National Trade Policy, 1920–1942* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

¹⁹ James L. Huffman, *Creating a Public: People and Press in Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

²⁰ Teikoku nōkai was created in 1910 as an umbrella organization for local landlord associations established throughout the country from the 1880s.

²¹ Byron Marshall, "Professors and Politics: The Meiji Academic Elite," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 3, no. 1 (1977): 71–97.

²² Byron Marshall, *Academic Freedom and the Japanese Imperial University, 1868–1939* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 8–15.

urban- and manufacturing-based party (the Kenseikai or Minseitō) against a rural-based party with ties to big landlords (the Seiyūkai). Thus, the establishment parties had expanded democratic representation, while keeping the reign of parliament tightly within the grasp of the upper class.

Over the first decades of the Meiji constitutional order, horse-trading and pork-barrel politics effectively dissolved the boundary between the parties and the cabinet. Parties were filled with bureaucrats, and party men were appointed to cabinet posts. They made deals in the smoke-filled rooms where policy was decided, and public opinion considered them all part of an establishment of insiders. This process culminated in the era of “party cabinets” begun in 1918, when Hara Takashi was appointed prime minister—the first time a party leader assembled a cabinet and led the government of Imperial Japan. Between 1918 and 1932, control of the cabinet changed hands back and forth between the two establishment political parties, the Seiyūkai and the Minseitō—a development championed by public intellectuals as the rise of a liberal political order.²³ Hara, the president of the Seiyūkai party, earned the signal honor of inaugurating party rule by an astute campaign to breach the walls of the bureaucracy during his appointment as home minister in multiple cabinets. From this base he appointed Seiyūkai-affiliated men to posts of prefectural governors and colonial governorships—extending party reach from local government into colonial administration. Hara’s legacy was fusing the top-down vision of the transcendental cabinet system with the commitment to loyal opposition that carried over from the early party movement.²⁴ The Diet and the government ministries became effectively redefined as a single political inside—an upper-class pluralism that balanced interest group politics of the business community, wealthy landlords, public intellectuals, and the upper ranks of the civil service. Despite the rough and tumble of politics within the establishment, its stakeholders offered a united front against challenges from the outside. This represented a democracy built and expanded from above: the electoral system and party organization managed the complex interests of the power elite via representative government for wealthy men.

Democracy from Below, 1914–1928

The term “Taishō democracy” generally refers to the period between the Great War and the invasion of Manchuria in the early 1930s.²⁵ Though the reign of the Taishō emperor technically began in 1912 and ended in 1926, popular

²³ The Kenseikai was reorganized in 1927 as the Minseitō.

²⁴ On Hara Kei, see Najita, *Hara Kei and the Politics of Compromise*; Mitani, “The Establishment of Party Cabinets,” 55–96.

²⁵ Some historians take the starting point for Taishō democracy back to the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, with the first urban rioting against the terms of the Portsmouth

perception aligns the Taishō period with the global 1920s. For Japan this signified the flourishing of social movements to expand civil and political rights, the establishment of party governments, cultural experimentation and cosmopolitan modernism in the arts and literature, a boisterous political press with a nationwide readership, and the rise of left-wing radicalism. Taishō democracy is associated with the embrace of liberal internationalism embodied in the Washington Conference System in China (1922) and permanent membership on the Council of the League of Nations (1920), as well as a cooling toward military expansionism expressed in the fallout from the ill-fated Siberian Expedition (1918–1922), participation in the antiwar Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) as one of the fifteen original signatories, and the negotiation of regional disarmament treaties with Britain and the United States at Washington (1922) and London (1930). Thus, the trends associated with Taishō democracy were liberal internationalism, leftist political opening, and cultural cosmopolitanism.

In theory, the Meiji oligarchs set up a system of limits on democracy, prescribing a servile citizenry, with political rights (for the 1%) expressed through the Diet, itself intended to act as a rubber stamp for the executive branch. In reality a very different form of democracy emerged by the 1920s. Despite obstacles to political activism, people organized themselves into interest groups, political parties, and social movements. They expressed their political will through the ballot box, and when that was unavailable, through protest and direct action. Even so, the imprint of the Meiji constitutional order left its mark on the democratic institutions that grew up upon its foundations, which were defined by the persistent logic of insider and outsider politics. As the composition of the “insiders” expanded, a new “outside” rose up in opposition to a government that appeared sealed off and unresponsive to public demands. In other words, the very success of democracy from above invited the movement for democracy from below.²⁶

Focused on grooming their relations with the government, the establishment parties eschewed possibilities for expanding a base of power outside of their upper-class constituencies and focused their democracy project on increasing

Peace Treaty. Edward G. Griffin, “Taishō Democracy,” in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983). Andrew Gordan, who coined the term “imperial democracy” to describe this phenomenon, also begins with the Hibiya Riots of 1905 and divides his study into the “movement for imperial democracy” from 1905 to 1918, “imperial democratic rule” from 1918 to 1932, and the “collapse of imperial democracy” from 1932 to 1940: *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

²⁶ The idea of democracy from above and below riffs off Maruyama Masao’s famous essay on Japanese fascism, which made the distinction between the movement for “fascism from below” by radical movements and “fascism from above” by agents of the government to convert the state to fascist form: “The Ideology and Dynamics of Japanese Fascism,” trans. Andrew Fraser, in Maruyama Masao, *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, ed. Ivan Morris (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 25–83.

access to the state for themselves. Probably the most striking expression of their commitment to limiting representation was the specter of the largest party, the Seiyūkai, opposing the movement for universal suffrage in the early 1920s. Denying large segments of the population a voice in parliament left the field open for new forms of opposition to the political establishment to emerge, as many people took to the streets to assert claims to power and resources in a militant push for democracy from below. Although the passage of universal manhood suffrage in 1925 meant that the original electorate of 1% had grown to an estimated 20% of the population, this still left plenty of people without recourse to democratic representation. Twelve million male citizens over twenty-five qualified to vote in the first elections under the new law in 1928, out of a population of sixty-two million. In an interesting twist, this included Koreans living in the home islands but excluded all residents of the colonies, including ethnic Japanese.²⁷

Left-wing radicalism exploded in the wake of World War I, and activists developed a toolkit of extraparliamentary and often extralegal tactics to express their political demands. Right-wing radicalism also gained steam, though on a smaller scale and with less overall impact. The movement for democracy from below was fueled by the energy of the left—a host of progressive political movements pushing for women’s rights and universal suffrage, labor and farm tenant rights, civil rights for foreign workers (Koreans) and former out-cast groups (*burakumin*), as well as Communist, Anarchist, and Socialist ideals. Right-wing organizations emerged to counter the left in universities, workers organizations, women’s groups, and other sites of the social movement. The alternative to parliamentary activism was direct action, and this became the tool of choice for opposition groups across the 1910s and 1920s. Starting with the Hibiya Riots of 1905 against the Russo-Japanese War treaty, rallies, marches, strikes, and other forms of popular protest proved their efficacy in telegraphing opposition sentiments to a government unaccustomed to and uninterested in hearing from the lower orders. Popular protest proved able to force real changes in policy and on occasion brought down the cabinet. The Rice Riots of 1918 were a spectacular demonstration of the power of the crowd. As a form of social politics via direct action, they made both a symbolic and a material impact on politics going forward.²⁸

²⁷ Neither Koreans, Taiwanese, nor Japanese residents in the empire were represented in the Diet. During the 1920s, limited forms of democratic local self-government were established in the colonies: Emer Sinead O’Dwyer, *Significant Soil: Settler Colonialism and Japan’s Urban Empire in Manchuria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015); Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

²⁸ Michael Lewis, *Rioters and Citizens: Mass Protest in Imperial Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

The rioting was touched off by price inflation and intermittent food shortages during the economic boom of World War I; unrest spread through the summer of 1918 to protest the price and availability of rice—targeting rice merchants and local elites who were perceived to have either caused the problem by manipulating supplies for profit or—just as bad—failed to use their wealth to help their fellow citizens. When police forces proved unable to prevent mobs breaking into rice warehouses and smashing the property of local elites, the government was forced to dispatch troops to 144 locations throughout the country. The mobilization of the army to put down the Rice Riots represented a signal failure of the state. The Terauchi Masatake cabinet fell in disgrace, demonstrating the ability of the unenfranchised crowd to determine the fate of the prime minister. Moreover, through the Rice Riots crowd action forced a host of new policies concerning rice prices and rice supply, as well as new measures to address poverty and provide social services for the urban poor. Most of all, the riots burned into popular memory the image of a chain of cities engulfed in rioting—the specter of urban revolution. They heralded the beginning of new forms of social politics that, along with party cabinets, defined Taishō democracy. Excluded from the deliberations of parliament and lacking access to the bureaucratic patronage, these political outsiders developed their own toolkit to shape policy and influence the state.

Political organizations representing those excluded from the realm of establishment politics proliferated rapidly and began to spread radical ideas through the mass media and culture industries. On the left, labor and tenant union membership grew rapidly and unions established links to proletarian political parties. For the most part these were vanguard parties, led by intellectuals and other elites who cast themselves in the role of enlightening workers and directing their political action. The Japan Communist Party was founded in 1922 and quickly outlawed, but continued to organize from an underground base and through connections to student organizations in Tokyo's leading universities. Intellectuals created Socialist parties and press organs beginning in the turn of the century, and the burst of union activism from World War I energized the Socialist movement and gave it new direction. By the mid-1920s close to 10% of the workforce was unionized, including both factory workers and tenant farmers; they struck factories and fields in increasing numbers across the decade. They demanded wage hikes and rent reduction as well as improved working conditions, asking to be treated with dignity and respect; they also called for civil rights and a political structure that gave power “to the people.” After the passage of universal manhood suffrage in 1925, proletarian parties organized to run candidates for office, winning 3–4% of the Diet in the first elections after the new law was enacted and 10% by the mid-1930s.²⁹

²⁹ Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan*.

The dramatic rise of left-wing movements in the home islands was matched by the appearance of anticolonial nationalism in the overseas empire. In 1919, violent uprisings in the March 1 Movement in colonial Korea and the May 4 Movement in China deployed Wilsonian principles to call for national self-determination. Colonial elites in Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria took up the language of “Taishō democracy” to push for local self-government, and Japanese colonists—who could not vote—also began to demand political representation. The movement for democracy from below was empire-wide.

While organized workers and their parliamentary representation constituted a small minority overall, they punched above their weight in terms of impact. The proletarian movement was strongest in the factories, in the universities, and in the farm suburbs of Tokyo and Osaka, where the upper class and establishment insiders were also concentrated. Japan’s upper classes gazed with increasing alarm at the expanding organizational strength and rising militancy of the left; they viewed these developments against the backdrop of the spread of international socialism and the specter of worldwide revolution. They connected it with an alarming breakdown in social order and the spread of anticolonial nationalism in the empire.

In the meantime, the radical right organized into its own political parties and action groups, constituting hundreds of small organizations, sometimes loosely affiliated with each other, but more atomized than the left. With names like Blood Pledge League, Righteousness Corps of the Divine Land, and the Anti-Red League, radical right activists regarded themselves as heirs to so-called *shishi*, revolutionary men of spirit called to act in the political crisis of the 1850s. Now they called for a cleansing of the political system through Taishō and Shōwa restorations of a purified imperial rule. Like the left, they condemned the parliamentary establishment for corruption and self-dealing; they denounced the concentration of economic power in the hands of the big business combines known as *zaibatsu*; they blamed the upper classes for the suffering of the working poor. Unlike the left, the right-wing were animated by virulent anticommunism and embraced the ultranationalist ideas labeled “Japanism”: the emperor cult, pan-Asianism, and hypermilitarism. To be sure, belief in the emperor-centered constitution, leadership in Asia, and the importance of a strong military were tenets of nationalist ideology shared across the political spectrum. Right-wing “Japanism” of the 1920s and 1930s simply pumped up and aggrandized these ideas, lending nationalism an extreme or “ultra” quality.³⁰

³⁰ For a discussion of the “ultra” quality of “ultranationalism,” see Maruyama, “The Ideology and Dynamics of Japanese Fascism”; Louise Young, “When Fascism Met Empire in Japanese-Occupied Manchuria,” in “Axis Empires: Toward a Global History of Fascist Imperialism,” special issue of *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 2 (June 2017): 274–296.

The radical right engaged in direct action of a different sort, as they mobilized militant gangs of followers to harass and beat up leftists; they drew up enemies' lists and sent members to China to operate in the shadowy underworld of continental adventurers. Like the specter of Socialist revolution evoked by the radical left, the right imposed its own psychic terror on the establishment through political violence. Most dramatically, rightists assassinated in 1921 both Hara Takashi, the architect of the transactional "politics of compromise" and head of the first party cabinet, and Yasuda Zenjirō, founder of one of the "big four" *zaibatsu*, who accrued his fortune through sweetheart deals with government insiders.³¹ Symbols of unsavory deal-making and crony capitalism, Hara and Yasuda paid the ultimate price for the perceived injustice of upper-class pluralism.

By the late 1920s democratic political traditions had grown in significant and substantive ways out of the restrictive foundation in the Meiji constitutional order. These included a free and vigorous political press, a political party system, the public embrace of democratic norms, universal manhood suffrage, and support for further broadening civil rights. Labor and farm tenant unions pressed their claims on employers and in the public sphere. A system of higher education made space for marginalized people, including women, colonial peoples (Koreans, Chinese), and former outcasts (*burakumin*). Yet critical weaknesses constrained the system as well. The state held extensive censorship and police powers to regulate political activity. Passage of the Peace Preservation Law in 1925, and its amendment in 1928, greatly enhanced instruments of political repression available to the state. The establishment political parties answered to wealthy businessmen, big landlords, and bureaucrats; they saw little benefit in responding to demands for greater representation. All the limitations of the Meiji Constitution were still in place and, with the notable exception of universal manhood suffrage, much of the democratic opening was effected via changing norms and informal practices rather than legal reform.

Thus, at the end of the 1920s, the Japanese political system was poised to move either toward greater democratic opening or toward the consolidation of upper-class pluralism. Democracy from below could have forced the system to represent an increasingly broad group of constituents. Democracy from above could have battened down the hatches against the pressures from the outside. The politics of compromise could have continued to convert outsiders to insiders. However, democracy is not linear. What happened instead was a slow-moving takeover of the state by the armed services and the marginalization of political parties. As we shall see, a concatenation of external and internal shocks in the late 1920s disrupted democratic evolution, triggering an extended stress test of

³¹ The phrase "politics of compromise" comes from Najita, *Hara Kei and the Politics of Compromise*.

Japan's political institutions. When the state seemed powerless to quickly resolve the multifront crisis, confidence in democratic governance disintegrated.

Shocks to the System, 1929–1932

The late 1920s and early 1930s proved challenging years for all industrialized societies, Japan not the least, as a decade of alternating inflation and deflation ended with a bank panic in 1927, and a tottering national economy slid ignominiously into the global crash of 1929.³² At the same time, the diplomacy of liberal internationalism which had effectively managed the competing ambitions of Britain, the United States, and Japan in the Asia-Pacific was coming under increasing stress. Naval limitations to forestall a financially ruinous arms race in the Washington Conference in 1922 were broadly championed by the political elite, but the optics of the London Naval Conference of 1930 provoked a more critical and anxious response.³³ Japan signed onto both treaties, which dictated ratios for various classes of vessels, calculated to guarantee each power's security interests; the sticking point was whether Japan had enough firepower to prevail in a potential war with the United States. While naval leaders from all three powers grumbled at the restrictions, the issue proved particularly bitter for the Japanese Navy, which split into two antagonistic factions over how best to guarantee military security vis-à-vis the United States. After their narrow failure in 1930, the antitreaty "fleet faction" used every tool at their disposal to ensure the collapse of another round of treaty revision in 1936. In the meantime, the rising tide of Chinese nationalism and the push to recover economic and political rights signed away under gunpoint began to splinter the united front of great powers, as Chinese diplomats successfully pitted Britain, the United States, and Japan against each other. Pressures to restart the arms race and the breakdown of great power unity in the face of Chinese nationalism coincided with the contagion of trade protectionism and tariff wars. Amplifying hostility and fear between the United States, Britain, and Japan over their respective ambitions in Asia, the challenges of arms limitation, anticolonial nationalism, and trade wars undermined support for liberal internationalism among Japan's political elite.³⁴

The sense of a gathering storm in the international arena coincided with heightened stress at home. The multifront socioeconomic crisis of the early

³² Hugh Patrick, "The Economic Muddle of the 1920s," in *Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan*, ed. James Morley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 211–266.

³³ Roger Dingman, *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); J. Charles Schencking, *Making Waves: Politics, Propaganda, and the Emergence of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1868–1922* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

³⁴ The following discussion draws on Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially 21–182.

1930s—agrarian stagnation and mass starvation in Japan's Northeast, unprecedented urban unemployment in cities large and small, plummeting exports to all of Japan's critical markets, the devastating decision to return to the gold standard in 1930 only to abandon it a year later—fed an atmosphere of desperation and panic.³⁵ In newspaper headlines and magazine articles, in passionate debate in the halls of the Diet, and in speeches before citizens rallies, opinion leaders called attention to a systemic economic crisis and demanded action. And yet, during the crucial months of 1929 and 1930, the government was paralyzed by bureaucratic in-fighting and a reluctance to take action that might adversely impact such core stakeholders as big landlords and business leaders. Looking out on the sea of human misery that washed across the national landscape, Japan's political establishment remained intent on self-dealing and incapable of mounting a competent and effective response.

The popular press was replete with examples of insider corruption and government impotence in those crucial years, but one will serve: the dollar-buying incident involving Japan's big business firms, the *zaibatsu*. Big business suffered from an image problem long before the dollar-buying scandal: the “big four” firms Yasuda, Mitsubishi, Mitsui, and Sumitomo dominated the national economy and were regularly criticized for the nefarious origins of their success, their cozy relationship with the establishment political parties, their purchase of aristocratic rank, and the numerous government corruption scandals with which they were associated. Although business organizations hedged their political bets by spreading their money around, conventional wisdom maintained that Mitsubishi *zaibatsu* had “bought” the Seiyūkai and that the Minseitō was “in the pocket” of Mitsui *zaibatsu*. After insisting for years that Japan maintain a convertible currency, the *zaibatsu* banks engaged in a fever of highly lucrative speculation against the yen in September and October 1931, undermining the frantic efforts of the government to shore up the value of the national currency in order to keep Japan on the gold standard. Moreover, the news that Mitsui sold barbed wire to the Chinese 19th Route Army, against whom Japanese troops were fighting in Shanghai in 1932, and salt to the enemy in Manchuria, provoked outrage and condemnation of big business as traitors.³⁶ And yet the government did nothing to bring Mitsui to account. To the public it appeared that the *zaibatsu* and their political tools, the establishment parties, lined their pockets while millions of ordinary Japanese were starving and out of work. For the middle and working class, who felt disconnected and unrepresented by the establishment political parties and who were bearing the brunt of the damage

³⁵ For a study of the rural dimension, see Kerry Smith, *A Time of Crisis: Japan, the Great Depression, and Rural Revitalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001).

³⁶ Young, *Japan's Total Empire*, 189.

from the economic crisis, the ability of the wealthy to game the system and continue their privileged access to the government establishment was outrageous and intolerable. It showed that parliamentary democracy worked only for the rich and connected.

In the meantime, trouble was brewing in Japan's overseas empire, compounding the sense of a nation beset by crisis on all sides. Attention turned to China, where Japan's position appeared embattled by the rising nationalist movement. Focused increasingly on overturning the legal structure that underpinned Japan's railroad imperialism in Northeast China, Chinese nationalists boycotted Japanese goods and struck Japanese-owned factories to demand the recovery of rights signed away over decades of gunboat diplomacy. Against the backdrop of global trade friction and tariff wars, the China market became Japan's "imperial lifeline" and the justification for an army-led invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

This invasion began with a military conspiracy unsanctioned by insider decision-making within the cabinet in Tokyo. Yet the occupation of Northeast China and the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo quickly became a fait accompli and ushered in a series of policy shifts of great consequence for Japan. It also established a pattern of actions by military actors in the empire that sequentially expanded the war front across the 1930s. The invasion of Manchuria, the escalation to all-out war with China in 1937, the attacks on Soviet Siberia in 1938 and 1939, and the destruction of the American and British fleets in the Asia-Pacific in 1941 were all teed up by military mission creep, where the creation of ever-changing facts on the ground generated forward momentum and closed off routes for retreat. What connected the serial openings of new war fronts were decisions by a small group of actors—military men on the spot, a faction within government—that did not represent a broader consensus of elite stakeholders within the prewar state. In each case, core groups fundamentally disagreed but were dragged along. They gave consent reluctantly or after the fact. In this sense the politics of military expansionism triggered a transformation of upper-class pluralism, shrinking the circle of insiders and making them less responsive to input from elite constituencies and interest groups.

The question remains: Why did the Japanese sphere of influence in Northeast China become the inflection point for democratic retreat? One answer is that Manchuria stood at the intersection of external and domestic crises, of diplomatic and economic dilemmas. For this reason, it served as the battleground between advocates of liberal internationalism and those of regional autarky. When elite consensus turned toward unilateralism in Manchuria, it signaled a broader pivot to go-it-alone Asianism and a rejection of the cooperative diplomacy of imperialism.

Japan acquired this sphere of influence after victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, when Russia transferred to Japan leaseholds and development

rights in the Kwantung Territory, the ports of Port Arthur and Dairen, and the South Manchurian Railway Zone—all of which China had previously signed away to Russia under duress. On this foundation, Japan built the largest and most profitable company of the prewar period, the South Manchurian Railway, and dominated the world trade in soybeans. Manchuria also served as base for the crack troops of the imperial army, the garrison force known as the Kwantung Army. Japan's stake in Manchuria was substantial by any measure. South Manchurian Railway assets added up to a billion yen in 1930, boasting spectacular rates of return of 20%–30% over most years of operation, though in steep decline in the late 1920s. A quarter-million Japanese lived in railway towns along the South Manchurian Railway, a large fraction of whom were railway employees and their families.

Statesmen had long considered investments in Northeast China as a bridgehead for plans to expand Japanese interests into the more developed regions to the south. Manchuria was the centerpiece of a far-flung colonial empire, including Taiwan, Korea, and the Pacific Islands, and a foothold for expanding economic interests into the rest of China. For Japan's trade-dependent national economy, and amid the global economic crisis, the empire in Northeast Asia became a critical market for both exports and imports and the hub of global trade networks. When Matsuoka Yōsuke coined the term “lifeline” in 1930 to describe the significance of Manchuria for Japan, it took hold precisely because of this history of involvement. The Japanese economy was externally dependent: if markets controlled by Britain and the United States were at risk, Japan could double down on a safety net in Asia.

Manchuria also became a trouble spot in the politics of nationalism and imperialism in China. Boosted by the rising tide of Chinese nationalism, an anti-imperialist “rights recovery movement” sought to reverse decades of infringement on Chinese sovereignty through legal challenges to leaseholds, investments, and railroad-building permissions. Led by Chiang Kai-shek, the nationalist movement sought to reunify the country militarily under the Republican banner, reclaiming it from regional warlords and their foreign imperialist allies. Between 1926 and 1928, the Northern Expedition brought Chinese territory up to the Great Wall under Chiang's military control—coming dangerously close to the Japanese sphere of influence in South Manchuria. By the late 1920s panic had set in among South Manchurian Railway administrators and Kwantung Army officers, who feared the vast investments in Manchuria were put at risk by the Chinese nationalist movement and Chiang. And while Korea, Taiwan, and other parts of the empire appeared securely within Japan's grip, the Manchurian crown jewel was in peril. South Manchurian Railway employees and Kwantung Army officers pleaded with Tokyo to act to protect Japanese investments from the threat of Chinese nationalism. A radical clique within the

Kwantung Army chose to force the government's hand by triggering a military crisis in Manchuria.

On September 18, 1931, the conspirators within the Kwantung Army staged an explosion on the Japanese railway track in Mukden and left evidence incriminating Chinese troops. The alleged Chinese attack became the pretext for Japanese forces on the spot to launch an invasion of Manchuria, acting without authorization from the high command in Tokyo to mobilize their troops, bomb the city of Jinzhou in South Manchuria, and attack the troops of regional warlord Zhang Xueliang. The series of independent actions carried out by the Kwantung Army between 1931 and 1933 became known as the Manchurian Incident. In the wake of military action, diplomacy scrambled to calm the protests of Republican China, the United States, and Great Britain, but when these efforts failed, Japanese statesmen walked out of the League of Nations in 1933. The Manchurian Incident put the army firmly back in charge of colonial policy in Korea and Manchuria and laid the ground for the *fait accompli* as a method to overcome the impasse of bureaucratic conflict when the army didn't get its way.

The Manchurian Incident demonstrated to actors in the bureaucratic state, to party politicians, and to the public at large that the army possessed the capacity for decisive leadership. Force, momentum, and action served to "overcome the deadlock" of political paralysis and secure an economic lifeline in a dangerous world. While the invasion originated with a conspiracy by rogue army officers, eventually the high command and the rest of the political establishment went along, sanctioning military action after the fact and choosing to profit from new facts on the ground that brought all of Manchuria under Japanese control. In the process, they surrendered power to a shrinking pool of insiders, hollowing out the democratic advances of upper-class pluralism and halting the momentum for democracy from below in its tracks.

Agents of Military Takeover, 1932–1936

Japan's response to the gathering global crisis of the late 1920s proved fateful for democratic institutions. Yet the breakdown in democracy in wartime Japan did not occur suddenly or through institutional rupture. Rather, the Great Depression and the Manchurian Incident of late 1920s and early 1930s together touched off a slow-motion military takeover. A breakdown, not a break, the political shifts of the 1930s represented a series of actions and choices made by human agents. This included, notably, the people who inhabited the institutions of insider and outsider politics as well as the groups and organizations supporting a culture of pluralism and liberal democracy. Over the course of the early 1930s, the invasion of Manchuria, the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo, the

intensification of conflict with regional powers, the withdrawal from the League of Nations, and the rejection of liberal world order all proved enormously popular with the public and were supported by government insiders and in the Diet. This support extended to the rising influence of the army in foreign policy decision-making and in the colonial empire at the expense of civilian ministries. Likewise, the public celebrated and the parliament supported “national unity” cabinets that augmented the power of the military, marking the effective end of party cabinets.³⁷ Army spokesmen commanded the airwaves, and their attacks on the incompetence and corruption of political parties resonated widely. Organized interest groups responded by putting their faith in army leadership in times of “national emergency.” Thus, the military takeover of government and the accompanying retreat from democracy were broadly supported.

Why did supporters of parliamentary democracy decide to place their faith in army rule? Popular Japanese stereotypes of the “dark valley” of the 1930s conjure up images of a militaristic police state which exercised unlimited powers of political repression to coerce an unwilling but helpless populace into cooperating with the army’s power play at home and abroad.³⁸ The reality was more complicated, with insiders and outsiders together steering the turn to an authoritarian, militaristic polity.

The military led the way in this effort by initiating the conspiracy in Manchuria, but equally important was a series of public relations campaigns carried out over the early 1930s that sold their Manchurian cover story (self-defense against Chinese necessitated the invasion) and promoted their worldview (“red peril” and “white peril” represented existential threats to the nation) through direct appeals to the public. Distributing a series of pamphlets making the army’s case to libraries and neighborhood centers; organizing mass rallies with speeches, music, and popular entertainment; and sponsoring films, radio shows, and press releases, the army used new forms of propaganda with increasing sophistication to shape and define public opinion. Initially their efforts aimed to reverse antipathy toward the military, grown over the course of the 1920s and expressed in popular support for the reduction of military budgets and participation in arms limitation treaties, as well as an alarming rise in draft dodging. Later the goals of the campaign expanded to fomenting opposition to the Japan Communist Party and spreading “red peril” sentiments, to whipping up support for Japanese unilateralism in Manchuria, racism toward the Chinese, and hostility to the League

³⁷ The last time the armed services tried to bully executive branch insiders over the choice of prime minister triggered the Taishō Political Crisis of 1913. The military lost that power play: Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 128–129.

³⁸ The dark valley mythology is mostly debunked in scholarly accounts of the 1930s but retains a strong hold in public memory, especially in museum representations of wartime Japan such as the Edo-Tokyo Museum and the National Shōwa Memorial Museum (Shōwa-kan), both in Tokyo.

of Nations, and to inciting panic about the putative “national emergency” (the military campaigns in China) and coming “crisis of 1936” (the Soviet military buildup). Though these campaigns began prior to the Manchurian Incident, the crisis on the continent made the public more receptive to the message. By the mid-1930s opinion effectively shifted on questions of empire and domestic politics—previous support for disarmament evaporated and even the proletarian parties moderated their anti-imperialist platforms to support the military occupation of Manchuria and take a harder line toward the Chinese Nationalists.

Critical to the success of army propaganda was the role of Japan’s commercialized mass media in whipping up war fever and spreading the idea of a “national emergency.” The jingoistic militarism of the mass media in the early 1930s represented a dramatic shift from the previous decade, when publishing and entertainment culture championed pacifism and international cooperation. Why did the media appear to switch sides, becoming unofficial propagandists for the army? One simple answer is that newspaper, magazine, and radio companies hyped the invasion because Manchuria sold so well in the highly competitive marketplace for news and infotainment.

Like “overcome the deadlock” and “Manchurian lifeline,” the term “national emergency” saturated media coverage of the Manchurian Incident and became shorthand for promoting military action in China. After the story broke of the military clash on September 18, the news of the latest action on the continent commanded the headlines for months. War songs set the fashion in popular music and battlefield dramas filled the stage and screen. The big dailies spread the Kwantung Army’s version of events in Manchuria and promoted their conspiracy as established fact. The opening of hostilities was reported on the front page of Japan’s leading newspaper: “[I]n an act of outrageous violence, Chinese soldiers blew up a section of South Manchurian Railway track . . . and attacked our railway guards.” From army press release to jingoistic headlines, Japanese audiences learned of the invasion of China from a credulous mass media.³⁹

Against the backdrop of the gathering crisis in Manchuria and the outbreak of war fever, the radical right launched a sustained attack on democratic institutions. In the face of perceived government inaction and ineptitude, groups of junior military officers joined hands with civilian organizations to enact a rapid-fire series of violent conspiracies aimed at reclaiming command over the state. The plot to stage a pretext for the invasion of Manchuria was just one dramatic example, as a series of conspiracies back in Tokyo accompanied radical action in China. In March 1931 plans for a coup d’état by a group of officers in the ultranationalist organization called the Cherry Society fell apart at the last minute, though they regrouped for a second attempt in October, again halted

³⁹ Young, *Japan’s Total Empire*, 57–58.

at the eleventh hour. In the spring of 1932, the Blood Pledge League drew up an assassination list that included business and political leaders; they executed the former finance minister Inoue Junnosuke and the head of the Mitsui business conglomerate, Dan Takuma, before the ringleaders were arrested. On May 15, remnants of the Blood Pledge League joined army cadets in another coup attempt, assassinating Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi and launching abortive assaults on several government buildings before surrendering to the police. The wave of army terror culminated in the most spectacular and audacious coup attempt yet on February 26, 1936. Under the leadership of junior officers, fourteen hundred troops seized central Tokyo, killed several members of the government and their guards, and declared martial law with the support of sympathetic senior officers. But after several days of tense stand-offs between different factions of the military, the coup opponents prevailed and forced the rebels to stand down.

This wave of right-wing terror, memorably called “government by assassination” by an American journalist, heightened the intensity of war fever and created a climate of panic among the political establishment.⁴⁰ “Government by assassination” subjected the political system to a stress test that challenged the integrity of both the bureaucratic politics of the state as well as party politics in the Diet. The response revealed many points of weakness. Indeed, establishment political parties reacted to the war fever and the army’s “national emergency” with opportunism and cowardice. In the 1920s, the Minseitō and Seiyūkai political parties were branded doves and hawks, respectively, based on their foreign policies (oppose or support military intervention in China; cooperate with great powers or act independently), and the approach to China tacked between these two poles depending on which party was in power. When the Kwantung Army launched their conspiracy in the fall of 1931, the Minseitō held the cabinet and initially tried to restrain military action. Amid war fever, attacks on their soft line proved effective, and elections swept the Seiyūkai into power. Both parties moved steadily to the right on foreign policy, outflanking each other to support army action and appease demands for “whole nation” (army-dominated) cabinets. In the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai in the May 15th Incident of 1932, army leaders insisted that the political parties step back from running the government to avoid further antagonizing restive elements in their ranks. Opportunists within both parties sought to direct this antiparty hostility toward their own internal rivals, marginalizing liberal internationalists within the parliament. These machinations effectively ended party rule in 1932.

Over the subsequent months and years, senior officers used the wave of violent conspiracies by junior officers to blackmail their bureaucratic opponents,

⁴⁰ Hugh Byas, *Government by Assassination* (New York: Knopf, 1942). The book was based on contemporaneous coverage in the *New York Times*.

demanding acquiescence to budget increases and the confrontational military policy on the continent. Together with the cowardice and opportunism of party politicians in the Diet, the dynamics of bureaucratic politics in the early 1930s ceded power to the military, which became the preeminent power broker within the political structure and whose authority only increased over the course of the decade. Military leaders worked hard to gather the levers of power in their hands. One important task was to get their own house in order, and after the coup attempt of 1936, the army cracked down on radical elements in its ranks. Conspirators were court-martialed and executed and sympathetic senior officers purged or demoted. Meanwhile, the military expanded its control over the bureaucratic state—with active-duty officers placed in charge of colonial governorships and with effective veto power over cabinet posts. Nothing about this slow-moving military takeover violated the Constitution. Indeed, the autonomy of the general staffs from cabinet control and the so-called right of supreme command that gave the military a direct line of authority to the emperor were key elements of constitutional design. The Meiji constitutional order provided army leaders the option to take over the state from within.

As the army moved to assume control over the levers of government, elite stakeholders in tandem relinquished control. Not only did the establishment parties shift dramatically to the right in support of army positions, but their core constituents also endorsed army moves toward unilateralism in Manchuria and militarization at home. Facing a rural crisis that both jeopardized their rents and heightened tensions with their tenants—who were demanding reduction in rents, access to low-interest loans, and better terms of trade for their farm produce—big landlords welcomed the distraction of colonial warfare. The rural elite also embraced plans to settle newly occupied rural Manchuria with Japanese tenant-farmers, allowing them to export the vexing problems of rural poverty and social strife. Finding themselves under attack from right and left radicalism, business interests sought to diffuse public antipathy through gestures of patriotism, making ostentatious contributions to home-front support campaigns during the “national emergency.” Moreover, chambers of commerce and new business organizations like the Japan-Manchuria Business Council expressed great enthusiasm for the opportunities before them with the government pouring funds into efforts to “develop Manchuria.” Intellectuals flocked to Manchuria, where demand for scientific know-how and research skills created a jobs bonanza during the economic downturn. Just as the state was limiting scope for free expression of ideas within the home islands, the army’s puppet state in China offered intellectuals the opportunity to shape the future of the empire. In these ways, intellectual opinion leaders, landlord organizations, and the business community endorsed the occupation of Manchuria and retreated before the army’s political rise at home.

Indeed, there were few reasons to argue with the retreat from liberal internationalism in the early 1930s. The Manchurian invasion was a spectacular success in military, economic, and diplomatic terms, and was broadly popular with both political insiders and outsiders. Militarily, Japan won! Zhang Xueliang's forces were driven out of Manchuria. Diplomatically, Japan paid little price for its violation of the "territorial integrity of China"—a fundamental tenet of great power engagement in the region since the turn of the century. Other regional stakeholders were consumed with domestic problems and chose not to block Japan: the Soviet Union with forced collectivization and a horrendous famine, Britain and the United States with the Great Depression, the Republic of China with its military campaigns against the Communists. The USSR sold its railway in North Manchuria to Japan and retreated to Siberia. Republican China laid down its arms and requested mediation from the League of Nations. America registered disapproval through a toothless "nonrecognition" doctrine. Britain initially worked to defend Japan in the League of Nations, and even though the British-run Lytton Commission Report of 1932 condemned the invasion, no action was taken when Japan decided to withdraw from the League in protest. Afterward, China acknowledged the loss of Manchuria with the Tangku Truce of 1933. In the meantime, rising military budgets and the investments pouring into Manchukuo reinflated the Japanese economy, pulling the country out of depression faster than any other industrial economy. The Manchurian war boom brought Japan back to full employment by 1934, and the deficit spending push by Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo anticipated the fiscal policy innovations of American John Maynard Keynes. Thus, in military, diplomatic, and economic terms, the turn to military imperialism represented a vindication of army leadership.

Just as the Manchurian Incident war boom was fading, and opposition to the inflated military budgets gathered among business organizations and local governments, the opening of new war fronts in North, Central, and South China in 1937 touched off yet another war fever, with greater reach and saturation. Like the national emergency that accompanied the Manchurian Incident, the crisis atmosphere of the China Incident provided cover to further shrink the influence of civilian bureaucrats and party men over government policy. But much like the crisis of the early 1930s, key constituencies—the big business community, landlord organizations, opinion leaders in the mass media—relinquished leadership to the military in exchange for something of value to them. By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the launch of the Pacific War in 1941, Japan was a military dictatorship for all practical purposes. The military takeover and democratic retreat were mutually implicated processes, decided by a play for power on one side and a voluntary, if reluctant, relinquishing of influence on the other.

Repurposing the State, 1936–1940

Over the course of the 1930s, multiple developments served to augment military control and hollow out democratic institutions. With the dissolution of political parties into the mass party known as the Imperial Rule Assistance Association (IRAA) in 1940, the polity became a de facto military dictatorship. Many scholars have pointed out that the key difference between the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Japan lay in the continuity of political institutions in Japan.⁴¹ Government continued to operate under the Meiji Constitution, and the party system survived for a decade after the Manchurian crisis. Even with the creation of the IRAA in 1940, parties retained informal influence as factions within the single-party state. Bureaucratic government was not taken over by a fascist putsch from outside, but through the triumph of military factions from within. Interest groups like chambers of commerce and landlord associations continued to exercise influence on state policy, albeit with reduced access; wartime mobilization called on long-standing voluntary associations like youth groups and reservist associations. Thus, the expanding power of the state over the public, and the enhanced authority of the military within the state, relied on repurposing existing institutions rather than creating something new from whole cloth.

Even though institutions themselves endured, a hollowing out and redirection meant that their democratic function attenuated across the 1930s. This breakdown in democratic efficacy occurred across multiple sites, but three stand out as revelatory of this process. First, political parties were excluded from forming cabinets and were demoted to outsider status. As part of their power play, the army reasserted the principle of transcendental government, whereby the state stood above and apart from the people. Second, the tightening of censorship and unleashing of the “thought police” led to a dramatically expanded system of political repression and a de facto police state. Third, the requirements of mobilization for war in China and the drive toward economic autarky laid the ground for a national defense state. All three developments represented the repurposing of structures already in place that helped transform a democracy into a dictatorship.

⁴¹ For overviews of the fascism debate, see Katō Yōkō, “The Debate on Fascism in Japanese Historiography,” in *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History*, ed. Sven Saaler and Christopher W. A. Szpilman (New York: Routledge, 2018), 225–236; Rikki Kersten, “Japan,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, ed. R. J. B. Bosworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 526–544; Louise Young, “Japan at War: History-Writing on the Crisis of the 1930s,” in *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*, 2nd ed., ed. Gordon Martel (New York: Routledge, 1999), 155–177. An influential essay rejecting the fascist concept for Japan is Peter Duus and Daniel Okimoto, “Fascism and the History of Pre-war Japan: The Failure of a Concept,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979): 65–76. Key arguments supporting continuity in political structures are Kato Shūichi, “Taishō Democracy as Pre-stage for Shōwa Militarism,” in *Japan in Crisis: Essays on Taishō Democracy*, ed. Bernard S. Silberman and H. D. Harootunian (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), 217–236 and Berger, *Parties Out of Power in Japan*.

After 1932, political parties continued to function, elections were held, and establishment parties commanded most seats in the Diet, but they lost the informal right to appoint the prime minister and determine the composition of the cabinet. As before, the privy council formally nominated the prime minister, but with the advent of so-called national unity cabinets the army arrogated for itself an informal veto. Subsequent cabinets were headed by senior officers or peers approved by the military high command. Excluded from government decision-making by a shrinking number of insiders, parties returned to an outsider politics that focused on budgetary combat and responding to initiatives coming from the cabinet. Since many of these initiatives involved the extension of state power under the exigencies of total war, parties concentrated their firepower on defending their shrinking scope of authority. Much of the latter half of the 1930s was consumed with holding the line against radical proposals for a New Political Order that envisioned the “purification of politics” through the overturning of divisive, Western-style liberalism and the reform of a pluralist multiparty system in favor of a single mass organization. The parties ultimately lost this battle, conceding to their dissolution with the creation of the IRAA in 1940.⁴²

Modeled on the Nazi Party, the IRAA, however, failed to live up to the hopes of the architects of the New Political Order. Rather than a mass organization that took shape organically, that could channel the popular will and would express fervent loyalty to the imperial state, the IRAA remained a prefabricated organization that forced into a single party the members of existing political organizations. Party men occupied a large fraction of the IRAA, where they maintained earlier ties with interest groups and with their regional base. Under the umbrella of the IRAA the Seiyūkai and the Minseitō continued to function as informal factions, and their social networks outside the party likewise persisted. Thus, the IRAA offers a prime example of the nature of the democratic break. This was a substantive change of institutional form from pluralism to a single-party state; as a political party the IRAA constituted a vehicle for channeling the will of the state to the people rather than the other way around. At the same time, it offered some limited scope for formal and informal mechanisms of party politics to endure as a “loyal opposition” under the dictatorship of the mass party, a faint echo of the chummy relationship between government insiders and party outsiders in the Meiji period.

Freedom of expression in the mass media and in political thought represented a second site where the breakdown in democracy was clearly felt. The legal and institutional infrastructure for surveillance and censorship of political thought was created in the Meiji period, with the Peace Police Law of 1900 and the

⁴² Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan*, 327–330; Gordon Berger, “Politics and Mobilization in Japan, 1931–1945,” in Duus, *Cambridge History of Japan*, 6: 97–153.

Special Higher Police—also known as the “thought police”—established in 1911. Deployed initially against the fledgling Socialist movement, after the Great War the government used the Special Higher Police to control leftist and progressive activism. The Peace Preservation Act of 1925 greatly enhanced state powers and enabled the mass arrests of March 1928 for “thought crime” in an effort to crush the Communist movement. This inaugurated a dramatic expansion of the infrastructure of repression; after 1928 branches of the Special Higher Police were established in all prefectures and agents deployed overseas and to the empire.

In tandem with the expanded powers of the Special Higher Police, Home and Justice Ministries developed an extensive program of intellectual rehabilitation of thought criminals known as “conversion,” or *tenkō*.⁴³ Between 1928 and 1941, the Home Ministry’s Special Higher Police arrested sixty-six thousand thought criminals, mostly leftist intellectuals, labor leaders, and members of proletarian political parties. Once behind bars, prisoners were subjected to an elaborate program of psychological pressure meant to break their commitment to antigovernment ideals and convert them to imperial state ideology. Justice Ministry prosecutors spent hours and days with prisoners deploying a combination of carrot and stick to engineer *tenkō*. While threatening families with exposure (guilt by association) and reprisals (ostracism, loss of jobs), prosecutors also offered to waive charges and return prisoners to their former position if they publicly recanted their beliefs and declared their loyalty to the state. This was called “the special dispensation system,” a kind of plea bargain whereby thought criminals could recant their beliefs in exchange for leniency. Initially developed after the first mass arrests of 1928, the system demonstrated its stunning success in 1933, when the two leaders of the Japan Communist Party, Nabeyama Sadachika and Manu Sanabu, recanted and triggered a cascade of conversions by other jailed members of the party. These jailhouse conversions of 1933 broke the back of the Communist movement in wartime Japan and eliminated a powerful voice for democracy from below.

Periodic mass arrests and the jailhouse pressures to convert were one element of the antidemocratic police state. While this targeted the radical left, the liberal intelligentsia became objects of state surveillance and repression via a different set of tactics that targeted freedom of expression in the elite universities. What was striking about the university environment of the 1920s was the coexistence of rightists, leftists, and liberals in the academy. Intellectual openness was tolerated even at Tokyo Imperial University, the flagship state academy and

⁴³ On *tenkō*, see Max Ward, *Thought Crime: Ideology and State Power in Interwar Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Shunsuke Tsurumi, *An Intellectual History of Wartime Japan, 1931–45* (New York: Routledge, 1986); R. H. Mitchell, *Thought Control in Prewar Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); P. G. Steinhoff, *Tenkō: Ideology and Social Integration in Prewar Japan* (New York: Garland, 1991).

training ground for upper civil servants. But this openness underwent a sharp transformation in the 1930s, as tolerance for any form of opposition shrank. Repression in the academy reflected a shift in the balance between fear of subversive ideas on the one hand and the value placed on the benefits of intellectual freedom on the other. On an unprecedented scale, conservative bureaucrats and right-wing scholars now purged from the academy intellectuals such as Takigawa Yukitoki and Minobe Tatsukichi, whose teachings had represented liberal orthodoxy and, in Minobe's case, had earned him a position in the House of Peers. In the series of university incidents that punctuated the decade, scientific analysis of Japan's history, polity, and society came increasingly under attack. Like mass arrests and jailhouse conversions, university purges were designed for both their specific targets as well as a broader form of police state terror. By making examples of celebrated intellectuals like Minobe, the state telegraphed the message that no one was safe to express opinions freely. Even so, liberal and even Marxist intellectuals continued some measure of public expression until a far-reaching purge of 1942–1943, when the thought police rounded up suspect intellectuals in universities, newspapers, publishing houses, and think tanks in major cities throughout the empire. This wiped out the last vestiges of press freedom and political expression for intellectuals.

Negative thought control through repression was supplemented by positive thought control via "spiritual mobilization," which also intensified across the course of the decade and corroded freedom of political expression and an independent press. Spiritual mobilization was part of a rapid growth of state power and activity over the course of the 1930s, an expansion that came at the expense of democratic control. This mobilization for total war represented the third site where democracy became transformed into military dictatorship. Underpinned by the shared belief among political actors in the efficacy of state action, successive cabinets expanded the purview of state control over labor, finance, politics, markets, ideas, trade, production, and other aspects of social, economic, and political life.

Much of this was directed by the cabinets of Konoe Fumimaro in the latter 1930s, under the rubric of the "new structure movement." Descendent of a powerful aristocratic family, Konoe's pedigree guaranteed him a position in the House of Peers and a glide path to the inner circles of executive power. After the failed military coup of 1936, he became a compromise figure among battling factions within the bureaucracy and led three cabinets during the crucial period between 1937 and 1941. One after another, Konoe rolled out a new order in Asia, a new economic order, a new order for labor, and a new political order. Promoted as replacing Western-style individualism and class conflict with Asian-style cooperation and mass unity, mechanisms to manage economy and society were created by technocratic officers and bureaucrats following some combination of

Nazi, Soviet, and Chinese blueprints. The national defense state of the late 1930s operated under the Meiji Constitution but supplanted the democratic norms and procedures that had emerged under Taishō democracy with technocratic-military rule. In this sense, the new structure movement replaced democracy from above with what Maruyama Masao called “fascism from above”—the fascization of the state from within.⁴⁴

One example of this process was the reorganization of the relationship between capital and labor. During the Taishō era, business organizations occupied the political inside as constituents of the establishment parties and through their connections to government officials; workers organizations pushed for the expansion of rights and representation from outside the system. The national defense state replaced the democratic logic of combat and compromise between and among insiders and outsiders with top-down mechanisms for the state to dictate terms to interest groups and voluntary organizations. This meant that business leaders and workers organizations were no longer pitted against each other as proponents of democracy from above and below, but were jointly placed in subordination to a shrinking inner circle of decision-makers.

Launched in 1937, the New Order for Labor replaced unions with discussion councils of workers and managers that brought labor and capital together into a “single body.” This project involved repurposing some existing company unions that already functioned as discussion councils, replacing more radical sectoral unions, and forcing the greater fraction of companies that were not unionized to organize workers councils in their factories. Factory councils were connected via regional branches to a central council, providing an organizational mechanism for the state to mobilize labor power in support of the war effort.

At the same time, the state wrangled control over business organizations through an expanding set of regulations limiting free markets. The New Economic Order adopted Soviet-style five-year planning to set targets for industrial development and government control. State planners established a list of types of industries that were subject to escalating levels of state management in what was called the controlled economy. Public utilities and industries related to national defense were reorganized into state-managed, privately owned companies; other industries were simply regulated. The series of laws that underpinned the various new orders concentrated decision-making in a new advisory body to the central government known as the cabinet planning council that relied on statistics and technocratic expertise to plan its way out of the national crisis.

Though both the New Order for Labor and the controlled economy fell short of their ambitious goals, they nonetheless expanded state power over society

⁴⁴ Maruyama, “The Ideology and Dynamics of Japanese Fascism,” 25–83.

and reduced social influence over the state. Like the military takeover of government and the engorgement of the thought police, the apogee of the national defense state spelled the effective end of democratic politics in wartime Japan. In all three cases the transformation of democracy into dictatorship represented a gradual process rather than a sudden rupture and was accomplished through the repurposing of existing institutions rather than creating something new and revolutionary. In this sense the story of wartime Japan is one of continuity of both institutions and actors, suggesting that the seeds of dictatorship lay within the political system. In Japan's case political modernity established under the Meiji Constitution contained the possibility of both bureaucratic authoritarianism and parliamentary democracy. With the paired passage of universal suffrage with the Peace Preservation Law during the high-water mark of Taishō democracy in 1925, the possibility of democracy opening wider emerged simultaneously with expanded tools for closing it down. A wildly popular imperialism spelled the end to democracy, as the popular embrace of the New Order in Asia swept an anti-democratic military regime into power.

Conclusion

What can we conclude about democratic breakdown in 1930s Japan? I would like to end with three observations. First, democracy is not linear. Despite the tenacity of a generalized modernization theory that envisions the evolution of democratic institutions and a trajectory of progress from less to more democracy, as well as the broadly held view that economic development brings political pluralism in its wake, Japan's case punctures both precepts of democratic ideology. In Japan, the arc of political history from the late nineteenth century tracked a zigzag course between democracy and authoritarianism, even amid steady movement through stages of industrial modernization. After Japan's defeat, democracy reemerged from the wartime state, with key institutions and actors once again shifting purpose, as political parties, bureaucratic ministries, and interest groups of political stakeholders, as well as higher education and mass media ecosystems, all survived the collapse of the war effort in 1945 and reemerged as the cornerstones of the new political order. From its foundations in the Meiji Restoration of 1868 the modern state became more democratic, then became more autocratic, then more democratic again. This suggests that we might think of dictatorship and democracy both as immanent to modern political systems, two sides of the same coin.

Second, both democracy and dictatorship are vulnerable to legitimacy hazards. The failure of democracy to deliver a solution to the geopolitical and economic crisis of the 1930s led to the rise of fascism. The even more catastrophic

failure of military dictatorship to deliver victory in World War II led to the collapse of the institutional legitimacy of the military, the overturning of belief in military-led modernization as a nation-building project, and the rejection of militarism as an ideology. In this sense, what went wrong with democracy also went wrong with dictatorship—leading to the embrace of democratic institutions once again, and cementing support for the antiwar clause of the new “peace” Constitution promulgated in 1947.⁴⁵ Because expanding the empire was popular in the 1930s, military officials were able to take over and repurpose the state. Because losing the empire was unpopular after 1945, civilian officials were able to purge the military and repurpose the state once again.

Third, if the Japanese case offers any lessons for the defense of democracy against an authoritarian slide, it is the risk of making Faustian bargains with antidemocratic agents. The transactional opportunism of political parties to gain advantage over a rival faction or to ride the wave of jingoism secured only short-term gain and hastened the overall decline of party influence. Left-wing and liberal intellectuals who joined colonial state think tanks and worked with the military, hoping to have a voice at the table and temper the army’s violent instincts, found themselves outmaneuvered and marginalized. They gave military imperialism legitimacy and expertise and got little in return. Cabinet officials gave way to military demands for troop surges and budget increases for fear of political retaliation or worse. Thousands of such bargains large and small enabled the slow-moving military takeover of the state. Core stakeholders in Japan’s democratic system, like the establishment political parties, the metropolitan daily newspapers, and business organizations, engaged in short-term thinking and opportunism, abandoning their active support for democratic principles such as freedom of expression or party control over the cabinet in a classic case of the tragedy of the political commons.

⁴⁵ Article 9 of Japan’s 1947 Constitution reads, “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.”