

Challenges for Japan (1912 - 1923)

Background

- Emperor Meiji died in 1912
- He was succeeded by Emperor Yoshihito, also known as Emperor Taisho
 - Hence, the period of his reign, 1912 - 1926, is known as the Taisho period
- The Taisho period was not politically stable

Political Challenges in Japan's Government

- Emperor Taisho was sickly and too weak to exercise his authority.
- Many of the Genro who advised the Emperor had left politics due to their age.
- Divisions between the court officials, the civilian politicians and the military worsened.

The Military

- Opposed internationalist diplomatic and trade policy pursued by the civilian government (PM and Cabinet)
- Resented cuts to its budget
- Began to disregard the civilian government
 - Emperor Taisho could not enforce much control over them either.

Civilian Government and Politicians

- Divided by emergence of political parties
 - E.g. Seiyukai and Minseito were political rivals which wrestled for power and influence in the government.
- Division between the parties made it difficult for the PM to gain support for their decisions
 - Many Taisho-period PMs and Cabinets were unable to remain in power
 - Some cabinets could not even be formed when the military refused to supply ministers for the army and the navy.

Economic Challenges

Although the Japanese economy made remarkable advances in the early 1900s, it repeatedly swung from boom to recession.

World War 1, 1914 - 1918

Without competition from European countries involved in the war, Japanese exports benefitted (e.g. Overseas sales of Japanese cotton cloth rose by 185%)

Inflation and Unemployment in Japan in the 1920s

However, by the early 1920s...

- Severe inflation set in and made Japanese goods very expensive (E.g. Rice increased 174% in price)
- There was high unemployment as a result of layoffs resulting from a decline in demand for Japanese goods
- Growing resentment towards the civilian government

Situation was worsened by the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake

Challenges in the Countryside

- Industrial growth led to increased living standards for most Japanese
 - E.g. Access to cheaper and better goods; improved services and infrastructure
 - However, the countryside did not enjoy such benefits as urbanites
 - Insufficient land due to large population growth
 - Majority of farmers were tenant farmers
 - Had to pay most of their harvest to landlords, leaving little for themselves

- Many farmers who owned their land, owned only small plots and often had poor harvests
- By 1920s, technological advances in farming began to be unable to spread through the countryside quickly enough.
- The productivity of the farmers stagnated

Tensions in Japanese Society

- The rapid economic and social changes of the Meiji period caused a number of societal divisions

Rich-poor divide

- Government support of the zaibatsu
 - Built cooperation and trust between the government and big businesses
 - Concentrated wealth in the hands of the big businesses

Rural-urban divide

- Richest landlords did not work on the farms and made up only ~2-3% of the population, but lived on rent from tenant farmers
- Landlords lived in luxury in sharp contrast to the poverty of the tenant farmers
- Unhappiness of the poor led to uprisings such as the **Rice Riots of 1918**
 - These riots were led by angry workers and triggered by sudden increase in commodities, especially rice.

Changing role of women

Traditionalists who worried about Japan losing its identity, one common complaint was that young women were abandoning their traditional roles.

- During the 1920s, many young women found jobs (e.g. in cafes, restaurants, silk mills and factories)
- Conditions were harsh but wages were reasonable
- Many young women found greater independence
 - Some even became active in politics
- They were seen as a threat to traditional Japanese society and values
 - They were accused of serving their own interests instead of the needs of their families

Impact of the Banking Crisis of 1927

Background

- In 1926, Emperor Showa / Emperor Hirohito became Emperor
- Many of Japan's political, economic and social problems continued and worsened
 - E.g. the banking crisis of 1927
- Led to increasing resentment among the Japanese people towards the civilian government
- In the 1920s, Japan had many small banks
 - They focused on small no. of borrowers who borrowed large sums of money
 - Such borrowers tended to be from the same few industries
 - This made banks vulnerable

- If the industries in question did not do well, the banks would have difficulty collecting their loans
- Government response
 - Introduced new policies to stabilise the banks
 - By 1929, most banks were stable and profitable again
 - It seemed the crisis was over
 - Until the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 / the Great Depression
- Japan was not spared by the Great Depression
- It caused Japanese exports, in particular its main export, silk, to fall drastically
- Japan's economy fell by 20% between 1929 - 1931
- Public resentment towards the civilian government grew.

Impact of the Great Depression

On Farmers

- As exports fell, it led to reduced demand for farmers' produce
- On average, incomes of the farmers fell 43% between 1929-1931
- Tenant farmers tried to get landowners to reduce rents
 - Landowners refused and even tried to evict their tenants who could pay their rent
 - Tenant farmers organised themselves into unions
 - They held protest meetings
 - They took landowners to court
 - Some disputes turned violent

On Small Business Owners

- Small business owners = owners of shops, restaurants, small factories, etc.
- They struggled to attract customers
 - E.g. 1930: 2x as many small business closures as an average year.
- Many small business owners joined protest movements
 - e.g. Imperial Middle Class Federated Alliance
 - Claimed that the political parties were favouring landowners, banks and zaibatsu whilst not helping small businesses.

Unemployment

- Caused mass unemployment
 - E.g. Between 1930 and 1932, ~15-20% of Japan's workforce lost their jobs
- Difficulty of the unemployed were made harder by Japan's labour laws
 - Most workers were only entitled to 14 days' pay when they were dismissed
- Desperate workers protested, sometimes violently.

Fear of Communism

- With increasing unemployment, workers began attracted to communism
 - However, the Japanese Communist Party was very small

- Nevertheless, the government feared the threat of communism
 - This fear was fostered by the USSR
 - It was close to Japan, with Japanese colonies in Korea and Manchuria directly bordering the Communist state

Growing Distrust in Government

- Due to combined effects of the existing economic problems and the Great Depression, the Japanese believed that the civilian government only cared about the elites (banks, landowners, zaibatsu)
- A strong feeling of distrust towards the civilian politicians
 - They believed they were either working with the zaibatsu/elites or were receiving money and benefits from them.

Factor	Short-Term/Long-term	Explanation
Role of the zaibatsu	Long-term factor	This factor is a long-term factor because... the centralisation of economic power under the zaibatsu and thus political influence fostered resentment among the Japanese people who increasingly saw the civilian government as working in the interests of said corporations at their expense.

Factor	Short-Term/Long-term	Explanation
The role of the Emperor	Long-term factor	This factor is a long-term factor because... the centralisation of political power within the office of the Emperor meant that should he prove an incapable leader, periods of political instability were inevitable.
The role of the military	Long-term factor	This factor is a long-term factor because... the disproportionate influence over the political system possessed by the military meant that it was a persistent threat to civilain rule.
The weak authority of the Prime Minister	Long-term factor	This factor is a long-term factor because... this had been a challenge faced by the Prime Minister since the Meiji restoration and severely weakened his position as he was unable to exert his authority.

Factor	Short-Term/Long-term	Explanation
The divide between the rich and the poor	Short-term factor	This factor is a short-term factor because... it was a phenomenon that led to resentment between the increasing wealthy zaibatsu and the poor peasants which undermined the authority of the civilian government.
Inflation and unemployment in Japan in the 1920s	Short-term factor	This factor is a short-term factor because... the inability of the civilian government to effectively deal with this economic crisis resulted in growing resentment towards it.
The 1927 Banking Crisis	Short-term factor	This factor is a short-term factor because... although government interventions eventually stabilised the situation, many Japanese had suffered the loss of their savings and thus had grown resentful towards the government's slow response.

Factor	Short-Term/Long-term	Explanation
The Great Depression, 1929	Short-term factor	This factor is a short-term factor because... it led to the resentment among the Japanese as the Japanese government proved itself unable to resolve the economic problems the Great Depression of 1929 brought to Japan.