

# Rise of Military Influence in the Government

## Background

### Civilian Politicians

- By the 1920s, the civilian politicians lost their strong position within the government as they lost the trust of the people due to their failure to deal with challenges in the 1920s.

### Military

- Its victories allowed it to prominence and popularity
- This prompted them to act on its own disregarding the civilian politicians in the government.

### Discontent from the Military

- In the 1920s, there was a growing feeling among some Japanese military officers that political parties and the zaibatsu were corrupt
  - They believed they were not interested in serving Japan but themselves.
  - Many of them were young and from families from poorer rural farming communities and new urban classes.
    - Both were badly affected by the economic challenges in the 1920s.
  - Generally felt that the civilian government no longer respected the military due to cuts to the military budget.
    - Felt that the politicians favored the zaibatsu rather than the military.

# Naval Restrictions

- Washington Naval Conference, 1922
  - In 1922, Japan signed agreements with Britain, France and the USA at the Washington Naval Conference to limit the total number of warships built.
  - Compared to the Western powers, Japan was restricted to a smaller fleet.
    - The countries agreed to the ratio of warship tonnage to be:
      - United States: 5
      - Britain: 5
      - Japan: 3
      - France: 1.75
      - Italy: 1.75
    - The navy felt that the civilian leaders had agreed to unfavourable terms.
- London Naval Conference, 1930
  - A conference to review the treaty signed by the Washington Naval Conference
  - Japan's demands to build more warships were rejected.
    - The countries agreed to the ratio for warship tonnage to be:
      - United States: 10
      - Britain: 10
      - Japan: 7
  - Japan was forced to sign the new London Naval Treaty of 1930.
    - Japan was not ready to confront the Western powers.
  - Aftermath
    - Several Cabinet ministers refused to agree to the Treaty and resigned in protest.
    - Was presented in the press (newspapers, radio, etc.) and navy commanders as a betrayal of the government
    - As a result, people's trust in the democratic government was further undermined.

# Manchuria

## Background

- Another discontented group in the military was the Kwantung Army stationed in Manchuria
  - It had been created in 1906 to protect Japan's Manchurian assets.
- Manchuria was seen as a solution to Japan's lack of natural resources as it was rich in natural resources (e.g. iron and coal)
- From 1916, China was divided into regions ruled by various warlords who fought each other for power
  - Initially, Manchuria's warlord, Zhang Zuolin, developed friendly relations with Japan and the Kwantung Army.
  - Over the years, Zhang's inability to defend Japan's interests frustrated the Kwantung Army.
- Assassination of Zhang Zuolin, 1928
  - The Kwantung Army assassinated Zhang to attempt to replace him with a more cooperative leader
  - Planned to:
    - Blame it on his rivals among the other Chinese warlords
    - Create a reason to force the Japanese government to take over Manchuria to better protect Japanese interests.
  - Aftermath
    - The Emperor criticised the Kwantung Army's actions and demanded the PM to discipline them.
    - Without the authority to do so, the PM was unable to force the military to punish those responsible for the assassination.
    - This revealed:
      - The Emperor's inability to control the military
      - The Military's ability to defy the civilian government.

- Mukden Incident, 1931

- Background

- Radical elements of the military especially in the Kwantung Army were emboldened by the assassination of Zhang Zuolin
      - E.g. Ishiwara Kanji
    - Ishiwara:
      - Was convinced that Japan should prepare for an inevitable war with the USA
      - Had plans to turn Manchuria into a colony and settle Japanese farmers there
      - Wanted to rebuilt Japanese society into one where all Japanese worked for each other and the Emperor, not themselves or corporations.
    - Although, they did not say so publicly, many top Japanese military leaders supported Ishiwara's views.
    - In September 1931, the Kwantung Army blew up a section of the railway at Mukden
      - They blamed it on the Chinese government
      - Used it as an excuse to take over Manchuria
    - By December, the Kwantung Army was in control of most of the region
    - In March 1932, the Japanese renamed it Manchukuo

- Manchukuo

- Theoretically independent, in practice was a Japanese colony

- Aftermath

- Military in Japan supported the Kwantung Army's actions
      - Civilian government could do nothing
    - Showed the limited control of the civilian government over the military and that the military had a greater say in Japanese foreign policy.
    - The invasion of Manchuria proved extremely popular with the Japanese people
      - Many saw Manchuria as a solution to Japan's economic problems
      - The victory was celebrated throughout Japan
      - It brought a unity to the Japanese people who had been divided in recent years due to the economic challenges of the 1920s.

# Growing Opposition to the Civilian Government

- By the 1930s, a network of ultranationalistic and anti-democratic activists began to form and grow
  - Included junior military officers
  - Likely had secret backing of senior military commanders
  - They were against civilian political leaders and the zaibatsu, who they saw as self-serving
- Examples
  - The Showa Restoration Faction
    - Sought to remove all aspects of the democratic government
    - Restore direct rule of the Emperor
  - Sakurakai (Cherry Blossom Society)
  - Kodoha (Imperial Way Faction)
  - All shared opposition to democracy

## Showa Restoration

Ultranationalist groups that wanted to remove all aspects of democratic government and restore direct rule to the Emperor

### **Sakurakai**

Secret society established by officers from the Imperial Army. It wanted to set up a militaristic state, via a coup d'etat if necessary.

### **Kodoha (Imperial Way Faction)**

A faction in the Imperial Japanese Army that wanted to set up a militarist government that promoted expansionistic ideals.

## **Ketsumeidan (League of Blood)**

It wanted to overthrow the political and economic elites through assassination. It was responsible for the 1932 League of Blood incident.

## **Assassinations**

These groups began to resort to assassinations to achieve their goals.

## **Assassinations in 1930s Japan**

### **November 1930**

- A right wing fanatic that Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi

### **February 1932**

- The League of Blood murdered the former Finance Minister

### **March 1932**

- The League of Blood assassinated the head of the Mitsui Corporation

### **May 1932**

- Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was shot dead by the League of Blood.

The assassinations intimidated the civilian politicians

- They dropped opposition to the military

Created a sense of instability

- Military exploited this atmosphere to give the impression that they were the only force that could "restore order"

Things that came to a head in 1932 with the 1932 with the May 15 Incident.

# May 15 Incident, 1932

- On 15 May, 1932, a group of naval officers from the League of Blood and other activists assassinated PM Inukai Tsuyoshi
  - Inukai had angered extremists by:
    - Opposing the actions of the military in Manchuria
    - Refusing to give official government acceptance of Manchukuo when it was announced in February 1932.
  - On the same day of the assassination, the attackers also attacked:
    - Mitsubishi Bank
    - The Seiyukai HQ
    - Several power stations
    - Other government officials
  - It was an attempted coup d'etat
    - The attackers had hoped that the people would rise up and support them in their attempt to overthrow the democratic government
    - However, the people did not rise up
  - Aftermath
    - The League of Blood activists were arrested and put on trial
      - However, the military commanders:
        - Did not condemn the rebellion
        - They issued a statement that accused the officers for their actions and demanded political reform.
    - Although the military did not spell it out, they were declaring that they wanted control of the government
    - In response, talks were carried out with military leaders
      - The Seiyukai party was prevented from forming a new Cabinet despite having a majority of representatives in the Diet
    - On 26 May 1932, the Emperor appointed a navy admiral as Japan's new PM.
      - His Cabinet had 15 members
        - Only 5 were elected civilian party representatives
        - The remaining 10 were military officers and government officials
        - This effectively brought Japan under militarist rule.