

## Japanese Imperialism

European imperialist projects in the nineteenth century had many goals – land for colonizing, raw materials, markets for manufactured goods, the civilization of the world, and glory for the mother country, to name just a few. The Japanese, who in the 1850s were the victims of American imperialism, built their own empire in the second half of the century for many of the same reasons. The following reading provides some background about how they did so.

### *Imperialism and Colonies*

The Japanese had rarely been engaged in foreign affairs before the Meiji Restoration. In the 1850s, however, the United States Navy, under Commodore Matthew Perry, forced the Japanese to open their ports to U.S. trade, and this forced a major change in Japanese policy towards the outside world. The Tokugawa Shogunate fell in 1867 with the Meiji Restoration, and Japan began to look at surrounding territories as places to establish colonies and project influence.

The “opening of Japan” began in the years before the Meiji Restoration; it was so controversial that it was a major reason why the Tokugawa Shogunate was toppled. Eventually, however, the Japanese accepted that they would need to modernize so that they would never have to repeat the experience of the Black Ships (as Perry’s fleet was called) again. The Meiji regime sent missions to the Western countries to try to understand their progress and duplicate it.

Soon, the pursuit of progress and the struggle to survive became hallmarks of Japanese imperialism, much as they were in the West with the rise of Social Darwinism and the doctrine of the survival of the fittest. Many in the Western world believed that only the strongest countries would persevere, and that the strongest were those that were best able to adapt to the situation in international politics. The Japanese accepted this idea and sought to become strong enough and modern enough to ensure their survival. The Japanese improved their armies so that they could meet the Western powers on equal terms in battle. They cultivated a strong sense of nationalism and state Shintoism in the populace, following the Western belief that a coherent society would be strongest. Finally, they overhauled their social institutions so that they would best reflect the goals Japan sought to achieve. This, the Japanese believed, would help them to repel European imperialists and perhaps build an empire of their own.

Japan’s first expansion was north, to the nearby island of Hokkaido. The island was populated by the Ainu, a society of hunter-gatherers. The Japanese sought the land for farming, so they assimilated the Ainu and converted them into farmers. Next, in 1879, Japan annexed the Ryukyu Islands to the south.

Tensions between Japan and Korea led the Japanese to acquire influence in the Korean Peninsula. In 1876, the Japanese invaded because the Koreans refused to accept the Meiji Emperor. The Japanese annexed territory in some of Korea’s ports and declared that all Korean ports were open for trade with Japan. In the ensuing decades, the Japanese and Chinese battled for influence in Korea. Tensions exploded in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), which the Japanese won. The peace treaty gave the

Japanese some trading rights in China and forced the Chinese to pay reparations to Korea. The Japanese would have taken some Chinese territory, too, but the European powers worried that Japan would gain too much influence in China and blocked this part of the treaty.

Japanese influence in China and Korea increased in the early 1900s. The Japanese exacted some control over China's Fujian Province, across from Taiwan, as well as an indemnity for helping to subdue the Boxer Rebellion. Meanwhile, Japan made Korea a protectorate in 1905 and formally annexed it in 1910. Within a short period of time, Japan had grown into a significant empire.

### *Relations with European Countries*

Japanese imperialism resembled European imperialism in many ways. The Japanese used their empire as a means to exploit natural resources for industrialization and provide a market for finished goods. They also developed colonies where mainland Japanese could live. This followed the pattern of European imperialism closely, but the main difference was that the Japanese did not fit the racial explanation for imperialism that many Europeans believed. The Japanese were not Christian Europeans who had a divine mission to civilize and subdue the planet, but a "lesser" race whose imperial period began after the Europeans and Americans had initially sought to project their influence on Japanese territory.

European countries had mixed reactions to Japan's more assertive foreign policy. Europeans were generally impressed by Japan's conquests, though the country was still considered a second-rate power on the basis of race alone. Nonetheless, Britain signed an alliance with Japan in 1902, which signified that Japan should be considered somewhat equal to the Western powers. The alliance was one of mutual convenience – both the Japanese and the British were concerned about Russian influence in Manchuria – but the fact that it was made at all is significant. The British pursued a policy of "splendid isolation" from European affairs in the late nineteenth century, and the alliance with Japan was the first they had made in decades.

The greatest opposition to Japanese imperialism came from Russia. Russia's opposition came not primarily because they believed the Japanese were racially unfit for empire, however, but because of competing interests. The Russian Empire had expanded greatly in Asia, and near the end of the nineteenth century it took parts of China as well. As Japan was expanding into China as well, the two empires were on a collision course. In the 1890s, Russia built the Trans-Siberian Railway from Moscow to Vladivostok, which was a former Chinese territory Russia had acquired. The railway was one of many ways in which the Russians were increasing their influence in Manchuria, a province in northeastern China close to Japan. The two sides entered into fitful negotiations at the turn of the twentieth century to maintain peace, but these negotiations were unsuccessful.

Vladivostok was in northern Manchuria, and because of the ice it was only open for part of the year. When the Russians leased the warm-weather port of Port Arthur from the Chinese, however, the Japanese believed that the Russians had encroached

too far. Late one night in 1904, the Japanese destroyed a great deal of the Russian fleet at Port Arthur in an attack similar to the one on Pearl Harbor decades later.

The Russians were infuriated, and retaliated. To their amazement, the Japanese proved more adept at modern warfare than expected and forced the Russians into a siege at Port Arthur. Confronted by a devastating defeat on their eastern borders, the Russians decided to deploy nearly their entire fleet from St. Petersburg. It was a huge undertaking – the fleet took a couple of months to sail around the tip of Africa, and its journey was chronicled extensively in the Russian press. It finally sailed around to Tsushima at the mouth of the Sea of Japan after much fanfare, and the Japanese were waiting. They sunk the entire Russian navy in a few hours, and sustained no casualties.

Japan's victory at the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 was the defining battle of the war. The Russians had no more means of attacking, and they requested peace. This was the first time that an Asian power had defeated a European one in the modern era, and it shamed the Russians. The Japanese gained some respect in the eyes of the Europeans, although some considered the victory more of an inevitable defeat for the Russians, who had always been considered a hybrid between Europeans and "Asiatics."

### *Summary*

- The shock of the American invasions of Japan in the 1850s pushed the Japanese to decide to open up to the world.
- Japanese empire building consisted of annexations in Korea and China as well as of the islands to the north and south. Japanese ambitions greatly resembled European ambitions in their imperial ventures in the nineteenth century.
- One of the reasons why the Japanese pursued their empire was to gain esteem in the eyes of the West. They were successful to some extent; the British in particular were receptive, and completed an alliance with Japan in 1902.
- Japan also gained some respectability after it soundly defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905.