

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 93

“The Twenty-One Demands”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In 1899, Germany had acquired a long-term lease to territory on the Shandong Peninsula, around the port town of Qingdao. In the intervening years, the Imperial German government had invested large sums to build Qingdao into one of the most modern and most comfortable places to live in East Asia.

But she also built it into a naval base, and in 1914, Qingdao was home to the largest German naval force outside Germany. When the Great War broke out, Britain appealed to Japan for help, and the Japanese saw an opportunity.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 93. The Twenty-One Demands.

Episode 11 of *The History of the Twentieth Century* was quite a long time ago now, but I’m sure you recall that the first step for Britain as she emerged from her policy of so-called “splendid isolation” back in 1902 was to form an alliance with Japan. The alliance with Japan was useful to the British, because it took some pressure off the Royal Navy. With the Japanese Navy available to help defend British interests in the Far East, the British Admiralty were free to redeploy naval assets closer to home, which becomes especially urgent once the Germans begin the naval race with Britain.

We haven’t said much about Japan on this podcast since the Russo-Japanese War, back in episodes 31 to 36. There’s a reason for that: Japan has been keeping to herself since the end of that war. A small country with a small economy, Japan went heavily in debt to finance that conflict, and she had been counting on getting a cash indemnity from Russia as part of the peace agreement, which would have been used to pay off the loans. But that didn’t work out; an indemnity was not included in the Treaty of Portsmouth, and it took Japan years to catch up on the bills. So that’s one reason why we haven’t been hearing much out of Japan lately. Not even in the dreadnought race, although the Japanese Navy did manage to lay down the first two Japanese dreadnoughts in 1909; these were commissioned in 1911 and 1912.

Another factor was the aging of the Meiji Emperor, who had had health issues later in his life and died on July 30, 1912, at the age of 60. The new Emperor would come to be known as the Taisho Emperor. His given name was Yoshihito.

The new Emperor had been born on August 31, 1879, and so was 32 years old when he acceded to the Chrysanthemum Throne. He is usually described as a sickly child and as being in poor health his entire life. He contracted cerebral meningitis shortly after his birth, which was no doubt part of his troubles. There is also evidence that he had neurological and possibly developmental impairments. Surely at least some of this can be attributed to the bout of meningitis. It is also said that he had suffered from lead poisoning, and it may be that he had some congenital disabilities that also contributed to his difficulties.

We'll never know for sure, but what *is* sure is that the Taisho Emperor would always struggle to fulfill his duties. He had trouble with his schooling, although he was said to have had a knack for learning foreign languages. He also seemed to have trouble understanding how Emperors are supposed to behave, or maybe that was a matter of the self-control necessary to fulfill those expectations. This may have been a neurological issue as well.

But the upshot of all this was that the Taisho Emperor just couldn't do many of the things an Emperor is expected to do. As a result, he was rarely seen in public and forewent many of the ceremonial appearances an Emperor is usually called upon to make. His ministers ended up making most of the Imperial decisions until 1921. That's when Crown Prince Hirohito was old enough to be appointed Prince Regent and take over.

The Japanese Constitution was based on the German model, with a legislature, the Imperial Diet, but the Prime Minister was appointed by the Emperor, as was the case with the German chancellor. The Constitution also required that the Army Minister be an active-duty army officer, and the Navy Minister be an active-duty naval officer. But in Japan at this time there was no formal mechanism to insure civilian control over the military, not even an informal ethic of deference to civilians within the military. This is going to be a problem for Japanese democracy, because the Imperial Army and Navy have a voice in the government, but are not required and usually not even expected to bend to the political will of the voters.

The system worked well enough when the Meiji Emperor reigned, because he had overseen the establishment of the Constitution in the first place and had grown to become a revered and beloved figure. But after his death, when his son proved no more than barely capable of holding the reins of power, the Japanese military became increasingly accustomed to having things their own way.

For example, shortly after the Meiji Emperor's death, his Prime Minister, Saionji Kinmochi, who was then still in office, attempted to cut military spending. The Army didn't like this idea, and was able to bring down the Prime Minister by the simple expedient of refusing to provide a general to serve as the Army Minister. If the PM doesn't have an Army Minister, then he doesn't

have a Cabinet. If he doesn't have a Cabinet, he doesn't have a government. And that means, bye, bye, Mr. Prime Minister.

His replacement, Katsura Taro, managed to bring the Army and Navy into line, but his government fell after violent demonstrations in Tokyo of citizens objecting to this military hijacking of the civilian government. Katsura lost a vote of no confidence in the Diet, for the first time since the constitution had taken effect. He was replaced in turn by Yamamoto Gonnohyoe, a retired navy admiral who had a reputation as a liberal and an upholder of constitutional government. He would become the third prime minister in four months.

But we're not through yet. Yamamoto's premiership would last barely more than a year. He and his Cabinet resigned in April 1914; this was in the wake of a scandal in which it was revealed that high-ranking officers of the Imperial Navy were receiving kickbacks from the British Vickers firm and the German Siemens firm in exchange for naval contracts. That's naval contracts as in, remember that military spending that the army and navy practically brought down the constitution in order to secure for themselves? Yeah, that's now winding up in the pockets of the generals and admirals. Not cool.

So the bottom line here is that the Japanese constitution and system of government is now taking a lot of lumps.

But when the Great War broke out, everybody—the Army, the Navy, the civilian government—everybody saw a big fat opportunity for further expansion. Japan was allied with Britain, and there were inadequately defended German colonial possessions scattered across the Pacific ripe for the plucking. Recall that Japan fought the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and then the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, and came out of both with new colonial possessions, access to more resources, and a stronger economy. Japan is leveraging its way to Great Power status, apparently in wars begun like clockwork at ten-year intervals every year that ends in “4.” And now it's 1914, so it's time for the next round.

And so, within days after the Great War began, Japanese diplomats were reaching out to their British counterparts and practically begging for the green light to join Britain in the war against Germany. If Japan did enter the Great War, of course the Army and the Navy would both be called upon to move against Germany, which would naturally mean both of them would be getting more funding, which, hey, isn't that what we've been fighting about in these constitutional crises for the past few years? Also, new colonial territories for the Emperor. What could be better? It's a win-win-win.

Funny thing, though. Qingdao, Germany's most important colonial possession in the Pacific, is, technically speaking, on Chinese territory. Germany and Austria-Hungary both hold other concessions in China, and the Chinese government, now under Yuan Shikai, that fellow who was once a general, then a viceroy, then a prime minister, and had recently outmaneuvered Sun Yat-Sen and claimed for himself the Presidency of the Republic of China, as you no doubt recall

from episode 58, wants to join the Allies, too. Because, of course, the Chinese government wants Qingdao back, as well as the other concessions the old Empire had been forced to grant to Germany and Austria. But the British weren't interested, and they pressed the Chinese government to remain neutral. China just didn't have enough military clout to make the offer interesting to the British, although China will generally support the Allies anyway; she will trade with them, she will send Chinese civilian laborers to France, and China will eventually enter the war formally, but not yet.

As for the Japanese, Britain also responded to their offer of aid with a marked lack of enthusiasm, at first. Britain had been all for Japan cutting Russia down to size ten years ago, but now Britain and Russia were allies, and they and Germany were busy fighting each other in Europe, meaning that the Japanese are suddenly in a stronger position in East Asia. With the Europeans locked in a Great War far away, Japan is now the premier power in the region.

After all, the whole Japanese Navy is stationed right there in East Asia, and they even have two dreadnought battleships now, *Kawachi* and *Settsu*, and that's two more dreadnoughts than any European power has stationed in the western Pacific, and also two new battlecruisers, *Kongō* and *Hiei*, with two more of each—two dreadnoughts and two battlecruisers—under construction. The British have only a few older cruisers and destroyers in the Far East, the China Squadron, which can usually be found at Singapore, or Hong Kong, or Port Edward. The Germans—

Huh. Come to think of it, the German East Asia Squadron is looking pretty sharp. This is the largest German naval formation anywhere in the world apart from the High Seas Fleet back home at Kiel. Its commander is Admiral Maximilian von Spee, and it includes six shiny new modern cruisers: *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, *Dresden*, *Emden*, *Leipzig*, and *Nürnberg*. They actually amount to a more powerful squadron of ships than the China Station, and the Royal Navy is in the awkward and unfamiliar situation of *not* being the supreme power in the region.

Of course, this German East Asia Squadron is still no match for the Japanese Navy. And while we're counting belligerent fleets in the region, I suppose I should mention that the Royal Australian Navy can boast its first battlecruiser, named *Australia*. This ship made even Admiral von Spee nervous. He said *Australia* alone was worth more than his entire squadron.

The East Asia Squadron was based at Qingdao, that crown jewel of German colonies in the Pacific. You'll recall from episode 10 that the Germans won this concession on the Shandong Peninsula from the Chinese back in 1897, after the murders of two German missionaries. Qingdao was at that time a sleepy little fishing village. The Germans moved in, razed the village, and built a shining new, planned city to replace it. By 1914, Qingdao had wide avenues, schools, modern water and sewer services, and was fully electrified, making it one of the snazziest towns in East Asia. There were Catholic and Protestant missions, the naval base of course, and in 1903 a brewery was founded that would eventually become world famous for its product, named after the town.

Qingdao also became a holiday resort, famous for its mountains and its beaches—some called it the “Eastern Riviera.” It was intended to be a showcase for German colonialism and it was a point of German national pride. And it was the home for the East Asia Squadron, and was garrisoned with thousands of German soldiers, and had substantial coastal defenses. Kaiser Wilhelm, with his characteristic excess of zeal had declared that “[i]t would shame me more to surrender Tsingtao to the Japanese than Berlin to the Russians.”

And so, reluctant though the British government might be to give free rein to the Japanese, the prospect of those German cruisers roving the western Pacific, raiding British merchant ships and retreating to their fortified base at Qingdao to repair and refuel while the China Squadron stood by helplessly, that was just too much. So the British asked for help in hunting down the German ships in the Pacific and eventually agreed to Japan’s demand that in return for that help, she would acquire all German possessions in the Pacific north of the equator. German possessions in the Pacific south of the equator would soon come under control of the British, Australians, and New Zealanders.

All this led up to August 15, the day Japan issued an ultimatum to Germany: Germany must withdraw all of its naval units from Chinese and Japanese waters and surrender Qingdao to Japan. After the deadline passed a week later, and no reply having been received from Germany, Japan declared war.

As it happened, those six cruisers of the German East Asia Squadron were all at sea on routine patrols in the Pacific when the war broke out. So unfortunately for the Allies, when the Japanese Navy showed up to blockade Qingdao, those six modern German cruisers weren’t at home. There are some interesting stories to tell about the fates of those six ships, but I’m going to save those tales for a future episode, and concentrate today on Japan and China.

The Japanese sent their best battleships to the blockade, and also their first and only seaplane carrier, *Wakamiya*. *Wakamiya* had begun her career as a British-built freighter operated by Russians. She had been seized during the Russo-Japanese War and had been fitted out with seaplanes and a crane that could be used to raise or lower the seaplanes into the ocean, making her a precursor to the aircraft carrier, which, spoiler alert, is going to become a big deal in naval warfare later in the twentieth century.

Wakamiya’s refit had been completed just days before the blockade began, and her planes flew reconnaissance missions over Qingdao throughout the siege, sometimes even dropping bombs. Although the Japanese aerial reconnaissance revealed that the German cruisers were missing, it also revealed the presence of an Austrian cruiser, *Kaiserin Elisabeth*. The Japanese demanded that the Austrian ship leave, the Austrians refused, and Japan then declared war on Austria as well.

The Japanese mobilized some 18,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry and shipped them to the Shandong Peninsula to seize Qingdao. The British were not entirely comfortable with an all-

Japanese operation and insisted that a few British troops also participate, although “a few” was all they would amount to, because of course most of the British Army was otherwise engaged. The British sent the South Wales Borderers Regiment, which was based in Tianjin and had participated in the fighting during the Boxer Uprising, as well as 450 Sikh Indian troops.

These British would be the first European soldiers in history to serve under an Asian commander, and the British were not happy about it. The Japanese were also less than enthusiastic about these arrangements; they went ahead and began landing troops on the peninsula before the British arrived.

Qingdao was well-fortified enough that a direct assault from the sea would be bloody, if not downright impossible. So the Japanese landed their soldiers farther up the peninsula and approached by land. That’s land as in Chinese land. China was officially neutral in the Great War, and marching troops across her territory to attack Germany was a violation of that neutrality, but nobody seems to have been terribly concerned about any of this. When the British arrived, they too landed their soldiers on Chinese territory. Which is kind of ironic, if you stop and think about: Wasn’t it just a few weeks ago that Britain entered this war ostensibly to defend Belgian neutrality against the Germans marching through in order to attack France? And now the British are marching through neutral territory to attack the Germans. Huh.

The Japanese surrounded Qingdao and settled in for a siege. They dug trenches and hunkered down, bombarding the Germans with heavy artillery, techniques they had learned from the Siege of Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War. The Germans abandoned their outer defenses and dug in at their innermost defensive line. They fired back at the Japanese with enthusiasm, using their own artillery. This might have been unwise, because, unlike the Japanese, the Germans have a limited stock of artillery shells.

Apparently, Chinese civilians were reporting to the Germans that the Japanese were suffering heavy casualties from thus German bombardment, which it what encouraged the Germans to keep at it. As it would turn out, however, these Chinese reports would prove to be exaggerated. In fact, Japanese casualties were quite light during this period of siege. Japan’s worst day would be October 17. That was the day a German torpedo boat managed to slip out past the blockade and attack the Japanese cruiser *Takachiho*. *Takachiho* was a veteran of the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War. She was carrying a load of mines; when the torpedoes hit, they set off the mines and the ship quickly sank. There were only three survivors out of a crew of 274. It is said that the dying sailors sang the Japanese national anthem as their ship went down.

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By early November, the German artillery guns fell silent. The Germans were out of shells. On the night of November 6, through rain and snow, the Japanese stormed the German defenses, overrunning many of the fortified positions. The next morning, the Germans asked for terms. While surrender negotiations were under way, the Germans took care to destroy their arms and

ammunition and anything else of military value, going so far as to open every can of their stockpile of canned food.

Despite Kaiser Wilhelm's proud words about wanting to hold on to Qingdao, in fact when the crunch had come, the Germans had not put up much of a fight. 199 German soldiers were killed; over 4,500 surrendered. 415 Japanese soldiers were killed in the assault, as well as 13 British soldiers. There was some looting in Qingdao and some abuse of the Chinese civilians, although the Japanese were scrupulous in their treatment of the German prisoners.

The Japanese Navy would meet virtually no resistance as they captured the German-controlled islands in the North Pacific. And that would pretty much be the extent of Japanese operations in the Great War, although the Imperial Navy would show the flag in a few places, even the Mediterranean.

But with Germany eliminated from Asia, and with Britain, France, and Russia all preoccupied with the war in Europe, Japan suddenly has a free hand in East Asia, in a way it never has before, and particularly in its dealings with China. European powers had traditionally acted in concert to limit Japanese influence over China, but, hey, nobody's around to ruin the party now.

And that brings us back around to China. We haven't said much about China in a while, not since episode 58, so let's refresh our memories a bit. In 1911, a series of provincial revolts resulted in a large region of southern China renouncing the authority of the Qing dynasty and declaring a republic. By early 1912, China was virtually divided north and south and there was a very real prospect of a long and brutal civil war in the world's most populous country.

And into that situation came the 53-year old military commander Yuan Shikai. He had previously been governor of the Shandong province, home of the Boxers, and had opposed the Boxers and kept his own military forces out of the conflict with the eight-nation alliance during the Boxer Uprising, which earned him the favor of the Great Powers, so he was permitted to keep his military post afterward and became an influential figure in the late Empire. He had supported the Empress Dowager over the Guangxu Emperor and his reforms, and earned the enmity of the Emperor for it. The Guangxu Emperor died in 1908, and it is likely Yuan poisoned him. The Emperor's will specifically commanded that Yuan be put to death, but this was not done.

But the little boy who became the new Emperor, the last emperor, was the previous Emperor's nephew, and his father, the previous Emperor's brother, was now regent. So that's still not so good for Yuan's career, and he was forced to retire, at least for a while.

But he was brought out of retirement by the Qing in 1911 to put down the revolution. But instead of putting down the revolution, he brokered a deal with the rebels. The Emperor would abdicate, both sides would agree on a new provisional President of the Republic of China, and the new President's name would be Yuan Shikai.

And that's where we left the story, back in episode 58. He was a popular choice with foreign powers, who still remembered how he had refused to fight them during the Boxer Uprising. Domestically, he was a useful compromise. He was Han Chinese and not part of the Manchu Dynasty, but he had the trust of the military. One concession that Sun Yat-Sen and the Revolutionary Alliance in the south had extracted in exchange for supporting Yuan as President was that the capital of the new Republic of China be Nanjing, in the republican South, not the old Imperial capital of Beijing, in the North. Besides the symbolic significance of a new capital for a new Republic, moving the capital south would help empower the southern republicans and weaken the monarchists in Beijing. It's not an accident that this would also require Yuan Shikai to move away from his power base.

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In understanding China, it's important to understand the Chinese emphasis on a strong central government. Historically, strong central governments have led to prosperity at home and respect abroad for China, while weak central governments lead to a Chinese nation bullied by foreigners and wracked with lawlessness and civil war at home.

And so in 1912, Yuan and Sun Yat-Sen and the other leaders of the Revolutionary Alliance were all in agreement that the new Republic should be organized as a state with a strong central government. But in fact, the revolution that had overthrown the Qing had started out as a very decentralized, province-by-province grassroots revolt. And even among those who agreed on a strong central government did *not* agree on who should be running it. Yuan had maneuvered himself into being indispensable to avoid a civil war, and I think we can all agree that avoiding a terrible civil war is a good idea. And the foreign powers were comfortable with Yuan as President, and this trust made it easier for the new Republic to win recognition from the major powers, so that's something, too.

But Yuan was less trusted at home, and particularly by the revolutionaries, since he had come to prominence by Imperial appointment, not by his role in the revolution. But they were willing to give the guy a chance and see what he did with it. It reassured no one when Yuan quickly reneged on the promise to move the government to Nanjing. The new provisional President appointed his own provisional Cabinet and to the revolutionaries, it looked a lot like Yuan was setting himself up as a dictator.

Elections to a National Assembly were scheduled for late 1912 and early 1913. The Revolutionary Alliance reorganized itself into a political party, the Guomintang, usually referred to in English as the Nationalist Party, and they campaigned vigorously, and in vocal opposition to the way Yuan was running the government. Sun Yat-Sen's sometime ally, sometime rival Song Jiaoren became the party leader, and the Nationalists ran on Sun Yat-Sen's platform of "Nationalism, Democracy, and the People's Livelihood." Song toned down the more socialist

aspects of Sun Yat-Sen's political philosophy, as he was angling for the support of the Chinese merchant class.

When the election was over, and all the votes were counted, the Nationalist Party won 269 out of the 596 seats in the National Assembly, more than double the number of seats taken by Yuan's supporters. Not quite a majority, but Song began negotiating at once with the smaller parties to form a coalition, and it seemed likely that he was going to become prime minister, and when the National Assembly got around to electing a proper President of the Republic, rather than a provisional President of the Republic, it was likely *not* going to be Yuan Shikai.

Or that's how it looked at first. In March 1913, Song was assassinated at the Shanghai railway station, as he was preparing to board a train to Beijing for the opening of the newly elected National Assembly. It is very likely that Yuan and his allies were behind this assassination, but it's hard to prove, because a number of those people who were involved in the conspiracy were killed themselves soon after.

The National Assembly convened anyway, but Yuan was able to keep the opposition divided while his government took on new international loans, adding to China's already crippling debt, and these new loans were used to finance upgrades to the Beiyang Army, which was Yuan's power base.

By July of that year, Sun Yat-Sen and the rest of the leadership of the Nationalist Party had had quite enough of this, and declared a second revolution, this time against Yuan Shikai, but the Beiyang Army put down the rebellion with little difficulty. The Nationalist Party was outlawed, the national and provincial legislatures were dissolved, press censorship was instituted, and a secret police created to suppress dissent.

By the end of the year 1913, Sun Yat-Sen and a number of prominent Nationalists had fled the country once again to Japan, which once again gave them sanctuary.

Yuan's rule wasn't all bad. He cracked down on opium, he promoted education, and he continued efforts to modernize the Chinese government and military. Foreign powers still liked dealing with him, probably because he, you know, gave them whatever they wanted. He conceded autonomy to Mongolia and to Tanna Tuva which allowed for Russian meddling in that region, and also to Tibet, which allowed for British meddling in *that* region.

And that brings us back around to the outbreak of the Great War and the Japanese seizure of Qingdao. As I said, with the elimination of German power in the region, and the preoccupation of the Allied powers with the situation in Europe, the way has seemingly been cleared for Japan to begin pressing the Yuan government in China the way the British and Russians are used to doing. Not to mention, the Japanese are protecting Sun Yat-Sen and the Nationalists, who are better respected among many Chinese right now than the Yuan government is, which gives the Japanese that much more leverage.

In January 1915, the Japanese government presented to the Chinese government a secret document known to history as the Twenty-One Demands. I'm not going to trouble you with a recitation of all twenty-one of the demands, but you can summarize them by grouping them like this: First was a set of demands related to Japanese rights in Chinese territory, specifically that the Chinese recognize the transfer of all German rights in Shandong Province to Japan, along with expanded Japanese rights in Manchuria and Mongolia and expanded Japanese mining rights in the rest of China. Second, that China agree to give no additional territorial concessions to any foreign nation other than Japan. The third and most controversial set of demands related to the Chinese government agreeing to allow Japanese advisors into its ranks, to allow Japanese construction of railroads, schools, hospitals, and temples in China, and consultation with Japan in the governance of the province of Fujian, which is the province just across the Taiwan Strait from Formosa, which is part of the Empire of Japan at this time.

The Chinese leaked this document to Britain and the United States, and both of these countries objected strenuously. In the end, the Japanese were persuaded to drop the demands in that last group, the ones that were most controversial, the ones that infringed most deeply on Chinese sovereignty. But the Yuan government felt it had to agree to the other demands. So Japan got important new concessions in China, but at the cost of seriously damaging its relations with that country, as well as with Britain and the United States. This will have consequences.

And even after the overthrow of the Qing, the point was made once again that the new Chinese government was just as weak, just as badly run, and just as easily forced to making humiliating concessions to foreigners, as the old Empire ever was. This will undermine whatever support Yuan might still have mustered at home.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and thank you to Anne for making a donation to help support *The History of the Twentieth Century*, and thanks as well to Steve for becoming a patron of the podcast. You can become a patron of the podcast for as little as \$2 per month or make a one-time contribution. Just visit historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the buttons. You can also help out by giving us a review at iTunes, or liking or tweeting or even the old-fashioned method of telling a friend or family member who might be interested in the show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to the next phase of the Mexican Revolution, which involves, spoiler alert, US military intervention. The Puritan of the North, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Japanese treated their German prisoners of war reasonably well, although perhaps not so well as they treated their Russian prisoners during the Russo-Japanese War. Circumstances were difficult at first because the Japanese had not anticipated taking such a large number of prisoners, over 4,500, and so the quality of the food was poor and the accommodations were pretty cramped, at least at first. After the prisoners were taken to Japan,

circumstances improved. Neutral American diplomats were permitted to visit the prisoners and publicize their condition, and when the Americans made criticisms, the Japanese did move to make changes.

Security in the prisoner-of-war camps was pretty easygoing. Some German prisoners were allowed to leave the camps unsupervised, get jobs in nearby towns, and even date Japanese women. Several German prisoners managed to escape Japan altogether by passing themselves off as Dutch or Danish or Norwegian and slipping into neutral China.

The Germans would remain prisoners of war for over five years, and would not return home until 1920. When freedom came at last, 171 of them opted to remain in Japan.

[music: Closing Theme]