The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 199
"1919 – Japan"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

There had been a time, within living memory, when Japan was just an insignificant island chain, populated by a people who still fought their wars with swords and armor, and who knew or cared little about the larger world.

Now, in 1919, if you measure a nation's military might by the size of its navy, which is what most people of the time did, Japan was the world's third greatest power.

Japanese foreign policy was at a crossroads. Where to go from here? Join with the Western idealists in their project to build a more peaceful and prosperous world? Or were today's ideals merely the latest trimmings on the same old imperialism? Perhaps Japan should attend first to its own self-interest.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 199. 1919 – Japan.

This is the 24th episode of our 1919 World Tour, and today we begin considering the post-war situation in Japan. On the face of things, Japan has come out of the Great War richer and stronger than ever. For the first time since Japan began trading with the outside world seventy years ago, it was running a trade surplus. The Allies had happily bought up all the arms and ammunition Japanese industry could produce, and with other industrial nations' output geared so heavily toward war, Japanese consumer goods were in high demand in Asian markets. Cotton textiles made up a major share of Japanese manufacturing at this time, and by the end of the war, Japan was a leading exporter of cotton goods. Japanese merchant shipping had also been in demand during the war, and new cargo ships would be hired as fast as Japanese shipyards could turn

them out. The Imperial Japanese Navy was a world-class fighting force. Only the Royal Navy and the US Navy were larger. By 1919, Japan had a population greater than France and an economy almost as big.

That's the good news. But Japanese strategic planners in the military and in the foreign ministry had plenty to worry about. Japan remained a nation lacking in raw materials. Japan needed a large merchant marine to bring her imports onto Japanese docks. Coal and iron from Korea and Manchuria. Sugar cane from the Philippines. Rice from French Indochina. Cotton from India. Petroleum and metal ores from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

These vital trade routes required a powerful navy to keep them protected. But even if you grant the merchant shipping and the navy to protect it, did you notice in that list I just read out that most of Japan's imports come from the colonial possessions of Europe and America? The Japanese certainly noticed. European powers like Britain and France protected their access to raw materials through colonialism, by using military might to force weaker nations to trade with them under arrangements advantageous to the Europeans. It was a great gimmick, and the Japanese wanted a taste of it. They already had Formosa, Korea, and Manchuria. That was a start.

Japan, being an island nation, was inherently more susceptible to naval threats than a land-based power like Russia or the United States. The British were in the same boat, so to speak, and the British dealt with it by building the world's largest navy and insisting on naval supremacy most everywhere in the world. Japan wanted the same. Not to be a global naval power; that was out of reach, but it was also unnecessary. Japan wanted, needed naval supremacy at least along the eastern seaboard of Asia, where its most important trade routes lay.

Over the past generation, Japan had fought several wars to assert its interests against regional threats. First China, then Russia, and most recently Germany had been eliminated as naval competitors in East Asia. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, which was still in effect, amounted to the British giving the Japanese Navy a free hand in the region, in exchange for Japan agreeing to help defend Britain's interests in the Far East. The French presence in the region was limited to Indochina.

So that left the United States as the biggest potential threat to Japanese interests. During these past thirty years, during which Japan has been asserting itself in the region, the United States has been doing the same thing, annexing Hawaii and seizing Guam and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. These acts put American military units smack in the middle of Japan's most vital trade lanes. The Americans had also significantly enlarged their navy in the past twenty years. It was now the world's second largest, and by 1919, the Americans were even threatening to outbuild the Royal Navy. And the United States Navy, traditionally focused on the Atlantic, was now touting itself as a "two-ocean navy."

What the Japanese leadership craved most was for Japan to be accepted as an equal, a peer of Great Powers like France, the United Kingdom or the United States. Some felt that was achievable; indeed, one could argue that Japan was already well on the way. But there were others who couldn't help but wonder whether white Europeans and Americans would ever look upon not-white Japanese as equals. For example, Japan had definitively shut the door on Russian imperial expansion in the Russo-Japanese War, but it had not escaped Japanese notice that instead of being grateful, many Europeans had instead muttered darkly about the "yellow peril." The Americans were even worse. They had opened their country to unlimited immigration from Europe while insisting on strict limits on immigration from Japan. Those Japanese who did migrate to the US found their children shunted off to second-rate segregated schools, away from the white kids. Did this sound like a country ready to accept Japan as an equal?

On the other hand, liberals in Japan's government quite liked the sound of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, his League of Nations, and his talk of disarmament, freedom of the seas, and mutual security guarantees. This led to the split in opinion I alluded to at the top of the episode. Should Japan go all in on the Paris Peace Conference, or should Tokyo remain wary of the other Great Powers?

While Japanese officials were meeting in Tokyo to debate these questions, officials in the Allied capitals were discussing policy toward Japan. In Paris, the French attitude toward Japan was similar to their attitude toward Italy. Japan had contributed little to the war effort and its contributions came with more than a whiff of self-interest. Japan had been happy to seize German possessions in the Western Pacific, but had declined to send its experienced and well-regarded army to the Western Front, which as far as the French were concerned, had been the most important front of the war.

The British likewise discounted Japan's contributions. The Australians and New Zealanders were getting distinctly nervous about Japan's rise as a regional power, and the British Foreign Office foresaw—correctly—a future Western Pacific in which the Japanese and the Americans were rivals. That being the case, British interests seemed much more closely aligned with the Americans. The Anglo-Japanese alliance that had seemed like such a good idea in 1902 now threatened to draw Britain into an alignment contrary to its own interests, and in fact when the pact next comes up for renewal in 1922, the British will opt to withdraw from the alliance.

The Americans were the most suspicious of Japanese intentions. They saw Japan as a threat to American control of the Philippines. Japanese control over the Pacific island territories formerly held by Germany, which the British had already promised them, would allow for Japanese naval bases within striking distance of Hawaii.

And then there was all that business involving Mexico. The Japanese had sold arms to the Huerta government, in defiance of US policy, and there were those rumors of a planned Japanese naval base in Mexico. And don't forget how the notorious Zimmerman Telegram had dangled before

the Mexican government the prospect of Germany, Mexico, and Japan uniting in an anti-American alliance. Admittedly, there was no hard evidence of Japanese complicity in these shenanigans, but still you have to wonder, with all this smoke, how likely is it that there is in fact no fire?

Although the Japanese economy had benefited in many ways from the Great War, Japan was not immune to the economic shocks the war brought to nations around the world. Like everywhere else, Japan experienced sharply rising food prices from 1917 to 1920, the year that reductions in military spending led to a worldwide recession. Rising food prices in Japan had led to the "Rice Riots" of 1918, which had brought down the government of Prime Minister Terauchi Masatake. His successor was the 62-year old Hara Takashi.

Hara holds the distinctions of being the first commoner and the first Christian to hold the office of prime minister in Japan. He was by nature centrist and cautious. He resisted public calls on the one hand for workers' rights and universal suffrage from the liberals and the left, but was never trusted by the conservative nationalist Japanese, owing to his policy of greater cultural autonomy for Koreans and his cooperative attitude toward the Allies. Hara struggled to maintain his political balance, but the hostility of the Japanese conservatives would eventually cost him his life in November 1921, when he would be assassinated by a right-wing extremist three years into his premiership.

Given the difficult political balancing act Hara had to maintain at home, he didn't dare go to the Paris Peace conference himself. Thus Japan would be the only one of the five major allies not represented by its head of government. And that in turn was the reason given why the Japanese were excluded once the Council of Ten became the Council of Four: because the Japanese representatives were lower ranking officials.

The Japanese didn't mind that so much. Most of the issues the conference would struggle with, involving ethnic minorities and post-war borders in Europe did not involve any compelling Japanese national interests. Most of the time, the Japanese delegation were content to serve as observers. But the Japanese delegation did come with instructions from their government to make three specific demands. Otherwise, Japan would be content to support Mr. Wilson, his Fourteen Points, and the League of Nations, but the Hara government, like the Italian government, needed to bring home tangible gains from the peace conference in order to placate its domestic critics. The left wanted evidence the war had been worth the cost of thousands of Japanese lives and tens of millions of yen of debt; the right wanted proof that a weak government hadn't bartered away Japan's rights in East Asia.

But oh, those three demands. First of all, Japan wanted all German island possessions in the Pacific Ocean north of the equator. Back in the dark days of early 1917, after the Germans had begun unrestricted submarine warfare but before the US entered the war, Britain, France, Italy, and Russia made a secret agreement promising these islands to Japan in exchange for Japanese

naval assistance against the German U-boats. Japan kept its end of the bargain; it sent ships to the Mediterranean to hunt U-boats and escort Allied shipping. But by 1919, the British and French attitudes toward Japan had changed in retrospect: Japan's assistance had been less helpful to the Allied war effort than expected and its eagerness to claim a share of the spoils in Paris seemed downright mercenary, particularly the eagerness with which Tokyo was sending tens of thousands of soldiers into Russia as the civil war raged there. Still, a deal was a deal, and Britain, France, and Italy supported the Japanese claim.

The American attitude was also similar to the US attitude toward Italian claims; that is, the US was not a party to that secret agreement, it did not approve of secret agreements in general, and it felt under no obligation to honor this or any other secret agreement.

The islands in question comprised most of what we call Micronesia, a collection of thousands of small islands in the northwest Pacific Ocean. The first humans to settle these islands probably came from the Philippines and arrived about 1500 BC. The first Europeans to discover the islands and make contact with the inhabitants were Ferdinand Magellan and his crew, episode 3. Afterward, Spain claimed them and governed them from the Philippines, although exactly how closely these islands and their 4,000 or so inhabitants were actually "governed" during this period is questionable. In the 19th century, when European navies were going global and required the establishment of coaling and telegraph stations across the world's oceans, the significance of these islands grew. In 1885, Spain sold the Marshall Islands to Germany. After the Spanish-American War, in which the US seized the Philippines and Guam, depriving Spain of its best bases in the region, the Spanish sold off their remaining island holdings, also to Germany.

Now the Japanese wanted them. For Japan, they would be valuable as forward bases against any encroachment from the United States. The US—and New Zealand and Australia—saw Japanese control of these islands as a potential threat. But as serious as these concerns were, the Americans and the other Allied governments had bigger problems with Japan's other two demands, so they let this one slide.

The US did try to make an exception for the island of Yap. If you've ever heard about Yap at all, what you've probably heard about is its unique system of currency that involves stone disks that can be as large as four meters in diameter and require an organized effort just to move, so much so that the Yapese don't necessarily move them when they change ownership. They just keep track of who owns what. The people of Yap mostly use US dollars today, but the tradition of the big stone disks lives on even in our time.

But the US government's interest in Yap had nothing to do with their currency. The Germans had kept a naval base there, and in the early twentieth century, Yap had become a communications center, a junction point for underwater cables that connected points across the western Pacific. But in the end, the Japanese got control over Yap and every other island they wanted. But the concession Woodrow Wilson got in return was that Japanese administration over

these islands would be in the form of a Class C mandate from the League of Nations. Japan would have to answer to the League for its rule over the islands and their inhabitants, and in particular, Japan would not have authority to place military bases in what became known as the "South Seas Mandate."

Why is a collection of islands all lying north of the Equator called the "South Seas Mandate"? The reasons are historical, not logical, which is why I always say that the answer to most questions is, "History."

Japan's second demand was far more controversial than the first. It was for control of the German concessions on the Shandong Peninsula in mainland China. Actually, the Japanese didn't see this as a separate demand. In their view, they had been promised all German territories in the Pacific and north of the Equator, and this one was part of the package.

But the Chinese certainly didn't see it that way. Remember that China was also a member of the Allies and had also contributed to the defeat of Germany. Surely the peace conference wasn't in the business of rewarding one ally for its assistance during the war by granting it the territory of another ally.

This was a particularly difficult demand for the Americans. Woodrow Wilson and the US government didn't recognize secret treaties. The guiding principle of this peace conference was supposed to be self-determination of peoples. In the case of Micronesia, you could argue that the islanders were too few and their communities too scattered and underdeveloped to make independence feasible, but in the case of the Shandong Peninsula, there's no argument. The population of the peninsula is close to thirty million and their ethnic identity is beyond dispute. No opinion poll or plebiscite needed. These folks are Chinese and they want to be a part of the Republic of China.

The situation was analogous to the standoff with Italy. Wilson had refused Italian demands for Dalmatia. He wouldn't even give in on his principles for tiny little Fiume. What possible justification could there be for ignoring the wishes of the thirty million people of Shandong? And it wasn't just Woodrow Wilson and his stiff neck. The publics of all the Allied nations, and especially the American public, were sympathetic to the Chinese.

The Paris Peace conference postponed consideration of the Shandong Peninsula question for a time, and so will we, because first I want to look at the third Japanese demand, which was the biggest and most controversial of them all. The Japanese dropped this bombshell on the peace conference just two weeks after the other ones. Are you ready for this? The Japanese government proposed an international agreement to…outlaw racism.

[music: "Sakura Sakura"]

The leaders of Japan dreamed of a world in which Japan was a peer of the other Great Powers, yet they were all too aware of the talk of the "yellow peril" in Europe and the United States. Indeed, they themselves did not always get the same treatment in foreign capitals that officials from "white" countries got. The leaders of Japanese industry and commerce, who were accustomed to receiving respect and deference at home, complained of having to endure a hundred small humiliations whenever they traveled abroad. Japanese immigration was sharply limited in the United States and Canada, and was prohibited outright in Australia. Japan had gone to war to fight for the rights of the US and the British Empire, and yet Japanese nationals were not welcome on the soil of their so-called allies.

Hostility to Japanese was endemic in the Pacific coast states of the United States. Immigration had been a boon to the US economy generally, providing workers for factories of the Northeast and the Midwest. But those European immigrants seldom traveled all the way to Washington or California. There were plenty of Asians willing to take up low-wage work in the West, but their arrival provoked fierce resistance from white Americans in the region. It was often said that a job taken by an Asian was a job stolen from a white man. Opposition to immigration from China had led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned Chinese immigration altogether, but the Japanese kept coming. Close to half a million over this period. There were protests, sometimes violence.

In 1906, the San Francisco school district began educating ethnically Chinese and Japanese children in segregated schools, which led to protests from Japan and a compromise under which Japan would agree to limit the number of emigrants to the US, the so-called "gentlemen's agreement" we looked at in episode 43.

But Japanese immigration continued to be a sore spot. Employers were pressured not to hire Japanese unless no white worker could be found to do the job. California enacted laws prohibiting ethnic Chinese or Japanese from owning real estate. Actions like these humiliated the Japanese, and radicals in Japan called for war with the United States to avenge the insult.

Well, the Great War happened instead, and by 1917 the US and Japan found themselves on the same side in the struggle, despite their differences, and again the question arises: Why is the US not willing to recognize Japanese people as equals, even as Japanese people are fighting and dying for American principles like freedom of the sea and the rights of nations?

The Japanese weren't the only ones asking these questions. For example, the Allied powers in Paris insisted that in the Little Treaty of Versailles Poland agree to respect the rights of ethnic German minorities in Poland, yet the Poles wondered why Germany was not asked to make a comparable commitment to respect the rights of ethnic Poles in the "big" Treaty of Versailles. When Woodrow Wilson lectured Queen Marie of Romania on the importance of Romania respecting the rights of its new ethnic minority citizens, the Queen responded sweetly that President Wilson must be very well acquainted indeed with the problems of minority citizens

denied their equal rights, given all the difficulties African Americans and Japanese faced in the United States.

In December 1918, a 27-year old Japanese aristocrat (and future prime minister) named Konoe Fuminaro published an essay titled “Reject the Anglo-American-Centered Peace.” In it he argued that the Allied talk of democracy and self-determination was a smokescreen for their real intention, which was to institutionalize Anglo-French domination of the world. He argued that the British and French had established their colonial empires first, that the real purpose of the Great War had been to shut Germany out of colonial expansion, and now the French and the British, with American connivance, were striving to lock in their own colonial empires, and lock out newer powers like Germany and Japan. If they were successful in this, Konoe argued, then nations such as Japan and Germany would face the choice of passively accepting their place as second-class powers or actively working to subvert and undermine this new world order.

Konoe became part of the Japanese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, which introduced its controversial proposal on racial equality just a couple of weeks after laying out its claims on German territories in the Pacific. The draft covenant of the League of Nations already included a provision requiring League members to treat all persons equally, irrespective of their religious beliefs. The Japanese proposal was in the form of an amendment to that provision, adding language barring discriminatory treatment based on race or nationality.

The Japanese knew this would be a touchy subject, but they wanted at least to establish the principle. The League of Nations was meant to be an international community, organized to safeguard the well-being of every member state, like a family. Surely it was not too much to ask that individual citizens of every member state be guaranteed equal treatment under the laws of every other member state.

But it was too much to ask, particularly in the American and British Empire delegations, both of which went “tilt” as soon as word got out that this Japanese proposal was forthcoming. Woodrow Wilson was himself a Southerner. His views on race were reasonably liberal for a Southerner of his time, although that’s not saying much. His administration’s record on race questions was downright embarrassing. Wilson was not someone you could count on to stand up for racial equality. He also faced the pragmatic problem that the forthcoming treaty would have to be approved by the United States Senate. Wilson already knew by this time that Senate approval would be an uphill fight. A clause committing the United States to grant equal rights to Japanese would surely cost the support of at least the six Senators representing California, Oregon, and Washington, and who knew how many Southern Senators.

Fortunately for Wilson and the American delegation, the United States would not have to assume the awkward position of publicly leading the fight against racial equality. As Colonel House put it, “It has taken considerable finesse to lift the load from our shoulders and place it upon the British, but happily, it has been done.” Yes, the British took on the responsibility to lead the

opposition to the Japanese proposal. It was awkward for them, too. Britain valued her relationship with Japan, but keeping the Empire delegation together was more important still, and there was strong opposition in the Dominions, especially from New Zealand Prime Minister William Massey and especially Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes.

Australian policy was open immigration for white people, and zero immigration for anyone else. And Hughes would not consider changing it. He argued that 95% of Australians rejected the very idea of racial equality. Not sure if he was counting Indigenous Australians in that statistic. On another occasion, Hughes declared that he'd rather walk into the Folies Bergère naked than agree to the Japanese proposal.

The matter was so controversial that Lord Robert Cecil, at the suggestion of Eleftherios Venizelos, withdrew the religious discrimination clause from the League covenant. The Japanese said they would press their proposal anyway. It would be politically impossible for them to drop the racial equality proposal when it was so popular back home in Japan. Better to have it out and lose than to give up the fight. Their lead diplomat said, "We are not too proud to fight, but we are too proud to accept a place of admitted inferiority…"

The Japanese proposal was put off again and again, for two months altogether, while negotiations took place in an attempt to find an acceptable compromise. These discussions were led by Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden and South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts. The New Zealanders and the Australians agreed to a plan that would exempt immigration policy from the racial equality pledge, but the Japanese rejected it.

Finally, on April 11, 1919, at a tense meeting of the committee devoted to drafting the League covenant, the Japanese introduced their amendment. It received eleven yes votes, from the delegations representing Japan, France, Italy, Brazil, China, Greece, Serbia, and Czechoslovakia. The delegations representing Britain, the United States, Portugal, and Romania abstained. The final vote was therefore 11 in favor and none against, with six abstentions.

Woodrow Wilson chaired the committee. After the vote was taken, he ruled that since opposition to the amendment was so strong, a unanimous vote would be required to pass it, and therefore the amendment failed. It was a highly questionable ruling, to say the least, but the Japanese did not contest it, and that was the end of the proposal.

The discussions over the racial equality amendment were covered closely in the Japanese press, and its rejection was greeted with outrage. As far as the Japanese were concerned, Japan had played by the rules, had worked cooperatively with its allies to build a new world order based on freedom and democracy and in return had been given the back of the hand. The so-called civilized world had made it clear it would never accept Japanese as equals, and Japanese liberals who advocated cooperation with the West had been thoroughly discredited.

Meanwhile, in Paris, the peace conference was facing its biggest crisis. The Japanese racial equality proposal had been rejected on April 11, which was a Friday. If you think back to episode 197, you'll recall that the following Monday, April 14, was the day Woodrow Wilson and Vittorio Orlando had their stormy meeting in which Wilson gave Orlando his final "no" on Italian claims in the Adriatic. Ten days later, Orlando walked out of the peace conference.

This put Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau in a difficult position. Orlando had walked out on them, and the Japanese delegation was threatening to do the same if they didn't get the racial equality agreement. The peace conference was hanging by a thread. It might survive the departure of one of these lesser allies, but if both of them walked out, it would undermine the credibility of the whole project. If the peace conference was merely the world's three most powerful nations, Britain, France, and the United States, dictating terms that even their own allies could not support, how could they claim to be upholding broadly held ideals of freedom and democracy? The peace treaty would be victors' justice, imposed by force on an unwilling world and the dream of a better way, one in which the nations of the world worked together like a family, would be extinguished.

No, the big three could not afford another walkout. They would have to placate the Japanese somehow, and if the racial equality amendment was out of the question, then they would have to give the Japanese something else they wanted. And so they did. And they took it from China.

We'll have to stop there for today. As always, I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Daniel for his donation, and thank you to David for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn helps keep Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century happy, and you know, that's the most important thing.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century,* as we turn our attention to China. Not to start a new topic, but to continue this one. The Western Allies may have placated Japan by conceding the Shandong Peninsula, but what is the reaction going to be in China? Find out next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. At the risk of giving out a spoiler, I'll mention that Japan did indeed sign the Treaty of Versailles and became one of the founding members of the League of Nations, which made it possible for the League to grant Japan the South Seas Mandate.

Japanese administration of this mandate would prove to be heavy handed. Foreign vessels were largely excluded from its waters. Japanese colonists would be brought it and settled on the islands, tens of thousands of them, until the native islanders were made into a minority in their own homeland.

In 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations, which should have terminated its mandate over the islands, but it didn't. Instead, the Japanese built military installations on several of them,

notably Kwajalein, Palau, Saipan, and especially the atoll of Truk, which became the principal Japanese naval base in the region.

[music: Closing Theme]