

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 265

### “Foreign Commentary Changes Nothing”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Japanese Army had seized control over Manchuria and declared it an independent state, without the knowledge or approval of the civilian leadership in Tokyo. Civilian leaders who opposed the Army’s actions had a way of ending up dead, at the hands of junior military officers who were members of various secret organizations that were in fact directed by their military superiors.

The world community was overwhelmingly opposed to this move. But in Japan, in the throes of the Great Depression, where unemployment soared as Japanese exports collapsed and Japanese children ate wheat bran intended for cattle, the public welcomed the seizure of Manchuria as an economic lifeline that would save the country. As one Japanese observer wrote in 1932, it “has now become common sense even to men of the street that without Manchuria, Japan, isolated from the world, would be helpless, while with it she can not only endure any emergency but can ward off any conspiracy... Without Manchuria, Japan cannot but be restless, but with it she will be about as secure as the United States of America...”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 265. Foreign Commentary Changes Nothing.

We already talked about the events leading up to the Japanese Army’s seizure of Manchuria. The short version is that rogue officers in the Kwantung Army, the force that occupied Japanese-controlled territory in southern Manchuria, occupied the whole of the region and declared an independent State of Manchuria that would be a protectorate of Japan.

The occupation was never authorized by the elected civilian government in Tokyo, but it was popular with the public, who saw a Japanese-controlled Manchuria as the key to rescuing the ailing Japanese economy sinking ever deeper into the depths of the Great Depression. As you know from our earlier episode, the leader of one of Japan’s major political parties was

assassinated by pro-military extremists in February 1932, and the prime minister, from the other major political party, was himself assassinated just three months later. The public largely supported these right-wing extremist assassinations. In the difficult political and economic climate in Japan at the time, the Army was seen as acting to relieve the nation's economic hardships, actions that the civilian government leaders were too cowardly or too corrupt to support.

Today I want to look at the reaction to the occupation of Manchuria in other countries, and we should of course begin with China. Japan and Russia both had internationally recognized interests in Manchuria, but it was undisputed that sovereignty over the region belonged to China, which meant it was held by the Kuomintang government of the Republic of China, led by Chiang Kai-shek.

Let me reiterate, though, that the Nationalist government's official control over all of China was in many places little more than a polite fiction. In those places, a local warlord held actual control, and that warlord's degree of loyalty to the central government was uncertain and subject to change. Manchuria was one of those places. The warlord Zhang Xueliang had been the person with actual control, although he was, officially at least, a Marshal of the Chinese Army who took orders from Chiang. Even Zhang's degree of control over Manchuria was open to question. Lawlessness and banditry were the norm in many rural regions. Even the Russian-controlled Chinese Eastern Railway was sometimes raided by Manchurian bandits.

This was the Japanese rationale behind seizing Manchuria. The faked bombing of the Japanese-controlled South Manchuria Railway was used as evidence that the Chinese government was unable to exert authority or impose order on Manchuria, so that task would have to be taken up by Japan.

Now, before I told you that when the Japanese began moving to occupy Manchuria in September 1931, Chiang ordered the Chinese military, including warlord-on-the-scene Zhang Xueliang, not to resist the Japanese takeover.

You may well wonder why. On paper, China had the largest army in the world: 1.5 million soldiers under arms. But half of them were there to keep an eye on the other half, and the government of the Republic struggled to meet the Army's payroll. Tax revenues were down; the Great Depression was affecting China too, although not so severely as other countries. China was less dependent on foreign trade, and had never been on the gold standard.

Recent experience in conflicts both with the Red Army and the Japanese Army did not reflect well on the Chinese military. And then there were the Chinese Communists, lurking in their mountain retreat in the northwest. Chiang felt he needed time. Time to reorganize and modernize his military, root out the Communists, and secure his position within China. So rather than resist Japanese encroachment militarily, Chiang continued his assaults of the Communists' mountain stronghold while ordering his forces in the Northeast to avoid contact with the Japanese. China

would instead make its case to the League of Nations. Remember that China was a founding member of the League, and the principle of “collective security” was central to the League’s mission. League members were supposed to be guaranteeing each other’s sovereignty against aggression. You’ll recall from episode 200 that Woodrow Wilson had specifically assured China that the League would defend its interests in the event of future aggression from Japan.

Now, that hypothetical scenario had become reality. Only Woodrow Wilson was dead and the US was not involved with the League. Was membership in the League a guarantee of anything? For the first time since the League was formed, over a decade ago, that guarantee was about to be tested.

This decision of Chiang’s, to forgo military confrontation with Japan, was the decision of a military officer. From a purely military standpoint, it made sense for him to avoid a potentially crushing defeat from the better-trained Japanese Army and instead bide his time until his position in China was more secure. But from a political standpoint, the decision was disastrous. The Chinese public was outraged by the Japanese occupation. There were protests, demonstrations, and another round of boycotts declared against Japanese imports.

The Communists in particular wasted no time in condemning Chiang’s decision. Chinese should not be fighting other Chinese, they declared. Not while a foreign invader was occupying Chinese lands. What right did Chiang Kai-shek have to call himself leader of the nation if he wasn’t willing to defend the nation? For their part, the Chinese Communists vowed to resist the Japanese and invited all patriotic Chinese to join them in the common struggle. These calls fell on sympathetic ears, even among left-leaning Nationalists.

Even as the Japanese began their occupation of Manchuria, a dissident group of Nationalists in Guangzhou set up an alternative government there. This group included Chiang’s longtime political rival Wang Jingwei, returned from exile a second time. The opposition to Chiang’s do-nothing policy toward the Japanese was sufficient to force him to step down from his position as head of the government, which would go to Wang. Still, Chiang retained command of the Army and he continued his policy of attacking the Communists while avoiding conflict with the Japanese.

Meanwhile, the Japanese Army, having established control over Manchuria by January 1932, were already looking beyond the borders of the soon-to-be-established State of Manchuria. For the right-wing leaders in the military, Japanese control over Manchuria was essential, but it was also just a first step. Now that Japan had a solid foothold on the Asian mainland, next would come further expansion deeper into China and into Soviet Siberia.

But that process began sooner than the Army intended. The Imperial Navy, the Army’s sometime partner, sometime rival, became envious of the Army’s quick and easy success in Manchuria and hoped to score a comparable success of its own. For that next step, the admirals eyed the wealthy and populous Chinese port city of Shanghai. Shanghai had an international settlement, a section

of the city that had been ceded to the British and the Americans by the Imperial government in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The French had their own, separate, enclave. In 1932, this was an autonomous region controlled and defended by the British and Americans and home to many other nationalities including Germans, Italians, and Danes. And Japanese.

The Japanese Navy went back to the same playbook that had won the Army Manchuria, only instead of faking a Chinese attack, they would provoke one. A group of five right-wing extremist Japanese Buddhist monks—yes, there is such a thing as right-wing extremist Buddhist monks—a group of five of them marched through Shanghai, calling out anti-Chinese and pro-Japanese chants and calling for Japanese control over all China. Outraged Chinese onlookers attacked and beat the monks outside a factory. One of them later died from his injuries. Japanese in Shanghai retaliated by setting fire to the factory, killing two Chinese workers inside and one policeman.

Anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out across the city. This was all the excuse the admirals needed to send a naval force and land thousands of Japanese marines. Aircraft from two of Japan's newfangled aircraft carriers, *Hosho* and *Kaga*, bombed the city, inflicting what historian Barbara Tuchman, patron saint of this podcast, described as “the first terror bombing of a civilian population of an era that was to become familiar with it.” Many commentators of this time had already raised the specter of aircraft used to drop bombs directly on civilian noncombatants. Now theory had become reality. The aircraft technology of the Great War had not quite been capable of this feat, but now here we are.

The fighting went on for about five weeks. The Japanese marines were not enough, which forced reluctant Army generals to send reinforcements. At last the League of Nations brokered a ceasefire. The Chinese agreed to withdraw all military forces at least 20 kilometers away from the international settlement, while the Japanese agreed to withdraw all but a small garrison. About 3,000 Japanese and 4,000 Chinese soldiers died in the fighting, as did some 10,000 to 20,000 Chinese civilians.

The Navy had fumbled. They had not won the same kind of quick and easy conquest the Army had in Manchuria. And this fighting had taken place in full view of tens of thousands of Europeans and Americans living in Shanghai. The Japanese had carefully avoided involving them in the fighting, but they were still eyewitnesses to the brutal Japanese assaults.

[music: “Edo Lullaby”]

The ceasefire in Shanghai ended open combat between Japanese and Chinese forces, as the Chinese military had already withdrawn from Manchuria. With the fighting stopped, there was space for diplomacy to start, and now would come the first real test of the League of Nations since its establishment eleven years ago. In the event of a dispute between members, Article 12 of the League Covenant permitted the League Council to arbitrate the dispute or to begin an inquiry. Japan refused to submit to arbitration, so an inquiry it would be.

The League appointed a five-member commission to investigate the conflict in Manchuria and return with recommendations. Its members would include one representative each from the United States, Britain, France, Italy and Germany, representing the five powers that had permanent seats on the League Council, minus Japan and plus the United States, which of course was not a member. The German representative, by the way, would be Doktor Heinrich Schnee, a name you've heard before, most recently in episode 128. He had served as Governor of German East Africa during the Great War.

The British representative would head the commission. He was Victor Alexander George Robert Bulwer-Lytton, the second Earl of Lytton, and member of a family that's been involved in British foreign affairs for generations. His father, the first Earl of Lytton had served as Viceroy of India during the famine of 1876-78 in which millions died, episode 218. His great uncle had negotiated the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty with the United States in 1850, episode 17. His grandfather, the novelist Baron Lytton, is the author who first wrote that "the pen is mightier than the sword," and also gave the English-speaking world that immortal opening line from his 1830 novel *Paul Clifford*, "It was a dark and stormy night..."

So quite the family history had this second Earl of Lytton, and now he would make his own mark on history as the head of what will be remembered as the Lytton Commission. They visited Japan and China, where they conferred with national leaders of both countries, then spent six weeks in Manchuria. In September 1932, while they were still writing up their report, the Japanese government under the successor to the assassinated Inukai Tsuyoshi, Prime Minister and retired Navy admiral Saito Makoto, yielded to the military and granted diplomatic recognition to the State of Manchuria.

The Lytton Report was submitted to the League Council in October 1932, and after a couple of months of further fruitless attempts at arbitration, was taken up in December, a full 15 months after the Japanese began their occupation of Manchuria.

The League Council was a sort of executive committee for the full League; it was the antecedent of the Security Council of the United Nations in our time. In 1932, the Council consisted of five permanent members: Britain, France, Japan, Italy, and Germany, and nine non-permanent members, elected for three-year terms by the full membership.

By this time, more than a year into the Manchurian Crisis, the smaller members of the League, notably Czechoslovakia, represented by its foreign minister Edvard Beneš, whom we met before, most recently in episode 176, were distinctly unhappy with the League's handling of the situation. As far as they were concerned, the whole point of the League of Nations was that the large and powerful nations of the world had agreed to band together to defend the smaller, weaker nations when they were attacked or bullied. What Japan had done in Manchuria was a textbook example of a major power inventing an excuse to attack and occupy a weaker neighbor. How was this any different from Austria bullying Serbia, or Germany invading Belgium, back in

1914? And yet, the response of the Great Powers that were permanent members of the Council was to discuss, delay, and dither.

The major powers seemed distinctly reluctant to take action against Japan. Was that because Japan was one of their own? How could smaller nations, like Czechoslovakia or Spain, to name two, trust the assurances of those nations that stood idly by while Japan carved off a hunk of China? Representatives of the smaller nations muttered darkly that despite the promises they had made to the world, when push came to shove, the major powers would not challenge another member of their private little club in a dispute against a weaker country.

Perhaps that was overstating the case, a little. China's argument was presented to the League by China's most able diplomat, Wellington Koo, whom we last met in episode 200, when he was at Paris Peace Conference 12 years ago. Back then, he had been pleading with the Allies not to award the German concession at Qingdao to Japan, but rather to restore it to China. Now he was before the League of Nations, pleading with the members not to let the Japanese occupation of Manchuria stand. The parallels between those two historical moments were striking, he argued, and the conclusion seems inevitable: allowing a nation to keep as a prize what it seized by force of arms encourages militarism and adventurism.

The Great War had begun because of an Austrian scheme to seize control of Serbia, and it would have succeeded, had not the Allies banded together and said, "Enough!" On the other hand, the Allies' award of Qingdao to Japan had only encouraged the Japanese to seek further gains at China's expense. Japan had violated the Treaty of Versailles, episode 175, the Nine Power Treaty, episode 224, and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, episode 260, all the great diplomatic achievements of our time. Does the international community really want to go back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century world, the one in which might made right and possession was nine-tenths of the law?

It was an argument that every small nation with a big neighbor could understand and sympathize with.

Against the Chinese complaint came the Japanese answer. The root of the problem did not lie with Japan, but with China: specifically, with China's longstanding inability to govern itself. China was rife with bandits and warlords and armed gangs who made a mockery of the Chinese government's claims to sovereignty. Japan was faced with the same difficulties in China that Western powers like Russia or America or Britain or France or Germany had had to face; it had entered into solemn agreements with a Chinese government that lacked the power or perhaps even the will to enforce. What the central government promised, freelancing regional forces took away. For a century, the Western powers had met Chinese instability with gunboats and marines. Why should Japan not be permitted to do the same?

Chinese sovereignty was a fiction, and for the international community to treat China as a sovereign entity was a fantasy. China was no more able to assert sovereignty over Manchuria than over any of its other distant regions, like Xinjiang or Tibet, and had been unable for more

than a century. Japan held internationally recognized economic interests in Manchuria that were vital to the Japanese state. If China could not guarantee the security of those interests—and it could not—then Japan would have to shoulder that responsibility itself.

These were the stormy seas through which the Lytton Commission had to navigate. Its final report was a model of objectivity; the Commission bent over backward to accommodate the Japanese. The Lytton Report surveyed the history of the conflict and frankly acknowledged the failures of Chinese administration of the region. It recognized Japanese interests and the need to defend them. With regard to the alleged Chinese bombing of the railroad that was the trigger for the Japanese occupation, the Report did not dispute the very questionable Japanese version of the incident.

Nevertheless, the Report concluded that Japan's response to the bombing was disproportionate and that an occupation of all Manchuria could not be regarded as a legitimate act of self-defense. The report also dismissed Japanese claims that the new State of Manchuria was an expression of Manchu self-determination. The State of Manchuria had been imposed on the people of Manchuria by a foreign power and its own people did not support it. It was illegitimate.

As an alternative, the Lytton Report proposed a system of administration in Manchuria based on an autonomous regional government that would include Japanese advisers and would be tasked with defending Japan's interests, while also acknowledging China's sovereignty over Manchuria.

The international community received the report warmly. Even the Soviet government praised it. If the Lytton Report had been issued a year earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the occupation of Manchuria, it is entirely possible that the Japanese government, still stinging from the insult of its own Army's insubordination, would have accepted the report and agreed to abide by its recommendations. But not now. Not after a year had passed, a year of consolidation of control, of the establishment of an independent Manchuria, and of a new, more conservative government, brought to power by assassination.

Even so, some voices in Japan urged accommodation. *The Japan Times and Mail*, the nation's largest English-language newspaper, warned that Japan was spurning the West just at the moment the West was embracing a more just and diplomatic approach to resolving international conflicts. In the Japanese Diet, where the paper's publisher held a seat, he declared the Army's disobedience in Manchuria "a disgrace to the constitutional government of Japan."

But another newspaper, *Jiji*, editorialized that, "In this country, we are all convinced of being in the right, and foreign commentary, whether favorable or not, changes nothing for us." In fact, foreign criticism had if anything fired up Japanese patriotism and rallied public opinion around holding onto Manchuria. The Japanese economy was beginning to improve. This was partly due to the end of the gold standard, which allowed the value of the yen to fall and Japanese exports to grow. But Japan's new, stronger position in Manchuria surely also played a role. Many Japanese believed so, at least.

When the founders of the League of Nations drew up its Covenant in Paris in 1919, they had expected that international censure and the threat of isolation would itself be a strong deterrent for any member state that felt tempted to defy the world consensus. It seems they had not considered the possibility that foreign condemnation might actually rally domestic public opinion around the very forces defying the world.

For months after submission of the Lytton Report, the League engaged in talks aimed at a negotiated settlement, but the Japanese side insisted to the end on international recognition of the State of Manchuria as a precondition to any talks. Finally, in the last week of February, 1933, negotiation having failed, the League brought the recommendations of the Lytton Commission to a vote. Forty-two nations voted in favor of accepting the recommendations. Only Japan voted no. After the vote, Japan's representative, Matsuoka Yosuke, took to the podium to announce his disappointment that Japan could no longer participate in the League of Nations. He then led his delegation out of the chamber. Japan, a founding member of the League of Nations, a permanent member of the League Council, once the League's most enthusiastic supporter in Asia, had become the second nation to quit the League.

The withdrawal was popular in Japan. Officials and commentators there argued that the League did not understand Asia, and that peacekeeping in that part of the world would be better handled by a regional organization led by Japan on the model of the United States and the Monroe Doctrine. Indeed, wasn't there a clause in the League Covenant allowing for regional peacekeeping organizations, a clause insisted upon by Woodrow Wilson and the Americans to protect the Americans' claimed rights in the Western Hemisphere? A few older Japanese diplomats recalled the peace talks in Portsmouth that had ended the Russo-Japanese War, where they had floated the idea of a Japanese version of the Monroe Doctrine for East Asia, and how no less an authority than Theodore Roosevelt had endorsed the idea.

For that matter, how was the situation in Manchuria any different from Theodore Roosevelt's own handling of the Panama Canal? Hadn't the Americans, faced with a pressing military and economic need for the canal, carved Panama away from Colombia and set it up as an independent state, for the sake of America's interests? How was Manchuria any different?

Elsewhere in the world, newspapers began writing the League's obituary. League optimists blamed the governments of the major powers for their unwillingness to enforce its authority. League pessimists penned some variation of, "I told you so."

Why hadn't the major powers been willing to pressure Japan to withdraw from Manchuria, if not with military power then at least with economic sanctions? The Great Depression is part of the answer. With the world economy in crisis, who could afford military action, or even a further decline in trade?

There were only three countries that could plausibly have forced Japan out of Manchuria. One was the USSR. But the Soviets had their own problems over the winter of 1932-33, as you well

know from episode 235. The first Five-Year Plan had ended successfully, but the USSR was in the throes of a severe famine and the Soviet economy was not yet strong enough to support a major war effort in the Far East, supplied through the long and narrow soda straw that was the Trans-Siberian Railroad. People in Russia still remembered the humiliation of the last war against Japan, not to mention the revolution it had sparked. So the Russians would treat the Japanese with kid gloves for now, though the second Five-Year Plan would include a buildup of tanks and fighter planes and other military assets, and by 1938, the Soviet Union would be in a position to get far tougher with the Japanese. But not today. The Soviet Union did go so far as to restore diplomatic relations with China, which had been broken in 1927 after Chiang Kai-shek turned on the Chinese Communists.

Also, the Japanese had reciprocated by treating the Soviets with deference. Japanese forces in Manchuria never got anywhere near Red Army garrisons along the Chinese Eastern Railway. Japanese control over northern Manchuria had been secured by political means, mostly the greasing of a few warlords' palms. The Japanese Army had kept its distance.

As for the United States, the US wanted to see a more aggressive League response, but wasn't willing to support one. The US had its own economic problems, and by early 1933, they were becoming dire. President Hoover opposed even economic sanctions against Japan, which he regarded as more likely to anger the Japanese government further than to lead to compromise. The US had important economic interests in China, which would be just as vulnerable to the Japanese as their economy would be to American sanctions. Also, as part of the agreements signed at the Washington Naval Conference in 1922, the US had agreed not to fortify its naval base in the Philippines, meaning the US Navy would be hard pressed to support offensive operations near Japan, while the Philippines would be a very tempting target for a Japanese counterattack.

The farthest the Americans would go was to refuse to recognize the new State of Manchuria. Secretary of State Henry Stimson declared the Japanese to be in violation of the Nine Power Agreement and the Kellogg-Briand Pact and articulated what came to be called the "Stimson Doctrine," which was that the United States would not recognize changes in territorial sovereignty imposed by force of arms. The Stimson Doctrine drew wide support in domestic US politics, though critics heard in it echoes of Woodrow Wilson's policies in the early years of the Great War and wondered whether the Stimson Doctrine too would merely postpone the day of military reckoning.

In Whitehall, one official of the British Foreign Office dismissed the Stimson Doctrine as "remarkable for its incoherence and utter futility." The British ambassador in Washington agreed, reporting home that the Stimson Doctrine "is, of course, perfectly futile, but in European questions the United States seems proudly and purposely resolved to be futile anyhow."

Besides the Soviet Union and the United States, the United Kingdom might have had the military clout to force Japan to back down, but the British economy was also struggling and the Admiralty were unanimously opposed to naval intervention in the corner of the world farthest removed from Britain against a nation with a formidable navy. An invasion of the Japanese Home Islands was deemed unthinkable; the best Britain could manage would be a blockade, and like the Americans, they feared Japanese counterattacks against poorly defended Hong Kong or Singapore. The Manchester *Guardian*, the voice of the British left, warned darkly that if League authority were flouted in East Asia, it would soon be flouted everywhere. The *Times*, on the other hand, articulating the Tory position, pointed out that Japan in Manchuria was doing no more than asserting the same authority Britain claimed in Egypt: to enforce law and order and protect vital economic interests.

I'll close today by nothing that although the US took no further action against Japan, apart from refusal to recognize the State of Manchuria, public opinion in the US was firmly on the Chinese side of this dispute. This was partly due to close trade links between the US and China, and partly because of the large numbers of Americans in Shanghai who were repulsed by the violence there during Japan's abortive attempt to seize the city and then came home to report on what they'd seen. I'd like to think the abstract justice of China's complaint played a role here, too.

It was in the aftermath of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria that many among America's political and financial elites began organizing to lobby the United States government to support Chiang Kai-shek and the Republic of China. These elites and the various advocacy organizations they created would become known as the China Lobby, with capital letters, and would be an influential force in American politics during the 1930s, the war years, into the Cold War, and beyond. It's fair to say the China Lobby still exists, and still plays a role in US foreign policy, in our time.

We'll be returning to that topic in future episodes, but we'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Hameeduddin and Mike for their kind donations, and thank you to Corey for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Hameeduddin and Mike and Corey help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And this is the last episode for the year 2021. The sixth anniversary of this podcast came and went in September, and I didn't even notice. Whether you just joined us or have been along for the ride since the early days, I'm glad to have you as a listener, and rest assured we will keep plugging along through 2022.

And I hope you'll join me again, next week, the second day of the new year, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to Germany and examine the rise of Adolf Hitler. I deliberately put this one off until the new year, but we can't put it off anymore. By the way, January 30, 2022 will mark the 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day Hitler became Chancellor, so we're in the right season for this story. After Hitler, Our Turn, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned in today's episode that on the day the Japanese delegation walked out of the League of Nations, Japan became the second nation to quit the League. You may be wondering which country was first.

The answer lies as an epilogue to episode 260, in which I told you about the Locarno Treaties and how part of that agreement was that Germany would join the League of Nations, and that it would take a seat as a permanent member of the League Council, a seat originally created for the United States, except that the United States never ratified the Treaty of Versailles and never joined the League.

When Germany joined the League and took that seat on the Council, three League members protested: Brazil, Spain, and Poland. Representatives of these countries argued that if Germany got a permanent seat on the League Council, the countries they represented should get the same. The compromise offered was to expand the number of non-permanent seats on the League Council from six to nine, thus making room for these three aggrieved countries.

This compromise was good enough to satisfy the Spanish and Polish governments, but not Brazil, which left the League of Nations in protest in June 1926, thus becoming the first nation to abandon its League membership.

[music: Closing Theme]