

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 300

“The Imperial Way”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“The Japanese are following the destructive example of the Western nations. The possessors of financial, political, and military power are striving to maintain their unjust interests under cover of the imperial power...Seven hundred million brethren in India and China cannot gain their independence without our protection and leadership...The only possible international peace, which will come after the present age of international wars, must be a feudal peace. This will be achieved through the emergence of the strongest country, which will dominate the other nations of the world.”

Kita Ikki, *A General Outline of Measures for the Reconstruction of Japan*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 300. The Imperial Way.

It's been a while since we talked about China, so it's time to get up to date there. Back in episode 234, I described the Nanjing Decade, the period from 1928-1937, a time of relative peace and prosperity in China, albeit one interrupted halfway through by the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the creation of a protectorate we in the West usually call “Manchukuo.” I told you about those events in episodes 263 and 265.

After the creation of Manchukuo, China was divided once more, dashing the hopes of those Chinese who wanted a China strong and united. The northeast of the country was now a Japanese protectorate, which billed itself as “Five Races under One Union.” This image was reflected in the flag of Manchukuo, which borrowed the old five-striped flag that the Republic of China had used until 1928, except in this version, the yellow stripe has swallowed up three-quarters of the flag, leaving only the upper left corner for the other four. The yellow was supposed to represent the Manchu people, with the other four stripes representing Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Mongol people. Hence, “Five Races under One Union.”

The population of Manchukuo was about thirty million and growing rapidly. The nation had its own Emperor, Pu Yi, the last Chinese Emperor, and though the government promoted veneration of the Emperor on the Japanese model, the real power was exercised by the Japanese Kwantung Army, which had seized the land in the first place. The Kwantung Army was led by right-wing national socialists—there's that phrase again—who were leery of the capitalism that in their view had weakened Japan. In Manchuria, they strove to develop a modern industrial economy that could help support the Japanese military.

They used as their model the Five-Year Plans of the Soviet Union, and in this project they were largely successful. For example, by the end of the 1930s, Manchukuo was producing more steel than Japan. Also by the late 1930s, the Army's attitude toward capitalism had softened somewhat, and Japanese businesses were being invited to invest in Manchukuo, though only in Army-approved projects. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese and Koreans migrated to Manchukuo in the 1930s. The Koreans mostly as farmers, while the Japanese immigrants were more typically white-collar workers in government, business, industry, and in that all-important Japanese-controlled South Manchuria Railway. Japanese immigrants could expect to earn double the salaries they were accustomed to receiving back home.

The native people of Manchukuo, mostly Han Chinese with a significant Manchu minority, did not share in this prosperity. Their farmland was taken from them for the benefit of those Korean immigrants and they were brutally exploited in Japanese-run factories.

In north-central China, the Communist forces that had survived the Long March set up a mini-state in the mountainous region centered on the town of Yan'an, which had a population of about 7,000. The Communists controlled an area roughly the size of the state of Ohio or the nation of Bulgaria, with a total population less than two million. The region was self-sufficient in food production, but had virtually no industry. Still, the Communist fighters knew the rugged region well enough and fought well enough to frustrate multiple attempts by the Nationalists to overpower them.

And then there was the Republic of China, which still encompassed most of China's population, land area, industry and economy. China had escaped the worst of the Great Depression, probably because China was not, and never had been, on the gold standard. The Chinese yuan was pegged to silver.

In the coastal cities of China, where the growing urban middle class had money to spend on modern entertainments, motion pictures and jazz music imported from the United States were hugely popular, as indeed they were most everywhere.

China's own writers and artists mostly held leftist inclinations, and that was a problem in the Republic of China, where censorship was a very real thing, forcing artists to make their social criticism subtle. One example is the 1932 short novel *Spring Silkworms* by Mao Dun, which tells the story of a poor family struggling to make a living farming silk in the face of predatory

lenders, cutthroat Japanese competition, and their own shortsightedness. It was adapted into a silent film in 1933. The 1934 silent film *The Goddess* tells the story of a prostitute who struggles to provide a better life for her son, battling poverty and prejudice along the way.

You'll recall that the government of the Republic of China, led by Chiang Kai-shek, was officially in control over all of China, apart from Manchuria and the Communist enclave, though in fact this control depended on the dubious loyalty of a number of regional warlords. Chiang had acquiesced in the Japanese takeover of Manchuria, judging his Army too weak to contest it, and focused instead on defeating the Communists and consolidating his control over those warlords.

In that quest, he acquired a surprising ally: the government of Germany. The German government of the Weimar era had kept relations with China on the back burner, but that changed suddenly after Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power. Hitler saw in Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party an Asian form of fascism serving as a bulwark against Communism. The German government and military well remembered how the French had kept the German Army at bay for twenty years through their alliance with Russia, because it threatened Germany with a two-front war. Hitler perceived that a strong and united anti-Communist China would pose a comparable threat to Stalin and turn the tables on the Russians. The leadership of the Soviet Union resented the losses of Finland and the Baltic States, as well as strips of formerly Russian territory taken by Poland and Romania, but they would not dare attempt to reclaim these lands by force while under the threat of a Chinese counterattack in the Far East.

And so in the middle 1930s, Germany sent military advisers to China to help train and modernize the Nationalist Army. The Germans sold rifles and light artillery pieces to the Nationalists, and even the distinctive German Army helmet, the *Stahlhelm*, became standard gear among the Nationalist forces. German lines of credit financed the construction of modern arms factories in China to supply the military.

Now, I should point out that the peace agreement imposed on China by the Japanese in 1933 not only ceded to Japan control over Manchuria, but created a demilitarized zone below the southern border of Manchuria and extending almost as far south as Tianjin and Beiping, China's former capital. Chinese armed forces were not permitted to enter this zone, but the Japanese military was permitted both aerial reconnaissance flights and ground patrols through the region, supposedly to ensure Chinese compliance with the peace terms.

None of this sat very well with Zhang Xueliang, one of the Republic's most important generals. We've met Zhang before, so let me just remind you that he was the son of the Manchurian warlord who was assassinated by a cabal of Japanese military officers in 1929, when the younger Zhang was just 27 years old, as part of the Japanese effort to seize control of Manchuria. The Japanese underestimated the younger Zhang, previously known mostly for his opium addiction

and his slutty private life. But Zhang surprised the Japanese, and not in a good way, by taking control of his father's military, executing commanders who had supported the Japanese, and submitting to the Republic and to the command of Chiang Kai-shek.

But two years later, the Japanese Army took control of Manchuria anyway. Zhang and his forces withdrew to the south at Chiang's order, and then, in compliance with the agreed demilitarized zone withdrew even farther south, meaning that the now 32-year-old former warlord had had to abandon the last scraps of territory he had once ruled. This did not sit well with him; neither did the widespread criticism he drew, especially from the Communists, for abandoning Chinese territory without a fight.

In 1936, Chiang ordered Zhang and one other former-warlord-turned-Republican-general named Yang Hucheng to send their armies into yet another offensive meant to clear the Communists from their mountain redoubt. This was a win-win proposition for Chiang, because if Zhang and Yang succeeded in defeating the Communists, that was good. Alternatively, if Zhang and Yang's forces met the same fate as previous expeditions sent to rout the Communists, then two of China's most powerful warlords would lose most of their armies, which would make them less powerful, and that was also good, for Chiang.

Unfortunately for Chiang, this plan was a little too obvious. Zhang and Yang understood perfectly well what he was up to, and like many nationalist-minded Chinese, had become unhappy with Chiang's strategy of making war on fellow Chinese while giving the Japanese free rein to seize control over the entire northeast of the country. In April 1936, they opened secret talks with the Communists at their own initiative to discuss an end to the conflict between them and the establishment of a second United Front to oppose the Japanese. (You'll recall that the first United Front between the Nationalist and Communist Parties was established in 1924 to overthrow the warlords and unite China. It ended in 1927 when Chiang massacred thousands of Communists in Shanghai.)

The Communists expressed their willingness to accept a deal under which they and the Nationalists would bury the hatchet and cooperate in opposing the Japanese. But Chiang got wind of these negotiations and in December 1936 flew to the Chinese city of Xi'an, near the front lines, to have a little talk with Zhang and Yang about their unauthorized negotiations with the Communists and the virtues of following orders.

Chiang was staying at the Huaqing Hot Springs, a lovely mountain resort outside the city. But instead of meeting him there, Zhang set soldiers who shot their way into resort and seized Chiang, in his bathrobe, as the story goes. The rebelling generals sent a telegram to the government in Nanjing, laying out their demands: that the government end the war against the Communists and unite with them against the Japanese.

In Nanjing, the government was divided over what to do. The military wanted to move against the rebel generals and immediately dispatched a force to march on Xi'an and put an end to the

mutiny. On the other hand, the civilian government, dominated by Chiang's wife and his powerful in-laws, wanted to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the standoff. Madame Chiang flew to Xi'an personally to open talks and—she hoped—forestall a military response.

Meanwhile, there was also dissention among Chiang's captors. Some of Zhang's and Yang's subordinate officers wanted to execute Chiang. But Zhang demurred, saying his goal had never been murder; he only wanted to force a change in government policy.

As for the Communists, some of them wanted Chiang dead as well, but orders came from Comintern in Moscow to pursue agreement instead. Let me pause here for a moment to remind you of what we've seen of the history of Comintern, the Communist International, the Soviet Communist Party organization meant to spread Communism and the Revolution worldwide. In its early days, Comintern had urged Communist parties in other countries to work cooperatively with socialist and bourgeois parties when there were common interests. It was that massacre of the Communists in Shanghai and the collapse of the first United Front in China in 1927 that persuaded Comintern to shift direction and embrace a strategy in which Communists remained aloof from all other political parties, even fellow socialists. This strategy failed spectacularly in Germany, when Communist intransigence paved the way for Hitler to take power.

In 1935, in the aftermath of that disaster, Comintern reversed course once again and embraced Communist cooperation with non-Communist political parties. In the United States, this led to a surge in Communist Party membership and the Party becoming almost respectable. In Spain and France, it led to Popular Front governments, in which Communists and socialists came together to oust right-wing parliamentary coalitions.

And in China, it meant a renewed willingness to work cooperatively with the Nationalists, especially if the goal was to oppose the Japanese occupation.

At first, Chiang Kai-shek refused to negotiate with the Communists. It was only after nearly two weeks in captivity, as it began to dawn on him that his stubbornness might cost him his life, that his attitude began to soften. That plus the news that Madame Chiang had come to Xi'an in the hope of negotiating his release.

When Chiang finally agreed to negotiate on December 24, who should turn up at that first meeting to represent the Communists but Zhou Enlai, the very same Zhou Enlai who had taught at the Whampoa Military Academy a decade earlier, back when Chiang was the commandant? Zhou opened the meeting by remarking that Chiang looked just the same as he had ten years ago, when they were colleagues at the Academy. Chiang reminded Zhou that back then, he was Chiang's subordinate, bound to follow his orders, and told Zhou he should follow them now. Zhou told Chiang that if only Chiang would end the war against the Communists and join with them to resist the Japanese, Zhou and the whole of the Red Army would gladly accept Chiang as their commander. And more than that, he was authorized to tell Chiang that Comrade Stalin had pledged Soviet military aid to the united effort.

Well, that was an offer hard to refuse, even if you weren't being held prisoner by the people making it. Chiang accepted, invited Zhou Enlai to Nanjing for further talks, and was released.

[music: Randria, *Hogaku*]

We've seen in past episodes on Japan the rising power of right-wing radicals in the Japanese Army; the sort of people responsible for the occupation of Manchuria and its conversion into a Japanese protectorate. That had all been engineered by the Japanese Kwantung Army at the scene without the knowledge or approval of the civilian government in Tokyo. The government of Prime Minister Tsuyoshi actually refused to recognize the new Manchurian state. He was assassinated for it by a cabal of junior naval officers.

In November 1934, a group of cadets at the Imperial Japanese Army Academy were arrested for conspiring to overthrow the government. As was the case with the Tsuyoshi assassination and indeed the actions of the Japanese Army, the lower-level officers and cadets involved were acting with the approval of certain higher-ranking officers who were part of an ultra-right-wing group within the Japanese Army called the Kodoha, or the Imperial Way. Exposure of the 1934 coup plot forced the dismissal of some of these high-ranking officers.

One afternoon in August 1935, Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa Saburo of the Japanese Army visited the Grand Shrine in Ise, dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. This is the most sacred Shinto shrine in Japan. There the colonel confided to the Sun Goddess his desire to assassinate Major General Nagata Tetsuzan. Colonel Aizawa was also one of the Kodoha, and he believed that the whole business of the five arrested cadets and the dismissals that followed had been a set-up, engineered by enemies of the Kodoha to discredit and weaken them.

In other words—and just let me summarize here—a member of a shadowy extremist movement plotting the overthrow of the elected government was enraged because some fellow members of said extremist movement were exposed doing exactly what the group was trying to do, overthrow the government, yet this exposure of them doing exactly what we all know they want to do was somehow actually an insidious plot by enemies of the movement to discredit it, and further, that General Nagata was the chief villain responsible for this dastardly plot.

Folks, by this point we are deep down in the rabbit hole of crazy.

So here was Colonel Aizawa at the shrine of the Sun Goddess. He told the Goddess of his desire to assassinate General Nagata and asked her, "If I am right, please help me succeed. If I am wrong, please make me fail."

Days later, Aizawa walked into the office of General Nagata. The general didn't even look up until Aizawa drew his sword and attacked. The first thrust missed. The second wounded Nagata as he rushed for the door. The third ran him through from behind while he was opening it.

Aizawa was court-martialed for his crime, but at the trial he and his counsel were permitted to explain his actions by denouncing Japanese government and society as decadent and weak. “The country was in a deplorable state,” Aizawa told the court, “the farmers were impoverished, officials were involved in scandals, diplomacy was weak, and the prerogatives of the Supreme Command had been violated...I came to realize that the senior statesmen, those close to the Throne, powerful financiers and bureaucrats, were attempting gradually to corrupt the government and the Army for their own selfish interests.”

His counsel warned the judges, “If the court fails to understand the spirit which guided Colonel Aizawa, a second Aizawa, and even a third, will appear.”

That sounds a lot like a threat to me, and these words will prove prescient, although they were not enough to save Colonel Aizawa from the firing squad. Still, the court martial was highly publicized and closely followed, and many right-wing Japanese, in and out of the military, accepted his critique of Japanese society and sympathized with the murderer’s aims.

So how did Japan get to this place, where murders of military officers and civilian elected officials by right-wing extremists are becoming routine, even celebrated?

One of the progenitors of this movement is the writer and intellectual Kita Ikki, who in 1919 published a book titled *A General Outline of Measures for the Reconstruction of Japan*, which I quoted from at the top of the episode. Kita argued a Japanese form of national socialism; that is, he rejected conventional socialism and argued instead that the Japanese were the international proletariat and all of Japan’s domestic social problems were caused by capitalists at home and abroad who greedily exploited them.

Kita’s prescription to solve this problem begins with the principle that Japan is unique among nations in that it is blessed with an Emperor who is descended from the Sun Goddess. Reform at home would begin by eliminating the barriers that existed between the Emperor and his people—by which he meant the prime minister, the cabinet, the Diet, the aristocracy, and the wealthy elites. The Emperor alone could be trusted to insure the well being of every Japanese.

Once full Imperial rule was secured at home, the next step would be to extend its blessings throughout the region, from Siberia to China to India, to Indochina, the East Indies, and Australia, and ultimately the world. Unlike some Japanese nationalists, Kita did not see the Japanese as a “master race” born to be lords of the world. He thought the Japanese Empire could and should assimilate other Asian peoples into a Pan-Asian empire, liberating them from Western influences, until eventually all the peoples of the world would live together in peace under the rule of the Emperor in a society in which Japanese and Asian values prevailed.

And this was the basic ideology of Japan’s nationalist right wing by the 1930s. There were variations; not everyone agreed with Kita on everything. For instance, some right-wing Japanese did indeed believe that the Japanese were the world’s master race, but what we have before us is

enough to give you a taste of their thinking. You might be tempted to label this Japanese fascism, and some historians do, but it does differ from what we see in Italy and Germany in some important respects. One is that it has a religious component, based in Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, which you don't see in European fascism. Another is the absence of a single leader at the top of the movement; there is no Japanese Mussolini or Hitler, unless you want to count the Emperor. The Japanese right wing placed a lot of stock in the idea that the Emperor's rule was the cure for everything wrong with the world. They described their goal as the Showa Restoration, a follow-on to the Meiji Restoration, which I told you about all the way back in episode one. In their view, their movement was the final fulfillment of the process that began with the Meiji Emperor.

And who was the current Emperor, the semi-divine whose rule would solve all Japan's problems, and eventually all the world's? In 1935, he was 34 years old. His personal name was Hirohito, and his personal appearance was hardly imperious. He favored old clothes that were wrinkled and ill fitting and wore thick glasses. His necktie was seldom straight and the buttons on his jacket often fastened to the wrong holes. In other words, he gave the impression not so much of a deity as an absent-minded professor, an impression only reinforced by His Majesty's strong preference for the study of marine biology over the affairs of the state.

In 1921, when he was still Crown Prince, the Emperor had spent six months in Europe, an unprecedented journey for an heir to the Chrysanthemum Throne. In Britain he had developed a taste for whiskey, golf, and British-style constitutional monarchy. When the Empress bore him four daughters, he declined suggestions that he take a concubine to insure a male heir to continue the longest reigning dynasty in the world, and perhaps we could say his faith in her was rewarded when she next bore him two sons.

The Emperor was raised to believe that his role precluded personal involvement in political disputes. Theoretically, every government action had to be ratified by the Emperor to become official; in practice, the Emperor ratified whatever the government put before him. The one time the Emperor took a position on a controversial question was in 1928, when the news came that Japanese Army officers in Manchuria had assassinated the warlord Zhang Zuolin, which we discussed in episode 263. The Emperor lost his temper and berated his prime minister for allowing such a thing to happen, but this incident was the exception, not the rule.

The Japanese Navy and Army, and especially the Kwantung Army, the force responsible for garrisoning Manchuria, were riddled with right-wing officers who deplored politics and democracy and wanted to see direct rule by the Emperor. How then did they account for the Emperor's own compliance with the principles of constitutionalism? They took it as an article of faith that the Emperor was ill-served and given bad advice by the politicians and the capitalists. Once these poisonous voices had been silenced, the Showa Restoration could begin.

To these right-wing military officers, Manchuria was the showcase that demonstrated what a proper Japanese Imperial administration could do for all Asia. Unlike in the Home Islands, where the Great Depression was starving farmers and keeping wages low for workers, Japanese and Koreans in Manchuria were prospering as their economy boomed. Now, the Han Chinese and the Manchus native to the region might not have seen it that way. They saw their lands being taken away and given to the immigrants while they themselves were laboring under brutal conditions for low pay in Japanese-controlled factories, but then, no one asked them.

These right-wing military officers saw Manchuria as proof of concept and their goal was to bring the same benefits to Japan and to all Asia—from Bombay to Vladivostok.

But how should Japan proceed? Here there was a serious difference of opinion. The Army and the Navy of Imperial Japan were separate institutions that seldom saw eye to eye. The Navy looked across the Western Pacific and eyed the wealth of the East Indies as greedily as Europeans had four hundred years earlier, as well as India, Indochina, the Philippines, and beyond, while the Army looked landward from its base in Manchuria, north to the untapped mineral wealth of Siberia and south to the economic potential of the industrious, but divided and poorly led, Chinese.

The most radical of the radicals in the Army were the Kodoha, the Imperial Way Faction, and they supported the doctrine Hokushin-ron, the Northern Road, meaning that they saw Japan's next logical step now that Manchuria was secure was to move north and west against Mongolia and Siberia, sever the Far East from Russian rule, and make it into a protectorate, as had been done with Manchuria. This doctrine was partly based on the benefits of exploiting Siberia economically, but also on opposition to Communism, which the Imperial Way viewed as the greatest threat to Japan.

Against the Imperial Way Faction was the so-called Toseiha, or Control Faction. This was a pejorative term, coined by members of the Kodoha to dismiss those military officers who were less radical but held greater control within the military. The Control Faction were just as skeptical of democracy and just as eager to expand Japanese rule, but not as skeptical of capitalism and less spiritual than the Imperial Way. The Control Faction was pragmatic: less interested in highfalutin philosophies of the Emperor's divinity and the Showa Restoration than in modernizing Japan's armed forces, and they had no problem in working with Japanese business and industrial elites to that end, whatever the philosophers might think about capitalism.

The Control Faction leaned more toward the doctrine of Nanshin-ron, or the Southern Road. That meant moving south against China and Indochina, the Philippines and the East Indies. The economic benefits were obvious, but the Imperial Way faction vigorously opposed the Southern Road. In their view, Soviet Communism was the biggest threat and therefore had to be dealt with first. Also, the rest of the Great Powers would likely remain neutral in a war between Japan and Russia as they had back in 1905, while an attack south into China would leave the Japanese

Army vulnerable to a Russian attack in their rear, and any expansion south by sea into, say French Indochina or the Dutch East Indies would likely draw the British and the Americans into the war. Japan could not expect to win a war against an alliance of two or three or even four other major powers.

We've seen before how the most radical of radicals will regard as their most hated enemy not those who are totally opposed to them, but rather those who sympathize with many of their views but are not quite as radical as they are. See for example Ernst Thälmann and the Communist Party of Germany. And so it was with the Imperial Way Faction, who felt their worst domestic enemies were not the politicians or the capitalists but the Control Faction.

And this brings me back around to Colonel Aizawa and his assassination of General Nagata. Aizawa was part of the Imperial Way, and when fellow members of that faction were arrested for plotting a coup, he blamed the Control Faction. He thought they had exposed the Imperial Way plot to weaken his movement and strengthen their own. Hence his murder of a high-ranking member of the Control Faction.

Aizawa was executed by firing squad, but his defense counsel's prediction of more Aizawas to come proved accurate, although it underestimated the number by three orders of magnitude. Early in the morning of February 26, 1936, as the city of Tokyo lay in darkness under a thick blanket of snow, a group of about 1,500 officers and soldiers sympathetic to the Imperial Way spread out across the city with the goal of killing seven top-ranking government officials, including the current prime minister and three former prime ministers, all deemed guilty of "obstructing the Imperial virtue" and then seizing control of the Tokyo Police Headquarters, the War Ministry and the Imperial Palace.

Former prime minister and current finance minister Takahashi Korekiyo was gunned down in his own bed as he slept. As finance minister, Takahashi had taken the yen off the gold standard in 1931 and favored new government spending as the tool to revive the Japanese economy, but he had also favored spending cuts in the military, which made him the enemy. Saito Makoto, the current prime minister's immediate predecessor, was also gunned down in his home.

As for the current prime minister, Okada Keisuke, soldiers forced their way into his official residence, but met resistance from police on the scene. The prime minister's personal secretary, who was also his brother-in-law, heard the exchange of gunfire and shepherded the PM into an unused bathroom. The soldiers shot and killed the brother-in-law, mistaking him for the prime minister, leaving Okada, the real prime minister, cringing in terror in his hiding place.

When morning came, most ordinary Tokyoites left for work unaware anything was amiss, until they discovered the police had blocked off a square mile of central Tokyo around the Diet and the Prime Minister's residence. The rebels had taken the Tokyo police headquarters and the War Ministry building. The war minister himself had been given a list of the rebels' demands, which

amounted to arrests of high-ranking soldiers they regarded as enemies, and allowed to take these demands to the Imperial Palace.

The minister did so and recommended the Emperor choose a new prime minister who would assemble a new government. The Emperor refused this advice and refused to accept any Cabinet resignations. Instead, he deplored the uprising and instructed the Army to put it down.

But this was easier said than done. Most high-ranking Army officers sympathized with the rebels' goals, even if they disapproved of their methods. That afternoon, the Army's high command issued an artfully worded proclamation, which declared that the Army shared their concern over the state of the nation, recognized their actions were well intended, and that the Emperor had been informed of them. What happened next would depend upon the will of His Majesty.

Whether this statement was an attempt to persuade the rebels to surrender, as the high command would later claim, or whether it was an endorsement of the uprising is a question still open to debate.

The Army's reaction to the uprising was ambivalent, but the Navy definitely disapproved. The next day, the 27th, dozens of naval warships entered Tokyo Bay and Japanese marines secured the naval ministry.

Throughout the day, the Emperor repeatedly inquired of the Army command whether the uprising had been suppressed, and the Army repeatedly replied with excuses. Finally, the Emperor had had enough and informed the Army command that if they did not end the rebellion, the Emperor would see to it personally.

It's hard to explain why this is such a big deal. The Emperor in principle is semi-divine and has virtually unlimited authority over the Japanese nation and its people. But the whole system is based on the principle that the Emperor earns the respect and devotion of his people by being sparing in the application of this authority. This is a spiritual and cultural principle quite apart from the legal theories of constitutional monarchy although, yes, constitutional monarchy also demands that the Emperor, though notionally the highest authority over the military, never ever issue orders to them directly.

The next morning, the 28th, the Army finally issued an unambiguous order to the rebels to withdraw from the buildings they had seized and return to their barracks, in the name of the Emperor. Within the rebel ranks, many were getting cold feet, especially the rank-and-file soldiers, most of whom were conscripts who went into this thing thinking it was a legitimate military operation and began to think otherwise only when they found themselves besieged by the police in downtown Tokyo. Surely, they thought, if it was the will of the Emperor that they withdraw, they should withdraw. But the officers kept insisting this was not truly the will of the Emperor, but represented yet more of the malign influence of the Control Faction.

You're probably wondering what became of Prime Minister Okada. On the 27th, the rebels permitted a member of the PM's staff named Sakomizu Hisatsune to enter the residence to collect the late PM's personal belongings. While he was inside, the household staff revealed to him that the prime minister, now hiding in the laundry room, was very much alive. Sakomizu left the residence in a panic, his mind racing furiously as he searched for a plan to rescue the PM before the soldiers occupying the residence figured out their mistake.

He considered sharing what he knew with loyalists in the military command or the war ministry, but he was all too aware of how many of them were privately sympathetic with the rebels.

Instead, Sakomizu and a couple other members of the PM's staff decided to rescue Okada on their own, along with a military police sergeant who had stumbled across Okada while searching the residence. This sergeant chose to keep his discovery to himself and join the conspiracy to free the prime minister.

The body of Okada's brother-in-law was laid out in the residence. Sakomizu and his fellow conspirators took advantage of the arrival of a delegation of mourners who had come to the residence to burn incense and honor the dead. They joined the delegation and smuggled in a Western-style business suit, which they gave Okada to put on while they oversaw the vigil, making sure none of the mourners got close enough to the body to realize it was not that of the prime minister. When Okada was ready, they put a mask on him and rushed him outside to a waiting car, explaining to the rebel soldiers that one of the mourners had become ill. Sakomizu had also arranged for a coffin to be delivered to the residence, and after the mourners' vigil had ended, the body was also spirited away, because the conspirators feared that even after his escape from the residence, Okada would still not be safe if the rebels found out he was alive.

Even after Okada was free, some officials didn't want him at the Palace. Some thought he should resign. Others feared the rebels would attack the Palace if they got word that Okada was there. The prime minister did come to the Palace that evening, where he met with the Emperor, who expressed his pleasure that Okada had survived and declined to accept his proffered resignation. The prime minister broke down in tears.

Despite the public declaration of the Emperor's will, when night fell on the 28th, the rebels had not yet capitulated. The following morning, the 29th, since 1936 was a leap year, the Army declared "we are positively going to suppress the rebels..." which was notable because this was the first time the military command used that word—rebels—to describe the leaders of the uprising. Tokyo was shut down. No one went to work or school, the streets were closed, and tanks were moving into position facing the rebel barricades. Signs were put up, leaflets dropped, and loudspeakers blared, all announcing the same message: The Emperor orders you to return to barracks. By afternoon, the last of the rebels had surrendered peacefully.

This attempted coup would go down in Japanese history as the 2-26 Incident. What violence there had been was brutal, but even so, only seven people were killed. The secretaries and

household staff around the prime minister, many of them women, had shown their bravery; the highest ranking soldiers in the Army their weakness and indecision.

The ringleaders of the 2-26 Incident were court-martialed, and seventeen were executed, along with two civilians deemed complicit in the uprising. One of these was Kita Ikki.

The Imperial Way Faction was discredited, which at first blush you might think a good thing for Japanese democracy, but no, that's not how it turned out. The decline of the Imperial Way Faction merely meant that the Control Faction was now in full control of the military. They were only a little bit less radical than the Imperial Way, and now that their right flank was secure, so to speak, they could turn their attention to the democrats.

The Okada government was also discredited, and they resigned a week later. Japanese Cabinets had been full of retired generals and admirals for decades, but now the Army and the Navy insisted that henceforth the Army and Navy ministers must be active duty officers. Remember that the Meiji Constitution requires that the Army and Navy ministers be members of those services. If an Army or Navy minister resigned and either service refused to replace them, then that would bring down the government. Now, under this new arrangement, these would not only have to be members of their respective services, but subject to the chain of command, which means that from now on, not only could an unhappy Army or Navy minister bring down a government, but the Army or Navy high commands could order a minister to resign and thus bring down the government at their whim.

This came in addition to the clear illustration the 2-26 Incident provided for what might happen to a civilian government that defied the military.

In a healthy democracy, the civilian leaders in Tokyo would be in control of the Army and the Navy, but Japan can no longer be considered a healthy democracy. Henceforth, and until 1945, the military would be running the Japanese government in all but name, and they would direct it toward the goals of the Showa Restoration: to bring the full blessings of the Emperor's rule, first, to all of East Asia, and second, well, everyone else. I suppose you could say that the extremists in the military lost the battle, but won the war.

To the Western world, the series of assassinations and the events of the 2-26 Incident were an obscure muddle. The Japanese were killing each other, apparently in a dispute over how properly to express one's devotion to the Emperor. It was easy to dismiss as a curiosity, comprehensible only to the Japanese. "How strange. How inscrutable. How Oriental."

But the political violence in Tokyo was about something much more immediate and concrete than the principles of Shinto, as the rest of the world would learn soon enough.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Pim and Richard for their kind donations, and thank you to Per for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Pim and Richard and Per 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 and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue this story. With Japan becoming ever more militant, and with the Chinese newly determined to resist them, it's only a matter of time and place before the war begins. The time is soon, and the place is called the Marco Polo Bridge. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Those two generals, Yang Hucheng and Zhang Xueliang, who had kidnapped Chiang Kai-shek and precipitated the Xi'an Incident, accompanied Chiang back to Nanjing after his release, where they were arrested and imprisoned.

After 13 years in prison, Yang Hucheng was executed in 1949, on Chiang's order. Zhang was taken to Taiwan, where he remained under house arrest for an additional 42 years. In 1964, he married his third wife and became a Methodist, taking the Christian name Peter. In 1991, when he turned 90, he was released from custody. In 1995, he and his wife emigrated to the United States, settling in Honolulu, Hawaii, where they lived out the rest of their lives. Zhang Xueliang passed away in October 2001, at the age of 100.

[music: Closing Theme]