

## Japanese Military

**Introduction** An organized political system was slow to emerge in Japan. China had seen four different political dynasties rise and fall before the end of the iron age and Korea enjoyed no less than three identifiable dynasties in the same era. When Pimiko, the first known monarch in Japan set up her kingdom called Yamatai in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, Japan was following well established patterns for leadership in East Asia. From the very beginning, however, Japan's governments were complicated. Power structures were murky and it is not clear whether or not even Pimiko reigned and ruled, or whether she was a spiritual figure only. In the Heian period (794-1185), emperors started out as strong rulers but later had that power diluted by the Fujiwara regents, who effectively ruled behind the scenes for 200 years. As Japan moved through the Kamakura period (1185-1333) there was a shōgun and a regent to the shogun (the Hōjō). Thus, by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there were four different political institutions existing simultaneously: an emperor, a Fujiwara regent, a shōgun and a regent to the shōgun. It was very difficult to know who was in charge! Though each succeeding political and military dynasty changed the system they inherited, this sort of opacity continued to exist into the contemporary era. Even after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the emperors didn't actually rule and were more of constitutional monarchs or figureheads. Thus, distinctive patterns set long ago have continued to find expression almost two millennia after first appearing.

### PREHISTORY-- The Neolithic age (10,000 BCE-2000 BCE)

**The Military.** Specialized military units didn't exist in the neolithic period. Small groups of hunter gatherers banded together for protection and safety. By definition, however, many members of hunter gatherer groups were proficient in the use of weapons that could take down large game. When threatened, the same skills and weapons used to hunt big game could be employed against enemies. These included spears and clubs, and mechanical devices such as bows and arrows and atlatl, which when used by an expert, could propel spears at significantly greater speeds and distances than by the simple throw of a spear. Small groups occasionally fought, likely over dwindling resources, abductions, and other perceived slights, but there is scant evidence of large scale warfare. Settlements and villages were extremely exposed if men were away hunting or fighting. Given the size of the population and the highly dispersed and isolated settlements, fighting was surely sporadic and also probably didn't result in the complete annihilation of an enemy. The taking of slaves and the abduction of women was more advantageous to the victor than the utter destruction of an enemy.

### IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

**Military.** The size, capability and shape of the Yamatai military is not known. Archaeologists believe that it must have been generally well organized but relatively small. Given the size and composition of the monarchy, it could likely field a thousand or so warriors in battle and sustain them there for a short period. This would have been a significantly larger force than any adversary. Soldiers would have used spears, swords, pikes, bows and arrows and other iron weapons. Most soldiers would have been peasants and hunter/gatherers who were called up for militia duty. Many would have been hunters with years of experience using weapons to bring down large game. The enemy of the Yamatai was other Japanese groups, most of whom could field only very modest forces, and the indigenous populations known as the Emishi.

### POST-CLASSICAL AGE (500-1500)

**The Military.** In the 7th and 8th centuries, the emperor established a military. Each province was to provide a certain number of soldiers for a standing army. The soldiers were to drill and be ready in case of emergency. After the period of unification was complete, however, there was little need for a large military, even one of dubious quality, because there were no known external threats after Tang China went into decline. The standing army therefore transitioned to a much smaller, more professional force positioned mostly in the rural areas and commanded by either a member of the Taira or Minamoto clan. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the Japanese military came to be used as a tool for the suppression of the political enemies of the Fujiwara or a retired emperor.

A loyal, standing army controlled by a ruling emperor had ceased to exist long before the Gempei War ended in 1185. Powerful cliques in Heian Japan (794-1185) each called upon their own military units to protect their own interests beginning in the 10th century. In general, two families—the Taira—who had lost in the Gempei War and the Minamoto—who had won, were the most prominent. But others existed, mostly as retainers to one of the two great families. After the Minamoto victory, Yoritomo sent out a number of his most trusted lieutenants to

act as *shūgo* and *jitō*. Some went back to their own home areas, others to completely new places. During the long period of the Hōjō regency (1203-1333), many of these families in the provinces emerged to exercise significant military influence in their own right. Under the titular command of the Hōjō regent, these armies controlled their own domains most of the time but could be called upon in time of national emergency. For example, the Hōjō called on the great families of Kyūshū and western Honshū during the first Mongol invasion in 1274 and 10,000 samurai responded. In the second in 1281, 40,000-50,000 samurai from all over Japan acted in defense of the realm. Japan was, for two decades, completely mobilized against foreign invasion. The military was rightly praised as the saviors of Japan and the myth of the samurai was born. It should be noted that these armies fought as small, independent units (and sometimes even as individual warriors) and not as one highly integrated, cohesive army. The structure of the military continued to devolve during the last years of the Hōjō regency and a sort of uneasy equilibrium came to exist. By the time of the Ashigaka shōgunate, no single family—not even the Ashikaga—could claim to be military hegemon of Japan without the consent and/or alliance of one or more of the other great families.

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

**The Military and Other Reforms.** The two main governing initiatives nationwide that Hideyoshi is known for are the Great Sword Hunt (*Taikō no katanagari*) and the Land Survey (*Taikō no kenji*), both of which had long lasting and very far reaching consequences. In 1588, Hideyoshi issued a decree that required all peasants to turn over their weapons to the authorities. This demilitarized society and had the effect of giving the government a monopoly on the tools with which to commit violence and engage in uprisings. At the same time, all warriors who still had a lord were to move to castle towns and out of the rural areas. Rōnin, or masterless samurai, were to quickly find a lord or become a farmer and turn in their sword. This had the effect of removing the samurai from part-time farming and removing farmers from part-time soldiering. Peasants were not allowed to leave their domains without permission and all samurai were to be under the direct supervision of their lords. It is not entirely clear if it was intended or not, but this edict effectively created the upper two classes of society, a condition which would be codified into the four classes of society under the Tokugawa (1600-1868). The Land Survey was just as important for the health and wellbeing of Hideyoshi's government. All peasants had to return to their ancestral lands, register and recommence farming. This allowed the government to know who was on the land, and later, how much they were producing. Given that no survey had been conducted in approximately 500 years, this was sorely needed. Peasants had long resisted thorough land surveys and hid or camouflaged their land under cultivation while they waited for a different lord to take power. Hideyoshi, however, was persistent and sent the hated surveyors around several years running, and at unpredictable times. In this way, his government was able to determine with some level of accuracy who lived in Japan and how much to tax them.

## 19TH CENTURY

**The Military.** In the years immediately following the Restoration, the oligarchs disbanded the old samurai system where warriors answered to their lords and not the central government. In this way, the samurai very quickly lost their status in society and their jobs as well. Field Marshall Yamagata Aritomo (1838-1922) then was tapped to create a conscript army, one which was drawn from all across Japan and which used modern training and modern weapons. It was believed that some of the samurai would join the ranks. However, they were largely found to be unsuited and the ranks were filled mostly by young men from the rural areas of Japan. Nonetheless, many of the martial ideals embodied in the samurai were transferred to the new army. This army came to be led by an excellent officer corps and a series of outstanding generals and admirals. In the late 19th century, it proved to be very capable and dealt first with the remnant of the samurai during the Seinan War/Rebellion (1877) and then the Chinese in several small skirmishes and finally the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).

The Meiji Constitution placed the military outside of civilian control. It is not clear that the authors of the Constitution intended to give it this much autonomy, but by making it accountable to the emperor only, only the emperor could reign it in. Neither the Diet nor the Prime Minister could get the military to do what the civilian leadership wanted unless the military wanted to do it. The Constitution also required the military to name a general officer (Admiral or General) to become Minister of War. The general staff soon discovered that if they didn't name a man to the position, it was extremely difficult for a cabinet to be formed. By the turn of the 20th century, the military discovered that it had a great deal more power than was intended by the framers. It effectively had the power to veto the formation of a cabinet. It should be noted that they didn't exercise this prerogative for many years until party politicians began to try to form cabinets. In spite of its many weaknesses, the system worked fairly well until the Meiji oligarchs began to retire from public life.

## EARLY 20th CENTURY (1900-1949)

**The Military.** The Japanese army and navy were considered to be the spiritual inheritors of the samurai traditions. They understood themselves to be the protectors of all that was right, true and patriotic in the country. They did not answer to the civilian leadership and were accountable only to the Emperor. They came to consider it their highest calling to protect the person and prerogatives of the Emperor, who was a living embodiment of the spirit of Japan and a god himself. They took their duties very seriously and seldom compromised with the politicians whom they despised and whom they thought was leading Japan astray in the 1920s and early 1930s. When the civilian leadership of Japan called upon the Japanese army to pull back from various areas of Manchuria in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the military responded that they operated independently. They demanded that the Diet continue to appropriate additional funds for the military on the mainland, which the legislature sometimes did. When they did not, the military often manufactured a crisis in Manchuria and demanded funding because of a new threat. In short, the Japanese army manipulated the civilian leadership. When that didn't work, they brought down a cabinet, creating the very instability they said they despised. In Manchuria, the military operated as a semi-independent arm of the government. And as long as they stayed in Manchuria where they faced an unorganized and poorly funded foe, they could maintain the fiction of independence of command. However, when they blundered into North China proper and encountered a determined, Nationalist army and a Chinese people who understood themselves to be fighting for their very existence, the military and the rest of Japan found themselves in a war that they could not win, but a war that they also could not end. It is the very definition of "mission creep."

The Japanese military was extraordinarily well trained, well equipped and highly motivated. They had some of the best weapons available for the era. In particular, the Japanese navy sailed aboard some of the finest, most capable vessels ever to go to sea. But the Japanese military was thin. When four aircraft carriers were sunk in the Battle of Midway in June of 1942, the Japanese capacity to project power was severely diminished and they were unable to build more. They had great airmen and advanced aircraft, but there were too few of them to fight the Chinese and later to fight the U.S. and other enemies at the same time. As an island nation, they also had a large merchant marine, but when submarine warfare began to take its toll, Japan could not sufficiently supply its military in the field. Its industrial capacity was insufficient and its population too small.

## LATE 20th CENTURY (1950-1999)

**The Military.** The 1947 Constitution is distinguished by its so-called "Peace Clause," which is Article 9. This article goes so far as to "forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation." However, by 1954, the Japanese government decided that it, in fact, needed a small military and came to call it the Japan Self Defense Forces (JSDF). This force is divided into the Ground Self-Defense Forces (Army), the Maritime Self-Defense Forces (Navy) and the Air Self-Defense Forces (Air Force). In its early form, the JSDF was quite small, seriously underfunded and not very capable. Most of the weapons they had at their disposal were US surplus items from the Korean War and even WWII. More recently, the JSDF has enjoyed a very large budget, one of the largest in the world, and now has an extremely capable but still small force. Though they do not yet have a large blue-water navy, recent Chinese actions have caused the Japanese to begin the process of creating a navy capable of projecting power abroad. Unlike the situation before the Pacific War, the current Japanese military is answerable to the civilian leadership. With the exception of a few deployments, most of which were UN peacekeeping missions, Japan has managed to avoid using its military abroad since the end of the Pacific War.

Over the course of the last two decades, calls in Japan have grown louder for the abandonment or modification of Article 9, and policy makers appear to be more receptive than in the past. There is a growing perception in Japan that the US government might not be as reliable a military partner as had been the case. In addition, Japan increasingly wants to set its own foreign policy agenda and to feel free to protect its own international interests.

## Readings

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