

Imperialist Japan

By the mid-1890s the Meiji leaders had succeeded in convincing the Western powers to renegotiate the unequal treaties, returning full diplomatic equality to Japan. Extraterritoriality ended in 1899, and treaty tariffs, in 1910. The Meiji leaders sought to buttress their new international position by building a colonial empire. Their motives were mixed: First, in the competitive climate of global imperialism, they wanted to improve Japan's national security by building a defensive buffer of colonial territories. In addition, only "civilized" countries, such as Britain and France, possessed colonial empires, so the acquisition of colonies was a marker of international prestige. Finally, having built up their own national wealth and strength, many Japanese felt that they had a mission to spread modernization among their Asian neighbors.

Sino-Japanese war

Initially, the Meiji government was most concerned about Korea. Korea had for centuries been a tributary of China. However, in 1876 Japan had used gunboat tactics to force Korea to open trade with Japan, a move that challenged China's dominance in Korea. The Meiji leaders feared that a weak and backward Korea, under the influence of a weak and backward China, would be easy prey for a predatory Western power, probably Russia, thus putting Japan itself at risk. In 1894 both China and Japan sent troops to Korea to deal with a peasant rebellion in the south. Once it had been suppressed, the Japanese decided to resolve the ongoing tension with China by going to war. The newly modernized Japanese army and navy won a quick victory over the larger but less prepared Chinese forces. The First Sino-Japanese War was over in just nine months.

Japan's victory surprised the Western powers, which had expected China to defeat its much smaller neighbor. Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed in April 1895, China ceded Taiwan and the P'enghu Islands to Japan, gave Japan a huge monetary indemnity, and allowed Japan to trade in China under the same unequal treaty privileges that the Western powers enjoyed in China. The Chinese also ceded to Japan the Liaodong Peninsula in southern Manchuria (as the northeastern region of China was then called), but the Russians, backed by Germany and France, forced Japan to accept additional indemnity money instead.

In the wake of the war, popular resentment against Russia ran high. It grew more intense when the Russians tried to expand their own influence in Korea and in Manchuria. In 1898, for example, Russia secured a lease of the very territory it had prevented the Japanese from acquiring—the Liaodong Peninsula with its important ice-free naval base of Port Arthur (now part of the municipality of Dalian)—and began building a railroad line in southern Manchuria. Japanese leaders saw this as a direct threat to Japan's own national security. Russia took advantage of the Boxer Uprising of 1900, a popular peasant revolt against foreigners in northeastern China, to send an occupation force into Manchuria and begin a military build-up on the Chinese-Korean border.

Russo-Japanese War

When diplomatic negotiations failed to dislodge the Russians, the Japanese decided to go to war. In 1904 the Japanese navy attacked the Russian fleet at Port Arthur. The Russo-Japanese War that followed was more daunting to the Japanese leaders than the First Sino-Japanese War had been. While Japanese armies won a series of early battles, the land war bogged down by early 1905. Only the complete annihilation of a vast Russian fleet at the May 1905 Battle of Tsushima finally brought the Russians to the negotiating table. The Treaty of Portsmouth, mediated with the help of U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt, gave Japan control over the Liaodong Peninsula, the railroad line in southern Manchuria, and the southern half of the island of Sakhalin (later known as Karafuto). The Russians also recognized Japan's paramount interests in Korea.

Consequences

Shortly after the end of the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese established a protectorate over Korea. The Korean court and the traditional Korean elite resisted the Japanese political intrusion. When the Japanese ousted the Korean king from the throne in 1907, anti-Japanese guerrilla activities spread quickly throughout the Korea Peninsula. In 1910, after three years of often brutal fighting, the Japanese finally annexed Korea to Japan under the name Chosen. The Japanese colonial government adopted a harshly repressive policy toward the Korean population, but it also embarked on a program of introducing modern institutions and developing the agricultural economy.

With the acquisition of Korea, the Meiji leaders rounded out a defensive perimeter of colonial possessions stretching from Taiwan in the south, through Korea in the west, to Karafuto in the north. They had also established Japan as one of the world's great powers, side by side with the United States and the major European countries. The Western powers were quick to accept the Japanese colonial sphere in East Asia, and they regarded Japan's military and naval prowess with admiration as well as concern. By the time of his death in 1912, the Meiji emperor, whose reign had begun when the humiliation of Japan's unequal diplomatic status was still fresh, stood among the ranks of the world's leading monarchs.