

第 32 回国際軍事史学会大会発表論文

Differing Visions of the Development of Japan as a National Defense State and Ideological Factionalism in the Japanese Army during the 1930s

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【要約】「1930年代の陸軍の諸派閥が提唱した将来国家像」

「国家、ナショナリズムと軍隊」をテーマとする本年度の国際軍事史学会において、昭和初期の日本陸軍でどのような将来国家像が模索および追求されたのかを検討することが本報告の目的であった。当時の陸軍では、大きく分けて「幕僚エリート」「桜会」「隊付将校」「青年将校」「皇道派」の各グループが存在し、それぞれが理想とする国家像を迫り始めた。本報告において、それぞれのグループの構成、特徴、目標および政策案を分析した後、それぞれのその後の活動の概要を説明した。

なお、報告は英語で行った。

I. Introduction

In his Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors which was issued in 1885, the Meiji Emperor called on his soldiers and sailors to be “neither led astray by current opinions, nor meddle in politics, but with single heart to fulfill your essential duty.” In exchange for having their independence on military command matters recognized, the military had agreed to essentially stay out of politics. Through the end of the Russo-Japanese War, the Army and Navy generally observed this arrangement.

In the 1920s, however, junior and field officers of the Army became increasingly involved in politics, i.e. actions which influenced the political future of the nation. In the process, a number of factions developed within the Army, each with its own ideas of how to reform the nation.

In the following, the objectives of the key factions within the Army shall be investigated, followed by an overview of how they tried to put their thoughts into action.

II. The Factions

A. The Elite Staff Officers (the Control Faction, or *Tosei-ha*)

The first and most clearly identifiable group was the elite staff officers of the Army. They were field grade officers who eventually staffed the key positions in the Army Ministry and General Staff. This faction is usually called the Control Faction.

The leaders of this group were Tetsuzan Nagata, Toshishiro Obata and Yasuji Okamura. They were all in the 16th Graduating Class (1904) of the Military Academy. The three began their “movement” following a famous meeting at Baden-Baden in October 1921. After returning to Japan, the three began meeting with other officers, and eventually created the *Futaba-kai* (Two-Leaf Society), which discussed means by which the Army and Japan could be reformed.

In the late 1920s, a similar association of somewhat younger staff officers would be formed, which called themselves the *Mokuyo-kai*, or Thursday Society, because they met on Thursdays. These officers had similar aims as those of the *Futaba-kai*, and the two merged in 1929, forming the *Isseki-kai* (One Evening Society).

The members of the *Isseki-kai* were primarily motivated by the lessons of World War One. In other words, they believed that Japan’s next war would necessarily be a total war, and felt that Japan must develop into a highly mobilized National Defense State in order to prevail. This required reforms in the Army, as well as in Japan’s industry and society. Specifically, the *Isseki-kai* eventually settled on the following aims:

- (1) A thorough cleaning out of personnel practices, and the forceful realization of policy. By the former, they meant the elimination of the so-called Choshu Faction, which played a major role in the creation of the Army in the 1860s and still had a grip on key posts within the Army. The “forceful realization of policy” meant the enacting of policies aimed at turning Japan into a highly mobilized defense state.
- (2) The resolution of the so-called “Manchuria – Mongolia Problem.” This called for the securing or legalizing of the interests and rights which Japan had acquired, or felt it had acquired, in the Manchuria region as a result of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. This issue will not be discussed in great detail here, but this was an extremely important issue in Japanese defense and foreign policy into the 1930s. It is interesting to

note that the Manchuria – Mongolia Problem came to the forefront of the staff officers' concerns only after the June 1928 assassination of Chang Tso-lin, which was perpetrated by one of their members, Col. Daisaku Komoto. Until then, the Manchuria – Mongolia Problem had naturally been discussed, but with far less enthusiasm than was seen after the Chang Tso-lin assassination.

- (3) The appointment of Sadao Araki, Jinzaburo Mazaki and Senjuro Hayashi to key positions in the Army, and the supporting of these leaders in the pursuit of the *Isseki-kais* objectives. These general officers were not members of the Choshu Faction, and it was believed that Araki in particular had the understanding and drive necessary to attain those objectives.

A key characteristic of the elite staff officer faction was their insistence on preserving the organization of the Army and observing laws. Thus, all reforms were to be led by the organization, i.e. the Army, and the organization itself would be reformed if necessary. Furthermore, all of their reforms were to be carried out by legal, non-violent means. Thus, for example, coup d'états were not part of their plan.

B. The Cherry Blossom Society (*Sakura-kai*)

The next major group was the Cherry Blossom Society (*Sakura-kai*). Its leader was Lt. Col. Kingoro Hashimoto, and it was formed around the summer of 1930. In many ways, this group was an offshoot of the elite staff officer group, and shared the same aims as the staff officers, but encompassed them in a broader objective named "State Reform" (*Kokka Kaizo*).

The big difference from the staff officers' movement was that the Cherry Blossom Society stated in their Society Platform that they would not refrain from violent or illegal means, including the use of armed force, in order to achieve their aims. Thus, for example, resort to a coup d'état was entirely conceivable to this group.

C. The Young Officers' Movement (*Seinen Shoko Undo*)

The third major faction was the so-called Young Officers' Movement. The

“Young Officers” were primarily junior grade officers, i.e. lieutenants and captains. In addition, most would not advance to the Army War College, and most were destined to spend their careers as line officers of combat units.

A major problem in the Army was the feelings of resentment felt by these career line officers toward the War College graduates, i.e. the staff officers. These staff officers were destined to become the elite of the Army, as mentioned above. They were required to serve only two years as a line officer, after which they served solely in staff positions and were promoted more quickly, and were qualified for possible promotion, eventually, to general officer rank.

The resentment felt by the non-War College graduates, i.e. the non-elite line officers towards the elite staff officers cannot be understated, and is a key to understanding the Japanese Army in the 1930s. In fact, some members of the Young Officers’ movement would shun what they felt was excessive elitism among the staff officers, and would decline appointments to the Army War College with a certain degree of pride, because they did not wish to be seen as members of the staff officer elite.

Like the other groups, the Young Officers wanted to renew and reform Japan. However, they differed from the staff officers in the means of such renewal. The Young Officers rejected the staff officers’ organization-centered approach and emphasis on political, economic and social reform, which they felt were foreign concepts, anyway. Rather, the Young Officers felt that the most important thing was to strengthen the perception or realization of kinship with the Emperor, among soldiers as well as civilians, and to strengthen one’s faith in the Emperor.

On a more practical level, the Young Officers felt that rural reform was necessary. Many of the Army’s conscripts came from impoverished rural areas. Because of their long assignments in combat and other line units, the Young Officers bonded strongly with their enlisted men and non-commissioned officers, sympathized deeply with the plight of the impoverished rural areas, and came to feel it was their duty to save their men from such a situation. Thus, the Young Officers strongly advocated policies aimed at revitalizing the rural areas and agriculture.

Finally, the Young Officers also believed that non-legal means of change were permissible, if the end justified the means.

D. The Imperial Way Faction (*Kodo-ha*)

Finally, there was the Imperial Way Faction. This was led by General Araki,

who was a major advocate of observing and enhancing the “Imperial Way,” and General Mazaki. Its members were officers, many of whom had been part of the elite staff officer group but then for various reasons chose to follow Araki and Mazaki instead. Araki popularized the use of the terms *Kogun*, or “Emperor’s Armed Forces”, instead of National Armed Forces, which had been used before. This faction advocated the placing of greater emphasis on such concepts as the National Polity or Essence (*Kokutai*), and the importance of the Emperor and his rule. Frankly speaking, these concepts are somewhat vague, but it is clear that the emphasis was on spiritual and emotional matters more than the type of cold, clear-cut industrial, economic, organizational and social reforms that were advocated by Nagata and his followers.

III. The Efforts to Reform the Army and Nation

By the summer of 1931, the *Isseki-kai* had managed to get its members appointed to nearly all of the key posts (for staff officers) in both the Army Ministry and the General Staff.

At around the same time, the Cherry Blossom Society attempted two coup d’etats in 1931. One was the “March Incident”, and the other was the “October Incident”. Both failed, due in no small part to incompetence on the part of the perpetrators. Reports about both incidents were suppressed, and those involved were not punished. While both efforts failed, they led to a perception among those factions willing to resort to violent means that the leaders of the Army would close their eyes to such illegal actions and efforts.

In the meantime, General Araki was appointed to Army Minister in December 1931. At this time, Araki was still the hope of both the Staff Officers and the Young Officers. His appointment as Army Minister therefore seemed to bode well for all of the factions in the Army.

Unfortunately, Araki did not fulfill these expectations. In Cabinet meetings, Araki failed to push the Army’s demands through, and repeatedly gave in to the Finance Minister and Navy, among others. Some say he was incompetent, others say that he tended to compromise too much. In any event, all of the factions realized that Araki could not be relied upon, and started to seek other ways to realize their goals.

Araki had also ordered many changes of personnel of key positions in the Army Ministry and General Staff. As a result, the last vestiges of the Choshu faction were

finally swept out, and followers of Araki were appointed to these positions instead. The Choshu faction was thus eliminated, but Araki's blatant favoritism further lowered his standing among the staff officers.

In November 1933, an important meeting took place between representatives of the staff officers and the Young Officers. The staff officers were concerned by the threat that the Young Officers' Movement posed to the unity and discipline of the Army, and made clear that the Young Officers' concerns had to be channeled upwards through the Army's organization. However, the Young Officers felt that relying on the Army as an organization to carry out their reforms was not realistic.

In January 1934, Araki finally stepped down as Army Minister. Later that year, Nagata was appointed chief of the Military Affairs Bureau. As that bureau was in charge of handling the political affairs of the Army, his position was very powerful, and Nagata began to implement his plans for reforming the Army and Japan. So, by mid-1934, it seemed that the program of the staff officers was back on track.

Further incidents, however, then took place. The most important was the sudden firing of Mazaki in July 1935 from the position of Inspector General of Education, to which he had been appointed. Among others, a rumor was circulated that Nagata had conspired to oust Mazaki as a means of weakening the Imperial Way Faction, and documents were produced which seemed to prove Nagata's complicity. Lieutenant Colonel Saburo Aizawa of the Imperial Way Faction retaliated by assassinating Nagata in broad daylight, in Nagata's office, in August 1935.

The final and greatest incident resulting from the factional strife within the Army was the infamous 2.26 Incident of 1936, in which 1,400 officers and men of the 1st Division attempted a coup d'etat in Tokyo, and assassinated former Prime Minister Makoto Saito and a number of other government and Army leaders. Mazaki and other Imperial Way officers tried to use this coup by the Young Officers for their own purposes, but were thwarted when the Emperor himself demanded that the rebellion be crushed.

IV. The Aftermath of the 2.26 Incident

The 2.26 Incident finally shocked the Army into dealing with its factional strife once and for all. Leaders of the Cherry Blossom Society, Imperial Way Faction and the Young Officers' Movement were forced into retirement or discharged. As a result,

the factions were eliminated for all practical purposes.

On the other hand, Kanji Ishiwara (formerly of the *Isseki-kai*) had been emerging as a leader in the Army after his appointment in August 1935 as Chief of the Operations Section of the General Staff. In this position, Ishiwara, a strong proponent of reforming Japan into a highly mobilized state, drafted and began to implement various plans, the objective of which was to develop Japan's heavy industry and other aspects of the economy and society and to turn Japan into a National Defense State.

Ishiwara's efforts got off to a fair start through late 1936 and early 1937, and their prospects appeared to be boosted with his promotion to Chief of the Operations Division in March 1937, but were derailed by the outbreak of war in China in July 1937. Ishiwara opposed the escalation of the fighting around the Peking area, but lost out and was transferred out of the General Staff. The demands of fighting an actual war quickly made it impossible to carry out Ishiwara's plans, and his efforts to develop Japan's capacity to fight a total war soon faded away.

It is difficult to say how successful Ishiwara's efforts to develop Japan's capability to fight a total war would have been if Japan had not become embroiled in the China War in 1937. Japan's industrial and military capability would undoubtedly have been strengthened over the next several years, but how substantial a difference any such improvements would have made in a total war fought against, for example, the Soviet Union or the United States in the late 1940s or beyond is another issue altogether and outside the scope of this paper.

V. Conclusion

Such was the factional strife which took place in the Japanese Army during the late 1920s and early 1930s. As noted above, each of the factions emerged in response to changes in Japan's domestic and international environment. Each felt that Japan in general, and the Army in particular, had to reform in order to cope with the challenges posed by such changes, which included the realities of total war, economic depressions, and the unreliability (or the perception thereof) of parliamentary democracy in dealing with the major social problems of the times. Each faction developed its own program for reforming the Army and Japan, but sectionalism then took over, and the factions ended up competing with each other. It is ironic that the various factions in the Army in the 1920s and 1930s, while each seeking to reform Japan for what they

felt was the good, may have only hindered and obstructed each other, as none of their aims were ultimately realized.

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