

5. DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

Struggle for survival in the presence of economic blocs

In Section 2 of this chapter, I introduced background information on the Manchurian Incident and outlined its causes. Here I shall describe the international environment surrounding Japan at the time the incident broke out, referring to the memoirs of three Japanese statesmen.

Resource-poor Japan discovered that becoming a trading nation was the key to its survival. This remains as true now as it was when the Manchurian Incident occurred. However, in 1932 the world, especially the nations of Europe, was undergoing a shift from free trade to a closed economy. The UK saw the need to weather both the Great Depression that began in 1929 and a persistent recession, and to protect existing interests against economic competition from emerging capitalist nations like Germany and Japan. In 1932 the British hosted the Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa, at which they established preferential tariffs between the UK and its possessions. Subsequently, wealthy nations, such as the US (with its Pan-American bloc), and the French bloc established economic blocs designed to take exclusive control of the markets of their colonies.

The following is an excerpt from *Political Upheavals of the Shōwa Era* by Shigemitsu Mamoru, minister to China at the time of the Manchurian Incident.

At that time, the Japanese were acutely anxious about their own future and the future of their country. Japan is a small island nation with very little arable land and negligible mineral resources. Her population, more than 30 million during the 1st Sino-Japanese War, doubled over the next 30 years, increasing at a rate of one million *per annum*. Finding a way to support this burgeoning population was a task that shook the very foundation of Japanese national policy. Since overseas emigration was not possible, Japan developed Korea and Taiwan to the utmost extent possible. Furthermore, she was making progress toward solving this problem through her economic activity in Manchuria. Of course, overseas trade was also essential, but trade requires partners, and obstacles sometimes present themselves. The Manchurian problem became more critical to the lives of the Japanese, day by day. We must be mindful that the objective of their hard work was survival, not a higher standard of living.

The League of Nations repudiated war, and sought to reduce the armaments of all nations. However, when it came to economic problems, problems on whose solution providing food, a basic requirement for the support of human life, depended, the League offered only empty words about free trade. Meanwhile, the world, or more accurately, the European nations, had in fact reverted to a closed economy.

(...)

Thus, in the era of extreme nationalism that followed the First World War, the policies of the Powers shifted, straying far from the principles of free trade. The fundamentals of economic freedom, which the League of Nations had embraced, were completely forgotten. Japan could no longer depend on the development of

overseas trade through her own hard work to feed her growing population, and was eventually compelled to lower her standard of living.

In connection with this problem, Japan had a particularly close relationship with China. The anti-Japanese movement severely damaged Japan's trade with China. ... Japan's interests, both in China proper and in Manchuria, were destined to be trampled by Zhang Xueliang. Nor was it easy for Japan to defend those interests in the midst of a tempest of anti-Japanese sentiment. Economic banishment from China proper *and* Manchuria would place the very livelihoods of the Japanese people in jeopardy.¹

The second statesman, politician Konoe Fumimaro, who later served as prime minister, described the causes of the Manchurian Incident in his memoirs:

The circumstances of the Manchurian Incident notwithstanding, I am convinced that the Powers were already making preparations to isolate Japan by forming an economic blockade against her. Blocs formed by the British Empire, the United States, the Soviet Union, and others, were on the verge of capturing the lion's share of the world's purchasing power, thus putting Japan in an unenviable position. In terms of population, these three blocs (the British Empire's 450 million, the United States' 120 million, and the Soviet Union's 160 million) account for more than 700 million souls, or one-third of the world's total population. Moreover, since they include nations with the most developed cultures, their purchasing power may exceed one-third, and most likely, rise to more than half or even two-thirds. This entire amount was to be put out of Japan's reach, whether or not the Manchurian Incident occurred, and whether or not Japan withdrew from the League of Nations.

(...)

Just as the dark clouds of the Powers' economic blocs were about to blanket Japan, the Manchurian Incident took place, like a bolt of lightning piercing those clouds. Even if the incident had not transpired when and in the way it did, sooner or later some attempt would have been made to dispel the dark clouds and clear the way for Japan's destiny. The 2nd Sino-Japanese War, which came on the heels of the Manchurian Incident and ultimately evolved into the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, was following the same fateful trajectory.²

Our third statesman, Tōgo Shigenori, was appointed foreign minister at the commencement of the Greater East Asian War. At the end of the conflict, he wrote about the economic blocs that were closing in on Japan.

¹ Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Shōwa no dōran, jōkan* (Political upheavals of the Shōwa era, vol. 1) (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1952); also, in slightly different form, in Shigemitsu, *Japan and Her Destiny: My Struggle for Peace*, tr. Oswald White (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958).

² Yabe Teiji, "Konoe Fumimaro" in *Sandai saishō retsuden: jōkan* (Biographies of three prime ministers, vol. 1) (Tokyo: Jiji Tsūshinsha, 1958).

Some believe, and some argue, that ever since the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, and especially the Manchurian Incident, Japan has been charging resolutely along a path of militaristic aggression. However, movements within Japan are not as simple as they seem. ... Some assert that unlike Japan, Britain and the United States have always been the epitome of justice, and have always striven to avoid war, but this too is an inaccurate perception. In 1932, while Japan was attempting to avoid war, the British held a conference in Ottawa.³ At that gathering it was agreed that an attempt would be made to suppress imports by establishing a tariff system that would favor trade within the empire, but impose high tariffs on nations outside it, Japan in particular. This could be construed as a defensive measure adopted in the wake of the worldwide economic depression that began in 1929, and as a means of competing with inexpensive Japanese products. However, many nations outside the empire followed suit. Japan, which relied on imports for the great majority of industrial raw materials, and exported more than 30 percent of her production, was deeply affected. Unemployment escalated, agricultural-product prices plummeted, and domestic unrest rose exponentially. Painfully aware of the need to secure raw materials and overseas markets, the Japanese turned their attention to Manchuria. From the Japanese perspective, the Ottawa Agreements and similar tariff barriers were at the root of the Manchurian Incident and other events.⁴

All three of these men were convinced that the powers' economic blocs triggered the Manchurian Incident. After World War I the powers were using exclusive economic alliances to shut out "have-not" nations, all the while trumpeting pacifism and international cooperation. The US, which had relentlessly nagged Japan to open its doors to China, now refused to open its continental borders to Japan. Under such international pressure, "have-not" Japan had no choice but to extricate itself from this paradoxical international framework and find a way to survive. Such was the international stage on which the Manchurian Incident unfolded.

Japan cornered by "circumstances"

At the IMTFE, the prosecution depicted the Manchurian Incident as the first stage of a war of aggression, a conspiracy perpetrated by Japan's military leaders. This portrayal contributed mightily to the accusation's becoming conventional wisdom in Japan. However, Justice Radhabinod Pal of India, who submitted a judgement stating that "each and every one of the accused must be found not guilty of each and every one of the charges in the indictment and should be acquitted of all those charges."⁵

Justice Pal wrote that during Japan-US negotiations held in 1941, right before the outbreak of war, "an action of legitimate self-defense was understood by the United States of America to mean 'their own decision for themselves *whether* and *when* and *where* their interests were attacked or their security, threatened.' This self-defense was understood to extend to the placing of armed

³ The British Empire Economic Conference, often referred to as the Ottawa Conference.

⁴ Tōgo Shigenori, *Jidai no ichimen* (Aspect of an era) (Tokyo: Kaizōsha, 1952).

⁵ "Dissentient Judgment of Justice Pal," International Military Tribunal for the Far East (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, Inc., 1999), 697; https://www.sdh-fact.com/CL02_1/65_S4.pdf.

forces in any strategic military position keeping in view ‘the lightning speed of modern warfare.’”⁶ He goes on to explain how the Manchurian Incident does not stray from that definition of legitimate self-defense.

The action of Japan in Manchuria would NOT, it is certain, BE APPLAUDED BY THE WORLD. At the same time it would be difficult to condemn the same as CRIMINAL. If a territorial sovereign is required to pay the same price for external defense of territorial integrity, whether such defense is demanded of an eastern or western nation, I would not, in the facts and circumstances then prevailing in Manchuria, and in view of the international law then existing, condemn the action of Japan AS CRIMINAL.⁷

Then Justice Pal describes the international environment surrounding Japan at the time, and concludes that the Manchurian Incident was not a conspiracy, but the consequence of that environment.

The signature of the Versailles Treaty on the 28th June, 1919, was looked upon by the other Allied Powers as crowning Japan's efforts at prosperity. Yet, as has been shown by the Surveyor of International Affairs, this proud moment proved to be, not the dawn of a golden age in which the Japanese people would be allowed to enjoy at ease the fruits of so laborious a national effort but rather a culminating point from which Japan was to descend into a valley of tribulation. The years that intervened between 1919 and 1926 brought a dramatic reversal in Japan's international position. The Soviet Government, assisted by American diplomacy, succeeded in salving for the U.S.S.R. the heritage of the former Russian Empire as a Far Eastern and Pacific Power. ... In the Washington Conference, the United States co-operated with the British Empire to restore, politely but insistently, the balance of power in the Pacific and the Far East. The earthquake followed the slump as a crowning economic blow. The United States Restriction of IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1924 followed the Washington Conference as an overt political humiliation. Last of all, in the year 1926 itself, came the rise of the Kuomintang in China with Russian Communist assistance. During the first stage in this movement when the Kuomintang was making itself master of the Yangtse Basin, the brunt was borne by Great Britain; and during 1926, as well as 1925, Japan saw her trade with China increase owing to British unpopularity. Yet, on a long view, these developments in China were more ominous for Japan than they were for Great Britain. Even if all British interests in China had perished, Great Britain herself would still have survived as one of the great commercial and political Powers of the world; but Japan — first bound to the Far Eastern mainland by an unalterable accident of geography, as Britain was bound to the continent of Europe — could scarcely hope to maintain her hard-won rank of a Great Power if the U.S.S.R. and a militantly Nationalist China, reunited by Russian aid, were to league themselves together against her. Poor as Japan was in minerals, her economic interests in Manchuria were not superfluities but vital necessities of her national life.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

(...)

Thus the international position of Japan — with Nationalist China, Soviet Russia, and the race-conscious English-speaking peoples of the Pacific closing in upon her — had suddenly become precarious again.

(...)

Circumstances were moulding the foreign relations of Japan. Whether the foreign policy that was developing were justifiable or not, I cannot say on this evidence that it was the result of any over-all conspiracy as alleged in the indictment or that it, in any way, indicated the existence of any such conspiracy. In my opinion the prosecution allegation in this respect is a fantastic one.

Manchuria itself was a pressing problem for Japan at that time and the evidence, in my opinion, does not lead us to any design against any country beyond Manchuria.⁸

Politicians' inexcusable ignorance about Manchurian situation

One often hears that the Japanese military, acting independently, caused the Manchurian Incident. One also hears that the incident shows how powerless politics was in the face of those independent actions and the might of weapons. However, such a view risks unfairly placing all the blame on the military, and does not reveal the whole truth. Konoe Fumimaro, who in some ways had keen discernment about the trends of the times, and excellent insight, wrote the following in his aforementioned memoirs.

At the time many intellectuals thought that the military had caused the Manchurian Incident, and that the Japanese people considered it an annoyance. Foreigners, especially Britons and Americans, embraced that view, and ever since then have come to believe that Japan's diplomacy was under the thumb of the military. Certainly, on the surface it appears that the military was the driving force behind Japanese diplomacy after the Manchurian Incident. It is true that there are many aspects of the military actions that warrant criticism. I can understand why the Americans thought that Japan's diplomacy could resume its proper course if the military's high-handedness were curbed. I do not fault them for hoping that a liberal government would rise. However, I considered this way of thinking superficial and shallow, and dismissive of national destiny, which lies at the root of it all.

(...)

I told Saionji⁹ that “the direction Japan is taking now is being propelled by the world situation. Military uprising or no, Manchurian Incident or no, whatever happens is the destiny of the people. As long as politicians fail to understand the people, ... the military will become the driving force, and our nation will continue to move forward

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249-51.

⁹ Saionji Kinmochi, prime minister of Japan (1906-08, 1911-12)

in this direction. ... To reclaim possession of politics from the military, politicians must first perceive Japan's destiny, and stave off that destiny by stealing the march on the military and implementing needed reforms."¹⁰

Konoe reports that Saionji laughed and commented, "There you go again with your talk about stealing the march!"

Konoe had made similar remarks earlier, specifically in 1936. I will cite from them to shed light on his opinions.

I hear an inordinate amount of talk about national policy. Politicians should determine national policy, and the military should base its defense plans on that policy. However, until now politicians have been overly immersed in party politics, and have not had the time to consider broader national policy. ... Diplomacy has suffered the same fate. It seems that there are quite a few people in the Foreign Ministry who are fluent in a foreign language and skilled in diplomatic matters. But how many of them possess strategic insight? Since the end of the Great War, Japan's diplomacy has largely been a matter of cooperation. Cooperation is, of course, all well and good. But this cooperation was not based on any policy or plan. We simply accepted and followed what the Powers said, assuming that that was the way of the world and inevitable. It is not surprising that the military and the public were resentful. ... I believe that the military is so powerful now because it has a clear objective and a plan for Japan. ... Today we hear indignant voices claiming that political parties, both in Japan and abroad, are being led astray by the military. But when those who have a plan meet those without one, the former will surely prevail. Politicians should cease being indignant and spend more time educating themselves.¹¹

When politicians become absorbed in trivial matters, are consumed by political strife, fail to show concern about their country's future, and fail to create fundamental national policies, it is right and proper for the military, responsible for national defense, to act independently. Konoe was scolding politicians for behaving like spectators. Along these same lines, how much of the blame for the incident can we place on the shoulders of Shidehara Kijūrō, who was foreign minister at the time?

In his memoirs Hayashi Kyūjirō, consul-general at Fengtian between 1928 and 1932, often states that Shidehara lacked an assertive policy toward Manchuria. In 1929 Hayashi sensed a pressing need to unify official Japanese organizations in Manchuria, with a view to reconciling the China policies of the military and the Foreign Ministry. He prepared a proposal whose objectives were (1) full control of the military, which was insisting on independent command authority, and (2) the establishment and development of Japanese diplomacy toward China. Although Foreign Minister Shidehara was not opposed to the proposal, neither did he have anything positive to say

¹⁰ Yabe, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

about it. Hayashi's efforts were met with silence from the Foreign Ministry. His comment at the time was, "Foreign Minister Shidehara is a sensible man, but he is not resourceful."¹²

On July 1, 1931, not long before the Manchurian Incident, Hayashi met with Shidehara and explained that a collision between Japan and China was inevitable (the Wanbaoshan Incident¹³ had already occurred). Hayashi emphasized, as he had in his proposal, that since any reckless act was certain to be met with international opposition, Japan's first priority was to gain control over the Japanese public and private sectors in Manchuria. "Precisely for that reason, I had previously urged the foreign minister to give immediate attention to the unification of our institutions in Manchuria: 'I hope Your Excellency will take decisive action for the sake of our nation's long-term future.' I pleaded with the Foreign Minister for about an hour, but he only expatiated about the railway negotiations and, regrettably, said nothing about the essential points that I had raised."

After returning to Manchuria at the end of July, Hayashi paid a visit to Uchida Kōsai, who had just been appointed president of the South Manchuria Railway, in Dalian. He told Uchida about the military's insistence on a strong stance, and said that if that was not restrained immediately, there was a real risk of serious consequences.

I told Count Uchida, "The current government is indecisive and unreliable. Your Excellency is a veteran of the halls of Kasumigaseki, and a senior statesman who enjoys the same courtesies at Court as does a former official. I beg you to return to Japan immediately and arrange to have an audience with the Emperor. Once you have explained the situation, His Majesty will issue an imperial command, and a serious crisis shall have been averted." But the Count did not seem to be listening to me, and I later heard that after I left, he said something about 'Hayashi's seeming agitated,' which I found terribly disheartening.¹⁴

In 1929, after having completed an inspection tour of Manchuria, Tōgo Shigenori presented a detailed description of the situation there to Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Makino Nobuaki: "If nothing is done, we must expect an explosion / upheaval at any time." Count Makino seemed shocked: "Has the situation worsened to that extent?" These anecdotes clearly convey the dearth of understanding (and misplaced optimism) on the part of elder statesmen Shidehara, Uchida, and Makino where the actual state of affairs in Manchuria was concerned. The time had come when even Shigemitsu Mamoru, often called "Little Shidehara," had no choice but to criticize Shidehara diplomacy.

There was no question that Foreign Minister Shidehara had undeviatingly followed the right path in his foreign diplomacy, but his weak point was that in a matter of life and death for Japan, such as the problem of Manchuria, he had no plan of solution that would convince the Japanese people. With the country's peril before its eyes, the Government still lacked the courage and the ability to provide

¹² Hayashi Kyūjirō, *op. cit.*

¹³ Conflict between Korean and Chinese farmers over irrigation near Changchun, Manchuria.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

constructive leadership and ensure a solution. That was the opening scene of the tragedy, and a major cause of the failure of liberal principles in Japan.”¹⁵

Kiyosawa Kiyoshi, a historian specializing in Japanese diplomatic history, wrote the following about the failure of the government and Japanese diplomatic officials to arrive at a proper understanding of the situation in Manchuria, and to forge remedial policies.

It is fair to conclude that diplomacy had become disengaged from reality, or that reality had parted ways with diplomacy. No matter how one describes the situation, Japan was certainly not behaving like an organic entity. This was the first time since the last days of the Tokugawa Shogunate when diplomacy did not represent actual power, and the lack of political power became obvious to the outside world.¹⁶

Accordingly, we can assume that the responsibility for the Manchurian Incident (if indeed any of us was responsible) lies with the military or the politicians. When politicians do not concern themselves with the fate of their nation, but instead are motivated by immediate profits and self-preservation, the people become enraged and the military rises up, just as in the past.

League of Nations’ admonition to Japan ignores the facts

As already stated, in March 1933 Japan reacted to the recommendations in the Lytton Report by withdrawing from the League of Nations in March 1933. As grounds for its departure, the Japanese provided the following:

The Japanese Government now finds themselves compelled to conclude that Japan and the other Members of the League entertain different views on the manner to achieve peace in the Far East and the Japanese Government are obliged to feel that they have now reached the limit of their endeavours to co-operate with the League of Nations in regard to the Sino-Japanese differences.¹⁷

In his *Study of Japanese-Manchurian Relations* political scientist Rōyama Masamichi provides comments and criticisms with respect to several aspects of the polarization between Japan’s position and the Lytton Report.

- (1) The Japanese had requested (and hoped) that a comprehensive examination of China be an important part of the investigation into the Manchurian Incident. Unfortunately, the Lytton Commission ultimately deferred to Western notions of China, notions that prevailed when the

¹⁵ Shigemitsu, *op. cit.*, 62.

¹⁶ Kiyosawa Kiyoshi, *Nihon gaikōshi, gekan* (History of Japanese foreign policy, vol. 2) (Tokyo: Tōyō Keizai Shinpōsha, 1942).

¹⁷ Rōyama Masamichi, *Nichi-Man kankei no kenkyū* (Study of Japan-Manchuria relations) (Tokyo: Shibun Shoin, 1933); Full text of “Japan’s case in the Sino-Japanese dispute as presented before the Special Session of the Assembly of the League of Nations,” Geneva, 1933, https://archive.org/stream/japanscaseinsino00leag/japanscaseinsino00leag_djvu.txt.

Nine-Power Treaty was concluded at the Washington Naval Conference. Consequently, the commission assumed that China would be well on her way to becoming a unified nation once certain conditions had been met. This was the statement in the report that was most at odds with Japanese public opinion.

- (2) The commission's decision not to recognize Manzhouguo was a "policy value judgement" that turned a deaf ear to the dialectical developmental relationship between the causes of the incident and the reality it spawned.
- (3) The commission gave highest priority to avoiding any territorial changes that might conflict with the Nine-Power Treaty, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, or other elements of the international peace machinery. Therefore, it was attempting to legitimize the autonomous status of Manchuria by once again declaring it an autonomous region. However, if it is the relationship with the international peace machinery that is at issue, the investigative team condemned actions taken in self-defense in the narrow sense of military action, and only in that sense. It did not acknowledge the broad scope of political actions, and completely ignored and dismissed statements from prominent citizens and leaders of various organizations who champion the government of Manzhouguo, not to mention residents who are staunch advocates of *baojing anmin*. Not only is this an unjust observation, but it is also a deliberate acknowledgement of conflict with the international peace machinery, and thus obstructs the path to resolution.
- (4) All things considered, we can assume that, when investigating and evaluating the facts, the commission always had Japan's assertions in mind, and was determined to refute them.

Joseph Grew, the US ambassador to Japan at the time, was certainly not enthusiastically pro-Japan. Even so, on February 23, 1933, he committed his doubts about the peace machinery, particularly the shortcomings and flaws of the League of Nations, to his diary.

In this diary I recently said that I was in accord with the Report and Recommendations of the League of Nations in the Sino-Japanese dispute. This statement must be modified, as indeed many of the statements in the diary, in which I am merely thinking aloud, are modified from time to time on maturer thought and consideration. The recommendations may be all right in theory, but the trouble is that they are ineffective in practice because they don't fit the facts and at least at present are unworkable. ... Yet the more one mulls over the whole problem, the more one is inclined to question whether the peace machinery which the world has been trying so earnestly and painstakingly to erect these last fourteen years is basically sound, or rather whether it is basically practical.¹⁸

Then Grew proceeded to compare the Manchurian Incident with the Spanish-American War in 1898.

To let one's imagination rove a bit – compare the Manchurian situation in 1931 with the Cuban situation in 1898. If the latter crisis had developed subsequent to the

¹⁸ Joseph C. Grew, *Ten Years in Japan: A Contemporary Record* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 78.

conclusion of the Kellogg pact, and if the *Maine* had been blown up in Havana Harbor, resulting in a war psychology sweeping over our country like a forest fire, and the words “Remember the *Maine*” on the lips of every man, woman, and child in the land, could our Government ever have prevented hostilities with Spain? McKinley wanted to avoid war in 1898 but couldn’t. Even if the Kellogg Pact had existed at that date, might we also not have occupied Cuba without declaring war, on the grounds of self-defense, forced by public opinion to do so?¹⁹

After stating that the Kellogg-Briand Pact could not prevent war, he arrives at the following conclusion:

Clearly, then, our peace machinery while magnificent in theory is ineffective in practice. It is ineffective because it is superficial. It is like a poultice prescribed for cancer by the surgeon long after the cancer has been allowed to develop.

(...)

The future peace machinery of the world must ... attempt treatment long before the disease itself materializes. ... To put the matter in a nutshell, the peace machinery of the world must be far more radical, far more prescient, far more concerned with facts, conditions, and circumstances than with theories than it is today, if it is ever to succeed in abolishing war.²⁰

Japanese public opinion celebrates Manchurian Incident

An article in a German newspaper suggested that Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations represented the beginning of a breakdown in relations between the Western nations and Asia. The Manchurian Incident also signaled a time when, in Japan, slogans like “Asia for the Asians” and “Turn not toward the West but the East” began to circulate.

Once Matsuoka Yōsuke set foot on Japanese soil after having delivered the speech announcing Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations, the Japanese public greeted him with wild enthusiasm. Matsuoka arrived in Yokohama on April 28, 1933 on the *Asama Maru*, which sailed to Japan via the US. The crowds waiting to welcome him thronged the pier, and at Tokyo Station schoolchildren lined up to greet him, waving the Rising Sun flag. The newspapers devoted a great deal of space to the event, describing Matsuoka as “a brave general who exercised independent diplomacy in an heroic battle for justice.” Radio stations broadcast every detail of his return nationwide. He might as well have been a victorious general returning triumphantly from battle. Impressed by the public response, US Ambassador Grew wrote that Matsuoka’s “fellow-countrymen looked upon him as a modern Horatius defending his people against the onslaughts of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the world. His arrival home was the occasion for a public patriotic demonstration of a size seldom seen in Japan.”²¹

Nor was it only the newspapers that exulted when the Manchurian Incident erupted, and were moved to commit their enthusiasm to paper.

I have already mentioned that by January of 1932, the year following the Lugou Bridge Incident, hostilities had spread to Shanghai, where the 1st Shanghai Incident occurred. It was there that the famous story of the Three Human Bombs unfolded. Their self-sacrificing actions at the Battle of Miao Xingzhen brought them eternal fame.

The story of the heroic deeds of three Japanese soldiers armed with Bangalore torpedoes, charged the enemy’s barbed-wire barricades, became known to everyone in Japan, and became the topic of more than one song. The lyrics of the most famous of them, “The Three Heroes Who Became Human Bombs,” were written by renowned poet Yosano Tekkan, who was clearly moved by their bravery. It begins as follows:

It was 5:00 a.m. on February 22nd
On a freezing cold night
Their comrades were already attacking
The enemy’s encampment at Miao Xingzhen.²²

Also deeply impressed by the heroes’ ultimate sacrifice was Tekkan’s wife, Yosano Akiko. She published an essay collection entitled *Be the Victors!* soon after learning about the incident, in which she wrote the following:

There are no soldiers in this world more stalwart than Japanese military men. But our civilians must emulate the courage of our soldiers, both in their work and their pursuit of knowledge. Young men and women, especially, must be inspired to live as boldly as the three heroes who rushed forward with their bombs. Soldiers should not be the only victors. Each and every Japanese must be tenacious on their journeys toward victory.²³

Yosano Akiko’s zeal must have intensified, since in June of the same year in *Japanese Women*, a poetry collection, she included “Morning Song,” which she dedicated to the Japanese people. The

²¹ Hosoya Chihiro, *Nihon gaikō no zahyō* (Coordinates of Japanese Diplomacy) (Tokyo: Chūōkōron-sha, 1988); US Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1933, The Far East, Volume III, Document 772: The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Acting Secretary of State, Tokyo, December 14, 1933*; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1933v03/d772>

²² “Bakudan san yūshi no uta” (Song of the Three Heroes Who Became Human Bombs), *Gekkan Seiron*, 07 February 2024, https://www.sankei.com/article/20240207-LPHHKEILKNC4ZMWNZBNCLTRPSY/?outputType=theme_monthly-seiron.

²³ Yosano Akiko, “Yūshōsha to nare” (Be a victor!) in *Yosano Akiko: hyōron chosakushū* (Critical essays of Yosano Akiko) (Tokyo: Tenrai Shobō, 1934).

song opens with Yosano's retelling of the heroic deeds of the three "human bombs" She then exhorts her compatriots to follow their example.

We civilians may not go to war
But we serve our country all the same, to the best of our ability,
Through unceasing, albeit tiny efforts.
For instance, this song of mine
Was inspired by the men who charged ahead,
Grasping their explosives tightly,
And dashed them against the enemy's barbed wire.
Though a powerless woman,
I feel at one with them.
We are truly fortunate to have inherited
Such admirable traditions from our forefathers.²⁴

It is difficult to believe that this is the same poet who, in 1904, during the Russo-Japanese War, wrote a poem entitled "My brother, you must not die." The earlier poem made an appearance in every single Japanese history textbook as an example of the work of the accomplished Yosano Akiko, an "antiwar poet."

I have introduced this work from the pen of a famous female poet to provide a glimpse into public opinion at that time. The Chinese had heaped hostile acts and insults on the Japanese people for many years. Consequently, the Japanese were encouraged by the Manchurian Incident, which arose "like a bolt of lightning piercing the dark clouds"²⁵ over Japan, to use the words of Konoe Fumimaro. This particular poem of Akiko's, however, will never appear in any Japanese history textbook.

²⁴ Yosano Akiko, "Nihon kokumin asa no uta" (Morning song for the citizens of Japan), *Nihon josei, Nihon kokumin bekkkan* (Japanese women, supplement to *Citizens of Japan*), June 1932.

²⁵ Yabe, *op. cit.*