

Manchuria

Manchuria, on China's eastern seaboard, was attacked by Japan in 1931. The League effectively did nothing.

What was the background behind this attack and the League's response ?

Just one week before Japan invaded Manchuria, Viscount Cecil, Britain's chief representative at the League of Nations, said in a speech to the League :

"I do not think there is the slightest prospect of any war."

Japan, the League's strongest member in the Far East, proved him wrong.

Why did Japan invade Manchuria ?

Japan was becoming increasingly crowded due to its limited size as a nation and its rapidly increasing population. Manchuria offered nearly 200,000 square kilometres which, as part of a Japanese empire, would easily accommodate any over-spilling population. The Japanese people had a very low opinion of the Chinese - a Japanese form of "untermenschen" - and, therefore, would have given no thought to the Manchurian people whatsoever. It was also believed in Japan that Manchuria was rich in minerals, forestry and rich agricultural land. With the problems that Japan was experiencing at home, Manchuria seemed an obvious solution to these problems.

By 1931, Japan had invested vast sums of money into the economy of Manchuria effectively controlled by the South Manchuria Railway Company. To guard all of its investments, Japan kept a large army in southern Manchuria.

The 1929 Depression hit Japan hard. The civilian government found that it had no solutions to the problems presented by the world-wide depression and to the army the civilian government looked weak. Many people admired the more robust response of the army. The unemployed of Japan looked to the strength of the army to assist their plight rather than to what weak politicians were doing. The voices of senior army generals were heard and they argued for a campaign to win new colonies abroad so that the industries there could be exploited for Japan. The most obvious target was a full-scale invasion of Manchuria.

An explosion on a section of the South Manchuria Railway, gave the army the excuse it needed to blame the local population of sabotage and to occupy the nearest Manchurian town of Shenyang. The League at China's request immediately ordered the Japanese army to withdraw. Japan's delegates at the League's headquarters in Geneva, agreed to this demand and blamed the event on army "hot-heads".

The Japanese government in Tokyo also agreed to this demand. However, the army did not listen and it launched a full-scale invasion of Manchuria and by the end of 1931, it had occupied the whole of the province. The civilian government had clearly lost control of the army, and the League's position was that it would deal with the government of the aggressor nation. But how could this succeed when the government had no control over the army which was the cause of the problem ?

The League could introduce three sanctions. Verbal warnings clearly did not work. However, the impact of the Depression meant that those nations that traded with Japan did not want to risk losing this trade. If a nation did give up trading with Japan, as Britain pointed out, their place would quickly be taken by another country willing to get trade started with the Far East's most powerful nation.

Britain was also concerned about her colonies in the Far East, particularly Hong Kong and Singapore. Would Japan attack them if Britain sided with those who wanted to carry out economic sanctions on Japan ?

How did the League deal with this problem of aggression ?

It established a Commission of Enquiry lead by Lord Lytton of Great Britain. This Commission, after a lengthy visit to the Far East including Manchuria, reported in October 1932. Lytton concluded that Japan should leave Manchuria but that Manchuria itself should be run as a semi-independent country instead of returning to Chinese rule. The report was accepted and approved by the League in 1933. In response to the report and the League accepting it, Japan resigned from the League and occupied a region around Manchuria called Jehol, which it claimed gave the Japanese army the ability to defend Manchuria.

What did this affair prove ?

- The League could not enforce its authority.
- A major power could get away with using force
- An issue so far from Europe was not likely to attract the whole-hearted support of the major European powers in the League - Britain and France.
 - The affair had indicated that Britain was more concerned with her territories in the Far East than in the maintenance of law and order.
- Other powers would almost certainly see this episode as a sign that they too could get away with the use of force
 - The League also lost its most powerful member in the Far East and ultimately Japan was to unite with the two other nations that broke League rules - Germany and Italy.