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THE PATH TO NANKING

IN TRYING to understand the actions of the Japanese, the questions that call out loudest for answers are the most obvious ones. What broke down on the scene to allow the behavior of Japanese soldiers to escape so totally the restraints that govern most human conduct? Why did the Japanese officers permit and even encourage such a breakdown? What was the complicity of the Japanese government? At the very least, what was its reaction to the reports it was getting through its own channels and to what it was hearing from foreign sources on the scene?

To answer these questions we must begin with a little history.

The twentieth-century Japanese identity was forged in a thousand-year-old system in which social hierarchy was established and sustained through martial competition. For as far back as anyone could remember, the islands' powerful feudal lords employed private armies to wage incessant battle with each

other; by the medieval times these armies had evolved into the distinctively Japanese samurai warrior class, whose code of conduct was called *bushido* (the "Way of the Warrior"). To die in the service of one's lord was the greatest honor a samurai warrior could achieve in his lifetime.

Such codes of honor were certainly not invented by Japanese culture. The Roman poet Horace first defined the debt owed by the young men of each generation to their rulers—*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* But the samurai philosophy went a giant step beyond defining military service as fitting and proper. So harsh was its code that its most notable characteristic was the moral imperative that adherents commit suicide if ever they failed to meet honorably the obligations of military service—often with the highly ceremonial and extremely painful ritual of hara-kiri, in which the warrior met death by unflinchingly disemboweling himself in front of witnesses.

By the twelfth century the head of the reigning (and thereby most powerful) family, now called the Shogun, offered the emperor, who was worshiped as the direct descendant of the Sun Goddess, military protection of his samurai in exchange for divine sanction of the entire ruling class. A deal was struck. In time the code of the samurai, initially followed by only a small percentage of the population, penetrated deep into the Japanese culture and became the model of honorable behavior among all young men.

Time did not erode the strength of the *bushido* ethic, which first emerged in the eighteenth century and was practiced to extremes in the modern age. During World War II the infamous kamikaze suicide missions, in which Japanese pilots ceremoniously trained to fly their planes directly into American ships, dramatically impressed upon the West how ready the young men of Japan were to sacrifice their lives for the emperor. But it was more than a small elite group that held to the view of death over surrender. It is striking to note that while the Allied forces surrendered at the rate of 1 prisoner for every 3 dead, the Japanese surrendered at the rate of only 1 per 120 dead.

Another force that gave Japan its peculiar character was its

isolation, both physical and self-imposed. By the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa clan, who sealed off the island nation from foreign influence. This seclusion, intended to provide security from the wider world, instead insulated Japanese society from the new technology of the industrial revolution taking place in Europe and left it less secure. For 250 years Japanese military technology failed to advance beyond the bow, sword, and musket.

By the nineteenth century events beyond Japan's control would knock the country out of its cocoon, leaving it in a state of insecurity and xenophobic desperation. In 1852, U.S. President Millard Fillmore, frustrated by Japan's refusal to open its ports to commerce and taking the "white man's burden" attitude toward other societies commonly espoused at the time to rationalize European expansionism, decided to end Japan's isolation by dispatching Commander Matthew Perry to the island. Perry studied Japanese history carefully and decided to shock the Japanese into submission with a massive display of American military force. In July 1853, he sent a flotilla of ships belching black smoke into Tokyo Bay—giving the people of Japan their first glimpse of steam power. Surrounding himself with some sixty to seventy aggressive-looking men armed with swords and pistols, Perry strode through the capital of the Shogun and demanded meetings with the highest-ranking officials in Japan.

To say that the Japanese were stunned by Perry's arrival would be a gross understatement. "A parallel situation," the historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote of the incident, "would be an announcement by astronauts that weird-looking aircraft from outer space were on their way to earth." The terrified Tokugawa aristocracy prepared for battle, hid their valuables, and held panicked meetings among themselves. But in the end, they had no choice but to acknowledge the superiority of American military technology and to accept the mission. With this single visit, Perry not only forced the Tokugawa to sign treaties with the United States but broke down the doors of Japanese trade for other countries, such as Britain, Russia, Germany, and France.

The humiliation of this proud people left a residue of fierce resentment. Secretly some members of the Japanese power elite advocated immediate war with the Western powers, but others counseled prudence, arguing that war would weaken only Japan, not the foreigners. Those taking the latter position urged that the leadership placate the intruders, learn from them, and quietly plan their retaliation:

> *As we are not the equals of foreigners in the mechanical arts, let us have intercourse with foreign countries, learn their drill and tactics, and when we have made the [Japanese] nations as united as one family, we shall be able to go abroad and give lands in foreign countries to those who have distinguished themselves in battle; the soldiers will vie with one another in displaying their intrepidity, and it will not be too late then to declare war.*

Although that view did not prevail, the words would prove prophetic, for they described not only the strategy the Japanese would follow but the long-term horizons of those who think of life in terms of the state and not of individuals.

With no clear course open to them, the Tokugawa decided to watch and wait—a decision that signed the death warrant of their reign. The Shogun's policy of appeasement, so different from what it required of its loyal adherents, disgusted many and supplied ammunition for its hawkish opponents, who saw the prudent response of the Shogun as nothing more than kowtowing servility before foreign barbarians. Convinced that the Shogun had lost his mandate to rule, rebel clans forged alliances to overthrow the regime and restore the emperor to power.

In 1868 the rebels achieved victory in the name of the Meiji emperor and ignited a revolution to transform a patchwork of warring fiefdoms into a modern, powerful Japan. They elevated the sun cult of Shinto to a state religion and used the emperor as a national symbol to sweep away tribalism and unite the islands. Determined to achieve eventual victory over the West, the new imperial government adopted the samurai ethic

of *bushido* as the moral code for all citizens. The foreign threat acted as a further catharsis for the islands. In an era later known as the Meiji Restoration, Japan resounded with nationalistic slogans, such as "Revere the Emperor! Expel the barbarians!" and "Rich country, strong army!"

With astonishing rapidity, the Japanese hurled themselves into the modern age—scientifically, economically, and militarily. The government sent the best students abroad to study science and technology at Western universities, seized control of its own industry to create factories for military production, and replaced the locally controlled feudal armies with a national conscript army. It also meticulously analyzed the defense cultures of the United States and Europe, favoring above all the German military system. But the knowledge of Western technology and defense strategies brought back by its foreign-educated students shattered the country's old confidence in Japanese military superiority, leaving it deeply uneasy about the inevitability of victory in its future showdown with the West.

By the late nineteenth century Japan was ready to flex its muscles, testing its new strength on Asian neighbors. In 1876 the Meiji government dispatched to Korea a naval force of two gunboats and three transports and forced the Korean government to sign a treaty of commerce—a move hauntingly reminiscent of what Perry had forced on Japan.

Then it clashed with China over Korea. An 1885 treaty had established Korea as a coprotectorate of both China and Japan, but hostilities broke out within a decade when the Chinese tried to quell a Korean rebellion backed by Japanese ultranationalists. In September 1894, only six weeks after war was declared, the Japanese not only captured Pyongyang but crushed the Chinese northern fleet at sea. The Qing government was forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki, under which the Chinese were made to pay the Japanese 200 million taels in war indemnities and to cede to Japan Taiwan, the Pescadores, the Liaodong region of Manchuria,

and four more treaty ports. This was later called the first Sino-Japanese war.

For Japan the triumph would have been complete had it not been later marred by the intrusion of Western powers. After the war the Japanese won the greatest prize of the war—the Liaodong Peninsula—but were forced to surrender the last by the tripartite intervention of Russia, France, and Germany. This further illustration of the power of faraway European governments to dictate Japanese conduct only stiffened Japan's resolve to gain military supremacy over its Western tormentors. By 1904 the nation had doubled the size of its army and gained self-sufficiency in the production of armaments.

That strategy soon paid off. Japan was able to boast of defeating not only China in battle but Russia as well. In the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, the Japanese recapture of Port Arthur in the Liaodong Peninsula and naval victory at Tsushima gained half of the Sakhalin Islands and commercial supremacy in Manchuria. This was heady stuff for a proud country that had been chafing for fifty years under the humiliation dealt it by the Western nations. Giddy with triumph, a Japanese professor summed up the sentiments of his country when he declared that Japan was "destined to expand and govern other nations."

Largely because of these successes, the early part of the twentieth century was a euphoric time for Japan. Modernization had earned for the country not only military prestige but unprecedented economic prosperity. The First World War created a huge demand for Japanese steel and iron production as well as for Japanese textiles and foreign trade. Stock prices skyrocketed, and moguls sprang up from obscurity, dazzling the country with their extravagance. Even Japanese women—traditionally cloistered away in this male-dominated society—were seen gambling away fortunes at casinos and racetracks.

Perhaps if the prosperity had lasted, a solid middle class might have emerged in Japan to provide the people with the strength to check imperial military influence. But it did not. Instead, Japan would soon be faced with the single most disastrous economic crisis in its modern history—a crisis that

would wipe out its previous gains, push it to the brink of starvation, and propel it down the path of war.

The 1920s drew down the curtain on Japan's golden era of prosperity. When the end of World War I halted the previously insatiable demand for military products, Japanese munitions factories were shut down and thousands of laborers were thrown out of work. The 1929 stock market crash in the United States, and the depression that followed it, also reduced American purchases of luxuries, crippling the Japanese silk export trade.

As important, many international businessmen and consumers went out of their way to shun Japanese products in the postwar decade, even though Japan had been on the Allied side in the First World War. Although both the European nations and the Japanese expanded their overseas empires with the spoils of the First World War, Japanese expansion was not looked on in the same way. Repulsed by aggressive Japanese actions toward China through the first decades of the new century, and even more so by Japan's attempts at Western-style colonialism in the former German colonies it now controlled as a consequence of the war settlements, Western financiers began to invest more heavily in the Chinese. In turn, China, enraged by the Versailles decision to grant Japan the German rights and concessions in the Shantung Peninsula, organized widespread boycotts of Japanese goods. These developments hurt the Japanese economy still further and gave rise to the popular belief that Japan had once again become the victim of an international conspiracy.

The downturn in the economy devastated the average Japanese community. Businesses shut down, and unemployment soared. Destitute farmers and fishermen sold their daughters into prostitution. Soaring inflation, labor strikes, and a tremendous earthquake in September 1923 only exacerbated the dismal conditions.

An increasingly popular argument during the depression was that Japan needed to conquer new territory to ward off

mass starvation. The population had swollen from some 30 million at the time of the Meiji Restoration to almost 65 million in 1930, making it increasingly difficult for Japan to feed its people. With great effort, Japanese farmers had pushed up the yield per acre until it would increase no more, and by the 1920s agricultural production had leveled off. The continually expanding population forced Japan to rely heavily on imported foodstuffs every year, and between the 1910s and the end of the 1920s rice imports tripled. They had once been paid for by Japan's textile exports, but the latter were now subject to reduced foreign demand, intense competition, and often discriminatory tariffs.

By the 1920s young radicals in the Japanese army were arguing that military expansion was crucial to the country's survival. In his book *Addresses to Young Men,* Lieutenant Colonel Hashimoto Kingoro wrote:

> There are only three ways left to Japan to escape from the pressures of surplus population . . . emigration, advance into world markets, and expansion of territory. The first door, emigration, has been barred to us by the anti-Japanese immigration policies of other countries. The second door . . . is being pushed shut by tariff barriers and the abrogation of commercial treaties. What should Japan do when two of the three doors have been closed against her?

Other Japanese writers pointed to the spacious territories of other countries, complaining about the injustice of it all, especially since these other countries were not making the most of their land by achieving the high per-acre yields that Japanese farmers had obtained. They looked enviously upon not only China's vast land resources but those of Western countries. Why, the military propagandist Araki Sadao asked, should Japan remain content with 142,270 square miles, much of it barren, to feed 60 million mouths, while countries like Australia and Canada had more than 3 million square miles to feed 6.5 million people each? These discrepancies were unfair. To the ultranationalists, the United States enjoyed some of the greatest advantages of all: Araki Sadao pointed out that the

United States possessed not only 3 million square miles of home territory but 700,000 square miles of colonies.

If expansion westward to the Pacific Ocean was the manifest destiny of the nineteenth-century United States, then China was twentieth-century Japan's manifest destiny. It was almost inevitable that this homogenous people of high personal esteem would see the socially fragmented and loosely governed expanse of China as having been put there for their use and exploitation. Nor were Japan's covetous intentions limited only to Asia. In 1925, just a short three years after Japan entered into a capital ship limitation treaty with the United States, Great Britain, France, and Italy that afforded it a distinctive role as the world's third largest naval power, Okawa Shumei, a national activist, wrote a book that insisted not only on Japan's destiny to "free" Asia but also on the inevitability of world war between Japan and the United States. In the concluding chapter of his book, he was more prophetic than he realized when he predicted a divine—almost apocalyptic—struggle between the two powers: *"Before a new world appears, there must be a deadly fight between the powers of the West and the East. This theory is realized in the American challenge to Japan. The strongest country in Asia is Japan and the strongest country that represents Europe is America. . . . These two countries are destined to fight. Only God knows when it will be."*

By the 1930s the Japanese government found itself mired in intrigue as those who favored using Japan's newly acquired technological skills to build a better society competed for influence with those who wanted to use the nation's military superiority over its neighbors to embark on a program of foreign conquest. Expansionist ideologies gained fervent support from right-wing ultranationalists, who called for a military dictatorship that would limit personal wealth, nationalize property, and dominate Asia. These ideas fueled the ambitions of junior military officers, whose rural backgrounds and youth made them naturally distrustful of Tokyo politicians as well as impatient for immediate access to power. Though the officers feuded

among themselves, they shared a similar mission: to overhaul society and eliminate all bureaucratic, economic, and political obstacles to what they believed to be Japan's divine mission to avenge itself against the Europeans and dominate Asia.

Step by step, the interventionists forced a series of compromises from the moderate elements in government. But disappointed by the pace of change, they began to conspire among themselves to topple the government. In 1931 a coup was planned but abandoned. In 1932 a group of naval officers launched a terrorist attack in Tokyo that killed Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi but failed to secure martial law.

On February 26, 1936, a clique of young officers launched a bold coup d'état that took the lives of several statesmen. Though the coup paralyzed downtown Tokyo for more than three days, it ultimately failed and the ringleaders were jailed or executed. Power shifted from the extremists to a more cautious faction within the government, though it is important to point out that even this faction shared many of the young officers' fanatical views when it came to Japan's right to a dominant role in Asia.

It soon became apparent to some Japanese ultranationalists that if they wanted to control China they would have to move fast. For there were signs that China, forced to submit to Japanese demands in 1895, was trying to strengthen itself as a nation—signs that gave the Japanese expansionists a sense of urgency in their mission.

China had indeed used the past two decades to transform itself from a disintegrating empire into a struggling national republic. In 1911 rebel armies defeated the Qing imperial forces and ended more than two centuries of Manchu rule. During the 1920s the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek successfully fought the warlords of northern China to unify the country. They also announced as a goal the elimination of unfair treaty agreements foisted upon the Qing dynasty by foreign powers. As Chiang's movement gained momentum, it threatened Japanese interests in Manchuria and Mongolia. Something had to

be done, and quickly, before China grew too powerful to be conquered.

With the approval of the Japanese government, the military began to intervene more aggressively in Chinese affairs. In 1928 they engineered the assassination of Chang Tsolin, the warlord ruler of Manchuria, when he failed to give them his full cooperation. The murder only served to infuriate the Chinese people, who organized more boycotts against Japanese goods.

By the 1930s Japan had launched an undeclared war with China. On September 18, 1931, the Japanese army blew up the tracks of a Japanese-owned railway in southern Manchuria, hoping to incite an incident. When the blasts failed to derail an express train, the Japanese killed the Chinese guards instead and fabricated a story for the world press about Chinese saboteurs. This incident gave the Japanese an excuse to seize Manchuria, which was renamed Manchukuo and where the Japanese installed Pu Yi, the last emperor of China and heir of the Manchu dynasty, as puppet ruler. The seizure of Manchuria, however, generated anti-Japanese sentiment in China, which was whipped up by Nationalist activists. Feelings ran high on both sides and erupted in bloodshed in 1932 when a Shanghai mob attacked five Japanese Buddhist priests, leaving one of them dead. Japan immediately retaliated by bombing the city, killing tens of thousands of civilians. When the slaughter at Shanghai aroused worldwide criticism, Japan responded by isolating itself from the international community and withdrawing, in 1933, from the League of Nations.

To prepare for the inevitable war with China, Japan had spent decades training its men for combat. The molding of young men to serve in the Japanese military began early in life, and in the 1930s the martial influence seeped into every aspect of Japanese boyhood. Toy shops became virtual shrines to war, selling arsenals of toy soldiers, tanks, helmets, uniforms, rifles, antiaircraft guns, bugles, and howitzers. Memoirs from that time describe preadolescent boys waging mock battles in the

streets, using bamboo poles as imaginary rifles. Some even tied logs of wood on their backs and fantasized about dying as "human bomb" heroes in suicide missions.

Japanese schools operated like miniature military units. Indeed, some of the teachers were military officers, who lectured students on their duty to help Japan fulfill its divine destiny of conquering Asia and being able to stand up to the world's nations as a people second to none. They taught young boys how to handle wooden models of guns, and older boys how to handle real ones. Textbooks became vehicles for military propaganda; one geography book even used the shape of Japan as justification for expansion: "We appear to be standing in the vanguard of Asia, advancing bravely into the Pacific. At the same time we appear ready to defend the Asian continent from outside attack." Teachers also instilled in boys hatred and contempt for the Chinese people, preparing them psychologically for a future invasion of the Chinese mainland. One historian tells the story of a squeamish Japanese schoolboy in the 1930s who burst into tears when told to dissect a frog. His teacher slammed his knuckles against the boy's head and yelled, "Why are you crying about one lousy frog? When you grow up you'll have to kill one hundred, two hundred chinks!"

(And yet with all this psychological programming the story is much more complicated. "There was a deep ambivalence in Japanese society about China," Oxford historian Rana Mitter observes. "It was not all racist contempt, as it was for the Koreans: on the one hand, they recognized China as a source of culture that they had drawn on heavily; on the other, they were exasperated by the mess that China was in by the early twentieth century. Ishiwara Kanji, architect of the Manchurian Incident of 1931, was a big fan of the 1911 Revolution. Many Chinese, including Sun Yatsen and Yuan Shikai, drew on Japanese help and training in the years before and after the 1911 Revolution. The Japanese also sponsored Boxer Indemnity Scholarships and Dojinkai hospitals for the Chinese, and scholars like Tokio Hashimoto genuinely appreciated Chinese culture. Japan's Foreign Office and army experts on China were often very well trained and knowledgable about the country."

This knowledge and tempering, however, would rarely pass down to the ordinary soldier.)

The historical roots of militarism in Japanese schools stretched back to the Meiji Restoration. In the late nineteenth century the Japanese minister of education declared that schools were run not for the benefit of the students but for the good of the country. Elementary school teachers were trained like military recruits, with student-teachers housed in barracks and subjected to harsh discipline and indoctrination. In 1890 the Imperial Rescript on Education emerged; it laid down a code of ethics to govern not only students and teachers but every Japanese citizen. The Rescript was the civilian equivalent of Japanese military codes, which valued above all obedience to authority and unconditional loyalty to the emperor. In every Japanese school a copy of the Rescript was enshrined with a portrait of the emperor and taken out each morning to be read. It was reputed that more than one teacher who accidentally stumbled over the words committed suicide to atone for the insult to the sacred document.

By the 1930s the Japanese educational system had become regimented and robotic. A visitor to one of its elementary schools expressed pleasant surprise at seeing thousands of children waving flags and marching in unison in perfect lines; quite clearly the visitor had seen the discipline and order but not the abuse required to establish and maintain it. It was commonplace for teachers to behave like sadistic drill sergeants, slapping children across the cheeks, hitting them with their fists, or bludgeoning them with bamboo or wooden swords. Students were forced to hold heavy objects, sit on their knees, stand barefoot in the snow, or run around the playground until they collapsed from exhaustion. There were certainly few visits to the schools by indignant or even concerned parents.

The pressure to conform to authority intensified if the schoolboy decided to become a soldier. Vicious hazing and a relentless pecking order usually squelched any residual spirit of individualism in him. Obedience was touted as a supreme virtue, and a sense of individual self-worth was replaced by a sense of value as a small cog in the larger scheme of things. To

establish this sublimation of individuality to the common good, superior officers or older soldiers slapped recruits for almost no reason at all or beat them severely with heavy wooden rods. According to the author Iritani Toshio, officers often justified unauthorized punishment by saying, "I do not beat you because I hate you. I beat you because I care for you. Do you think I perform these acts with hands swollen and bloody in a state of madness?" Some youths died under such brutal physical conditions; others committed suicide; the majority became tempered vessels into which the military could pour a new set of life goals.

Training was no less grueling a process for aspiring officers. In the 1920s all army cadets had to pass through the Military Academy at Ichigaya. With its overcrowded barracks, unheated study rooms, and inadequate food, the place bore a greater resemblance to a prison than a school. The intensity of the training in Japan surpassed that of most Western military academies: in England an officer was commissioned after some 1,372 hours of classwork and 245 hours of private study, but in Japan the standards were 3,382 hours of classwork and 2,765 hours of private study. The cadets endured a punishing daily regimen of physical exercise and classes in history, geography, foreign languages, mathematics, science, logic, drawing, and penmanship. Everything in the curriculum was bent toward the goal of perfection and triumph. Above all the Japanese cadets were to adopt "a will which knows no defeat." So terrified were the cadets of any hint of failure that examination results were kept secret, to minimize the risk of suicide.

The academy was like an island to itself, sealed off from the rest of the world. The Japanese cadet enjoyed neither privacy nor any opportunity to exercise individual leadership skills. His reading material was carefully censored, and leisure time was nonexistent. History and science were distorted to project an image of the Japanese as a superrace. "During these impressionable years they have been walled off from all outside pleasures, interests or influences," one Western writer observed of the Japanese officers. "The atmosphere of the narrow groove along which they have moved has been saturated with a special

national and a special military propaganda. Already from a race psychologically far removed from us, they have been removed still further."

In the summer of 1937 Japan finally succeeded in provoking a full-scale war with China. In July a Japanese regiment, garrisoned by treaty in the Chinese city of Tientsin, had been conducting night maneuvers near the ancient Marco Polo Bridge. During a break several shots were fired at the Japanese in the darkness, and a Japanese soldier failed to appear during roll call. Using this incident as an excuse to exercise Japan's power in the region, Japanese troops advanced upon the Chinese fort of Wanping near the bridge and demanded that its gates be opened so that they could search for the soldier. When the Chinese commander refused, the Japanese shelled the fort.

By the end of July, Japan had tightened its grasp on the entire Tientsin-Peking region and by August the Japanese had invaded Shanghai. The second Sino-Japanese War was no longer reversible.

But conquering China proved to be a more difficult task than the Japanese anticipated. In Shanghai alone Chinese forces outnumbered the Japanese marines ten to one, and Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Nationalist government, had reserved his best troops for the battle. That August, while attempting to land thirty-five thousand fresh troops on the docks of Shanghai, the Japanese encountered their first setback. A hidden Chinese artillery emplacement opened fire and killed several hundred men, including a cousin of the Empress Nagako. For months the Chinese defended the metropolis with extraordinary valor. To the chagrin of the Japanese, the battle of Shanghai proceeded slowly, street by street, barricade by barricade.

In the 1930s, Japanese military leaders had boasted—and seriously believed—that Japan could conquer all of mainland China within three months. But when a battle in a single Chinese city alone dragged from summer to fall, and then from fall to winter, it shattered Japanese fantasies of an easy victory. Here,

this primitive people, illiterate in military science and poorly trained, had managed to fight the superior Japanese to a standstill. When Shanghai finally fell in November, the mood of the imperial troops had turned ugly, and many, it was said, lusted for revenge as they marched toward Nanking.