Introduction

The history of Anglo-Japanese relations in the first half of the twentieth century is an epic tragedy. After the alliance was signed between the two countries in 1902, Japan was held up as a model in Britain and Britain in Japan. Many British officers and war correspondents encouraged their readers to emulate the nationalistic warrior culture they saw in Japan; the Japanese were proud to be allied to the greatest imperial power. Japanese emperors were given Britain’s highest honours, including the Order of the Garter, and military officers went on exchanges between the two countries. But gradually the mood changed; British people came to see Japan as the first country to challenge the League of Nations and to begin a new age of imperialism. Conversely, the Japanese armed forces saw Britain as the greatest obstacle to Japanese ambitions in China and elsewhere, a change epitomized by the title of Lieutenant Commander Tota Ishimaru’s book, *Japan Must Fight Britain*, which was first published in Britain in 1936. Five years later, the two countries were at war and the feelings stirred up by that conflict still have resonance today.

Of course, the relationship between the two countries was never as simple as these bald generalizations would suggest. In the first half of the twentieth century, British officers who served in Japan and East Asia often doubted the rationale for their country’s policy towards that region. Before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 many questioned the wisdom of the alliance. The military attaché in Tokyo, Colonel Churchill, feared that the Japanese would lose in the looming war with Russia and that Britain would be dragged into the conflict. Conversely, if Japan were successful against Russia, others worried that the Russians would avenge themselves on British India. The more prescient were concerned about Britain, the greatest imperial power, allying with an Asian country against a European state because they rightly predicted that this would encourage anti-colonial nationalism in India, Egypt and elsewhere. During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 the Japanese confounded the fears about their weakness and astonished the world with their military successes. The Royal Navy was particularly impressed and senior officers even talked of placing the British naval forces in the Pacific under Japanese command should
the allies both be involved in a conflict – an astonishing suggestion given Britain's naval superiority throughout the nineteenth century. British army officers serving in Asia were less enthusiastic and those responsible for Indian security feared that Japan's military successes had both directed Russia's energies southwards and encouraged Indian nationalism.

It was not until after the First World War that the army officers serving in Japan drew closer to the Japanese and became, in effect, a lobby for better Anglo-Japanese relations. Here, once again, their worries put them out of step with British foreign policy because London agreed to end the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1922 in favour of a four-power treaty with the United States, France and Japan to govern the Pacific. This was not because of any doubts about Japanese power; indeed, it was because of pressure from Washington which continued to fear a war against an Anglo-Japanese coalition. The reports from the army officers attached to Japanese regiments in the 1930s praised their efficiency and warned of the dangers which would arise from an Anglo-Japanese war. The attachés and many senior officers in the War Office advised the government to avoid giving the Japanese the impression that Britain was the main stumbling block to their colonial ambitions in China. In the period before the Russo-Japanese War the government's judgement had been proved right and some of the 'country' experts wrong, at least about Japan's military strength, while the military had proved right to warn of the fillip to Asian nationalism which Japanese victory would produce. In the 1930s the Japan 'lobby' was right to stress the threat from Japanese military power to the British Empire, though it is difficult to see how Britain could have ignored Chinese appeals for help, abandoned its extensive economic interests in that country and entirely dismissed the growing US hostility towards Japanese aggression. Lying behind all this was the only half-appreciated fact that those in power in Japan were determined, at whatever cost, to turn the Europeans out of Asia and impose a unipolar international system on the region centred on Tokyo.

There was then a deeper sense in which the Anglo-Japanese 'lobby' was out of step not just with policy but with British opinion as a whole. That other group of Asian experts made up of visitors and residents in the region had long criticized Japanese behaviour towards the Koreans and Chinese. The journalists, who covered the Russo-Japanese War, sometimes echoed these concerns, and anxieties grew much stronger with the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s. It was not just that the Japanese were trying to conquer China in contravention of the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Nine Power Treaty, drawn
up in 1922 specifically to preserve the Chinese status quo, but the brutality with which they repressed all opposition. Looking back from the twenty-first century, when the West again faces powerful non-Western civilizations, these concerns seem particularly understandable. But the Japan ‘lobby’, made up of military officers, suggested that the fears were exaggerated and that Western protests would, in any case, alienate the Japanese military without helping the Chinese.

At the end of the Russo-Japanese War, Charles Repington, the Military Correspondent of The Times wrote of Britain’s Japanese allies:

There has never been a nation engaged in war since legendary days which has given such signal proofs of utter immolation of self for the sake of the Emperor, country, ancestors and home. If this does not deal a mortal blow to Western egoism, then nothing will. . . Victory has been both won and deserved by national qualities which made any other result but victory impossible. . . It is not possible to raise from among a people abandoned to luxury, materialism, and the cult of undisciplined individualism, armed forces endowed with Spartan simplicity of life, the moral strength and the sentiment of collective self-sacrifice which distinguish the warriors of Japan.¹

Colonel Repington went on to argue that the Japanese armed forces must have been devoted to their profession, ‘to the utter exclusion of all other aims, interests and occupations’. Plainly, focused as he was on military affairs, he believed this was a highly commendable state of affairs, which the British armed forces should emulate, and equally plainly his comments on luxury, materialism and individualism were aimed at his fellow countrymen and perhaps, consciously or unconsciously, a confession of guilt, given his scandalous private life.²

Four decades later, at the end of a devastating war, Japan’s military leaders were tried and executed after the Tokyo trials for showing precisely that exclusion of all other considerations except emperor and country, and utter determination to win whatever the costs to Japan and other peoples. The Tokyo trials reflected the way in which both Britain and Japan had changed since 1905, the two civilizations were on diverging courses in their views of international affairs and the role of war.

During the Russo-Japanese War it had seemed to many British people that their country and Japan were natural and harmonious allies. They had a common enemy in Russia which had been assiduously expanding its frontiers for many decades towards India and Korea, areas that one or other of the allies considered a vital strategic interest. The Imperial Japanese Navy was largely built in Britain and modelled itself on the Royal Navy. British banks raised
money to help Japan during the war against the Tsar's empire; the Royal Navy bought warships from neutral countries to prevent them from being acquired by the Russians; Japan's victories were received with admiration, and the bravery of its troops was, as Repington showed, regarded with enormous respect. On its side, the Japanese allowed British naval officers to watch the major battles from their warships, and they permitted far more British army officers to accompany their land forces than they really wanted. After the end of the war, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was tightened to allow the Imperial Japanese Army to help the British against a Russian attack on India. It seemed that all was well between Tokyo and London, and that relations would, if anything, gradually become closer.

And yet there were already rumblings of problems to come because the starting point for the two nations' trajectories at the beginning of the twentieth century was vastly different, though this was not obvious to many commentators at the time; Britain was an 'old', satiated, Christian-Humanist power with global responsibilities, which was just beginning to doubt its right to rule vast non-European territories; Japan was a thrusting, reinvigorated state, with wholly different traditions, determined to make its presence felt on the international scene and to dominate parts of the Asian mainland whatever the views of the inhabitants. Despite Russian suspicions, the British government had not expected or wanted Japan to attack Russia. Rather, they had hoped to establish a balance of power in East Asia which would prevent the expansion of either empire and enable the Royal Navy to reduce its forces in the region. They did not want Japan to incorporate Korea in its empire and, although they quickly accepted the fait accompli during the war, some British journalists, officers and diplomats felt guilty about the part they had played in the Korean tragedy. British traders in China were often critical of the Japanese, and the colonists in Canada, Australia and New Zealand feared the rise of an Asian power.

It was indeed anomalous for the greatest colonial power to be allied with a non-European nation which could challenge the Europeans in a conventional war. Such a challenge had not been made for generations and its impact was considerable. As the Japanese piled up victory after victory on land and sea through 1904 and 1905, reports came in to London from India, Turkey and the Middle East about the effect these were having on European prestige and non-European nationalism. The government became aware of increasing unrest in the Indian core of the British Empire. Indians living in London and elsewhere met together to plot uprisings and assassinations. Sir William Curzon-Wylie, one of the assistants of the Secretary of State for India was
murdered and an attempt was made on the life of the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge.  

British feelings of racial superiority had grown steadily through the nineteenth century. These were repressed when they were working together with their Japanese allies for some common purpose, such as preventing Russian expansion, but, once frictions arose between the two countries, then the emotions re-emerged. On their side the Japanese had been humiliated when the Americans and Europeans forced them to open their doors and admit foreigners and their trade in the 1850s. They had been further humiliated when the foreigners refused to allow their citizens to be tried in Japanese courts and infuriated when the French, Russians and Germans banded together to force them to abandon the territories which they had won from China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5. They believed they were struggling to defend themselves in a Darwinian struggle for survival and, like so many Europeans before 1914, they felt that the weak would, and should, be controlled by the strong.

The Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars thus increased Japanese assertiveness and faith in military power. The wars convinced them that the social, economic and military reforms they had introduced over the last half century were on the right lines because they were making them more secure. Britain, the greatest imperial power, had allied with them, breaking its long-standing policy of isolation. Their nearest great power neighbours, the Chinese and the Russians, were so weakened that they were no longer capable of challenging them and the nearest small power, Korea, had been brought under their control. Their views were beginning to be listened to with respect in Washington and the European capitals, and when the Paris conference was convened at the end of the First World War, they were treated as one of the great powers.

The First World War had the reverse effect on the European nations. It showed people that Repington’s widely-shared vision of the state of society was utter nonsense. The great mass of British people were not wallowing in luxury in 1905, they were struggling with desperate poverty, the threat of unemployment and disease. Many of those who had volunteered to fight in the Boer War of 1899-1902 had been rejected because years of under-nourishment had undermined their physique. The Victorian poet laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson, was much closer to a realistic vision of Britain’s cities when he asked his fellow countrymen whether they could possibly believe in progress when:

City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city slime. There among the glooming alleys Progress halts on Palsied feet, Crime
and hunger cast out maidens by the thousand in the street. There the Master scrimps his haggard seamstress of her daily bread, There a single sordid attic holds the living and the dead. There the smouldering fire of fever creeps across the rotted floor. And the crowded couch of incest in the warrens of the poor.  

Of course, it could be that Repington was thinking mainly of the upper classes when he contrasted their egoism and undisciplined individualism with the Spartan simplicity and moral strength of the Japanese. But here again his ideas were completely adrift. It was these same upper classes who sacrificed themselves in their tens of thousands leading their troops into the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele.  

The problem was that this extraordinary courage and patriotism, demonstrated similarly by the other belligerents, led to the internecine slaughter of millions of Europeans and the destruction of the economic and political life of the continent. The European peoples and their leaders were never to be so confident again, and their place in the world was to be increasingly usurped by the United States, Japan and other external powers. The Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German Empires collapsed in turmoil. France was utterly drained by the Marne, Verdun and the Somme, and by the devastation which four years of fighting had wrought on its eastern provinces. London was no longer the financial capital of the world, nor Lancashire its industrial capital, and the defence of the British Empire against a combination of Great Powers was now beyond the country’s resources. Often Europeans espoused pacifism, blaming militarism and nationalism for their problems. The terror of another major conflict was natural and pervasive. As the well-known writer, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson put it: ‘war and civilization are henceforth incompatible. . . The very existence of mankind is incompatible with that further development of methods of destruction on which science is actually engaged.’ The conventional wisdom was that another war would resemble its predecessor but would be worse because of the advent of bombing aircraft and the widespread use of bombs and chemical weapons against civilians.  

In Britain the wartime Prime Minister, Lloyd George, held the armed forces responsible for the carnage in the trenches and the near-starvation of the country because of the initial failure to defeat the U-boat attacks in the Atlantic. The Royal Navy had refused for months to introduce the convoys which eventually proved to be the solution to the threat to merchant shipping. The army had, allegedly, wasted lives by useless and ineffective attacks on enemy trenches. They were professionally incompetent. The spread of such views lessened military influence but, even if the politicians had been more
sympathetic during the 1920s, the armed forces had to be starved of funds to repay the vast debts, which had been built up to pay for the war. Some £357 million went on repayments for internal and external loans in 1924-5 and £115 million on defence; the armed forces had to run down their numbers and equipment, and to abandon most of their plans for innovation.¹⁰ The middle classes grumbled about their income tax burdens, and the super tax and inheritance tax destroyed many of the landed families and their country houses. The soldiers, who had been promised a land fit for heroes on their return from the trenches, only too often found instead that they were unemployed and reduced to begging in the streets.¹¹

Japan had been peripherally involved in the conflict as Britain’s ally but it had not suffered the hundreds of thousands of casualties inflicted on the Europeans, nor been emotionally involved in the war. Malcolm Kennedy, one of the British officers in Japan and a key figure in our narrative, noted how his Japanese colleagues regarded accusations that the Germans were committing war crimes as excuses for the military incompetence which Lloyd George also claimed to discern. For the Allied peoples war crimes were of central importance in justifying the struggle, for the Japanese they were of little significance. Very often they sympathized with the central powers more than the allies and greeted the allied victory in 1918 with indifference.¹² The German Army had trained the Japanese who continued to admire it even in defeat. For Japan, the Russo-Japanese War remained the major example of conflict while the European War was parochial, but Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia had each lost far more men than the Japanese had mobilized for the Russo-Japanese War. The consequence of such carnage was a revolutionary attempt to reform the international system by establishing the League of Nations in the hope of abolishing war and the tightening of the law of armed conflict should it nevertheless occur.¹³ Japanese governments went along with these reforms in the 1920s but many of their countrymen did not invest their deepest and most passionate hopes in them in the way that many Europeans did.¹⁴ Indeed, some regarded the League as a trick to preserve Anglo-American dominance. As Konoe Fumimaro, the Prime Minister who was to take Japan into war in 1941, wrote in 1918:

Anglo-American pacifism has nothing to do with justice or humanity, but is a do-nothing-to-rock-the-boat formula in favour of those trying to maintain that status quo. Yet apologists in this country, intoxicated with the rhetoric of their declarations, take peace as such to be humane; any consideration of our position ought rather to make people in Japan as well as Germany, call for breaking up the status quo; but in an excess of enthusiasm for Anglo-American style peacemaking, they greeted the League of
Nations as though it were tidings from on high, whilst in fact such an attitude amounts to hateful servility.  

European Christians did indeed regard the League as in accord with Christian notions, and peace as such to be both humane and vital for man’s survival. This was precisely the message preached by the Archbishop of Canterbury in a famous sermon in Geneva on 3 September 1922.

Japanese nationalists in the armed forces seized their opportunity in the Great Depression of the 1930s to run their own foreign policy in Manchuria and later China, and threatened civilian governments in Tokyo which stood in the way of using war as a means to conquer other countries. Tokyo began a massive rearmament programme while British rearmament started late to meet Axis aggression and was conducted at a leisurely pace to conserve resources. This was one reason, though not the only one, for the contempt for the British armed forces which Japanese army officers freely expressed to the British officers attached to their units in the 1930s. Meanwhile, the Royal Navy drifted ever further apart from its Japanese equivalent. Although there had been close cooperation in the First World War and the Japanese had helped convoy merchant ships in the Mediterranean, and although the British had advised the Japanese how to set up their aircraft carrier forces after the end of the fighting, the Royal Navy rejected Japanese proposals to resume exchanges of officers on the pre-war pattern. Thus, the British were not fully aware of the rapidity of the naval progress the Japanese made in the 1930s. Those naval officers who did understand something of the expansion of Japanese naval might, found it difficult to suggest any way in which the Royal Navy could strengthen its position in the Far East without denuding European waters of capital ships; Britain simply had not enough power to go round.

The higher echelons of the British armed forces spasmodically responded to this dilemma in the 1930s by advising the government to make terms with Japan but, as pointed out previously, this was impossible without sacrificing China and the whole legal base of international order. Japan’s policy was the first challenge by a great power to the League of Nations system, it demonstrated clearly that the values, which had inspired the organization, were not only not shared across the world but actually treated with the derision expressed by Konoe in 1918. Paradoxically, though they were supposed to reduce the prospects of war, they would have to be fought for if they were to survive at all. Britain and Japan were advancing on completely opposite trajectories in foreign and colonial policy. Britain was gradually accommodating Indian nationalism and giving the Indians
ever greater control over their own country. Successive British governments believed that this was not only the way to avoid bloodshed but morally justified. As one of the official reports on Indian politics commented:

We have grown to understand something of the ideals which are inspiring the Indian national movement, and no man who has taken part in working the representative institutions of Britain can fail to sympathize with the desire of others to secure for their own land a similar development. We ... suggest a plan by means of which Indian constitutional reconstruction may be peacefully and surely promoted.

The Japanese armed forces wanted to crush liberal developments in their own country, while fighting a ferocious counter-insurgency campaign in China, symbolized by General Okamura Yasuji's call to destroy the guerrillas in a 'kill all, burn all, destroy all, campaign'. As far as this campaign went, the British and Japanese had wholly different views of what was going on in China. British newspapers were deeply critical of Japanese military repression, while Shiratori Toshio from the Japanese Foreign Service told the British ambassador in Tokyo, Sir Robert Craigie, in 1937 that the Chinese were enjoying peace of mind under the superbly trained Imperial Japanese Army.

There was an unbridgeable gap between the two world views.

In parallel with this ethical and political dichotomy, Japanese officers had a different view of their own society and the West. They shared Repington's inaccurate vision of a West soaked in egoism and materialism, and unwilling to defend itself. This was all the odder because, as pointed out above, it had been totally undermined by the sacrifices made by the Western nations in the First World War. Of course, it may be said that Tokyo's main concern in 1941 was the United States, and the US had only sent forces to Europe during the last year of the First World War and had not made sacrifices on anything like the same scale as the European nations. The Americans might thus have been effete even if the Europeans had proved they were not, though the next four years were to show that there was nothing to choose between the Western nations in terms of their willingness to defend their countries. Historians have also disputed the vision of Japan as a Spartan nation united in its determination to challenge the world. John Dower has, for example, pointed out that it was politically deeply divided and that its people were no more physically fit than their equivalents from the industrial cities in the West.

Given the contrasting cultures and historical experiences, it is surprising that Japan was prepared for a while to live with the League of Nations system and the Washington Treaties of 1922 preserving the
status quo in China and the Pacific. At that time, Western hard and soft power was enough to maintain order and to corral Japan. When this power weakened during the Great Depression those British army officers, such as General Piggott and Malcolm Kennedy, who wanted to re-establish close Anglo-Japanese ties, could make no headway. Western and Japanese ideas about the nature of the international system, the situation in China and the value of the League of Nations were so far apart that, once the Japanese armed forces found a new mentor in Nazi Germany and came to believe they had the ability to change the 'oppressive' status quo, war became certain, a war which was to be fought with particular ferocity because of racial, legal and moral differences.

Ironically, it was the British Army whose representatives had been so sympathetic towards the Japanese in the 1930s which was to suffer most appallingly at Japanese hands. Many of those crimes, which commentators had accused the Imperial Japanese Army of committing in Korea and China, were now to be committed against British soldiers. Thousands of British and Australian POWs died at Japanese hands building the railway through Thailand to Burma, mining copper in Taiwan or coal in Japan. Again, the West had moved on a very different trajectory from the Japanese. The treatment of POWs had evoked growing anxiety during the First World War and the laws protecting them had subsequently been strengthened. Governments had a legal and a moral duty to do what they could to protect the POWs who had fallen into their hands. To mistreat POWs was an outrage, to allow them to die of starvation, disease and torture was abhorrent.

But the POWs were witnesses to even more serious outrages. They saw Indonesians buried alive, Chinese men, women and children taken down to the beach in Singapore and murdered in thousands, and Tamil families carried off to work on the Thai railway and left to die of cholera in their tens of thousands. Fortunately, enough British POWs survived to record these events.

It was an appalling end to the saga which began with the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 and the euphoria with which Japanese successes against Russia were often greeted in British newspapers. This book describes the Anglo-Japanese military relationship and its slow demise. It is written from the British point of view and using British archives. The first chapter looks at the strategic assumptions within the British government about the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and its impact; the second shows the extent of British help to the Japanese during the war against Russia; the third and fourth chapters show how the British war correspondents and military observers fitted the war into the continuing debates about the threat of a European conflict; the next
two, more narrowly technical, chapters analyse the way in which the Russo-Japanese War influenced, or failed to influence, British military policy; Chapter 7 shows how the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the war, confirmed Japan on its imperial course while obscuring the moral and political divergence between East and West; Chapter 8 examines how the British authorities in India worried that the war would both encourage Russian expansion through Afghanistan and the rise of Indian nationalism; Chapter 9 shows the gradual divergence between the West and Japan in the 1930s and the way the British military experts on Japan tried to bring Britain and Japan closer together politically; Chapter 10 examines the war itself through the eyes of the economist, Paul Einzig; Chapter 11 explains why Japan treated POWs and Asians as slaves during the Second World War and the following chapter examines the literature produced by the former POWs on their experience of slavery; Chapter 13 looks at the ‘victim’ state of Korea and how it suffered in the first half of the twentieth century. The conclusion shows how British military observers failed to see the full extent of the clash of civilizations and ethics between Japan and the West until they were confronted by its horrific implications in the ‘Death March’ of American prisoners in the Philippines, and the British suffering in the copper mines of Taiwan and on the Burma-Thai railway.