The Manchurian Crisis, 1931

Japan considered the neutrality of Manchuria, China’s northeastern region, crucial to the defense of its Korean colony, leading it to maintain special privileges in Manchuria throughout the twentieth century. Thus the Japanese were alarmed when their influence there was threatened by the success of Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the nationalist Kuomintang government, in unifying China in the late 1920s as well as Soviet pressure from the north.

On the night of September 18, 1931, an explosion along the Japanese-controlled South Manchurian Railway served as a pretext for Japanese troops to seize Mukden. On September 21 reinforcements arrived from Korea; during the ensuing weeks Japanese control expanded throughout Northern Manchuria and across the entire region at the end of three months. Chiang Kai-shek adopted a policy of non-confrontation, counting on the League of Nations to settle the crisis. The Lytton Commission, appointed by the League, found Japan to be the belligerent but instituted no meaningful consequences. Japan then withdrew from the League and maintained its occupation of Manchuria until 1945.

The Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945

The second Sino-Japanese War was the culmination of events initiated by the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) in which China, under the Qing dynasty, was defeated by Japan and forced, in the Treaty of Shinonoseki, to cede Taiwan and recognize Korean independence. Japanese imperialism and its domination of China led Sun Yat-sen, founder and first president of the Republic of China, in 1912, to begin efforts to unify the country. Chiang Kai-shek continued those efforts through his leadership of the Kuomintang government, with the ultimate goal of ridding China of Japanese influence.

The war’s beginning can be traced to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, when the Imperial Japanese Army assaulted that vital access bridge to Beijing. The Chinese government, deciding that was the final straw on the camel’s back of Japanese aggression, commenced full mobilization of its army. The Japanese attacked again and, after the brutal three-month long Battle of Shanghai, were victorious. The Japanese then captured the capital, Nanking, which fell on December 13, and initiated the worst massacre of the war, killing, according to some accounts, more than 300,000 civilians. The Japanese attacks culminated in the capture of Wuhan in October 1938, but the Chinese Kuomintang government initiated a defensive strategy that U.S. general Joseph Stillwell called “winning by outlasting.” The succeeding years were characterized by Chinese successes in frustrating Japanese advances but regaining little occupied territory and, in addition to other atrocities, the indiscriminate bombing of civilians by the Japanese air force. That status quo continued until the United States was drawn into the war at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.