



# The Not-So Noble Lie: The Militarization of the Japanese Population Through Education



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## THESIS INTRODUCTION

In the Twentieth Century, the Japanese possessed one of the most powerful and successful militaries in the world. They both impressed and horrified the world with their dedication to the Japanese cause and stringent military discipline. Historians generally cite fervent nationalism, an independent military, and economic pressures as the triggers for Japanese militarism and wartime conduct. While these factors played a role, the Japanese education system was the catalyst for the militarization of the population prior to World War II.

## JAPAN AND THE WEST

The Japanese traditionally exercised a policy of isolationism, especially in regards to the West. Only one port-Nagasaki, was open to foreigners. Eager to exploit the strategic position and resources of the island nation, US president Millard Fillmore commissioned Commodore Matthew Perry to open Japan for trade with the United States in 1852. The Japanese initially refused, but they bowed to the pressure of American naval supremacy. Humiliated by a forced trade agreement with the Americans, the Japanese developed a hatred for the imperial Western powers and a desire to recreate their success. At the conclusion of World War I, the Japanese held colonies in Asia and boasted one of the world's largest navies.

## BUSHIDO AND EDUCATION

Bushido is the Japanese which means “the way of the warriors”; it typically refers to the code of ethics and conduct practiced by the samurai. This tenet of Japanese culture was exploited and made into a weapon by the Japanese government. The Ministry of Education was tasked with writing propagandist textbooks. Social studies texts justified the Sino-Japanese War, claiming that the Chinese had rejected offers of friendship from the Japanese and violated the rights of Japanese living in China. Music education was filled with war songs. Elementary school children were taught that death in combat was honorable. Secondary education encouraged male students to enter military service and female students to enter nursing. Suicide became common among young men after a lack of success at military academy of defeat in battle.

## JAPAN AND RACISM

The Japanese believed they were the master race, and they inculcated their xenophobic ideologies in their children. The Japanese saw other ethnic groups like the Koreans and Chinese as inferior, on the same level as vermin. Science classes taught a version of science in which the Japanese were “proven” to be the master race. In social studies classes, Japanese students were told Japanese colonialism was paternalistic, and it was the duty of the Japanese to care for racial inferior Asian groups.



*Young boy engaging in bayonet practice. Tokyo, 1944*

## THE EMPEROR MYTHOS

In Japanese culture, the emperor retained a god-like status well into the modern era. His images were considered sacred, and they were treated with great respect. An order from the emperor was equivalent to an order from a deity, and this was impressed on Japanese schoolchildren both at home and at school. To serve the emperor or to die trying was the highest calling. Often times, military officers would order their subordinates to do unspeakable things in the name of the emperor, and their subordinates, entrenched in years of indoctrination, obeyed.

## THE JAPANESE WAR PERSPECTIVE

Since the years following World War II, Japanese textbooks have been eerily silent regarding wartime atrocities, especially regarding those committed during the Sino-Japanese War. The Rape of Nanking, which claimed the lives of as many as 300,000 Chinese, and the use of comfort women are glossed over. These shocking crimes may take up a few lines or a single page in a social studies textbook.



*Cover of a Japanese publication for young boys, 1922.*

## CONCLUSION

The Japanese government's methods of education during the early Twentieth Century illustrated how vital the education system can be in shaping the character and destiny of a nation. Schoolchildren can be armed with weapons and ideologies to assist them in the fight against foreign powers, or they can be armed with an understanding of others and a critical mind to assist them in the fight against oppression.