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Disaster, Technology, and the Military
The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and the Impact of the Environment on Cultural Perceptions of the Military

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ABSTRACT

The Great Kanto Earthquake and the impact of disaster on cultural perceptions of the military as well as the synergistic relationship between disaster, technology, and the military had a profound bearing on ensuing developments in Japan and have subsequently been overlooked and underestimated in modern historical scholarship. This paper studies the Japanese response to disaster in the chaotic atmosphere associated with the challenges of a state struggling with modernity, urbanization, and industrialization. A burgeoning democratic polity and a growing middle class wrestled for a voice within an oligarchic state run by an aging elite. These clashes were frequent and often bloody in the early twentieth century leaving the popularity of the military at its lowest mark since the Meiji Restoration. In 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake reversed the fortunes of these military perceptions and reinvigorated the military hierarchy. The public’s perception of what was conceivable was subtly changed, as a once hostile urban community now acquiesced to ever-increasing militarism in order to protect life and property. Although this trend certainly continued and mirrored political developments that had already been occurring prior to WWI, the public shift in perceptions caused by this military disaster response provided the impetus for a more conservative turn and a decline of the democracy movement over the next several years. This historical narrative provides troubling signs in the context of recent developments in the twenty-first century and provides relevancy to growing fears about global warming, the militarization of disaster response, and the slow degradation of American political institutions in a post-9/11 United States.
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INTRO: “A Soldier! Thank you for all you’ve done.”¹

The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 resulted in the death of over one hundred thousand people and was a defining moment in Japan’s transformation to modernity. This paper scrutinizes the diverse responses to the disaster, arguing that those responses combine ostensibly unrelated phenomena, such as the rise of Japan’s obsession with air power, the continued fixation on technology as a solution to Japan’s geographic limitations, and the enduring high public opinion of the military as the most efficient branch of the Japanese government. The confluence of Japan’s first domestically constructed aircraft, the growth of aerial photography following World War I (WWI), and the use of these technologies during the Great Kanto Earthquake by the military provide a unique visual record of the challenges implicit in coping with disaster. The use of new technology in a time of crisis and the subsequent elevation of these machines by authority as a symbol of control and progress are noteworthy events. The Great Kanto Earthquake and the impact of disaster on cultural perceptions of the military as well as the synergistic relationship between disaster, technology, and the military had a profound bearing on ensuing developments in Japan and have subsequently been overlooked and underestimated in modern historical scholarship.

Rising economic strain within Japan and several public clashes with the military prior to 1923 had left the Japanese people largely disdainful and hostile towards the military. The image of a militaristic Imperial Japan united around the common soldier

from the Meiji Restoration to World War II (WWII) is an inaccurate observation of the period, largely fueled by propaganda in Japan and abroad. Prior to 1923, many soldiers had stopped traveling in their uniform, and the military itself was viewed as an impediment to Japan’s future democratic development. These were further compounded by unpopular, expansionist policies overseas while the general population economically struggled after WWI. These developments received a sudden shock in September 1923, and the changes that occurred in Japanese urban society were profound. These changes even stunned the military who initially were not sure how to receive the change in fortunes. One eyewitness, Kawabe Torashiro, a captain in the Imperial Japanese Army perfectly describes this point:

> When I entered the unburned portion of the suburbs, I could see the movements of men whose shadows were barely reflected flickeringly in the light of candles. These people, peering at my uniformed outline, greeted me twice or three times with “A soldier! Thank you for all you’ve done.” Just a few short weeks before, when I left Tokyo, we in uniform had unpleasant and scornful glances directed towards us in streetcars and other places.²

Clearly, the earthquake and the subsequent military response had profoundly changed the public’s thoughts on the military as well as created an opportunity for the military that had not been possible prior to the disaster. This development, influenced by many other factors in the interwar period, contributed to a changing atmosphere among the public of what was possible or conceivable after a sudden catastrophic disaster. This historical record highlights a growing interest and trend in twenty-first century scholarship that remains concerned with modern disaster, global warming, the militarization of civil disaster response, and military culture.

² Kawabe, interview, 53.
The impetus for this paper emerged while sitting in the back of a military reconnaissance aircraft droning in circles over southern Louisiana. I had spent many years in the military as an intelligence analyst and aerial observer. Our primary mission was to provide real-time intelligence to ground forces as they maneuvered on the battlefield; we had acquired substantial amounts of experience in the post-9/11 world while deployed overseas in multiple combat environments. However, it was with some incredulity that I and my fellow crewmates found ourselves repeatedly reassigned to humanitarian and disaster relief missions while in the United States. These missions sometimes required us to adjust our deployment schedules and operational training while time and money were spent at conferences and meetings aimed at preparing for emergency contingencies. Many of these events built a momentum of their own, and significant amounts of funding and equipment became associated with these types of support operations. Training for new operators and newly acquired equipment was used in emergency operations, and combat experience was refocused towards search-and-rescue operations stateside. Reciprocally, experience garnered from stateside operations (while not always applicable to combat operations) was in turn utilized overseas in combat settings by fresh crewmembers.

One might suppose from my comments and reflections that I remain biased towards these types of military operations, but that is certainly not the case, and the value of these efforts in a calamitous post-disaster setting is indisputable. I would never argue the legitimacy of the profound necessity for stateside disaster relief operations, and I participated in many personally rewarding missions in order to help people caught in nature’s wrath. What remains puzzling and needs substantially more historical study is
the way in which the military responds to these types of events and the public’s perception of the military after these operations. Specifically, these operations seemed to take a life of their own at the expense or to the detriment of preparation for our primary war-fighting responsibilities. Many responses seemed excessive as various military units were assigned to milder climatic events in what seemed an over-reaction to previous disasters. This created an atmosphere where intelligence assets were actually competing against each other during disasters while forces deployed overseas in combat were screaming for support. Over the years, my frustration built, and I remained incredulous when observing how units and military leaders expended limited resources and valuable assets to support an ever-growing series of “emergency” operations.

The internal development of this sort of “disaster militarism” within the United States has increased exponentially in recent decades and these military humanitarian assistance missions are now being exported throughout the world to beleaguered nations. It does not take much to understand the reasons for these efforts when one observes the money, resources, and positive feedback from authorities after each mission, regardless of the necessity or results. In 2003, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was reorganized as part of the Department of Homeland Defense (DOHS) as a direct result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, essentially placing disaster and environmental response under the same umbrella of terrorism and international crime, the implication being that earthquakes and hurricanes need to be

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fought and defeated using the same methodologies used to combat external attacks on
the nation. This is a very problematic solution to a very complicated issue that blurs the
line between war and civil affairs.

Recently, a small series of articles has begun to appear in various forums,
questioning the increasing amount of military activity in the disaster relief field,
particularly following the 9/11 attack. Kathleen Tierney describes how recent
developments in disaster response motivated by cultural disaster myths promulgate
misconceptions of administrative incompetence and public panic:

(following the Katrina Hurricane) administration officials had likely already concluded that civil
authorities were incapable of responding to Katrina and that the military would have to play a
significantly larger role than it has traditionally played in U.S. disasters.4

The injection of the military within a disaster zone exemplifies the problems
associated with using troops for disaster relief:

Search and rescue missions in the flooded neighborhoods of New Orleans began to resemble
military search and destroy missions, as armed soldiers broke down doors and entered homes in
search of stranded victims.5

While the level of destruction that may ensue from a natural disaster often seems
devastatingly war-like, lumping these resources and capabilities into the same
department proves problematic when the historical record is analyzed. Eric Holdeman
asked this very question in his recurring emergency management blog entitled, “The
Militarization of Disaster Response,” in which he describes the creation of The Northern
Command and the expansion of military representatives in each regional FEMA

4 Kathleen Tierney, “Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane
5 Tierney, “Metaphors Matter,” 70.
headquarters.\textsuperscript{6} Many have begun to question the dangers implicit in continuously increasing military involvement in civil operations, which some contemplate directly threatens or may endanger civil liberties in some future scenario.

Based on my experience in the field, these developments are certainly not the result of some Machiavellian plan to subvert American freedom but, in nearly all cases, are the result of well-intentioned efforts to protect the civilian population and their property. However, the law of unintended consequences and the most well-meaning efforts often generate unforeseen costs when large government agencies are involved and millions of dollars are at stake. While I was in the military, I witnessed local leadership and state governments pleading for the support offered by the most modern technology available for reconnaissance. Often, it seemed the technology being used and the message it sent to the public developed out of proportion to its usefulness in the field. Each disaster recovery effort warranted the best technology loitering over a particular problem so that the public was made aware that everything was being done to support their relief efforts. Both the military and the local as well as federal government seemed to be attempting to benefit from this propaganda. What became even more stunning over time and with ensuing operations was the way in which, not only the public, but also the military leadership itself became enamored with the potential of using expensive cameras and satellite radios to overcome problematic and complicated environmental issues on the ground. Furthermore, the impressions left with the general public seemed to fuel further military support and clearly impacted feelings towards the military and its relationship with society.

Christof Mauch has observed, “Memory of natural disasters is, in contrast to the memory of war, markedly short-lived.” I find this a tremendously poignant observation given that most of my medals, awards, and military recognition came from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite the fact that I spent countless flight hours supporting various disaster and humanitarian operations stateside. Mauch elaborates his point further: “There are no veterans’ associations and but few memorials to keep alive the memory of great natural disasters; similarly, catastrophes caused by nature frequently receive no mention whatsoever in history books.” When considering the silent impact of these operations over time and the way they are largely forgotten in the historical record, several questions immediately come to mind: How does this impact cultural perceptions of the military? Do the positive public impressions generated by civil operations generate a more willingly compliant population when faced with further societal stressors, such as economic depression, class struggles, and external threats? Is there a concerted effort by military leaders to reap positive propaganda from these events? Is there an indirect relationship between spending on military technology and disaster relief? What effect might this have on later military budgets and perceptions of military strength? Furthermore, what are the long-term cultural ramifications of continued military involvement in civil affairs? These and many other questions immediately became the focus of my research, and it has become surprising to discover that there has been very little historical exploration on this critical subject.

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The Japanese Military

The Japanese military in the 1920s provides an excellent historical case study for these types of questions for many reasons. Japan was at a pivotal point, both militarily and culturally, in its modern development following WWI. Technical innovation was seen by many as a solution to growing concerns over limited resources as well as environmental limitations imposed by the Japanese archipelago. Aerial technology captured the imagination of the public and was viewed as one of these new answers, which seemed to offer enormous opportunities for a modernizing nation. The Japanese environment is one of the most active earthquake locations in the world, providing a plethora of examples of the challenges faced by a modern nation coping with recurring disasters. While every culture, society, and disaster are unique, the patterns observed here remain historically informative regarding these types of cultural influences and societal developments. There is a definitive similarity between various technical military responses to calamity and disaster relief efforts ninety years later. This case study will use the Japanese earthquake of 1923 as a specific example to uncover clues regarding these connections, which may be relevant to today’s relationships between society and the military following a disaster.

Furthermore, my thesis will investigate how these post-disaster cultural perceptions helped shape public policy as well as demonstrate the military hierarchy’s efforts to benefit from disaster. Unlike the Japanese navy, which had profited from propaganda surrounding several successful military adventures, the aviation proponents were largely untried and newly arrived on the scene following WWI. Renewed efforts for a self-sustaining, indigenous, aircraft industry, and the popular pride associated with
Japanese-manufactured aircraft built upon the memory of the aviation response to disaster. Although military spending declined in the 1920s, these memories of disaster response placed military aviation in an advantageous position in the subsequent decade. The Great Kanto Earthquake stimulated modernization efforts and created an experience that promoted the idea of new technology as a solution for extremely challenging geopolitical and economic concerns in subsequent decades.

The history of disaster in Japan is a long and painful story of tragedy and stoic resolve in the face of nature’s wrath. Japanese society had learned to adapt to their chaotic archipelago over many millennia; their culture has reflected their environment with beautiful works of art and a keen understanding of their relationship with nature. The early modernization of Japan in the nineteenth century under the Meiji Restoration added a powerful new dynamic to this traditionalist culture. A critical facet of this development is the way in which segments of Japanese society perceived modernization in the context of their environment. While romanticizing modern myths around the emperor, nationalism, and ancient samurai traditions, “Meiji Japan also promoted a modern economy, industry, science, and technology to survive in the capitalist and colonial competitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”9 This conflicting dichotomy placed in the context of rapid urbanization and industrialization provided a recipe for social conflict by 1923.

In order to avoid leaning too sharply towards an environmentally determinist perspective regarding the impact of the Kanto disaster, several key points should be highlighted. First, disasters were a normal fixture of Japanese life well before the

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twentieth century; however, these recurring events had a mounting effect on their society’s memory. Second, modernization, especially military modernization, was well underway for many geopolitical and economic reasons; however, political infighting and traditionalist leaders produced mixed results. Third, interest in aviation among leaders and the public was rising before 1923. The important point here is to analyze the stressors and impact of this particular disaster on this burgeoning new technology and the ways in which this influenced later events within Japan.

Disasters do not often create change but can be the impetus or catalyst for a renewed effort within portions of a society. Moreover, the impact of a disaster on military culture and public perceptions of a nation’s military after such disaster have often been overlooked when studying the rise of military authority and nationalistic movements. The memories created and the narratives shaped by elites in this particular case will be proven to have propelled Japanese society towards a different direction not altogether predetermined by their culture and past. Although their rich cultural and ancient past most certainly factored into this complicated dynamic environment, it was the 1923 earthquake that became the catalyst for later developments.

**Historiography**

The historical foundations for this study would not be possible without the excellent work of two preeminent authors and scholars, Gennifer Weisenfeld and Charles Schencking, who have been studying Japanese disaster history for several decades. While each author pursues a different methodological approach, they both have studied the Great Kanto Earthquake with the intent of revealing the earthquakes significance to
1920s Japan. Perhaps not unnaturally given the subject matter, both authors establish a rather dark vision of the impact of calamity on a nation and both authors correctly relate these events to later developments in ensuing decades. Their focus provides the initial insight and cultural context behind which this paper has been pursued. However, these influential works seem to overlook some of their own keen observations when interpreting the impact of these events on military culture and the larger Japanese society.

Weisenfeld’s background as an art historian places her in an excellent position to evaluate the rich catalogue of art and media that was generated following the 1923 quake in her captivating book, *Imaging Disaster: Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan’s Great Earthquake of 1923* (2012). She chronologically interprets several years of art and print photography with an eye towards demonstrating the reciprocal relationship images have with a society’s culture. Not only do images reflect a culture’s interests and desires but they also illuminate the ways in which a culture may be affected by the visual record over time. The key point of her work is her conclusions regarding how the creators of imagery attempt to steer the narrative towards a beneficial outcome. In this regard, the imagery produced from military aircraft and displays of military forces providing security and support to the masses generate feelings of sympathy from the general public. Unfortunately, Weisenfeld’s observations are all too short on this subject, and the comprehensive nature of a historical book devoted to art culture leaves little room for any in-depth analysis of disaster and the military. Nevertheless, this author’s brilliant observations provide the spark for further research on this subject.
The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan (2013) by Charles Schencking provides a wide-ranging study focused on the cultural, political, and social ramifications of the 1923 earthquake. The penetrating depth of research he provides throughout this work reveals the high quality of his scholarship and his conclusions regarding the rebuilding effort are pivotal for our focus. We will see that the post-earthquake political landscape was a plethora of competing actors all hell-bent on pursuing their own agendas. Schencking observes that many of the hoped-for innovations and opportunities provided by the disaster largely crumbled under fiscal challenges and these competing narratives. He concludes that these desires by the general public to return to normalcy or rebuild their lives, resulted in a failed attempt at renewal; therefore, he concludes that disasters do not impart much change in a society striving to simply rebuild their lives. Schencking is following a well-established historical record of previous historians who clearly identify this as a disappointing outcome with an eye towards what later happens in the 1930s and 1940s. While the premise of the failed rebuilding effort is totally warranted in this case, he overlooks in his conclusions the ways in which the disaster was a catalyst for later perceptions and developments from an environmental perspective. If one believes that later ultra-nationalism and militarism in the 1930s were an inevitable outcome of Imperial Japanese culture, then one has to look no further than Schencking’s conclusions. However, it will be demonstrated in this paper that military authoritarianism was hardly a foregone conclusion leading into the 1920s, and there is substantial evidence that the earthquake forced an involuntary direction change on an unsuspecting public.
Chronology

The chronology of my paper will be divided into four main sections. The first section will provide a clear and unequivocal global historiography of the cultural impact of military operations during disaster relief operations. The subsequent sections will be divided into three main periods focused on the Japanese case, particularly on the 1923 earthquake as a crux point for later developments.

The first section will broadly study the confluence of two distinct areas of historical study that have often only slightly overlapped, namely, environmental and military-political histories. Environmental histories have built a rich catalogue of scholarship on disasters and their impact on culture and society; however, while reporting on the timely efforts of the military to alleviate suffering, they often only provide a superficial analysis of the effect on military culture and public perceptions of the military. Additionally, military historians rarely insert environmental response into their broader tactical and strategic military histories. The gap between these two fields is the unheeded middle ground that I will demonstrate has had a substantial influence on culture and the military. This brief historiography will also demonstrate how external environmental stressors exacerbated nation-state internal weaknesses. These examples will compare outwardly struggling states with apparently healthy modern nations in order to demonstrate the subtle impact of natural disaster on a nation’s society.

The remaining chapters return to the Japanese case, the first of which is the pre-disaster political and technological atmosphere prior to the 1923 earthquake. This section focuses on the burgeoning democracy movement, challenges within the military hierarchy, the development of aircraft technology, and public perceptions of the military
combined in a rich stew of competing social and political adversaries bent on promoting their own agendas. These competing narratives placed considerable internal stress on a young industrializing nation struggling with a rich and ancient traditional culture in contrast to the technological transformation occurring at the dawn of the twentieth century.

The Great Kanto Earthquake provides a picture of a nation’s use of technology in a time of crisis and demonstrates how external environmental stress can intensify internal weaknesses. Practically in this case, the civil authorities became overwhelmed with the monumental impact of the catastrophe, and the national government’s inadequate initial response received intense criticism. This natural disaster wreaked havoc on Japan’s urban imagination, inciting violent pogroms against Koreans and provoking incidents of nationalistic racism, which later contributed to the eclipse of Japan’s emerging democracy. The public perception of the military subtly shifted in the post-disaster environment as the military was often seen as the only functioning, effective organization within Tokyo. Military aircraft droning overhead, patrols on streets, checkpoints, water and food distribution centers, and the military leadership’s efforts to restore order immediately created a positive perception among civilians for the first time in many years. Although the military had been undergoing extensive cutbacks prior to the earthquake, and some of the blame for violence was attributed to military authority, an immediate financial reversal occurred during relief operations and by the end of the fiscal year in the Diet.

In the decades following the 1923 earthquake, a marked change in Japan’s political climate occurred with an increased fixation on military strength and technology in
response to increasing global challenges.\textsuperscript{10} The resurgence of Russia, the threat of a reunified nationalist China, arms treaty limitations, United States anti-Japanese immigration laws, and economic depression led to a fearful and paranoid sense of looming disaster among the elite military leadership. This sense of listlessness was compounded by deep divisions within the military’s own leadership following the demise of the original samurai familial and geographical cliques which had previously controlled the military into the early twentieth century. As mentioned previously, technological solutions to Japan’s problems were not new, but the pressure of the disaster intensified by these external anxieties provided an impetus by conservative societal elements and submission by more liberal minded individuals.

Despite these challenges, the popularity of aviation continued to capture the public’s imagination through various forms of imagery, art, and journalism. The media not only became a facilitator for interpreting disaster but also an authoritative commentator on how the disaster developed in the minds of the community. Interestingly, the media relationship with the military also advanced in a synergistic manner because of the publishing of aerial photography of a ruined Tokyo. Both parties benefited from the creation of aerial reconnaissance photos and the subsequent publishing across mass media for a hungry public. The end result of this dominating narrative is a public perception of aviation competence, dedication, and sacrifice out of proportion to what had actually been accomplished with military aviation by the end of the 1920s, under the guidance of a fractured and conflicted military elite.

Disaster and the Military, A Brief Historiography

Increasing fears over recurring environmental disasters in the twenty-first century have stimulated interest in numerous studies, straddling multiple disciplines, concerned with the cultural impact of disaster on society. David Alexander interpreted disaster “as a window upon the inner workings of society.”11 This poignant statement illuminates a growing interest among scholars to reexamine traditional historical narratives with a renewed scrutiny based on what disasters tell us about their individual cultures and society. Often, a society under intense environmental stress provides observable clues to deeper intrinsic issues, such as racism or corruption. In some cases, these events have been an enormous catalyst for change, while in other cases the observable response has been much more subtle and complicated. The plethora of responses ranges from the impetus for improved reform, continued stagnation, and even bloody revolution. Historians have often overlooked these crux points as simple unexpected glitches on the radar, and superficial analysis seems to support a return to normalcy after these events as communities struggle to rebuild after a disaster. An increasing amount of research is demonstrating that there is much more to these events, and the depth of their impact has had far-reaching consequences.

The following section will highlight numerous cases of recent scholarship that support this environmental argument and plainly back the premise of this paper, which as stated previously, contends that the Great Kanto Earthquake profoundly affected the Japanese military between the two world wars. These cases demonstrate a global

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perspective that covers a wide array of manufactured disasters and natural cataclysms. Included within many of these environmental studies are political, social, cultural, scientific, and economic approaches incorporated into regional and global histories. In this case, I will endeavor to highlight clear evidence that demonstrates the impact of disaster on social-political developments, as well as the juxtaposition of the military and its relationship with the public and a nation’s government within these environmental schemata.

The tone of environmental response, as mentioned above, is often complicated and varied, but the relationship of society with political-military structures is often directly influenced by the overall health of a state and its people. In situations where the state is perceived as weak, perhaps economically struggling or lacking necessary infrastructure, not only does the disaster wreak havoc on the unprepared populace, but the changes that occur as well as the societal relationship between those in positions of power also often shift in unexpected directions. In many cases, those with the means to enforce power either feel compelled to take action or simply use the opportunity to strengthen their own position.

On the other hand, industrialized, capable, and modern states have demonstrated the ability to absorb these events with much less trauma to the general public as well as without dramatic shifts in power. However, this has left some to mistakenly conclude that modern states have little to fear from sweeping cultural changes influenced by natural disaster. A closer scrutiny demonstrates that the influence of disaster on cultural relationships and elite power structures affects all societies regardless of overall health

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and technological capability. Societies’ ability to absorb these events and seemingly rebound makes the study and interpretation of these events much more complicated, as the repercussions and effects in some cases have often taken years to become discernible within the historical record. The ensuing cases highlight not only the differences between outwardly healthy states but also those who that are internally struggling with weighty and complicated issues prior to disaster.

**Struggling States**

Struggling or outwardly unhealthy states troubled by serious poverty or destabilizing internal stressors often provide the most obvious examples of the impact of calamity on a culture and society.¹⁴ There are many historical examples, and these cases have been well-studied throughout the globe, but a few key examples from Stuart B. Schwartz’s *Sea of Storms* (2015), and recent scholarship on twentieth century Argentina by Mark A. Healey aptly demonstrate the previous points.

*Sea of Storms* by Stuart B. Schwartz, is an ambitious macro-study of hurricanes in the Caribbean over five hundred years, encompassing all of the major western powers and periods of the modern era. A historical study of this scope naturally covers a number of historical perspectives, but Schwartz’s narrative is predominantly social in nature as he attempts to circumvent many of the traditional borders imposed by geography and national boundaries. The predominant point provided by the author is the striking conclusion that although various disasters by themselves have not determined regional history, the cumulative effect of so many storms over so many

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¹⁴ Alexander, *Confronting Catastrophe*, see “circle of increasing vulnerability”, 7-22.
centuries has, in fact, substantially impacted every people and nation that has come into contact with the Greater Caribbean. Additionally, the fragility of several Caribbean states in the post-colonial period highlights the intense cultural response these hurricanes continue to incite from these states.

The first example demonstrates the power of authority to manipulate these recurring hurricanes and the internal turmoil generated for their own benefit. In the 1920s, several hurricanes hit the Dominican Republic extremely hard. In 1930, while the global community was beginning to feel the impact of a world-wide depression, the Dominican Republic was hit once again and the resulting political disorder was used to great effect as an excuse to disarm resistance to the regime and reinforce the dictatorship of General Trujillo.\textsuperscript{15} While vast portions of the population were dead or homeless, he proclaimed martial law and permanently subverted democratic institutions. Trujillo also used forceful propaganda to create an image of himself as the benevolent leader helping his people in the post-hurricane recovery. The hurricane was used as an excuse to rather boldly strengthen his position at the expense of other elites. Much of the pain that the general population suffered might have been avoided with proper infrastructure and effective governing, but the internal weaknesses of the state were obscured and manipulated in order to increase power through military action. In this case, the military response did not provide much relief or generate a positive public perception but was effectively used as a cover to strengthen General Trujillo’s hold on power.

In another circumstance within \textit{Sea of Storms}, we learn how the Cuban dictator, Fidel Castro, used his aggressive governmental response to environmental disaster in

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1963 as propaganda to promote his leadership over previous inept leaders. His appeal to nationalism and the Cuban people was a bold attempt to “provide a sense of community” in the wake of tragedy.\textsuperscript{16} A salient point of his response to the hurricane in 1963 was the massive relief effort conducted by the military. Castro wisely utilized all the modern equipment he had available, including tanks and amphibious landing craft to provide relief to the masses. Most critical for our examination was his use of aircraft, particularly the helicopter, in combination with news media and film to promote his narrative. Through film and speeches Castro stated, “…the sense of community and common purpose (was) created by the revolution, and (thus) the ability of the revolution (is) to confront and overcome natural disasters.”\textsuperscript{17} Undoubtedly, these were subtle analogies intended to demonstrate his strength and continued confrontations with the United States, which helped to reinforce not only his ability to overcome nature, but also the superpower located only a few short miles to the north. His use of propaganda and military technology in the wake of disaster became what Schwartz referred to as “a transformational moment” in Cuba and helped to consolidate his control into ensuing decades.

Lastly, one of the most compelling and conspicuous illustrations of the power of change created by environmental pressure on a community and the ways in which various actors manipulate these events for their own gain is the story of the Argentine earthquake in 1944. Mark A. Healey has made the case in \textit{The Ruins of the New Argentina: Peronism and the Remaking of San Juan after the 1944 Earthquake} (2011) and in “The Fragility of the Moment: Politics and Class in the Aftermath of the 1944

\textsuperscript{16} Schwartz, \textit{Sea of Storms}, 290.
\textsuperscript{17} Schwartz, \textit{Sea of Storms}, 290.
Argentine Earthquake,” that the earthquake shattered the old order and launched the successful career of Colonel Juan Peron. No more direct case provides strength to the challenges implicit in a struggling polity and the weakening of traditional institutions in the face of disaster. While Peron was only an unknown functionary as Secretary of Labor prior to the quake, his rise to fame and the growth of his political movement can be directly attributed to his efforts in the post-earthquake landscape. The mobilization of his aid campaign and the rapid involvement of the military demonstrated a competence that immediately made Peron a hero and strengthened the positive public opinion of the military.\(^\text{18}\) While later efforts to continue the rebuilding largely failed, Peron’s meteoric rise to power was only beginning.

Outwardly Healthy, Modern States

Modern, industrialized states demonstrate the point that, where disasters occur is as important as what type of disaster takes place.\(^\text{19}\) Modern states have developed extensive emergency response plans as well as having the infrastructure and resources on hand to respond to even the worst cases. Often, these immediate responses are in large measure the actions of modern military forces, (not unlike weaker states, but with discrete differences that will be demonstrated below) called in to provide relief or recovery in a task-saturated environment. The long-term cultural responses in these states are often hard to decipher as much of the initial effort is focused on recovery and a return to normalcy. Additionally, many of the elites within these societies focus


considerable effort on creating narratives of censuring or attributing deficiencies to previous authorities, all aimed at shifting the blame elsewhere. Thus, the long-term cultural impact of disaster often remains a regional concern in larger states and is often overlooked when considering later historical developments. Little or no effort has been made to examine the cultural impact of the modern military’s involvement in these events. However, several recent scholars have begun to delve into this intriguing question and have developed some rather striking conclusions.

Franz Mauelshagen’s essay “Disaster and Political Culture in Germany since 1500” provides a rare opportunity to assess catastrophe on a region not normally associated with disaster history. Although his broad scope provides too little specificity in some places and is largely focused on the pre-industrial era, his conclusions regarding nation-building are extremely pertinent in this case. In 1954 and 1962, floods in West Germany and the involvement of the federal army in relief efforts contributed to a changed outlook on German rearmament and the public perception of the military. While the public continued to hotly debate the issues regarding rearmament in the post-WW II and Cold War political landscape, the German public shifted towards a more favorable atmosphere following these events. West Germany’s admission as a member of NATO a short while after the floods in 1954 was accepted quite calmly by the general public. Mauelshagen’s observations regarding perceptions of state-power and the publics willingness to embrace these efforts towards rearmament, despite earlier misgiving and Germany’s recent past, accentuate how public opinion and the military can be

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powerfully impacted by disaster.

In Acts of God, the Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America by Ted Steinberg we are again exposed to nation-building in the post-WW II landscape. Disasters and their impact have been an important slice of American history over the last one hundred and fifty years. Steinberg's Acts of God chronologically describes many of these disasters with the intention of discrediting the common narrative that these events are unavoidable acts of nature. His environmental, political, economic and social history of American disaster systematically and powerfully describes the ways in which the government, the business community, elites, and the media have controlled our understanding of disasters. In this particular case, the federalization of disaster by the United States government converted what had traditionally been a local or state issue into an emotional, national-political event. This increased politicization of disaster installed several new players in the race for positive media attention and federal dollars. For example, with everyone from congress, media elites, political parties, federal agencies, and the military vying for dollars and promoting their own narratives, the idea that hurricanes are increasing or becoming more frequent despite the dangers of exposed communities and unregulated expansion into danger areas confuses the public perception of the reality surrounding the issues.21 In short, the demonizing of nature provides a perfect scapegoat for poor policies and justifies lavish spending in order to defeat this nature-enemy. This manipulation of vested interests has had a deep effect on the United States public, politics, and the entire nation-state, bringing about ever-increasing military budgets geared towards disaster relief. The growth and development

of the United States and the interest of the military-industrial complex in disaster response remain an unfinished story.

Richard J. Samuels conducted extensive research and published a well-written account of the March 11, 2011\textsuperscript{22} Japanese earthquake, the subsequent tsunami, and the Fukushima Daiichi meltdown that provides a modern picture of disaster. Samuels describes in chilling detail the initial developments within the government during and after the disaster. The economic costs, poor crisis management, charged political atmosphere, and social reaction are reviewed and assessed. This work is primarily a present-day political and social analysis of Japan; however, the author does provide a brief section that includes some historical perspective and comparative analysis. Samuels conclusions and observations regarding the military response and performance during the disaster are the relevant points of this study. The governmental response to these events produced a reaction similar to United States responses following 9/11 and Katrina. Although each nation is culturally and socially distinct they both demonstrate a growing trend in twenty-first century military response to disaster.

Modern Japan’s relationship with the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) has been complicated and troubled by a general anti-military outlook in the post-WWII era. This mood is particularly reinforced by the Japanese constitution, which prohibits involvement in war and only allows (on paper at least) a military for self-defense. This political and social attitude is interesting when compared to events prior to the 1923 earthquake and provides another telling example of the ways in which the environment compels a community’s decisions and perceptions. After the 311 disasters, many within

\textsuperscript{22} Typically referred to as 311 in print and media.
conservative elements of Japan have argued that the SDFs inability to provide relief without the support of the United States is another clear example of the need for remilitarization. Furthermore, this rhetoric uses 311 as a war-like demonstration of the SDFs capabilities in the face of a foreign attack, suggesting that “…this time, it was a nuclear accident, but tomorrow, it could be a foreign enemy.”\textsuperscript{23} A January 2012 cabinet poll determined that 97.7 percent of Japan appreciated the SDF’s efforts.\textsuperscript{24} An even more striking result was the positive feelings and welcome the United States Marines received from the general public during relief operations. The U.S. Marines have largely been viewed unfavorably by the general Japanese public since WWII. This turn in public perception has not been lost on military leadership in Japan and the United States. Conservative elements within the Japanese government have not missed the opportunity to frame this crisis in the context of national security, and the long-term results of this shift in Japan have not yet been concluded.

When considering these examples from healthy and unhealthy nations, several conclusions can by drawn from the previous disaster wreckage relating to twenty-first century developments in the United States. As states modernize and develop, they become better equipped to not only absorb these sudden catastrophic events but also have developed amazing levels of spin control in order to deflect blame and mollify public perceptions. However, in nearly every case, this pressure strains the functioning of each nation-state’s capabilities and often provides opportunities for actors in positions


\textsuperscript{24} Richard J. Samuels, \textit{311: Disaster and Change in Japan}, (Cornell University Press, 2013), 80-81.
of power to strengthen their own agendas through a compliant and exhausted public. The results of these efforts are usually only sudden when the state is weaker. Stronger states may rebound from these types of events when not threatened or under stress elsewhere, especially given enough time and space to dull the pain of the initial conservative, fearful backlash. The continued militarization of FEMA and disaster response should be no surprise given the 9/11 terrorist attack and Katrina hurricane in the first decade of the century. The next sections will demonstrate that there are long-term dangers implicit in even the strongest and most resilient states when continuing to acquiesce to increasing military involvement in civil affairs for the sake of public safety.

In conclusion, while the challenges associated with the impact of the environment and the cultural-historical inferences to be made from disaster response create many opportunities for a reexamination of traditional histories, several key points must be understood within the context of these events. Firstly, disasters vary in terms of landscape and type, creating unique circumstances in almost every case. Secondly, as demonstrated above, the impact on a community varies with the strength of the state or community affected by the disaster. Thirdly, the relationship with powerful elites, the population, and the military varies by degree in direct proportion to the previous two points. Lastly, the cultural impact of these events can only be analyzed over time, as many of the responses in subsequent years often seem to confuse perceptions. Although the above cases emphasize all of these points, a relentless theme is the impact on the public’s relationship with its military, and its influence on military culture is indisputable.
PRE-DISASTER 1905 - 1923, A Growing Modern State

The pre-disaster landscape created the setting as well as the opportunity for change within Japan; while this ancient culture and young nation-state were certainly unique outside of the western world, the trajectory they were following was not unlike that of many early industrial states in the nineteenth century. A growing liberal, democratic polity was challenging conservative elites, while a rising middle-class and industrialization tested traditional values and norms. Following the Meiji Restoration and the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, a strong modernizing, Japanese nation catapulted onto the international stage. The democracy movement continued to gather strength under an increasingly vocal and adversarial atmosphere, and an oligarchy of aging samurai remained at odds with a new cadre of young liberal leaders. Additionally, a clique of young, outsider officers, often schooled overseas and trained in modern warfare, was also at odds with these elderly leaders and deeply concerned that Japan had technically fallen behind other modern powers. The Japanese aircraft industry was in its infancy following WWI, and carrier-launched aircraft had only been in development for a few years. The building of an indigenous aircraft industry, the transfer of foreign technology to Japan, and the struggle for increased spending are all readily apparent during this period. Further accentuating these budget concerns and internal conflicts, the army was becoming deeply unpopular with the general public, placing not only the last of the diminishing old oligarchs on the defensive but also the entire conservative military cultural tradition.
The rise of the democratic movement within Japan began during the Meiji Restoration under the supervision of an oligarchy of former samurai aristocrats in order to continue to reform the Japanese government. These reformations were seen as a necessary expedient in order to remain competitive and independent from western imperialistic powers. Although a constitution and parliament (Diet) were instituted in 1892, the center of power remained within this small group of increasingly elderly men who manipulated all of the strings behind the scenes. This cautious westernization began to show signs of strain at the turn of the twentieth century as a younger core of pro-democracy advocates struggled for more decision-making power within the government. Cabinets were formed at the approval of the oligarchs, and all were members of the ruling elite; additionally, by 1900, the military had placed itself in a position to control the formation of cabinets based on their approval of a war minister. However, compromise with the emerging political parties was necessary to approve fiscal policies as well as modernization legislation in the Diet, giving party leaders the opportunity to join cabinets and permitting admission into the exclusive elite membership created by the oligarchs.

Unfortunately, these concessions did not reduce conflict, and public dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Portsmouth boiled over in violent demonstrations following the end of the Russo-Japanese War. The public felt Japan had attained a great victory at a high cost in the war, but poor leadership had allowed the nation to be humiliated in negotiations when the treaty did not provide an indemnity from Russia. This disappointment resulted in the Hibiya Riots during which nearly a thousand

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causalities resulted from clashes with authorities. The military was called up and martial law was established but the embarrassing unrest forced the resignation of the Prime Minister and his cabinet.26 A subtle conservative response to this continued clash of ideologies was the creation of a Special Higher Police Force or “thought police” in 1911, demonstrating the ruling elites’ anxieties over growing liberalism.27 Despite these concerns, the first democratic-party-dominated cabinet under Hara Takashi rose to power in 1918, and this delicate balancing act between the last of the geriatric conservative oligarchs and the rising liberals continued in the post-WWI political landscape.

The military hierarchy struggled with their own growing pains during this period and these internal conflicts were destined to wreak havoc on their once proud and somewhat mythologized samurai tradition. Although the military had created a national army during the Meiji Restoration, the leadership remained under the influence of the oligarchs and a smaller group of select younger protégés within the higher ranks. This nepotism began to have telling consequences after the Russo-Japanese War, as many outsiders within the leadership chain began to clamor for reform and modernization. While the older clique and their surrogates preferred élan, traditional values, and the bayonet, a new crop of leaders with recent experience against Russia saw continued modernization and training as the keys to the future. Compounding this secret internal battle was the very public disagreements against Diet members over military expenditures, arms reduction, and future fiscal policy. Victory against Russia and global recognition by other western powers provided a false sense of security until WWI, when

26 Henshall, A History of Japan, 97.
27 Henshall, A History of Japan, 98.
conflict with Germany demonstrated how dangerously inferior Japanese machines were against a modern power. This bitter feud between the various cliques and competing strategies within the army reached critical mass by 1921 when the Generals Tanaka and Ugaki publicly advocated for a reduced army size in order to permit modernization - a principle that was considered by many as anathema to their military tradition.\textsuperscript{28} Half-hearted attempts at compromise did not satisfy either army faction, but the military limped forward with the creation of several machine-gun battalions, an air squadron, and some minor experimentation with new technology.

The development of aircraft technology in this complicated political maelstrom is a significant facet and telling indicator of the military reaction to the 1923 disaster. The aforementioned military squabbling between various geographic factions dating back to the Meiji Restoration had been challenging the system since 1905 but adding further to these struggles was the increasing competition between the army and navy for resources, finances, and strategic vision. While the army’s visionaries debated the virtues of modernization with the elderly oligarchs, Japanese admirals readily recognized the need for improved aircraft and ships to combat foreign navies. Despite the limited resources within Japan, the Japanese navy had purchased their first aircraft and trained their first aviators by 1912.\textsuperscript{29} It was Japanese naval aviation that experienced combat against the Germans in their Pacific colonies during WWI, and it was their lessons learned that provided the impetus for aircraft development. This interest and development by the navy provided the motivation for the army to pursue

\textsuperscript{28} Edward J. Drea, \textit{Japan’s Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall 1853-1945}, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 146.

their own limited programs as well as for manufacturers to consider developing an indigenous, independent-aircraft industry. By February of 1923, using British advisors and test pilots, the Japanese navy launched aircraft from its first proto-aircraft carrier, the Hosho.\textsuperscript{30} Despite this incredibly rapid achievement, the navy and army remained bogged down by fiscal constraints and an increasingly hostile public, which continued to restrain further development. The understated shift in interest in technology and the public’s later and rather mild acceptance of military development are critical to understanding the changes that took place after the 1923 disaster.

The high point of the public’s perception of the military was the welcome home ceremonies after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. “There was no hint of resentment against the heroic generals and admirals or the brave soldiers and sailors whom they commanded.”\textsuperscript{31} The first turn for the worse occurred in 1912 when the Saionji cabinet collapsed because of the army’s intransigent behavior and the war minister’s resignation.\textsuperscript{32} The army demand for an overall increase in strength by two divisions created an unexpected backlash among the public that was fueled by the rising democratic movement.\textsuperscript{33} The opening of WWI and Japan’s alliance with Britain brought them into the war against Germany and distracted the public for a brief moment. However, the decision to support an allied operation to intervene in the Russian civil war turned into a disastrous quagmire in Siberia. While the western powers recognized the hopeless nature of involvement in the civil war and withdrew, Japanese military

\textsuperscript{30} Peattie, \textit{Sunburst}, 20.
\textsuperscript{32} Humphreys, \textit{The Way of the Heavenly Sword}, 19.
\textsuperscript{33} Henshall, \textit{A History of Japan}, 109.
leadership insisted on lingering in the region in what was viewed by many as an obvious effort towards imperial expansion. Public distrust at home under the new democratic cabinet and global condemnation resulted in an eventual withdrawal by the army, but not before the public's feelings towards the military had taken another damaging hit. The growing demand by the global community for arms reduction in the face of the millions of deaths in WWI affected Japanese politics as well, leaving the militarists and what remained of the conservative oligarchs reeling and defensive.

Compounding this growing clash between the rising cosmopolitan, democratic public and the more traditionalist conservatives were the Rice Riots in 1918. Inflationary food prices in the post-WWI economy, acerbated by the government’s massive purchasing of rice in order to support the early stages of the very unpopular Siberian Intervention, led to widespread discontent. What began as a localized protest soon grew into violent clashes and larger public demonstrations. “It is estimated that 700,000 people vented their frustration and wrath on rice dealers, rice brokers, employers, governmental officials, and peace officers in an unexampled burst of spontaneous popular discontent.”\(^{34}\) The army was called in to quell unrest in at least sixty instances and in several cases, clashes resulted in people being killed by bayonets and rifle fire.\(^{35}\) The resulting drop in confidence caused the downfall of the reigning cabinet and ushered in the first true party cabinet under Hara Kei, leader of the Seiyukai party, and a steadfast opponent of the Siberian Intervention.\(^{36}\) A world-wide peace movement, arms

\(^{34}\) Humphreys, *The Way of the Heavenly Sword*, 42.
\(^{35}\) Humphreys, *The Way of the Heavenly Sword*, 43.
\(^{36}\) Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army*, 143.
reduction, democratic reform, and distrust in the military all continued to grow in the wake of WWI:

In Japan, the infusion of these ideas did not result in so dramatic a turn, but their influence was unmistakable. Party government appeared in 1918. Japan entered an unprecedented era of parliamentary influence, and political parties flourished. The labor movement blossomed, and socialism became firmly rooted in the intellectual and laboring classes. The Japan Communist Party was formed in 1922.37

This continuing progress left to its own development, in historical comparison with other industrial powers, would likely have resulted in more democracy and liberal institutions.

Military conservatives were appalled by these developments within their nation and struggled for answers to demands for reduced budgets and the unprecedented and demoralizing public animosity towards the common soldier on the streets. These conflicts at home derailed military expansionist goals in China and the greater Pacific. One principle the factitious military cliques could agree upon was the need to continue to expand overseas in order to provide much-needed resources for the homeland as well as to create additional geographic buffers between themselves and the seemingly expansionist, western powers. The annexation of Korea in 1910, the political-economic interests in China, and the acquisition of German territories after WWI all seemed in danger under the new politically hostile climate. The army received particular condemnation during this period but the navy also felt the pinch, predominantly after the signing of the Washington Naval Arms Limitation Conference in 1922. The conference

37 Humphreys, The Way of the Heavenly Sword, 43.
left many military elites seriously indignant with a leadership that they believed had acquiesced to a racist, disadvantageous, battleship-tonnage ratio, which ensured British and American naval dominance in the Pacific. In 1921, a right-wing youth assassinated pro-democrat Prime Minister Hara. In 1922, the army finally begrudgingly pulled the last troops from Siberia, after which the Diet reduced military expenditures to one-quarter of the budget. The military culture was demoralized, and enlistments were in decline; military leadership was pessimistic and contentious with few answers to changed perceptions among the public. Generals and admirals watched with resentment as the Diet and the publics hunger for more democracy and an additional stake in governmental policy shaped strained fiscal policies. It was clear to many within the military elite that compromises would continue to have to be made in order to maintain force levels at a minimum amount while adjusting to what appeared to be a well-established democracy gathering momentum in the post-WWI era.

Despite the horrific outcome of WWI, Japan remained largely unscathed and continued to benefit from a rising independent industrial complex and liberal reform. Some institutions remained largely illiberal, and the conservative elite still secretly managed many affairs, but public popularity and clamor for democracy were indisputable. However, several internal stressors strained what otherwise appeared to be a healthy, strong state. These stressors included the democracy movement’s challenge of the traditional system, military discontent and infighting, and extensive public dissatisfaction with military conservatism. These internal stresses certainly could

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39 Drea, Japan’s Imperial Army, 145.
have been reasonably overcome by a maturing modern power, one which could avoid any external threats or additional internal challenges and given the time and space to continue to develop responsible institutions. Unfortunately, 1923 would shock the nation and the world and create several indirect reactions that threw Japan into a different future.

**DISASTER STRIKES, SEPTEMBER 1923, Crux Point**

The Great Kanto Earthquake provides a revealing snapshot of a region during a time of crisis and demonstrates how external environmental stress can exacerbate internal weaknesses. Particularly, in this case, the civil authorities became overwhelmed with the monumental impact of the catastrophe, and the national government’s inadequate initial response received intense criticism. The public perceptions of the armed forces subtly shifted in the post-disaster environment as the military was often seen as the only functioning, effective organization within Tokyo. Military aircraft droning overhead, patrols on streets, checkpoints, water and food distribution centers, and the military leadership’s efforts to restore order immediately created positive feelings among civilians for the first time in many years. This was heightened by a new, modern mass media that rushed to capture this event on print, images, and film for a hungry, captivated public. Although much of the imagery simply pictured an uncomprehendingly large amount of rubble and charred bodies, popular images taken from military aircraft and scenes of the army providing relief were also a predominant fixture. This intense atmosphere provided another window into the darker inner workings of Tokyo society with the vigilante attacks on Koreans. The earthquake wreaked havoc on Japan’s urban imagination, incited violent pogroms against Koreans, and provoked incidents of
nationalistic racism, which certainly provide clues regarding the eventual eclipse of Japan's emerging democracy. Although the military had been undergoing extensive cutbacks prior to the earthquake an immediate financial reversal occurred during relief operations and by the end of the fiscal year.

On September 1st, at two minutes to noon, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake rocked the coast and the greater metropolitan area of Tokyo. Within forty-eight hours over 120,000 people would be dead due to collapsing buildings and an unprecedented firestorm that nearly enveloped the entire city. The dropping of an atomic bomb could hardly have been worse for the residents of one of the most vibrant cities in the world in 1923. The totality of destruction not only left the inhabitants of the ruins in shock but also stunned the world, which rushed to offer aid in one of the twentieth century's first acts of global disaster relief. To this day, September 1st remains Disaster Prevention Day in Japan and is synonymous with catastrophe and disaster readiness.40 Once the tremors had stopped and people began to pull themselves from the ruble, they were greeted by a disturbing silence and a rising cloud of dust over the city. Sadly, as people assessed the damage and rushed to locate loved ones, the horror was only beginning as numerous small fires began to smolder in the ruins. Soon, these tiny sparks grew into a horrendous inferno that swept through the largely wood city with a speed that prevented many people from escaping on foot. The chilling aftermath of the fire storm left tens of thousands of charred bodies littered throughout the city in what must have appeared to have been a sort of post-apocalyptic landscape. The images and memories

of this disaster would remain burned into the national psyche for many generations, and the impact of this event can hardly be underestimated when considering the historical narrative.

Any government response under these difficult conditions could hardly be criticized during the best of circumstances, but the timing of the disaster seemed particularly troubling given recent political developments. The sitting Prime Minister, Kato Tomosaburo, had just died of cancer on August 24\textsuperscript{th}, and the new Prime Minister, Yamamoto Gonnohyoe, was still considering who to select to join his new cabinet on the day of the disaster.\textsuperscript{41} Further weakening any potential response was the lack of any contingency strategy or emergency operation plan to cope with the immediate crisis.\textsuperscript{42}

Although Japan was intimately familiar with earthquakes, modern responses to disaster in a growing industrialized state were still in their infancy; few outside of small academic circles recognized the absolute need for crisis management as cities and industries grew at exponentially alarming rates in the early twentieth century. Japan’s hierarchical leadership structure left few authorities with any idea what to do as they awaited orders from the leaderless elite. Many brave and loyal local leaders, police, and fire departments rushed to offer aid but, within hours, were overwhelmed and swallowed up in the burning city. Communication broke down, and vast portions of metropolitan Tokyo simply became a dark void of information, with no messages coming out and nothing getting in. In areas where authority still managed to communicate, the system was inundated with pleas for assistance and calls for help. This turmoil at the top and spiraling confusion left the government paralyzed for several days; however, there were

\textsuperscript{41} Schencking, \textit{The Great Kanto Earthquake}, 49.

\textsuperscript{42} Schencking, \textit{The Great Kanto Earthquake}, 49.
a few notable exceptions that came to play critically important roles over the next few days and weeks.

Within a few hours of the disaster, several key men in commanding positions began to take the initiative the city so desperately needed. The deputy commander of the Imperial Guard Forces, General Ishimitsu Maomi, acted immediately to deploy his troops to protect the imperial palace.\(^{43}\) The highest-ranking police official, the inspector general of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, Akaike Atsushi, contacted General Ishimistu and asked for assistance. These two men, on their own authority, began the slow process of providing initial relief and support to an increasingly panicked population as fire swept the city.

The following day on September 2\(^{nd}\), new cabinet ministers were finally sworn in, and one of their first official acts was to mobilize troops and declare martial law. This initiated the largest peace-time mobilization and deployment of the army in Japan’s history prior to the 1940s.\(^{44}\) In effect, civilian leadership willingly handed full authority for the capital to the army until martial law was withdrawn. Curiously, the declaration of martial law included many auxiliary powers, including “...the power to examine mail and telegrams, close land and sea routes and conduct house searches.”\(^{45}\) The military was, in fact, the only vital government authority capable of handling the magnitude of the disaster, and this response was critical to the subsequent memory of effective, reliable answers to emergency.

\(^{43}\) Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake*, 49.
\(^{44}\) Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake*, 51.
On September 2nd, the commander of the Third Army Division began moving elements of his forces into Tokyo in what could only be compared to the movement of an army during war. The army had no accurate or reliable information about the city, no one in authority had any answers, and everything appeared to be in complete anarchy. Small reconnaissance units were ordered into the city and initial checkpoints were secured at critical locations as the army inched its way into the ruins. In order to get a better picture of the destruction as well as determine adequate routes in and out of the city, aerial reconnaissance flights from the army and navy began circling overhead nearly constantly for the next several days and weeks.\textsuperscript{46} For many beleaguered inhabitants, the first sign of civilization in those first eerily quiet days must have been the incessant drone of airplanes overhead.

The memory of these aircraft remains so strong, even today, that in the 2013 film \textit{The Wind Rises} by the Academy Award winning filmmaker, Hayao Miyazaki, these aircraft are pictured flying directly overhead after the disaster.\textsuperscript{47} The next several generations will remember the disaster and the response from the military as one of the most unforgettable moments of the inter-war period. While the cultural significance of this memory remains strong in Japan, the west has all but over-looked the enduring legacy these recollections have had on Japanese culture. It is certainly no coincidence that Miyazaki included the Great Kanto Earthquake and a brief glimpse of aircraft during the disaster in his fictional portrayal of the brilliant engineer Jiro Horikoshi. Horikoshi later becomes the chief engineer in the design of several Mitsubishi aircraft, the most

\textsuperscript{46} Schencking, \textit{The Great Kanto Earthquake}, 53.

\textsuperscript{47} Hayao Miyazaki, “The Wind Rises,” Directed by Hayao Miyazaki. (Tokyo, Japan: Toho, 2013), DVD.
famous of which is the A6M Zero, one of the very types of aircraft that flash across the sky at Pearl Harbor in 1941.\textsuperscript{48}

Returning to 1923, the challenges may have seemed insurmountable, but within a few days, the troops were well established in the city, and the process of cleaning up began with staunch efficiency. Military checkpoints were posted throughout the region, medical and food distribution centers were set up, and the recovery of remains was organized. The navy began rebuilding the docks in order to facilitate aid to the city, and Tokyo began receiving shipments of rice on navy vessels within the week.\textsuperscript{49} Army engineers began rebuilding bridges and railroads almost immediately, and the temporary replacement of transportation had a direct and positive impact on relief operations. With over half a million homeless refugees and over two million people needing food and basic necessities, the herculean relief effort was commendable for its performance under such trying circumstances. Weisenfeld vividly describes the impact of these operations not only as relief efforts but also as “visual assertions of authority” in a chaotic environment.\textsuperscript{50} These efforts would leave metropolitan Tokyo and the nation with a deep visceral memory of the state’s relationship with the public as a guardian and rejuvenator.

The mass media’s relationship with the military at this juncture is an effective illustration of the way relationships within segments of a society develop under crisis. During the initial chaos, journalists and photographers struggled to get into the city or gather coherent information from panicked citizens. With no effective communication

\textsuperscript{49} Schencking, The Great Kanto Earthquake, 63.
\textsuperscript{50} Weisenfeld, Imaging Disaster, 53.
with any of the news agencies in the city, several enterprising photographers and
reporters leapt at the chance to fly on the continuous reconnaissance and relief flights
the military was sending over the city. Some of the earliest public photos of the disaster
were images captured from military aircraft circling over the burning landscape. This
seemingly arbitrary event, permanently fixed in time, became the symbol of military
expertise, the nation-state, and their relationship with the public. The media’s efforts to
provide an image of disaster to the public also gave the military an image of “command
and control” among a pliable and fearful public. Aircraft became the medium of control
and safety, demonstrating the presence of what, in truth, was an all but absent state
authority.

Despite the military’s efforts to relieve the city and establish a semblance of
authority in post-disaster operations, events within the city were not without some
setbacks and serious controversy. Although army assistance was deeply needed, their
efforts were often heavy-handed and excessive in certain situations. Not unlike their
efforts to quell protests during the Rice Riots, individual units often severely responded
to incidences of looting and violence. Many within the city panicked during the
disaster, and once the city was in ruins, several neighborhood groups began forming
vigilante gangs, which subsequently preyed on the weak and minorities. One of the
groups most profoundly affected by this was the large community of Korean workers
residing in the city. In blatant acts of racist violence, several thousand Korean residents
were killed in targeted attacks, fueled by exaggerated rumors of Korean wrongdoing.

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The police and army units were disconcertingly complacent in these early attacks, and later reports attributed many deaths to swords, bayonets, and bullets. During the remainder of the month, many more incidents were reported, including the assassination of numerous members of the socialist labor movements. Eyewitnesses later reported that members of the military police were often present during these attacks and in one high-profile case, the leftist Osugi Sakae, was actually in custody at the time of his death. Surprisingly, given the public uproar and earlier responses to military heavy-handedness before the disaster, after a few weeks, the public largely turned a blind eye to these events as the nation became fixated on the rebuilding process.

The famous anarchist Osugi Sakae’s unfortunate murder, along with the feminist Ito Noe and Osugi’s seven-year-old nephew, occurred while in custody at a military police substation on September 17th; he was strangled to death by the army captain Amakasu Masahiko. Not only is this a tragic reminder of the chaotic and dark nature of humanity after a disaster, but it also contains demonstrative symbolic significance of the clash between the left and right. Additionally, this is another example of the way in which disaster can uncover the sordid underbelly of unresolved social conflict within a community. Sadly, although the sudden nature of Masahiko’s actions seemed a lone act of built-up resentment and unwarranted hostility towards a perceived threat to his

1996, 66.
56 Humphreys, The Way of the Heavenly Sword, 56.
57 Humphreys, The Way of the Heavenly Sword, 56.
radical conservative ideology, it remains symbolic of how the tragedy of 1923 ended any chance for the burgeoning democracy movement. The impetus for this symbolism is the Great Kanto Earthquake, an event that without which there would have been no murders on that day. The sensational nature of the crimes drew considerable attention during the trial but was largely forgotten by the general public, and Masahiko was released from jail just three years later.\textsuperscript{58}

Imperial Japan was a mix of modern and traditional culture that struggled with one foot in its identity in the past while the other remained planted firmly within the image of a modern western state. This process began with early modernization in the nineteenth century under the Meiji Restoration and almost immediately added a powerful new dynamic to an otherwise technologically outdated culture. These contradictions symbolized by an imperial mythology and romanticism for the past in contrast to urbanization and growing heavy industry, typified the intense social strain placed on Japan’s culture.\textsuperscript{59} The growth and development of Japan as a modern nation was further challenged by the rapid nature of this change which was initiated from the top in only a few short decades.

A critical facet of this development is the way in which segments of Japanese society perceived modernization in the context of their relationship with the dangerous earthquake-prone landscape. An environment of recurring earthquakes requires a high degree of resiliency for any community, but what modernization meant in this context was interpreted differently by many groups within Japanese society.\textsuperscript{60} Some, such as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Humphreys, \textit{The Way of the Heavenly Sword}, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Mizuno, \textit{Science for the Empire}, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Schencking, \textit{The Great Kanto Earthquake}, 11.
\end{itemize}
the rural communities and conservatives, felt that excessive modernization was not only a threat to tradition but also left them fearfully more vulnerable to disaster. Still, others, such as urban elites and young liberals, felt that modernization and technological solutions were the answer to dominating their environment and overcoming the shaky ground of the Japanese archipelago. In many ways, both groups were proven correct, and historical hindsight now demonstrates that the dynamically changing cultural landscape, as well as the destabilization of traditional mores shaped by industrialization and modernization, created cultural and societal cracks within Japan; unfortunately, these remained unresolved as the worst disaster in the nation’s history approached. Japan had run out of time before many of the hoped-for reforms and liberal institutions could be permanently fixed within the state and before a catastrophic event ripped the ground from underneath the nation. However, the technological, modern military response not only saved lives and ensured the capacity for rebuilding but also generated an unprecedented national awakening of Japanese identity in the aftermath.

It is this awareness of shared experiences enhanced by a powerful new media and the many competing narratives within society which became the inter-war crux point behind future developments within Japan. The disaster not only contributed to an injection of nationalism, not dissimilar to the Russo-Japanese War, but also changed the landscape of what was conceivable by the general public. It no longer seemed inconceivable to many liberals that the military was the answer to many future challenges, and most would agree that the military had rehabilitated itself in the wake of catastrophe.
AFTERWARDS 1923 - 1931, Hopeful Future - Dark Turn

In the decades following the 1923 earthquake a marked change in Japan’s political climate occurred with an increased fixation on military strength and technology as a response to increasing global challenges.\(^6\) Competing narratives after the disaster created a mixed and confused array of interpretations during the reconstruction process. Compounding these internal developments were several external pressures: the resurgence of Russia, the threat of a reunified nationalist China, arms treaty limitations, United States anti-Japanese immigration laws, and economic depression. These led to a fearful and paranoid sense of looming disaster among the elite military leadership. This sense of listlessness was compounded by deep divisions within the military’s own leadership following the demise of the original samurai familial and geographical cliques, which had previously controlled the military into the early twentieth century. Out of the maelstrom of these events, a new reforming leader, General Ugaki Kazunari, rose to become army minister and subsequently dominated army organization and development for the next several years. Ugaki’s adroit recognition of the challenges facing the military after the Great Kanto Earthquake resulted in several changes that coaxed the direction of the military towards a more technological, modern force. This was further enhanced through a compliant public by the militarization of disaster preparedness within schools and the later regular practice of air raid drills within urban areas. This turn towards a more fearful future and technical-military response to disaster was built upon a community memory of disaster response as well as fueled by a visual and cultural record in images and print.

The public readily continued to devour media in various forms of imagery, art, and journalism that showcased the popularity of aviation as well as the power implicit in a technically superior military force. The end result of this dominating narrative was a public perception, driven by military disaster response in 1923, of a competent, dedicated military, that was ready to make great sacrifices to protect the homeland against not only foreign western powers but nature itself. Sadly, this public image was out of proportion to what had actually been accomplished with military aviation by the end of the 1920s, as even after Ugaki’s efforts towards reform, the military remained fractured, internally conflicted, and resource poor.

**Ugaki Era**

Reconstruction and renewal after a disaster are often the scene of competing accounts regarding not only the cause of the destruction, but also what is at stake in the rebuilding process. Many felt that the rebuilding of Tokyo was an opportunity to propel Japan into modernity, while other elites remained concerned with many modern social challenges. Conservative elements remained particularly troubled by the perceived earlier growth of liberalism and democracy, as well as seeing the modern urban landscape as a degradation of moral values. These fiercely competing visions locked horns over the next few years, not only on principles of reconstruction but also on the future direction of the state. Various cliques within the government had a significant amount of interest in developing these competing narratives in order to support their

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own political agendas. Emotions ran high as these differences seemed to put the very future of the state and Japanese culture in the crosshairs.

Despite this deluge of conflict, some military leaders seized an opportunity to settle their own internal disputes concerning military technical modernization versus traditionalist doctrines of war. In the face of declining military budgets and rising unpopularity, the fortunes of the army immediately began to turn by the end of 1923 and subsequently received its first serious transformation since the Meiji Era in 1924. Given the extreme conservative elements sitting at the top of the command hierarchy, it would be too much to state that these developments shocked the military culture into a new stage of expansion, but nevertheless, the attempt to renovate the army during this period proved pivotal for later developments.

The Great Kanto Earthquake took place during an extremely critical period and provided the opportunity for new ideas to rise to the top, and their developments remained influential into the 1940s. Several factors contributed to this atmosphere in 1923, the most important of which were the decline and demise of the last great samurai cliques left over from the Meiji Era. The last of the young samurai who had defeated the Tokugawa Shogunate and restored the emperor to power, facilitating the modernization of Japan, had finally passed away, leaving only protégés and leaders who had no living memory of the initial restoration. Furthermore, The Yamamoto cabinet collapsed at the end of 1923 under the pressure of reconstruction and the controversial assassination attempt on the Crown Prince.65 This opened the door to the rise of General Ugaki Kazunari as army minister within the new cabinet, and his leadership

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was so influential that historians refer to this period from 1924 - 1931 as the Ugaki Era.\textsuperscript{66}

Army Minister Ugaki was a product of the traditionalist military culture of the period and rose to prominence as one of the followers of the old guard, but from his accession to the top post, he quickly and deftly took firm control and became the most dominating figure within this exclusive club for the remainder of the 1920s. This is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, and to the surprise of his mentors, he was a reformer and modernizer. Second, for the first time within the contemporary Japanese military, he attempted to surround himself with men of ability rather than based on clan nepotism. His first official acts in 1924 immediately recognized the necessity to address military fiscal challenges in the post-quake setting but sought to exploit these events to the military’s benefit. Even prior to his appointment as army minister within days of the earthquake, Ugaki wrote in his diary:

“The people of the country except gross ingrates, at least all classes of people who feel the direct influence of the recent calamity, have a feeling of gratitude for the actions of the army. Moreover, the idea of cursing the military and the advocacy of arms reduction will perhaps change somewhat as a result of [their] appreciation.”\textsuperscript{67}

A superficial analysis of army developments during this period would lead to the conclusion that army reductions continued at a pace equivalent to events prior to the disaster, but several key developments have often been overlooked by previous scholars. Ugaki recognized that expenditures on the military would have to be reduced

\textsuperscript{66} Humphreys, \textit{The Way of the Heavenly Sword}, 72.
in order to rebuild Tokyo despite recent appropriations to the military to support disaster relief operations. The audacious ploy Ugaki attempted was to agree to the reduction in the size of the army, a concept considered contemplable and preposterous by the old guard, and use the money saved for research and modernization.\textsuperscript{68} The reduction of four army divisions created further deep divisions within an already factional military structure, but the beneficiaries of this modernization were the technocrats, who supported the creation of several aircraft units and renewed efforts at experimentation.\textsuperscript{69} The military willingly played on the Diet civilian leadership’s positive feelings towards aircraft in the post-disaster environment to expand this branch of the armed forces at the expense of other areas.

In Japan, the turbulent post-WWI period was only further destabilized by the 1923 quake, and feelings of listlessness and dread crossed all classes and social strata. Powered by a continuing sense of looming disaster and surrounded by so many perceived adversaries in the global community, the elite leadership struggled to reign in what they saw as dangerous tendencies in the general public. Following the earthquake, the militarizing of disaster response was felt to be a necessary expedient to prevent future panic among the general public as well as to strengthen the nation. Military-style drills that “integrated physical and mental training” were initiated in public schools in order to prevent the sort of urban mob panic and atrocities seen in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake.\textsuperscript{70} In 1928, air raid drills became a regular fixture in major cities; army and navy aircraft often flew during these drills in order to

\textsuperscript{68} Humphreys, \textit{The Way of the Heavenly Sword}, 79.
\textsuperscript{69} Humphreys, \textit{The Way of the Heavenly Sword}, 92.
\textsuperscript{70} Schencking, \textit{The Great Kanto Earthquake}, 313.
simulate attacks on urban regions.\textsuperscript{71} One cannot fail to recognize that these efforts continued to capture the public's imagination regarding not only the threat of air attack but the continued growing potential of Japanese air power. These developments are not unlike similar worldwide examples of the conservative turn the public and government often take following a shocking disaster as discussed previously.

**Hopeful Future**

The visual and cultural record of the impression that aviation continued to have on the public's imagination in the 1920s is easy to identify and clearly places military aircraft at the forefront of their ideas regarding technical modernization. This was in contrast to developments prior to the disaster, during which considerable imagery focused only on ground forces and the negatives associated with public riots and suppression. The exception to this was the Imperial Navy, which had learned its lessons in the Russo-Japanese War and was highly attuned to the powerful propaganda associated with a modern navy.\textsuperscript{72} The army was certainly aware of this propaganda and without a war to showcase their modern weapons, under Ugaki's vision, used the Great Kanto Earthquake as a warlike facsimile to generate positive feelings. Over the next few years, beautiful works of art and media photography continued to showcase the powerful symbolism associated with aircraft. Numerous works of art are still displayed today within the Kanto Memorial Museum in Tokyo, and several stunning paintings

\textsuperscript{71} Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake*, 313.

prominently showcase aircraft over the disaster site. Additionally, military reconnaissance photos taken of the city rubble became very popular as postcards during the subsequent period and can still be found for sale as collectors’ items on eBay today.

Visits to the Great Kanto Earthquake Memorial in 2015 and 2016.
Image taken by author at Great Kanto Earthquake Memorial Museum, Tokyo, Japan, (2016).

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73 Visits to the Great Kanto Earthquake Memorial in 2015 and 2016.
74 Image taken by author at Great Kanto Earthquake Memorial Museum, Tokyo, Japan, (2016).
Takunaga Hitoomi (Ryushu), 1871-1936. Image taken by author at Great Kanto Earthquake Memorial Museum, Tokyo, Japan, (2016). Note the prominent nature of the military aircraft turning over the city in one of my most favorite images. (Best)
Takunaga Hitoomi (Ryushu), 1871-1936. Image taken by author at Great Kanto Earthquake Memorial Museum, Tokyo, Japan, (2016). Compare the image from a reconnaissance aircraft above and the painting created a few years later by Takunaga Ryushu. (Best)
The interest in aviation and the propaganda associated with it are also evident in print, particularly in the *Bureau of Social Affairs, Home Office, Imperial Japanese Government History of the Disaster* published in 1926. This official government history contains the Imperial Edict on Reconstruction, the Crown Prince’s Message, numerous photos and a complete historical description of the disaster, including substantial amounts of statistical data. In the section entitled, “Exploits of Army Fliers”, the heroism of military aviators is rather dramatically highlighted:

“Owing to the gravity of the mission, which required urgent delivery the flights were carried out suddenly in most cases with no preparatory arrangements and irrespective of weather conditions. They were, indeed, all forlorn hope flights. Some aviators flew at the rate of over 200 kilometers an hour and yet no injuries occurred.”

Descriptions typically emphasize the heroic nature of specific crews in their efforts to come to Tokyo’s rescue:

“...and a fourth plane piloted by Lieutenant Ogawa and a private, conveying mobilization orders to other army divisions, started for their respective destinations...the aviators flying through the dark [not an easy task in 1923 aircraft, authors note] safely carried out the important mission...”

A small chart includes the total number of flights and total flying hours recorded by some of the flying units from September 2 - 9, 1923, which is rather stunningly high for

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aircraft of the period and perhaps conveys the magnitude of the army effort in the first few days. 80

Dark Turn

Despite the efforts of the military leadership to modernize, the end results of efforts to update the Japanese military were ultimately unsatisfactory and dangerously deceptive as the 1930s approached. The factional, dogmatic nature of elite military politics effectively continued to undermine Ugaki’s best efforts, and he rather despairingly wrote in his diary: “I tried to seize the initiative, but the tendency of the army was to go in the opposite direction. Resisted by my juniors, everything I wished to do came to naught.” 81 Although Ugaki remained a titan of the military hierarchy throughout the 20s, the fortress-like nature of the military bureaucracy as well as the deep-seated obscurantism of many traditionalists within all branches of the services undermined long-term efforts.

Compounding the failure of these reforms was the global depression which only further weakened an already thin Japanese economy. The critical result of these events was to create an altogether different sense of affairs within the general public. The extremely secretive nature of elite leaders’ political infighting was to leave the masses with a distinct positive memory of military competence following disaster and the wondrous potential of technological progress. These failed outcomes essentially created a paper tiger while instilling the public with faith and overconfidence in the state’s ability to overcome nature and man. This was made worse by the further acquiesce to

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80 total flights 201, total flying hours 256.17.
81 Humphreys, The Way of the Heavenly Sword, 79.
conservative authority, allowing the burgeoning democracy movement to slowly wither and all but disappear among misguided perceptions of external threats and internal weakness.

There were two exceptions to this military paper tiger that were to have a profound impact on developments in the succeeding decades. The Imperial Japanese Navy continued to pursue efforts at modernization, motivated by global competition and wartime success dating back to 1905. The other exception to this was aircraft expansion; although still riddled with internal squabbling, undermined by anti-air traditionalist, and attacked by penny-pinching bureaucrats, aircraft technology continued to grow outside the reach of the military hierarchy. Primarily invigorated by a captivated public following the 1923 earthquake and the powerful economic interests of civilian industrial giants, aircraft advances continued uninterrupted into the 1930s. These developments left Japan with two areas of military capability more than equal to the other great powers but altogether underpowered by factionalism and a struggling resource-poor economy. The public and later even the generals themselves saw these deceptive strengths and the potential of military power as a continued solution to both internal and external challenges, further fueled by their own propaganda and popular imagination. These impressions, while not exclusively the result of disaster, were, in no small measure the consequence of military operations following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923.

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CONCLUSION: The Military and Disaster Response

On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack that stunned the world and triggered the United States’ entry into WWII. Ever since that moment, historians have struggled to separate the attack and the ensuing war years from preceding events. A rather ethno-centric outlook among western historians has argued the inevitability of the Pacific War given the combative militaristic tradition that was born during the Meiji Restoration. Despite recent efforts to reevaluate early twentieth century Japan without the foreshadowing of the later conflict, the record continues to be problematic given the deep-seated cultural outlook many within even the scholarly community still inevitably and unconsciously sustain. This paper avoids the teleology of WWII by showing how the prospect of Japan’s militarization went through the Great Kanto Earthquake, rather then by looking back from Pearl Harbor. However, these developments must also be understood and reevaluated within the context of our time in order to appreciate and understand what actually transpired in those formative years.

Firstly, why might the most economically weak and smallest nation among the great powers consider it feasible to attack and defeat the United States? There is a plethora of reasons and answers in this regard and many of them are outside the scope of this paper. However, history demonstrates that culturally and politically, the Japanese leadership had learned several hard lessons from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth, not the least of which were the benefits of having a strong and powerful military, which was not only able to project power but also defend the region around the Japanese home islands.
Secondly, where precisely did these ideas and principles come from? It is well documented that observations made about both western imperialism and the results of the Russo-Japanese War went a long way towards influencing these concepts. Certainly, a cultural tradition fostered on principles of militarism during the Meiji Restoration contributed to these notions as well. The simple premise of this paper is not to deny these earlier conclusions or refute their impact on 1941, but rather to consider new, previously ignored stimuli that shaped these same events. These considerations hold further weight when we consider recent trends in environmental scholarship and current global political events in the twenty-first century; these connections should be warning signs for the danger of discounting the potential of these patterns in the past.

Identifying clausal relationships between environmental stimuli and various nation-states is largely problematic and open to many interpretations; this is further complicated by the differences between healthy and unhealthy states. The variety of the landscapes, the strength of the nation-state, and the extremely intricate relationship between militaries and society make drawing specific conclusions regarding the impact of disaster and the environment a thought-provoking problem. However, the historical record reveals that these incidents have definitively influenced later events, and further research in this field is highly necessary given the upward surge in global temperatures over the last few decades. Although the link between global warming and war has not scientifically been confirmed at this point, the sudden and unexpected nature of disaster upon nation-states has provided many insightful opportunities to gauge global responses to nature.²³ Perceiving disaster as only one piece of a complicated puzzle

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²³ Halvard Buhaug, “Will Climate Change Lead to More War?” (Peace Research Institute Oslo), 10 April, 2018, University of Nevada, Reno, Lecture.
that requires thorough investigation from a political, cultural, sociological, and historical perspective may provide the missing ingredients to unravel these relationships. Rather than consider disasters as separate or individually isolated events, they must be viewed as adrenaline shots to the system. Simply described, they accelerate trends, or in some cases strikingly reverse pervious events because of the unforeseen stress placed on the given society. Furthermore, these shots to the system can, in some cases, be overcome like a common cold, if the state is strong; weaker states find these events life-threatening and may not survive the ensuing shock. Nevertheless, even the strongest states have turned to military response in order to effectively cope with these events, making the influence of these stressors extremely important when evaluating politics and cultures.

Disaster changes what is imaginable by the general public and the Great Kanto Earthquake accentuated fears, heightened vulnerability, and provided opportunity across all classes, groups, and interests. The hopeful democratic movement lost momentum after the disaster and was largely re-supplanted by the conservative elite. The military hierarchy within the army was galvanized into action under General Ugaki for a short period but largely reverted back to normal by the early 1930s; however, not before the foundation and incentive for modern aircraft had been firmly placed in the imagination of both the public and military. Most importantly, the cultural perceptions and the existing memory of Japanese society returned to a relationship where the military was perceived much more favorably, not unlike post-wartime perceptions of the Imperial Navy following the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. This was decidedly different from public observations and visible clashes that had been taking place after WWI.
Urbanization and industrialization had destabilized many traditional Japanese cultural values, but the 1923 earthquake roused the public into a national awakening that was readily recognized by the military elite and conservatives within the state. While not the creator of Japanese nationalism or later militarism, the stimulus of these events is clear. Although these developments took many more years to materialize and were certainly bolstered once again during the Great Depression, this shift is an important part of the interwar historical record. These changes and the opportunity created in the wake of the earthquake have been conspicuously absent from much of the traditional historical record.

Schencking astutely observed that societies after a catastrophic event often believe that everything will change in various ways; however, he argues, “…if history serves as a judge, (rarely) have disasters imparted change in societies, behaviors, or systems in such a sweeping manner.”\(^{84}\) He does conclude that what disaster reveals about a society is far more relevant than what actually changes. The arguments and developments that are exposed tell the historian much about society’s concerns and fears. Schencking is largely correct, but these observations are shaded with historical hindsight and slightly miss how these events influence continuing developments. His analysis reflects the disappointment of many groups who remained hopeful that the rebuilding effort after the disaster would provide the impetus for change. Instead, there was a general retrenchment, as well as a turn towards a more conservative more militaristic approach to internal and external problems, which was certainly a disappointment to many more democratically minded people in Japan. Schencking’s

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\(^{84}\) Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake*, 308.
conclusions ultimately suggest that Japanese militarism and the events as they occurred in the 1930s were unavoidable given the flaws within Japanese society. I resolutely contest this conclusion and argue that, although these flaws were apparent, events beyond the state’s ability to endure stymied the growth of the state and amplified deep-seated fears during a troubled period of urbanization and change.

By 1941, a few leaders’ own misconceived perceptions of what was militarily plausible, amplified by actions during the late nineteenth century and the Russo-Japanese War, fueled a sense of ultra-nationalism that was out of proportion to what was probable. These elite leader’s dominance and control of problematic political solutions, compounded by the nation’s serious economic constraints, clouded their vision and mistakenly produced what appeared to be only military solutions to their problems. The impetus for these militaristic conclusions may have begun during the Meiji Era but were reinforced not only by several successful wars but also disaster response in 1923. These were further justified by observations and conclusions regarding western imperialism in the near east and were seen as largely permissible by other powers until after WWI.

This did not mean that WWII and conflict with the United States were a forgone conclusion based on the inevitability of Japanese militarism, as so many have simplistically argued. A key example is the way in which Japanese leaders recognized and attempted to emulate western democracy on their own terms during the Meiji Era. Democracy was recognized by the oligarchy for its potential for economic prosperity and rapid industrialization under a free market system; the creation of the Diet and controlled reform were the results of these observations. Nevertheless, in the 1920s and
certainly by the early 1930s, the democracy movement faltered, and Japanese fears were heightened as the nation remained under economic strain throughout this period. What had been a conflict between a growing liberal pro-democratic elite and largely elite military conservatives shifted in the conservative’s favor after the earthquake. Their continuing control of the narrative surrounding environmental, global, and political challenges seemed to leave few options for more moderate thinkers and a fearful public.

Meanwhile, the indigenous development of aircraft during this period was a pivotal influence on the military hierarchy’s imagination, and the impressions of technical moderation enamored leaders who desperately searched for any solution; however, they failed to appreciate the incomplete nature of these developments within the Japanese state. The incompleteness of this technical modernization was the result of factual infighting and limited economic potential, which was largely overlooked by narrow minded perceptions of what was possible with current military forces. This failure was the result of not only earlier political and military actions in the Pacific but was also, and most importantly for this paper, the product of military disaster response during the 1923 earthquake. They succumbed to their own propaganda and infatuation with technological advances, not only as a path to victory in war but also as a way to harness nature and overcome geographic limitations intrinsic to the Japanese homeland, as was so aptly demonstrated after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923.

The relationship between news agencies and the military subtlety shifted during this period as well. The media not only became a facilitator for interpreting disaster but also an authoritative commentator on how the disaster developed in the minds of the
community. Previously critical of heavy handed military responses and overseas adventures, the media readily embraced the effective response of the military during and after the disaster. Both parties benefited from the creation of aerial reconnaissance photos and the subsequent publishing across mass media for a hungry public. The end result of this dominating narrative is a public perception of aviation competence, dedication, and sacrifice out of proportion to what had actually been accomplished with military aviation by the end of the 1920s, under the guidance of a fractured and conflicted military elite.

These images in print and replicated in art not only reflect the public popularity of this narrative but also create a vision of military competence for those who did not actually witness the earthquake. Weisenfeld demonstrations how several years of art and print photography built this reciprocal relationship.\textsuperscript{85} Not only do images reflect a cultures interests and desires but they also illuminate the ways in which a culture may be affected by the visual record over time. The key point of her work is her conclusions regarding how the creators of imagery attempt to steer the narrative towards a beneficial outcome. In this regard, the imagery produced from military aircraft and displays of military forces providing security and support to the masses generate feelings of sympathy from the general public. This change in perceptions had an immediate effect on the relationship between the public and the military. The army was certainly aware of this propaganda and without a war to showcase their modern weapons used the Great Kanto Earthquake as a warlike facsimile to generate positive feelings. Over the next few years, beautiful works of art and media photography

\textsuperscript{85} Weisenfeld, \textit{Imaging Disaster}. 
continued to build upon this memory and showcase the powerful symbolism associated with aircraft and military power.

While the specifics of each nation’s history require that the historian not generalize or simplify conclusions, in this case, disregarding the Japanese historical narrative prior to WWII as an isolated incident not relevant to western democracies misses the subtler influences these events have had and demonstrates the same amount of hubris often pointed at Japanese leadership prior to 1941. Historians have endlessly studied the impact of war on cultures and societies throughout the past; the influence of war on military culture and the state is indisputable in this case. Disasters often look and feel like wars; frequently, the military is the only effective response to these calamities. Despite these observations, few have recognized the impact of disaster response on the military itself, as well as on the nation as a whole. In the twenty-first century, military disaster response has become the default solution to global problems and to the growing strain on massive, modern nation-states that struggle with unexpected catastrophe. While this has not been uncommon since industrialization and the nationalization of armies, the increasing demands on the state caused by unregulated expansion into environmentally weak regions, exponential growth in urbanization, and global warming have all increased strains on the state’s ability to cope with disaster.

Larger, technically advanced militaries increasingly involved in civil operations in response to real disasters, as well as much lesser events, change what is imaginable for a struggling society that simply demands a return to normalcy. Disaster militarism

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86 Alexander, Confronting Catastrophe, 142.
within many nations promotes the impression that the military is the only agency capable of dealing with any large or small disaster. These efforts “facilitate military expansion and dominance.” The United States militarization of FEMA since September 11th and the Katrina Hurricane comprise only a small sampling of this growing trend. Following the 311 disasters in Japan, disaster relief has become a primary justification for increasing U.S. troop levels in the Pacific. Even in Japan, which has arguably become one of the most pacifist oriented nations in the world since 1945, has seen a spike in rhetoric supporting disaster militarization. It has now become politically expedient to immediately call for governmental and military support every time the wind changes direction or the Mississippi River overflows its banks.

The end result of these actions may generate unforeseen consequences, even among the healthiest states and robust democracies. The slow degradation of political institutions in a climate of acceptance and acquiescence to military involvement in civil affairs becomes the justification for protecting life and property at all costs. These are dangerous precedents, not only for the military’s operational wartime capabilities but also for a public that readily continues to accept military response in their own lives. The military’s involvement in these types of missions confuses its role and distorts the effective ability of military leaders to gauge overall combat readiness. Compounding this subtle erosion, unscrupulous actors within the government bureaucracy as well as corporations with vested interests in the military-industrial complex, rush to profit from increased programs and additional government largess. All of these events obscure the

89 Fukushima, et al, “Disaster Militarism,” (March 2014)
90 Samuels, 3.11, 81.
need of suffering citizens after a disaster who simply desire a return to normalcy. The solution to these many challenges is beyond the scope of this study, but a close analysis of the historical record demonstrated throughout this paper, supports the premise that nations of the twenty-first century need to begin looking elsewhere for appropriate disaster response.

Substantially augmenting national civil agencies, internal state agencies, or even contracting capabilities to commercial companies to provide their own quick reaction teams in times of crisis may be the best solution to the growing trend in disaster militarism. These organizations could be used worldwide in order to stabilize weaker states in times of crisis without the extra burden placed on military forces that are often woefully underqualified to respond to these types of events. Although, in the absolute worst cases, the military’s vast logistical and infrastructure capabilities may be called in to provide limited support, these organizations mentioned above should be separate from the military, with their own functioning capabilities to respond to disasters specific to their region. Ignoring the dangers implicit in the Japanese historical narrative described in this paper jeopardizes the future of liberal democracy and erodes a realistic perception of what is possible with the military in a future political and environmental crisis.


