

## Sakurakai: A Failed Attempt at Military Government

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A beautiful cherry blossom is in bloom for only a few short days in Japan before a wind sweeps through and carries it away. In one sense, this is a beautiful sight, yet in the pre-war 1930s the cherry blossom stood for something radically different and much less peaceful. One of the many ultra-nationalist groups to spring into life during this time took the cherry blossom as their symbol. The members of this organization choose this flower because its short time in bloom "reminded the Japanese of the essence of the samurai code—the readiness to die at a moment's notice, if need be."<sup>1</sup> This is the favorable light with which the members of the Sakurakai viewed themselves. However, the cherry blossom is apt for another reason as well. Just as the flower does not remain on its bough for long, the Cherry Blossom Society was not long lived, lasting only from 1930 to 1931. In that time, the Sakurakai suffered from one failure after another. It was their goal to replace Japan's government with a militaristic government. However, due to organizational factors, miscommunications, and plan defects, the Sakurakai were bound to fail in achieving this goal on Japanese soil. Occasionally, the government would grant the ultra-nationalists a concession as a way of appeasing them, but in the end, they did not have the lasting impact for which they had hoped. After a little over a year of activity, its leaders were arrested and the rest of the group was dissolved. From this point on, their activities were fragmented and members often joined with other, more successful right-wing organizations.

Official membership into the Sakurakai was limited to active officers with a rank of lieutenant colonel and below with a concern for national reorganization. Another qualification

was that members could not have a private problem which they hoped to vindicate through the organization.<sup>2</sup> The group was started with a mere ten field-grade officers and never surpassed more than one-hundred members. However, members were drawn from many different areas of service such as the War Ministry (9), military police headquarters, the general staff (29), and a few different army schools (40). The leader of the Sakurakai, Lieutenant Colonel Hashimoto Kingoro, the chief of the Russian Section of the Army General Staff, had connections outside of the Sakurakai which he often consorted with. Akamatsu Katsumaro and Tadokoro Teruaki served as his left-wing connections.<sup>3</sup> His right-wing, civilian ally was Okawa Shumei. Outside of the Army, Hashimoto looked to Seiyokai, who was in the Navy and also the leader of the Stars and Ocean Society.<sup>4</sup> As necessary as this outside help was, it was the junior rank serving officers who were vital. These were the officers who had access to the weapons needed to carry out any of planned disturbances. After all, how valuable is a group that threatens to use violence when they do not have the weapons needed to back up their threat?

Intelligence Chief Tatekawa organized the Sakurakai originally as a debating society whose purpose was to "promote political awareness among field-grade officers."<sup>5</sup> The organization gained legitimacy when War Minister Ugaki bestowed upon them his recognition of their meetings as study groups.<sup>6</sup> However, one member of the Sakurakai recalls that, "The original meetings invariably degenerated into rambling discussions about the desirability of a Showa restoration. . . ."<sup>7</sup> At one of the meetings, Hashimoto drew upon the example

the Young Turk Movement to illustrate to the members how officers can effectively renovate a country. The specifics of most of the plans discussed during meetings of the Sakurakai were not kept in any records. What is known is that the topic of many of the conversations concerned the depression the world was experiencing and its affects on the economic, social, and political problems in Japan.

Through all of the vague concepts and varying ideas of the Sakurakai, the primary goal which everyone agreed on was the Showa Restoration, or the imperial way. Even this concept varied in meaning. Some individuals felt that all Japan really needed was to morally regenerate itself. Extremists, such as the Sakurakai, held a far different view. They insisted on "a military dictatorship, in which the Emperor in fact, if not in name, would be no more than a sacred puppet."<sup>8</sup> Basically, the Sakurakai only wanted to use the Emperor as a figurehead to legitimize their actual intentions to eliminate Parliamentary political parties and establish a military government. The big businesses (zaibatsu) were also targets for the ultra-nationalists since the military government they planned to establish would prepare Japan economically and ideologically for war. These conclusions were reached after Tatekawa decided to examine Japan from the inside for a change and report the findings in the 1930 "Inspection of General Circumstances" which summarized the problems as,

Corrupt political parties and cartels were interposing a fogged filter between the pure executive light of the Emperor and his moths of men in the regiments and on the farms. To remove this blemish and 'perfect the national structure' a Showa Isshin or Hirohito Restoration must be carried out which would convert Japan into a 'National Defense State' that would be 'mobilized for total war'.<sup>9</sup>

It was the Sakurakai's job to make enough noise about the subject that business magnates and politicians would feel threatened into coming up with money for the national defense plan, their other alternative was to force the magnates and politicians to succumb to total mobilization. Other factors that sparked discontent within the military that would lead them to want to take these drastic measures were Prime Minister

Hamaguchi's disarmament policy, the Minseito cabinet's moderate China policy, the Anti-Japanese movements in China and Manchuria, the growing capabilities of the Soviet Maritime Army, and finally, the London Naval Treaty which gave Japan the bad end of the deal concerning armaments.<sup>10</sup> The Diet had opted to agree to the treaty in an effort to advance peace rather than get picky over details.<sup>11</sup>

Along with differing opinions on precisely what the goals of the society were and who they should target, there were also disagreements on what the best way to achieve the Showa Restoration might be. As a result, the Sakurakai developed three factions. The first, and most influential believed that the old must be destroyed, by force if necessary, before the new can be put in place. The second faction felt that careful planning could avoid the problems associated with destruction. This fairly tame group from the military did not receive a great many supporters. The last group was comprised of opportunists and supporters who wanted to reap the rewards but preferred to stay neutral in how to go about attaining the goals.<sup>12</sup> With a group that never totaled over one-hundred members, a three way split in opinion on how to achieve such a lofty undertaking made the odds that any one plan would work became drastically lower from the start.

One cause for the dysfunctional attempts to take over the government can be traced back to the educational system itself. The Military Academy and the War College officers were trained differently, resulting in differing perspectives of how to handle various situations. Officers who graduated from the Military Academy had an understanding of basic tactical skills, the administrative system of the army, and warrior ethics. However, it was these officers' counterparts at the War College that went on to get high commanding positions and jobs in the general staff and war ministry. This caused tension between officers from both schools. Even the officers from within the War College sometimes had contempt for their peers since only a small number of elites were selected to work in central headquarters. Consequently, officers who worked in the war ministry were sensitive to economic and political factors while those in the general staff used reason, strategy,

and intelligence to approach problems.<sup>13</sup> The differences in approach coupled with the contempt that members from these different areas had for one another, make it is easy to see why it was hard for the Sakurakai to have just one specific goal and agree on a way to make it a success, considering that the group was comprised of members from all of these divisions.

Had it not been for the traditional Japanese doctrine that was taught at these schools, the Sakurakai might never have found a disturbance in the system so wrong that they felt the need to fight for it. Combat ideology, combining the divine myth of the emperor and the warrior ideology of dying for the emperor had been ingrained into soldiers minds for decades. After awhile, it became hard to separate the two. Hence, the officer corps in the 1930s held mystical beliefs about the divine qualities of the Imperial institution and felt, therefore, obliged to remain loyal to the Emperor.<sup>14</sup> As Japan came to be dominated by businessmen and political parties and the Emperor's power diminished, these officers viewed the army as the only remaining source of traditional social, ethical, and political values. War Minister Ugaki Issei pushed the army over the edge when he attempted to reorganize the army in the 1920s. Foreign doctrines would not be tolerated in the army, "the Emperor's most trusted servant."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the officers decided to take actions which led to a series of failures and embarrassments.

The Sakurakai's first major attempt at a coup d'état became known as the March Incident. Five months previous to this botched scheme, in November of 1930, the editor of the right-wing periodical, *Japan and the Japanese*, foreshadowed that, "things may start to happen from now on."<sup>16</sup> Sure enough, an independent patriotic youth shot and killed Prime Minister Hamaguchi, thus setting the stage for the Sakurakai. Hashimoto and his civilian accomplice, Okawa Shumei, hatched a three part plan to take over the government. The first part of the plan centered around an anti-labor legislation protest rally that was to take place outside of the Diet in early March to prevent the introduction of the Labor Union Act and the Labor Disputes Control Act.<sup>17</sup> The rally was to

turn into a riot and the rioters would then attempt to storm the Diet, surround the prime minister's residency, the Minseitō party building, and the Seiyūkai party building. Next, specifically selected army units would cordon off these buildings and the radio station. Finally, high ranking officers would enter the Diet and try to convince them to declare martial law with General Ugaki as the leader. The expected outcome that the officers hoped for was a voluntary dissolution of the Diet and an end to the unpopular political parties.

Unfortunately, their plan did not have the solid support it needed to succeed. Before the plan could even get off of the ground, the army needed the support of the laborers since it was their rally that would create the scene and allow the military to step in. However, the majority of the people involved in the labor movement were suspicious of the military officers and utterly opposed to coup d'états as a means of national reform.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it was Okawa's duty to provide the mobs and the weapons to be used in the coup. Hashimoto provided training grenades to make the crowds appear more threatening than they were in actuality.

The first serious problem that Hashimoto ran into was financing the operation. Okawa needed money and explosives to do his part in staging the mob riots. Hashimoto expected to use funds from the secret service, but the amount that he attained from this source was not enough to cover expenses. Okawa received 200,000 yen from Marquis Tokugawa Yoshichika, a nationalist sympathizer. In return, Tokugawa was promised the position of Minister of the Imperial Household if the coup d'état succeeded.<sup>19</sup> Another Sakurakai participant, Major Sato Kotoku sought money from the Mitsui zaibatsu. He claimed the money was needed for national purposes, meaning the coup d'état. The zaibatsu had actually begun the practice of loaning money to the same right-wing organizations that sought to destroy them as a way of buying the lives of their top executives. When the coup was called off, Sato returned the full amount of money to Mitsui.<sup>20</sup>

The next big set back involved General Ugaki. He was a key person that the nationalists needed in their corner if things were to go as planned. The officers played on Ugaki's

vanity to draw him into the scheme. They convinced him that the Emperor Hirohito was tired of the corrupt politicians and would favor a military coup to restore national integrity. Ugaki would naturally be the Emperor's choice as the military *genro* due to his loyalty to the Hirohito. However, the officers reiterated time and time again that the emperor was not to be involved in the plot. This made Ugaki suspicious of the Sakurakai's true motives. Yet at the same time that the officers were trying to cajole Ugaki into participating in their scheme, they did not fully trust him and therefore drew up a decoy plan as well as the original. It was the bogus plan, giving the impression that the Sakurakai was "a relatively innocuous society, holding very restrained and moderate opinions," that Ugaki agreed to. Most likely, it was when Ugaki learned of their true intentions and after the supposed date of the march on the Diet had passed that he finally withdrew his support. The conspirators continued to act like the real action was coming in the near future,<sup>21</sup> but Ugaki had had enough.

Since he withdrew his support before the plan could be set into motion, the army failed to discredit him. Their purpose in offering him a position of leadership in the new government was to make him out to be disloyal to the Emperor. Why would the army want to do this? The answer is simple, it was Ugaki that oversaw tremendous cuts in the army budget. However, instead of being discharged from the army, Hirohito placed Ugaki in the honorable post of governor-general of Korea. A possible explanation as to why Hirohito was lenient on Ugaki could be that the Emperor had some knowledge of the plot ahead of time. Marquis Kido and Count Makino, members of the Emperor's loyal court, had played a part in manipulating Ugaki into the plan in the first place, yet they did not want to risk their own careers and lose the Emperor's trust, so they may have confided in him their knowledge of what was to take place. Hirohito, realizing that Ugaki had been set-up, choose not to punish him harshly.<sup>22</sup>

After Ugaki withdrew his support, Hashimoto's own partner, Okawa blackmailed the Sakurakai. He moved the grenades he had to an undisclosed location and demanded

money to pay off members of the Black Dragon who had participated in a token demonstration. If he was not paid, he threatened to reveal the conspirators' plans. As a result, he paid off his bills and still had money remaining to spend in geisha houses. Despite this blackmail operation, Hashimoto continued to conspire with Okawa on future events.<sup>23</sup>

The Sakurakai's second big coup d'état plan came in October of the same year. Ideas for this plot were derived at the Golden Dragon teahouse. Amidst drinking contests, Colonel Hashimoto and Major Cho Isamu also competed to write operational coup novels. Major Cho's plan won the competition. He wrote,

Our objectives are to attack the prime minister's residence and kill Wakatsuki and his ministers during a Cabinet conference; to seize Metropolitan Police headquarters; to occupy the War Ministry and General Staff Headquarters; to punish various good-for-nothings in the Army and the bureaucracy; to establish a new government with Lieutenant General Araki Sadao [the senior officer of the Strike-North Faction] as prime minister, [Panay-sinker] Hashimoto as home minister, [Peerless Pimp] Tatekawa as foreign minister, [master plotter] Okawa as finance minister, [the blood-thirsty Major] Cho Isamu as Metropolitan Police chief, and Rear Admiral Kobayashi Shosaburo [the commander of the Misty Lagoon Air Station] as Navy minister.<sup>24</sup>

Politicians and army men alike heard of this joke and by mid October, rumblings of a plot could be heard. This plan for a second coup was a supposed "... domestic extension of the Kwantung Army's actions in Manchuria."<sup>25</sup>

Due to the senior officer's reluctance to participate in the March Incident, Hashimoto and his co-conspirators realized that they had to use force with the army leaders as well as the government. Still, Hashimoto lacked the backing of many high ranking officers. This coup, he realized, had to be more violent and do more damage than the previous one had planned to do. The end objective remained the same: declare martial law. However, the means of getting there changed. The Cabinet would be hit with an air strike, after which a guards division would be called in to get control over the confusion. Among the persons slated for arrest were politicians, financial magnates,

palace advisers, and a few key figures of the privileged class. The War Ministry would then be isolated until martial law could be declared and a reform cabinet established.<sup>26</sup>

Once again, the Sakurakai ran into problems in their plan before it could even be set into motion. Lieutenant General Araki Sadao, the chosen leader of the new government, seemed to not have known about these plans for him until right before the plot was to unfold. Instead of being greedy, like Ugaki, Araki informed Hashimoto and Cho that he had no intention of following through with the plans and that, "It is almost inconceivable that I should have to come here in military uniform to a place where you are drinking sake in order to admonish you in this sort of matter."<sup>27</sup> With that said, he went on to explain to the conspirators the procedure which their disciplining would follow. On 18 October 1931, eleven officers involved in the plot were detained and Hashimoto and Cho were put under house arrest at the Golden Dragon. The October Incident became yet another failure for the ultra-national Sakurakai.

The failure of this coup proved devastating to the Sakurakai. The Young Officers, who were desperately needed to lead the troops if the group were to ever attain their goal, felt isolated and betrayed by the senior officers of the Sakurakai. It was believed that Okawa Shumei revealed the details of the plan to Makino Nobuaki, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, thus causing their arrest. After World War II, Lieutenant Okura Eiichi, leader of the Young Officer's movement revealed that, "The October Incident was the parting line between us, the Young Officers, and the central headquarters faction. It was then that we realized that we had to rely on ourselves and achieve our goals by our own efforts. . . ." <sup>28</sup> Another Young Officer, Isobe, explained that the difference between the Sakurakai and the Young Officers is that the former wanted to increase the power of the General Staff and reform Japan by decree, while the latter wanted to unite the Army through a Restoration and awaken the people of Japan. Isobe took things one step further by comparing the senior officers of the army to authoritarian Germany, saying, "These men once used to ape the Army of the Kaiser; now they are imitating Hitler. No wonder we

young officers can find no common language with them."<sup>29</sup> With the loss of the Young Officers, the Sakurakai seemed to lose any remaining chance at taking over Japan's government.

Ironically, Emperor Hirohito actually benefited from this botched attempt to take over his government. First, he continued to reign as Emperor. Since he had fathered no male heirs up to this point, the Emperor left open the gate to his younger brother, Prince Chichibu to take the throne. Prince Chichibu supported the nationalists and was involved, although in what capacity it is not known, in the October plot. Actually, it is the prince's involvement which saved the plot from being exposed at an even earlier date than it was. Also, the October plot caused Emperor Hirohito enough embarrassment that the League of Nations decided to hold off on its condemnation of Japan concerning her actions in Manchuria because the League did not want to make the militant groups any more upset than they already were.<sup>30</sup>

The Sakurakai and other ultra-nationalist groups did gain a few small victories to counter balance their immense failures. First, the Wakatsuki Cabinet, which they wanted to bomb as part of the October plot, ended up resigning in December of 1931 because it could not restrain the Army in Manchuria. Also, as an attempt to appease Army extremists in Japan and abroad, Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi appointed General Araki to the position of War Minister. Throughout the life of the Sakurakai, the government was very tolerant of their activities and offered extremely lenient punishments in light of the violent and disruptive plans the Sakurakai had intended to carry out. Basically, the only disciplining the Sakurakai received was an order to disband and its ring leaders were separated from each other.

Hashimoto and other members did achieve some success in Manchuria. However their attempts to set the stage for military activity abroad in March and to capitalize on their successes in Manchuria at home met with defeat. In fact, nothing ever became of their plans at all. Among the contributing factors within the Army itself which led to failure to bring about a Showa Restoration were the

various ideals drilled into officers at the War College and the Military Academy, the imperial myth which clouded the officers' minds on the feasibility of their goal, factions within the Sakurakai, and vague, varying ideas concerning their true purpose. These problems merely prevented the organization from being as solid as it needed to be in order to follow one clear path to their goal. Although there were problems between the members of the organization, it was the failure to think plans through carefully that ultimately brought them down. Had they thought clearly about General Ugaki, they might have realized that he could turn on them as soon as he found out the truth. All of their plans hinged on keeping secrets from each other and manipulating leaders with false ideas in order to achieve their support, only to lose it when time for the event came so near

that they had to explain what was really going to happen. Knowing that the support of the Young Officers was necessary, the senior officers should have been more careful not to alienate them as well. Amidst all of the defects in their plans, the Sakurakai can only be thankful that they were enough of a threat to cause the government to make a few concessions in order to appease them. Without these concessions, the Sakurakai would not have had any internal effect on Japan at all. Throughout World War II Prime Minister Tojo continued to keep an eye on various members of the Sakurakai who were thought to have joined forces with other, more successful ultra-nationalist groups.<sup>31</sup> However, the embarrassment of the March Incident and the October Incident were enough to prevent any more serious attempts by the Sakurakai to take control of the government.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Storry, *The Double Patriots: A Study of Japanese Nationalism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1957) 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ben-Ami Shillony, *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> James B. Crowley, *Japan's Quest For Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy 1930-1938* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), 94.

<sup>8</sup> W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), 240.

<sup>9</sup> David Bergamini, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1971), 395.

<sup>10</sup> Crowley, 82.

<sup>11</sup> "Britain Will Retain Her Naval Program," *New York Times*, 4 March 1931, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Storry, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Crowley, 83-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Behr, *Hirohito: Behind the Myth* (New York: Villard Books, 1989), 83.

<sup>17</sup> "Proletarians Plan Big Demonstration," *The Japan Times and Mail*, 3 March 1931, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Shillony, 69-70.

<sup>19</sup> Storry, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Shillony, 83.

<sup>21</sup> March 20, 1931 was the planned date.

<sup>22</sup> Behr, 85-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Bergamini, 446.

<sup>25</sup> W. G. Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 179.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>27</sup> Bergamini, 447.

<sup>28</sup> Shillony, 29.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>30</sup> Behr, 102-3.

<sup>31</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, *Warlord Tojo Against the World* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarborough House, 1993), 80.

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