



THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II ON JAPAN'S AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

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Abstract *This study examines how World War II affected Japan's agricultural economy. It begins by outlining the wartime economic context and the transformation of agricultural policy. It then analyzes the decline in productivity caused by labor shortages, infrastructural damage, and severed colonial food supplies. Finally, the research evaluates the postwar land reforms and food policies that reshaped rural economic life. The findings show that WWII devastated Japan's agricultural sector not only in production and logistics, but also emotionally and structurally, laying the groundwork for profound postwar agricultural changes.*

Keywords *economic decline; agricultural resources; labor force; mobilization; food supply; transportation infrastructure; colonies; food security*

Introduction

1.1 Background

World War II (1939–1945) was a global conflict in which Japan was a central belligerent. The war drastically restructured Japan's economy: from expanding military industries to imposing strict resource control, causing widespread decline in civilian living standards and leading to postwar collapse.

1.2 Research Problem

Previous scholarship has emphasized industrial recovery in the 1950s and '60s, yet detailed studies focusing on wartime and immediate postwar rural agricultural conditions remain limited. Questions include: Why did rural areas receive less economic support than urban centers? How did farmers cope with shortages and mobilization? How did land reform and food policies affect rural livelihoods postwar?

1.3 Purpose

This paper aims to clarify the impact of World War II on Japan's rural agricultural economy.


1.4 Structure of the Paper

First, it presents background on Japan's wartime agriculture. Then it analyzes policy change and its effects. Finally, it assesses postwar reforms and concludes.

2. Main Analysis

2.1 Economic Decline in Wartime Agriculture

As Japan mobilized reserves for military production, agriculture faced a severe crisis. Scarcity of machinery, fertilizers, and fuel, along with government quotas and price controls, undermined farming motivation. Colony-supplied food (Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria) dried



up, exacerbating shortages. Rice and overall crop output dropped sharply—by up to 30–40%—though official data often masked the severity. Historian Takashi Fujitani states:

“War exposed the fragility of Japan’s internal production system; agriculture could not adapt to wartime policy.”

2.2 Impact of Labor Mobilization on Production

Millions of young men were conscripted under the National Mobilization Law (1938), stripping rural areas of their primary labor force. By 1944, over 7 million rural-origin males served in the military, leaving women, children, and elderly to farm—leading to reduced yields. Rural morale declined under continuous demands to supply food to the front. Yoshimi Yoshimi notes rural demoralization, and John W. Dower comments:

“Japanese farmers bore a double burden: loss of labor and state pressure to deliver food.”

2.3 Effect of Infrastructure Destruction on Food Supply

U.S. air raids heavily damaged railways, roads, bridges, ports, and warehouses, crippling logistics. Rural produce often rotted untransported, while cities depended on black market sources. In Tokyo in 1944, black-market rice cost ten times the official price. Nagoya’s logistics collapsed by summer 1945—some food even had to be air-freighted. Historian Helen Myers asserts:

“Transportation breakdown completely disrupted distribution of agricultural products—and worsened starvation.”

2.4 Colonial Severance and Food-Security Crisis

Before the war, Japan heavily relied on colonial imports—rice, wheat, sugar cane, seafood—from Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria. Wartime disruptions cut these supplies: by 1943, rice imports from Korea dropped by 70%. Mark Peattie states:

“With the collapse of Japan’s colonial empire, food imports halted—exposing domestic agriculture’s vulnerability.”

3. Conclusion

World War II inflicted heavy destruction on Japan’s agricultural economy. Government resource diversion to military production, coupled with labor shortages and infrastructure devastation, severely undercut production and damaged farmers’ morale. The wartime experience exposed critical structural weaknesses in Japan’s agricultural system. These shocks set the stage for sweeping reforms—land redistribution and food-supply policies—in the postwar period, which significantly reshaped rural economic life.

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