

Navigating the Revolution

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Contemporary Japan

“I believe that, regrettable though it is, our defeat in war is imminent and inevitable.”¹ –

Prince Konoe

By February 14th, 1945 the Japanese war position had become untenable. The Japanese military had been suffering unsustainable losses since the Battle of Midway, Allied forces were steadily advancing in the Pacific, and American B-29 bombers operated with near impunity in the Japanese skies. On that day, Prince Fumimaru Konoe dropped a bombshell of his own. Realizing the precariousness of the situation, and fearing for the continuity of the government and potential communist machinations, Konoe called upon the Emperor to end the war before it was too late.² He was ignored, and Yoshida Shigeru, former ambassador to Great Britain and future Japanese face of the occupation era, was imprisoned for aiding in the drafting of the statement. As war continued, and Japan’s cities were reduced to ash the inevitability of Japan’s defeat became all too apparent, particularly to the Allied Powers. The Allies realized that they were in a perfect position to dictate terms of surrender. On July 26th, they did just that with the Potsdam Declaration. No conditions were to be accepted from Japan in surrender. On August 6th, Japan would become the first and only nation to ever suffer the terrible havoc of the atomic bomb. Nine days later on August 15th, Japan capitulated. Konoe’s worst fears seemed realized. The total defeat of Japan meant that nothing was safe. Not the Government, not the Japanese way of life, not even the Emperor.

¹ Fumimaru Konoe “The Konoe Memorial, February 14th, 1945” in *Sources in Modern East Asian History and Politics*, ed. Theodore McNelly (New York: Meredith Corp 1967), p. 162

² Fumimaru Konoe “The Konoe Memorial, February 14th, 1945” in *Sources in Modern East Asian History and Politics*, ed. Theodore McNelly (New York: Meredith Corp 1967), p. 163

Yet out of ambiguous beginnings a clearer picture of the future would form. The Americans arrived not as conquering savages but as men on a mission to impose a “revolution from above” designed to remake a nation and a people.³ However, the Americans carried with them a bias and an ignorance that would in some ways make their job impossible. Their lack of knowledge would allow a certain degree of input and obfuscation from the Japanese at all levels of society. Ultimately, American misconceptions and lack of expertise would lead to different results than may otherwise have occurred had they been more knowledgeable.

The time between the surrender of Japan and the beginning of the Allied occupation is really the tale of two perspectives, one of cavalier confidence, and one of intimidated insecurity. On the Western end of the Pacific as The Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers(SCAP) was being formulated decisions were made regarding the personnel lineup that would have significant consequences for both the direction and efficacy of the occupation. An internal conflict between East Asian specialists within the government largely drawn along faction lines between the more liberally inclined “China Crowd” and the old conservative “Japan Hands” was brewing. The existing Japan experts were largely conservative in nature, experienced primarily in dealings with similarly conservative Japanese leaders. They largely believed that the Japanese citizenry were an “obedient herd” incapable of self-governance.⁴ These men, however, with their cozy prewar relationships with Japanese businessmen and politicians, would end up the losers in this debate and ousted from the occupation. This decision would eliminate a significant

³ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 69

⁴ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 217-18

source of expertise on Japan from the equation, and it would not be replaced. Remaining, however, would be a white supremacist tinged view of the Japanese. This is depicted in the training film “Our Job in Japan” in which the Japanese brain is described as a blank slate to be filled with democratic values.⁵ Neither MacArthur nor his subordinates would have much opportunity, or inclination, to correct this misconception. They showed little interest in the culture that they were attempting to refashion, as evidenced by MacArthur’s willfully limited experience in the host country.⁶ As a result of the loss of expertise, it became both necessary and agreeable to keep certain extant institutions in place, namely the Emperor and the bureaucracy.

On the Japanese side fear persisted, but also a certain self-assurance. In addition to the equivocal nature of the coming occupation, as the Konoe Memorial mentioned previously illustrates, Japanese civilian leadership were already apprehensive regarding a communist coup even before the occupation began. As Dower explains, conservatives feared revolutions from three directions, from the masses below, sideways from a foreign power, particularly Russia, and from above as the exigencies of war forced the militarist faction to nationalize more and more the means of production.⁷ The fear of a revolution from above would seem realized in the coming years, and would color the majority of their actions during the occupation. This can be seen in the alacrity with which they turned on the militarists, as well as their opposition to the various SCAP initiatives imposed upon them. Additionally, while greatly fearful for the future of the Emperor,

⁵ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 215

⁶ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p 223

⁷ John Dower, *Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878-1954* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1988), p. 281-2

they're self-assurance was derived from their confidence in their ability to Japanize whatever SCAP attempted to do, and their strong belief, shared by a now freed Yoshida Shigeru, that the antecedent national structure was still valid. The war and the reign of the militarists was a perversion of what was still fundamentally a sound system of governance. In their minds, the war had just been a "historic stumble."⁸ This was a view that would clash with SCAP's prevailing attitude that an entire overhaul of the national structure was necessary.

The Japanese conservative's fear of revolution from below would quickly prove to be far from baseless. When SCAP purged the old militarist regime, the old mechanisms of control and suppression suddenly vanished. Americans preached democratic consensus, individuality and active participation, and the Japanese public able, arguably for the first time, to have their voices heard answered in a thunderous fashion. Laborers organized, massive protests were carried out, and new political movements initiated. Of course, the conservatives had not been incorrect in fearing leftist stirrings from the deep. Many of these actions were socialistic in nature, something SCAP would never have intentionally allowed, and indeed would eventually quash. Still they were given an opening and, for a time, thrived due in part to the bias and ignorance of the American forces. It is reasonable to assume that American anticipation of the Japanese as a docile "follow the leader" populace led them to underestimate the extent to which the Japanese might express themselves after the restrictions that had impeded them were removed. Unfortunately for the protestors, it was a very bad time to be a socialist.

⁸ John Dower, *Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878-1954* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1988), p. 277-8

MacArthur and the majority of SCAP likely had little sympathy for communist thought before this time, but the post-World War II environment had paved the way for the Cold War, and sensibilities were far rawer than they had been even a few years previously. The planned mass strike of February 1947 proved to be the turning point, with MacArthur shutting it down and SCAP policies making a sharp turn on Labor.⁹

Still, the legacy of the political left that was allowed to blossom under the occupation is significant. Examples such as Teramoto Kosaku, ironically a member of the thought police under the previous regime, more or less authoring the 1947 Labor Standards Law with SCAP merely rubberstamping it prove the incredible opportunity that the Japanese public had to shape their world going forward. The proliferation of political protests in the years immediately following the country's capitulation provide further evidence of the Japanese public's willingness and opportunity to take part in the remaking of Japan. While these movements were met with initially open arms as expressions of democratic zeal, it is unlikely that they'd have been allowed a space to operate had SCAP not ridden into town on a horse of racial stereotypes. Their belief that the Japanese were not capable of political expression without guidance led them to underestimate the agency of the Japanese citizenry. That so many of these movements were leftist in nature is another indication that the occupation forces couldn't have imagined such an outpouring of participation, as SCAP, while certainly having its fair share of liberals and New Dealers, was hardly a left wing organization. Given the added irritation of the Cold War, it is unlikely that SCAP would have intentionally opened a

⁹ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 269-70

door for socialist ideas to enter the public discourse, much less the formation of a Socialist Party cabinet as briefly happened 1948. The cancellation of the strike and the leftist purge later in the occupation are good indicators of where SCAP's sympathies ultimately resided.

Another area in which American misconceptions and lack of knowledge allowed for substantial Japanese input is to be found in the handling of the Emperor. While an attitude prevailed in Washington that the Emperor was to be tried for war crimes, MacArthur and other top SCAP officials had different ideas. They were determined that the Emperor would prove more useful as a tool in the maintenance of public order and the efficacy of the reforms that they intended to implement. MacArthur's strong desire to see the Emperor retained can be seen in his letter to President Eisenhower, in which he states: "Destroy him and the nation will disintegrate."¹⁰ This, however was counter to a study conducted by field analysts. They concluded that post-surrender Japanese were more concerned with food than royalty, stating "The Allies are unduly apprehensive of the effect on the Japanese if the Emperor were removed."¹¹ That MacArthur and Co. deeply misunderstood both the importance and the function of the Emperor would be seen in how they chose to reform his position. The Emperor was to become human.

The Allied forces were right in viewing the Emperor as a deistic figure, but as Dower notes, the idea of the Emperor cult was really a fairly recent invention.¹² This is not to say that the conservative Japanese politicians were in any rush to embrace his

¹⁰ Douglas MacArthur, "Emperor Not Guilty of War Crimes, 1946," *In Japan a Documentary History*, ed. David J. Lu. (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, Inc, 1997), p. 468

¹¹ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 305

¹² John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 312

humanization. The man was still their sovereign after all, and more importantly, a symbol of the status quo they so desperately sought to preserve. They used various tactics to shield the Emperor. They took advantage of the Americans' attraction to pomp.¹³ They clung to older conventions such as the Meiji Charter Oath in order to argue that the existing system was one that was already sufficiently democratic without significant revision. They also shifted focus away from the Emperor's renunciation of divinity in order to ground the "New Japan" in tradition.¹⁴ To accomplish this last feat they employed linguistic and rhetorical gymnastics in order to obfuscate the renunciation, and place the Emperor in a theistic grey area, which can be best be seen in the Imperial rescript renouncing divinity.

Examining the Imperial rescript in which the Emperor disavowed his divinity, it is readily apparent that there were many cooks in the kitchen. Throughout the course of the short statement it manages to satisfy the requirements of SCAP by renouncing divinity and embracing pacifism, address the fears of conservative politicians by warning against "radical tendencies," and hearken back to tradition by referencing the Meiji Charter Oath.¹⁵ The most significant aspects of the rescript, however, cannot be found in translation. In order to attenuate the renunciation of divinity, the royalists resorted to linguistic obfuscation. Relying on antiquated terms such as "*Akitsuikami*," an archaic word unfamiliar to even most highly educated Japanese and meaning "visible exalted deity." made the renunciation far more obscure in the original Japanese than in English.¹⁶

¹³ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 301

¹⁴ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 313

¹⁵ Maeda Tamon, "Emperor Hirohito's Rescript disavowing his Own Divinity, 1946" In *Japan a Documentary History*, ed. David J. Lu. (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, Inc, 1997), p. 466-7

¹⁶ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2000), p. 317

Tricks such as this helped the Emperor to skirt the issue of divinity and deistic lineage and avoid any straight forward renunciation of divinity by relying on the ignorance of the Americans.

In all of this several things become clear. The Americans greatly overestimated the significance of, and the difficulty of removing the emperor. It is likely that their view of Japanese society as a primitive feudalistic culture guided them to these conclusions by blinding them to the agency of the Japanese. This allowed the monarchy to continue, albeit in a new, more accessible form, when a clearer understanding might otherwise have seen Hirohito replaced, or the entire monarchy abolished. This was a clear victory for the conservative politicians who sought to preserve the traditions that they could in order to arrest the spread of new, and in their opinion, dangerous ideologies that might seek to fill the void. That they were able to do so right under the nose of SCAP by using obscure linguistics is a stunning example of how unequipped the occupation forces really were.

In a symposium of Japanese views on the occupation published in 1952, a wide array of Japanese intellectuals gave brief treatment to “What [Japan] had gained, and what it had lost.”¹⁷ Opinions varied widely, ranging from glowing reviews of the occupation, to bitter critiques, and wait and see attitudes. Salient to the conversation at hand, however, is that none of the responders cited the Emperor’s divinity as a loss, and several posit advances in labor rights as something gained. To be sure they cite many

¹⁷ Victor Otake, Douglass G. Haring “Japan Looks Back on the Occupation” *Far Eastern Survey* 22, No 3 (Feb. 25, 1953) accessed March 29, 2012, [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/3024127](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3024127)

other things, for Japan in 1952 was a very different nation than it had been seven years before but it illustrates the broad spectrum of thought and opinion and agency of the Japanese. While more often than not, what SCAP wanted to happen, did happen, with land reform, women's suffrage, and education reform, being just a small set of examples. What this paper shows, however, was that it was not merely a "revolution from above" with the Americans dictating policy to the passive Japanese. Rather, the occupation was a revolution from every conceivable direction, with different reforms embraced or rejected by differing groups who had the ability to participate in the process if they so chose. It was a revolution that was somewhat ameliorated by a hapless bloc of conservatives who at the end of the day just wanted everything to be the way it once was. Finally it was a revolution in which a space for these groups to participate and ameliorate was created by the occupier's racist sentiments of superiority, and the subsequent misunderstandings and underestimations that followed. In this way did SCAP remain insufficiently knowledgeable to completely attain their goals, and the Japanese were allowed to, at least partially, chart the course of the revolution.

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