
The US Occupation of Japan, 1945–52

ENEMIES TO ALLIES

An important story of the Occupation concerns how the United States and Japan were able to transform their bitter rivalry into a close alliance. During the Pacific War (1941–45), the propaganda machines of both nations demonized and dehumanized the enemy to an extraordinary extent. Each side committed atrocities, but focused only on those committed by the other, and citizens on both sides of the Pacific were conditioned to expect the worst from each other (Dower, 1986b). The Japanese had seen sixty-six of their major cities reduced to ashes by extensive conventional bombing and firebombing. The twin tragedies of **Hiroshima and Nagasaki** in August 1945 brought an abrupt end to what has been called a ‘war without mercy’, but the decision to surrender was opposed by military leaders until the Emperor intervened and broke a deadlock among his senior advisors. Japan’s nearly 15 year rampage through Asia (1931–45) was finished, in the end claiming the lives of an estimated 3 million Japanese and over 15 million Asians, mostly in China. Japanese brutality in war, including mistreatment of prisoners-of-war (POWs), generated sentiments favouring retribution and punishment. It was in this inhospitable climate that **US troops** landed in Japan and began the Occupation.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

A nuclear weapon was dropped on Hiroshima 6 August 1945, killing a total of 140,000 people, including many Koreans working in the city’s factories, while another nuclear weapon was dropped on Nagasaki on 9 August 1945 killing a total of 80,000 people. The victims were mostly civilians.

US troops: There is an apocryphal tale that merchants in the Ginza understood that there was a Christian holiday that involved someone called Santa Claus and hoped to welcome the US soldiers. This may explain why GIs reported seeing a giant Santa Claus hanging on the side of a store – nailed to a cross.

The Occupation was aimed at demilitarizing and democratizing Japan. The United States arranged for the repatriation of some 7 million Japanese scattered around the rubble of empire throughout the Asian theatre, an operation that taxed the logistical capacity of the US military and added to the already large problems of unemployment and food and housing shortages. Upon returning home, the troops were demobilized and sent home with a train ticket and a bag of rice.

The demilitarization of Japan meant the elimination of the armed forces. This was seen to be a guarantee that Japan would not again embark on military adventurism. In the first 2 years of the Occupation purges of thousands of

officers, bureaucrats and industrialists blamed for the war were a further hedge against a revanchist threat. Democratization was also seen to guarantee Japanese pacifism by eliminating the concentration of power exercised by a small elite prior to and during the war. By spreading power within the government and among all citizens, including voting rights for women, and by supporting a robust press and unions, the **Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP)** was attempting to inoculate Japan from the scourge of militarism. US policies in the Occupation are best understood in the context of what people at that time thought had been the sources of Japan's descent into militarism.

Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP): General Douglas MacArthur served in this capacity during the US Occupation of Japan (1945–52) and as the de facto leader of what was nominally a multilateral institution that governed the country and sought to realize the goals of demilitarization, democratization and decentralization. SCAP also refers to the institutions of the Occupation and is often used interchangeably with general headquarters (GHQ).

WHAT WENT WRONG?

There are competing schools of thought when it comes to explaining what went wrong in Japan during the 1930s and 1940s. Some scholars trace the problem to the Meiji Constitution of 1889. They argue that the absence of checks and balances within the government and the concentration of broad discretionary powers in the office of the Emperor created a distorted system. The advisors of the Emperor could wield power and authority to promote their agenda without having to accommodate the usual debate and compromise characteristic of a parliamentary system of democracy. During the Meiji period (1869–1911), these powers were used to transform Japan and promote modernization under the slogan *fukoku kyohei*. Scholars generally credit the Meiji Emperor's advisors with using these powers wisely, but given the unchecked discretionary powers of government concentrated in the potential for the abuse of power, authoritarianism and radical swings in policy carried ominous potential. In this system, the military exercised de facto veto power because it could block the formation of a cabinet. The rising fortunes of the military based on victory over China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, combined with its decisive political power in forming cabinets, facilitated the emergence of military-dominated governments in the 1930s.

Fukoku kyohei: Literally 'rich nation, strong military'. This was the rallying slogan of the Meiji era government (1868–1911).

The Great Depression that started in 1929 in the United States and soon spread around the world became a catalyst for Japanese militarism. The sharp decline in world trade caused by protectionist policies had a devastating impact on the Japanese economy, hitting the majority of Japanese still living in the countryside especially hard. The dislocation in rural areas dependent on the export of silk involved the familiar cycle of indebtedness, loss of land, growing class disparities and often the selling of daughters into prostitution. Many of Japan's military officers were farm boys who were angered at the ineffectiveness of the government in bringing relief to their country brethren.

In addition, they were disenchanted with the corruption and excess displayed by leading industrialists and politicians. In this turbulent time of socio-economic upheaval, the military engaged in assassinations and other acts of intimidation against government officials, often in the name of the Emperor. Young military officers were committed to purifying Japan by imposing greater discipline and rooting out the corrupt excesses of capitalism and party politics. Some scholars have described this as fascism, but there were significant differences from developments in Germany and Italy where Hitler and Mussolini rose to power.

The Taisho era (1912–25) was a heady period for Japanese internationalism and democracy. There is general agreement that Japan became disenchanted with the post-First World War international system because it seemed weighted to the advantage of the Western-directed status quo and relegated Japan to the second tier of nations. The roots of Japan's alienation from the international system are long and complex, but clearly Western racism and double standards played a key part. Japan's moderates had little to show for their efforts at working within the international system, prompting criticism of those efforts and highlighting the insults and sacrifices Japan was seen to be enduring at the hands of the Western powers. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and its withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933 marked the end of Japan's support for the international system. The militarist hardliners succeeded in taking over Japan's foreign policy, steering it on a collision course with the United States as they escalated expansion into China, especially after 1937, and later targeted Southeast Asia's natural resources.

Reischauer (1977) has suggested that Taisho democracy was going well until it was hijacked by the militarists in the 1930s, arguing that Japan was on a trajectory of modernization until this process was derailed by a relatively small group of ultra-nationalists. Those sympathetic to his view argue that the Occupation was an effort to revive democracy and return Japan to the modernization trajectory. Others argue that Taisho democracy was an illusion doomed to fail because of the structural flaws of the Meiji Constitution that favoured the emergence of authoritarianism. Proponents of this view dismiss the 'hijacking' theory and point out that the shift towards ultra-nationalism and imperial expansionism enjoyed broad media and popular support (Young, 1998). Blaming a small group of fanatics, they argue, tends to exonerate the Japanese people from responsibility for Japan's expansionist rampage in Asia and overlooks sustained public enthusiasm for such policies. These differing interpretations of what went wrong are connected to the ongoing debate over continuity and transformation between contemporary and wartime Japan. Did SCAP remake wartime Japan or, in making common cause with the existing conservative elite, did it accommodate a certain degree of continuity unimaginable in occupied Germany?

DEMOCRATIZATION

MacArthur and his advisors exercised a decisive influence on the nature of democracy in Japan. Confident in victory and:

With a minimum of rumination about the legality or propriety of such an undertaking, the Americans set about doing what no other occupation force had done before: remaking the political, social, cultural, and economic fabric of a defeated nation, and in the process changing the very way of thinking of its populace. (Dower, 1999: 78)

Perhaps the boldest initiative was in writing the new Constitution in 1946 and compelling its acceptance by the Japanese **Diet**. It is often considered the greatest achievement of the Occupation and has never been amended since being promulgated in 1947. The Emperor was forced to renounce his divinity and was stripped of all political power. Interestingly, his support for the new Constitution proved critical in winning its acceptance among the public. Sovereignty was vested in the people and the prewar aristocracy lost its privileged status. Women were given the right to vote and, indeed, the **rights of women** as specified in the Constitution are perhaps some of the most progressive in the world. In reality, these ideals have remained elusive. The new Constitution specifies and guarantees a total of thirty-one civil and human rights, clearly responding to the widespread trampling of these rights under the Meiji Constitution.

The new Constitution is based on the British system of parliamentary supremacy rather than the US system of checks and balances between the respective branches of government. The Constitution promotes the autonomy of the judiciary and a Supreme Court was established with the power of determining the constitutionality of laws, although it has demonstrated little enthusiasm for exercising this power of review.

Article 9 of the postwar Constitution aimed to impose pacifism by prohibiting Japan from maintaining armed forces and obliging it to renounce the right of belligerency [**Doc. 1, pp. 118–21**]. Although the language is clear and the intentions of the legislation were spelled out in Diet interpellations in 1946, since the early 1950s the **Self-Defense Force (SDF)** has existed and Japan now has one of the five largest defence budgets in the world. The constitutionality of the SDF has been challenged, and some lower court decisions have determined the SDF to be unconstitutional, but the higher courts have consistently affirmed the constitutionality of the SDF. **Article 9** remains prominent in political discourse, and some in the conservative elite seek to revise it to give Japan greater leeway on security, but it remains highly valued by the Japanese people (see Chapter 6).

Diet: The parliament in Japan which is composed of an elected Upper and Lower House.

Rights of women: Beate Sirota Gordon, author of *The Only Woman in the Room* (1998), recounts her role in driving around Tokyo in early 1946, gathering all the books she could find on various constitutions and participating in drafting the new Constitution. It was she who advocated inclusion of progressive provisions for women.

Article 9: The article in the Japanese Constitution that bans the development of military forces and the resort to war to settle international disputes.

Self-Defense Forces (SDF) (*Jietai* in Japanese): The military forces of Japan.

Article 9: More than 7,000 Article 9 Associations aimed at preserving this war renouncing article were established in Japan during the first decade of the twenty-first century in response to moves by conservative politicians to revise the Constitution.

Land reform: In 1946 land reform was aimed at reducing tenant farming (66% of all farms in 1943) where farmers paid nearly half of their production to landlords as rent, ensuring their poverty. Nearly 6 million farming households were affected by this land redistribution policy, rural incomes became more equal and the political power of the rural elite was reduced significantly.

Zaibatsu: Family-owned industrial conglomerates that dominated the pre-Second World War Japanese economy. Initially, these were targeted for dissolution by SCAP because they were held to be responsible for supporting and abetting the 1931–45 military rampage through Asia. However, after the reverse course, SCAP did not aggressively proceed with the dissolution. During the Occupation the ownership and structure of these conglomerates was transformed and the pre-Second World War *zaibatsu* became the post-Second World War *keiretsu*.

Reverse course: After 1947, the US Occupation in Japan became influenced by the Cold War between the United States and the USSR. Punitive policies were replaced by an emphasis on rebuilding Japan into a showcase for American-style democracy and capitalism. The progressive New Deal policies

SCAP also promoted democracy by promoting **land reform** in the countryside and a strong union movement that drew inspiration from the New Deal reforms under the Roosevelt administration during the 1930s. Union organizers, including many communists, were released from jail and legislation protected their right to establish unions. Given the miserable working and living conditions prevailing in the aftermath of war, the unions grew rapidly and became more radical in their demands and tactics.

The first year and a half of the Occupation were a time of grand efforts at socio-economic reforms based on the belief that Japan needed to be transformed in order to exorcise the demons of militarism. Right-wing militarists and alleged sympathizers were purged from government service and banned from elected office. The powers of the police were restricted and centralized police authority was abolished. The educational curriculum was modified to eliminate vestiges of imperial ideology and central government control over the educational system, including textbooks, was curtailed. The conservative landlord class was targeted, with land reform aimed at redistributing land in favour of the farmers actually working the land. The rural gentry was considered a bastion of conservatism and thus a barrier to democratization; removing their economic clout based on large landholdings and onerous sharecropping arrangements was a strategy to eliminate their political influence.

MacArthur also promoted trust-busting tactics at the expense of the *zaibatsu*, the large family-owned industrial conglomerates that dominated the Japanese economy since the Meiji era. Reports about large-scale pilfering by the *zaibatsu* of public stockpiles of commodities soon after the surrender on 15 August 1945, at a time when ordinary citizens were at the brink of starvation, made a deep impression on MacArthur. In addition, analysts suggested that the *zaibatsu* were willing accomplices of the military and had benefited handsomely from military expansionism and war-related procurements. Breaking up the *zaibatsu* was intended to promote the general policy of deconcentrating power as that was seen to be the major flaw of the Japanese prewar system. The excessive concentration of power, political and economic, was thought to have made it easier for a small coterie of conspirators to hijack national policy for their own ends.

THE REVERSE COURSE

The record of SCAP on democracy after 1947 left much to be desired. The ‘**reverse course**’ is the term often used to describe the sudden conservative shift in US Occupation policies. The reverse course was one of the early

consequences of the Cold War that was just heating up between the United States and the Soviet Union (Schaller, 1985). The first salvo involved MacArthur banning a general strike that had been called for 1 February 1947. This signalled the beginning of the end for the radical union movement as SCAP withdrew its support and encouraged the union-busting tactics of Japanese corporations and the government. For the United States, in waging a worldwide ideological war, it became imperative that Japan be a success story. Japan was to be a showcase for the superiority of capitalism and the American way. Thus, retribution and any reforms that might impede Japan's rapid recovery were shoved to the side in favour of policies that would transform Japan into a 'bulwark of the free world' in Asia. This was also a time when political attitudes in the United States were rapidly shifting to the right, meaning that the New Deal-inspired reforms that had initially animated the Occupation were out of favour. It is perhaps difficult to appreciate the sudden swing in the mood of the country, but the rise of McCarthyism and communist witch-hunts were soon central features of the US political landscape and were echoed in US policy in Japan.

The anti-*zaibatsu* efforts of SCAP had little impact because there were very few trustbusters and there were many opponents skilful at defending big business. The Japanese conservative political elite repeatedly warned SCAP that over-zealous reforms of the *zaibatsu* would play into the hands of the communists by slowing economic recovery and prolonging the suffering of workers. Since the Occupation was indirect, meaning that SCAP depended on the Japanese government for implementing its ambitious agenda of reforms, there was ample opportunity for modifying, vitiating and slowing the pace and extent of reform initiatives. They quickly teamed up with American allies, including some large, influential US corporations that had prewar ties with the *zaibatsu* and were concerned that their business interests might be adversely affected (Davis, 1997). They lobbied Congress for support, lamenting the 'left-wing' inclinations of SCAP and pointing out that busting the *zaibatsu* would prolong Japan's dependence on US aid. Thus, the domestic political fallout of the Cold War in the United States resonated strongly in Japan. In the end, the *zaibatsu* emerged from the Occupation in modified form as *keiretsu*.

THE LEGACIES OF OCCUPATION

From 1947, the Japanese government, supported by MacArthur, unleashed a **Red Purge** that targeted those Japanese considered to have left-wing views. Union activists, members of the Communist Party, writers and government

implemented between 1945 and 1947 were in many cases 'reversed' by more conservative policies. Prior to 1947, SCAP and the Japanese government sought to prosecute right-wing militarists, but after 1947 the government engaged in what is known as the Red Purge, cracking down on left-wing unions and activists.

Keiretsu: Bank-centered, industrial conglomerates that dominate the Japanese economy, many of which have strong links with the pre-Second World War *zaibatsu*. The exclusionary business practices and conflicts of interest within the *keiretsu* have come under scrutiny as a source of trade friction.

Red Purge: The Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) and the conservative Japanese government initiated a crackdown beginning in 1947 on left-wing activists, radicals, unions, etc. as a consequence of the Cold War-inspired reverse course. The purge was a response to shared concerns that prevailing socio-economic conditions left Japan vulnerable to the appeal of communism, a prospect feared by the United States and their conservative allies in the Japanese government.

officials were affected by the purge. The success of the Japanese Communist Party in the 1949 elections, continued labour unrest and Mao's victory in China had hardened attitudes. The resulting infringement on the civil liberties enshrined in the new Constitution certainly reflects badly on the US commitment to the democratic ideals it was espousing and reminded not a few Japanese of the authoritarian system they had endured before and during the war. Certainly, most Japanese enjoyed far more freedoms and rights during the Occupation than they had under the militarists, but the use of tactics inimical to democracy cast a cloud over US ethics and leadership. Censorship was also prevalent as SCAP prohibited negative commentary about the Occupation and discussion of the atomic bombings. Ironically, SCAP was nurturing democracy, but was itself unaccountable and could and did act arbitrarily, claiming rights and privileges that put its staff above the law. Moreover, the virtual imposition of a democratic constitution on Japan with little consultation or compromise generates doubts about the nature of Japanese democracy that still resonate today. In order to achieve its goals, SCAP sometimes acted outside the law or issued what amounted to edicts in an effort to create a semblance of legality. The suppression of democracy for the sake of democracy proved to be a lasting paradox of the American interregnum [Doc. 2, pp. 121–2].

Dower, the pre-eminent historian of the Occupation, argues that SCAP's neo-colonial revolution from above pursued an agenda of both progressive change and reaffirmation of authoritarian structures of government. It is a telling commentary that, 'while the victors preached democracy they ruled by fiat; while they espoused equality, they themselves constituted an inviolate privileged caste . . . almost every interaction between victor and vanquished was infused with intimations of white supremacism' (Dower, 1999: 211). While the embrace of peace and democracy may well be the talismanic legacy of the Occupation, the gutting of the union movement, suppression of dissent and ruthless repression during the Cold War-inspired Red Purge left a bitter taste and did little to promote tolerance. The American embrace of the conservative elite in Japan during the reverse course enabled the latter to slow the pace of reform, shift it to the right and consolidate their power; once the Occupation ended in 1952 they were in a position to roll back or dilute many of the reforms.

The US decision not to prosecute **Emperor Hirohito** for war crimes was controversial at the time because allies and leftists in Japan believed that he should be held accountable for the excesses committed by the Imperial armed forces (see Bix, 2000, for a detailed account of the Showa Emperor's active involvement in waging war and US complicity in covering up that role in the postwar era.) The Americans believed that Hirohito was more valuable to their reform efforts alive and free than dead or incarcerated and feared

Emperor Hirohito (1901–89): The Emperor reigned for 62 years, longer than any other Japanese Emperor, ascending to the throne in 1926. His era is known as *Showa* (Enlightened Peace). Debate over his role in and responsibility for the war persists. He died a popular figure, known to most Japanese for his keen interest in marine biology and for his self-effacing style. The outpouring of international condolences and the large attendance of foreign dignitaries at his funeral indicate how far Japan was rehabilitated and reintegrated into the community of nations following the Second World War.

creating a martyr for the nationalist movement. The **Showa** Emperor went on to become a symbol of Japan's postwar renaissance and is widely credited with having a constructive role during and after the Occupation. However, the decision to absolve the Emperor of war responsibility cast a cloud over the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and muddied the entire issue of war responsibility. If the national leader could not be held accountable, others felt justified in also evading their responsibility for what happened because they believed they were acting in his name. Significantly, this meant that few Japanese really confronted their support of Japan's military violence in Asia or the prevailing racist attitudes that had condoned it.

Japanese remain ambivalent about the Occupation. The policies of democratization and demilitarization were generally welcomed at the time and there is still a substantial residue of goodwill emanating from the positive legacies of that period. Older Japanese, who lived during the Occupation, recall the hardships and some unfortunate incidents, but express generally positive impressions about the process of transformation unleashed by SCAP. Certainly, the Occupation went better than anyone had anticipated at the time of surrender and the United States is credited with enacting policies that laid the foundations for subsequent economic success. In addition, many Japanese were relieved that the American Occupation bore no resemblance to Japan's often brutal occupation of China and Southeast Asia during the war. It is perhaps one of the most benign and non-punitive occupations in history, an extraordinary achievement given the level of hostility between the United States and Japan at the end of the war.

The Occupation helps explain why American influence is so strong in Japan and why Washington looms so large in the mindset of Tokyo. The patterns of relationships developed during the Occupation have lingered too long; many Japanese slide easily between resentment and respect for the US because they chafe at the **unequal relationship**. More than a half-century after the Occupation ended, established patterns persist, reflecting Japan's sense of vulnerability and dependence on the US security umbrella.

Conservative Japanese frequently trace many of Japan's current social problems back to the Occupation. They see women's legal equality, the end of the patriarchal *ie* system, educational reforms, the new Emperor system, demilitarization, etc., and a vague process of Americanization as harmful to the Japanese social fabric. In 1998, one of the largest grossing films produced in Japan was *Pride*, an epic hagiography focusing on Prime Minister Hideki Tojo and the injustice of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal that led to his death by hanging. Certainly, the proceedings of the tribunal ignored due process and they serve as compelling evidence of American hypocrisy and victor's justice. However, the popular press and right-wing writers tend to portray the Japanese defendants solely as victims of biased legal proceedings without

Showa: Era of 'enlightened peace' (1926–89) under the reign of Emperor Hirohito.

Unequal relationship: Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama (2009–2010) has called for ending the unequal relationship and developing a partnership among equals, meeting stiff resistance from Washington where the patterns of the past persist and an ally that does what it is told is valued.

ie: The patriarchal family system that denied women independence and legal rights. The Constitution sought to correct this bias with decidedly mixed results. Many Japanese women today still bridle under what they see as the legacy of this male-oriented system in the home, in society and at work. Conservatives often blame current social problems on the decline of the *ie* system.

Yushukan Museum: Renovated in 2002, the Yushukan Museum is Ground Zero for an unrepentant perspective on Japan's shared history with Asia and a shifting of blame for Japanese aggression. The exhibits emphasize Japan's sacrifices and victimization while glossing over the considerable devastation and violence inflicted by Japanese colonialism in Korea (1910–45) and Japan's Imperial Armed Forces waging aggression 1931–45, especially in China but also through much of the rest of Asia. Under US pressure, suggestions that President Franklin Roosevelt deliberately provoked the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor were modified in 2006.

examining the question of whether they in fact committed war crimes. Such an exonerating narrative is also evident at the **Yushukan Museum** adjacent to Yasukuni Shrine in central Tokyo. In Japan as elsewhere, the present is usually projected on to the past in ways that tend to do history little service.

HIROSHIMA AND PEARL HARBOR

Japanese and Americans look back at their shared past through the images conjured up by two catastrophic events. Pearl Harbor, what President Roosevelt described as the 'Day of Infamy', remains shorthand for sneaky treachery. Many Americans draw on this memory of victimization to vindicate their subsequent actions and to ascribe undesirable national characteristics to the Japanese. By focusing on the single event, there is no need to examine the preceding process of polarization between the two nations that began back in 1853 when Commodore Perry arrived in Japan with an armada and demanded that Japan sign an unfavourable treaty of commerce with the United States. In the subsequent nine decades, there are numerous instances of American actions that were provocative, insensitive and punitive. So it is folly to examine Pearl Harbor in a historical vacuum and to portray the United States as an innocent victim of an inexplicable outrage. There is plenty of blame to share on both sides of the Pacific for the outbreak of war.

Similarly, when Japanese recall the war it is usually to dwell on their own suffering. Hiroshima has become a symbol of Japan's victimization during the war. Unfortunately, the lure of victimization has tended to obscure Japan's role as victimizer and how its own suffering was a consequence of its actions and choices. The victims of Japanese aggression remain faint images in the official history. There are signs of improvement, however. The haunting exhibits displayed at the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima previously presented the atomic bombing in a historical vacuum, with no attempt to explain how or why this tragedy occurred. Now, dioramas provide enough historical background for visitors to realize that this was not some inexplicable natural disaster. These efforts to provide a more balanced view have not been replicated throughout Japan. Balance has also been elusive in the United States. For example, in 1995 the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, facing Congressional pressure, staged a watered-down exhibit about the atomic bombings that averted eyes from the horrific consequences (Hein and Selden, 1997). Clearly, the past still lingers in the present and both nations have only begun to come to terms with the tragedies of their shared past. The consequences remain an undercurrent in dealing with current frictions that flare up between these allies.