

# Debating the Allied Occupation of Japan (Part One)

By Peter K. Frost

Japanese war leaders are made to rise from their seats during their arraignment at the Tokyo Trials, which were held by the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Far East in Japan. Source: U.S. Army website *The Tokyo Trials* at http://tinyurl.com/zgwx7y9.

The Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) was an extraordinary time in world history. Working through SCAP, a term that stands for both the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (General Douglas MacArthur until 1951) and the largely American bureaucracy, the United States and its allies insisted that Japan must enact major reforms before regaining independence. Conservative Japanese naturally resisted, but massive casualties, two atomic bombs, anger at the militarists, and fears that the Soviet Union and local radicals might be even more demanding led them to become what Yoshida Shigeru, Prime Minister for much of the period, called "good losers." While all this has been documented in standard texts, there are six specific issues that I have found useful to discuss with students. Three political topics are presented in this essay. Discussions of three economic and cultural issues should appear in a forthcoming *EAA* issue. Most topics I address in the following essay are still the source of contemporary debates.

### **Keeping the Emperor**

At least since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan's leaders had stressed that the Japanese Emperor was a semimystical symbol of Japan's *kokutai*, or national unity. Officials proudly boasted of citizens who had risked death to save the Emperor's picture from destruction or even committed suicide when they failed. During the war, militarists encouraged suicidal *kamikaze* or *banzai* attacks in the Emperor's name. Even after the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the declaration of war by the Soviet Union, hotheads still wanted to fight a final battle to try to protect the Emperor.<sup>1</sup>

When combined with what John Dower has shown to be the deeply racial nature of the Pacific war, it is hardly surprising that the "China Crowd" (which included Dean Acheson, President Harry Truman's future



Emperor Hirohito and General MacArthur at their first meeting in the US Embassy. Tokyo, September 27, 1945. Source: United States Army photography by Lt. Gaetano Faillace on *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/zc95co3.

Secretary of State) argued that the Emperor must be punished for allowing Japan to go to war, or that in September 1945, the US Senate suggested that Hirohito should be tried as a war criminal. In 1949, W. Macmahon Ball, the Australian delegate to the Allied Council for Japan, worried that the Emperor was part of a larger strategy of "complete outward compliance with the orders of the conquerors, combined with lasting spiritual resistance to the conqueror's will." In 1971, David Bergamini, an American civilian who was interned by the Japanese during the war, published a controversial book highly critical of the Emperor. When the Emperor died in



Japanese war criminals, including Tõjõ Hideki (second row, left, in glasses), on their way to be arraigned at the War Ministry Building Tokyo, Japan, where the first session of the trials were held in May 1946. Source: US Army website, *The Tokyo Trials* at http://tinyurl.com/zgwx7y9.

1989, John Dower suggested that the Emperor might be "malleable" and hence capable of once again supporting undemocratic forces. That year, the Mayor of Nagasaki was shot and seriously wounded after saying that Hirohito should bear some responsibility for the war, while Dower's *Embracing Defeat* and Herbert Bix's *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* both added to the criticism of the Emperor. Bix's work in particular documents how well-informed Hirohito was about current politics and how often he encouraged Japan's soldiers to fight even harder.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the "Japan Crowd" (which included Joseph Grew, the prewar Ambassador to Japan) claimed that Hirohito, despite all the pomp and circumstance, was simply a figurehead who must ratify, rather than dispute, any policy unanimously submitted to him by his ministers. Hirohito himself argued this in his famous "monologue" (published only after his death) that when his advisers unanimously agreed that Japan's only choice was to go to war, "I have no choice but to approve it, whether I desire it or not." In August 1945, on the other hand, policymakers were badly split over whether to accept the Allies' July 26 Potsdam Declaration's demand that Japan surrender unconditionally. In this case, the Prime Minister could arrange two meetings in which Hirohito was asked to speak. In the first, he got the government to accept the Potsdam Declaration on condition that it "does not comprise any demand which prejudices the prerogatives of His Majesty as a sovereign ruler." When the Americans replied that the Emperor would be "subject to the supreme commander of the Allied Powers" (i.e., that he might well be allowed to stay), Hirohito spoke again urging surrender. While critics argued that the Emperor could have done more privately, in short, his defenders insisted that he was normally helpless.<sup>3</sup>

A different argument claimed that whatever his responsibility for the war, keeping the Emperor on the throne made it far easier for SCAP to achieve its goals. Unlike critics like W. Macmahon Ball, for example, General MacArthur believed that the Emperor's 1946 New Year's speech renouncing any claims to religious superiority was useful. "The Emperor's New Year's statement pleases me very much," he said. MacArthur was also impressed by the Emperor's general support of SCAP policies and his new willingness to meet the public. Because he hoped that Christianity would fill Japan's "spiritual vacuum," MacArthur was delighted when the Imperial family hired Quaker pacifist Elizabeth Grey Vining to tutor Crown Prince sum, pragmatism triumphed over punishment.

**Discussion Question**: Should the Occupation have forced the Emperor to abdicate?

## **Punishing the Guilty**

(and current Emperor)

Akihito. Conversely, when

Washington asked whether

Hirohito should be tried for

war crimes, MacArthur dra-

matically insisted that if the

Emperor were arrested, he

would need at least a million

more troops to maintain or-

der. As he surely knew, the

US government so wanted

to bring the troops home that it preferred to keep the

ican government's policy

throughout the Occupation

was to "use the existing form

of government in Japan, not to support it." Even Ball

admitted that "the extraor-

dinary smoothness of the

Occupation stems ultimate-

ly from the Emperor's will."5

Despite ongoing protests, in

As a result, the Amer-

Emperor on the throne.<sup>4</sup>

If the Emperor was not to be punished, who was? Here MacArthur, following orders, initiated four kinds of war crimes punishments. The first of these was "The Removal and Exclusion of Undesirable Personnel from Public Office" but was popularly known as "The Purge." Under this policy, some 200,000 Japanese were barred from public office. Most of those purged had been in high military positions, but some were prominent politicians, and a few were business leaders or simply rabble-rousers. Initially aimed at punishing militarism, on June 6, 1950, The Purge was applied to the top leaders of the Japanese Communist Party on the grounds that they advocated antidemocratic violence. In 1951, most of those purged were excused by General Matthew Ridgeway, MacArthur's successor. The rest were depurged in 1952 when Japan regained its independence.<sup>6</sup>

While critics on the right argued that The Purge went too far, those on the left felt that it did not go far enough. They noted that many more Germans were not only barred from public office, but in many cases fined. They objected also to the unexpected late purging of Ishibashi Tanzan, a Japanese politician who criticized MacArthur's policies, and Matsumoto Junichiro, a critic of the Emperor who also happened to be a member of a discriminated group of Japanese known as *Burakumin*. Others argued that punishing the entire Central Committee of the Japanese Communist Party ran counter to the free speech ideals of a democratic system. Both Hans Baerwald, a SCAP official who worked on The Purge, and the Japanese-American journalist Kawai Kazuo believed that the shift in emphasis from punishing militarists to purging Communists made Japanese wonder if The Purge was simply being used by different SCAP factions for partisan purposes.<sup>7</sup>

Class C war crimes trials debated a more severe form of punishment. Unlike The Purge, these were formal trials of those accused of individual acts of brutality against Allied POWs or citizens. Because many of the trials were held in different countries, the records are unclear, but estimates range from 4,000 to 6,000 defendants, of whom perhaps 700 to 900 were executed. English-language sources have paid little attention to the legal issues raised, but brutality toward Western POWs has led to a number of books and films, including Laura Hillenbrand's bestselling Unbroken: A World War Two Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption.<sup>8</sup>

Class B war crimes trials were more controversial. These were brought against officers who were accused of "command responsibility" for atrocities committed by troops under their command. Twenty were charged, but only two (Generals Homma Masaharu and Yamashita Tomoyuki) were convicted by a military court. Homma was accused of allowing the infamous 1942 Bataan Death March, during which thousands of exhausted US and Filipino POWs died on a long, forced march to a prison camp. Since the POWs stumbled closely past Homma's headquarters, his claim that he was too busy to notice was unconvincing. There were few protests when he was found guilty.9

Yamashita's case was different. He was accused of allowing the slaughter of suspected guerrilla fighters and innocent civilians during the final battle to recapture the Philippine capital of Manila. Prosecutors asserted that the atrocities were so widespread that the



General Yamashita Tomoyuki arriving at the military tribunal in Manila, Philippines, in 1945. Source: *The Thai–Burma Railway & Hellfire Pass: Australian Prisoners of War on the Thai–Burma Railway 1942–1945* website at http://tinyurl.com/zmxo5ew.

general should have known what was happening. How could he not? In rebuttal, Yamashita's defenders argued that MacArthur controlled the courts that sentenced to death the only two generals who had defeated him in battle and noted that four of the five military judges lacked either legal experience or battlefield knowledge of how chaotic war can be. His lawyers emphasized that Yamashita had lost contact with his own troops and that the atrocities he was held responsible for were committed by naval, not army, forces who had disobeyed his command to evacuate Manila. Despite vigorous efforts by Yamashita's defense team, a divided US Supreme Court decided that it could not intervene in military proceedings overseas. Truman declined to get involved. MacArthur then decided that the trials were fair, and both generals were executed.<sup>10</sup>

Yet it was the Class A war crimes trial that has generated the most

controversy. Between May 3, 1946, and November 4, 1948, twenty-eight military and civilian leaders were put on trial in Tokyo for an alleged conspiracy to commit war crimes, crimes against peace, and crimes against humanity. The group consisted of fifteen army officers (mostly generals), three admirals, five career diplomats, three bureaucrats, one party politician, and one right-wing propagandist. They were defended by Japanese and American lawyers, and judged by eleven justices chosen from the sovereign states that had been at war with Japan, plus Justice Delfin Janarilla, who came from the Philippines (a US colony until July 4, 1946); and Radhabinod Pal, who



neo, December 1945. All four were sentenced to death for their ill treatment of prisoners during the war. Source: The Thai-Burma Railway & Hellfire Pass: Australian Prisoners of War on the Thai-Burma Railway 1942–1945 website at http://tinyurl.com/zmxo5ew.

came from India (a British colony or dominion until August 15, 1947). After two and a half years of testimony and long delays, seven of the defendants were sentenced to death, sixteen to life imprisonment, and two to shorter prison terms. Two died before the trial ended, and one was declared insane. SCAP reduced several of the sentences in 1950; the Japanese government, with the approval of the Allies, freed all those who remained in 1958.<sup>11</sup>

The trials basically followed the charter first issued to govern the trials of the Nazi leaders in Nuremberg. While Japan had actually protected Jews and others from Nazi-style extermination camps, advocates of the trials still believed that Japan's brutal invasions of China and neighboring countries, its mistreatment of POWs, and its unannounced attack on Pearl Harbor required its leaders to be judged under the same standards. Advocates felt that the defendants could not simply go free and that legal trials were far better than summary executions. Most of all, they hoped that these trials would

show the public that Japan had been ruled by a small, immoral clique of men who had hoodwinked the public and severely punished dissenters. To accomplish this aim, said Robert Jackson, the US Supreme Court justice and chief prosecutor in the Nuremberg trials, the trials should not let the "common sense of justice" be "complicated or obscured by sterile legalisms developed in the age of Imperialism."<sup>12</sup>

Critics of the trials focused on a number of issues. Procedurally, there were concerns that all the justices were from countries or colonies that had been at war with Japan. Indeed, Janarilla had even been a prisoner on Japan's appalling Bataan Death March. The first US Justice (Joseph P. Higgins) resigned after two months, and Joseph Keenan, the American-appointed chief prosecutor, was widely faulted for having a drinking problem and being ineffective. As previously noted, many thought it wrong to try

only twenty-eight suspects when many others, including the Emperor, were spared.<sup>13</sup>

Legally, the "conspiracy" argument used by the prosecution was a uniquely American concept not found in Japanese or other legal systems. Similarly, prosecutions of individuals for "crimes against peace" were not covered under the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war, nor did that pact preclude what Japan regarded as a war of self-defense. There was no discussion of crimes in Korea or Taiwan, as they were then Japanese colonies, and hence no prosecution of atrocities such as the sexual slavery of "comfort women" there. Perhaps to protect

their research, the United States chose not to prosecute the Japanese for the "Unit 371" biological laboratory for using captured Chinese for cruel human experiments. Nor did the trials rule on arguably similar acts committed by the Allies, such as the Soviet Union attacking in violation of its neutrality treaty with Japan, the slaughter of some surrendered Japanese soldiers by an Australian unit, or the horrors associated with the American decision to fire-bomb cities and drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>14</sup>

All this led Tōjō Hideki, Prime Minister for much of the war and one of those sentenced to death, to remark that the trials were nothing more than "victor's justice," imposed by those who had won the war. Pal agreed, voting to acquit all the defendants on the grounds that the trials had no basis in international law. In 1966, Pal was given an award by the Emperor. After Pal's death in 1967, a memorial was erected to him in Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto shrine dedicated to the nation's military heroes. By 1970, the souls of all A, B, and C defendants were enshrined in Yasukuni, and are visited periodically by various Japanese Prime Ministers, some of whom-given constitutional requirements that religion be separated from politics-claimed that they were visiting only as private citizens. Not surprisingly,

these visits have been hotly protested by Japan's neighbors, particularly China and the two Koreas.<sup>15</sup>

Others wondered if the trials had met their educational goals. When the verdicts were finally announced, Kawai Kazuo, a Japanese-American journalist present in Japan at the time, claimed that the once mildly interested public was now "annoyed to be made aware that the trials were going on so long. Why was further punishment necessary when history itself had broken and discredited these old men?"16 Others disagreed. In 1983, Onuma Yasuaki, still a distinguished professor of international law, conceded that "the legal basis for the Tokyo and Nuremberg trials cannot be found in international law as it existed at the time," but also noted that the trials reflected the "norm consciousness," or common moral sense, that what Japan did was wrong.17

Overall, the Japanese trials (along with the German trials) had at least two effects. First, they established the right to try individuals for war crimes. Contemporary courts now regularly judge individuals accused of war crimes. Yet, second, debates over exactly what is a war crime, who should be charged with command respon-



Sailors aboard Japanese destroyer *JS Kongo* (DDG-173) watch line handlers as the ship moors pierside Naval Station Pearl Harbor. October 15, 2007. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/jh53byr.

## The Occupation of Japan: Other EAA Resources

nstructors and students are encouraged to learn more about a number of Occupation-related topics, including contrasting perspectives regarding the Occupation's alleged successes and failures, as well as accounts of Americans who shaped Occupation policies. Interested readers are encouraged to access "John Dower on Embracing Defeat: An EAA Interview with Kathleen Krauth and Lynn Parisi" (winter 2000, vol. 5, no. 3, http:// tinyurl.com/jlrdyjf), as well as two teaching resources essays, George W. Chase's "Teaching with Embracing Defeat: Notes from a Humanities Teacher" (winter 2000, vol. 5, no. 3, http://tinyurl.com/ze3jmw7) and Edith Roberts's "Voices of the Occupation: Teaching with Haiku" (winter 2000, vol. 5, no. 3, http://tinyurl.com/hogbagl). George Packard's "Through the Minefields of Japanese History: Another Look at the Occupation" (fall 2003, vol. 8, no. 2, http://tinyurl.com/jopr3tk) offers a different perspective than Dower's interpretation of the event. Readers who want to use primary sources in their classes should access two interviews with Americans who were part of the Occupation: "Framing Japan's Constitution: An EAA Interview with Colonel Charles L. Kades" (Peter Frost, fall 1996, vol. 1, no. 2, http://tinyurl.com/hh46aja) and "Serving in the Occupation: An Interview with Wilson Dillon" (Daniel Métraux, winter 2012, vol. 17, no. 3, http://tinyurl. com/hvcj3je).

sibility for crimes committed by troops under their command, and how the accused should be judged continue to be contested issues.

**Discussion Question**: Did SCAP treat alleged war criminals fairly?

## **Outlawing War**

A third controversy centered around how to write a new constitution that would protect the Emperor yet prevent Japan from waging war in his name. Here MacArthur felt caught between conservative Japanese leaders who were hardly eager to change the existing constitution and pressure for serious political change from progressives both in Washington and in the newly formed Far Eastern Commission (FEC)which included the Soviet Union. Worried that the rapidly approaching first meeting of the FEC might bring on a crisis, MacArthur, on February 3, 1946, ordered a committee headed by Colonel Charles Kades to draft the kind of constitution that he wanted. After a week of unprecedented secret work, the American draft was shown to a surprised and shocked Japanese government. As SCAP made it clear that the fate of the Emperor hung in the balance, the American draft became a Japanese proposal. Japan's Diet (Parliament) made some relatively minor changes (with SCAP approval), and the Emper-

> or proclaimed the new constitution on May 3, 1947.<sup>18</sup>

This constitution stated that the Emperor was now only "the symbol of the state and the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power." A strong bill of rights protected free speech and freedom from arbitrary arrest. The constitution established equal rights for women (including, by subsequent legislation, the right to vote, run for public office, own property, marry freely, and divorce) and reflected the hope that Japan would be more pacifistic if the allegedly aggressive, male-oriented, multigenerational family system (the ie in Japanese) were dismantled. Constitutional rights of religious freedom and better education also aimed at creating better-informed voters eager to block any future "conspiracy" to wage an aggressive war.

The most original provision of the new constitution, however, was Article 9, which in its final form said that:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces as well as other war potential will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.<sup>19</sup>

Commentators argued over who dreamed up the idea of a "no-war" clause. Was the new constitution, as Kawai Kazuo claimed, an awkwardly phrased translation of an American demand that left the Japanese apathetic? Not so, said MacArthur, both at the time and in his 1964 memoirs. MacArthur stressed that the constitution had been carefully debated in the Diet and approved by the Emperor. Article 9 was actually proposed not by himself, he claimed, but by Prime Minister Shidehara Kijuro in a private conversation. Since there is no record of Shidehara mentioning the idea to his colleagues, this claim is at best overstated. Shidehara's opinion was probably more accurately revealed when he told the cabinet that in the current situation, approving the American-inspired constitution was "the only possible choice."<sup>20</sup> Given contemporary pressures to revise or repeal Article 9, its origins are, in fact, more important than it might seem at first glance.

A second issue revolved around exactly what the new article meant. During the course of the Diet negotiations, Ashida Hitoshi, a prominent politician, added the opening clauses "aspiring to an international peace based on justice and order . . . " and "in order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph. . . ." Initially, he said that adding these clauses made Article 9 more positive, but he soon argued that in the absence of a just and orderly peace, those clauses allowed Japan to rearm. Kades, MacArthur, and the charter of the United Nations all agreed that all nations have the inherent right of self-defense. Indeed, as the Cold War heated up and the Japanese Communist Party led more aggressive protests, MacArthur in 1950 authorized a 75,000-person National Police Reserve. This was renamed the Self-Defense Force in 1954.<sup>21</sup>

Debate then turned to how "self-defense" might be defined. Weren't all wars waged in the name of self-defense? At first, it was decided that the difference between a defense force and a military capable of aggression could be reckoned by limiting the military budget to 1 percent of the gross national product. In 1986, this was raised to 3 percent, a relatively large amount for a GNP as big as Japan's. Japan's military now numbers a little over 247,000 land, sea, and air personnel. Next, 1992 legislation allowed the Self-Defense Force to participate in United Nations' Peacekeeping Forces in Cambodia. Later a "reconstruction and support group" was sent to Iraq. In 2015, the Diet passed Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's controversial bill allowing the notion of "self-defense" to include coming to the aid of an endangered ally. As the chief "ally" was understood to be the United States, many protested the new law.

Japan is thus still divided internally. Opponents argue that revoking Article 9 will help Japan defend itself against increasingly belligerent neighbors. It will also restore full national sovereignty, allow Japan to participate in United Nations Peacekeeping missions, and hence someday let Japan gain a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. By contrast, supporters of Article 9 argue that particularly when combined with the visits by Japanese Prime Ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine, Japanese rearmament only encourages strong protests by neighbors such as China and the two Koreas. As the only nation in the world that experienced the atom bomb, Japan should lead by example in the struggle for world peace. As Onuma Yasuaki puts it, "Postwar Japan has, by means of its peace constitution, conducted itself in a manner far superior to the Allied powers." Here, too, there is room for vigorous debates over Occupation reforms.<sup>22</sup> Prime Minister Abe's sweeping July 2016 victory in Upper House Diet elections will only fuel to the constitutional debate.

Discussion question: Should Article 9 be kept as it is?

#### NOTES

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- 2. W. MacMahon Ball, Japan: Enemy or Ally? (New York: The John Day Co., 1949); John W. Dower, War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York: Pantheon Press [Knopf Doubleday], 1986), Japan in War and Peace: Selected Essays (New York: The New Press, 1994), and Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); and Herbert Bix, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000).
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  *PROJ*, 424; Ball, 44.
- 6. Hans Baerwald, *The Purge of Japanese Leaders under the Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).
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  James, 98ff.
- 10. Richard L. Lael, *The Yamashita Precedent: War Crimes and Command Responsibility* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982).
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- 12. Ibid.
- 13. Ibid.
- 14. The full text of the Japanese Constitution is available online at the *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet* website at http://tinyurl.com/kqfdzt3. It is technically an amendment to the Meiji Constitution of 1889.
- 15. Information on the controversies over Justice Pal and the Yasukuni Shrine visits can be found in the *Wikipedia* entries for "Radhabinod Pal" (http://tinyurl.com/z7frrh4) and "Yasukuni" (http://tinyurl.com/cynawr6).
- 16. Kawai, 23.
- Yasuaki Onuma, "The Tokyo Trial between Law and Politics," in Chihiro Hosoya, Nisuki Ando, Yasuaki Onuma, and Richard Minear, eds., *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: An International Symposium* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 45–52.
- PROJ 72ff; Charles Kades, "The American Role in Revising Japan's Imperial Constitution," Political Science Quarterly 104, no. 2 (1989): 215–247; Ray A. Moore and Donald J. Robinson, Partners for Democracy: Crafting the New Japanese State Under MacArthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 19. See the Japanese Constitution on the *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet* website at http://tinyurl.com/kqfdzt3.
- 20. Kawai, 52; MacArthur, 301ff; James, 129; Moore and Robinson, 269ff.
- 21. Kades, 237
- 22. Onuma, 51. Basic information on international reactions can be found by Google searches on "Japan's Self-Defense Force" and "Yasukuni Shrine."

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