

2001 Pulitzer Winner

By Kathleen Krauth



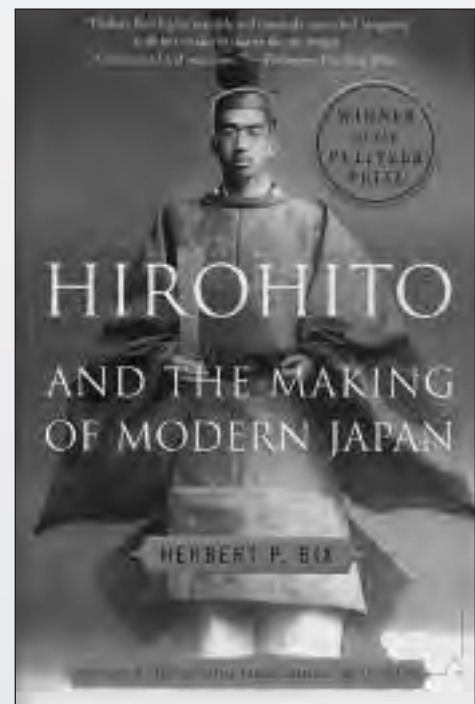
Photo courtesy of Herbert Bix.

HIROHITO and the Making of Modern Japan

Herbert P. Bix is a professor of history and sociology at Binghamton University in New York, where he was recently appointed after three and a half years at the prestigious Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo. In the fall of 2001, I had just moved to Tokyo to teach Japanese history

and Asian studies at The American School in Japan. After reading Bix's biography of Hirohito, I immediately invited him to speak to my senior honors classes, and thankfully, he graciously accepted. The talk Professor Bix gave four months later at The American School and the ensuing discussion had a huge impact on my students. We had read major portions of the book as a class, but the students really struggled with the idea that what they had learned about Hirohito in their textbook was just wrong. Bix calmly, but forcefully, explained to them in what way the traditional narrative about Hirohito was incorrect, and how such misleading and erroneous accounts of the Emperor came to be so widely accepted. Somehow Professor Bix made these high school seniors comfortable with what had seemed to them a betrayal of sorts. Bix talked about the life of Hirohito, but what he really taught them was that history is ambiguous, tenuous, and controversial, and as a result, always fascinating. Isn't that what we all want to teach students?

For his important work on the life of Hirohito, Bix received the 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2001 Pulitzer Prize. One of my main goals in conducting an interview with Bix was to introduce current historical interpretations not only into the high school setting, but also the junior college and university environments. Bix's book offers an exciting and unique chance to engage students at all levels in historiography and the process of writing history.



Why was Emperor Hirohito such a negligible factor or indeed no factor at all in accounts of the process that led to Japanese expansionism in the 1930s? Was it really true that the emperor related to his own armed forces only as a robot or puppet? And why wasn't emperor ideology an object of study for students interested in explaining the road to Pearl Harbor?

Kathleen: I want to thank you for agreeing to this interview and to congratulate you on the many awards and great reception that your book has received in the last year. What initially motivated you to study Hirohito?

Herbert Bix: Thank you for that. It's been a delightful surprise. For decades before I wrote the book I was interested in the problem of the "emperor system," or (in Japanese) *tennosei*. Why was Emperor Hirohito such a negligible factor or indeed no factor at all in accounts of the process that led to Japanese expansionism in the 1930s? Was it really true that the emperor related to his own armed forces only as a robot or puppet? And why wasn't emperor ideology an object of study for students interested in explaining the road to Pearl Harbor? I had these questions in mind at the start of the 1980s when I did a schematic piece on "emperor-system fascism" which later appeared in *The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. At that time there was very little information on Hirohito. So one spoke not about the occupant of the throne but about the "emperor system," which meant the institution, the social basis for the prewar monarchy, and the ethos and psychology that informed the monarchy.

For various reasons I was soon diverted from this sort of study. My attention turned to peasant studies and peasant uprisings. When I finished writing *Peasant Protest in Japan* (Yale University Press, 1986), I was looking for another project that would cover a long sweep of historical time. The Shōwa Emperor died in January 1989, and shortly afterward there appeared the diary of his Vice-grand Chamberlain, Kinoshita Michio. Appended to the diary was interesting new documentary material pertaining to a dictation that Hirohito had made with the help of his aides in the late winter and spring of 1946. The next year, 1990, the journal *Bungei shunju* published a shortened version of the actual dictation, which it dubbed "The Monologue": eight hours of talk by the Shōwa Emperor. After reading this material I saw that it was possible to focus a study on Hirohito, the imperial house, and the ideology of emperorism. So I thought I would pull together my previous studies and reinterpret many major events of twentieth-century Japanese history.

I began to write my book at the start of the 1990s and continued working on it throughout Japan's so-called "lost decade" of uninterrupted economic recession and rising government debt. Cabinets were changing repeatedly at short intervals; conservative politicians were talking about the need for structural reform, but they were practicing business as usual; and the press was reporting more and more stories of incredible corruption by bureaucrats, including those in the Foreign and Finance ministries and the police. Although Japan's international situation and strategic position in East Asia was quite unlike what it had been before World War II, the parties and the bureaucracy seemed to me to be acting as they had in imperial Japan. They were putting their organizational concerns ahead of the general public concern, acting in their own rather than the national interest. The longer I worked on *Hirohito*, the more I saw opportunities to bring out implicit parallelisms in political behavior between inter-war and wartime imperial Japan and the Japan in which I was living at the end of the twentieth century. I thought that I would furnish the historical background for understanding Japanese styles of leadership, especially the distinctive Japanese system of irresponsibility in decision making.

Kathleen: The first statement you made in a discussion with students at The American School in Japan in March 2001 was a quote from E. H. Carr's *What Is History?* "There is no such thing as valueless history." Can you speak to how this quote relates to past studies of Hirohito and to your own ten-year study of Hirohito?

Herbert Bix: I think it was Howard Zinn, a historian I admire, who in some of his writings on historiography had picked up and expanded on a point that E. H. Carr had made:



Before the defeat of Japan by Allied forces in 1945, Hirohito, as commander of the Japanese armed forces, was frequently pictured in military uniform atop his white horse.

Photo and caption from the Cornell University
Web site: <http://cidc.library.cornell.edu/DOF/japan/japan.htm>



Sept. 27, 1945: This photo of General MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito at the American Embassy marked the beginning of a useful partnership.

Photo and partial caption from *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. (K. K. Kyōdō News)

. . . there were a few critical voices like Price, Lattimore, and Brown, but mainstream scholars paid them no heed during the Cold War. The Cold War really had a distorting effect on the kinds of histories of Japan that were written; it inflicted a lot of harm in our cultural life.

how historians in their work do seem to realize values that they hold important, and that they have always done so. Well, the overriding theme of my book—the problem of accountability—is one I have been concerned with for a long time. I knew that the whole issue of the emperor’s role in the war had been raised right at the end of World War II. There were people on the left, Americans, who understood that Hirohito was absolutely central to the Japanese war effort. Owen Lattimore, a New Deal liberal, viewed Hirohito as integral to the expansion of Japan. He wrote a book in 1945, *Solution In Asia*, in which he said something like, if you don’t identify the Japanese emperor with Japanese imperialism, then you don’t understand the line-up of political forces in Japan, and you can’t understand what divides liberals from so-called militarists.

Willard Price, a writer for *National Geographic* who had lived in Japan in the 1930s, wrote a book around the time of the Battle of Okinawa in May 1945, called *Japan and the Son of Heaven*. Price saw how central emperor ideology was for the Japanese people in the 1930s and 40s. Price also saw that Hirohito was in some ways more guilty than the so-called militarists because, as he would say, this man permitted himself to be prostituted to a policy which he later claimed was disastrous to his country. Price’s book was ignored after it came out.

The work of anthropologist Ruth Benedict encountered a different reception. She saw the emperor as a South Pacific type of totem, the stereotype of the emperor as a powerless figurehead through whom others spoke. It was this view that came to prevail in the American academy even though one could still find, on occasion, a lonely voice of dissent. In 1957, for example, Allen Brown did a master’s thesis at Stanford in which he argued that a very strong case could be made that Hirohito should be indicted and stand trial just on the basis of what had been submitted as evidentiary material at the Tokyo Trials. So there were a few critical voices like Price, Lattimore, and Brown, but mainstream scholars paid them no heed during the Cold War. The Cold War really had a distorting effect on the kinds of histories of Japan that were written; it inflicted a lot of harm in our cultural life.

Kathleen: *What about other scholarly writings and research that have been done on Hirohito?*

Herbert Bix: The emperor was a long-ignored subject in the academy in Britain and the U.S. The few pieces that came out were usually apologias. I remember that when Edward Behr published *Hirohito Behind the Myth*, in the same year Hirohito died, the response of the Japan establishment in the U.S. was extremely hostile. Of course there were reasons for that. Behr’s scholarship was sloppy, though no sloppier than a lot of books one reads from university presses. Some eighteen years before Behr, in 1971, David Bergamini wrote *Japan’s Imperial Conspiracy*. Bergamini tried to make sense of the Japanese monarchy and Emperor Hirohito, but he embedded his whole analysis in a vast conspiratorial theory. The academics devastated him even more than they did Behr. But Bergamini got the main point right: Hirohito was no passive onlooker at the events unfolding around him. Unfortunately, Bergamini set back scholarship on the emperor, and after him graduate students were reluctant to tackle the subject.

I mentioned that I once did a journal article on emperor-system fascism, but I don’t know of any others in English. Hirohito was a subject set off from respectable topics of academic research by a certain taboo. In a bibliographical essay on the subject that came out in a Japanese journal a few years before I completed my book, I argued that first the anthropologists, then the political scientists and the historians, uncritically accepted the official American Occupation view of the emperor and his role in the war. The Shōwa Emperor has been a historical enigma for a long time. Indeed, for most of the post-World War II period, the study of the man who prosecuted the Asia-Pacific War, but never took responsibility for his actions, has been difficult.

I wrote my book on the basis of half a century of the fruits of Japanese scholarship, and I am always happy to give credit to these scholars who I admire so much.

Kathleen: *Some of your book is based on the work of Japanese historians who have been researching Hirohito's role in the war for years, and 95 percent of your sources are in Japanese.*

Herbert Bix: I wrote my book on the basis of half a century of the fruits of Japanese scholarship, and I am always happy to give credit to these scholars who I admire so much.

Kathleen: *I know that you don't want your study of Hirohito to be viewed as that of the foreigner coming in and revealing truths about Japan, but why haven't these previous studies by Japanese historians and academics become part of the common discourse on Hirohito, especially in Japan?*

Herbert Bix: That's a difficult question. Let's take American and British professionals who have lived many years of their lives in Japan and learned a lot about Japan. Sometimes it's hard for them to learn new things when new things come along that challenge what they have written or believed for a long period of time. There's clearly that element—an uncritical acceptance of received opinion, an unwillingness to learn new things, and being committed to positions staked out earlier in their careers. More important, though, the decade of the 1990s is the decade in which Hirohito gradually became a figure *in* history. When the former mayor of Nagasaki, Motoshima, speaking in the Nagasaki Prefectural Assembly, made his statement about the war responsibility of the dying emperor, Hirohito wasn't yet a historical figure; he hadn't yet died. Motoshima's remarks caused right-wing thugs from all over Japan to descend on Nagasaki. The LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) turned its back on the mayor, even though he was a fellow member of the LDP, and Motoshima ended up being shot. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* came out almost a decade later, and the reception has been quite different, so I would say that for my book the timing was just right.

Kathleen: *I know Kodansha has picked up the rights to publish in Japanese.*

Herbert Bix: They did so only a few months after the book came out. People had these preconceptions that the Japanese publishers would be afraid of the book. Historical views of the lost war remain contentious and the Japanese people remain deeply divided over their past, but overall there has been gradual progress in acknowledging the aggressive nature of the war and the crimes that were committed in the war by Japanese military men. But the struggle goes on, and, as you know, under this current Koizumi regime, you've got many regressive signs of an effort to foster a more racially self-conscious, nationalist discourse or to move discussion in Japan in a more self-consciously nationalistic direction. This reflects itself in Koizumi's de facto sanctioning of the new Fusosha textbook despite the many criticisms educators have mounted against it.

Kathleen: *Yes, I wanted to link your book to current events in Japan. Clearly, the issues of the war are still current, and the year 2001 has seen yet another in a series of textbook controversies and controversies over Yasukuni Shrine which are adversely affecting relations with China and South Korea. The decision of Prime Minister Koizumi to honor all the war dead by visiting Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, 2001, the anniversary of the end of the war, has been particularly contentious. When does the postwar really end if people still have not come to terms with the war and the war is still constantly an issue?*

Herbert Bix: Yes, the postwar has been repeatedly declared over ever since the early 1950s, but some of the ideals enshrined in Japan's postwar constitution, including the separation of politics and religion and Japan as a "peace state" that exercises force only in self-defense, remain at issue. We really have to talk about the U.S.-Japan relationship here. The United States has long encouraged Japan to build up its armed forces and to function as an integral part of the American military establishment in East Asia, and the Security Treaty has been revised repeatedly. The problem is one of having military and strategic considerations take priority over the Japanese Constitution. Officials of the Bush administration are recommending that Japan



Shinso 40 (April 1, 1950): Even as the political mood in Japan shifted to the right, the satirical magazine put hat-doffing Hirohito, standing on a ground of human skulls, in the limelight.

Photo and partial caption from *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. (San Ichi Shobo K. K.)

***Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* corrects a certain falsity in our conventional accounts of postwar Japanese political history, which left out the emperor. I am saying that you can't understand the history of twentieth-century Japan without putting Hirohito and the monarchy back at the center where they belong.**

revise its constitution; they would support Prime Minister Koizumi's efforts to abolish Article 9. This is unfortunate. But ever since John Foster Dulles secured a treaty that allowed American military leaders to have their bases in Japan for as long as they wanted, wherever they wanted, the American military has exercised a predominant voice in the framing of American policy toward Japan. This issue will probably be highlighted more and more as our new century unfolds. My book is an extended reflection on this theme of excessive military influence in the making of national policy.

One of its major themes is how Hirohito's life, like the life of his grandfather Meiji, illustrates the tendency of military power to expand when democratic institutions are either absent or non-functioning. Here I'm quoting myself from the introduction to the book, but I was also thinking of American militarism when I wrote it. If the chief executive is lax or indulgent, and Bush is both, then who will restrain the military?

Another major theme of the book is what happens to a nation when its head of state is given immunity from crimes and the crimes get covered up and there is no investigation. Historical records get distorted and falsified. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* corrects a certain falsity in our conventional accounts of postwar Japanese political history, which left out the emperor. I am saying that you can't understand the history of twentieth-century Japan without putting Hirohito and the monarchy back at the center where they belong.

Kathleen: *The implications of not holding Hirohito responsible for wartime events . . .*

Herbert Bix: were profound.

Kathleen: *And I think they are very well detailed in your book. You argue that because Hirohito was never held responsible for the war, individual Japanese people and Japan as a nation were never forced to come to terms with their own responsibility.*

Herbert Bix: That's right.

Kathleen: *But what other implications does this lack of responsibility have for postwar Japanese society, and then, on the other side, what implications did the American failure to hold Hirohito accountable for the war have for the United States?*

Herbert Bix: Well, first let me say that American lawyers have been at the forefront in forging international orders that would support peace. But American governments have invariably drawn back from the implications of subjecting American power to the constraints of international law. The first international war crimes trial that could be called such was the Nuremberg Trial. But the Nuremberg Trial and what followed wasn't successful in certain respects. The U.S. curtailed its war crimes program aimed at de-nazifying Germany and punishing the convicted Nazi criminals. We never adequately punished and ended up aborting the process. We did that in Germany, but also in Japan. Nevertheless, there was a short period of time when real progress was made in international law, though in the end Great Power considerations led to the immunization of Hirohito and the men responsible for Japanese bacteriological warfare and chemical warfare in China.

When you look at this history of impunity from the American viewpoint, you can say that strategic, Cold War considerations dictated much of our policy toward Japan. Now that the Cold War is over, we face a situation where we are going to be spending more on our armed forces than we ever spent at any time during the Cold War. This is disturbing. Those of us in Japanese studies have an obligation to point out the inherent realism of the pacifist principles, including the outlawing of aggressive warfare, embodied in the Japanese Constitution. There has been considerable progress in international law over the course of the twentieth century; we should struggle to see that it continues regardless of what Bush does.

I argue that imperial Japan never had a constitutional monarchy in any conceivable Western sense, and that Hirohito wasn't principled or consistent, except where preservation of the throne with himself on it was concerned.

Kathleen: *Much of your work reveals the importance of evaluating sources, working with what sources are available, and, ultimately, the sometimes imprecise and ambiguous nature of history.*

Herbert Bix: When you deal with a head of state and the top policy-makers and advisers in government, these people, regardless of their nationality, are highly conscious of the need for deniability to protect themselves. They hold onto their records for dear life, or they take their most important papers with them and try to sequester them from public scrutiny. Therefore any effort to combat the impunity of heads of state is a threat to them, and they can be expected to resist it. But the effort should be made to hold these people accountable. We live in an interesting time because these issues are now front and center.

Kathleen: *Many of the sources that were important to your work became available only after Hirohito's death in 1989, and some known sources, such as Hirohito's diary, may never become available. Can you talk about the specific problems you encountered in your research?*

Herbert Bix: I didn't rush it, though I was tempted to do so. But I waited until the whole seven-volume diary of Prince Takamatsu, the emperor's brother, came out and I was able to go through that and other diaries and sources. I think that just waiting for more and more material to become available helped. In 1992, Stephen Large, an American teaching in Britain, published a book, *Emperor Hirohito and Shōwa Japan: A Political Biography*, that purported to answer Behr. Large found Hirohito to be a politically passive, constitutional monarch. Of course, I argue that imperial Japan never had a constitutional monarchy in any conceivable Western sense, and that Hirohito wasn't principled or consistent, except where preservation of the throne with himself on it was concerned. He certainly wasn't a passive monarch during most of the 1930s and early 40s. I don't think that the stereotype of Hirohito as passive can ever be revived because there is too much evidence against it. Some people will continue to believe it, but that is a different matter. Anyway, I tried to address these myths of him as a pacifist, anti-militarist, and constitutional monarch. That's one of the things historians do—address and expose myths.

Kathleen: *Your exposure of one of these myths was one of the most shocking revelations for me. This was the fact that some of Hirohito's advisers actually welcomed the atomic bombings and the Soviet invasion because these events gave them and Hirohito an excuse to surrender. You quote Yonai Mitsumasa saying to Admiral Takagi Sokichi on August 12: "I think the term is perhaps inappropriate, but the atomic bombs and the Soviet entry into the war are, in a sense, gifts from the gods. This way we don't have to say that we quit the war because of domestic circumstances." This description of events completely contradicts the conventional story of the surrender in which the timid Hirohito, out of a heart-felt sense of compassion for the misery and suffering of the Japanese people, particularly after the atomic bombings, finally musters the courage to confront the evil militarists and forces them to stop the war. Can you comment on the chapter, "Delayed Surrender," in which you discuss the role of Hirohito and the end of the war?*

Herbert Bix: Yes, Japan's elites were actually looking for a way to lose the war that would enable them to stay in power with the aid of a politically empowered monarch in the post-surrender period. That way they could control the situation and not have to suffer the consequences of their misuse of power and mismanagement of affairs. It's very important to ask why Japan delayed surrender so long, and in that chapter I try to reconstruct the process chronologically. Officially, Hirohito was presented as the hero who single-handedly ended the war. I argue that he was the most important person in delaying the inevitable confrontation with reality which came in the late summer of 1945, long after Japan had effectively lost the war and had very little materiel and trained personnel to go on resisting. That was the problem to be explained. It's a pitiful, sad, and tragic story, but in that chapter



February 1946: The new “human emperor” inspecting war-damaged areas in Kanagawa prefecture, at the beginning of his national tours.

Photo and partial caption from *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. (Mainichi shinbunsha)

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It helps if we put a human face
on these figures; I tried to put
a human face on Emperor Hirohito.***

I don't let Truman off the hook either, because I think the use of the atomic bombs was a war atrocity. So we have Truman on the one side, and Hirohito and Kido on the other, and at the very end of the chapter I point out the lost opportunities.

It's interesting. Japan's leaders would maintain the official view of the war that was announced by the government of General Tōjō Hideki in December of 1941, that Japan was fighting for self-defense and self-preservation. This official view of the war would be perpetuated in postwar democratic Japan. Keeping Hirohito on the throne after the defeat also meant perpetuating this official view of the war. From the moment Yoshida Shigeru signed the San Francisco Treaty and accepted the results of the Tokyo Tribunal, Japanese political leaders have acknowledged a war of aggression for foreign consumption, but for domestic consumption they have asserted that it was a righteous war for self-defense and self-preservation. The historian Yoshida Yutaka coined the term “the Japanese double standard,” and that is precisely what has been maintained. When Prime Minister Koizumi visits Yasukuni Shrine he is visiting a religious institution that disseminates the “revisionist” or imperial view of history. Granting immunity to the emperor had the most profound implications. Perhaps we should bear this in mind as The Hague Tribunal adjudicates the fate of Slobodan Milosevich.

Kathleen: *One final question: do you have any suggestions for how university and high school teachers might use your book in their classrooms?*

Herbert Bix: Some of the chapters in my book are self-contained, so if educators want to understand the China War, then they could just look at chapter 9, “Holy War.” If they want to examine how the Manchurian Incident changed Japan profoundly, they might look at chapter 7, “The Manchurian Transformation.” The book can be used to ask and answer many questions about the relationship between power and authority in prewar and wartime Japan. Why did Japan attack Pearl Harbor? When did the Japanese first begin to discuss in official policy documents going to war with Britain and the U.S.? The chapter on the Tokyo War Crimes Trial (chapter 15) is also distinctive and offers a view that is as revisionist as many other parts of the book.

I think that teachers of history can get students excited and involved in the study of twentieth-century Japan by taking figures who seem so unlike and comparing and contrasting them. Compare General Tōjō Hideki, the quintessential militarist, with the man considered to be the quintessential pacifist, Hirohito, and ask why Hirohito had his most satisfactory working relationship with General Tōjō? What did this so-called narrow-minded military marionette have in common with the Shōwa Emperor? Where did they differ?

So many questions can be asked. It helps if we put a human face on these figures; I tried to put a human face on Emperor Hirohito.

Kathleen: *Thank you very much for your time. ■*

KATHLEEN KRAUTH is currently a Social Studies Teacher at The American School in Japan, located in Tokyo. She teaches a senior level honors elective on modern Japanese history, and other courses in Japanese studies and the history of Asia. Kathleen's current academic interests are Okinawa, the national memory of World War II in Japan, and postwar Japanese culture as expressed through *manga* and *anime*.