

ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan

BY HERBERT P. BIX
NEW YORK, HARPER COLLINS PUBLISHERS, 2000
800 PAGES, ISBN 0-060931-302, PAPERBACK

As a senior high school student, I enrolled in a social studies elective on World War II. As one of only two girls in a class of twenty, I submitted to the group consensus in identifying the most significant figures in the war. Amidst the predictable favorites of high school boys—the military strategists—we also studied the three “bad guys”: Hitler, Mussolini, and Tōjō. In the histories we read, Hitler and Mussolini were given some breadth and depth, but Tōjō was depicted as a one-dimensional villain. There was no context for his “evil,” no historical developments, no economic, political, or social explanations. Somehow this devil-incarnate had rallied the “100 million hearts as one,” planned the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, and invented new and truly inhumane military tactics to use against Americans, like the kamikaze, for example. Emperor Hirohito was never, ever portrayed as the villain. Actually, he was rarely discussed at all.

I graduated from high school thirty-five years after the Japanese surrender, and yet, even after all those years, very little quality scholarship on Hirohito had been conducted. Although Japanese and American journalists and historians have explored the issues of Hirohito’s responsibility and actions in World War II in the postwar period, the studies and explanations had always come up short, until now. It has taken almost fifty years to come to terms with the actual role that Hirohito played during the war, but with Herbert Bix’s new biography of the Japanese emperor, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, we finally have a thoroughly researched and comprehensive study of this enigmatic monarch.

As with most historical issues, the reasons for the delay in coming to terms with Hirohito’s role before and during the war are complex. One basic reason was that many documents and primary

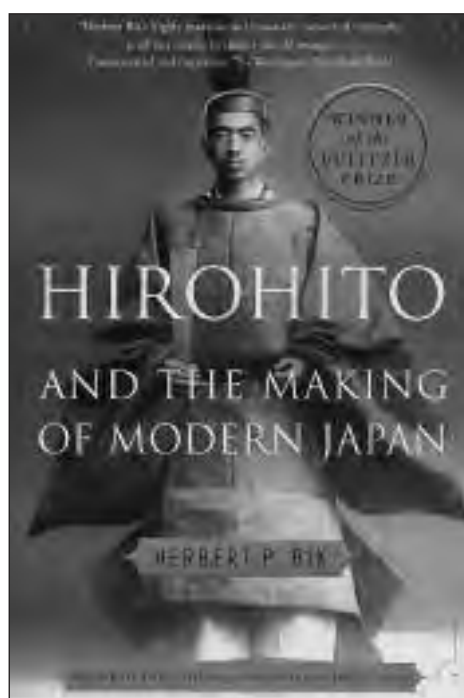
sources on Hirohito were not available until after his death in 1989. Another was that the orthodox view of Hirohito was so deeply rooted that alternative interpretations of Hirohito’s role were disparaged, or at best ignored. (See Bix’s more detailed comments on postwar scholarship on Hirohito in his interview contained in this issue of *Education About Asia*.) But maybe the most important reason is that Bix posed different questions than those previously

asked about the emperor’s role, and was willing to do the arduous research to answer those questions. The questions that Bix asked seem all too obvious now: What actual role did Hirohito play in the daily decisions of the military between 1931 and 1945? If Hirohito was powerful enough to end the war after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, why was he unable to prevent the attack on Pearl Harbor? Why were any proposed investigations into Hirohito’s responsibility deflected and discouraged in the immediate postwar period and throughout the American occupation of Japan?

The answers are fascinating, sometimes stunningly so, for Bix’s study reworks the accepted image of a peace-loving, passive man unwittingly manipulated by evil warmongers. Instead, Bix’s narrative details an active and engaged military, political, and religious leader, who was not only informed of the maneuverings of the Japanese armed forces, but who constantly intervened and ultimately made the final decisions. Hirohito’s decisions, in the end, proved to be disastrous for the Japanese nation and the Japanese people.

Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan is marketed as a political biography, but it is much more. It is indeed a revealing account of the life and importance of Emperor Hirohito, who reigned in Japan from 1926–89. But the story of Hirohito’s life is truly an account of Japan in the twentieth century. Bix’s biography also sheds light on American policies during the Cold War as well as the repercussions of these policies for Japan, the United States, and the world.

Bix’s book offers an opportunity for secondary, junior college, and university instructors to incorporate current historical scholarship into their classrooms. There are so many different issues and themes explored in this book that its use need not be limited to Asian history classes. For example, Bix’s discussion of the role of international law is relevant not only to the immediate postwar



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period, but also to contemporary international politics. American diplomacy during the Cold War and its serious and lasting repercussions are also explored. Another theme that could easily be taken up by students is the question of what a historian actually does—how the questions that he or she asks frame the historian's task as well as the final results.

My classes at The American School in Japan focused on the construction of historical narratives and an examination of which of these narratives end up in our history textbooks. First, we gathered all the school textbooks and books from the library that contained any information about Hirohito's role in the war. Then we examined these documents one by one. We found that the narratives and even the wording were astoundingly similar: Hirohito was a passive, constitutional monarch, who was manipulated like a puppet by Japanese militarists. The photos chosen for the textbooks were also instructive: we saw a nice, old man carefully examining marine specimens or insects on the grounds of the Imperial Palace; or sometimes we saw a rather awkward looking solitary military figure on a beautiful white horse. We never saw the pictures of the commander-in-chief reviewing his troops à la Hitler or Mussolini.

My students were shocked at the pervasiveness of this single interpretation: Hirohito was depicted exactly the same in studies published both in Japan and the U.S., and this portrait of the emperor remained virtually unchanged for fifty years. Confronted with the overwhelming logic of Bix's arguments and the voluminous research in support of his thesis, which blatantly contradicts established views on Hirohito, they finally became personally engaged in the study of history.

We must recognize that all of our students are personally engaged in the study of history this year. The events of September

11, 2001, forced students in every high school and university to consider the present as history. Students fully realized that these events and their ramifications would be recorded in high school textbooks twenty years from now—in short, that history is currently under construction.

This is an incredible opportunity for us as educators, for we can challenge students to critically consider the future interpretations of 2001: In what historical context will these events be explained? What political, social, and economic factors will be blamed? Who will be one-dimensionally portrayed as the evil villains?

We can also challenge students to understand how history can be used and abused. So in light of September 11, 2001, how is the past being used to interpret the present to create policies for the future? To understand this issue, we should be guided by the same historical methods and questions that Bix used in his study of Hirohito: In what context do we place these events? How is our understanding limited by the available sources, by the questions we are and are not asking, and by the current climate of acceptable interpretations? Bix's study shows us the importance of asking different and difficult questions, even about current events. ■

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