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War Responsibility and Historical Memory: Hirohito's Apparition

Herbert P. Bix

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Since the appearance of *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* in 2000, the unearthing in Japan of new information on the Asia-Pacific war has proceeded apace. Historical war narratives using new documentary evidence and drawing on the insights of various disciplines continue to appear. Oral history, women's history, studies of war prisoners and international law, even theories of postwar "reconciliation," have widened the perspectives of Japanese historians. Thanks to the work of many progressive historians the ethical dimensions of military history are being opened up and explored as never before. [1] But in no fundamental way have these scholarly efforts altered the picture of Hirohito as the activist, dynamic, politically empowered emperor who played a central role in Japan's undeclared wars. The following discussion recapitulates some of the arguments that I presented earlier when analyzing Hirohito's leadership at the policy level, then goes beyond them to address problems of historical memory. [2] The same Nuremberg and Tokyo principles of individual and state responsibility for war crimes, however, inform this essay just as they did my book.

Introduction

Japan's wars of the 1930s and early 1940s inflicted on the peoples of Asia and the Pacific tremendous human and material losses. Over ten million Chinese died from the effects of the war that began in 1937, with some estimates of actual deaths running twice as high. Within countries occupied after 1941 by Japanese forces and later fought over by the Allies, massive numbers of combatants and non-combatant civilians died, including over a million Filipinos. Tens of thousands of war prisoners fell into Japanese hands. Many of them died in captivity and many others from US "friendly fire." Japanese forces detained 130,000 to more than 140,000 civilians for the duration of the war. [3] At its end, Japan itself lay prostrate, its cities in ruins, its people demoralized. Official Japanese government underestimates say that 3.1 million Japanese died in the Asia-Pacific War. Of that number about 800,000 were non-combatant civilians, most of them victims of American fire bombing and atomic bombing in the war's final months. [4] American combat deaths of about 123,000 in the Pacific pale in comparison. [5]

The individual who oversaw these wars and in whose name they were fought, Hirohito, was forty-one-years-old when Japan unconditionally surrendered its armed forces. Two decades earlier, upon ascending the throne, he had taken the auspicious reign-title "Showa" ("illustrious peace"). But for the emperor and his subjects, and especially for the people of Asia and the Pacific, there would be no peaceful times in the two decades that followed.

Hirohito: Japan's Last Empowered Emperor

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In the years between November 1921 and December 25, 1926, before the shy, taciturn Hirohito succeeded his ailing father, the Taisho emperor, he had been displayed to the Japanese nation as the dynamic representative of "young Japan," the embodiment of Japanese morality, the person destined to invigorate the imperial house. Two years later the Showa emperor and his entourage strengthened the monarchy's links to state Shinto through year-long enthronement ceremonies that mixed Western-style military reviews with nativistic religious rites while elevating Hirohito to the status of a living deity.



Hirohito's enthronement portrait

Hirohito's enthronement helped to move Japan in a more nationalistic direction. It was based on the theocratic myth of an imperial house whose destiny was defined by the emperor—a human in form but actually a deity ruling the country in an uninterrupted line of succession. No matter what project the emperor undertook, his "subjects" were presumed and required to be absolutely loyal in "assisting" him from below. In newspapers and on the radio the message echoed throughout the land that Japan had broken with its immediate past; it now had a monarch cast in the mold of his illustrious grandfather, Emperor Meiji, who (in the words of Hirohito's first imperial rescript) had "enhanced the grandeur of our empire" and never allowed himself to be treated as a puppet.

For Hirohito, like most Western heads of state, empire, national defense, and national greatness were primary. Given his strongly opportunistic nature, he would extend Japan's control over China when given the chance. In other words, as a traditional imperialist and nationalist, he was firmly committed to protecting Japan's established rights and interests abroad even in the face of the rising world tide of anti-colonial nationalism. But he was also highly sensitive to the internal balance of political forces and even more totally dedicated to preserving the monarchy.

Hirohito differed from other contemporary rulers in the type of Machiavellianism that he practiced in order to maintain the monarchy and extend the reach of the Japanese state. Like successful Western imperialists, Hirohito was able to effectively deploy the rhetoric of ethics, virtue, and morality as means to mobilize his nation for war. He and the elites who protected him treated international law as a fetter on their freedom of action and they were not averse to using scheming and trickery for purposes of national defense. [6] Hirohito alone, however, could display leadership by using the technique of the substantive question that carried the force of a command. He was also unique in his view of Japan's colonial and semi-colonial rights as his genealogical inheritance from his dead ancestors. Since childhood he had been taught that his ancestors, not his living "subjects," were the source of his authority and the object of his responsibility—the sole entities to whom he was morally accountable. [7] Hirohito's denial of responsibility for errors of policy and judgment pervaded the entire structure of Japanese collective decision-making.

The young Hirohito was neither bellicose nor intellectually shallow. He was serious,

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methodical, energetic, and intelligent; he was also physically slight and quite inarticulate. He had been carefully groomed to exercise imperial oversight through building and maintaining consensus so as to achieve unity in policy-making. Above all, he had been trained to make rational judgments as both head of state and supreme commander. [8] Yet from the start occasions arose when passion and ideology intruded; on these occasions Hirohito, the unifier, blundered badly.

The Meiji constitution gave him great power and authority which could not be restricted by the political parties in the Diet. It positioned him at the intersection of politics and military affairs—allowing him on occasion to move the entire government. Eager to assert the prerogatives of imperial power that his own father had been unable to exercise, Hirohito, with the strong encouragement of his entourage, soon fired his first prime minister. Their main grievance against prime minister General Tanaka Giichi, was that Tanaka wanted to punish two young officers who in June 1928 had assassinated the Chinese warlord Chang Tso-lin (Japan's chief collaborator in China's Manchuria), rather than hush up their crime as Tanaka's cabinet ministers wanted. [9]

Hirohito persisted in influencing from behind the scenes the policies and conduct of the two prime ministers that followed. In 1930 his determination to achieve arms control in concert with the US and Britain led him and his close advisers to give inadequate attention to consensus-building among the elites. They forced through Japan's acceptance of the London Naval Treaty of 1930 over the objections of the navy's minority faction, who believed that Japan had to be able to brandish naval power on a par with the Anglo-Americans if it was to achieve its national goals. The backlash from the minority factions in both services, and from politicians in the Diet who agreed with them, came swiftly. By making the Court a new, institutionally independent player in an era of party cabinets, Hirohito and his Court Group undermined the tenuous system of party cabinet government that had begun to develop around the time of Meiji's death. [10]

Meanwhile, out of public view, Hirohito was slowly forming his own political space within a complex system of institutions and processes, designed to protect him, so that he could exercise positive leadership at will, and not merely serve as a passive monarch sanctioning policies presented to him by the cabinet. Hirohito tells us that over time he improved his modus operandi, becoming more adept at practicing self-restraint and avoiding actions and comments that could incur criticism.

After the eruption of the Manchurian Incident in September 1931, in the face of the global Great Depression, Japan's domestic political situation became increasingly unstable. Hirohito and the men surrounding him then made a series of decisions with disastrous consequences for both China and Japan. Instead of demanding the punishment of insubordinate officers who had staged that incident, Hirohito accepted the army's fait accompli, joined in the cover-up of the facts, and failed to back the efforts of the incumbent party cabinet to bring the Kwantung Army to heel. Only by imputation may Hirohito (who was following his inner circle) be deemed criminally liable for these actions committed by senior and intermediate level officers in both Tokyo and Manchuria who, though under his command, were not yet under his actual control. But once he had learned the true facts, he not only failed to punish the wrongdoers, but actively joined in aiding and abetting the army's seizure of Manchuria. In these ways, Hirohito allowed the military in general and army field commanders in particular to effectively take over Japan's China policy and turn it openly aggressive. [11]

In spring 1932, following the assassination of a prime minister by young naval officers,

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Hirohito and the Court Group abandoned their support for constitutional government conducted by party cabinets, thereby quickening the militaristic drift in Japanese politics. Cabinets of national unity headed by admirals moved to the fore. Japan was a signatory to the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928), which obligated it to refrain from using force against other states, and the Nine-Power Treaty (1922), which stipulated respect for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. When in the fall of 1932 Japan formally recognized the puppet state of "Manchukuo," it violated both treaties. Hirohito was pleased that his army had expanded the empire and partially redressed Japan's strategic weakness in natural resources such as coal and iron, but also agricultural land and its produce. So rather than abandon this huge territorial gain in the face of vehement US and Chinese criticism, he sanctioned Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in March 1933 and issued an imperial rescript announcing the move.

The rhetoric of "national emergency" and endangered "lifeline," generated during the Manchurian crisis, continued to effect thinking about Japan's domestic situation. Lethal conflicts involving military officers had shaken the country and Hirohito was uncertain how to proceed in the face of multiple pressures. Radical rightist politicians in the Diet called for the dissolution of political parties. The army and navy, dissatisfied with their respective budgetary allocations, wanted a complete break with the Washington treaty system and an end to the court's pro-Anglo-American line in diplomacy. Hirohito, keenly aware of Japan's economic dependence on the West for resources, technology, and markets, hoped to be able to cooperate with Britain and the U. S., and simultaneously seek to isolate China diplomatically.

Over the next four years Hirohito groped for ways to restore discipline among alienated military officers impatient for domestic political reform, by which they meant mainly accelerated rearmament. Although concerned about the army's overreach on the continent, he worried even more about domestic disorder, which could undermine the monarchy. Then in 1935 army and civilian extremists tried to overcome all constitutional restraints preventing the emperor from ruling "directly" without relying on his advisers. Their nationwide campaign attacked law professor Minobe Tatsukichi's organ theory of the constitution that had been used to legitimize party government and lodge the monarchy more firmly within the constitutional order. The cabinet that the extremists targeted for overthrow counter-attacked by launching its own campaign to repudiate the organ theory and emphasize the emperor's "direct" personal rule, which had been the core concept of the Meiji Restoration. Hirohito lent his authority to both moves, partly to prevent his power from being dwarfed by groups acting from below, and partly to protect his closest advisers whom the radicals had singled out for attack. [12]

In late February 1936, a military insurrection in Tokyo took the life of Hirohito's closest political adviser and many others.



Troops occupy Nagata-cho, Tokyo after the insurrection

Only after intervening forcefully to suppress the uprising and punish the rebel officers, did Hirohito sanction a large expansion of the military budget, a threefold increase in the size

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of the army's small garrison force in north China, and national policies that "required Japan 'to become the stabilizing force in East Asia." [13] Thereafter the army and navy played the guiding role in shaping domestic policy; and Hirohito, who still imagined himself to be a traditional "benevolent monarch," threw off his earlier indecisiveness and slowly began to assert "direct" imperial rule in his capacity as uniformed commander-in-chief.

In July 1937, Japanese and Chinese Nationalist troops clashed briefly at the Marco Polo Bridge south of Peking. The different army factions on the General Staff divided as to how to handle the fighting. One faction wanted to settle this minor provocation locally in order to concentrate resources on building Japan's economic and military might; the other wanted to use the incident to resolve at a stroke all the outstanding issues with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government. Hirohito, from the outset, supported the territorial expansionists. When thousands of troops had been dispatched, he sanctioned a broad Japanese offensive in the Peking-Tientsin area. Shortly afterwards, on July 29-30, Chinese troops, students, and workers killed the remnants of the Japanese garrison force in the city of Tungchow, east of Peking, and also massacred 223 Japanese and Korean civilians, including many women and children. [14] Then, on August 13, Chiang suddenly spread the fighting in north China to Shanghai, in the lower Yangtze River region, where the interests of the foreign powers were most heavily concentrated. The conflict developed into an all-out, undeclared war. [15] Wanting to end it quickly, Hirohito urged major troop reinforcements and the strategic bombing of China's cities. He also "endorsed the [army's] decision to remove the constraints of international law on the treatment of Chinese prisoners of war." [16]

In late November 1937, having seized Shanghai after a bitter struggle, Japanese troops and naval and army air units began converging on China's symbolically important capital of Nanking. Hirohito sanctioned the establishment of an Imperial Headquarters and the reorganization of the command structure so as to bring his constitutional command responsibilities and his real control into harmony. Thereafter he was in a better position to assess intelligence, authorize and initiate field operations, and perform as an active supreme commander guiding from behind closed doors the actual conduct of the war. When Nanking fell, Nationalist soldiers failed to completely evacuate the city and many donned civilian clothes, giving the vengeful Japanese military an excuse to massacre Chinese war prisoners and civilians en masse.



Japanese forces enter Nanking

Hirohito, who must have learned about these events even if he did not grasp their seriousness, kept silent and appears never to have ordered an investigation into the criminal behavior of his armed forces. As the "China Incident" dragged on, with the military refusing to comply with international law to China, Japanese war atrocities increased. For these atrocities, Hirohito, as commander-in-chief, shares indirect, derivative responsibility. He bore more direct responsibility for sanctioning Japan's use of poison gas. And he signed off on the order (Tairikumei 241) that led to the North China Area Army's multiple, far more destructive and longer lasting, "annihilation campaigns," that one Japanese scholar

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estimates to have killed over two and a half million Chinese noncombatants. [17]

In 1938 the China War stalemated. Even with thirty-eight divisions and 1.13 million troops in China by the end of that year, Japan's leaders saw no way to end it quickly until Nazi Germany started World War II and occupied Western Europe. [18] By then, an intergovernmental liaison body, the Imperial Headquarters-Government Liaison Conference, in which Hirohito participated, had already resolved on a southern advance to complete China's encirclement and position Japan to move into resource-rich areas of colonial Southeast Asia. In September 1940 Hirohito ordered the army to begin its entry into French Indochina in preparation for striking further south. The US responded by applying economic sanctions. Hirohito then reluctantly assented to the Tripartite military alliance with the dictatorships in Germany and Italy. Three months later he ratified a treaty of friendship and peace with the independent, formally neutral state of Thailand, stipulating respect for Thai sovereignty. Having Thailand on Japan's side would, it was felt, facilitate the advance southward by force.

By January 1941, almost half a year before the German-Soviet war broke out, Hirohito was exercising the full prerogatives of his position. Then on December 8 (Tokyo time), Japan attacked the military forces and outposts of Britain and the United States, its major Western opponents, each of which was an imperialist state holding Asian peoples in colonial subjugation. Hirohito fussed over different drafts of his final memorandum to the US government in order to insure that not a single sentence in it hinted at a decision to declare war. By issuing his war rescript without giving prior notification to the US or any other targeted country, he deliberately violated international law. As for the Netherlands, colonial master of the Netherlands East Indies, the main prize of the southern advance, Hirohito saw no need even to bother with a war declaration. And when plans called for Japanese armed forces to launch attacks from ships in the South China Sea on Singora in southern Thailand and Kota Bharo in the northernmost Malay State, Hirohito did not hesitate to trample on the recently concluded Japan-Thai Friendship Treaty either. [19]

To summarize: For war crimes committed by Japan's military forces, which were the authorized servants of the emperor-state during the undeclared Japan-China War, Hirohito, as commander-in-chief, bore the strongest share of political, legal, and moral responsibility. He gave post-facto sanction to Japan's take-over of Manchuria in violation of international treaties and agreements. He later participated actively in the planning and waging of Japan's total war of aggression in China. As Japan's sacred spiritual leader and symbol of national identity he (and his Court Group) framed the China conflict as a "holy war." Working in close cooperation with the military, Hirohito brought emperor worship to fever pitch. He also ordered and monitored the bombing of Chinese cities, use of poison gas, and annihilation campaigns to wipe out the entire populations of contested areas in North and Central China. [20]

For the war crimes and other violations of international law committed by Japan's military forces *after* December 7, 1941, the largest share of responsibility may again be attributed to Hirohito as both commander in chief and head of state. At every stage on the road to Singora, Kota Bharo, and Pearl Harbor he was free to choose alternative courses of action rather than accept the thinking of his military chiefs. When, for example, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, on September 5, 1941, gave him the chance to stop the rush to war against Britain and the US, he rejected it. [21] Over the next four years, until mid-1945, whenever confronted with the option of peace, he chose war.

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Japanese historians have carefully documented Hirohito's key role in war and postwar actions throughout the 1930s and '40s. It is now understood that he seldom allowed his generals and admirals to fight the war just as they wished, and that he delayed Japan's surrender in order to preserve the imperial throne with himself on it. This last point must be emphasized. According to the accounts of individuals close to Hirohito, the emperor recognized by summer 1944 that Japan would eventually have to seek a negotiated end to the losing war. But he insisted that his armed forces first had to achieve at least one substantial military result in order to improve the surrender terms. He also rejected the idea of allowing the Allies to punish Japanese war criminals or abolish Japan's armed forces, for they would be needed to check the Soviet Union and prevent the spread of communism at home. A year later, in late June 1945, Hirohito abandoned these preconditions: the battle of Okinawa had been lost; there would not be one-last-victory. Although he was not thinking of immediate capitulation, he was prepared to allow the Allies to punish war criminals; and even contemplated disarmament. But he (and other hardliners on the Supreme War Leadership Council) persisted in maneuvering for peace through the good offices of the still neutral Soviet Union, with the sole aim of preserving and protecting himself and the monarchy.

None of this means that Hirohito prescribed all policy, made all the decisions, or exercised unbounded influence. On the contrary, he had been taught never to perform as a Western-style dictator exercising power arbitrarily. [22] The stereotyped Western understanding of this "system" as a military dictatorship in which the military always got its way, and the emperor was merely its powerless puppet, did not reflect reality. Whenever Hirohito chose to do so, he guided and made contributions to the conduct of the war in all four theaters: Manchuria (1931-45), China-within-the Great Wall (1937-45), colonial Southeast Asia (1941-45), and the Western Pacific (1941-45), where the US always focused its main military effort. He also mediated and acted as the final arbiter of conflicts among the high commanders; read the directives of both higher and lower level officers; and sent his aides to the front to investigate what the armies were doing. And long after military defeat and the massive destruction of Japanese cities stared him in the face—indeed, two full years after general staff studies showed that Japan had no prospect of achieving victory, Hirohito remained stubbornly committed to fighting on. He would delay surrender until his future as a politically-empowered sovereign was internationally guaranteed. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and, perhaps even more, the Soviet entrance into the war, finally created a situation in which the ruling elites would risk acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration. [23]

After Japan's surrender Hirohito did not abdicate as many expected, and as his own brothers and some members of the extended imperial family urged. Instead, he remained on the throne actively exercising political influence throughout the period of the first two post-surrender cabinets. Even after the new "Constitution of Japan" had stripped him of all political power and turned him into a ceremonial figurehead who was less than a "constitutional monarch," he persisted in trying to influence events. As for the Japanese Foreign Ministry, it would always be quick to condemn the Soviet violation of its Neutrality Treaty with Japan but say nothing publicly about Japan's violation of the Japan-Thai Friendship Treaty, which would have weakened the force of its charge and drawn Hirohito into the picture. [24]

Why Hirohito Was Not Tried

When the Allies put on trial for war crimes and crimes against peace a small, representative group of leading government and military

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officials of the Axis states, why was Japan's commander-in-chief not indicted and tried, or, at the very least, questioned by US occupation officials about his responsibility for the war? Certainly the manner in which Westerners understood the monarchy and the political culture that supported the emperor had something to do with the failure of Americans to question him. [25] But more important factors were also at work, both within Japan and abroad, determining that Hirohito would not be tried or the monarchy abolished.

Of the internal factors, none was more important than Hirohito's own actions and those of his entourage and high government officials between August 15, 1945 (when a recording of his voice announcing the end of the war was broadcast to the Japanese nation) and early September (when he told a special session of the 88th imperial Diet that Japan would strive to "build a peace state and contribute to the culture of mankind.") [26] During the crucial first two weeks of transition to peace, before occupation forces took control and reforms commenced, Japan's ruling elites astutely linked Hirohito to the idea of peace and enjoined the people to blame themselves rather than their leaders for the disaster. By closing ranks to conceal the emperor's hands-on role in planning and waging war, they hoped to protect the throne, its occupant, and their own rule. For like no other event, the long war had impoverished the nation and produced a leveling of classes, giving new voice to individuals from the poorest social groups. Ruling elites feared that their relationship with the people could be torn asunder..

To protect their state and themselves, Japan's decision-makers destroyed and hid massive amounts of documentary evidence. These materials pertained to war atrocities, massacres, sexual slavery, the treatment of war prisoners, and Yasukuni Shrine, as well as the emperor's role in the complex bureaucratic process leading to war in 1941 and during the war itself. Another of their methods was to foist all blame for the war onto army leaders while pretending that the emperor and the people had done nothing wrongful because they had been "deceived" by "the military," which in the minds of most Japanese meant the army. [27] In fact, at every important turning point on Japan's road to wars in China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, senior naval leaders were equally at fault. Nevertheless, the myth persisted in postwar Japanese culture and memory that the senior officers of the imperial navy had been less militaristic and had a more rational perspective on the world than the army.

Additionally, in thinking about why Hirohito avoided all meaningful accountability, one cannot fail to note the powerful effect of his war termination rescript—the so-called "sacred decision" that brought peace. The drafters of this document never used the word "defeat," affirmed the official war aims of self-defense and self-preservation, emphasized the future, and gave encouragement to rebuilding from the ruins. Determined to "protect the *kokutai*" in an unprecedented situation of military collapse, they skillfully concealed Hirohito's delayed surrender. Hirohito and his chief political adviser, Kido Koichi then chose Prince Higashikuni Naruhiko to head the first "imperial family cabinet" formed right after the surrender.

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Hirohito recording the surrender speech

Higashikuni followed up on the emperor's rescript by urging the entire nation to repent and not seek justice for those who had ruined and disgraced the nation. His successor, former foreign minister Shidehara Kijuro, made denial of Hirohito's war responsibility Japan's official policy by defining the emperor under the Meiji Constitution as a normal, peace-minded constitutionalist, which he never was. The Shidehara cabinet's decision on the emperor remained throughout the postwar Showa era, part of Japan's dominant ideology of rule, fully supported by the US government. (Even today, arguments constructed to defend Hirohito still breathe the spirit of this decision.) For this and other reasons the war generation as a whole during the occupation years did not persist in clarifying the causes of defeat but instead channeled its energies into reconstructing and building a better Japan, so that the nation could regain its dignity and the trust of the world.

When assessing the external factors that contributed to Hirohito's survival into the post-surrender period, one confronts a different set of facts, arguments, and assumptions. To begin with, the decision-makers in the Truman administration were divided over Hirohito, whereas General Douglas MacArthur, before he had even arrived on Japanese soil, assumed incorrectly that Hirohito had been a mere figurehead emperor and a virtually powerless puppet of Japan's "militarists." This helped the US military to use him just as Japan's militarists had once done, to ease their rule, legitimize reforms, and insure their smooth implementation.

Joseph C. Grew—former ambassador to Japan and, at war's end, the acting secretary of state—also tried to protect the emperor. His efforts and those of other influential American friends of Japan proved helpful to Japan's rulers. In Washington Grew promoted the myth of the emperor's innocence and the notion that the men who surrounded him were "moderates," committed to peace. In Tokyo GHQ worked to save Hirohito from being held accountable for his actions. These American efforts promoted the fiction that the emperor had always been a peace-minded constitutionalist kept in the dark about the details of the war. But GHQ also ordered the remolding of Japanese opinion on the lost war through news articles serialized in the American-censored Japanese press and occasionally broadcast on the American-censored radio. These accounts placed the entire blame for the war and defeat on the "militarists." Such occupation-sponsored myths strengthened Japanese victim consciousness and impede the search for truth.

The postwar trial of war criminals had been an Allied war aim, incorporated in the Potsdam Declaration. After Japan's formal surrender (Sept. 2, 1945) the US military under Supreme Commander MacArthur began to rule indirectly, issuing orders to the Japanese government from GHQ offices in Tokyo while keeping in the background an American occupation force of over 100,000. Arrests of war criminal suspects soon began, and in

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spring 1946 the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (or Tokyo Trial) commenced. In the course of its lengthy proceedings, the Japanese people learned that the Chinese were not to blame for either the Chang Tso-lin assassination or the Manchurian Incident, and that their own armed forces had committed countless war crimes. Although the prosecution never presented a full picture of the Nanking atrocities, enough material was submitted in court to shock the Japanese nation. Similarly, the issue of forced sexual enslavement ("comfort women") was aired in court with documents establishing that the army and navy had committed this war crime throughout the Japanese-occupied parts of Asia and the Pacific. What was never allowed, however, was any discussion of American war crimes, including Western colonialism.

Meanwhile, MacArthur had carefully removed from Article 6 of his charter for the Tokyo Trial, dealing with the official position of defendants, any explicit reference to "Head of State," as stated in the Nuremberg charter. He and his subordinates preserved, in addition, the principle of head of state immunity for Hirohito's premises and property. The latter included all of Hirohito's official and private papers plus the papers of his military aides-de-camp that could have revealed valuable facts about his war role. [28] MacArthur then went to extraordinary lengths to shield Hirohito from every phase of the trial, including influencing the testimony of former wartime prime minister General Tojo Hideki, who was pressured to go to his death having assumed all responsibility for the lost war. [29]



Tojo at the Tokyo Trial

Hirohito too did not stand idle. At GHQ's prodding he toured the country, intent on saving the monarchy, resuscitating what remained of its mystique, and establishing his bona fides as the "human" emperor, a "pacifist" in tune with the democratic values of his people. Hirohito participated with the "moderates" and others in the court milieu in a concerted campaign to shift all blame for war and atrocities onto subordinates. They entertained the Chief Prosecutor at the Tokyo Trial, Joseph B. Keenan; they gathered intelligence on what high officials of MacArthur's General Headquarters thought about the emperor; and they influenced the lawyers on the International Prosecution Section who were preparing the case against "Class-A" war criminal suspects. Key members of Hirohito's Court Group also served as "secret informants" for the prosecution, helping to select the men who would be indicted as "Class A" war criminal suspects, and in the process settling scores.

Hirohito's famous "Monologue—the account of his role during the war years, which he dictated to five close aides starting March 1946—was a deliberate attempt to counter the Tokyo tribunal by placing the emperor's version of events in MacArthur's hands. [30] That Hirohito was given immunity from prosecution

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for his official acts and later protected from the trial proceedings indicates how far at odds Tokyo was from the letter and spirit of Nuremberg. The Hirohito case set a bad example by reestablishing the ancient tradition of immunity from prosecution for heads of state, which the Nuremberg charter had undermined.

But when some of the judges on the Tokyo tribunal felt compelled to call attention in their dissenting final judgments to the emperor's total, unqualified political immunity from leadership crimes even though he had launched the aggressive war, they insured that the Hirohito case would be remembered.

War Remembrance: the Endless Search for Truth and Justice

One should not lay all blame for Japan's war crimes at Hirohito's feet any more than one should blame Hitler for all the war crimes of the Wehrmacht and the German people. Nor, for the same reason should one assign exclusive responsibility to President George W. Bush for all the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by American forces in the illegal wars that he started in Iraq and Afghanistan. What the architects of the first international war crimes trials intended to prioritize was not blame per se but rather the principle that planning, preparing, initiating and waging an aggressive war is illegal. Apropos of this principle, Imperial Japan's ministers of state, chiefs of staff, some of its Court Group officials and certainly most of its middle-echelon army and navy officers, were even more culpable for plunging Japan ever deeper into aggressive wars. So too were prominent war mongers at lesser levels of power in the bureaucracy and in the mass media. Journalists, their editors, radio script writers, and assorted opinion leaders dutifully propagandized the myth of the living deity. On matters of war they disseminated all the lies and propaganda that their government put out, just as the major American print, television, and radio news media do today with respect to US wars and occupations in the Middle East.

Many of Japan's bureaucrats, business, religious, and educational leaders had also embraced the goal of ending by force Anglo-American domination of Asia and the Pacific, substituting in its place Japanese rule in China and Southeast Asia, though that did not make them equally blameworthy as war criminals. Hirohito, however, was at the very center of the policy-making process through every stage of war; he provided continuous oversight for wars that he knew were aggressive; and he incurred steadily mounting responsibility for those aggressions. He also figured centrally in the cultural process that nurtured the actual perpetrators of war crimes. In short, he made the system work and was the reason why it worked.

In November-December 1945, according to the US Strategic Bombing Survey, sixty-two percent of the Japanese people still wanted Hirohito to reign. [31] Rather than quickly distancing themselves from their emperor the way the Germans did from Hitler, in their effort to evade punishment and moral responsibility, Japan's political elites drew closer and did all in their power to protect him. [32] This telling difference reflected not only the distinctive nature of leadership in Japan but also the ethos that informed decision-making. Furthermore, most Japanese people never reflected that since the end of the nineteenth century the monarchy as an institution had been the vital lynchpin to a class system that oppressed farmers, workers, and women. *They did not understand—nor did the American occupation authorities help them to understand—that this institution was an agent of their prewar and wartime oppression. It had narrowed their intellectual horizons and encouraged many to see themselves as powerless vis-a-vis the state.* Thus, as long as Hirohito remained on the throne, unaccountable to anyone for his official

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actions, most Japanese had little reason to question their support of him or feel responsibility for the war, let alone look beyond the narrow boundaries of victim-consciousness.

Through four decades of US-Soviet cold war conflict, the reformed Japanese state connived at the official version of the lost war as one of "self defense and self preservation," which the emperor and his ministers had reaffirmed at the time of surrender. Historical researchers who attempted to pursue Hirohito's wartime conduct found the vast resources of the government all but closed off. Only after Japan normalized diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1972, in a vaguely worded "Japan-China Joint Communique," was victim-consciousness increasingly challenged by those who came to recognize that Japan had also been a major perpetrator of war crimes.

During the 1970s, Japanese tourism to cities in Manchuria, to former colonial areas, and to Pacific war battlefields helped to widen intellectual horizons and foster the growth of perpetrator consciousness. But it was mainly in the 1980s and 1990s that major historical studies exploring the relationship between politics, the military, and the emperor began to appear. And many more years had to pass after Hirohito's death in 1989 before the Japanese mass media ended its self-imposed taboo on judgments about the emperor's faults and discussed his unacknowledged war responsibility. Even then, efforts by neonationalists and conservatives to obfuscate the emperor's role in political and military affairs hampered public recognition of Hirohito's enormous war responsibility. Just the same, Japanese citizens continued to question and to widen the boundaries of war responsibility.

The end of the Cold War, the abrupt breakup of the Soviet Union, and the concurrent rise of China hastened the development of new economic and financial ties, binding Japan and its Asian neighbors and spurring attempts at reconciliation. [33] Many Japanese, viewing these large-scale political and economic changes, wondered why their country remained militarily tied so tightly to the US, the world's leading practitioner of state terror and militarism. Their perceptions of recent wars and the current balance of forces in the world have shaped the Japanese search for historical truth and justice. In addition, some American politicians have now added their voices to Asian movements pressing Japan to confront problems left unresolved from the Asia-Pacific War, even though the United States has not directly apologized to the Japanese people for its historic terror bombing of their cities; nor has it paid reparations to Vietnam, a nation that it once targeted for aggression just as it does in Iraq.

Looking closer, while bearing in mind global patterns of hypocrisy on issues of war responsibility, the first point to note is that Japanese public discussion of problems from the lost war has served multiple purposes. Sometimes debate over war remembrance advanced the political position of different civic organizations; at other times it camouflaged narrow institutional agendas, generating political capital for Diet members and their parties. [34] Such debate was relatively intense during the early years of foreign occupation (1945-52). This was the period when Japan advanced further than Germany did at any time while under Allied occupation and during the era of Chancellor Conrad Adenauer (1949-63). Throughout that period with few exceptions, little debate occurred on German war crimes. But when the US changed its occupation policy to building up Japan as a Cold War ally rather than pursuing war criminals, Japanese discussion waned, and along with it concern over Hirohito's unacknowledged war responsibility. Interest did not rekindle until Hirohito traveled abroad in the early- and mid-1970s—first to Britain and West Germany

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where he was greeted with hostile public demonstrations. In 1975, after making his first and only state visit to the United States, Hirohito returned home and held press interviews with Japanese and foreign journalists. These events continued to shake loose memories of his wartime behavior and led a vanguard of Japanese historians to investigate the machinery of the wartime monarchy and the individuals of the Court Group who operated it, starting with its most important member, Hirohito. [35]

As the cold war moved to its sudden end, Japan entered an era in which issues of war responsibility could be openly debated on the basis of a trove of newly published documents, diaries, and other first-hand accounts of the emperor by his innermost circle of advisers, men who had served him in war and peace. Consequently, many more Japanese were able to free themselves from falsehoods about the lost war, the practices of the Japanese state, and the role of Hirohito.

Yet as historian Yoshida Yutaka and others have shown, every phase of Japan's debates on war responsibility has also been a phase in the expression of nationalist sentiment. Discussions of textbook revision to eliminate references to war crimes, religious rites of remembrance for the war dead, or revising the Imperial Household Law to allow a female emperor, all revealed deep cracks in public opinion. For example, one of the most irreconcilable splits concerns how to mourn the national war dead. Over nearly fourteen years, about 435,600 Japanese combatants were killed in China (excluding Manchuria) and Hong Kong alone. [36] Japanese civilians in the home islands also died in huge numbers from US terror bombing. But it was the remembrance of the enormous number of *soldiers who had died futilely* on all fronts in the war of aggression that mainly revived the Yasukuni Shrine issue.

Yasukuni Shrine is a state-established site of collective war remembrance, connected to state-worship and dedicated to preserving both the emperor-centered view of the past and the official interpretation of the "War of Greater East Asia." The Army and Navy Ministries once administered this Shinto religious institution and its attached center for disseminating war propaganda (the Yushukan), and made it an integral part of Japanese state worship and militarism. There the spirits of 2.47 million people, including a small number of Taiwanese and Koreans, who died fighting for the emperor, are enshrined. [37] Before, during, and soon after the war Emperor Hirohito expressed his gratitude and respect for the war dead by visiting or sending emissaries to participate in the annual national memorial rites to assuage their spirits.



Hirohito visits Yasukuni Shrine, 1935

MacArthur's Headquarters, determined to de-legitimize official state worship, disestablished Shinto, closed the Yushukan building, and ordered the emperor to stop visiting the shrine, saying that GHQ's intention was to protect the monarchy from criticism. Naturally, Hirohito complied. [38] Not until the occupation ended did the "symbol emperor" resume his visits.

Meanwhile, despite the new constitution's separation of politics from religion, Yasukuni Shrine had reestablished its symbiotic relationship with the Japanese government

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through the Welfare Ministry, which granted pensions and sorted out those qualified for enshrinement. In 1978, three years after Hirohito's eighth postwar visit, Yasukuni collectively enshrined the spirits of fourteen convicted war criminals, igniting foreign and domestic criticism. Hirohito, reportedly upset that some men whom he blamed for perpetrating the war had been enshrined, abruptly ended his visits. Government officials and cabinet ministers continued visiting in their private capacity, though not without provoking criticism.

In August 1985, on the fortieth anniversary of the war's end, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, who since 1983 had made more private visits to Yasukuni than any previous prime minister, announced that this time he was going to worship at Yasukuni in his official capacity. Almost immediately, the shrine became embroiled in Japan's international affairs. Nakasone pulled back. The next year, however, the Yushukan reopened and began disseminating its anachronistic view of the lost war.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, as conservative politicians looked for ways to generate public support for abandoning Japan's official anti-war stance, they contemplated using this anachronistic but hallowed place of war memory to create a new nationalism. Liberal Democratic Party Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro is remembered for, among other things, having dispatched Japan's Self Defense Force's overseas in blind support of the US war and occupation in Iraq. He also made four official visits to Yasukuni, starting in 2001, which led to a series of diplomatic protests from China and Korea, as well as strong criticism at home. Ever since, Yasukuni has served as a tool for politicians seeking to heighten nationalism among the young. Private pressure groups such as the Association of Shinto Shrines and the Bereaved Families Association also use Yasukuni as a tool, dreaming to restore further elements of state Shinto. What the political dynamics of this symbol of collective war remembrance distorts, however, is the natural human need of people, especially family members, to remember their dead.

When neonationalist politician Abe Shinzo succeeded Koizumi in 2006, he promised to mend relations with Japan's neighbors. Instead, his own remarks denying that the Japanese military had systematically coerced women into sexual slavery again disappointed Japan's Asian trade partners—above all China and Korea. Abe also turned back the clock on issues of educational reform and constitutional revision. During his short, scandal-plagued tenure, he made compulsory the teaching of patriotism in schools and raised the status of Japan's Defense Agency to a full ministry. But when, during the sixtieth anniversary of Japan's peace constitution (May 3, 2007), Abe announced that the Constitution had "become incapable of adapting to the great changes" in the world, the public took alarm. In an Upper House election two months later he was soundly repudiated for, among other reasons, seeking to draw Japan closer to a bellicose United States.

As this election showed, it is not only the deepening economic and cultural relations between Japan and China, South Korea, and the nations of Southeast Asia that are keeping transnational conflicts over war issues and memories from the past within manageable bounds. So too is the good sense of the majority of the Japanese people, who continue to support the "peace" Constitution because they feel more secure with Article Nine intact. Nevertheless, the parliamentary balance of power remains fraught. The LDP's agenda for constitutional revision has been postponed, but neither current Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo nor the powerful business federations which support revision have given up the fight.

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Japanese historians, journalists, and concerned citizens continue to rethink the historical issues that the post-World War II tribunals failed to adequately confront. The best histories not only show how diverse the Japanese responses to war actually were, but also cast an ever-widening net of responsibility for the Asia-Pacific War—a net in which Hirohito is invariably captured. Through books, journal articles, and documentary films they help Japan to understand where it went wrong, who committed war crimes and why, and what should be done to maintain peace in Asia and the Pacific. Yet Japan's conservative political elites and bureaucrats remain an obstacle. The repeated apologies that they make for the damage caused by the imperial armed forces are undermined by the Yasukuni question, the whitewashing of history textbooks, and their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the Japanese state's responsibility to pay reparations to war victims.

The Japanese government, and the district courts that usually mirror its policies, failed to give satisfaction to former Allied prisoners of Japan who sought reparations and official apology. Veteran soldiers, who were recruited from Japan's colonies but later denied pensions, sued and lost in Japanese domestic courts. Chinese and Korean laborers, seeking economic compensation and official apology for having been kidnapped from their homes and forcibly brought to work in wartime Japan, fared no better. Women coerced into sexual slavery have been even more dismissively treated. Japanese courts failed not only the war victims in Asian countries. They were also unable to provide justice to the bereaved families of Japanese civilians murdered by the army and navy during the battles of Saipan and Okinawa, and to the Japanese victims of the imperial military's illegal (pre- and post-surrender) courts martial of soldiers and officers who had been forced to surrender on the battle field, and were later tried and punished for desertion. [39]

In April 2007, Japan's Supreme Court foreclosed all pending and future lawsuits arising from actions taken by Japan in the course of prosecuting its lost war. The judges cited as a main ground the relevant provisions of the US-imposed San Francisco Peace Treaty, drafted at the height of the US-Soviet cold war, which has never brought justice to the victims of Japan's wartime aggression. Ignoring the treaty's contested legal provisions, the judges claimed that the signatories had settled these problems by waiving reparations claims at the state level. [40]

On the issue of paying reparations to all war victims, Germany's practice since 2000, when the Bundestag established a reparations mechanism, euphemistically labeled a "Fund for Remembrance, Responsibility, and the Future," contrasts vividly with Japan's continued intransigence. There is no doubt, however, that throughout the cold war German progress was slow. The initiative came in the late 1990s from German industries, concerned that lawsuits brought by victims of Nazism would harm their reputations and profits; class action lawsuits lodged in US courts also played an important role. Equally important are the different political dynamics and ideologies that inform politics in post-Cold War Germany and Japan.

One of the characteristics of this difference is precisely the historical Hirohito and the many meanings that he carries for Japan and the Japanese people. The war dead cannot be officially remembered without him; the full truth of the war cannot be known in his absence. As long as the record of imperial Japan's misdeeds is aired and issues of leadership and war responsibility are debated, the apparition of Hirohito will linger and he will have an eternal place in Japanese politics.

Herbert P. Bix, author of the Pulitzer Prize-

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winning Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, writes on problems of war and empire. A Japan Focus associate, he prepared this article for Japan Focus. Posted May 6, 2008.*

Notes

[1] For representative recent works on problems of war and postwar, see the essays in the eight-volume Iwanami Koza Ajia Taiheiyo senso (Iwanami Shoten, 2005-7); and Kosuge Nobuko, Sengo wakai: Nihon wa 'kako' kara tokihanatareru no ka (Chuko Shinsho, 2005).

[2] Herbert P. Bix, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan (HarperCollins Perennial Edition, 2001) contains 688 pages of text. More than 350 of these pages treat the Asia-Pacific War and the Tokyo trial. But the remaining half addresses the prewar emperor, the nature of the empire, and problems of postwar remembrance and accountability. See Kawashima Takane, "Haabaato Bikkusu, 'Showa Tenno' no yomarekata," in Kikan senso sekinin kenkyu, No. 41 (Fall 2003), pp. 2-10.

[3] For the "over 130,000" figure see Bernice Archer, The Internment of Western Civilians Under the Japanese 1941-1945 (Routledge Curzon, 2004), p. 5. Gavan Daws, Prisoners of the Japanese: POWS of World War II in the Pacific (William Morrow & Co., 1996), p. 96, gives the higher estimate.

[4] Eguchi Keiichi, Taikei Nihon no rekishi 14, Futatsu no taisen (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1989), p. 372.

[5] In the European and Pacific War theaters, total American deaths did not exceed 293,000, according to Vladislav M. Zubok, A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War From Stalin to Gorbachev (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 2; Yui Daizaburo, "Sekaishi no naka no Ajia Taiheiyo senso," in Iwanami koza: Ajia Taiheiyo senso 1, Naze, ima Ajia, Taiheiyo senso ka (Iwanami Shoten, 2005), p. 261, citing Robert Goralski, World War II Almanac: 1931-1945 (Hamish Hamilton, 1981), pp. 421-28.

[6] See the comments of Yoshida Yutaka, "Kanshusha atogaki," pp. 336-7, quoting from the work of Masumi Junnosuke, in Showa tenno, ge: Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan (Kodansha 2002). Translated by Okabe Makio, Kawashima Takane, and Nagai Hitoshi.

[7] Bix, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan, p. 39.

[8] For evidence, see Bix, chapters 1 through 4.

[9] Bix, pp. 184-6, 198, 208-9, 211-12, 217-19.

[10] From the start of his reign, Hirohito and his Court Group, with the aid of the last Genro, became the appointers of the prime minister, taking into account, though only when it served their purposes, the preferences of the majority conservative party in the Lower House of the imperial Diet. At such moments they clarified their policy preferences to the prime minister designate. If he later failed to take them into account he would lose their confidence and be unable to govern. In Meiji's time the system was less complex: the Genro chose the prime minister and political parties were at a nascent stage. See Bix, p. 700, endnote 52.

[11] Mori Shigeki, "The 'Washington System' and Its Aftermath: Reevaluating After Imperialism From the Perspective of Japanese Historiography," International Journal of Asian Studies, 3.2 (2006), p. 265.

[12] Bix, pp. 288-9.

[13] Bix, pp. 359, 307.

[14] Bix, p. 322.

[15] Bix, p. 323.

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[16] Bix, p. 359.

[17] Bix, pp. 361-2, 365, 367.

[18] Yamada Akira, "Heishitachi no NitChu senso," in Iwanami koza: Ajia Taiheiyo senso 5, Senjo no shoso (Iwanami Shoten, 2006), p. 35.

[19] Bix, pp. 434-5; Yoshida Yutaka, Ajia Taiheiyou senso (Iwanami Shinsho, 2007), pp. 20-21; Takashima Nobuyoshi, "Rekishikan—Medeia Watching," Kikan senso sekinin kenkyu, dai 58 go (Winter 2007), pp. 94-95. As Takashima notes, ever since Japan's surrender the Foreign Ministry has avoided public mention of the Japan-Thai Friendship Treaty while condemning the Soviet Union for its violation of the Japan-Soviet Neutrality Treaty.

[20] Bix, pp. 362-367.

[21] Bix, pp. 409-10.

[22] In contrast to the authoritarian political order in the United States under the Bush administration, where the "commander-in-chief" and his subordinates publicly defend torture, contempt for the rule of law was never the governing principle of the imperial state.

[23] Bix, Ch. 13, esp. pp. 506-519.

[24] Takashima, "Rekishikan—Media Watching," pp. 94-95.

[25] Akazawa Shiro, "Tenno no senso sekininron e no shatei" [The Trajectory of the Emperor's War Responsibility] in Iwanami Koza: Ajia-Taiheiyo senso, dai nikan, Senso no seijigaku (Iwanami Shoten, 2005), pp. 235-6.

[26] Cited in Yoshida Yutaka, "Senso sekininron no genzai," in Iwanami Koza: Ajia-Taiheiyo senso, dai ikkan, Naze, ima Ajia-Taiheiyo senso ka (Iwanami Shoten, 2006), p. 94.

[27] Yoshida, "Senso sekininron no genzai," p. 96.

[28] Arthur Watts, "The Legal Position in International Law of Heads of State, Heads of Government and Foreign Minister," Recueil des cours, Vo. 247, No. 9 (1994), pp. 82-83.

[29] Bix, pp. 585-6.

[30] Bix, "The Showa Emperor's 'Monologue' and the Problem of War Responsibility" in Journal of Japanese Studies, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1992), 295-363.

[31] Yoshimi Yoshiaki, Kusa no ne fuashizumu: Nihon minshu no senso taiken (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1991), p. 273.

[32] On early postwar attitudes toward Hitler, see Tony Judt, Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945 (The Penguin Press, 2005), p. 809.

[33] On the disintegration of the Soviet Union, see Zubok, pp. 303-35.

[34] See Franziska Seraphim, War Memory and Social Politics in Japan, 1945-2005 (Harvard Univ. Press, 2006, esp. chapters 8, 9, 10, and Conclusion.

[35] For detailed periodization and discussion see Akazawa, pp. 226, 237ff; Bix, pp. 674-77.

[36] Yamada Akira, "Heishitachi no NitChu sensou," in Iwanami Koza Ajia-Taiheiyou sensou, Dai 5 kan, Senjou no shosou (Iwanami Shoten, 2006), p.33, citing Kuwata Zei and Maehara Toshie, Nihon no senso zukai to deeta (Hara Shobo, 1982).

[37] Yoshida Yutaka, "Yasukuni jinja, gokoku jinja," in Hara Takeshi, Yoshida Yutaka, hen, Iwanami Tenno, koshitsu jiten (Iwanami Shoten, 2005), p. 322; Yasumaru Yoshio, "Kokkashugi to musubu tokui na sonzai subete no rei no hifun ni kenmoku o" in Asahi shinbun

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(Aug. 9, 2001). Yasumaro calls attention to the medieval Buddhist tradition of no discrimination between enemy and ally (onshin byodo) and contrasts it to the Yasukuni practice of sorting out the war dead.

[38] On protecting the monarchy by refraining from visiting Yasukuni, see Takamatsu Nomiya nikki 8 (Chuo Koronsha, 1997), p. 346, entry of April 30, 1946.

[39] Yoshida Yutaka, "Sengoshi no naka no gunkeiho," in Kikan senso sekinin kenkyu, No. 25 (Fall 1999), pp. 24-29.

[40] Mark A. Levin, “Nishimatsu Construction Co. v. Song Jixiao et al; Ko Hanako et al. v. Japan,” in American Journal of International Law, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Jan. 2008), pp. 148-9. The San Francisco Peace treaty, signed in September 1951, has been in force since April 1952. The largely American mishandling of its reparations clauses, which were cursory in nature and lacked explicit detail, was a cause of acute disagreements at the time.

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