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Hirohito: String Puller, Not Puppet ヒロヒト天皇　操り人形ではなく、操る側

Herbert P. Bix

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

Introduction: Can an Official State Record of War and Occupation Be A Truthful One?

Japanese and Chinese translation available below.

Herbert P. Bix

The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12, Issue 41, No. 3, October 13, 2014

See also Herbert P. Bix and David McNeill, **Selective History: Hirohito's Chronicles** **Japan Times** October 11, 2014; and Norihiro Kato, **The Journalist and the Emperor. Daring to Ask Hirohito About His Role in WWII** New York Times October 15, 2014.

Selective history: Hirohito's chronicles

Much can be learned from revisiting the life and times of imperial leaders of the twentieth-century, particularly those who were one thing in name and another in practice, or who combined power and authority but were neither dictators nor warmongers. The Showa Emperor Hirohito, who reigned from December 25, 1926, to his death on January 7, 1989, was such a person.

As imperial Japan's wartime leader in the years 1931-45, the emperor exerted a high degree of influence and continuous oversight of the policy making process. Working with key individuals in his entourage, he practiced dissimulation, authorized force, and cleaved to a distinctive type of Machiavellianism. A contradictory ruler, he played many roles, and did not always act according to reason. He could caution his closest subordinates to bear in mind his spirit of benevolent rule, then turn right around on the same day and sanction the use of poison gas against Nationalist forces in China. From the moment Japan began its "total war" in China in 1937 his legal and moral responsibility for waging wars of aggression mounted. Again and again he found himself prodding the major players in his oligarchic decision-making process, reconciling differences among them, and gradually becoming a real wartime leader. Along the way, rather than wielding his influence to stop the momentum for war, he

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kept making one disastrous political decision after another.

Now, the release by the Imperial Household Agency on September 9, 2014, of the largest official account of the Showa Emperor's life, based on a trove of previously inaccessible and in some cases unknown documents and diaries, has made possible new discoveries about the emperor. At the same time the Agency has tried to control public debate both through its own choice of materials and by encouraging selective media reporting and interpretation of its narrative. Because of its many omissions, the new official biography of Emperor Hirohito could be called a monumental effort at concealment, reinforcing prewar myths and raising more questions than it answers. By touching also on the timing of this event, the following article suggests that the Japanese government is still trying to shape historical consciousness in the service of a nationalistic political agenda—just as the U.S. government is attempting to present to Americans a sanitized official history of American war crimes throughout the Vietnam War era.

Hirohito: String Puller, Not Puppet

Herbert P. Bix

Originally published in the *New York Times*, September 29, 2014.

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — LAST month, I received a startling email from an employee at one of Japan's largest newspapers, about a development I'd long awaited. The government was about to unveil a 12,000-page, 61-volume official biography of Emperor Hirohito, which a large team of scholars and civil servants had been preparing since 1990, the year after his death.

I was asked if I would examine an embargoed excerpt from this enormous trove and then comment on the emperor's perspective on various events, including Japan's 1937 expansion of its conflict in China and its decision four years later to go to war with the United States and Britain; the trial of war criminals; the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and the American military occupation of postwar Japan.

But there was a condition: I could not discuss Hirohito's "role and responsibility" in World War II, which would be strictly outside the scope of the newspaper's reporting. Having devoted years of my life to examining precisely this topic, I politely refused.

The release of Hirohito's official biography should be an occasion for reflection around the world on a war that, in the Pacific theater, took the lives of at least 20 million Asians (including more than three million Japanese) and more than 100,000 citizens of the Western Allied nations, primarily the United States and Britain.

Instead, Japan's Imperial Household Agency, abetted by the Japanese media, has dodged important questions about events before, during and after the war. The new history perpetuates the false but persistent image — endorsed by the Allied military occupation, led

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by Gen. Douglas MacArthur — of a benign, passive figurehead.

As I and other scholars have tried to show, Hirohito, from the start of his rule in 1926, was a dynamic, activist and conflicted monarch who operated within a complex system of irresponsibility inherited from his grandfather, the Meiji emperor, who oversaw the start of Japan's epochal modernization. Hirohito (known in Japan as Showa, the name of his reign) represented an ideology and an institution — a system constructed to allow the emperor to interject his will into the decision-making process, before prime ministers brought cabinet decisions to him for his approval. Because he operated behind the scenes, the system allowed his advisers to later insist that he had acted only in accordance with their advice.

In fact, Hirohito was never a puppet. He failed to prevent his army from invading Manchuria in 1931, which caused Japan to withdraw from the League of Nations, but he sanctioned the full-scale invasion of China in 1937, which moved Japan into a state of total war. He exercised close control over the use of chemical weapons in China and sanctioned the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Even after the war, when a new, American-modeled Constitution deprived him of sovereignty, he continued to meddle in politics.

From what I've read, the new history suffers from serious omissions in editing, and the arbitrary selection of documents. This is not just my view. The magazine Bungei Shunju asked three writers, Kazutoshi Hando, Masayasu Hosaka and Michifumi Isoda, to read parts of the history. They pointed out, in the magazine's October issue, significant omissions. Only the first of the emperor's 11 meetings with General MacArthur was mentioned in detail. Instead, the scholars noted Hirohito's schoolboy writings and commented on trivialities like the discovery of the place where his placenta was buried.

That does not mean that the project is without merit. Researchers collected 3,152 primary materials, including some previously not known to exist, such as the memoirs of Adm. Saburo Hyakutake, the emperor's aide-de-camp from 1936 to 1944. They documented Hirohito's messages to Shinto deities, fleshing out his role as chief priest of the state religion. They collected vital materials on the exact times, dates and places of imperial audiences with civil and military officials and diplomats.

Hirohito was a timid opportunist, eager above all to preserve the monarchy he had been brought up to defend. War was not essential to his nature, as it was for Hitler and Europe's fascists. The new history details his concern over the harsh punishments enacted in 1928 to crush leftist and other opposition to Japan's rising militarism and ultranationalism. It elaborates on his role in countering a coup attempt in 1936 by young Army officers who wanted to install an even more right-wing, militaristic government. It notes that he cried for only the second time in his life when his armed forces were dissolved.

The official history confirms Hirohito's bullheadedness in delaying surrender when it was clear that defeat was inevitable. He hoped desperately to enlist Stalin's Soviet Union to obtain more favorable peace terms. Had Japan surrendered sooner, the firebombing of its cities, and the two atomic bombings, might have been avoided.

Why does all this matter, nearly 70 years since

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the end of the war?

Unlike Germany, where acceptance of responsibility for the Nazis' crimes is embedded in government policy, Japan's government has never engaged in a full-scale reckoning of its wartime conduct. This is partly because of the anti-imperialist dimension of the war it fought against Western powers, and partly because of America's support for European colonialism in the early Cold War. But it is also a result of a deliberate choice — abetted by the education system and the mass media, with notable exceptions — to overlook or distort issues of accountability.

The new history comes at a politically opportune time. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Liberal Democratic Party government is waging a campaign to pump up nationalist pride. Mr. Abe has made no secret of his desire to enhance the monarchy's status in a revised "peace constitution" that would rewrite Article 9, which prohibits Japan from maintaining offensive forces.

The very idea of a carefully vetted official biography of a leader fits within the Sino-Japanese historical tradition, but raises deep suspicions of a whitewash, as well as issues of contemporary relevance. Okinawans cannot take pride in the way Hirohito sacrificed them, by consenting to indefinite American military control of their island. Japan's neighbors, like South Korea and the Philippines, cannot be reassured by the way its wartime past is overlooked or played down, but neither can they be reassured by America's confrontational, militaristic approach toward Chinese assertiveness.

After Hirohito died, in 1989, there was an outpouring of interest in his reign and a decade-long debate about his war responsibility. Now, after decades of mediocre economic performance, generational divides have deepened and the Japanese may not take much note. If so, a crucial opportunity to improve relations with Asian neighbors and deepen understanding of the causes of aggression will have been lost.

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論説 | 寄稿記事

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マサチューセッツ州ケンブリッジ：先月、ある

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