

The Allied Occupation of Japan: 1945-52

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The Allied Occupation of Japan began when Japanese representatives, aboard the American battleship Missouri, surrendered to the United States and its allies on September 2, 1945. Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru and Army Chief of Staff General Umezu Yoshijirō signed the surrender instrument by which Japan agreed to the Potsdam Agreement and surrendered its rights of sovereignty to the Supreme Commander for Allied Powers (SCAP), American General Douglas MacArthur, rights Japan did not regain until 1952.

As the occupation began, Japan's economic and social infrastructure lay in ruins. America's bombers and submarines had destroyed 43% of the buildings in 63 of Japan's 66 largest cities, 30% of all housing in the country, and 80% of Japan's ships. In 1945, rice production reached only 59% of the 1937 harvest, and Taiwan and Korea, major sources of imported rice, were no longer part of Japan's empire. Manufacturing had fallen to 53%, textile production to 6%, and processed food production to 32% of the prewar level. To add to the malaise, thirteen million demobilized soldiers, repatriated civilians from the lost empire, and unemployed workers from the disbanded weapons industry had to be housed and fed. In addition, rampant inflation caused by runaway wartime military spending undermined the value of the yen. General MacArthur and his staff and troops, never more than 150,000 after the first months of the occupation, took over a defeated nation in crisis.

Beginning in the fall of 1945, SCAP (a term which refers both to General MacArthur and to his headquarters) undertook three sets of programs: providing food, shelter and public health for millions of people in order to avoid famine and epidemic disease in the winter of 1945-1946, demilitarizing a polity dominated by the army and navy, and democratizing Japan.

Demilitarization

Demilitarization included demobilizing Japan's soldiers and abolishing its army and navy, trying a large number of Japanese soldiers and civilians for specific wartime atrocities as well as a small number for their responsibility in planning and conducting the war, and in "purging" men identified as militarists from holding any kind of public office. To demobilize Japan's military, the allies forcibly brought over six million soldiers and civilians home from the former colonies and territories. One can imagine the burden this placed on allied shipping for a short period, and on the Japanese economy for a

longer time. War criminals were divided into three categories for trial: over 4,000 Class C war criminals whom the allies tried for specific acts of brutality. Of these, the allies executed 700, sent 3,000 to prison, and acquitted the rest. Twenty Class B were tried because of atrocities carried out by soldiers under their command. Of these, the courts sentenced only two to death. Twenty-eight Class A war criminals, including the wartime Prime Minister, General Tōjō Hideki, were tried for crimes against humanity and for conspiring to fight aggressive war.

The trials for Class A criminals, which began in May 1946, did not end until November 1948, when seven of the defendants, including Generals Tōjō and Matsui Iwane, the Japanese commander in Nanjing at the time of the atrocities there in 1937-1938, were sentenced to death. Sixteen others received life sentences (all commuted within two or three years after the occupation's end) and two shorter sentences. The allies purged some 200,000 former "rightists" from public office—a ban that prohibited the purgees from serving as schoolteachers, village assemblymen, policemen, national railroad workers or in any other publicly funded position. Since the occupation authorities had no way of identifying which Japanese actually had been ultra-nationalists, they chose those to be purged by category. SCAP thus banned from public office all active military officers, all current mayors, even of the smallest villages (but not their predecessors), all school principals (but not assistant principals or ethics teachers), and all chiefs of village and town branches of the Imperial Military Reservist Association.

Chances are that many of these people had been involved in right-wing activities; nevertheless, one cannot help but think that they were victims of timing. If they had left the mayor's or principal's posts in 1944, or had been slated to succeed in 1946, they would have avoided the purge.

Democratization

Having cleared away these vestiges of militarism and ultra-nationalism, occupation authorities then set out to democratize Japan, but at the same time decided to govern Japan and to carry out their efforts at inculcating democracy from above by working through the existing Japanese government—not necessarily a bastion of liberal democratic thinking. The first step taken by the SCAP was to release all political prisoners from jail, a step that the Japanese governmental leaders opposed and SCAP later regretted. Most political prisoners in 1945 were members of the few organizations that had resisted Japan's road to militarism and emperor-centric ultra-nationalism; most important of these was the banned Japanese Communist Party. Many of the freed communists returned to the kind of work they had done before their prewar incarceration, organizing labor unions; they returned to this work in unions established under the auspices of SCAP's next important reform, the encouragement of labor

organization. In December 1945, the Diet, at SCAP's urging, passed the Labor Union Act, a law modeled after the Wagner Act in the United States. The new law gave workers the right to create unions and bargain collectively without fear of reprisal from management. A series of subsequent acts, again passed by the Diet under pressure from SCAP, established working hours, overtime requirements, minimum pay rates, and minimum standards of working conditions. By the end of 1946, unions had recruited five million members, about one-third of all non-agricultural workers in Japan. The occupation authorities at first thought of this reform as one of their success stories-until some of the unions, under their radical leadership, began to challenge the legitimacy of the government and even of the occupation itself.

At about the same time, General MacArthur instituted a land reform to, in his words, "destroy the economic bondage which has enslaved the Japanese farmer to centuries of feudal oppression." In 1945, about 45% of the arable land in Japan was farmed by cultivators who did not own it. After rejecting a Soviet proposal for agricultural collectivization, SCAP had the Diet pass a land-reform bill on October 21, 1945. This and subsequent bills allowed farmers to own as much land as they themselves could cultivate; it required them to sell the rest to the government, which then sold it to the actual cultivators by long-term, low interest mortgages. Luckily for tenant farmers Japan underwent a severe inflation in the late 1940s that reduced the burden of repaying their mortgages by over 80% in three years. Land ownership by its cultivators increased from about 60% in 1946 to 90% in 1949. One American historian was surprised, when he interviewed a group of former Japanese soldiers, all of whom had been tenant farmers before the land reform, to be told, "Thank you for the land reform. You Americans and General MacArthur are great people."

In addition to labor and land reform, SCAP introduced another program to promote economic democracy, zaibatsu dissolution. According to the view of the occupation authorities, a small group of ten conglomerates, four large zaibatsu or networks of centrally-owned companies, and six lesser ones, controlled so much of the Japanese economy that they were a hindrance to competition. Thus, SCAP set out to destroy the holding companies that held the conglomerates together and to break up some of the larger subordinate corporations. The particular targets were the Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Yasuda zaibatsu.

SCAP undertook many reforms in its later aborted zaibatsu dissolution program, but one stood out because of its draconian nature. The Capital Levy Law of November 17, 1946, passed by the Diet under strong pressure from SCAP, called for a one-time tax on all personal assets above ¥100,000 (\$300); the rates began at 25 percent and rose to 90 percent for assets of ¥15 million (\$42,000) or more. In other words, SCAP's policy confiscated the wealth of every rich, or even moderately rich family in Japan, thus

wiping out the financial control that the Iwasaki (Mitsubishi), Mitsui, Sumitomo and Yasuda families held over their respective conglomerates. Word of these efforts shocked American businessmen and politicians like Senator William Knowland when they finally heard about them in 1947-1948, and so stimulated the mobilization of a conservative coalition in the United States to block further efforts at breaking up Japanese corporations.

Another important program was educational reform. SCAP believed that by putting American style civics courses in place of the wartime "ethics" education that had inculcated emperor-centered nationalism, by simplifying the Japanese writing system so that students would spend less time memorizing kanji (Chinese characters), by opening up secondary and higher education to a much larger number of students, and by giving women greater educational opportunities, it could encourage independent and democratic thinking at the expense of emperor-centered militarism. In this light, the emperor, in his New Year's Rescript of January 1, 1946, explicitly denied any ideas of his own divinity.

His statement read in part:

The ties between us and our people have always stood upon mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere legends and myths. They are not predicated on the false conception that the emperor is divine and the Japanese people are superior to other races and fated to rule the world.

The key document of SCAP's efforts at democratization is the Constitution of Japan, which went into effect on May 3, 1947. The Constitution, which was promulgated by Emperor Hirohito on November 3, 1946 as an amendment to the 1889 Constitution (under its terms, only the emperor could amend the constitution), passed both houses of the Diet almost unanimously even though written by members of General MacArthur's staff. The new constitution transferred sovereignty from the emperor to the people, established suffrage for all men and women twenty years old or older, continued the prewar parliamentary/cabinet system, created a system of representative local government, and gave the people the same kind of freedoms of speech, assembly and religion that Americans had received under the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution. Women particularly benefited from the new constitution, which forbade discrimination on the basis of sex, race, social status, or family origin, gave them the right to vote, and allowed them to divorce and inherit property.

The clause of the 1947 constitution that has caused the most long-term controversy is Article 9, the anti-war clause. It reads as follows:

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

In other words, the constitution (still in effect today) prohibits Japan from fighting wars or having military forces, even for defensive purposes.

Conservative critics of Article 9 argue that it does not preclude defensive wars or armaments. Public opinion polls show that the Japanese public overwhelmingly rejects efforts to amend the constitution to allow Japan to arm and fight; in fact, one of the salient characteristics of post-World War II Japanese is their commitment to an anti-nuclear, peace culture.

The Reverse Course

Although it is hard to pin down exactly when it began, sometime in mid-occupation, SCAP began to carry out the so-called "reverse course," that is, it changed directions from the democratizing reforms of the early occupation to a policy of rebuilding Japan economically as an American ally. A combination of the American conflict with the Soviet Union in Europe and elsewhere, the rise of Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communist Party to power in China, the anti-government/anti-occupation attitudes of many of Japan's fledgling labor unions, and in June 1950, the onset of the Korean War, led the government in Washington and SCAP in Tokyo to see Japan as an important Cold War bulwark against the perceived threat of communism. Rather than continue the radical reforms of the early occupation, SCAP turned increasingly to conservative leaders like Yoshida Shigeru, who were willing to allow the United States to use Japan as a military base in return for help in rebuilding Japan's crippled industrial economy.

On July 14, 1950, only two weeks after the outbreak of war in Korean, Prime Minister Yoshida, leader of a country still under occupation and thus not sovereign, made a speech in which he pledged his government's complete support to the United Nations forces on the Korean peninsula. Japan's role in the Korean War, which lasted until July 1953, was crucial both to the United Nations' success in stemming the tide of the North Korean invasion, and in Japan's subsequent economic miracle. The United Nations' military, in this case, United States' fighters and bombers, flew hundreds of combat missions over Korea from its "unsinkable aircraft carrier," the Japanese archipelago. Japan became a critical intermediate staging area for troops, weapons and supplies from the United States destined for the Korean conflict. And Japanese enterprises received millions of dollars in contracts to supply everything from food and clothing to

trucks and other war goods produced under licensing agreements with American companies. The skilled, but still inexpensive Japanese workforce was crucial to America's war efforts in Korea.

The Korean War was a godsend to conservative politicians like Yoshida. It allowed them to pursue anti-communist repression in Japan and support Japan's industrial enterprises in rebuilding its economy-with both Washington's and SCAP's wholehearted support. In early June 1950, even before war erupted in Korea, General MacArthur, with Yoshida's agreement, purged top leaders of the Japan Communist Party, banned publication of the JCP's newspaper, Akahata (Red Flag), had thousands of party members dismissed from jobs both in the public and private sectors, and rehabilitated a number of individuals who had been purged as militarists in the early days of the Occupation-these activities intensified after the Korean War began in late June. The war and its procurement activities set off the Japanese economic "miracle." Not only did the United States buy many of its war goods in Japan, but it also took the lead in reintroducing Japan to the world's political and economic order; with U.S. support, Japan joined the United Nations in 1956, became the second largest borrower from the World Bank by the late 1950s, and was recognized as an advanced industrial country when it joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1964. From 1952 until 1978, Japan's economy grew by 8.4% per year; over this quarter of a century, Japan maintained full employment and real wages rose by over half of that growth rate.

The Allied Occupation of Japan ended on April 28, 1952, when the San Francisco Peace Treaty was enforced. A year earlier, in May 1951, President Harry Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, had appointed the Republican John Foster Dulles as special ambassador to negotiate a treaty to end World War II and thus the occupation. Having worked out arrangements to guarantee American protection in the case of a resurgence of Japanese militarism, Dulles persuaded Japan's Asian neighbors, excluding China and the Soviet Union, to agree to a peace treaty with Japan.

Representatives of forty-eight Allied nations and Japan met in San Francisco in September 1951 to sign a treaty that ended the Allied Occupation and returned sovereignty to Japan and its people. Crucial to the agreement was Yoshida's signing the United States-Japan Mutual Security Agreement, a pact which allowed the United States to station troops in Japan and use them both to pursue American and Japanese security needs in Asia and to intervene in unrest within Japan that the American and Japanese governments believed was incited by other outside nations. From 1952 until the revision of the Security Treaty in 1959-60, American military personnel in Japan lived and worked much as foreigners had in the treaty ports of the late nineteenth century; a soldier did not even have to carry a passport-his American military identification card was all he needed to travel freely within the newly "independent"

Japan. By enlisting in the American Cold War order, Japan regained its sovereignty and undertook its dramatic economic recovery and expansion.

Conclusion

The question of the success or failure of the occupation of Japan is a controversial one. While most writers on the subject (and Japanese on the street) agree that the first two years of the occupation, in which SCAP, albeit sometimes in an obtuse and top-down, undemocratic way, dismantled Japan's wartime military order and set the foundations for a democratic polity, was on the whole beneficial to Japan, many think that the policies of the reverse course period obstructed the development of real democracy in Japan. By throwing its weight behind leaders who had cooperated in Japan's wartime aggression and by using force to suppress opposition activists who disagreed with its policies, SCAP showed it did not have a real commitment to democracy. Others criticize Yoshida Shigeru and his successors in running the Liberal-Democratic Party for their cooperation with the United States in the cold war. These critics fall into two groups: those on the left, who think Japan's natural allies were China and the Soviet Union, and those on the right, who decry Yoshida's surrender of Japan's foreign policy-making independence to the United States. Yoshida's supporters counter by arguing that he kept Japan from falling under the communist yoke and that he built the foundations for Japan's development into the world's second richest nation-and for the dramatic growth of Japanese standards of living. It seems in conclusion that one can give "two cheers" for the Allied Occupation. There is no doubt that the average Japanese is freer and richer in the early twenty-first century than his grandparents were before World War II; and that Japan today is far more egalitarian than it was in the 1930s. On the other hand, the Japanese government, in spite of a highly developed "peace culture" in Japan, that is, a citizenry who are overwhelmingly opposed to war of any kind, still thinks it necessary to follow Washington's lead in pursuing its foreign policy. Up until now, Japan has found that, for better or worse, "going along" is more profitable than "going alone."

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