

The American Occupation of Japan

The American occupation of Japan began in late August, 1945, following the Empire of Japan's defeat in World War II. It lasted, in two distinct phases, until the conclusion of a formal peace treaty between the United States and Japan in 1952 and was crucial in creating modern Japan.

The occupation was formally under the auspices of the 11-member Allied Far East Commission (FEC) and subject to the decisions of the Allied Council for Japan, composed of the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China. However, the occupation was “almost exclusively” American, and almost personally directed by the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur.¹

Unlike defeated Germany, the Japanese homeland was not divided among the Allied powers. Though the Soviet Union had sought a sphere of influence on Hokkaido, this request was rejected by the US, and all territory remaining under Japanese control fell under the supervision of SCAP. Japan's former colonies were divided, however. The Korean peninsula was partitioned at the 38th parallel with the United States influencing the south and the Soviet Union the north. The United States also took control of Okinawa and various Pacific islands, while the USSR occupied the Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. Taiwan and the Penghu Islands were returned to the Republic of China.

¹ Louis Hayes, *Introduction to Japanese Politics* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 29.

In July, 1945, the Allies had issued the Potsdam Declaration, defining the terms of surrender for Japan.² The occupation was carried out to fulfill these terms, which had two overarching goals. The first was demilitarization, to eliminate permanently Japan's war-making power and the second was democratization along American lines, ensuring Japan's future as a pro-American ally.³ The first goal had two components: that Japan's sovereignty would be limited to the four main home islands and associated islets, and disarmament, with a parallel decrease in the military's role in the government. The second goal included an inculcation of respect for civil liberties and human rights as well as peaceful economic development. These objectives were formalized on 6 September, when President Truman signed the "US Initial Post-Surrender Policy for Japan."⁴

With these goals in mind, the occupation had four major characteristics: MacArthur's leadership, a sense of urgency, a lack of relevant experience among American officials, and a remarkable amount of cooperation among the Americans and the Japanese. MacArthur's leadership style was noted for its independence, self-assuredness, and detachment. For much of the occupation he was essentially the sole ruler of Japan, and policies were shaped by his Christianity and his moderate left economic thinking, which was reflective of American New Deal policies.⁵

² Ibid., 31.

³ Robert Ward, "Reflections on the Allied Occupation and Planned Political Change in Japan," in *Political Development in Modern Japan*, ed. Robert Ward (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 480.

⁴ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 227-8.

⁵ Hayes, *Japanese Politics*, 30.

The sense of urgency was driven not only by MacArthur's personal style and unwillingness to have his policies scrutinized by the FEC, but also by the enormity of SCAP's task: to demolish and replace the wartime Japanese order as well as write a new constitution. Therefore, elections were hurriedly scheduled for April 1946.⁶

Unfortunately, SCAP's staff had little direct or academic experience with Japan. Those with language skills were "excluded from important positions," and many advisors were in fact China experts who had "little knowledge of, and even less sympathy for, Japan."⁷

Fortunately, the occupation proceeded with great cooperation between the Japanese and the Americans. This may be partially due to a Japanese cultural deference to those who had demonstrated their "superiority" by success in battle, but also to surprise that the Americans did not live down to their reputation for pillage and plunder.⁸ More important, however, may be the example of Emperor Hirohito in his cooperation with the occupation.

The Allies had disagreed about what role, if any, the Emperor would play in post-war Japan, and whether he or any members of his family would be prosecuted for their roles in the war. Ultimately, due to MacArthur's warnings about the unrest the Emperor's deposing would cause, the new constitution retained the Emperor as a constitutional monarch, "the symbol of the State and the unity of the people," and all imperial family members were exempt from war crimes prosecution.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Gordon, *Modern History*, 229, 232.

From 1945 - 1947, SCAP moved quickly to implement its goals for Japan. The Japanese armed forces were disbanded on 30 November 1945, and by 1948, nearly 7 million soldiers and civilians were repatriated from across Asia. Other major reforms included declarations guaranteeing the freedoms of speech, press, and assembly, and to unionize. Censorship was ended. Political prisoners, including communists, were released, and the “thought police” were disbanded, while all police power was decentralized. Political rights were granted to women. State sponsorship of Shinto was ended.¹⁰

All Japanese territory acquired through conquest, beginning with the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War, was divested. China regained Manchuria and Taiwan and Korea gained independence. France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom regained control of their southeast Asian colonies.¹¹

SCAP also established the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, which, from April 1946 to November 1948, oversaw the prosecution of nearly 6,000 war criminals, of whom nearly 1,000 were executed. Twenty-eight of the highest-profile leaders were categorized as Class A war criminals. Seven were hanged.¹² In addition, over 220,000 people were barred from any future government or official service.¹³

SCAP had planned to “democratize and reform the bureaucracy” as well, but its efforts were only partially successful, mainly due to the need to rely on the existing official structures to

¹⁰ Ibid., 228-9.

¹¹ Hayes, *Japanese Politics*, 33.

¹² Gordon, *Modern History*, 228.

¹³ Hayes, *Japanese Politics*, 34.

govern Japan.¹⁴ Both the police and education bureaucracies were initially localized, but later recentralized. As the Cold War intensified and concern about the political left overwhelmed concern for the political right, removal of conservative elements in the bureaucracy largely ended. “The occupation failed to reduce the power of bureaucracy or to make it more politically responsible.”¹⁵

Conversely, economic recovery was not one of SCAP’s initial objectives and immediate reforms were targeted at the *zaibatsu* family holding companies, which were viewed as major supporters of militarism and the war. However, these efforts met with “considerable resistance and foot-dragging” from both government officials and the business community. Moreover, as pressure mounted in the US for a stronger Japanese recovery, acceptance of strong economic management grew. The *zaibatsu* largely reorganized as *keiretsu*, centered on banks, leading to the union of industrial conglomerates, bureaucracy, and entrenched political parties which lasted for decades.¹⁶

The economy staggered and inflation spiraled until 1949, when US economist Joseph Dodge arrived to implement a plan of balanced budgets, no state loans to industry, and no state subsidies, as well as a fixed exchange rate to promote exports. Inflation was curbed, but true growth and recovery did not arrive until the Korean War brought a flood of US military orders.¹⁷

The flurry of initial reforms slowed, and was in some ways overturned, in Phase 2, or the “Reverse Course,” which lasted from 1947 to the end of the occupation in 1952. Due to

¹⁴ Gordon, *Modern History*, 232.

¹⁵ Hayes, *Japanese Politics*, 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., 40, and Gordon, *Modern History*, 234.

¹⁷ Gordon, *Modern History*, 239.

increasing threats from the Soviet Union, Japan was increasingly seen in the US as a bulwark against the spread of communism in Asia. The focus of the occupation turned from reforming Japan to making it a strong, anti-communist ally. Support grew for the pre-war elite, who could responsibly manage the Japanese recovery. Members of the Japanese Communist Party and labor movement were purged or arrested for endangering the goals of the occupation.¹⁸

The “Reverse Course” was also due to a general turnover of most domestic governance responsibility from SCAP to the Japanese, beginning in 1947, and the rarity with which SCAP intervened in Japanese decision-making following the outbreak of the Korean War. The Japanese were therefore free to partially undo some of the reforms which had been implemented earlier.¹⁹

The most long-lasting and successful of SCAP’s reforms was its land reform program. It was not entirely an American initiative, since tenant farmers had been agitating for land ownership since the 1920s, and the government had carried out some reform during the war to spur food production. Still, pre-war, 46% of farmland was cultivated by tenant farmers. The SCAP reform allowed landowners to retain only 10 acres, purchased the rest, and sold it cheaply to tenants. After the reform, 90% of all farmers were landowners. Also, rent reform prevented in-kind payment.²⁰

SCAP’s ideas for the shape of postwar Japan were enshrined in a new constitution, which was drafted by a committee of occupation officials in 1946, then ratified by the imperial Diet, taking effect in May 1947. The constitution was presented as a continuation of its Meiji

¹⁸ Ward, “The Allied Occupation,” 503.

¹⁹ Ibid., 515-6.

²⁰ Gordon, *Modern History*, 233, and Hayes, *Japanese Politics*, 38.

predecessor, but reflected American ideas about government, human rights, civil liberties, and the role of the emperor. It was based on the concept of popular sovereignty and the emperor was reduced to a symbol. It included a long list of liberties, such as the freedoms of speech and religion, as well as guarantees of education and sexual equality. It defined a parliamentary system of government and included provisions to prevent the military's involvement in governing. Most remarkably, it included an article renouncing the right to war and prohibiting the maintenance of armed forces or other war potential. Though many of these ideas were new to Japan, the constitution has never been amended.²¹

In only seven years, the American occupation of Japan accomplished thorough reforms of Japanese society, leaving a pro-Western, anti-communist ally with a stable and fast-growing economy. In only a few decades, Japan's prosperity would become the envy of the world. Though the reforms were not as thorough-going as some had hoped, and many members of the pre-war elite did pass through the occupation to retain their power and influence, even early observers judged that "prospects are very good that the essential gains for democracy brought about by American influence will be permanently retained."²² The American occupation was the foundation of Japan's great success in the ensuing decades.

²¹ Hayes, *Japanese Politics*, 41-44, and Gordon, *Modern History*, 229.

²² Kazuo Kawai, "American Influence on Japanese Thinking," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 278, (Nov. 1951): 31.

Bibliography

Gordon, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Hayes, Louis. *Introduction to Japanese Politics*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009.

Kawai, Kazuo. "American Influence on Japanese Thinking." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 278, (Nov. 1951): 23-31.

Ward, Robert. "Reflections on the Allied Occupation and Planned Political Change in Japan." In *Political Development in Modern Japan*, edited by Robert Ward, 477-535. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968.