

The Allied Occupation of Japan

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May 2000

The reforms during the Allied Occupation of Japan from 1945 and 1952 imposed on the country a constitutional democracy and brought about many significant social, economic, and political changes. "The Occupation succeeded because it built upon earlier trends yet also broke with the prewar system in revolutionary ways." The first part of this essay identifies what makes the Occupation unique in the history of the world. Next, the essay analyzes the ways in which the Occupation drew upon practices from the prewar system. The final section discusses the ways in which the Occupation broke from the prewar practices. The second and third sections of the essay evaluate the Occupation's success in terms of meeting the original American objectives of demilitarizing Japan and the later objective of creating a bulwark against communism.

Uniqueness of Occupation in World History

The Allied Occupation of Japan occupies a unique place in the history of the world, being the only time an occupying force tried to democratize another nation by instituting sweeping political, social, and economic reforms. The U.S. had a "sense of urgency that the country should not only be 'democratized' to prevent the reemergence of militarism, but simultaneously immunized against a rising tide of communist influence" (Dower 1999, 75). Since the U.S. completely dominated the Allied Occupation, the democratic transformation had its foundation on the American model.

The Japanese political leadership only acceded to the imposition of this radical agenda of democratization because they had almost no power to stop it. Japan had effectively been subjected to an unconditional surrender to end the war, and many of the most influential Japanese political leaders in late 1945 and early 1946 still feared trial and punishment for their role in the war, so they could not press their opposition very far. Although called an Allied Occupation, the Americans completely dominated the leadership and decision making. Moreover, General Douglas MacArthur, as Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), could issue directives, both formally and informally, that had to be obeyed by the Japanese leaders and populace.

SCAP's imposition of a completely new constitution on the Japanese people represents the most visible symbol of the uniqueness of the Allied Occupation. The new constitution, promulgated by the Emperor in November 1946, replaced the Meiji Constitution of 1889. The new constitution "retained the imperial system but simultaneously established the principle of popular sovereignty and guaranteed a broad range of human rights" (Dower 1999, 82). The next two sections of this essay deal with some of the specific provisions contained in the new constitution.

Occupation's Similarities with Past Practices

A principal reason for the Allied Occupation's success in demilitarizing Japan can be attributed to the continuity of certain prewar practices. The decision to retain Emperor Hirohito as the symbolic head of the state provided political continuity and stability, even though the new constitution effectively stripped him of any real power. The Diet continued to function throughout the Occupation, although the new constitution changed its structure to make members of both houses subject to popular election. The prewar and wartime bureaucratic structure also continued to operate, and SCAP worked through the bureaucracy in the implementation of most of its reforms.

The Japanese militarist leaders exercised strict censorship during the war, with violators subjected to imprisonment, torture, and even death. Although the penalties under the Allied Occupation were not nearly so severe (but could result in great economic hardships), the General Headquarters (GHQ) of SCAP continued to practice widespread censorship, with the following being a few examples of censored topics: criticism of SCAP, criticism of U.S. or other Allied nations, references to censorship, criticism of SCAP writing the constitution, and fraternization of Allied personnel with Japanese women (Dower 1999, 411). SCAP found the exercise of censorship to be very effective in curbing Communist and left-wing publications. The censorship by GHQ pointed out to the Japanese people the incongruity between the lofty rights set forth in the new constitution and the actual practices carried out by SCAP.

Dower (1999, 439-40) points out that one of the most important legacies of the Occupation was "continued socialization in the acceptance of authority," with the U.S. authorities making clear that "the better part of political wisdom was silence and conformism." Although the constitution claimed democratic ideals, the use of absolute power by SCAP through the existing bureaucracy, such as the practice of widespread censorship, made it clear to the Japanese that democratic freedoms have their limits.

Occupation's Differences from Past Practices

Although some prewar practices continued during the Occupation, SCAP also implemented many changes that were radically different. For example, Article 9 of the new constitution provided that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right" and stated that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." Japan became the only major economic power in the world to ever renounce the right to wage war.

Early in the Occupation (1945-47), Article 9 of the constitution was passed to prohibit military forces, and SCAP sought to break up the *zaibatsu*, which played a critical role in the production of Japanese military goods. However, with the rise of Communist threats in the Soviet Union and China, the U.S. sought a "Reverse Course" when compared to the progressive social reforms early in the Occupation. From 1947 to 1952, SCAP focused more on strengthening the Japanese economy to provide a bulwark against Communism. Japan was encouraged to rearm itself with a Self-Defense Force, and the U.S. no longer fought against the concentration of economic power, so many of the former *zaibatsu* quickly reformed as *keiretsu*, which are characterized by joint stock ownership, interlocking directorates, and other close financial and business relationships.

In addition to the destruction of weapons, purging of various political leaders, and the breakup of large companies that produced military goods, the Occupation Forces took several other specific steps to ensure the demilitarization of Japan. They purged the heads of the national police force and the Ministry of Home Affairs, and they abolished the "thought police." The police forces, previously under control of the Ministry of Home Affairs, became the responsibility of local governments.

The Allied Occupation also instituted several significant social and economic changes, which were radically different than past practices. Women were guaranteed equal rights with men. Women were provided the right to vote. The structure and curriculum of the educational system were revised to be more in line with the American model. Land reform was instituted to drastically increase the number of independently-owned farms.

Works Cited

Dower, John W. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.

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