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**A Reexamination of Emperor Hirohito's Military and Political Role in Wartime
Japan, 1926-1945**

A Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

Undergraduate History Program of the University of Washington Tacoma

By

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Abstract

This paper discusses and reexamines Emperor Hirohito's degree of responsibility in Japan's military aggression in China during the late 1920s and 1930s to the attack on Pearl Harbor in the United States during World War II. Scholars have long debated the extent of Hirohito's role as a warmonger due to his ambiguous position as a head of state and the lack of primary evidence displaying his actions and thoughts on the war. This paper will utilize the Constitution of the Empire of Japan of 1889 (informally known as the Meiji Constitution) which delineated the emperor's supreme position in the government along with primary sources by Hirohito's aides and ministers referencing his thoughts on the war situation and Hirohito's personal statements. Scholars, particularly from a non-Japanese perspective, support the interpretation that Hirohito was legally responsible for the war effort, based on the evidence of the articles stipulating the emperor having divine authority and supreme command over the military. In reality, his powers were limited to a ceremonial role due to the political body structured by the oligarchs who had established the Meiji Constitution. From a personal aspect he was opposed to Japan's war efforts, but he was unable to use his influence to prevent the outbreak of the war as he was compelled by his top advisors,

ministers, and military leaders to limit his role to a ceremonial one and to support the war from a national aspect as he thought it would serve the country's best interests.

Japanese Terminology

Genro: Elder Japanese statesmen from the Meiji period acting as advisors to the emperor who had the authority to appoint and dismiss prime ministers. A portion of them was responsible in establishing the Meiji Constitution.

Kodo: “Imperial way,” an ultranationalist ideology revering the emperor and advocating his imperial rule. It became prevalent in the 1930s with the rising militarism.

Kokutai: “National essence” or “national polity.” Starting from the Meiji period, the definition emphasized the emperor’s sovereignty and the values of an emperor-centered state, becoming a fundamental concept in Japan’s ruling system until the surrender in 1945.

Seidan: “Imperial decision,” the decision announced by the emperor which was considered to be sacred.

Showa tenno: “Showa emperor,” referring to Hirohito’s posthumous name. Showa is the name of the period of Hirohito’s reign from 1926 to 1989.

Introduction

Hirohito reigned as the 124th Emperor of Japan from 1926 to 1989, overseeing the military aggression in China and the subsequent Pacific War against Asia and the United States. For a long time, scholars in and out of Japan have been engaged in an inconclusive and controversial debate on the emperor's role in the war and whether he should have been tried as a war criminal along with other Japanese political and military leaders. Critics claimed Hirohito was legally responsible for initiating the war, citing the Constitution of the Empire of Japan of 1889 (informally known as the Meiji Constitution, and hereafter referred to as such), which articulated that the emperor had the ruling power over the country. Furthermore, Hirohito issued an imperial decree leading to the surrender of Japan in the Pacific War after the dropping of the two atomic bombs and the invasion of the Soviet Union, demonstrating his ability to assert and impose his authority. The Meiji Constitution and the imperial decree are provided as evidence by the critics that Hirohito was the head of state and controlled the military, portraying him as an active leader in instigating the war against China and the United States.¹

On the other hand, there are those who argued that the emperor was not

¹ Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2000), 1.

responsible, pointing out that the articles specifying the emperor's political and military authority in the Constitution were not fully carried out in practice, putting the emperor in an ambiguous role as a head of state. As a result, Hirohito did not have the influential authority to prevent military aggression in China and was unable to interfere with the decision-making process in the government Cabinet during the diplomacy with the United States. His recorded statements and speeches also hinted that he was against the actions of the military and the decision to go to war with the United States.²

Using the Meiji Constitution as a framework and analyzing the primary sources of government ministers, military leaders, and advisors highlighting their dialogues with the emperor, I reexamine the debate and argue that while the articles in the Constitution represented the emperor, including Hirohito, as a head of state with an active role and decision-making authority, what happened in practice was that his imperial powers was relegated to a ceremonial one, due to the fact that the *genro* intended to emphasize the imperial rule of Japan using the emperor's name as they controlled the governmental bureaucracy behind the scenes. Additionally, the rise of militarism caused by acts of insubordination in China during the 1930s overshadowed Hirohito's assertion of his constitutional powers. On a personal aspect, while Hirohito opposed the war efforts

² Kajiyama Shigeru, *Showa tenno wo omou* (Tokyo: Soushisha, 1990), 23-24.

against China and the United States, he perceived that it was for the survival of the state, served the nation's interests and preserved the *kokutai*. When Hirohito became aware that Japan was suffering more losses than gains and the war situation was not improving, he took the initiative by issuing a decree calling for the surrender and the end of the war.

Methodology

As this research involves the psychology behind Emperor Hirohito, primary sources from his advisors, imperial attendants, military leaders, and ministers are used, consisting of dialogues and statements mentioning or announced by Hirohito. As of now, no records exist that Hirohito kept a diary or memoir, and the number of archival sources pertaining to the emperor are extremely limited due to the restricted access between the general public and the imperial family of Japan.³ The closest source recording Hirohito's statements is the *Showa tenno dokuhakuroku* (The Showa Emperor Monologue) by Terasaki Hidenari, a diplomat based in the United States who acted as a translator in Hirohito and General Douglas MacArthur's meeting after the surrender of

³ It is not clearly known if the sources were destroyed or lost during the wartime. However, there is a possibility that some were kept confidentially to avoid political controversies. See "Emperor Showa wanted to express 'deep regret' in speech, documents reveal," NHK-World-Japan, Jan 23, 2020, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/817/>.

Japan. The monologue reveals statements and speeches made by Hirohito starting from the 1930s, although statements referencing political and military matters are scarce.

Several secondary sources written by Japanese and non-Japanese scholars are used to analyze how Hirohito and his decisions were interpreted and evaluated. To better understand the context and argument of the topic, two main secondary sources in the Japanese language are used. They are Irokawa Daikichi's *Showa-shi to tenno* (The History of Showa and the Emperor) and Kajiyama Shigeru's *Showa tenno wo omou* (Remembering Emperor Showa). A traditional theoretical framework is applied in writing this paper to evaluate Hirohito's thoughts behind his actions.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions about Emperor Hirohito's war responsibility were not prevalent until his death in 1989. Since then, academic scholars and historians from various backgrounds have been divided on the emperor's role. The Western outlook tends to be critical, with scholars arguing that Hirohito was a decisive factor in initiating the war against China and the United States. Herbert P. Bix, one of the prominent critics and author of *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, highlights that the emperor was an authoritarian leader who exercised significant influence on the decision-making process in the 1931 Manchurian Incident and the subsequent attack on Pearl Harbor,

arguing that he had the imperial influence to prevent it.⁴

Others presented Hirohito's personal statements after the war as evidence of how he felt responsible for the conflict. In his article, "Hirohito and General Douglas MacArthur: The First Meeting as Documented by Showa tenno jitsuroku," Peter Mauch shows how Hirohito confiding to his advisers and subsequently to MacArthur expressing his guilt and the desire to take responsibility, hence acknowledging the role he played during the war.⁵ Peter Li, author of *In Search of Justice: Japanese War Crimes*, uses a legal framework to argue that according to the Meiji Constitution, Hirohito possessed the imperial power to rule the country and move the military at his will, making him accountable for the outbreak of the armed conflicts and the war crimes that occurred. Additionally, Li analyzes Hirohito's Imperial Rescript on Surrender in 1945 and points out that he did not express remorse or guilt over the war.⁶ Peter Wetzler's *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in*

⁴ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 12.

⁵ Peter Mauch, "Hirohito and General Douglas MacArthur: The First Meeting as Documented by Showa tenno jitsuroku," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 28, no.4 (2017): 587-588, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2017.1386446>.

⁶ Peter Li, "Hirohito's War Crimes Responsibility: The Unrepentant Emperor," in *The Search of Justice: Japanese War Crimes*, ed. Peter Li (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 63-65.

Prewar Japan shifts the focus from legal and moral responsibilities of the emperor to the imperial household, arguing that Hirohito wanted to preserve his lineage and the *kokutai*. Therefore, he participated in the decision-making process of the war efforts, sharing a responsibility with other political and military leaders in the outbreak of war against China and the United States.⁷

On the other hand, Japanese scholars leaned more toward the idea of Hirohito having a pacifist personality who cared for his people but was forced to participate in the war efforts. Japanese scholars Irokawa Daikichi and Kajiyama Shigeru stressed that Hirohito, his political powers being restricted by the Meiji Constitution, was unable to control the military due to their acts of insubordination in China. He expressed his concerns and worries of Japan getting involved in a large-scale conflict with China and the United States.^{8,9} In *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, author Noriko Kawamura takes a more balanced approach and reassesses the two dominant positions she considers to be exaggerated – the emperor being a pacifist constitutional monarch

⁷ Peter Wetzler, *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 202.

⁸ Irokawa Daikichi, *Showa-shi to Tenno* (Tokyo: Iwanami Seminar Books, 1991), 157-160.

⁹ Kajiyama Shigeru, *Showa tenno wo omou*, 23-24.

and an active commander during the war – arguing that Hirohito was entrapped in an ambiguous political position which made it difficult to draw the distinction between his personal opinions and his state decisions. Hence, Kawamura highlights that Hirohito was neither a staunch pacifist nor an aggressive militarist.¹⁰ The historiography looks to be an inconclusive debate between the two sides, but with the possibilities that more sources on the emperor could be unearthed in the future, there is hope that Hirohito's true role in the war can be comprehended.

The Meiji Constitution

Before the American-drafted and current Constitution of 1947 (still in effect today) that stipulated the emperor as the “symbol of the state and the unity of the people”, the Meiji Constitution was established in 1889, using a combination of Prussian-influences and Japanese imperial models. Several articles in the Constitution mentioned the role of the emperor as the head of the state. They were:

Article I: “The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal”.

Article III: “The Emperor is sacred and inviolable”.

¹⁰ Noriko Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 12-13.

Article IV: “The Emperor combined in his being the supreme rights of rule”.

Article XI: “The Emperor has the supreme command of the army and navy”.

Article XII: “The Emperor determines the organization and the peace standing of the army and navy”.

Article XIII: “The Emperor makes war, makes peace, and conclude treaties”.^{11,12}

These articles delineated the emperor as an influential supreme leader in managing diplomatic relationships with other states and commander of the military. However, the Constitution also ensured the emperor does not shoulder all of the responsibilities.

Article LV “called for the various ministers of state to advise and assist the emperor within their respective areas of responsibility”.¹³ This signified that the ministers had to reach a consensus on decision and policymaking, which would be forwarded to the emperor who would give the green light to pass it through. Nevertheless, with the majority of articles referring to the emperor as the supreme commander of Japan, scholars critical of Hirohito have pointed out that he had utilized these powers to initiate

¹¹ Wetzler, *Hirohito and War*, 5.

¹² Li, “Hirohito’s War Crimes Responsibility”, 63.

¹³ Wetzler, *Hirohito and War*, 5.

military aggression against China and the United States.

However, what happened in practice, as it developed over the course of the Meiji period, was rather different. The Meiji Constitution was created by the *genro*, and in accordance with Article I and LV, the *genro* intended to stress the imperial tradition that the state of Japan was “reigned” by the emperor eternally.¹⁴ At the same time, the *genro* handled the administrative affairs of the government body not only to reduce the emperor’s workload but also to avoid having him shoulder all the responsibilities. Hence, the Constitution was structured in a way that leaned toward a mixture of absolute and constitutional monarchy. As the *genro* became took charge of domestic and foreign politics – some of them having a military background that gave them the authority to mobilize troops - the emperor’s role was reduced into a passive one of not being able to directly command the ministers or the military, but he was able to attend and discuss political and military decisions.¹⁵ This practice demonstrated that issuing government policies under the name of the emperor was a façade to emphasize the

¹⁴ Wetzler, *Hirohito and War*, 182.

¹⁵ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 32.

imperial will that sought to safeguard and serve the national interests of Japan.¹⁶

Since 1890, an imperial policy known as the Imperial Rescript on Education was issued by Hirohito's grandfather, Emperor Meiji, calling for the Japanese people to serve their country and protect the emperor. The Rescript announced that "Should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth."¹⁷ Along with the imperial will, this rescript became the building block of the *kokutai* that Hirohito strongly desired to preserve regardless of his personal convictions. He associated the imperial household and the state of Japan as one entity, and if either one collapses he perceived that it would mean the end of the country.¹⁸ In the 1930s, the definition of *kokutai* was officially formalized by the Ministry of Education, who published a booklet called *Kokutai no hongii* (Fundamentals of our national polity). A revised version on the Imperial Rescript on Education, it called for Japanese citizens to

¹⁶ Wetzler, *Hirohito and War*, 5.

¹⁷ Cabinet Office of Japan, *Kyouiku ni kansuru chokugo*. Japan, 1890, National Archives of Japan Digital Archive. https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/DAS/meta/Detail_F000000000000087481 (accessed February 11, 2020).

¹⁸ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 183-184.

“serve the emperor and to receive the emperor’s great august Will...[Japan] is a great family nation, and the Imperial Household is the head family of the subjects and the nucleus of national life.”¹⁹

Hence, the scholarly view of Hirohito being legally responsible for the war was partly derived from the fact that the articles in the Constitution denoted him as a supreme commander of the country. However, as the contradiction between theory and practice of the Constitution has revealed, the role of supreme commander has been misinterpreted at a face value.

The 1930s: Early Years of Reign and the Rising Military Influence

When Hirohito took the imperial throne in 1926, Japan was becoming one of the major economic and military power states in the world along with Great Britain and the United States.²⁰ Since the 1890s, Japan experienced military victories over China and Russia, becoming a colonial power by gaining Taiwan from the former and had also annexed Korea. World War I provided Japan an opportunity to further extend its sphere of influence into China, but its efforts were inhibited by the Allied powers. Hence, the

¹⁹ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 68.

²⁰ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 141.

Japanese military devised other ways to gain control of China, causing political tensions.²¹ In 1927, a year into Hirohito's reign where he was still new to the throne, China's Nationalist Party led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek unified the country that had been divided and ruled by local warlords, a situation Japan had taken advantage of. To protect their people and interests residing in China, Japan sent troops to fight against Chiang's army, ushering in the series of military skirmishes that gradually culminated into a large-scale conflict.

Also in the 1920s, Japan faced domestic difficulties and was plagued by an economic crisis following the destruction of the capital Tokyo by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and subsequent bank closures.²² This was aggravated by the Great Depression beginning in 1929, when Japan's economy, which had been heavily dependent on imports and exports between Europe and the United States, was deeply affected.²³ As dissatisfaction toward the civilian government for being ineffective in

²¹ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 146-147.

²² Osanaga Kanroji, *Hirohito: An Intimate Portrait of the Japanese Emperor* (Los Angeles: Gateway Publishers, 1975), 111.

²³ Ben – Ami Shillony, *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, Incident*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1973), 3-4.

solving the nation crises surfaced, various sociopolitical groups and ideologies surfaced to with proposed solutions to Japan crises. A debate emerged on how the *kokutai* should be upheld. Nationalists conceptualized the “imperial way” - the *kodo* - to bring effective reforms to the country by using the emperor’s powers. It signified the ideology that the Empire of Japan was manifested in the emperor himself and, hence, rule with the emphasis on Japanese traditions and moral codes by abolishing Western sociopolitical ideologies.²⁴ *Kodo* became increasingly prevalent in the military, as it sought to displace the civilian government that had been ruling Japan in a Western-influenced liberal approach. These national issues created a turbulent era for Hirohito as he observed the increasing military influence both in domestic and foreign politics.²⁵

On a personal level, Hirohito hoped to reign over the country by leaning more toward a constitutional monarchy and with relative peace, influenced by his 1921 trip to Europe when he was a Crown Prince. There he witnessed the close relationship King George V of Britain had with his citizens as well as the ruins of cities caused by the

²⁴ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 11-12.

²⁵ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 146-147.

destruction of World War I.²⁶

However, the political situation during his reign prompted him, reluctantly, to think otherwise. As discussed previously, mentioned in the Meiji Constitution, the emperor supposedly had supreme command over the military, but because of his relegation to a ceremonial role contributed by Article LV stating that political duties were to be carried out by ministers, Hirohito had no direct control of the army who were moving at their discretion.

In 1927, a military skirmish occurred between the Japanese forces and Chiang's army, who had recently unified China. When Hirohito was signing an agreement allowing Japanese troops to enter China so as to protect Japanese residents there, Hirohito expressed concern of a possible armed conflict at a larger scale. One of Hirohito's imperial attendants, Osanaga Kanroji, heard from the emperor's aide that as Hirohito was about to sign the document, he hesitated for a while and questioned: "How will the Japanese residents be evacuated safely? Won't this be a repetition of the Nikolaevsk Incident?", referring to the 1920 Siberian expedition during the Russian civil war that killed a large number of Japanese nationals. This episode demonstrated to

²⁶ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 144-145.

Osanaga that the “mind of the emperor was always focused on the welfare of the people.”²⁷

A year later in 1928, a group of army officers from the Japanese Kwantung Army, who were stationed in China, instigated an explosion as an act of insubordination with the intention of extending Japanese influence in Northeast China. The explosion killed the Chinese warlord Zhang Zuolin, the governor of Manchuria. Hirohito was upset that the army had acted without the government’s permission and that requested prime minister Tanaka Giichi investigate the incident and identify the culprits.^{28,29} Tanaka promised to emperor that the perpetrators would be severely punished.³⁰ However, upon identifying the culprits, a group of military leaders and right-wing nationalists expressed their opposition to the severity of the punishment, pressurizing Tanaka to report to the emperor that the perpetrators’ punishments had been reduced to a

²⁷ Osanaga, *Hirohito*, 111-112.

²⁸ Kojima Noboru, *Tenno 2: Manshuu Jihen*. vol. 2 (Tokyo: Bungeishunjuu, 1981), 52.

²⁹ Kawai Yahachi, *Showa shoki no tenno to kyuuchuu: Jijuu jicho Kawai Yahachi nikki [Dai 2 kan]*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993), 221.

³⁰ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 148.

lighter one.³¹ In response, Hirohito reprimanded Tanaka: “What you have reported to me initially is different, isn’t it?!” He then told his imperial attendant that “I do not understand a single thing Prime Minister Tanaka is telling me. I do not wish to hear from him again.”³²

Subsequently, Tanaka and his cabinet announced their resignation, demonstrating how the emperor had used his imperial authority to influence the government. *Genro* Saionji Kinmochi was concerned about this movement and advised to Hirohito: “For Your Majesty to directly compel a prime minister to resign is not ideal in accordance to the Constitution.”³³ Saionji, the last surviving *genro*, had been an mentor of Hirohito, teaching him the significance of upholding the imperial family and tradition for the country.³⁴ Heeding Saionji’s advice, Hirohito, from then on, refrained

³¹ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 148.

³² Harada Kumao, *Saionjikou to seikyoku: Dai 2 kan – Ji Showa 6 nen 7 gatsu shi Showa 8 nen 1 gatsu*. vol. 2 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1950), 10-11.

³³ Kawai Yahachi, *Showa shoki no tenno to kyuuchoo: Jijuu jicho Kawai Yahachi nikki [Dai 3 kan]* vol. 3 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993), 113.

³⁴ Wetzler, *Hirohito and War*, 2-3.

from voicing opinions that would significantly influence politics.³⁵ As the ringleaders involved in the explosion incident were let off with a light punishment, it emboldened a portion of the military to believe they could act without permission from their commanding officers and the emperor.³⁶

Although Hirohito expressed his concerns whenever he was able to, the international situation gradually escalated into a conflict that forced Hirohito to move away from a more pacifist position. Emboldened by the assassination of Zhang Zuolin, in 1931, officers in the Japan's Kwantung Army, without the tacit agreement of the generals in the Tokyo headquarters, staged an explosion - another act of insubordination - that became a *casus belli* in Northeast China, known as the Manchurian Incident. In the aftermath of the incident, the Army seized control of Manchuria and set up the puppet state Manchukuo, which the League of Nations called an act of aggression and refused to recognize.

Upon hearing about the incident, Hirohito sought an explanation from the Army General Staff, asking why the army had entered Manchuria without his

³⁵ Kajiyama, *Showa tenno wo omou*, 19.

³⁶ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 149-150.

permission.³⁷ An imperial conference consisting of the ministers discussing on the incident was subsequently held. They reached a consensus on how the military commands were not obeyed. The emperor reportedly stated that the government was making the effort to quell the situation, implying his demonstration of support for the ministers' consensus.^{38,39} However, this action drew ire from a group of military officers in the Army intending to expand their influence in China as they interpreted that the government was attempting to sway the emperor's opinion.⁴⁰ The ministers were prompted to prove that this was not the case. Kido Koichi, one of the ministers in the government who later become the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, the chief advisor for Hirohito, noted in his diary that "[U]nless there is no alternative, it would be best not to have the Emperor's word from now."⁴¹ The conference concluded that Hirohito was to accept the actions of the army. Cases pursuing the relationship of the emperor and the

³⁷ Kido Koichi, *The Diary of Marquis Kido, 1931-45: Selected Translations into English* (Maryland, University Publications of America, 1984), 5.

³⁸ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 237.

³⁹ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 5.

⁴⁰ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 237.

⁴¹ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 5.

military should be stopped so as to avoid conflict with the latter. The way the Manchurian Incident was dealt with demonstrated how the military's power had more influence than the governmental Cabinet.⁴² From this point onward until 1945, the military would be in control of Japan's foreign policy; the Manchurian Incident had led to what historian Peter Duus called the "diplomatic revolution".⁴³

With the chain of command between the imperial palace, government, and the military in disorder state, some of the military officers – in another act of insubordination - took matters in their own hands to eliminate targets who were against the war efforts in China. On February 26, 1936, a group of nationalist army officers, assassinated several ministers and nearly killed the prime minister. The officers proclaimed the Showa Restoration – the aim to overthrow the current political order and to put the emperor back into his authoritative imperial role, thereby restoring the *kokutai*. They claimed to be acting for the sake of Emperor Hirohito.⁴⁴ Realizing the incident had cost the lives of prominent men and had the potential to tarnish Japan's

⁴² Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 237.

⁴³ Peter Duus, *The Rise of Modern Japan* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 205.

⁴⁴ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 298.

reputation in the world, Hirohito took a tougher stance on the military.⁴⁵ He rebuked Kido, “whatever [the army officers’] excuses are, I am displeased with this incident. It has brought disgrace on the fundamental character of our *kokutai* [national polity].”⁴⁶ Kido noted that the emperor said “Suppress the insurgents as soon as possible. Hold your post with sincerity until peace and order are restored.”⁴⁷ This exemplified Hirohito’s use of his constitutional powers of having supreme command over the military, although the circumstances were unconventional given that Hirohito wanted to assure that he was not the political leader that the army officers claimed to be advocating for.⁴⁸ In addition, his vehement response to the incident portrayed his pacifist characteristic as he did not want his country to be engaged in a civil conflict. Hirohito told Honjo Shigeru, his chief aide-de-camp, that

the senior statesman and generals whom I have trusted the most as my hands and feet have been killed...Their actions have violated the constitution...blackened

⁴⁵ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 64-65.

⁴⁶ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 131.

⁴⁷ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 133.

⁴⁸ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 302-303.

the national polity (*kokutai*) and defiled its purity. At this time the army should be cleansed thoroughly, and steps should be taken to prevent such a disgraceful incident from ever occurring again.⁴⁹

However, Honjo, an army officer himself and sympathetic to the incident, did not take heed of Hirohito's advice, maintaining the military's status quo.⁵⁰

Diplomacy with the United States

Following the outbreak of the full-scale Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the subsequent invasion of French Indochina in 1941 that Hirohito and the Japanese civilian government was unable to prevent due to the results of the military skirmishes occurring since the 1931 Manchurian Incident, the United States imposed a trade embargo on Japan, cutting off their oil supply. Importing 80% of its oil from U.S. owned oil companies, the embargo was to compel Japan to withdraw their troops from China.⁵¹ During this period from 1938 to 1941, Army and Navy generals, along with the ministers in the Cabinet, were discussing the possibility of attacking the United

⁴⁹ Honjo Shigeru, *Honjo nikki* (Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 1987), 44.

⁵⁰ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 301.

⁵¹ Walter J. Levy, *Oil Strategy and Politics, 1941-1981* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1982), 24-35.

States in order to cripple the U.S. Naval fleet and morale.⁵²

Hirohito had hoped to make peace with Great Britain and the United States, but the intensifying war situation in China initiated by the army and exacerbated by Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro made it difficult for Hirohito to voice his concerns. Konoe had escalated matters by advocating for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and forming the one-party state of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association.⁵³ Hirohito opposed the invasion of French Indochina, reminding Army Minister Sugiyama Hajime: “Do not provoke an armed conflict. Prioritize efforts to settle the situation as peacefully as possible.”⁵⁴ However, knowing he could not directly intervene in the war decisions, Hirohito started to raise concerns about Japan’s survival. He told the military department that the French Indochina operation should be treated with caution for the sake of national policy, and asked Kido, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, whether the suggestion to invade both the Soviet Union and Southeast Asia would be sustainable,

⁵² Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 91.

⁵³ Irokawa, *Showa-shi to Tenno*, 174-175.

⁵⁴ Tanaka Shinichi, *Daitoa senso he no doutei I* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 1941), 44.

demonstrating his priority toward the country's interests.^{55,56}

Hirohito remained adamant in opposing a war with the United States, and expressed his dissatisfaction with Konoe's diplomatic approach on negotiating with the United States on the surface but building up the military behind the scenes. Hirohito requested Konoe prioritize negotiations over armed conflict, but Konoe responded that it was impossible to do so.⁵⁷ Kido explained the rationale of going to war by stating how the oil supplies in Japan would only last for another one to two years following the embargo. Hence, he highlighted that Japan should get hold of resources in Southeast Asia, while maintaining its peaceful relations with the United States using a strategic approach.⁵⁸

On September 6, 1941, an imperial conference was held to discuss the directions Japan was going to take toward Great Britain and the United States,

⁵⁵ Kajiyama, *Showa tenno wo omou*, 22-23.

⁵⁶ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 285.

⁵⁷ Terasaki Hidenari and Mariko Terasaki Miller, *Showa tenno dokuhakuroku: Terasaki Hidenari, goyo-gakari nikki* (Tokyo: Bungeishunju, 1991), 62.

⁵⁸ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 299-300.

consisting of the decision to attack Pearl Harbor.⁵⁹ A day before, Hirohito had looked into the agenda report for the conference, remarking to Konoe that the process appeared to be using war as a means to negotiate, and wanted to question the Army and Navy general staffs – Sugiyama and Nagano Osami respectively - on the rationale. Konoe reiterated that the government would engage in diplomatic negotiations, and if it failed, they would start preparing for the war.⁶⁰

Hirohito then asked Sugiyama if he was confident about being able to resolve the war efforts against the United States. Sugiyama said he would plan to resolve in three months. Hearing this, Hirohito probed Sugiyama: “You were the Army Minister during the outbreak of the Second-Sino Japanese War. I remember you said it will be resolved in a month. But it has been four years now. Why has it not concluded yet? And on what basis do you say that you can resolve the war with the United States in three months?”⁶¹ Sugiyama was unable to answer, and Nagano offered an explanation stating

⁵⁹ The imperial conference was a national meeting of the government ministers and military leaders, in which Hirohito participated to observe the outcome and was not allowed to influence the decision-making process. See Wetzler, *Hirohito and War*, 38.

⁶⁰ Konoe Fumimaro, *Ushinawareshi seiji* (Tokyo, Asahi Shinbunsha, 1946), 120.

⁶¹ Konoe, *Ushinawareshi seiji*, 121.

they would do their best to reach a negotiation, but would resort to force if diplomacy breaks down, encouraging Hirohito to agree with the conference's agenda. In response, Hirohito asked: "The military command will place emphasis on the diplomacy. Is that right?" Both of the generals replied affirmatively.⁶²

The next day Hirohito told Kido he wanted to ask some questions in the conference council, but Kido said that the council president would ask the crucial questions regarding Japan's policy to the United States, and advised the emperor there was no need to do so, possibly reflecting a concern that Hirohito might go against the Constitution by politically influencing the government again.⁶³ Later that day, Kido asked the emperor about the progress of the conference, and Hirohito replied "that the supreme command had not answered the question of the president of the Privy Council as to whether they were attaching importance to the diplomatic negotiations with the U.S.A."⁶⁴ Disappointed, Hirohito recited a poem written by Emperor Meiji, his grandfather, on the country's predicament: "In a world where all the seas are brethren,

⁶² Konoe, *Ushinawareshi seiji*, 122.

⁶³ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 304.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

why do wind and wave so stridently clash?” Then, he announced to the conference: “I make it a rule to read this poem by Emperor Meiji every day, with the hope of emulating his spirit of peace. However, matters have now reached this truly regrettable state.”⁶⁵

This was seen from the audience in the conference as an attempt by Hirohito to stop the outbreak of the war, portrayed in the medium of poetry to ensure he was not making political statements to sway governmental decisions, and also to demonstrate his hopeless appeal for peace.

Ultimately, the ambiguous power relationship between the imperial palace, government and the military command, which resulted from the uncontrolled power the latter had since the Manchurian Incident and the contradictory practices in the Constitution, undermined the consensus regarding diplomacy with the United States.⁶⁶

This portrayed Japan attempting to reach a negotiation with the United States on the surface while making war preparations behind the scenes. Konoe, who took a moderate position on the war situation, resigned as prime minister shortly thereafter due to his

⁶⁵ Osanaga, *Hirohito*, 128.

⁶⁶ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 96.

failure to keep up on the deadline for going to war.⁶⁷ He was replaced by General Tojo Hideki who had been pushing for the war efforts. With this change in leadership, Hirohito gradually accepted the fact that Japan was preparing for war against the United States.

On December 1, an imperial conference was held to formally declare war against Great Britain and the United States, with Hirohito announcing the imperial order of approval. A day before, Kido noted in his diary that “The Emperor said that, to his great anxiety...[he had hoped] for the avoidance of war as much as possible.”⁶⁸ A week later, Japanese army forces commenced the attack on Pearl Harbor, initiating war with the United States. Osanaga noted that “when Tojo and Sugiyama reported the complete success of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the emperor sat impassive, showing no signs of gratification.”⁶⁹ From then on to the last days of the Pacific War, the emperor made no references to the pacificism that he had voiced before, instead focusing all he could on

⁶⁷ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 100.

⁶⁸ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 321.

⁶⁹ Osanaga, *Hirohito*, 129.

the war situation to preserve Japan.⁷⁰

The Imperial Decision to Surrender and Hirohito's Reflection

In mid-1942, following the defeat from the Battle of Midway, Japan's military strategy turned into a defensive one that began to favor the United States. With further major defeats beginning in 1945 such as the Battle of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, Japan was pushed to the losing edge of the war. A faction of the government advocated for the end of the conflict as soon as possible. Hirohito, observing the hopeless situation his country was entrapped in, began to voice his concerns as well.⁷¹ He told his military aide that "I believe that this war is certainly winnable if we make our best efforts, but I am anxious about whether or not the people will be able to endure until then."⁷² Kido thought the only way for Japan to end the war was to surrender unconditionally, reporting to Hirohito on the grave military situation and suggesting he should use his imperial authority, the *seidan*, to end the war when it became necessary.⁷³

⁷⁰ Bix, *Emperor Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 434-435.

⁷¹ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 141-142.

⁷² Togo Shigenori, *Togo Shigenori gaiko shuki* (Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 1967), 340.

⁷³ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 145-146.

With the defeat of Germany in May and the Potsdam Declaration demanding Japan's unconditional surrender in July, Hirohito "earnestly [urged] concluding peace with the Allies" despite the army's insistence on fighting.⁷⁴ However, as was the case with the failed diplomacy with the United States before the war, the lack of consensus between the military and government caused tensions and delays in the decision-making process regarding surrender. In August 1945, the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, combined with the Soviet Union's declaration against Japan, became the catalyst for the ending the war.⁷⁵

Hirohito, with the help of his closest advisers, required a *seidan* so that the military had to obey the emperor's orders, thereby forcing a national consensus.⁷⁶ The reason the *seidan* was not used to prevent the attack on Pearl Harbor was due to the fact that the majority of the government at the time, dominated by military leaders, was leaning toward war, and Hirohito, who was not supposed to use his personal opinions to influence politics, agreed to it in the name of preserving the *kokutai*. Now that the

⁷⁴ Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido*, 441-442.

⁷⁵ Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, 161.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

kokutai was on the brink of disintegration, and with a handful of imperial and political officials advocating for peace, the advisors used this dire predicament to turn Hirohito's opinion into a state decision.⁷⁷ At the imperial conference on August 14, Hirohito appealed to everyone, with tears in his eyes that "If we continue the war, Japan will be altogether destroyed... I cannot express the sorrow I feel as I think of all who were killed on the battlefield or in the homeland and of their bereaved families... I will do everything in my power to help."⁷⁸

The next day, the imperial rescript on surrender was broadcast on the radio, and for the first time, the Japanese people heard the voice of the emperor. In the broadcast, Hirohito announced that "the war situation has not developed necessarily to Japan's advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest...should we continue to fight, it would only result in an ultimate collapse of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Osanaga, *Hirohito*, 132-133.

⁷⁹ Emperor Showa, *Daitoasenso shuuketsu ni kansuru shoushou*. Japan, August 15, 1945, Imperial Household Agency Official Website. <https://www.kunaicho.go.jp/kunaicho/koho/taisenkankei/syusen/pdf/syousyo.pdf> (accessed February 15, 2020).

When General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers who oversaw the occupation of Japan after its defeat, met with Hirohito, he was astonished by the emperor's willingness to take responsibility for the war. MacArthur recalled that Hirohito told him: "I accept total responsibility for initiating the war in the political and military aspects. I leave it up to your representative of the country to decide on my judgment."⁸⁰ Although scholars debate the validity of the emperor's statements, it is likely that Hirohito did feel a sense of guilt for not being able to use his imperial authority to prevent the military aggressions but was able to end the war.⁸¹ Tajima Michiji, one of the stewards in the Imperial Household, possessed documents on how Hirohito wanted to express his remorse over the war to the public. Hirohito told Tajima that "the military, the government, the public – they all have things to feel remorse for, such as overlooking the military's arbitrary actions."⁸²

Influenced by the fact that Hirohito did not act accordingly on what was stipulated in the Meiji Constitution and his personal guilt, MacArthur decided it was

⁸⁰ Kajiya, *Showa tenno wo omou*, 54.

⁸¹ Peter Mauch, "Hirohito and General Douglas MacArthur", 589-590.

⁸² "Emperor Showa wanted to express 'deep regret' in speech, documents reveal," *NHK-World-Japan*, Jan 23, 2020, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/817/>.

best not to criminalize the emperor for war crimes, in addition to the reason that “his indictment will unquestionably cause a tremendous convulsion among the Japanese people, the repercussions of which cannot be overestimated. He is a symbol which unites all Japanese. Destroy him and the nation will disintegrate”.⁸³ Hirohito was then prompted to renounce his status as a living god and declare his humanity in his second radio broadcast on January 1, 1946. The revised Constitution drafted by the United States changed the emperor into a “symbol of the state and of the unity of people”, stripping the imperial institution of political powers.

Conclusion

Due to the limited number of primary sources pertaining to Emperor Hirohito and his course of actions during wartime, along with the inconclusive scholarly debates which are partially clouded by political positions, the true extent of Hirohito’s accountability might never be known. The articles written in the Meiji Constitution portray the emperor as being legally responsible for military actions, but this paper has demonstrated that in keeping with the pattern established by his grandfather Emperor Meiji, Hirohito did not perform the roles to the fullest extent, contributed by the *genro*’s intent to place the emperor into a de jure position. Emperor Meiji had a close working

⁸³ Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, 568.

relationship with the *genro*, but most of them were gone by the time of Hirohito's reign, prompting Hirohito to consult with other advisors, ministers and military leaders.

Additionally, the military's acts of insubordination in China in the 1930s emboldened them and increased their influence in the Japanese government, weakening and overshadowing the Cabinet's decision-making powers. This became apparent in the diplomacy toward the United States in 1941 where the imperial household, the government and the military were working at odds with one another, with the military eventually prevailing.

From a personal dimension, Hirohito had long been against the war efforts, influenced by his tour of post-World War I Europe. However, announcing his opinions to influence politics was deemed to be against the Constitution, and thus he had to remain as an observer for most of the time, except during the war, so as to preserve Japan's *kokutai*. In retrospect, Hirohito expressed guilt and remorse over the war, believing he should shoulder all the responsibilities.⁸⁴

Understanding that Emperor Hirohito acted more as a ceremonial leader helps

⁸⁴ The article "Emperor Showa wanted to express 'deep regret' in speech, documents reveal," during the postwar period was further evidence that Hirohito was "pushed around" by his government. In 1952, Hirohito wanted to announce that the war was against his will, but since the declaration of war was signed under the Emperor's name, imperial steward Tajima Michiji compelled Hirohito to say that he went along with "the momentum".

to reduce the biased view of him as an active warmonger. This perspective also shows that the initiation of military aggressions was mostly attributed to the army and navy, and to a certain extent, the government. While this is not to claim that Hirohito is completely absolved, the unwarranted prejudice toward the Japanese imperial household in contemporary society could be mitigated to clear the inaccurate representation of an imperial ruler that was aggressive and warlike. Additionally, it makes the public opinion realize that the head of state is not always necessarily the head of government, and that the issue of accountability does not solely focus on a single leader – but must also consider other figures or movements surrounding the leader.

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