



## Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan

*Herbert P. Bix*

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Winner of the Pulitzer PrizeIn this groundbreaking biography of the Japanese emperor Hirohito, Herbert P. Bix offers the first complete, unvarnished look at the enigmatic leader whose sixty-three-year reign ushered Japan into the modern world. Never before has the full life of this controversial figure been revealed with such clarity and vividness. Bix shows what it was like to be trained from birth for a lone position at the apex of the nation's political hierarchy and as a revered symbol of divine status. Influenced by an unusual combination of the Japanese imperial tradition and a modern scientific worldview, the young emperor gradually evolves into his preeminent role, aligning himself with the growing ultranationalist movement, perpetuating a cult of religious emperor worship, resisting attempts to curb his power, and all the while burnishing his image as a reluctant, passive monarch. Here we see Hirohito as he truly was: a man of strong will and real authority.

Supported by a vast array of previously untapped primary documents, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* is perhaps most illuminating in lifting the veil on the mythology surrounding the emperor's impact on the world stage. Focusing closely on Hirohito's interactions with his advisers and successive Japanese governments, Bix sheds new light on the causes of the China War in 1937 and the start of the Asia-Pacific War in 1941. And while conventional wisdom has had it that the nation's increasing foreign aggression was driven and maintained not by the emperor but by an elite group of Japanese militarists, the reality, as witnessed here, is quite different. Bix documents in detail the strong, decisive role Hirohito played in wartime operations, from the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 through the attack on Pearl Harbor and ultimately the fateful decision in 1945 to accede to an unconditional surrender. In fact, the emperor stubbornly prolonged the war effort and then used the horrifying bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with the Soviet entrance into the war, as his exit strategy from a no-win situation. From the moment of capitulation, we see how American and Japanese leaders moved to justify the retention of Hirohito as emperor by whitewashing his wartime role and reshaping the historical consciousness of the Japanese people. The key to this strategy was Hirohito's alliance with General MacArthur, who helped him maintain his stature and shed his militaristic image, while MacArthur used the emperor as a figurehead to assist him in converting Japan into a peaceful nation. Their partnership ensured that the emperor's image would loom large over the postwar years and later decades, as Japan began to make its way in the modern age and struggled -- as it still does -- to come to terms with its past.

Until the very end of a career that embodied the conflicting aims of Japan's development as a nation, Hirohito remained preoccupied with politics and with his place in history. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* provides the definitive account of his rich life and legacy. Meticulously researched and utterly engaging, this book is proof that the history of twentieth-century Japan cannot be understood apart from the life of its most remarkable and enduring leader.

## Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan Details

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## From Reader Review Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan for online ebook

### Peter says

What a fantastic read. This book really delves into the aspects of the Japanese and its emperor that never are addressed in modern popular literature. Dr. Bix did an excellent job in describing Hirohito and the political movements that influenced the twentieth century from the perspective of the Japanese themselves.

I would highly recommend this book if you are looking to broadening your worldviews.

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### William2 says

Herbert P. Bix's biography of Hirohito surpasses that of Edward Behr (*Hirohito: Behind the Myth*, New York, 1989) in depth and nuance. Bix has spent an enormous amount of time among original Japanese-language sources. Behr consults Japanese-language sources infrequently, and when he does so it is through translation. Since Hirohito left virtually no writings that would have given substance to his views, Bix has had to look closely at the diaries left by those who worked with him, and other sources, and from this *infer* a character for Hirohito. It is this job of inference that is the foremost achievement of the book, and it is achieved largely through a mutual or overlapping confirmation of sources. Hirohito is at times directly quoted, but these moments are rare and usually come from his later years when he regularly sought to avoid accountability for his role. Bix largely confirms David Bergamini's conclusions of forty years ago (see *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy: How Emperor Hirohito Led Japan Into War Against the West*, New York, 1971). But whereas Bergamini's narrative could be strident, and a bit racist at times, Bix's is dispassionate and subtle. If Bergamini's Hirohito weren't such a caricature of so-called Asian inscrutability, he would be sinister. Bix's Hirohito, by contrast, is more the vacillating politician. I learned a lot from the book. Some highlights: (1) the degree to which Japan's military was completely out of control in the 1930-40s and led the nation into war; (2) Hirohito's maddening penchant for vacillation while so many died; and (3) the picture of across the board governmental dysfunction. Hirohito's original impulse was to maintain Japan's alliance with Britain and the U.S. He was only too aware of how much Japan depended on those countries for imports of oil and scrapmetal. So he was--at the start--essentially left to sanction his army's wild and murderous caprices after the fact, or risk looking inept. When he finally steps out of the shadows to put down the young army officers rebellion in 1936, executing 17 ringleaders, the reader feels that finally he is becoming more decisive. Bix wants to show us that Hirohito could have stopped it. That his rejection of the army's unsanctioned campaigns would have certainly made him less sympathetic among his people, but he could have been at least partially effective in slowing the rush toward catastrophe. Instead, with the army out of control, Hirohito's impulse was to get out front of the breaking wave and try to ride it. He was certainly aware of the futility of such an intervention. In the days before Pearl Harbor he is told that the chance of winning a war against Britain and the U.S. is 50-50 at best. Yet he green lights the attack! By then the U.S. and Britain had begun trade sanctions against Japan for its military exploits in Manchuria. So while there was initial hesitation on Hirohito's part, once he became committed he gave it his all. He played an active role as commander in chief. That point Bix establishes beyond doubt. There's so much to learn about Japan from this book. I did not know prior to reading it of the extent of the army's wild disobedience. Neither was I aware that the "throne," or Imperial House (*kokutai*), considered democracy every bit as dangerous and subversive as Communism. Fascism though was widely embraced. The overwhelming sense Bix leaves us with is that World War II was a war Japan had to fight and had to lose. They had to fight it because there was

no other acceptable course that the reactionary officer corps would have tolerated. They had to lose it so that they could develop further as a nation. In all World War II-related engagements Japan lost 2.1 million military personnel, or about 4% of its 1939 population. (This does not include those killed in the atomic and incendiary bombings by the U.S.) The U.S. by contrast, not counting Allied forces, lost 96,000 personnel during the Pacific War, or 0.07 percent of its 1939 population. Japan is now a highly pacifist state operating under a "peace constitution" that was largely written by MacArthur's American occupation. Highly recommended.

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### **Aaron Million says**

Bix writes about as good of a biography as possible about Hirohito - Japan's disappointing and selfish Emperor from 1926-1989. All but the last forty pages focuses on Hirohito's life up to the late 1940s when he was obsessed with making sure that he was absolved of any culpability in starting WWII and then delaying Japan's surrender. The bulk of the book is on the "China incident", in reality Japan's invasion and occupation of China in 1931, through the 1930s, the long build-up to attacking the U.S. in 1941, the Hirohito's abysmal stewardship of his country throughout the War and immediately afterward.

While no fault of Bix's, the book lacks the intimacy of many biographies of famous figures as Hirohito took great strides to prevent anyone from ever knowing just how involved he was in Japanese politics and the country's militaristic attitude. Hirohito rarely wrote or said anything - that would be evidence that could be used against him. So, much of what Bix writes about is the story that he is able to piece together through diary entries of some people who had proximity to Hirohito, and general Japanese views of the monarchy.

Bix is a good writer, and the story flows smoothly. With limited sources, he does an admirable job of reconstructing Hirohito's life. The Emperor really should have been tried as a war criminal; he as much as anyone, if not more than everyone, was responsible for the loss of so many lives in the Pacific (that is not to minimize the atrocities committed by Japanese troops in China in the 1930s). The book does end rather abruptly though, with Bix rapidly sifting through the last almost forty years of Hirohito's life. In the end, Hirohito comes across as a bland, uninteresting, out of touch, power-hungry despot who was indifferent to the suffering of the Japanese people.

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### **AC says**

I read this book several years ago, when it first came out in paperback -- I knew very little at that time (not that I know much now) about Japan, and so cannot say how good it is. I have read some of the criticisms of it. It certainly made a persuasive case, so far as I could tell, against what was still the common view that Hirohito was merely an uninvolved cipher, who was used by the militarists and ultranationalists. According to Bix, Hirohito firmly controlled events by allowing his ministers to act - and that whenever they acted contrary to his desires, he would simply step in and divert them (or remove them). Hence, he fully bears the war guilt.

Dower speaks as if this question of Hirohito's pacifism and involvement is settled (and cites Bix). According to Dower, this image of the Emperor was a sham and a construction -- begun already pre-surrender by the likes of Shigemitsu with the aim of saving the throne (Shigemitsu believed that the reforms of the Occupation would eventually be undone, when the zaibatsu would be restored); and then adopted by

MacArthur's "wedge policy" (derived from Bonner F. Fellers), which sought to drive a wedge between the militarists and the people by associating the Emperor with the latter: in other words, the Emperor and the people were good, and the "militarist gangsters" had betrayed them both.

This book is enormous -- but it read very quickly, for some reason. Maybe I didn't know enough to read it slowly.

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## Clif says

It's difficult for an American, living under the philosophy that we are all equally human and have a right to elect those who govern, to understand a system where one person is considered divine and entitled to rule absolutely. Japan no longer has such a system but it did from 1868 (the Meiji Restoration) until the end of World War II.

This 700 page book covering the life of Emperor Hirohito gives the reader a detailed account of how the Japanese system worked, in the process providing a view of the run-up, prosecution and aftermath of WWII from the other side.

Until I read this book I had been under the impression that Hirohito was a figurehead who was pressured into war by militarist subordinates. Nothing could be further from the truth, yet my lifelong view is not surprising as it was the intent of both the emperor and the American occupation force under Douglas MacArthur after the war ended that the deception be pulled off. The emperor's interest was in maintaining the relationship of the Japanese people to him. For MacArthur, the deception made it easier to exercise control over the Japanese through the compliant emperor. I wonder how many Americans are still under the false impression.

Hirohito underwent an intensive education to prepare him for his role and he took to it with relish. At the same time, his subjects did not question in the least his right to rule. The military was in charge and Hirohito was in charge of the military. Korea, Taiwan and Manchuria in China were all brought under Japanese control years before the attack on Pearl Harbor. From time to time, ambitious generals in China would on their own initiative launch advances to capture more territory. Hirohito never failed to approve after the fact, feeling that success was justification.

He was careful in his thinking, liked to stay on top of details and had his own independent means of gathering information outside of the military bureaucracy. Far from being a dupe, he was always at least as informed as those who reported to him and demanded a rationale for any action that was suggested to him, peppering his subordinates with questions. In addition to commanding the military, he appointed prime ministers and met with them constantly, charting the course of the government even though it was made to appear that decisions were coming from the parliament (the Diet).

The emperor could not be wrong. In the cases where he made a bad decision, others would take the blame, quite willingly as their responsibility as subjects. This was evident after WWII was over when the former prime minister, Tojo, was convicted as a war criminal and executed, though it was Hirohito all along who had made the decisions.

I was impressed by the isolation of the emperor from the results of his decisions. He never visited a battlefield and issued his orders from an always serene and civil environment. He could order armies of tens of thousands to fight and die without any thought that there were individuals dying. Like Hitler refusing to

end the war even when all hope was lost, Hirohito was perfectly willing to see the war fought to the last Japanese. With the Japanese Navy destroyed and no army left to defend the Japanese home islands, he ordered citizens to fight with bamboo stakes. Suicidal attack was honored.

Most remarkable is that Hirohito and his subordinates knew before the attack on Pearl Harbor that there was no way Japan could defeat the United States. Their hope was that they could win a decisive battle at sea that would so demoralize the United States it would agree to terms. The only thing to be decided was the date for opening the attack, the sooner the better because America could only grow stronger with time. A mixture of mysticism and racism played a large part, the Japanese being convinced they were superior to "the white races". Again, as with Hitler, Hirohito often thought that the only thing required to win was the will to do so regardless of the disparity in numbers or armament. Thus are men slaughtered in service to their leaders. To this extent Japan was living in a militarist dream to be awakened only with the shock of Hiroshima and the announcement that the USSR would be invading in addition to the US. The greatest fear? That the three sacred regalia of the emperor might be captured.

There was never an attempt from within to end the war by killing Hirohito. Even after the atomic bombs were dropped, subordinates were fully willing to continue if Hirohito willed it. This makes it all the more astounding that he came out of it all portrayed as a man who wanted peace but was forced into war. Near the end of his life, this war criminal was walking around Disneyland with Mickey Mouse on a visit to the U.S. in the 1970's.

Through it all, Hirohito was a shy, nervous, small man with a squeaky voice, at a loss for words and suffering nervous tics when finally he was required to speak in public. His is an astounding story.

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## **Hadrian says**

This long and comprehensive biography of the Sh?wa Emperor in English has received critical acclaim here, and even a largely benign, if mixed, reaction in Japan. I browsed the Amazon.co.jp reviews after writing mine, and two of most popular negative reviews complained about the 'unintelligible' (????) translation, but they considered the ideas in the book worthy of further analysis.

The main thesis of this book is that the Emperor Hirohito was not blameless in the conduct of the aggressive Japanese foreign policy starting in the 1930s and continuing until the end of the Second World War. Instead of being an isolated puppet, Bix claims, he was the leader of Japanese military and diplomatic strategy, and was active in commanding operations.

The first sections detail the emperor's early education, the Japanese political situation of his childhood, and the contrasting examples of his two predecessors, the Meiji and Taish? emperors. Although the institution of the emperor had existed in some form since 660 BCE, the office was largely impotent since the 12th century, with military leaders or various factions holding the true power, and the emperor existed largely as a figurehead. The Meiji Emperor was the exception to this, and was proactive in his military and political reforms.

His successor, the Taish? Emperor, was sickly and barely capable of command, and various factions again rose to prominence. The Taish? era could even disputably be termed as 'the Taish? democracy' due to the influence of political parties and the Diet. After the Great Depression, extremist factions gained power, and sections of the military acted autonomously in their invasions of China. Bix is subtle and nuanced in the

portrayal of this period and the political actors here, but also the Emperor's education and tutelage in this period, and the attempts to balance the symbolic and ruling roles.

The majority of the narrative, however, focuses on the Emperor's culpability in wartime, and his post-war fate. full cooperation with the aggressive policies of the military, and was only saved from a war crimes tribunal by 1) resting the blame wholly on other cabinet ministers and the armed forces and 2) maintaining his own position as a figurehead.

Bix demonstrates rather decisively that the Emperor was not inactive. One of the most telling moments was a transcript of a meeting with the Navy Chief of Staff, where he scolds them for pursuing an aggressive war with the Western Allies even after the bloody morass of the Chinese war. I quote:

"You say the interior of China is huge; isn't the Pacific Ocean even bigger than China? Didn't I caution you each time about those matters? Sugiyama, are you lying to me?"

Imagine if your God-Emperor talked to you like that. Humbling experience.

However, even with the evidence Bix presents, alternative explanations are plausible to explain the Emperor's conduct. He signed numerous documents authorizing the war and various operations, including the use of chemical weapons in China. If he had any objections, these were largely overruled - he was a rubber stamp. He had no control over appointments, and is quoted on leaving matters to his 'favorite Prime Minister' - Tojo. He could well have intervened if he wanted to, but the militarist factions were not above political assassinations in the past.

Bix claims that Hirohito was a backroom manipulator in his politics, but this seems unlikely. Instead he seems like a minor figure, trying futilely to act within his cage, but instead becoming compliant in the conduct of the war anyway. In terms of the Emperor's actions, Bix largely *infers* actions where evidence is scanty. The one instance where Hirohito does decisively intervene was in the closing months of the war in 1945, when he argued forcefully in favor of surrender.

Curiously enough, Bix seems to change his mind at the end of the book, saying that the military and politicians are largely in control after all.

So what can we conclude from this? Bix is decisive in concluding that the Emperor was not a helpless bystander, but he tends to overstate his own role in wartime conduct. Likewise, he is wholly negative about his post-war conduct, saying that his survival limited the growth of Japanese democracy, and was largely the result of MacArthur's coercion. Couldn't this be a pragmatic move instead?

Bix does make heavy, if questionable, use of Japanese-language sources, although many of them were secondary. Most interesting was his use of diaries kept by high-ranking staffers and members of the Imperial Family. There are vague rumors of a diary kept by the Emperor himself, but even if it did exist, there was no way Bix could have accessed it. The research and sources are excellent, and sections of the narrative are brilliant in their approach. However, the ambiguous nature of the rest of his argument means that this book will continue to generate controversy and further debate, almost like the Emperor himself.

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## Colin McEvoy says

I had been interested in reading *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* ever since I had seen an exhibit of American anti-Japanese propaganda advertisements from during World War II, which used extremely exaggerated Asian stereotypes in its portrayals of the emperor. In addition to being highly offended by the overt racism, it occurred to me that I really didn't know much about Hirohito himself, and my only real impression of him was that he was largely a figurehead who was forced into the war by the Japanese military. As it turns out, this impression was not only false, but probably itself also resulted from American propaganda, which dates back to when American leaders protected Hirohito from prosecution as a war criminal in order to establish democracy in post-WW2 Japan. In this book, Herbert P. Bix presents a strong and compelling argument that the decades-long perception of the emperor as a passive figurehead is a false one, and that Hirohito was in fact a very active player in the country's militarism during the 1930s and 1940s; an emperor who both reigned and ruled.

Although I had long been interested in Japan, particularly 20th century Japanese history, I had not read much about the subject heading in to *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, and I did struggle with the reading at first. Bix does a fairly decent job of providing enough context that the material is approachable even to someone without much past knowledge of Japanese history, but even so it was initially difficult to keep certain names and events straight. But while the initial chapters with Hirohito's childhood and education were a bit slow, the book picks up in a *big* way once we reach 1931, starting with the Manchurian Incident that led to the Japanese invasion of China. After this point, the book was quite gripping, and Bix's account is especially impressive given how very first-hand accounts and texts were left behind by Hirohito, and how much information is still not rendered publicly available by the Japanese government.

As the book unfolded, it was really interesting to watch how the role of the emperor changed and evolved over the course of the 20th century, from one of the embodiment of a living deity to one of a more symbolic constitutional monarch. The idea of Hirohito, after World War II, being forced to tell his subjects that, despite what they have believed all their lives, he is NOT in fact a god was fascinating to me as an outsider to this culture looking in. I also found intriguing, and somewhat infuriating, how much more quickly the war *could* have been brought to an end if Hirohito and other Japanese leaders had been more concerned about ending the suffering of their people and less concerned about finding a way to protect their power structure and, as Bix puts it, "lose without losing." As someone several generations removed from this period of history, I've long had issues with the fact that the U.S. government took so many noncombatant lives with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the air raids on Tokyo and other Japanese cities, and I still do. But it's mind-boggling to think how many hundreds of thousands of Japanese lives could have been saved if Hirohito had not delayed his country's surrender for so long.

This is an excellent, comprehensive biography of an intriguing historical figure, impressive in its depth of research and nuance, and it's well worth reading for anyone interested in this area, regardless of how much prior knowledge you have of modern Japanese history.

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## Chris says

Wow, this was a tough one. It wasn't a bad book by any means - it was well-researched and informative and certainly illuminating. But it was a tough read anyway.

Bix had a very important purpose in writing this book other than simply writing a biography. He wanted to look at Hirohito's true role in the wars of Asian aggression and World War 2. One of the most enduring myths of modern Japanese history is that Hirohito was a passive ruler, manipulated by his advisers and the military. He pretty much sat by, helpless, and his only true act of leadership was in ending the war.

Not so, Bix says, and spends 288 pages explaining why.

He looks all the way back to Hirohito's childhood, when he was groomed almost from birth to be an effective emperor. His grandfather, the emperor Meiji, had been handed control of a chaotic state back in the 1860s, and pulled it all together through sheer force of will. He was an impressive man who had natural leadership ability, which is a very good thing for Japan. If it had been otherwise, the country probably never would have made it into the 20th century intact. His son, however, was not so lucky. Yoshihito was sickly, weak-willed and generally useless as a leader. Even from his youth, the Imperial court knew that this was not the man who would be able to lead Japan in the manner of the great Emperor Meiji. And so they turned to Yoshihito's son, Hirohito.

From the day he was born, Hirohito was surrounded by teachers and instructors who were preparing him to take his father's place as the supreme ruler of the Japanese Empire. Every lesson they taught him was focused on one very important fact: he was the descendant of an unbroken line of living gods, and the survival of Japan was inextricably bound to the Emperor. He was taught to revere the memory of his grandfather, to love the military, and to follow the "Yamato Spirit" which had made Japan great in the past. But, and this was important, to make sure that the imperial line was never extinguished.

The war in East Asia was an incremental one, and, according to Bix, had Hirohito's marks all over it. The Army had been sent out into Manchuria to "keep the peace," but also to expand territory wherever it could. It was given free rein to do so, too - abuses such as the well-known "Rape of Nanking" and the *sanko* policy of "kill all, steal all, burn all" went unpunished and unchecked, despite the many, many chances that the Emperor had to keep the army under his control. At every step, the Emperor either explicitly sanctioned or permitted by silence the actions of the Imperial Army and Navy.

The biggest problem with this book, which Bix states right out, is that there's so very little information available from Hirohito's own hand. He wasn't a prolific diary-keeper, and the Imperial Household Agency wouldn't let such information out in public anyway. The only way to figure out what the Emperor did and didn't know, say or do is either by secondary sources - the diaries of his ministers and advisers for example - or through inference.

Still, the evidence for Hirohito's war responsibility is pretty damning. Bix concludes that not only did Hirohito actively participate in the planning of the war, but he was more involved in the delay of the war's end than in the ending of the war, contrary to popular belief. As before, he had every opportunity to put an end to the war and the deaths of thousands of people, but he delayed out of pride and arrogance and a disbelief that any force could stand against the sheer willpower and devotion of the Japanese military. He had been trained in the idea that it was not strategy that won a war, but passion and desire, and his Imperial Army was his tool. As far as he was concerned, they were an extension of his will, and for the army to surrender would reflect not only on Japan, but on him.

And when the war did end, when two cities were laid waste, he did everything in his power - with the happy assistance of the United States - to appear blameless. Together with MacArthur and GHQ, the supreme commander of the Japanese armed forces and the embodiment of the nation itself was reduced to an impotent puppet. He was stripped of his power and humanized. But he survived, and he remained the Emperor. He'd

held power without responsibility, and suffered no consequences for his actions. So is it any wonder that Japan has a hard time dealing with its past? If the Emperor, the person who was supposed to have been the very embodiment of the nation, the one for whose benefit the people of Japan existed cannot accept his part in the Greater East Asian War, how can the rest of the country?

It's an interesting book, once you can get through it. There was a lot of minutia that kind of bogged the story down, which is very good in a history book, not so good in a page-turning account of a historical figure's life. But it was essential to proving Bix's point - Emperor Hirohito was complicit in the wars of aggression in Asia-Pacific, and completely escaped responsibility.

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### **Tyler Anderson says**

Whenever I construct a course of reading for myself, I always try to include an important biography of a major figure. This was my biographical selection for a short course (4 books?) on Japanese history I read in 2007. While overall I came away from this reading series feeling like I understood hardly any more about Japanese history and society than I had before I started, my gleanings from *Hirohito* were the notable exception. This was an informative and engrossing narrative, digging pretty deeply into this man and the Japan that formed him, and was subsequently re-formed by him.

Particularly of interest was how thoroughly Bix placed Hirohito, from youth, within a coterie of advisors, mentors and teachers, and how efficiently he outlined their own backgrounds, philosophies and objects. As with most Royals the world over, Hirohito was raised in a completely and purposely fabricated bubble, disconnected from the broader human experience which would be basic for any "normal" person. The result of this, of course, is a certain sociopathy. The author effectively observes and places this man within the context of world fascism and absolutism, revealing Hirohito as the greatest of the escaped war criminals, not the fictional, hapless, retiring gentleman who emerged shrugging his shoulders at the tail end of the war.

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### **George says**

Embracing Defeat -- meet your match! As with Dower's book, Bix makes heavy use of Japanese language primary source materials. Bix is coy in the beginning when he warns the reader that access to historical imperial records remains limited, but the breadth and depth of his research can't be faulted in the slightest. A highly enjoyable and insightful read!

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### **S. Miles Lotman says**

The American novelist, William Faulkner, famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." His subject matter was black-white race relations and the legacy of slavery in the American South, but his words serve the Japanese experiment in twentieth century imperialism, the scars of its militarism yet unhealed, and the descendants of the rulers and the oppressed nursing respective grievances. World War II ended nearly seventy years ago, the blood spilled long since washed away, but a new nationalism in East Asia is drawing up a stale and divisive rhetoric, taking arrogant postures, and pretending history is malleable and can be recast according to one's manufactured political persuasions.

The American historian, Herbert Bix's biography of Japan's most notorious emperor, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan (Harper Collins, 2000), is an 800-page tome indicting Hirohito in no uncertain terms for the war crimes for which he was never prosecuted. Like an attorney who will leave no doubt in the reader's mind, Bix carefully assembles a narrative, beginning with Hirohito's grandfather, Meiji, and how his constitution allocated tremendous authority to the Chrysanthemum Throne. Nearly a hundred pages of the book are citations of evidence reflecting Japanese militarism and a racist philosophy propagated by Japanese intellectuals and historians that led to the colonization of Manchuria, sexual bondage in the Korean peninsula, and an irrational war of conquest that nearly caused Japan's total obliteration. Every step of the way, Hirohito authorized or failed to punish the inhumane crimes of his military establishment. Moreover, Bix argues it was Hirohito's self-centered maneuvers to preserve his throne and avoid just punishment that prolonged the war unnecessarily long after Japan's cause was lost, and that the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians is the emperor's burden, as much as it is that of the Americans who authorized the atomic apocalypses.

Modern Japanese militarism has its origins when policy leaders began debating the *kokutai*, an archaic rarely-used concept nowadays. *Kokutai* are the best possible principles of Japanese state and society. Alas, it was inevitable that conservative ideologues would win the interpretation to ensure a status quo of the nearly feudal hierarchy that defined the structure of Japanese society for most of its history. *Kokutai* was then coupled with *kodo*, the "imperial way," a political theology that declared the divine right of the emperor, who embodied moral goodness. The court, the military, and conservative political operatives could then utilize their reactionary agenda via imperial decree, as the emperor could make palatable even the most ruthless policies.

Hirohito was an amateur marine biologist. Small in stature, shy, and awkward, he was not a strongman. His personality was easily overshadowed by his arrogant generals and court advisers. Nevertheless, he was intelligent, detail-oriented and had been inculcated by court tutors to take divine right seriously, and that it was his responsibility to take part in political affairs, legitimizing Japanese militarism to the poor farmer sons who would have to leave their homeland and their families for dubious acts of violence in China, Korea, and Taiwan in service of the Emperor.

Because of WWII's total destruction, it's easy to overlook the trauma of the first world war. After Versailles, the US and Britain, via the League of Nations, put together a number of international treaties outlawing wars of aggression, most famously the Kellogg-Briand pact of 1928. Japanese leaders interpreted that as an Anglo-American initiative to consolidate their vast colonial holdings (a fair argument-- they also called Europe on its hypocrisy, declaring peace overtures while resorting to violence to keep its multitudes in Africa and Asia in line). The Japanese imperialist philosophy, Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, wanted to rid Asia of European colonialists (as well as their pernicious cultural influence). The war in Asia-- beginning in China, and spreading to Britain's and France's holdings in Southeast Asia, as well as the United States' colony in the Philippines-- was justified as Asia for Asians, though the new hierarchy would indubitably place Japan at the top.

Every step of the way, Hirohito rubber-stamped his generals' advances. As emperor he could have cautioned or refuted militarism, and initially he sometimes did feel outrage at aggression, but overwhelmed by other, stronger personalities, he admitted "it can't be helped," whether it was the political assassinations, repression of radicals, the Nanking Massacre, Pearl Harbor, or allied bombing of Japanese civilians, Hirohito decided to continue an unwinnable war waged with morally dubious values.

There is no question that Hirohito had absolute power. There is also no doubt that by summer of 1944, Japan would lose the war. Their ally, Nazi Germany, had been invaded at Normandy, and it was certain that the

Soviets would turn their attention to Japan once Berlin fell. Moreover, after a spectacular blitzkrieg in late 1941, early 1942, Japan lost every single battle against the United States beginning with Midway, sustaining heavy casualties (to surrender to the enemy was seen as an act of ultimate shame-- better to die for the emperor). The US had closed Japanese sea lanes, in the process removing access to vital natural resources, as they slowly moved the Pacific war towards the home islands. In fact, the army and navy were in such dire shape, the only major losses the Americans were incurring by 1945 were kamikaze attacks and suicide charges. Thus, thousands of young men were being asked to die needlessly in the emperor's name. Why did Hirohito permit this? Why didn't he stop the war after Tokyo was firebombed on the night of March 9th, 1945 (in which 100,000 civilians were killed)? Instead they passed out bamboo spears to women, children, and old men in the event of an amphibious American invasion. They sent thousands of balloons charged with explosive across the Pacific (almost none of them reaching the U.S. and none detonating over population centers) Meanwhile, dozens of Japanese urban industrialized areas would be bombed in the five months between Tokyo's firestorming and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Why did Hirohito persist, causing so much unnecessary death?

Self-preservation, of course. The Americans wanted unconditional surrender, like they'd had with Germany. The atomic bombs and the Soviet declaration of war (happening the same week, a very bad one for Japan) spelled the futility in no uncertain terms. On August 15th, 1945, Hirohito gave his famous radio address announcing Japan's surrender. But the emperor needn't have worried. Though he had to give up his divinity status, US leadership (under the guidance of General Douglas MacArthur) was more concerned with total destabilization brought on by his abdication (they were quite concerned about communism and radicalism). During the Tokyo Trials, Hirohito was not brought up as a war criminal and the infamous, Hideki Tojo, became the fall guy, the villain, taking the rap for the emperor (supposedly the emperor wept the morning Tojo was executed). Hirohito received all the credit for surrendering and none of the blame for the catastrophe. He kept his throne, collaborated with the Americans for the reconstruction of Japan, and approved of the famous peace constitution written by the Americans "forever" renouncing war. Hirohito would reign for another 44 years, in what would be one of the greatest economic booms of any society on earth, creating a middle class, a strong safety net, and progressive values, where once there had been almost none.

Bix has presented irrefutable evidence from various court sources and testimony regarding Hirohito's war guilt. American leadership made a calculated choice not to prosecute him for these crimes. Bix's immense and laboriously composed book is not necessarily a judgment on either the emperor nor Truman and MacArthur. It is not saying that Hirohito was a "bad" man. History is too complex for such trite conclusions. But it is conclusive that the emperor was complicit in giving his imperial seal on some of the worst excesses of Japanese war crimes. And moreover, his failure to act decisively in the certainty of defeat inexorably led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians. This is not up for debate or revision. This is what happened. But how to imagine a Japan had Hirohito been tried and punished like his beloved general and prime minister, Tojo, is one of those pathways history turned away from.

So we return to Faulkner and the presence of the past, our contemporary time and a new nationalism ascendant in Japan's far right government. The prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is playing a risky game of brinksmanship with South Korea and especially China, quarreling territorially over a few rocks near Taiwan and revising history, absolving Japan of its criminal past. It is terrifying to consider how clumsy Abe is diplomatically, moreover, how poorly he is mistaking his agenda as that of a populist's. Japan's far-right is a vocal community, but they are a distinct minority, and the vast population of Japan does not seem very politically inclined, and would certainly be outraged by any sacrifice induced by (yet another unwinnable) war with China. Perhaps he is thinking his security treaty with the United States means U.S. armed forces would do his dirty work? I don't think any US president would commit American boys to China for a few

uninhabitable rocks and Japan's reactionary misguided historical viewpoint. And certainly, almost no Japanese today will be willing to die for their emperor. That ideological cult is in the dustbin of history. He is no longer a god, he is just a man, a flawed one, like all of us.

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## **Dan says**

Hirohito is an important and exhaustive history of Japan's most famous emperor that won the Pulitzer for General Non Fiction in 2001. This is an objective biography that holds Hirohito at least partially responsible for the the WWI and WWII Japanese atrocities against Korea, Shanghai, Nanking and the Philippines.

The early portion of the book covers Hirohito's childhood up to his assumption of the throne in his early 20's. These chapters were a fascinating read. We see the extreme privileges that were given to him at a very early age. We learn of his middling intelligence and capabilities and also of his dedication.

The next section of the book covers his assumption of the throne, marriage and the drama around his ascendancy and his interaction with the Japanese government leading up to Pearl Harbor. I did not find this section of the biography to be particularly interesting.

The third section of the book comprises the WWII years. While this section was interesting, there are several other books that did a better job of explaining Japan's actions during WWII including one of the best history books ever written, *The Rising Sun* by John Toland.

The last portion of this biography was extraordinarily well researched. These pages covered the post WWII years until Hirohito's death in 1989. In particular, hundreds of pages were dedicated to the rehabilitation of the Emperor's image. This image makeover was facilitated by MacArthur who believed that executing the emperor for war crimes would devastate post WWII Japanese society. It turns out that MacArthur was correct but his decision was a very difficult pill to swallow for millions of Koreans and Chinese who experienced massacres and atrocities at the hands of Japan's occupying forces. It is covered in fascinating depth in the book. While Hirohito did not directly order these atrocities he did nothing to stop them and was at the same time a strong proponent of Japanese racial superiority as justification for invasions of the Asian mainland. The energy with which Hirohito and Japan threw themselves into modernizing their society into an economic power was also quite remarkable.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the book was not well received in Japan as Bix, in this book and in subsequent articles, continues to hold the Japanese government to task for its reluctance in owning up to war crimes. Honoring ancestors is still a very powerful nationalistic force in Japan today and contributes to some reluctance to admit guilt.

Like most Americans, I remember exactly where I was when the planes hit the twin towers on 9/11. I was visiting Tokyo on business and there was a tropical storm hitting at the same time. Beyond grieving and watching news, there was little to do for days while waiting for flights to resume their service to the United States. So each day as a distraction, I ran laps around the Imperial Palace in the monsoon. The Palace is one of the few building complexes of any importance that survived the bombing of Tokyo from during WWII and it is a special landmark in the midst of Tokyo. Hirohito spent a great deal of time here. I remember thinking, while circling the palace, how incongruent the idea was of an emperor, now Akihito, occupying this building in a modern world with terrorism. It took me 16 years to get around to reading this biography. Oddly enough, I experienced nostalgia reading about Hirohito occupying the palace, someone who died

more than a decade before I even visited.

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### **Louise says**

As the title suggests, this is a political and not a personal biography of Hirohito. Herbert Bix shows that by selecting the information you want to consume, you can see him as a pacifist or leader of the war effort; nevertheless, Bix builds a solid case for Hirohito's ultimate responsibility in leading Japan to war.

The closest the book gets to personal is the description of Hirohito growing up in the shadow of his over-esteemed grandfather and his (perhaps mentally deficient) father. His over-structured childhood is described. He was trained to be apart. He was separated from his classmates to eat a western lunch alone, while they sat together for a Japanese lunch. His education was narrow and leaned heavily on military affairs. You learn how his wife was selected and (merely) that they had children.

He comes to the throne as a young man in 1926. His advisors and cabinet members see how they can benefit from deifying the Emperor position and created the myth of Hirohito's divinity. Interestingly, Bix shows that not everyone bought into it, including Hirohito. You watch him grow into his role and how he gradually came to support the military and help it cover up its atrocities in China. You see how the need for raw materials meant more military conquest and how, when Roosevelt sanctioned Japan for its aggression no options but war were considered.

Once at war Bix documents how Hirohito operated like an 18th century general issuing orders with little knowledge of the events on the ground. After Hiroshima, Hirohito would still not surrender. With no realization that the world powers were (obviously) now with the Allies (or wanted to be), Hirohito choose to negotiate with Stalin (i.e. let Russia have some of China & the Japanese POWs as slave labor) to re-join the war with them. (Stalin, of course, ignored the emissaries who took the message to Moscow.)

As foolish as Hirohito was for Japan's interests during the war, he was wise for his own interests during the occupation. Bix shows how Hirohito escaped scrutiny as did many of his top military staff. War trials were limited (only 7 war leaders/criminals were executed). While many people had a lingering sense that their leaders betrayed them, much about the war was censored allowing Hirohito to promote himself as the man who ended the war. Once the Occupation was over, hundreds of war criminals were pardoned; many of whom went right back into politics which accounts for the continued censorship and official distortion of the war's history in Japan.

This book is worthy of the awards it has received. The author has assembled a lot of research. For the general reader, it can be tough. I had to read and re-read a lot of the text regarding the lesser known (to me) events. An annotated list of the people and a glossary of Japanese terms (almost one on every page in some chapters) are very much needed. I would have liked more development of the person and character of Hirohito and more on his family. The concluding chapters, particularly ones on what became of the perpetrators of this tragedy and "The Legacy of Showa" are excellent.

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### **J.M. Hushour says**

Reviewing works of history can be tough when you're approaching it from the perspective of a non-expert. I

am no Asian Studies scholar and especially not a student of Japanese history. I have, however, some experience with reading and critiquing historical writing, so I feel fairly confident in asserting that for the lay reader, this book might be a bit much.

Bix's main thesis is that Hirohito was no pawn, no figurehead, and figured prominently in many of the bad decisions that lead to lots of nasty things in China during the 30s and World War II, writ large. Fine. He also takes on the postwar manipulation by the US occupying forces of Hirohito's image to make the postwar situation more palatable and acceptable to the Japanese people. Fine.

But do you want to slog through a 600+ page book (with 70 pages of footnotes) to get to these nice, salient points? Not unless you're a specialist. And this was the real problem for me. As others have complained, the sheer amount of minutiae and detail are mind-blowing and there are so many names, events, political machinations and what-have-you tossed in the reader's face that the main points became lost in the mix. With a certain amount of assumed knowledge of the politics of the period, a specialist might have no problem with this work, but as a general biography or look at the time, it doesn't succeed.

Structure and density aside, there are other issues that make the ears prick up. Bix admits early on that there's quite a bit of material out there unavailable to scholars and he seems to lean heavily on a lot of secondary source materials that Japanese scholars have picked apart over the years, so some of his conclusions seem somewhat dubious or at least malleable as new information comes to light. The postwar use of the Emperor by the US seems fairly uncontroversial but the ongoing debate over Hirohito's culpability and real role seems to still be uncertain.

I think a slimmed-down version of this work might make his argument more succinct but it gets bogged down in so much detail that it's almost hard to assess where everything fits and how.

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### **Susan O says**

Very well-written and documented book. I enjoyed Bix's writing style and learned a lot about a subject I knew little about.

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