

Noriko Kawamura. *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 238.

Allied propaganda images of the Second World War frequently depicted Japan's Emperor Hirohito alongside Germany's Adolf Hitler and Italy's Benito Mussolini as—quite rightly—one of the three leaders of the Axis powers,<sup>1</sup> but as Noriko Kawamura, associate professor of history at Washington State University, points out in the introduction to her *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War*, the Japanese monarch was anything but a dictator with absolute power over his country. The wording of the Meiji constitution of 1889 allowed widely divergent interpretations of the role of the emperor within the Japanese state, pitting ultranationalists and militarists, particularly in the army, who insisted that the position be understood as that of a divine sovereign with absolute powers, against moderates, including Hirohito himself, who favoured the British model of a purely ceremonial monarch. Until the issue was definitively settled postwar with the emperor's speech of 1 January 1946 renouncing his divinity, followed by the American-imposed democratic constitution of 1947, the tension between these two views of imperial sovereignty was never satisfactorily resolved. The resultant ambiguity can perhaps best be seen in the fact that while the emperor was unable to prevent the initiation of hostilities against Britain and the United States in December 1941, he *was* able, through the issuance of a *seidan* (sacred imperial decision), to compel the surrender of Japanese forces in August 1945.

With a possible view to prosecuting Hirohito for war crimes—until the idea was dropped in the spring of 1946—the American occupation authorities were naturally very interested in the question of why, if the emperor had the power to end the war, did he not stop his nation from going to war in the first place? In this book, the stated intention of the author is to examine the reverse of this

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the front cover of the US Army instructional booklet *Two Down and One to Go* by the illustrator and caricaturist Arthur Szyk, noteworthy for its avoidance of the extravagantly grotesque Asiatic features found in so much of the imagery of this period. War Department, *Two Down and One to Go*, War Department Pamphlet No. 21-31 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1945). The front cover alone can be found at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur\\_Szyk\\_\(1894-1951\).Two\\_Down\\_and\\_One\\_to\\_Go\\_pamphlet\\_\(1945\).Washington\\_DC.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur_Szyk_(1894-1951).Two_Down_and_One_to_Go_pamphlet_(1945).Washington_DC.jpg).

question; namely, if the emperor could not prevent the inexorable slide to war in 1941, how was he able to end hostilities in 1945? But this proves to be a distinction without a difference. In a compact work of fewer than two hundred pages of main text, comprising an introduction, six chapters arranged chronologically, and an epilogue, Kawamura devotes just as much attention to decision-making at the highest levels in the period leading up to the attacks on Malaya and Pearl Harbor as she does to the epoch-making events leading to the surrender. Beginning her narrative in the aftermath of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference to provide essential geopolitical context, the author expends considerable effort elucidating the complex web of relationships between the three centres of power in Japan at the time, comprising the emperor and his advisors, the prime minister and his cabinet, and the commanders of the army and navy. With many illustrative examples and not-infrequent repetition of key points, the novice reader should have a good understanding of the workings of this system by the time, on page 110, the country is at war with the Western powers.

Among the many interesting themes explored in this book, the relations between the imperial court and the high command of the military—governed, as they were, by a supreme irony—deserve special mention. Among the strongest supporters of the view that the emperor was to be seen as an absolute monarch, an incarnate divinity beyond the reach of the state, was a powerful faction of militant ultranationalists in the army. Yet for all their belief in the authority of the emperor, Hirohito's own preference for a constitutional monarchy meant nothing to them. As he complained to his naval aide-de-camp in May 1935, "Don't you think the army is contradicting itself by advocating the theory of imperial sovereignty against my wishes?" (p. 58). Similarly, Hirohito's oft-stated desire for an early cessation of hostilities in China posed little obstacle to the continued expansion of conflict on the Asian mainland, his voice largely ignored by the army. As he told his military aide-de-camp in April 1935, "When the Manchurian Incident broke out ... The army would not provide me with the information I sought from the cabinet ... Why does the army prevent me from gaining information that I require for my own reference?" (p. 57). By 1945, though, the situation was very different. Defeat after defeat had strengthened the hand of a growing peace faction among the emperor's advisors, the government, and the military, particularly in the navy. As early as March of that

year, discussions began in secrecy to lay the groundwork for a *seidan* scenario, whereby the emperor would conclude the war through a sacred pronouncement. After the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the Soviet entry into the war against Japan, and the bombing of Nagasaki, the time was judged to be right. When the emperor issued his famous *seidan* of 14 August advocating surrender, the leaders of the army, long inculcated with the virtue of obeying the imperial will without fail, were now trapped in their own logic, and with the exception of a few hardliners who were swiftly dealt with, an orderly surrender of Japanese forces ensued. We will never know, of course, what the result would have been had the emperor employed the device of the *seidan* with the intention of preventing war in the autumn of 1941.

Although the author engages with previous English-language scholarship on this subject, her references to these works are to be found mostly in the introduction and epilogue. Her sources for the narrative chapters, on the other hand, consist almost entirely of primary material in Japanese, as is only to be expected from a scholarly work. But because the Japanese in 1945 had a number of days between the surrender and the arrival of the first occupation forces to burn whatever documents they could, very few of these sources are in fact archival, consisting instead mainly of published memoirs and diaries of those close to Hirohito during the events examined here.<sup>2</sup> That being said, documents of potentially great importance are suspected by some to still reside in the imperial archives, but the Imperial Household Agency will not discuss what material of this type may have survived. Until public access is granted to these documents—assuming they even exist—the sources consulted by Kawamura remain the best available.

The main point of originality in the present volume would probably have to be Kawamura's detailed account of the manoeuvrings of the peace faction in the lead-up to the 14 August *seidan*, as well as the importance she attaches to their efforts, arguing that the atomic bombings and the Soviet declaration of war would not have led directly to Japan's surrender on their own. But by no means is she the first to discuss the intrigues of the peace faction—that goes back at least as

<sup>2</sup> The reader who consults every endnote will find the experience very different from reading similar works on Nazi Germany, which can have a veritable alphabet soup of abbreviations for the numerous archives that may have been consulted.

far as 1954 with Robert Butow's *Japan's Decision to Surrender*<sup>3</sup>—and the explanations she provides of precisely how her interpretations differ from previous scholarship, argued at length on pages 152-4, are exceedingly subtle. Nevertheless, exclusive of general biographies of Hirohito, Kawamura's monograph is the first in English, as far as I am aware, to examine the role of Hirohito in the decision-making for both war and peace; previous works have dealt with either one period or the other.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as one of the most recent books in English on any aspect of Hirohito's reign, members of the academic community at any level with an interest in this subject, particularly those without Japanese-language skills, will not be able to ignore this volume. Purists may complain that the exclusive reliance on the Roman alphabet makes it harder, rather than easier, to locate Japanese-language sources listed in the bibliography, but this should only be a concern to a minority of prospective readers. The index, moreover, functions in part as a glossary, helpfully providing an English translation of the few Japanese terms that, because of their importance, are given in the original in the text. Dealing primarily with events at the political, grand strategic, and strategic levels of analysis, the narrative contains only the most important toponyms, which are easily accommodated (for the most part) on the single map. With a spare but clear writing style, the author gets straight to the point and almost always stays there, which no doubt helps explain her ability to cover so much material in such a short book. In particular, the non-specialist with an understanding of the workings of European dictatorships of the period is encouraged to engage with this intelligent, tightly focused account of a governmental system that, regardless of what Allied propaganda may have implied at the time, bore no more than an outward resemblance to those of Japan's Axis partners.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert J.C. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> See, in addition to the above, Butow's *Tojo and the Coming of the War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); David Anson Titus, *Palace & Politics in Prewar Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); and Peter Wetzler, *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).