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Research Note



Emperor Hirohito's Post-Surrender Reflections

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Abstract

This essay introduces readers to the recent discovery of the personal papers of Grand Steward Tajima Michiji. These documents capture the post-surrender reflections of Hirohito, Japan's Shōwa Emperor, and record him speaking on such issues as his war responsibility, as well as the culpability of prewar politicians such as Konoe Fumimaro and General Tōjō Hideki. In August 2019, Nippon Hoso Kyokai (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) (NHK) announced that it had gained privileged access to the papers. Acting on advice from scholars, it then released extracts from Tajima's audience records. Drawing not on the Tajima papers themselves, but on what the NHK has made available, the documents demonstrate that Hirohito, after Japan's surrender, experienced anguish and over the war and its outcome. He continued as emperor because he accepted "moral responsibility" for the war that required him to help his nation and its people endure occupation and reconstruction. This article also describes Hirohito's postwar reflections on several issues, such as Japanese field officers and subordinates in the 1930s initiating without authorization acts of aggression, the Rape of Nanjing, and Japan's postwar rearmament. While the Tajima papers will not resolve the ongoing debate over the emperor's responsibility for Japan's path of aggression before 1945, they do provide valuable insights about his role in and reaction to events before, during, and after World War II.

Keywords

Emperor Hirohito – World War II – Tajima Michiji – war responsibility

Readers may be interested to learn of the discovery of an extensive set of personal papers that capture the reflections and introspections of Japan's Shōwa Emperor in the early aftermath of World War II. Tajima Michiji, the Imperial Household Agency's inaugural Grand Steward, kept the documents and this article hereafter will refer to them as the Tajima papers. They include records of 613 separate audiences between Tajima and the Shōwa Emperor, spanning the period from February 1949 until December 1953. These include 334 records of audiences in the Imperial Household Agency's imperial office room ("*gozajo*"); 175 records of audiences in the Imperial library ("*obunko*"); 32 records of audiences in the Hayama Imperial Villa; and twelve records of audiences in the Nasu Imperial Villa.

The existence of the Tajima papers does not come as a complete surprise. Sophia University's Katō Kyōko gained at least partial access to the Tajima papers, and discovered a draft imperial rescript—the monarchy presumably drafted it in 1948, but never publicly released it—which included mention of the emperor's deep shame at the war and which also acknowledged that the war had been the emperor's own fault.¹ Also, the 61-volume, 12,000-page-plus Imperial Household Agency compilation (2016–2017), entitled *Shōwa tennō jitsuroku* (*True Documents of the Shōwa Emperor*), made apparent that the Tajima papers include audience records for the period between 1949 and 1953, although it provided no detailed accounts of those audiences.²

It is perhaps necessary to add a few words about the Tajima papers' provenance. Japan's public broadcaster Nippon Hoso Kyokai (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) (NHK) announced in August 2019 that it had gained privileged access to the papers. To examine the papers, the NHK assembled a team of historians, including Hata Ikuhiko, Furukawa Takahisa, Yoshida Yutaka, Chadani Seiichi, and Tominaga Nozomu. On the basis of their scholarly advice, the NHK has released extracts from Tajima's audience records. The papers nonetheless remain in the Tajima family's possession and, but for the extracts that the NHK provided, remain for now inaccessible to researchers. This being the case, this

1 Katō Kyōko, *Shōwa Tennō 'shazai shōchoku sōkō' no hakken* [*Discovery of the Shōwa Emperor's "draft apology rescript"*] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2003).

2 Kunaichō (ed.), *Shōwa Tennō jitsuroku* [*Documents concerning the Shōwa Emperor*], 21 vols. (Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 2015–2019).

essay draws not on the Tajima papers themselves, but unavoidably on information that the NHK has chosen to make available.

One should see the emperor's innermost thoughts, as outlined below, in the broader context of other materials concerning the emperor and his post-surrender reflections that have become available since his death in 1989. The first such source comprises the emperor's so-called "monologue," which he delivered in early 1946 and which first became available to researchers in 1990. Composed to deal with issues arising at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (commonly known as the Tokyo Trials), the monologue laid particular blame for the war on Japan's incurably aggressive armed services.³ The diary of Vice Grand Chamberlain Kinoshita Michio became available to researchers in 1991; it revealed the emperor engaging his courtiers in a conversation concerning Japan's road to war as early as December 1945.⁴ The daily newspaper *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* on 20 July 2006 scooped the papers of Imperial Household Agency Deputy Director Tomita Tomohiko, which revealed the emperor speaking as recently as 1988 about his discomfort at Yasukuni Shrine's enshrinement of Japan's Class A war criminals. Chamberlain Urabe Ryōgo's diaries offered further evidence of the emperor toward the end of his life expressing his remorse at Japan's participation in World War II.⁵ The ageing emperor's reflections on World War II also receive treatment in Chamberlain Kobayashi Shinobu's recently published diaries.⁶

The Tajima papers make readily evident the emperor's anguish over the war and its consequences. Some two months before the San Francisco Peace Conference, which would bring Japan's foreign military occupation to an end, he expressed his gratitude at the leniency of the terms that the United States was offering Japan and at the looming return of Japanese sovereignty. Yet, he noted that as a result of defeat in World War II, Japan had lost territory and suffered tremendous casualties. He also lamented that very many of his people had been unable to return to Japan from far-flung battlefields around Asia and

3 Terasaki Hidenari and Mariko Terasaki Miller, *Shōwa Tennō Dokuhakuroku—Terasaki Hidenari Goyōgakari Nikki [The Shōwa Emperor's Monologue and Imperial Household Consultant Terasaki Hidenari's Diary]* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1991). See also, Handō Kazutoshi, "Shōwa Tennō no Dokuhaku 8-jikan: Taiheiyō Sensō Zenbō o Kataru" ["The Shōwa Emperor's eight-hour monologue tells the whole story of the Pacific War"], *Bungei Shunjū [Spring and Autumn Literary Arts]* 68, no. 12 (1990): 94–145.

4 Kinoshita Michio, *Sokkin nisshi [Aide's diary]*, (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1991).

5 Urabe Ryōgo, *Urabe ryōgo jijū nikki [Chamberlain Urabe Ryōgo Diary]*, Mikuriya Takashi and Iwai Katsumi (eds.), 3 vols. (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 2007).

6 Kobayashi Shinobu, *Shōwa tennō: saigo no jijū nikki [Diary of the Shōwa Emperor's Last Chamberlain]*, Kyōdō Tsūshin (ed.) (Tokyo: Bunshun Shinsho, 2019).

the Pacific. In consideration for the “victims,” he said, it was inappropriate to “exult” in the peace.⁷

The Tajima papers also make apparent the keen responsibility that Hirohito felt for the war. In August 1951, a few short weeks before the San Francisco Peace Conference, the emperor told Tajima that although he bore no “legal responsibility” for the war, he was taking “moral responsibility” by remaining on the throne and directing all his energies toward Japan’s “painful reconstruction.”⁸ One might note here parenthetically that, even before surrender, the emperor had spoken of taking responsibility by remaining on the throne.⁹ The emperor elaborated on these thoughts in November 1951. Hirohito explained that he would welcome the opportunity to abdicate. He did not believe, however, that he had the “freedom” to make such a choice. His role, he stated, was “self-sacrificing” and entailed “confronting difficulties” from the throne.¹⁰

The Tajima papers reveal that Hirohito wanted to speak directly to the Japanese people about the war and his role therein. He raised this desire with Tajima in January 1951. He spoke of the propriety of a public address or perhaps a radio broadcast which would coincide with conclusion of the peace treaty, and he specified his wish to address, among other issues, his “responsibility” for the war. Tajima raised this with Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, who insisted that the emperor mention neither the war nor his responsibility. The emperor backed away, but in January 1952 again raised with Tajima his wish to deliver a public address. Hirohito made clear that he wanted to include mention of the deep introspection in which he had engaged since the war. “I feel that whatever happens,” he stated, “I simply must insert the term ‘introspection.’” His reasoning was simple—Hirohito told Tajima in February 1952 that he had indeed engaged in “much introspection.” Tajima subsequently prepared an address which expressed the emperor’s “sympathy” for the war’s “victims,” and which also included reference to the emperor’s “introspections.” Prime

7 NHK [Hoso Kyokai (Japan Broadcasting Corporation)], “Kodawatta ‘hansei’ no kotoba” [“The term ‘introspection’ to which the emperor clung”], *Shōwa tennō haietsuki* [*Shōwa Emperor audience records*], 2019, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/emperor-showa/articles/diary-repentance-03.html> (accessed 2 April 2022).

8 NHK, “Shōwa tennō: ‘kokumin ga motomeru nara taii chūcho senu’” [“The Shōwa emperor: ‘If the people request it, I will not hesitate to abdicate’”], *Shōwa tennō haietsuki*, 2019, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/emperor-showa/articles/diary-abdication-01.html> (accessed 2 April 2022).

9 Takamatsunomiya Nobuhito, *Nikki* [*Diary*], vol. 8 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1997), 62.

10 NHK, “Tennō no i ni todomaru beki ka: kokoro no ugoki mo kijutsu” [“Should I remain in the emperor’s position? Entries about his feelings”], *Shōwa tennō haietsuki*, 2019, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/emperor-showa/articles/diary-repentance-04.html> (accessed 2 April 2022).

Minister Yoshida again balked. Such a speech, he said, would invite questions about the emperor's culpability for the war. Yoshida wanted no mention of the war. He wanted the emperor, instead, to focus on the post-surrender period. In particular, Yoshida wanted the emperor to exhort the Japanese people to ever greater efforts in the long road to national reconstruction. Hirohito was strongly "displeased" but had no real recourse. The matter ended there.¹¹

The Tajima papers also reveal Hirohito's occupation-era thoughts on the origins of the war. He lamented the phenomenon of "*gekokujō*," in which field officers and subordinates imposed aggressive solutions on their superiors. In conversation with Tajima, the emperor pinpointed Colonel Kōmoto Daisaku's assassination of Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin in June 1928 (Kōmoto acted without authority) as the "genesis" of this lamentable process. This was particularly the case because the army's hawkish elements took note of the fact that Kōmoto escaped "severe punishment" for his actions.¹² Some three years later, the Japanese garrison force known as the Kwantung Army launched the conquest of Manchuria without first bothering to secure formal approval from the authorities in Tokyo of its plans, although some senior government officials were aware of them.

Full-scale Sino-Japanese warfare began in July 1937. The Japanese army stumbled into that war, and against Hirohito's wishes, the fighting quickly spread from around Beijing to Shanghai and then the Nationalist Chinese capital of Nanjing. The emperor told Tajima, in February 1952, that he had heard "dimly" of "horrific things happening" in Nanjing during the so-called Rape of Nanjing in December 1937 and January 1938.¹³ The emperor also focused his attentions on the opening of war against the Anglo-American nations in December 1941. In conversation with Tajima, he recalled that some two months before the outbreak of war, he had approved orders for General Tōjō Hideki to form a cabinet, in the hope that Tōjō would steer Japan away from war and would "control" the army in the process. Hirohito admitted to Tajima in September 1951 that, with the benefit of hindsight, he could say that Tōjō's appointment had been a "mistake." Then, in April 1952, the emperor turned his attention to Tōjō's prime ministerial predecessor in Konoe Fumimaro. "You

11 NHK, "Kodawatta 'hansei' no kotoba."

12 NHK, "Kurikaeshi sensō no kaiko: kōkai kataru" ["Repeated war reminiscences: the emperor expresses his regrets"], *Shōwa tennō haietsuki*, 2019, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/emperor-showa/articles/diary-repentance-01.html> (accessed 2 April 2022).

13 NHK, "Nankin jiken' mo kaiko" ["Reminiscences also about the 'Nanjing Incident'"], *Shōwa tennō haietsuki*, 2019, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/emperor-showa/articles/diary-repentance-02.html> (accessed 2 April 2022).

might say," Hirohito said, "that Konoe started the Pacific War."¹⁴ Precisely what he meant in making this statement is not altogether clear, but Konoe resigned as prime minister in October 1941, in a last-ditch attempt at erasing the October deadline for war which his cabinet (along with the Supreme Command) had set some months earlier. Few scholars would take issue with the assertion that Konoe bore heavy responsibility for the war that ensued.

The Tajima papers also provide insights into the emperor's thoughts about Japan's post-occupation rearmament. Hirohito told Tajima in February 1952 of his belief in the need for constitutional revision. In the emperor's estimation, Article Nine (which expressly forbids the maintenance of an army, navy, or air force) required revision. Then, in March, the emperor raised his intention to inform Prime Minister Yoshida of his view that the continued existence of "aggressors" rendered defensive forces an "unavoidable necessity." Tajima was quick to remind the emperor that the constitution not only forbade the maintenance of armed force, but also reduced the emperor himself to a "symbol" and totally removed him from policy and politics. This advice was sound and seems to have convinced Hirohito to keep his opinions about rearmament and constitutional revision to himself. The issue nonetheless continued to exercise the emperor. The revival of Japan's Imperial Army and Navy, he told Tajima in May 1952, was "utterly disagreeable." He wanted instead a "defensive force" that would protect Japan in the event of aggression or invasion. Hirohito also spoke of the need, for the meantime, to rely on the U.S. security guarantee as outlined in the Japanese-U.S. security treaty.¹⁵

By way of conclusion, it probably makes sense to note that the Tajima papers probably will not end a long-standing scholarly debate about the Shōwa Emperor. On one side of the debate are those scholars, including for example Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Herbert P. Bix, who regard Hirohito as having played an active role in pre-war and wartime Japanese aggression and then, after surrender, as having allowed men such as Tōjō and Konoe to shoulder the blame for Japan's lost war.¹⁶ On the other side of the debate are those scholars, including Kyoto University's Itō Yukio, who believe that the emperor was unable to slow or prevent pre-surrender Japan's aggressive course, and on

14 NHK, "Rekidai sōri daijin no jinbutsuhyō kurikaesu" ["The emperor repeats his appraisal of successive prime ministers"], *Shōwa tennō haietsuki*, 2019, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/emperor-showa/?tab=1&diary=5> (accessed 2 April 2022).

15 NHK, "Tōzai reisenka: saigunbi ya kaiken ni mo genkyū" ["Under the east-west cold war: reference to rearmament and constitutional revision"], *Shōwa tennō haietsuki*, 2019, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/emperor-showa/?tab=1&diary=4> (accessed 2 April 2022).

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

these grounds argue that he did not bear the same responsibility for the war as did men like Tōjō and Konoe.¹⁷ One conclusion, however, is for certain—the Tajima papers will add a fascinating level of detail to existing portraits of the post-surrender Shōwa Emperor.

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17 Itō Yukio, *Shōwa Tennō den* [Biography of the Shōwa Emperor] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2011).

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