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Imperial Japan and Defeat in the Second World War: The Collapse of an Empire by Peter Wetzler.

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Like Schrödinger's cat, the historical Shōwa Emperor Hirohito (b. 1901; r. 1926–89) existed in two mutually exclusive states: as (a) a constitutional leader who sought peace but was powerless to overrule the military, and (b) a power-obsessed absolute monarch who precipitated Japan's wars and dictated their brutal courses in every savage detail. Right-leaning historians open the box and find the first Hirohito, while those on the left find the second. Historian Peter Wetzler¹ (Ostasieninstitut, Ludwigshafen) eschews this dichotomy and highlights his subject's ambivalences and ambiguities. Within a purview extending from mid-1944 to the war's end, he develops pictures of Hirohito and his advisors based especially on the new 12,000-page official *Actual Record* of the Shōwa Reign (2014–19). He has also canvassed other collections of key primary source materials relating to the war.

Hirohito's education as crown prince stressed traditional (largely mythical) Japanese history and the doctrines of the Shintō state religion, of which he would become the high priest. Shintoism sacralized the *kokutai*, or essence of Japan, at whose center stood the emperor in a "Line of emperors unbroken for ages eternal," in the words of the 1889 Constitution.

Wetzler distinguishes two contrasting imperial roles: secular chief of state and its apparatus of government and profoundly revered demigod embodying the nation or folk. Concerned that involvement in the messy quotidian business of the state would sully the sacred mystery of the *kokutai*, the founders of modern Japan took pains to keep imperial actions out of the public eye.

After some initial missteps, the young Shōwa Emperor, supported by top bureaucrats, officers, and courtiers, found ways to wield his immense authority while conserving it. Insisting on his right to be kept informed, he involved himself in the typical Japanese polycentric policy-formulation processes, whether tête-à-tête behind drawn screens or via emissaries authorized to speak with his full authority.

The emperor's constitutional role was to sanction his ministers' recommendations and, by informal but unbreakable extension, those of his military leaders, which he all but invariably did. He and his apologists claimed that, had he insisted on restraining their aggressiveness, he would have been killed or forced to abdicate. The author argues that the emperor was informed of (if not directly involved in) the formulation of major plans and policies. Wetzler's Hirohito was an intelligent man who yet lacked the imagination and breadth of knowledge to grasp both the policies he approved and the range of possible alternatives. In principle, able government ministers should have made good these deficiencies, but in the years leading up to the war, many of them

1. His earlier work includes *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan* (Honolulu: U Hawaii Pr, 1998).

had been forced to retire or murdered by fanatical nationalists. There remained only the sorry lot that hewed to the nationalist party line.

In mid-1941, as war with the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands loomed, Hirohito picked Gen. Hideki Tōjō as his least-bad choice for prime minister. Tōjō was no more statesman-like, perceptive, or capable than his sovereign of steering Japan clear of the traps (mostly set by the army) that surrounded it. So, with Hirohito's formal blessing (and sometimes behind-the-screen participation), Japan began its descent into war and destruction.

After six giddy months of virtually unimpeded expansion, Japan lost the initiative to the Allies and never regained it. By mid-1944, the United States, having rebuilt and greatly strengthened its fleet, was nearing Saipan at the northern end of the Mariana Island chain and within heavy-bomber range of Japan's population centers.

The Japanese Army and Navy commands, being bitter rivals in the competition for resources and imperial favor, coordinated wretchedly, despite Hirohito's urgings. Hence, they were ill-prepared when the great US invasion fleet appeared off Saipan and began to land a force of seventy-one thousand troops, outnumbering the island's defenders by more than two to one; they also enjoyed vastly superior air power and ship-based artillery. The Japanese Navy's all-out effort to repel the invading fleet quickly devolved into what the Americans called the "Marianas Turkey Shoot." Hirohito insisted that the island be retaken, but Japan's military could only go through the motions. Its leaders edited, spun, embroidered, and even concocted stories in an effort to manage him.

The Emperor was not a dictatorial monarch. Assuming positions he knew were contrary to those of Imperial Japan's military leaders would in the long run undermine his aura and authority. He was able to exercise sometimes more sometimes less influence on wartime events based on his authority as head of the nation but was hobbled by military leaders as head of state. Hirohito's status as emperor of the nation insured that he was regarded with awe by his military leaders, but this did not guarantee unconditional acquiescence to his executive authority as head of the state. (56-57)

Wetzler next turns to the "suicide attack," "special attack," "certain-death one-way," and "body-ramming" forces generally lumped together as "Kamikaze." Such tactics were bruited as early as the 1930s and had multiple origins. The author finds no evidence that the Emperor had any part in initiating them. But, after hearing an exaggerated account of early attacks, he reportedly remarked, "So did it really have to come to this? But well done!" (73). That "Well done!" was relayed widely and encouraged more attacks. Whether Hirohito ever expressed remorse about them remains a mystery.

Wetzler next explores a fundamental question regarding the conflict—the roots of the ethos of self-sacrifice in the Imperial military and Japanese society generally—with due attention to General Tōjō's darkly tragic role. He builds here on earlier research, particularly by Robert Butow,² as well as relevant but previously little used other sources.

After the catastrophe of Saipan, Tōjō was removed as prime minister and Army head, with little effect. Japan had gone to war against a coalition of western countries led by the United States, but neither Hirohito nor his major officials understood the nature of this alliance or its internal dynamics and thus could formulate no effective plan to deal with them. "Unconditional surrender" was the coalition's declared goal, but Japanese leaders apparently did not grasp the signifi-

2. *Tojo and the Coming of the War* (Stanford: Univ Pr, 1961).

cance of fellow Axis member Italy's being granted conditions (including retention of its monarchy) in return for surrendering in 1943.

Hirohito insisted that the sacred national essence and the imperial line must be preserved. In theory, unitary Japan could have pursued a focused negotiating strategy with the fragmented and contentious Allies, but made little effort to do so. It was taken for granted that inflicting sufficient injury on the American forces would redress the balance to the point where the Japanese could extract terms more to their liking than abject surrender and, more important, preserve the sacred honor of the Army and Navy. This was patently a forlorn hope, given the means then available to them, but they wasted over a year while their industries and cities were reduced to rubble and ashes, stocks of food and other essentials dwindled, and many hundreds of thousands of their people were slaughtered. The military bolstered Hirohito's resolution with a stream of mendacious reports minimizing Japan's losses and grossly exaggerating damage inflicted on the Americans. But despite his lack of knowledge and imagination, in the end Hirohito was a realist well aware of the deteriorating situation.

A cascade of disasters made it clear that a military defense of the home islands was impossible and no climactic battle would yield anything more than annihilation. Still, some in the military believed fighting on for nothing but glory while hoping for divine intervention was better than accepting defeat. Thus, for once, the Emperor was presented with divided counsel, and for once he openly and decisively cast the final die.

Imperial Japan and Defeat in the Second World War is a scholar's book. Its main text runs 178 pages; richly detailed notes and a bibliography add another fifty-six. Few will agree with everything in it, of course, but it provides an informed and cogent analysis for anyone seriously interested in Emperor Hirohito and the war he helped to make and unmake.