Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

A. Porter, Edgar, et al.
Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation.
Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
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Getting Acquainted

People kept a watchful eye out for the first American soldiers to arrive, and for the Occupation of their country to begin. The August 29 edition of Oita Godo Press, in a front-page article titled “Majority of Landing Forces Have to Stay in Tents This Fall to Repair Ports and Roads in Japan,” reported that in spite of Japan’s “full cooperation” with the Occupation forces up to that point, the Americans still anticipated possible interference, and cooperation was important. The article informed the residents that the immediate goal of the occupiers was to restore railway lines and begin a massive effort to repair roads so that heavy equipment could be transported for construction. The Americans, it said, would be importing “a great amount” of equipment from outside Japan. Most forces, it assured the populace, would be staying in temporary quarters outside the cities while long-term facilities were being constructed. Overall, they were told, the number of U.S. forces entering Japan would eventually rise to 500,000, and it would take over five months for them to finish disembarking.¹

Even in the midst of planning for the coming Occupation, the people of Japan were reminded often of the great generosity and kindness of their emperor, whom many still acknowledged as a god. As it was still unclear how the emperor would be treated once the occupying forces arrived, perhaps this was an attempt by both his court administrators and the newly appointed government officials to show the best side possible of the monarch, emphasizing his willingness to cooperate with the former enemy and new master. Only two weeks after his announcement ending the war, for example, the August 30 newspaper in Oita carried a story described how the emperor would donate parts of his forests for the purpose of reconstructing Japan, with special attention to building 300,000 new homes toward this goal. Under the headline, “Venerable Emperor’s Warm Consideration for Restoration: Lumber from His Own Forests to Be Donated,” a spokesman for the government exhorted the populace “to show appreciation for the emperor’s thoughtfulness,” and “cooperate firmly with each other and increase the speed of reconstruction in every field.”²

² Ibid., August 30, 1945, p. 1.
On September 3, the day after the surrender on the *Missouri*, the Oita newspaper headline read, “Plenipotentiary Shigemitsu and Umezu Sign Instrument of Surrender on U.S. Naval Ship.” Why mention the names of the signatories in the headline? It seems that even though defeated and disgraced, these loyal followers of the emperor maintained high standing in their home prefecture. In the end, the article reminded people that even at its last official act to end the war, the emperor of Japan was represented by these sons of Oita.³

By mid-October, the first Americans arrived in Oita. The October 11 edition of the local newspaper, under the story tagline “Want to Get Acquainted: U.S. Officers Meet the Mayor of Beppu,” the initial visit of Captains Baker and Swanson and two aides with Mayor Suematsu was reported. The purpose of the meeting, it said, “was not official, but casual, to become acquainted.” In an act of courtesy, the newspaper reported, “They brought in all their food and supplies for their own use from the United States in order not to trouble the Japanese people.”⁴ After these first Americans departed Beppu to inspect other areas of the prefecture, the Beppu City Chamber of Commerce met with local manufacturers and merchants to develop commemorative souvenirs “with full Japanese flavor” to sell to the officers and soldiers who were expected to arrive soon and live in their town for the foreseeable future.⁵ On October 13, an advance team of seventeen Occupation soldiers arrived in Oita from the recently landed 28th Marine Regiment assigned to Oita. The next day “300 American soldiers under the command of Colonel Collins arrived by rail at Oita station. They were welcomed there by Governor Nakamura, Mayor Miyoshi of Oita, and other representatives of Oita City and Prefecture.” The soldiers then assembled “neatly” at the station square and proceeded to their temporary living quarters, which had only weeks before served as the dormitory of the “Juvenile Airman’s Academy.” The officers had better quarters, staying 15 kilometers away in the hot springs resort Hotel Tsuruta in Beppu.⁶ These 300 troops were from Company A, 5th Tank Battalion, 28th Marine Regiment, which had first been stationed in the port city of Sasebo, until recently a large Japanese naval base. Soon some of these troops were sent over to occupy Beppu.

³ Ibid., September 3, 1945, p. 1.
⁴ Ibid., October 11, 1945, p. 2.
⁵ Ibid., October 14, 1945, p. 2.
⁶ Ibid., October 15, 1945, p. 2.
After their arrival, on Sunday, October 14, the Americans were permitted to leave their dormitory and walk around Oita City and Beppu. Some went shopping for their families and some went to a Sunday church service. According to the local press, “Happy scenes were observed here and there.” On that same day, Lieutenant Hashigami of the Kyushu Munitions Administration Office met five American officers in Beppu to begin inspection of military sites, especially stocks of hardware, in the Beppu area. The morning following this initial inspection, the Americans were taken on a tour of the Beppu hot springs and feted by local authorities. In the American major’s response to this tour, he kept up the polite protocol with the following comments, as reported in a local news account, “The name of Beppu Hot Springs is so well known that I have longed to come here at the earliest opportunity. Everything is good at Beppu Hot Springs. I am totally satisfied with this and wish I could come again someday and enjoy a vacation here.” That evening the Americans were treated to a performance of Japanese traditional dancing at Hotel Seifu, completing the evening by presenting chocolate, biscuits, and chewing gum to, as the local press reported, an appreciative troupe of dancers who “expressed their gratitude over and over, saying ‘thank you, thank you’ in English.”

The next day they visited other cities with Lieutenant Hashigami to make similar inspections, review military sites, and dispatch reconnaissance parties to scout for good locations to establish new headquarters. They sought out local government leaders as they moved from city to city, making for a smooth transition to the American Occupation.

There were several immediate needs to address. Food was first and foremost. When the Americans first arrived they saw firsthand that the people of Oita needed food. But in those first few weeks feeding everyone was not their job. The people, at least for the foreseeable future, had to take care of themselves. Steven J. Fuchs, in his study of the Occupation period, sums up the conditions:

The resulting food shortage forced workers to migrate to the countryside in search of food, shelter, and employment. Factories struggled to maintain their labor force as food shortages led to the reduction or complete stoppage of supplementary rations for industrial workers, since the staple food ration received priority. Workers, having suffered from diminished rations for six years, displayed “mental lethargy and inability to carry out prolonged physical labor characteristic of chronic malnutrition.”

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7 Ibid., October 16, 1945, p. 2, and October 17, 1945, p. 2.
“Absenteeism” and “food holidays” prevailed as workers made “foraging expeditions to secure food.” Food accounted for approximately 70 percent of a family’s budget in 1946, as purchasing food on the black market and inflation devoured wages.8

Despite this lack of early attention to alleviating hunger, there were some attempts to help the people get on their feet, mostly through their own efforts with limited American support. Coming on the heels of positive early meetings, and seeing that worries about guerrilla or isolated military actions against the Occupation proved unfounded, the U.S. acknowledged the crises on October 14 when General MacArthur ordered the importation of foodstuffs and textiles, especially rice, wheat, and cotton. This was done, the local press reported, because of the severe food shortages that were “expected to continue even after completing the improvement plans, including cultivation of unplowed lands, land improvement, lake reclamation, and instruction in the cultivation of wheat to improve diets and enhance economic development.”9

Working for the Americans

At first the government tried to guide demobilized soldiers toward employment to address these needs. Local newspapers reported that, as of the middle of October 1945, former soldiers found jobs in agriculture, fishing, and manufacturing facilities. Towns and villages were encouraged to hire more of them, as many were still looking for work. As the number of American troops in these early days was small, Japanese laborers worked under American supervision to begin reconstruction tasks. Sanitation squads, for example, worked on housing facilities for the coming troops and others repaired roads that had been washed away by floods and heavy Japanese military use. Soon, this quick repair at least allowed the durable American military vehicles to move across the region. Railways were also repaired and former Japanese military equipment began to be inventoried.10 When the permanent Occupation headquarters in Beppu opened at the end of 1946,

10 Ibid., October 15, p. 2.
demobilized soldiers and recently graduated high school students served as carpenters and laborers. Some were hired to work in the kitchen. Akira Tani, who was eighteen at the time, recalls:

I worked for two years at the American military camp, the first six months cleaning up and preparing the food. Then I was promoted to cook. I got this job because I cut the meat the way the Americans liked it. But they still didn’t trust us completely. There were two of us Japanese cooks, but we were never on the same shift, so we never worked together. There would always be one American cook working with one Japanese, never two Japanese together. My salary was 13,400 yen per month. And I got three full meals free every day. The average pay for someone just graduating from high school then was about 3,500 yen a month. So my salary was huge and my friends all envied me and my family was happy.

As the Americans settled in, Japanese saw their food supplies slowly improve and jobs begin to appear. Crucially, they also saw that their women were not being systematically raped. Unexpected mutual trust between the Occupation soldiers and occupied Japanese, while still tense in many quarters, was off to a good start.

Searching for Contraband

But the war had only been over for a few months, and memories of that war and its barbarity remained fresh in the minds of the occupiers. In fact, there was still sporadic fighting in parts of China and Southeast Asia, so for some the war was not yet over. In addition, even though they entered Japan peacefully, the American troops followed the early Occupation admonitions to remain alert for possible, if isolated, acts of resistance, treachery, and sabotage. Accordingly, U.S. soldiers conducted surprise searches of schools, temples, shrines, and homes looking for unreported swords, guns, technical instruments, and documents. It was still too early to trust everyone, so actions were taken to root out possible hidden weapons and to instill a bit of intimidation in the hearts of those who might want to retaliate against the forces that defeated them.

Hideo Sonoda remembers the day the U.S. soldiers came to his home.

Shortly after the Americans arrived, they carried out door-to-door inspections in Oita. One day, two soldiers showed up at my home. They opened
the cabinets and dressers to search for weapons or illegal publications. They came in the house quietly and performed their duties professionally, and of course they found nothing. But we were angry at them because they came in without taking off their shoes! I swear those two guys....

Very little contraband was discovered during these searches. In fact, most people had willingly given up anything listed as contraband, and soon the searches ended.

It was early in the Occupation, and over the next several months new American military units arrived to take control of the Occupation in Oita. But for the Japanese, it mattered little which units controlled their communities. Most of them were too preoccupied with finding food and clothing, and getting back to some sense of daily routine.11

Confusion in the Classroom

In the area of education, a mind-bending shift took place almost immediately. When the war ended, schools were not in session due to the summer holidays, which began in early August. But when the classrooms opened again in early October, everything changed. Teachers who only weeks before had taught their students to prepare to die for the emperor discarded all texts referring to the war effort, or at least redacted those parts of the texts if still used in the classroom. The picture of the emperor disappeared, military training ceased immediately, sports returned to the playground, and the arts took on a radically new look.

Takafumi Yoshimura, fourteen, had been studying at temples and shrines in Usa for fear his school would be bombed. After the surrender he and his friends went back to their school to meet their teachers.

The thing I remember most is that we had no military drills now. Also, the contents of the education changed to cultural lessons, and we had no political or history class at that time. It was a transition period. For example, during the last months of the war, we were all poor and no one had nice clothes. The boys still wore military uniforms distributed by the school. That’s all we had. But one day something happened that made me realize

that life had begun to change. Some Kagoshima High School students had been in Usa at the end of the war making cannons in the military factory. They were getting ready to return to their hometown. Before leaving, they came to our school to give a concert! As they walked into the school, we were all surprised that they wore their prewar school uniforms, and they looked very nice. That was the moment of realization. Also, soon after that, we put on a school play. During the war all plays had to do with winning the war, but this play was completely different. It was “The Emperor's New Clothes.”

Times certainly had changed.

For some of the older students returning to school, a more focused interest in new politics took hold. Kou Takeda in Saiki was particularly interested in democracy.

When we got back in the classroom after working in the factories, the content of our education had already been revised. Teachers introduced new ideas about democracy and I was shocked by the speed of their drastic changes. Many in my generation were fascinated by the new politics, and I was especially interested in the creation of a new constitution. When the newspaper reported the drafts of the new constitution, I followed it closely. We learned that the draft was patterned after the American constitution, and I knew if Japan was to create its own constitution, it’d be like the disaster we’d had before. So I was enthusiastic about the new constitution and studied it carefully.

Another high school student remembers a political slant in his education, but not that of an American-style democracy. Shunsaku Nanri, who had grown up during most of the war in Shanghai as the son of a businessman, maintained a negative image of Americans.

I didn’t like them because I’d been taught not to, and because Japan had lost the war. When I went to high school in Beppu after the war, I chose not to study English, but took German instead. While still a high school student, I got involved in the student movement against the American Occupation. Many of our teachers had become communists. The Japan Teachers Union was run by communists, and communist branches were set up in every school. Some students became communists. I attended the meetings, like most students, though I never joined the Communist Party. We were taught that Japan had been a bad country and that we had to change it.
For most teachers, the quick changes became a terrible burden. They had been instructed to, indeed had taken pride in, teaching their wards about the godlike nature of the emperor and the absolute dedication all were expected to show the Japanese military and government. For some, the change was too much to bear. Nobuo Kawamura, the school teacher who recited the authorized spiritual history of Japan to his students each morning prior to being drafted into the army, returned to Oita to take up his old profession. But he could not face the new reality.

At the end of the war, and within days of leaving the army, I became so confused. So much had changed. For one year I stayed away from the school to recover from this psychological breakdown, because I couldn't stand teaching the new curriculum. I'd believed so strongly in the militarist education that I had taught my students, and now I must teach them democracy. However, there was a critical shortage of trained teachers, so I was eventually asked to take up my old profession again. When I returned to school in 1946, I found certain sections of the textbooks we'd used during the war were blacked out, especially any mention of the emperor. It was very difficult for me, but I began to recover, and soon became interested in some new ideas of socialism. So, I went from talking like a right-wing educator to a left-wing educator in one year.

Yet for a few, it was easy to shift to the new reality, though not always with the best of intentions. For some of these, the new democracy and breakdown of traditional values was used for their own advancement. In the town of Saiki, Minoru Kanda recalls:

During the war, one of the teachers in my school had reported to the authorities that my family couldn't be trusted. This was because my grandmother had kept some of the flyers dropped by American pilots toward the end of the war. Now, after the war, this same teacher came to our house to talk about democracy. But my grandma hated him and refused to speak to him. He was a man with a big, fake smile, an opportunist taking advantage of the hard times. His real reason for coming to see us was to get us to invest in his business, a shady scheme that we refused to join. We compared him to another teacher who struggled with the changes from a military to a democratic approach, and openly shared her concern with others. Everyone respected her for her honesty and hated the opportunist.