



Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan

By Herbert P. Bix

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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

In 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.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

To many, Emperor Hirohito of Japan is remembered as a helpless figurehead during Japan's wars with China and the U.S. According to the received wisdom, he knew nothing of the plan to bomb Pearl Harbor and had no power to stop atrocities like the Rape of Nanking. The emperor was the mild-mannered little man who traipsed with Mickey Mouse in Disneyland and who brought peace through surrender, certainly not "one of the most disingenuous persons ever to occupy the modern throne." Herbert Bix's charged political biography, however, argues that such accepted beliefs are myths and misrepresentations spun by both Japanese and Americans to protect the emperor from indictment. Since Hirohito's death in 1989, hundreds of documents, diaries, and scholarly studies have been published (and subsequently ignored) in Japan. Historian Bix used these sources to develop this shocking and nuanced portrait of a man far more shrewd, activist, and energetic than previously thought. Caught up in the fever of territorial expansion, Hirohito was the force that animated the war system, who, acting fully as a military leader and head of state, encouraged the belligerency of his people and pursued the war to its disastrous conclusion. To the very end, Hirohito refused to acknowledge any responsibility for his role in the death of millions as well as the brutalities inflicted by his forces in China, Korea, and the Philippines. In fact, he worked with none other than General MacArthur to select his fall guys and fix testimony at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials--the emperor trying to protect the throne at all cost, the U.S. acting to ensure control of the Japanese population and the military by retaining Hirohito as a figurehead.

Not surprisingly, this hefty work of scholarship is making waves, as Americans and Japanese reconsider their roles in WWII and its aftermath. By placing Hirohito back in the center of the picture and puncturing the myths that surround him, Bix has effectively asked the Japanese to come out of their half-century repression of the past and face their wartime responsibility. Without doing so, he implies, the monarchy will forever impede the development of democracy. For those interested in Japan's wartime past and its influence on the present, this is fascinating, if lengthy, reading. --*Lesley Reed*

From Publishers Weekly

Bix penetrates decades of "public opacity" to offer a stunning portrait of the controversial Japanese emperor, "one of the most disingenuous persons ever to occupy the modern throne." Hirohito ascended to the Japanese throne in 1926 (at the age of 25) and ruled until his death in 1989. Bix closely examines his long, eventful reign, concentrating on the extent of the emperor's influence--which was greater than he admitted--over the political and military life of Japan during WWII. Bix's command of primary sources is apparent throughout the book, especially in the voluminous endnotes. From these sources, the author, a veteran scholar on modern Japanese history, draws a nuanced and balanced portrayal of an emperor who did not seek out war, but who demanded victories once war began and never took action to stop Japan's reckless descent into defeat. Bix makes Hirohito's later career intelligible by a careful exposition of the conflicting influences imposed on the emperor as a child: a passion for hard science coexisted with the myths of his own divine origin and destiny; he was taught benevolence along with belief in military supremacy. These influences unfolded as Hirohito was drawn into Japan's long conflict with China, its alliance with the fascist states of Europe, and its unwinnable war against the Allies. The dominant interest of the Showa ("radiant peace") Emperor, Bix convincingly explains, was to perpetuate the imperial system against more democratic opponents, no matter what the cost. Bix gives a meticulous account of his subject, delivers measured judgements about his accomplishments and failures, and reveals the subtlety of the emperor's character as a man who, while seemingly detached and remote, is in fact controlling events from behind the imperial screen. This is political biography at its most compelling. Agent, Susan Rabiner. (Sept.)

From [Booklist](#)

Most postwar histories have portrayed Emperor Hirohito in one of two ways: a shy, hands-off monarch who preferred marine biology to affairs of state or a pacifistic but weak ruler who was dragged by militarists into a war of conquest against his better judgment. Bix has written extensively on Japanese history and is currently a professor in the graduate school of social sciences at Tokyo's Hitotsubashi University. In this provocative and disturbing work, he paints a far more complex portrait of Hirohito. Aided by newly available material from Japanese archives, Bix convincingly asserts that the emperor was deeply involved in most aspects of the Pacific war, from start to finish, and he voiced few objections to the most brutal outrages of his military. It is particularly disturbing to see how the cocoon of lies spun around Hirohito has been used by conservative and especially reactionary politicians in Japan to advance their nationalistic agenda. This book will undoubtedly cause a storm of controversy, especially in Japan. However, it is a vital contribution to an ongoing and critical debate. *Jay Freeman*

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