

Japan im Pazifischen Krieg: Herrschaftssystem, politische Willensbildung und Friedenssuche. By Gerhard Krebs. Munich: Iudicium, 2010. 936 pages. Hardcover €98.00.

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Upon finishing this formidable tome of almost one thousand pages, my sense was that readers could only find it, as I did, emotionally stirring. The book—whose title translates into English as *Japan in the Pacific War: The System of Government, the Political Decision-making Process, and the Quest for Peace*—tells the story of the rise and fall, and the fortunes and misfortunes, of an influential Japanese elite—events constituting the most dramatic years in modern Japanese history. By choosing the ideals of civilization and enlightenment, Japan joined the West to become a responsible member of the international community, its diplomats an asset to the nation. The country then took a path that would lead to dire consequences. How did all this come about? Why, during the 1930s, did Japan turn so militaristic? Aggressive toward its neighbors and ruthlessly exploiting the interests of other powers, Japan justified its crimes with a litany of excuses about their necessity for security and prosperity while suffocating its population under the guise of patriotism.

Gerhard Krebs focuses on the Pacific War and on the opportunities Japan missed to maintain a peaceful status quo. The book begins at a time when the clear leadership that circumstances called for was not forthcoming and foreign relations had become conspicuously messy. The government, under the control of the army and navy, who—as the constitution unfortunately allowed—overturned the cabinet *ad libitum*, was caught up in the wrong kind of choices. Britain and the United States could no longer accept Japan's expansionism to the south and into the Asian continent, especially not its undeclared war in China. The situation

was worsened by Japan's growing alignment with the totalitarian regime in Nazi Germany. It was obvious the country was playing with fire. Joined by the Netherlands, including the Dutch Indies, Britain and the United States imposed an embargo on imports, which hit Japan hard as it badly needed energy and natural resources. The sanctions were not intended as mere economic measures but were an unambiguous strategy to force Japan to abandon her belligerent actions. But by August 1941, when China had been at war for four years and Europe was fearful that its own war would widen, Japan's radical militarists were already bent on taking Japan even further along its hostile path.

The book aims to analyze the decision-making processes and to offer a close-up view of the councils, boards, and governmental bodies that in one way or another served the public interest. In doing so, it draws attention to new sources that have only become available in recent years. They include material hitherto unknown, often because people were hesitant to go public with diaries and records—whether because they were unaware of their historical value or reluctant to reveal themselves in a bad light, or out of consideration for their colleagues and their families.

The first chapter discusses the constitutional background and lays out the main players. Many democratic institutions still in existence are easily recognizable, though of course they were under pressure from the military at the time. The emperor was surrounded by a considerable body of court officials, among them the minister of the Imperial Household (*kunaidaijin*), the lord keeper of the privy seal (*naidaijin*), the lord high chamberlain (*jijūchō*), and the aide-de-camp to the emperor (*jijūbukanchō*), the highest attendant to report on military affairs. From 1933, it was customary for former prime ministers to be selected as *jūshin*, serving as informal advisers to the emperor and replacing the select group of elder statesmen who had performed that function as *genrō*, a designation established in the early days of the Meiji government. Also near to the emperor were the Privy Council (*sūmitsuin*), and last but not least the Imperial Princes, who did not always agree with the emperor but were in a favorable position to tell him the truth when circumstances required. The princes were respected and were seen during the war as sympathetic to a demoralized population. The only son of Prince Asaka, the emperor's uncle, was killed in action in early 1944 at the battle of Kwajalein, a coral island in the Pacific.

It is surprising to note how pluralistic Japan was at the time compared to Germany under Hitler. Both chambers of parliament and the cabinet, the link between the parliament and the emperor, fulfilled their tasks as outlined in the Meiji Constitution, almost as if nothing had changed since the nineteenth century. Superficially, this all seemed proof of a well-established constitutional monarchy that reflected the will of the people, but in fact it was mere window dressing. The balance of power had been tilted toward the armed forces, both the army and navy having developed into completely independent entities. The author deals with this breach between civilian and military institutions: the powerless emperor's government on one side, and on the other, a presumptuous new bakufu resurrected from the ashes of the Tokugawa shogunate. This might not have mattered during peacetime, but having led the nation to war while at a technical disadvantage to the United States, the military was on the verge of destroying not only its own reputation but the very foundations of the nation.

Well before mid-1945, those in power were aware of the reasons for their failure to prevent war in 1941 and for not concluding a peace treaty. It must have been extremely disappointing for Japanese diplomats and civilian cabinet members, as well as for the more moderate of the military officers, *not* to have found a way to come to terms with the enemy. No one had stood up to make the necessary decisions and translate them into prudent action. The

importance of this was well known but no one took the necessary steps. Washington feared a backlash at home if the terms of peace were as lenient as the long-time American ambassador to Japan, Joseph C. Grew, had been advocating. The Japanese authorities feared losing face among its people, not to mention the potential for further demoralization and for a military backlash worse than anything experienced so far.

Parts of the book are heavy going. There are dozens of names and dates; an endless chronicling of meetings, squabbles, and rumors; long lists of suggestions from advisers, princes, officers, ministers, and members of the court; and so on. Given the seriousness of the situation, this must have been a constant frustration for those charged with separating the wheat from the chaff. One occasionally wishes that some of the sections had been more concise, but at the same time there is no faulting the author for his meticulous documentation and reconstruction of events.

To immerse oneself in this chapter of Japanese history is to be caught up in the emotions of a country at war. One is annoyed to see the elder statesmen, men such as Makino Nobuaki or Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, procrastinate for so long when they should have taken the decisive action called for by persons in these positions. Moderate politicians did not lack for ideas: in the event of an American invasion, the emperor could be evacuated to Manchuria; a summit could be set up between the emperor and Stalin to broker a peace; perhaps—some even debated—Prime Minister Tōjō, the trigger-happy general, could be assassinated; and if Japan were to become hemmed in, Konoe might be dispatched to Switzerland or Spain or, if that failed, former prime minister Hirota Kōki could be sent abroad for talks with Soviet leaders or to head a delegation to Germany or Sweden. In fact none of this materialized. The war dragged on for nearly four years, to Japan's disadvantage, with Pearl Harbor, the Battle of Midway, the landing of American troops on Okinawa, and two atomic bombs.

What was the cause for inaction among these intelligent men? It was an overwhelming anxiety that the barely functioning democratic apparatus would be completely swept away and the army left to fill the vacuum. The February 26 incident of 1936 (*ni-niroku jiken*), in which parts of Tokyo were occupied by radical officers and high-ranking officials from among the cabinet and the court were killed, was still fresh in everyone's minds. The leadership stood like a mouse staring into the face of a snake.

Defeat was inevitable, and, by this point, it was welcome. At the very last moment, the cabinet came to a decision, moved by a courageous emperor who finally spoke up in the name of the democratic principles that had been tragically shunted aside but never wholly abandoned.

This voluminous treatise, for all its twists and turns, is a reliable study of the many incoherencies and ramifications that marked this tumultuous period. At the end, we have been helped to better understand how Japan, after a long and bitter war, managed to enter the community of democratic nations harmoniously. Some readers might disagree with the author's view that Japan's democratic roots finally proved stronger than totalitarian ideas and perhaps even argue that, if anything, undemocratic habits and centralizing tendencies survived the war and prevented a real rebirth. The key word here is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—the struggle to learn from and overcome the past—and I tend to concur with the author's choice here not to take the easy way out by culling sources as he conducted his research. Under very particular and extremely difficult circumstances, Japan's democratic institutions indeed continued to function, and to lead the country beyond the brutalities of war into which militarism had thrown it. The vast amount of data gathered together in these pages and the thoughtful commentary make this book a most useful resource.