

Krebs, Gerhard, 2010, *Japan im Pazifischen Krieg. Herrschaftssystem, politische Willensbildung und Friedenssuche*. München: Iudicium, 936pp., ISBN 978-3891290101, €98.00 (hb)

Could the Japanese war against the United States have been avoided? Krebs' truly monumental study traces the efforts of Yoshida Shigeru and other members of Japan's elites to prevent war within the overall context of Japanese pre-war history, its institutions, elites, and ideas and concepts circulating at the time. Prospects for peace looked bleak. As early as 1938 the General Staff had retracted its demands for a compromise peace with China, realising that this would seriously undermine the authority of government within Japan, but also dangerously weaken Japan's international position. By 1941 the Chief of Staff Sugiyama held that "only when Japan gains the upper hand against England and America would it be possible to conclude the war against China" (p.41). Japan's policies were not simply dictated by any one leader, but the outcome of extremely complex manoeuvring among members of Japan's elites. Krebs places decision-making processes and its main actors in the wider context of modern Japan since 1868. The first chapter provides a lucid overview of the workings of the institutional framework and elites participating in decision-making. This is a highly recommendable introduction to the first eight decades of modern Japanese history, including the roles of the Emperor, the military, institutional politics, the bureaucracy, economic elites and (radical) activists. Krebs points out that available Western studies on these issues do not reflect recent advances in the research of primary sources in Japanese, at times even ignoring primary and secondary sources published in Japanese. He is critical of John Dower's well-known *Empire and Aftermath* with its bias against Yoshida whom he calls a "reactionary". The studies by Dower and others appeared too early to include recent major research by Itoo Takashi, Shibata Shinichi, Furukawa Takahisa and Baba Akira. Krebs makes intensive use of these sources in order to establish a detailed – often day-by-day – narrative that pays much attention to attempts to oppose those tending towards war against the US, such as Yoshida Shigeru and his role in supporting General Ugaki Kazushige, later Admiral Kobayashi Seizo and Admiral Suzuki Kantaro. Krebs also uses the unpublished legacy of Joseph C. Grew, US Ambassador to Tokyo until the outbreak of the Pacific War. Grew was in close contact with Japanese politicians whom he thought

might help to prevent war. Any move by members of the Japanese elites was subject to restrictions imposed by Japan's ruling system (Herrschaftssystem). Yoshida himself was also a target of repressive organs such as the Tokko and the Kenpeitai who suspected him of passing on information to Anglo-Saxon embassies (pp. 141f, 666f). Krebs' detailed description of elite politics avoids simplistic dichotomies such as "the military" versus "civilians", "democracy" versus "dictatorship", nor does he touch on larger issues such as whether Japanese society might be characterised as "fascist". The latter question is not merely an academic one – from the mid-thirties US concepts of Japan as "fascist" (such as in Freda Uteley's *Japan's Feet of Clay*) cleared the way to view Japan as the Asian equivalent of fascist Germany.

While not falling into the trap of those who claim Japan's "uniqueness" the book would have gained by placing Krebs' construct of Japan at war in the larger context of debates on twentieth century authoritarian and totalitarian states. The 100+ page bibliography demonstrates Krebs' acquaintance with Western research on US policy making towards Japan. Together with his superb command of sources in Japanese this should allow him to discuss the quality of views in Japanese primary sources that form the mainstay of his narrative. When were the views contained in those sources a direct reflection of convictions by its authors, or were they mainly formulated to serve as weapons in Japan's internal politics? Krebs points out that all players also saw war as a way out, locked in an impasse that could not be resolved otherwise. To this must be added the fogginess of Japanese communications where even leading politicians and military participating in conferences did not phrase their opinions clearly. Such practices within Japan were continued in contact with foreign countries, and also contributed to the outbreak of war (pp. 76, 84). On the issue of the attack on Pearl Harbour without a proper declaration of war Krebs asserts that "official Japan" until now persists in presenting falsified history. (p. 267)

The major focus of this book is on details of political manoeuvring around issues of war, and once war had broken out on ways to search for peace. This leaves relatively little room for discussing to what extent ideas and ideologies co-shaped the actions of those in power. Fear of Japan's "Bolshevization" was widespread; during the thirties "young officials" and other nationalist groups frequently displayed an anti-capitalist bias, while the state did remain monarchical rooted in religious (and pseudo-historical) myths. The reader is left wondering to what extent changes in Japan's economic system towards a war economy beginning around 1936 exercised a major

impact on the nature of Japan's political structure. Krebs refers to radicals and nationalists in terms of "reformists", "young officials", "Nipponists", largely avoids categories of "Control Faction" (Tosei) and "Imperial Way Faction" (Kodo), and refers to supporters of Yoshida and Konoe somewhat vaguely as "members of their circles". Especially Yoshida and his supporters are seen as parts of an "opposition" – but could their efforts be compared to the German domestic opposition to Hitler? Krebs avoids simplistic comparisons, and adds that Konoe and Yoshida were interested to save as much as possible of the "old order" and prevent Revolution – but he does not specify what kind of "old order" they had in mind (p. 767).

The last part of the book covers the complex manoeuvring in the US and Japan for a post-war world, in which Japan was seen as a force resisting Soviet expansionism. The conclusion of only six pages does no justice to his important major study, which should be made available to English language scholarship as soon as possible.

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