

# HIROHITO



## BEHIND THE MYTH

EDWARD BEHR

AUTHOR OF *THE LAST EMPEROR*

"I came away from *Hirohito* with the sense that a curtain had been drawn aside, and an inner chamber of history had been revealed to our gaze."

—Los Angeles Times

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## Behind the Myth

E D W A R D B E H R

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FOR P.B. AND C.B.

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## FOREWORD

**I**t was while researching *The Last Emperor* that I determined that my next book had to be a biography of Emperor Hirohito.

Pu-yi, the puppet emperor of Manchukuo, and Emperor Hirohito had much in common: both were prisoners of an extremely rigid court routine; both were treated, in their youth, like "living gods"; and both were singularly ill equipped physically to assume the roles they were made to play. But whereas Pu-yi's whole life was a tragicomic failure, the saga of Hirohito is a barely credible one for its ironies: one of the "three most hated men in the world" alongside Hitler and Mussolini, according to Allied wartime propaganda, he went on to become a universally respected constitutional monarch, his prewar and wartime past certainly forgiven, if not forgotten. Not only the sheer longevity of his reign but the way he managed to extricate himself from responsibility for any of the prewar and wartime decisions leading to millions of deaths make him without doubt the ultimate survivor of all time.

Many of the events described in this book have been only partially reported outside Japan: the rise of Japanese imperialism was overshadowed, in Western eyes, by the rise of fascism in Italy and Hitler's domination of Germany. Pearl Harbor came as a horrifying shock to

most Americans, even though the prospect of war between the United States and Japan had seemed inevitable to President Roosevelt and his advisers.

This book would not have been possible without the invaluable source material provided by two key books: the two-volume Kido diaries and the two-volume *Sugiyama Memorandum*. From the moment he became confidential secretary to the Lord Privy Seal, a post he eventually assumed himself, Koichi Kido kept a detailed diary. After his arrest as a Grade A war criminal suspect, he decided, on the advice of his son-in-law, to turn over this diary to the prosecution staff of the International Military Tribunal of the Far East (IMTFE), which eventually sentenced him to life imprisonment. It has since been published in Japanese, but never in translation. Many earlier books about Hirohito and the rise of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere quote selected portions of Kido's diaries, but to my surprise I discovered much in them that had never been utilized before.

The *Sugiyama Memorandum*, another seminal work about the period, is a diarylike record of all meetings held during the time General Hajime Sugiyama was army chief of staff; so detailed are the day-to-day entries that at times they read like tape-recording transcripts.

For chapters 3 and 4, I have relied heavily on that monumental piece of research the *Brocade Banner* report; for chapter 5, I am indebted to Jerrold M. Packard's *Sons of Heaven* for the description of the wedding and coronation ceremonies; for chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11, to the *Honjo Diaries* and *Brocade Banner*. From chapter 12 onwards, I have drawn heavily on the Kido diaries and the *Sugiyama Memorandum*, State Department and OSS records, and the SCAP Archives at Suitland, Maryland.

My thanks, above all, to those who patiently translated thousands of pages of documents, diaries, books and newspaper articles for me—Fuyuko Nishisato, Motoko Suzuki and Yukiko Shimahara, my interpreter; to the BBC's Anthony Geffen and Janet Williams, in London and Tokyo; and to the numerous experts on the period and subject who were kind enough to submit themselves to lengthy interrogations: Faubion Bowers, General MacArthur's former aide; Robert Fearey, formerly with MacArthur's SCAP, Tokyo; Robert Donihi, former prosecution staff, IMTFE; Dr. Ikuhiko Hata, professor of history at Tokyo's Takushoku University, Tokyo, and author of *The Emperor's Five Decisions*; Professor Kyoshi Inouye, author of *The Em-*

*peror's Responsibilities*; Dr. Roger Buckley, associate professor, International University of Japan, Tokyo; Dr. D.C.S. Sissons, Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra; and H.I.H. Prince Takamado.

John Taylor of the National Archives, Washington, D.C., gave me invaluable guidance, and the staffs of both the National Archives and the Military Archives in Suitland were unfailingly helpful and patient, as were the staffs of the libraries of the School of Oriental and African Studies, at London University, of the Correspondents' Club and of the *Japan Times*, Tokyo.

Among veteran experts on Japan's prewar and wartime period who talked to me I want particularly to thank Robert Guillain, *Havas* correspondent in Tokyo from 1938 to 1945 and *Le Monde* correspondent there from 1948 to 1971; Ambassador Jacques Baeyens; Ambassador Bernard Dorin; Sir John Pilcher; Rear Admiral George C. Ross (retired); General Eiku Arisue; Morio Tateno, formerly of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Company); Torahiko Nagazumi, a Peers' School contemporary of Emperor Hirohito and later one of his chamberlains; Peter McGill, Tokyo correspondent of the *Observer*; Masaki Shimosato of *Akahata*; Taro Kimura; Shizuto Haruna, formerly of NHK; Toshiya Matsuzaki of *Josei Jishin*; Tetsuya Chikushi, *Asahi Shimbun*; Kyo Naruse, president of the Hara Shobo publishing house; Mrs. Yoshiko Yashimoto; *Newsweek's* Ted Slate; Walter Harris and many others. Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Penny Bergamini, for generously allowing me to use her late husband's archives and source materials, and Ed Victor, for his continued support and encouragement.

Edward Behr  
Paris, 1989



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## INTRODUCTION

On September 27, 1945, an extraordinary event took place, marking the end of an invincible era that had lasted in Japan for over twenty-six hundred years. On that day the oldest serviceable imperial limousine (an ancient Mercedes) was coaxed into life in the Imperial Palace garage, and at 10:00 A.M. an unusual motorcade emerged through the palace gates, crossed the moat, and wended its way up the hill through flattened, charred, war-ravaged Tokyo. There were five cars in all (two of them filled with police and palace bodyguards) and two motorcycle outriders, a modest enough attendance by imperial standards.

Inside the Mercedes (which later became known to American forces, after its frequent appearances, as "the cement mixer," and now has pride of place in West Germany's Mercedes museum) sat a small, dapper man with a neat mustache and a slightly receding chin, dressed in a black morning coat, striped trousers and top hat. The clothes, a witness noted, were almost as old as the Mercedes—and indeed, for the next three years, Emperor Hirohito would make it a practice to wear shabby, ill-fitting suits, to share, symbolically, the hardships and penury of his people. That September morning, Emperor Hirohito was on his way to meet General MacArthur, the supreme commander,

Allied powers (SCAP), the new American “shogun,” in the main reception room of the United States Embassy residence in Tokyo—a meeting that symbolized both Japan’s defeat and the emperor’s own determination to render obeisance to the new master of Japan.

The encounter, immortalized in a faintly comic picture taken by a U.S. signals-photographer sergeant, emphasized the difference between the two men. MacArthur, tieless, hands in pockets, in simple tan army shirt and trousers, stands next to the emperor, who barely comes up to his shoulder. MacArthur is stern, unsmiling, his jaw set in something of a snarl. Emperor Hirohito’s features are fixed in a somewhat nervous half-smile; he has a fatalistic but slightly apprehensive air, and looks incredibly young. The photographer, recalled ex-Major Faubion Bowers, MacArthur’s personal aide, was allowed only a few seconds to operate. MacArthur wanted only one picture. As a good professional, the sergeant begged for two, “in case the first doesn’t come out,” and MacArthur agreed, with a curt nod. (It was a wise decision: in the first picture, the emperor’s eyes are closed, and it would have been unusable.)

Japanese editors were appalled by the contrast between the towering MacArthur and their tiny emperor, and were at first reluctant to publish the photograph, but SCAP directives prevailed. Paradoxically, the photograph did more to endear the emperor to the Japanese public than any of his later proclamations because he looked so vulnerable, and so clearly shared his people’s predicament.

MacArthur’s informal attire scandalized not only editors but almost all Japanese readers as well. They felt that the general should at least have dressed up in his full general’s uniform for the occasion. In MacArthur’s eyes, there was nothing disrespectful about his appearance—his was, after all, the standard dress of all U.S. personnel in U.S.-occupied Japan. He was surprised later to learn of these Japanese reactions, for he believed he had done his utmost to protect the emperor from embarrassment: there was no advance notice to the press of the visit, no mention of the appointment ever found its way into the MacArthur agenda, nor did the Honor Guard at the embassy residence gates know whom to expect when the Mercedes, followed by two other cars, entered the small driveway. All they had been told was to “present arms” with exceptional “panache” to an expected VIP delegation. Even the U.S. Army photographer who took the historic photograph had no inkling of the visitor’s identity until he actually saw

him. MacArthur deliberately stuck his hands in his pockets, Bowers feels, "to show who was boss."

Emperor Hirohito must have found the whole morning's experience somewhat baffling. From the start there was a studied informality about it. An aide, General Bonner Fellers, greeted the emperor with a hearty handshake. "Welcome, it's a pleasure to meet you, sir," he said. The nine palace aides who accompanied the emperor caused MacArthur's staff something of a problem. "We expected him to come alone, or accompanied by only one equerry," Bowers remembered. Instead, the nine most senior officials of the Imperial Household Ministry, including Tsuneo Matsudaira, the Imperial Household minister, and Marquis Koichi Kido, the Lord Privy Seal and also the emperor's closest adviser and lifelong friend (they had prepared together for the meeting the previous day for nearly three hours), remained downstairs in a tiny sitting room. Conversation was difficult. Bowers, MacArthur's personal interpreter as well as his military aide, did his best to amuse them with desultory small talk. An expert on kabuki theater, he tried to steer the conversation round to his pet subject. The palace officials were polite but their minds were evidently elsewhere.

The emperor's nervousness was apparent and well founded. He was, understandably, terrified. On the day of the signing of Japan's unconditional surrender aboard the *Missouri*, only some three weeks previously, the elderly Japanese foreign minister, Mamoru Shigemitsu, exhausted from his climb up the gangway of the battleship—an exceedingly painful ordeal for a seventy-year-old with only one leg (he had lost the other in a bomb explosion in Shanghai in the thirties)—had asked for a glass of water, and Admiral William Halsey had refused. Hirohito did not know what to expect. His request to see MacArthur had been curtly granted ("About time, too," the "Supremo" had told his staff), and he did not know whether he would be humiliated, as his foreign minister had been aboard the *Missouri*, or perhaps even be arrested on the spot.

For all these reasons, Bowers recalled, Hirohito "looked frightened to death. As I took his top hat I noticed his hands were trembling. On meeting MacArthur on the threshold of the drawing room he bowed low, very low, a servant's bow." MacArthur shook hands with the emperor, and said, "You are very, very welcome, sir." He added that an American interpreter, Bowers, was standing by, but if he preferred,

the emperor could use his own interpreter, and MacArthur would not insist on a second one being present. Hirohito immediately commanded his own interpreter, Katuzo Okamura, to remain by his side. Sitting on straight-backed Louis XV-style chairs around a low table decorated with valuable Japanese ceramics, the three of them talked in apparent secrecy. The emperor's insistence on his own interpreter was understandable: what he had to say was so delicate, so difficult to express, that the idea of allowing a foreigner to translate would have been intolerable. He would have been mortified to know that Jean MacArthur, the general's wife, was listening to every word behind a curtain.

Later, MacArthur was to tell his staff that the emperor was both nervous and tense, but determined not to show it. "I tried to make it as easy for him as I could, but I knew how deep and dreadful must be his agony and humiliation," MacArthur said. "How painful it is to see someone raised so high brought so low." At one point he offered the emperor a cigarette, and Hirohito "was so nervous his hands shook." MacArthur lit it for him. The cigarettes had been an afterthought. "Does he smoke?" MacArthur asked Bowers minutes before the emperor's arrival. MacArthur, of course, smoked only his corncob pipe. Bowers gave the general his own pack of Lucky Strikes.

If anyone on the American side could put the emperor at ease, it was Douglas MacArthur, who, as aide-de-camp to his father, General Arthur MacArthur, had accompanied him on a visit to Japan just after the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, during the reign of Emperor Meiji. MacArthur reminded the emperor of this, and actually made him smile, thus breaking the ice. The new Supremo told Hirohito how preoccupied Emperor Meiji had been about a serious cholera epidemic that had broken out among the army units which had taken part in the campaign. The trouble was, the emperor had told MacArthur's father, the soldiers simply refused to take their anticholera pills.

"My father," MacArthur told Hirohito, "had a piece of advice for your grandfather. He suggested that inside each box of pills there should be a notice: 'The Emperor requests that each soldier take one capsule every four hours.' My father's advice was followed—and the cholera epidemic ceased."

From then on it was clear sailing, although there were a few awkward moments. Hirohito recognized the good conduct and restraint of the U.S. occupation troops; MacArthur congratulated Hirohito on

the conduct of the Japanese people in this difficult time. The generalities then became a little less formal. After MacArthur had praised Hirohito for ending the war, the emperor replied that others, too, deserved credit. "The peace party did not prevail," said Hirohito, "until the bombing of Hiroshima created a situation which could be dramatized."

MacArthur then asked a question many people have asked since. How was it that an emperor powerful enough to end the war had been unable to prevent it? "I felt my heart was breaking," said Hirohito, adding that the worst part of it was reflecting on the consequences of the war on the British royal family, "who had treated me with great kindness when I visited them as Crown Prince. But the idea of gain-saying my advisers in those days never even occurred to me. Besides, it would have done no good. I would have been put in an insane asylum or even assassinated."

"A monarch must be brave enough to run such risks," said MacArthur.

But Hirohito had another, unexpected rejoinder, and, considering the circumstances, it showed him to be both a stubborn man and a brilliant poker player. "It was not clear to me that our course was unjustified," he said. "Even now I am not sure how historians will allocate the responsibility for the war." He then, in what must have been an excruciatingly difficult speech to make, told MacArthur that he came before him "to offer myself to the judgment of the powers you represent as the one to bear the sole responsibility for every political and military decision made and action taken by my people in the conduct of the war."

It was, of course, an empty gesture: the emperor knew full well by this time, nearly two months after Hiroshima, that on the whole MacArthur was against his indictment as a war criminal, and that his status as emperor, though likely to change, would not be ended outright, as he would almost certainly not be asked to abdicate. MacArthur knew that the emperor knew that he knew this. But "bellytalk" is an essential part of formal Japanese social intercourse, and the emperor, in offering himself up as a scapegoat, was in fact making the point that the occupation authorities should not lean too hard on Japan, especially where "war criminals" were concerned. If they were determined to spare the emperor, how could they possibly punish his loyal and devoted servants?

MacArthur, too, was at pains to tell the emperor that America did not intend to behave as a colonizing power. In all, the meeting lasted thirty-five minutes. After it was over, according to Paul Manning, a veteran U.S. correspondent who had covered the war in the Pacific, flown on bombing missions over Japan and witnessed the surrender aboard the *Missouri* and had privileged access to MacArthur's staff, "both knew they could work together to rehabilitate Japan and its people. Their respect was mutual, their courtesy and empathy marked. . . . They knew they were to be partners in the task of occupation that lay ahead." For Hirohito, the dreaded meeting had turned into a personal triumph. As he told Marquis Kido later, MacArthur had actually asked him for advice! As Kido recorded in his diaries, MacArthur had said "that the Emperor of Japan knows best about the important men in the Japanese political world. Therefore I want to get your advice from now on, on various matters. . . ."

As he left, Emperor Hirohito was heard to ask Marquis Kido for the name of the general who had ushered him into the embassy, and later sent Bonner Fellers a photograph, signed in English. It was a surprising gesture on the part of a still-divine emperor, and proof that Hirohito, for all his palace seclusion, was fully aware of Western-style public relations techniques. More tokens of esteem followed: shortly after the meeting, Empress Nagako sent Jean MacArthur a huge basket of flowers, which she acknowledged in a thank-you letter addressed to "Your Majesty." And shortly after that came another gift, from the emperor this time: a gold and lacquered writing box, for General and Mrs. MacArthur. Mrs. MacArthur promptly had it appraised and was slightly disappointed to learn that, though valuable, it wasn't all that old, probably dating back to the nineteenth-century Tokugawa era.

MacArthur was quick to acknowledge the emperor's first postwar victory. He told his aides that Hirohito "was an Emperor by inherent birth but at that instant I knew I faced the first gentleman of Japan in his own right." He said to a visitor that at first "I came here with the idea of using the Emperor more sternly. But it hasn't been necessary. He is a sincere man and a genuine liberal." At no time did MacArthur ever write to his titular chief, President Truman, an account of what had gone on in the embassy residence between himself and Hirohito. This apparent dereliction of duty was deliberate: MacArthur, in this and all subsequent conversations with the emperor (there were to be

ten in all before the occupation ended), respected Hirohito's wish that they be not only off the record but completely private, even though, after subsequent meetings, the Japanese Foreign Ministry immediately debriefed the emperor's interpreter, with Hirohito's consent. Besides, as Faubion Bowers recalled many years later, "anti-Japanese feeling ran so high in Washington at the time that had MacArthur reported back that the Emperor claimed full responsibility for the war, the pinkos in the State Department would have clamoured: fine, let's try him." (The substance of their subsequent talks has remained in a top-secret file inside the Ministry, with the exception of one deliberate leak, engineered by the Japanese Foreign Ministry, which led to the dismissal of one of Hirohito's interpreters, at MacArthur's request.)

Three months after his first meeting with MacArthur, Emperor Hirohito renounced his "godliness" in a carefully prepared text he had mulled over for days. "The bondage between Us and you, the people," he said, "is constantly tied with mutual trust, love and respect. It is not brought about by mere mythology and legends. It is never founded on a chimerical conception which ascribes the Emperor as a living deity, and, moreover, [regards] the Japanese as superior to all other races of people, hence destined to rule the world." All pictures of him showed him in civilian clothes, and a new spirit prevailed within SCAP. MacArthur's deputy chief of the government section, Colonel C. L. Kades, said MacArthur felt that "the Emperor had atoned for any past errors by his wholehearted support of the Occupation." General Courtney Whitney, MacArthur's chief aide, told reporters, "I would consider it a gross breach of faith if the Emperor were to be tried as a war criminal after all the services he has rendered to the allies."

The story of Hirohito is a complicated one to unravel, not least because, in the short space of time between the emperor's decision to surrender and the arrival of the American occupying force, almost all Japanese confidential documents were destroyed. The Imperial Household minister ordered the elimination of all "sensitive" palace papers shortly before Japan's surrender, and the foreign, army and navy ministers, as well as the army and navy chiefs of staff, gave similar instructions, which were obeyed with rigorous thoroughness, so that when the time came for prosecutors of Japanese war criminal suspects to gather evidence they found almost no documents to work on, in marked contrast to the mass of papers left behind by the Nazi bureauc-





Hirohito was not necessarily immune from prosecution as a war criminal and that SCAP Headquarters was to collate evidence to be forwarded to Washington, to enable officials there to decide whether or not he should stand trial.

In almost any other political context, the supreme ruler of a country that had perpetrated such behavior would have been tried and perhaps even executed. Indeed, there is a case for saying that many of those tried at Nuremberg were punished for far less, that their responsibilities, though major, nevertheless fell short of Hitler's. There is an even greater case for maintaining that the fate of the Japanese war criminals sentenced in the Philippines in 1945 and at the close of the "Japanese Nuremberg trials" in 1947 was a travesty of justice.

The view that Hirohito was a war criminal—prevalent at the close of World War II—has since become shockingly unfashionable, and even to raise the subject is enough to provoke a storm of indignation, especially in the United States. Nowadays, any hint that Emperor Hirohito may deserve even a small portion of the blame for the events that led to Pearl Harbor and tens of millions of Western and Asian deaths is regarded as unwarrantable. The only major English-language "revisionist" book to question the accepted view of Hirohito as a peace-loving, powerless prisoner of his entourage, David Bergamini's *Japan's Imperialist Conspiracy*, was so violently attacked by a cohort of academic experts that Bergamini became a pariah, reviled, ridiculed and driven to an early death by the weight of negative critical abuse. Bergamini's error was to attempt to discover a conspiratorial pattern in Hirohito's behavior, from his earliest years as crown prince, and to try to prove that he deliberately placed a handful of key supporters in top positions in order to plan Japan's militaristic expansionism, ruthlessly suppressing those who disagreed with the "Strike South" option (the conquest by force of Southeast Asia) and favored, instead, the "Strike North" option (a move against the Soviet Union that would have recovered part of Siberia, which had once belonged to China). It was a flawed view, for Bergamini failed to grasp the difference between the emperor's formal, "abstract" powers and their practical limits, and this failure was compounded by erratic scholarship, an attempt to twist all available facts to prove his theory. Bergamini also had a somewhat paranoid attitude toward Japan in general, perhaps as a result of his own experiences as an adolescent civilian internee in