

America: The Nation Builder

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Early in the morning on December 7, 1941, a cataclysmic event took place that forever changed the relationship between the United States and Japan. The Japanese surprise aerial attack on Pearl Harbor was a tragic onslaught that would prompt the United States to break its policy of isolationism which had been faithfully obeyed until the 20th century. Despite originally declaring neutrality, the United States went on to play a significant part in bringing an end to World War II, which would forever change its role in global affairs. The United States emerged from World War II as one of the two superpower countries of the world alongside the Soviet Union. As a global superpower, the United States was put in charge of overseeing the rehabilitation of Japan, which had been brutally brought to its knees by the Manhattan Project. The United States' role in Japan greatly changed after World War II because the United States was tasked with overseeing its military occupation, punishing Japan, and restructuring the nation.

Japan and the Axis Powers were commonly viewed as the villains of World War II because of the horrible war crimes that they committed such as the Rape of Nanking, genocide of Chinese people, and abuse of prisoners of war. With the conclusion of World War II, the Allied Powers agreed to task the United States with the reconstruction and reformation of Japan.¹ General Douglas MacArthur was appointed as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) and was put in charge of overseeing the military occupation of Japan which lasted from 1945 to 1952.² Prior to the war, the United States had little to no influence in the Asian country. In the years following the war, the United States played a significant role in Japan by completely taking over the nation and managing every aspect of Japanese living. In order to subdue them, the United States demilitarized Japan by demobilizing its army and dismantling its navy.

¹ Surrender Order of the Imperial General Headquarters of Japan, S. Treaty Doc. (Sept. 2, 1945). <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/ghq.htm>.

² Kristen D. Burton, "Occupying Germany and Japan," The National WWII Museum, last modified October 21, 2020, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/united-states-occupying-germany-and-japan>.

Between August and October of 1945, the Japanese War Ministry demobilized nearly 2,000,000 troops, and the Japanese naval power was broken up into several smaller, less powerful units. Chapter V of The General Demobilization Program required that all enemy equipment be delivered to locations designated by the Allies. Rifles, bayonets, explosives, and ammunition were confiscated by the United States. Japanese officials were ordered by the SCAP to ensure that all mines, minefields, and other impediments that disrupted travel by land, sea, and air were deactivated and discarded.³ MacArthur ordered the liberation of all Allied prisoners of war held in Japanese detention camps.⁴ With the demobilization of the Japanese Imperial Army, it became apparent that the formerly minimal American presence in Japan had swiftly turned into absolute domination of the nation. General MacArthur established martial law across Japan, which greatly affected the everyday lives of Japanese civilians. Under martial law, the military had unlimited authority to make and enforce laws, and the everyday lives of civilians were dominated by military regulations. It is undeniable that the United States military occupation in Japan heavily affected the lives of both Japanese soldiers and everyday citizens. In the years after World War II, the United States would continue to maintain a strong military presence under the principles of the Truman Doctrine. President Truman established the Truman Doctrine in 1948, which pledged the United States to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”⁵ The Truman Doctrine was used to justify the United States’ choice to remain stationed in Japan and defend the nation against the spread of Communism throughout the Cold War. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States

³ Reports of General MacArthur, H.R. Rep. No. 66-60006-1, at 297 (1994).
<https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/MacArthur%20Reports/MacArthur%20V1%20Sup/index.htm#cont>.

⁴ Surrender Order of the Imperial General Headquarters of Japan, S. Treaty Doc. (Sept. 2, 1945).
<http://www.taiwandocuments.org/ghq.htm>.

⁵ Joe Scarborough, *Saving Freedom* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2020), [Page xix].

has sustained its military presence in Japan, an outright contrast to the little influence that America had on Japan prior to the war.

The ultimate goal of military occupation in Japan was to punish, revive, and reform Japan. The United States' first major step was to punish Japan for the crimes committed during World War II. The task of punishing Japan proved to be difficult. The United States had to be thoughtful in its role in punishing Japan. In the past, the punishment of Germany after World War I had led to Adolf Hitler's rise to power during the antebellum period preceding World War II. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill supported summary executions, in which persons accused of a crime were immediately executed without the benefit of a full and fair trial. The other two members of the "Big Three," Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin, overruled Churchill's vote. Instead, the Yalta Conference conceived the outline of a punishment system that would put war criminals on trial and execute them if they were deemed guilty. On January 19, 1946, General MacArthur ordered the creation of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE), also known as the Tokyo Trial or the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, to punish Japanese wartime leaders.⁶ A charter was drafted for the Tokyo Trial that was based on the Nuremberg Trial, a series of thirteen trials that tried Nazis for Crimes Against Humanity during World War II. The goal of the Tokyo Trial was to punish those that treated Allied prisoners inhumanely and those that misled the Japanese people to embark on world conquest.⁷ Of the 2,200 Japanese that were tried for war crimes, seven were executed by hanging and sixteen were sentenced to life in prison. Among those that were executed was Hideki Tojo, the General of the Imperial Japanese Army. Tojo ultimately took responsibility for

⁶ Kristen D. Burton, "War Crimes on Trial: The Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials," The National WWII Museum, last modified November 24, 2020, accessed June 2, 2022,

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/nuremberg-and-tokyo-war-crimes-trials>.

⁷ "Tokyo War Crimes Trial," The National WWII Museum, accessed June 2, 2022,

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/tokyo-war-crimes-trial>.

World War II in order to protect the Japanese Emperor Hirohito. Many believed that Emperor Hirohito should have been tried because of his approval of Japanese policy during World War II, but Tojo's sacrifice swayed the United States to allow Emperor Hirohito to remain in power until his death in 1989.⁸ Other major war criminals that were executed alongside Tojo included Iwane Matsui, one of the primary perpetrators of the Nanjing Massacre, and Heitaro Kimura, a general who tormented allied prisoners of war.⁹ Allied judges continued to determine the fates of convicted Japanese war criminals until December of 1948. After the Tokyo Trial, additional domestic tribunals were held to try thousands of less significant war criminals. The Tokyo Trial, created by U.S. General Douglas MacArthur, played a significant role in determining the fates of those that chose to violate the laws of war during World War II. The punishments decided by the Tokyo Trial and other lesser tribunals forever changed the lives of thousands of Japanese soldiers, generals, and leaders who were involved in World War II. For decades, the Tokyo and Nuremberg Trials served as the only examples of international war crimes tribunals until the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1993.¹⁰ To this day, the Tokyo Trial serves as a reminder to state and military leaders that they will be held accountable for their actions if they ever choose to violate the new charter of human rights.

The last two steps of the United States military occupation of Japan focused on revitalizing and reforming Japan after the devastating blows the nation suffered during World War II. After the establishment of the Tokyo Trial to punish Japanese war criminals, General MacArthur led the United States to enact political, economic, and social reforms throughout

⁸ Burton, "War Crimes," The National WWII Museum.

⁹ "Tokyo War Crimes," The National WWII Museum.

¹⁰ "About the ICTY," International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, accessed June 3, 2022, <https://www.icty.org/en/about>.

Japan. The most notable change made by the United States was Japan's adoption of a new constitution, known as the MacArthur Constitution which replaced the old Meiji Constitution of 1889.¹¹ One of the most radical changes brought about by Japan's new constitution was the integration of democracy into Japan's political system. Under the new constitution, sovereignty rested in the hands of the people rather than the emperor. Although Emperor Hirohito was kept in power after World War II, he was completely stripped of his powers and instead stood as a figurehead for Japanese unity and culture.¹² Japan's new constitution also implemented several new laws that resembled the amendments of the U.S. Constitution: women's suffrage, freedom of speech, and weakened powers of the police.¹³ Despite the numerous remarkable changes made by Japan's new constitution, the most significant revision of all was Japan's relinquishment of declaring war, which was proclaimed in Article 9 of the MacArthur Constitution.¹⁴ The United States' decision to abolish Japan's ability to make war ensured that the island nation would forever remain a pacifist country that will (hopefully) never commit such atrocities again. In addition to the creation of a new constitution, the United States also enacted many social and economic reforms for Japan. One of the more renowned reforms was the introduction of land reform in Japan. Prior to World War II, the average farmer had a little over an acre of land to grow crops.¹⁵ With the establishment of the land reform in Japan, a great deal of land was stripped from big landlords and redistributed to farmers of Japan, allowing the farmers of Japan to thrive after years of poverty. To further renovate Japan's economy, the United States sought to expunge large Japanese business chains known as zaibatsu. The zaibatsu, which had been

¹¹ The Constitution of Japan, S. Exec. Res. 109 (enacted). Accessed June 2, 2022. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

¹² Burton, "Occupying Germany," The National WWII Museum.

¹³ "Occupation and Reconstruction of Japan, 1945–52," *Encyclopedia Americana*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/japan-reconstruction>.

¹⁴ The Constitution of Japan, S. Exec. Res. 109 (enacted). Accessed June 2, 2022. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

¹⁵ "Occupation and Reconstruction."

controlled by just a few prominent families, were attacked by the SCAP, tipping the balance of economic power in favor of small businesses and farmers. As the economy began to rebuild, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida devised the Yoshida Doctrine, a postwar strategy that permitted the United States to remain on Japanese soil after Japan regained sovereignty.¹⁶ The outbreak of the Korean War resulted in a capitalist boost that promoted Japanese industries to flourish.¹⁷ It is apparent that the United States' intervention in Japan during the years following World War II completely overhauled almost every aspect of Japan's economy and politics for the better. Under the protection and guidance of the United States, Japan has made one of the greatest comebacks in history and boomed into one of the United States' closest allies and trading partners.

The end of World War II was a dark period for Japan, which had been brutally demolished by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A glimmer of hope for a new beginning was unlikely for this defeated nation. It is hard to believe Japan is one of the strongest countries in the world in the contemporary age. Japan's success in the decades after World War II can be strongly attributed to the efforts of the United States. The United States military occupation of Japan, led by General Douglas MacArthur, was a paramount factor in the revitalization of Japan after facing a crushing defeat. U.S. forces took over almost every aspect of the Japanese economy, politics, and society. Under the orders of the SCAP, Japan was rebuilt from the ground up, adopting a new constitution and revamping its economy. The role of the United States was crucial for the recovery of Japan following the events of World War II because the United States was tasked with punishing Japan, restructuring the country, and overseeing its military occupation.

¹⁶ "Yoshida Doctrine," University of Pittsburgh, accessed June 3, 2022, <https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/glossary/yoshida-doctrine>.

¹⁷ Kristen D. Burton, "Great Responsibilities and New Global Power," The National WWII Museum, last modified October 23, 2020, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/new-global-power-after-world-war-ii-1945>.