

HIROHITO'S STRUGGLE TO SURRENDER

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In the fall of 1945, I stood in the doorway of the impressive American Embassy in Tokyo and watched a black limousine pull slowly to the curb. Out stepped an obviously nervous, bespectacled Japanese, dressed in a pre-war cutaway and high button shoes. Just as my hand snapped down from a rigid salute, he edged close enough to seize it and shake it firmly. We exchanged greetings and, turning, walked side by side into the Embassy. Thus, as military secretary to General of the Army MacArthur, I officially met Hirohito, Emperor of Japan. Subsequently I learned the well-nigh incredible facts behind Japan's surrender.

These facts show indisputably that the USSR repeatedly rejected Japanese overtures for peace with the Allies -- with the USSR to act as intermediary -- as long as six months before Japan's surrender. Coldly, and in her own self-interest, the USSR was determined to obtain a dominant position in the Orient, both territorially and politically, and to implement this determination she planned to enter the war at a time most favorable to her. Through official interrogation of Hirohito's cabinet and other highly-placed Japanese, and through the Emperor's own personal story, I learned that the USSR first smothered Japanese surrender moves throughout the winter and late spring of 1945 by extortionate demands, simply as a fee for acting as intermediary between Japan and the United States. In July, she again blocked an attempt at capitulation by failing to receive Prince Konoye as an official envoy from Japan's Emperor with authority to surrender and negotiate a peace. Beyond doubt, Hirohito's repeated attempts to obtain peace months before the August surrender show clearly that the atomic bomb neither induced his decision to surrender nor did it have any effect on the ultimate outcome of the war.

Actually, the Emperor's personal decision to surrender and first attempt to obtain Russian mediation traces back to February, 1945, after General MacArthur's forces liberated the Philippines and entered Manila. On the 14th of that month the Emperor summoned Prince Konoye -- premier of Japan on three occasions, and relatively pacifistic -- to Konoye's first palace conference in several years. Pacing the floor, obviously shaken, Hirohito declared bluntly that he believed defeat to be unavoidable but that the militarists wanted to fight on. They argued that the allied demands for unconditional surrender could only mean the abolishment of the Emperor system; moreover, they stood bitterly opposed to a direct approach to the United States, since it had been President Roosevelt who had originated the unconditional surrender phrase. Konoye informed Hirohito that he did not believe America would continue fighting merely to destroy the Emperor's dynasty; Hirohito assented, but said that with the militarists controlling all means of communication, it would be impossible to deal directly with the United States. The Emperor particularly wanted to know if Konoye would assist him in surrender negotiations; Konoye readily agreed.

Immediately -- one of the most revolutionary turnabouts in all Japan's history -- Hirohito began to press his militarists with extraordinary vigor. He pointed out that they had lied consistently about the war's progress, even informing troops that the army had landed on the west coast of the United States; that only recently the navy had claimed total sinkings of 77 American aircraft

carriers and 26 battleships -- most of the carriers and more battleships than the United States possessed! The militarists were aghast at this rebuke. At that time they had materially weakened the Manchurian army for a defense of the home islands, and were particularly fearful that the USSR might enter the war. Therefore, when Hirohito told them he was ordering Foreign Minister Hirota to open unofficial peace conversations through the Russian embassy in Tokyo, with the USSR to act as a possible intermediary with the Allies, the militarists reluctantly agreed, in the hope that Russian mediation would prevent Soviet attack.

This proved the first crack in the iron front the militarists had always presented to any idea of capitulation. But Melik, Soviet ambassador in Tokyo, turned out to be strangely cool to Hirota's efforts to obtain Russian assistance. An exceptionally shrewd diplomat who was well aware of Japan's desperate position, Melik dragged out his conversations with Hirota for months. Simply for the USSR's service as intermediary, he demanded heavy concessions to the Soviet Union. These demands immediately stiffened the grudging attitude of the Japanese militarists, who in a showdown were willing to make only the most minute concessions toward any peace. Meanwhile, through Sato, Japanese ambassador in Moscow, the Emperor learned that the USSR was cold toward the peace and, even though not at war, would discuss no proposal other than a condition tantamount to unconditional surrender. This, Japanese army and navy leaders at that time would have refused even to consider.

The Emperor thereupon decided on an even bolder step. Tough, grizzly, 77 years old Kantaro Suzuki -- so avowedly a pacifist that he was shot four times and left for dead in the uprising of the so-called "young militarists" in 1936 -- was suddenly, on April 7, appointed prime minister by the Emperor. Hirohito believed that appointment of such a well-known opponent of the militarists would be regarded by the Allies as a clear signal that Japan desired peace. Moreover, Suzuki and the Emperor had been lifelong friends, so that for the first time since the war started Hirohito felt he had a leader in whom he could confide. In secret conferences, Hirohito told Suzuki that he did not trust his Imperial Headquarters and could not understand why they blindly continued the war when all hope of victory had gone. Further loss of life, the Emperor declared, was criminal.

To Hirohito's and Suzuki's amazement, no offer to negotiate came from the Allies. April dragged into May, and Hirohito's determination to end the war grew stronger with each passing day. In a single B-29 attack on Tokyo, 185,000 casualties had been inflicted; leaflets dropped from American planes and picked up by the Emperor on moody walks through the palace grounds, promised that such attacks would be intensified. Yet the militarists continued to argue that when invasion came they could win at the beaches, where American forces would be at a great disadvantage. At least, they reasoned, the heavy losses which would be inflicted during landing might enhance Japan's position when she did seek peace. Military defeat in the Pacific Islands, Philippines, and Okinawa, the loss of their fleet, the impotence of their air force, still left the fanatic militarists psychologically incapable of surrender. This mental inability to yield made the Emperor's problem extremely difficult and forced him to proceed with caution lest he himself be assassinated for "betraying" the empire.

As the Emperor and Suzuki worked secretly through May and June to develop a surrender formula acceptable to the militarists, our air strikes increased in intensity, destroying hundreds of thousands of homes and buildings in some fifty major cities with steadily decreasing opposition from defending Japanese air forces. After the destruction of Tokyo and Yokahama the last of May, the Emperor told his household that he proposed to stop the war no matter what happened to him personally. Finally, a bitter fight by Suzuki in the Supreme Council -- composed of the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, War Minister, Navy Minister, and chiefs of staff of the army and navy -- won at least tentative agreement to approach the Soviet government in Moscow, officially and directly, in an effort to attain peace. Yet -- even after having agreed to approach the USSR -- members of the Supreme Council, like characters in some Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, could not bring themselves to initiate negotiations.

To the worn, harassed Hirohito, this was the last straw. After waiting for days, he called the members of the Supreme Council to the palace and brusquely ordered them to take immediate action. On the same day -- June 22 -- he had Japanese radio stations broadcast a statement of revolutionary implications direct to the people: "Personal government by the Emperor, based upon the tradition and sentiments of the nation, is more deeply recorded than government by law, and can more successfully meet orders occasioned by the gravity of the situation." Whatever its oriental obliqueness, this meant that Hirohito intended to assume personal leadership of Japan, above and beyond the constitutional government of the Japanese Diet or control by the army and navy.

Still feeling direct communication with the United States was impossible because of the rigid military grip on all communication facilities, Hirohito on July 7 by-passed the Supreme Council altogether by ordering Suzuki to request Russian permission to send the Emperor's own personal emissary to Moscow. Hirohito had already selected Prince Konoye for this mission, and together the two had concocted a desperate scheme with envisioned virtual unconditional surrender to the Allies. In October, 1941, with Hirohito's approval, Konoye had unsuccessfully attempted to arrange a meeting with President Roosevelt during which Konoye planned to sign an agreement to withdraw all Japanese troops from China and have the Emperor publicly approve the decision by wire before the militarists knew such a decision had been made. Hirohito now envisaged precisely the same procedure for Konoye at Moscow -- i.e., a virtual carte blanche for Konoye to obtain peace at any price, with immediate public ratification by the Emperor.

But this plan, too, proved doomed to failure. A radio message had been dispatched to Moscow July 10 requesting the Soviet government to receive Konoye -- but days dragged by without a reply, despite efforts of Ambassador Sato in Moscow to prod the Russian Foreign Office into action. In fact, Stalin and Molotov left Moscow for Potsdam in enigmatic silence four days after the message had been received. On July 22 Moscow finally asked to be "enlightened more clearly on the objectives of the Konoye mission," and the Emperor sent a blunt reply stating Japan sought Russian mediation for peace. No answer came to the second Japanese message.

Up until now, the Emperor on his own initiative had taken at least four definite steps toward peace -- the first negotiations with Russian Ambassador Melik in Japan, the appointment of the notoriously pacifistic Suzuki as prime minister, Hirohito's own public assumption of personal leadership, and the official but fruitless request that the USSR receive Prince Konoye to discuss peace terms.

All these steps, except the original negotiations with Melik, were known to the American Government at the time they were taking place. Moreover, in May, the highest circles in Washington were urged by former President Hoover that Suzuki's appointment meant the Japanese were ready for capitulation, and in all probability if a ballon d'essai were put up which gave them only two concessions -- the preservation of the Emperor and an ultimate liberal government of their own selection -- they would submit to every other requirement -- demilitarization, punishment of war criminals, reparations and return of conquests. His basis was Suzuki's background, which I have already stated. Mr. Hoover urged that Suzuki's selection as Premier was an obvious white flag and offered the opportunity to make a quick peace without Russian complications as they were not at war with Japan. Despite all the "unconditional surrender" chatter of this time, these were approximately the Potsdam terms offered Japan some seventy-five days later. I do not know what steps the United States took to exploit this favorable opportunity from May to July -- before the atomic bombs were dropped -- when it was known that the Emperor was already seeking peace.

Meanwhile, as the Emperor deliberated on what new action to take in view of the Soviets' apparent unwillingness to receive Konoye, the Potsdam declaration was issued on July 26. To the Emperor and other liberal Japanese it appeared to be an acceptable basis for surrender. While the Supreme Council still wrestled with the problem, however, the first atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima on August 6, followed three days later by the second atomic explosion at Nagasaki and the USSR's declaration of war on Japan. That same morning the Supreme Council had voted to accept the Potsdam terms with four reservations -- that the dynasty survive, that Japan not be occupied, that she direct disarmament and evacuation of her own troops, and that she herself handle persons responsible for the war.

Hirohito listened to the decision of the Supreme Council in stony silence. He felt positive that if Japan pressed for acceptance of the Supreme Council's conditions, the Allies would ignore them. He knew that America's Pacific Air Forces, vastly supplemented by air might from the European theatre, would intensify the cataclysmic bombing which had already destroyed Japan's industry and flattened her principal cities. Therefore, he ordered that the Supreme Council reconvene shortly before midnight for further debate in his temporary palace -- a small cottage built over one of the deepest air raid shelters in Japan.

In blacked-out and gutted Tokyo, lighted only by the smoldering fire which burned throughout the city, the Supreme Council trooped slowly into a small conference room to begin the most portentous debate in Japan's history. The midsummer night was hot and humid; mosquitoes from the stagnant palace moat buzzed viciously around the conference table as Japan's perspiring leaders seated themselves, shaken and trembling, after low bows to the Emperor. In addition to the six members of the Supreme Council and the Emperor, Baron Kuchiro Hiranuma, president of the Privy Council, was present.

One after another, the three chief militarists of the Council -- War Minister Korechika Anami, Army Chief of Staff General Yoshijiro Umezu, and Navy Chief of Staff Admiral Soemu Toyoda -- spoke against capitulation. Their usual taciturnity and stoical calm had deserted them. All wept. Surrender was unthinkable. They would destroy the Americans on the beaches. Fight on! Frenzied, their voices shrilled through the room as they begged for more time, a month's delay, a few weeks Preemptorily, Prime Minister Suzuki, trembling with emotion and exhaustion, demanded a vote. With two bullets in his body from the assassination attempt by military extremists nearly ten years before, he knew

the murderous fanaticism of the militarists could easily result in a coup d'etat and the death of all who opposed them. Yet Suzuki was implacable. One by one, members cast their votes. The three militarists remained unalterably opposed to surrender except on condition they disarm their own troops and Japan remain unoccupied. Suzuki, Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo, Navy Minister Mitsumara Yonai and Baron Hiranuma voted for surrender -- the sole condition that the Emperor's dynasty remain intact.

By rigid custom, never before broken, the Council's decision must be unanimous. Yet its members stood deadlocked, 4 to 3. Now the Emperor -- who had remained quiet throughout the tense debate and subsequent voting -- began to speak. Calmly and coldly, he pointed out that from the start of the war, the plans of the military had been far removed from the true facts. "Considering the true state of affairs," he went on, "it is quite useless to continue the war at the cost of lives and destruction of property. I have been listening to those who oppose ending the war. But I have not changed my opinion; I trust the Allies and their terms. I want to accept the terms as they are." He paused, then, in a voice of command -- the first command a Supreme Council had ever heard from a Japanese Emperor: "I wish all of you to agree with me on this point."

The meeting had been going on now for hours, and it was nearly 3 a.m. Tears streaming, members of the Council bowed their heads as Hirohito finished speaking. The silence was broken by War Minister Anami. Falling to his knees, he crawled toward Hirohito. Contemptuously, the Emperor turned his back. Anami's voice rose to a scream. "Please, we have plan, you must not surrender!" he cried hysterically. Approaching closer, still on his knees, he reached for the Emperor's coat. With a disdainful movement, Hirohito turned and walked away. Waiting for a moment, he again faced the Council. "I wish all of you to agree with me," he said again, and left the room.

Dawn had broken when the Council members left the palace, after complying with the Emperor's demands by dispatching a cablegram to Sweden and Switzerland for transmission to the United States, Great Britain, China and the USSR. The message agreed to accept the Potsdam Declaration unconditionally if the Imperial Household and rights of sovereignty be confirmed. But the battle with the militarists -- temporarily overcome by awe of the Emperor -- had not yet ended. Three days later the Allies replied, with a statement that the "ultimate Japanese government must be established by the freely expressed will of the Japanese people." In a hot dispute during a meeting of the Supreme Council in an air raid shelter, the War Minister and chiefs of staff of the army and navy again demanded that the war go on, arguing that the Allied reply meant abolishment of the Emperor system. Meanwhile, American planes were dropping copies of the Potsdam Declaration and Japan's answer throughout the nation.

Marquis Kido, Keeper of the Privy Seal and one of the Emperor's confidantes, carried a leaflet direct to Hirohito. Both feared that the army -- mostly deployed along the seacoasts and thus largely unaware of the terrific destruction in the cities -- at any moment might break out in revolt when they learned Japan had agreed to surrender. Hirohito knew that the bulk of the army would hold that Japan's unconditional surrender meant national humiliation and might easily reject its terms; fanatic officers, on the other hand, might lead them to believe the Emperor's acceptance of such terms was a fake, and urge the troops to continue the fight. On the other hand, the Emperor knew the people were sick of bombing. From air-dropped leaflets they had long known the true war picture and would welcome his rescript. Thus, the Emperor reasoned the Potsdam terms would have opposite effects: incite the Army to fight on -- cause the people to demand peace. To prevent murderous disorder, he must not let the situation get out of hand; it was imperative that an Imperial Rescript ending the war be broadcast immediately.

Once more the Emperor summoned the Supreme Council into session on the morning of August 14. The two chiefs of staff and the War Minister again violently opposed surrender. The Emperor eyed them menacingly. "My decision to accept the Potsdam Declaration was not made lightly," he declared. "It has undergone no change at all. Unless the war is terminated at this juncture, not only will Japan's national policy be destroyed, but the Japanese people will be ruined. In the future, Japan will be entirely separated from the means to wage war and thus will enjoy true eternal peace. As I want to make myself understood by the people, prepare a draft of an Imperial Rescript. I require----" here again he looked menacingly at the militarists -- "that all present agree with my views."

By that evening, with the militarists apparently finally crushed -- the Rescript was ready. At 11 p.m. the Emperor finished a recording of the Rescript, with a representative of Radio Tokyo standing by to take it to Radio Tokyo's studio for broadcast to the nation. But just as the recording was ready to be removed from the Emperor's cottage, nearly 1,000 dissident soldiers infiltrated the palace grounds. Before the soldiers could reach the cottage, however, the recording had been locked away in Hirohito's safe, which -- either through reverence or ignorance of its whereabouts -- the troops never touched.

That night proved the wildest any Japanese Emperor had ever experienced. Six different times the rebel troops invaded the cottage, seeking the recording and Marquis Kido, whom they were determined to assassinate for the part they believed he had played in the surrender. Kido hid in a secret underground passage, while the Emperor remained hidden in another part of the cottage, believing his own assassination might be imminent. Meanwhile, other troops attacked Suzuki's residence with machine guns and then burned it to the ground. At 4 a.m. War Minister Anami, overwhelmed because of the attempted coup d'etat and his opposition to the Emperor, committed suicide. Shortly after 8 a.m. General Shizuichi Tanaka of the Eastern Defense Command arrived on the scene and persuaded the soldiers to disperse. Two of their officers shot themselves. Then General Tanaka went to his room and shot himself. By evening, the recording of the Imperial Rescript had been broadcast, and the nation had heard their own Emperor's voice tell them of Japan's final capitulation.

Thus -- except for scattered incidents -- ended all formal opposition to the Emperor's six months' battle for peace, and throughout the Pacific 7,000,000 Japanese troops, tough spiritually and physically, laid down their arms and turned toward home. This historically unprecedented surrender unquestionably shortened the war by many months and prevented an estimated 450,000 American battle casualties, plus billions of dollars in additional armaments.

Was Hirohito always a pacifist who had been made a tool of the fanatic militarists without means of fighting back? I left Japan convinced that he was. As titular leader of Japan, of course, the Emperor cannot but share technically the war guilt of his leaders. Yet that does not lessen the high drama of a figurehead Emperor who dared face down his own fanatic militarists, usurp their power, and compel them by sheer strength of will to surrender a defeated country to a superior enemy.