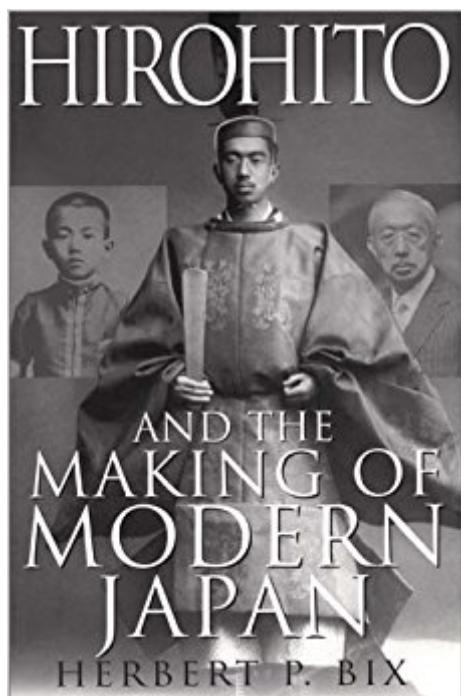


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Hirohito And The Making Of Modern Japan



Synopsis

Winner of the Pulitzer PrizeIn this groundbreaking biography of the Japanese emperor Hirohito, Herbert P. Bix offers the first complete, unvarnished look at the enigmatic leader whose sixty-three-year reign ushered Japan into the modern world. Never before has the full life of this controversial figure been revealed with such clarity and vividness. Bix shows what it was like to be trained from birth for a lone position at the apex of the nation's political hierarchy and as a revered symbol of divine status. Influenced by an unusual combination of the Japanese imperial tradition and a modern scientific worldview, the young emperor gradually evolves into his preeminent role, aligning himself with the growing ultranationalist movement, perpetuating a cult of religious emperor worship, resisting attempts to curb his power, and all the while burnishing his image as a reluctant, passive monarch. Here we see Hirohito as he truly was: a man of strong will and real authority. Supported by a vast array of previously untapped primary documents, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan is perhaps most illuminating in lifting the veil on the mythology surrounding the emperor's impact on the world stage. Focusing closely on Hirohito's interactions with his advisers and successive Japanese governments, Bix sheds new light on the causes of the China War in 1937 and the start of the Asia-Pacific War in 1941. And while conventional wisdom has had it that the nation's increasing foreign aggression was driven and maintained not by the emperor but by an elite group of Japanese militarists, the reality, as witnessed here, is quite different. Bix documents in detail the strong, decisive role Hirohito played in wartime operations, from the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 through the attack on Pearl Harbor and ultimately the fateful decision in 1945 to accede to an unconditional surrender. In fact, the emperor stubbornly prolonged the war effort and then used the horrifying bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with the Soviet entrance into the war, as his exit strategy from a no-win situation. From the moment of capitulation, we see how American and Japanese leaders moved to justify the retention of Hirohito as emperor by whitewashing his wartime role and reshaping the historical consciousness of the Japanese people. The key to this strategy was Hirohito's alliance with General MacArthur, who helped him maintain his stature and shed his militaristic image, while MacArthur used the emperor as a figurehead to assist him in converting Japan into a peaceful nation. Their partnership ensured that the emperor's image would loom large over the postwar years and later decades, as Japan began to make its way in the modern age and struggled -- as it still does -- to come to terms with its past. Until the very end of a career that embodied the conflicting aims of Japan's development as a nation, Hirohito remained preoccupied with politics and with his place in history. Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan provides the definitive account of his rich life and legacy. Meticulously

researched and utterly engaging, this book is proof that the history of twentieth-century Japan cannot be understood apart from the life of its most remarkable and enduring leader.

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Customer Reviews

Herbert Bix's biography of Emperor Hirohito of Japan is an outstanding work, but it must be read with caution, a critical eye and an open mind. The work is permeated with a sense of Bix's righteous indignation at Hirohito's escape from censure for his part in Japan's role in China and in the Second World War and this seems to color his judgment when facts grow thin and motivations are evaluated. What Bix contributes to the historical record regarding Hirohito, the Japanese military, and Japan's wars is important and revealing. In Western culture the term "emperor" connotes Rome with a sort of English royalty superimposed on it, a blend of the two greatest empires of the Western world. What gets lost in this merger is the memory that the emperor in the Roman system enjoyed a godhead and that the empire was partly a theocracy. Theocracy is a missing element in most evaluations of the seemingly insane strategic decisions that governed Japan's entry into, atrocities during, and conduct of World War II. The blind faith that overrode rationality in upper echelons of the Army and Navy makes more sense in the light of the theocratic Shintoist emperor system. Bound up with a system of belief in a state headed by a living god, the racist inhumanity of Japanese atrocities becomes more understandable, but not justifiable. The willingness to "die for the Emperor" in banzai charges and kamikaze flights also becomes more clear. But where Bix's work raises question marks is in his evaluation of Hirohito's role. While Bix has unearthed an emperor who definitely had a hand in government and the fatal decisions that propelled Japan into war, and bore unacknowledged

responsibility for those decisions, he has not necessarily proven Hirohito to be their animating force.

Quite by coincidence I happened to come into possession of this work at the same time I received Ian Kershaw's two-volume biography of Adolf Hitler. Hirohito was no Hitler. They never met, and their styles and upbringing were diametrically opposite. Hitler used force of personality to perpetrate his genocide and destruction; Hirohito condoned his own genocide and war crimes from behind a sculpted mask of religion and myth. The eminently argued thesis of author Herbert Bix is that a weak, petty, and selfish man can be just as lethal as a megalomaniac at those perilous junctures in history. Hirohito's grandfather was the great Meiji, whom readers may remember from high school days as the Japanese Emperor who warred with China and Russia at the turn of the twentieth century and upon whom Teddy Roosevelt kept a wary eye. Meiji did not always win his wars, but he was remarkably successful in creating a schizophrenic self-concept of his nation. On the one hand, Meiji maintained appearances of a modern, westernized world player with an emerging democratic government. At the same time, Meiji rejuvenated an ancient Japanese concept, "kokotai," a term used frequently throughout the book. Kokotai embodied national, religious, and racial unity in the persona of the emperor. While kokotai was a remarkable unifier of the masses, if not the intellectuals, it also promoted tendencies toward xenophobia, racism, militarism, censorship and despotism, all of which would accelerate into the tragedies of the 1930's and beyond. Meiji's son was a weak and distracted emperor, and thus the hopes of the nation fell upon the young regent, Hirohito. Certainly one of the more fascinating aspects of this work is the education of the young emperor-to-be.

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