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Christine de Matos

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The Japanese Occupation is generally remembered as primarily an American affair and as a dichotomous relationship between Japan and the United States. However, it was an Allied Occupation, and, despite the persistence of selective historical memories, there was a distinct and at times contentious Allied presence, contribution, and experience. The Occupation provided a terrain on which the victor nations, believing their social, economic and political values vindicated by victory, competed to reshape the character of Japan's modernity. One Ally that participated in this process, and often acted as a dissenting voice, was Australia. Examining the involvement of additional participants in the Occupation does not challenge the notion of US dominance, but does demonstrate that others periodically played significant roles in both administering the Occupation and in challenging US policies.

Australian participation

Australia was a party to the Occupation both diplomatically and militarily. For instance, an Australian delegation participated in the Far Eastern Commission (FEC) in Washington, an Australian represented the British Commonwealth on the Allied Council for Japan (ACJ) in Tokyo, an Australian, William Flood Webb, presided over the International Military Tribunal of the Far East (IMTFE), and an Australian military contingent, along with Britain, British India and New Zealand, contributed to the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF).

The Australians were stationed in Hiroshima prefecture, with their base at Hiro (the BCOF HQ was at Kure). At its height in 1946, Australia provided around 12,000 troops to the total of 40,000 BCOF troops (US troops numbered 152,000).[1] However, by 1948 Britain, India and New Zealand had withdrawn from Japan, leaving Australia as the sole representative of the Commonwealth forces, at least until the outbreak of the Korean War. An Australian acted as Commander-in-Chief of BCOF for the duration of the Occupation. This article focuses on Australia's diplomatic contribution to the Occupation.

While close attention has been paid to the ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, the neglected conflict between Australia and the United States, as well as their cooperative actions, casts further light on the nature of the occupation. For the first four years of the Occupation, Australia had a left-wing Australian Labor Party (ALP) government under Ben Chifley, and a contentious and outspoken foreign minister in H.V. Evatt. Thus there was great potential and much ammunition for conflict to occur over the progress of Occupation reforms, especially after the so-called 'reverse course' in Occupation policies. The Chifley government had its own agenda that it wished to impose upon Japan. Militarily, diplomatically, economically and politically, this was of course an unequal battle. Yet, in the early post-hostilities enthusiasm for a new world order, the Australian government was confident of contributing to its creation – whether in the UN, or in Occupied Japan – and took a number of initiatives that were actively addressed, if not always implemented.

The role of the emperor

One of the best-known points of contention between Australia and the United States occurred over the position of the emperor in postwar Japan. Australia's position has been portrayed as one of simple retribution for war crimes. While populist rhetoric pandered to anti-Japanese passions amongst the Australian electorate, the official policy position was a little more complex. The issue of the emperor had two main components: first, the question of the trial and punishment of the emperor as a war criminal; and second, the future of the imperial institution in the context of political reform.

The Australian government, like the United States, advocated thoroughgoing democratic reform. However, they differed on how this was best accomplished. While, from at least 1945, Australia favored eliminating the emperor system as the way forward for democratic revolution, this was to be decided by the Japanese people as soon as conditions permit a freely determined decision. Political movements aiming at the abolition of the institution of Emperor or his reduction to a constitutional head of State [are] to be allowed freedom of organization and propaganda.[2]

In other words, while this was to be a decision made by the Japanese people, the Australian government held that the Allies should encourage movements sympathetic to their agenda. By contrast, the US position was not only that the imperial institution in modified form should be maintained, but also that Hirohito remain on the throne to help avoid widespread chaos. Australian social, economic and political policies towards Japan, in many ways more radical than US policies, were unencumbered by any attachment to the throne, or to maintaining the social status quo.

For Australia, communism in Japan was not seen to be a great threat: a return to militarism was. The Japanese people, unencumbered by the monarchy, were seen as a possible source of protection against militarism. If the Australian government did not carry great international weight in the matter, it did provide a reasoned and consistent voice calling for the trial of the emperor as a war criminal. SCAP/GHQ, while unyielding on this point, used this aspect of Australian policy to invoke fear among uncooperative Japanese leaders – that is, the threat to take such issues as the constitution to the FEC where, it was alleged, the Australians and Soviets would demand the abdication of the emperor, or worse. It was a highly effective tactic that maximised American leverage without achieving Australian goals.

The postwar constitution

Differences in policies towards the emperor became manifest in the positions of the US and Australia on the constitution. At the end of the Asia-Pacific War, Australia sought to create the opportunity for the Japanese people to debate and modify the existing Meiji constitution. This approach, a 'restoration' of democracy, was believed to make it less likely that the Japanese people would later reject the constitution as an imposition.[3] When the fait accompli of the so-called 'MacArthur constitution' became evident, Australia and other members of the FEC turned to analysing the draft and submitting proposed changes. Important Australian suggestions included the guarantee of universal suffrage, and the stipulation that the prime minister and state officials should be civilians, both of which were incorporated into the constitution during Diet deliberations in September 1946. [4]

MacArthur reacted to the FEC suggestions by stating that this was 'a complete repudiation of the requirement that the constitution must be a free expression of the people's will'. He warned that the Japanese would 'unquestionably bear some resentment against such allied interference', thereby attempting to maintain the charade that the constitution had sole Japanese authorship.[5] Thus began a struggle between MacArthur and Australian diplomats over who or what best reflected the 'will' of the Japanese people in the new constitution. In this instance, Australia succeeded in shaping the constitution in significant ways.

On 17 October 1946, the FEC adopted 'Provisions for the Review of a New Japanese Constitution' to counteract the fait accompli. Sent to MacArthur as an FEC policy directive, the 'Provisions' were inspired by H.V. Evatt, and were intended to provide an opportunity for the Japanese people to 'judge the Constitution in the light of their experience of its working'.[6] The objective was to have the provision attached to the Constitution at promulgation, in order to ensure that the Japanese people were aware of their right to comment and have public debate on the Constitution, and, if deemed necessary, amend it. While Evatt favored a public referendum on the constitution as the final act of review, the FEC policy only specified this as an option, the preferred option being that the Diet and the FEC conduct the review within one to two years of the constitution taking effect.
MacArthur's reaction was swift and hostile. He claimed that the Australian proposal constituted inappropriate Allied interference in Japanese political affairs. With the US government maneuvering to maintain authority in the hands of SCAP, specifically proposing that it be left to the discretion of MacArthur whether to publish it, Australians on the FEC provided the most vociferous challenge. They claimed it would be dishonest not to let the Japanese people know they had the right of review.[7] In the end, MacArthur agreed to publication of the Provisions outside of Japan (in March 1947, two months before the constitution was to take effect), while exercising censorship within Japan. Although the 'Provision' was leaked to the Japanese press in March 1948, with the constitution already in effect, it had little public impact.

When it came time for the 'Provisions' to take effect in 1948, the Ashida government began a review process, as did two Japanese research groups, the Public Law forum (Koho kenkyukai) and the Constitutional Research Committee of Tokyo University (Kempo kenkyukai). However, MacArthur and the second Yoshida government, which took office after the fall of the Ashida government in 1948, halted the review process. On the FEC, the Australian delegation encouraged the review but, given the lack of support from Washington and Tokyo within the Occupation context of the 'reverse course', it was conducted without enthusiasm.

In 1949, the FEC sent some proposals for discussion to SCAP, including:

1. Queries over the use of the terms kokumin (citizens) and nambito (all persons), as 'it was not clear how the Constitution guarantees fundamental civil rights to all persons within Japanese jurisdiction (as distinguished from Japanese citizens)';
2. Greater clarity to be given to empower the Supreme Court to determine constitutionality;
3. Greater clarity desirable in Articles 7 and 69 on the procedures for the dissolution of the House of Representatives.[8]

The first point related directly to the volatile issue of the rights of Koreans and Taiwanese residents of Japan who had been deprived of the citizenship rights enjoyed under colonial rule following Japan's defeat.

However, these suggestions were not sent as an FEC policy directive, but were simply submitted to SCAP, there was no imperative for MacArthur, or anyone else, to consider, no less act on, them. And, in a year in which such contentious issues as the 'red purges' and Dodge economic stabilisation program arose, no one did. In the end, Evatt's original ideal that the Japanese people would have a voice in assessing, shaping and revising their own constitution was lost. Now approaching six decades on, there has been no amendment to the Constitution, although controversial changes are currently being pressed by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

Labour reform

Further conflict between Australia and the United States centered on the role of the labour movement. The two countries had very different labour histories and their ideas for the place of labour in Occupied Japan differed in fundamentals. The Australian delegation was instrumental in framing FEC labour policy encapsulated in 'Principles for Japanese Trade Unions'. Incorporating Australian (and British/European) experience, the ideal it put forth of a politicised labour movement, that is a labour movement that would seek political representation in government by supporting or creating a political party that reflected its interests, was anathema to both MacArthur and the US government, providing a fertile source for Allied conflict.

The Australian government protested many aspects of Occupation labour policy, including MacArthur's 1 February strike ban of 1947 as Japanese labour mobilised to carry out a general strike. The different approaches of the Allies to labour issues are best exemplified in the revision of the National Public Service Law (NPSL) from 1948 to 1949. Patrick Shaw, an Australian representing the British Commonwealth to the ACJ (1947-1949), protested the removal of the right to strike for all government employees under the revision, and, even more, the lack of an independent arbitration body. Shaw protested publicly in the ACJ as well as privately to SCAP/GHQ. Protests also emerged on the FEC, led by the Australian delegation, and the Australians proposed a new FEC provision that read 'provisions of F.E.C.-045/5 (Principles for Japanese Trade Unions) should be applied to workers in Japanese government enterprises.'[9]

In the face of widespread support for this initiative on the FEC, MacArthur accused Australia and Britain of using Japanese labour to further 'their own socialistic experiments'[10] and the US State Department called in Australian FEC delegates to press them to drop their proposal on the grounds that it would serve to heighten communist activities in Japan.[11] Eventually, under US pressure and delay tactics, the Australian proposal fell into abeyance. With a change of government in Australia from the ALP to Robert Menzies' conservative Liberal Party, the proposal was never revived. One change was quietly gained: the NPSL in its final form contained a more independent arbitration machinery mechanism than when it was first envisioned. It was a small and subtle victory, but one nonetheless.

Land reform

One area in which there was substantial U.S-Australia agreement, and where the Australian contribution was significant, was land reform.

When MacArthur surprisingly asked the ACJ for advice on land reform, William Macmahon Ball, an Australian academic/diplomat representing the British Commonwealth on the ACJ (1946-1947), and his economic advisor, Eric E. Ward, responded with enthusiasm. Ward's research into the issue led him to believe that the 3 cho Landlord Average Maximum Retained Area (LAMRA), as proposed by SCAP/GHQ's Wolf Ladejinsky and William Gilmartin, was too large, as it would only release about 45 percent of tenanted land for transfer. Ward calculated that for land reform to be a success, it would be necessary to release 70 percent, and a one cho LAMRA would therefore be required. When Macmahon Ball presented this as part of a 10-point program to the ACJ, MacArthur responded that the proposal was 'most constructive and valuable'.[12]

Ball was then surprised to read in the Mainichi Shimbun on 2 July 1946 that the Japanese government had prepared a land reform bill 'on its own initiative' that incorporated 'in a most exact and detailed way the ten points program' he had submitted to the ACJ.[13] Ogura Takekazu, an official involved in drafting the bill, wrote in 1979 that the Ball-Ward proposal contained the clear ideas lacking in the US 9 December directive, and was, therefore, used extensively to help draft the bill.[14] Reference to the Australian role in land reform is rare in Occupation historiography. In this area where Australian and SCAP views meshed, and where they were also synchronous with a significant Japanese policy group, Australia was able to play an important role in crafting the program.

Conclusion

Occupied Japan was an ideological battleground for contesting ideas concerned with charting Japan's postwar transformation, with the US voice dominant. The Australian Chifley government proposed an alternative approach, what it termed 'social democracy', between the extremes of Soviet communism and American laissez faire individualism. However, in the manichean context of the Cold War, in many policy realms the Australian voice, as well as other alternate voices from within and without Japan, tended to disappear from the historical record. In some fields, however, of which land reform is most striking, Australian proposals shaped significant policy outcomes, while in others, they shaped the terrain of debate.

The political divisions apparent in the Occupation era are manifest again today – the ALP, now in opposition, sometimes reflects a dissenting voice to US/Australian conservative policy in Iraq, though rather more subtly than in Chifley's time, and without the political weight of a party holding the reins of government. The issues are not simply of historical interest: the debate about the constitution is one obvious example of the contemporary currency of contested issues of the 1940s. In order to take the 'inevitability' out of teleological perspectives, it is worthwhile remembering the alternative and dissenting voices of the Occupation – both in terms of their sometimes subtle or forgotten contributions, and of the paths not taken that can be as integral to our historical understanding as those that were.

[1] British Commonwealth Forces National Council, 'Brief History of Australia's Participation in the Occupation of Japan 1945-1952', 5 July 2000, available online: http://www.bradprint.com.au/bcof/history.html
[2] National Archives of Australia (NAA): A3300/7 290, Cablegram Department of External Affairs to Australian Legation Washington, 10 August 1945.
[3] NAA: A5475/1 13, 'Information on Japan', c. November 1945.
[4] MMA: RG-5, Box 73, Fol: 'FEC Radio File', MacArthur to Washington, 19 August 1946; MMA: RG-5, Box 73, Fold: 'FEC Radio File', MacArthur to Washington, 25 September 1946. The US government overrode MacArthur on this issue in order to placate the FEC.
[5] MMA: RG-5, Box 73, Fol: 'FEC Radio File', MacArthur to Washington, 19 August 1946.
[6] W.D. Forsyth to W. Macmahon Ball, 21 June 1946, in Wayne Hudson and Wendy Way, Documents on Australian Foreign Policy1937-1949, Vol. IX, Document 323, pp. 542-543.
[7] James Plimsoll, in MacArthur Memorial Archives (MMA): GR-6, Box 73, Fol: 3 F.E.C. Minutes October-November 1946, 'Transcript of Thirty-Third meeting of the Far Eastern Commission', 1 November 1946, p. 5.
[8] MMA: RG-9 Radiograms, Box 82, Fol: 'State Department May 1949', Department of Army to SCAP, 7 May 1949.
[9] NAA: A1838/278 483/1 Part 3, 'Japanese Peace Settlement. Far Eastern Commission Agenda December 1949', p. 34.
[10] MMA: RG-9, Radiograms, Fol: 'Labor, 2 April 1946-31 October 1948', SCAP to Dept of Army, 21 October 1948.
[11] NAA: A1838/278 483/2 Part 5, Cablegram Australian Embassy Washington to External Affairs, 26 April 1949.
[12] Alan Rix, Intermittent Diplomat: The Japan and Batavia Diaries of W. Macmahon Ball, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1988, p. 75. A cho is 2.45 acres.
[13] NAA: A1067 ER46/13/27, Cablegram Macmahon Ball to External Affairs, 9 July 1946.
[14] Eric E. Ward, Land Reform in Japan 1946-1950, the Allied Role, Tokyo: Nobunkyo, 1990, pp. 74-75.

Christine de Matos teaches at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, and researches Australian involvement in the Allied Occupation of Japan. She is the author of 'Contesting the "Will of the People": Australia and Constitutional Reform in Occupied Japan', Japanese Studies, Vol 24, No 2, September 2004, pp. 181-200. She can be contacted at c.de-matos@uws.edu.au. This article was written for Japan Focus and posted on July 27, 2005.

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