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## **Presentations of Emperor Hirohito in Japanese War-Related Museums**

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### **Abstract**

Emperor Hirohito is a controversial figure in the narrative of World War II. Depictions of his role as monarch have ranged from the deified leader of a militaristic nation to a tragically powerless figurehead. My research examines depictions of Emperor Hirohito in Japan today through the multimedia and multipurpose modes of museum exhibits. The three Japanese war-related museums examined were selected for their variance in management and educational purpose. This paper aims to investigate the variety of ways in which Japanese war-related museums utilize or omit Emperor Hirohito and how the emperor's portrayal contributes to the agenda of each museum.

### **Rationale & Objectives**

#### *Emperor Hirohito and Japan at War*

In order to analyze Emperor Hirohito's complex image, we must first try to understand the political and social situation leading up to and during his rule. The situation may be traced back at least as far as the Meiji Restoration (1869), which took place in the name of the emperor, and the formation of Japan

into a constitutional monarchy. The meaning of the term “constitutional monarchy” was not without ambiguity, but it essentially granted the Japanese emperor freedom of governance within the bounds of the constitution. The Meiji constitution, issued in 1889, ascribed the emperor a number of vague qualities and rights, among which were his situation in an eternal line of emperors (Article 1); sovereignty through divinity and inviolability, which placed the emperor above the law (Article 3); and command of the army and navy (Article 11).

These qualities—particularly the emperor’s divinity and military role—would later be enforced by the Imperial Rescript on Education and Imperial Rescript on Soldiers, both of which emphasized service to one’s family and nation through service to (and, as was increasingly emphasized, death for) the emperor.<sup>1</sup> The Rescript on Education became compulsory material for schools and was read to students in assemblies across the nation on a regular basis, usually with the accompaniment of a portrait of the emperor in Western military attire, to which students and teachers were required to bow.<sup>2</sup> Under this same pretext, military drills became a part of school curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

The pervasiveness of the idea of emperor worship, particularly in association with patriotic death, can be seen in many firsthand accounts of the war. It is perhaps particularly telling in the journals and letters written by members of *shinpū tokubetsu kōgeki tai*, more commonly known as *kamikaze*. Ohnuki-Tierney has written a volume that compiles the contents of five such journals,<sup>4</sup> and the Yushukan museum has on display a great deal of similar records, though their respective selection criteria account for great differences in their content. Whether or not the writers seemed to take the idea of death for the emperor to heart, the recurrence of this theme certainly speaks to the prevalence of the ideology.

When the war came to an end, it was the charge of the occupying forces to determine the emperor’s future. Should he be removed from the throne and tried as a war criminal, or should he be allowed to remain? These questions were hotly debated around the world during the months following Japan’s

surrender. It was the opinion of many that the emperor would be invaluable in stabilizing Japan in the absence of its former government. This idea proved effective when the emperor's radio announcement of the end of the war facilitated the initial mission of the occupation.<sup>5</sup> The decision was eventually made that the emperor would maintain his throne under the new constitution. With this decision came a necessary image change. From a divine general, Emperor Hirohito's public image was transformed to one of a peaceful, and slightly more humanized, monarch. The image promulgated worldwide of the emperor's role in Japanese aggression was that, although personally adverse to war, the emperor was no more than a figurehead who had granted validity to, but had no power over government and no say in decision-making processes.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to maintain Emperor Hirohito by no means put an end to the debate over his war culpability. The questions of exactly how much power the emperor held and whether he could have used his power to prevent the war remain to be answered. The scholarship conducted on the question to date is of a wide range, depicting the emperor as everything from a powerless figurehead to a diabolical war criminal. Scholars have examined journals and other firsthand accounts to construct a picture of Emperor Hirohito's personal motivations and concerns. They have also looked at the emperor's position within the government, attempting to better understand the constraints that the system placed on him.

A limited number of scholars have maintained that Emperor Hirohito held great responsibility for the war. An early example is David Bergamini, writing in *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (1971).<sup>7</sup> As the title implies, Bergamini proposed that the passive image of the emperor promulgated by General Douglas MacArthur and the occupation government was nothing more than a cover-up, that in fact Emperor Hirohito had been the instigator of Japanese aggression and should be held solely responsible for the war. His book was criticized on the grounds of thin evidence, anonymous sources, and poor translations of Japanese primary sources.<sup>8</sup> The idea, however, was not put to

rest. The most recent example written in this vein is Herbert Bix's *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (2000).<sup>9</sup> Considerably more widely researched than Bergamini's work (as evidenced by his endnotes, though he provides no bibliographical information), Bix gives a wide-ranging description of the wartime government, including constraints put upon the emperor's decision-making powers, while also attempting to paint a vivid picture of the emperor's character as an individual. He ultimately argues that Emperor Hirohito's main concern was with preserving *kokutai* (in this case, the imperial line), and that his efforts to do so contributed greatly to Japan's aggressiveness. Like Bergamini, Bix highlights the post war necessity of General MacArthur and the Truman administration's efforts to paint a picture of the emperor that would facilitate the goals of the occupation, and that this image acted effectively as a cover-up of the emperor's actual wartime behavior.<sup>10</sup> While Bix's book was criticized for its subjectivity, it has been widely read outside of scholarly circles, and received a Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

Other scholars have taken an opposing position. Much early scholarship and bibliographical work on Hirohito following the war was in the vein of the helpless figurehead image of MacArthur's time. Robert Butow's *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (1961) was an ambitious analysis of the structure of Japan's wartime government, within which the emperor was unable to play a substantial role, though his personal inclination was toward peace.<sup>11</sup> Leonard Mosley's *Hirohito, Emperor of Japan* (1966), though criticized for the absence of political analysis such as Butow had undertaken, similarly claimed that Emperor Hirohito was a proponent of peace, focusing largely on the emperor's upbringing and education to paint a picture of him as the unfortunate victim of a turbulent time in history.<sup>12</sup> David Anson Titus's *Palace and Politics in Prewar Japan* (1977) focused on the emperor, but did so by continuing in Butow's vein of political, rather than personal, analysis, examining specifically the imperial institution and its position in government. While, like Bergamini, he found that in fact the emperor was

much more involved in matters of state than earlier scholars had reported, he ultimately concluded that the system so severely limited the emperor's power that it was unreasonable to hold him accountable.<sup>13</sup>

Later scholarship has tended to depart somewhat from the strict binaries of earlier years. This may be attributed to the gradual release of primary sources, giving more insight into prewar and wartime decision-making, such as General Honjō's diary, translated by Mikiso Hane in a volume that included a number of essays on Honjō and Emperor Hirohito and published in 1982.<sup>14</sup> In addition, such events as the death of the emperor in 1989 and the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995 have made the last decades a period of re-evaluation and have seen, in addition to Bix's work, a number of other critical evaluations of the emperor's war responsibility. Steven Large, in his book *Emperor Hirohito and Showa Japan: A Political Biography* (1992), proposes that Emperor Hirohito was concerned with adherence to his position as a constitutional monarch, particularly in so far as "a constitutional monarch should always abide by and not interfere with the decisions reached by his government."<sup>15</sup> For Large, the emperor's goal was to facilitate the workings of the government, rather than command them. Peter Wetzler's *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan* (1998) also attempts to explain the emperor's thinking through examining the imperial institution.<sup>16</sup> He hypothesizes that the emperor's primary motivation was to protect *kokutai*, an idea that Bix would later borrow in his work. He agrees with Large that Hirohito's role as a constitutional monarch, while not excluding him from matters of state, did limit his ability to oppose the decisions of his government, pointing out, as did the emperor himself, that to do so may have resulted in a coup. Wetzler concludes that the emperor in fact shares partial responsibility for the war.

### *Museums and National Narrative*

As evidenced by the scholarly debate outlined above, while the topic of Emperor Hirohito's war culpability is sensitive, it is

by no means dead, nor is it likely to die out as long as Japan's imperial line continues. The question seems likely to go unanswered, and for this reason it was not within my ambitions to answer it in my research. Rather, it was my intention to gain a greater understanding of the wide variety of narratives regarding World War II, and the way that they attempt to answer, or evade answering, the questions of Emperor Hirohito's war responsibility.

I approached this goal by visiting three Japanese museums representing the history of the war. Museums, like books and documentaries, are one source of information that people have exposure to and that play a role in the creation of the viewer's conception of history. Museums collect a variety of media that are intended specifically to distribute information to the public in general, rather than to one specific demographic of people. They aim to be interesting and informative, while also easy to comprehend. The language used is often simple enough for young people to understand. This quality of accessibility to all ages, combined with the use of visual aids and interactive elements, as well as translations of some or all of the exhibits into other languages truly makes museums sources of information that are accessible to a great variety of people of different ages, occupations, and even nationalities.

However, is the purpose of a museum purely educational? Some, in fact, have argued the exact opposite. To quote Texas Representative Sam Johnson on the controversy over the Enola Gay display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, "It's not a teaching institution. It's a museum, plain and simple, a display." Geoffrey White uses this quote to open his article on museums as spaces that combine educational and memorial functions.<sup>17</sup> White examines the Enola Gay case<sup>18</sup> alongside the *USS Arizona* Memorial for parallels in controversy over the content presented to visitors. One expects a museum to be a place to collect new and unfamiliar information, while a memorial assumes that visitors are already familiar with the narrative that the nation supports. He points out that, while the names of the two institutions indicate that one functions primarily as a *museum* and the other primarily as a *memorial*, in practice

both institutions serve in both capacities. In both cases, controversy arose when content from outside of the institute's narrative (especially the *national* narrative) was proposed or introduced, as "professionalized historical practices introduced new representations competing with the narrative I-voice."<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, a multifaceted, academic presentation of history often comes secondary to adherence to a museum's function as a commemoration of one specific historical narrative.

As highly visible, intentionally accessible sources of historical narrative available to the public, museums and their contents commonly come under scrutiny and criticism. The Enola Gay controversy at the National Air and Space Museum is a famous American example, and White is not the only scholar to address these issues. Such controversies surround museums in Japan as well. Conservative Japanese museums have tended to justify World War II as self-defense,<sup>20</sup> while the existence of many left-wing "peace museums" is a testament to the existence of a public desiring Japan's wrongdoings to also be presented. Modifications to the exhibits at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum are one example of the results of these public concerns. The addition of multiple new exhibits in the 1990s took place in response to public requests that the museum present a more complete story of the war, and not only the suffering endured by those residing in Hiroshima at the time of the bombing.

In Japan, peace museums (particularly those concerned with exposing atrocities committed by Japan in Asia for the purpose of providing context to Japan's subsequent suffering) in particular have come under attack from right-wing groups. Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka described the controversy over Peace Osaka, which was criticized heavily by members of the Liberal Democratic Party and other conservative groups, including later the Group to Correct the Biased Exhibits of War-Related Material (*Sensōshiryōno henkōtenji o tadasu kai*).<sup>21</sup> Peace Osaka, as well as other similar museums whose veracity has been challenged, have tended to make concessions to their challengers. For example, Peace Osaka changed some of its explanations of graphic photographs, and agreed to fly the *hinomaru* flag outside the building.<sup>22</sup>

These are just a few examples of controversy over museum exhibits related to war. Each museum examined in the course of this research is a part of this ongoing debate, and some of the issues introduced in both American and Japanese examples are relevant to the topic of this paper. Ultimately, each museum's narrative is determined both by its goals and, to some degree, by the social or political pressure under which it is placed. As related to this research, depictions of Emperor Hirohito in each museum may reveal not only what the museum wishes to say about the emperor himself, but also what the museum's overall goals are, as well as its reactions to external pressure.

### **Methodology**

My research took me to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, the Kyoto Museum for World Peace at Ritsumeikan University, and Yushukan at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Each of these museums aims to inform its visitors of Pacific War history, and while each strives for historical accuracy, each also has a different mission and presents different perspectives on the war. I spent an average of five six-hour days at each of these museums over the course of three weeks. This allowed me sufficient time to spend one day getting a feel for each museum by viewing it in its entirety. This step involved marking a map with the locations of information relevant to Emperor Hirohito or the imperial system. While this process facilitated later note taking, it also gave me an opportunity to observe what overall message the museum tries to impart to its visitors.

Once I had determined relevant locations, the second step was to return and record the text and layout of relevant areas. Taking photographs of panels and images was the most efficient method in terms of time. However, because neither of the last two museums allowed photography inside, this was the stage that consumed the most time. Relevant panels were any that mentioned Emperor Hirohito or the imperial system. When possible, I took note of both Japanese and English language translations. I made notes on layout, observing use of photographs or other visual aids, and the location of the noted panels within the overall layout of the museum. In addition,

both the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the Kyoto Museum for World Peace provide Japanese and English audio guides to supplement the information in the exhibits themselves. In the case of the Kyoto museum, I made exact transcriptions of the relevant portions of these audio guides as well. (Refer to the appendix for examples of notes and transcribed texts.)

In collecting and assimilating this data, I approached each museum with a number of questions:

- § How often is Emperor Hirohito mentioned? How important is he to the museum's overall narrative?
- § Is Emperor Hirohito presented as an individual, and if so, what kind of person is he said to have been?
- § How is the emperor depicted in relation to other members of government?
- § Is Emperor Hirohito linked to past emperors or to nationalistic myth?
- § Is the issue of Emperor Hirohito's war responsibility approached directly?
- § How does word choice contribute to the image of Emperor Hirohito?
- § Overall, how does the inclusion or exclusion of the emperor contribute to the narrative of the museum?

## **Results & Data Analysis**

### *Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum*

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is a large building located at the southern end of Heiwakinen Park in central Hiroshima. This municipal museum was established in 1955, and continues to draw visitors of a great variety of ages and nationalities. Its goal is "to communicate to the people of every country the truth of the damage caused by the bombing of Hiroshima and to contribute to nuclear weapon abolition and eternal world peace, which are the heart of Hiroshima."<sup>23</sup>

The museum itself is divided into three large sections. The Main Building displays an impressive collection of artifacts from the demolished city, accompanied by information and stories that attempt to communicate what conditions were like on the ground following the bombing. The first floor of the East Building,

which was added later to provide context for the exhibit mentioned above,<sup>24</sup> introduces the history of Hiroshima city before 1945, as well as the United States' decision-making process that led up to the bombing. The second and third floors detail the history of nuclear arms development, the state of nuclear proliferation today, and the movement toward nuclear arms abolition. In addition, there are temporary exhibit halls located in the basement: one reserved for films, one for art and stories contributed by survivors, and one rotating exhibit hall.

Mention of the emperor in this museum is extremely limited. He is first mentioned in the section on the first floor of the East Building that deals with the United States decision-making that led up to the bombing of Hiroshima. Specifically, this section contains two panels, as well as a copy of Secretary of War Henry Stimson's journal, regarding the Potsdam Declaration. "The Declaration contained no provision guaranteeing continuation of the emperor system, which was known to be key to obtaining surrender," explains one panel. Similarly, Stimson's journal reflects the tensions among members of the United States government regarding provisions in the Declaration for the preservation of the emperor system. While Stimson, and others with knowledge of Japan, felt that preserving the emperor system would ease the transition into occupational government, ultimately it was fear of domestic criticism that caused this section to be removed from the Potsdam Declaration.

The section regarding the United States is done in great detail, meticulously mentioning the names and positions of each individual involved in the decision-making process. In this context, it is interesting to note that decisions made by the Japanese government at this time are all but ignored, both here and throughout the museum. Very few names of individual politicians or military leaders are mentioned, and contextual content regarding Japan at war is largely limited to events within the limits of Hiroshima City. Not only Emperor Hirohito, but the Japanese political situation in general is largely omitted. The effect of this omission is not only that the museum avoids the sensitive topic of the emperor's role in the war, but also fails to

look at Japan's wartime decision-making critically, while implicating the United States. Even the narrative of the Potsdam Declaration, by its focus on the fact that the United States had knowledge of the importance of the emperor system but chose to ignore it, fails to point out that the Japanese played a role in the Declaration's initial rejection. It is the United States' concern for domestic criticism, and not Japan's choice to hold out for better terms, that is implicated in the fateful continuation of the war.

The omission of any discussion of the emperor becomes more confusing in the next section of the narrative, the only other instance in which the emperor is mentioned. Atomic bombs have been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan has signed the Potsdam Declaration. The panel reads simply, "The following day, the emperor spoke on the radio announcing to the Japanese people that Japan had surrendered. The long war was over." Without prior knowledge of Japan, and of World War II in particular, a scrutinizing visitor might find this passage confusing. The emperor—who has been mentioned very infrequently in the museum so far—is the one who ultimately brings the war to an end. Again, decision-making on the Japanese side is unmentioned. The emperor is the only individual to whom the end of the war is attributed. However, the passage is certainly not accusatory.

From the limited information presented by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum regarding Emperor Hirohito, it might be unfair to attempt to construct an image of the emperor. However, conclusions can be drawn about the role that the emperor plays in Hiroshima's war narrative, exemplified as much by his absence as by the instances of his mention. That is, given that the goals of this museum are to communicate the story of the bombing of Hiroshima to contribute to nuclear abolition and world peace, what purpose does the emperor's absence serve?

The Hiroshima museum's main concern is with what occurred within the precincts of its own city, a fact reflected both in the museum's mission statement and in its exhibits. The

original exhibit in the Main Building, which depicts in detail the effects of the bomb on Hiroshima, remains the most thorough and powerful section of the museum, overshadowing the supplementary “context” exhibits in the East Building. The exclusion of almost any information regarding Japan’s actions during the war is justified through this narrow focus. Extending the museum’s content to include anything beyond Hiroshima’s borders would open up the museum to criticism for ignoring many of the controversial issues of the war, including Japanese war atrocities, which might detract from the impact of the graphic exhibits. In this Hiroshima-centered narrative, Emperor Hirohito has no place. Whether or not the Japanese emperor had decision-making powers is not within the scope of this museum, which does not discuss the Japanese at war abroad at all. This being said, however, it seems unbalanced that this Hiroshima-centered story includes great detail on the United States’ decision to drop the bomb. The emperor is used in this section to expose internal conflicts in the United States. The validity of a system that puts the continuation of the emperor system above the lives of its citizens is not discussed; rather, the narrative points to the failure of certain members of the United States government to recognize the importance of the emperor as the cause that eventually leads to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

#### *Kyoto Museum for World Peace*

The Kyoto Museum for World Peace is located next to the Ritsumeikan University campus in northern Kyoto. Its establishment in 1992 is just one example of Ritsumeikan’s ongoing dedication to anti-war sentiment, borne of the university’s extensive military involvement in World War II. Professor Anzai Ikuro, the museum’s director, states, “The fundamental principle of the peace museum is to face the past faithfully. We must face the past sincerely and admit what actually happened in history. We feel that the Japanese government is not facing the past faithfully and (as a result) there are many controversial problems between Japan and Korea and China.”<sup>25</sup> Overall, the museum’s goal seems to be

to expose the atrocities caused by war around the world, beginning with a critical admission of Japan's conduct overseas, conduct in particular many other historical narratives are afraid to touch.

The first section of the museum deals critically with Japan's military activities overseas, leading up to and during World War II, and also includes a large section on Japanese citizens who criticized their nation and strove for peace. Additional exhibits have continued to be added since 2005, and the museum's content now deals with conflicts around the world, and also has space upstairs for rotating exhibits. This paper will focus largely on the first section of the museum.

Unlike the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, the Kyoto Museum for World Peace uses the emperor extensively as a key player in its narrative. After an animated video about a Japanese boy growing up to be deployed to the warfront and killed, the first line of the first panel in the museum, labeled "Soldiers and the Armed Forces," reads, "The modern Japanese military forces were deemed to belong to the Emperor, not to the people, and soldiers' human rights were severely suppressed." In this first section of the museum, the panels continue from this initial assertion to explain the power granted to the emperor through the *Maiji* constitution and through imperial rescripts. Young men were conscripted into the army at age 20, where their education under the Imperial Rescript to the Army and Navy taught them that the emperor was their supreme commander, and that they were to regard any order from a senior officer as an order from the emperor. Emphasis on the *mental* power of the army meant that supplies and modern weaponry were ignored, resulting in a number of deaths in the ranks.<sup>26</sup> All of these compromises were made possible, the Kyoto museum explains, by the system that put the nation before the rights of its people.

The emperor's power is depicted as almost limitless. Another panel states, "By the Japanese Imperial Constitution, promulgated in 1889, the emperor held an absolute right called 'Imperial Supreme Authority.' The Constitutional Legislature

was only able to limit the emperor's rights by a small amount." His power was widespread—the museum details the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education to schools, where children began exposure to Japan's emperor-centered ideology at a young age. These same children were forced to bow before the small shrine containing a photograph of the emperor, a claim illustrated by a photograph of a row of children in uniform, bent at the waist, their heads inclined to an object in the background.

This version of the imperial power story differs considerably from the version publicly accepted from MacArthur's time onward, which depicts the emperor as a powerless puppet. It even goes further than scholars like Titus and Wetzler in their questioning of the puppet image. The emperor of the Kyoto museum was a powerful figure indeed, backed by a favorable constitution framed by an ancient myth, aided by a widely distributed state military ideology, and completely in control of the lives of his subjects. Furthermore, the Kyoto museum rarely mentions politicians or military leaders, the other individuals in positions of power at the time, to whom museum visitors might be able to allocate some of the blame for the atrocities presented later in the museum. "Japan's army was the emperor's army," the museum states, and proceeds to expose some of the most controversial and horrible events of the war, all of which took place at the hands of Japan's military government. While the museum does not directly implicate the emperor in any of the atrocities, it also does little to assuage the idea that the emperor, as the supreme commander of the military, was responsible.

However, does the Kyoto Museum for World Peace really succeed in depicting the emperor to be at fault? It is important to note that what this museum is criticizing is not the emperor as an individual, but the imperial system. Emperor Hirohito is never mentioned by name, and is instead referred to as "the emperor"; only by looking at the dates of events can visitors distinguish between Emperor Hirohito and his predecessors. Furthermore, while the museum points out the great power granted to the emperor through the constitution, he is never

depicted as an individual who has volition or makes decisions. Not once is he depicted as taking any action. When decisions take place, they are by the military government, which is empowered not by the emperor as an individual, but by the imperial system itself. Even the audio guide explains that the ultimate decision to continue the war even after most of Japan's major cities had burned to the ground was "for the purpose of maintaining *kokutai*."<sup>27</sup> According to this museum, it was Japan's imperial system that ultimately was responsible for military expansion and overseas atrocities.

The Kyoto museum, however, does not entirely sidestep questioning Emperor Hirohito's war responsibility. It does so in a panel with the heading "Some Japanese war criminals were not tried because it did not meet the intentions of the United States." Alongside Japanese experiments with biological and chemical warfare overlooked by the occupation, the panel reads, "In order to make the occupation easier for the United States and other nations, the emperor was excluded from the list of war criminals." The panel does not elaborate further, allowing the visitor to make up his or her mind on the issue. However, given the extremely anti-imperial sentiment of this museum, visitors without prior biases would be hard pressed to defend the emperor based on the museum's story alone.

While Emperor Hirohito is never mentioned by name, he is, in a way, a crucial figure in the overall narrative presented by the Kyoto Museum for World Peace. The museum depicts an imperial system that grants inviolable power to its leader, in fact even to the *image* of its leader. The individual behind the title of emperor in this narrative is absent almost completely—the one person who, according to the Japanese constitution, should have been able to put an end to the cruelty and war perpetrated by the Japanese military. It is through this system that the gross breaches of universal human rights, which are the focus of this museum, were able to take place. The emperor's role in this narrative is to provide a focus for blame, and his service in this capacity does not seem entirely inaccurate.

The museum's neglect to investigate or even mention the possibility of internal constrictions on the emperor's power not

explicitly mentioned in the constitution calls into question the overall accuracy of the museum. However, this omission certainly helps to simplify the narrative of the oft-ignored social injustices that the museum aims to face. Fair treatment of the Japanese government or the imperial system is not the concern of this museum; rather, it aims to explain, as Professor Anzai Ikuro put it, “both what we experienced in the war as well as the experiences of the Asian people at that time.” Rather than explaining Emperor Hirohito’s, or any other leader’s, individual role in the war, this museum’s primary function is to describe the *experience* of war from the ground. The all-powerful emperor described by this museum is an image that dates to this time. Its inclusion seems meant to leave visitors with the same feeling that Japanese citizens might have felt: powerless, compromised, and perhaps even resistant.

### *Yushukan*

Yushukan is located just next to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Though officially the two are not directly connected, their proximity and the fact that the museum is most easily accessed through the shrine gates make them appear as two parts of the same entity. The museum was established in 1882, not long after the establishment of the shrine in 1869. The museum itself is maintained by the shrine, and calls itself one of Japan’s oldest war museums. The dedication on the website states, “Yushukan is a museum to inherit sincerity and records of enshrined divinities of Yasukuni Shrine by displaying their historically important wills and relics.”<sup>28</sup> The divinities mentioned in this explanation are war heroes, men and women “who dedicated their precious lives for their loving motherland, hometowns and families.”<sup>29</sup> Yushukan, like the shrine next door, sometimes comes under criticism for its portrayal of Japanese history, its nationalistic bent, and its glorification of war. On these counts, it is certainly of a different ilk than the museums in Kyoto and Hiroshima.

After walking through an impressive entryway displaying military machinery, visitors head upstairs and into a pair of rooms displaying “the history of the Japanese warrior.” The first room

is minimally filled, with a few glass panels displaying poetry and symbols of warrior spirit, patriotism, and the Japanese nation. The room directly behind this gives a timeline of famous Japanese wars and overseas expansion, notably beginning with Emperor Jimmu (711-585 BC), ostensibly the first emperor of Japan.<sup>30</sup>

The ensuing narrative, though focused on the military aspects of Japanese history, is in a way centered on the narrative of the imperial line. Emperors throughout history, including Jimmu, Komei (1846-1867), and Meiji (1867-1912) are depicted primarily as wise leaders with a great deal of concern for their subjects—qualities that are reflected in their poetry, which is quoted calligraphically on panels throughout the museum. The presence of the emperors throughout the museum adds a somber—it would not be inaccurate to say “religious”—tone to what is otherwise a tale of battles won and lost.

The inclusion of, and even the centrality of imperial history in the Yushukan narrative of Japanese wars is not coincidental. Yushukan is, in fact, a particularly visible retelling of well-known Japanese nationalist history. In this tale, the emperor’s family line is of the same lineage of deities that created Japan, and it is through the power of these deities that the emperor is able to rule. In this way, the purported unbroken line of emperors from ancient days up to the present is the very essence of the Japanese nation. Although in fact the imperial household has held various amounts of power throughout Japan’s long history, Yushukan’s narrative clearly comes to a high point at the Meiji Restoration, when the emperor’s power is restored. The use of the term “restoration of imperial rule of old” implies a return not only of the emperor’s power, but of the correct order of things.

This use of imperial narrative is extremely valuable to the museum’s overall goal, historical representation of Japan’s military history, in a way that supplements the deification of war heroes at the neighboring shrine. War heroes are those who died in service of their nation, a concept which cannot exist without the simultaneous existence of a unified nation to

die for. Of course, the concept of Japan as a unified nation begins with the end of the Warring States period (mid-fifteenth century to early seventeenth century), and evolved into something close to its current state as late as the Meiji period (1868-1912). In spite of this, the Yushukan narrative goes back to a time before recorded history, and certainly before the unification of Japan into one nation.

What unifies this extremely long history of Japan into one cohesive narrative is the imperial line. From a Japanese mythological perspective, the unbroken line of emperors has existed from the beginning. Yushukan introduces legendary military leaders alongside the emperors of old, and their mission is depicted to be more or less one and the same—to ensure the prosperity of their homeland and, by association, the imperial system.

Against this backdrop, Yushukan presents a long and detail-oriented narrative of Japan's military history after the Meiji restoration. The exhibits are resplendent with maps and diagrams, heavily supported by photographs and personal effects of the war heroes enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine. The museum's function as a glorified repository for such objects is clear; meanwhile, Japanese internal politics are largely unmentioned in this section of the museum.

Before proceeding to narratives of Japan's involvement in World War II specifically, where Emperor Hirohito appears for the first time, there is one more room in the museum that is notable for the purposes of this study. This is the Special Exhibition Room, reserved for exhibits related to the imperial family. Visitors entering from the long side of a rectangular room are immediately faced with portraits of Emperors Meiji, Taisho, and Showa (Hirshito). Two glass display cases along the sides of the room contain photographs, documents, and personal effects such as swords and military uniforms. The Special Exhibition room stands out, particularly as it seems an obvious break from the chronological order imposed on the rest of the museum—its effect is something like an intermission in a long documentary. The uniqueness and importance of this exhibit is further emphasized by its position in the museum, in the rear

center of a rectangular building. The plaque at the entrance notes that this is the most honored position for the exhibit to be placed—the same position that the sacred object would occupy in a shrine. The building itself, then, is organized as a shrine, surrounded by a number of deities, the greatest of which is located in the sacred center.

Yushukan's organization, unlike that of the two museums discussed earlier in this paper, is largely chronological. For this reason, Emperor Hirohito himself does not appear until near the end of the historical narrative, which draws to a close shortly after the conclusion of World War II. His role begins in a timeline laid out across the wall of multiple rooms, which outlines negotiations between Japan and the United States between September and December of 1941, the time between initial Hull Note negotiations and Japan's declaration of war against the Allies. Among terse entries reflecting Japan's wish for peace and the unwillingness of the Americans to negotiate, the notes on the imperial conferences are something of a break. One reads:

At an Imperial Conference, the decision is made to go to war with the United States unless an agreement has been reached by late October. Emperor Showa requests that every effort be made to reach a peaceful settlement after reciting the poem by Emperor Meiji:

*Across the four seas  
All are brothers.  
In such a world  
Why do the waves rage,  
The winds roar?*

Subsequent entries depict the emperor in a similar fashion, cautioning his officials “not to be bound to decisions,” to choose peace over war if possible.

The tale, as it is told here, is tragic. The Japanese nation, under the caring and moderate guidance of the emperor, began expansion into Asia “to ensure the stability of East Asia and to

contribute to world peace,” declares an Imperial Rescript dated December 8, 1941. Hostilities in China were due to China’s “failure to comprehend the true intentions” of the Japanese Empire, and were only exacerbated by support from the United States and Britain. Under economic and political pressure from the war mongering Allies, Japan was left with no choice but to go to war.

This timeline is followed by another detailed account of battles won and lost, which draws to a close as Japan’s prospects take a turn for the worse and Japanese forces begin to retreat. In spite of the efforts of “pro-Japanese experts” Henry Stimson and Joseph Grew the Potsdam Declaration is issued without any assurance that Japan’s imperial system (*kokutai*) would be preserved. The Japanese government chooses to wait until a reply is received from the Soviet Union regarding mediation in negotiation of surrender terms, but a mistranslation leads to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Here follow two long accounts of Imperial Conferences regarding the Potsdam Declaration, which took place on August 9 and 14, respectively. Emperor Hirohito is the focal point of these two reports. In both instances, government officials are unable to decide whether or not the terms of surrender should be accepted. Their anxiety is over the lack of any assurance of the preservation of *kokutai*. In both instances, the officials ask Emperor Hirohito for *seidan*.<sup>31</sup> On the first occasion, in a short quote, the emperor expresses his wish that the innocent people of Japan should be spared, and that the war should come to an end, but the second conference is even more climactic. The emperor is given a long quote, in which he expresses eloquently his wish that his people should be saved, at risk of his own life. The emperor’s words end “amidst bitter sobbings of all those present at the conference.” Subsequently an Imperial Rescript is issued to announce the end of the war. The panel adjacent to this one contains a poem written by the emperor regarding the August 14 Rescript:

*Saddened by the loss  
Of the precious lives*

*Of so many of my people  
I ended the war.  
It mattered not what became of me.*

Following the emperor's radio announcement of surrender, the Japanese nation sadly but obediently lays down its arms, impressing even the occupation forces with their compliance with the emperor's wishes. The narrative finishes with the January 1 Rescript (in which the emperor renounces his divinity—Yushukan claims that the emperor's true intention was to declare a return to the principles laid down by Emperor Meiji and to bolster the spirit of his people) and the emperor's subsequent travels across Japan, which "cheered and reassured Japanese people, and reminded the occupation authorities that the Emperor and his people were one and inseparable."

Overall, the image of the emperor that we draw from this museum is very different from those given in Kyoto and Hiroshima. Emperor Hirohito is described as an individual with a distinct personality and individual concerns. His primary worry is the well-being of his people. In this way, his personality does not differ greatly from that of the other great emperors who came before him. In fact, while he is an individual, his reign is still linked to the great imperial myth, both implicitly through the inclusion of the imperial line narrative throughout the museum and explicitly through his purported references to Emperor Meiji. He appears greatly respected, both by members of the Japanese government and by the Japanese people, of whom no better example can be given than the hundreds of photographs of young men who lost their lives in the war. Ultimately he repays their sacrifice by his willingness to sacrifice his own life for the safety of his people.

Emperors throughout the museum, and Emperor Hirohito specifically, are shown to have a great deal of power to decide the fate of the Japanese government. How, then, does the Yushukan narrative explain the emperor's exclusion from the list of those tried for war crimes in the Tokyo Trials? There are two factors that contribute to his innocence. The first is Emperor

Hirohito's continual dedication, according to the records presented, to the quest for peace, as mentioned above. The second, however, is this museum's justification of Japan's motivation in going to war. Yushukan's war narrative greatly downplays the severity of the effects that the Japanese occupation had on Asian countries, emphasizing instead Japan's intent to free Asia from colonial rule by Western countries and bring peace to its neighbors. It claims that Asian nations' failure to comprehend Japan's peaceful intentions, combined the determination of the United States and Britain to foil Japan's plan, was responsible for Japan's involvement in World War II. This strain of logic leaves not only the emperor innocent, but also suggests that other war criminals (including the seven Class A war criminals enshrined at Yasukuni, whose photographs are displayed prominently in the museum) should be pardoned, as their intentions were pure and their leadership concerned only with peace.

### **Conclusion**

Each of the three museums selected for investigation during the term of this research has taken a radically different approach to its presentation of World War II. The material in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is limited in order to focus on what happened in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped. The Kyoto Museum for World Peace, in an almost penitent tone, harshly criticizes the decisions and conduct of the Japanese military in order to highlight social injustices, which its curators feel have been largely ignored by the Japanese. Yushukan's primary goal is to showcase the personal effects of the deified war dead, and goes to great lengths to glorify the Japanese nation and its military history in order to do so.

To these ends, all three museums give preference to some events, while downplaying or completely excluding others. The manner in which Emperor Hirohito is described (or excluded) in the narrative of each museum is certainly not exempt from this pattern. On the contrary, we have seen that presentations of Emperor Hirohito are indicative of the museum's intended

narrative as a whole. Hiroshima is able to exclude him almost entirely, due to its focus on events within the city, though an exception is made both for the emperor and for the museum's regional limitation in the section dealing with the United States. Kyoto does not distinguish between Emperor Hirohito and the imperial system, but heavily criticizes the latter and uses it as the focal point for the anger that visitors are sure to feel after viewing exhibits that expose the social injustice of war. By contrast, at Yushukan the imperial system is the thread that ties together the narrative of glorified, patriotic wars. Emperor Hirohito, while depicted as one in a long line of noble leaders, is without a doubt one of the most important—he saved his nation and his people by ending Japan's most destructive war ever, and his dedication to his people continued.

Not only are these depictions of the emperor telling of each museum's overall message, but they also give an idea of the great range of approaches to the issue of Emperor Hirohito. While the Hiroshima museum pragmatically avoids this figure, Kyoto and Yushukan seem to take opposite stances, with the former blatantly critical, the latter bordering on worship.

However, are the two truly directly opposed? It is notable that the Kyoto museum criticizes the system, but not the individual. Had it chosen to be critical of Emperor Hirohito as an individual it would not have been alone in the world of World War II discourse, but instead it avoids any mention of individual emperors at all. It is possible that this is a reflection of the pressure put on liberal peace museums of this type by conservative groups. However, it also seems possible that a lack of direct criticism of Hirohito in any of the museums indicates something else. Whether this is a reflection of positive public opinion of Emperor Hirohito himself, or of a taboo on direct attacks is a topic for further research.

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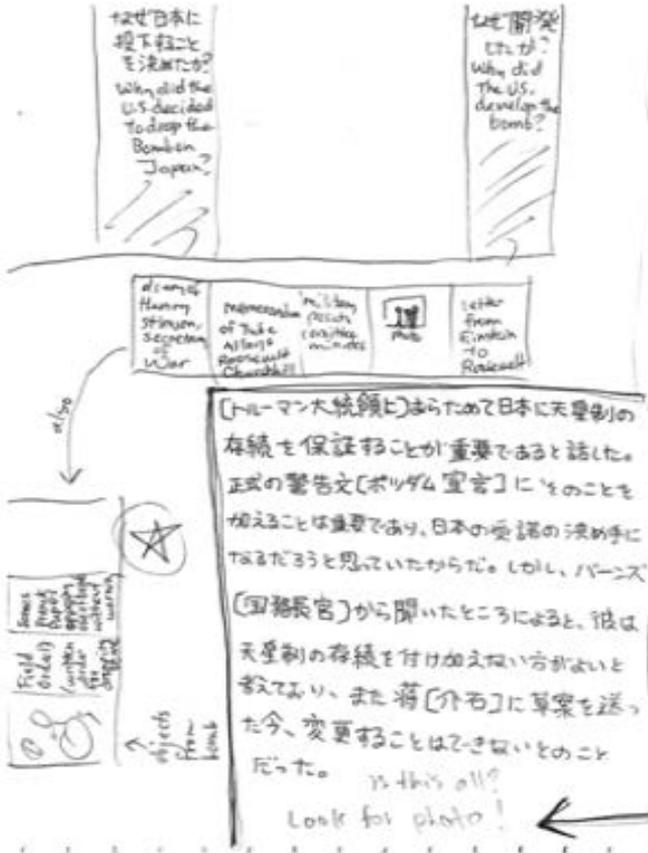
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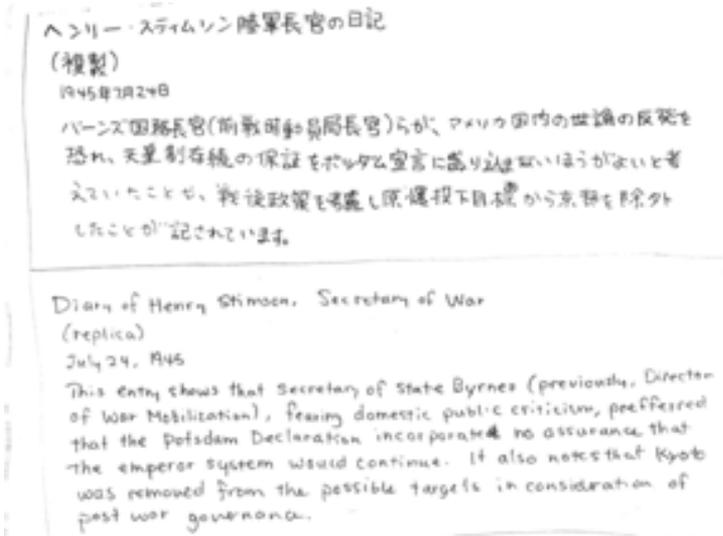
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Appendix I—Examples of Notes from Hiroshima Peace Memorial  
Museum

Image 1: Layout sketch, Hiroshima MuseumMuMuseum



## Image 2: Henry Stimson's Diary



## Appendix II—Example of Notes from Kyoto Museum for World Peace

## Item 1: Example of panel, in English and Japanese

## 軍隊と兵士

近代日本の軍隊は国民の軍隊ではなく、天皇の軍隊であった。兵士の人権はきびしく抑圧されていた。十五年戦争になっても精神主義が強調され、兵器の近代化や補給などが軽視された。兵士の命は無視され、犠牲を大きくした。日本軍は中国などに無差別爆撃をしたり、毒ガスや細菌兵器などもつかった。戦場では捕虜や民間人を殺したり、虐待したりした。抵抗する地域を破壊しつくような作戦もおこなった。

## Soldiers and the Armed Forces

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japanese military forces were deemed to belong to the Emperor, not to the people, and soldiers'

human rights were severely suppressed. Even at the time of the so-called “Fifteen-Year War” (1931-1945), emphasis was put on mental rather than physical power; weapons were old-fashioned and supplies were poor. No attention was paid to the dignity of the soldiers’ lives. Inevitably, these conditions resulted in increasing numbers of deaths in the ranks.

In addition, Japanese military forces conducted indiscriminate bombing and used poison gases and biological weapons against countries such as China. In war zones, they killed and tortured soldiers and civilians alike, their operations aimed at totally destroying areas that put up resistance.

### *Item 2: Example of transcribed audio guide*

戦争だからといって何をやってもいいというわけではありません。毒物の使用や物資の略奪、捕虜の虐待などはハーグ陸戦条約やジュネーブ捕虜条約で禁止されています。これらに違反することは通例の戦争犯罪と呼ばれていますが、第二次世界大戦後は戦争犯罪はもっと広くとらえられ、侵略戦争を始めたこと自体が平和に対する罪と考えられ、一般住民を大量に殺害するなどの残虐な行為は人道に対する罪として裁かれるようになりました。ドイツのナチ指導者の罪は後に見るようにヌルンベルグ裁判で裁かれましたが、日本の戦争指導者たちは通称東京裁判と呼ばれた極東国際軍事裁判で裁かれ、東条英機ら七人が絞首刑を言い渡されました。また、通例の戦争犯罪を犯した5700人の被告はBC級戦犯裁判で裁かれ、984名が死刑になりました。しかし、今なお裁かれていない戦争責任の問題も少なくありません。連合軍による日本の都市に対する無差別爆撃、アメリカの原爆投下、ソ連軍によるシベリア抑留などもそうですし、日本軍についても天皇の戦争責任、軍隊慰安婦や強制連行などの問題が残されています。日本の戦争責任に関連して、1995年、村山富一首相が日本の侵略戦争と植民地支配を反省し、謝罪する談話を発表したことも記憶されるべきでしょう。

Today the world no longer accepts the old saying “All’s fair in war.” The Hague Convention of 1907, establishing the laws and customs of war on land, and the Geneva Convention of 1929, on the treatment of prisoners of war, outlawed the use of poisonous substances, the plunder of occupied territories, the killing or abuse of prisoners of war, and other such acts, defining them as war crimes. After World War II, the definition of “war crime” was expanded, so that the very act of starting a war of aggression was considered a crime against peace, and the massacre of civilians was punishable as

a crime against humanity. After World War II, surviving Nazi leaders were tried for war crimes in the Nuremberg Trials, while the war crimes committed by Japanese military leaders were addressed in the Far East International War Crimes Tribunal, which was held in Tokyo. Tojo Hideki, the Japanese Prime Minister who ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor, and six other Japanese leaders were sentenced to death for Class A war crimes. Of the 5700 Japanese accused of regular war crimes, and tried as B and C Class war crimes tribunals, 984 were executed. However, responsibility has not been settled for many other war crimes committed by both sides. Unresolved issues concerning the conduct of the Allied Forces include the indiscriminate bombing of Japanese civilians, the dropping of the atomic bomb by American forces, and the internment of Japanese in Siberia by Soviet forces. On the Japanese side, they include the Emperor's responsibility for the war, the sexual enslavement of the so-called "comfort women," and the abduction of civilians for use as forced laborers. The public apology and expression of remorse for the Japanese invasion and occupation of Asia by Japanese Prime Minister Murayama in 1995 was a notable sign of progress in Japan's acknowledgement of its responsibility. This section of the exhibit includes photos of the Far East International War Crimes Tribunal and panels describing issues yet to be resolved, including the crimes of Japan's infamous Unit 731, and compensation for the so-called "comfort women" who were used for sexual slaves for Japanese troops during the war. Displays in the glass cases also cover the internment of Japanese in Siberia, after the end of the war, and include items used by some of the Japanese held there.

### Item 3: Photograph Notation

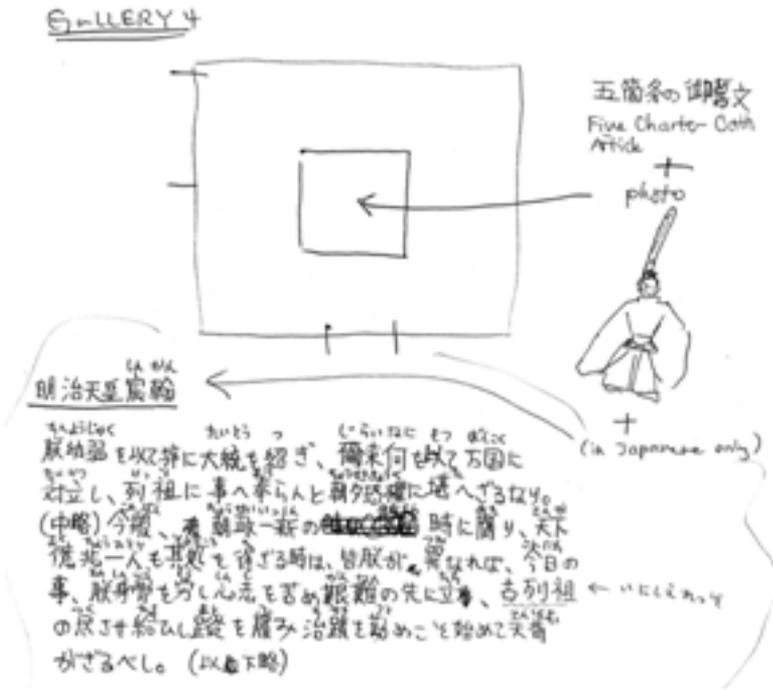


Appendix III- Examples of Notes from Yushukan

Image 1: Timeline-“Japan’s Quest for Avoiding a War”



Image 2: Meiji Emperor's Imperial Letter



Appendix IV – Selected Photographs

Image 1: Hiroshima Peace



*Image 2: Kyoto Museum for World Peace*



*Image 3: Yasukuni Shrine*



### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>John Benson and Takao Matsumura, *Japan, 1868-1945: From Isolation to Occupation* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001), 134.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 106.

<sup>3</sup>John Benson and Takao Matsumura, 135.

<sup>4</sup>Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>Masanori Nakamura, *The Japanese Monarchy: Ambassador Joseph*

*Grew and the Making of the "Symbol Emperor System," 1931-1991* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992), 74-77.

<sup>6</sup>John Benson and Takao Matsumura, 221-222.

<sup>7</sup>David Bergamini, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy*, (New York: Morrow, 1971).

<sup>8</sup>See Charles D. Sheldon, "Japanese Aggression and the Emperor, 1931-1941, from Contemporary Diaries," *Modern Asian Studies*, 10 (1): 1-40 and Herschel Webb, "Review of *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy*," *Pacific Historical Review* 42 (1): 124-125.

<sup>9</sup>Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 18.

<sup>11</sup>Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954).

<sup>12</sup>Leonard Mosley, *Hirohito, Emperor of Japan* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

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<sup>15</sup>Stephen S. Large, *Emperor Hirohito and Showa Japan: A Political Biography* (London, Routledge, 1992), 82.

<sup>16</sup>Peter Michael Wetzler, *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup>Geoffrey M. White, "Museum/Memorial/Shrine: National Narrative in National Spaces," *Museum Anthropology* 21(1): 8.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 24.

<sup>20</sup>Daniel Seltz, "Remembering the War and the Atomic Bombs: New Museums, New Approaches," *Radical History Review* 75: 73.

<sup>21</sup>Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka, "Exhibiting World War II in Japan and the United States since 1995," *Pacific Historical Review* 76 (1): 70.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 72.

<sup>23</sup>Author's translation, from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum Mission Statement

(広島平和記念資料館条例)。「第1条：原子爆弾による被害の実相をあらゆる国々の人々に伝え、ヒロシマの心である核兵器廃絶と世界恒久平和の実現に寄与するため、広島平和記念資料館を設置する。」)

- <sup>24</sup>Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka, “Exhibiting World War II in Japan and the United States since 1995,” 65.
- <sup>25</sup>Kyoto Museum for World Peace, Ritsumeikan Univeristy, Ritsumeikan, 3 (1), <http://www.ritsumeikai.ac.jp/eng/newsletter/summer2005/3feature3-1.shtml> (accessed April 25, 2010).
- <sup>26</sup>It is interesting to note that the Japanese version of the text uses the word 犠牲 (victim) to describe the soldiers who died under these conditions, an implication that is lost in the English translation.
- <sup>27</sup>国体 – This word is translated as “imperial system” but has strong connotations of nationalism. This is the only occasion where this museum uses the word kokutai instead of *tennousei* (天皇制) which translates literally to “imperial system” and is not so heavily nuanced as kokutai. It is notable that the audio guide, following this quote, even interprets the word for the audience, explaining that “preservation of *kokutai*” literally meant protecting the emperor.
- <sup>28</sup>Yushukan: Yasukuni Shrine, <http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/yushukan/index.html> (accessed April 25, 2010).
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup>According to the Kojiki, Emperor Jimmu is a descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu. This myth has long been used to legitimize imperial rule, and was used especially during the wartime Showa Period (1926-1945) to explain Japan’s history of expansionism.
- <sup>31</sup>聖断 (imperial decision)