Japan After World War II Essay, Research Paper

The occupation of Japan was, from the beginning to the end, an American operation.

General Douglas MacArthur, sole supreme commander of the Allied Power was

in charge of it. The Americans had insufficient men to make a military

government of Japan possible; so they decided to act through the existing

Japanese government. General Mac Arthur became, except in name, dictator

of Japan. He imposed his will on Japan. Demilitarisation was speedily

carried out, demobilisation of the former imperial forces was completed by

early 1946.

Japan was extensively fire bombed during the second world war. The

stench of sewer gas, rotting garbage, and the acrid smell of ashes and

scorched debris pervaded the air. The Japanese people had to live in the

damp, and cold of the concrete buildings, because they were the only ones

left. Little remained of the vulnerable wooden frame, tile roof dwelling

lived in by most Japanese. When the first signs of winter set in, the

occupation forces immediately took over all the steam-heated buildings. The

Japanese were out in the cold in the first post war winter fuel was very

hard to find, a family was considered lucky if they had a small barely

glowing charcoal brazier to huddle around. That next summer in random

spots new ho uses were built, each house was standardised at 216 square

feet, and required 2400 board feet of material in order to be built. A

master plan for a modernistic city had been drafted, but it was cast aside

because of the lack of time before the next winter. The thousands of

people who lived in railroad stations and public parks needed housing. Some even lived in forests.

All the Japanese heard was democracy from the Americans. All they cared

about was food. General MacAruther asked the government to send food, when

they refused he sent another telegram that said, “Send me food, or send me

bullets.”

American troops were forbidden to eat local food, as to keep from cutting

from cutting into the sparse local supply.

No food was brought in expressly for the Japanese during the first

six months after the American presence there. Herbert Hoover, serving as

chairman of a special presidential advisory committee, recommended minimum

imports to Japan of 870,000 tons of food to be distributed in different

urban areas. Fish, the source of so much of the protein in the Japanese

diet, were no longer available in adequate quantities because the fishing

fleet, particularly the large vessels, had been badly decimated by the war

and because the USSR closed off the fishing grounds in the north.

The most important aspect of the democratisation policy was the adoption

of a new constitution and its supporting legislation. When the Japanese

government proved too confused or too reluctant to come up with a

constitutional reform that satisfied MacArthur, he had his own staff draft

a new constitution in February 1946. This, with only minor changes, was

then adopted by the Japanese government in the form of an imperial

amendment to the 1889 constitution and went into effect on May 3, 1947. The

new Constitution was a perfection of the British parliamentary form of

government that the Japanese had been moving toward in the 1920s. Supreme

political power was assigned to the Diet. Cabinets were made responsible to

the Diet by having the prime minister elected by the lower house. The

House of Peers was replaced by an elected House of Councillors. The

judicial system was made as independent of executive interference as

possible, and a newly created supreme court was given the power to review

the constitutionality of laws. Local governments were given greatly

increased powers.

The Emperor was reduced to being a symbol of the unity of the nation.

Japanese began to see him in person. He went to hospitals, schools, mines,

industrial plants; he broke ground for public buildings and snipped tape at

the opening of gates and highways. Suddenly the public began to take this shy, ill-at-ease man to

their hearts. They saw in him something of their own conquered selves, force

to do what was alien to them. In 1948, in a newspaper poll, Emperor

Hirohito was voted the most popular man in Japan.

Civil liberties were emphasised, women were given full equality with men.

Article 13 and 19 in the new Constitution, prohibits discrimination in

political, economic, and social relations because of race, creed, sex,

social status, or family origin. This is one of the most explicitly

progressive statements on human rights anywhere in law. General Douglas

MacArthur emerged as a radical feminist because he was “convinced that the

place of women in Japan must be brought to a level consistent with that of

women in the western democracies.” So the Japanese women got their equal

rights amendment long before a concerted effort was made to obtain one in

America.

Compulsory education was extended to nine years, efforts were made to make

education more a training in thinking than in rote memory, and the school

system above the six elementary grades was revised to conform to the

American pattern. This last mechanical change produced great confusion and

dissatisfaction but became so entrenched that it could not be revised even

after the Americans departed.

Japan’s agriculture was the quickest of national activities to recover

because of land reform. The Australians came up with the best plan. It

was basis was this: There were to be no absentee landlords. A person who

actually worked the land could own up to 7.5 archers. Anyone living in a

village near by could keep 2.5 acres. Larger plots of land, exceeding

these limits, were bought up by the government and sold on easy terms to

former tenants. Within two years 2 million tenants became landowners. The

American occupation immediately gained not only a large constituency, for

the new owners had a vested interest in preserving the change, but also a

psychological momentum for other changes they wanted to initiate.

The American labour policy in Japan had a double goal: to encourage the

growth of democratic unions while keeping them free of communists. Union

organisation was used as a balance to the power of management. To the

surprise of the America n authorities, this movement took a decidedly more

radical turn. In the desperate economic conditions of early post-war Japan,

there was little room for successful bargaining over wages, and many labour

unions instead made a bid to take over industry and operate it in their

own behalf. Moreover large numbers of workers in Japan were government

employees, such as railroad workers and teachers, whose wages were set not

by management but by the government. Direct political action therefore

seemed more meaningful to these people than wage bargaining. The Japanese

unions called for a general strike on February 1, 1947. MacArthur warned

the union leadership that he would not countenance a nation-wide strike. The

strike leaders yielded to MacArthur’s will. The re after the political

appeal of radical labour action appeared to wane.

The Americans wanted to disband the great Zaibatsu trust as a means of

reducing Japan’s war-making potential. There were about 15 Zaibatsu

families such as – Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Yasuda, and Sumitomo. The Zaibatsu

controlled the industry of Japan. MacArthur’s liaison men pressured the

Diet into passing the Deconcentration Law in December 1947. In the eyes of

most Japanese this law was designed to cripple Japanese business and

industry forever. The first step in breaking up the Zaibatsu was to spread

their ownership out among the people and to prevent the old owners from

ever again exercising control. The stocks of all the key holding companies

were to be sold to the public. Friends of the old Zaibatsu bought the

stock. In the long run the Zaibatsu were not exactly destroyed, but a few

were weakened and others underwent a considerable shuffle.

The initial period of the occupation from 1945 to 1948 was marked by

reform, the second phase was one of stabilisation. Greater attention was

given to improvement of the economy. Japan was a heavy expense to the

United States. The ordered break-up of the Zaibatsu was slowed down. The

union movement continued to grow, to the ultimate benefit of the worker.

Unremitting pressure on employers brought swelling wages, which meant the

steady expansion of Japan domestic consumer market. This market was a

major reason for Japan’s subsequent economic boom. Another boom to the

economy was the Korean War which proved to be a blessing in disguise. Japan

became the main staging area for military action in Korea and went on a war

boom economy with out having to fight in or pay for a war.

The treaty of peace with Japan was signed at San Francisco in September

1951 by Japan, the United States, and forty-seven other nations. The

Soviet Union refused to sign it. The treaty went into effect in April 1952,

officially terminating the United States military occupation and restoring

full independence.

What is extraordinary in the Occupation and its aftermath was the

insignificance of the unpleasant. For the Japanese, the nobility of

American ideals and the essential benignity of the American presence

assuaged much of the bitterness and anguish of defeat. For the Americans,

the joys of promoting peace and democracy triumphed over the attendant

frustrations and grievances. Consequently, the Occupation served to lay down

a substantial capital of good will on which both America and Jap an would

draw in the years ahead.