



Emperor (2013)

Personal Notes

While I never saw or met General Douglas MacArthur, my Auntie Vivian McConchie (nee Black) - (my father's sister and wife to Ross McConchie, the man to whom this course is dedicated) – actually worked as a clerk in the General's office at Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road Melbourne. When General MacArthur later moved his headquarters to Brisbane to be closer to the conflicts being fought in the Pacific, Viv also relocated and continued as part of his staff.

On a trivial history note, in making the rail journey from Melbourne to Brisbane, Douglas MacArthur stopped at the Albury Railway station to make the switch from the 5'3" Victorian rail track system to the 4'8" NSW system. I wonder what he thought of our archaic and inefficient rail transport system, which continues to plague our Australian nation more than 70 years on?

Background

The film 'Emperor' provides a solid and important depiction of a less well known but historically significant event in our modern world history, set in a devastated Japan just weeks after the Japanese surrender.



In late 1945 some in the United States are beginning to see Japan as a potential ally in East Asia, as relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated and the civil war in China continued.

However, Allied war propaganda had so effectively demonized the Japanese people and Emperor Hirohito in particular, that there was significant public, political and military pressure in America at this time to punish Japan's Emperor for his part behind the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

At that point Japan was starving and teetering on the edge of total collapse, and it wouldn't have taken much for widespread resentment to ignite into a nation-wide revolt.

MacArthur was astute enough to realize that with hostile Russian armies poised on Japan's northern doorstep, his execution of the Emperor could have provided the spark for Japanese insurrection and the opportunity for the entry of Communism into the country.

MacArthur was therefore faced with a dilemma: he was required to prosecute thirty of Japan's worst war criminals - the masterminds of the war - but the question of what to do with Emperor Hirohito loomed large. To arrest and try him for war crimes would endanger the occupation and break the tenuous peace. To leave him unpunished would invite serious displeasure from the American public and its politicians – a distasteful prospect for a man with Presidential aspirations.

The American public and the Justice Department wanted the Emperor tried as a war criminal, an outcome that would most likely have led to his hanging. MacArthur on the other hand, realized that he needed the emperor and his mystical appeal to the Japanese people as a veritable god in order to implement the enormous political and social changes that he and the occupation authorities were planning for post-war Japan.

The film strongly hints that MacArthur had already made up his mind about the treatment of Hirohito, which he almost certainly had, but he wanted Fellers to supply the written rationale for his decision.

Film Review

The film 'Emperor' has three story strands: MacArthur's occupation of Japan; Fellers' investigations leading to his written opinion to the General; and Fellers' search for his former girl-friend in the midst of Japan's post war chaos.

The film focuses primarily on General Bonner Fellers (Mathew Fox), a Japanese cultural expert on whose opinion MacArthur chooses to rely. Fellers was close to MacArthur, having served with him even before the war.

Fellers loved Japan, had visited the country before the war, and produced for the American military a valuable assessment of the Japanese military mind. He had additionally predicted war with Japan well in advance of Pearl Harbour.

Fellers re-joined MacArthur in 1943 and accompanied him during the Supreme Commander's momentous first weeks on post war Japanese territory.

MacArthur assigns the task of making an initial assessment of the Emperors potential guilt to Fellers, with a timeframe restriction of just ten days to conduct one of the most crucial post-war American military investigations. This seems strange, for to my knowledge this review process in real life was conducted over a period of some five months.

Fellers must determine if Emperor Hirohito should be arrested and tried for instigating the War against the United States and for overseeing unspeakable atrocities —or if he will be allowed to remain as head of the Japanese nation.

Except for a series of 'flashbacks', "Emperor" is set in the immediate aftermath of the war. The embers are still burning in Tokyo and the nation is on its knees. The defeated Emperor Hirohito resides within the untouched Imperial Palace in central Tokyo, while General MacArthur and his team debate his fate.

The film vividly portrays the physical destruction and devastation suffered by the ordinary Japanese people in the immediate post war era, while also hinting that the property assets of senior Japanese officials such as the Emperors Palace may largely have survived intact.

Fellers' flashbacks relate to a pre-war romance he had with a Japanese student named Aya (Eriko Hatsune), who happened to be the niece of a Japanese General of the Japanese Imperial Army. The latter's infrequent appearances in the film provide us with some valuable insights into the complexities of Japanese traditions and culture.

In his endeavours to investigate the Emperor's possible complicity Fellers questions a number of Hirohito's former advisers. These included Japan's war time **Prime Minister** and army chief of staff, Hideki Tojo and the Lord Privy Seal, Marquis Koichi Kibo, the highest figure in the Imperial Household and a friend to Hirohito.

Fellers is frustrated with the information he receives and is unable to come to a verifiable decision. The evidence provided by two of the Emperor's key advisers indicates that he was definitely instrumental in bringing the war to a conclusion, in the face of violent opposition of his 'militarist' advisers and their supporters. However Fellers is unable to obtain evidence of the Emperors complicity or otherwise in Japan's decision to launch the War.

Towards the end of his investigations Fellers comes to the conclusion that a person could carry out research for 1000 years on the issue and be none the wiser as to the extent of Hirohito's role in starting the war. I think that is a pretty fair assessment of this whole opaque question of Emperor Hirohito's innocence or guilt. Quite simply, it is something we will never know.



Finally, in a unique and historic meeting between the Emperor Hirohito and General MacArthur within the latter's private residence, the Emperor's perception of human dignity is presented and MacArthur finds the rationale for the outcome he had preferred.

MacArthur's decision not to charge the Emperor with war crimes became the lynchpin of his Japanese post war policy: to respect the cultural differences of the Japanese instead of seeking to override them. This sent the message to the Japanese people that the post-war American mission was not to occupy and control, but to facilitate the rebuilding of the nation and the recovery of its people.

In retrospect, MacArthur's enlightened policies led to a Japanese post war economic recovery from wartime devastation, and to a post-war harmony between Japan and the West that replaced virulent wartime hatred.

Points of Interest for our Chat Room Discussion

Given the inhumane treatment meted out by the Japanese army to Australian and other Allied prisoners of war, to this day many Westerners continue to believe that Hirohito was a war criminal who should have been punished.

Given the geopolitical background that existed back in 1946, what is your view on this contentious issue.

With the declaration of an armistice in the Great War in 1918 and the terms and consequences of that war stipulated by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the losing nation -Germany- was forced to pay compensation to the victors.

In 1945 however, the victors on this occasion rebuilt the Japanese society and its economy.

Outline your views on the policy of rebuilding rather than destroying nations that have been defeated in war.