

Developing American Cold War Policy: The Occupation of Japan

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Abstract

With tensions rising between the United States and the Soviet Union after the Second World War, most of the world found itself embroiled in the ideological battle that took place between the two superpowers. In response to what it saw as Soviet aggression, the United States quickly and drastically changed its post-war foreign policy objectives. This shift was most visible in how the United States handled its occupation of Japan. This paper discusses how American policy towards Japan changed due to the perceived Soviet threat. Although the Americans first sought to introduce democracy to their former adversary, the Cold War led to this goal being deprioritized in favor of establishing Japan as a steadfast ally against the spread of communism in Asia. Through this, the United States established foreign policy objectives that defined its handling of the Cold War.

The Cold War, in many ways, defined the latter half of the twentieth century. Almost immediately after the end of the Second World War, much of the world was dragged into yet another conflict as two world powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, waged an ideological battle. To stop the spread of communism and Soviet influence, the United States made significant changes to how it conducted foreign policy. This can be clearly seen through the American occupation of Japan after the Second World War. Initially, this occupation was meant to transform Japan into an

independent, democratic nation that would remain peaceful and demilitarized perpetually. Once the Americans began to focus on addressing the Soviet threat, the occupation of Japan entered a new period that was defined by a reversal of previous policies. This Reverse Course, as the time period became known, began in 1947, just two years into the occupation, and lasted until the Americans officially left Japan in 1952. During this five year period, the Americans were no longer concerned with establishing Japan as a pacifist and independent nation. Instead, they sought to

ensure that the United States had a loyal ally in Asia that could help defend against Soviet expansion.

There were two main ways that American policy changed to respond to the Cold War. The first, more subtle shift was through a new emphasis on supporting conservative politics within Japan. Earlier in the occupation, the United States had primarily focused on strengthening democracy. This was done by purging conservatives who had worked in Japan's wartime administration from their roles in the government and bureaucracy while simultaneously encouraging the expansion of left-leaning political parties, like the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP), to promote political diversity. In theory, this was meant to promote a democratic system with more varied politics, while simultaneously rooting out any militarist tendencies that remained from the war. However, the changes brought on by the Reverse Course meant that there was very little time for political diversity to entrench itself.

By 1947, the American occupation, led by General Douglas MacArthur, began cracking down on the labor unions and leftist political parties that they had, just months earlier, been actively supporting. Labor unions were banned from organizing a general strike against working conditions, with the Americans citing concerns over disrupted industry (MacArthur, 1964, p. 308). Political parties like the JSP were treated as Soviet sympathizers who were seeking to destabilize the Japanese government (Fearey, 1950, p. 116). This eventually led to a second "red" purge to remove leftists from influential positions. At the same time as leftists had their ability to organize systematically destroyed, conservative political parties experienced a resurgence. Under the guise of adding much-needed experience back into Japan's governmental structure, conservatives within

the American occupation's structure advocated for the removal of many lower-level bureaucrats and politicians from the wartime era from the purge lists, allowing them to re-enter the public service and influence Japan's development once again (Eiji, 2002, p.162). In adopting this drastic deviation from their initial policies, the Americans empowered Japan's conservative, anti-communist parties just as they began targeting leftist political activity.

The second change that occurred during this period was in how the Americans viewed Japan's future as a strategic military asset. During the Reverse Course, the United States steadily weaponized its presence in Japan to establish a military stronghold in Asia that could respond to any threats from the Soviets in the area. At first, American policy in this regard only changed slightly. As they became more concerned with Soviet aggression, the Americans justified extending the occupation in order to protect Japan, which was incredibly vulnerable in its demilitarized state. Initially, the United Nations was meant to secure Japan's safety after military pacifism was enshrined in its post-war Constitution (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947, Document 376). However, the newly formed organization was not yet in a position where it could provide large-scale military protection, particularly from a country as powerful as the Soviet Union. The United States, in its stead, sought to maintain its military presence in Japan to provide that protection while giving itself the ability to quickly respond to any aggression from the Soviets. Part of this shift occurred out of genuine concern for Japan's safety. However, the United States was also hoping to establish a military presence in East Asia to help guard its Pacific coast and Hawai'i (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Document 519). In doing so, the Americans essentially abandoned any notion of an

independent Japan. The United States was given control of Japanese islands to establish military bases, and a long-term partnership was formed that firmly placed Japan in the American sphere of influence (Bix, 1995, p. 351). By abandoning its initial desire to establish Japan as an independent, pacifist nation, the United States fully accepted that it had deserted the aspirations it had laid out before the Cold War began.

These two changes in its policy towards the Japanese occupation reflected some of the larger policy decisions made by the United States to deal with the Soviet threat. The Americans continued to ally with conservative, anti-communist politicians while strengthening their ability to address potential military intervention from the Soviets. In Japan, this was not necessarily a deliberate decision. However, the need to quickly respond to the changing political environment forced the Americans' hands. The occupation of Japan soon became a testing ground for the United States as it developed the policies it would use to respond to the Soviet Union. As the shift in occupation policy reveals, the Cold War had a drastic effect on how the United States handled its foreign policy after the Second World War.

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