

Investigating Fascism: Was Hirohito a Fascist?

The fundamentals of fascism involve extreme nationalism, militarism, and the supremacy of both the nation and the single, powerful leader over the individual citizen. Hiroto (1901-89), the longest reigning emperor of Japan, was the constitutional leader of a fascist state. He aided and abetted fascism. Just how "fascist" Hiroto himself was remains a matter of debate.

First things first: What is Fascism?

In the beginning, there was the "fasces," a symbol represented by an ax tightly bound with sticks. This Ancient Roman symbol of authority and power was ultimately adopted by the 20th Century Italian leader Benito Mussolini. "Fascism" before this was sometimes a benign term for various types of groups (from a word meaning "bundle"). Mussolini made it infamous.

Here is a rewording of Meriam's dictionary definition of fascism. It's an accurate summary of Mussolini's regime.

A political doctrine that puts nation (and sometimes race) ahead of the individual, advocating centralized control under a single autocratic leader, harsh economic and social regulations, and oppressive suppression of opposition.

Fascism sometimes is a general term that means "rule of a dictator," something favored by authoritarian regimes. Political scientists tend to classify fascism a bit more narrowly.

Authoritarian governments want the population to remain passive while fascist regimes demand public participation in society through government-organized channels.

We can summarize the qualities of fascism as including:

- Extreme nationalism
- Cult of Personality
- Militarism
- Ethnic Divisions
- Use of Mass Movements (Negative Populism)
- Denial Of Civil Liberties

The 1930s was a breeding ground for fascism. Economic difficulties led to government by dictators with the rights of the people threatened in various ways, an "us vs. them" nationalistic and militaristic mentality arising. Mussolini and Hitler are prime examples.

Was Japan Fascist As Well?

Japan was pressured to move into the modern age when U.S. naval gunboat diplomacy in the 1850s showed its weak international condition. Japan quickly modernized and provided strong competition to European powers in the Age of Imperialism.

This modernization included a political revolution. The Meiji Constitution of 1889, which was in place until after WWII, set in place a constitutional monarchy with an emperor ruled by subordinate political leaders. The emperor had special respect, treated as a type of divine figure under Shinto, the national religion of Japan. But, his political power was limited.

Japan was controlled by the military by the 1930s with imperialism goals most clearly seen in the nation's war with China. The culture suppressed the rights of the individual for the good of the state. An ultranationalistic policy, including in education that promoted the idea that each person only had value if they served the needs of the state, arose.

Some historians argue that Japan at this point was merely a military dictatorship. Nonetheless, we can see the major signs of fascism. WWII-era Japan can fairly be labeled a fascist state.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FASCISM



NEGATIVE POPULISM

Creating mass movements of most citizens to support the leader.

EXTREME NATIONALISM

The fascist nation is superior to all others

MILITARISM

Needed for defending the nation and empire-building

ETHNIC DIVISIONS

Certain groups are superior and others are scapegoats

CULT OF PERSONALITY

Strong, charismatic leader inspires the masses

DENIAL OF CIVIL LIBERTIES

All opponents are removed, censorship is used for propaganda

Michinomiya Hirohito

Hirohito was born in 1901, the first son of Japan's Crown Prince Yoshihito, who became Emperor Taisho. Hirohito developed an interest in marine biology. Hirohito became the first Japanese crown prince to go abroad, traveling to Europe. The English royal family impressed him.

Hirohito became emperor of Japan in the 1920s when his father died. Hirohito chose Shōwa, which roughly translates to "enlightened harmony," as his official imperial name. His reign is thus known as the "Shōwa Era." Hirohito was "His Majesty" or "His Majesty the Emperor."

The United States decided that Hirohito would be a stabilizing presence after Japan was defeated in World War II and allowed him to stay in power. Hirohito had to give up his divine status but was safe from war crime trials and the like. He continued his status until his death in 1989, ultimately becoming the longest reigning Japanese emperor.

Was Hirohito a Fascist?

After WWII, when it was convenient, Hirohito framed his earlier role as a sort of figurehead. He was basically like the current king of England, not having much agency over events.

The government might have been led in his name with the emperor treated as a type of god. But, Hirohito himself was controlled by events; he did not control them. Historians have a range of positions on the question. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

Hirohito was not a mere figurehead. He was the leader of a nation in a fascist period. He took part in war briefings. Hirohito condoned (at least up to a point) the atrocities of Nanking, which involved the royal family.

The military had a lot of control in Japan. Hirohito was not a dictator with the ability to simply control events. He also was educated to follow the constitutional system of the time where the emperor was guided by political and military officials. Other World War II political leaders, including President Roosevelt, had more direct power over events.

Nonetheless, Hirohito made the choice to go along, including declaring war on the United States. The evidence suggests that his statement when surrendering to the Americans was an honest expression of his beliefs: "We declared war on America and Britain out of our sincere desire to ensure Japan's self-preservation and the stabilization of East Asia."

Hirohito accepted the cult of personality that surrounded him. Hirohito believed that Japan was fighting to defend its culture, accepted using military power and suppression of civil

liberties to do so. If we appropriately can label the wartime Shōwa Era a fascist state, Hirohito in various ways aided and abetted fascism. Is this enough to label him "a fascist"?

A Final Decision

Ukraine recently apologized after it included a photograph of Japan's wartime emperor, Hirohito, in an anti-fascism video alongside images of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.

The matter is clearly very sensitive. Ukraine can be seen as simply having committed a foreign policy faux pas. Hirohito reigned long after Hitler and Mussolini, both generally dismissed as evil fascists by history, were dead and buried. He became a kindly ceremonial figure.

But, was the usage right on the merits? It is now your turn to judge Hirohito himself. Was he a fascist? History often involves questions that divide. We have to weigh the facts, which are often incomplete and do not only lean in one direction, to make the best conclusion.

There is evidence available to make the case that Hirohito was a fascist. He seems to check off many of the boxes.

Meanwhile, some can use the same historical facts to argue he played a more ceremonial role. And, the evidence can be further applied to show he was also not a fascist.

A middle path might argue that Hirohito did play a role in events, including promoting Japanese nationalism and militarism to some extent, but was not a fascist himself. Perhaps, you can even argue that "fascism" is an inappropriate label for World War II Era Japan.

Was Hirohito a fascist? My final decree is: no.

The emperor reflected some of the characteristics of fascism, but so do many dictatorial leaders. The Japanese military had a great deal of influence during World War 2, in some cases overshadowing the emperor. There were no ethnic divisions because there was no diversity in the population, therefore nobody to vilify. Finally, the emperor's "cult of personality" was due largely to the position he held, not his charisma.