

Mokusatsu, Japan's Response to the Potsdam Declaration

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ACCORDING TO THE commonly accepted story, Japan chose to spurn the Potsdam Declaration of July 26, 1945, which called upon her to surrender, and thereby brought down upon her head the atomic bombing and the Russian declaration of war against her. A close examination of the Japanese response to the Potsdam Declaration will show, however, that the Japanese government never intended to reject the Potsdam Declaration. Its policy was that of *mokusatsu*, which was quite a different thing from rejection.¹

The subsequent course of events predicated on the assumption that Japan had rejected the Potsdam Declaration represents a tragedy of errors for which the major responsibility must be attributed to the inexcusable bungling of the Japanese officials. But some measure of responsibility also rests upon the more excusable but unfortunate deficiency in perception on the part of the Western allied leaders and upon the calculated reluctance of the Russian authorities to share their information with their Western allies.

It is no new revelation that Japan was moving toward surrender long before the issuance of the Potsdam Declaration by the Allied powers on July 26, 1945. Some preliminary maneuvers in that direction were apparent as early as the spring of 1944.² By the time the Suzuki cabinet assumed office on April 7, 1945, the securing of peace on any terms was the unannounced but clearly recognized aim of the Japanese government.

¹ The present writer was editor of the *Nippon Times* of Tokyo at this time. Sensing that something significant was afoot during these days, he supplemented the coverage of his staff by personally spending several hours each day during this period in the Japanese Foreign Office. Wartime censorship prevented the publication of the material thus collected at the time, but the account presented in this article, except where otherwise noted, is based on his own notes and diary written while the events described were taking place. Conventional forms of citation have been dispensed with, inasmuch as this article constitutes primary material, an on-the-spot reportage.

² The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Japan's Struggle to End the War*, Chairman's Office (Washington, July 1, 1946), 2-3. Hereafter cited as USSBS.

An appearance of negotiating for terms less onerous than unconditional surrender was maintained. . . . It seems clear however that *in extremis* the peace-makers would have peace, and peace on any terms. This was the gist of the advice given to Hirohito by the Jushin in February, the declared conclusion of Kido in April, the specific injunction of the Emperor to Suzuki on becoming premier which was known to all members of the Cabinet.³

As the climax to the repeated efforts to establish indirect contact with the Allied powers, the Japanese government in the early part of July, 1945, sought to send Prince Fumimaro Konoye to Moscow to solicit Russia's intercession with the United States in order to stop the war. Konoye has testified that when Sato, the Japanese ambassador at Moscow, sounded out the Russians they had indicated they would not consider a peace role unless the terms were unconditional surrender. Apparently with full knowledge of this Russian attitude, the Emperor instructed Konoye to accept any terms he could get.⁴ When the Russians on July 13 put off the Japanese overtures with the excuse that Stalin and Molotov were about to leave for Potsdam and could therefore give no answer until their return, the Japanese came to suspect that the eventual answer might be unfavorable, and hence they even toyed with the idea of broadcasting a peace appeal directly to the United States.⁵

In view of this background which indicates that an overwhelming desire for peace at any price had come to obsess the Japanese leaders by this time, it hardly seems likely that they would have summarily rejected the Potsdam Declaration. And, indeed, a careful examination will reveal that the Japanese government never did actually reject the Potsdam Declaration, although it is true that the confused character of the Japanese action caused the Allied powers to assume that Japan had rejected it.

The Potsdam Declaration became known to the Japanese authorities at a time when they were hoping against hope that the Russians would agree to receive Konoye's mission. On July 20, despite the fact that Japan's desires had previously been intimated to the Russians many times, a message was relayed from the Russian leaders already at Potsdam to the effect that Konoye could not be received unless the purpose of his mission was defined more clearly. On July 25 the Japanese government replied in most specific terms that Konoye's mission would be for the purpose of requesting Russia's good offices for peace with the United

³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

States and Great Britain, and of seeking an improvement of Russo-Japanese relations.

On the very next day came the Potsdam Declaration in which the governments of the United States, Great Britain, and China demanded the unconditional surrender of Japan on pain of complete annihilation if she refused. It was a pretty clear indication that the Russians, for reasons of their own, had failed to acquaint their allies with the efforts which Japan was already making to approach the Allied powers for peace. But the Japanese did not become entirely discouraged, for they discerned in the terms of the Potsdam Declaration a definition of the "conditions" of the unconditional surrender. The Japanese Foreign Office, immediately sensing the significant difference between these terms and the terms of the surrender imposed upon Germany, argued that they provided an attractive basis for the opening of discussions with the Allies. The majority of the members of the cabinet, as well as others in high quarters, were inclined toward this point of view.

As was to be expected, however, War Minister General Korechika Anami, supported by the army and navy chiefs of staff but not by the navy minister, argued that the Potsdam terms were too severe and urged that the government issue a point by point rebuttal of the Potsdam Declaration for foreign broadcast. At the same time the army insisted that all knowledge of the Potsdam Declaration be strictly withheld from the Japanese public. But Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo, knowing that news of this sort was bound to leak out anyway and anxious to prepare the public for an unfavorable peace which he considered inevitable, argued in the cabinet from two until six o'clock on the afternoon of July 27 for the prompt release of the Potsdam Declaration to the newspapers.

Togo finally won his point, and late that evening the text of the Potsdam Declaration was made known to the public, but not until his timid cabinet colleagues had succeeded in suppressing the threatening portions warning of "utter destruction of the Japanese homeland," the clause concerning "stern justice" for all war criminals, the clause promising the return of the disarmed soldiers "to their homes with the opportunity to lead peaceful and productive lives," and a few strong words here and there like "self-willed military cliques of traitors."⁶ The reason for these deletions was the fear that these words would invite popular

⁶ The official text of the Potsdam Declaration, which became available to the Japanese only much later, did not contain the term "self-willed military cliques of traitors," but referred to

disquiet, but the effect of this toning down of the original text was to make the Potsdam Declaration appear more lenient and attractive to the Japanese public than it really was.

The government, in contrast to the sentiments of the army and navy, thus obviously had no intention of rejecting the Allied demands, and, although it could not immediately bring itself to accept the Potsdam Declaration *in toto*, fumbled around for some way to respond to the Allies. Its hope was to convey its feelings through the Russians, but there had been no response to its latest communication of the twenty-fifth to the Soviet government. In the meantime, the cabinet decided not to commit itself publicly one way or the other, and, while allowing the press to publish the text of the Potsdam Declaration, ordered that there should be no editorial comment or criticisms whatever. Obviously the enemy's demand for surrender could not be praised, but equally obviously the government did not want it criticised inasmuch as tentative moves toward its conditional acceptance were being contemplated. The only possible course for the moment was to remain silent, and the government accordingly announced that its policy was one of *mokusatsu*.

But here the Japanese language played a fateful trick on the government's policy. *Mokusatsu* is a word which has no exact equivalent in the English language. It is a word which is ambiguous even in the Japanese. It might be translated roughly as "to be silent" or "to withhold comment" or "to ignore." "To withhold comment" probably comes the closest to its true meaning, implying that something is being held back, that there is something significant impending. Certainly that is what the Japanese government meant.

Hence it was with great displeasure that the Foreign Office officials greeted the Tokyo *Mainichi's* headline "Laughable Matter" spread above the text of the Potsdam Declaration, although obediently enough the paper ran no editorial comment. It was with alarm that Foreign Minister Togo discovered on the twenty-eighth that, in violation of the cabinet decision of the previous day, War Minister Anami was working to permit the newspapers to interpret the term *mokusatsu* as "rejection by ignoring" and that he had even prevailed upon Dr. Hiroshi Shimomura, president of the Board of Information, to prepare a radio talk interpreting the term *mokusatsu* in this sense. That Togo was able to have these

"self-willed militaristic advisers." The first version which came over the short-wave radio, as monitored in Japan, did contain, however, the more forceful expression, and it was this version which the Japanese cabinet discussed and gagged over at its meeting of July 27, 1945.

unauthorized activities immediately stopped indicates clearly enough, however, what the government's real attitude was.

The more perceiving sections of the Japanese public had no difficulty in understanding what the government's attitude was. The day after the publication of the Potsdam Declaration the nation's stock exchanges, long dormant during the war, began to show a sudden spurt of activity and on August 2 registered an average jump of three points. It is significant that the greatest gains took place in the quotations of peacetime consumers' industries like beer, tobacco, paper, and textile companies. The announcement of the Potsdam terms raised perceptible hopes that peace was near.

The Japanese government soon discovered to its dismay, however, that the meaning of its policy of *mokusatsu* had been completely misinterpreted by the outside world. Japan's own propaganda agencies were partly to blame, for Radio Tokyo and the Domei News Agency, without stopping to reflect on the implications of the word *mokusatsu*, had rushed to broadcast to the world in English the bald statement that Japan was "ignoring" the Potsdam Declaration. The cabinet was even more to blame for having used such an ambiguous term in the first place without taking adequate precautions to forestall an embarrassing interpretation. In any case, the world's interpretation was that Japan had spurned the Potsdam Declaration, disdaining even to take notice of it. Thus the Japanese government's intention of holding the matter open for an eventual favorably inclined response came to naught with the ensuing stiffening of the Allied attitude.

Who knows but that save for the fateful word *mokusatsu*, Japan might have been spared the horror of the atomic bomb which came only a few days later! This is not to suggest that the American decision to use the atom bomb was unjustified. Perhaps it was necessary in order to speed the actual act of surrender.⁷ But it has been noted that the army leaders who opposed the acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration when it was first made continued to oppose unconditional surrender even after the atomic bomb, while the key members of the government who eventually

⁷ For the most recent addition to the already voluminous American literature bearing on this controversy, see former Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson's vigorous criticism of Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy's stand concerning the atom bomb as expressed in his recent book *I Was There*. Says Patterson: "He (Admiral Leahy) ventures the opinion that Japan was ready to surrender in August, 1945, and that the use of 'this barbarous weapon' at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no assistance in bringing the war to an end. . . . We now have the most powerful proof that it was the intervention of the Emperor after the atom bombs and because of them that brought about the surrender." (*The New York Times Book Review*, March 19, 1950.)

brought about the surrender showed by their initial reaction to the Potsdam Declaration that they were even then already in favor of surrender.⁸ The atomic bomb undoubtedly imparted a sense of urgency, but it changed no opinions in Japan. If the Americans had fully realized how favorably disposed toward the Potsdam Declaration so many of the key Japanese leaders were from the beginning, it is conceivable that that knowledge might have significantly modified the decision to use the atomic bomb. Apparently that realization did not exist, to judge from American reaction to Japan's supposed response to the Potsdam Declaration. To a Japanese, that is a regrettable and disappointing fact, for American military intelligence seemed to know so surprisingly much about so many other things in wartime Japan.

The failure of the Americans to discern the real attitude of the Japanese government toward the Potsdam Declaration, though regrettable, is easy enough to understand and excuse. But the failure of the Russians to inform their Western allies of Japan's readiness for surrender is something else again. For the Russians could have easily enlightened their allies of Japan's eagerness for peace if they had been so minded. Obviously Russia was determined that Japan should be given no opportunity to surrender until after Russia had declared war on Japan. And, cynically, the Russian declaration of war on Japan, when it came on August 8, stated:

The demand of the Three Powers—the United States of America, Great Britain and China—of July 26th of this year on the unconditional surrender of the Japanese armed forces has been declined by Japan. Thus, the proposal of the Japanese Government, addressed to the Soviet Union on mediation in the Far Eastern War, loses every ground. Considering Japan's refusal to surrender, the Allies proposed to the Soviet Government that it join the war. . . . The Soviet Government . . . accepted the Allies' proposal and joined the declaration of the Allied Powers of July 26th of this year.⁹

To the Japanese government which had never intended to reject the Potsdam Declaration outright and which had counted on the Russians to make known to the Allies Japan's readiness to surrender, this was the crowning irony.

⁸ USSBS, 13.

⁹ Domei News Agency's translation, in *Nippon Times* (Tokyo), August 10, 1945.