

From Hiroshima to Fukushima: The political background to the nuclear disaster in Japan

A guest contributor
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Part 1 | Part 2

This is the first of a two-part article on the historical antecedents of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Following the Japanese earthquake and tsunami disaster of March 11, the meltdown of the nuclear reactor in Fukushima continues to alarm people all around the world. The world witnessed the events virtually live as one reactor building after another exploded and one of the planet's most high-tech countries tried to quell the 770 000 terabecquerel (1) radioactivity unleashed from the meltdown with bucket and hose. Japan was desperate to convince the world that everything was under control.

Following the media reports from Japan, many people ask themselves why governments chose to gamble on nuclear power in such an earthquake-prone country—after the US and France, Japan is the world's third largest nuclear power nation—and why the people of this land appeared to be so indifferent to the dangers of nuclear energy.

These are the questions we want to pursue.

Eisenhower's change of course

The propagation of nuclear technology in Japan was a direct consequence of the US military's endeavours to wield influence over the country's development immediately after the Second World War. Shortly after the end of the war, the US began to transform Japan into a bulwark against the Soviet Union. This policy was intensified following the taking of power by Stalinist regimes in China and Korea. Having lost the monopoly on nuclear weapons, it became necessary for the US to make Japan receptive to nuclear power.

On April 20, the Japanese *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper wrote: "During the eighth General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1954, former US President Eisenhower held a speech, entitled "Atoms for Peace". His strategy was to assign relevant technologies to other countries in order to integrate them into the US power bloc, thereby securing hegemony in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. That Japan, the only country to have suffered the full force of nuclear weapons, would agree to embrace nuclear technology was of enormous strategic importance".

The CIA agent, "Podam"

The same newspaper article quoted Tetsuo Arima, media researcher and professor of social science at the University of Waseda, concerning the Japanese pro-nuclear politician and media magnate, Matsutaro Shoriki: "After the world war, the CIA worked closely with Mr. Shoriki to advance the campaign for nuclear energy in Japan. It did so because this man had not only the necessary connections to

politics and economics, but also the power to mobilise his newspaper and television empire".

During years of research in the United States National Archives and Records Administration, Arima discovered 474 pages of CIA files, documenting in detail the progress of the introduction of nuclear technology to Japan. From one of these, he quotes the following: "Relations with Podam have now progressed to the stage where outright cooperation can be initiated".

"Podam" was the code name for the member of parliament and CIA asset, Matsutaro Shoriki, who would later become president of the atomic energy authority he founded, as well as minister for science and technology. Shoriki is today regarded as father of Japan's nuclear power.

The Japanese Goebbels

Shoriki's career would have been unthinkable without his close relationship with the CIA and the Pentagon. As head of the political police in fascist Japan before and during the war, he was particularly responsible for hunting down and crushing the unions, communists, socialists and opponents of the war. Later he became a member of the upper house of parliament and head of the information department of the interior ministry, which was responsible for ideological warfare and propaganda. He had become owner of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* as early as 1924. This newspaper was to become the main mouthpiece for the warmongers and the military dictatorship in the 1930s and 1940s. *Yomiuri Shimbun* is today Japan's largest newspaper with a circulation of about ten million. It can be said that Shoriki was the Joseph Goebbels of Japan.

Following the war, he was imprisoned as a major war criminal for three years. However, his case was never brought to prosecution. Instead, he was released without trial. The CIA and the US Defense Department needed his skills and influence to implement Eisenhower's policy in Japan. Secret US government files show that the CIA and the Pentagon provided funds, amounting to tens of millions of dollars, for the construction of the Shoriki media empire—he was also the founder of the first private television broadcaster, Japan TV, as well as Japan's professional baseball league. (2)

At that time, the Japanese people were still traumatised by the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, reacting with horror to any mention of atomic power, whether for peaceful use or employed as a weapon. In March 1954, another event shook the Japanese public. A Japanese fishing trawler was so strongly contaminated by radiation during a hydrogen bomb test in the Bikini Islands that a crew member died and many of the crew were seriously injured, despite the boat having been in an area declared safe by the US authorities. The anti-

nuclear sentiment now developed into a broad mass movement against the US. In order to implement Eisenhower's policy in Japan, the CIA therefore needed the war criminal, Shoriki, to create a favourable climate for nuclear power and distract the population from political developments in general. (3)

The re-militarisation of Japan

This coincided with Shoriki's interests, although he had a somewhat different intention from that of the CIA. On April 20, 1952, his newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* carried an article, headed: "The government commissions a concrete plan for the establishment of a Department of Science and Technology in preparation for re-armament and weapons production". The article went on to quote Kantaro Suzuki, the last imperial admiral and prime minister at the time of Japan's surrender: "We have lost this war because of our lack of science. Therefore, it is now imperative for us to promote science in order to rebuild Japan". For Suzuki, however, "to rebuild Japan" meant to restore the Japanese empire.

Shoriki, the ardent nationalist, was reluctant to be simply of service to the CIA for propaganda purposes. On the contrary, he intended on using the CIA and the Pentagon for his own projects. His plan was to exploit his relationship with the CIA and the Pentagon to become head of government, and rebuild Japan into a military superpower.

The Department of Science and Technology—the predecessor of the Ministry of Education and Science—was in fact established, and by Shoriki himself. Touting the campaign slogan, "A new Industrial Revolution by means of nuclear power", he became a member of parliament, and went on to become president of his own creation, the Atomic Energy Authority, which later developed into the Department of Science and Technology. Masao Maeda, one of Shoriki's party colleagues from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), drafted the legislation to establish the Department of Science and Technology. He defined the task of a body subordinate to this department, the Central Institute for Science and Technology, with the following words: "research into weapons technology, including nuclear weapons". (4)

Karl Mundt, a right-wing Republican Senator who authored the legislation founding the Voice of America (VOA, the anti-communist propaganda radio station of the American armed forces in Asia), sent a member of his Senate staff, Henry Holthusen, to Japan to meet with Shoriki to launch a television version of the VOA in the country. At the time, Holthusen was cooperating with the Unitel corporation to run a television station for the US Army throughout the Far East. (5)

Shoriki agreed to Holthusen's request. He used his connection to the Pentagon—the law firm of Murphy, Duiker, Smith & Burwell in Washington—to make a deal with the US Defence Department, concerning the amount of money he would need to set up the television station. (6)

Thanks to Shoriki, this operation was implemented just at the time that the anti-nuclear and anti-American sentiment of the population developed into a major mass movement.

Nakasone, Shoriki's enforcer

It became increasingly difficult for the CIA and Pentagon to control Shoriki. The US certainly had no intention of equipping its former wartime enemy with nuclear weapons technology. Eisenhower's policy was rather to make Japanese society compliant to nuclear energy so that, on one hand, American nuclear weapons could be stationed wherever required. On the other hand, a large market was to be opened in Japan for the US nuclear power industry.

This is the reason why nuclear technology know-how was only communicated under the strictest supervision of the US government

and only on American soil. Thus, most of the nuclear engineers in the Tokyo Electric Company were "trained" in a school in Illinois, the International School of Nuclear Engineering, which was operated by the Atomic Energy Commission. However, the know-how imparted was insufficient for the development of Japan's own nuclear reactors, and only useful for operating the ready-for-use nuclear power plants, sold to them by the US. (7)

However, Shoriki was primarily interested in weapons technology. Therefore, the first reactors he was responsible for constructing as head of the Atomic Energy Agency in Japan were the Calder Hall type from England, which were originally developed for the production of plutonium for nuclear weapons. The utilisation of heat, emanating from the production of plutonium, for power generation was really only a byproduct.

The US was appalled by this sleight of hand on Shoriki's part, and he was increasingly unable to count on any further support from the CIA or the Pentagon. His goal of taking over the government of Japan could no longer be realised.

To be continued

Notes

- 1) 1 terabecquerel is 10 to the 12 power becquerels.
- 2) T. Arima: Genpatsu, Shoriki, CIA (Nuclear power plants, Shoriki and the CIA), Shinchosha publishers, 2008.
- 3) See: Crypto-Convergence, Media, and the Cold War: the Early Globalization of Television Networks in the 1950s, Media in Transition Conference, MIT, May 2002; James Schwoch, Northwestern University, Center for International and Comparative Studies
- 4) Report on "Problems of the Japan Atomic Energy", published by the Association of Democratic Scientists, Department of Physics, 1953, p. 21
- 5) Jack K. MacFall-Holthusen April 4, 1952, TV Worldwide Network Japan, Holthusen Papers, Box 8 in Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.
- 6) Telecommunication Network System for Japan: Memoranda and Exhibits Prepared and Presented by Murphy, Duiker, Smith, & Burwell, Overseas Information Program Subcommittee, Section I, pp. 1-4, Hickenlooper Papers 86, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.
- 7) Genpatsu e no Keisho (Alarm Clock Nuclear Power), Katsuo Uchihashi, Kodansha 1986, p. 69, ff.



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