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Enshrinement Politics: War Dead and War Criminals at Yasukuni Shrine

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This article examines the role of military, emperor and government in the enshrinement of Japan's war dead from 1868 to 2007. Below also find an Asahi Shimbun editorial reflecting on the constitutional and political issues of enshrinement.

Yasukuni Shrine visit at the New Year in the early postwar years

Yasukuni Shrine has been at the center of repeated domestic and international controversies since then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's official visit on August 15, 1985. The shrine made headlines again on March 29, 2007. All major Japanese newspapers headlined a report on released National Diet Library documents, which revealed the active involvement of the Japanese state in the enshrinement of the war dead at Yasukuni. Particularly problematic were exchanges regarding the enshrinement of the Class-A war criminals that took place between Yasukuni Shrine and the War Victims' Relief Bureau (*Hikiage Engo-kyoku*) of the then Health and Welfare Ministry. Making sense of the issues at stake requires understanding the process of enshrinement both at the height of empire and during the US occupation and its aftermath.

At the International War Crimes Tribunals conducted from May 1946 to November 1948, twenty-five Japanese military and political leaders were charged with Class-A war crimes, or crimes against peace, of whom seven were executed in Sugamo Prison on December 23, 1948. At the time, these deaths seemed unrelated to Yasukuni Shrine: formerly a national sanctuary that enshrined as deities the military dead from 1853 to 1945, Yasukuni was reborn during the occupation as a religious institution in accord with the 1947 constitution's separation of religion and state. The situation changed on April 19, 1979, when major newspapers reported that, during the enshrinement ritual preceding the 1978 fall festival, Yasukuni Shrine had quietly enshrined fourteen Class-A criminals, including the seven that were executed, five that died while serving their sentences, and two that died before the final trial. Ever since, state involvement in Yasukuni affairs, particularly visits by prime ministers on or around August 15th, the date of Japan's surrender, has come under domestic and international scrutiny. Prime ministers Ohira Masayoshi and Suzuki Kantaro paid tribute at Yasukuni after the Class-A enshrinement became public, in 1979 and 1982

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respectively. But it was Nakasone's visit that captured international attention. In contrast to his predecessors, Nakasone signed the guest register as Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, and made an offering of flowers purchased with public funds. Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion, forbids the state and its organs from participating in religious activity. Article 89 forbids public support for religious institutions. Nakasone had violated both: Article 20 by the visit, and Article 89 by making an offering using public funds.

Between 2002 and 2006, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro repeatedly visited the shrine in the face of domestic and international protests, ultimately provoking multiple lawsuits in Japan and severely straining Japan's relations with China and Korea.

Koizumi visits Yasukuni, August 15, 2006

Demonstrators hold candlelight vigil outside Yasukuni, August 11, 2006

Koizumi's visits prompted several Diet members to ask the National Diet Library, which serves as a research organ for the Japanese Diet, to compile material concerning postwar interaction between the Health and Welfare Ministry and Yasukuni Shrine. Among 808 new documents released, 179 had previously been held by the shrine and 94 by the former Health and Welfare Ministry. To better understand the role of the Health and Welfare Ministry, particularly its War Victims' Relief Bureau, in the enshrinement, it is helpful to review the changes in Yasukuni enshrinement procedures made following the Asia-Pacific War.

Prior to Japan's defeat and occupation, the war dead were enshrined in Yasukuni according to the following procedure: (1) for each death, the military determined whether a person was qualified to be enshrined based on how he had

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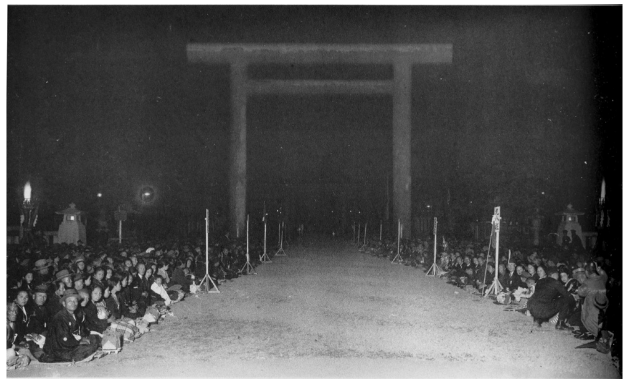
died, and compiled a list of eligible dead (to be eligible, one needed to have died in battle, or from wounds or sickness suffered while on active duty); (2) the list of names was presented to the Emperor for final approval; (3) enshrinement took place at Yasukuni at the *shokon* ceremony preceding the biannual shrine festivals.

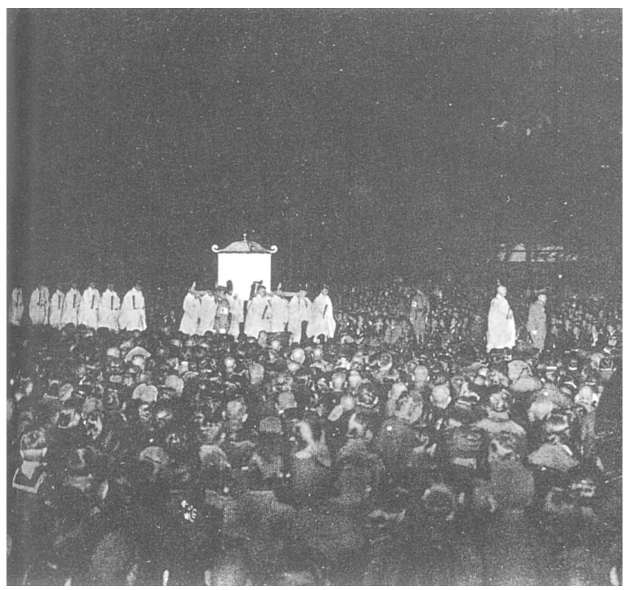
Emperor paying tribute at Yasukuni, 1935

Head priest calling in the spirits of war dead at shokon ceremony, 1935

Only a fraction of the war dead were enshrined in this way, however. Of the 2,342,341 that were enshrined at Yasukuni for sacrificing their lives in the conflict that lasted from September 1931 to August 1945, only 251,135 enshrinements were completed by April 1945, the last ceremony before the end of the war. In other words, almost ninety percent of the Asia-Pacific War dead were enshrined after the war, through a process that differed from that during the war in rituals that solidified the relationship between the military and the emperor.



Bereaved family members at shokon ceremony, 1935



Palanquin procession carrying the spirits into the main shrine, 1935

Soon after the start of the Occupation, former members of the military received a new mission – to take care of the war dead. On December 1, 1945, the Army Ministry was reorganized to form the First Ministry for the Demobilized (*Dai-ichi fukuin-sho*), the Navy Ministry was converted into the Second Ministry for the

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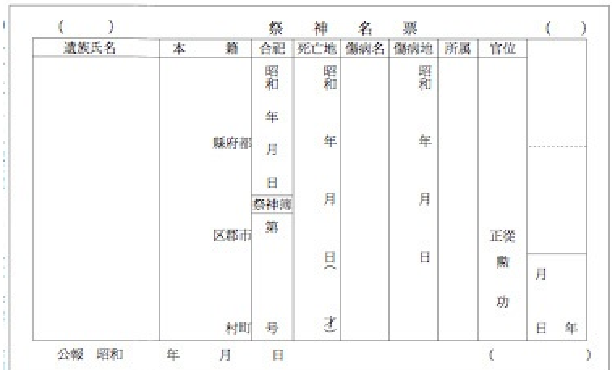
Demobilized (*Dai-ni fukuin-sho*). On June 15, 1946, the two merged to form the Agency for the Demobilized (*Fukuin-cho*), the predecessor of the War Victims' Relief Bureau. This Bureau, headed until 1970 by influential figures of the former military, was responsible for providing information about the war dead to Yasukuni Shrine to assure their enshrinement.


祭神名票
遺族氏名 | 本籍 | 合祀 | 死亡地 | 傷病名 | 傷病地 | 所属 | 官位
県府都 区郡市 村町
昭和 年 月 日 祭神簿 第 号
昭和 年 月 日（ 才）
昭和 年 月 日
正従 勲 功
年 月 日
公報 昭和 年 月 日

Information sheet sent from War Victims' Relief Bureau to Yasukuni Shrine

Like the military previously, the Bureau determined eligibility for enshrinement. Eligibility was determined in accordance with the War Victims' Relief Law (*Izoku engo-ho*). If a death was deemed to have occurred on official duty (*komu-shi*) according to the Law, one was eligible for enshrinement. This was a tactic by the Bureau to increase enshrinement, thereby solidifying the relationship between bereaved families and the LDP, by making eligible all whose families qualified for pensions. In practice, as long as the dead had not been court-martialed or executed by the Japanese military for desertion or other dishonorable acts, they were considered to have died on official duty, hence eligible for enshrinement.

Unlike the high profile wartime enshrinement ceremonies that involved the entire nation, including inviting bereaved family members of those that were being enshrined in a particular ceremony to attend Yasukuni in person, and through live radio broadcasts of the ceremony throughout Japan and the colonies and occupied areas, postwar enshrinements received little attention. That is, with the exception of a particular enshrinement that involved fourteen men charged with Class-A war crimes in the Tokyo Trials. And that only after the fact. Their inclusion among the honored dead at Yasukuni – in particular, wartime Prime Minister Tojo Hideki and six others that were hung – has been central to the criticisms surrounding prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni. While state employees' involvement in a public capacity in Yasukuni, a religious institution, is itself a violation of articles 20 and 89 of the Constitution, the bulk of the domestic and international criticisms have centered on the symbolic significance of the presence of these war criminals.

On January 25, 1956 the Health and Welfare Ministry issued "Prospectus on Cooperation for Enshrinement Affairs at Yasukuni – Former Army Related (*Kyu-rikugun kankei: Yasukuni Jinja goshi jimu ni taisuru kyoryoku yoko*)" [National Diet Library (NDL) document file number 184]. A series of documents followed in the following months, which instructed all prefectures to cooperate with Yasukuni enshrinement, and outlined the Ministry's plan, together with the shrine, to conclude enshrinement of all war dead in three years. According to these documents, a series of meetings subsequently took place between the Ministry and Yasukuni officials at the shrine to establish criteria for enshrinement. It was during these meetings that the war criminals were included in groups to be considered for enshrinement on a case-by-case basis. (The decision is first noted on June 4, 1957 [NDL document file number 212], and repeatedly appears in subsequent documents under category of groups to consider for enshrinement. Other groups under consideration included military related personnel that committed suicide at the end of the war, those who died of accidental deaths during training, etc.)

The earliest mention of Class-B and -C war criminals in the released documents is April 9, 1958. Class-B criminals were convicted of war crimes and Class-C criminals of crimes against humanity. These were soldiers, police and auxiliaries, many of them of low rank, who were convicted of committing war atrocities on the front lines and in prison camps during the war. In the course of the discussion of enshrinement, the Health and Welfare Ministry requested that the war criminals be enshrined in small groups in order to avoid attracting attention, to which the shrine responded that they would consult with their representatives. Also in this document, Class-A criminals were dismissed as “not part of the Relief Bureau matters” [file number 232]. The enshrinement of Class-B and -C criminals was completed by 1966. While it is well known that there were fourteen Class-A criminals that were enshrined, the number of B and C criminals cannot presently be documented. Even the number that were executed varies according to sources. BC *kyu senpan saiban* (Iwanami shinsho, 2005) by historian Hayashi Hirofumi, lists the number of confirmed executions as 934. This is not, however, definitive as countries other than the United States, Great Britain and Australia have not made all the trial documents public. Moreover, the total does not include executions conducted in Russia and the People’s Republic of China. In addition, around 130 more died while serving their sentences. It is not clear how many of them were enshrined in Yasukuni. The only document included in the released material that notes the number of war criminals to be enshrined is dated February 8, 1966. It lists 12 Class-A criminals and 82 Class-B and -C criminals who were declared eligible for enshrinement. [file number 302]

According to the above document, at least twelve of the Class-A criminals had been cleared for enshrinement by February 9, 1966. (The number cited here is twelve rather than fourteen; it presumably does not include the two that died before the final trial.) The final decision on the enshrinement of the twelve was made during a meeting between the shrine and the Ministry on January 31, 1969. The meeting minutes notes that the enshrinement will not be made public, and the enshrinement notification will be sent directly from the shrine to the families. [file number 309] On June 25, 1970, however, the decision was reversed. [file number 313] It was not until 1978 that the actual enshrinement took place. Since the June 25 entry is the last in the released documents regarding Class-A war criminals, it is still not clear exactly how the Class-A criminals came to be enshrined, or whether and how the shrine and the state interacted in the process that led to enshrinement after 1970.

One notable factor is the appointment of new Yasukuni head priest Matsudaira Nagayoshi in July 1978, following the death of head priest Tsukuba Fujimaro, who had strongly opposed the enshrinement of Class-A criminals. Shortly after his appointment, Matsudaira, who had publicly called for reversing the verdicts of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal to restore Japan’s national spirit, added the war criminals’ names to the already completed list of names that were to be enshrined during the fall 1978 ceremony. Matsudaira’s eagerness to enshrine the fourteen is demonstrated in his later comment reflecting back on the enshrinement as “the one act of my entire life that I can be proud of.” He went on to explain that he had proceeded with the enshrinement as a way to discredit the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal.

The Japanese state has always denied involvement in the postwar enshrinement process, insisting that it merely fulfills requests for information from the shrine. Even after the release of these documents, the state’s position has not changed, as can be seen in Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s comment: “I don’t see a problem [from the viewpoint of separation of state and religion]. It was the shrine that

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performed the enshrinement, and I believe the Health and Welfare Ministry was only providing information [about the war dead] that was requested of them." (Asahi shimbun, March 29, 2007) It is hardly news that the Ministry had been supplying Yasukuni with names and other necessary information about the war dead. For its part, Yasukuni has used its relationship with the Ministry to evade sole responsibility for the enshrinement – insisting that it only enshrines after the Ministry provides the necessary information. This insistence begs the question: if the enshrinement of the war criminals was something to be proud of, as Matsudaira asserts, why did the shrine secretly enshrine them, and why has the shrine, as well as the government, dodged responsibility ever since?

Attempts made to solve the controversies surrounding Yasukuni Shrine include proposals to remove the names of the seven war criminals that were executed in 1948 (the issue of Class-B and –C war criminals was not addressed) and calls to build a new non-religious national memorial. The former stalled when the family of former Prime Minister Tojo Hideki refused to sign a petition – previously signed by family members of the other six – to remove the seven names from Yasukuni. The shrine, too, has vehemently opposed the removal, explaining that, unlike an ordinary shrine, where each god has its own seat (*za*), Yasukuni gods all occupy a single seat. Therefore, it is impossible to separate one from another once enshrined.

Tojo on trial

While no progress has been made toward establishing a national memorial since 2002, its realization could resolve the international conflict that springs from state officials paying tribute to convicted war criminals among the enshrined. Yet a new national memorial will not solve the root problem, which is the official Japanese attitude toward war responsibility and war crimes. Many, particularly international critics, have pointed out that the heart of the Yasukuni problem is the Japanese government's glorification of its military past and reluctance to accept responsibility for its wartime deeds. State patronage of Yasukuni is intimately related to LDP efforts to revise the Constitution in order to strengthen Japan's war-making powers. But simple removal of the physical structure of Yasukuni, or disenshrinement of the war criminals, will not resolve the Yasukuni problem. Let me explain. Many Japanese who are critical of the war and of Japanese war crimes, focus their criticisms on the shrine itself, including state involvement in the shrine, and the failure of the state to adequately provide apology and reparations to Asian victims of Japan's wartime aggression and war crimes. In the process, like the new postwar generation of nationalists who currently lead the LDP, they fail to question the war responsibilities of the Japanese people, including their parents and grandparents – or, even themselves, for their reluctance to initiate

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a sincere dialogue on making amends. The ultimate solution to the problems associated with Yasukuni Shrine and crimes of war can only be resolved when both state and people accept responsibility and act to put the dark episodes of the war behind them through sincere apologies, reparations, and education of the next generations of Japanese. Examination of the war experiences of other nations who waged aggressive and colonial wars past and present make clear just how difficult such self-reflection can be. Yet the stakes are high for a Japan which has constructed a postwar identity as a promoter of international peace, and whose economic and political future will hinge in no small part on its ability to come to terms with China, Korea and other rising Asian powers that once were victims of Japanese colonialism and war.

The documents released by the National Diet Library are available here:
www.ndl.go.jp/jp/data/publication/document2007.html

Several newspapers provided brief summaries of enshrinement-related entries in the released documents on March 29, 2007, including:
Mainichi Shimbun, “Yasukuni Jinja: Goshi meguri kyu koseisho to no yaritori nama nama shiku”
Yomiuri Shimbun, “Yasukuni goshi, kyu koseisho ga sekkyoku kan’yo... Kokkai toshokan ga shiryo kokai”

Who Enshrines? The Japanese Government and Yasukuni

Asahi Shimbun editorial

The National Diet Library recently released documents that recorded the process of how war criminals were memorialized at Yasukuni Shrine after World War II.

The documents highlight the deep involvement of the former Health and Welfare Ministry, in other words the government, in the enshrinement process. After the war, the ministry took over operating the shrine from former imperial military and naval forces.

According to internal Yasukuni Shrine documents, the following events took place:

In April 1958, six years after Japan regained sovereignty through the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the ministry's repatriation relief bureau and shrine officials met in an office at the shrine. Ministry officials suggested that the shrine consider discreetly enshrining Class-B and Class-C war criminals in a manner that would not result in inconveniences after deliberating each case.

In a meeting held in September 1958, the enshrinement of former Prime Minister Tojo Hideki and other Class-A war criminals was discussed. At that time, the ministry suggested that as a first step Class-B and Class-C war criminals executed overseas be honored in an unostentatious manner.

The ministry and Yasukuni Shrine frequently held such meetings and decided to first enshrine Class-B and Class-C war criminals in 1959. In a meeting in 1969, they also approved the enshrinement of Class-A war criminals.

What is remarkable is that the two parties paid the closest attention to trying to make things move forward as quietly as possible. In particular, when it came to Class-A war criminals who were held liable for taking leading roles in the war, the parties even agreed on "no outside announcements."

They were probably afraid of being criticized for justifying the war and muddying the issue of responsibility by enshrining such people.

The government has claimed that it does not

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know anything about the process or the reasoning behind enshrining Class-A war criminals at Yasukuni Shrine. On Thursday, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo said, "I think the former Health and Welfare Ministry submitted information because it was asked for it." He stressed that Yasukuni made the decision on enshrinements.

Yet the newly released documents describe in detail how the ministry and the shrine worked closely together on the matter. It may be that the shrine honored the war criminals, but it is undeniable that the government's intentions were strongly reflected in the decision.

Relationships akin to the prewar "state-run shrine" era have dragged on for many years even after the war. That is not permissible in light of the constitutional separation of politics and religion.

We opposed former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro 's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, and one reason was that the pilgrimages likely violated the principle of the separation of the state and religion. We do not believe the relationship between the government and the shrine still continues to the extent that it used to, but it is necessary to clearly draw a line, considering such past relations.

We have been calling for a national, non-denominational memorial. Everyone, including the emperor and the prime minister, would be able to pay their respects to war victims at such a place without any discomfort. The recent news highlights the need for such a facility.

The revealed documents are certainly important, yet it is a shame that records around 1978 are missing--the year the Class-A war criminals were honored. Those documents should also be made public.

This article appeared in the IHT/Asahi Shimbun on March 31, 2007.

Akiko Takenaka teaches architectural history and theory in the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan. She is the author (with Laura Hein) of "Exhibiting World War II in Japan and the United States since 1995," in Pacific Historical Review 76.1 (February 2007), 61-94 and "Architecture for Mass-Mobilization: The Chureito Memorial Construction Movement, 1939-1945," in Alan Tansman ed., The Culture of Japanese Fascism (Duke University Press, forthcoming). She is currently working on a book manuscript on the history and politics of Yasukuni Shrine (tentatively titled Yasukuni: Nation, Violence, Memory).

She wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted on June 7, 2007.

A selection of Japan Focus articles on Yasukuni Shrine and Japanese war memory includes:

Takahashi Tetsuya, Yasukuni Shrine at the Heart of Japan's National Debate: History, Memory, Denial

Takahashi Tetsuya, The National Politics of the Yasukuni Shrine

Utsumi Aiko, Yasukuni Shrine Imposes Silence on Bereaved Families

Mark Selden, Nationalism, Historical Memory and Contemporary Conflicts in the Asia Pacific: the Yasukuni Phenomenon, Japan, and the United States

John Breen, Yasukuni Shrine: Ritual and Memory

Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun, Yasukuni Shrine, Nationalism and Japan's International

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Relations	Andrew M. McGreevy, Arlington National Cemetery and Yasukuni Jinja: History, Memory, and the Sacred

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