On 14 August 1945, the Shōwa Emperor, known as Hirohito in the west, issued an ‘august decision’ to accept the Potsdam Declaration and end the Second World War. Among other things, this meant disbanding the imperial armed forces under his command, seeing his nation occupied by foreign armies, and placing his trusted state leaders on trial for war crimes. The Proclamation required that:

The Japanese Government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people. Freedom of speech, of religion, and of thought, as well as respect for basic human rights shall be established.

Imperial government authorities, however, continued to suppress those rights with unabated vigor well into October, when Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) General Douglas MacArthur ordered an immediate end to all such violations. Nevertheless, the cabinet headed by imperial prince Higashikuni Naruhiko was bent on ‘preserving the kokutai,’ or divinely created national polity, which specifically denoted Hirohito’s ‘sacred and inviolable’ status as sovereign head of state plus all of his powers stipulated in the 1899 Imperial Constitution. Higashikuni told SCAP that he would uphold laws against lèse majesté, retain the Peace Preservation Law, and invoke these against anyone seeking to abolish the Emperor System or seeking to alter Japan’s form of government and system of private property. SCAP dissolved Higashikuni’s cabinet, and within a week the U.S. Army ordered the release of over five hundred political prisoners, including Tokuda Kyûichi of the outlawed Communist Party who had been incarcerated for eighteen years. This was too late, however, to save the scholar Miki Kiyoshi and others, including Korean dissidents, who had already died in captivity.¹

Thus, over two months after Japan’s putatively unconditional surrender—and only as a direct result of SCAP intervention—did imperial subjects come to enjoy basic human rights as stipulated in the Potsdam Declaration. Only at the behest of an enemy army, then, did imperial subjects become able to broach the issue of Hirohito’s war guilt. As novelist Takami Jun sneered:

> When you lose a war and foreign armies take over your country, you would expect them to curtail your freedoms; but here they are upholding these. What a humiliating disgrace!²

The Shidehara Kijirō Cabinet formed on 9 October 1945, in a resolution dated 5 November, reaffirmed its predecessor’s position on Hirohito’s non-responsibility for the war.³ But opinion polls showed that foreign peoples deemed Hirohito a class-A war criminal equivalent to Hitler and Mussolini, and there was deep-seated mistrust and resentment toward him even in Japan. Law professor Yokota Kisaburō of Tokyo University cited the precedent of Germany’s Wilhelm II as a monarchic head of state subpoenaed on war crimes charges after the First World War.⁴ The president of Tokyo University Nambara Shigeru, the president of the Peers College Abe Yoshishige, several other leading academics, and Ōyama Ikuo, a party politician returned from exile, all urged Hirohito to abdicate on moral grounds. As Nambara wrote: “This is not just my personal opinion; indeed, all teachers in Japan from primary school to university share it.”⁵ Even Hirohito’s close advisors and relatives—Konoe Fumimaro, Tajima Michiharu, Kido Kōichi, and Princes Mikasa Takahito and Higashikuni Naruhito—counseled that abdication was unavoidable. However, it is imperative to note, that they spoke more from a desire to preserve the imperial line descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu, rather than from the same considerations that motivated critics such as Abe and Nambara.⁶

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⁵ *Asahi shimbun*, 13 June 1948.