BOOK REVIEWS


This book was published in two volumes in Japanese translation in 1983. The English original, edited by Professor Herbert Passin, is a valuable edition to participant accounts of the American occupation of Japan. The primary theme is how a brash young American in 1945-47, using the power of a military occupation, tried to build a political foundation for a Socialist regime in Japan, why he failed and the consequences for American relations with Japan. A secondary theme is that the roots of Japan’s postwar economic miracle can be found in the occupation’s economic reforms. Despite his tendency to refight the battles of the past, Cohen’s volatile personality and lively style make this an exciting and highly rewarding insider’s view of the occupation.

Early in the book Cohen tells how New Deal radicals in Washington in 1945 added ideas from the Morgenthau Plan for Germany to a moderate State Department policy directive that was to guide MacArthur’s military occupation of Japan. (pp. 29-30) The radicals wished to destroy concentrations of economic power by removing industrial plants, purging businessmen, weakening big business and landlords, and creating strong labor unions and socialist parties that would rule Japan after the occupation ended.

The most valuable part of the book is Cohen’s account of his sixteen-months in 1946-47 as Chief of MacArthur’s Labor Division. He wrote Japan’s laws on labor unions and labor standards, and encouraged Japanese workers to organize. When militant Communist-led unions staged strikes in defiance of the Japanese government and the American military, Cohen fought to preserve, as he tells it, the interests of the Japanese working class against revolutionary Communist leaders on the one hand and American military men on the other. The Labor Division tried to steer unions through strikes without provoking confrontations with the U.S. military. But union leaders, often Communists who were more interested in a “people’s republic” than economic benefits for the workers, laid plans for a general strike in early 1947 and provoked a confrontation with MacArthur. Cohen shows ambivalence about these events. While criticizing the communist labor leaders, he also blames MacArthur’s presidential ambitions for his ambiguous response as the strike deadline approached. (p. 289)

Cohen seems blind to his own responsibility for the confrontation, which sparked labor’s lasting distrust of U.S. policy. His actions in the 1946 Yomiuri Newspaper dispute, for example, convinced the union leaders and Japanese and American officials that he was an ally of the militant labor movement. (pp. 250-251) Japanese labor leaders, counting on Cohen’s support for labor’s right to strike, even a general strike, misread warnings against a massive walkout. Overcoming his political inhibitions, MacArthur banned the strike at the eleventh hour, removed Cohen from the Labor Division, and “promoted” him to the post of advisor to General Marquat, head of the Economic and Scientific Section.

In just sixteen months in Labor Division, whose principal mission Cohen defines as “encouraging labor unions and permitting strikes” (p. 299), the author angered American and Japanese officials, embarrassed the Supreme Commander, and helped bring on a major confrontation between Japanese labor and the occupation. Responding to the critics of his performance in this event, he says that hostility to him arose.
from “the fact that I was young, a civilian... and a New York Jew...” (p. 299) No reader could reasonably ignore other more pertinent personal qualities: his self-righteous attitude, bellicose personality, emotional outbursts, and the bullying of others. (pp. 271, 275, 292)

As an advisor to General Marquat in 1947-50, Cohen had an insider’s view of the occupation’s attack on the zaibatsu, half-hearted attempt to reform Japan’s “feudal” bureaucracy, and economic recovery program. He might be expected to cheer the assault on big business. Surprisingly, however, his attitude is ambivalent. He berates “hard-driving trust-busters” Corwin Edwards and, especially, Edward Welsh, for their inflexible “classical American” approach to dealing with the zaibatsu. He charges that Welsh mislead his bosses about Washington’s policy on the zaibatsu (Cohen denies that zaibatsu-busting measures of FEC 230 were ever official U.S. policy) and kept Marquat in the dark on the details of the anti-zaibatsu legislation he was preparing. Cohens argument here strikes me as little more than a personal attack on a man he detested. It is unlikely that MacArthur was “unable to control Welsh” (p. 370), or that Welsh proceeded with a policy the Supreme Commander didn’t support. (p. 371) On the contrary, MacArthur’s “populist perception that big business per se was a threat to political democracy...” (pp. 371-72) is clear from Cohen’s own account.

The chapter on civil service reform concentrates on the conflict between members of MacArthur’s staff over collective bargaining for Japanese government employees. Cohen argues that MacArthur’s decision to deprive those workers of the right to strike had serious consequences for Japan and for U.S. relations with Japan. Angry workers deserted “pro-American” Socialist ranks and shifted their support to the extreme left, thus polarizing Japanese politics and destroying chances for a stable Socialist regime. (pp. 394-95) Cohen’s obvious preference for socialist control of Japan earned him a reputation as a radical. The failure of his cause may explain his disillusionment as Washington, from 1948, insisted on directly policy in a more conservative direction.

Cohen attacks the 1948 economic recovery plan, which he associates with Army Under Secretary William Draper, as a harsh medicine that unnecessarily alienated one-third of the Japanese—workers, Socialists and intellectuals—the very groups that U.S. planners in 1945 had “counted on to keep Japan peaceful and democratic in the future....” (p. 403) He denies that the cold war and American strategic interests were responsible for the new policy of building up Japan economically. He argues, uncon­vincingly it seems to me, that the change was due to Draper’s personal influence and the decline of liberal influence in Washington rather than to a new global policy. (pp. 405-406)

In a vivid portrayal of Detroit banker Joseph Dodge, the “imperial accountant” sent by Truman to oversee Japan’s economic stabilization program, Cohen expresses grudging admiration for Dodge’s success in controlling inflation and in forging an alliance between American and Japanese business communities and conservative politicians. But he doesn’t admire the result, which, he says, undermined Japanese support for occupation policy. As the economic recovery and anti-communist measures took hold in Japan after 1948, “insistence on fiscal orthodoxy” and “foreign dictation”, destroyed the “pro-American national consensus” of 1945-47 and created, at the end of the occupation, “an emotionally divided public and an incomplete alliance [with the U.S.]”. (p. 462) Tragically, Cohen suggests, such measures were unnecessary, for Japan, given its head, probably “would have recovered almost as fast” and the “national consensus” behind the radical reforms of 1945-47 would have been preserved.