

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Tojo: The Rise and Fall of Japan's Most Controversial World War II General

Book Launch by Dr Peter Mauch

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Dr. Peter Mauch's Presentation

Thank you to everyone joining us today. I am here to speak about my latest book, a biography of Tojo Hideki. Most of us are familiar with his name; he served as Japan's Prime Minister for the greater part of World War II. The logical starting point for our conversation is to ask: why a study of Tojo, and why now?

Broadly speaking, almost nothing has been published on Tojo in English since Princeton University Press published Robert Butow's landmark study, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, back in 1961. While Butow's work has largely stood the test of time, his book stands almost entirely alone in Anglophone scholarship. This is a stark contrast to the mountains of biographies available for other wartime leaders like Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, or Benito Mussolini. Tojo has been largely neglected.

Furthermore, a vast volume of primary source materials has become available since 1961. For example, the diaries of Tojo's wartime secretaries have been transcribed and published, offering clean copies that frequently quote Tojo directly and provide deep insights into his character. Beyond these primary sources, the last fifteen to twenty years have seen a minor "Tojo boom" in Japanese scholarship. Japanese historians have produced fascinating work on Tojo, the Imperial Japanese Army, and the Army's role in wartime politics.

As I worked through these sources, I began to envision the biography I wanted to write. My goal was to flesh out Tojo's character by drawing on his own words and actions, situating him in the historic events in which he participated, and using his career to reconsider key themes in modern Japanese history.

Some readers may view this book as a biography of a man against the backdrop of Japanese military history. Others may see it as a study of the Imperial Japanese Army through the conceptual lens of Tojo. In truth, these are two sides of the same coin.

To bring color and reality to this approach, I will offer three brief examples of his career.

Three Examples of Tojo's Conduct

1. Army Factionalism and Nagata's Uniform (1935)

The first example is Tojo's role in the intense factionalism that roiled the Japanese Army in the late 1920s and mid-1930s. This conflict came to a bloody head in August 1935 when Tojo's close friend and mentor, Major General Nagata Tetsuzan, was assassinated in his office by a sword-wielding junior officer. At the time, Tojo was stationed far outside Tokyo, in Kyushu, and rumors swirled that he was next on the assassin's hit list. Despite the danger, Tojo rushed back to Tokyo, visited his deceased mentor's family, and was gifted the bloodstained uniform Nagata wore when he was killed. Tojo took the uniform to his hotel, dressed himself in his fallen colleague's bloodstained uniform, and vowed fidelity to their factional cause.

2. Escalation of the Sino-Japanese War (1937)

The second example involves Tojo's role in the opening stages of the war with China. Fighting erupted near Peking in July 1937. Both the Japanese government and military authorities in Tokyo initially sought to localise and de-escalate the conflict. However, Tojo, who was stationed on the continent with the Kwantung Army in Manchuria, decided to lead military operations into Inner Mongolia, far to the west of the original firefight. He repeatedly ignored direct orders from Tokyo to halt his advance, ultimately pushing the warfront hundreds of miles west of Peking. In direct defiance of official policy, Tojo single-handedly escalated the fighting far beyond its original scope.

3. Pearl Harbor and Misleading the Emperor (1941)

The third example concerns Tojo's role in the simultaneous surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor and Malaya. Remarkably, Tojo did not learn of the Pearl Harbor attack plan until early December 1941, just days before it was executed. Once informed, he prioritised operational success above all else, accepting the Navy's argument that success required total surprise. Consequently, Tojo presented a series of half-truths to Emperor Hirohito, ensuring the Emperor remained unaware that Japan was launching a war against the Anglo-American powers without issuing a prior declaration of war.

Tojo's Relationship with the Emperor

This final episode highlights a central thread in my biography: Tojo's complex relationship with his Emperor. This is a vital theme in modern Japanese, Asian, and world history. It quickly became clear to me that no biography of Tojo would be complete without examining this dynamic.

Crucially, Tojo had to earn the Emperor's trust. When Tojo was first proposed as Army Minister in July 1940, the Emperor made it clear he preferred a different soldier. Their first ministerial audience was incredibly difficult for Tojo. Instead of a formulaic meeting, the Emperor reprimanded him, stating that the Army had engaged in disgraceful behavior and that he expected Tojo to reestablish discipline and order.

These words were likely fresh in Tojo's mind a few weeks later when Japanese soldiers in southern China crossed the border into French Indo-China and clashed with French colonial authorities, ignoring Tokyo's official policy, much like Tojo had done in 1937. Tojo reacted swiftly and decisively, cashiering and forcing the retirement of a large number of disobedient officers. This strict disciplinary action put the entire Army on notice that unauthorised initiatives would no longer be tolerated under his leadership.

Additionally, Tojo forbade his subordinates in the Army Ministry from communicating with other government ministries in Tokyo without his express permission. While this was partly a response to the Emperor's demand for discipline, it had a massive structural impact. Previously, the Army had been politically fractured, with different groups of officers lobbying Navy officials or Foreign Ministry diplomats independently. By routing all institutional communication through himself, Tojo centralised and significantly increased his personal power in Japan's decision-making process.

By mid-October 1941, the Emperor reluctantly agreed that Tojo was best suited to serve as Prime Minister. However, even as he made the appointment, the Emperor voiced misgivings that the Army and Tojo were usurping imperial prerogatives, and felt uneasy about rewarding the Army with the premiership after a decade of insubordination. Ultimately, the Emperor's trust in Tojo rested on Tojo's ability to enforce discipline. The Emperor believed that if he issued an order, Tojo could compel the Army to obey.

This trust sustained Tojo in office until June 1944. Following catastrophic military defeats on the continent and in the Pacific, specifically the loss of Saipan, which brought the Japanese home islands within range of American B-29 long-range bombers, the Emperor finally withdrew his support, forcing Tojo's resignation.

Post-surrender, the Emperor reflected on Tojo on several occasions. In 1949, speaking with his grand steward, the Emperor noted that he had always seen "two faces" in Tojo, one very good, and one very bad. This ambivalence is historically fascinating because it humanises Tojo, moving us away from polarised debates that paint him either as a simple monster or as a flawless statesman.

Postwar Tokyo Trial and Public Memory

This brings us to Tojo's postwar trial before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the Tokyo counterpart to Nuremberg) and his place in Japanese war memory.

To quote my colleague Furukawa Takahisa, for the vast majority of Japanese people today, Tojo's name is "a byword for evil." Most contemporary Japanese hold the Army primarily responsible for dragging the nation to near-ruin, and Tojo personifies that reckless behavior.

This public memory largely echoes the findings of the Tokyo Trial. Tojo was found guilty of Class A war crimes (crimes against peace, specifically planning and waging aggressive war) and Class B war crimes (conventional war crimes, such as the maltreatment of prisoners of war). While Tojo accepted responsibility for the Class B crimes as the head of the military chain of command, he fiercely rejected the Class A charges, denying that Japan had

acted aggressively. However, he accepted full responsibility for all decisions made throughout his time as Army Minister and Prime Minister.

In the early 2000s, a small conservative group in Japan began pushing back against the public's acceptance of the Tokyo Trial's verdict. They sought to rehabilitate Tojo's memory, arguing that his villainous reputation was merely a product of "victor's justice" or the "Tokyo Trial view of history," and advocated for a more patriotic view of Japan's wartime past. I argue that these revisionist arguments are misplaced. The public hostility toward Tojo predates the Tokyo Trial and stems from wartime events.

In January 1941, Tojo approved the publication of the *Senjinkun* (Field Service Code), which every soldier carried. Crucially, the code forbade soldiers from suffering the disgrace of being taken prisoner. As the war progressed, Japanese forces followed this injunction to the letter, fighting and dying to the last man in hopeless island battles in the Pacific, a phenomenon the Japanese called *gyokusai*, meaning "shattering like broken jewels."

As these mass deaths accumulated, the Japanese public began whispering that Tojo should take responsibility by committing ritual suicide. These whispers grew louder after Tojo was ousted in July 1944 and continued through the surrender. He received intense hate mail questioning why their relatives had died needlessly, with some even threatening his own sons.

Tojo took the concept of *gyokusai* to an extreme. Even after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he vehemently opposed surrender, arguing instead for a massive, bloody defense campaign against the projected Allied invasion of the Japanese home islands.

When Japan surrendered and US occupation forces moved to arrest him as a war criminal, Tojo attempted suicide by shooting himself in the chest. He survived, but because he was taken prisoner—directly violating the *Senjinkun* code he had enforced on millions of others—he became an object of intense public derision, contempt, and hatred. This anger was homegrown and existed well before the Tokyo Trial even began.

Tojo's Personality

To add some color to Tojo's personality, I have consciously avoided psychoanalysis in the book; I do not believe readers benefit from an omniscient narrator. Instead, I let Tojo's own words and actions speak for themselves.

He was an intensely formidable, incisive character who thrived in interpersonal conflict, particularly when debates became personal. Conversely, he was remarkably generous to his subordinates, which earned him sycophantic loyalty.

On a human level, his daily routine included an early morning horse ride. Perhaps his strangest wartime habit was a folksy method of assessing the adequacy of the civilian diet. Having spent several years in Central Europe after World War I investigating Germany's economic collapse, Tojo was highly sensitive to food scarcity. To monitor Japan's food supply, he would literally rummage through citizens' rubbish bins in the morning. If he

found food scraps, he would satisfy himself that the population was not doing too badly yet, often preferring this hands-on approach to the official bureaucratic statistics he received.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the questions my book seeks to address:

1. Approach to biography: How does one write a biography that neither rehabilitates nor demonises its subject, especially when previous literature is so polarised?
2. Rise to power: How did Tojo rise through the single most powerful institution in the state, the Army, and further consolidate its power within Japan's complex political system?
3. Byzantine decision-making: What do Tojo's career and conduct reveal about the place of the military in Japan's complex decision-making processes? Where did power actually lie, and how was it exercised?
4. Imperial relations: How should we understand Tojo's relationship with the Emperor in terms of constitutional ambiguity, institutional ritual, and political responsibility?
5. Separation of powers: How did Tojo navigate the separation of powers within the military, particularly between the Army Ministry and the Army General Staff? How did he try to build a working consensus with the Navy, despite their deep strategic disagreements and budget rivalries?
6. Wartime empire: How did Tojo envision the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere"? To what extent was it oriented toward genuine cooperation, and where were its blind spots?

Thank you very much.