

## CHAPTER 11

# The Priesthood's Wartime Behavior

On December 25, 1926, Japan's Emperor Taisho died. A new emperor, Showa—known to the world outside Japan by his

***Distortion of  
the Daishonin's  
Teachings***

given name, Hirohito—took the throne, and the era was renamed Showa. During the early years of Hirohito's reign, Japan grew increasingly nationalistic, with the military gaining a growing influence in politics. As the nation ran headlong toward war, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood succumbed to pressure from the government and compromised Nichiren Daishonin's teachings in support of the nation's war efforts and the state-supported Shinto religion, which promoted belief in the divinity of the emperor. The priesthood's behavior contrasted sharply with that of the newly formed Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, whose first and second presidents demonstrated uncompromising commitment to the integrity and spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism. (The Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, or "the educational society for value-creation," was the name of the Soka Gakkai prior to the war and its postwar reconstruction.)

During the 1920s and '30s, Japan's militarist regime

tightened its control over thought and religion. It cracked down on religious organizations deemed unfavorable to government policy. The Omoto, Hitonomichi and Honmichi sects were disbanded by the government. In 1941, the government revised the Maintenance of the Public Order Act in order to unify all religious organizations under the umbrella of state Shinto. The revised act stipulated “any blasphemous act against the dignity of a Shinto shrine” as punishable with the maximum sentence of death. The act became a pretext for the government to oppress religious organizations, especially newly established groups and Christian denominations.

The government also pressured the various Nichiren schools to delete passages from the Daishonin’s writings it viewed as disrespectful toward the emperor and the Shinto deity. In June 1941, the newly merged Nichiren School, which consisted of the Minobu, Kenpon Hokke and Hon’mon schools, decided to delete 208 phrases and passages from about seventy of the Daishonin’s writings. The school also discontinued the publication and sale of any of the Daishonin’s writings.

Following the lead of the combined Nichiren School, the Nichiren Shoshu administrative office issued a notice, dated August 24, 1941, stating that because the Daishonin’s works were written more than seven hundred years ago during the social conditions of the Kamakura period, people of the present age in reading his writings might “doubt the Daishonin’s desire to respect the emperor and protect his empire.” Thus the priesthood decided to stop publication of the Daishonin’s writings.

The notice also states: “The doctrine that the Buddha is true while deities are transient is a vulgar belief in Buddhism. . . . This school, therefore, shall not rely on this doctrine as it has been previously interpreted.” Nichiren

Daishonin's Buddhism views the positive and nurturing workings of the environment as "Buddhist deities" and regards them as ephemeral manifestations of the Mystic Law to which Buddhas are enlightened. In this sense, his teaching subordinates "deities" to "Buddhas." Fearing oppression from the government, the priesthood thus abandoned one of the essential teachings of its founder.

Furthermore, on September 29, the Nichiren Shoshu Study Department issued a notice that instructed the deletion of passages from the Daishonin's writings where the nation's sovereignty, symbolized by the Sun Goddess—which Shinto considers to be the supreme deity and origin of Japan's imperial lineage—is described as inferior or subordinate to the Buddha. For example, the priesthood deleted the passage where the Daishonin states, "I, Nichiren, am the foremost sage in Jambudvipa" (WND, 642). Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest of Taiseki-ji, who restored the Daishonin's teaching within the Fuji School by correcting erroneous doctrines advocated by his predecessors, considered this passage to be one of those constituting scriptural proof of the Daishonin's identity as the original Buddha. The Fuji School's view of the Daishonin's identity was a doctrinal mainstay that distinguished it from other Nichiren denominations, especially the Minobu School. The notice from the priesthood's Study Department also prohibited the use of the deleted passages in sermons or lectures. The priesthood's decision to delete key passages of the Daishonin's writings and ban their usage was a serious doctrinal compromise.

In addition, Nichiren Shoshu revised the silent prayers of its liturgy to appease the military regime. Published in an August 22, 1941, notice, the new silent prayers extolled the nationalistic ideals of the military regime and promoted state

Shinto. For example, the revised first silent prayer read in part, “I humbly thank the Sun Goddess, the ancestor of the emperor, and all emperors of the successive reigns since the time of first Emperor Jimmu for the great debt of gratitude I owe to them.” In the fourth silent prayer, a prayer for the spread of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, the priesthood inserted nationalistic expressions such as “the unity of government and people” and “the increase of the nation’s majesty.”

Behind the priesthood’s doctrinal compromise was one high-ranking official of Nichiren Shoshu. Jimon Ogasawara, then a director of propagation, strongly requested that the priesthood adopt the doctrine that the Buddha is subordinate to the Shinto deity. Also, regarding the silent prayers, Ogasawara sharply criticized the head temple administration. In the magazine *Sekai no Nichiren* (Nichiren of the World), he writes: “To place the Sun Goddess after Brahma, Indra and the king devil of the sixth heaven is a great blasphemy. Heavenly deities worshiped in India such as Brahma and Indra must be deleted at once.” His criticism was heard, and the Indian deities were promptly deleted from the silent prayers while the Shinto deity and the emperor were given a more prominent place.

Ogasawara’s scheme was chiefly motivated by his desire to gain control within the head temple administration. Earlier in his career, he supported Nichikai (father of Nikken; later to become the sixtieth high priest) in order to remove Nitcho, the fifty-eighth high priest, from office. But when Nichikai campaigned for the high office in an election after the resignation of the fifty-ninth high priest, Nichiko, Ogasawara supported his opponent, Koga Arimoto. Nichikai won the election, and Ogasawara lost his influence. Ogasawara was then forced out of the priesthood’s ruling faction. By advocating a doctrine

that subordinated Buddhism to Shinto, Ogasawara attempted to regain his influence.

Through his close associations with military officials, Ogasawara caused the government to apply pressure on Taiseki-ji. He also sent a letter to High Priest Nikkyo, asking him to clarify his stance regarding the relative merits of the Buddha and the Shinto deity. Ogasawara attempted to lure Nikkyo into making a statement offensive to the military regime, thus placing the high priest in a vulnerable position. Ogasawara's scheme, however, was not successful. He underestimated the priesthood's willingness to compromise its doctrinal integrity to protect itself.

On September 14, 1942, the priesthood expelled Ogasawara, charging him with minor violations of the priesthood's rules and regulations such as failing to pay administrative dues. The decision, however, was political, not doctrinal. The fact that the priesthood continued to support the military regime's nationalistic propaganda based on state Shinto after Ogasawara's expulsion indicates that the head temple administration's decision was motivated by its desire to remove an element hostile to the controlling faction, not by its intent to punish Ogasawara for advocating an erroneous doctrine.

On December 7, 1941, with its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan declared war against the United States and Great Britain. At the start of the Pacific War, High Priest Nikkyo issued the following message: "Today His Majesty declared war on the United States of America and Great Britain. I can hardly suppress my awe and joy at this.... I ask that all believers summon forth the faith and practice they assiduously developed thus far and ensure victory in this great, unprecedented battle, through their resolve to endure

any hardship and exert their utmost in their respective positions and capacities.”

As the nation plunged into war, the priesthood’s support for the military regime became even more enthusiastic. The January 1942 issue of *Dai-Nichiren*, the priesthood’s official magazine, carried Nikkyo’s New Year message in which he repeated nationalistic propaganda in support of the nation’s war efforts. In this message, Nikkyo declares, “It is the purpose of the founder’s advent for us to realize the principle ‘the world is the Japanese nation’ through loyally dedicating our lives to the nation.” On October 10, 1942, one month after Ogasawara’s expulsion, the Nichiren Shoshu administrative office issued a notice instructing believers henceforth to face and worship in the direction of the Ise Shinto Shrine at 10:00 a.m. every October 17, when an important annual Shinto harvest festivity was customarily held there.

This act by the priesthood would certainly have been viewed as an abomination by Nikko Shonin, who instructed his disciples as follows: “Lay believers should be strictly prohibited from visiting [heretical] temples and shrines. Moreover, priests should not visit slanderous temples or shrines, which are inhabited by demons, even if only to have a look around. To do so would be a pitiful violation [of the Daishonin’s Buddhism]. This is not my own personal view; it wholly derives from the sutras [of Shakyamuni] and the writings [of Nichiren Daishonin]” (GZ, 1617).

On November 19, 1942, the priesthood established the Nichiren Shoshu Association for Serving the Nation (Jpn Nichiren Shoshu Hokokudan) “in order that priests and lay believers in each parish cooperate and unite for the promotion of the movement to serve the nation.” The association’s chief purpose—to serve the nation—meant to support the

national war effort. The association raised money for the war and encouraged its members to pray for Japan's victory as well as for the success and good fortune of the Imperial Army. The high priest became the association's first secretary general.

While the priesthood supported the nation's war efforts, the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai continued to uphold the Daishonin's teachings and refused to accept Shinto. The priesthood grew nervous about the lay organization's stance. In June 1943, the priesthood summoned Gakkai leaders to the head temple. With Nikkyo, the sixty-second high priest, and Nichiko, the retired fifty-ninth high priest, in attendance, Jikai Watanabe, then director of general affairs, instructed Gakkai members to accept a Shinto talisman, a small religious paper depicting the Sun Goddess. The government was urging all households to enshrine and worship this talisman. President Tsunesaburo Makiguchi refused. Later that same month, Makiguchi returned to the head temple to remonstrate with the high priest on this point. His warning, however, fell on deaf ears. Instead of heeding Makiguchi's warning, the priesthood attempted to discipline the Gakkai leaders for their disobedience by barring them from the head temple.

In July, twenty-one Soka Gakkai leaders, including President Makiguchi and General Director Josei Toda, were arrested. Shortly before this crackdown, on June 16, Renjo Fujimoto, a Nichiren Shoshu priest, was arrested for treason. (Fujimoto eventually died in prison in January 1944.) Alarmed by the arrests, the head temple administration expelled Fujimoto from the priesthood and stripped the Gakkai leaders of their status as believers in the school. The priesthood denied all ties with those who, on account of their belief in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, had offended the military regime.

Still Nichiren Shoshu's support for the nation's war efforts and its disciplinary measures against those who disobeyed were not enough to put the minds of Nichiren Shoshu priests at ease. During priests' seminars held at Taiseki-ji on August 21 and 22 and again on August 25 and 26, the head temple administration instructed participants to enshrine a Shinto talisman in their living quarters at their branch temples. On November 1, the head temple's administrative office issued a notice instructing all believers to visit a local Shinto shrine for a Shinto festivity to commemorate the birth of the late Emperor Meiji and to pray for Japan's victory in the war.

The priesthood also contributed head temple properties to the military regime. Giant cedar trees on the temple grounds were felled for lumber, and a large bell was removed for military use. The priesthood's official magazine, *Dai-Nichiren*, reported in 1944:

The contribution of good timber from our sacred grounds was made so that it may be turned into ships to crush the United States and Great Britain, and this accords with the honest desire of the Buddha to secure the peace of the land through establishing the truth (*rissho ankoku*).... These old cedar trees and the large bell, which have been donated,... shall respectively become a ship to carry the soldiers, supplies and weapons of the Imperial Army and bullets to penetrate the breasts of fierce enemies as intended by the Buddha.

In December 1944, the priesthood made the Grand Lodging Hall on the head temple grounds available for a regiment of the Korean Volunteer Army. Despite its euphemistic name, the



“volunteer army” consisted of Koreans brought to Japan as farm laborers from their occupied country, under the command of Japanese military officers. Soon after the regiment came to the head temple, a Shinto talisman was enshrined in the Grand Lodging Hall next to the high priest’s living quarters. The enshrinement of a Shinto talisman at the head temple was emblematic of the priesthood’s distortion of the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

While the priesthood at Taiseki-ji was plagued with corruption and factional infighting in the early 1900s, an important

***The Martyrdom  
of Makiguchi***

event, though unnoticed at the time, took place in the history of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. In 1928, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi took faith in the Daishonin’s teaching, soon followed by his disciple Jogai Toda, who later renamed himself Josei.

Makiguchi was both an educator in practice and an educational scholar. An elementary-school teacher, he later served as a school principal where he gained experience in school administration. A pioneer of pedagogy in Japan, Makiguchi established a unique theory, which he named “the value-creation educational system.” At the core of his educational theory was his philosophical belief that the purpose of life was the pursuit of happiness, which he equated with the creation of value.

In November 1930, with help from his disciple Toda, Makiguchi formed a group of educators dedicated to educational reform based on Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. The group was called the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai or “Society of Value-Creation Education.” As Makiguchi’s understanding of

the Daishonin's teachings deepened, the Gakkai gradually broadened its scope from that of an educational reform movement to one aimed at building a peaceful society through the reformation of the individual based on Buddhism.

In 1937, the Gakkai held an inaugural meeting and started conducting activities steadily. Makiguchi himself attended discussion meetings and communicated the Daishonin's Buddhism to a broader audience. As a result, people from walks of life other than education started to join the Gakkai. In 1941, the organization began publication of its newspaper *Kachi Sozo* (Value-creation). By this time, the membership had grown to two thousand.

In 1942, the government ordered the Gakkai to cease publication of its newspaper as Japan plunged further into war and government control of religious organizations became more intensive. Despite this pressure from the government, Makiguchi continued to uphold the Daishonin's teachings. At the same time, he was often critical of the priesthood for its unwillingness to protect the integrity of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

At the fifth general meeting of the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai held in November 1942, Makiguchi said, "The Tendai School during the days of Nichiren Daishonin corresponds to today's Nichiren Shoshu among Nichiren denominations" (*Complete Works of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi*, vol. 10, p. 151). By the thirteenth century, Japan's Tendai School, which had been viewed as an orthodox school based on the Lotus Sutra, descended into esotericism similar to that of the Shingon School. Makiguchi indirectly pointed out that, despite Nichiren Shoshu's claim to the orthodoxy of the Daishonin's Buddhism, its substance had degenerated as it carried favor with the military regime. In the same speech, Makiguchi went

on: "We must ask who among the existing believers of Nichiren Shoshu is experiencing the three obstacles and four devils" (ibid., p. 152). Makiguchi no doubt made this statement with the following passage from the Daishonin in mind:

If you propagate it, devils will arise without fail. If they did not, there would be no way of knowing that this is the true teaching. One passage from the same volume reads: "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge in confusing form, vying with one another to interfere . . . . One should neither be influenced nor frightened by them. If one falls under their influence, one will be prevented from practicing the correct teaching." This statement not only applies to me but also is a guide for my followers. Reverently make this teaching your own, and transmit it as an axiom of faith for future generations. (WND, 501)

Clearly his statement was directed toward the priesthood, which was compromising the Daishonin's teachings to avoid government persecution. In this regard, Makiguchi also said: "Those who are instructing others without experiencing persecutions themselves are none other than the jailers of hell leading people to the evil paths."

Inspired by Makiguchi's strict guidance, Gakkai members refused to accept the Shinto talisman promoted by the government. But the Gakkai's uncompromising stance made the priesthood uneasy. As a result, the priesthood summoned Makiguchi and other Gakkai leaders to the head temple and instructed them to accept the Shinto talisman.

As mentioned before, Makiguchi rejected the priesthood's

order. In his essay titled “The History and Conviction of the Soka Gakkai,” Josei Toda describes the incident as follows:

The head temple feared persecution if it supported Mr. Makiguchi’s contention that unless they follow the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin and Nikko Shonin, any country, family or individual would experience punishment. It seemed that the head temple was more frightened of the possible persecution it would face from the military if believers did not obediently enshrine the Shinto object of worship.

In June 1943, Soka Gakkai leaders were ordered to the head temple. Jikai Watanabe, on behalf of Nichiren Shoshu, suggested that the Gakkai members receive this Shinto talisman in the meantime and follow the direction of the military for awhile. This suggestion was made with the current and retired high priests on hand as witnesses.

Again, Nikko Shonin states in his “Twenty-six Admonitions” that we should not follow even the high priest if he takes actions that oppose the teachings of true Buddhism. In this spirit, President Makiguchi resolutely rejected the idea of accepting the Shinto talisman and left the head temple. On the way home, he said to me: “What I lament is not that one sect will be ruined but that our nation will perish. I am afraid that the Daishonin is indeed sorrowful about this plight. Isn’t this the time to admonish the entire nation? I don’t know what the head temple is afraid of.” (*Seikyo Times*, June 1991, p. 31)

When Makiguchi and other Gakkai leaders were arrested

on charges of treason and other violations of the Maintenance of Public Order Act in July 1943, Nichiren Shoshu stripped them of their status as lay believers. In the same essay, Toda comments on the reaction of the priesthood as follows:

We should take to heart the strictness of the Daishonin's golden teachings without fearing authority. President Makiguchi had such vehement spirit. Nevertheless, the warped military government treated him like a criminal, even though he had committed no crime. Twenty-one Soka Gakkai leaders were imprisoned solely because they refused to enshrine talismans of the Sun Goddess. At that time, many believers and priests at the head temple were shocked and at a loss as to what to do. When I heard about this, I was ashamed of them. President Makiguchi, myself and our followers were barred from visiting the head temple, and the whole country criticized our families as being enemies of the nation. Those were very strange days. (ibid., p. 31)

Makiguchi, despite intimidation from the government and inhumane conditions in Japan's wartime prison, upheld his belief to the end. He asserted the correctness of the Daishonin's Buddhism to the interrogating prosecutors. The August 1943 issue of *The Special Police Monthly Report* published some of Makiguchi's responses during the interrogations. When asked about the Gakkai's treatment of the Shinto talisman, Makiguchi responded:

Nowadays a talisman of the Sun Goddess is enshrined in almost every home. So, above all, I have been encouraging [Gakkai members] to remove them. The

reason for their removal is that if individual members enshrine [the talisman] as an object of devotion, it will confuse their faith in the Gohonzon, thus slandering the Law. Furthermore, to enshrine a talisman of the Sun Goddess at home will instead amount to committing treason for the reason I mentioned before. Needless to say, to visit and offer a prayer at those shrines and temples would be to slander the Law. Since the retribution from slandering the Law is weighty, I have been instructing [Gakkai members] not to visit.

When asked if he thought Japan was an evil society of the Latter Day in light of the Lotus Sutra, Makiguchi responded: “[The Daishonin] states that a nation will experience disasters—such as internal strife, revolution, famine and pestilence—and be led to ruin [if it slanders the Lotus Sutra]. Our past history indicates that we experienced such incidents and similar national disasters. The cause for the current Japan–Sino conflict and the war in greater East Asia lies in the nation’s slander of the Law.” It should be noted that Makiguchi made these statements at a time when the emperor was considered divine, and war declared under his name as just and sacred. Makiguchi was well aware that his statements violated the Maintenance of Public Order Act, whose maximum sentence was capital punishment.

Emaciated from malnutrition and old age, Makiguchi died in Tokyo Detention Center on November 18, 1944. He was seventy-three. The day before, he had been moved out of solitary confinement. Having refused any help from the guard, he dressed himself and walked to the prison’s infirmary. Soon afterward he lay down, fell unconscious and the next morning breathed his last.

Later Toda eulogized Makiguchi: “My mentor gave his life to the Lotus Sutra. As he always quoted the Daishonin, saying that it is a wise man’s dishonor to be praised by a fool, he at last was praised by the greatest man of wisdom [Nichiren Daishonin]” (*Complete Works of Josei Toda*, vol. 1, p. 529).

Makiguchi’s martyrdom stood in contrast to the high priest’s tragic death in a fire at Taiseki-ji on June 17, 1945. Around 10:30 p.m., a fire broke out in a meeting hall of the building that housed the high priest’s residence and quickly spread through his living quarters, the adjacent study, the Mutsubo Hall and the Reception Hall. It continued to burn until 4:00 a.m. next day. The fire was caused by a student priest’s cigarette.

A gruesome discovery was made in the charred ruins. High Priest Nikkyo was found dead—his lower body trapped in an open hearth located in the temple employees’ cafeteria. He was the only one who died in the fire. The high priest had been resting in his quarters directly above the cafeteria. The floor burned through and gave out, and the high priest fell and was trapped in the hearth below.

Several unfortunate coincidences contributed to his death. On the day before the fire, Nikkyo had returned to the head temple from a retreat where he had been convalescing. Obesity combined with illness apparently hindered his escape. During a service at Myoko-ji, a branch temple in Tokyo, in September 1945, Kosei Nakajima, then an acting chief executive of Nichiren Shoshu, spoke about the incident:

In the study, three hundred farming corps members were staying. But for some reason, they were unable to assist in fighting the fire. A fire engine parked in front of the gate was not working. Another fire engine

at a [military] tank school in Kamiide was out of gasoline. In Fujinomiya, upon hearing of the fire, an engine was quickly readied for duty. But [the firefighters] received no order from the department chief, who was absent, and so they remained idle. By the time they received a request from the Ueno Police Station and rushed to the fire, it had already spread through the reception hall, and not much could be done. There were so many adverse conditions that I can only say that [the fire] was truly karmic.

Before an assembly of believers, Nakajima also referred to Nikkyo's death as "a compassionate admonishment from the Daishonin." Furthermore, he acknowledged that a student priest caused the fire. Later, however, the priesthood distorted the facts. It announced that the fire was set by Korean Volunteer Army soldiers dissatisfied with Japanese military officers and that the high priest took responsibility for the fire and committed an honorable suicide (from *On Refuting the Counterfeit Dai-Gohonzon Theory* [Jpn Akusho Ita Honzon Gisaku Ron o Funsaisu], published by the Nichiren Shoshu Propagation Society in 1956, pp. 92-95).