

Not as Alien as We Might Like to Think

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Nihon-gun no horyo seisaku

[The POW Policies of the Japanese Military]

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A nation which once sought to impress the world with its respect for international law becomes involved in a conflict overseas. For the sake of military and political convenience, no formal declaration of war is ever made and as a result, the nation deals with captured enemy combatants outside the framework of international rules established for the protection of prisoners of war. The nation has also refused to enter into a widely-accepted international treaty regime on the grounds that the associated burdens would fall mainly on its own military. As the conflict expands into a global one, the nation is increasingly subject to international criticism regarding the way it treats its captives. Some prisoners are accused of terroristic crimes and tried by special military tribunals under ex-post facto laws and procedures. Many others are subject to a regime of imprisonment that would not have been possible had they been on the nation's home soil. The nation's military resources become thinly stretched and even those who try to treat the prisoners in accordance with the laws of war are subject to increasing limitations on their ability to do so. Prisoner facilities are now being managed by poorly-trained reservists, rear-echelon troops and in some cases, civilians. Resentful of the ongoing and increasingly unsuccessful conflict, many mistreat their charges. While some of these rear-echelon personnel are ultimately tried for their abuses, a higher level organizational failure is also clearly to blame.

While the above may sound like a summary of recent news, it is also an accurate description of Japan's own experience with prisoners of war in the first half of the twentieth century. Historian Aiko Utsumi's thoroughly researched book on Japan's prisoner of war (POW) policies is an important work for two very different reasons. First, it provides an extensively researched Japanese perspective on the subject. Second, without the author even attempting to draw any, it contains a number of eerie parallels to current affairs. It is a shame more of the U.S. political and military elite will not be able to read it in its original Japanese.

Barely clothed and perpetually malnourished, they were completely exhausted. Even when collapsing from sickness, they were given no medicine and their corpses were left to rot in the fields.

This is the sort of description the casual reader of history may be accustomed to associate with Japan's treatment of allied prisoners during the Pacific War. However in Utsumi's book it is a description of the treatment of Czechoslovakian prisoners of the Bolsheviks held in post-World War I Siberia. Japan used the pretext of rescuing them from their plight as one of the justifications behind its 1918-25 military intervention in

post-revolutionary Russia, as did the United States and a number of European countries. However, it was an excuse that Japan could plausibly call upon, based on its own experience and conduct in past conflicts.

It is common to attribute Japan's treatment of allied POWs in the Pacific War to culture – to the Samurai notion of *bushi-dô*, according to which a warrior should prefer death to capture. Thus, the theory goes, in the eyes of their captors, POWs were unworthy of life and treated accordingly. This view is doubtless also comforting at an unconscious level: through it the incredible suffering experienced by many POWs can be attributed to some fundamentally different cultural “other;” to a barbaric alien race with no respect for the laws of war. Utsumi's book renders what happens to POWs unpleasantly familiar. There are laws and regulations and conflicting interpretations of what they mean. There are administrators, jurisdictional disputes, conflicting bureaucratic imperatives, organizational charts and organizational failures. There are well-meaning leaders attempting to do their jobs (with well-thumbed and annotated compilations of laws and regulations at their side) and sadistic groups of individuals who take out their frustrations on the helpless. Utsumi's research includes interviews and correspondence with both former allied POWs as well as their Japanese captors. She has also delved deeply into testimony and other evidence presented at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and related war crimes trials.

Those who subscribe to the cultural explanations of Japan's treatment of prisoners will probably be surprised to learn that Japan treated the 70,000 prisoners it took in the Russo-Japanese war humanely and in compliance with international law. Having ratified the 1899 Hague Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land, Japan treated its Russian prisoners well almost to a fault – captive officers were given active duty pay at a rate corresponding to Japanese officers of the same rank (as provided in the Convention). Kept in camps set up throughout Japan, these prisoners were treated if not as guests, at least as fascinating alien visitors. Authorities had to issue now quaint-seeming warnings to their own citizens to cease “following or surrounding the prisoners” or “peeking into the POW camps.”

Incidents of prisoners being brutalized or slaughtered did occur, but on the battlefield “out of the view of international legal scholars and the military top brass.” At the same time, for a Japanese soldier being taken prisoner by the Russians involved some dishonor and was officially frowned on. Those returning after the war from camps were subject to harsh investigations regarding the circumstances of their capture. However, much of this dishonor was often *tatemaie* – on the surface only – and many such former prisoners went on to receive medals for their wartime service. Fought in 1904-1905, the Russo-Japanese War was early enough in Japan's modern history that some of its military and political leaders would actually have been born in Samurai households. Clearly then, factors other than a warrior tradition were at work in conflicts to come.

At the time there were, of course, practical reasons for scrupulously complying with international law. Japan was trying to get rid of the “unequal treaties” that it had been

compelled to sign with Western nations after being forcibly opened to trade by America's Commodore Perry in 1854 following centuries of isolation. These treaties rendered Japan inferior by exempting foreign nationals in the country from Japanese law, and limiting its autonomy in international trade. The country's leaders were thus at pains to show that it had become a "civilized" country, worthy of equal treatment in its diplomatic relations. In this respect, its conduct of the Russo-Japanese war was a success: by 1911 the last of the unequal treaties had been eliminated.

Nonetheless, Japan treated POWs well in World War I also. Joining the allied side in that conflict, Japan took over 4,000 German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners, mainly when it overran Germany's protectorates in China after a short battle in 1914. These prisoners were held in Japan for over five years, and were again treated in a manner that complied scrupulously with international law as well as the domestic laws and regulations regarding the handling of prisoners that Japan had begun developing in 1904. Some refinements were made to suit Japanese interests. This time, for example, captured German officers were now only given reserve pay on the grounds that as POWs, they were no longer on active duty. More importantly perhaps, it was realized that these prisoners had a wide range of skills from which Japan could benefit. Many had, after all, been hastily conscripted from other professions into military service from throughout the German community in Asia (one captured German officer had been a law professor at Tokyo university, a position to which he returned after the war). By treating the prisoners well, the Japanese were able to learn from them, just as they had been eagerly learning from the West since before the Meiji Restoration. The Germans taught their Japanese hosts dying techniques, how to butcher cattle and one even helped a local enterprise to develop the rubber production techniques upon which the Bridgestone Tire company was founded. A German restaurant in Ginza still bears the name of the German POW chef who helped found it. In addition to these skills, the German prisoners were welcomed by their surrounding communities as a large group of captive (literally) consumers. The officers' pay and the wages POWs of other ranks could earn by working had a significant impact on the local economies. While the number of German prisoners was small compared to the Russo-Japanese war, their contributions to the Japanese economy foreshadowed a pattern to be followed in future wars.

Conditions at different camps varied. Some were worse than others due to overcrowding and other factors, but others had tennis courts and soccer fields. Some German POWs who had lived in Asia before the outbreak of war were able to have their wives move to accommodations nearby. Whichever camp it was, however, the conditions in which the German POWs were kept were almost uncertainly more civilized than those endured by many captive "enemy combatants" today. As with the Russo-Japanese war, World War I was a declared war, which triggered Japan's obligations regarding prisoner of war status under the various international treaties to which it was a party, as well as its own laws and regulations.

Of course Japan also treated its German prisoners well because it had the luxury of being able to do so. Other than the battle for Tsingtao and minor actions in the Pacific and Africa, World War I was almost entirely a European affair. Japan was thus able to reap the benefits of participation on the winning side at little cost to its growing economic and military power. It is in an incident involving German POWs, however, that we see the first signs of the irrational extremism associated with Japan's militaristic emperor-worship. In celebration of the coronation of the Taishō Emperor Yoshihito in 1912, one bottle of beer and two apples are presented to each German officer POW. At one camp, however, two captives refuse the offering, on the grounds that as prisoners of war, they are not permitted to accept gifts from foreign governments. Enraged by this *lese majeste* the camp commandant strikes them. That Japan's treatment of POWs was at this time exemplary is illustrated by the fact that this minor drama became an international incident. The United States makes its first significant appearance here: then still a neutral country, personnel from the American Embassy in Tokyo inspects all of Japan's POW camps on Germany's behalf, and it is to the United States ambassador that the aggrieved German prisoners address their complaints about their treatment.

It was during World War I and the rest of the Taishō Period (1912-26) that the Japanese military began to further dogmatize the idea that Japanese soldiers should never be taken prisoner in any circumstances. This was reflected in Japan's schizophrenic attitude towards the 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (the Geneva Convention so frequently referred to in "Hogan's Heroes"). Although the Convention was attended and signed by representatives of Japan's government, its military expressed a variety of objections which ultimately prevented its ratification by the Japanese Diet. Some of these objections were undeniably practical – prescient, even. Were Japan a party to the convention, went one argument, enemy airmen could embark on one-way bombing missions on the Japanese homeland from an extended range (which is what happened in the 1942 Doolittle Raid), safe in the knowledge that they would be well treated as prisoners. Other objections may even sound familiar to the modern reader: it was deemed undesirable from a military perspective that POWs have opportunities for unsupervised communications with representatives of neutral third countries (as was required by the Convention). And although the Convention was structured as a series of mutual obligations among signatories, it was feared that the burdens of these obligations would fall mostly on Japan: since its own soldiers were now not expected to be taken prisoner, they would not enjoy the treaty's protections. One objection was simply logical, yet foreshadowed one of the core problems encountered by allied POWs in the world war to come: the Japanese military already disciplined its own soldiers and sailors more harshly than POWs could be punished under the Convention (to paraphrase one former Australian POW writing in different context, "Sure the Japanese soldiers would beat you with baseball bats, but they beat each other with baseball bats too"). Although Japan never ratified (and was thus never bound by) the Convention, it remained a party to the 1899 Hague Convention as well as other

international instruments on the laws of war. And Utsumi shows that Japan's leaders were not unaware of their obligations under these instruments into the Shōwa Period (1926-1989) and through the end of World War II.

Awareness of international law was, after all, one of the reasons for Japan not formally declaring war on China, despite numerous clashes in the 1920s and the 1930s which ultimately led to all-out conflict following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937. A formal state of war would have triggered legal restrictions on Japan's ability to procure supplies from the United States and other neutral countries. Japan was also seeking to placate a hostile Chinese populace by purporting to fight a limited battle, one to *help* the Chinese people and save them from their wrongful leaders who tolerated communism and opposed Japan. Japanese soldiers were sent to China with instructions that their enemy was not the Chinese people, and a renowned Japanese scholar of international law declares that "a formal state of war has not yet developed" between Japan and China. On the battlefield, however, reality was slipping away from both of these hopeful notions.

The absence of a formal state of war had profound consequences for Chinese soldiers captured by the Japanese. In a formal war, as in past conflicts, POW camps and an organizational structure to administer them would have been established under the Minister of the Army. With no war declared, however, such an organizational structure was never formed. Prisoners remained under the jurisdiction and control of the combat units that captured them, to be "processed at the discretion of the various ranking commanders" as one set of orders instructed. "Processing" could involve treatment as prisoners or use as slave labor. Other prisoners might be disarmed and impressed into military units of Japan's puppet Chinese government in Nanking. Others were simply killed, either on the battle field as a tactical convenience or, more cruelly, behind the lines as live targets for bayonet practice and swordsmanship.

As the conflict in China dragged on and expanded in scope, morale in Japan's conscript army dropped, with an accompanying collapse in discipline. Not only did Japanese soldiers take out their frustrations on Chinese prisoners, but they raped and looted the Chinese civilian populace. Although some soldiers were court-martialed for such crimes, legal practicalities could make convictions difficult. For example, under Japanese law, the crime of rape required the victim to pursue a prosecution (and presumably to be alive to do so). Nonetheless, the military attempted to restore discipline through a number of initiatives, such as amending the military criminal laws to make it easier to punish crimes against civilians. But the fact that these amendments included new punishments for disobeying orders and killing officers illustrates the scope of the disciplinary crisis the military faced by this time. By some accounts, the crisis was never resolved.

It was in the context of this greater effort to control discipline, however, that the military further enhanced the indoctrination of its troops against being taken captive. Seemingly mundane series of changes in administrative procedures also played an

important factor in the formation of attitudes towards POW status. In 1937, as casualties began to mount in the China conflict, Japan's Ministry of Justice notified local government offices throughout Japan that instead of simply recording in family Registries (the records still maintained by local governments in which are recorded the births, deaths, marriages and other details of every Japanese family) that a family member had "died", it should be marked that the person had "died in battle" when appropriate. In 1938 this was expanded to allow a notation of "died of wounds in battle". Either notation became a permanent part of the family record, and was a matter of honor and community status for its surviving members. These changes were paralleled by changes in other regulations which allowed a commander to declare a subordinate dead without physical confirmation. Thus, by the time of Japan's vicious border skirmishes with the Soviet Military at Nomonhan in 1939, a soldier who went missing in action whether due to capture or other reasons, might quickly have been officially recorded as a dead war hero, and to return alive would cast ill repute on family members now honored by this status. As a result, the Asian mainland came to be populated by a scattering of wanderers – Japanese soldiers who could not return home because they were believe dead.

Eventually, its campaign in China dragged Japan into World War II, already in progress. Japan entered into its war with the West acutely aware of its obligations under international law. The Netherlands was not included in the declaration of war against the United States and England made on the same day that Pearl Harbor was bombed: Prime Minister Tojo did not believe there was any need to give advanced warning of Japan's planned invasion of the Dutch East Indies. Subverting the niceties of international law to gain tactical advantage had been a hallmark of Japan's mode of warfare since its first "modern" war with Ch'ing dynasty China in 1894-1895.

The incredible success of Japan's early campaigns in Asia and the Pacific presented Japan's military with a tremendous logistical problem on top of its already over-extended lines of supply; how to deal with a large number of allied POWs, starting with over 10,000 commonwealth soldiers taken at the fall of Hong Kong on Christmas Day 1941. Placed in camps with inadequate food, water or sanitation, the treatment of these and other prisoners made Japan infamous, even before the notorious Bataan Death March of 1942 which so inflamed U.S. public opinion. These early views of Japan inspired the anger and vengefulness which, in combination with Japan's own never-surrender credo, ultimately turned the war in Asia into what historian John Dower has called a "War Without Mercy."

Far from the battlefield, the country's leaders assured themselves that the claims of maltreatment were baseless, but worried about the effect they were having on Japan's world image. Part of this image problem, however, was at least partially attributable to confused efforts to appear respectful of international legal norms while at the same modifying the attending obligation to suite Japan's own military and political convenience. By January of 1942 most of the allied nations had announced their intention to apply the terms of the Geneva Convention to the war in Asia, despite it not having been

ratified by Japan. With thousands of its own nationals stranded by the war in hostile countries, Japan was under pressure to make a similar announcement. After much internal debate, it was first announced that although it was not bound by the Convention, Japan would “to the extent possible” apply its provisions “mutatis mutandi” (*jun’yō*) – modified accordingly. Further announcements on the subject of compliance with the Geneva Convention would only heighten suspicions as to Japan’s intentions regarding the Convention, but this uncertainly only reflected the political conflict between Japan’s foreign ministry, its army and its navy over what “mutatis mutandis” actually meant. The Foreign Ministry believed it to mean general compliance with the Convention – indeed, throughout the war many Foreign Ministry personnel evidenced acute awareness of the need to reconcile the treatment of prisoners with Japan’s obligations under international law. However to the Army, “mutatis mutandis” only meant that the treaty would apply, subject to whatever changes were necessary to reflect domestic law and reality, and having primary responsibility for the administration of prisoners, the Army’s interpretation was ultimately the only one that mattered. In any case, the practical realities of Japan’s war were quickly developing into something completely irreconcilable with the Convention’s terms. Nonetheless, even by the end of the war, at least one POW camp commander was able to inform his American interrogators that he had preserved all documentation mandated by the Geneva Convention.

A sign of the way Japan would interpret the Geneva Convention and other international laws to suit its own immediate needs came with the first American bombing raid on Japan in April 1942. A total of eight U.S. airmen involved in the raid were taken prisoner and the sheer affrontery of the attack – as well as the resulting civilian casualties – brought demands for their immediate execution. If they were prisoners of war, however, this was not permitted under international law. Instead the airmen were tried by special military tribunals under procedures established *ex post facto* to address their specific crimes: bombing non-military targets, deemed a war crime under the 1923 Hague Draft Rules of Aerial Warfare, which both Japan and the United States had signed. As war criminals the captives were not entitled to POW status, and all were found guilty. In an effort to be merciful, only three – those deemed responsible for elementary school students who died in the Doolittle Raid – were executed. This pattern of treatment was repeated throughout the war with bomber pilots captured in Japan, though often with fewer legal niceties and even less mercy. In one case, eight captured B-29 crewmen were murdered in vivisection experiments at the medical school of Kyushu Imperial University. Novelist Shūsaku Endō used this incident as the basis for his novel “The Sea and Poison.”

As for those taken prisoners in other parts of Asia, far from being disgraced warriors unworthy of life, they rapidly became a critical source of labor, a resource of which the Japanese were desperately short on all fronts. Most of the Indian and other Asian troops comprising allied colonial armies were eventually freed. This was of course part of a hearts and minds campaigns to turn the Asian populace against their colonial masters.

However, it also had the more prosaic merit of allowing the Japanese to use them as quasi-slave laborers free from any of the restrictions that would apply were they to be deemed enemy combatants. Similar legal sleight of hand was now also being used with captured Chinese soldiers who were sent to “training institutes” then sent to Japan as slave labor (though putatively under employment contracts), arrangements endorsed by Japan’s puppet Chinese government. The experience of such laborers at the end of the war was tragic – despite being virtual slaves, not having been prisoners of war, they did not enjoy any of the benefits of being “freed” at the wars end. Yet the hardships they suffered no less than white POWs – one Chinese laborer remained in hiding in Hokkaido until 1958.

Race was a key factor in Japan’s World War II POW policies. White prisoners provided a valuable propaganda tool, particularly when shipped to Korea, where an increasingly hostile native population needed to be reminded of the superiority of their Japanese colonial masters (Japan was about to introduce conscription in the territory, and many Koreans ended up serving as POW camp guards). And as in World War I, the Japanese found their Anglo-Saxon captives to be a valuable source of skilled labor. Detailed surveys were conducted of their skill sets and many were sent back to imperial territory (which included both the Japanese islands and colonies in Korea and Taiwan). Here, POW labor was actively sought out by Japanese industry and was regarded by some factory managers as being “better than our own people”. Of the approximately 105,000 allied POWs at the end of the war, over 30,000 had been shipped to Japan as laborers. Their critical importance to the country’s wartime economy is illustrated by the fact that they were still being transported back to Japan even in 1945, despite a desperate shortage of shipping.

For a prisoner to be shipped to Japan had important legal ramifications. Captured allied soldiers formally became POWs after having been processed and transferred to the POW camps in Japan (and its colonies) administered in accordance with applicable laws and regulations by a dedicated unit established under the jurisdiction of the Minister of the Army. Although this organization was a poor stepchild of the army, staffed by second- and third-rate officers who were sometimes even given orders by lower ranking officers from other branches (generally unthinkable in the rigidly hierarchical Japanese military), it was at least created and administered for the sole purpose of dealing with POWs. This was the organization that kept the records, notified enemy nations of the names of prisoners, and even oversaw the occasional visits to prisoner camps by Red Cross representatives from neutral countries.

If they did not come under the jurisdiction of this organizational apparatus in the home territories, however, prisoners were at the mercy of the operational commanders who captured and held them. Here it is important to understand that the authority for the prosecution of the war-tactical and theatre-level operations ran up through the ranks through the general staff and ultimately inured to the Emperor himself. Even the Minister of the Army (a political position) was unable to interfere directly in the con-

duct of military operations. Therefore, the majority of prisoners – those who were not shipped back to Japanese territory (and thus did not come under the jurisdiction of the POW units) – remained in camps controlled by local operational commanders whose primary duty in every theatre was the prosecution of an increasingly doomed military campaign. This partially explains (but in no way excuses) the brutality inflicted on those POWs forced to build the Siam-Burma railway made famous in the movie *Bridge on the River Kwai*: the rapid completion of the railway was critically important to the tactical imperatives of Japan's Burma campaign. Being attached to combat units, the prisoners were simply being driven as hard as their Japanese captors. And in the context of the operational necessities of what had become for the Japanese a struggle for national survival, many of the legalities of POW handling fell by the wayside.¹ Similarly, it was operational commanders from the Japanese home army, not POW administrators, who captured and turned over for experimentation the airmen who became the subject of Endo's famous novel.

Ultimately, other than the cruelty of some of their captors, the problem faced by POWs throughout Asia was generally the same problem suffered by the Japanese themselves: diminishing resources of every type, food in particular. At many camps, captors and captives wasted away together. Even then, the rations allocated to POWs were sometimes greater than those available to Japanese civilians themselves. "What delicious food the prisoners appear to be eating! May we come to your camp and become prisoners too?" One resident near a camp in Japan inquires sarcastically of its keepers. The comments of another are more threatening: "My son died on the battlefield, yet these prisoners loll about. Wouldn't it be best to kill them all? What on earth are the people running these camps thinking?" With few resources and little authority within the military, camp administrators had to tread a fine line between enraging the local populace and keeping the prisoners alive so they could continue their critical work for Japanese industry.

In some camps the combination of military rations and Red Cross packages may have put the prisoners in a better situation nutritionally than their guards. And it is the fate of Red Cross packages that illustrates the crucial difference the training and morality of individual camp personal could make in the lives of prisoners. In some camps pilfering by the commandant or his subordinates was rife, in others procedures were scrupulously observed, including even the delivery to the Red Cross of receipt for each

1 Even so, the status of the prisoners has legal ramifications in the context of the contract negotiations for the Siam-Burma railway, which is effectively a joint venture between Japan and Siam. Since Siam is opposed to giving railway concessions (having seen them become tools of colonial intervention elsewhere in Asia), it preferred that the completed railway system remain under the control of the Japanese military until the end of the war. Japan, however, did not want the railway referred to as a military enterprise, since it would have been a violation of international law to use POWs for explicitly military purposes. The two countries sign a vaguely-worded compromise as a result.

package, signed by prisoner representatives. Here the quality of personnel may have exacerbated the already desperate conditions of even those prisoners held in Japan. Staffed with generally inferior personnel from the outset, as the war dragged on, virtually every-able bodied soldier was needed on the front lines. Thus, camps increasingly came to be run by personnel with little training, Korean conscripts, or wounded veterans who could no longer fight but were full of resentment. Club-wielding civilians were also provided as guards by the companies who used POW labor. Personnel of this type were rarely (if ever) aware of international law, let alone the military's own regulations regarding the handling of prisoners. Some tried to do their best, others were cruel and vengeful. In either case, it was these lower level administrators who bore a heavy burden of allied vengeance in the post-war war crimes tribunals (approximately 1/4 of the personnel named by American war crimes investigators in their initial inquiries were POW administrators). And ironically, some of the initial post-war investigations of incidents of cruelty by such men were conducted by a commission of high-ranking Japanese officers from other branches of the military.

Wherever they were located, the combination of malnourishment and labor took its toll on POWs just as it did on the Japanese. While the legal prohibitions on forcing captured officers to work arose, it was often resolved by making the officers work "voluntarily" (sometimes at bayonet-point). The simple fact was that Japan was in a total war. With even children and old people doing war work on the home front, Tojo and other leaders felt Japan was unable to allow a single idle mouth. As Professor Utsumi puts it, when comparing Japan's policy towards POWs in the Russo-Japanese War and World War I to that of the Pacific War, "the fundamental difference is probably not an issue of compliance with international law, but the use [of POWs] as labor within a total war environment." As in the past, POWs of all ranks were paid for their work, but now the cost of their upkeep was deducted, and by prohibiting the amount of cash a soldier could have on his person at any time, the saving of most earnings in Japanese government accounts was in effect compulsory. There was little to buy in any case. Utsumi relates an incident where after Japan's surrender a prisoner representative is handed a thick bundle of savings books reflecting the accumulated wages (in now-worthless yen) of all prisoners. Some procedures, at least, were followed to the end.

So it seems that most POWs were at the mercy of muddling and sometimes cruel bureaucrats, not demons from an alien culture. Where cultural differences arose, they often did so in the mundane, yet often enhanced the sense of cruelty, such as when prisoners complain about "foul" Japanese food that their guards went to some trouble to procure, and would have been happy to eat themselves. While nothing can or should excuse the conditions suffered by prisoners, a great deal of suffering was caused by a combination of inadequate resources and organizational failure. Some was the result of the cruelty of individual camp administrators and their leaders and thus reflect individual failures of morality. In this light, therefore, the attribution of POW suffering to

some vague notion such as *bushi-dô* may be a form of intellectual laziness. By providing a thorough analysis of Japan's POW policy, Utsumi renders the simplistic cultural explanation untenable. And one cannot help also concluding that some of the suffering and much of the condemnation ultimately directed at Japan can be attributed to the gradual sacrifice of respect for international law to immediate political and military necessity.

Utsumi also provides a valuable Japanese perspective on the widely-held belief of many allied POWs: that there was a secret plan to massacre them in the event of a pending allied victory. Laurens Van Der Post wrote "The Night of the New Moon", his memoirs of his time in a Southeast Asian POW camp in response to a question regarding the morality of dropping the atom bombs on Japan. His answer, in effect, was that the lives of him and every other POW in his camp had been saved by the bombings. There had been many signs that their Japanese captors were preparing something sinister. According to Utsumi, in some camps, even the Korean guards feared a similar fate at the hands of the Japanese. Japanese military records, however, are not so clear. Although orders were issued regarding the treatment of prisoners in the event of an allied invasion that included cryptic instructions to the effect that "extraordinary measures" might be required when unavoidable, for the most part orders circulated were more concerned with preserving POWs as a source of labor and keeping them out of allied hands. Some orders even made it clear that prisoners could be set free in some circumstances. This is in fact what General Tomoyuki Yamashita did to American POWs in the Philippines after the American landings there. It did not save him from being subsequently tried and executed as a war criminal.

Utsumi follows the story of the allied POWs through the end of the war and into the war crime trials, which have been more widely studied in the West. She ends on a pointed question directed at Japan today. Having renounced war in its constitution, why has the Japanese government been attempting to pass "emergency measures" legislation that includes provisions for the handling of POWs?

Containing numerous anecdotes and stories related by individual POWs and Japanese military personnel, Utsumi's book neither whitewashes nor defends the brutality inherent in Japan's POW policies. Nor does it dwell on them at the expense of analysis. It is, after all a book about policy – a failed set of policies that were themselves a part of what was doubtless one of the greatest policy failures of the twentieth century – Japan's 15 year war in Asia. A war which started as a limited intervention to remove a disfavoured government in a strategically important country. It may well be true that history teaches us nothing other than that it teaches us nothing. But perhaps we can at least gain insights as to how present events may eventually be viewed as history. From that perspective there is a great deal worth observing in Professor Utsumi's book.

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