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DAILY LIFE IN WARTIME JAPAN, 1940–1945



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## *Introduction*

On July 4, 1992, I started reading the “last letters” of special attack pilots—known outside Japan as *kamikaze*—that I had been collecting for several years. I remember the date because it seemed ironic that I was reading these letters on that most patriotic American holiday. Over the next two years I read and translated about 130 of these letters. But my close reading of these last letters revealed that they were not truly private documents, so I began searching for wartime diaries, first servicemen’s diaries and then those of the home-front population.

During the next two decades, I found about 160 published diaries. Some were complete and others were fragments, but all were interesting and revealing. When the managing editor at the University of Hawai‘i Press, Pat Crosby, expressed an interest in publishing my translations of these diaries, I chose eight and composed them as a book.<sup>1</sup>

As I prepared the diaries for publication, I wondered whether I could use them to write what German historians call an *Alltagsgeschichte*, a “history of everyday life.” *Alltagsgeschichte* emerged in the mid-1970s as a critique of the studies of the Nazi phenomenon that looked only at the larger social and economic “structures, processes, and patterns” that were thought to have created it and the leadership that directed it. These studies left out the *kleine Leute*, literally, “little Germans,” which I would translate as “ordinary Germans.” In response, the practitioners of *Alltagsgeschichte* called for an examination of ordinary Germans and the part they played during the war.<sup>2</sup>

The Japanese diaries that I had read seemed to provide enough material for a history of everyday life in wartime Japan. They offered what one historian labeled the “inner perspective” on the war, revealing exactly how the wartime government, from 1937 onward, mobilized the populations of Japan’s home islands and its colonies (Taiwan and Korea) to fight, against first the Chinese and then the United States and its allies. In addition, the diaries tell us how ordinary Japanese responded to mobilization; the outbreak of war; Japan’s early victories; the demands of the neighborhood associations and community councils for obedience, compliance, and sacrifice; the horrifying impact of the Allied bombing of Japanese cities and towns; and, finally, the prospect and reality of defeat.

The diaries also show that the impact of the war on ordinary Japanese varied. For example, those living in the big cities—Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, Nagoya, and Kobe—were the first to feel the effects of the war, and those living in the countryside never experienced the physical destruction and hardships that the urban population did. Class is another dimension of the war that emerges clearly in the diaries: high-ranking officials, military men, and the rich were better off than most of their fellow Japanese, and they also had enough to eat. Finally, the diaries reveal the desperate conditions on the home front in the last months of the war.

Why has it taken so long for these wartime Japanese diaries to be translated, given that they contain so much information about the war? And why have historians in the English-speaking world been so slow to use them to write a history of everyday life in wartime Japan? First, the diaries came to light only slowly. The Allied forces occupied Japan for nearly seven years, from August 1945 through April 1952, and those Japanese who kept diaries during the war undoubtedly were reluctant to come forward and publish them, as they might incriminate the diarist and his or her family. Moreover, the diaries had to clear the Allied censors before they could be published, and this was not an insignificant barrier. For example, I found a young woman’s diary that had been published during the Occupation but that showed unmistakable signs of having been worked over by Allied censors. It thus had been reduced to virtually nothing more than her impressions of the weather, blossoming flowers, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> I wondered what objectionable things the original had said. Another diary that I translated and published in *Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies* was written by Yoshizawa Hisako, a single working woman from Tokyo who first released her diary under her husband’s name.<sup>4</sup> Was this because he was a writer and had the requisite credentials? Or were there other reasons?

A remarkable collection of letters and diaries published during the Occupation, entitled *Kike wadatsumi no koe*, consists of letters and diaries written by university students who had died in the war. After many years it finally was translated, first into French. Then in 2000 Midori Yamanouchi, a professor of Japanese at the University of Scranton, and Joseph Quinn translated the collection into English, published as *Listen to the Voices from the Sea*.<sup>5</sup>

Would American, Australian, Canadian, or British readers have read these diaries if they had been available in English translation after the war? Maybe not. After all, the Japanese enemy was so hated and caricatured that it might have been impossible for, say, an American to be interested in the personal diary of a Japanese. Moreover, the Japanese had been characterized as primitive, infantile, pagan, insane, subhuman, and nonhuman, and described as apes, dogs, bees, sheep, and vermin.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, American readers might have asked: Do fanatics keep personal journals? Do monkeys keep diaries? Do vermin write? Besides, we Americans had John Hersey, Frank Gibney, and Richard Tregaskis.<sup>7</sup> Why would we need anything else?

Another problem was that the official Allied interpretation of what happened in Japan in the 1930s and during the war was that Japan's "military leaders suppressed the people, launched a stupid war, and caused this disaster!"<sup>8</sup> This judgment was first articulated in 1946 and later affirmed by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in its indictment of Japanese class A war criminals. This view—that Japan's wartime leaders were solely responsible for the war and that ordinary Japanese were innocent—became an orthodoxy. Why, then, would anyone need to read the wartime diaries of ordinary Japanese?

Moreover, the prevailing American view of "Japan" and "the Japanese" in the 1950s and 1960s was that they were an inferior and backward people whose women were loose and easy and whose factories made cheap, shoddy goods that broke easily. The best thing that could be said about the Japanese was that they were little people who made little things, such as transistor radios, miniature cameras, and, later, small cars.

Another explanation for the slowness with which wartime Japanese diaries were translated and read is patriotism, which made it hard for Americans to see the Japanese as they saw themselves. This was revealed at a display at the Smithsonian Institution commemorating the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The exhibition of a section of the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, prompted a fierce debate between those who wanted to cel-

celebrate the atomic annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and those who felt it should be condemned. As Susan Sontag wrote about the perspective of the former group: "A museum devoted to the history of America's wars . . . that fairly represented the arguments for and against using the atomic bomb in 1945 on the Japanese cities, with photographic evidence that showed what these weapons did would be recognized, now more than ever, as a most unpatriotic endeavor."<sup>9</sup> According to this thinking, translating and publishing wartime Japanese diaries would have been unpatriotic as well.

Another reason why the diaries were slow to be translated was that they would have been subversive in the eyes of many. Indeed, the wartime diaries challenge many of the prevailing myths about the Japanese: that they were an innocent people misled by their "military leaders" (International Military Tribunal for the Far East narrative), that they were a backward and inferior people who pulled themselves up and out of the ashes of the wartime rubble to become an economic superpower (Cold War narrative), that Japan was a feudal kingdom that succeeded in modernizing itself beginning in the mid-1660s (modernization narrative) and even outperformed the United States in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup> The wartime diaries challenge these myths by revealing what one scholar called the "doubleness of knowledge": the diaries reveal that postwar narratives of "Japan" were fabricated to serve American geopolitical interests in the Cold War.<sup>11</sup> This analysis also made me wonder whether the *absence* of a narrative of everyday life in wartime Japan was itself a narrative of the war in which "everyday life" was absent, a narrative in which ordinary Japanese do not appear. Like the images of Nagasaki and Hiroshima after they were destroyed, this would be an account in which no humans appear.

Fortunately, wartime Japanese diaries have begun to be translated into English. We now have a translation of the diary of a Japanese army officer on Iwo Jima, Lieutenant Sugihara Kinryū, thanks to the editors of the *Journal of Military History*, who published it in 1995.<sup>12</sup> Eugene Sowiak and Tamie Kamiyama translated the wartime diary of a leading Japanese journalist, Kiyosawa Kiyoshi, which Princeton University Press published as *A Diary of Darkness: The Wartime Diary of Kiyosawa Kiyoshi* in 1999.<sup>13</sup> But diaries like these raise difficult questions: How are we to read them? Which should we avoid?

At first, we might think that these diaries give historians exactly what they need. A diary like the one kept by Yoshizawa Hisako tells us how an ordinary Japanese woman felt about the war, her government, her military, and the enemy. Isn't this what historians want and need? Diaries like

Yoshizawa's give us an abundance of what philosopher Arthur Danto calls "true descriptions of the world."<sup>14</sup> A "true description" is a statement like the following from Yoshizawa's diary: "Just before two o'clock, an air-raid warning sounded, and a bombing raid followed."<sup>15</sup> Danto points out that historians *always* configure "true descriptions" and that their configurations are *their* representations of the facts contained in each "true description." So Danto might say of those of us who use wartime Japanese diaries in our research that we necessarily configure the true descriptions contained in these diaries, that this is how we make sense of what we read and what "gives us access" to the wartime Japanese. Frank Ankersmit, one of Danto's contemporary interpreters, reminds us that when we configure the true descriptions found in wartime diaries and generate a representation of life on the Japanese home front during the war, we do something that the writers of the diaries could never "do themselves," because these diarists were not aware of "their own representations of the world."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, when we "enclose" wartime Japanese in our representations, to use Ankersmit's terms, we also distance them, because our "representations have no counterpart in how they experience[d] their lives and the world."<sup>17</sup> To say that "*our* representations have no counterpart in how [wartime Japanese] . . . experience[d] their lives and the world" seems strangely paradoxical and demands explanation.

What Danto and Ankersmit are saying is that no matter how hard we historians try to recover the wartime experiences of ordinary Japanese, we are destined to fail. That is, our "history of everyday life in wartime Japan" is necessarily *our* version of the history of everyday life in wartime Japan, a voiceover that drowns out the voices of ordinary Japanese. Perhaps we historians should assume that the wartime diaries do not give us "true descriptions" but, rather, "experiences," the raw, unmediated experiences of the war.

Here historian Joan Scott offers us some guidance. In a brilliant essay entitled "The Evidence of Experience," she disagrees with the historians who, as she puts it, "have argued that an unproblematized 'experience' is the foundation of their practice."<sup>18</sup> "Experience," she contends, is of questionable value because it is not simply what an individual undergoes at a particular moment in time. Nor is it the product of an immaculate intellectual conception: pure, unsullied, and simply as it is. Instead, experience is more complex than that. "It is not individuals who have experience," she explains, "but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation . . . but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced."<sup>19</sup>

This is her response to historians who regard “experience” as unproblematic. Thus, even experience is a construction and first must be understood on its own terms, analyzed, and explained before historians can use it.

I would argue that in order for wartime Japanese diaries to be useful, they first must be understood as the work of wartime Japanese subjects whose very existence was carefully shaped by their government through their community councils and neighborhood associations, through hundreds of wartime propaganda broadcasts, through the many hours of air-raid drills, and, in the case of children, through classroom and out-of-class instruction. Accordingly, even the diarists’ language was in some sense learned and neither natural nor spontaneous. Therefore, when historians read wartime Japanese diaries, they also must locate them in a specific time and place and understand them as a product of that time and place, heeding Scott’s cautionary advice about “experience.”

Sontag’s book *Regarding the Pain of Others* offers a third perspective on reading wartime Japanese diaries. Her fascinating discussion of war photography poses another set of questions about wartime Japanese diaries. What is distinctive about a war diary? What do such diaries include and exclude? Are they literalist? Sontag reminds us that the great war photographers always composed their shots very carefully. The great Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner, for example, moved the body of a Confederate soldier to compose the photograph that became known as the “Home of a Confederate Sharpshooter.” He, and also Mathew Brady, did this to capture what they regarded as the horror of that war.<sup>20</sup> Were wartime Japanese diaries “staged” as well? Where was artifice introduced, and how did it shape diary entries and even whole diaries?

Following Sontag’s suggestions, we also might ask, What do wartime Japanese diaries include and exclude? Do they really give us a close-up of the war? How did what diarists wrote about in their journals shape their experience? For example, Sontag observes that the “enemy” who appears in war photographs always has the same quality: anonymity. When we can recognize the enemy, she writes, we are shocked because they look a lot like us.<sup>21</sup> Maybe this is why the enemies in *our* photographs of the Pacific War are barely recognizable as human beings and why, for so long, we were never shown their faces. The Japanese were represented as human beings like us only when they surrendered and accepted our superiority. But a recently published album of photographs taken during the battle for Iwo Jima suggests that this has changed, for it gives us “full-frontal views” of both Japanese and American dead.<sup>22</sup> Was this possible because the passage of time has dissolved some of our feelings about our former enemy? Is it



because there now are fewer Americans who lived through and remember the war? Or because we Americans now have new enemies who are caricatured and dehumanized in the same way the Japanese once were and thus have displaced them?

Borrowing from Sontag, I would suggest that the Japanese enemy was long “regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees”—and, I would add, who keeps diaries.<sup>23</sup> This may be another reason why it took so long for Japanese wartime diaries to be translated into English. In the same way that the enemy does not see, he or she does not keep diaries. Thus reading the wartime Japanese diaries requires that we recognize our former enemies as fellow human beings, with families, passions, preferences, and even a sense of humor. It means recognizing that the enemy is like us and that, in a sense, we are the enemy.

Those of us who write the history of everyday life in wartime Japan face a challenge. We have to search for diaries that represent the entire spectrum of Japanese and their range of wartime experiences; we need to look for diaries written by both servicemen and civilians, city folk and country folk, women and children as well as men, ordinary people as well as the powerful and rich, and ethnic Chinese, Koreans, Taiwanese, and Pacific Islanders as well as Japanese. We have to understand the complicated network of military and home-front organizations that enveloped these diarists as they wrote, as well as the endless ways in which ordinary Japanese were encouraged to comply with their government’s policies and to support the war effort. We also must remember how special and privileged our position is as those who “see,” and we must recognize that it is we who will configure the material from the diaries and we who will represent the Japanese, not in *their* voices, but in *ours*. Our history of everyday life in wartime Japan will be just that: *our* history of everyday life in wartime Japan.

