

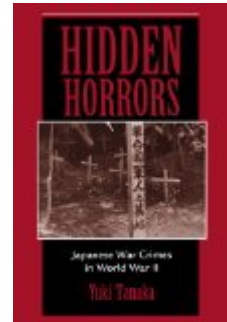
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Yuki Tanaka. *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes In World War II*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996. xix + 267 pp. + 12 pp. of plates. \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-2717-4; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-2718-1.

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War crimes and atrocities are arguably the most important issue to emerge from the Pacific War still open to further interpretation. Until the 1980s, the lack of reliable documents left accounts of those crimes to rumors, press reports, witnesses' memories and stories recounted in books, partly not directly experienced and surely magnified to some extent. Today, new documentation and files are being opened to researchers, and in near future most of the relevant papers yet to be de-classified may be available in the near future. This is very good news for scholars, who will now be able to get a definite evidence of those crimes, and will have a chance to assess guilt and responsibility more properly—although we may never be able to understand what went on the minds of those who participated. With regard to the Second World War, John W. Dower recalls in the foreword the difficulty “to truly imagine its extraordinary breadth and grasp its tangled imperatives and psychopathologies.”

While the interest in this documentation can sometimes be reduced to specialized groups or to curiosity, war crimes and brutalities committed during WWII remain a popularly important issue—the Lipinsky resolution at the American Congress is the latest example. Such pressure can be a burden for scholarly work, and the author, Yuki Tanaka, has already experienced some of it, as we can learn by what he refers to in his acknowledgments. After a conference presenting one of the book's chapters, he was the object of “nationwide” (p. xvii) criticism concerning the veracity of his accounts on misconduct by some members of the Australian occupational forces in Hiroshima.

The author's arguments were reinforced by a former

Australian soldier in his war-time diary, but this help should have been only a temporary lull; after all, no reference is made in history books mentioning Australians in Hiroshima—and this is the origin of the critique. The author does not elaborate further on the criticisms he received, but surely they reflected doubts about the capacity of a Japanese to make an objective study of crimes committed by his compatriots: being Japanese is an additional burden if you want to write for other audiences.

Hidden Horrors, however, is a well-researched and balanced book. Its scholarly achievement cannot be dismissed by having been written by a Japanese. On the contrary, it benefits from a large Japanese bibliography, although for the books translated into English he should have mentioned and quoted the translations. This being a book on Japanese War Crimes on Australian territory, he has researched extensively in the different branches of the Australian National Archives and in the Australian War Memorial, as well as in the U.S. National Archives and the Japanese National Diet Library, using also published sources from the Defense Agency (or Boueichou) and the “Centre for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility,” whose location and Japanese name the author fails to mention. Also, Tanaka has met some survivors in 1992, and uses interviews from television programs. Predictably, some of those informants, including former Formosan guards, preferred not to discuss their roles during the conflict.

The book was previously published in Japanese in 1993 under the title *Shirarezaru Senzou Hanzai*, (subtitled in English: *What Japanese forces did to Australians*). From John Dower's foreword we can learn that Japanese was a

shorter version, but there is no indication by Tanaka as to what parts or which topics were enlarged. Certainly, he did not spend much time in modifying the bibliography, because titles of books in Japanese are never translated and appear only in Roman script. The book also lacks a few additional pages indicating Japanese names and concepts in kanji and roman script.

Tanaka claims as his aim in investigating the war crimes his desire to master the past, meaning this not only comprehend the events but also exercise *moral imagination*, something that “requires us to take responsibility for past wrong-doings and at the same time stimulates us to project out thoughts toward the future through the creative examination of our past.” And to achieve this fully comprehension he aims at, the chapters of the book are a selection of different types of crimes, each with a interpretation or explanation suggested for why they happened.

In the first two chapters he refers to the Sandakan POW Camp in Borneo, where no survivor remained as a consequence of the deliberate policy in the last months of the conflict to eliminate them. Out of 2,000 detainees sent to build and repair an airfield at Northeast Borneo, only six were able to recall the experience later, thanks to having escaped. The decision to eliminate all the detainees seems to come from the attempt to destroy all evidence from the atrocities committed there, although the most important historical lesson, Tanaka says, comes from the extreme cruelty showed by the Japanese armed forces, particularly if we compare it with wars held by Japan during the Meiji period. Then the book goes on to analyze how the POW policy of the Japanese Army allowed such an extreme case. Tanaka traces failures up to the beginning of the war, when the detainees were relatively well treated: they were given a salary for their work and allowed leisure time and a canteen, following the Geneva Convention, and recalls that already in 1942, during the first year of the war, a plan was implemented to exploit POWs for military labor, even though this contravened agreements already accepted by Japan, although not signed. “The Japanese forces effectively treated POWs as equivalent to military supplies” (p. 71) and when the prisoners became useless once the airfield stopped reparations after every bombardment, they were disposed of, regardless of other considerations.

In a similar way were treated the *ianfu* (“comfort women” or “sex slaves”), part of the second topic he addresses: the Japanese Experience on Rape and War. While much research has been done, Tanaka focuses on

military nurses, and guesses unconvincingly about the different way one group of Australians were massacred by Japanese soldiers: men were bayoneted individually and their bodies were left on the beach while women were driven into the sea and machine-gunned as a group. Although the account given by the only nurse to survive the massacre does not mention it, the author surmises that some of those massacred were raped and therefore the “Japanese intended to eliminate these women from the battlefield” (p. 88). The possibility that the Japanese soldiers were the same ones who raped and murdered British nurses in Hong Kong two months before, reveals Tanaka stepping on shaky ground, particularly when he raises as almost certain the possibility that the survivor nurse tried to save her dead colleagues from the disgrace of being known as victims of rape. This possibility cannot be denied, same as that the survivor nurse was also raped, but this can only be a guess at best and there is no further evidence for elaborate conclusions. Tanaka continues giving data on the already demonstrated impossibility “to deny that the Japanese military was directly involved in organizing comfort houses and recruiting women to work in them” (p. 97) and concludes that the difference between sexual abuses in the War in Europe and those in the Asia-Pacific War is that in Europe relevant decisions were made by those on the ground, while in Japan top officials seem to have been responsible.

Later on, referring to “The Universality of Rape in War,” he suggests that predisposition to rape could have comparative ramifications with soldiers of different armies: data of reported cases of rape from the area around Yokohama in the period just after the war leads him to state that “the scale of rape by U.S. forces was comparable to that of any other force during the war” (p. 103); he obviously suggests, without mentioning explicitly, the Japanese army. This army, also “is not the only force to have used or condoned rape as a device for maintaining the group aggressiveness of soldiers” (p. 108); sexual abuses committed in former Yugoslavia can indicate Tanaka is right. He also mentions compelling psychological reasons to explain gang rapes, which are the majority in times of war: “The need to dominate the ‘other,’ the enemy, is imperative in battle with other men [...] The violation of the bodies of women becomes the means by which such a sense of domination is affirmed and reaffirmed” (p. 107).

Accounts on cannibalism, the third topic he refers to, are probably the most painful to read, in spite of the lack of direct witnesses. The existing reports make clear

that its practice “was something more than merely random incidents perpetrated by individual or small groups subject to extreme conditions” (p. 126) and Tanaka classifies it as a sort of general “group-survival cannibalism” driven by starvation, although there are some references to cannibalism during the first months of the war, on the so-called Kokoda Trail in present Papua New Guinea. Tanaka highlights the fact that “discipline was maintained to an astonishing degree” (p. 127), this being the reason for some soldiers to participate in order to avoid being seen as traitors to the group solidarity or even, in some cases, to avoid being eaten themselves by their own companions. It’s understandable the collectivist psychological tendency by which an individual in a closed group feels obliged to accede to group pressures, however, Tanaka should have elaborate further on the reasons for that group solidarity became so paramount so as to make cannibalism a form of “bonding.”

Hidden Horrors also includes a chapter on Biological Warfare Plans. As they were held mainly in the Chinese front, the book can add little significant data in relation to recently published books like “Unit 731”.^[1] However, it’s important to know that although the Pacific front was apparently avoided of biological warfare, plans were made and soldiers were trained for its eventuality. Experiments were made at Rabaul on POWs to test if a kassava diet could help survive the lack of rice, but also injecting poison or viruses. The enormous rate of deaths among Japanese soldiers due to starvation and tropical diseases made doctors think that experiments might have been performed on soldiers, named *Maruta*, as in Nazi Germany. POWs became “military supply” areas, and served for Tanaka as another example of the way in which “[t]hose who are guilty are often the victims of war crimes themselves” (p. 134). Victimizers and victimized, a topic that appears occasionally along the book and that is also mentioned often by John Dower.^[2]

The last chapter is another example of crimes in situations difficult to comprehend outside the context of war. Tanaka refers two different massacres of civilians, one of sixty persons (mostly German clergymen and Chinese) aboard the Japanese ship *Akikaze* in March, 1943, and another of thirty-two (twenty-three Australian civilians and nine German clergymen) in Kavieng, New Ireland, in March, 1944. Tanaka focuses on Japanese soldiers’ feeling that they were having their last days as a result of an foreseen allied attack that never happened: the order of no surrender left them little choice but death. There was no other option than *gyokusai* (translated by Tanaka as “glorious self-annihilation,” although John

Dower in its *War Without Mercy* avoids this significance and prefers to indicate the meaning of its ideographs: “jewel smashed”)[3] and detainees were regarded as a hindrance to be avoided. Tanaka blames this massacre to the fact that “the concept for basic human rights, in particular for individual lives, was lacking among Japanese soldiers,” and probably is right in it: Japanese soldiers did what they thought would be done to them had the positions been reversed.

The five different examples allow us to understand the level of brutalities committed by the Japanese Army and help to explain why the death rate for POWs under the Japanese was seven times that of POWs under the Germans and Italians; for starvation and diseases in tropical countries cannot be the only explanation. The book is a good selection of some extreme cases providing fruitful insights into the “emperor ideology” that dominated in Japan during this time. Tanaka tries to separate this ideology from former periods in Japanese history, showing a clear example of the corruption of the concept of “*Bushidou*” at a time when the samurai class concepts that had been maintained along the nineteenth century had deteriorated so that soldiers had to be imbued with “fighting spirit.” Ideological pressure produced a blind obedience that went much further than the loyalty needed by a bushidou warrior from former times. Japanese soldiers also suffered from a radicalization evidenced by Japan’s decision to start a war without having plans on how to end it or to occupy New Guinea, for example, without further knowledge on the territory.

Tanaka concludes, as has been mentioned before, that Japanese soldiers became also victims: aggressors and victims at the same time. Certainly, this exercise of *moral imagination* can be a good way to grasp the intricacies and the common features of the brutalities narrated in the book, as well as many other massacres all around the world. However, probably this conclusion will be of little consolation to those whose role was limited to be only victims.

And although Tanaka focuses on brutalities of Japanese soldiers as being humans, we can understand better Japanese culture by learning about this kind of behaviour in critical times, when continuities and ruptures do occur at the same time. *Hidden Horrors* recalls that discipline was maintained through eating human flesh, which is probably a ritual difficult to find in other countries’ soldiers. Thinking nobody would break up the pact of silence among soldiers made just after the war to avoid the Allies to learn the truth (and punish-

ment), a religious ceremony was held at the ship after the sixty killings, or it was suggested that the POWs in Borneo sign contracts, pledging they would not attempt to escape—further examples of a way to deal critical moments by men with an specific background. Understanding Japanese culture needs a *creative examination* and the book can help us to do it.

Notes:

[1]. Peter Williams and David Wallace. Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II_ New

York: Free Press, 1989.

John W. Dower. *Japan in War and Peace* New York: New Press, 1993, p. 51.

John W. Dower. *War Without Mercy. Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986, pp. 231-233.

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