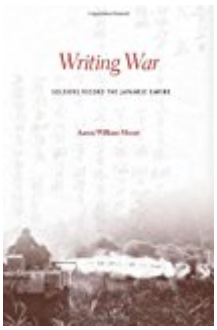
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Aaron William Moore. *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 388 pp. $47.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05906-1.

Reviewed by Lisa Beckenbaugh

Published on H-War (February, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

At first glance of Aaron William Moore's *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire*, one might expect to hear the voices of Japanese soldiers and their experiences during World War II. While there are hints of those voices, along with the voices of some Chinese and American soldiers, this book is not a "straight-forward military history," or even a compilation of war experiences (p. 7). *Writing War* is an attempt by Moore to "reconcile, through the medium of language, often silent individual desires with the articulate demands of society, media and the state" (p. 2). By reviewing the diaries, letters, postcards, and memoirs written by soldiers during the war, Moore assesses the state's role in the creation of the soldier's sense of self during the conflict.

In six chapters, Moore delves into the history of military diary writing in these three cultures. In writing in their diaries, soldiers were committing to the war through discipline, something Moore calls "self-mobilization." As the war progressed and atrocities were witnessed and committed, these diaries helped soldiers redefine their sense of self in an attempt to understand the "chaos of the battlefield" (p. 115). He ends the book by describing postwar historical memory and the use of veterans' narratives as a type of "self-censorship" to fit into a state postwar narrative (p. 243). Soldiers reworked their diaries after the war to fit what they felt was the official narrative or to make themselves seem braver or more heroic than they really were at the time.

While Moore's work offers a new and interesting perspective on soldiers' experiences during the war and the state's role in shaping how those events were recorded, both consciously and unconsciously, there are some weaknesses in this work. Millions of people served in the Pacific theater during World War II as both civilians and servicemen. His sweeping generalizations of all soldiers or all Americans or Japanese or Chinese are far too broad. Moore does not specify individual soldiers' roles. Their specific roles had a significant impact on their experiences during the conflict. Also, how does the work of Japanese revisionists who claim that many of these atrocities,

such as the Nanjing Massacre, either did not happen or were exaggerated by the Chinese, fit into Moore's study? Finally, the final chapter on historical memory is too superficial. Myth and memory are powerful when it comes to military accounts. It is often hard to separate the two in postwar writing, especially the further you get from the actual event. Was the "veterans' stubborn adherence to the 'truth' that they discovered during the war" actually a "direct result of their self-discipline" or the result of reading too many other accounts and attending too many reunions (p. 286)?

Even with these shortcomings, the work is a valuable addition to the history of World War II in the Pacific theater. In the West, Chinese and Japanese voices are typically absent or discounted quickly. *Writing War* opens a window into an otherwise too often neglected area.