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Kevin C. Murphy is the chair of the Department of Humanities at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. He has spent several years teaching in Japan, which has provided him with an excellent basis for an examination of the cultural factors that influenced Japanese behavior during the invasion and occupation of the Philippines, and in particular, the Bataan Death March. Murphy contends that the common narrative of the march is inherently flawed, as it relies almost entirely on the memories of American survivors, who have an obvious reason to report the worst behavior of their erstwhile enemies.

At times, Murphy seems to be channeling William Manchester’s *Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (1979), in that he intersperses his personal experiences walking along portions of the Death March route and interacting with Japanese citizens into the discussion of the historical record. In Manchester’s case, the concept worked, as he revisited the same battlefields where he had fought decades earlier. In this work, it is not so successful, as it leads Murphy down the path of speculative rambling, basing his assumptions about the events of 1942 on the current appearance of the route of the march. Murphy tends to be extremely defensive about the Japanese actions, seemingly arguing that they cannot be blamed for the death rates during the march because their culture set them up to be cruel toward captured enemies. On far too many occasions, he presents ill-considered comparisons to the Holocaust and other atrocities, as if to excuse the Japanese behavior by surrounding it with other horrible, but contemporaneous, events. This form of collective excuse making is ultimately meaningless, as a similar defense might be applied to every mass crime and genocide in history. Murphy is also guilty of the scholarly sin of cherry-picking his evidence, ignoring Filipino records and most of the obvious sources in American archives. He cites material from the National Archives yet skips over the most important record groups in his quest to absolve the Japanese of guilt. His citations are almost entirely to printed works, despite the enormous amount of online material from survivors’ groups. The maps that are interspersed throughout the work are hand drawn and not remotely to scale, and there are a few illustrations supplied by Christopher Leet that are moderately disturbing and some play up racial stereotypes.

The introduction begins the work with a fairly arrogant and pompous suggestion that Murphy is the first historian to tackle the Bataan Death March with a critical eye. Moving into the first chapter, he presents a sympathetic defense of General Masaharu Homma, while castigating General Douglas MacArthur for poor strategic choices, almost as if to blame the American commander for creating the situation and absolving Homma for actually carrying it out. The second chapter is a detailed, and arguably unnecessary, history of the Imperial Japanese Army. The author seems more determined to show off his knowledge of Japanese history than to remain focused on the topic at hand. The next chapter provides a similar treatment of the American army in the Philippines prior to World War II, but it floats across years and topics with little cohesion, coming across more as a stream of consciousness than a historical examination.

Chapter 4 returns to the moral relativism of the in-
Introduction, essentially pronouncing the Japanese as having acted within their cultural beliefs, and thus in an acceptable fashion. Even if they killed American and Filipino captors at will, they were only following their own notions of honor and bowing to military necessity. The next chapter starts with a discussion of the weaknesses of human memory, particularly in a collective sense, and shows some promise. Unfortunately, it then transitions into an attack on the most extreme examples of unlikely memories from the Death March and proceeds to dismiss all survivors’ accounts on the grounds that some are exaggerated or flawed.

Chapter 6 finally presents a discussion of the literature surrounding the Death March, and at times, the criticism that Murphy includes is well founded, but at other times, it verges on the silly. For example, he whines that the HBO miniseries The Pacific (2010), which he admits follows the life of three US marines, does not cover the Death March in any detail. Of course, given that none of the subjects of the series were part of the march, and in fact, there were no marines on the march, is irrelevant to the argument. Murphy seems to adamantly dislike the survivors of the march and their descendants, and presents the groups as overly demanding and exclusive. The next chapter examines the terrible things many prisoners of war (POWs) did to survive captivity, including preying on one another in POW camps, as if to justify the march by pointing out the horrors that followed. At the same time, Murphy manages to sympathize with kamikazes, who he describes as “militarism’s ultimate victims,” without looking at the true victims of Japanese militarism (p. 192).

In chapter 8, Murphy finally spends a bit of time on the experiences of Filipinos forced onto the march, a topic to which he promises to give equal weight in his introduction, but which is almost entirely ignored to this point. He correctly notes that the Filipinos comprised the bulk of the victims of the march but essentially dismisses their victimhood for the same reasons. The final chapter of the work provides a handful of examples of Japanese kindness, either on the march or in the camps that held American POWs. Once again, this is a very selective history, substituting a handful of anecdotes for significant analysis of the camp conditions.

In short, this is not a well-written examination of the Bataan Death March, the literature that has developed about it, or the weaknesses of human memory. I cannot in good conscience recommend this work for any readers, as there is almost nothing novel or useful in the work. Readers would be much better served to consult the standard literature on the march, which Murphy so thoroughly disdains, if they wish to have a better understanding of the unnecessary cruelty in the Pacific War.

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