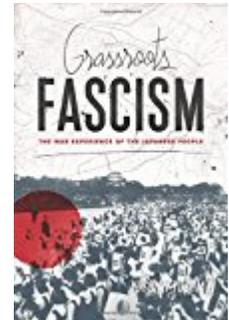


Yoshiaki Yoshimi. *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People.* Translated by Ethan Mark. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 360 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-16568-6.



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Published on H-Japan (June, 2015)

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Timing, William Shakespeare famously said, is everything. That Ethan Mark's elegant translation of Yoshiaki Yoshimi's *Kusa no ne fashizumu* (1987)—rendered in English by the translator as “Grassroots Fascism”—should be made available in an historical moment marked by the approach of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War on the one hand, and Japanese prime minister Shinzō Abe's (et al.) apparent determination to rewrite the history of that war on the other, is nothing short of fortuitous, and is sure to add a crucial level of complexity to the global scholarly discourse on the nature of Japan's war, and indeed on the social mechanics of war in general.

This richness and complexity stems from the fact that Yoshimi's work chooses to see the war not from the standpoint of geopolitics and military strategy, but from the level of everyday actors (the “grassroots” of the title) seeking to survive the war on terms beneficial to them, both on the homefront and in Japan's former colonies. In its examination of the ways in which individuals

navigated the circumstances of war and the demands of the state, Yoshimi's work calls to mind such important and pioneering works as Sheldon Garon's *Molding Japanese Minds* (1997) and Louise Young's *Japan's Total Empire* (1998)—but its scope is considerably more expansive. Yoshimi has scoured dozens of firsthand and official accounts to tell the stories of individuals who are sometimes ecstatic, sometimes despondent, often conflicted, but always driven by the quest for survival (even posthumous survival, in some cases). In its most effective moments, in other words, Yoshimi's work can be considered an empirical manifestation of important theoretical insights from thinkers from Baruch Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze, and makes an excellent companion to other works that grapple with questions of survival in times of crisis, such as, for example, Ken C. Kawashima's *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan* (2009).

The book is headed by an excellent translator's introduction, wherein Mark helps to familiarize the reader with the historicity of war and

fascism as revealed by Yoshimi in the ensuing chapters, and with some of the dominant analytical approaches to war and fascism as considered on both Japanese and global scales. Indeed, an important insistence of the author here is that “Japan” and “the global” are always already inextricably intertwined, a reality that informed both the manner in which Japanese fascism, fueled in part by imperial anxieties, developed, and the ways in which the experiences of war and fascism were narrated after the fact (p. 9). Mark provides a concise overview of the conceptual routes by which Japanese fascism was typically approached by postwar analysts—as a consequence of feudal remnants, for example, or as a freakish and tragic misstep on the path to (capitalist) modernity, or, as Maruyama Masao argues, as a sort of combination thereof—and situates Yoshimi’s contribution amidst the historical discourses dominant at the time of the work’s release. In the midst of an analytical climate that tended to situate the fountainhead of fascism at a variously envisioned “top” of society, Mark insists that “what ultimately sets Yoshimi’s approach apart is his combination of an empirewide perspective with a focus on the rise of fascism from the ‘bottom up’” (p. 20). And, crucially, the translator sets the groundwork for a critical understanding of precisely how and why fascism intertwined with many social actors at the grassroots of this period by pointing out that fascism’s “greatest support came from those whose skills equipped them with the social potential and ambition to enter the middle class, even as—or perhaps precisely *because*—their achieved social and material positions did not (as yet) match this potential” (p. 22).

The body chapters of Yoshimi’s work itself are very (sometimes brutally) engaging, though they tend to lean more toward an empirical explication of individual experiences and strategies at varying moments of Japan’s war than they do toward critical analysis per se. In this we can clearly hear Yoshimi’s response to the historical moment and attendant analytical culture of its origi-

nal production (as noted by Mark)—but while innovative, this emphasis on the experiences of the grassroots at the expense, perhaps, of critical clarity appears today as something of an ambiguous strategy, one that both enhances and undermines the strength of the book in terms of its value to contemporary scholars. Chapter 1 (“From Democracy to Fascism”), for example, provides both an important overview of some of the structural (economic) factors that contributed to the rise of fascism—including the exacerbation of unevenness between urban and rural areas, and the reluctance on the part of middle-to-lower social actors to translate discontent with the state and socioeconomic conditions into actual resistance to war, owing to the belief that the state’s (mis)adventures would ultimately improve the conditions of their own lives—against the backdrop of the lived experiences of diverse actors in the early-war period. Some of these examples—such as that of Akita teacher Kimura, whose war experiences fed a desire for social engineering that could truly be considered fascist, a project that he pursued in earnest on his return from the front—are extremely illustrative of the relation between war and fascism. Other examples, however, while clearly brutal examples of (anti-Chinese) racism and the acidic side effects of nationalism, seem less concretely tethered to the development of fascism itself—and as I shall discuss below, it is this ghostly, omnipresent treatment of (something called) “fascism” that threatens to frustrate attempts to lay concise critical hold thereof.

Chapter 2 (“Grassroots Fascism”) serves to continue the discussion of the ways in which individual actors navigated Japan’s war years and how the choices that they made tied into “imperial fascism.” At this point in the narrative, “imperial fascism” speaks to the mechanics (including, for example, the *kyokoku itchi taisei*, which involved the dissolution of political parties) of a (self-)imposed “oneness,” one manipulated by conjuring a gravitational pull of a national body centered upon the emperor, and the manners in

which this conceptual “oneness” served to bolster fascism. Of particular interest here is Yoshimi’s attention to the desires of women, who are depicted as having cooperated enthusiastically with state policy in order to raise their own stations and standards of living, and to movements such as the lifestyle reform movement of Okinawa, which aimed at the eradication of dialect and “backward” customs as means by which to draw nearer to an imagined Japanese center. Central to Yoshimi’s critique here, of course, are the ways in which desires for inclusion and belonging weaved their ways through the choices made by grassroots actors—and particularly marginalized grassroots actors—in the imperial period. Lurking behind these specific critiques, however, lay rather uneasy slippages between patriotism and nationalism, and fascism. While the former are clearly problematic in their own right, one is left wanting of a more surgical excision of the fascistic, in order to lay it bare and potentiate a critique thereof that is not necessarily limited to historical conditions of war. The question of precisely where “oneness” ceases to constitute solidarity (for example) and begins to devolve into fascism is also of great importance to this sort of critical exercise.

In chapter 3 (“The Asian War”), Yoshimi shifts his focus to how the war was experienced (by Japanese actors, for the most part) in Asia and introduces some of the ways in which geographic specificity impacted the complex and ambiguous ways in which Japan’s war was greeted and comprehended by actors in the colonies. In an intriguing sort of twist on Maruyama’s understanding of imperial fascism, Yoshimi reveals the ways in which Japan’s “holy war” and its purported missions were disparaged as “groundless” by degrees—the nearer one was to local residents and their lives in Asia, in other words, the more dismissive Yoshimi’s actors appeared to be of any merit to Japan’s war (p. 173). Highlighted in this chapter is Yoshimi’s attention to the sometimes unpredictable ways in which the actual lived experience of war in geographically disparate lo-

cales shaped the outlooks of individual (Japanese) actors: it was not “fascism” as a universal, somehow “Japanese” contagion that served to bolster the war, but rather a reciprocal relationship to history that served to bolster fascistic outlooks—but sometimes alternative outlooks as well. Yoshimi introduces us, for example, to an actor named Ida whose pacifism and later esteem for the post-war, war-renouncing Japanese constitution could be traced to his wartime experiences. It is, in fact, this reciprocal relationship to history that seems to hold the conceptual key to releasing fascism from its confinement to moments of war—a leap, as I will suggest below, that is of crucial importance to ongoing studies of fascism as social phenomena.

Indeed, it was precisely such historically and geographically specific experiences that, in Yoshimi’s formulation, finally brought about the undoing of support for Japan’s war. As the author points out in the work’s final chapter (“Democracy From the Battlefield”), “war weariness” rooted in material shortages and the outright terror of the bombing of the homeland “contributed greatly to the collapse of the Japanese people’s will to fight” (pp. 220-222). The concrete historical experience of impending defeat led, in other words, from a shift in emphasis from sacrifice for the state to self-preservation, and as a result, “[c]onfronted with the severely negative side of war, the people were finally beginning to separate from the fascist state” (p. 235). But as Yoshimi notes with some puzzlement and apparent dismay, this did not instantaneously lead to an abandoning of “imperial outlook” and seizure of “the opportunity to free themselves from the constrictive power of the imperial state.” It is, perhaps, precisely in this befuddlement over the misalignment between historical reality and social directionality—itsself seemingly rooted in a lurking assumption that war provides both the foundational, potentiating conditions for fascism and, in its cessation, the conditions for its demise—that we can detect the pres-

ence of the analytic premise most demanding of further scholarly attention.

As would be expected from its title, fascism (or something called “fascism”) haunts all corners of this work, permeating the strategies and desires of Yoshimi’s actors even as it is bolstered and solidified by the same. But as a wise teacher of mine once said: if fascism is everything, then it is also nothing. For all of its focus on Japanese fascism, in other words, it is precisely (and paradoxically) fascism that remains something of a translucent, shape-shifting specter throughout the book, playing at the corners of our peripheral vision and seeming to vanish as soon as we attempt to bring it into focus. To be sure, Yoshimi’s understanding of the nature of “emperor-system fascism” and its dual-pronged consequences of mobilization and suppression (here, as Mark points out, Yoshimi shares much with Marxist scholar Furuya Tetsuo) is distilled effectively in the introduction to the work. But as I have noted above, most of the empirical narrative unearthed and presented by the author concentrates (understandably) on individual experiences in the war and the various strategies deployed to survive its horrors. This is, of course, highly illuminating—but the strategy seems somehow to render elusive the fulfillment of the work’s critical potential, and presents unanticipated challenges for understanding these narratives as narratives of *fascism*, as opposed to *war* or *nationalism*. Many of the experiences revealed by Yoshimi are heartbreaking and brutal, to be sure—but what, precisely, makes them “fascist,” or ties them to “fascism” as social phenomena? Fascism (as is well indicated by the introduction to the book) is infuriatingly difficult to define concisely, and thus to lay critical grasp of. I by no means wish to suggest that Japan did not experience fascism during the war years of 1931 to 1945 (I am convinced that it did), but the danger inherent in equating fascism to nationalism or to wartime strategies of survival is that we risk reproducing precisely the analytical error committed by Edwin O. Reischauer and others—

that is, the error of committing fascism to moments in history animated by war, which amounts to a premature exorcism of a ghoul that continues to haunt the world, in Japan and beyond (pp. 3-4). There seems, in other words, a pressing need to disentangle the mechanics of fascism from the experience of war and the ambiguous potentials of nationalism, in order to render it visible before it reveals itself to us on its own terms. This is crucial work that, hopefully, will be pursued by area studies and history scholars in the years to come, and it is my fervent hope that the reader will view the comments herein not so much as criticisms of Yoshimi’s very fine work, but rather as modest suggestions concerning how scholars might build upon the important foundation that it provides.

By situating fascism in the realm of the everyday, Yoshimi Yoshiaki was far ahead of his time when he released *Kusa no ne fashizumu* in 1987. Situated alongside other pioneering works that aim to shift the emphasis of investigations into the social from state policy and superstructure to the ambiguous ways in which individual actors aim to navigate the conditions of their own existence, Yoshimi’s extremely important and highly engaging work—and Ethan Mark’s elegant, insightful, and eminently readable translation thereof—is sure to prompt further discussion about the nature of fascism and its relationship to history, paving the way to ever more concise and critical engagements with both. And if there has been any moment in recent history when such a discussion is pressing and timely, surely that moment is now.

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Citation: Scott W. Aalgaard. Review of Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

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