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Japan in the twenty-first century has undertaken its most significant reassertion of military power since the end of World War II. Although Article 9 of the postwar Constitution, which renounced war as a means of settling international disputes, remains in place, successive Japanese governments over the past two decades have steadily moved toward a more robust definition of self-defense, largely in response to multiplying national security challenges posed by North Korea and China. Most recently, with its the announcement of plans to more than double traditional national defense spending to over two percent of GDP, along with purchasing Tomahawk cruise missiles from the United States, the government of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio is initiating an even more ambitious approach to developing Japan's military power. This buildup has also considerably elevated the profile of Japan's military in an increasingly contentious East Asia-Pacific region, therefore, makes *Inglorious, Illegal Bastards: Japan's Self-Defense Force During the Cold War* (2022), Aaron Herald Skabelund's study of the origins of the SDF, an even more welcome and timely contribution to the body of scholarship on Japan's postwar remilitarization.

Skabelund focuses on the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF), Japan's equivalent of an army (the SDF also has maritime and air forces), from its origin in 1950 through the reversion of sovereignty over Okinawa and subsequent stationing of GSDF units there in 1973. As he recounts, the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 prompted Douglas MacArthur to authorize the Japanese government headed by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru to establish an armed force that would help compensate for the US manpower losses incurred by the dispatch of troops to Korea. MacArthur's directive was met with considerable ambivalence by
Yoshida, who was unclear about the composition and mission of the new force and was understandably opposed to reviving the military given the disastrous consequences of Japanese militarism. As a result, the new force was christened the Police Reserve Force (PRF), which not only highlighted that its mission would largely be confined to domestic security but also reflected the government’s concern to avoid calling it an army, which would have been certain to antagonize the largely anti-militarist public. And indeed, the hostile early public response to the PRF confirmed the fears of its reluctant architects. Recruitment was difficult even in the straightened economic circumstances of postwar Japan; PRF members, who were already distinctly uncomfortable with their US-issued uniforms and equipment, were treated with widespread public contempt as parasitic “tax thieves”; and numerous critics charged that the very existence of PRF was illegal because it violated Article 9.

Under such inauspicious circumstances, the leadership of the new military and the politicians that supported it worked slowly and carefully during the 1950s and 1960s to cultivate, if not enthusiastic public support, at least acceptance of its legitimacy and utility. As Skabelund describes, there were internal and external aspects of these efforts. Internally, GSDF recruits were intensively indoctrinated in an ethos of patriotism defined by apolitical public service, with constant admonitions to bear manifestations of public hostility with patient humility. The emerging GSDF leadership internalized these values as cadets in the National Defense University (Bōeidai), where their education cultivated the “officer and gentleman” ideal borrowed from the US military education system. Externally, although it was indeed an armed force, the GSDF focused on missions with significant public outreach visibility, such as flood relief and assisting with the transporting of snow to the annual Sapporo Snow Festival. Soldiers were even encouraged to reach out to the frequently impoverished rural communities around GSDF bases to the extent of marrying local women and settling in those communities after their service. At the same time, the GSDF was sensitive to keep a low profile when called upon to assist the police in securing public order during the US-Japan Security Treaty (Anpō) riots of 1959-60 and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

On balance, Skabelund makes the case that the GSDF’s assiduous efforts to legitimize its existence in the eyes of a frequently skeptical public met with some success despite occasional bumps in the road in the form of scandals, at times vocal media criticism of the very existence of the military, and some confusion about the role of the GSDF as an armed force. At the same time, the GSDF adapted quite effectively to its role as a “hidden army,” content to operate in a state bordering almost on anonymity in Japanese society. Consequently, _Inglorious, Illegal Bastards_ is a singularly apt title for a book that is impressively researched in a variety of Japanese and English sources, logically organized, soundly argued, and cogently written. Skabelund is to be commended for shedding much-needed light on the origins of Japan’s revival as a military power, which is very much an ongoing development.
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