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Introduction: Japan's Military as Seen from Abroad

Frank Jacob and Sepp Linhart

Japan's modern history is defined by its wars. Related to them is the image of the Japanese, especially that of the Imperial Army's soldiers abroad. When taking a look at the different perceptions during these wars, a transformation from almost Western-like "gentlemen-soldiers" during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), when "Asia's Prussians" defeated the Czarist Army in every battle of the war, to demon-like monsters and perpetrators during the Pacific War (1941-1945), who tortured POWs and raped women by the thousands, can be emphasized.¹ The image of the Japanese soldiers changed similarly to the role of Japan within international politics. After the forceful opening of Japan in 1853 by an American diplomatic mission under the leadership of Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794-1858), the Asian country, which was often described as militarily antiquated by Western visitors,² decided its future course after an internal power struggle and the reinstatement of the Emperor as the real political power in Japan: the Meiji Restoration.³

The new leadership realized rather fast that it needed reforms in two areas to prevent a colonial, or semi-colonial, fate, as could have been observed to be coming into existence in China. The agenda was consequently clear: rich country, strong army (*fukoku kyōhei*). Foreign specialists (*o-yatoi gaikokujin*) were hired to train Japan's future elite in almost every sector, but especially its military and economic leaders of the next generation.⁴ The Japanese Imperial Army was trained by French and later Prussian officers, while the Navy was following the British model. Both would show the country's achievements five decades later, when the island nation was able to defeat the "Russian bear" in a war over influence in Korea and north-eastern China.⁵ Nevertheless, the new course for the country after 1868 was not accepted uncontested by all subordinates of the Emperor. The old warrior

¹ For a discussion of the Japanese Army and its war crimes see: Frank Jacob, *Japanese War Crimes During World War II: Atrocity and the Psychology of Collective Violence* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2018). For the perception of these crimes see: Barak Kushner, *Men to Devils - Devils to Men: Japanese War Crimes and Chinese Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). For the reasons for this "War without Mercy" see: John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

² Many early Western visitors later published their impressions of the Asian country. One example would be: Gustav Spiess, *Die preussische Expedition nach Ostasien während der Jahre 1860-1862. Reise-Skizzen aus Japan, China, Siam und der indischen Inselwelt* (Berlin: Otto Spamer, 1864).

³ A classic read on the Meiji Restoration is Tōyama Shigeki, *Meiji isshin* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018).

⁴ Umetani Noboru, *O-yatoi gaikokujin: Meiji Nihon no wakiyaku-tachi* (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 1965).

⁵ On the Russo-Japanese War and its Impact see: Frank Jacob, *The Russo-Japanese War and Its Shaping of the Twentieth Century*, Paperback edition (London/New York: Routledge, 2019).

elite, the *samurai*, whose image would dominate the stereotypes about the Japanese army even after their disappearance, would not tolerate all the reforms, especially general conscription, the abolishment of the right to wear swords in public, or the transformation of the feudal into a stipend system.⁶ In the later 1870s, the Japanese government had to use force to settle its internal conflicts first. A discourse about the invasion of Korea (*seikanron*) in 1873⁷ had shown two things: 1) the government was not willing to send the *samurai* abroad to invade a foreign territory, and 2) Korea would become a target of Japanese expansionism in later years. The impoverished *samurai*, however, remained a factor of instability, and a conflict seemed inevitable, eventually causing the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877⁸ and its suppression by the Japanese Imperial Army, a conscript army established and trained according to Western standards.

The age of the *samurai* ended before Nitobe Inazō (1862-1933), with his work *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1900),⁹ described a long gone time, but he thereby stimulated the continuation of Japanese stereotypes abroad for decades to come. In the meantime, Japanese soldiers had shown the value of their military education during the Sino-Japanese War, when the Emperor's army defeated the Chinese. Not many military observers had expected such a result,¹⁰ but the victory proved that Japan was more important in the region. It consequently demanded not only financial reparations, but also Chinese territory as a token of victory. However, the so-called Triple Intervention by Russia, France, and Germany prevented the Japanese government from taking the Liaodong Peninsula from China to extend Japan's influence on the mainland. As Russia was the initiator of this humiliation of the island country and had thereby also emphasized that Japan was not considered to be an equally great power, the enemy for a future war had already been chosen in 1895.¹¹

⁶ For a more detailed discussion see: Frank Jacob, "Die Meiji-Restauration und die Neuordnung Japans. Umverteilung und sozialer Wandel," *Traverse: Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 22 (2015), 79-92.

⁷ On the *seikanron* see Andō Hideo, *Saigō Takamori – Hyōden*, 2nd edition (Tokyo: Shirakawa Shoin, 1977), 158-168; Sakamoto Takao, *Meiji kokka no kensetsu 1871-1890* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1999), 165-178; Suzuki Hideo and Yoshii Akira, *Rekishi ni miru: Nihon to Kankoku - Chōsen* (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 1999), 64-65; Tōyama Shigeki, *Meiji ishin to gendai*, 19th edition (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1986), 205-208.

⁸ On the Satsuma Rebellion see Olavi K. Fält's chapter in this volume.

⁹ Nitobe Inazō, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (Philadelphia: The Leeds & Biddle Co, 1900).

¹⁰ Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) was acutally one of the German military thinkers and planners, who was not surprised by the Japanese victory. Frank Jacob, "General der Infanterie Erich Ludendorff," in *Des Kaisers militärische Elite*, ed. Lukas Grawe (Darmstadt: WBG, 2019) (forthcoming).

¹¹ George Alexander Lensen, "Japan and Tsarist Russia: The Changing Relationships, 1875-1917," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 10:3 (1962), 338-339.

A decade later, during the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese Army and Navy, now allied with Britain in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance,¹² showed the world that they were equals on the battlefield with Western soldiers and sailors. The Czar was surprised by Japan's decision to go to war, and probably even more surprised by the defeats of his own army, which was driven further back battle by battle by the Japanese forces. Around the world, interest in Japan and its army continued to grow, especially since it had to be taken to be a serious factor in future war plans on a global scale or even solely within the Pacific. Nevertheless, the tradition to caricature the Japanese in Western print media or on picture postcards continued, and no Japanese victory seemed to change that.¹³ While the observers highlighted the effectiveness of the military performance of Japan's army and navy, many military planners continued to pay almost no attention to the developments in that region during the years to come. It seemed like many lessons with regard to the war between Russia and Japan had simply been ignored.

It was very often emphasized that the spirit of the soldiers was decisive in winning the battle for Port Arthur, although reports, like the one later published by Sakurai Tadayoshi, highlighted that it was by the use of "human bullets" and not by spirit that the Russian fortress was eventually won.¹⁴ The war also further stimulated the idea of a Yellow Peril,¹⁵ and had tremendous global implications. However, the Portsmouth Peace Treaty was considered a humiliation for the Asian country, whose soldiers and sailors had died on the battlefields, and who now again felt betrayed by the Western Powers, especially the United States, whose President, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), had helped to forge this treaty. The Hibiya Park Riots in Tokyo expressed these feelings of anger about a supposed betrayal of the last war within the Meiji period (1868-1912).

The First World War saw Japan as an allied power of the Entente, providing some of its naval power to secure British transports in the Mediterranean and fighting a short war against the German troops in China. The fact that Japan was an allied power stimulated further interest in the country and its people, especially since the Japanese soldiers and

¹² Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The Diplomacy of Two Island Empires, 1894-1907* (London: Athlone, 1966).

¹³ Sepp Linhart, *"Dainty Japanese" or Yellow Peril? Western War Postcards 1900-1945* (Vienna: LIT, 2005).

¹⁴ Sakurai Tadayoshi, *Human Bullets: A Soldier's Story of Port Arthur* (Boston/New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907).

¹⁵ John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yates, *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (London/New York: Verso, 2014).

sailors, as during the Russo-Japanese War, were praised as gallant and chivalrous.¹⁶ During the war, Japan was a topic of interest, and this was displayed in multiple ways. To name just one example, the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915 in San Francisco offered its visitors an insight into the Asian country that lacked “no detail of landscape, trees, plants, flowers and pretty native women presiding in its shops and tea houses needed to make the illusion complete.”¹⁷ The successes on the battlefield eventually caused an interest in Japan and its culture, making the “land of cherry blossoms and geisha girls”¹⁸ more popular among Westerners around the globe. The growing interest in Japan, however, was not enough to overcome stereotypes or to accept the idea of “racial equality” as one of the preconditions for the League of Nations, which was to secure peace in the aftermath of the “war to end all wars.”

Fig. 1: “Geisha Girls” at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915 in San Francisco. The subheading says: “Three Types of Japanese Comeliness Now Living in ‘Japan Beautiful’ [the Japanese section of the exhibition, F.J.] Who Assist in the Welcome of Visitors to the Exposition.” Image taken from: “Japan at the Big San Francisco Exposition,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 13, 1915, 51.

¹⁶ Famous scenes from the Russo-Japanese War were also re-printed during the First World War. One example would be “A Japanese Charge, From Famous Picture,” *The Day Book* (Chicago, IL), May 10, 1915, 7.

¹⁷ “Japan at the Big San Francisco Exposition,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 13, 1915, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*



While Japan had gained from the First World War financially and was also transformed by its events in many ways,¹⁹ the socio-economic impact of the war eventually led to a crisis. The radicalization of the Japanese Army in the 1930s, especially visible through the acts of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria, the May 15 incident in 1932, and the February 26 incident in 1936, was a process related to the growing ambition to extend Japan's influence in China as well as the increasing antagonism with the United States. At the same time, a battle within the military leadership about the course of a future war, either against the Soviet Union or to increase Japan's influence in the Pacific, led to further trouble within Japan's army and navy. The war against China since 1937, and eventually

¹⁹ Inoue Toshikazu, *Dai-ichiji sekai taisen to Nihon* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2014), 174-211 (society) and 214-251 (culture).

the Pacific War that would globalize the Second World War (1939-1945), witnessed a new kind of Japanese soldier, one who had been unknown in the years before: the violent and aggressive Japanese. These soldiers would be known for many things during and after the war, especially their acts of violence and inhumanity, their willingness to fight until death and to sacrifice themselves, if not on the ground²⁰ or at sea then as *kamikaze* pilots, and their inability to show human emotions towards their victims or the defeated enemy. It also seemed unlikely to ever be able to engage with a Japanese POW, because as the US *Intelligence Bulletin* reported in July 1945, “[w]hen surrounded by an Allied force, Japanese soldiers were either to break through the encirclement or commit suicide.”²¹ If, however, a rare chance for an interrogation appeared, it was reported that only two types of Japanese POWs existed:

There will be those who surrendered voluntarily because they couldn’t take it, and those taken against their wills because of wounds or shock. The first are mostly stupid animal-slaves who have been drilled and drilled until they know how to handle a piece or wield a knife and kill. Otherwise they know absolutely nothing about anything. They have no minds of their own and act only when a superior presses a button.

The second type is something else again. They are fanatic, shrewd and possessed of an amazing singleness of purpose that is the direct result of just one thing – their sheeplike subservience to their superiors and to the Emperor. They’re slick and well trained and live only to obey their superiors’ orders to kill as many of us guys as possible. Otherwise they’re just like the first type – mindless automatons who move when the button is pressed.

There’s a third type, too, but you won’t see many of them in any prison camp because they’re almost never captured. They’re the killers who fight like madmen until they’re wiped out. You can realize how many of these bastards there are when

²⁰ Japanese ground forces were repeatedly involved in raids that targeted key personnel of the enemy. The US *Intelligence Bulletin* reported that “these attacks may vary from concerted raids by trained units to small suicide assaults executed by ordinary Jap service or combat foot soldiers.” “Combat Methods of Small Raiding Parties,” *Intelligence Bulletin* 3:2 (July 1945), 6-14, quote from 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10. Some Japanese soldiers were even reported to have committed suicide after reading US propaganda leaflets about the US victory in the war. “Jap Reactions to Propaganda,” *USAF Intelligence Bulletin* 12 (March 23, 1945), 20.

you consider the small number of prisoners we've taken compared with Jap casualties.²²

In contrast to the Japanese soldiers, who resisted being taken prisoner because they considered it as a shame for their whole family, many US soldiers became POWs during the war, and, due to being despised by Japan's army, suffered from countless forms of violence, most visible due to the Bataan Death March,²³ or the famous building of the Burma-Thailand Railway.

Those prisoners, who were supposed to build the latter, were instructed as follows in the often quoted speech by Col. Nagatama, who was responsible for the railway's construction from the Burmese side: "He told [the POWs that they] were the remnants of a beaten nation and should weep with gratitude that the Imperial Japanese Army had spared [their] lives. 'But,' he finished, 'your lives are worth nothing if they can't serve us. I intend to build that railroad – if it is over your dead bodies.'"²⁴ For the Japanese soldiers, it was not a question of guilt²⁵ when the British and American POWs were treated badly, especially since it was considered more honorable to commit suicide than to become a prisoner of the enemy.

All in all, the war was one "without mercy," which on both sides was based on racial stereotypes that had preconditioned the mind and the attitude towards the enemy. These stereotypes were also expressed by US POWs, as the following statement by a survivor of the Bataan Death March highlights:

In all prison camps, we nicknamed the Japanese in attendance. These names were chosen primarily because of physical characteristics. Here are some of those names ...: Creepy, Sportsu, Humpy, Paddlefoot, The Snake, The Squirrel, Goldtooth, Bundle of Love, Gobo, The Wine Merchant, Bushido, One Armed Bandit, The Kendo Kid, Fat

²² Sgt. H. N. Oliphant, "A Talk with Some Japs," *Yank: The Army Weekly* 3:34 (February 9, 1945), 2-4, quote on p. 2.

²³ Jacob, *Japanese War Crimes*, 94-108.

²⁴ Bill Reed, "Prisoner of the Japs," *Yank: The Army Weekly* 4:11 (August 31, 1945), 2-4, quote on p. 3.

²⁵ Frank Jacob, "Narratives Without Guilt: The Self-Perception of Japanese Perpetrators," in *Genocide and Mass Violence in Asia: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Frank Jacob (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 101-116.

Stuff, Peg Leg, Gimp, Duck Butt, Horse Face, Leather Wrist, White Fist, Iron Fist, Shufflefoot, Smiling Jack.²⁶

Those who continued the fight would gather souvenirs on the battlefield, often taken from dead soldiers, sending them home to highlight their success in fighting the Japanese devils. These souvenir collections, very well described for US troops by Mark D. Van Ells, took strange forms. Some soldiers would send Japanese plane parts to the radio broadcasting stations of the War Department in exchange for a tune,²⁷ while others would cook the heads of dead Japanese soldiers and send the skull home by mail to keep as a trophy.

All in all, as this short survey shows, the image of the Japanese soldiers and sailors depended on many things. While the initial image of the *samurai* was rather a fantasy, since its perception began after the ancient warriors of Japan had already disappeared, the allied soldiers of the Asian country were naturally much better perceived than the enemy. The image of the Japanese enemy during the Pacific War was full of stereotypes, and the racial antagonism on both sides found its reproduction on the battlefields, where soldiers were trying to survive while killing an Other that was described to both parties as violent, morally inferior, and racially unworthy. This was one factor that led to extreme forms of violence during the Pacific War, and an extreme change to the image of the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy. This transformation also shows that historical perceptions tend to change in the same way as alliances and military necessities change. The eight chapters of the present volume, however, want to further trace the reasons and ways Japan's military personnel were perceived abroad between 1868 and 1945.

Olavi K. Fält, in the first two chapters, discusses the image of the Japanese military due to the Formosan Expedition in 1874 and the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877. He focuses on the perception of the events and the Japanese forces by the local Anglophone press and therefore provides an early insight into the perception of Japan's modern army by the English reading community in Japan and abroad. Henna-Riikka Pennanen then shows how Japan was step by step considered a military threat for the United States at the end of the 19th century as the Pacific became a contested ocean between the two imperialist powers. The further development of the martial image of Japan, especially during the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) and its suppression in China, will be analyzed in Joe

²⁶ Ernest B. Miller, *Bataan Uncensored* (Long Prairie, MN: Hart Publications, 1949), 322.

²⁷ "Among My Souvenirs," *Air Force* 26:4 (April 1943), 3.

Fonseca's chapter. The above-mentioned impact of the Russo-Japanese War on the perception of the Japanese Army and Navy abroad will then be discussed by Frank Jacob, whose chapter deals with this war and the extent to which a third power, in this case Imperial Germany, was perceiving the events in East Asia in general, and its military consequences in particular. How and why the image of the Japanese soldiers changed from the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) to the Pacific War (1941-1945) will then be taken into closer consideration by Sepp Linhart, who will compare this image in American popular songs.

The final two chapters will then specifically deal with the period of the Pacific War and its aftermath. Adam S. Rock discusses the popular perceptions of Japanese POWs in the United States to show how the question about their identity as monsters or men was answered by the US public. The image of the Japanese perpetrators and war criminals in particular, however, were not only shaped during the Pacific War, but were established, further discussed, and eventually solidified by postwar events. Aiko Otsuka discusses this process as it relates to the mass killings of civilians in British Malaya during the war. All in all, the volume only offers a first survey of different images of Japanese soldiers and sailors at different times, and the editors hope that it will stimulate further research related to the overall topic discussed here, namely the changing images and perceptions of Japan's military forces abroad.

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