

War crimes in wwii japan history essay



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This paper addresses issues related to war crimes committed by the Japanese during World War Two (1942-45). It begins with a brief history, background information, and continues with an analysis of the Japanese wartime mentality that includes selected events in depth. The subsequent sections of this paper identify and describe what war crimes are, and elaborate on two vital examples during World War II. In doing so, this paper will analyze the issue of war crimes and its impact and denial as a feature within Japanese politics.

The militaristic tradition – feudalistic structure which concentrated power in the hands of the daimyo establishes the historical precedence that lead to the development of Japanese wartime mentality. At the top of the ‘ class structure’ was the Samurai Warrior Class. The Samurai were about 10% of the population and they commanded respect. The Samurai answered only to their leader the Daimyo which were the landed aristocratic leaders. Samurai as top of the class structure and in many ways sanctioned them to do anything as long as it was for and in service for their masters/warlords

The tactical and political demands of the Japanese militarists outdated the strict moral and ethical essentials of the Code of Bushido. Firstly, the term “ Bushido” is a concept that includes a large amount of interpretation. It’s vital exposing the misleading context of bushido to show that within this flexible doctrine, any action can be interpreted as just or moral as long as it fulfills the end goal. For a law of a doctrine to be corrupt, and illegal action to ensue, the laws must be clearly defined which the code of bushido was not. Secondly, Bushido emphasized obedience above all over aspects of conduct. It was required as long as it serve the motives of the individual, giving them

the freedom unrestrictive action which can be seen in the Japanese conduct in WWII making their behaviour part of a continuous pattern of martial culture. As an ideal construct, Bushido emphasized honesty, filial piety, honor, selflessness, loyalty and unquestioning obedience to one's superiors. In fact, according to the Historian Yuki Tanaka, the brutality committed by Japanese soldiers during WWII was an effect of the subordination and the corruption of the Code of Bushido.

The second example would be Nationalism. It was in this environment that the Tokugawa Shogunate was toppled and the emperor re-empowered during the Meiji Restoration of 1868. It was also in this environment, faced with external dangers and internal instability that the Japanese government became more centralized and the importance of nationalism and patriotism was stressed to the people. Loyalty was transferred from the daimyo and the shogun to the emperor-though the emperor largely remained a figurehead and the real machinations of government were being run by an oligarchy of powerful politicians.

In order to develop a deep and abiding sense of nationalism it was necessary to stress what was uniquely Japanese. According to Conroy (1955: 828), “ the program was to be ‘ national renovation,’ purification of the national polity, are turn to the traditional Eastern morality.” By reviving traditional Japanese ethics the Meiji government could bring the people together under a set of commonly shared values that were unique to the Japanese. This would help create a national consciousness which is a necessary component of nationalism. This moral revival largely focused on stressing traditional Shinto and Confucian ethical precepts. There was another source of ethical values, <https://assignbuster.com/war-crimes-in-wwii-japan-history-essay/>

however, one which centered on the values of loyalty, honor and courage- just the values that the Meiji leaders wanted to instill.

This source was Bushido, Jansen points out that the “ samurai served as ideal ethical types, theoretically committed to service and indifferent to personal danger and gain” (2000: 101). These were precisely the values that the Meiji leadership wanted to instill in the population. From the abolition of the class structure, this clearly created a tight unification among the inhabitants of Japan and this is what pushed national strength to survive. Looking forward this can be seen as the progression of the “ us vs. them” mind-set that can be found frequently in war. By creating this exaggeration of the virtues of samurai heritage, it intensifies and separates self-image of the Japanese as a virtuous and warrior-like population from everyone else.

During World War II, Japanese society was a volatile combination of feudalism and nationalism that concluded in a national acceptance of military rule during the war years. The Japanese armed forces were a highly nationalistic, well established modern fighting force. Their doctrine was the Bushido code of feudal Japan permitted the fighting code of Japan’s servicemen

Stephen van Evera notes that “ the effects of nationalism depend heavily on the beliefs of nationalist movements, especially their self-images.” He also argues that “ chauvinist mythmaking is a hallmark of nationalism” and that “ self-glorifying myths encourage citizens to contribute to the national community-to pay taxes, join the army, and fight for the nation’s defense” (van Evera, 1994: 26-27, 30)

Japan's movement toward militarism began after the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the commencement of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, with Meiji oligarch's adoption of fukoku kyohei, meaning rich country, strong military. The Meiji Oligarchs did show signs of restraint towards expressions of militarism and imperialism in the first portion (decades?) of the Meiji period but this did not mean that they did not agree with the goals of foreign and military expansion. They first focused more on modernization and economic growth to catch up with Western industrial powers before they took any steps to expand Japan's influence in foreign matters.

Japanese militarism and imperialism progressively developed for five principal reasons. The first reason was Japan's desire to be a Western-style imperialist power and the second reason was Japan's concerns for its security and safety which played an important roles in the growth of militarism up to the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. The next two reasons, Japan's belief in its leadership role for Asia and Japan's frequent provocations by Western powers, gave rise to an expansion of militarism and imperialism from 1905 to the 1930s. The final reason, Japan's desire to secure its economic interests, rose in importance as Japan entered the decade of the 1930s.

The last example is during the Meiji Restoration (1868) it also resulted in the refashioning of old militaristic goals to include expansionist ambitions overseas; such as Japan's desire to be a Western-style imperialist power it's concerns for its security and safety, its belief in its leadership role for Asia and its desire to secure its economic interests.

National survival became tied to imperialism and expansionist ambitions with increased contact with imperialistic Western countries. The island nation became to a point paranoid with Western countries and its influence; from economically and militaristically catching up, unequal treaties that brought them humiliation, to freeing other Asian countries from Western imperialist power.

Militaristic tradition, the development of a fiercely nationalistic culture which helped led to the development of Japan's leaders' imperialistic ambitions pitted the Japanese 'us' against 'outsiders.' The combination of these three historical developments led to the formation of a Japanese mentality where any kind of military action against outsiders was sanctioned as long as it furthered the larger goal of increasing Japanese strength and ensuring the nation's survival. This ethnocentric view was not uncommon among imperialist countries and explains the way Japanese (and in fact, imperialist countries) viewed war crimes.

Understanding the Japanese mentality towards the war and their nation's role in it helps shed light on how war crimes were perceived by the Japanese. As such, I would define war crime in the Japanese eyes during World War II as follows. A war crime is an act of cruelty against one's own people that is neither to the country's benefit in any form nor sanctioned by one's superior. By approaching the war crime in this context, it is possible to deduce that the Japanese soldiers did not see the acts of cruelty they committed during the war as crimes for they were all for the larger Japanese imperialistic goals and furthermore, committed against 'outsiders.'

Japanese troops entered the capital on 13 December 1937 and for six weeks, conducted a campaign of terror, humiliation and brutality known as the murder and rape of Nanking. Civilians and captured military personnel were subjected to looting, rape, torture, decapitation, mass killings and killing practice exercises. From a population of approximately 600, 000-700, 000 inhabitants in the city before it fell, it is estimated that at least 300, 000 were killed and at least 20, 000 were raped.

Of all the atrocities committed in the Asian territories occupied by Imperial Japan between 1937-1945, the Nanjing Massacre is perhaps the most well-known. As historian Professor Charles S. Maier (Harvard University) has written: “ Within both Japan and China... the Nanjing Massacre has assumed the somewhat same salience in public memory as the Holocaust in Europe and America....’

‘ The Japanese army’s killing spree at Nanjing... has become the other emblematic massacre of the Pacific War, and it remains the epitome of the cruelty and aggression that the Japanese military unleashed. The Nanjing rampage seems all the more atrocious in that it involved not what has seemed so horrifying about the Holocaust – its bureaucratized planning and mechanized execution – but the often gleeful killing of perhaps hundreds of thousands of civilians by individual soldiers using sword and bayonet as well as bullet. The killings were all the more appalling in that they were unnecessary for the military objective, continued after the victory was secured, and apparently involved such joyful or at least indifferent murder.”

(Bold mine)

Brutal killings that seemed to have no meaning after victory was secured & killing contests Japanese saw these acts as demonstrations of military prowess which harks back to samurai brutality in the past during the Sengoku era . Japanese did not see ‘ outsiders’ as equals and because of that, not really worthy of compassion or sympathy and treated them as lesser beings. Mentality of Japanese as the superior race with them making light of the lives of ‘ outsiders’ is not unique. This can be seen in Germany’s persecution of Jews during WWI or known as the racist dimension of Social Darwinism.

The official and extensive enslavement of young women by the imperial government for sexual exploitation – stands out as one of the most egregious examples of how women suffer the cruelest blows of war. Historians have estimated that as many as 200, 000 civilian women were forcibly conscripted in Japanese-occupied countries between 1931 and 1945 and forced to serve as sexual slaves in Japanese Army brothels.

The Imperial Japanese Army assigned these victims the euphemistic term “ comfort women”. The majority of these women were conscripted in China and Korea, but this barbarous practice occurred in every country occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army.

Representatives of the Japanese government pressed them into sexual servitude with lies, including promises of education, or simply by snatching them from the streets. Usually taken from their home countries to military brothels elsewhere, they were kept isolated and imprisoned.

From China, Korea, SEA and even Japan itself, perhaps the fact that it included even Japanese women makes it even more of a controversial topic to talk about. Also, the 90s saw women ‘coming out’ to tell of their experiences which kept this crime alive and an important feature of Japanese dealings with the outside world long after the end of WWII.

Comfort woman is an example of how different forms of oppression work within a system of war. The oppression faced by the combination of race and gender create a dangerous environment for these women. These two factors worked to dehumanize Japanese women and justify the behaviour of the government. Even the language used to describe this crime is a euphemism. Language is a very powerful tool used by the government to legitimize the rape and enslavement of thousands of women. Taking away their autonomy and reducing Japanese woman to their reproductive organs denies them basic human rights. The system of comfort woman also intersects with another form of oppression class. Comfort woman were woman of the lowest class. Therefore you have a government that is using its most marginalized demographic as a tool during war.

Japanese view of women are lesser than men, purpose: to service men – thus even enslaved Japanese women as comfort women, needs of the soldiers come before anyone else (harks back to samurai superiority – were always the top of the class structure before Meiji period). Although due to its borders the definition of war crime as mentioned above, since it included crimes against their own people as well, comfort women remains an issue that nationalists politicians struggle to reconcile even till today.

Notably, this difference in perception over war crimes carries on up till today which leads to the issue of war crimes still being a feature of Japanese politics. The Tokyo War Crimes Trials (1946 – 1948): Ultimately, victors convicting the losers, outsiders convicting the Japanese. Japanese defendants accused of war crimes were tried by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, which was established by a charter issued by U. S. Army General Douglas MacArthur. The so-called Tokyo Charter closely followed the Nürnberg Charter. The trials were conducted in English and Japanese and lasted nearly two years. Of the 25 Japanese defendants (all of whom were convicted), 7 were sentenced to hang, 16 were given life imprisonment, and 2 were sentenced to lesser terms. Except for those who died early of natural causes in prison, none of the imprisoned Japanese war criminals served a life sentence. Instead, by 1958 the remaining prisoners had been either pardoned or paroled.

Japan's refusal to acknowledge its war guilt and war crimes stands in stark contrast to the willingness of Germany to confront its war crimes. However, it is arguable that Japan has only been able to avoid squarely confronting its war guilt and war crimes because of the active connivance of the United States. In 1948, intensification of the Cold War persuaded the American government that Japan should become an American ally and bulwark against the spread of communism in Asia. This was unlikely to happen if investigation and prosecution of Japanese for war crimes continued.

This is what many believe what sparked the Japanese government to refuse to acknowledge Japan's military aggression. Many Japanese LDP members of parliament, government officials, academics, and revisionist film makers

have aligned themselves with militarists and extreme nationalists in claiming that Japan's "intervention" in China in 1931, 1933, and 1937 was necessary to "liberate" the Chinese from exploitation by Western colonial interests. Even if political figures do apologize to their neighbours they receive backlash and negative reactions in Japan. When Japan's first Socialist Prime Minister, Tomiichi Murayama, was touring South-East Asia in 1995, he apologised for the "tremendous damage and suffering" caused by Japan's "colonial rule and aggression... in the not too distant past". Murayama's apology did not mention atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre, and was the closest Japan has ever come to an admission of war guilt and apology for its war crimes. The apology by Murayama was viewed as inadequate in China but caused widespread fury in Japan.

Another large issue over the years would be the textbook controversies. In 1962, an officially sponsored seven-volume history of the Pacific War was published. This sanitised history, called "Japan's Way into the Pacific War", ignored Japan's military aggression across East Asia and the western Pacific and the countless atrocities committed by Japan's military. From then, textbooks have been censored from statistical data such as the fatality rates, creating false historical information or even downplaying of words and content.

Impact on foreign relations even to this day tensions between Japan and its Asian neighbours escalated from time to time. On Wednesday, the 67th anniversary of the end of World War Two, as South Korea and China both told Tokyo to do much more to resolve lingering bitterness over its past military aggression. Despite close economic ties in one of the world's

wealthiest regions, memories of Japan's wartime occupation of much of China and colonisation of South Korea run deep in the two countries.

Throughout wars there have always been casualties from both sides. The death tolls which include the estimates of all deaths that are either directly or indirectly cause by war, within World War II are the highest. The two most infamous executions by the Japanese military are the Nanjing massacre and the development of comfort women. Through western influence and the Meiji Restoration is what progressed into Japanese nationalism and expansionism. To this day Japan's neighbors are bitter towards their history which can be seen through the attitudes of the older generation in Asia, the text book controversies and the constant refusal to accept their war crimes.