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## Japanese Society at War: Death, Memory and the Russo-Japanese War

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John Steinberg

*Japanese Society at War* deepens our understanding of the impact of the Russo-Japanese War on Japanese society. An accomplished historian who is a Senior Lecturer in Japanese History in the School of Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck College, University of London, Shimazu's previous publications include, *Japan, Race, and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* and an edited collection, *Nationalisms in Japan*.<sup>(1)</sup> In the book under review, she deftly uses primary sources to expose the social and political divisions that existed in Japan at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. In demonstrating that Japanese society did not offer unified support to its government's imperial efforts in Manchuria in 1904, Shimazu shatters the myth of a homogenous Japan falling in line with the demands imposed upon it by the government at the beginning of the 20th century.

From the start of the book, Shimazu reveals that serious divisions existed in Japanese society at the beginning of the 20th century. She accomplishes this first by demonstrating that through 'modern' media, referring here mainly to photography and cinematography, Japanese people were able to more closely identify with the war in a constructed, manufactured, 'patriotic bubble'. These new media forms, however, provided viewers with a more graphic depiction of conflict than previously available, resulting not only in the birth of war reportage in modern terms, but also in fostering the emergence of people questioning the

point of conflict in general. From here Shimazu offers an analysis about the anti-war movement that grew in strength as war casualties mounted thanks largely to the graphic presentation of the conflict that people could witness at their local movie theaters. Hence, a new public sphere emerged in Japanese society thanks largely to mass media outlets that fueled popular nationalism. This nationalism expressed itself most prominently in lantern parades that were originally intended to occur as a means to support the war effort. Instead they became a forum where people felt free to express themselves, an attribute the government feared because of the potential such demonstration offered to Japanese people to express their true beliefs. The government's worse fears, of course, came true with the Hibiya Riots of 5 September 1905. Shimazu is careful to inform her readers that, while there is no direct link between the Hibiya Riots and Lantern Parades in a political sense, the latter had given the Japanese a sense of empowerment that came to bear when the terms of the Peace of Portsmouth were made public. Thus, from the outset of her book, the author reveals the emergence of a Japanese society that has a developing public identity which the government fears because of the potential of forces opposed to its policies and conduct.

Beginning with the second chapter of the book, however, Shimazu emerges as a superb practitioner of the historian's craft through her use of basic primary sources. Her examination of the dairies of Takada Kiichu, Sawada Matashige, Makaida Hatsuichi, Tada Kaizo, Negoro Tokichi, Nakazawa Ichitaro, Iwai Shichigoro, all soldiers or non-commissioned officer and veterans of the Russo-Japanese War provides readers with vivid evidence of the war time experiences of common soldiers. Shimazu, however, is not interested in their 'war stories' per se. Instead, she focuses on two themes, the first being, the journey that the soldiers experienced from their homes to the front where they would ultimately meet the enemy. What emerges from this research is the story of men who did not necessarily view themselves as 'Japanese' when they left their homes. Instead, they identified with provincial or local political and social issues. But, on the way to points of debarkation for the theater of operations, a sense of national identity (*kokumin*) emerged as a result of the treatment they received over the course of their journey; hence the idea of being a citizen of a nation comes out of the mobilization of Japanese society in 1904. The other topic that Shimazu presents at this stage of her book is the attitude of the soldiers toward dying in battle for their Emperor. Contrary to perceptions at the time of the war, Japanese soldiers thought little of meeting their death prematurely and on a foreign battlefield. These revelations alone shatter common perceptions of Japan and the Japanese in 1904<sup>25</sup>. After all, traditional historiography of the Japanese army of the period paints a picture of it prevailing in Manchuria because of its better training and superior élan. Traditional portraits of the Russo-Japanese War paint a picture of Japanese soldiers willing to die for their Emperor while Russian soldiers had no such inclination.

The close analysis of Japanese soldiers in the Russo-Japanese War provides Shimazu with the information she needs to dedicate the rest of her book to her main concerns which are death and memory. No one – Japanese, Russian, Chinese, the over 100 military observers, and the countless journalists and other witnesses – anticipated the extent of the casualties arising from the combat activities of this war; medical units were completely overwhelmed during and after battles. To cope with this unfolding catastrophe, Japanese propagandists legitimized the sacrifice of its citizenry by inventing the idea of “honorable war death”. While Japanese soldiers paid lip service to the idea, mainly to satisfy wartime censors, Shimazu, through her use of primary sources, ably demonstrates that they thought very little of dying for the Emperor; here the stereotypical image of death defying Japanese soldiers is shattered. Instead, the reader learns that Japanese soldiers maintained discipline and morale through their desire to return home and take care of their families. If a national political element entered into their thinking, it related back to their provincial identity and to the emerging sense of national citizenry that the government did not necessarily support because such ideas could lead to opposition against the war, and potentially against the government and the nation itself. Ultimately, the author’s fine work allows readers to closely identify with Japanese soldiers when she reveals how these men were overwhelmingly lonely when they went into battle and squarely faced death. Regardless of the propagandistic goal of the “honorable war death” concept, Japanese soldiers feared death and met it thinking of their loved ones instead of the Emperor or the State. Through this analysis, therefore, Shimazu clearly exhibits a Japanese soldier who is not unlike most other soldiers going into battle. They were not some type of Asiatic superman who did not fear death or mutilation on the battlefield.

Once Shimazu made clear that death on the battlefield was not a preferred option for the soldiers, she launches a complex explanation of Japanese attitudes toward war dead. Demonstrating incisive consistency in her analysis, the author reveals how local/provincial officials oversaw the handling and treatment of the remains of soldiers killed in battle or who later succumbed to war wounds. Even better, particularly for western readers not familiar with Japanese burial practices, she takes her reader on the commemorative death journey of a Corporal Nakazato Yoshiji. From this description readers learn that Yoshiji’s remains were interned in seven different sites: battlefield grave, family grave, private family monument, county war monument, village war monument, army burial ground, and the Yasukuni Shrine. His family had little to do with the decisions that culminated in these multiple burials. Only the return of a portion of his remains to a private family monument allowed the family some personal closure for their loss; the bereaved family had little input into the final disposition of the remains of their loved one. The central point Shimazu seeks to make through this portion of her manuscript is that in controlling the final internment of the men who came from their province, the local elites first sought to address local interests and then appealed to patriotism, but usually on a local, not a national level. At the time this was occurring, the Japanese government, most likely preoccupied with military concerns, supported the activities of local officials. As this part of the book concludes, however, Shimazu notes that the Yasukuni Shrine was still being consolidated into site of national war commemoration and, as a result, it did not serve as a national outlet for the remembrance of those who sacrificed for the State. From this experience the Japanese government learned that it had to work harder to link the power of local officials to a national Japanese vision.

Having carefully constructed a paradigm that exhibits a diverse society composed of powerful local elites who sent men to war without a firm idea of being a national citizen embedded in their minds, Shimazu then focuses on the prime goal of Japanese governmental communication throughout the war. The Japanese government went into the Russo-Japanese War determined to shatter all perceptions of a medieval, barbaric Japan by acting as a civilized nation; civilization, therefore, became the key word of Japanese governmental discourse in 1904<sup>5</sup>. In their effort to fight the war as a civilized state, the Japanese government commanded that all of its representatives follow international law in their conduct during wartime. So closely did the Japanese government link its proper international conduct to state policy that Shimazu coins the phrase “humanitarian nationalism” to demonstrate that the Japanese government became determined to shatter all yellow peril myths by the end of the war. Nothing epitomized this development more than the treatment given to Russian prisoners of war. In addition to the treatment of mass casualties, Japanese government officials also had to contend with overwhelming numbers of prisoners of war. By focusing on the activities

of the Matsuyama prison camp, the author ably demonstrates that Russian POWs were treated with such kindness, particularly by the local population who benefited economically from their presence, that she (Shimazu) ultimately will describe them as accidental tourists. Japanese officials understood that the entire world was watching them and did not wish to squander the opportunity to properly place themselves on the same international stage as the other Great Powers.

Then, in a strong display of her skills as a storyteller and historian, Shimazu uses a hero's tale, that of naval commander Hirose Takeo, to inform her readers about such wide ranging topics as the Japanese idea of a "God of War," through representations of modern masculinity, to how his exploits in the Russo-Japanese War transformed into myth and, along with other heroic war myths, maintained a lasting impression among the Japanese into the 1930s. Hirose died an "honorable war death" on 27 March 1904 while participating in a naval action designed to impose a blockade on Port Arthur. The naval ministry immediately started the process of propagandizing his death to generate support for the war effort. Shimazu brushes aside the standing interpretation of the Hirose hero myth – that it was a creation of spontaneous popular enthusiasm – and, true to her standards, uses primary sources to exhibit how the navy cultivated this tale. Using the work of the *de facto* official Japanese naval historian of the war, First-Lieutenant Ogasawara Naganari, she demonstrates that Hirose's heroic tale begins in his narratives, something he did for other naval heroes, such as Admiral Togo Heihachiro, and then took on a life of its own. What makes this part of her narrative successful is how the author then demonstrates that Hirose's tale takes on a life of its own because of the way his death was treated on a local level. Hence, his story ends up fitting nicely into Shimazu's overall analysis of the relationship between national and provincial sources of power. In this case they worked together to propagate the heroism of both a national and local hero. Hirose's story, in the post 1905 period became embedded in the national educational curriculum, a part of the national narrative in film, literature, wood block prints, and even the construction of a bronze statue.

Pageantry, exhibitions, and film are the three genres of commemoration and remembrance that Shimazu embraces to inform readers how the lessons and myths of the Russo-Japanese War prevailed in Japanese society up to the Marco Polo Bridge incident of July 1937. She notes how these genres perpetuated heroic war myths while gaining significant traction in major urban areas. At one point she notes that Tokyo is able to emerge as a center of national power on a new and heightened level because of its prominence in promoting the memory of the War. Moreover, activities aimed at remembering the war in its proper national context gave political authorities the capability of blending traditional customs and practices with modern media that together helped to move Japanese society into the 20th century. Her argument gains strength as she spells out that, while the Japanese used traditional ideas to define the martial spirit of soldiers, they at the same time used modern thinking to convey ideas of power and technological mastery. Much of this propaganda also contributed to, and supported, the widely held belief of the period that war was a masculine activity with women playing a minor support role at best. Ultimately, the propaganda that created war heroes who became the source of myths that created a spiritual legacy would fade after the Japanese army invaded China proper in 1937. Once the Japanese army engaged in combat against the Chinese, the Russo-Japanese War faded rapidly into the background of conversation and commemoration as a war of a bygone era.

In summation, Naoko Shimazu's book shatters multiple myths that emerge from the early 20th century about Japan as a militaristic country. Her research demonstrates that Japan, and the Japanese people, were much like the citizens of the rest of the world powers who were engaged in imperial activities. Japan was not a unified nation composed of citizens or subjects who were so blindly loyal to an Emperor that they did not value their lives or the lives of their loved ones. Soldiers went to war with much trepidation, hence they though little of meeting their end on a foreign battlefield. Civilians on the home front first questioned and were later outraged by government policies that culminated in the loss of loved ones. Meanwhile, in response to the power of provincial authorities and a growing anti-war movement, the national government strove to develop everything from war monuments to myths designed to commemorate and justify the hardships and ultimately the sacrifices of soldiers in Manchuria. At the same time, the Japanese government sought to enhance its international reputation as a great civilized nation by demonstrating that it could treat Russian prisoners of war with the respect and dignity warranted to brave combatants regardless of their

(Japan's) own attitude toward men captured in battle. This shattering of myths allows Shimazu to substantially revise the long standing historiographic interpretation of Japan at this moment in history. As such, her book is a valuable contribution to the literature and should be read widely by all people interested in the period when Japan entered the 20th century.

## Notes

1. Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race, and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London, 1998); *Nationalisms in Japan*, ed. Naoko Shimazu (London, 2006). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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