

Japan's World War II POW Policy: Indifference and Irresponsibility

Utsumi Aiko

Japan's World War II POW Policy: Indifference and Irresponsibility

by Utsumi Aiko

[Part I of a two part series on the treatment of prisoners of war examines Japan's World War II treatment of prisoners and the verdicts of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal punishing prisoner abuse. Utsumi Aiko is Japan's leading specialist on World War II POW issues. See also the two part article by Wall Street Journal correspondent [Jess Bravin](#) on the rights, and abuses of those rights, of POWs under the Japanese in World War II and the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay. The articles raise important issues about responsibility: the responsibility of the soldier who commits abuses of prisoners, and the officials at the highest levels who frame policies of degradation and atrocities. The analogy should be a chilling one for a nation that pioneered, in the wake of World War II, in pressing charges of prisoner abuse and insisting on responsibility both of the immediate perpetrator of violations of human rights, on up through the chain of command to the highest authority.]

Guy Stanley, author of the novel Nagasaki Six based on the Koyagi Island POW camp in Nagasaki, introduces the following statement by a POW:

“The two great crimes of the Second World War

were the Nazi massacres of the Jews and the Japanese Army’s ill-treatment of prisoners-of-war.”

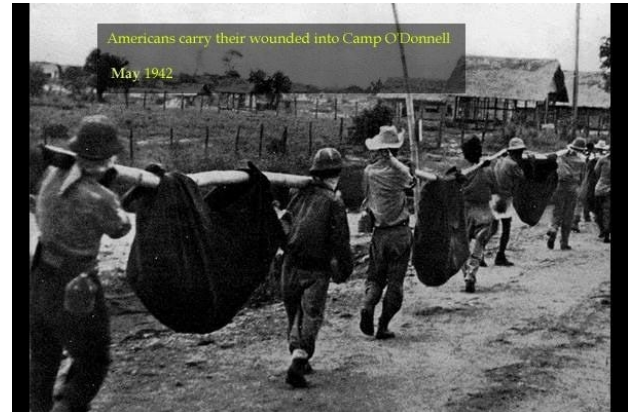
Although the Japanese Army’s ill treatment of POWs is sufficiently notorious internationally that some have compared it with the Nazi massacres of the Jews, if on a much smaller scale, hardly any Japanese understands the issues that are at stake. Even if the “abuse of POWs” is mentioned, most Japanese have no idea of the reality. Few students even know the words “Burma-Thailand Railway.” There has been a long-running debate among Japanese over the Nanjing Massacre, and understanding of the Japanese Army’s invasion of Asia and its responsibility for aggression has taken root in the minds of many. By contrast, however, interest in the abuse of POWs is so low that there is no debate. Even among those Japanese who debate war responsibility, the “POW problem” is a blind spot.

The film, *The Specialist*, that dealt with the Eichmann trial portrayed the Nazi project for the extermination of the Jews as being carried out in accordance with a calculated plan. The Japanese Army’s abuse of prisoners might be described with only slight exaggeration as the opposite. Because of the indifference or tendency to belittle the POW matter, the sloppiness, incoherence, and cover-up in the POW administration amounted in effect to abuse. A system was set up to handle POWs, but neither the budget nor staff was adequate to the huge numbers. Furthermore, many staff doubled up from other jobs. Because the POW administration was not considered important, competent staff were not appointed. Some

POW camps were run by “permanent colonels,” men bypassed for promotion to the rank of general. According to testimony to the Tokyo Tribunal of Colonel Yamazaki Shigeru of the Army Ministry’s Military Affairs Bureau POW administration section, the situation, unthinkable in the Japanese army, arose in which a POW camp commander would take orders from a lower ranking officer of the Military Affairs Bureau; so despised was the task of looking after POWs.

There was also the problem of classification of prisoners within the Japanese Army. In the documents presented to the Tokyo Tribunal, the term “regular POW” often appears. There were both “regular” and “irregular” prisoners. “Regular” POWs refers to those prisoners held in camps set up under the orders of the Army Minister. In these camps prisoners were subject to international law and their names were communicated via the International Committee of the Red Cross to their home countries. Imprisoned officers were paid the same salary as officers of the Japanese Army. The diary of the Australian army doctor, E.E. Dunlop, describes how officers’ pay was pooled and used to buy eggs or other necessary foods for sick prisoners.

On the other hand, there were surrendered prisoners who were taken captive by an operations unit that had no POW camps or prisoner administration, and were therefore “irregular prisoners.” Depending on where the control over the prisoners lay, those captured were divided into these two groups. Thus responsibility for the death of many soldiers of the US-Philippines Army on the “Bataan Death March” rested with Honma Yasuhiko, commander of the 14th Army, not with Army Minister and later founder of the POW camps, Tojo Hideki.



Further, in the case of Asian troops prisoners, some were simply “freed” and others were used as romusha laborers. Filipino soldiers from the US-Philippines Army who surrendered in the Philippines were provisionally detained and then “released.” “Release” meant freedom from the status of POW. After being “freed”, however, they were detained as forced laborers. Asian prisoners became romusha. In the case of the British Army soldiers that surrendered at Hong Kong, Indian troops were “released” to form a “special labor brigade” used by the Japanese army for miscellaneous tasks. Some were mobilized to serve as special agents promoting Indian independence from British rule. Indian troops were not treated as “prisoners.”

The Army doctor Dunlop referred to above was one of the Australian army personnel who surrendered in March 1942 on Java. The Java POW camp was not set up until August 1942. For six months prior to that he was held prisoner by the 16th Army, which was an operations unit. Once the Java POW camp was established, he was transferred to it in September, and from that day he began to receive pay. A detailed survey was taken of all prisoners and the Japanese Army set about mobilizing them as a labor force, making use of any expertise they might have, and Dunlop became responsible as a military doctor for the

units sent to the Burma-Thailand Railway.

A very narrow interpretation was applied to determine which prisoners were being held under international law. “Regular prisoners” were sent to Japan itself, or to Korea or Taiwan. Some were also used on the construction of the Burma-Thailand Railway. Responsibility over prisoners on labor sites belonged to the Railway Corps of Engineers, which was part of the General Staff, while the camps were the responsibility of the military government, i.e. the Army Minister. The Railway Corps used the prisoners, but was not responsible for feeding them or providing medical care. For this reason, there were cases in which the camps had no tools and no materials for the construction of living quarters, yet the Railway Corps refused to allow use of their equipment for these purposes. Although medical supplies were inadequate, there were times when the Railway Corps refused to provide any, saying “no medicine for prisoners.” Different administrations were responsible for the running of the camps and the work sites. Heads of POW administration who became aware of the flaws in the system and recommended reform were summarily told that “intervention in the administration of the Railway Corps amounts to infringement on the right of supreme command.”

There was no system to administer POW matters with proper authority and in a unified fashion. Some among the officers of various sectors strove within the limits of their authority and tried to improve things when they learned the reality of the abuses. But all turned a blind eye to what lay beyond their immediate authority. Under a bureaucratic system that encouraged people to take flight into their own sphere of responsibility, prisoner abuse was ignored.

Japan did not ratify the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war but notified enemy countries via the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs that it would apply the Convention, *mutatis mutandis*. However, there were subtle differences between the Army Ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs over what *mutatis mutandis* might mean. The Army Ministry took absolutely no steps within Japan to implement what had been pledged. Even among officers, it was common to treat international law lightly and to say “Japan has not ratified the Geneva Convention.” Few had any understanding of the meaning of *mutatis mutandis*. POW camps were in fact administered in accord with Japanese domestic regulations for the handling of prisoners. The NCOs, soldiers and civilian aides who were in control of the prisoners knew nothing of the Geneva Convention. In the treatment of POWs, at the point of intersection between international and domestic law, international law was either ignored or belittled. Reference to breach of the Geneva Convention was common at the Tokyo Tribunal, but there were defendants who knew nothing of their existence, and who did not know why they were being tried or what crime they were supposed to have committed.

Individually administered punishments (i.e. vindictive bashings by camp guards) were a major issue at the Tribunal. Such beatings were rampant, whether in the actual camps or on work sites. But such “cruel treatment” was an everyday matter in the Japanese Army. The person who beat a prisoner had himself been trained by being beaten to the point where beating was taken for granted. Some prisoners therefore asked why it was that only those who had beaten prisoners were being punished when no punishment was sought for those who had beaten Japanese soldiers. There was little understanding or sense of having committed any war crime on the part of those tried for ill treatment of prisoners. Likewise, there was little awareness on the part of senior officers who drew up POW policy or officers who administered the POW camps that what they had done might constitute a war crime. Their excuse was that they did their best and “it

couldn't be helped."

It was the treatment of prisoners by the Japanese Army that led to the deaths of one in four, or perhaps even one in three. The Japanese military and government tended to see the POW problem as insignificant or of no concern, yet responsibility for it was pursued as a high priority at the Tokyo Tribunal. Those connected with prisoner administration who during the war were treated lightly or at times even contemptuously found themselves arraigned in court. Those who had actually carried out the abuse of prisoners were arrested one after another on the testimony of the POWs. Many of those connected with the POW camps felt, "Why me, There must be others who should be tried." What about the officers who shouted abuse at subordinates for treating the prisoners too gently, or the staff officers who pressed construction of the railway even if it meant that all the prisoners dying? The sense of injustice of the trials was strong among those who were tried, and it became one psychological factor leading to the refusal to admit any war criminality.

On the one hand, there are the former POWs

who see the ill-treatment of prisoners as tantamount to the massacre of the Jews, while on the other the Japanese people lack any sense of having abused prisoners. The sense of injustice is widespread over the way that those at the bottom of a system who carried things out were judged severely when it was the lack of concern with prisoners on the part of the army and government at the highest levels, that actually caused the wide-scale abuse of prisoners. Without clarifying the bureaucratic structure that produced the abuse, the root of the problem cannot be grasped. Insensitivity to human rights, and the tendency to dissolve personal responsibility in the bureaucratic collective, persists.

Utsumi Aiko is professor of humanities at Keisen University, Tokyo. Her numerous books include *Korean B and C Class War Criminals* and *Japanese Colonialism*, and *The Thai-Burma Railroad and Japan's War Responsibility* (in Japanese). She prepared this article for Japan Focus. Posted May 10, 2005.

Translated by Gavan McCormack, a Japan Focus Coordinator and author of [Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe](#).