

Lack of Japanese Resistance to Militarism

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The histories in *Japan at War: An Oral History* by Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook (New York: The New Press, 1992) provide convincing evidence of why the Japanese people did not actively resist and rebel against their militaristic ultranationalist leaders in power during World War II. Government propaganda, the educational system, government and military repression, and social pressures combined together to effectively eliminate any significant or sustained resistance against the government and the military. Although many of the histories in the book by the Cooks support this thesis, three histories have been selected for use in this essay: “Teaching War” by Ienaga Saburô (441-447), “Making Balloon Bombs” by Tanaka Tetsuko (187-192), and “Bringing the Liberals to Heel” and “Thought Criminal” by Hatanaka Shigeo (64-68, 222-227).

From the start of the war with China in 1937 until the end of World War II on August 15, 1945, Japanese leaders took steps to ensure that only government-sanctioned propaganda reached the Japanese citizenry. The government controlled the news media through rigid censorship and often issued detailed instructions on what should be reported, such as the 1943 order to place the slogan “We’ll never cease fire till our enemies cease to be!” on the cover of all March issues of magazines (Hatanaka 67). Constant repetition and widespread publication of slogans regarding such common themes as self-sacrifice, preeminence of the Emperor, and solidarity of the Japanese people ensured that every Japanese person knew what they should believe.

The strict control and censorship of the news media guaranteed that the Japanese public knew nothing of the losses suffered during the War and the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers. Ienaga (441) explains that he knew nothing of the inhuman acts of Japanese soldiers in China: “I knew nothing about Japan’s cruel behavior. There was really no way of knowing.” Tanaka (191) describes the lack of news for workers at her factory: “We didn’t have any newspapers. No radio. We didn’t even hear the news announcements made by Imperial General Headquarters. We just pasted paper.” Based on many of the stories in the Cooks’ book, factory workers and military men would have had little time and energy to critically examine and evaluate news, even if it had been

reliable. The Japanese military kept all information cloaked in secrecy, with only the minimum number of people necessary allowed to know any details.

The Japanese educational system, from elementary school through college, served to indoctrinate children and young adults in the foundations of Japanese superiority and obedience to the Emperor. Tanaka (188) portrays her education as one based on the following ideals: “You weren’t supposed to think about yourself: Work for the Emperor, even if you must give up your own life.” “We were part of a divine country centered on the Emperor. The whole Japanese race was fighting a war.” In the pre-War years, Japanese students were not trained to think critically and to ask questions, but rather just to accept and support the “truths” told to them in the classroom.

Under the Peace Preservation Law and other laws against dissent, the Japanese government could punish any person who did not obey the rules, such as criticizing the military, government, or Emperor, or even not actively supporting the war effort. Hatanaka (222-227) vividly describes the torture inflicted by the Tokkô (Special Higher Police or thought police) on persons suspected of actions or beliefs against the national polity (*kokutai*). The military required unquestioned obedience to all their orders, and they had their own police force (*kempeitai*) to ensure the rules were followed. The military remained above criticism because the Emperor himself led the military, so no institutional limitations existed to check the military’s power, even in cases of torture, murder, and other forms of abuse (Ienaga 442).

Japanese individuals of any age who tried to express dissent would have been subject to much pressure from their peers and others in society. The societal pressure to conform can be observed in the famous Japanese saying that “The nail that sticks out gets pounded down.” Even elementary school students who expressed non-sanctioned ideas would be ridiculed, threatened, bullied, and beat, both by teachers and other students, until they conformed. The government also established neighborhood associations (*tonarigumi*), which consisted of small groups of families in a locality required to report any of their neighbors’ suspected violations, no matter how small, to the police.

In conclusion, Japanese government propaganda, the educational system, government repression, and social pressures effectively prevented the Japanese people from resisting government policies, military orders, or the war. Hatanaka (67) puts it bluntly: “Honestly speaking, nobody said openly that they opposed the war. If you said that you’d have been killed immediately, or taken away and killed later.”