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A story that won't fade away: Compulsory mass suicide in the Battle of Okinawa

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Abstract

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A Story That Won't Fade Away: Compulsory Mass Suicide in the Battle of Okinawa

Kawabata Shunichi and Kitazawa Yuki

Introduction by Matthew Allen

From early in 1945, Okinawa's geopolitical location at the southern border of 'Japan proper' made it an obvious and immediate target for the Allies' invasion of the mainland of Japan. In the most intensive land attack launched against Japan by the United States, the so-called 'typhoon of steel' rained down on Okinawans for months as the Japanese military dug in for a war of attrition.

Okinawans, who became 'Japanese' after events in the late nineteenth century led to annexation of the former independent kingdom, were perceived by Tokyo, and particularly by the Japanese military, as potentially disloyal subjects. The concept that Japan should protect civilians, and especially those from the margins of nation – i.e. Okinawans – was anathema for the military, who tended to see Okinawans as impediments to their defence campaign (Ota, 2000). This distrust of Okinawans as 'the other within' (Tomiyama, 2000), led to a policy of disseminating disinformation about the motives and behaviour of the invading Americans, which in turn led to a directive that Okinawan civilians should choose to die by their own hand rather than at the hand of the evil, rapacious Americans.

Grenades were distributed to villagers, and many families, hiding in caves on the outer islands in particular detonated the devices, killing themselves and their families. This state-sponsored self-sacrifice was seen as necessary by the Japanese government at the time. Okinawans were caught in a conundrum; they were told that the military would not protect them, that were they caught they would be raped and/or tortured, and that in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor, and for practical reasons, they were expected to die rather than surrender. That more than one quarter of the population died in the battle is evidence of the sacrifice Okinawans made for Japan. From survivors' accounts, there is little doubt that a considerable number of these deaths were directly or indirectly caused by the Japanese army and its policies, including direct orders to commit suicide.

Today, 35 years after the postwar reversion of Okinawa to Japanese rule, the Japanese education ministry has decreed that the military policy of enforcing villagers in the front line of the land invasion to lay down their lives 'for the sake of the emperor' is historically 'debatable' and therefore references to 'shudan jiketsu' should be expunged from seven new high school textbooks. Such perspectives do great harm to the rapprochement which Tokyo and Okinawa have been developing since Japanese recovery of Okinawa in 1972. Moreover, such perspectives demean Okinawans, their sacrifice during the Pacific War, and their extraordinary will to survive against all odds. Already condemned to a footnote of Japan's history as a nation, Okinawa's wartime history is being officially rewritten in a way which denies the discrimination with which the former independent kingdom was viewed by officials in Tokyo in 1945.

Decisions such as that taken by the education ministry reinforce the idea that there are some in power in Japan who would like to see history cauterised, and in doing so reject the lessons that one can learn from a more critical, reflexive, and informed perspective of history. It is exactly such historical recidivism that concerns China, Korea, and indeed many nations in Asia today.

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Under the education ministry's screening of history textbooks, references to coercion by the Japanese military in forcing Okinawan civilians to commit mass suicide in 1945 have been erased.



Miyahira Haruko points to the site of a bomb shelter where she says she was told by a soldier to kill herself.
(Kawabata Shunichi)

But what will not vanish is survivors' memories. Time and again, survivors of the bloody Battle of Okinawa have spoken of how they were told to kill themselves, often in groups, rather than be shamed by being taken prisoner by invading American forces.

Of the roughly 200,000 casualties, 94,000 were civilians, accounting for nearly one-quarter of Okinawa's population.

The testimony of survivors adds to a barrage of criticism against the government, which has instructed many publishers of high school history textbooks to alter descriptions that refer to the Japanese military's direct involvement in the mass suicides of islanders.

In the Kerama islands, plenty of survivors are willing to tell their stories. Miyazato Ikue, 82, is one. She told The Asahi Shimbun that she was told by a Japanese soldier to take her life by pulling the pin on a hand grenade.



Kerema Islands

Miyazato was working at a Japanese army unit stationed on Zamamijima island when U.S. forces started aerial bombing raids of the Kerama islands on March 23, 1945, in a prelude to landing on the Zamamijima and Akajima islands on March 26 and Tokashikijima island on March 27.

Miyazato said she asked Japanese soldiers to take her with them when they rallied to counterattack.

Refusing her request, a Japanese soldier handed her a grenade, saying, "In an emergency, kill yourself with this (grenade)." He then showed Miyazato how to detonate the device.

Mass suicides of local residents occurred March 26, the day U.S. troops began to land on the island. The previous night, islanders had been told to gather in front of a monument near their village. Because of heavy shelling by U.S. forces, some islanders didn't make it.

It emerged that many residents committed suicide separately and in groups at various locations, such as in dugouts and caves.

Miyazato later learned that her mother and a sister had committed suicide together. She, too, contemplated committing suicide with a group of friends but the grenade she was given did not explode.

Miyahira Haruko, 80, said she was also told by a soldier to kill herself rather than be taken captive when she took cover from the bombing in a shelter on Zamamijima island.

"Please have the good grace to kill yourself to avoid being caught," Miyahira quoted the soldier as saying.

Uezu Sachiko, 84, said a Japanese soldier told a group of evacuating islanders, including her, to commit suicide before they were found by U.S. troops.

Uezu was fleeing with her mother and her elder brother's wife, among others, when they met with another group of residents in a mountainous area.

A Japanese soldier who was with the group told them to kill themselves by any means possible, even by biting off their tongues, if they were found by the Americans.

According to Uezu, one of the islanders, a young man, began to cry, saying he did not want to die.

Many of the Zamamijima islanders fled into the mountains after U.S. troops landed.

On Tokashikijima island, mass suicides occurred March 28.

Yoshikawa Yusuke, 78, said he had no doubt that Japanese army soldiers ordered the suicides. Yoshikawa, who then worked at a village office, was with his father and mother when civilians started taking their lives en masse.

He now lives in Aichi Prefecture. He said that he and other residents reached a site near a Japanese army position after an all-night walk while watching U.S. troops landing on the island.

Local residents drafted into military service also gathered with their families. Many took hand grenades with them, Yoshikawa said.

Typically, mass suicides occurred after a village mayor had been contacted by a locally drafted soldier who served as a messenger.

Yoshikawa said he could not hear what the messenger was saying above the roar of shelling. Soon after, he heard a series of explosions caused by grenades all around him.

Yoshikawa's father tried to set off an explosion by hurling four grenades, one after another, to the ground. But none of them blew up.

Aniya Masaaki, professor emeritus at Okinawa International University, said it was impossible for civilians, including islanders who had been drafted into military service, to prepare hand grenades for use in mass suicide without receiving orders from superiors.

However, some survivors deny the Japanese army played a direct role in the suicides.

Chinen Choboku, 84, former officer of a naval special volunteer unit on Tokashikijima island, said he had never heard his unit chief hand down such instructions.

This article appeared in the International Herald Tribune/Asahi Shimbun on May 15, 2007 and was posted at Japan Focus on July 12, 2007.

Matt Allen teaches Asian history at the University of Auckland and is a Japan Focus associate. He is the author of Identity and Resistance in Okinawa.

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