

## Japan Wants To Rewrite World War II

August 12, 2010: August 15th is 65th the anniversary of the end of World War II, the day when Japan finally surrendered. This year, the anniversary is notable because, for the first time, the U.S. sent its ambassador to attend the commemoration of the Hiroshima atomic bomb attack on August 6th. It was that event, plus the second atomic bomb three days later, the Soviet Union invasion of Manchuria on the same day, plus the complete isolation of Japan via the use of submarines, and naval mines (delivered by submarine and aircraft) that convinced Japan they needed to surrender, and not fight to the death. Otherwise, Japan faced the possibility of mass starvation. Japan needed to import food from Korea and Manchuria to sustain its population. With the Soviets overrunning Manchuria and Korea, and the U.S. blocking any shipping from anywhere, the Japanese were faced with extinction (according to the pessimists in the Japanese government). So Japan finally acceded to Allied demands for unconditional surrender. World War II, which killed over a hundred million people, had a profound effect on the nations where it was fought. Japan (which began invading in 1937) and Germany (1939) were the two main aggressors, and after the war, the Germans and Japanese had a different reaction to their bad behavior during the war. The Germans (most of them) were remorseful and guilt ridden.

The Japanese immediately tried to rewrite history, and are still at it. Within days of Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, coded messages went out from Tokyo to Japanese diplomats around the world, ordering them to start a campaign portraying Japan as a victim in the war, and to play down Japanese atrocities and play up Japanese civilian losses in the recent atomic bomb attacks. These particular messages were not decrypted by the United States until years after the war. That's because the war was over, there were other priorities (like cracking Russian codes) and the Japanese the messages were recorded and filed away. By the time the Japanese messages were deciphered, the Cold War had begun, and Japan was needed as an ally against the communist menace. Those decrypted messages were kept secret for decades, along with most of the details of how Allied code breakers had read most of the enemies (and some friends) secret messages throughout the war.

What was not so secret were Japanese efforts to ignore the war and portray themselves as victims. Many Japanese opposed rewriting history, which was often quite blatant. This meddling with historical facts regularly caused problems with neighbors, especially China. But the Japanese were insistent on evading responsibility. They still are, and many Japanese really believe it.

Meanwhile, the horrific actions of Japan during World War II were largely forgotten in the West, although not in the Asian nations where the Japanese committed most of these atrocities. It all began in July, 1937 when Japan openly made war on China. This came after years of incursions, raids, skirmishes, and occasional battles. The Japanese had occupied much of the Chinese countryside in the late 1930s and committed enough atrocities for American journalists to get a steady supply of gruesome stories, what with their troops' penchant for conducting bayonet practice on Chinese prisoners and similar horrors. The situation in China was thus always quite an issue in America, although less so in Europe (where they had Hitler and his Nazis to make them nervous.) It was Japanese aggression in China that caused the United States to impose a raw materials embargo on Japan, and "forced Japan" (as the Japanese like to describe it) to attack the United States in December, 1941. Japan had to have those raw materials, especially oil from Dutch colonies in Indonesia, in order to keep its war in China going.

Let us not forget that the Japanese did not conduct war the way Western armies did. For example, the Japanese were in the habit of keeping their army surgeons in practice by allowing them to use prisoners to test new surgical procedures or simply to improve their skills. The "patients" usually didn't survive the procedures. If they did, the "patients" were killed anyway as the Japanese did not see any reason to practice post-operative skills. The slicing and cutting was usually done without anesthesia, as medicines were always in short supply and were saved for Japanese patients. This macabre form of medical training was common in China, but American and Allied prisoners were subjected to it on Guadalcanal and other battlefields. Given their attitude towards prisoners ("better suicide than capture") the Japanese thought nothing of this sort of thing. After all, the more skillful their doctors were, the better they could treat Japanese wounded. Japan also used prisoners for testing chemical and biological weapons (which were later used against the Chinese).

Japanese treatment of prisoners of war was deplorable, and the death rate among American and Commonwealth prisoners ran about 30 percent, more than three times higher than that suffered by such in German hands. This was, however, still better than the treatment generally accorded Asian troops captured by the Japanese. As word spread of the Japanese attitude towards prisoners of war, it became rather difficult for Japanese troops to surrender, in the unlikely event that they were so inclined. As a result, only a relative handful of Japanese troops became prisoners of war, although their numbers increased as their morale weakened towards the end of the war.

And many of the atrocities Japanese troops committed were seen by Japanese officers simply as a way to improve morale by letting the troops take out their frustrations on the locals. After all, the women raped and men murdered were not Japanese. So what did it matter? This racist attitude influenced everything the Japanese soldier did. When fighting the formidable American soldiers and marines, the Japanese were particularly enraged. How could these non-Japanese dare to actually defeat us? A combination of frustration and contempt caused Japanese soldiers to be even more vicious. Prisoners often received particularly harsh treatment. Not just because they were non-Japanese, but mainly because the Japanese did not consider surrender an option. So if foreigners surrendered, they were not real men, not real soldiers. They had disgraced themselves and deserved whatever bad treatment the Japanese could come up with. This led to things like using prisoners for bayonet practice, or live subjects for Japanese army doctors to practice surgery on.

At the end of the war, before the atomic bombs were dropped, the Japanese high command sent orders to all commanders of prisoner of war camps to be prepared to kill all their prisoners on short notice, especially if enemy forces were nearby. The Allies became aware of this order, and when the Japanese finally agreed to surrender, the Japanese were told to rescind the "kill all prisoners" order, or else.

Nearly a million Allied troops were preparing to invade Japan when the surrender was announced. These troops were overjoyed. And here's why. Despite their unbroken string of victories, Allied troops did not look forward to an invasion of Japan with any enthusiasm. They were pretty sure what would happen, mainly because two Japanese populated islands (Saipan and Okinawa) had recently been invaded and the reactions of Japanese civilians were now known. The Japanese civilians on these islands actively assisted the Japanese troops. Moreover, many of the civilians committed suicide when it was clear that the battle was lost. On Saipan, two thirds of the civilian population died and, as usual, nearly all the troops fought to the death. On Saipan, 30,000 Japanese troops caused 14,000 American casualties. On Okinawa, 107,000 Japanese troops died (and at least 75,000 civilians), but there were over 60,000 U.S. combat casualties and over 40,000 non-combat injuries. On Iwo Jima the ratio had been even worse, approximately one American killed or injured for every Japanese soldier killed.

Thus it was believed that the Kyushu invasion (Operation Olympic) would be more like the Philippines fighting, which had cost the U.S. 60,000 casualties, including 13,000 dead. Kyushu was a much larger island than Guam or Okinawa, and it was believed that sinking morale among Japanese civilians might cause more of them to avoid the combat. Taking into account the differences between the two campaigns, U.S. Army planners estimated that the Kyushu fighting would incur 125,000 American casualties, including 31,000 dead. The Honshu invasion (Operation Coronet) in early 1946 would involve about twice as many troops, and was expected to incur about twice as many casualties. Thus, if Japan were to be conquered by invasion, the American casualties, based on recent experience, would be about 370,000, including about 80,000 dead. This would amount to a 27 percent increase in US casualties for the war. If the Allies agreed to simply blockade Japan, and starve them out, millions of Japanese would die from disease and starvation over the Winter of 1945-46, and tens of millions more if the blockade were continued. The "kill prisoners" order would probably lead to the death of thousands of Allied prisoners of war, including many civilians who were also being held. The invasion was ordered (in case the atomic bombs did not work, or did not persuade the Japanese to give up) because the American public was very much in favor of ending the war quickly, by any means possible. But over the last 65 years, the Japanese have created a fantasy version of World War II in which they were victims, their many atrocities never happened and the atomic bombs were war crimes, not key factors in halting the Japanese created horrors.