

Japan: No Surrender in World War Two

By David Powers – BBC History (2/17/2011)

By the end of World War Two, Japan had endured 14 years of war, and lay in ruins - with over three million dead. Why did the war in Japan cost so much, and what led so many to fight on after the end of the hostilities?

The end of hostilities

When Emperor Hirohito made his first ever broadcast to the Japanese people on 15 August 1945, and enjoined his subjects 'to endure the unendurable and bear the unbearable', he brought to an end a state of war - both declared and undeclared - that had wracked his country for 14 years.

He never spoke explicitly about 'surrender' or 'defeat', but simply remarked that the war 'did not turn in Japan's favour'. It was a classic piece of understatement. Nearly three million Japanese were dead, many more wounded or seriously ill, and the country lay in ruins.

To most Japanese - not to mention those who had suffered at their hands during the war - the end of hostilities came as blessed relief. Yet not everybody was to lay down their arms. Tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers remained in China, either caught in no-man's land between the Communists and Nationalists or fighting for one side or the other.

Other, smaller groups continued fighting on Guadalcanal, Peleliu and in various parts of the Philippines right up to 1948. But the most extraordinary story belongs to Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda, who continued fighting on the Philippine island of Lubang until 9 March 1974 - nearly 29 years after the end of the war.

'Lieutenant Onoda... doggedly refused to lay down his arms...'

Two years earlier, another Japanese soldier, Corporal Shoichi Yokoi, had been found fishing in the Talofofo River on Guam. Yokoi still had his Imperial Army issue rifle, but he had stopped fighting many years before. When questioned by the local police, he admitted he knew the war had been over for 20 years. He had simply been too frightened to give himself up.

Lieutenant Onoda, by contrast, doggedly refused to lay down his arms until he received formal orders to surrender. He was the sole survivor of a small band that had sporadically attacked the local population. Although one of them surrendered in 1950 after becoming separated from the others, Onoda's two remaining companions died in gun battles with local forces - one in 1954, the other in 1972.

A worthy enemy?

After early attempts to flush them out had failed, humanitarian missions were sent to Lubang to try to persuade Lieutenant Onoda and his companions that the war really was over, but they would have none of it. Even today, Hiroo Onoda insists they believed the missions were enemy tricks designed to lower their guard. As a soldier, he knew it was his duty to obey orders; and without any orders to the contrary, he had to keep on fighting.

To survive in the jungle of Lubang, he had kept virtually constantly on the move, living off the land, and shooting cattle for meat. Onoda's grim determination personifies one of the most enduring images of Japanese soldiers during the war - that Japanese fighting men did not surrender, even in the face of insuperable odds.

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Before hostilities with the Allies broke out, most British and American military experts held a completely different view, regarding the Japanese army with deep contempt. In early 1941, General Robert Brooke-Popham, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in the Far East, reported that one of his battalion commanders had lamented, 'Don't you think (our men) are worthy of some better enemy than the Japanese?'

This gross underestimation can in part be explained by the fact that Japan had become interminably bogged down by its undeclared war against China since 1931. Since Japan was having such difficulties in China, the reasoning went, its armed forces would be no match for the British.

The speed and ease with which the Japanese sank the British warships, the Repulse and the Prince of Wales, off Singapore just two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor - followed by the humiliating capture of Singapore and Hong Kong - transformed their image overnight. From figures of derision, they were turned into supermen - an image that was to endure and harden as the intensity and savagery of fighting increased.

Total sacrifice

Although some Japanese were taken prisoner, most fought until they were killed or committed suicide. In the last, desperate months of the war, this image was also applied to Japanese civilians. To the horror of American troops advancing on Saipan, they saw mothers clutching their babies hurling themselves over the cliffs rather than be taken prisoner.

Not only were there virtually no survivors of the 30,000 strong Japanese garrison on Saipan, two out of every three civilians - some 22,000 in all - also died.

The other enduring image of total sacrifice is that of the kamikaze pilot, ploughing his plane packed with high explosives into an enemy warship. Even today, the word 'kamikaze' evokes among Japan's former enemies visions of crazed, mindless destruction.

What in some cases inspired - and in others, coerced - Japanese men in the prime of their youth to act in such a way was a complex mixture of the times they lived in, Japan's ancient warrior tradition, societal pressure, economic necessity, and sheer desperation.

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When Japan began its military adventures in China in 1931, it was a society in turmoil. Less than 80 years previously, it had been forced out of two-and-a-half centuries of self-imposed seclusion from the rest of the world, when the Tokugawa Shogunate was overthrown, and Japan embarked on rapid modernisation under Emperor Meiji.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Japan was beginning to catch up with the world's great powers, and even enjoyed its own version of the Roaring Twenties, a period known rather more prosaically as Taisho Democracy.

But as shockwaves of the Great Depression reached Japanese shores at the end of the 1920s, democracy proved to have extremely shallow roots indeed. The military became increasingly uncontrollable, and Japan was gripped by the politics of assassination.

Bushido

Nationalists and militarists alike looked to the past for inspiration. Delving into ancient myths about the Japanese and the Emperor in particular being directly descended from the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, they exhorted the people to restore a past racial and spiritual purity lost in recent times.

They were indoctrinated from an early age to revere the Emperor as a living deity, and to see war as an act that could purify the self, the nation, and ultimately the whole world. Within this framework, the supreme sacrifice of life itself was regarded as the purest of accomplishments.

'Do not live in shame as a prisoner. Die, and leave no ignominious crime behind you.'

Japan's samurai heritage and the samurai code of ethics known as 'bushido' have a seductive appeal when searching for explanations for the wartime image of no surrender. The great classic of Bushido - 'Hagakure' written in the early 18th century - begins with the words, 'Bushido is a way of dying'. Its basic thesis is that only a samurai prepared and willing to die at any moment can devote himself fully to his lord.

Although this idea certainly appealed to the ideologues, what probably motivated Japanese soldiers at the more basic level were more mundane pressures. Returning prisoners from Japan's previous major war with Russia in 1904-5 had been treated as social outcasts. The Field Service Code issued by General Tojo in 1941 put it more explicitly:

Do not live in shame as a prisoner. Die, and leave no ignominious crime behind you.

Apart from the dangers of battle, life in the Japanese army was brutal. Letters and diaries written by student conscripts before they were killed in action speak of harsh beatings, and of soldiers being kicked senseless for the most trivial of matters - such as serving their superior's rice too slowly, or using a vest as a towel.

But John Dower, one of America's most highly respected historians of wartime and post-war Japan, believes a major factor, often overlooked in seeking to explain why Japanese soldiers did not surrender, is that countless thousands of Japanese perished because they saw no alternative.

He argues that the attack on Pearl Harbor provoked a rage bordering on the genocidal among Americans. Not only did Admiral William Halsey, Commander of the South Pacific Force, adopt the slogan 'Kill Japs, kill Japs, kill more Japs', public opinion polls in the United States consistently showed 10 to 13 per cent of all Americans supported the 'annihilation' or 'extermination' of the Japanese as a people.

Kamikaze

It was a war without mercy, and the US Office of War Information acknowledged as much in 1945. It noted that the unwillingness of Allied troops to take prisoners in the Pacific theatre had made it difficult for Japanese soldiers to surrender. When the present writer interviewed Hiroo Onoda for the BBC 'Timewatch' programme, he too repeatedly came back to the theme 'it was kill or be killed'.

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The same cannot be said of the Special Attack Forces, more popularly known as kamikaze. Yet, even though nearly 5,000 of them blazed their way into the world's collective memory in such spectacular fashion, it is sobering to realise that the number of British airmen who gave their lives in World War Two was ten times greater.

Although presented in poetic, heroic terms of young men achieving the glory of the short-lived cherry blossom, falling while the flower was still perfect, the strategy behind the kamikaze was born purely out of desperation.

But to anyone who believes the kamikaze were mindless automatons, they have only to read some of the letters they left behind. The 23-year-old Ichizo Hayashi, wrote this to his mother, just a few days before embarking on what he knew would be his final mission, in April 1945:

I am pleased to have the honour of having been chosen as a member of a Special Attack Force that is on its way into battle, but I cannot help crying when I think of you, Mum. When I reflect on the hopes you had for my future ... I feel so sad that I am going to die without doing anything to bring you joy.

Selfless sacrifice, for whatever purpose, was present on all sides in the conflict.

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