

*Explaining the Interbellum Rupture in
Japanese Treatment of Prisoners of War*

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Introduction

Among the most enduring themes in the collective memory of the Second World War in the English speaking countries is that of the brutality of the Japanese Imperial Army towards Allied prisoners of war. The Bataan Death March, construction of the Burma-Thailand railway or “The Bridge on the River Quai,” the “hell ships” used to transport Allied POWs and the vivisection of captured American B-29 airmen by doctors at Kyushu Imperial University are features of the narratives about Japanese war crimes in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.¹ The narrative is often supplemented by stories about brutality toward civilian populations, including the Rape of Nanking, Unit 731’s testing of chemical and biological warfare agents on captive human subjects, sexual slavery of the “comfort women,” and coercion of one-third of the Okinawan civilian population into committing suicide during the American invasion.

“Prisoners of the Rising Sun,” a September 20, 2006 television episode of *War Stories with Oliver North* on the Fox News Channel, may be a perfect specimen of the popular themes.² The episode mixed grainy photographic images and the personal

¹ Michael Bess, *Choices Under Fire* (New York: Vintage, 2006), pp. 32.

² “Prisoners of the Rising Sun,” Fox News’ War Stories With Oliver North, December 17, 2006. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,214763,00.html> Retrieved July 9, 2007.

testimony of survivors with an analysis of Japanese strategic objectives that effectively reduces complex events to a historical cartoon. Lost in the descriptions of individual tragedy and the expressions of moral outrage is a political historical puzzle: why did the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war shift dramatically in the *interbellum* period between the First World War and the Second Sino-Japanese War? Japanese authorities were scrupulous in their adherence to international humanitarian law regarding the treatment of captured Russian combatants in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War and of captured German and Austrian combatants in the First World War.³ Yet with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and continuing through the Second World War, Japanese authorities treated the captured with a brutality that still shocks the modern conscience.⁴ The stark difference in treatment between the two periods has been noted by several scholars in their discussions of Japanese violations of international humanitarian law yet they typically fail to explain the transition.⁵ For those who do offer an explanation it is vague, as when Ienaga explains the brutality as the result of the “moral degeneration of the ruling elite.”⁶

This article assesses three explanations for the behavior. Largely derived from wartime propaganda and subsequent popular history, the first explanation ignores the difference in treatment from the First Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese War and First World War to the Second Sino-Japanese War and Second World War, and instead simply explains the barbarity in the latter conflicts as the product of indoctrination in brutality of ordinary Japanese soldiers and their officers. Constructivist analysis informs the second explanation, which attributes the *interbellum* shift to change in the

³ Philip A. Towle, “Japanese Treatment of Prisoners in 1904-1905—Foreign Officer’s Reports,” *Military Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 115-117 (October 1975); James L. Tryon, “The Regulation of War,” *The Yale Law Review*, Vol. 20, No. 7, pp. 540-541 (May 1911); Charles Burdick and Ursula Moessner, *The German Prisoners-of-War in Japan, 1914-1920* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

⁴ Haruo Tohmatsu and H.P. Willmott, *A Gathering Darkness: The Coming of War to the Far East and the Pacific, 1921-1942* (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2004), pp. 12-13; Richard Connaughton, *Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: Russia’s War with Japan* (London: Cassel, 2003), pp. 255-56.

⁵ Charles G. Roland, *Long Night’s Journey into Day: Prisoners of War in Hong Kong and Japan, 1941-1945* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), pp. 317-318; Yoichi Kibata. “Japanese Treatment of British Prisoners of War: The Historical Context,” in Philip Towle, et al., eds, *Japanese Prisoners of War* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), pp. 137-38; S. P. Mackenzie, “The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 66, No. 3, (1994), pp. 487-520, 513-514.

⁶ Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 190.

perception of Japanese foreign policy decision-makers about Japan's relative place in the international system.

Constructivist analysis also informs the third explanation, but the focus of attention moves from the encounter between Japanese foreign policy makers and their counterparts in the other major powers to the experience of Japanese military decision-makers of warfare in 20th century continental China and other occupied countries.

Indoctrination in Brutality and its Supplements

In English speaking countries, there is no dispute about the reality and scale of Japanese war crimes committed against captured military personnel and civilians during the period from 1937 to 1945 that encompassed the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War.⁷ Nor is there any dispute that the Japanese were subjected to intensive wartime propaganda that presented a dehumanized image of American, British and other Commonwealth soldiers.⁸ Only in contemporary Japan is there any appreciable "memory contest" about Japanese brutality toward the captured during the period, and the scholarly disagreement on the matter is not spirited. Historical revision that diminishes the enormity of Japanese war crimes is as likely to be punished as it is ignored or rewarded, as General Toshio Tamogami discovered when he was dismissed as Air Force Chief of Staff on October 31, 2008, for an essay that denied Japan was the aggressor during the Second World War and described Japanese colonial rule as "very moderate."⁹ In addition to the consensus about the reality and scale of Japanese war crimes committed against captured civilians and military personnel in the English speaking countries, there is also an equally strong consensus about the reason for those war crimes.

⁷ Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "The Nanking 100-Man Killing Contest Debate: War Guilt and Fabricated Illusions, 1971-75," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 307-340.

⁸ Kinya Tsurata, "Japanese Perceptions of Westerners in Modern Fiction," in Keizo Nagatani and David W. Edgington, ed., *Japan and the West: The Perception Gap* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 54-55.

⁹ n.a., "Japan's Air Force Chief Sacked Over WWII Comments," *Agence France Presse*, October 31, 2008. <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hVSB97PuOJ2SmiI6PuOMJm5zObFg> Retrieved November 3, 2008; n.a., "Contest Organizer Confirmed Tamogami Would Accept Prize," *Daily Yomiuri Online*, November 3, 2008. <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20081103TDY02305.htm> Retrieved November 3, 2008.

Benedict's 1946 cultural interpretation, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, attributes the brutality toward prisoners of war during the Second World War to indoctrination, to belief in the shameful of surrender.¹⁰ If honor required that Japanese soldiers accept their own expendability and fight to the death, then it was perforce dishonorable for Allied soldiers to do otherwise. The humanity of the captured was, therefore, devalued to such a degree that they might be summarily executed or abused without compunction.

Russell's presentation of the indoctrination in brutality thesis in his 1958 popular history, *The Knights of Bushido*, elaborates on the indoctrination in brutality thesis.¹¹ His narrative begins with a description of the territorial ambitions of the rightist nationalist secret societies of Japanese junior officers in the period immediately prior to Japan leaving the League of Nations and then describes Japanese war crimes against Chinese Prisoners of war and civilians in the Second Sino-Japanese, which began in 1937, and against Allied prisoners of war and civilians in the Second World War in the Pacific, which began in 1941. How the Japanese military treated its prisoners of war in international wars before the Second Sino-Japanese War is missing from the narrative. The overarching explanation for the brutality is that Japanese soldiers were inculcated with the code of Bushido, which held dying in combat to be honorable and surrender to be shameful. Enemy soldiers who surrendered were held in contempt and thus unworthy of moral consideration.¹²

Russell also offers instrumental purposes for brutality as explanations to buttress his overarching explanation. Brutality against Chinese civilians and prisoners of war was intended to break the will of the Chinese people to resist Japanese rule.¹³ Allied prisoners of war were systematically subjected to public humiliation to, "impress the other peoples of Asia with the superiority of the Master Race of the East and to lower the prestige of Western civilization."¹⁴ What the narrative leaves unclear is whether these separate instrumental purposes, individually or together, would have been

¹⁰ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946, 1989 reprint), pp. 36-41.

¹¹ Lord Russell of Liverpool, *The Knights of Bushido: A Short History of Japanese War Crimes* (London: Greenhill Books, 1958).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

sufficient as explanations without reference to indoctrination in brutality.

Roland's *Long Night's Journey into Day*, a study of the treatment of Allied prisoners of war in Hong Kong and Japan, also attributes Japanese violence against the captured primarily to indoctrination in brutality via the code of Bushido, in particular its prohibition against surrender as dishonorable.¹⁵ The author describes the acceptance of such indoctrination as the result of the general acceptance of cruelty in Japanese culture. Roland buttresses the indoctrination in brutality explanation with subsidiary explanations, including desperation leading to exploitation of prisoners of war conscripted for labour, logistical collapse leading to food shortages, inability to communicate with the captured, and Japanese anger at the experience racial discrimination by whites.¹⁶

Tanaka's *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II* also attributes the violence meted out against the captured to indoctrination in brutality that begins with the systematic mistreatment of Japanese soldiers by their superiors and is then redirected against captured or occupied non-Japanese.¹⁷ Atrocities committed against captives was the result of a corruption of code of Bushido, explains Tanaka, that flowed from blind loyalty to the emperor.¹⁸ Tanaka buttresses the indoctrination in brutality thesis with a subsidiary explanation: the repressed rage that Japanese soldiers felt about their relatively low status in Japanese domestic society could then be redirected at even lower status non-Japanese colonial subjects and prisoners of war. When Koreans conscripted into the Japanese Army replaced Japanese guards in prisoner of war camps, the expression of rage over social status would have been even more intense.

The tension between the indoctrination in brutality explanation and the subsidiary psychological explanation is evident in the following passage in which Tanaka struggles to resolve the issue of moral culpability:

“In literal terms, Japanese soldiers were obviously the physical perpetrators of such atrocities. In psychological and ideological terms,

¹⁵ Roland, pp. 303-18.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 313-16.

¹⁷ Yuki Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 197-215.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 206-11.

they were the victims of an emperor system that legitimized such atrocities in the name of serving the emperor.”¹⁹

In his comparative study of the Japanese military occupation of Java and Luzon, *The Blue-Eyed Enemy*, Friend attributes the atrocities committed against the Javanese to indoctrination in extreme military discipline and contempt for the captured, whether Japanese or foreign, as “spiritually dead” non-persons.²⁰ That explanation, however, is wrapped in a description of the Kenpeitai, the military police force with effectively unlimited authority to enforce discipline in Japanese ranks. The Kenpeitai is assigned responsibility for conducting mass summary executions of suspected opponents of Japanese rule in occupied territories.²¹ So Friend also uses an instrumental explanation—the existence of a coercive apparatus—to buttress the indoctrination in brutality thesis.

Lamont-Brown’s brief description of the Kenpeitai explains the violence inflicted on prisoners of war by its personnel as the product of indoctrination in brutality which is decomposed as blind obedience to authority, abuse of subordinates by superiors, and extreme differences in social status.²² The author also states that abuses increased in intensity as Japanese defeat became more certain and the perpetrators sought psychological relief in sadism.²³

In his popular military history, *The Burma Road*, Webster describes sadistic executions of Allied prisoners of war by Japanese troops: “When they took British prisoners alive, the Japanese were known to strip them, tie them to trees, and use them as bayonet practice.”²⁴ At other times, they would encourage the British to surrender only to execute them immediately after they were disarmed.²⁵ As in Russell’s account, Japanese brutality was explained by the fanaticism of the Japanese who refused to give

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 204.

²⁰ Theodore Friend, *The Blue-Eyed Enemy: Japan Against the West in Java and Luzon, 1942-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 190.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 185-97.

²² Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Kenpeitai: Japan’s Dreaded Military Police* (Somerset, England: Sutton, 1998), pp. 9-10.

²³ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁴ Donovan Webster, *The Burma Road: The Epic Story of the China-Burma-India Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), p. 36.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 247.

surrender and would instead chose to fight to the death or commit suicide.²⁶ Webster also describes the systematic individual summary executions by OSS (Office of Strategic Services) teams of Americans and ethnic Kachins of as many as six hundred Japanese deserters who had fled the siege of Myitkyina.²⁷ Webster's Kachins are savages, whose brutality might, therefore, be deemed understandable or even excusable. But what explains the savagery of the Americans in these OSS teams? Although left unstated, perhaps it was brutality that they witnessed *and learned* during war.

Where more than the mistreatment of prisoners of war by the Japanese is being explained, the indoctrination in brutality thesis must shed information. Surveying several centuries of genocide across all inhabited continents in his 2008 *Blood and Soil*, Kiernan attributes the horrors of the Second Sino-Japanese War to the ideological fusion of Japanese nationalism, agrarianism, racism and militarism promoted by rightist and nationalist secret societies of Japanese junior military officers.²⁸ The result was that, by the mid-1930s, colonization of Manchuria by Japanese farmers was an important objective of Japanese foreign policy. As in the other cases of genocide that Kiernan describes, ideological content led inevitably to mass murder. In effect, he shifts the focus of the indoctrination in brutality thesis from obedience to military authority to the content of ideology.

Where the mistreatment of small numbers of prisoners of war by the Japanese is being explained, the indoctrination in brutality explanation loses its pride of place to become one among multiple explanations. Describing the June 20, 1945 execution—decapitation by sword—of a handful of captured American Airmen in Fukuoka, Francis emphasizes not only the effect of indoctrination in unquestioned obedience to military authority but also the precedent of executions of captured airmen elsewhere, the effect of mixed signals about punishment from military authorities to the responsible officers, popular anger over aerial bombardment, and racial hatred encouraged by wartime propaganda.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 263-65.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 239.

²⁸ Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 465-85.

²⁹ Timothy Lang Francis. "To Dispose of the Prisoners": The Japanese Executions of American Aircrew at

In his prisoner of war memoir of the Bataan Death March and slave labour in a Japanese coal mine, *My Hitch in Hell*, Tenney includes indoctrination in brutality in his explanation for the mistreatment that he witnessed and experienced.³⁰ However, he assigns it no more significance than inadequate planning by the Japanese general staff for the large numbers of unhealthy Americans and Filipinos they captured, controlling large numbers of prisoners of war through terror, inability to communicate with the captured, public humiliation to impress the Filipino population with the U.S. military defeat, low quality and low status of Japanese prison guards, and psychological compensation by guards for their anger and frustration.³¹

The contradiction at the heart of the indoctrination in brutality thesis is that it is employed to denounce Japanese war crimes yet it contradicts the central assumption made in the prosecution cases brought against Japanese military officers following the Second World War. Those prosecutions assumed that the defendants were responsible for the war crimes committed by the soldiers under their command. The thesis instead echoes the arguments made by their defense council. Where the prosecution cases accused them of specific crimes against Allied prisoners of war, the defendants pleaded that they were the products of a warrior culture, “born and raised in a time of militarism and Emperor-worship.”³² So the dominant explanation denounces acts of barbarity yet serves as apologia for the perpetrators. That contradiction is still relevant today because war crimes cases represent something more than judicial decisions about the guilt or innocence of the accused. Trial transcripts from war crimes prosecutions also serve as the master narratives that allocate moral responsibility for the trauma of war and thereby prevent survivors from engaging in an unending and probably futile search for justice against all parties who were complicit.

Beyond serving as an apology for war crimes, the indoctrination in brutality thesis is flawed for four reasons. First, although it rarely stands on its own there is no consensus about which of the supplemental explanations should be incorporated.³³

Fukuoka, Japan, during 1945.” *The Pacific Historical Review*. 66,4 (Nov. 1997), pp. 469-501.

³⁰ Lester J. Tenney, *My Hitch in Hell: The Bataan Death March* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1995), pp. 66-67.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44, 60, 74-75, 111, 129.

³² Timothy Maga, “‘Away From Tokyo:’ the Pacific Islands War Crimes Trials, 1945-1949,” *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 36, No.1, (2001), pp. 40-41. 2001.

³³ One exception is James D. Morrow, “The Institutional Features of the Prisoners of War Treaties,” *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Autumn 2001), pp. 971-991, 979.

Second, the precise nature of the indoctrination in brutality thesis varies with the level of analysis. Third, when expressed in popular history it seems little more than an updating of the racist themes in Allied war propaganda.³⁴ Lastly, and most importantly in the context of this article, it fails to explain for the *interbellum* change in the treatment of prisoners of war. These flaws warrant consideration of other explanations.

Constructivism and Japanese National Political Elites

Explanations for the change in Japanese international behavior supported by constructivist theory offers a useful alternative to the indoctrination in brutality thesis. Constructivism assumes that the behavior of states is the result of norms and practices learned and unlearned by political elites by interacting with those of other states in the intersubjective context of the international system of states. States may be said to be “socialized” in the current norms and practices of that system. They may also challenge them by explicit violation. Whether a state adheres to or rejects the strictures of international humanitarian law with respect to prisoners of war is an especially salient indication of its attitude. Both elites and masses are typically attentive to the treatment of prisoners of war by their captors. In the language of neorealism that constructivism supplants or supplements, when a great power challenges norms and practices to reflect its relative power vis-à-vis other great powers, it becomes a revisionist power rather than a *status quo* power.

Although Kibata credits indoctrination in brutality together with various supplemental explanations discussed in the previous section as parts of the explanation for war crimes committed by the Japanese military against prisoners of war during the Second Sino-Japanese War and Second World War, he asserts that it was the change in the Japanese attitude toward international law and sensitivity to racial discrimination that better explain the *interbellum* change in the treatment of prisoners of war.³⁵ Until the late 1920s, the practice of the Japanese government was to conform scrupulously to the rules of the international system of states. “Fair treatment of POWs was a

³⁴ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, pp. 118-46.

³⁵ Kibata, p. 137.

significant aspect of this basic attitude.”³⁶ While the Japanese government signed and ratified the 1907 Second Hague Convention, it signed but failed to ratify the 1929 Geneva Convention. Kibata argues that Japanese elites believed this would realize their aspiration that Japan be recognized as one of the great powers and as equals of the white citizens of the great powers. When achieving that no longer seemed likely and an alternative emerged in the form of alliance with the revisionist fascist powers Germany and Italy, Japanese elites abandoned the *status quo* norms of international behavior, including those concerning the treatment of prisoners of war. Japanese alienation from the *status quo* great powers, expressed in terms of cultural difference between East Asia and Western Europe rather than racial antagonism, was part of the motivation for the 1929 Japanese decision not to ratify the Geneva Conventions. The centrepiece of the indoctrination in brutality thesis, training military personnel to reject surrender to the enemy as shameful, becomes increasingly emphasized in Japanese military doctrine and training only in the period between the First World War and the Second Sino-Japanese War.³⁷ What changed in the *interbellum* was the assessment by Japanese elites of Japan’s status in the world if they continued to act as a subordinate *status quo* power.

Although Pyle does not present the constructivist explanation for the *interbellum* change in the treatment of prisoners of war, he does present a constructivist explanation for the break in foreign policy, marked by the Japanese withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933 and the effective end of the Washington Treaty System limiting naval armaments, as the result of the degree to which international politics reverberated in Japanese domestic politics.³⁸ The transformation from *status quo* power to revisionist power takes place in the international context of the erosion of liberal free trade because of the Great Depression, intense Chinese nationalism and continuing British, French, Dutch and American imperial colonial rule in Southeast Asia.³⁹ For Pyle, the February 24, 1933 vote by the League of Nations to formally accept the Lytton Commission report rejecting the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo client in Manchuria marks the turning point in Japanese foreign policy.⁴⁰ From then until the surrender in 1945,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 144-145.

³⁸ Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

³⁹ Ibid, p.172.

⁴⁰ James B. Crowley, *Japan’s Quest for Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930-1938* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 185-86; see also Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka, *The Making of Japanese*

Japanese political elites embarked on a campaign to establish a new international order in East Asia consistent with their aspirations for recognition of Japan's rightful place in the world. Pyle explains the transformation in the following terms:

“As they saw the liberal international order crumbling, their external world anarchic and devoid of rules or enforcers, their security concerns and strategic objectives reasserted themselves. Other powers were forming closed regional spheres, the international system was collapsing, and fascism seemed to be the wave of the future. They did not want to miss the bus.”⁴¹

As would Germany and Italy, the other major late developing powers, Japan rejected the international order of the *status quo* powers and became a revisionist power. Germany, in particular, would also violate the norms of international humanitarian law with respect to the treatment of Soviet, French and Italian prisoners of war.

Although the constructivist account succeeds in explaining the *interbellum* change, it is flawed because it locates the learned norms and practices solely at the national level. While that assumption would be consistent with foreign policy making in general, and prisoner of war policy making in particular for the other great powers, it is inconsistent with what is known about decision-making power in Japan at the time.

Constructivism and Japanese Theatre Military Elites

Constructivism permits an alternative explanation more proximate to the behavior to be explained. If political elites learn and unlearn norms and practices through diplomatic interaction with the political elites of other states, military elites surely also learn and unlearn norms and practices by waging war against other military elites. Adversaries in protracted wars tend to change their weaponry, tactics and even strategies in response to the changing tactics and weapons of the enemy.

Manchuria, 1904-1932 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 237-238.

⁴¹ Pyle, p. 54.

Historical examples of evolution or co-evolution in waging war are common. Some cases involve innovation to counter the material and technological advantage enjoyed by the enemy. In response to the French Army's construction of the Morice Line across the Algerian-Tunisian border during the Algerian Revolution, which combined, mines, barbed wire, a 5000 volt electric fence, electric lights, motion detectors, searchlights, artillery, helicopters and mechanized patrols, the Algerian National Front learned to breach the defenses with tunnels, insulated ramps and Bangalore torpedoes.⁴² In response to the greater firepower and mobility of the United States Army in South Vietnam, the Vietnamese National Liberation Front excavated underground bases.⁴³ Veritable underground fortresses, the bases resisted attack because their defenders could exploit the vast extent of the tunnel systems, concealed surface openings, together with baffles and booby traps.

Other cases involve adoption of the innovations of the enemy. In the 19th century, the governments of Texas and the United States responded to raids on their settlements by the highly mobile horse-borne Comanches and allied Native American tribes by deploying their own cavalry units to raid encampments, respectively the Texas Rangers and the U.S. Second Cavalry.⁴⁴ After its initial poor performance against the more mechanized German Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front in the Second World War, the Soviet Red Army was reorganized by eliminating rifle corps and introducing new mechanized corps.⁴⁵ In response to the effective use of spies by the Israeli Shabak, the domestic civilian counterintelligence agency, Palestinian Hamas recruited Palestinians to join Shabak as double agents.⁴⁶ Both the Israeli Defense Forces and the Russian Federal Intelligence Service have been accused of combating terrorism with "false flag" operations that mimic the actions of their enemies.⁴⁷

Soldiers are hardly alone in learning to use the innovations of their opponents.

⁴² Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York, Penguin, 1977), pp. 263-267.

⁴³ Tom Mangold and John Pennycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi* (New York, Berkeley Books, 1985).

⁴⁴ T.R. Fehrenback, *Comanches: The History of a People* (New York, Anchor Books, 2003 reprint, 1974), pp. 299-302, 421-422.

⁴⁵ Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (New York, Vintage, 2007), pp. 248-249, 490-491.

⁴⁶ Zaki Chehab, *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement* (New York, Nation Nooks, 2007), p. 52.

⁴⁷ Chehab, *Ibid.*, p. 77; Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2002), p. 67.

Competitors in other struggles may also learn important lessons from their opponents. Sri Lankan Buddhist monks and lay adherents responded to the missionary activities of British Protestants supported by the British colonial government in the late 19th century by adopting their mass publication of religious tracts, aggressive rhetorical style, emphasis on scriptural teaching and enhanced lay responsibility in the community.⁴⁸ Mexican security forces and Mexican drug cartels have adopted comparable tactics.⁴⁹ Indeed, one of the most formidable of the cartels is Los Zetas, which was organized by Mexican soldiers who deserted from the Special Air Mobile Force Group in 1991.⁵⁰

That Japanese military elites would have waged war differently after the *interbellum* could be attributed to the context of extreme political fragmentation and commonplace violence against prisoners in China, the decision-making autonomy of the Japanese Kwantung Army, frustration at the inability to defeat China despite battlefield victories, and the enormous territories in Southeast Asia that Japan occupied after 1941.

The political fragmentation of China into warlord domains occurred because the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 ushered in a period of military dictatorship from 1912 to 1916 under President Yuan Shih-k'ai, during which the size of both his own Beiyang Army and the armies of his subordinate provincial governors grew in size.⁵¹ Following Yuan's death, the generals he had appointed as governors were autonomous of the central government because they were protected by personal armies, which they supported by extracting taxes, fines and bribes, taking a percentage from the opium trade and criminal rackets, and sometime outright theft.⁵² By the mid-1920s seven major warlords ruled most of China and the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party government

⁴⁸ David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity* (Washington, DC, Institute of Peace Press, 1994), pp. 17-21.

⁴⁹ Jason Beaubien. "Mexico's 'Murder Capital' Lives Up To Reputation." *National Public Radio*. September 4, 2009. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112546474> Accessed September 4, 2009.

⁵⁰ Corey Flintoff. "A Look At Mexico's Drug Cartels." *National Public Radio*. April 16, 2009. <http://www.wbur.org/news/npr/103178523> Accessed October 16, 2009

⁵¹ James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912-1949* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 48, 52.

⁵² James E. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-sheng* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966); Alfred H.Y. Lin, "Building and Funding a Warlord Regime: The Experience of Chen Jitang in Guangdong, 1929-1936," *Modern China*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2002), pp. 177-212.

controlled only Kwangtung Province in the south.⁵³ Among the warlords struggling with one another for control of other provinces were figures like Chang Tsung-ch'ang, the Dog Meat General, an illiterate who ruled through unpredictable terror with a palace guarded by White Russians exiles. A *New York Times* news report captures the violent anarchy gripping China in 1927:

Of the opposing leaders, Chang Tso-lin, Chang Tsung-chang and Sun Chuan-fang have the qualities of the typical feudal baron. Their will is law and democracy and other such nonsense interests them not in the slightest. If Chang Tso-lin hears that bankers are speculating in his paper money, he calls them in for admonition and then sends them out to be shot. Sun Chuan-fang has acquired new distinction by sending his execution squads into the very streets of Shanghai.⁵⁴

The armies of the warlords, often recruited from among bandits, fought innumerable small wars and engagements between 1916 and 1928.⁵⁵ McCord describes brutality toward the Chinese civilian population in Hunan caught in clashes between warlord armies in 1918 and 1920 as comparable to that of the Japanese Imperial Army after 1937: wholesale robbery, arson, rape and murder.⁵⁶

After 1928, the warlords continued to rule their territories and retained command of their personal armies that were officially but only notionally integrated into the Kuomintang's National Revolutionary Army. Rather than assign new commanders to the incorporated armies or reassign the armies to new bases, they were simply renamed and left them under the command of warlords and in the same locations. To cement their cooperation, the warlords were also often given formal

⁵³ Sheridan, map, p. 85.

⁵⁴ Henry Kitteridge Norton, "The Leaders and the Battle in China," *The New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1927. p. 23.

⁵⁵ Sheridan, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Edward A. McCord, "Burn, Kill, Rape and Rob: Military Atrocities, Warlordism and Anti-Warlordism in Republican China," in Diana Lary and Stephen MacKinnon, ed.s, *Scars of War: The Impact of Warfare in Modern China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2001), pp. 18-49; Edward A. McCord, "Cries That Shake the Earth: Military Atrocities and Popular Protests in Warlord China," *Modern China*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2005), pp. 3-34.

offices in the Kuomintang central government proportional in importance to the strength of their incorporated armies.⁵⁷ Warlordism in that form would continue until the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949.⁵⁸ How different then, was the Japanese policy of co-opting Chinese warlords as clients and the creation of client Chinese governments and militias to secure their control over occupied territory?⁵⁹

The frequent resort to coercion by political elites to resolve their disputes signals the essential normlessness of politics in Republican China both before and during the Second-Sino Japanese War. General Chiang Kai-shek used his Whampoa Academy Clique, later organized along fascist lines as the Blue Shirt Society, to liquidate political opponents.⁶⁰ In December 1936 Chiang Kai-shek was himself briefly kidnapped by a conspiracy of his own officers.⁶¹ In such an atmosphere contempt for the lives of ordinary Chinese soldiers by commanders of the National Revolutionary Army is only to be expected. This was evident in an attrition strategy that accepted not only high rates of casualties in battle. Orders directing Chinese units not to withdraw even in the face of overwhelming odds mirror Japanese orders to conduct mass summary executions of surrendering Chinese soldiers. Contempt for the lives of ordinary soldiers was also evident in extraordinary deaths rates among Chinese conscripts due to mistreatment, which would have constituted a war crime if they had been prisoners of war in the custody of a captor state.⁶²

With units stationed in China two decades prior to the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Kwantung Army, the Japanese Imperial Army in China, enjoyed relative autonomy in decision-making not only from the national government in Tokyo but even from the Imperial Army High Command.⁶³ Indeed, conspiracies of its junior and senior officers undermined Japanese democracy and drew the Japanese military deeper

⁵⁷ Sheridan, *Ibid*, p. 241.

⁵⁸ Diana Lary, "Warlord Studies," *Modern China*, Vol. 6, No. 4, (1980), pp 439-70, 442-43.

⁵⁹ Hs-Cheng Ch'i, *Nationalist China at War: Military Defeats and Political Collapse, 1937-1941* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1982), pp. 51-52.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁶¹ T.A. Bisson, *Japan in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 169-170.

⁶² *Ibid*, 46-47; R.J. Rummel, *China's Bloody Century: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1991), pp. 114-16; Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-45*, (New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 183, 456, 483-84;

⁶³ Alvin D. Coox, "High Command and Field Army: The Kwantung Army and the Nomohan Incident, 1939," *Military Affairs*, (1969), pp. 302-12,

into China with the 1928 assassination of the warlord Chang Tso Lin and the Mukden Incident in 1931.⁶⁴ The relative autonomy of the Imperial Army High Command and its Kwantung Army from the national government developed from “an interpretation of Articles 11 and 12 of the Meiji Constitution, with state affairs under the authority of the civilian government and “military command” under the authority of the Imperial Army and Imperial Navy.⁶⁵ That meant that the Japanese military could adapt to local conditions with less restraint from the national government than that of the occupying militaries of other great powers. One sanguinary consequence of that adaptation was that Japanese military elites ordered atrocities against non-combatant populations—prisoners of war and civilian captives—because they wished to retaliate for Chinese atrocities against Japanese noncombatants, because of frustration at the inability to achieve final military victory over China despite their battlefield successes, and because terror tactics successfully intimidated the population in occupied territory. As Hugo Slim explains, one of the important reasons why leaders order soldiers to kill civilians is that they believe doing so may have utility.⁶⁶ Supporting that conclusion is the statistical analysis by Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth and Dylan Balch-Lindsay of cases involving the intentional killing of 50,000 or more civilians between 1945 and 2000 which found that such events were typically the product of a military strategic decision to deprive strong guerrilla armies of their base of support in the population.⁶⁷

In his survey of the treatment of prisoners of war during the Second World War, Mackenzie reiterates the indoctrination in brutality thesis but also attributes atrocities to the frustration of the Japanese Imperial Army with the seemingly endless war in China, which undermined military discipline.⁶⁸ Although Pyle articulates a constructivist explanation for the transformation of Japan from a *status quo* to a revisionist great

⁶⁴ James B. Crowley, *Japan's Quest for Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 183-86; Paul S. Dull, “The Assassination of Chang Tso-Lin,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (August 1952), pp. 453-463.

⁶⁵ Tatsuo Kobayashi, “The London Naval Treaty, 1930,” in James William Morley, ed., *Japan Erupts: The London Naval Conference and the Manchurian Incident, 1928-1932* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 11- 117, 60-61.

⁶⁶ Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Methods, madness, and Morality in War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 151-156.

⁶⁷ Benjamin Valentino, et al., ““Draining the Sea”: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare.” *International Organization*. Vol. 58., (2004), pp. 375-407.

⁶⁸ S. P. Mackenzie, “The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II.” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 66, No. 3, (1994), pp. 487-520, 513.

power, he joins in adopting the indoctrination in brutality thesis but supplemented by reference to a breakdown in military discipline motivated by “rage at Chinese resistance.”⁶⁹

In addition to the vast territories occupied in the north and along the coastal lines of China before 1941, the Japanese military also won control of vast territories in Southeast Asia after 1941. They defeated British and Commonwealth, Dutch and American forces to conquer Malaya and Singapore, British Burma, the American Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies, in addition to British Hong Kong and much of the insular Pacific in a series of brilliant campaigns. As a result, the Japanese military occupied territories with a total population of 269 million people, or slightly more than twice the total population of 129 million people in the territories occupied by the German military.⁷⁰ The task of imposing and maintaining political control over this many people with a military supported by a small economic industrial base offers one explanation for reliance of violent coercion as a means. Convincing the populations of their newly won territories that they had indeed achieved military victory over the European powers required effective propaganda, such as parades of captured enemy. Singaporeans observing captured British officers and enlisted being marched to detention in the custody of Japanese soldiers in 1942 were left in no doubt about the identities of the victorious and the defeated.⁷¹

The second constructivist explanation for the *interbellum* change in Japanese treatment of prisoners of war is that theatre military elites developed new norms and practices while waging war in China and then extended those norms to the territories in Southeast Asia occupied after 1941. Senior Japanese officers transferred from China to battlefields in Southeast Asia and the Pacific would have brought their experience and of dealing large numbers of civilians and prisoners of war with them. Methods adopted successfully in one battlefield and occupation environment are likely to be transferred to other battlefield and occupation environments. During the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya, the British Army applied a classification system to the captured to distinguish between those with intense and weak commitment to their cause that had proven

⁶⁹ Pyle, p. 195.

⁷⁰ Tohmatsu and Willmott, pp. 143-44.

⁷¹ Ronald H. Spector, *In the Ruins of Empire: The Japanese Surrender and the Battle for Postwar Asia* (New York, Random House, 2007), p. 78.

successful during the Malayan Emergency.⁷² From 1956 to 1959, the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam, reorganized the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnamese Army) into divisions and army corps on the model of the U.S. Army, just as the Army of the Republic of Korea had been reorganized during the Korean War.⁷³

One flaw in this second constructivist account is that it seems to echo the belief expressed by American General William Westmorland that “life is cheap in the Orient” in order to justify what had become a strategy of attrition during the American war in Vietnam.⁷⁴ As such, it risks inviting the inference of a justification for war crimes. With the caveat that war crimes can never be morally justified, the proposition that experience fighting in China explains why Japanese elites changed their treatment of prisoners of war offers a solution to the puzzle that assigns it to the agents with the power over prisoners of war.

Conclusion

Complex and multi-causal explanations are conventionally accepted by scholars for large scale social phenomena. Justifiable moral outrage and the desire to present a coherent narrative, however, are likely to tempt scholars into imposing a uni-causal, or, alternatively, a single integrating explanation on complex events. Succumbing to that temptation is likely in the aftermath of a major war, a moment when scholars still recall the “why we fight” themes in wartime propaganda, still feel some of the intense passions aroused by the conflict, and are sensitive the fact that survivors are still recovering from their physical and emotional wounds. The *consensus scholarum* that indoctrination in brutality largely explains the horrific treatment of the captured by the Japanese military during the Second Sino-Japanese War and Second World War emerged in such a social context. The post-war dominance of neo-realist international

⁷² Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, Henry Holt, 2005), pp. 103-106.

⁷³ James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC, Department of the Army, 1991), pp. 7-9. <http://www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/devtrainrvn/index.htm> Accessed October 9, 2009.

⁷⁴ Beau Grosscup, *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment* (London: Zed Press, 2006), p. 91.

relations theory—constructivist international relations theory develops later—deprived scholars of an important tool for presenting a more complex explanation. The problem with the *consensus scholarum* is that while the indoctrination in brutality is itself unquestionable and likely necessary for the execution of orders to commit brutalities on a massive scale, it fails to explain the *interbellum* rupture, the puzzling change in the treatment of the captured between the First World War and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Thus the indoctrination in brutality explanation is not incorrect, but rather incomplete.

This article offers two constructivist solutions to the *interbellum* puzzle. The first is that the rupture is attributable to what Japanese foreign policy maker learned from their interaction with the foreign policy makers of other states about Japan's current and likely future status among the great powers in the international system. The second is that the rupture is attributable to what Japanese military decision-makers learned from waging protracted war in continental China against the conventional and guerrilla forces of an enemy that could be bested on the battlefield yet not defeated, practices transferred to other fronts and military occupations in Southeast Asia and the insular Pacific. Where the first constructivist solution accounts for the willingness of foreign policy makers to sanction the violation of international humanitarian law, it fails to recognize the relative autonomy of action possessed by their agents who held actual power over the captured. Only the second constructivist solution accounts for both the *interbellum* rupture and recognizes the relative autonomy of action possessed by the Japanese military in the field. Thus, the first two explanations for the behavior—the indoctrination in brutality thesis and first constructivist account—merit acceptance as necessary conditions, only the second constructivist explanation provides the sufficient condition necessary to solve the puzzle.

That soldiers ought never to be indoctrinated in brutality toward the captured is an obvious lesson from this tragic chapter in history, and one that merits repeating. So too is the lesson that diplomats representing status quo powers should to be sensitive to the perceptions of relative status in the international system of potential revisionist powers. However, there may be another, less obvious but just as important, lesson: decision makers need to take prophylactic measures to prevent their forces from either being contaminated by or spreading the contamination of brutal practices toward the

captured that they learn in protracted conflicts.