
Review Essays

The Debate over Japan's War Responsibility

INOUE Toshikazu*

From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor: Who Was Responsible?, edited by James E. Auer. Tokyo: The Yomiuri Shinbun, 2006, 408 pp., ¥4,200 (hardcover ISBN 4-643-06012-3 C0021)

Nitchū Sensō kara Sekai Sensō e (From the Sino-Japanese War to World War), by Nagai Kazu. Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 2007, 480 pp., ¥7,600 (hardcover ISBN 978-4-7842-1334-4)

From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor is the English translation of *Kenshō: Sensō Sekinin* (2006) written and edited by the Yomiuri Shinbun Sensō Sekinin Kenshō Inkaï. The organization of the contents of the English and Japanese editions differ, reflecting their assumed readerships, but the overall views presented are the same. The explanation of the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, with which the editor and authors are affiliated, as given in the book (p. 441) is quite inadequate, so I would like to supplement it here.

The *Yomiuri Shinbun* is the national newspaper with the largest circulation in Japan, and it stands out among other papers in that its editorial stance closely reflects the views of Watanabe Tsuneo, the chairman and editor in chief of the Yomiuri Shinbun Group. This is the only newspaper in Japan where one individual's position is so thoroughly reflected in its content.

Another point that must be noted is that this book is not a work of research in the strict sense, but reflects particular political motives. The original Japanese edition is based on a column commemorating the 60th year since the war's end serialized in the *Yomiuri Shinbun* from August 2005 to March 2006. The timing is significant, as the column's publication coincided with conflicts both nationally and internationally over Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. *Yomiuri Shinbun* has traditionally taken a conservative stance regarding such issues, but when editor-in-chief Watanabe switched from favoring the visits to opposing them, the column was launched, not to defend, but rather to critique the story of Japan's wartime experience. The column, blasted by conservatives determined to defend the actions of prewar Japan, ended up adding fuel to the long-smoldering 'Yasukuni problem'.

With this background in mind, we can more clearly see the true motive of this book, which is dedicated to 'our neighbors'. While directly referring to China and South Korea, it also points indirectly to the United States. The dedication makes the book's intent clear: to improve Japan's diplomatic relations with neighboring countries—the US included.

INOUE Toshikazu is a Professor of Law at Gakushuin University. He has an LL.D. from Hitotsubashi University, where he also earned his B.A. in Sociology. His publications include: *Kiki no naka no Kyōchō Gaikō* (Cooperative Diplomacy in times of Crisis), Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha (1994), *Ajiashugi wo Toinaosu* (Reconsidering 'Asianism'), Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō (2006), *Nitchū Sensōka no Nihon* (Japan during the Sino-Japanese War), Tokyo: Kōdansha (2007), and *Shōwashi no Gyakusetsu* (The Paradox of Showa History), Tokyo: Shinchōsha (2008). He can be reached at the Faculty of Law, Gakushuin University, 1-5-1 Mejiro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo 171-8588 JAPAN, or by email at 19890219@gakushuin.ac.jp.

*Translated from the Japanese by Graham Carpenter.

The title, too, makes the intent clear. The Japanese version has the noncommittal title *Kenshō Sensō Sekinin* (Investigating War Responsibility), but the English version raises the question more directly: ‘who was responsible?’ The volume’s investigation focuses on who was responsible for events from the Manchurian Incident up to the outbreak of the Pacific War.

This book can be credited on three points. First, it provides a concise introduction to Japan’s wartime and prewar history for Anglophone readers. Equipped with graphs, maps, photographs and a glossary, Chapter 1 of the first part effectively delivers the preliminary knowledge necessary to give readers a firm background to matters of Japan’s war responsibility. This diligent effort to inform the reader should not be overlooked. It represents an extremely useful approach that encourages dispassionate debate without prejudice and preconception.

Second, the book approaches the attribution of war responsibility by tracing the lineages of faulty decision-making. For example, Chapter 2 discusses the avenues by which members of the military elite meddled in political affairs; Chapter 3 looks at the ramifications of foreign minister Hirota Kōki’s submissiveness to the military and inability to recognize the power of Chinese nationalism and Chapter 4 demonstrates how Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro’s failure to exercise strong political leadership led to the expansion of the Sino-Japanese War.

Third, the book examines the wartime leadership as the preeminent source of war responsibility. For example, in Chapter 8, blame for the defeat in the Battle of Midway is attributed to the ‘personal vanity’ of military leaders and their failures of judgment during battle. Moreover, as illustrated in Chapter 9, the book condemns the lack of rational tactical decision-making by the military, and the futile rivalry between the army and navy that resulted in soldiers choosing ‘honorable deaths’.

Despite the above strong points, the book suffers from a number of problems. First, even though the points at issue are made quite clear, the discussion offers surprisingly little that goes beyond conventional views. To be sure, the book pursues war responsibility in detail, such as in Chapter 16, which points to particular errors of political judgment that led to the collapse of Japan’s war effort by figures such as Konoe and Tōjō Hideki. But the characterization of the prewar Japanese political leadership based on this analysis is little different from faulting it for being a ‘system of irresponsibility’, as is often found in previous studies. The reader thus searches in vain for much that is original or new in this debate.

Secondly, the book does not adequately trace the expansion of the war from the Manchurian Incident to the defeat in 1945 in terms of fluctuations in international relations. This shortcoming can be seen in the way the book refers to the war as the ‘Shōwa War’. Why must it evoke the imperial era name? What is the merit in preferring this terminology over the more established ‘Fifteen-year War’ or ‘Asia-Pacific War’? The book does not make this clear. ‘Shōwa War’ would tend to emphasize Japan’s internal affairs during the war. Japan was involved in what was just one of the fronts of World War II, so greater reference should have been made to its international dimension.

The second work here under review, *Nitchū Sensō kara Sekai Sensō e* by Nagai Kazu, is a collection of previously published essays by the author. In evaluating this work, some background may be useful for readers who are not familiar with the study of Japan.

Marxist methodology dominated historic research in postwar Japan for a long time, and this book reflects that tradition. For example, Chapter 2 (‘The Sino-Japanese War and Anglo-Japanese Friction’) features ‘Japanese imperialism’ as its subject and analyzes how the conflict with Great Britain over China resulted in the expansion of the war. This point must be kept in mind in order to understand the history of the conflict described in the addendum.

However, the book is no mere repetition of Marxist history. While carrying on the traditional analysis of the structure of modern Japan in typical Marxist historiographical style, it also adheres to the principles of historical empiricism, which makes this book a valuable work of scholarship.

The book is organized as follows. The preface, 'Japan in the 20th Century History of East Asia', discusses the position in which Japan should be placed in the discussion of 20th century East Asia and serves as the introduction to the following chapters. Chapter 1, 'Japanese Army's North China Occupation Plan', excavates and analyzes historical documents that reveal the Japanese army's plan to occupy North China. Chapter 2, 'The Second Sino-Japanese War and the Anglo-Japanese Friction', and Chapter 3, 'The Anti-British Movements of 1939', discuss the conflict between Japan and Great Britain during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Chapter 4, 'The Second Sino-Japanese War and the Imperial Diet', studies the process by which wartime legislation was deliberated. Chapter 5, 'Second Sino-Japanese War and the Army's Comfort Stations', proposes a third alternative theory regarding the issue of military comfort women. The addendum gives attention to the research of historian Eguchi Keiichi and offers a new viewpoint by organizing the controversies regarding the history of the war.

The first strong point of the book that must be pointed out is the veracity of the historical sources on which it is based. This strength is fully demonstrated in Chapter 5. The debate over whether the comfort women were brought in forcefully by the military has raged over interpretations of a single document, but this book explores other relevant sources, and offers a third interpretation. While stating that interpretations that argue categorically or speculate about forced recruitment will not hold up, it presents a persuasive analysis showing that 'in early 1938 the military/government adopted a policy of setting up comfort stations'.

Second, the book successfully asserts the original arguments regarding the conflict between Japan and Great Britain. From today's vantage point, knowing that the Second Sino-Japanese War expanded to the Pacific War, there is naturally a tendency to analyze the war from the viewpoint of the US-Japan conflict. If there had been a confrontation over empire, however, it would have been with Britain, and this book should be praised for bringing this point to our attention.

The third strength, as indicated by the title 'From Second Sino-Japanese War to a World War', is how the book reconstructs the expansion of the war in terms of international relations. This analytical view is effective not only in this chapter and the preface but also in Chapter 4, where it describes, for example, how the Diet debated the 'New Order in East Asia'.

Even with the above excellent qualities, the book is not without its faults. First, the analysis is not systematic. This may be inevitable due to its structure as a collection of essays. But the author could have tied the debate in the preface and the topics in the later chapters together through supplemental improvements, such as adding further comments at the end of the preface. Because the book provides so many new ideas and much new knowledge, this may not be too much to ask of the author.

The other problem is its self-contained nature. This book carries on the orthodox lineage of post-war Japanese history, with a highly self-contained structure in that particular school, which is one major drawback. The author could have set his research in a way that would encompass the development of Japanese historical study in its entirety through expanding his argument and expanding his discussion to cover other schools.

These two books differ in their purposes, critical interests and analytical viewpoints, but they have much in common in other respects, particularly: their basic stance of pursuing the cause of the expansion of the war. *From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor* tries to investigate the main causes of the war's expansion by investigating individual war responsibilities, while *Nitchū Sensō kara Sekai Sensō e* analyzes the mechanism of the expansion from the point of conflicts between imperialist nations. The results obtained from this method demonstrate that the research in this field has moved into the next stage.

In other words, as *From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor* shows, Japanese can hold ideologically conservative views towards history and yet have a critical view of history that does not glamorize the

prewar era. We also learn from *Nitchū Sensō kara Sekai Sensō e* that, through reading this kind of solid factual research, we can develop arguments on the basis of rigorous, critical examination of historical documents, regardless of our political beliefs. It should be noted that the publication of these two books coincided with the end of the long-lasting, ideologically driven and completely unproductive debate over the content of Japan's high school history textbooks.

Despite the significant contributions made by these two books, both leave problems that have yet to be addressed. First is the issue of Japan's internal structure. While *From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor* may have made clear the individual war responsibilities of the prime minister, foreign minister and members of the military, without unraveling the reasons workers, peasants and women voluntarily took part in the war, it will be impossible to unravel the entire mechanism that led to the expansion of the war. Based on these two books, an analytical viewpoint on the internal structure that led to that expansion must be sought that incorporates psychology, sociology and economic history into the scope of research.

Another problem is that analyses of the policy-making process are poorly elaborated. For example, if focusing on the clash of empires, as does *Nitchū Sensō kara Sekai Sensō e*, then there could have been the possibility of imperialistic compromises, that is, compromises between Japan and Great Britain at the expense of China, and yet the war expanded. Much more detailed analysis must be made of the policy-making processes.

These two books represent highpoints of the historical study of postwar Japanese history, but they also can be considered signposts for further research. I hope that the publication of these two books will help move this field of research in new directions.

Reference

Yomiuri Shinbun Sensō Sekinin Kenshō Iinkai. 2006. *Kenshō: Sensō Sekinin (Investigating War Responsibility)*. Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha.