

<Book Review>

Between Incompetence and Culpability: Assessing the Diplomacy of Japan's Foreign Ministry from Pearl Harbor to Potsdam.

Seishiro Sugihara

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Reviewed by Tadashi Hama

This collection of essays by Professor Seishiro Sugihara, Musashino Women's University, dispels the shadows that have until recently covered the pre-war peace negotiations between Japan and the US. The movements and counter-movements of the Japanese and the US government are well known to specialists of this period. The current book, however, focuses on facts that may not be well known to westerners, including the poor handling of Japan's "final note" to the US, which suggest a dysfunctional pre-war Japanese Foreign Ministry and its lack of transparency regarding the mishandling of the "final note" after the war. In fact, Sugihara suggests that the Foreign Ministry's incompetence was responsible for American behavior, in the form of firebombings and nuclear attacks against Japanese civilians, towards the end of the war. In fairness, Sugihara does show that a number of non-Japanese personalities from that era, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his cabal of pro-China, anti-Japan advisors, conspired to drag an America that wanted no part in global war into one. Sugihara's saves most of his exasperation for the Japanese Foreign Ministry, particularly its bureaucracy.

The lead in Japan's search for reconciliation with America in 1941 was Foreign Minister Yotsuke Matsuoka, a person with a complex personality, to say the least. Sugihara is rather lenient, describing Matsuoka as "inept". Historian John Toland recounted that Matsuoka antagonized everyone, including the military, prior and after his signing of the Tripartite Pact. Following the signing of a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, Matsuoka even offended Stalin. During negotiations between Japan and the US, Matsuoka made numerous "provocative announcements," going so far as to insult US Ambassador Joseph Grew. Neither colleagues nor adversaries thought highly of Matsuoka. Toland stated that Navy Minister Koshiro Oikawa thought Matsuoka was "insane". After reading an intercepted cable Matsuoka sent to Japanese Ambassador to the US Kichisaburo Nomura, President Roosevelt commented that the message was "a product of a mind which is deeply disturbed and unable to think quietly or logically." Matsuoka's attitude and vanity gave Secretary of State Cordell Hull the impression that the Japanese were not negotiating in sincerity. While Hull did not mention Matsuoka, he obliquely blamed him on the impasse between Japan and the US. Nonetheless Matsuoka was infuriated. Finally, in July, to expel him from the cabinet, Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoye asked everyone resign at an extraordinary Cabinet session. As it so happened, Matsuoka was not present to object and Teijiro Toyoda became the new Foreign Minister.

Particularly galling to Sugihara, however, is the performance of the staff of the Japanese Embassy in Washington, DC during the critical moments before the Pearl Harbor attack. While somewhat competent, Ambassador Nomura was lacking in English language skills, which may have led to misunderstandings with Hull during their conversations. In response to entirely unacceptable demands (“ultimatum”) in the form of the “Hull note”, the Japanese government sent its “final notice” (a memorandum rebutting the “Hull note”) to its Washington embassy in 14 parts prior to the Pearl Harbor attack. We learn from Sugihara that embassy staffers Sadao Iguchi and Katsuzo Okumura were responsible for translating and transcribing the final notice for presentation to the US government at 1 PM, about 30 minutes before the attack. As it turns out, the final notice was handed over to the US well after the Pearl Harbor attack, which instilled the impression in American minds that the Japanese launched a “sneak attack”—a sucker punch—and “December 7” became America’s rallying point. Sugihara suggests that the incompetence of the Foreign Ministry evoked a spirit of vindictiveness, which in turn, made America’s war against Japan a brutal one.

The first 13 of the 14-part final notice was sent to Japanese embassy on the morning of December 6, the day before the attack. The cable section, we read, had only one cipher machine as one was broken and one other had been dismantled by order of Tokyo—most of the decryption was done by hand. (That staff did not think anything was amiss when they received the order to destroy a cipher machine from Tokyo reflects their cluelessness.) Furthermore, Tokyo stated that only staff of Secretary ranking was to type the message and so the job fell to Secretary Okamura, who was in fact a poor typist. (Last minute corrections from Tokyo further delaying the process.) Amazingly, rather than complete transcribing the final notice, it appears that Okamura went out that evening to play cards at an acquaintance’s home. In addition, it appears that that Councilor Iguchi allowed Embassy staff, including the cipher staff, to leave early on December 6, for all intents and purposes, leaving the Embassy “virtually unattended” until the morning of December 7. Iguchi attended a farewell party for First Secretary Hidenari Terasaki on the evening of December 6.

While embassy staff had recommended implementation of a “night duty watch system for members of the cable section staff,” Iguchi, as office manager, ignored this suggestion. The final, 14th part of the final notice was received at the Embassy at about 7 AM on December 7. No one was notified about the dispatch, which was marked “urgent”, until 9:30 AM. Indeed, Sugihara notes that there were “mountains of telegrams” for staff to attend to that morning. When Iguchi was repatriated to Japan in 1942, Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo inquired about the delayed delivery of the final notice. Iguchi “curtly” denied any responsibility.

In the mean time, US cryptographers handed the first 13 parts of the intercepted final notice to President Roosevelt for his review on the evening of December 6—“This means war!” he noted.

Following the war, both Iguchi and Okumura were promoted to vice minister, “the highest administrative position available within the Foreign Ministry” by Prime Minister

Shigeru Yoshida, Sugihara goes on to recount the incompetence of Foreign Ministry personnel:

The abilities of the two ambassadors [Nomura and Saburo Kurusu] should perhaps be questioned, but the capability of the embassy staff overall was problematic. United States Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew lamented that the competence of personnel at Japan's Washington embassy was frighteningly low, and he was absolutely correct.

Also of interest from the book is that Japan was decrypting US cables. The Americans heard about this through a leak from Tomihiko Ushiba, Prime Minister Fumimoro Konoe's personal secretary. Rather than change its codes, the US quietly feed Japan disinformation, with the goal of misleading the Japanese leadership. The book does not mention if Ushiba was sought out for punishment after the war.

Sugihara does a fantastic job of detailing prewar Japanese history that is not very well known outside of Japan. However, there are a two historical points in the book that some may not agree with.

In Chapter 6, "Mr. Prime Minister, what do you think of the accounts in these textbooks?" the issue at hand is the lack of objective portrayal of the so-called "Nanking Incident," also known as the "the Great Nanking Massacre" or the "Rape of Nanking", in Japanese history text books. What led Sugihara to the Nanking Incident was the Foreign Ministry's response in 1982 to Chinese, and later Korean, criticism of the Japanese government's alleged meddling in the review of high school history text books. Sugihara points out that the Foreign Ministry readily acceded to the wishes of its neighbors rather than setting the historical record straight with painful truths and to protect Japan's domestic affairs.

The Chinese based their criticism on what turned out to be absolutely erroneous Japanese media reports. Sugihara informs readers that the Foreign Ministry knew the media reports were wrong, but nonetheless pandered to Chinese interests by quashing attempts by the Ministry of Education to correct erroneous media reports.

While the Ministry of Education should be lauded in its attempt to demonstrate that media claims were false, the Ministry should, nonetheless, be chided in allowing a false narrative, of a "Great Nanking Massacre", to persist in high school text books. It appears that the review of textbooks for historical accuracy is entirely beyond the capabilities of the Ministry. Chapter 6 is enlightening, in that it clearly exposes the extent of inanity that has swept through the entire Japanese government like a virus.

Sugihara describes how the Nanking Incident is portrayed in high school history textbooks and goes on to show that there was no "organized or planned campaign of killing... There was certainly ... no "great massacre."” Sugihara's review of the evidence is wide-ranging. He uses primary sources (records "produced at the time or shortly after the Nanking Incident") to support his claim. He goes on to suggests that Japanese

acceptance of a historical falsehood like the “Great Nanking Massacre” is the result of Japan not engaging in serious post-war reflection concerning the war and due to the condemnation of Japan through a sham judicial process by the Allies, the Tokyo Trial.

However, Sugihara later writes, “This is why international condemnation at the time of the Nanking Incident was revised after World War II; in short, in order to magnify condemnation of the Incident (made before the war) ...” Later on, again: “... the Nanking Incident ... truly deserved the international condemnation of its time.” Perhaps Sugihara was merely repeating what textbooks claimed, that “other countries fiercely condemned [the “Great Nanking Massacre”]”. Readers will likely be confused—in fact, no country at the time lodged protest over a so-called “Great Nanking Massacre” as there was no “Great Nanking Massacre”.

Neither the Nationalists nor the Chinese Communists said anything about a Japanese-instigated “Nanking Massacre”, following the Japanese occupation of Nanking in December 1937 or thereafter. Mao Zedong, in 1938 lectures to his cadres, did not mention anything concerning a “massacre” during the battle for Nanking. In fact, Mao chided the Japanese for not being more aggressive against the Nationalists. In the official Republic of China records of its war against Japan, *Modern Chinese History: the Conflict with Japan*,¹ there is no mention of a Japanese massacre with the fall of Nanking. English language publications printed in China in 1938 and thereafter made no mention of a “Nanking Massacre”. Editorial columns even before the fall of Nanking were typically filled with tired tropes of a “reign of terror” and vague accounts of “atrocities”, where ever Japanese troops were. If neither the Communists nor the Nationalists complained, then how could have the rest of the world known about a “Great Nanking Massacre”?

Indeed, since the start of open conflict between China and Japan in July 1937, China’s representative to the League of Nations, Gu Weijun (also known as Wellington Koo), used the League of Nations at any opportunity to submit censures concerning Japanese “aggression”, which were duly adopted by the League. While Gu mentioned a “Nanking Massacre” during a League meeting in 1938, his comments were based entirely on foreign news reports, of dubious veracity.

Meanwhile, the US and British did protest the sinking of the US gunboat *Panay* and the shelling of the British gunboat *Ladybird* in December 1937 by Japanese forces, for which Japan officially apologized. (The head of Japanese naval air units in China was relieved of command.) In the case of the *Panay*, after the US send an itemized bill for losses, Japan paid over \$2 million for property losses and indemnity. These were the major news items for late December and early January, not of a “Great Nanking Massacre” or a “Rape of Nanking”. There were media reports, from highly suspect sources, during this period that claimed looting and raping in Nanking by individual Japanese soldiers, yet even these did not spark “international condemnation”.

¹ He Yingqin, (ed. by Wu Xiangxiang), *Modern Chinese History: The Conflict With Japan* (Taipei: Wenxing Shudian, 1948).

One other point of historical contention that may not be entirely true is Sugihara's claim that "the decree to 'establish a clan and convert names,' from Korean to Japanese, was compulsory, and it "ignored the pride and feelings of the Korean people and were quite deplorable." Sugihara goes on to characterize Japan's annexation of Korea as "unpleasant" and the "height of arrogance," and Sugihara closes with "these are immutable facts of history." While characterizations such as "unpleasant" and "height of arrogance" are highly subjective, others have shown that the Japanese annexation period was in fact very beneficial at a number of levels for Koreans—this is the "immutable" fact of history.

With respect specifically to the decree of changing Korean names to Japanese names, Koreans were at first prohibited by the Government-General of Korea in changing their names to Japanese. Following annexation, Koreans were by law Japanese citizens, and found this prohibition "discriminatory". In 1940, the Governor-General allowed the use of Japanese names by Koreans, and decreed that this was entirely voluntary—in fact there was no law concerning name changing. The following year, Koreans continued to use their Korean names. When Koreans did change their names, many adopted Japanese names that identified their origin or heritage.

References

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