

Book Review by Translator

It is my privilege to have been asked to translate Seishiro Sugihara's *Question of Guilt: Japan's Foreign Ministry and Its War Responsibility* from Japanese into English. This is the first full length book to trace the incompetence and culpability of Japan's Foreign Ministry since its beginnings in the Meiji era. Although the Ministry introduced an examination system in the 1870s based on models established in Europe and the United States to select and train staff, Sugihara shows how this paradoxically produced a coterie of individuals dedicated to the pursuit of ministerial interests over those of the Japanese people.

Most egregious of the Ministry's blunders was its administrative mishandling of the "final notice" to the United States that turned the Imperial Japanese Navy's surprise assault on Pearl Harbor into an unannounced "sneak attack," and led to tragic consequences for Japan. The author explains how this and other blunders were largely due to the incompetence of Ministry staff, and to deeply flawed institutional, organizational, recruitment and training issues. He analyzes more recent bribery and embezzlement cases, and also shows how the Ministry has failed when reacting to exigent circumstances abroad such as efforts to evacuate Japanese nationals during the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Critical of the Ministry's attempts to enact internal reforms, he makes recommendations to correct these flaws so that Japan may finally conduct a decent and proper foreign policy that remains true to the national interest, and to the people of Japan.

Conventional postwar multi-volume narratives of Japanese diplomacy have largely portrayed the Foreign Ministry in a passive role during the events of the 1930s, leading up to a war instigated exclusively by Japan's two military services. This paradigm has persisted and is perpetuated in treatments by insiders and former diplomats, who largely take an uncritical approach to the Ministry's actions in the postwar era. Little has been made of the antiquated systems in place within the Ministry, some of which have remained unchanged since their introduction in the Meiji era, nor of the effect these structural and institutional problems have had on the Ministry's general performance. However, factional and policy disagreements over the past decade have revealed unprecedented influence peddling and embezzlement scandals, and triggered widespread scrutiny of the workings of the Foreign Ministry in greater detail than ever before.

In a welcome departure from such uncritical narratives, Sugihara has written

the first major work to examine the Foreign Ministry's chronic weaknesses. He has produced an unsanitized history of Japan's diplomatic blunders and errors, from both the turbulent decades leading up to war with the United States, and the postwar period as Japan slowly reestablished its standing in the international community.

Sugihara has written extensively on the diplomatic history of Japan. *Question of Guilt* can be viewed as the fourth volume of an unofficial "tetralogy" chronicling the failings of the Foreign Ministry. The first book in this quartet is *Japanese Perspectives on Pearl Harbor* (Asian Research Service, 1995), translated by Theodore McNelly, and is a survey of media reports around the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The second is *Between Incompetence and Culpability: Assessing the Diplomacy of Japan's Foreign Ministry from Pearl Harbor to Potsdam* (University Press of America, 1997) where he examined in detail the circumstances surrounding the bungling by diplomats at Japan's Washington embassy on the eve of war that inadvertently turned the Imperial Japanese Navy's assault on Pearl Harbor into a "sneak attack." This led him to examine more closely the administrative and political record of Japan's Foreign Ministry in the postwar period to determine how officials assessed, recorded, concealed, and begrudgingly acknowledged their culpability for this egregious error. The third book of the series is *Chiune Sugihara and Japan's Foreign Ministry* (UPA, 2001) which championed the causes of individuals such as Chiune Sugihara (unrelated to the author, Seishiro, by family or marriage) and Naoya Nakano, two Ministry employees who followed their consciences to uphold the national interest over the narrower interests of the Foreign Ministry, and were subsequently ostracized for their "insubordination." He ties all these threads together in *Question of Guilt* (the final volume in this tetralogy) to produce an unprecedented survey of the failings of the Foreign Ministry, since its beginnings in the Meiji period to the present day, and offers alternatives for future reforms.

Sugihara has also written extensively on the Japanese education system, and the significance of the Fundamental Law of Education, the emperor system, and the separation of church and state in Japan. His work on jurisprudence, religious education, and historiography in pedagogical studies was recognized by the Japan Buddhist Education Association in 1998. He was appointed president of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform in 2011, and has recently shepherded a new middle school textbook through the complicated authorization process, a book that deals with these complex and controversial wartime, foreign policy and diplomatic issues in a frank and principled manner. He is dedicated to the cause of overcoming

the tragic consequences of the war between Japan and the United States, and demonstrates how, even in our fractious and turbulent world, erstwhile foes can indeed come together as true friends and allies.

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