

## CHAPTER 5: JAPAN AND WORLD WAR I

### 4. THE NIKOLAYEVSK MASSACRE

#### **Rape, slaughter, unimaginable atrocities**

At the beginning of 1920 the objective of the Siberian expedition, i.e., the rescue of the Czech Corps, was near fruition. At that point the Japanese narrowed their operations down to the direct defense of their Manchurian and Korean interests, announcing their plan to withdraw troops in the near future. But then, a totally unexpected incident arose — an event of an unspeakable nature: the Nikolayevsk Massacre.

Japan's historians, history textbooks, and newspapers are wont to exaggerate atrocities allegedly committed by Japanese troops. But for some inexplicable reason, they have been silent about the worst massacre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one in which more than 700 Japanese fell victim to communists. It was just as if Japan's chroniclers had turned a blind eye to the tragedy, and made a concerted effort to expunge it from Japan's collective memory and from the pages of history.

Nikolayevsk is a town situated on the bank of the Amur River opposite Sakhalin, where the river's estuary flows into the Sea of Okhotsk. At the beginning of 1920 Nikolayevsk was inhabited by approximately 750 Japanese: civilians, an Army garrison, and a Navy signal corps. When Allied troops withdrew, 4,000 communist partisans (Russians, Koreans, and Chinese) surrounded and besieged the town. The partisans entered into a truce with the Japanese garrison, which turned out to be a ruse, and took control of Nikolayevsk. They then proceeded to establish a revolutionary court that held trials and executed the "guilty." On March 12, the third anniversary of the Russian Revolution, fighting broke out between the communists and Japanese soldiers. The communists annihilated most of the garrison and threw some 150 civilians into prison.

A Navy officer who was in Nikolayevsk at the time and witnessed the atrocities, managed, with great difficulty, to escape to Vladivostok. He kept an account of the atrocities committed by the communist partisans as he witnessed them, which appeared in the 20 April 1920 edition of the *Osaka Mainichi Shinbun*.

The radicals did not act on the spur of the moment. They had obviously made careful plans.

During the first phase of their savagery, Russians were their victims. The communists surrounded the homes of wealthy Russians. After brazenly robbing them of all their assets, they herded all residents — old and young, men and women — into their houses and barricaded all exits from the outside. Then the communists set fire to the houses and, showing no remorse whatsoever, incinerated their inhabitants.

The targets of the communists' second phase were pro-Japanese Russian intelligentsia. They robbed, raped, and slaughtered intellectuals, unleashing pitiless brutality against their unfortunate victims, whether government officials or private citizens. During the third phase, the monsters ruthlessly and unrelentingly bared their poisonous fangs, this time setting upon my compatriots. Finding words to

describe such unspeakable brutality seems an unbearable, impossible task, but at the same time, I feel driven to speak for the precious souls of the victims, and for the sake of benevolence and justice throughout the world as well. I hope those who read this will understand.

The mob of rioters then gathered in a public space, where they satisfied their loathsome lust at the expense of my female compatriots. Their depravity knew no limits, as they amused themselves by severing their victims' limbs, slashing or chopping off fingers, arms, and legs, making certain to cause as much pain as possible during their murderous rampage.

The atrocities knew no end. The shameless attackers placed two horses side by side and selected their next Japanese victim, male or female, it mattered not to them. They tied one of their quarry's legs tightly to the saddle of one horse and the other leg to the saddle of the other. When the horses were turned loose and sped off, the victim's body was soon torn apart. I cannot imagine a more painful death. The communists clearly enjoyed the spectacle, whooping and guffawing with pleasure, and jeering at the poor victims. Their voices joined together in a chorus — a chorus of jubilant savages. I cannot find words to describe their brutal, heinous acts, which even the most savage beast would never commit. Is there anyone in the world, has there ever been anyone since the founding of our empire, who could find it in their hearts to forgive these enemies of humanity itself?

My countrymen and women, having wept and wept until no more tears would come, made a firm resolve: "If we must die, we shall all die together. We shall depart from this fleeting existence, falling like cherry blossoms. We shall stay together and help each other." They then sought refuge at the consulate. Then the communist mob seized all the assets belonging to my compatriots, residents of the town, and proceeded to commit other acts of violence, burning and destroying everything in their path. Still, both our soldiers and consular staff members, knowing that they were outnumbered, suppressed their grief and anger, and took great pains to avoid confrontations with the attackers, instead exercising perseverance and prudence. However, the angry mob grew more and more violent with every passing moment, and began shooting at the consulate. The building was soon engulfed in flames, and those inside then realized that they were doomed.

At that moment all the Japanese, men and women alike, rose to action. They resolved to defend themselves by confronting the enemy. Every man among them took up a weapon and launched into a defensive battle, fighting stubbornly, together with the remaining garrison soldiers. Nor did the women shrink from danger. Rather than fall victim to the vicious monsters, they would die bravely, together with the soldiers. All of them raised their arms, vowed they would fight to the death, and immediately took action.

Nevertheless, no matter how hard they fought, they continued to lose ground. Moment by moment, their numbers decreased. Eventually, even the frail women took up the rifles and pistols once brandished by their dead comrades, and while receiving hasty instructions about loading and shooting the weapons, joined in the fighting. With their hearts full of regret, they made a final, valiant attempt against the enemy, and every last one of them died a heroic death. In the end, there was

hardly anyone left to fight. They had no more ammunition and had exhausted all their strength. But the few courageous women who had survived, along with wounded men who could still move, somehow managed to summon up the will to fight. They made a final, desperate attempt to fend off the enemy, together, until they breathed their last within the roaring flames.

### **Handwriting on the wall bears witness**

When the snow and ice had melted to some extent, Japan dispatched reinforcements to Nikolayevsk. But in early May, before they could arrive, the communists had slaughtered every single Japanese they had imprisoned. Out of 12,000 Nikolayevsk residents, the mob had massacred approximately 6,000 souls who were opposed to communism. After setting fire to the town, they burned it to the ground and fled. Among the victims were Vice-Consul Ishida Toramatsu, his wife, 384 civilian Japanese residents of Nikolayevsk (among them 184 women and children), and 351 Japanese soldiers. The communists had raped, tortured, and slaughtered some 750 Japanese.

Two weeks after the massacre, eight Japanese war correspondents visited the crime scene. The following is an excerpt from their report on that visit as it appeared in the 13 June 1920 edition of *Jiji Shinpō*.

Of Nikolayevsk, which extends approximately 6 km from north to south, and 10 km from east to west, only the chimneys of Russian stoves remained. Everywhere we looked, we saw only desolation. Brick houses had been blown up and reduced to rubble. Wooden houses had burned to the ground, leaving no trace behind. Charred telephone poles were lying on the ground. Our feet became entangled in electric wires that had been knocked down. Scattered throughout the burned rubble were articles of women's clothing, shoes, cooking pots, children's cots, and other household goods.

The prison was in the northern part of the town. As soon as we arrived there, we entered one section that had escaped the flames. Overcome by a terrible stench, all of us recoiled. That part of the building had been divided into eight rooms. We were immediately confronted with horrifying sights. Spoiled rice balls were scattered around, and the walls were spattered with what looked like fresh blood. A woman's red sash was hanging on a nail. There was graffiti on the walls, most of it in Room No. 2, where someone had written "Never forget May 24, 1920 at 12 p.m." Next to it was a drawing of the face of a clock that read "12:00." We also saw several haiku:

*The sun will soon rise  
I lie awake worrying  
Then the cuckoo calls*

*How splendid it is  
When someone admires flowers  
That bloomed this morning*

Another poem:

*Yesterday misfortune seemed so far away  
But now it has befallen me*

Elsewhere on the wall someone had written *Bushidō*. Most of the graffiti were written in pencil on the white-painted walls. Particularly heart-rending was a chart showing the calendar days written in red pencil. It began with May 19 and ended with June 23. Each day was crossed out up to May 24; the rest were unmarked. On the night of May 24, all 140 prisoners were dragged out of their jail, marched to the bank of the Amur River, stabbed to death and thrown into the water.

Our group of journalists paced back and forth for a short while, imagining the agonies of our countrymen. Then we headed for the riverbank. In front of the shipbuilding factory was a 650-square-foot vacant lot whose surface was soaked with blood, now turning black. The blood of our compatriots! We made more gruesome discoveries: blood-drenched ropes used to bind the victims; a cotton crepe shirt soaked with fresh blood that someone had retrieved from the river; more blood, huge amounts of it, splattered on the side of a boat. We were forced to avert our eyes! We imagined our compatriots suppressing their rage and regret as they succumbed to the poisonous blades on this terrible shore. We could not take even one step forward without treading on their blood!

We paid a call on Commander Tsuno Kazusuke. His eyes brimming with tears, Maj.-Gen. Tsuno said, “Every single one of our compatriots is dead. But while our grief is unbearable, I am heartened by the knowledge that every one of them fought bravely to the end, never resorting to mean or cowardly behavior.

At the end of his account of the Nikolayevsk Massacre in *History of the Japanese People (Meiji and Taishō Eras)*, historian Shiroyanagi Shūko writes, “Seven hundred of our compatriots, both young and old, fell victim to evil monsters — communist partisans — and for a long time became demons on the Amur River. The torments the communists inflicted on our innocent compatriots were cruel beyond description. As long as there is humanity in this world, it is unlikely that any historian will be able to summon up the courage to write about the massacre.”<sup>1</sup> However, when one reads both the naval officer’s account and the journalists’ report, it is possible to imagine how terribly shocked the Japanese public was by the sheer brutality of the massacre.

Since the Meiji era, Japan’s conservatives (the so-called right wing) have wholeheartedly supported ethnic revolutionaries in neighboring nations. However, they have consistently demonstrated wariness and repudiation of communist revolutions, and that stance can certainly be attributed to the Nikolayevsk Massacre. Reports of this incident should be disseminated more widely and memorialized so that it occupies its rightful place in political and intellectual history.

### **Japanese perspicacity about communist aggression**

Called the worst affront to Japan since the Mongolian invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Nikolayevsk Massacre did indeed enrage the Japanese people. Unsurprisingly, their hatred toward Russia grew. Japanese troops placed the northern half of Sakhalin under protective occupation, which significantly delayed their withdrawal from Siberia.

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<sup>1</sup> Shiroyanagi Shūko, *Meiji Taishō kokumin shi 1-5* (History of the Japanese people: Meiji and Taishō eras, 5 vols.) (Tokyo: Chikura Shobō, 1936).

Earlier in this chapter I included an excerpt from a dismissive account about Japan's Siberian Expedition in a Japanese textbook. I believe that readers will now perceive the extent to which that account distorts the historical significance of Japan's contribution. Additionally, I hope that the publication's editorial policy will be revealed for exactly what it is, i.e., an attempt to give the impression that in participating, Japan had aggressive, ulterior motives. I do not think I need to tell readers who had more insight into history — the Americans, who believed that the Bolsheviks were democrats at heart, and who interfered with the Japanese expedition, using the Open Door Policy in north Manchuria and Siberia as a pretext — or the Japanese, who kept their troops in Siberia to prevent the spread of communism from Siberia to Manchuria and Korea. Communism did, however, infiltrate Manchuria and Korea from Siberia, and in doing so, strongly affected the course of history. Today we know it gave rise to the Manchurian Incident, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sino-Japanese War, and ultimately, the Greater East Asian War.

Even today, 70 years later, the “open door” to Siberia and Maritime province remains completely closed to the US and all other non-Soviet states. Obviously, the unshakable American conviction that keeping the Japanese from making inroads in those areas would result in an open-door policy in Siberia was wrong. Here is historian Charles Tansill's view:

As a result of numerous conferences dealing with the Far East it was finally decided to send General William S. Graves with a small army (9,014 officers and men) to Siberia to co-operate with an Allied expeditionary force. The duties assigned to this force were to assist the Czechs, help steady genuine Russian efforts at self-government and self-defense, and to guard Allied military stores. The force under Graves stayed in Siberia from August 1918 until April 1920. Its sole achievement was to save the maritime provinces of Siberia for the ruthless rule of Red Russia.<sup>2</sup>

To this I add the opinion of George Bronson Rea, long-time editor in chief of Shanghai-based *Far Eastern Review*:

Had Japan been permitted to act alone in Siberia, the Communist program for the domination of Asia would never have passed the paper stage. ... The dispatch of an American army to Siberia made Asia safe for Communism. ...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tansill, *op. cit.*, 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> George Bronson Rea, *The Case for Manchoukuo* (New York: Appleton-Century Company, 1935), 341-42.