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This past fall I was thinking once again about the intractability of Japan's part in the Pacific phase of World War II when the news came: Okinawans had staged a huge rally to protest the Japanese government's banning of textbook references to the military's role in "group suicides" among civilians during the Battle of Okinawa. According to some reports, a single examiner at the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science, with dubious outside connections, made the change. To explain it, he pointed to a suit recently filed against Oe Kenzaburo's 1970 assertions.

The examiner, if he was thinking at all, took an action as improbable as the war itself. Yes, Japan may have been pushed up against the wall by America's compromise-be-damned approach to international complications. But the Japanese leaders who started the war did so in the perfect knowledge that the odds were overwhelmingly against them. After the initial series of victories, Japan had its first big defeat in the Battle of Midway, a mere six months after Pearl Harbor. From then on, it was all down hill, for reasons many had foreseen. [1] And as matters turned bad, then disastrous, the military leadership's reactions became ever more irrational, as if starting the war itself wasn't irrational enough. One of the more infamous examples of that irrationality is the use of the word *gyokusai*, the ancient Chinese word *yusui* pronounced the Japanese way,

meaning "to die gallantly as a jewel shatters." [2]

With the annihilation of its 2,500-man force on Attu Island, in the Aleutian Archipelago, a year after Midway, the Japanese military used the term for the first time in a formal document. The official announcement on May 30, 1943 stated that those unable to take part in the final attack because of wounds or illness committed suicide in advance of it. [3] The annihilations termed *gyokusai* after that saw the number of "shattered" soldiers increase: the Battle of Tarawa (November 21-23, 1943), 4,600 (17 surviving); the Battle of Kwajalein (January 30 to February 5, 1944), 7,900 (105 surviving); the Battle of Biak (May 27 to June 20, 1944), more than 10,000 (520 surviving); the Battle of Saipan (June 15 to July 9, 1944), 29,000 (921 surviving), and so on. [4]



Japanese soldiers killed in what is thought to have been their final charge on Attu Island

In that light, you might say that the Battle of Iwo Jima (February 19 to mid-March 1945 [5]) about which Clint Eastwood recently made twin films, one from the perspective of the defenders, did not create more deaths among Japanese forces than the Battle of Saipan only because the sulfuric island, one third the size of Manhattan, could not sustain more soldiers. The *gyokusai* there claimed 21,000 lives (1,000 surviving).

Gen. Kuribayashi Tadamichi, Commander of Japanese forces, Iwo Jima.

Photo touched up to show him as a full general, the rank to which he was promoted following the gyokusai. When he died, he was a lieutenant general. For a related article about him, click [here](#).

As a matter of fact, more than a year before the U.S. decided to send its soldiers into Iwo Jima, that is, in February 1944, Prime Minister Tojo Hideki, in his “emergency declaration,” had made the sweeping call: *ichioku gyokusai*, “100 million *gyokusai*.” It was a demand that the entire Japanese population be prepared to die. Japan’s mainland population at the time was 70 million, so he was also ordering Taiwanese and Koreans to meet the same fate.



Prime Minister Gen. Tojo Hideki

The Battle of the Philippines (fall 1944 to August 1945) is not usually cited as an example of *gyokusai*, but its essence was the same. Lt. Gen. Yamashita Tomoyuki, whom Tojo demoted after he made his name in Malaysia, suddenly found himself assigned to a place where no fortification efforts had been made and where his troops were woefully equipped and provisioned. What was the mission given him, then? Prolonging the war as long as possible against an enemy materially and numerically vastly superior. Yamashita told his troops, "Carry out resistance in perpetuity to provide assistance to the never-ending Imperial Fortune by turning yourselves into human pillars, unperturbed, for the Imperial Nation." [6] The "human pillar" or *hitobashira* is the idea dating from mythological times of sacrificing a human being to placate whatever it is that is creating havoc. The result: more than 450,000 Japanese soldiers died.



Lt. Gen. Yamashita Tomoyuki

The so-called kamikaze tactic [7] was put into practice during the Battle of Leyte Gulf (October 23-25, 1944). [8] Less than half a year later, when Vice Adm. Ito Seiichi showed reluctance to lead Japan's last sizable naval sortie, without air cover, to Okinawa on a similar suicidal mission, he was told, "You are requested to die gallantly in advance of the 100-million *gyokusai*." [9]



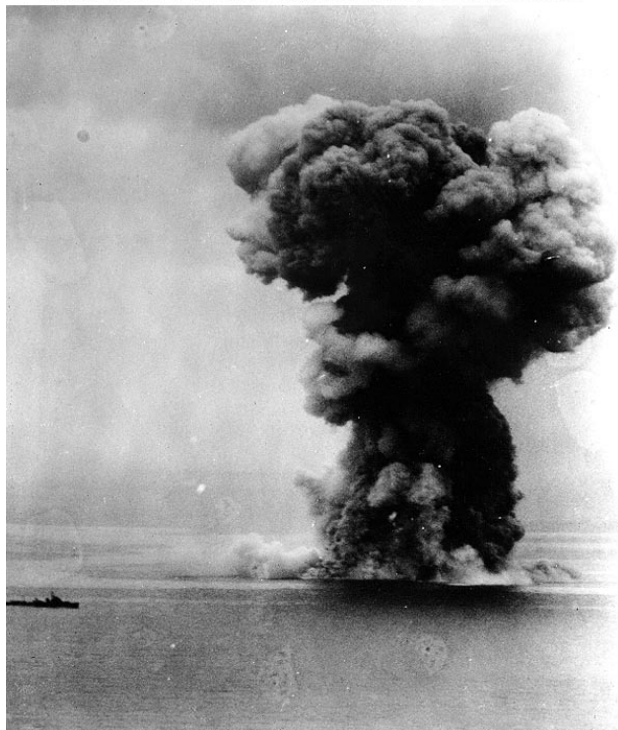
Vice Adm. Ito Seiichi

The result: six of the ten warships that made up the fleet were sunk, including the flagship Yamato, with 3,700 men lost.



Battleship Yamato running trials

Photo # NH 62582 Explosion of Japanese battleship Yamato, 7 April 1945



Yamato exploding with Ito on board

Not that the Japanese high command was as callous or as irrational as that from the outset. When they learned of U.S. forces massing

toward Attu in the spring of 1943, they tried to send a fleet to rescue the island's defense unit but the distance from the South Sea to the Aleutian Archipelago was too great and the mission was aborted. [10] The Japanese forces were overstretched, as Faubion Bowers learned firsthand earlier that year when he found himself in New Guinea. Bowers, later Gen. MacArthur's aide-de-camp and personal interpreter, read, among captured Japanese documents, booklets on edible plants and animals.[11] The Japanese troops were expected to survive in any area where they were deployed. The Japanese military had lost its logistical ability by then – actually, long before then.

That one notion behind *gyokusai*, in any event, had to be that of the injunction, “Die, rather than become a POW,” in the *Senjinkun*, “The Code of Conduct on the Battlefield” – was not exactly what I was thinking when I heard the news of the Okinawan protest rally, but just then I happened to be looking at the injunction and the code, in puzzlement and wonderment.



Tojo Hideki as a young army officer

Issued in January 1941 in the name of Tojo Hideki, then minister of the army, the *Senjinkun* is known today virtually for that command alone. Because of that, I was doubly surprised when I read the code, along with an account of how it came into being. First, I learned that the Japanese army prepared it in an attempt to counter the widespread collapse of military discipline on the Chinese front: “violence against superior officers, desertions, rape, arson, pillage” – the kind of criminal acts “not seen on the battlefields during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars,” wrote Shirane Takayuki, one of the small group of officers tasked to write it.[12] Shirane was no more than a cavalry lieutenant in the spring of 1939 when he was pulled from the unit confronting Chiang Kai-shek’s army to work on

the code, but he had studied philosophy and education at the Imperial University of Kyushu. By then, evidently, the Imperial Rescript to the Soldiers, issued in 1882, had lost its hold. What came to be known as the Nanjing Massacre was just one heinous manifestation of the loss of military discipline and order. So, most of the *Senjinkun* was devoted to reminding the soldiers, in much greater detail than the rescript, of the importance of upholding the honor of Imperial soldiers. Don’t get drunk, don’t get carried away by lust, do treat non-combatants with kindness, and so on.



The *Senjinkun*

What surprised me equally was the command in question, Part II, Article 8. As Shirane put it, after Japan’s defeat, the code as a whole won notoriety “from the humanistic viewpoint” because of the injunction, “Die, rather than become a POW.” But the wording confused me. A sentence with two parts in apparent parallelism, it did not entirely make sense to me. It said, as I saw it, something like, “Thou shall not suffer the shame of being taken prisoner while alive; thou shall not leave the infamy of crime and penalty when you die.” In short, it did not seem to say, “Rather than be taken prisoner, kill yourself.” Put another way, it seemed to say, “Do your best not to be taken captive.” Minus “shame,” the injunction to avoid capture may be universal. It occurs in the Code of the U.S. Fighting Force, for example.

So I asked my erudite friend at Cornell University, Kyoko Selden. After carefully parsing the two-part sentence, she concluded that the original does not seem to say what it has always been taken to mean. The “traditional” interpretation may have been deliberately encouraged, she suggested, or the existing idea led to that reading. I can readily support the latter possibility from Japan’s long military tradition.



Col. Yamazaki Yasuyo

Commander of the Attu Garrison Col. Yamazaki Yasuyo, in any event, knew exactly what the article meant when he cited it in his wire, on May 29, 1943:

Under ferocious attack by enemy land, sea, and air, the two battalions to the fore were both almost smashed. We have barely been able to sustain this day. I arranged so the wounded and

the ill in the field hospital were disposed of, the light ones by themselves, the serious ones by the medics. I made the civilian employees who were noncombatants each take up a weapon, form a unit, both army and navy combined, and follow the attack unit. We had them make a resolve [to die], lest we together suffer the shame of being taken prisoner while alive. It is not that there is no other way; I simply did not wish to sully the soldiers’ last moments. We will carry out a charge with the heroic spirits [of those killed in battle]. [13]

Other than Japan’s military tradition, there were a few factors that may have made the notion of *gyokusai* more or less acceptable, rather than condemnable as an outright military failure. Going to war was long equated with meeting death. Many military songs at the time attest to this. Most important among them is *Umi Yukaba* (When Seagoing). The Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) in 1937 commissioned Nobutoki Kiyoshi to compose it. The lyrics were an ancient military vow that Otomo no Yakamochi (716?-785) incorporated in his poem in the *Man’yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), the oldest extant anthology of Japanese poetry, and went: *Umi yukaba mizuku kabane*, etc.:

When seagoing, we might become watery corpses,

mountain-going, corpses for grasses to grow from.

Our wish is to die by our Sovereign’s side

with no looking back.[14]

This song, which was often sung in gatherings to send soldiers off to the front, went on to be

known as a “semi-national anthem.”[15]

Another song, which is said to have become the most popular, was also composed in 1937. It said, in its first stanza,

*For victory, I pledged,
and gallantly left the country.
Without exploits, I can't die. . . .*

and in the third,

*My father, appearing in a dream,
urged me, “Come home in death.”*

“Come home in death” (*Shinde kaere*), to paraphrase, means, “Fight with resolve to die on the battlefield and come home only as a soul.” These words are from “The Song of Bivouac” (*Roei no Uta* [16]). The lyrics were selected from those submitted by ordinary people in a 1937 newspaper contest. It was the year in which the Nanjing Massacre occurred.

There was another factor. Despite the Geneva Convention, “take no prisoners” was the prevailing practice at the time – not just in the Japanese but in the Chinese military as well. The US military, too, largely followed it in practice, if not as a matter of policy.

“We of course do not expect to return alive” (*Seira motoyori seikan o gosezu*) – so vowed Ebashi Shinshiro, representing all 25,000 university students, on October 21, 1943, at the ceremony in the Meiji Jingu Gaien stadium, in Tokyo, to send them off to the military.[17] Earlier that year, the Tojo cabinet had raised the eligible draft age to 45 and then abolished draft exemptions for university students. Ebashi was a student at the Faculty of Literature of the Imperial University of Tokyo. Prime Minister Tojo himself gave the farewell speech.

Tojo Hideki was forced out as prime minister following the defeat at Saipan, which included 5,000 suicides, many among civilians. There evidently was military coercion, though coercion in that milieu doesn’t carry much meaning. It was, in the first place, a total war; civilians were regarded as part of the war effort. Then there was the frenzy and hysteria created by the furies of war: bombing, bombardment, strafing, machine-gunning.

“The mass suicides by deliberate drowning or by rushing futilely against an overwhelming force, were, from the evidence, due to hysteria and despair [rather than “fanatic militarism”],” Helen Mears, in her 1948 book *Mirror for Americans: Japan*, concluded after cataloguing the myths being created and perpetuated by the New York Times editorialists and others even as their own reporters were saying different things. “There is strong reason to believe that the chief motive in many of the mass suicides was fear of what we would do to them should they surrender,” she went on to note. “Japanese propaganda against us (like ours against them) emphasized our savagery and ruthlessness as a foe. It is significant that we responded to such propaganda by killing more Japanese.”[18]

This brings us to the Battle of Okinawa, the biggest *gyokusai* as far as the military clashes to which the term is applied are concerned. To quash the Japanese forces defending the fragile archipelago, the U.S. amassed 550,000 soldiers with a vast armada of air and sea power. New York Times reporter W. H. Lawrence filed a report on the battle in June 1945, using blunt language that his successors at the newspaper 60 years later would not imagine deploying in reporting from Iraq, even though a vastly superior power does exactly the same thing: “Stated in its simplest terms we were able to announce the victory of Okinawa because the enemy had run out of caves and boulders from which to fight and we were nearly out of Japanese to kill.”[19] A later official U.S.

account put the number of Japanese soldiers killed in action at 110,070, with 7,401 captured. In addition, an estimated 100,000 civilians, between one quarter and one third of the Okinawa population, were killed.

Island people called the American assault “an iron storm” – a series of “shock and awe,” if you will, that lasted for three months. The government structure quickly disintegrated [20], the military command system rapidly splintered. With the idea of death over retreat or surrender prevailing, it would have been a miracle had no Japanese soldiers forced civilians to kill themselves or killed them outright in that chaos and madness.

This substantially expanded version of his column, “Fatal deliverance from an ‘iron storm,’” which appeared in The Japan Times on October 29, 2007, was written for Japan Focus. Posted at Japan Focus on February 9, 2008.

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For other articles on the Battle of Okinawa, *gyokusai* and Japanese historical memory see

1. [Compulsory Mass Suicide, the Battle of Okinawa, and Japan's Textbook Controversy](#), Aniya Masaaki, The Okinawa Times, and Asahi Shinbun. Translated by Kyoko Selden
2. [Shattering Jewels: 110,000 Okinawans Protest Japanese State Censorship of Compulsory Group Suicides](#), Kamata Satoshi, Shukan Kinyobi translated by Steve Rabson.



Tojo Hideki rescued after suicide attempt

Notes:

[1] Hiroaki Sato, “[Foreseeing the future – and ignoring it](#),” Japan Times, January 26, 2004.

[2] Most such words Japan adopted came from ancient Chinese texts. *Gyokusai* comes from a passage from the *History of North Qi*: “A great man might as well die as a jewel shatters; he cannot be like a tile left untouched.” North Qi was a Chinese Dynasty that lasted briefly, from 550 to 577.

[3] The Daihon’ei (Imperial Headquarters) announcement cited in the Japanese Wikipedia article on *gyokusai*, as well as [this site on the Attu gyokusai](#).

[4] Dates of battles and numbers of casualties here are mostly taken from Wikipedia (Japanese and English) and other readily available sources. They can differ from site to

site, from one account to another.

[5] Robert Sharrod, reporting from Iwo Jima for *Life*, wrote: “The island had been bombed for 74 straight days before D-Day. In January it had been thoroughly shelled by cruisers and battleships. For three days prior to D-Day many cruisers, battleships and destroyers poured more than 8,000 tons of high explosives on the eight square miles of Iwo Jima” (*Reporting World War II: Part Two: American Journalism 1944-1946*, Library of America, 1995, pp. 634-638). This shows that counting the duration of a battle from the day of landing makes little sense.

[6] Ooka Shohei’s *Leyte Senki* (Chuo Koron Sha, 1974), Vol. 3, p. 288. Ooka, a survivor of the Battle of the Philippines who went on to write such novels as *Fire on the Plain* and *Taken Captive*, wrote the detailed account of the Battle of Leyte Gulf “for the soldiers who died.”

[7] The proper term was “special attack force” (*tokubetsu kōgekitai*, abbr. *tokkōtai*). The Navy’s initial unit was named *Shimpu*, the sinified reading of a set of two Chinese characters (Chinese: *Shenfeng*), but the news accounts soon started giving it in its Japanese reading, *Kamikaze*, which stuck.

[8] Referring to Vice Adm. Kurita Takeo’s decision to abandon the battle in the Leyte Gulf midway, Ooka observed: “. . . when you really think about it, [Kurita’s failure to follow through the operation plans] corresponds to the inability of Japan as a whole to carry out, in August 1945, the [government’s call for] 100-million *gyokusai*.” *Leyte Senki*, Vol. 1, p. 259.

[9] The words of Vice Adm. Kusaka Ryunosuke, chief-of-staff of the Combined Fleet. See, for example, Yoshida Mitsuru’s life of Ito Seiichi, *Teitoku Ito Seiichi no Shogai* (Bungei Shunju, 1977), p. 161. Chapter 11 of his book is an attempt to puzzle out the “irrationality” of the action. Yoshida, a survivor of the sinking of the

Yamato, wrote *Requiem for Battleship Yamato*.

[10] Hayashi Shigeru, *Taiheiyo Senso* (Chuo Koron Sha, 1967; Vol. 25 of *Nihon no Rekishi*), pp. 340-342. His Majesty’s Aide-de-Camp Jo Eiichiro’s diary records the Showa Emperor’s concern about the fate of Attu. See Hando Kazutoshi’s compilation *Showa-shi Tansaku*, Vol. 6 (Chikuma Shobo, 2007), pp. 232-241.

[11] In Bowers’ talk at JETRO New York in the fall of 1995 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Japan’s surrender. Sato’s translation of the talk in the November 1995 issue of *OCS News*.

[12] *Senjinkun* and Shirane Takayuki’s account cited in full in Hando Kazutoshi’s *Showa-shi Tansaku*, Vol. 5, pp.143-157.

[13] The Internet site on the Attu *gyokusai* cited in note 3 carries Yamazaki’s wireless message in its entirety (with a couple of orthographic errors). If the message cited here reproduces the original, Hayashi, quoting it, p. 341, toned it down considerably. His Majesty’s Aide-de-Camp Jo (see note 10), noting the *gyokusai* in his entry on May 30, 1943, added a parenthetical remark: “In recent times, ‘moving stories’ from the frontline, in many cases, appear [intended] to make up for operational deficiencies.” Jo was killed in battle as captain of the aircraft carrier Chiyoda on October 25, 1944 during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. In his oral recollections of the war, Ooka Shohei said that the Imperial Guard Infantry Regiment, to which he was assigned after being drafted at age 35, despised the *Senjinkun* in general and Article 8, Part II, in particular. Ooka, *Senso* (Iwanami Shoten, 2007; originally 1970), p. 60.

[14] Hiroaki Sato, *Legends of the Samurai* (Overlook Press, 1995), pp. 17-18. *Umi Yukaba* can readily be heard on the Internet. Click [here](#) for a youtube video.

[15] Technically, Japan had no national anthem until the Japanese government recently made

Kimigayo the official anthem.

[16] Shigure Otowa's *Nihon Kayoshu* (Shakai Shiso Sha, 1963). p. 295. *Roei no Uta* can also be heard on the Internet. Click [here](#) for a youtube video.

[17] Hando's *Showa-shi Tansaku*, Vol. 6, pp. 257-259.

[18] Helen Mears, *Mirror for Americans: Japan* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), p. 81.

[19] Mears, p. 88.

[20] The daylong bombing involving 1,300 aircraft on October 10, 1944 destroyed 90% of Naha City. Governor Izumi Shuki, along with

other prefectural officials, began shirking work; Izumi, as a matter of fact, secured appointment as governor of Kagawa while visiting Tokyo and never returned to Okinawa. Shimada Akira, newly appointed governor in January 1945, arrived on the thirty-first and ordered all prefectural employees to return to work. On March 24th US pre-landing bombardment began, forcing Shimada to disperse government work to five different caves the following day. From then on he had to move from cave to cave until early July when, injured, he shot himself. See "Saigo no Okinawa Kenchiji," Yomota Inuhiko ed., *Nakano Yoshio* (Chikuma Shobo, 1993), pp. 208-254. Also, Tanaka Yozo, *Okinawa no Shimamori* (Chuo Koron Sha, 2006; originally 2003).