

'Little Citizens' and 'Star Pupils': Military Middle Schools in Wartime Japan

Adam Lebowitz

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Translated and adapted by Adam Lebowitz



Children at a nursery school in Wakayama shout banzai on hearing the news of the capture of Nanjing, December 1937. The accompanying article reported that afterwards they prepared imonbukuro care packages of soap and candies for soldiers at the front (see magazine covers below) and said enthusiastically, "When I grow up they'll send me one, too!"

Translator's Introduction: On 17 July, 2006, *The Asahi Shinbun* began a daily feature entitled *Shashin ga Kataru Senso* (The war as photos tell it) based on photos taken during World War II by the newspaper's cameramen. Stored in an Osaka warehouse during the Occupation, the photos are now being catalogued and stored digitally. Accompanying the introductory article was an explanatory statement: "The collection of 70,000 prints leaves behind an immediate (nama-namashiku nokosarete-iru) record of the lives of individuals at the front in China, in the colonies, and in areas occupied by the Imperial

Army." The first prints shown – soldiers and nurses at the front in China, anti-atrocity graffiti in Nanjing, kindergarten students in Jakarta raising Boys' Day carp banners, grass-skirted girls in a Yap Island primary school, a child laborer in a Korean silk factory wearing a "Rising Sun" headband among others -- demonstrate the intended scope of the feature.

If considered as an editorial statement, the explanation is important because it counters the logic of denial. This is because researchers and politicians who argue against Imperial Army responsibility for atrocities point to lack of material evidence in the form either of official orders or visible proof: nothing is "left behind". The *Asahi's* feature in contrast provides visual evidence that is "left behind" (nokosarete-iru) to illustrate the violence and coerciveness of the wartime regime.

The coercive nature of primary and secondary education during the war was the subject of the 8 July, 2007 edition featuring military boarding middle schools (rikugun yonen gakko). It is not difficult to see how such an issue has current relevance beyond historical debate. Recent Japan Focus articles on changes to Japan's education curriculum ([Japan's Education Law Reform and the Hearts of Children](#) and [Hammering Down the Educational Nail: Abe Revises the Fundamental Law of Education](#)) have noted the renewed emphasis on patriotism and "morality". As the photos and interviews in the *Asahi* article show, given certain conditions a patriotic education can easily convince children that the only "just death" (isagiyoishi) is self-sacrifice for the nation. A.L.

Believing in the Righteousness of a Noble Death



Children from a village primary school perform a “dogfight” which was watched and praised by Army Minister Tochigi in February 1940. The airplanes were built by students from the local girls’ high school for the Military Banner Festival.

In the 1930’s as the military strengthened its position in the highest echelon of government, children’s lives became more colored by wartime ideology. In 1934 the first directive ordering schools to train students “psychologically and physically” was issued. This was followed by the Education Edict of March 1941 that renamed primary schools *ko kumin gakko* (schools for national citizenry). The goal was to provide primary-level education in the imperial way and to polish and perfect (*rensei*) the individual’s sense of national duty. Martial arts, formation drills, model recitations, and ritualized displays of respect for the Emperor became part of the regular curriculum. Pre- and primary-school age children were called *sho-kokumin* (literally “little citizens”).

As Japan’s wartime situation deteriorated, in June 1944 the Cabinet declared a general evacuation for all children in urban areas likely to be affected by bombing. This was followed

by a full mobilization of all middle-school-age children for work in factories in August. In April 1945 schools were ordered to participate full time in the war effort and regular education effectively ceased. The Imperial Army and Navy, which had begun recruiting volunteers 16 years old and over in 1930, had lowered the recruitment age to 14 by the war’s end. Posters for the Youth Air Corps appeared in schools and on street corners. Just before Japan’s surrender, student recruits received minimum training before being sent to the front.

During the war all children devoted their time outside of school to the national

defense by participating in air raid drills and collecting metal. Playtime was *senso-gokko*, “make-believe warfare”, such as making toy guns or engaging in battles. Children’s magazines dedicated themselves to the promotion of militaristic mentality through articles celebrating the military and pictorials of tanks, battleships, and other weapons. The Asahi Shinbun and the major publishing house Kodansha also produced their own weeklies for “little citizens.”

Military Middle Boarding Schools



Students at a girls' middle school practice wearing gas masks, Osaka, September, 1937

On April 1, 1940 - "Year 2600" in the imperial reign calendar adopted by the government linking the modern nation of Japan with a mythical founding - the Osaka Military Middle School inducted its 44th class, the first in 18 years. Out of over 15 00 13- and 14-year olds taking the entrance examination 150 were accepted, and as "Star Pupils" (*Hoshi no Seito*) wore the coveted epaulettes embossed with gold stars. Today, 81-year-old Ando Mineo remembers that day standing in front of the new students to introduce them formally to the principal, Lt. Hayashi. "I was so nervous I was shaking. There was this pride that, although we were not real soldiers, we were the youngest members of the Imperial Army.



In this photo from the Osaka Asahi Shinbun (2 April, 1940), Ando Mineo (in front), Baba Junzo and the other new students swear allegiance and fidelity to the state during their matriculation ceremony at the Osaka Military Middle School.

By the beginning of the twentieth century six primary schools for training officers had been established across Japan in Tokyo, Sendai, Nagoya, Osaka, Hiroshima, and Kumamoto, but given the movement towards world disarmament following World War I all except the Tokyo school were closed. This situation was reversed during the 1930s when Japan remilitarized and colonized Manchuria. The Osaka school was relocated from its former premises near Osaka Castle south to the former residence of the famous fourteenth century samurai Kusunoki Masashige. The move was considered significant for the students' spiritual education: Kusunoki, who had committed battlefield *seppuku* with 600 loyal troops in a hopeless campaign ordered by Emperor Go-Daigo, epitomized the highest standards of fealty. In December 1941 at the start of the Pacific War the school principal affirmed his commitment to teaching the nobility of dying for the emperor. According to Ando's classmate and former soldier Baba Junzo, 82, "Dying for the nation became an inescapable part of our consciousness."

The Asahi Shinbun covered the school twice in the 1940s in articles entitled "Nurturing the Spirit of the Imperial Army" and "Even as they learn history and math, all materials have but

one objective." The three-year course did not differ significantly from the standard junior high school education with a special emphasis on "cultivating a warrior spirit." All students slept in barracks and woke at 6 a.m. to reveille. Then they dressed in uniform, stood in formation, bowed in the direction of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, recited from a military primer, and had their rifles inspected. Students were taught how to handle the katana sword, imperial history, army regulations, military music, and kendo and weapons training.



Morning calisthenics at the Tokyo Infantry Middle School, 1943.

Physical education included mountain climbing, swimming, and formation drilling. Before going to sleep there was silent contemplation. Psychologist and writer Nada Inada (78) was 14 when he entered the Sendai school in 1944 and remembers life as "*gunkoku-shonen*" (literally "military youth") that included much war gaming and leading recycling drives for the war effort. "Ninety-nine out of 100 children were *gunkoku-shonen*. In life, I thought there was only one path in life: to be a soldier. Children are easily molded: just give them a patriotic education and send them to the front. They're very convenient."



Uwajima Middle School students receive anti-aircraft gun training on the City Hall roof, September 1936.

A number of A-Class war criminals graduated from these schools including former Prime Minister Tojo Hideki and Army General Itagaki Seishiro. According to Kobe University historian Nomura Rieko, who has written on the wartime school system, "Graduates were generally slated for the top positions. Separated from their families and wider society at an early age, their thinking was elitist and militaristic. They were taught to believe they would become leaders of the country."

After Japan's defeat, the military schools were closed. Thirty years after it closed, a history of the Osaka school was published revealing pride amongst its graduates -- a member of the fourth graduating class said, "Many were extremely self-confident and reliant" -- but also some soul-searching: a member of the 22nd class reported, "Central Command's knowledge of the US and Britain was very slim." After graduation, Ando Mineo entered officer's training in the infantry air corps, and was sent to Manchuria in the spring of 1945. Captured by the Soviet Army, he spent three years as a POW. Concerning these experiences, Ando said: "In Siberia, those with special skills in barbering or carpentry received the bread. If you had these skills, you could survive. If your whole education was dedicated to military training, well, you just couldn't sustain yourself

living off that pride.”

Daily Schedule of the Osaka Military Middle Boarding School

6:00 Reveille, roll-call, paying respects to Emperor, calisthenics, washing-up, weapons inspection
 6:45 Prayers and breakfast
 7:15 Study
 7:45 Uniform inspection
 8:00 Classes
 10:50 Rest, exercise
 11:05 Classes
 12:10 Lunch, rest, health inspection
 13:00 Classes or study
 14:05 Training and practice (tutoring, exercise, kendo, military psychology, etc.)
 16:00 Extra-curricular activity
 16:50 Weapons cleaning, bathing, dinner, one hour of study
 19:50 Second hour of study
 20:50 Silent contemplation
 21:00 Roll call
 21:30 Lights out



Covers from two wartime children's magazines showing imonbukuro "care packages" prepared for the troops (note the sword carried by the boy in the lefthand cover). The cover of Kinderbook (right) has the subtitle "Thank you, soldiers." Kinderbook celebrates its 80th anniversary in 2007, but from 1942-45 it was called "Mikuni no Kodomo" (Children of the Beautiful Country).

For additional reports on wartime children, see:

- [Owen Griffiths, Militarizing Japan: Patriotism, Profit, and Children's Print Media, 1894-1925](#)
- [Takahashi Akihiro, Ground Zero 1945. A Schoolboy's Story](#)

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