

# "The Most Crucial Education": Saotome Katsumoto and Japanese Anti-War Thought

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By Matthew Penney

Tahara Soichiro's *Nihon no sengo* (Japan's postwar), a recent work of Japanese popular history from one of the country's best-selling and most widely read journalists, bears the provocative subtitle "Were we mistaken?" [1] This question, asked of the entire postwar period, is representative of a significant current in contemporary Japanese thought – the idea that Japan has strayed from the "correct" path and failed to live up to international "norms". In recent years, Japanese debates about war and peace, on both sides of the ideological divide, have been influenced by this view. Conservatives play up the idea that the Japanese constitution, which explicitly forbids participation in armed conflict and the maintenance of military forces, means that the nation has not been able to play a role in world affairs appropriate to its economic might. Progressives criticize the Japanese government's failure to adequately apologize and compensate the victims of colonialism and war for aggression and atrocities. In both views, Japan is abnormal, and incapable of living up to "universals" – either the "universal" right to self-defense and duty to participate in international conflicts like the "war on terror", or the necessity to inculcate the view that "war is wrong" and the idea that past crimes must be dealt with honestly in the public sphere.

In the 11 September 2005 election, the Liberal Democrats won a landslide victory, capturing

295 seats in the Diet. Progressive parties like the Japanese Communist Party and Social Democratic Party, whose representation plummeted in the 1990s, were held to a mere nine and seven seats respectively. Nevertheless, when polled about the Liberal Democratic Party's goal of constitutional revision, 62% of Japanese questioned responded that they would not approve of the elimination of the "peace-clause". [2] This suggests that while progressives have failed to secure seats in the Diet, their fundamental position on war and peace has considerable currency. A significant reason behind this is the prevalence of anti-war images in Japanese popular culture.

Author Saotome Katsumoto wrote in 2002 of the "war on terror": "Terrorism is, of course, a form of violence difficult to forgive, but the war being waged in retaliation is also violence ... where and in what way can we put on the brakes?" [3] For Saotome, war is wrong, and the "war on terror" an unjustifiable threat to world peace. Saotome, a survivor of the 10 March 1945 American air raid on Tokyo that killed over 100,000 civilians and left five million homeless, became a popular anti-war author. He is also a veteran grass-roots socialist activist and a lifelong supporter of progressive politics. After writing for *Akahata* (Red Flag), the Japan Communist Party paper in the 1960s and the 1970s, Saotome moved into a career as a writer of non-fiction. [4] He is one of Japan's most prolific authors on subjects of war and peace having written volumes for some of the most significant non-fiction series in the Japanese language – the *Shinsho* series from Iwanami Shoten aimed at adults and the

Iwanami Junior Shinsho and Kusa no ne haha to ko de miru (Grassroots mother and child see) series for children. These works are a staple at public and school libraries across Japan and at major booksellers.



Photograph of Tokyo in the wake of firebombing of March 10, 1945

Saotome's work highlights peace as a "universal" value. For example, he wrote: "The twentieth century is often said to be the century of war. Of course, in the first half there were two world wars and in the second there were various civil wars and conflicts which did not go away, but we must also turn our eyes to a movement in human history to outlaw war." [5] He points to the failed League of Nations and to the United Nations as significant steps in the direction of this "universal" anti-war ideal. [6] He also emphasizes the UN charter and the promise "[t]o save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind" as embodying a "universal" goal. [7] Saotome quotes Oscar Arias Sanchez, the former president of Costa Rica, a country that he admires for disbanding its military, who says "[y]ou cannot protect us by digging trenches or putting up high defensive walls. Instead, we need to educate human hearts to believe in goodwill, harmony, human tolerance, generosity, and sympathy." [8]

Saotome has long emphasized the importance of anti-war education: "'Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it' is the warning of philosopher George Santayana and at present, I think that the first thing that we can do for the sake of peace is to know and to learn." [9] Through education, "universal" values and the "universal" goal "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" can be achieved. Saotome's perspective is not only rooted in local narratives and the image of the Japanese people as victims of war. It draws upon a wide variety of anti-war images. His books include *Haha to ko de miru: Nankin kara no tegami* (Mother and child see: a letter from Nanking) and *Betonamu 200 man nin gashi no kiroku: 1945 nen nihon senryo no moto de* (A record of the starvation of 2,000,000 in Vietnam: 1945 under Japanese occupation).

Writing on the atomic bombs and the firebombing of Japanese cities, Saotome sympathetically portrays the plight of Japanese victims. This "victim's narrative" exists, however, side by side with powerful statements of Japanese as assailants in war. In the hands of writers like Saotome, perspectives like victim and assailant, inside and outside, are not dichotomous but can constitute a comprehensive critique of war. The suffering brought about through the use of organized violence, be it the suffering of the Japanese people in war, the suffering of others at Japanese hands, or suffering as manifested in international anti-war symbols like Auschwitz and Vietnam, are all conveyed to readers.

I will examine three of Saotome's major works to highlight the central themes of his perspective on war. The 1979 children's title *Tokyo ga moeta hi* (The day Tokyo burned), while primarily concerned with the suffering of Japanese civilians in wartime, also shows the Japanese as assailants in war, thereby providing a critique of Japan-centric narratives. In a similar vein *Betonamu 200 man nin gashi*

no kiroku: 1945 nen nihon senryo no moto de offers a critique not only of past actions by the US and Japan, but also of contemporary Japan. Finally, *Ikiru koto to manabu koto* (Living and learning), published in 1997, uses war to illustrate Saotome's philosophy of education and his understanding of war and peace. In sum, Saotome deploys both global and local themes to zero in on both international wars and Japan's war experiences.

### The Day Tokyo Burned

In 1979, Iwanami Shoten, Japan's leading progressive publisher, inaugurated a non-fiction series for children patterned after its most popular line, the Shinsho series. The series introduces historical and cultural themes. The editors wrote:

You, the young generation, are standing at the starting line of your lives ... modern society is burdened with many contradictions ... the threat of the annihilation of humanity through nuclear war, human inequality beginning with the gap between rich and poor ... for the peace and development of mankind, you urgently need to apply yourselves and gain new wisdom. [10]

Saotome Katsumoto's *Tokyo ga moeta hi*, the fifth volume in the Junior Shinsho series which has since swelled to nearly 500 titles, remains in print today. Saotome explained: I wrote this book with a desire to tell of my experiences at 12 years old, on that day, 10 March, to my own child who has suddenly become a middle school student of that same age, and to other members of that generation." [11]

These comments fit into a larger trend in Japanese popular thought – resistance to what has been described as the *fuka* (weathering) of war experience and the importance of teaching the lessons of the Pacific War to “children who do not know war”. The latter phrase is the title of a hit 1968 folk tune which struck a popular chord in its description of a Japan in which over

half of the population were born after the end of the war. [12] The necessity to teach about the “tragedy of war” to this group became an important factor in discourses about education and in historical writing for children. [13] This was a major concern of Saotome's, expressed most clearly when he wrote:

"If you ask ‘what day is 10 March?’ I wonder how many people can quickly recall the Tokyo air raid? Just recently, while working for a certain broadcaster, I put the microphone in front of Tokyo primary school students and when I asked that question, the children just turned their heads and looked blank. I thought that there would at least be one child who knows about the Tokyo air raid but the result was zero. Although it was something I had envisioned, I was still surprised and depressed." [14]

Saotome begins his anti-war appeal and argument for the importance of remembrance and education with the idea of the Japanese people as victims of war:

"Like the sorrowful tragedy of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I had wanted to think that children would be encouraged to keep in their hearts, in some form, the memory of 10 March Tokyo air raid in which 100,000 lives were lost in a single night, as an example of the importance and dignity of human lives. However, I wonder if this was only my hope?" [15]

This attempt to bring about the “peace and development of mankind” begins by recalling the firebombing of Tokyo alongside the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Tokyo ga moeta hi* vividly describes the mindset behind the indiscriminate bombing of civilians. Of General LeMay, who orchestrated the American bombing campaign, Saotome writes that:

"We can well understand how much General

LeMay valued the lives of his subordinates [and such an attitude] was not just limited to General LeMay. . . . If the life of one person was treasured so greatly, what can be made of the 100,000 lives lost in a single night by indiscriminate bombing? Was it the same as wiping out small bugs?" [16]

He continues:

"However, if we are going to condemn the indiscriminate bombing of ordinary civilians, it is not only LeMay and America. We also cannot lose sight of the fact that in 1937, the year of the outbreak of the war between Japan and China, the Japanese army, after occupying the Chinese capital of Nanking and massacring civilians there, chased Chiang Kai-shek's government to ... the city of Chongqing and from February of the following year carried out indiscriminate bombing raids that included non-combatants as targets some 46 times." [17]

With the Chinese example, Saotome transcends the "Japanese as victim" conceptualization to universalize the plight of civilians in wartime bombing. The suggestion, common in the English-language press and in monographs like Erna Paris' *Long Shadows: truth, lies, and history*, that Japanese authors exclusively project the image of Japanese as victims in war is overly simplistic. [18] Saotome looks at the problem of indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations from a variety of angles, showing Japanese people both as victims and assailants.

Saotome extends the discussion of LeMay and civilian bombing to the Vietnam War: "LeMay, using the B52 strategic bomber ... in place of the B29, rained North Vietnam with fire - genocidal indiscriminate bombing - all the while saying 'I'll bomb them back into the stone age.'" [19]



General Curtis LeMay

The bombing of North Vietnam provided a rallying point for anti-war thinkers including Saotome. Saotome emphasizes not only American aggression in Vietnam but Japan's supporting role. From the firebombing of Tokyo and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Japanese atrocities in China and provision of support for US bombing of Vietnam, Saotome presents a compelling palette of US war crimes complementing his critique of Japanese crimes in the Pacific War. In the 1980s, Saotome condemned Japanese war atrocities in the same terms he used to promote awareness among young readers of the bombing of Tokyo.

### Starvation Under Occupation



In 1993, Saotome published a book aimed at adults entitled *Betonamu 200 man nin gashi no kiroku: 1945 nen nihon senryo no moto de*. [20] As is usual in Saotome's non-fiction, he begins by relating his own experiences. He writes about wartime rationing, about how school supplies for children were far from a priority during the war years, and about feelings of dejection. [21] The first part of the work, which describes Japanese mothers crying because they did not know where they would get the rice to feed their children, sets the stage for the discussion of Vietnamese hardships. [22] The image of Japanese suffering is an effective jumping-off point for Saotome's subsequent commentary. This is an important element of the work's structure and a technique that Saotome has exploited frequently. After outlining rice shortages in wartime Japan, he tells how rice taken from Vietnam (then under Japanese rule) precipitated famine there that some believe may have claimed over 2,000,000 lives. [23]

Saotome also states that his research helped him "to understand the true form of the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' that Japanese militarism had built up in Indochina." [24] He paints a startling picture of starvation in words and photographs to bring out the full force of the tragedy.

However, Saotome is interested in doing more than showing the Japanese army as assailants of the Vietnamese population. Most of the rice taken from the Vietnamese, the cause of mass starvation, was consumed by Japanese civilians. [25] Saotome makes this point in part to force his audience to think about the issues of agency in war, about victims and assailants, and in part to inspire reflection on Japan's prosperity and place in the world in 1993. He writes, "Starvation, refugees, and the poverty problem are not just things of the distant past. According to a UNICEF report from late last year, 35,000 children die of malnutrition and disease every day ... I hope that this book will

help us consider the human condition from the past to the present and into the future." [26]

Saotome deploys historical examples as the basis for a contemporary critique designed to inspire reflection on global poverty and to emphasize Japan's responsibility to provide aid for the less fortunate.

### "The Elite"—Auschwitz and Unit 731

In 1997 Saotome published *Ikiru koto to manabu koto* (Living and learning) in the Iwanami Junior Shinsho series. [27] The work deals with war but focuses on the critique of elitism – elite students or elite bureaucrats. "Elite" status and the assumption that justice and rationality go along with it, he argues, are behind the scientific and organized killing that took place at Auschwitz. [28]

Saotome describes his first visit to Auschwitz in powerful terms: "I still can't forget the violent shock that I received when I first visited here." [29] It was the mountains of eyeglasses and children's toys that made the biggest impression on the author.



Mountain of eyeglasses at Auschwitz

Saotome links the crimes of Auschwitz to elements of the Nazi organization and the "elite" status of its leaders. Saotome does not blame what happened on the "German

character” but rather on flawed values that are not limited to Nazi Germany. “I am just another human being; if I was placed in the same position, I wonder if I would have done the same thing.” [30]

Saotome’s comments about Auschwitz and universal responsibility serve as a jumping off point for a discussion of Japanese war crimes. “If we move our eyes from Europe to the nations of Asia, Japanese militarism’s fangs of aggression were being bared with rage.” [31]

He discusses Unit 731, a branch of the Japanese army charged with developing biological and chemical weapons in Manchuria and North China, which carried out human experimentation, ending in the murder of more than 3,000 Chinese and other victims. The elite status of the doctors and the “scientific progress” represented by their experiments legitimated the atrocities that Saotome describes in horrific detail. He also introduces an analogy that strikes close to home for Americans, writing that the scientists “... assumed that they had made a contribution to Japanese medicine. This is just like the researchers devoted to the development of weapons of mass destruction like the atomic bomb.” [32]

In his discussion of “the elite”, Saotome not only presents the Chinese as victims, but an association between Nazi terror in Europe, Japanese aggression in Asia, and US firebombing and atomic bombing of Japanese civilians.

## Conclusion

Saotome Katsumoto’s anti-war commentary reflects a deep personal conflict. He writes of his own war experience: “I can’t say ‘I was just a kid so I was a victim of war’ and leave it at that. Even if just for a short time, I worked in a weapons factory – I have an assailant’s side as well. How should I think about this?” [33] He

has attempted to answer this question in a lifetime of anti-war education – appealing to Japan’s direct responsibility even while exploring global anti-war symbols such as Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam.

Saotome examines the interplay between the Japanese people as victims of war, as in the Tokyo and Hiroshima bombings, and as assailants, as in the China war and signature atrocities such as the comfort women and Unit 731, and ranging over past and present both to appeal to a common humanity and to highlight Japan’s responsibility.

Others have deployed “universal” symbols of war and atrocity for precisely opposite ends. Since 1996, members of the Atarashii rekishi kyokasho wo tsukurukai (Society for the Creation of a New History Textbook) and like-minded writers have also employed globalized images in their writing. Their aim, far from documenting Japanese responsibility for war crimes, however, has been to downplay Japanese imperialism and aggression as no more than trivial examples among far greater atrocities. Nishio Kanji, in his influential *Kokumin no rekishi* (History of the people of the nation) for example, plays up examples from other countries, noting that “This book is overflowing with interest in foreign countries as there are even more references to China, Europe and America than to Japan.” [34] Nishio’s examples, particularly those of European and American imperialism, are designed precisely to excuse Japan’s brutal colonial domination throughout Asia as a reaction to the “Western” threat in a period when imperialism was considered a given and thus entirely justifiable. [35] The universal example in Nishio’s hands provides a rationale for all Japanese wartime behavior. Similarly, in the popular *Sensoron* (On War), manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori uses the abuses of Western imperialists in Asia to justify Japanese actions. [36] These arguments stress that Japan is not unique, and that what critics present as

its flaws are instead “universal values”. Ironically, such views emphasizing the universality of colonialism, war and atrocity, are frequently coupled in the work of writers like Kobayashi and Nishio with insistence on Japanese uniqueness, usually in the form of glorification of the wartime rhetoric of freedom and cooperation in “Greater East Asia”.

In the end, however, revisionist viewpoints have, in the works of Saotome Katsumoto and other likeminded authors, a powerful popular counterpoint. The awareness that Japanese have been both victims and victimizers in war is not limited to Saotome. It can be found in the works of noted Japanese scholar-activists such as Oda Makoto, Ienaga Saburo, and Fujiwara Akira. It is also an important dimension of many works published outside of Japan such as John Dower’s *War Without Mercy*, which discusses cruelties on all sides of the Pacific conflict. [37] Other works such as the collection *Censoring History*, edited by Laura Hein and Mark Selden, also bring this problem into focus. [38] The view of the Japanese as both victim and aggressor has also surfaced in works such as Gomikawa Junpei’s bestselling novel *Ningen no Joken* (*The Human Condition*). Saotome’s importance lies not in the uniqueness of his ideas but in the breadth and depth of his approach. Drawing on images of the Japanese as both victims and assailants in war as well as myriad international anti-war symbols, Saotome has written popular works for adults and children for over three decades. In this time, he has challenged revisionists, pushed for the preservation of the “peace clause” of the Japanese constitution, and taken steps to ensure that Chinese and other Asian voices are heard in the chorus of Japanese war remembrance.

Japanese academic writing has offered a prolific and nuanced critique of wartime atrocities. Academic works, however, are rarely accessible to popular audiences, particularly to children. Reaching these readers demands a

very different tone and means of articulating ideas about history. It is here that Saotome Katsumoto’s genius for communicating difficult themes to all levels of Japan’s reading public becomes evident. Saotome has successfully drawn upon the image of the Japanese side as both victim and assailant in war in support of a comprehensive anti-war critique. He has also demonstrated a gift for bringing historical themes into contemporary focus. His use of the Nazi and Unit 731 examples to question the nature of Japanese education is a powerful case in point. In this way, his anti-war themes transcend a purely historical discussion and become part of a far-reaching social critique. Saotome’s basic message that “war is wrong” and that education must guard against it may be a simple one, but in a time when rightwing sound bites have become increasingly strong, and in the context of the Japanese government’s continued ambiguity and silence on issues of aggression and atrocity, it is significant. Theodore Adorno, in a 1966 radio broadcast entitled “Education After Auschwitz”, commented that “The demand that Auschwitz must never happen again is the most crucial education. It is so much more important than anything else that I don’t feel I have to or should justify it.” [39] This is a vision of education, of anti-war thought, and of reflection on past atrocities to inform the present. It is also striking in its simplicity. Saotome Katsumoto’s writings promote a similar, simple message. This, however, is his strength, his talent for bringing to mass audiences the idea that “war is wrong”, a point that, supported by a variety of anti-war images from within Japan and without, he considers the “most crucial education”.

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(Routledge). Posted at Japan Focus on December 3, 2005. He can be contacted at [penneym@hotmail.com](mailto:penneym@hotmail.com).

## Notes:

- [1] Tahara Soichiro, *Nihon no sengo* (Japan's Postwar) Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2005).
- [2] Tabuchi, H, 'Japan seeks to amend pacifist constitution.' [Available at:](#)
- [3] Saotome Katsumoto, *Kataritsugu senso: 15 nin no dengon* (Passing on the war: the testimony of 15 people) (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo, 2002), pp. 3-4.
- [4] Saotome Katsumoto, *Saotome Katsumoto* (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Senta, 2004) pp. 252-3.
- [5] Saotome Katsumoto, *Kataritsugu senso*, p. 3.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [9] Saotome Katsumoto, 'Ima senso o kangaeru' (Considering war now), in Iwanami Shoten Henshubu ed. *Boku-tachi no ima* (Our now), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002), p. 67.
- [10] Iwanami Shoten Henshubu, 'Iwanami jyunia shinsho no hossoku ni sai shite (On the occasion of the start of Iwanami Junior Shinsho)', in Iwanami Shoten Henshubu ed. *Bokutachi no ima* (Our now) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002).
- [11] Saotome Katsumoto, *Tokyo ga moeta hi* (The day Tokyo burned) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979), p. 212.
- [12] Kitayama Osamu, "Senso wo shiranai kodomotachi," (The children who do not know war) in *Nihon no uta* (Japanese songs), vol. 4 (Tokyo: Nobarasha, 1998), p. 123.
- [13] Yoshida Yutaka, *Nihonjin no Sensokan* (Japanese views of war) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), pp. 106-8.
- [14] Saotome, *Tokyo ga moeta hi*, p. 209.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 204-5.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- [18] Erna Paris, *Long Shadows - Truth, Lies and History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

- [19] Saotome, *Tokyo ga moeta hi*, p. 206.
- [20] Saotome Katsumoto, *Betonamu 200 man nin gashi no kiroku: 1945 nen nihon senryo no moto de* (A record of the starvation of 2,000,000 in Vietnam: 1945 under Japanese occupation) (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten, 1993).
- [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- [23] The figure of 2,000,000 dead that Saotome uses has been challenged. It was the figure accepted by the Vietminh, but in 1945, Vietnamese government officials estimated the total dead at around 400,000. In addition, while Japanese rice requisitions were a major factor behind the famine, typhoon damage and the disruption of rice transport as a result of American bombing were also contributing factors. Ogura Sadao, *Monogatari Betonamu no Rekishi* (The Story of Vietnamese History) (Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 1997), pp. 345-346.
- [24] Saotome Katsumoto, *Betonamu 200 man nin gashi no kiroku*, p. 177.
- [25] *Ibid.*, pp. 129-44.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- [27] Saotome Katsumoto, *Ikiru koto to manabu koto* (Living and learning) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997).
- [28] *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.
- [29] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- [30] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- [31] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- [32] *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- [33] Saotome Katsumoto, *Senso to kodomo-tachi* (War and children) (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten, 2003), p. 2.
- [34] Nishio Kanji, *Kokumin no rekishi* (History of the people of the nation) (Tokyo: Sankei Shimbun-sha, 1999), p. 768.
- [35] Kibata, Y. 'Kokumin no rekishi no seiozo to nihon teikoku shugi (The view of the West of history of the people of the nation and Japanese imperialism)', in *Kyokasho ni Shinjitsu to Jiyu o' Renraku-kai* (ed.) *Tettei hihan: kokumin no rekishi* (A complete criticism of history of the people of the nation) (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten, 2000), pp. 245-7.
- [36] Kobayashi Yoshinori, *Sensoron* (Tokyo:



Gentosha, 1998), pp. 27-34.

[37] John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

[38] Laura Hein, Mark Selden, ed., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan,*

*Germany, and the United States* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2000).

[39] Rathenow, H., "Teaching the Holocaust in Germany", in Ian Davies ed. *Teaching the Holocaust - Educational Dimensions, Principles and Practices* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 73