

**The Group Suicides (Coerced Group Deaths) of the Battle of Okinawa****Aniya Masaaki****January 6, 2008**<http://www.japanfocus.org/-Aniya-Masaaki/2629>

The nearly three-month long Battle of Okinawa (April-June 1945) saw what was arguably the most intense combat of the Asia-Pacific theater of World War II and marked the only battle of that war that unfolded on Japanese soil. It is estimated that one in three residents of Okinawa Island—mostly civilians-- lost their lives during the battle. It is readily understandable to outside observers why this experience might generate a strong streak of pacifism in contemporary Okinawan political culture. Less readily apparent to the uninformed observer is why the same experience would generate resentment against the *Japanese* military that was ostensibly defending compatriots from the American attack. Yet the battle not only did so but has also become a source of recurrent conflict among Okinawans themselves, and between Okinawans and the mainland government. Okinawa International University professor emeritus Aniya Masaaki elucidates the historical reasons behind the controversy by describing the circumstances surrounding the “group suicides” of Okinawan civilians that occurred in various parts of the prefecture during the battle and a ground-level account of one such group suicide. It deserves note that this article was written just when controversy was coming to a head in 2007 over the depiction of these “group suicides” in Japan’s high school history textbooks. The article helps the reader make sense of the lingering emotional resentment toward the mainland government that many Okinawans still harbor today.

This article was originally translated by the late Kyoko Selden and then modified by the editor for this collection.

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### **Textbook Review Denies Historical Truth**

On March 30, 2008, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbukagakushō, hereafter Ministry of Education) announced the results of its review of approved high school textbooks to be used beginning in the 2008-2009 school year. With respect to [passages in] history textbooks (7 different books published by 5 companies) on “group suicides” (*shūdan jiketsu*) during the Battle of Okinawa, it issued a judgment asking for revisions of “statements purporting that there were Japanese military orders and coercion [of civilians] to commit suicide.” The gist of the Ministry of Education’s assessment was as follows: “It cannot be concluded that there were suicide orders from the Japanese military. To say that that [civilians] were driven by the Japanese military to commit suicide invites misunderstanding of the Battle of Okinawa.” The people of Okinawa responded very critically and protested that [the judgment] “distorts the truth about the Battle of Okinawa.” The Okinawa Prefectural Assembly and every municipal assembly in the prefecture objected to the deletion of [passages regarding] the military’s involvement in “group suicides” during the textbook review and passed resolutions by unanimous votes demanding a retraction of the judgment. However, the Ministry of Education rejected the demands of Okinawan citizens and ignored their general will, stating merely that “such was the decision of the textbook review council.”

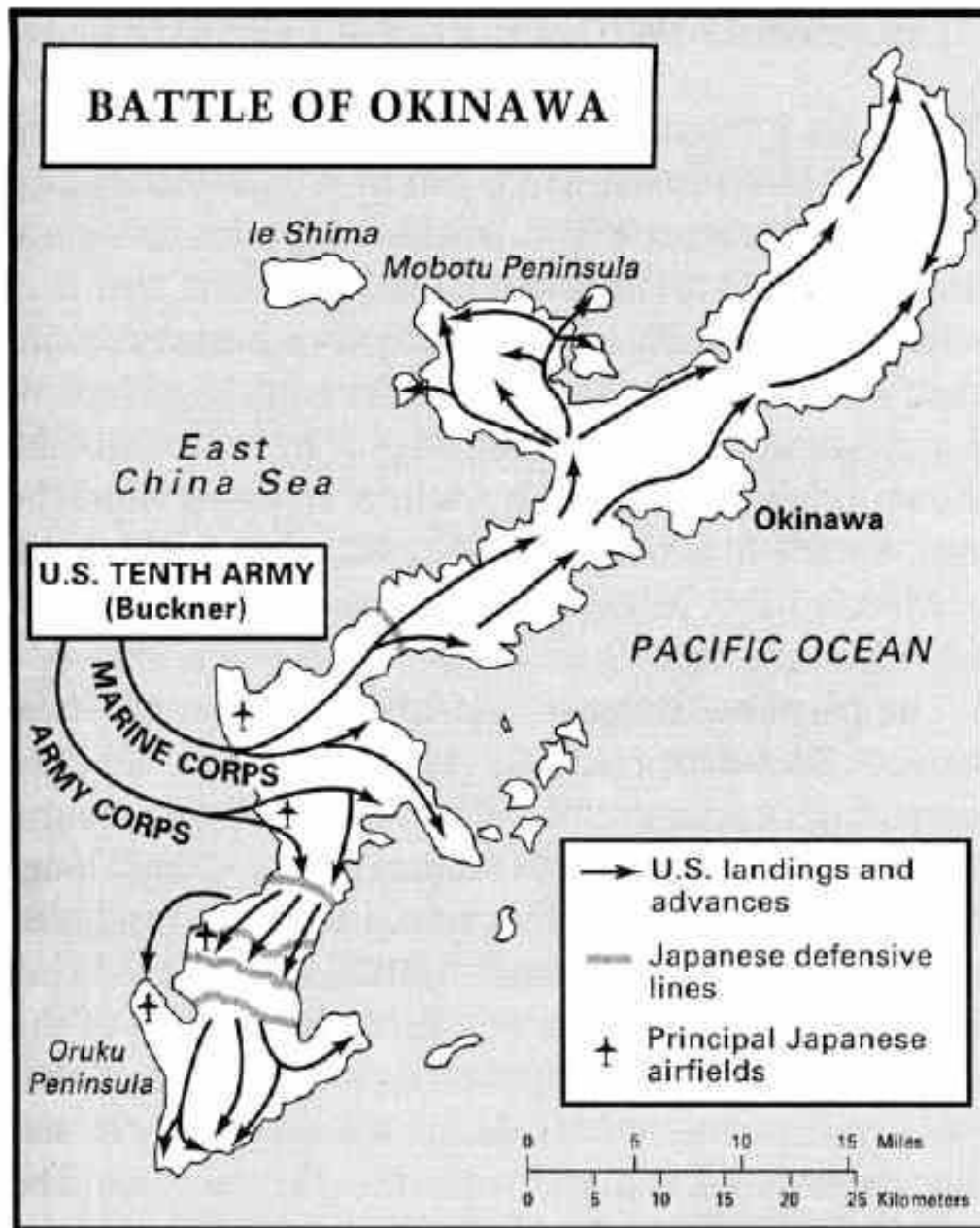


**Okinawan sculptor Kinjo Minoru's relief depicting the horror of the Battle of Okinawa, during which many Okinawans were killed or forced to commit suicide after seeking refuge in the island's caves.**

There are ongoing efforts in various parts of the country to distort the truth with respect to the victimization of local residents during the Battle of Okinawa and to lead historical understanding in a mistaken direction. One instance of these is the case of "group suicides" on the islands of Tokashiki, Zamami and Kerama in the Kerama Islands group.

The Japanese forces garrisoned in the Kerama Islands consisted of a main force of 300 special attack boats and a roughly 300-member marine attack corps, along with an attached base force that included about 600 special marine labor corps (Korean workers). A locally-drafted defense corps and volunteer corps were also incorporated into the islands' defense force. The Kerama Island marine attack corps was an Army marine special attack force that was to man small one-person boats loaded with 120 kilograms of depth charges and destroy enemy vessels by smashing into them. Their effectiveness had been the subject of exaggerated reports, and the local population met the "Army special marine attack corps" with skepticism and doubt.

American forces began landing on the Kerama Islands on March 26, 1945, with the support of artillery fire from both air and sea. By the 29th they had gained control of virtually the entire Kerama Island group. Not a single marine attack boat attack had been launched. The Japanese Army had itself blown them up.



VANTAGE ART

Okinawa Battle map

It was amid this fighting that horrendous “mass deaths” by local residents who had been driven to suicide as a result of coercion and incitement by the Japanese Army occurred on Kerama, Zamami and Tokashiki Island. Against this, the commanders of the troops garrisoned in these islands, contended that “there was no military order.” In fact, the surviving families of Colonel Akamatsu Yoshitsugu, the leader of the forces on Tokashiki Island, and Major Umezawa Yutaka, the leader of the troops on Zamami Island, launched a

law suit in the Osaka district court against [the writer] Ōe Kenzaburo and his publisher Iwanami Shoten, claiming that in his book *Okinawa Notes* [in which he reported on these incidents] Ōe had “disparaged their reputations” and demanded compensation for damages. Attaching the label “Okinawa Group Suicide Libel Suit” to the trial, they are [currently] denouncing Ōe and Iwanami. The plaintiffs argue that “the group suicides on the part of residents of Tokashiki Island and Zamami Island were not the result of a military order but rather of their choosing death in a sublime spirit of self-sacrifice.”

What we have here is not just an instance of “libel,” but a historical revisionist scheme to legitimize a war of aggression and to excuse atrocities committed by the Imperial (the Emperor’s) Army. Adding to the obfuscation are the statements of local Okinawan ex-soldiers and government officials who are jumping on the bandwagon of the Liberal Historical Perspectives Research Association. One can only conclude that in the recent textbook review judgment the statements of the troop commanders that there were no military orders was accepted without verification. It would appear that that the testimony of island residents that family members were forced to kill one another was dismissed as unreliable and the commanding officers’ testimony accepted as credible. It is preposterous that a textbook review decision has been issued based on the claims of Messrs. Akamatsu and Umezawa and the group associated with them in the midst of litigation in Osaka District Court.

### **Staking the National Polity on the Battle of Okinawa**

The Battle of Okinawa, the last ground combat between Japan and the US in the Pacific War, was fought with the understanding that Japan’s defeat was inevitable. Maintaining the national polity by preserving the Imperial institution was the Imperial government’s highest priority objective and gaining time to prepare for a decisive battle on the mainland and to negotiate a conclusion of the war were considered crucial for this purpose.

On January 14, 1945, shortly before the Battle of Okinawa, former prime minister Konoe Fumimaro memorialized to the emperor that the war had reached a critical juncture:

Regrettably, defeat in the war is now virtually inevitable . . . . Defeat will bring shame to the national polity (*kokutai*). However, opinion in England and the US has not yet reached the point where they are requiring a change (*henkaku*) of national polity . . . . I therefore do not think that we need to be concerned about the effect of defeat itself on the national polity . . . . What we do need to be concerned about from the standpoint of preserving the national polity is not defeat but the communist revolution that will accompany defeat . . . . I am therefore convinced that we need to find a way to end the war as soon as possible in order to preserve the national polity. (Hosokawa Diary)

Former Prime Minister Konoe’s memorial is remarkable in that a member of Japan’s ruling strata openly discussed before the Emperor the reason why the war needed to be brought to an end. But the key point is that he was more concerned about the disintegration of the structure of Imperial rule than he was about defeat. The Emperor responded to Konoe’s recommendation by saying, “I do not think that that will work unless we achieve another

victory in the war." This shows how the Emperor remained committed to continuing the war even at this late stage.

The Battle of Okinawa was thus a "battle on which the national polity was staked" and one in which defeat was taken for granted. It is often said that "Okinawa was a pawn sacrificed in order to defend the mainland," but in fact it was a battle to buy time to prepare for the battle on the mainland and to negotiate an end to the war. It was not a battle to protect the people but instead the precursor of a battle in which the lives of the entire nation were to be sacrificed.

The Japanese imperial government intensified its total war mobilization system in preparation for the last stand battle on the mainland. On May 22, 1945, the Wartime Education Ordinance (*senji kyōiku rei*) was made public. Under it even elementary schools and schools for the blind, deaf and dumb were ordered to organize students into military units. On June 23, the day that the forces defending Okinawa (the 32nd Battalion) disintegrated and organized resistance came to an end, a Volunteer Military Service Law was promulgated and women, too, were now ordered to serve in national volunteer combat units. On July 8, 1945, the paramilitary units of the Okinawa Normal School and the Okinawan Prefectural First Middle School were honored in absentia in a ceremony in Tokyo. Minister of Education Ōta Kōzō urged students throughout the country to follow the example of Okinawa's student military units and give their lives in the defense of the national polity. (*Asahi Shinbun* July 9, 1945)

Maintenance of the national polity was the central concern when the Japanese imperial government accepted the Potsdam Declaration. Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, destroying these cities. The Japanese leadership, however, was more concerned about the threat posed by the Soviet Union's entry into the war than with the destructiveness of the atomic bombs. The Soviet Union renounced the USSR-Japan neutrality pact and declared war against Japan on August 8. It then attacked Manchuria, Sakhalin, and North Korea. Confronted with these developments, it was brought home to the Japanese ruling strata that the fate of the imperial institution now hung in the balance. They resolved to bring the war to a conclusion.

An Imperial conference was called in the middle of the night on August 9. At 2:30 a.m. on the 10th the decision was made to accept the Potsdam Declaration on the condition that the national polity be maintained. This was labeled a "sacred decision" (*seidan*), that is, a pronouncement of the son of heaven. Army minister Anami Korechika wrote in his diary:

The Japanese government accepts the three countries' combined declaration dated from the 26th of last month with the understanding that the conditions stated in do not include the demand to change the Emperor's prerogative to state rule.

There are Japanese politicians who say that Japan's defeat was hastened by the dropping the atomic bombs and thus unavoidable [the reference is to former Defense Min. Kyuma Fumio. Tr.] but this is an unreflective statement by someone who is subservient to US policy and ignorant of the suffering of the citizenry.

Consider why and how the US dropped the atomic bombs. Young people who have studied the reality of the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki offer the following clear explanation.

1. The US wanted to carry out attacks on the cities to test the bomb's power: its ability to destroy with shock waves and ultra-high heat, the effect of radiation on the human body and the environment, the secondary effects of exposure on internal organs (the bomb's effect is not just that which occurs at that moment). It was not just Japanese who were subjected to the bombings, as there were also Koreans and Chinese forced laborers as well as allied POWs present.
2. Anticipating the postwar US-Soviet conflict, they wanted to demonstrate the power of the atomic bomb to the Soviet leadership.
3. The B-29 which set out from Tinian in Micronesia at 2:49 a.m. on August 9 dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki at 11:02. That aircraft landed at Bolo Airport in Yomitan on the main Okinawan island at 1:00 pm on the 9th. After refueling, it returned to Tinian at 10:55 pm on the 9th. By that time, US forces in Okinawa had set up an airfield with a 2,000 meter runway that could accommodate B29s.



### Memorial for the Korean victims of atomic bombing in Hiroshima

#### **“Coerced Group Deaths” Under Imperial Army Compulsion and Incitement**

The Okinawa Defense Force (the 32nd Battalion), addressing the citizens of Okinawa, proclaimed that “the Army, government and civilians live and die as one.” And saying “every single tree and blades of grass will be used to fight the battle,” they mobilized everyone including the young, the old, women and children.

The military and paramilitary forces recruited locally in Okinawa numbered more than 25,000, and included active duty soldiers, newly drafted soldiers, defense units, student units and volunteer units. It is important to stress that one fourth of the Okinawa Defense Force was composed of “Japanese soldiers” coming out of Okinawa prefecture. Thus it is a mistake to assume that the Japanese forces in the Battle of Okinawa were exclusively officers and men from the mainland (Yamato troops).

During the last stages of the Battle of Okinawa between June and July, the American forces, in an exercise they called “Jap hunting,” indiscriminately attacked Japanese soldiers and local civilians in the caves where they were hiding. The Imperial Army drove residents from the caves in which they had taken shelter, took their food, prohibited them from surrendering, tortured and slaughtered them when they were suspected of spying, forced family members to kill each other, and left the sick and handicapped on the battlefield. The number of civilians who perished in the Battle of Okinawa is estimated at more than 150,000.



**A Marine guards Japanese prisoners of war after the Battle of Okinawa.  
More than 148,000 civilians died in the campaign.**

What stands out among the various ways in which civilians were victimized during the Battle of Okinawa is what has been called *shūdan jiketsu* or “group suicides.” First we must clarify what is meant by the term. Normally, *jiketsu* (which is made up of the characters for “self” and “decision”) presumes individual choice and voluntariness on the part of those who choose to die. Consequently it is not possible for infants and toddlers to engage in *jiketsu* nor do people of their own accord choose to kill family members. Mutual killings of close relatives—meaning that “parents killed young children, children killed parents, big brothers killed little brothers and sisters, and husbands killed their wives,”—occurred on battlefields where Imperial Army soldiers and citizens intermingled.

The book, *Army Strategies in the Okinawa Area* compiled by the War History Office of the Ministry of Defense writes as follows: “They served the Empire in a sacrificial spirit by engaging in *shūdan jiketsu* and dying for the Empire so that they could alleviate the complications that combat personnel faced.” But such a claim goes against the facts. Citizens on the battlefield did not choose death of their own accord. While there were a number of interrelated factors involved, basically close relatives were compelled to kill one another because the Imperial Army and local leaders who followed the Imperial Army coerced them into doing so. To have compelled families to kill one another is tantamount to the Imperial Army itself killing citizens. One cannot call the death of people who “were forced” or “cornered” *shūdan jiketsu*. In fact, it is wrong to call what happened *shūdan jiketsu*, and doing so hinders the accurate conveying of reality and invites misunderstanding and confusion. The term itself has been used since the 1950s and some argue that it is now an established one. But using the term *shūdan jiketsu* without explaining the reality behind it encourages misconstruction and mystification. It needs to be re-emphasized that the true meaning of the term *shūdan jiketsu* is “*en mass* deaths of local residents as a consequence of Imperial Army coercion and inducement.”

Behind the “residents’ mass deaths” in the Battle of Okinawa was the *kōminka* or imperial subject education system [i.e., education to make everyone a loyal subject of the Emperor] which pitched the act of dying for the Emperor as *the* most sublime expression of national morality. The concept of “military, government, and civilians living and dying together as one” bred “a sense of solidarity in death” that was repeatedly emphasized during the battle. The role of local Okinawan leaders, including those in the Association of Reservists, the Support Group of Adult Men, police and military affairs, and chiefs of local and municipal government, was most important. The islands’ leaders thought it to be perfectly natural that they would be given hand grenades so that all residents could be killed if the situation demanded it. However, we cannot consider this a case of “spontaneous and voluntary” *shūdan jiketsu*, for this was a time when it was not possible to refuse to carry out “deaths” ordered by the Imperial Army.

The extreme fear of “the American and British brutes,” cultivated by the Japanese military, became a factor that compelled people to choose death. The Japanese Army’s slaughter of Chinese on the continent following the “Manchurian Incident” was widely discussed; and people were in a state of despair as they anticipated plunder, assaults and massacres carried out by Americans, which they accepted as their fate now that they were losing the

war. There were returned emigrants who did not believe that the Americans would kill civilians but they could not openly express such an opinion because returnees were suspected to be spies. To make such a statement was to court being labeled a spy and slaughtered. There were people who came to the twisted conclusion that it was an act of love for them to kill their female siblings and wives with their own hands in order to spare them from the shame of being abused and killed by the American and British brutes.

Fear of the Imperial Army's spy hunts increased the level of despair among local civilians. It was Imperial Army policy to never allow residents who had been exposed to military secrets to be taken by the enemy. Those taken under the protection of the US military were regarded as spies. Being trapped between the Japanese and American military under these extreme conditions pushed local civilians to their deaths. One other reason for their "rush to death" was their loss of hope in their chances of surviving the shelling of an island from which there was no way to escape and their picturing of their own deaths under the most pitiful of circumstances. The "en masse deaths of residents" took place as these various elements joined together, causing mass panics that led people to kill one another as a communal activity. Fear and madness overtook the villages.



**Thousands of protesters in Ginowan, Okinawa, demanded that Japanese government drop plans to remove references in textbooks to the coerced mass suicides on their island in 1945.**

### **"Group Deaths" in an Encircled Area**

By the time the Battle of Okinawa began, control of sea and air in the area of the Southwest [Ryukyu] Islands was entirely in the hands of the US military. Communication and transportation with Kyushu and Taiwan were cut off and the islands were under siege. The Okinawa Defense Force gave orders even on matters that were the jurisdiction of the prefectural and local governments and through this they imposed the concept of the “army, government and civilians living and dying as one.” There was no civil government. All activities of prefectural residents were regulated by the commanders of the garrisoned forces. The military referred to combat zones of this kind as *gōi chiiki* or “encircled areas.” Encircled areas were established through a “declaration of martial law” (*kaigenrei*) whenever there was an encirclement of or an attack on an area.

In an encircled area the rule was that ranking military personnel of the garrisoned forces would be granted supreme authority. The Constitution would be suspended and all or part of legislative, administrative and judicial authority would be exercised by the military. Martial law was not declared during the Battle of Okinawa, but the entire Southwest Islands area was a de facto encirclement area. This was the situation that led to the administrative authority of the prefectural governor and village mayors being ignored and the garrisoned forces issuing orders at will. Directives and orders to local residents were received as “military orders” even when they were conveyed by town and village governments and local leaders.

[To take two examples,] On Tokashiki Island of the Keramas, Colonel Akamatsu Yoshitsugu wielded total authority. On Zamami Island, Major Umezawa Yutaka held complete authority. Village administration was placed under the control of the military; there was no civil administration. Under this type of military rule, it was the military affairs directors of the village offices who played the critical role of communicating military orders.

These military affairs directors were the local officials who were in charge of matters related to the military such as updating and confirming rosters of draft-age men and their whereabouts, handling draft deferrals, transmitting orders to draftees to report for duty, and providing assistance to families of the war dead and wounded soldiers. During the Battle of Okinawa, the primary duty of village military affairs directors was to round up and deliver requested draftees to local military units, and to transmit to local residents military orders for the supply of labor power, evacuation, assembly and eviction.

Tōyama Majun, who was the chief of military affairs of the village of Tokashiki, testified that:

1. On March 20, 1945, there was a message from the Akamatsu Squad to the village military affairs director Tōyama Majun ordering him to assemble the residents of Tokashiki hamlet in the village office. In accordance with this order he assembled youths under age 18 and village office workers in the front garden of the village office.
2. At that time, a lower ranking non-commissioned officer known as the weapons sergeant had a subordinate bring two boxes of grenades. The weapons sergeant distributed two hand grenades each to the twenty-plus people gathered there and instructed them as follows: “It is now certain that US Forces will land and that

everyone on Tokashiki Island will die an honorable death (*gyokusai*). If you encounter the enemy toss one of these at the enemy. When it appears that you might become a prisoner use the other one to kill yourself.”

3. There was a “group death” incident on March 28 at Fijiga located along the upper reaches of the Onna River. On this occasion members of the Defense Force brought hand grenades and induced residents to “commit suicide.”

This testimony of a military affairs director conveys vividly the situation on the ground at the time of “group deaths.” One can see that the military affairs directors who conveyed military orders in an encirclement area bore a crucial responsibility. Japanese citizens were taught that a military order was “an order from the Emperor.” Also people believed that “choosing death” rather than becoming a POWs was “the way of an imperial subject.” They were thus compelled, under the direction of local leaders, to put into practice the provision in the Field Service Code (*Senjikun*) that instructs one “not to suffer the humiliation of becoming a prisoner of war.”

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