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Citation

Seekins, D. M. (2006). Creating the mindset for total war. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12751>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Creating the mindset for total war

Kushner, Barak. 2006. *The Thought War: Japanese Imperial Propaganda*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 243 pages, ISBN 10 0 8248 2920 4 (hardcover)

Donald M. Seekins

Historians have remarked that few Japanese – the exceptions being a handful of stubborn communists – opposed their military rulers' empire building in China and South-east Asia during the Fifteen Years' War (1931-1945). In *The Thought War*, Barak Kushner offers an explanation based on the pervasiveness and effectiveness of Japan's wartime propaganda, which was deeply rooted in the country's social structure and values.

Japanese leaders were keenly aware that the war on the ground could not be won without winning the thought war (*shisosen*). Propaganda (*senden*) was its principal weapon, not only to forge wholehearted support for the war effort among the Japanese people, but also to gain the trust of peoples in the newly conquered territories of the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere'. The various organisations and individuals involved in the thought war created highly sophisticated and, at least on the home front, remarkably effective products.

Pre-war and wartime propaganda was closely tied to an older concept, the Con-

fucian concept of 'moral suasion'. Naturally, the Japanese police and military took a leading role, including the use of Allied POWs as weapons in the propaganda war. But the Japanese advertising industry saw the war as an opportunity to promote its own social respectability. *The Thought War* also discusses Japanese efforts to counteract the skilful use of propaganda by the Chinese communists to undermine the morale of Japanese troops, and the ways in which wartime propaganda transformed itself into 'defeat propaganda', which urged the population to co-operate with the US occupation – although the goal of preserving the *kokutai* (national polity) did not change.

Some of Kushner's most interesting discussions deal with the prominent role of comedy in wartime Japan. Teams of comedians (performers of traditional *rakugo* and *manzai*) went to the China front in *warawashitai* or 'we want to make you laugh' brigades to entertain the troops, and returned home to enthusiastic local audiences with glowing reports of military heroism, producing best-selling records of their most popular routines right up until 1945. This showed that for ordinary Japanese the war elicited a wide range of emotions:

not only rage at the enemy ('hate the enemy – do not pity him'), grief for the fallen and shame if a father, husband or son were unfortunate enough to become a prisoner of war, but also laughter – and ceaseless light-hearted disparagement of the Chinese and Anglo-American enemy. Comedy was considered so important by the military that when comedienne Hanazono Aiko was killed by Chinese guerrillas while serving in a *warawashitai* brigade, she was given a state funeral attended by the wife of Premier Tojo Hideki and was enshrined in Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine (pp.106-107).

Kushner disputes the idea that the militarists as a group were solely responsible for Japan's wars of aggression (the view of the Far East Tribunal) and a second widely accepted view, that the 1931-1945 period was a 'dark valley' in which the militarists terrorized and silenced Japan's civil society. In fact, civil society – as represented by entertainers, advertising executives, intellectuals and ordinary citizens, men and women – wholeheartedly joined hands with the government and military in producing and consuming high quality propaganda. He calls this 'democratic fascism': 'The media created an environment

in which Japanese individuals felt they participated in something larger than themselves.... Japanese propaganda programs demanded active participants, not drone-like followers' (p.26).

But to what extent was the Japanese case unique? For all its major participants, the second world war involved the total mobilisation of national populations. Weren't German or American consumers of wartime propaganda also 'active participants'? The difference, Kushner argues, is that *senden* was created and diffused by members of civil society as well as the military and the government, and possessed an 'everydayness' that made it 'a virtually unassailable part of the social consciousness that stabilized wartime Japanese society' (p.3). Moreover, the people's co-operation with vertical authority, in the name of the *kokutai* and efficient social management, continued long after the war. *The Thought War* provides ample evidence that despite the post-1945 façade of 'democratisation', there is essential continuity in social structures and values between wartime and postwar Japan.

However, Kushner's case for modernisation being the central theme of *senden* rather than 'emperor worship' (pp.10-11) seems to miss a vital point. As John Dower argues in *War without Mercy*, the irrational polarization of the 'pure self' to the 'demonic other' was a major – if not the major – theme in wartime propaganda (Dower 1986: 203-261). The self-representation of 'Japan' in the wartime era was complex and contradictory: a modern, hygienic, technically advanced nation, the natural leader of Asia, but also a place where irrational violence and death were glorified, where 'purity' was attained by washing away the stains of worldly existence with blood. Many Japanese find the comparison of the 'Special Attack Forces' (known as *Kamikaze* in the west) with Islamist suicide bombers offensive, but the parallels between the two are striking, especially the equation of violent death with spiritual purity.

A future edition of the book might expand its scope: the information war in China is covered in some detail, but not propaganda in the western colonies of Southeast Asia that were occupied (or 'liberated') by Japan in 1941-1942. Burma and Indonesia are intriguing examples of how the Japanese attempted to enlist local cultures and nationalisms in the war effort, with arguably greater success than in China. Moreover, *The Thought War* inexplicably passes over a pivotal wartime figure, Otaka Yoshiko, the colourful singer and film star who, as the 'Chinese' Ri Ko-ran (Li Xianglan), became a propaganda icon in Japanese-occupied parts of China and Manchuria ('Ri Koran', 2003).

One popular *manzai* (comedy duo) routine from 1943 involved a comparison of American and Japanese mothers. While the former worry about their sons and 'put nice white flags in their service bags so that if the enemy catches them ... well, you know ...', Japanese mothers demonstrate their superiority by being happy that their sons have the opportunity to die gloriously in battle, 'like falling cherry blossoms' (p.111). Such a routine, apparently performed without irony, entertained audiences staring blindly into the maw of defeat and destruction. Black comedy, indeed. ◀

References

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