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6 Narratives Without Guilt: The Self-Perception of Japanese Perpetrators

Introduction

Many former POWs who survived one of the many Japanese camps during World War II must have considered the “charges against the Japanese brought forward [at] the Tokyo War Crimes Trials [as] chilling.”¹ Many prisoners of the Imperial Japanese Army did not survive the Second World War and in Japan’s POW camps a massive number of soldiers died in comparison with those POW camps ran by other Axis powers. The judgment at Tokyo mentioned that only 4% of the 235,000 Allied, i.e. American and British, POWs lost their lives in German or Italian captivity, while 27% of the 132,000 men that were caught by the Japanese Army died. From a US perspective the numbers are even more shocking, as 9 out of every 10 dead POWs died in Japanese captivity during the war.² There are horror stories like those of the eyewitnesses of the Bataan Death March, due to which more than 70,000 US and Filipino soldiers were forced to march for days, without any supply of food, to reach the trains that would bring them to Camp O’Donnell to the north.³ Other POWs, especially from Britain and Australia, were forced to build the Thai-Burma Railway, on which the present chapter will focus, and many of those who were forced to work on this project died during the war.⁴ Reports about the treatment of the prisoners highlight the cruelty used by the Japanese soldiers, who forced their prisoners

¹ Van Waterford, *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II: Statistical History, Personal Narratives and Memorials Concerning POWs in Camps and on Hellships, Civilian Internees, Asian Slave Laborers and Others Captured in the Pacific Theater* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994), 1.

² Daqing Yang, “Documentary Evidence and the Studies of Japanese War Crimes: An Interim Assessment,” in *Researching Japanese War Crimes Records: Introductory Essays*, ed. Edward Drea et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration for the Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency Working Group, 2006), 31.

³ On the Bataan Death March see: Stanley Falk, *Bataan: The March of Death* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962); Donald Knox, *Death March: The Survivors of Bataan* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981); Frank Jacob, *Japanese War Crimes during World War II: Atrocity and the Psychology of Collective Violence* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2018), 94–108.

⁴ Gavan McCormack and Hank Nelson, eds., *The Burma-Thailand Railway: Memory and History* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1993).

to work until they were too exhausted to survive any longer in an environment characterized by abuse, malnutrition, and diseases.⁵

Although one has to be careful when dealing with sources provided by POWs, since they are very often one-sided and “either biased by a speedy presentation or scattered by selective memory”,⁶ they nevertheless offer an insight into the suffering of many men from Australia, Britain, Indonesia, the Netherlands, and the United States. Roy Bulcock, in his book *Of Death but Once* (1947), described the survivors of the Thai-Burma Railway, who were also very well depicted in the 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, as follows:

That such skeletons could still retain a spark of life: staring eyes; beak-like noses; retracted lips; a green-grey skin; shoulder blades like knife-edges cutting through the skin; knee joints twice as thick as thighs; biceps thinner than wrists; and ribs almost devoid of covering. Yet, their ankles and stomachs were bloated horribly and these were the men not ill enough to go to the hospital.⁷

Those POWs who had to participate in the ambitious building project in the jungles of Burma and Siam in the 1940s were, according to Harold Atcherley’s (1918–2017) eyewitness account, “subjected to inhumane and brutal treatment.”⁸ While the Japanese Army was initially unprepared for so many prisoners of war as had been created by the fall of Singapore, the occupation of the Philippines, and the takeover of Dutch East India (Indonesia), they found ways to exploit the mass of prisoners. A railroad to connect Siam and Burma had been discussed since the 19th century, but the almost unsurpassable terrain in the jungles of the two countries prevented its existence from being realized. However, to quote the Australian-American writer Gavan Daws, “the Japanese in 1942 were doing their sums by the arithmetic of war. To turn the Burma campaign in their favor they had to have a railroad. . . . The military ordered it ready for use by the end of 1943.”⁹

To achieve this ambitious aim, the Japanese Army used around 60,000 POWs – 30,000 British, 18,000 Dutch, 13,000 Australians, and 650 Americans (131st Field Artillery and survivors of the *Houston*) – on the 250 miles of track

⁵ Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (New York: Morrow, 1994). See also E. Bartlett Kerr, *Surrender and Survival: The Experience of American POWs in the Pacific, 1941–1945* (New York: Morrow, 1985).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ Roy Bulcock, *Of Death but Once* (Melbourne/London: Cheshire, 1947), S.167.

⁸ Sir Harold Atcherley, *Prisoner of Japan: A Personal War Diary, Singapore, Siam and Burma, 1941–1945* (Cirencester, UK: Memoirs Publishing, 2012), ix.

⁹ Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese*, 184.

construction.¹⁰ The initial promise made by Japanese Lieutenant Colonel Yoshitada Nagatomo would soon become reality: “We will build the railroad . . . [even] if we have to build it over the white man’s body.”¹¹ In the present chapter, which is a first-hand case study, namely of a trial interrogation in Singapore in 1946, I will discuss how the Japanese officers who participated in the building process and who also witnessed or caused the death of 12,000 Allied POWs – and a larger number of Asian civilian workers who were forced to participate in the construction work – considered their own acts in the aftermath of the war. Which narratives did they use to explain their own involvement and their acceptance, if not active participation, in the measures leading to the death of so many POWs?¹² After describing the life of the prisoners in the camps controlled by Japan, especially of those who were forced to work on the Thai-Burma Railway, I will describe the perpetrator’s perspective in more detail to show which post-war narratives were used by the Japanese officers to explain and often excuse their own involvement.

The Life of the POWs

Some POWs of the Japanese were able to escape from the Japanese POW camps, and once they had reached territory controlled by the Allied powers, as US military historian Gregory J. Urwin remarks, they “stunned their superiors with graphic descriptions of the savage treatment that the Japanese dealt out to helpless prisoners of war.”¹³ As a consequence of such reports, the *New York Times* highlighted on 29 January 1944 that “The Japanese in war are not men we can understand. They are men of the old Stone Age, animals who sometimes stand erect.”¹⁴ The Japanese, who had been praised for their extraordinary treatment of POWs in the past, e.g. during the Russo-Japanese War,¹⁵ were now

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 185.

12 The small case study, presented at this point, is part of a larger new project on the self-perception of Japanese perpetrators in the aftermath of the war.

13 Gregory J. Urwin, “Foreword,” in Gene Boyt, *Bataan: A Survivor’s Story* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), xii.

14 *New York Times*, January 29, 1944, cited in *ibid.*, xiii.

15 Eric Johnston, “Civility Shown to Russo-Japanese War POWs Lives on as Matsuyama’s Legacy,” *The Japan Times*, August 22, 2016. Accessed April 2, 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/08/22/national/history/civility-shown-russo-japanese-war-pows-lives-matsuyamas-legacy/#.XLCEzxMza8U>

considered animals, responsible for the physical and psychological destruction of their prisoners, especially from the US. It is consequently no wonder that the “preserved memories present a catalog of horrors so monstrous that it still has the power to elicit intense emotional reactions.”¹⁶ American historian John Dower, in his important book *War Without Mercy* (1986), highlighted the existence of an “obsession with extermination on both sides” and while the Japanese enemy was considered “[s]ubhuman, inhuman, lesser human, superhuman,” it was also common for American soldiers to have the “belief that the Japanese were a uniquely contemptible and formidable foe who deserved no mercy and virtually demanded extermination.”¹⁷ For the Japanese, at the same time, “Americans and Europeans existed in the wartime Japanese imagination as vivid monsters, devils, and demons”¹⁸ who needed to be destroyed and driven out of Asia. Stereotypes therefore very often determined the way soldiers were treated by the enemy. One has to understand and accept that such “stereotypes of hate,” as I would like to call them, existed on both sides. Americans considered the Japanese to be genuinely evil, and caricatures usually displayed Japan’s soldiers or the country’s leadership as “short, round-faced, jug-eared, buck-toothed, myopic behind horn-rimmed glasses.”¹⁹

It must consequently not be surprising that, to quote John Dower again, “Japan’s aggression . . . stirred the deepest recesses of white supremacy and provoked a response bordering on the apocalyptic.”²⁰ One could argue here that, from the time from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 until the 1930s, the Japanese had tried extremely hard to be accepted as equal by the Western world, especially the United States. Nevertheless, they were always treated as a minor and inferior power. It is hard to determine the exact moment in time when Japanese sentiments consequently switched to an anti-Western attitude, but this was definitely the case, and when Japan entered the war the former sympathy had been replaced by pure hate. “The war,” Dower correctly emphasizes, then “exposed core patterns of racist perception in many forms: formulaic expressions, code words, everyday metaphors, visual stereotypes”²¹ on both sides, but also stimulated the eruption of hate on an individual level that would make the war one “without mercy.”

¹⁶ Urwin, “Foreword,” xiv.

¹⁷ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, Seventh Edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John W. Dower, *Japan in War and Peace: Selected Essays* (New York: New Press, 1993), 259.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

Another reason for the intensive experience of violence during the war is related to its perception by the Japanese soldiers, who, according to their own tradition, believed in the purifying power of war *per se*.²² For Japan's soldiers, death on the battlefield was the ultimate honor, which is why the surrender of the American enemy at Bataan, and of other Allied troops during the war, surprised the Japanese. With "death in war [as] the ultimate expression of selflessness"²³ it was hard to understand, for the officers and soldiers of the Japanese Army, why the enemy would not commit suicide, instead of surrendering in large numbers. However, it was not only a different "cultural setting" towards war that would stimulate extreme forms of punishment and a steady use of violence against the foreign prisoners.

The Japanese Army was simply overwhelmed by too many prisoners of war, who were very often considered a burden and competition for the supplies, which were short enough already anyway. Japan's military leadership was not prepared for the immense numbers of POWs they eventually had to take care of. However, in the case of the Thai-Burma Railroad, the POWs were considered a valuable resource. Along the planned track for the new railway, labor camps were built in which the POWs had to live during their work assignment. Yet the climate, the spread of diseases, and the lack of medicine and food decreased the number of prisoners very quickly. It was hard to treat malaria, which had infected a large number of prisoners in their new jungle environment. The disease could also spread easily, since most soldiers were simply underfed, and only those with money or something to trade, and who could also bypass the Japanese guards, were able to get some additional food for their hungry stomachs.

Sir Harold Atcherley (1918–2017) kept a diary during his period as a POW and describes the events related to the building of the railway in great detail.²⁴ He states that all prisoners "were subjected to inhumane and brutal treatment" from the beginning of their journey, which happened to start after the fall of Singapore in February 1942.²⁵ Most of the British forces had not been trained for jungle warfare before they were dispatched to the Asian theater of war, and with the lack of food supplies once they were POWs under the Japanese, life "soon became increasingly harsh." Early in 1943, the British prisoners were

²² *Ibid.*, 273–274.

²³ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁴ The following description is based on this source, i.e. Atcherley, *Prisoner of Japan*. In the further text references to this source will be given in parenthesis.

²⁵ See for a discussion of this subject in detail Brian Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940–1942* (Stroud: The History Press, 2006).

transferred to Thailand, where they had to begin the work on the railway. The Japanese planners had decided that only 18 months were needed to finish the construction, a nearly impossible task: “It was going to be the worst work in the world, but the Japanese had scores of thousands of prisoners of war; they could work them like slaves, work every one of them to death, if that was what it took.”²⁶ The odds to survive the work were close to zero, considering that the POWs were in bad condition before the work even began. Atcherley describes the situation of the prisoners even as early as the transportation phase as disastrous:

Twice a day, we were let out briefly to be given a small quantity of rice in onion water. There was no form of sanitation. Practically all of us were suffering from malaria, dysentery or both. The only way to relieve oneself was to hang precariously out of the wagon, the weaker ones being supported by others to prevent them falling out.

After the train ride, the POWs were forced to march 200 miles into the jungle. During this trip, many British soldiers lost their lives, if they were unable to keep pace with the main group:

Every night of the march a number of prisoners became too weak to keep up. A few officers marched at the rear of the column to carry them on makeshift stretchers, but some had to be left behind because there was no one who had the strength to carry them. We remonstrated with our guards to allow us to rest, but they insisted that we kept going by threatening us with their bayonets. Stragglers were set upon by marauding Thais and many were never heard of again.

Only 182 of Atcherley’s unit, which counted 3,000 men at the beginning of the war, would survive the jungles of Burma and Thailand, where they not only suffered from hard work, bad and insufficient nutrition, as well as diseases, but also from physical and violent abuse by the Japanese soldiers, who were very often not reluctant to use the smallest incident to beat the POWs. At the end of a working day, the POWs also had to bring the corpses of those who had died during the day back to the camp, to prove that nobody had tried to escape. It is surprising that Atcherley did not accuse the Japanese of being genuinely evil after all his experiences, but the British officer felt sympathy with the former enemy, once the war was over. He states his ideas about the reasons for the abuse in his description of the events in 1942/43 as well:

I do not believe our treatment stemmed from any innate cruelty in the Japanese population as a whole. It was essentially due to brain-washing by the military commanders to

²⁶ Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese*, 184.

ensure that the army fought with the extreme ruthlessness and brutality demanded. There were, of course, civilised Japanese who did whatever they could to help us.

Nevertheless, the situation of the POWs was very often disastrous and only in retrospective was Atcherley able to leave his anger aside. During captivity, which he describes in much detail, there was no time or reason to look for an explanation why the Japanese might be so cruel. The only task was to survive another day, not losing hope that, in the end, freedom was an option. When Atcherley's unit were brought to their first POW camp, the realities must have been shocking, further highlighting that the Japanese Imperial Army was simply overwhelmed by the number of prisoners that had to be taken care of. On 5 August 1942, the POWs reached a camp which had been used by two companies (200–250 men) before the war, where now up to 850 men were supposedly to live. In another camp, viz. Selarang labor camp in Changi, Singapore, no arrangements for latrines had been made, leading to unbearable hygienic conditions. Furthermore, no water supplies were guaranteed and 8,000 men had only one point where water was available to them. Most of the prisoners were consequently sick, suffering from malaria and/or diarrhea. Life in the barracks, however, went on: “[A]ll we can see ahead of us is an endless procession of days, weeks and months stretching away into a hopeless future. It would be so much easier if we could be given a sentence of so many years. We could then settle down accordingly and watch the months bring us ever nearer freedom.” From late December 1942, the meat rations were stopped, which further worsened the chances for survival. Regardless of the harsh conditions, Atcherley was able to survive and was brought to Thailand in 1943, where, from April onwards, he had to work on the Thai-Burma Railway with thousands of other POWs.

At the smaller camps along the railway, food was literally “non-existent, [and] just a small amount of bad rice and watery stew” was available from time to time. Ulcers, malaria, and even cholera took a high toll, with 20 dead men per day. Of the 1,600 men who started to work with Atcherley on the tracks, 1,200 died like flies and their “[b]odies piled up waiting to be put on the cremation fires.” Hospitals were non-existent; only the main camp had one. However, this hospital was nothing more than a euphemism, because it “was nothing more than fourteen filthy huts, with hundreds of disastrously sick men laid out in rows, a body in pain every three feet, not enough doctors, and hardly any medicine.”²⁷ The common “[a]nesthesia was . . . [the doctor] yelling louder than the patient”²⁸ and medicine was never really available.

²⁷ Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese*, 187.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

In Burma, where 95% of the POWs were suffering from malaria, it was hard to get hands on additional supplies of medicine, but the doctors in the so-called “camp hospitals” tried everything legal and illegal to get their hands on additional supplies.²⁹ Regardless of their efforts, there were simply too many sick people to take care of and too many sicknesses to keep track of. While the works on the railway often went on day and night, some Japanese also beat POWs to death, since they were supposedly not working hard or fast enough.³⁰ The camps along the railway were carefully renamed by the prisoners, with names ranging from “Cholera Hill” to “Shit Creek.” The Japanese also suffered from the jungle diseases, but – with regard to the total numbers – only 7 out of every 100 died, in contrast to 20 out of every 100 for the POWs.³¹ The Japanese would later argue that this was a matter of discipline, but the reality is that most POWs received neither sufficient food, nor sufficient medical supplies. Their treatment during the railway construction, as well as the one they received in the camps, must consequently be considered a war crime, especially since the activity and passivity of the Japanese soldiers, officers, and military leaders caused the high numbers of dead prisoners.

It was the combination of malnutrition, disease, and hard physical labor that demanded a large human toll for finishing parts of the railway tracks. In addition to climate and nutrition hardships, many Japanese guards would react violently if the POWs could not fulfill their workload. Those who survived the railway project would consequently suffer from trauma for the rest of their lives. Yet after the war, some of the Japanese officers were put on trial in Singapore in 1946³² and described their own perspective, i.e. the perpetrators’ perspective. I would now like to take a closer look at this with regard to three topical categories – the housing of the POWs, food supply, and medical treatment – and show how the interrogated Japanese officers considered their own role during the construction of the Thai-Burma Railroad.

²⁹ Ibid., 192.

³⁰ Ibid., 219.

³¹ Ibid., 220.

³² On the trials in Singapore see: Wui Ling Cheah, “An Overview of the Singapore War Crimes Trials (1946–1948): Prosecuting Lower-level Accused,” *Singapore Law Review* 34, no. 1 (2016): 1–46.

The Perpetrators' Perspective

German scholars Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer have described how soldiers in wartime usually experience violence and how they continuously perceive their own violent acts. They argue that regardless of the fact that “[t]he idea of war brutalizing soldiers plays a central role in social-psychological research” and while autobiographies also strengthen the “impression that over time, soldiers become brutal as they themselves are exposed to increasing brutality,” one has to consider that on the one hand there is “the possibility that violent behavior can be something attractive for which one ‘itches,’” and on the other that soldiers do not need to be specially prepared to commit extreme acts of violence.³³ Christopher Browning correctly speaks of “ordinary men”³⁴ who were not only able to participate in the mass killings on the Eastern Front, but also commit the crimes of the German Wehrmacht.³⁵ Extreme forms of violence seem to be possible because, in war time, the soldiers experience a “feeling of having power in areas where one normally has none” and live in a temporary “social framework in which killing is permissible, even desirable.”³⁶ It was consequently the war experience that stimulated the violent behavior of the Japanese soldiers, for whom, like for other soldiers during the Second World War, “violence was far more normal, expected, legitimate, and commonplace than it is today.”³⁷ The soldiers, among themselves, would even brag about violent experiences, as if they were sharing hunting stories.³⁸ If we analyze the behavioral patterns of Japanese soldiers and their extreme violent acts during the Second World War, it is important to focus on the space-time continuum they acted in. Violent abuse, even of the soldiers themselves and particularly within the Japanese Army, was quite common, which is why it was considered natural to use violence against the POWs as well.³⁹

33 Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldiers: German POWs on Fighting, Killing, and Dying* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 44.

34 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New Edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017).

35 For a short survey on the debate about the role of the German Wehrmacht during the Second World War see: Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter, and Ulrike Jureit, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (Munich: Beck, 2005).

36 Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldiers*, 44.

37 *Ibid.*, 52.

38 *Ibid.*, 65–69.

39 For a more detailed analysis of the space-time-continuum in war see Jacob, Japanese War Crimes, 14–37. For a case study of the behavior of Japanese soldiers during the Rape of Nanking see: Frank Jacob, “Banzai! And the Others Die – Collective Violence in the Rape of

In addition to their identity as soldiers in an actual war, many men serving in the Imperial Army of Japan might have been feeling hubris, and were therefore experiencing similar feelings as those that German historian Thomas Kühne proved were felt by German soldiers during the Second World War, which means that they were “intoxicated with omnipotence and grandiosity.”⁴⁰ For many men involved in violent acts during the war, the latter was important for testing and emphasizing their masculinity. Far away from home, the soldiers entered a “moral no man’s land”⁴¹ where they could reframe the legal contexts on a daily basis. What was allowed and what was prohibited did not depend on societies as a whole, but on the soldiers, whose consensus on the use and forms of violence very often determined the experiences of the POWs as well. This also means that violence as such is not necessarily indoctrinated by a racist ideology, but can be triggered by the local environment or problems which can supposedly be solved by the use of brute force.⁴² Major studies have tried to explain why violence is triggered by war and its use increased to an excessive rate, but historian Omar Bartov emphasizes that “we still do not know much about the individuals concerned, especially the ‘little people’ who have always been underrepresented both in history and historiography.”⁴³ For soldiers, group identities – often related to power hierarchies – and violence played an important role, while the experience of military service, as historian Richard Bessel highlighted in the case of the German SA members, “offered not only activity, adventure, novelty and . . . a chance, perhaps the first in their lives, to escape the boredom and isolation of their own homes and communities.”⁴⁴

In exceptional circumstances, as they were provided by the war and the control of the Japanese Army over so many POWs, morale decreased and only a few men were able to deny obedience within a situation that allowed the abuse of violence.⁴⁵ Some soldiers even got attracted by the possibilities and

Nanking,” in *Global Lynching and Collective Violence*, Vol. 1: *Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, ed. Michael J. Pfeifer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 78–102.

⁴⁰ Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler’s Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2010), 95.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴² Omer Bartov, “Introduction,” in *The Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath*, ed. Omer Bartov (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁴ Richard Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany 1925–1934* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1984), 49.

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Über das Böse: Eine Vorlesung zu Fragen der Ethik*, 4th edition (Munich: Piper, 2010 [2007]), 52.

developed sadist habits, which Hannah Arendt called the “vice of all vices.”⁴⁶ Once peace had been re-established, the most secure way not to be branded as a perpetrator was silence about the past. Only those willing to remember their own acts can feel remorse,⁴⁷ but many soldiers would later try to legitimize their own actions of the past with narratives that highlighted the role of others and denied personal responsibility.⁴⁸ Similar strategies were used by the Japanese soldiers who were involved in the construction process of the Thai-Burma Railway. The following analysis will highlight how, especially in terms of how officers of the Japanese Army serving in Burma and Thailand perceived their own acts and which narratives were used after the war, when they were accused of their war crimes.

Takei Isami, Commander of the 60th Company, Building Unit was stationed on the Burma side of the railway construction between 1942 and 1943. It was his duty to build camps for the working units along the track every five kilometers. When he was asked to explain the bad condition of one of these camps (62 Kilo) when the POWs arrived to begin their work on this particular track section, the Japanese officer claimed that such a situation was impossible, since the POW parties were not allowed to move into unfinished camps. He rather explained these facts as follows: “I imagine that they did not come in immediately after we built the camp. The place was used by native coolies and they spoilt it and it was not repaired and they did come in before repairs were made to the huts.”⁴⁹ Whatever might have been the reason, it was not a Japanese fault that the POWs had to live in an unfinished or inconvenient camp. Since latrines were spoilt very often as well, Takei emphasized that “somebody had used it before . . . and damaged them” before the POWs moved in. He, however, was not able to clarify who specifically would have been such a somebody.

When he was asked about the reasons for the high death rates among the POWs he explained:

I think there were many reasons. One of them . . . a very acute case of malaria was found in this region. And then the construction was urged and we had to hurry up in completing the work and therefore, the work was so hard and the consumption of physical strength

⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁸ Annette Abel, “Die verschleierte Sprache der NS-Täter in Selbstzeugnissen und Ermittlungsakten: Mein Großvater als Offizier in der Waffen-SS,” in *Nationalsozialistische Täterschaften: Nachwirkungen in Gesellschaft und Familie* (Reihe Neuengammer Kolloquien 6), ed. Oliver von Wrochem (Berlin: Metropol, 2016), 444.

⁴⁹ Australia, Military Jurisdiction, Prosecutor v. Yoshitada Nagatomo et al., [Entire Trial Transcript Part 2], National Archives Kew, London, A-0471 No. 81655, 158.

was so great, and along with that the transportation of supply was very hard and we did not have enough food supplies to make up for that large amount of consumption. . .⁵⁰

It is obvious that the interrogated man did not show any kind of remorse or sympathy for the many dead POWs. He also never considered it possible to have made a mistake. If one of the camps was in bad shape, it was never his or his unit's responsibility. He did his work appropriately, a narrative that is quite common among the statements of interrogated officers.⁵¹

Another one of these officers, Gentarō Nagashima,⁵² who was a Supply Staff Officer in the Japanese Army, confirmed the problems that existed with regard to the food supplies. Yet, when he was asked hypothetically what he could have done in the case that he were a Branch Commander who was unable to “get proper supply of rations from the [Japanese] Commissariat” he stated:

In that case I would try to accommodate within the budget assigned in the sum total. We did not have any budget particularly assigned to such purpose, but within the general budget I shall manage to pick up and collect a certain amount of money to buy and get sufficient supplies, but since the fact was that it was strictly controlled by the Commissariat Unit, it was not possible.⁵³

This specific answer highlights one important aspect. While there might have been possibilities to strengthen the nutrition base of the POWs by unofficial means, the Japanese officer would not act against existent supply rules, mainly because he considered it impossible. That also means that, according to Nagashima's narrative, a Japanese officer would not have acted against his orders, although they were creating increased suffering for the POWs. The narrative is clear: I simply followed my orders.

50 *Ibid.*, 150

51 The trial of Adolf Eichmann was probably the most-well known case, in which an accused Nazi referred to the excuse, to have only followed orders by higher superiors, to explain his actions and within the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt observed the trial and published her impressions *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963). For another experience report of the trial see: Haim Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth: The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

52 Nagashima, Major General and Supply Staff officer in the POW headquarters in Thailand. See related material in: University of Houston Libraries Special Collections, Samuel Milner U.S.S. Houston (CA-30) and 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery Papers, Box 12, Folder 15. For detailed studies about the prosecution of Japanese war crimes in Asia see Philip R. Piccigallo, *The Japanese on Trial* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) and Yuma Totani, *Justice in Asia and the Pacific Region, 1945–1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

53 *Prosecutor v. Yoshitada Nagatomo et al.*, 165.

With regard to the physical condition of the POWs related to the lack of medical supplies, Tomizō Higuchi, who would later be convicted by the court in Singapore on 16 August 1946 and received a life sentence, was a Medical Captain in the Japanese Army, and was interrogated during the trial in Singapore. The prosecutor needed to find out how medical supplies were obtained. Higuchi explained the process in quite a detailed way:

First I make out a list of necessary medical supplies to be requested and through the Branch Commander we went [to hand] in such request to the Supply Depot, that is the unit which is responsible about the medical supplies. And then when this request is examined by the Supply Unit and the Command of that unit gives orders to supply it is issued. In order to receive such supply we had to go to RANGOON or NIKI to receive them, and after we received them we handed it over to the POW in charge.⁵⁴

Regardless of this process, “Such medicines as emetine, iodoform, opium tincture, ether, chloroform and sulphanilimide . . . were very much short always and in addition bandages were always very short.”⁵⁵ Higuchi consequently could not hope to get many of the supplies he had requested. From the beginning onwards, the amount of medicine received was only about one or two percent.⁵⁶ Asked by the prosecution what could have been done to improve the situation of the POWs, the Japanese officer explained:

I did all my best to get enough supplies to meet the need and found it was impossible. The first thing I presented my opinion to my superiors about the following items. First the work must be lighter, that sufficient food should be supplied especially such food as nutrients should be given and for that purpose the Canteen Supplies should be made in better ways and then I tried to meet some kind of medicines that we could not get when we requested.⁵⁷

When additionally stating that “[w]e made every effort to impress the high officers in H.Q. in RANGOON that the general condition of hygiene amongst the POWs was very bad and it could not be like that so by letters, monthly reports and by direct interview,”⁵⁸ the accused, however, also points the prosecutor in the direction of the higher ranks of the Japanese Army, away from himself. Especially since Higuchi was supposedly only following his orders, an excuse

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 175–176.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

for his role within the system of POW exploitation is very often expressed between the lines.

In Higuchi's case, however, some POWs had made accusations against him. It was reported that he made sick prisoners walk over a kilometer to get to his headquarters for inspection. Higuchi then argued that "[s]uch things never took place. I had a bicycle in my use and I always used the bicycle whenever there was a case I was needed for and I had to go to Hospital, I went by bicycle. Therefore, such things could never take place and did not take place."⁵⁹ Another accusation brought forward against the Medical Officer claimed that Higuchi had picked 200 patients at one camp (55 Kilo) who were sent back to work. The accused denied this as well: "I never did such things. When I went over to the hospital and made that inspection and after that inspection 10 or 20 patients were sent back to work camps. As to the recovered patients and during a certain period it amounted to 200 – if that is what he refers to as the case well I had nothing to do with it."⁶⁰ A sense of guilt or remorse can hardly ever be identified.

Conclusion

To put forward a first conclusion from the present case study, one can argue that there are several ways to react to accusations. One is denial. The reported events simply never took place. The POWs misremember the situation and there is no need for the Japanese officers to feel guilt or remorse at all, since the actions they were accused of did not happen at all. A second strategy is to point the finger at higher officers. They were the responsible ones, since they had been informed about the situation, but did not do anything about it. Again, there is no remorse or sense of guilt on behalf of the officers who, with such narratives, simply transfer the question about guilt to the next level up in the military hierarchy. And finally, there is the focus on a specific work aspect. As long as the Japanese officers fulfilled their duty relating to their own field of expertise or demand, they were not guilty of everything else. As long as the building unit finished the huts, it was of no concern to them who had to live in them. Considering that the system needed such minor and often "indirect" acts to function, it is clear that the system of POW exploitation could not have worked without them. The participating officers must therefore also be

⁵⁹ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 188.

considered guilty, even if they might have got away without a sentence in the trials, because they complied in the face of better knowledge.

The analyzed narratives often resemble what I would like to refer here as to the “Eichmann narrative.” The soldiers and officers considered themselves to be part of a larger operation, and therefore not responsible for the deaths of the POWs that could only have been prevented by higher authorities. They were not responsible for the overall decisions, and if the local situation was bad, they could not do anything about it, at least according to their own post-war narratives. Of course, such narratives allowed the Japanese officers to claim a clear conscience for themselves, as they had not done anything wrong. Nevertheless, the fact that they did not act if they could, that they allowed bad things to happen, and probably increased the level of suffering by observing the local conditions without any reaction makes them as guilty as those who planned the Thai-Burma-Railway in the first place. However, regardless of such ethical discussions, the Japanese officers do not seem to have considered any form of guilt to have existed on their side, which presents a reason for their lack of remorse during and after the trials. “War is never nice, but war was our work,” they would say.

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