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Japan's Kamikaze Pilots and Contemporary Suicide Bombers: War and Terror

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Kamikaze Pilots

It is widely believed that the major source of kamikaze suicide pilots was the Air Force Cadet Officer System in the Japanese Imperial Navy and Army Forces, which recruited university and college students on a voluntary basis. In fact, however, the majority of kamikaze pilots were young noncommissioned or petty officers, that is graduates of Navy and Army junior flight training schools. A total of 708 noncommissioned Army officers died as kamikaze pilots, while the total death toll of Army Air Force officer class kamikaze pilots was 621. In the Navy, 1732 petty officers died as kamikaze pilots compared with 782 officers. Many assume that the majority of kamikaze pilots were former college students, because the letters-home, diaries and wills of these young men, who became kamikaze pilots through the Air Force Cadet Officer System, were compiled and published as books and pamphlets after the war. The best known of these publications is *Kike Wadatsumi no Koe* (Listen to the Voices from the Sea). Unfortunately similar personal records left behind by non-commissioned and petty officers are not publicly available. It is therefore necessary to rely on private records to gain a fuller understanding of the thoughts and ideas of these kamikaze pilots.

The Navy Air Force Cadet Officer System was introduced in 1934 to assure preparation of well-trained fighter pilots. Until 1942 students were exempt from conscription. However, with the soaring death toll of Japanese soldiers, the conscription of all healthy male university and college students of Humanities and Social Science, who were 20 years of age or older, was introduced in October, 1943. Students were allowed to apply for the position of Navy Air Force cadet, but the selection criteria were stricter than for those of other cadet positions in the Japanese Imperial Forces, both in the Navy and the Army. The Army introduced the Air Force Cadet Officer System in July 1943, but many students chose the Navy which enjoyed the aura of being modern and fashionable.



Between 1934 and 1942, 507 Air Force Cadet Officers were accepted into the Navy Air Force. From September 1943 the numbers increased rapidly, with 14,347 inducted between September 1943 and 1944, and an additional 285 in 1945 for a total of 15,149. Of these, 2,485 (16%) died, of whom 685 died as kamikaze pilots.

The total death toll of Navy kamikaze officer pilots, including 685 former college students, was 782. This means that only 12 percent of those who died among Navy kamikaze officer pilots were professional fighters. The percentage of former students amongst the Navy kamikaze officer pilots who died in the Battle of Okinawa (i.e. in *Ten Ichigo Sakusen* [Operation Heaven No.1]) between late March and late July in 1945) was as high as 81.3%. (Or, according to another source, 82.9%.) In the Army, 58 percent of the kamikaze officer pilots who died in the Battle of Okinawa were former students. This statistical data is the main source of the criticism of the leaders of the Japanese Imperial Forces from surviving former student kamikaze pilots and the relatives of those who died on mission towards the end of the war. They claim that the Navy particularly sacrificed former students in order to save professional pilots.

In analyzing private records of the cadet officer kamikaze pilots, the following psychological themes emerged as bases for accepting or responding to a kamikaze attack mission.

1) Rationalizing one's own death to defend one's country and its people

In the final years, the cadets clearly understood that Japan would lose the war. Therefore, they had to rationalize their own deaths in order to believe that their sacrifice would not be a total waste. To this end, some convinced themselves that their determination to fight to the end would save the Japanese people (i.e. the Yamato race) and their country by forcing the Allied Forces to make concessions so as to end the war as quickly as possible to avoid further Allied casualties by kamikaze attack. However, as testimonies of dead and surviving pilots clearly show, their idea of "country" was far from the nationalistic notion of "nation-state." For most of these young students, "country" meant their own "beautiful hometowns" where their beloved families lived. In this context it is interesting to note that there is very little reference in their wills, letters-home, and diaries of their loyalty to the emperor. Occasionally we find some stereotypical militaristic phrases such as "Kokoku Goji (Uphold the Empire)," "Shinshu Fumetsu (the Immortal Divine Land)," "Yukyu no Taigi (the Noble Cause of Eternal Loyalty)," and the like, but these words are usually used rhetorically rather than conveying deep conviction or abiding nationalistic sentiment.



Photograph of send off of a group of Kamikaze found on the body of a pilot shot down in the Solomon Islands. The confident gaze of their commander contrasts with the uncertainty of the kamikaze. Courtesy of Dale Smith.

2) The belief that to die for the "country" was show filial piety to one's own parents, particularly to one's mother:

Many wills and last letters convey apology to parents for the inability to return all the favors the kamikaze pilots had received and for causing their parents grief by their premature death. Yet, they also state that their death for the "noble cause" was one way to compensate for the misery caused their parents. This way of thinking is clearly intertwined with the idea of defending the "country," i.e. the "hometown." The announcement of their death as kamikaze pilots in the national press brought praise and honor to their parents, in particular, praise by residents of their local community. Thus, in this way, filial piety ("koo") to parents became identical with "loyalty" ("chu") to parents and then to "country." Their loyalty to the emperor invariably emerges as a logical extension of loyalty to parents and hometown, rather than the reverse. To defend one's mother in one's hometown was thus the most basic, almost instinctive, element in rationalizing a cadet's death as a kamikaze pilot. This explains why many intelligent youths accepted their suicidal mission despite feelings among some of deep mistrust and criticism of military leaders and politicians. The majority of cadets viewed their unavoidable duty as defending their mothers no matter how corrupt the society and politics. The strong emotional attachment to mothers is overwhelmingly clear in their private records, a phenomenon perhaps related to the fact that the majority of these youth were not yet involved in sustained relationships.

3) Strong solidarity with their flight-mates who shared their fate as Kamikaze pilots:

This solidarity, which can be termed "a convoy of death," clearly softened the fear of death by making participants feel that others would die with them on the same mission. US pilots flying in formation communicated with each other by radio. Japanese planes were not equipped with radios, but it was common practice for the same flight formation team to be maintained through all stages from training to actual combat in order to create and sustain coordinated team actions. Not surprisingly, unusually strong friendships formed, especially among kamikaze pilots. In cases where pilots in the same team were separated on different missions, many complained bitterly to their commanders, claiming that they had pledged to die together. It seems that, in some cases, their friendship even developed into homosexual relationships.



4) A strong sense of responsibility and contempt for cowardice:

Most of these top university students were sincere and had a strong sense of responsibility. They felt that if they themselves would not carry out the mission nobody else would follow suit. They also saw escape from their "duty," for whatever reason, as an act of cowardice. "To live free from cowardice as a human being" was a strongly expressed desire. It seems that this mentality derived from university life, which had sheltered them from conventional ways of thinking. Clearly, they were naïve and such naivety and sincerity were encouraged at cadet school where students with similar social background lived and trained together while preparing to die for country. However, some boys, if clearly a minority, resisted orders to complete kamikaze missions by feigning illness or fleeing. (There was even one case in which a kamikaze pilot took off on a mission, but deliberately crashed his plane into a military brothel, killing several "comfort women," including his favorite, as well as himself.)

5) A lack of an image of the enemy:

One of the striking features of these youths' ideas is that they convey no discernible image of their enemy. In their diaries and letters-home there is barely any reference to their adversaries. The enemy did not exist in their mind. Specifically, virtually no sense of "hatred of the enemy" can be found in their writings. Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that these cadets had never experienced actual combat. By contrast, the Allied navy soldiers who encountered kamikaze attacks usually regarded the kamikaze pilots with intense fear and hatred, calling them "crazy, cruel, and inhumane Japs". In the case of these Japanese youths, a concrete mental concept of "the enemy" did not exist at all. Instead they were preoccupied by philosophical ideas such as how to find some spiritual value in their brief lives, how to spend their remaining time meaningfully, and how to philosophically justify their suicidal act. The concept

of killing the enemy, as opposed to fighting for "country," was simply lacking in their thinking.

Contemporary Suicide Bombers

In the absence of detailed information on the ideology and psychology of contemporary "terrorist suicide bombers," it is not easy to compare the kamikaze mentality with that of terrorist bombers. One important difference stems from the fact that kamikaze attacks were implemented and legitimized by the military regime of a nation-state, while "terrorist suicide bombing" is generally planned and authorized by organizations outside a state structure. Certain preliminary comparisons are nevertheless still possible.

As surviving former kamikaze pilots correctly point out, in contrast to contemporary terrorist bombers, their targets were always military planes, ships and personnel, never civilians. To be sure, under wartime conditions, particularly in the final months of the Pacific War, military targets were the only ones that the kamikaze could challenge. Had they been closer to American civilians, as Palestinian suicide bombers are to Israeli civilians, they too might have attacked civilian targets. Nevertheless there seem to be some fundamental similarities between the two groups of suicide attackers: in the imbalance of technological power between them and their foes, in the conceptions of those who dispatch them, and in the mentality of those who sacrifice their lives.

The following discussion emphasizes Palestinian suicide bombers, though they are of course not alone in seeking to use this strategy. Anwar Ayam, the brother of a Palestinian suicide bomber, is said to have observed, "It will *destroy their economy*. It causes more casualties than any other type of operation. It will *destroy their social life*. They are scared and nervous, and it will force them to leave the country because they are afraid." (emphasis added) In the eyes of the attackers, the distinction between military and civilian in the ranks of their oppressors is not a real concern. The goal for Palestinian suicide bombers is to shake the foundations of the Israeli establishment by destroying its social and economic life, and above all its sense of security as a means, ultimately of forcing the Israelis to leave their occupied land. The same logic applies to the 9/11 bombings in New York and Washington, and suicide bombings in Iraq. For kamikaze pilots, too, the ultimate aim of their actions was not to kill enemy soldiers or to achieve victory in the war, but to force the Allies to make concessions to end the war by terrorizing them with suicide attack. In both cases, concrete images of the victims may be lacking in the attackers' mind, thus the actions of killing others becomes ritualised. This observation is not, of course, limited to killing by kamikaze or suicide bombers but may extend to other terrains of war.

In this sense there is an important similarity between suicide bombing (including kamikaze attack) and the "strategic bombing." Strategic bombing, i.e., the indiscriminate bombing of civilians, is justified as the most efficient method of destroying the morale of the enemy nation, and thus the most economical way to force surrender. In this concept too, concrete images of victims are absent in the minds of strategists and bombers. This similarity is not surprising. This is because the indiscriminate bombing of civilians conducted by military forces is nothing but state violence against civilians, that is, it is state terrorism. "Terrorist attacks" either by a group or by a state can only be executed when images of victims are abstracted and detached from the minds of attackers and strategists.

Another similarity between kamikaze attack and suicide bombing is the huge technological gap in military capability between suicide attackers and their enemies. To be sure, Japan, in contrast to the Palestinians in particular, had created a powerful army, navy and air force that allowed it to become the dominant power in Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, the kamikaze strategy, particularly as it emerged in 1944-45, was a direct response to the fact that the Japanese Imperial Navy had lost most of its major battleships and almost all its aircraft carriers, while the Allied Forces had numerous aircraft carriers, hundreds of battleships, and thousands of aircraft with abundant fuel, bombs and ammunition. By 1944, the Imperial Army troops stationed throughout the Asia Pacific were incapacitated and struggling to survive without food and ammunition, indeed, many were cut loose from supplies and left to their own devices.

Bombing of major Japanese cities such as Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe and Fukuoka by B-29 bombers, underway by March 1945, caused hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. Kamikaze pilots saw their "country" being destroyed and their own families directly targeted by aerial bombardment. In these circumstances, the Japanese military leaders decision to emphasize the suicide kamikaze attack was a desperate strategy whose only possible meaning was to convince the US and its allies to ease surrender terms and prevent a US landing in Japan.

Similarly, Palestinian fighters have no comparable weaponry to directly attack F-16 jet fighters, Apache helicopters, tanks, missiles and the like; before their eyes their homes are blown up, women and children are torn apart, their bodies charred and chewed up by shrapnel, and Palestinian communities are fenced in by Israeli barbed wire that makes them captives in their own land. Moreover, Palestinians have endured decades of torture, humiliation, killing and the robbing of their lands and resources by Israel. In contrast the Israelis have been astonishingly free of reprisal from within the territories during these years. With far fewer strategic options than those available to Japan in the Pacific War, a segment of the Palestinian resistance, in utter despair, has opted for suicide bombing in urban centres as the most effective means to demoralize Israelis. For some young Palestinians who see no future in their life, terminating their own lives is not such a terrifying and difficult matter. It is a natural psychological extension for one who no longer finds meaning in his or her own life to slight the lives of others as well.

In my view, religious or ideological indoctrination is not the decisive factor in turning a young person into a suicide attacker. Rather religion and ideology are used to justify and formalize their cause of self-sacrifice and to rationalize the killing enemies, whether military or civilians. In so doing, they mirror the strategies of their oppressors who likewise, in practice, make no distinction between military and civilian targets. Ritualising killing makes it psychologically easier not only to annihilate enemies but also to terminate one's own life.

Ritualized violence and brutality as exemplified by suicide attack may constitute the most negative manifestations of a human being's desire to let one's own people live by sacrificing one's own life. However, war and violent conflict inevitably brutalize not only suicide attackers, but all human beings. Undoubtedly war is an act of madness, its absurdity clearly shown in the paired (but imbalanced) actions and reactions of World War II: as Japan adopted kamikaze-style suicide attacks, the US used "strategic bombing" to indiscriminately kill hundreds of thousands of civilians, and finally engaged in atomic bombing attacks. Yet, to a great extent, it is the former acts that have borne the opprobrium of history while the latter would come to shape the strategic horizons of subsequent wars. Thus terrorist suicide bombing, which is occurring more and more frequently throughout the world, bears the opprobrium of "lunatic actions by fanatics," while the bombing of civilians, such as those executed by the U.S. and British forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, are widely regarded as "legitimate military operations." It is crucial that we find effective ways to break the vicious cycle of these two types of terrorism.

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For another recent analysis of the kamikaze, and contemporary visual representations of their heroism, see Davie Earhart, "All Ready to Die: Kamikazification and Japan's Wartime Ideology," *Critical Asian Studies* 37:4 (2005) 569-596.