The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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The Aso Mining Company in World War II: History and Japan's Would-Be Premier ***Japanese translation available.***

By William Underwood

Despite his recently failed third attempt to become prime minister, Aso Taro remains one of Japan's best-known and most influential politicians. The former foreign minister still aspires to the top post and in two books published earlier this year he has sketched a road map for the nation.

Japan the Tremendous, a bestseller written in a populist tone, highlights the peaceful nature of postwar Japan and calls the country a "fount of moral lessons" for Asia. *Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons* expatiates on Aso's tenure as foreign minister from October 2005 to August 2007.

Aso Taro: Japan's future leader?

But a 1975 book called *The 100-Year History of Aso* sends a different message about the would-be prime minister's view of World War II and his vision for Japan's future.[1]

Aso Taro oversaw publication of the 1,500-page company history as president and CEO of Aso Cement Co. Marking the centennial of the family firm, the book suggests the United States tricked Japan into attacking Pearl Harbor and glorifies the Japanese war effort with little critical commentary.

The World War II chapter of *The 100-Year History of Aso* begins by recapping the Imperial Japanese Army's move into Manchuria in 1931, followed in 1932 by the spread of war to Shanghai and the establishment of the Japanese puppet state, Manchukuo. The book recounts the 42-1 vote by which the League of Nations condemned Japanese expansionism in China in 1933 and Japan's withdrawal from the world body.

Aso Takakichi, Aso Taro's father, became the second president of Aso Mining Co. in 1934 at age 24. Aso Taro's great-grandfather founded the business in 1872, supplying "black diamonds" from the Kyushu coalfields to fuel Japan's fast-modernizing economy. Aso Taro's grandfather died prematurely and never

headed the firm.

Aso Takakichi forged his own identity as the new boss by establishing Aso Academy (Aso Juku), aiming at the cultivation of the "Aso man" capable of serving the nation in "spirit, body and technical ability." The school styled itself as a "Showa Shoin Juku," evoking the academy founded by Yoshida Shoin in nearby Yamaguchi Prefecture that nurtured leaders of the early Meiji era.

Japan's shift to a war production economy in the course of the 1930s prompted Aso Mining to open a Tokyo office and new coal pits in Kyushu. Domestic business operations expanded in Wakamatsu, Kobe, Osaka and Nagoya, while the company's young president assessed the international situation during an overseas fact-finding trip for five months in 1936-37. By the end of the decade Japan was waging all-out war in China and on a military collision course with the West.

In a section called "Aso Fights," the corporate history quotes for several pages the January 1940 address to assembled employees by Aso Takakichi, whose son Taro would be born later that year. Aso sought to motivate the miners by portraying the firm as a front-line unit in Japan's war of economic production, resolving as unit leader to share the fate of his troops.

*Aso Takakichi, left, took charge of Aso Mining in the 1930s, while Aso Taro was running the family firm when the corporate history was published in 1975. (*The 100-Year History of Aso*)*

"In our country labor and management are one, facing in the same direction—toward the emperor. We must advance on the path of national duty," Aso solemnly told his workforce, stressing the sacred nature of coal mining and the urgent need for greater self-sacrifice. "If it is possible that anyone here does not understand this spirit of service to the nation, as a Japanese subject he should be truly ashamed."

Aso Takakichi struck an anti-capitalist chord by insisting that the corporation's goal was not to make money. He told the employees that while some profit was required to fulfill his duty of continuing the family business, additional profits would be gladly distributed to workers first. He pledged to reward

workers by building facilities for their benefit and helping to improve public services.

Noting that 1940 was the 2,600th anniversary of Japan's mythical founding, Aso's address inventoried the challenges confronting the nation: the raging war in "Shina" (the diminutive Japanese name for China), hostile relations with the Soviet Union and increasing friction with the United States and the United Kingdom.

Japan "forcibly advanced" into French Indochina in 1941, the book continues. In response the U.S., the U.K., France and Holland "tightened the net" around Japan by freezing overseas financial assets and halting oil shipments to the nation. Late-1941 diplomatic negotiations between Tokyo and Washington are reviewed in considerable detail.

"Whether we liked it or not and even as the world busily tried to avert war," the Aso chronicle states, "the unfortunate year of Showa sixteen (1941) was just like a pus-filled tumor that resists medical treatment and bursts open. Charging into an economic war to secure natural resources became unavoidable."

Top U.S. leaders had detailed knowledge of Japanese military plans before the attack on Pearl Harbor, according to Aso historians, who add that the Imperial Navy initially wanted to fight America two years later. Japan was purposely allowed to strike the first blow in December 1941, so that "Remember Pearl Harbor" could become a rallying cry for Americans.

"This cleverly united American opinion for war against Japan," the book says. "But America lost the backbone of its Pacific fleet as a result. Moreover, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, expanding the conflict into a world war."

Aso Mining responded to this "most desperate crisis in Japanese history" by digging coal in record quantities. The company became like a "kamikaze special attack production unit."

"Coal is the mother of greater military strength," wartime Prime Minister Tojo Hideki is quoted as saying. Given Japan's vulnerability with respect to oil, coal was indeed crucial to the Japanese economy.

"In response to the enemy's materiel offensive, we will fight by means of increased coal production," said Kishi Nobusuke, then Japan's minister of commerce and industry. "All miners must come together in spirit and the patriotic mining industry must dash forward."

*Left: Aso miners doing calisthenics during the war; right: ore cars at the Aso Yoshikuma mine. (*The 100-Year History of Aso*)*

Tojo was executed as a Class A war criminal in 1948. Kishi was imprisoned for three years as a Class A war crimes suspect but never tried. He served as Japanese prime minister from 1957 to 1960, and was a main founder of the LDP. Abe Shinzo, whose rocky year as prime minister ended in September, is Kishi's grandson.

Aso Taro's grandfather was Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, the most powerful Japanese leader of the occupation era, while his wife is the daughter of former Prime Minister Suzuki Zenko. Aso's sister is married to Prince Tomohito of Mikasa, a first cousin of the current emperor. His great-great-grandfather, Okubo Toshimichi, was a chief architect of the modern Japanese state. Aso's family lineage thus runs from the upper echelons of the Meiji Restoration through postwar Japan's top political leadership to the royal family.

The 1975 book recalls wartime initiatives like the "Certain Decisive Victory Increased Production Campaign." Government slogans included "Planes, ships and bullets: all thanks to coal," and "One lump of coal equals one drop of blood."

Weekends disappeared during the move to a seven-day workweek, jokingly replaced by two Mondays and two Fridays. But coal production eventually plunged as skilled miners became soldiers and shipped out for overseas battlefields. The lack of mining materials and equipment during the desperate late-war years led to reckless mining and ruined mines.

Aso Mining and Forced Labor

Severe manpower shortages necessitated the widespread use of forced labor in wartime Japan—and at Aso Mining. Some 700,000 Korean labor conscripts were brought to Japan using varying degrees of coercion beginning in 1939. The Japanese military transported more than 30,000 Allied prisoners of war to Japan beginning in 1942, while nearly 40,000 Chinese arrived under similarly forcible conditions starting in 1943.

Aso Mining was employing 7,996 Korean conscripts as of January 1944, according to a wartime report by the Special Higher Police (Tokubetsu Koto Keisatsu), and 56 conscripts had recently died. Fukuoka-based historians estimate Aso used a total of 12,000 Koreans between 1939 and 1945. The wartime police report shows that 61.5 percent of Aso's Korean laborers resisted conscription by fleeing their work sites, the highest percentage of runaways in the region. While this figure indicates that security conditions

were not prison-like, most Korean conscripts in Japan were never properly paid for their work.

Young Korean labor conscripts at Aso Mining's Atago mine: workers assigned to the Jowa dormitory in 1942 (top) and the Yamato dormitory in 1943. (Hayashi Eidai photos)

There were also 300 Allied POWs at the Aso Yoshikuma mine in Fukuoka Prefecture. Documentation includes the Aso Company Report of January 1946 and other records produced by the postwar Japanese government, as described by Japan Focus in May 2007.

Yet the family conglomerate, now known as Aso Group and headed by Aso Taro's younger brother, has never publicly acknowledged or commented on its POW legacy. Recent phone calls to the Fukuoka office of Aso Lafarge Cement were not returned.

A spokesperson for then-Foreign Minister Aso addressed the POW issue for the first time in June 2007, but stopped short of acknowledging the historical record (see article below). Previously, the Foreign Ministry had cast doubt on foreign media reports about the Aso-POW connection. Japanese-language media have avoided reporting the issue.

The 1,500-page Aso corporate history contains a single cryptic reference to wartime forced labor. As Japanese miners left for military service, the book says, "people like Korean laborers and Chinese prisoners of war filled the void" in Japan's mining industry.

Although 6,090 Chinese forced laborers were used at 16 sites in Fukuoka, and 11 percent of them died, Aso Mining was not one of the five Japanese

companies involved. It is unclear why the book mentions Chinese workers (and accurately describes them as "prisoners") but omits the Allied POWs that Aso did use three decades earlier.

The Seoul government's Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization Under Japanese Imperialism has been vigorously researching wartime labor conscription since 2005. Assisted by Japanese citizens, commission members spent a week in Kyushu in early 2007, searching mostly in vain for information about Aso Mining's extensive use of Korean conscripts.

Shortly after Aso Taro became foreign minister in late 2005, a South Korean truth commission official charged that Japanese companies were not cooperating in efforts to locate the remains of Korean workers still in Japan.

"The corporations' survey of remains has been insincere," the South Korean official said. "It is also strange that the family company of the foreign minister, who should be setting an example, has provided no information whatsoever."[2]

Aso Mining's former Akasaka mine in the late 1970s and a Korean forced to work there during World War II. (Hayashi Eidai photos)

Aso Group today consists of more than 60 companies in diverse fields such as health care, education, construction and real estate, while also supplying gasoline and running a golf course located beside the former Yoshikuma mine. Aso Cement merged with Lafarge, the French multinational and world's largest cement maker, in 2001. Aso ceased coal mining in the 1960s.

Highlighting the company motto, "We deliver the best," the flashy Aso Group website plays up the family's Meiji-era business roots and provides excerpts from *The 100-Year History of Aso*. Yet wartime records related to Aso's use of forced labor have apparently vanished.

"We couldn't investigate into the history of Aso Mining even if we wanted to, because records just aren't available from so long ago," an Aso Group official told the Associated Press in November 2005. "All we can say is that everybody employed forced labour during the war. There must have been a dozen mining companies in Kyushu at the time, and they all used forced labour. So it wasn't a practice limited to Aso Mining."[3]

Disappearing Korean Remains

In February 2006 the Japanese Foreign Ministry (headed by Aso Taro) was informed by Aso Group (headed by Aso Yutaka) that Aso Cement had returned six sets of Korean remains to family members living in the vicinity of the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine in 1984-85.[4]

During redevelopment in the 1960s, a communal cemetery containing the cremated remains of an estimated 504 people was discovered near the entrance to the recently closed Yoshikuma mine. Aso Mining soon built a charnel house a few hundred meters from the cemetery and transferred the remains into it.

In the early 1970s, Zainichi Korean and Japanese activists began researching the Fukuoka area's legacy of Korean forced labor. Hayashi Eidai, a respected local historian who has written 50 books about forced labor and other aspects of Japanese war conduct over the past four decades, was one of the researchers involved.

Hayashi gained access to the Aso-built charnel house in 1975 and photographed six remains containers (known as tsubo), each of them bearing a Korean name. The rest of the remains were either unidentified or belonged to working-class Japanese with no known next of kin. Hayashi returned to the Yoshikuma charnel house the following year to gather information for a television documentary.

By 1976, however, all six sets of Korean remains had been removed from the charnel house shelves. Hayashi was shown a small hole beneath the shelves and told by the Buddhist priest in charge that the Korean remains had been deposited in an underground storage area. The unusual funerary practice was not further explained.

1975 images of the exterior and interior of the Aso Yoshikuma charnel house.
Six containers of Korean ashes (right) disappeared the following year. (Hayashi Eidai photos)

Aso Taro was president of Aso Cement at the time; he left the post upon his election to the House of Representatives in 1979. Korean conscript remains may have been removed from the shelves of the Aso Yoshikuma charnel house in 1975-76 because they were viewed as a potential liability for the family scion's political career.

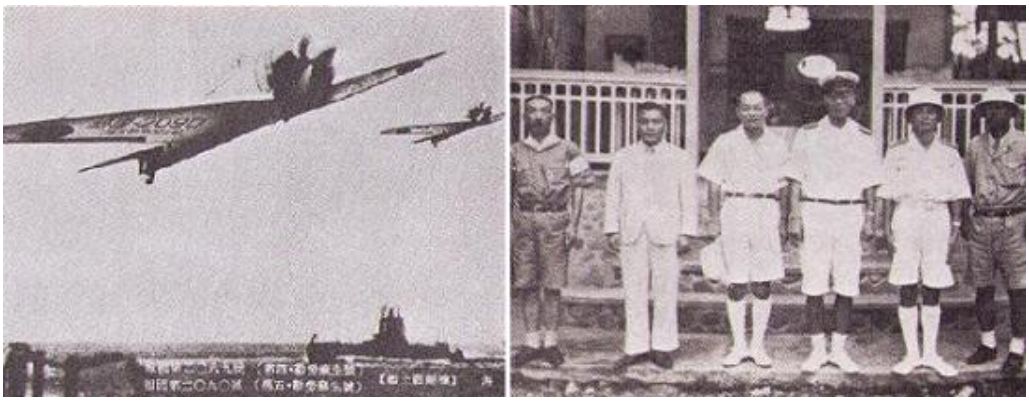
Today, Hayashi and other Fukuoka-based researchers doubt the veracity of Aso Group's claim that the six sets of Korean remains were returned to family members.

Instead, the Fukuoka researchers suspect the ashes were removed from their individual containers and dumped into the storage space beneath the Aso Yoshikuma charnel house. There were no Korean families still living around the Yoshikuma mine to receive the remains in the mid-1980s, according to Hayashi.

It is also unclear why Aso Cement supposedly handed over the ashes at that time: four decades after the war's end, two decades after the remains were exhumed from the cemetery at the Yoshikuma site, and one decade after they disappeared from the charnel house shelves following the first researcher inquiries.[5]

The World War II chapter of the Aso history book concludes by describing the company's late-war mining venture on the island of Celebes, now part of Indonesia. Two hundred Aso employees were dispatched for the project at the request of the Imperial Navy and the Coal Control Association. Aso's hefty financial investment in the Celebes mine was lost due to Japan's defeat.

Photographs in the book depict Aso workers doing calisthenics before entering the Kyushu mines, a site visit by top sumo wrestlers, and various aspects of coal and cement production. Another photo shows two carrier-based warplanes that Aso employees presented to the Imperial Navy through their donated labor. Lyrics of patriotic mining songs are provided.



Left: Imperial Navy warplanes; right: Aso Mining officials in the Celebes.
*(*The 100-Year History of Aso*)*

It is not surprising that an account of Aso Mining's wartime activities includes the imperial ideology and spiritual mobilization so central to the period. It is also true that the Aso dynasty has made many positive contributions to the Fukuoka region since 1872, not only economically but in fields such as education and health care.

Yet the book's silence about the company's own use of forced labor, and the suggestion that Japan fought a morally just war it did not desire, are more troubling. A string of provocative comments by Aso Taro appears to be connected to the version of Japanese history found in the company book project.

Aso has infuriated Koreans by defending Japan's colonial rule and insisting that Koreans had voluntarily requested Japanese names. He has also described contemporary Chinese military spending as a "considerable threat" and

expressed his desire for Japan's emperor to visit Yasukuni shrine.

The Aso company line on World War II resembles the revisionist narrative being advanced by Yasukuni's controversial history museum, which seeks to justify Japan's colonial rule and military aggression. Aso opined as leader of Japan's diplomatic corps—and before the most offensive exhibits were toned down—that the Yasukuni museum "merely shows what the wartime situations were."

"Historical perspectives based on masochistic views don't correspond with my philosophy," Aso said last month during a key debate with Fukuda Yasuo, referring to how he would approach contentious war-related issues. Fukuda, who seeks to address Northeast Asia's history problem in a more conciliatory fashion, defeated Aso to become the current LDP president and Japanese prime minister.

"Masochistic" (jigyakuteki) is a codeword used by Japanese groups, in and out of the LDP, advocating a historical perspective that Japan's neighbors say whitewashes Japanese war misconduct. Whereas as Fukuda pledged during the campaign to avoid visiting Yasukuni while heading the government, Aso insisted the opinions of foreign governments should be disregarded when considering the question.

Aso left the helm of the Foreign Ministry and became LDP secretary general last August, following the party's disastrous showing in Upper House elections in July. The new job was viewed as the ideal springboard for Aso to eventually succeed Abe Shinzo as prime minister.

Most news reports of Abe's sudden resignation in September mentioned Aso as the probable next prime minister. LDP factions soon united around the grandfatherly Fukuda instead, but Aso still received far more party support than expected, especially from local LDP chapters. Younger Japanese are said to appreciate Aso's unvarnished speaking style and identify with his passion for manga comic books.

Although Aso Taro, 67, held key cabinet posts in both the Abe and Koizumi administrations, he turned down Prime Minister Fukuda's request to join the current cabinet. "I want to have my hands free," Aso told reporters, signaling that his prime ministerial ambitions remain intact.

Despite his reputation as an assertive nationalist, Aso served as the point man for Japan's "values-oriented diplomacy" during his stint as foreign minister, while seeking a more proactive role for Japan on the world stage. The related slogan for Aso's recent campaign for the premiership was "Japan's Potential Power—Seeking Vitality and Security."

Readers of *The 100-Year History of Aso* may sense a mismatch between the vision and the man who would be prime minister.

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Aso questions content of 1946 records

By William Underwood

Aso Taro now possesses the postwar records proving that Aso Mining used Allied POW forced labor, but his spokesperson has made conflicting statements about their meaning.

Last June, I mailed the then-foreign minister both Japanese and English versions of the Aso Company Report, produced by his family's firm on Jan. 24, 1946. Ordered by Occupation authorities investigating war crimes against Allied prisoners, the report clearly shows that 300 POWs were assigned to the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine.

Ex-POW Arthur Gigger was forced to work without pay for Aso Mining in 1945 (Ian Millard photo). Two of Gigger's fellow Australians died at the Yoshikuma mine and are buried in the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Yokohama.

Muramatsu Ichiro, Aso's policy secretary, was then interviewed by telephone twice. "The authenticity of the documents is very high," he said during a freewheeling, hour-long conversation on June 21. The report is written on company stationery and bears an official seal.

Muramatsu seemed to readily agree that the Australian, British and Dutch prisoners had dug coal for Aso Mining beginning in May 1945. But he questioned whether their work could be described as "forced labor," stressing that the Aso Company Report says wages were paid. Australian survivors of the Yoshikuma labor camp, however, have insisted they received no money from Aso.

"How was a POW any different from a conscripted Japanese worker?" Muramatsu asked.

He also raised the subject of Japanese POWs who were taken to Siberia by the Soviet Union to perform forced labor after the war. About ten percent of the Japanese prisoners died. None have ever been compensated for their mistreatment by the Soviet Union, Russia or Japan.

The compensation fund for Nazi-era forced labor set up by Germany's government and corporations recently finished paying out some $6 billion to 1.7 million people living in 100 countries. Many of these recipients received

wages during the war; some even lived in their own homes.

Muramatsu also said that Aso Mining Co. had no connection to Aso Cement Co., which was headed by Aso Taro during most of the 1970s. But the Aso Group website today proudly highlights the historical continuity of the family's various businesses.

The abandoned Aso Yoshikuma work office (left) and ruined Yoshikuma mine buildings in the late 1970s. (Hayashi Eidai photos)

A shorter, less cordial phone call to Aso's policy secretary took place on June 22. I asked Muramatsu to clarify whether the Allied prisoners performed "forced labor" at Yoshikuma and why they do not appear in *The 100-Year History of Aso*.

Muramatsu then reversed his previous position, refusing to acknowledge that Aso Mining used Allied POWs at all.

He said the contents of the 1946 Aso Company Report should be accepted or rejected in their entirety. With American war crimes investigators as its target audience, the report claims the Western prisoners were treated better than Japanese workers and thanked Aso Mining staff by giving them gifts after the war.

"Selectively using the records is dishonest," Muramatsu said.

William Underwood, a faculty member at Kurume Institute of Technology and a Japan Focus coordinator, completed his doctoral dissertation at Kyushu University on forced labor in wartime Japan. He can be reached at kyushubill@yahoo.com. Japan Focus *thanks Hayashi Eidai for access to his photo archives. Posted at* Japan Focus *on Oct. 6, 2007.*

This is an expanded and updated version of an article that originally appeared in the Japan Times on June 26, 2007.

See also related articles by William Underwood:

Proof of POW Forced Labor for Japan's Foreign Minister: The Aso Mines

Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages (1): Reparations for Korean Forced Labor in Japan

Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages (2): Seeking Redress for Korean Forced Labor

Endnotes

[1] *Aso Hyakunen Shi*. Iizuka, Fukuoka: Aso Cement Co., 1975.

[2] "Aso gaisho no kankei kaisha, choyosha ikotsu joho teikyo sezu, Kankoku de hihan." *Yomiuri Shimbun* online (Kyushu edition), Dec. 24, 2005.

[3] "Japan FM family firm in spotlight." *BBC News* online. Nov. 30, 2005. Available. It should be noted that the Aso spokesman likely used the term "choyo" (best translated as labor "conscription"), not "kyosei renko" (best translated as "forced labor").

[4] "Aso gaisho no shinzoku kigyo, tanko shikichinai no Chosenjin ikotsu 6 tai wo henkan." *Yomiuri Shimbun* online (Kyushu edition), Feb. 28, 2006. See also "Firm of Aso's father returned remains of 6 Korean workers to kin." *Kyodo News International* online, Feb. 28. 2006. Available.

[5] This account of Korean remains at the Aso Yoshikuma charnel house (Japanese version here) is based on an unpublished manuscript, "Human Remains at the Aso Yoshikuma Coal Mine," received from Hayashi Eidai in July 2006 and follow-up conversations with him. Hayashi prepared the manuscript for possible use by a Japanese Diet member during an interpellation session, but the issue has never been raised in the Diet.