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The Firebombing of Tokyo and Its Legacy: Introduction　東京大空襲とその遺したもの--序論

Bret Fisk, Cary Karacas

The Firebombing of Tokyo: Views from the Ground

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More than sixty-five years after the Great Tokyo Air Raid of March 10, 1945, and the subsequent firebombing and destruction of Japan's cities by the United States Army Air Forces in World War II, a cursory examination of the relevant English-language literature, both popular and academic, reveals a striking lacuna. Researchers have covered substantial ground in analyzing various historical aspects of the U.S. bombing campaign against Japan. Specifically, much has been done to situate the events within the emergence of strategic air war in the twentieth century and within the concurrent evolution of American military air power doctrine. Scholars have discussed the air raids within the context of the evolution (and subsequent violations) of principles of noncombatant immunity during war, and have also provided important analyses regarding when and why the United States chose to target Japan's cities for destruction.[1]

Nihei Haruyo, eight years old during the Tokyo firebombing of March 10, 1945 shows a map of the areas destroyed by the bombing at the Tokyo Air-raid Center.

Photo by Norimatsu Satoko. See also this site.

In stark contrast to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, historians and other professional scholars working in the English language have yet to fathom the tremendous societal impact – both immediate and long-lasting – of the destruction by firebombing of Japan's cities. What remain particularly underdeveloped are an historical understanding and appreciation of the Japanese civilian experience, specifically an understanding of the effect of the air raids on Japanese communities, cities, and social institutions. For example, although it is easy to obtain statistics that illustrate the catastrophic nature of the Great Tokyo Air Raid, few have attempted to provide a sense – through oral histories or in-depth explanations based on survivor accounts and other available sources – of the actual experience and legacies of the firebombing.

In the future, researchers will be able to examine a multitude of topics related to the firebombing raids that destroyed a significant percentage of most of Japan's cities, wiped out a quarter of all housing in the country, made nine million people homeless, and killed at least 187,000 civilians, and injured 214,000 more.[2] The wartime reorganization of neighborhoods and cities under ever-changing civil defense policies merits attention, as does the unexplored contradiction between the established expectations of city residents in relation to air defense/firefighting and the Japanese government's knowledge of the inefficacy of such tactics in the face of incendiary weapons. Other avenues of research include: the disintegration of family structures through voluntary and forced evacuations of school children from Japan's cities, the many children orphaned by the air raids when their parents were killed in the cities, issues related to large-scale population transfers out of cities following the initiation of the U.S. firebombing campaign, and the postwar return of residents to their devastated cities. Whole books could be written on the destruction (and reconstruction) of larger cities such as Osaka, Yokohama, Nagoya, and Kobe. Additionally, the contentious issue of the Japanese government's postwar treatment of air raid victims, while discussed briefly in this special issue, warrants extended analysis. Last, translations and analyses of some of the oral histories, fiction, and poetry written in Japan about the air raids would greatly enrich the field of Japanese studies.

While the above mostly represents a "wish list" of topics that merit research, it is a privilege to take a small step in the direction of furthering research into air raids conducted against Japan with the following set of articles, collectively titled "The Firebombing of Tokyo: Views from the Ground." For many readers, the most striking portion of this collection will be "That Unforgettable Day--The Great Tokyo Air Raid through Drawings." These eleven paintings and the accompanying descriptions of various experiences of the March 10 firebombing viscerally communicate the horror of the event, whether viewed from the perspective of a young evacuee witnessing the burning of the heart of Tokyo from a neighboring prefecture, or via Miyamoto Kenzo's haunting "My Child" illustration and description of being scarred as a young boy by the experience of witnessing a pregnant woman unable to move while her child was incinerated in front of her. These illustrations, similar to some of those found in *Unforgettable Fire: Pictures Drawn by Atomic Bomb Survivors*, draw our attention to the heart of the matter: the civilian experience of a holocaust that has been largely forgotten in the United States and globally.[3] In "The Tokyo Air Raids in the Words of Those Who Survived," Bret Fisk provides a few examples of the different forms of survivor accounts extant in Japanese, which he categorizes as "Complete Personal Narratives," "Incomplete Episodes and Incidents," and "Sites of Mass Suffering." His examination emphasizes the lack in

English of oral histories or other personal narratives of the people whose lives were changed forever by the firebombing of urban Japan.[4]

Another unique aspect of this collection is that it contains the first translation into English of writing by Saotome Katsumoto, the central figure in the decades-long movement in Japan to remember the Tokyo air raids. Saotome's story is a remarkable one. His life was forever altered by the March 10 raid (which he experienced as a twelve-year-old boy), yet with little formal education he managed to forge a career as a writer. Saotome infused his works with a heartfelt humanism and empathy for the weakest members of society, and he became an activist in the cause to memorialize the air raids in the late 1960s. As a core member of the Society to Record the Tokyo Air Raids, Saotome was instrumental in producing a five-volume work that contains over a thousand descriptions of the air raids by survivors as well as scores of key government and media documents related to wartime air defense and strategic bombing. In "Reconciliation and Peace through Remembering History: Preserving the Memory of the Great Tokyo Air Raid," a translation of a speech given at the University of Bradford in 2009, Saotome shares his personal experiences of the March 10 raid and provides the audience with a general introduction to key facts about the firebombing. He then situates the Tokyo air raids within the context of twentieth century terror bombing campaigns and Japan's "Fifteen Year War" in Asia. Yamabe Masahiko's "Thinking Now about the Great Tokyo Air Raid" may be considered a companion piece to Saotome's speech in that it further explains and contextualizes the Tokyo air raids. Yamabe, currently a senior researcher at the Institute of Politics and Economy, which is attached to the Tokyo Air Raid and War Damages Resource Center located in Koto Ward, Tokyo, has long analyzed and promoted the establishment of peace museums in Japan. Additionally, Yamabe is part of a movement among intellectuals and activists who over the last handful of years have sought to examine the air raids on Tokyo and the rest of urban Japan from a transnational perspective. The final article in this collection, "Fire Bombings and Forgotten Civilians: The Lawsuit Seeking Compensation for Victims of the Tokyo Air Raids," by Cary Karacas, provides the historical context for a lawsuit filed against the Japanese government in 2008. When collectively considered, one striking aspect of the pieces by Saotome, Yamabe, and Karacas is the fact that the main personalities, including but not limited to intellectuals, involved in the various aspects of the movement to remember the Tokyo air raids insist on situating these raids within the context of Japan's own actions during the Asia-Pacific War.

In closing, it is our pleasure to announce the establishment of an online bilingual digital archive – JapanAirRaids.org – dedicated to the dissemination of information regarding the World War II air raids against Japan. In addition to a variety of primary and secondary documents, the archive features a strong visual and multimedia component, with numerous Army Air Forces photographs, videos of survivor interviews (with English subtitles), sound recordings, and more. Since the website officially opened in late November 2010, it has attracted over 50,000 unique visitors. This unexpectedly high level of interest is surely a strong indication of the need for such an archive and it is our hope that the wide range of air raid-related documents and other resources that the website showcases will act as a catalyst for additional research into this important topic.

Bret Fisk is a writer and translator living in Odawara, Japan. He is co-creator of the digital archive JapanAirRaids.org. Fisk's first novel is in Japanese, Between the Tides「潮汐の間」, *published by* 現代思潮新社 *in Tokyo. Fisk can be reached at: bretfisk@gmail.com.*

Cary Karacas is an assistant professor of geography at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island. His research focuses on the Japan air raids and issues of place and memory. He is co-creator with Bret Fisk of the digital archive JapanAirRaids.org. He is the author of "Place, Public Memory, and the Tokyo Air Raids," The Geographical Review *100 (4), October 2010.*

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Articles on relevant subjects include:

Robert Jacobs, 24 Hours After Hiroshima: National Geographic Channel Takes Up the Bomb

Asahi Shimbun, The Great Tokyo Air Raid and the Bombing of Civilians in World War II

Yuki Tanaka and Richard Falk, The Atomic Bombing, The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and the Shimoda Case: Lessons for Anti-Nuclear Legal Movements

Marilyn B. Young, Bombing Civilians: An American Tradition

Mark Selden, A Forgotten Holocaust: US Bombing Strategy, the Destruction of Japanese Cities and the American Way of War from World War II to Iraq

Yuki Tanaka, Indiscriminate Bombing and the Enola Gay Legacy

Notes

[1] A short list of essential works includes Conrad Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians: American Airpower Strategy in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Gordon Daniels, "The Great Tokyo Air Raid, 9-10 March 1945," in W.G. Beasley, ed., *Modern Japan: Aspects of History, Literature and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, pp.113-131); John Dower, *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9-11/Iraq* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010); E. Bartlett Kerr, *Flames over Tokyo: The U.S. Army Air Forces' Incendiary Campaign Against Japan 1944-1945* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1991); Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Thomas Searle "'It made a lot of sense to kill skilled workers': The firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945," *The Journal of Military History* 66 (2002), pp.103-33; Mark Selden, "A forgotten holocaust: U.S. bombing strategy, the destruction of Japanese cities, and the American way of war from the Pacific War to Iraq," in Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn Young, eds., *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth Century History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009, pp. 77-96); and Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: the Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[2] These are conservative estimates from the *Overall Report of Damage Sustained by the Nation During the Pacific War*, Economic Stabilization Agency, Planning Department, Office of the Secretary General, 1949, which may be viewed here.

[3] Nihon Hoso Kyokai, *Unforgettable Fire: Pictures Drawn by Atomic Bomb Survivors* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

[4] While narrative accounts of well over a thousand people who experienced the Tokyo fire-bombings exist in Japanese, nothing similar to Kyoko Selden and Mark Selden's *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1989) has yet to

appear in English. See Haruko Cook and Ted Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992) for a few exceptions.

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