The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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# Reconciliation and Peace through Remembering History: Preserving the Memory of the Great Tokyo Air Raid 「歴史の記憶」から和解と平和へ東京大空襲を語りついで

**Saotome Katsumoto**

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**Saotome Katsumoto**

**Translation by Bret Fisk**

*Introduction:* In this 2009 speech given by a central figure in the decades-long citizen's movement to remember and memorialize the Tokyo air raids, Saotome Katsumoto discusses details of his own experience of the March 10, 1945 firebombing of Japan's capital. He then situates the air raids on Tokyo within the context of twentieth century terror bombing campaigns and Japan's "Fifteen Year War" in Asia.

Good afternoon, everyone. I am a novelist from Japan and I am honored and pleased to have this opportunity to speak at Bradford University today. In Japan, I am the director of a privately founded and operated historical museum dedicated to preserving the memory of the damage wrought by American planes near the end of the Second World War. Accompanying me today are members of our museum staff.

Photo taken at UC Berkeley in 2010 by Cary Karacas

During the precious little time I have today there are several themes I would like to address including the aforementioned damage incurred during the war, the importance of keeping that memory alive, historical background and issues, and, finally, peaceful cooperation on a civilian level as a basis for future peace. By the end of World War II in 1945, not only had Japan lost the war it began but for the first time in human history, atom bombs had been dropped by the American military on Japanese cities. Hiroshima was bombed on August 6, and the attack on Nagasaki came shortly thereafter on August 9. Due to the intense heat, explosive power, and effects of the radiation produced by these bombs, it is estimated that 140,000 citizens of Hiroshima and 70,000 citizens of Nagasaki had died by the end of the year.

However, despite the fact that no nuclear weapons were used, Tokyo lost an estimated 100,000 citizens during a single air raid earlier in the year. Although it caused as much damage and loss of life as an atom bomb, how many people today are even aware of this raid?[1]

I was twelve years old at the time of the attack. Because I barely survived myself, I have considered it my responsibility since then to speak on behalf of the children and women—the small and weak ones—who were silenced that night. (See an interview of Saotome Katsumoto describing his experience of the air raid here) First, let me attempt to give you some idea of the extent of the damage. 1945 was the year the Nazis surrendered, but it was also the year that the homelands of Japan were converted to a battlefield. America began to attack using a weapon developed specifically to destroy the various cities of Japan: the B-29 long-range heavy bomber. For days on end, it seemed the eerie wail of the warning sirens never rested. Although Tokyo would eventually be bombed on over one hundred separate occasions, one attack in particular resulted in unprecedented human suffering: the air raid that took place in the early hours of March 10, 1945. On this night, the B-29s made the heavily populated Shitamachi district of downtown Tokyo their target. Because the purpose of this raid was to demoralize the civilian population, it had several characteristics that set it apart from previous air raids.

This was the first nighttime raid on a Japanese city, which allowed an unprecedented number of B-29s – around three hundred – to better avoid ground-to-air fire even though they flew at a relatively low altitude in order to carry out an indiscriminate carpet bombing raid. Also, one must consider the deadly nature of the bombs themselves. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,700 tons of deadly napalm incendiaries were poured into the city. The attack itself lasted less than two hours, but because the Shitamachi area was so densely covered in wooden buildings and because the flames were fanned by a seasonal north wind, everything was consumed in a raging wave of fire. In a single night, the history and fate of Tokyo were altered forever. An estimated 1,000,000 people were left homeless, countless numbers of civilians were injured, and 100,000 precious lives were lost.

All of these were people who had only hours earlier been talking and sighing while sharing scanty meals in their dimly lit wartime homes. One must use one's imagination in order to remember that each and every one of them had a unique personality and a unique life to live. Never before in recorded history had 100,000 people been killed in such a short amount of time. Tokyo had been turned into a battlefield the likes of which had never been seen before. When dawn broke on Shitamachi, the streets were littered with burned corpses so unidentifiable that you couldn't even tell if they were male or female. Among them I saw an infant untouched by flames, but dead nevertheless, in the arms of its mother.

By the end of the war in August, Tokyo would end up with over half of its total area laid waste by flames. However, it was not Tokyo alone. The B-29 air raids would be extended to cities throughout the nation. By napalm incendiaries, explosive bombs, and atom bombs, (and to this can be added the devastation wrought upon Okinawa during the land battle there), the war-scarred lands of the Japanese islands were reduced to rubble and debris.

For Japan it had been a fifteen year war that began with her own invasion of China in 1931, leading to an alliance with Germany and Italy, and escalating into a worldwide conflagration. The number of Japanese lives lost, including soldiers, other military personnel, and civilians, is officially estimated at 3,100,000. However, the number of civilian casualties this figure takes into account is probably less than the actual total due to a problematic tendency of the government to downplay this reality.

Another figure to consider is the average Japanese lifespan during the war years. Based on the deaths occurring each year, a shocking average of 23.9 years for males and 37.5 years for females is reached for the year 1945. In other words, men could expect to live twenty-four years and women thirty-eight years. The war did end in August of this year, but these figures starkly illuminate the enormous death toll among children and young adults. For such reasons, Japanese people tend to think of themselves as victims of the war. However, any such victimization is nothing but a particular result of the war, and one must not forget that when there is a given result, there must also be a cause or process developing up to it.

Regarding the development of aerial bombing, we know that during the 1930s bombers flying the Japanese flag were the first to implement indiscriminate carpet bombing against Chongqing and other Chinese cities soon after the commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. A decade earlier in 1922, international laws prohibiting the bombing of noncombatants had been instituted in the form of the Hague Rules of Air Warfare. The international community, including Japan, was quick to accept these limitations, but Nazi Germany would eventually be the first country to act in defiance of them. This took place during 1937 in the Spanish town of Guernica in the form of an indiscriminate attack by German and Italian air forces on civilian residential areas. Guernica was the German military's initial test of its air strength and they quickly passed the baton to Japan.[2]

As if to keep up with the Germans, the land and naval air forces of the Japanese military set out on a course of bombing Chinese cities that escalated yearly. From 1939, the city to suffer most from a constant rain of fire was the erstwhile capital city, Chongqing.

With the commencement of the Second World War two years after the German attack on Guernica, the Germans, Americans, and British began air attacks on enemy cities with great ferocity.[3] Within Europe, such cities as London, Coventry, Hamburg, and Dresden became targets. The Allies showed no hesitation in striking back at the Germans.

During what became a never-ending cycle of attack and retaliation, more and more effective weapons were developed. Stronger, deadlier weapons were seen as the best way to cause the enemy population to lose its will to fight. The process reached a peak in 1945. The use of the atomic bombs, as well as the Great Tokyo Air Raid itself, were indiscriminate attacks in the wake of Dresden that allowed for no differentiation between combatant and noncombatant.

Such "terror from the skies" did not end with the Second World War. Such attacks were to be repeated during the Korean War, the Viet Nam War, the Gulf War, and the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. We can only regret that strategic bombing continues in the world today. Most regrettable of all is the fact that most victims of such bombing are women, children, and other weak members of society. This is an undeniable fact of modern warfare. Most recently, we have the example of Israel's bomb attacks against Gaza from December 2008 to January 2009. It is said that five hundred of the 1,417 people to lose their lives were children. We should take seriously the French government's investigation into Israel's actions as possible war crimes.

At this point I'd like to return to the matter at hand and share with you my personal experiences at the time in question. When the war ended on August 15, 1945, I was a thirteen-year-old junior high school student. I knew from the adults around me that the war had ended, but I still had no real understanding of what it meant that peace had come. After all, the war in China had begun before I was even born. There were two things, however, that made me think "Oh, so this is what peace is." One was the fact that we could now leave our lights on freely after years of nightly enforced blackouts. I remember seeing the gathered faces of family members under a bare light bulb and thinking, "Peace is light and brilliant!" I knew I could sleep that night without fear of air raids—a wonderful feeling in spite of my hungry stomach. The second thing was not so much recognition of peace on an emotional level as it was a confirmation that peace had actually come. In November 1946, Japan's new constitution was born. When I learned about it from my older brother, what impressed me most was Article Nine. This article contains two important points. First, through Article Nine, Japan permanently renounced war. Second, Japan renounced the maintenance of military capabilities and gave up the right to even participate in war. I felt that this was truly a guide for Japan's future and my heart warmed at the thought. Unfortunately, within just a few short years, Japan embarked on a path of rejecting its peaceful constitution.

When the Korean War began in June of 1950, Japan was still occupied by the allied powers (with the United States playing the prominent role). As the United States' intervention on the mainland progressed, the commanding officer of the allied forces, General MacArthur, ordered the Japanese government to establish the National Police Reserve. This force would eventually become the present day Self-Defense Forces. America was turning Japan into a front line base from which to fight the developing Cold War and from this point Japan began its return to military power status.

Day after day, the same B-29s that had attacked Japan were now using Japan as a base from which to launch attacks on the Korean Peninsula. It's quite an easy thing to imagine the devastation wrought in Korea buy those raids. I was personally unable to attend university or even high school. But as a young factory worker, I was concerned about what I knew must be happening to the people targeted by those B-29s. I wished there was something I could do and eventually settled on the idea of writing about my experiences during the war. Fortunately, one such volume was published when I was twenty. Since then I've written while thinking and thought while writing. I've traveled the world and written nearly 150 books, most of which deal with the effects of war on civilians. Before I even realized it, I had become a seventy-seven-year-old man. I've begun to wonder how much time I have left.

Sixty-four years have now passed since the end of World War II. I have watched the once enemy nations of Britain and Germany strive toward reconciliation and make progress in overcoming deep-seated mistrust and resentment. I have been much impressed with the German government's "victory over its past." Unfortunately, the opposite situation holds true for Japan, which is a nation that has never really been able to put its past to rest. Using the opportunity provided by the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, the Prime Minister, who was a member of the Socialist Party then governing Japan, expressed "heartfelt remorse" for "colonial rule and invasion." However, the government made no real effort to act on its "heartfelt remorse." It was an apology devoid of true sorrow that made no effort to provide compensation in any form.

Although the Japanese government provided major support in the form of pensions to ex-military personnel from the early post-war era, nothing has ever been done to help the civilian victims of air raids or their families. Up to the present day, the government has never enacted any policies geared toward such support. Currently there is a lawsuit being brought against the government with the families of victims serving as plaintiffs. These people claim that the government has acted in negligence of basic human rights guaranteed by the constitution, against pacifistic principles, and in opposition to the principle of equality under the law. This "Great Tokyo Air Raid Lawsuit" seeks to obtain apology and compensation from the country that began the war. I believe it is a true act of democracy and I am the first witness to be called.

Concurrently, the "Chongqing Air Raid Lawsuit" has also been brought against the Japanese government by Chinese citizens seeking reparations for damages incurred during the Japanese bombing of that city. However, the members of the groups bringing both of these lawsuits are obviously those who experienced the air raids firsthand. As such, they are all elderly—as old or older than me. An entire generation's memory of the Second World War is about to come to an end. The era of directly passing on knowledge of the war has reached its limit and the era of indirect experience is about to arrive.

In an era devoid of direct knowledge of war, the matter of most importance is the preservation of accurate records and materials. This is particularly true in Japan due to the government's tendency to overlook, or even hide and distort, the details concerning the extent of civilian suffering during the Great Tokyo Air Raid. Attesting to this neglect is the fact that even though it is a city where 100,000 people were killed, Tokyo still has no public hall or park memorializing that event. No investigation to identify all who died so meaninglessly has even been undertaken.

Is the reason for this attitude the fact that the very existence of such civilian victims is bothersome for a system that is set on following in the footsteps of the United States to become a great military power? If so, the passing on of knowledge regarding the civilian experience of war might be an important way to put the brakes to such a system. It would also be an important way to give vitality to the pacifistic constitution.

It has been seven years since we built our historical museum, dedicated to preserving the memory of war damages using only private donations (The Center of the

**Supporters of a lawsuit demanding an apology and compensation to victims of Japan's air raids on Chongqing, China.**

Courtesy Hoshino Hiroshi

**Center of the Tokyo Air Raid and War Damages, Koto Ward**

Photograph by Cary Karacas

Tokyo Air Raid and War Damages, link). It is a small building, but we are able to store and exhibit air raid related materials as well as carry on research and provide a place for the direct passing on of knowledge by those who experienced the raids. Every year, one hundred and eighty schools bring their students on trips to visit the museum. From Shitamachi we are sending out a message for a more peaceful world: we will never again silently endure the ravages of war or strategic bombing.

In

**Tokyo firebombing survivor Hashimoto Yoshiko, far right, discussing her experiences in front of map showing air raid damages and sites of temporary mass graves, Center of the Tokyo Air Raid and War Damages**

Photograph by Cary Karacas

March 2009, we sponsored our first international symposium, which included invited representatives from Guernica and Chongqing. As a result of the symposium, we published a book entitled "Tokyo, Guernica, Chongqing –Thinking about Peace in Light of the Air Raids." We hope to maintain our global perspective in the future while focusing on citizen action to preserve historical memory. We also hope to hold more international symposiums. Problems to be addressed include the analysis of victimization and aggression, development of strategies for overcoming contention and rivalry, and the encouragement of reconciliation after ending the act of war itself. These are issues that must be addressed with an eye to establishing a sure basis for peace in future generations and we hope that we can make some contribution along those lines.

*Saotome Katsumoto is the director of the Tokyo Air Raid and War Damages Resource Center (東京大空襲戦災資料館, also referred to as the Center of the Tokyo Air Raid and War Damages). In addition to being the author of a significant body of work that includes non-fiction and fiction, he wrote the screenplay for "War and Youth" (戦争と青春), director Imai Tadashi's final film.*

*Bret Fisk is a translator and director of an English conversation school living in Odawara, Kanagawa prefecture, Japan. With Cary Karacas he is the co-creator of JapanAirRaids.org, a bilingual digital archive.*

*Recommended citation: Saotome Katsumoto, Reconciliation and Peace through Remembering History: Preserving the Memory of the Great Tokyo Air Raid 「歴史の記憶」から和解と平和へ東京大空襲を語りついで, The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 3 No 4, January 17, 2011.*

See the following articles included in this special issue:

That Unforgettable Day--The Great Tokyo Air Raid through Drawings　あの日を忘れない・描かれた東京大空襲

Bret Fisk, The Tokyo Air Raids in the Words of Those Who Survived 被災者が語る東京空襲

Yamabe Masahiko, Thinking Now about the Great Tokyo Air Raid 今、東京大空襲を考える

Cary Karacas, Fire Bombings and Forgotten Civilians: The Lawsuit Seeking Compensation for Victims of the Tokyo Air Raids 焼夷弾空襲と忘れられた被災市民—東京大空襲犠牲者による損害賠償請求訴訟

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] Editor's note: While one can take issue with the assertion that the loss of lives from the Tokyo raid are numerically comparable to the atomic bombings (especially in the case of Hiroshima when including deaths from radiation), the author's point about the lack of knowledge regarding the catastrophic results of the firebombing of Tokyo is nonetheless valid.

[2] Editor's note: The Hague Rules of Air Warfare were never officially adopted. Also, the Japanese navy's destructive aerial attacks on Shanghai in 1932, considered "the first significant aerial operations in East Asia," predate Guernica by five years. Mark Peattie, *Sunburst: The Rise of Japanese Naval Air Power, 1909-1941*, Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001, p. 51.

[3] Editor's note: As Mark Selden explains, the United States refrained from area bombing until its February 1945 attack on Dresden, Germany. "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).

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