

War Crimes in the Philippines during WWII

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When one talks about war crimes in the Pacific, the Rape of Nanking instantly comes to mind. Although Japan signed the 1929 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War, it did not ratify it, partly due to the political turmoil going on in Japan during that time period.¹ The massacre of prisoners-of-war and civilians took place all over countries occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army long before the outbreak of WWII using the same methodology of terror and bestiality. The war crimes during WWII in the Philippines described in this paper include those that occurred during the administration of General Masaharu Homma (December 22, 1941, to August 1942) and General Tomoyuki Yamashita (October 8, 1944, to September 3, 1945). Both commanders were executed in the Philippines in 1946.

Origins of Methodology

After the inauguration of the state of Manchukuo (Manchuria) on March 9, 1932, steps were made to counter the resistance by the Chinese Volunteer Armies that were active in areas around Mukden, Haisheng, and Yingkow.² After fighting broke in Mukden on August 8, 1932, Imperial Japanese Army Vice Minister of War General Kumiaki Koiso (later convicted as a war criminal) was appointed Chief of Staff of the Kwantung Army (previously Chief of Military Affairs Bureau from January 8, 1930, to February 29, 1932).³ Shortly thereafter, General Koiso issued a directive on the treatment of Chinese troops as well as inhabitants of cities and towns in retaliation for actual or supposed aid rendered to Chinese troops.⁴ This directive came under the plan for the economic “Co-existence and co-prosperity” of Japan and Manchukuo.⁵ The two countries would form one economic bloc. The Army would control ideological movements and would not permit political parties to exist. It would not hesitate to wield military power when necessary.⁶

War Minister Sadao Araki expanded on this directive by invoking the principles of Hakko Ichiu (bringing together of the corners of the world under one ruler) and Kodo (The Imperial Way).⁷ Its principles lie in denying judicial due process and the method of execution used was called Genju Shobun (Harsh Disposal) or Genchi Shobun (Disposal on the Spot).⁸ The Japanese Cabinet at a meeting on April 11, 1932, approved the execution of the Manchurian policies.⁹

This method was used by General Iwane Matsui, (later convicted as a war criminal) Commander of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force starting in 1937.¹⁰ He issued an order in late November 1937 to capture Nanking which was then the capital of China.^{11, 12} Matsui used the principles of Genju Shobun starting on December 13, and on December 17, 1937, he made his triumphant entry into Nanking.¹³ During the first six weeks of the Japanese occupation, it is estimated that 200,000 civilians and prisoners of war were murdered.¹⁴ The German government was informed by its representative about “atrocities not by an individual but of an entire army” was qualified as a “bestial machinery.”¹⁵ These massive atrocities included looting, rape, starvation, torture, mutilation, shooting, and burning. This evolved into the intensive cleanup operation called San Guang or Sanko Sakusen or the Three All’s (kill all, burn all, loot all).¹⁶ After the fall of Nanking, the war extended to Canton and Hankow where similar atrocities occurred.¹⁷ His Vice Chief-of-Staff, General Akira Muto later became the Chief-of-Staff for General Tomoyuki Yamashita, Commanding General of the 14th Army Group in the Philippines.¹⁸

Kempei Tai

The Kempei Tai (Japanese Military Police) was initially established to enforce military discipline among Japanese soldiers. Later on, it became the enforcer for Zonification, the systematic extermination of soldiers and civilians.¹⁹ The zonifications in the Philippines began in 1942 against guerrilla activities. The Kempeis were aided by Filipino collaborators named Ganaps which was subsequently incorporated into an organization called Makapilis in November 1944.²⁰ Zonification intensified after the Leyte landing on October 20, 1944, and took place all over the country. The Kempeis used the same methodology of Genjo Shobun and Sanko Sakusen.

The Defense of Bataan in the Philippines during WWII

In pursuance of the Philippine Independence Act (Tydings-McDuffie Act) of March 24, 1934, the U.S. Army Forces in the Philippines (USAFFE) was created by a military order on July 26, 1941, because of the rising tensions with Japan.²¹ It called into service all organized military units in the Philippines under the service of the U.S. Armed Forces. General Douglas MacArthur was recalled from retirement (he served as the Philippine Commonwealth's Military Advisor from 1936 to 1941) and was appointed as its Commanding General. Initial mobilization did not take place until September 1, 1941.²² The Philippine Commonwealth troops had just started basic training when Pearl Harbor was bombed. The basic infantry weapons consisted of WWI equipment, there were no spare parts, and 70% of artillery ammunition were duds.²³

The Philippines was attacked by Japan approximately 6 hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941.²⁴ On that same day at around noontime, the U.S. Far East Air Force lost most of its planes in Clark Air Force Base and Iba Air Force Base and major army bases were bombed. Except for a few reconnaissance planes, the U.S. Far East Air Force ceased to exist after the first week forcing the USAFFE army to fight without any air support.²⁵ Sangley Naval Base was destroyed on December 10, and on that same day, two Japanese battalions landed in northern Luzon. On December 22, General Masaharu Homma's 14th Army landed in Lingayen Gulf.²⁶ On December 23, General MacArthur, who previously revised War Plan Orange 3 to meet the invading Japanese army on the beaches of Luzon Island, reverted to the original war plan and ordered the troops to do a strategic retreat on the mouth of Manila Bay to perform a sacrificial delaying action on the Bataan peninsula, the gateway to Manila Bay.^{27,28} On December 24, General MacArthur, the Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon, their families and staff were moved to the island of Corregidor, about 2 miles off the coast of Bataan.²⁹ On December 26, General MacArthur declared Manila an open city.³⁰

By early January, General MacArthur addressed his troops that help was on the way (no help ever came).³¹ At the same time, he ordered that rations be cut in half.³² The USAFFE troops were able to repel the enemy and inflicted much damage on the Japanese troops in January and beginning of February. By February, quinine the cure for malaria was no longer distributed to the troops and by March rations were cut in quarters leading to a marked decrease in combat efficiency. Five-hundred troops per day were being hospitalized for malaria, and by April 1, the numbers were doubled. Dysentery, beri-beri, diarrhea, vitamin deficiency, and other tropical diseases plagued the troops. The lack of gasoline and trucks prevented the evacuation of the sick. On March 12, General MacArthur, upon orders from the War Department, left the Philippines for Australia. By 15 March, combat efficiency was down to 15% and markedly lower by April 1.³³ Hospital #1 was bombed in late March and Hospital #2 was bombed in early April. There were no longer supplies for clothing, shoes, and other basic supplies. Meanwhile, fresh Japanese troops and reinforcement arrived by the end of March. Pressure from the enemy increased and throughout April 1 and 2, the enemy continued shelling the battle positions with low flying bombers strafing the front lines. Despite suffering from major disease and starvation and fighting without any air support or reinforcement, the USAFFE troops were able to delay the 60-day timetable of the Imperial Japanese Army by holding on to the Bataan peninsula for 99 days.³⁴

The Bataan Death March and War Crimes

On April 9, 1942, General Edward P. King, Jr., Commanding General of the Bataan Forces was forced to surrender approximately 63,000 Filipino and 12,000 American troops to the Imperial Japanese Army.³⁵ Majority of the troops were suffering from disease and starvation. Due to the lack of transportation, the troops were forced to march some 65 miles away in extreme tropical conditions without any provisions for food, water, shelter or medicine. Those who could no longer go on were beaten, bayoneted, shot, some were even beheaded. Between 5,000 to 10,000 Filipino and between 250 to 650 American soldiers died along the way in what became known as the Bataan Death March.³⁶

General Masaharu Homma

Previous to his assignment in the Philippines, he was Commanding Officer of the 27th Imperial Japanese Division in China from July 1938 to December 1940 and participated in the Wuhan-Hanchow campaign.³⁷ He arrived in the Philippines on December 22, 1941, as Commanding General of the 14th Army. He commanded the Imperial Japanese Army soldiers when the Bataan Death March took place. After Japan's surrender, he was held responsible by the American government for the atrocities committed by his troops while he was in the Philippines until August 1942. He was convicted on February 11, 1946, in Manila and executed by firing squad in Los Banos on April 3, 1946.

Aside from the Bataan Death March, these are some of the war crimes attributed to General Homma:

April 10, 1942—Approximately 100 Filipino soldiers were executed near Cabcaben Airfield.

Pantingan River Massacre—On April 12, 1942, approximately 350 to 400 officers and non-commissioned officers of the 91st, 71st and 51st Divisions were shot, bayoneted, stabbed and beheaded in a mass execution by the Imperial Japanese Army while en route from Bagac, Bataan to Limay, Bataan.³⁸

April to August 1942—American and Filipino prisoners of war at Camp O'Donnell were mistreated, tortured, not properly fed or given proper medical attention. Approximately 20,000 Filipinos and 1,600 Americans died while inside the camp.

May 1942—After the surrender of Corregidor Island around May 6, 1942, 15 American soldiers were taken to Tagaytay City and executed.

June 1942—10 American prisoners of war were shot and killed at Prison Camp No. 1 in Cabanatuan.

General Tomoyuki Yamashita

General Tomoyuki Yamashita served in Manchukuo as Supreme Adviser to the Military Government Section in 1931 around the time of the Mukden incident in September 1931.³⁹ He became Chief-of-Staff of the 4th Army, North China Expeditionary Force in 1938 under General Hajime Sugiyama and used these same methods for mopping up in Northern China.⁴⁰ He was called the Tiger of Malaya for his speedy conquest of Singapore and Malaya in February 1942.⁴¹ He was the Commanding Officer during the Sook Ching Massacre following the fall of Singapore which killed approximately 50,000.⁴² He became the Commanding General of the Japanese Army 14th Group (14th Area Army) in the Philippines from October 9, 1944, to September 3, 1945, upon his surrender.⁴³ In addition, he also commanded the Kempei Tai and controlled the prisoner of war and civilian internment camps.

He was arrested on September 3, 1945, arraigned on October 8, 1945, and accused of 123 atrocities.⁴⁴ The actual trial began October 29, 1945, and ended December 7, 1945. The record consisted of 4,063 pages and 437 exhibits. He was sentenced to death by hanging and was executed on February 23, 1946.⁴⁵

The most notorious war crime under his watch took place between February and March 1945 in what is called the Battle of Manila where approximately 100,000 civilians died from massive atrocities and artillery fire. Initially, Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi of the Imperial Japanese Navy was blamed for the rampant atrocities during the battle. In analyzing the events, the pattern of war crimes was quite similar to those that happened in China in 1937 and in Singapore in 1942. Many of the war crimes included the methodology of Sanko Sakusen or the Three All's (kill all, burn all, loot all). Evidence in the form of captured documents prescribed the procedure to be followed: the victims were to be gathered in a house or other place, killed with the least expenditure of ammunition and manpower, and the bodies disposed of by burning with the building or being thrown into a river. These took place in schools, hospitals, churches, convents, etc.

A few instances of war crime charges:⁴⁶

Puerto Princesa, Palawan Island—On or about December 14, 1944, American prisoners of war were forced into a dugout. The entrances doused with kerosene and set into fire. One-hundred-forty-one POWs died, while 9 escaped.

Batangas Province, Luzon Island—Mistreating and killing without cause more than 25,000 men, women, and children, unarmed non-combatant civilians from October 9, 1944, to May 1, 1945. In addition to bayoneting, shooting, and burying the victims alive, the Japanese forced 300 men to jump by small groups into a well 30 meters deep, after which they were shot and heavy weights were dropped on them. In another instance 300 to 400 unarmed civilians were forced into a room, bayoneted, and shot, after which kerosene was poured on the bodies and they were set on fire. In addition, women were raped. Two pregnant women were assaulted, and an unborn child was ripped from its mother's body.

Accompanying these massacres were numerous cases of pillaging and wanton destruction. Several entire barrios were burned to the ground and several towns were almost entirely destroyed. In the town of Lipa, a total of 2,298 were massacred.

Laguna Province, Luzon Island—In the town of Los Banos, about 300 burned bodies and skeletons were found on February 3, at the College of Agriculture. Between February 21 and March 6, 1945, the Japanese Officers, soldiers and military police came back and gathered and killed by bayoneting 264 men, women and children. In the town of Calamba, more than 2,500 men, women, and children were killed by bayoneting or burning on February 12, 1945. In the town of San Pablo, some 6,000 to 8,000 male residents between the ages of 15 and 50 were assembled in a local church on February 24, 1945. Among those assembled were 700 Chinese residents who were forced to dig large trenches then were bayoneted to death.

Bulacan Province, Luzon Island—Five-hundred men of the village of Polo were gathered up by the Japanese soldiers on December 10, 1944. Some were beaten, a few released, and the rest executed at the cemetery. On the same day, 200 men from the town of Obando were executed.

Leyte Province, Central Philippines—At the barrio of Dapdap, Ponson Island on December 29, 1944, 300 civilians were assembled in a church, where 100 were singled out, bayoneted, and machine gunned.

Hell Ships—On December 13, 1944, 1,619 officers and enlisted men, prisoners of war, were kept in the holds of the Japanese steamship "Oryoku Maru," an unmarked merchant vessel. There were no facilities for toilets (five gallon cans were provided for urinals and latrines) and ventilation was nil. It was bombed by an American aircraft, and as the prisoners of war scrambled out of the holds, they were machine gunned and bayoneted.

Conclusion

The many atrocities inflicted upon Prisoners of War and Civilians during World War II in the Philippines by the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy were not isolated incidents of soldiers' disobedience or soldiers

running amok. It was part of a systematic pattern called Genju Shobun (Harsh Disposal) first employed in Manchukuo in 1932 and later further developed into Sanko Sakusen, or the Three All's (kill all, burn all, loot all), in Nanking in 1937. Sanko Sakusen was enforced in other areas occupied by Japan during WWII—Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Guam, Singapore and Malaya, Peleliu, Wake Island, etc. But submission by force, like in thousands of events previous to WWII, only creates deep seated rancor that ignites strong resistance.

Unfortunately, this system is still ingrained in some armies as evidenced by events in more recent conflicts such as in Bosnia, Syria, Rwanda, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. In 2005 the United Nations member states made a commitment to the World Summit Outcome Document to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, a principle referred to as the “Responsibility to Protect.” The United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect acts as an early warning mechanism by alerting the UN and the Security Council to situations where there is a risk of genocide and presenting recommendations.⁴⁷ But unless the leading countries of the United Nations, especially the five permanent members of the Security Council (U.S., Russia, China, France, United Kingdom), have the political will to enforce this commitment, this heinous military tool will continue.

A conquering country cannot truly claim victory over the vanquished unless it wins the hearts and minds of the people. Knowledge of the customs and traditions of a foreign people and not submission by force is a first step to securing a conquered people’s trust. It is therefore incumbent upon the military to work towards educating its soldiers towards this goal not just to win the war but to ensure the well-being and safety of its men and women in uniform.

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