

## Japanese Nationalism vs Japan's Security

Professor Ikuhiko Hata is Japan's most famous military historian. In fact, not only Japan's. He is without a doubt one of the world's leading military historians specializing in the Pacific War. Many of his works have been translated into English and are generally considered the standard reference on the subject.

However, my judgement of professor Hata's quality as a historian is not based just on reputation alone but on actually reading many of his works. The first time I came across his name was about 10 years ago, when I read many of the articles in the multi-volume Cambridge History of Japan. This is a very prestigious work of history, edited by the former Stanford University historian Peter Duus, which consists of articles on various aspects of history of Japan written by the most highly regarded experts from all over the world, about a third of them Japanese. Professor Hata's article is entitled "Continental Expansion, 1905-1941". It concerns Japan's expansion during that period, which, of course, included the war in China. Hata's article was chosen because of both Hata's reputation as a leading military historian of this period, and the quality of the article itself.

When I read this article I was struck by its objective manner, its clear logic and the wealth of new information that is not found anywhere else. I recommend this article to anyone who wants to understand how Japan got involved in the war in China leading eventually to Pearl Harbor. I was so impressed by this article that I remembered the author's name and tried to find all English translations of his works that were available. I have got and read a number of them and all of them have the same qualities. Professor Hata's books on Japanese fighter pilots are the most authoritative works on the subject and they are most widely read among non-professional historians. But his most important work, in my opinion, is "The Showa Emperor in War and Peace". It should really be the standard text on this subject. As always, it is very objective, extremely well documented, and full of unique facts and documents that cannot be found in any other work. This is typical of all of Hata's work. This book should be better known and, in particular, is far superior to the often quoted book by the leftist historian Herbert Bix "Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan", which is constantly used as reference in American school textbooks and on Wikipedia.

Hata also wrote extremely interesting articles and books on many other subjects related to World War II, only some of which have been translated into English. The most famous of those that have not been translated is "Nankin Jiken", which is, in fact generally regarded as the best documented, the most carefully researched and the most objective study of what happened at Nanking in 1937. Of course I have not read this book because it has not been translated, but my wife, who is Japanese (and who is a former professor of Tokyo university), has read it and she confirms that it has all the typical qualities of Hata's writings: careful, objective style, no emotional "fervor" (so typical of nationalists), the use of a variety of sources and the, very importantly, full appreciation of the uncertainty involved in any such investigation. Such qualities are completely lacking in the writings of Japanese nationalist writers, who are in most cases only amateur historians, or as in the case of Higashinakano

“historians of ideas”, which is a completely different type of activity from military history and quite unsuitable qualification for this type of research.

Military history is a very special kind of history. The subject is very difficult and is becoming less and less popular. This is partly because in left wing dominated academia the study of “war” is now seen as “reactionary”, but another reason is that military history demands much greater expertise in many different areas, much greater attention to detail and also different kind of life experience from other kind of history. Firstly, a military historian needs to understand war, which is difficult to do without actual experience. But what makes it even more difficult is a huge variety of evidence needs to be considered, each type requiring different expertise. For a start, it is impossible to rely on the testimonies of soldiers, because each soldier has a very limited perspective. It is also impossible to rely solely on documents, because they are unreliable for many reasons. One of them is the use of propaganda, always present in war. The other is secrecy and destruction of documents. Yet another is honest mistakes which are very common in the chaos of war. A good example of the problems faced by a historian of war are Hata’s books on Japanese fighter aces. To start with, pilots claim to have shot down an enemy plane, but very often several pilots believe that they shot down the same plane. These claims are often added. In addition, some of the planes believed to have been shot down actually manage to land. So to get the numbers right you need to check the accounts of the enemy, which are also unreliable. A military historian must also understand very well such things as technology, he must have a good grasp of economic issues, and so on. In addition to all of this, there is one more thing that a good military historian needs and a usual person or even a “usual” historian often lacks: a good understanding of the role of chance. War is above all chaos and most things in war happen by chance, quite unplanned by anyone. But most human beings do not understand chance, the natural human inclination is to see a “reason” behind everything, often some kind of “hidden hand”. As a mathematician I am quite acutely aware how bad most people are at judging probabilities. Many things that are very likely to happen they consider unlikely and conversely. Many conspiracy theories are based on this simple confusion; the belief that certain things could not be coincidences or due to chance, when in fact they usually are. In war this happens more often than probably any other situation. Even the second China-Japan war was probably mostly due to chance rather than any conspiracy or a long term plan of conquest (as implied by the well known forgery known as the “Tanaka memorandum”).

Because of such things there are in every country very few real military historians. But instead there are lots of people who claim to be experts on subjects that actually belong to military history, and usually these people are motivated by ideology, they are either leftists looking for new kind of victims, or nationalists who are of two kinds: those who want to defend their “national honor” and those who want to prove that their “nation” is a historical victim rather than a perpetrator. It is very rare for such people to be military historians or even interested in history just for the sake of knowledge. Their interest begins and ends with trying to prove the idea that is already decided and usually immune to influence of any evidence.

Many “nationalists”, particularly in Japan (where after the war the word “nationalist” acquired a negative meaning) refuse to admit that they are nationalist and call themselves “patriots”. But that is because they do not know what “nationalism” means. Basically, if you believe that humanity consists of units called nations, which have a historical continuity, the exclusive right to sovereignty and “personal qualities” such as honor, then you are a nationalist. If you want to defend “Japan’s honor” (rather than just being concerned with the present and future welfare of Japan) then you are a nationalist and not just a patriot. I think it is completely fair to say that people such as professor Fujioka or Ms. Sakurai are Japanese nationalists, though Ms. Sakurai shows this less when she writes in English.

I do not, by the way, condemn all nationalism. Nationalism exists in all nations. Nations are modern (19-th century inventions) but now, at least in some sense, they really exist. When their existence is threatened, as for example, in Ukraine, nationalism is necessary to defend them. The main reason why Russian attempts to destroy Ukraine’s nationhood have so far miserably failed is the many thousand young Ukrainian nationalists who were ready to die to defend their young nation.

But nationalist history is a different matter. It has completely no ability to persuade anybody except the nationalist themselves and it always alienates all impartial foreigners. In this way nationalist historians or really propagandists can cause great damage to their country. The case of Japan is a perfect illustration.

Japan today has a serious security problem, which it cannot solve alone. Although history is unpredictable and China may well enter an economic crisis, the balance of power between China and Japan is very unfavorable to Japan and is likely to be getting worse and worse. If Japan does not want to suffer the fate of Ukraine, it needs to change its pacifistic constitution, strengthen its defenses and protect its trade routes but above all it needs allies. In the future quite possibly the growing economic and military power of India may be able to balance China but this will not happen at least for 30 years or longer. So there is no other way for Japan than to continue to rely on its alliance with the United States. But this alliance has to take a new and much more equal form, because the growth of China’s power and of isolationism in the United States means that it is very unlikely that the U.S. will risk a nuclear confrontation with China to defend Japan especially if Japan does not defend itself.

So the situation is quite serious and Prime Minister Abe has been trying to take some of the necessary steps. But all his efforts are harmed by, above all, the Japanese nationalists who keep concentrating on historical topics, believing that they are “defending Japan’s honor”. In reality they are providing China with godsend opportunity to claim that Japan’s attempts at strengthening its defense ability are actually motivated by a desire to return to the policies of Japan of the late 1930s. Every time professor Fujioka writes another “open letter” the actual effect is to damage prime minister Abe’s reputation abroad. The same thing happens every time a new article is posted on the “Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact” site. Every such open letter and every such article damages the standing abroad of the Abe government and its attempts to revive Japan’s strength. This is completely obvious to anyone outside Japan but since it is hard to imagine that Japanese nationalists damage Japan’s

interests intentionally so I assume that they do not understand why. Let me then try to explain it.

By itself Chinese communist and Korean nationalist propaganda would be completely ineffective in both Europe and America. Very few people believe in anything coming out of China, which is a tyrannical communist dictatorship with a bloody record, which regularly murders and tortures people for political reasons. Korean nationalists are even more ridiculous, especially in their attempts to change the name of the Japan Sea, or to make Korea look as one of the greatest victims of World War II, which are universally mocked. The Nanking massacre and the comfort women issue, would never attract anything like the attention that they have attracted if it wasn't for the publicity that the Japanese nationalists have given to them. Let me give you a typical example. In volume 6 of the Cambridge History of Japan, in which professor Hata's article on Japan's continental expansion appears, there is also an article by the now deceased professor of San Diego State University Alvin D. Coox on the Pacific War. Alvin D. Coox was also a military historian, whose specialty was the Russo-Japanese war. This war, by the way, which was mentioned by Prime Minister Abe in his speech, ought to be mentioned by the Japanese much more often than it is, because during that war the behavior of the Japanese army towards prisoner's of war and civilians was exemplary. No nation ever fought a war with greater attention to international law. In fact as can be proved from documents) this kind of "Anglo-American" attitude was explicitly rejected by the Japanese leadership during World War II.

In his article Alvin D. Coox writes about the battle of Nanking:

"In December 1937 the city fell, Chiang Kai-shek fled, and the inflamed Japanese soldiery went on a rampage of killing, looting, and raping. The scale of the Shanghai-Nanking campaign is suggested by the casualties incurred in six weeks: There were over 70,000 Japanese killed and wounded and more than 367,000 Chinese casualties."

The words "inflamed Japanese soldiery went on a rampage of killing, looting, and raping" suggests a "massacre", but the word itself is not used. Such kind of "rampage" by "inflamed soldiery" which had suffered huge casualties is very common in the history of war, and I can give you at least dozen of examples just off my head many of them relatively much larger in scale. After all, the population of China at the time was 500 million people, The very large figure of 70,000 dead for the Japanese casualties is interesting, because it explains why the Japanese troops would have been very inflamed.

Coox does not try to distinguish civilian from military casualties, because he knows such a task is very difficult if not futile. The whole account of Nanking is three sentences and no special importance is attached to it. But at the end of the article Coox has much more to say about the Japanese nationalists:

"In recent times, a bitter controversy arose concerning textbook revision in Japan. Residents of countries that had been invaded and occupied by the Imperial Army were incensed by reports of the softening of language regarding the war, whereby the Ministry of Education certified the "sanitizing" of certain passages in high school texts. Particularly offensive was

the playing down of atrocities such as the Rape of Nanking, and the frequent suppression of the harsh wording formerly used to describe "invasion," "aggression," and "thrust." Critics in Japan and abroad feared that governmental attempts to control textbooks represented "part of a well-orchestrated, systematic plan to push the country to the Right." The critics had another profound concern: that survivors of the war would view it with nostalgia and that new generations would glamorize it out of ignorance. In short, the matter of attitudes toward the war of 1941-5 remains vivid in Japan and those countries that it fought, whether the hostilities are termed the Greater East Asia or the Pacific War."

Alvin Coox cannot be considered anti-Japanese or leftwing. In his article he does not, for example, criticize the Japanese decision to go to war or attack Pearl Harbor except for its "emotionalism". He does not put a particular stress on Japanese cruelty and war crimes. He says "Japanese conduct of hostilities was characterized by calculated risk, gambles, intuition, inflexibility, and poorly defined objectives." He is also critical of much of American anti-Japanese wartime propaganda and of the Tokyo trials. In other of his writings Alvin Coox strongly criticized David Bergamini's book "Japan's Imperial Conspiracy" as full of errors and Iris Chang's terribly amateurish "The Rape of Nanking". But it is clear that it is the Japanese nationalist's attempts to whitewash wartime Japan that he sees as the most dangerous.

This is true not only of Coox but practically of every Western scholar of just casual reader who comes across Japanese nationalist writings. They see in them attempts to rehabilitate wartime Japan and ask why do they do that? The left and Chinese and Korean propaganda say that the answer is, that they want to restore the wartime system and its policies. I don't think this is true of anyone I have met personally, I think they all are genuinely concerned with what "defending the honor of Japan" rather than taking Japan back to the pre-1945 era (although there are probably some who also dream of the latter).

The problem is that even though the writings of professor Fujioka and many of the articles on the SDHF site, contain true and valuable material, it can never have any impact, except negative. One reason is the author's reputations as nationalists, Another is their view of history and their style. It is clear that professor Fujioka's interest in history is motivated by his desire to defend Japan. However, this is not an acceptable motivation for any scholarship. This shows frequently in the emotive language used in his articles and "open letters". I could give many examples, but let me mention just one. In one of the articles on the Comfort Women issue he calls Yoshida a "traitor". I am quite convinced that Hata proved Yoshida to have been a liar, but a "traitor" to whom? Not to the Imperial Japanese Army which had been defeated and no longer existed when Yoshida wrote his book. Not to modern Japan, either. American leftists constantly write articles and books slandering American historic leaders, such as Washington of Jefferson, the American military from the beginnings of US history, and nobody calls them "traitors" (in fact, it seems to me, that many Japanese nationalists enjoy and support such writings, when they are concerned with America). So who was Yoshida a traitor too? I suppose the answer must be "the Japanese nation". Well, this is indeed the typical answer of a nationalist. One can hear exactly the same thing said in other

countries, such as Poland, where nationalism is strong, about anyone who “defames” national history. This kind of thinking is the very essence of nationalism.

The same is true of the SDHF site. One thing that shows how isolated Japanese nationalists are is the name of this society: “Society for Dissemination of Historical Fact”. Does nobody in Japan realize how unscholarly and nationalistic this kind of name sounds? One can find such names only in communist countries or other totalitarian dictatorships because everybody else knows that there are very few “historical facts”. The only completely undisputed “historical facts” are facts such as there was a war between the United States and Japan between 1941 and 1945, Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo. But about almost everything stated at a greater detail is to some degree disputable and uncertain. For example, who won the battle of Waterloo, the English or the Prussians is disputable and subject to various interpretations. The same applies to who lost it: Napoleon, marshal Ney or maybe Grouchy. Only nationalists are certain that they know for sure the “facts”. English nationalists have always been certain that it was Wellington who won the battle of Waterloo while German ones have been equally certain that it was Blucher. To say that you are “dissemination fact”, rather than engaging in research (whose conclusions are always uncertain and never fully settled) is the same as announcing that you are interested only in spreading propaganda. Of course some have written here that is exactly what they are interested in, and that they think that all Japanese should unite to spread as much pro-Japanese propaganda as possible and “defend Japan’s honor”.

The problem with that is this. People in free countries are rather good at recognizing propaganda. Russia and China are both making great efforts in this area but the effects are miserable. Japanese propaganda will be no more effective, in fact, even less. Moreover, once you acquire the reputation of a nationalist propagandist, you will never get rid of it. Those Japanese who have already acquired it are now only damaging Japan’s national interest.

I will give you one more example. When I was last time in Japan I talked with a prominent Japanese person who is a leading member of a Japanese conservative “think-tank”. I suggested that the Japanese should try to establish relations with American conservative think-tanks, which broadly support the Abe government efforts to strengthen Japan’s defenses. I was told that they tried to establish such relations with the American Enterprise Institute, but it was not successful because of “Chinese influence”. I was very surprised by this statement, because I knew that one of the leading figures in the AEI, is Michael Auslin, a historian and a journalist known for his open opposition to China’s expansion. He is strongly supportive of Japan’s need for stronger defense, and even opposed any further apologies by Japan. (You can see a sample of his writings here:

[http://www.wsj.com/news/article\\_email/SB10001424052702304418404579464961123578976-1MyQjAxMTA0MDMwMTEzNDEyWj](http://www.wsj.com/news/article_email/SB10001424052702304418404579464961123578976-1MyQjAxMTA0MDMwMTEzNDEyWj) )

So the claim that the AEI is “under Chinese influence” is simply an excuse. The truth is that no respectable institution in America or in Europe, whether on the right or (much more so) on the left, will want to have any open relationship with what any Japanese group that is

viewed as wanting to “defend Japan’s honor” or rehabilitate almost anything that Japan did during the period 1936-1945 (that is, from the “February 26 incident” to Japan’s surrender).

The mere association with Japanese nationalism will damage anybody who tries to work for Japan’s interest. In fact, tragically, this happened to professor Hata. Though professor Hata has never been a Japanese nationalist, at some point he began to collaborate with nationalists. I think he did it because he sincerely and correctly believed that Japanese school textbooks had been too much influenced by marxists who for many years dominated the Japanese academia and that a balance needed to be restored. Some people claim that the experience at a conference at Princeton University in 1997, when Iris Chang demonstratively walked out when Hata was speaking and the audience shouted him down and yelled insults at him, contributed to this decision. It may be also that Hata thought that only with the aid of the nationalist he could combat what he correctly saw as falsehoods and propaganda on the comfort women issue. Unfortunately, the effect of these efforts was not to enhance the nationalist cause but to reduce Hata’s influence outside Japan.

What Japan needs, in my opinion, is a new kind of conservative movement focused on security and cooperation with the West and having no relation with old style Japanese nationalism. This movement should be focused on the future and on the past. It of course true that Japan needs to be proud of its history, including military history, but there is enough to proud of before 1936. Let me quote how professor Hata described that the “February Incident”: “in chasing the tiger from the front gate the emperor had unwittingly allowed to wolf to slip in through the back door”. In order to effectively support Japan’s security and insure peace and prosperity it is necessary to give up any attempts to pretend that the “wolf” was actually the loyal dog Hachiko. Those for whom “national honor” is more important than Japan’s future must be excluded from this movement and the Japanese government should cut all public relations with them.