



Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers

By Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney

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“We tried to live with 120 percent intensity, rather than waiting for death. We read and read, trying to understand why we had to die in our early twenties. We felt the clock ticking away towards our death, every sound of the clock shortening our lives.” So wrote Irokawa Daikichi, one of the many kamikaze pilots, or *tokkotai*, who faced almost certain death in the futile military operations conducted by Japan at the end of World War II.

This moving history presents diaries and correspondence left by members of the *tokkotai* and other Japanese student soldiers who perished during the war. Outside of Japan, these kamikaze pilots were considered unbridled fanatics and chauvinists who willingly sacrificed their lives for the emperor. But the writings explored here by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney clearly and eloquently speak otherwise. A significant number of the kamikaze were university students who were drafted and forced to volunteer for this desperate military operation. Such young men were the intellectual elite of modern Japan: steeped in the classics and major works of philosophy, they took Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” as their motto. And in their diaries and correspondence, as Ohnuki-Tierney shows, these student soldiers wrote long and often heartbreaking soliloquies in which they poured out their anguish and fear, expressed profound ambivalence toward the war, and articulated thoughtful opposition to their nation’s imperialism.

A salutary correction to the many caricatures of the kamikaze, this poignant work will be essential to anyone interested in the history of Japan and World War II.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Like Anne Frank's diary, this collection of kamikaze pilot diaries (translated by anthropologist Ohnuki-Tierney) uses the eyes of those on the cusp of adulthood to bring to life the unfathomable daily realities of war. Drawing from stores of knowledge that spanned from Western philosophy to contemporary Japanese cultural criticism, the young men who penned these diaries ("the intellectual *crème de la crème* of Japan") sought to use the traditional medium of journal writing to find meaning in the uncertain adulthoods they were on the verge of entering. The range of views encompassed illustrates these young men's varying convictions: the latent patriotism in one young idealist, Sasaki Hachiro ("We cannot succumb to the 'Red Hair and Blue Eyes'"), the influence of Thomas Mann on Hayashi Tadao ("Japan, why don't I love and respect you?"), the sentimentalism of Matasunaga Shigeo ("Those who, even then, love Japan are fortunate. / But, poor souls; it is the happiness of a wild goose. / It is the fake blue bird whose color fades away under light") and the resignation of Hayashi Ichizo ("I will do a splendid job sinking an enemy aircraft carrier. Do brag about me") together eerily illuminate the tragedy of war in a way no textbook could.

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Review

"Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's book is designed to challenge Western perceptions of the kamikaze generation. By assembling brief biographies of some of the young Japanese who perished on suicide missions, and by quoting extensively from their wartime diaries and poetry, she portrays a group of literate, thoughtful people, most of whom hated the war and were reluctant to die." - Sunday Telegraph (UK) "If we wish to understand the phenomenon of terrorism in the modern world... the first and most necessary step is to understand our enemies. We must give respect to our enemies as courageous and capable soldiers enlisted in an evil cause, before we can understand them. Kamikaze Diaries gives us a basis on which to build both respect and understanding." - Freeman J. Dyson, New York Review of Books "The poems, letters, and diaries featured in this book give the lie to the notion that Japan was unified behind the war.... Kamikaze Diaries is a timely and necessary correction of a popular myth, and an important contribution to the understanding of Japan at war." - Economist"

About the Author

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney is the William F. Vilas Research Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She is the author of numerous books, including *Kamikaze*, *Cherry Blossoms*, and *Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

Users Review

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