

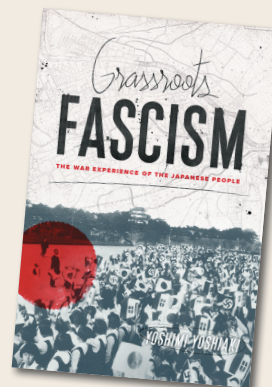
BOOK REVIEW

Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People

By Yoshimi Yoshiaki;
Translated by Ethan Mark

Columbia University Press, 2015
347 pages.

Reviewed by Rotem KOWNER



This recent publication is a long-awaited translation of the widely known 1987 book *Kusa no ne no fashizumu: Nihon minshū no sensō taiken*. It is essentially a structured and thematic compilation of personal records of wartime experiences, but has much more to offer beyond this. The book's four chapters present a large selection and analysis of biographies and unpublished texts originating in a vast array of diary entries, government reports, and postwar memoirs. Their authors were non-elite Japanese men, mostly soldiers, who participated in their country's imperial expansion during the crucial period of 1937–1945. In this respect, the book reveals the profundity of the popular participation in Japan's imperial designs, the belief in official propaganda (even after the war), the sense of national superiority and hatred for the Other, and the readiness to engage in violent and at times even horrendous acts in the name of the state and the emperor.

Grassroots Fascism also bears a degree of importance associated with its author's identity. Currently emeritus professor of history at Chuo University, Yoshimi Yoshiaki is probably Japan's most critical voice of his nation's wartime conduct. A founding member of the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility, the 71-year-old Yoshimi has worked indefatigably for the last four decades to bring Japanese war crimes during the war against China (1937–1945) and the Pacific War (1941–1945) to light. Besides the above book, his efforts culminated in later years in the publication of three additional books on the comfort women issue (Yoshimi 1992; Yoshimi 1995) and gas warfare (Yoshimi 2004) as well as several co-authored and edited books on these and related wartime themes. *Grassroots Fascism* could thus be seen as a token of his relentless commitment to uncovering Japan's grim history, believing that self-reflection and responsibility are necessary to create a better society. One must also commend Ethan Mark, the book's translator and a prominent historian in his own right, who succeeded in producing an accessible and very readable translation and enriching it with an invaluable thirty-nine-page introduction and numerous notes.

That said, the book can be read in several ways. It can be regarded as a straightforward oral history about the popular reaction to the war, not unlike later compilations of wartime oral history and diaries of Japanese soldiers and civilians (for example, Cook and Cook 1992; Yamashita 2005; Ohnuki-Tierney 2006). Alternatively, it can be seen as a study of

the personal and political background of Japanese wartime behavior and atrocities in East and Southeast Asia. A third reading might consider it as presenting voices of dissent among lower-class officials and the rank and file, and as offering a somewhat different outlook on Japanese society and its support for war and imperial expansion. Finally, and as the title indicates, it can be read as an analysis of grassroots fascism, that is to say a view from below on the crystallization of the Japanese militarist mindset during the final and climactic eight years of the imperialist period.

Nonetheless, the fascinating texts and their interpretation are underpinned by an all-embracing blunt message. By concentrating on the mode of thinking and actions of low-echelon men in the military and bureaucracy, Yoshimi propagates a view that suggests that ordinary Japanese participated willingly in their nation's imperial designs. Hence, he also places the blame on millions of lower-ranked soldiers and officials who shared and at times even prodded a racist and violent culture of expansion. Yoshimi's perspective, as reflected in this book, can thus be considered a moderate functionalist view (to borrow a phrase from the discourse on the origins of the Holocaust) of Japanese imperialism and militarism. It is somewhat at odds with the mainstream historiography of this theme, certainly at the time of the book's publication. A further uncommon and illuminating insight, especially with respect to today's Japan, is Yoshimi's demonstration of the wartime divergence between the popular spite for the colonial Other and the official propaganda which argued that Japan was fighting for the liberation of fellow Asians.

These remarkable features notwithstanding, the book suffers from several drawbacks that even the mediation of Mark's superb introduction cannot alleviate. The first among these is methodological. Yoshimi does not provide any hint on the manner in which he chose his protagonists, their specific experiences, and their texts. One can only wonder, therefore, whether the book's sample represents the typical soldier and/or civilian's wartime thought and experience. Such an unspecified selection could make sense when dealing with a small unit, such as the five hundred Germans who served in Reserve Police Battalion 101 (Browning 1992). But when one examines the personal experience of ordinary individuals serving in armed forces that mobilized more than seven million soldiers toward the end of the war, there should be clear criteria for the choice of illustrative texts alongside an evaluation of the actual prevalence of the experiences mentioned. Without these, one can only doubt the extent to which it is possible to draw valid conclusions about grassroots consciousness and experience from the sample presented in the book.

A second drawback is associated with the way Yoshimi presents his materials. All too often, it seems, he acts as a committed writer (*écrivain engagé*), whose agenda is obvious and who will do his utmost to prove it. To this end, Yoshimi does not seek to balance his testimonies, nor does he look for additional interpretations or even nuances. In fact, he does not even provide his readers with essential information on whether the texts were written during the war or retrospectively after the war. The final drawback deals with the book's theoretical exposition and concern for academic foundations. The author does very little in the way of presenting a general theoretical argument that places the book within a broader framework. (This specific point, however, is addressed by the translator's introduction.) Similarly missing are definitions of the concepts employed. Fascism may serve as a case in point. Although it is found in the titles of both the original book and its translation, there is no discussion of this concept, and, in fact, the word itself hardly appears in the text.

Moreover, Yoshimi does not provide any operational definition of this concept, nor does he discuss its differences compared to either similar forms of motivation (such as militarism, imperialism, or even patriotism) or other forms of fascism from outside Japan.

All things considered, *Grassroots Fascism* is an important contribution to the English-language literature on Japan in general and on its imperial era in particular. Moreover, this book should also be judged against the background of its time of original publication (the late 1980s) when the texts it disclosed and the critical perspective it brought forth so forcefully were considered pioneering. And yet, even today, some thirty years after its initial publication in Japanese, the book does not feel dated. In this respect, the availability of an English translation now allows a far greater circle of students and scholars to access its wealth of primary materials and to compare it with other similar records currently available with regard to Japan and other participants in World War II or other conflicts. Likewise, given the current climate of rising nationalism and growing attacks on historians that diverge from the official self-serving perspective now predominant in the historiographies of Japan, East Asia, and many other parts of the world, *Grassroots Fascism* serves as a reminder, if not an emblem, of intellectual and civil courage.

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