

BOOK REVIEW

Japan's Postwar Military and Civil Society: Contesting a Better Life

By Tomoyuki Sasaki

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xiv + 208 pages.



Reviewed by Guy ALMOG

Much has been written about the Japanese Self Defense Force (SDF) in recent years, and especially with regard to the issues of its constitutionality (or lack thereof) and the scope of its acceptable legal activities (for example, participation in international “peacekeeping operations”). As the struggle to “protect” or “revise” the Constitution rages on with growing intensity under the current administration of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (incumbent since December 2012), Tomoyuki Sasaki’s *Japan’s Postwar Military and Civil Society: Contesting a Better Life* is a stimulating read. Throughout the book, Sasaki examines the ways in which the SDF has managed to integrate into civil society in postwar Japan, that is, to “militarize” substantial parts of it, through such different means as recruitment, disaster relief, and propaganda, despite the possible contradictions with the Constitution.

Sasaki adopts such terms as “militarization” and “militarized” in a broad sense in order to encompass “a wide variety of interactions and interdependence between the military and civilians” (p. 7). His main focus (chapters 2–5) is set on Hokkaido between the 1950s and the 1980s, due to the proportionately large congregation of military facilities and personnel there, a focus which, according to Sasaki, “allows us to see most clearly and vividly how the SDF strove to build solid relations with civil society and to solicit popular support, how civilians responded, and how such intimate civil-military relations altered society and residents’ way of life” (p. 11). Throughout the five chapters of the book Sasaki manages to present this intricate subject with a careful and multifaceted analysis. While such an analysis can certainly provide significant insights for anyone who is interested in the relations between the military and civil society in Japan in particular, and everywhere else in general, it also leaves the reader with many unsolved questions as Sasaki himself admits in the conclusion of this book:

How would it be possible to stop militarization, slow it down, or minimize its effect? Providing concrete solutions is beyond my capacity, and it has not been the aim of this book. But one crucial point that this book has made clear is that militarization is not a problem that individuals or communities alone face, but a structural problem deeply embedded in postwar Japan’s capitalist development. (p. 164)

Sasaki on the whole succeeds in producing a relatively objective picture, one which presents both sides of the “militarization” coin with subtlety and clarity. For example, the SDF is analyzed and presented as a provider of mass employment and as an absorber of “surplus population,” but also as an organization which possibly infringes civilians’ “right to live in peace.” Yet, reading between the lines, it seems that Sasaki inclines to a view of the SDF, and the increasing “militarization” processes within Japan, as negative. For instance, he refers to “militarization” as a “structural problem” (pp. 19 and 164), and relates it to the growing militarization of Hokkaido from the 1970s as “exploitation” (p. 11). Such a choice of wording is not necessarily to be avoided, of course, but it carries moral implications and evaluative judgments, and calls for further elucidation and exploration.

For example, Sasaki provides some theoretical framework regarding the nature of the modern military itself in the first chapter. He claims, *inter alia*, that the military “is at odds with individual rights and freedoms” which are “the very ideas upon which modern nation-states place the greatest value,” and that in the military “the rank system is rigid, and those in lower ranks are expected to obey unquestionably the commands of their superiors” (p. 41). Yet, this characterization of the military presents two kinds of gaps. The first is theoretical: it is not clear from Sasaki’s argument how the military is different from other kinds of governmental organizations within the modern state. The police and the courts of law also limit the rights and freedoms of citizens on a daily basis. Like the military, they do so in order to protect other (and, theoretically at least, more important or vulnerable) freedoms and rights. The courts in Japan, for instance, can limit a murderer’s freedom by putting him or her behind bars, and even overrule the murderer’s right to life with a death sentence, in order to protect the rights and freedoms of the general public. The military, as well as the police, may restrict similar rights and freedoms under similar circumstances. For example, both of these organizations can utilize lethal force in certain situations, and by doing so they override various rights and freedoms of some individuals in order to protect rights and freedoms of other individuals. The second gap is empirical: the claim that “those in lower ranks are expected to obey unquestionably the commands of their superiors” is simply not true, not in the case of the Japanese SDF, and not in other modern militaries of democratic states. In fact, soldiers are expected to constantly question the commands of their superiors and to make sure that the commands are *lawful* before they execute them. In other words, if the command is blatantly unlawful (like orders to rape, pillage, or commit suicide) soldiers are obligated by law not to fulfill it.¹

All in all, and despite such gaps, *Japan’s Postwar Military and Civil Society: Contesting a Better Life* is a fascinating book which sheds light on an important yet understudied subject. The amount of previously unexamined primary sources in Japanese that the book employs is also very impressive. Finally, Sasaki’s approach to militarization and to the civil-military interdependence is thought provoking, and can certainly be adopted by future studies which focus on different case studies, both within and outside of Japan.

¹ See, for example, Okuhira 2010, p. 53.

REFERENCE

Okuhira 2010

Okuhira Jōji 奥平穰治. “Gunji soshiki ni okeru shiki meirei kankei no kadai: Wagakuni no kokusai heiwa kyōryoku no issō no suishin ni mukete” 軍事組織における指揮命令関係の課題: わが国の国際平和協力の一層の推進に向けて. *Bōei Kenkyūjo kiyō* 防衛研究所紀要 12 (2010), pp. 49–78.