

“I wanted to build Greater East Asia.”

NOGI HARUMICHI [1]

Yatsuo is a quiet town, one hour by train from Osaka. His study smells of the fresh-brewed coffee he has just brought back from a trip to Indonesia. Very tall and handsome, he is a retired real estate agent.

The idea of creating an economic zone wherein all the nations of Asia could develop in concert was widespread in Japanese academic and political circles in the late 1930s. Of course, Japan was seen as the natural leader of such a regional realignment. Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke made the first official use of the term “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” in August 1940. The resources of the Dutch East Indies, particularly its petroleum, became increasingly vital to Japanese industrial and military planners as Japan’s war in China led to deteriorating economic and political relations with the United States.

A student in 1940, Nogi Harumichi joined the Patriotic Students’ Alliance at his university and was gradually drawn into the shadow world

of semiclandestine rightist groups, preparing themselves to play a role in “liberating the Indies from their Dutch masters.”

The man who really got me all stirred up about colonialism was Professor Imamura Chūsuke. He was the founder and head of the Department of Colonial Economics at Nihon University, the private college we called Nichidai. He’d say in class, “I’ve been to Shanghai where signs say ‘Dogs and Yellow People—No Entry!’ I’ve been to the South Seas, an area controlled entirely by the white man.” He’d ask us, “What are you going to do to knock down this structure?” He had studied in America and was a professor of current events, but he devoted himself to rousing speeches like this. My feelings resonated with him. I burned with a desire to act. “Given an opportunity, I want to go to the front. I want to go to China. I want to do something myself!” That’s what we all said.

America and Britain had been colonizing China for many years. Japan came to this late. China was such a backward nation. At the time of the Manchurian Incident in 1931, we felt Japan should go out there and use Japanese technology and leadership to make China a better country. What was actually happening on the battlefield was all secret then, but I felt sure that the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere would be of crucial importance to the backward races. Japan and Germany would only have to combine forces to break the Anglo-Saxon hold on Asia, and redistribute the colonies. That’s how we felt then.

Beginning in 1939, Hitler’s newsreels were shown every day. When I played hooky, I always went to see them. I’d watch those stirring movies about Hitler and wonder, “What’s the matter with the Japanese army in Manchuria? Why can’t they just annihilate the British or the Americans? Hitler took all of Poland and united it with Germany!” Then I bought Hitler’s heroic autobiography *Mein Kampf*. Japanese youth at that time adored Hitler and Mussolini and yearned for the emergence of a Japanese politician with the same qualities. We wanted decisive action.

Hashimoto Kingorō, a former army officer, and Nakano Seigō, a politician who advocated the “Southern Advance,” were two who took after Hitler and copied his style. I went to their speeches, all of them. Sometimes I’d be thrown out. Their supporters would demand to see my student ID and then say I wasn’t old enough. Somehow, they didn’t like students. So I’d take off my school uniform and sneak in. The meetings were held at the Hibiya Public Hall. Whenever extreme right-wing talks were given, on subjects like “Attack Britain and America,” enormous crowds came. People brought box lunches and formed long lines from six in the morning to get in and hear Nakano Seigō endorsing the liberation

of Asia. Even then, sometimes you couldn't get in. This was in 1940 and early '41, before the war. When you heard these talks, you felt as if your burdens had been lifted. You were satisfied. The audience would be carried away with enthusiasm for the ideals and theories of the Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Nagai Ryūtarō was another brilliant orator and people loved his tone. He, too, advocated Asia for Asians. I loved the atmosphere of his talks. When Britain lodged a protest with Japan because a British gunboat was sunk by Japan in China, they denounced the British, saying, "While they're engaged in aggressive acts, how dare they complain about the Japanese army there?" They called on us to protest against the British Empire. I myself once went to a demonstration at the British embassy where I joined in shouting, "Britain get out of China! Stop your aggression! What are you doing in the Orient?" We couldn't accept their presence in what they called the Far East.

You would be shocked by what we were taught. "Democracy" meant you could do whatever you pleased. If we found ourselves where we had to fight America, we were assured we would not have to worry. America was a democratic nation and so would disintegrate and collapse. That was common talk. In America, they can't unite for a common purpose. One blow against them, and they'll fall to pieces.

I was studying law and accounting. It bored me, just adding up and recording taxes or looking up interpretations of existing laws. I felt I couldn't stand doing that my whole life. It was at just such a moment that the branch chief of the Patriotic Students' Alliance at Nihon University pulled me aside and said he had a request to make of me. "We have work to do, but it must be carried out clandestinely. That's why I've selected you. If you don't wish to participate, don't say a word to anyone. If you wish to join us, contact me within a week." Then he told me he would introduce me to a "boss." At most of the universities and higher technical schools there was a branch of the Patriotic Students' Alliance. It was founded by right-wing groups and was part of the so-called International Anti-Communist Alliance. I now realize they played the role of skirmishers in agitating for war, but then I was concerned that they might be a gangster group. What if the assignment were to assassinate somebody? I confronted the branch chief and asked him for assurances that it wouldn't be anything like that. He assured me that the work would involve the independence movement in Indonesia. Indonesian independence? That sounded exciting. Even thrilling. I decided to join in early 1940.

They had a private academy located at the home of a businessman, near Meguro in Tokyo. He had a big hall for *kendō* fencing behind his

house. The head of the private academy, Kaneko, was a disciple of one of the right-wing leaders, Iwata Ainosuke. He'd gone to Indonesia in early Shōwa, soon after 1926, and had spent years there, wandering around. He was like one of the "China *rōnin*," masterless Japanese samurai who had worked mostly on their own initiative with the Chinese nationalists to overthrow the corrupt Ching dynasty before China's revolution in 1911. I guess I should call him a "Southern *rōnin*."

When I arrived at Meguro, this man came out wearing a formal man's kimono. He looked like Takasugi Shinsaku, the hero of the Meiji Restoration. He was only about thirty-six. Twenty of his students had returned from Indonesia. They were my age, just youths who, on graduation from elementary school, with no real prospects for jobs or work in Japan, had been sent to Indonesia. There they worked in large department stores in cities like Surabaya, and all were able to speak Indonesian fluently. My Indonesian was only what I could pick up at Nichidai while studying colonial economics, but now I burned to go somewhere overseas.

I believed in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere myself, but I couldn't really discuss that with these other students. Perhaps it was because they didn't have the educational level required, but we did talk about what was best for the Indonesian independence movement and focused on how to develop better relations with Indonesia. We saw Indonesia as a nation with great natural abundance, but a nation lagging behind in development. Japan should go there to help them use their wealth. It was a very utilitarian view. Gradually, I sensed that we were being groomed as reserves for the military. Despite that, I thought that it would be wonderful if we were to take part in the independence movement and liberate Indonesia from the Dutch. Even if our army didn't do it, we would, I thought. But gradually we came to believe that perhaps the military was going to do it.

That Twenty-six-hundredth Anniversary of National Foundation! A great moment in Japanese history. We were mobilized for that in the summer of 1940. We students were assigned tasks like guiding people around and preparing their schedules for ceremonies and events. There was a grand meeting of overseas Japanese all under one roof—representatives from Latin America and even from the U.S.A. We took them to military ports and accompanied them to the Imperial Palace for an audience with His Imperial Majesty. Just a year before the outbreak of the war, efforts were made for the total mobilization of overseas Japanese. They were told Japan would not lose if it came to war. These affairs connected with the anniversary, and conducted by the government, were

intended to raise the Imperial Army and the Navy high on a pedestal and to demonstrate Japan's dignity and prestige to overseas Japanese, as much as to the nations of the world as a whole.

I participated in what was called the Sumera Study Group. It was a play on words. *Sumera* in Japanese means both the Japanese Emperor and the Sumerians, the Middle Eastern people who were the founders of human civilization. Several scholars founded the group at the beginning of 1940. The organizers gathered student leaders from all the colleges and schools, including the imperial universities, not just the private ones like Nichidai. We met on the second floor of the Shirakiya Department Store. We were even given money when we attended the lectures. We were taught that Japan had to be more aggressive and told how we might expand the nation for the sake of the Emperor. From experiences like this, I'd say almost all the students of that time were caught up in militarism in some way.

I sometimes ran errands to the navy's Military Affairs Section for our academy, bringing them lists of people who resided in the South and things like that, without really knowing much about what I was doing. One day, the head of the group told me, "You're going into the navy. Get your application in order." I was a little surprised since I hadn't even taken an exam. I didn't realize that by then I was already deep inside, that our group was closely tied to the navy's "Advance to the South" faction.

I did have doubts at times, but on such occasions I believed that these thoughts surfaced in my mind because I was lacking in patriotic fervor and spirit. I felt I had to drive myself forward. If a nation decides to take action, everyone must move along with the decision! And, of course, I can't deny that I thought about what advantages might come to me. One can protect oneself best in the company of others.

In November 1941, one of the members of the academy, Yoshizumi Tomegorō, suddenly disappeared. The head of the academy didn't mention it. We'd sensed that preparations for war were on-going and we were just waiting for it to start. Whenever we asked when, they only told us to wait. Wait. They refused to give us any date. Our school year was shortened. We would now graduate in December. I got permission to leave the academy temporarily in order to study for my university graduation examinations and was allowed to board outside the academy if I agreed to join the navy. When I returned to the academy grounds at the beginning of December to take my preliminary physical and the navy written exams, I found it virtually deserted. All the young men had left. They'd mainly been assigned as interpreters for our landing forces. I later learned Yoshizumi had actually landed in Indonesia as a spy for the military.

The day the war broke out in victory, a great pot of sweet red-bean soup was prepared and we took it to the men in the Eighth Group of the Military Affairs Section who'd planned the Southern Strategy. The boss and I served each man in turn. "Congratulations, congratulations," we said. The normal impression you got from navy staff officers was of a cold distance. They hardly ever spoke, and they had the bearing of men supremely confident in their secret mission. But that day, while their faces were still composed, they had a sunny look about them.

What was supposed to happen had finally taken place. I felt a sense of relief at that moment more than anything else. Maybe all of Japan felt that way. Suddenly the constraints of deadlock were broken and the way before Japan was cleared. Yet I still harbored some doubt inside: Was it truly possible Japan could win?

I received notification that I had passed the examinations for the navy on January 15. I was told to go to paymasters' school. There were only six people present, including students in Indonesian language from the Tokyo Foreign Language Institute, a student from Takushoku University, and me, though they'd accepted three hundred. The others, we learned, were on a year's training course somewhere in Chiba prefecture. We six just waited around at the Military Affairs Section. They told us to prepare ourselves until the occupation of the Southern Area was completed, which would be very soon. We didn't even know how to salute. I'd been a student until the day before. Literally. Now I was in a navy uniform with the single gold stripe of a cadet ensign.

In the navy, everything had gone so well that they were already planning Australian operations. In preparation for landings there, they summoned people who'd lived in Australia, made long trips there, or just recently been repatriated. Every day we sent telegrams to them to come to the headquarters. They were asked to confirm the accuracy of tactical maps. We cadet ensigns were invited to observe. A lieutenant commander from the Navy General Staff would question them, asking about the beach line at Sydney Harbor, or inquiring about the depth of the water. You could get an overview of an operation just by listening. Finally, I asked the lieutenant commander, "So are we going to land in Australia?" He just blew up at me. "Never will you ask such a question again! Questions are forbidden! And you must never mention a word of what you've heard here outside this office!"

We received orders to leave for Indonesia at the end of March, aboard the *Tatsuta maru*. I was overjoyed with the idea of finally going to the scene of my dreams.