

From floor to ceiling, his study holds books on Okinawan history and culture. He has written extensively on the Battle of Okinawa.

A Quest for Meaning

ŌTA MASAHIDE [2]

"I saw local people treated very cruelly and harshly by Japanese soldiers on the beaches of Mabuni during the Battle of Okinawa. Why was this happening, I wondered, since we'd all desperately done our best. Out of my one hundred twenty classmates, only about thirty-five survived. The battle didn't end with my friends' deaths. Among the survivors were many disabled, some maimed, and some unable to lead any life in society. They made it through the battle alive, thanks to all their efforts, but mentally they were destroyed. Such people are still here today. They were literally crippled by the war. Those are some of the reasons why I've studied the battle of Okinawa for so long and why I chase after its elusive character."

When we meet at his home in Ginowan City, Okinawa, he is a professor of journalism and sociology at the University of the Ryūkyūs.

When I was a teenager, we had no other books than those with the "Imperial-nation" view of history. For people who lived in Tokyo or Kyoto, even though some books were prohibited, somewhere secretly such books surely existed. Moreover, in the higher schools, students had a fairly advanced education. If they wanted to, they could obtain different kinds of books and listen to progressive thinkers. Such possibilities were closed to us on the islands. Okinawa was the only prefecture in all of Japan without either a technical school or a university. The goal of our education was only to create men who would fervently throw away their lives for the sake of the Emperor, men who were full of loyalty. We had no way of knowing anything other than what we knew. Therefore, we just did what we were told, and we did it believing in it.

We were really ignorant of our own history. We had a subject called Local History, but there were no lectures. We had no idea what had happened to us when the old feudal domains were eliminated and the prefectures were established.^o The basis for the tragedy of the girl nurses' Lily Corps and the other student units lay in this lack of knowledge. We were a "pure culture," distilled by our education to be the Emperor's subjects. The soldiers knew the reality of war because they had participated in battles in China, so they went into the depths of the caves and stayed there. We students, and those like us who didn't know anything, were told, "This is your homeland! It is natural for you to defend your own Motherland." We had no choice but to do it. We went out without even having a healthy fear of war and ended up being slaughtered.

We must look at the Battle of Okinawa to see what distinguishes it. One of its most striking features is that soldiers of the friendly army—Japanese soldiers whom Okinawans considered to be on their side—murdered local residents, and not just a few, either. There are records that more than one thousand people were murdered because they'd engaged in "spy activities." I cannot confirm the figure, but I would say it was certainly more than eight hundred people, based on my personal investigation of the histories of various towns, cities, and villages. Moreover, a fairly large number of people were entrapped in "group suicides."

I didn't really comprehend the meaning of this kind of murder until one day I was shocked by an article I read in the *Asahi* newspaper. The killing of local residents as spies, and the group suicides took place on the

^o Okinawa, a semi-independent kingdom, was annexed to Japan in 1879, more than a decade after the Meiji Restoration had overthrown the Tokugawa shoguns.

Kerama Islands, too. One man who was a company commander there joined the Ground Self-Defense Forces after the war, rose to the rank of major general. He taught the military history of the Okinawan battle. He now wrote that in the battle, such tragic incidents as the hanging of residents as spies did take place, but he claimed that there was no point criticizing the commanders of that time for such acts, that these only ended up becoming personal attacks, and that wasn't the main issue. Instead, he wrote, Japan's wars had been fought outside the country since Meiji, and now, "For the first time, things previously done outside the country were done inside during the battle of Okinawa. The Japanese Army did not know how to fight on its own territory, so the customs of war learned outside were brought inside the homeland. That is why such tragic incidents occurred."

My principal question to him is simply this: "What customs of war did Japan follow outside the nation?" That's really hung me up. I've been trying to clarify this. I'm writing a book called *Genocide*, and in my own way I've probed the Nanking Incident. All the top Defense Forces leaders for the Battle of Okinawa had been directly involved in the Nanking Incident—the commander Ushijima, the chief-of-staff Chō, and the staff officers. The staff officers all personally saw what happened in Nanking. I was truly stunned by this knowledge. For the first time, I thought I understood the meaning of what happened in Okinawa.

Chief-of-staff Chō Isamu held routine meetings, and at one of these on the ninth day after the American forces landed, he issued an order to the effect that from that day on, whether a person was a military man or not, speaking any language other than Japanese was forbidden. Anyone speaking Okinawan would be punished as a spy. In the War History Office of the Self-Defense Forces you can still see the daily log of orders, and that order is among them. On May 5, once again the same order was issued, bearing the signature of the chief-of-staff. People over sixty years of age here spoke nothing but the local dialect because the creation of prefectures from feudal domains took place here only in 1879. Moreover, the education level was very poor. These people used their own local language, the tongue with which they grew up, and particularly so on the battlefield, in the most extreme and difficult of all imaginable situations. Yet, merely speaking in Okinawan meant punishment as a spy.

Japanese officers and soldiers had no knowledge of Okinawa. They had never been taught anything about the place. Many Japanese thought of the Okinawans as a different race. Even after the war, one company commander's writings show that he still saw the Okinawans as a separate race. He said they had no idea where the Okinawans might dash off to if they didn't keep their eyes on them!

The particular tragedy of the battle of Okinawa may have come from the fact that Okinawans came to see themselves this way too. Because of the past history of Okinawa, various influences from Burma, Thailand, and China entered Okinawan life, and with its different habits, customs, and language, Okinawa was supposed to lack in loyalty and patriotism. Okinawans could not be true members of the pure Japanese, but only third-class Japanese. In order to become a first-class Japanese, an Okinawan had to cultivate loyalty to the Emperor, conceding nothing in the intensity of his loyalty to the Japanese of the Main Islands. When the war was lost, Japanese soldiers spread the story that the defeat was the result of Okinawans spying for the enemy. Children from Okinawa, who were evacuated to Kyushu and other areas, were told the battle was lost because Okinawans had betrayed the country. There were lots of dark incidents.

Mainland researchers, in their study of the Occupation of Japan, still treat Okinawa as if "the Ryūkyūs" weren't part of Japan. They say things like "Japan didn't have a divided Occupation" or "Japan was fortunate not to be divided like Korea or Germany." That's completely wrong. Of course Japan had a divided occupation—if, that is, you consider Okinawa a part of Japan. It's just the same as Germany. The very day the U.S. forces landed, a line was drawn at thirty degrees north latitude separating Okinawa from Japan. That division didn't officially end until March 15, 1972, when Okinawa reverted to Japan.

Today, Okinawa is the poorest prefecture in Japan. Income is only seventy-four percent of the national average. Seventy-five percent of all U.S. forces stationed in Japan are in Okinawa, which makes up only one percent of the nation's land mass. The highest-ranking Japanese often say that Japan is prospering because of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. I say that is fine, but I ask them, "Why don't you have a base right next to your estates? Why are the bases only in weak places like Okinawa? Share the burden of the bases equally." Shifting responsibility to the weak, while they themselves prosper comfortably—this is the policy Japan has been taking throughout Asia. It was the same towards the minorities inside the country.

POSTSCRIPT: In 1990, Ōta Masahide was elected Governor of Okinawa on a progressive ticket, defeating the candidate backed by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party.