

A Foreign Country in Japan: Sugamo Prison

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Review of Utsumi Aiko, *Sugamo Prison: The Peace Movement of the War Criminals* (Sugamo purizun—senpantachi no heiwa undo). Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2004.



"Sugamo Prison" became Sugamo Keimusho (jail) at the end of the occupation when it passed from American to Japanese-government control. Until that time, it was the place of confinement for convicted war criminals and

suspects. Although located inside Japan, it was an abnormal space—one might call it a foreign country—where Japanese had their freedom restricted by the Occupation authorities. If we view it from a stance critical of "the Tokyo Trial view of history" (e.g., the new nationalist history), "Sugamo Prison," was a space in which victims were confined by "victors' justice". However, viewed through the eyes of those "who were visited with the horrors of war" (to quote the Preamble to the Constitution), this prison was a space for implementing "justice" in which aggressors were confined.

The complex character of this space stems not merely from differences of perspective. It also derives from the diversity of the inmates. Although all were "war criminals," there were two distinct groups of people: B and C Class criminals, the majority, were those accused only of "conventional war crimes" such as maltreating POWs. A Class war criminals, while fewer in number, received greater attention, having been accused not only of "conventional war crimes" but also of "crimes against peace" and "crimes against humanity."

The presence among the B and C-Class war criminals of some former colonial subjects whose Japanese citizenship had lapsed with the peace treaty further complicated the prison's human order. The author has long concerned herself with the problems of people of this sort and has published extensively about them; at many points she insightfully brings to light the fruit of that work.

Further, since some B and C-Class prisoners maltreated POWs, whether because they could not defy the orders of superiors or because, in

their own harsh circumstances, they had no other options, there were quite a few cases of the same person being seen as an assailant by the prisoners they had maltreated, yet who, within the absolute command structure of the army, were also victims.

Looked at this way, the dualistic approach to "Sugamo Prison"—was it space in which victims or assailants were confined?—has to be reconsidered. The stone that marks the site where "Sugamo Prison" once stood bears simply the words, "Praying for eternal peace," but the connotation of those words is truly complex.

In order to resolve this complexity, the author first paints a detailed picture of what kind of people, for what reasons, via what processes came to this space and how they lived their daily lives there. Here she makes ample use of her long research on and interaction with war criminals and prisoners.

The depiction of daily life extends to meal menus, forced labor, which was assigned to all except the A Class, those over 60, and the sick, as well as leisure activities. Prisoners could freely borrow books from Ueno Library and had such liberal opportunities for study that it was called "Sugamo University," a point related to the peace movement discussed below.

The diversity of human elements who shared the space of "Sugamo Prison" sometimes precipitated internal confrontations. The resentment of the B and C-Class prisoners toward the A Class prisoners, for example, was evident in the following incident: "Some B and C-Class prisoners made a point of going up to the entrance to the A Class prisoners' section and shouting abuse. This led A Class prisoners to ask that the gate be shut" (91-2). Also, among the B and C-Class, confrontations arose between "the group of higher officers who formed the core of the old military and the peace group and its sympathizers, the latter comprised of lower ranking soldiers and drafted officers."

The author addresses the diversity of human elements from the perspective not only of the human conflicts among the prisoners, but also their reactions to the war crimes themselves. Emphasis is on the majority B and C-Class criminals. Using multiple types of evidence such as her own interviews, the "Sugamo Newspaper" and personal memoirs, she makes the varied and carefully painted human portraits come alive.

The author focuses on the peace movement in Sugamo. The last part of the book examines in fascinating detail the pacifist research and writing that would produce "I Want To Be a Shellfish."

With the outbreak of the Korean War, Japanese rearmament began, and one-time Class A suspects, having been released, returned to political leadership. Amid these developments, a peace movement was born at Sugamo in the form of a social sciences study group. From it came the anonymous letter to the editor published in the October 1952 *Sekai*: "We are Not Coupons to Exchange for Rearmament: on the meaning of the movement to release war criminals." In reaction there was an incident—A former officer, a colonel, tried zealously to find the miscreant, and the disturbance grew large" (161). From outside the prison, too, Sasakawa Ryoichi, former A Class war crimes suspect, who had been released, is said to have applied pressure (163).

The letter itself criticized the fact that the "movement to release war criminals" that was promoted widely at the time was in fact waged by conservative forces using the war criminals. In conclusion it said that as war criminals what they genuinely wished was that, "via a comprehensive peace, that is, one including the U. S. S. R., China, and India," the Japanese "would be given the opportunity to defend independence and peace as one of the peace-loving peoples and thereby contribute to human happiness" (162).

The peace movement people, a small group of 40-50 out of the 1700 war criminals in June 1950 [92], assisted in the publication of *Rooms with Thick Walls—the Lives of Sugamo's B and C-Class War Criminals and Seven Years Later—Letters from Prison of Student-Soldier War Criminals*, which contained "I Want To Be a Shellfish," and the notes of Kato Tetsutaro writing under the pen name Shimura Ikuo. The latter had great impact as a TV drama with Hashimoto Shinobu as adapter and starring Frankie Sakai. This impact was due to the moving last words spoken by the main figure who had been taught that "the orders of a superior are the orders of the emperor." He was sentenced to death for stabbing to death an American P. O. W. on order of his superior: "If I'm born again, I don't want to be Japanese. I don't even want to be human. I intend to be born a shellfish."

After their release, activists among the group conducted activities in such varied fields as support for medical malpractice suits and postwar compensation for victims of war crimes. These results were made possible by the abilities they had honed in social-science analysis and their heightened social awareness. It also resulted from the fact that the Japanese social structure, with all the contradictions that they had fought at Sugamo, had not changed.

The issue of why Japan's social structure had not changed after the defeat is closely tied up with the fact that war criminals were sealed up in "Sugamo Prison," that separate country within Japan, and war crimes issues could not be resolved in Japan itself. Even in Germany, which punished war criminals itself, the problematic nature of the "banality of evil" stemming from the apoliticality of organization men, or "specialists", continues, as Hannah Arendt observed in Eichmann in Jerusalem. Again, even among Jews in the concentration camps who were victims of the holocaust, the difficult problem that Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved* labeled the "gray territory",

remains. That is the problem of victims who cooperated with their victimizers.

In the displacement of oppression under the emperor system that Maruyama Masao describes as a "structure of irresponsibility," the Japanese people were unable to prosecute the war crimes of their own people after the defeat and, ever since former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's slogan of "Putting Post-War Politics Behind Us," there has been a strong tendency to deny the outcome of the Tokyo Tribunal as a humiliation due to wrongful foreign pressure. Recently, there has been a strong trend toward revision of the peace constitution, with revisionists seeing it as a foreign imposition even though in truth constitutional revision itself cannot escape such a connotation.

Thus it remains necessary today to reconsider problems of Japanese society in light of the specific space "Sugamo Prison." The author says in her conclusion (183): "How to exist in an organization What are orders? Can unconstitutional orders be refused? These problems of B and C-Class war criminals are not problems of the past. The problems the war criminals faced then we face now."

If I might add, the issues we face now are not merely those of the B and C-Class criminals but concern the entire structure including issues of Class A. We can find in Sugamo's peace movement the embryo of reform in the whole structure. That would involve the realization by B and C-Class war criminals of their sins as assailants even while pursuing the responsibility of the A Class war criminals. One example is Yi Hak-nae, (Hiromura Kakurai), a B-C-Class war criminal who visited Australia and apologized to the POWs he had maltreated. I have elsewhere called this direction "reverse dominoes" (*The Politics of Peace, Human Rights, and Welfare*).

For having made this direction clear, the Sugamo peace movement that is the focus of this book is of crucial importance. Everyday life

in the abnormal space "Sugamo Prison," a foreign country within Japan, demonstrates in compressed form the problems of Japan's entire social structure. As such, in the new context of international regulation, such as the International Criminal Court, it continues to be something whose meaning we must continue to reexamine.

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