

Japanese Mustard Gas in China: Then and Now¹

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Under the putative cause of "making a contribution to the international community" commensurate with our economic power, Japan's government is ignoring the tragic lessons of history to "dispatch troops" (shuppei 出兵) overseas again, much as it did in the 1930s. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was thwarted in that attempt last December when it failed to ram a bill legalizing United Nations' "Peace-Keeping Operations" (PKO; heiwa iji katsudō 平和維持活動) through the Diet. But, undeterred, the LDP government is trying once more in the current Diet session--and may well succeed. Its PKO bill clearly violates Article Nine of the Postwar Constitution, which renounces war as a sovereign right of our nation and expressly forbids the mere keeping--much less the dispatching overseas--of Japanese military forces.

The LDP, however, does not bother to win popular consent for this momentous step, or even to follow proper legal procedures for amending the Constitution. Instead, the government seeks to create yet another in a long series of faits accomplis which, when taken together, reduces the highest law of our land to a dead letter and rebuilds Japan into a military power. This shows a callous lack of critical self-reflection toward Asian and Pacific peoples, especially the Chinese, who suffered Japanese imperialist depredations in the first half of this century.

Note that Self-Defense Force (SDF; Jieitai 自衛隊) personnel have already been dispatched overseas--even though the PKO bill has yet to become law. For example, SDF officers specializing in chemical affairs were chosen by the Japanese government to join UN teams that inspected Iraqi chemical weapons factories last year. There is as well a special school for chemical weapons research located on an SDF base in Ōmiya 大宮 City about 30 kilometers north of Tokyo. The existence of this school leads us to expect that the SDF are now engaged in developing chemical weapons. So, the fact that the Imperial Armed Forces developed and tested biological and chemical weapons against China cannot be dismissed simply as past events; there are continuities to be seen in the present day.

Even more ominously, Kyōdō 共同 News Agency reports that SDF officers went to Northeast China last June with orders to survey and remove the vast numbers of poison gas containers discarded by Imperial Army units in 1945. This "dispatching of [SDF] troops" presum-

ably continues apace and is shrouded in mystery; for no official reports of their findings have been published and the Chinese and Japanese governments both treat the issue as top secret.

Startling Kyōdō releases were published on November 5, 1991 in local Japanese newspapers, such as Tōkyō shinbun 東京新聞, Kanagawa shinbun 神奈川新聞, Fukui shinbun 福井新聞, Shikoku shinbun 四國新聞, and Tokushima shinbun 徳島新聞. They reported the following. In the wake of Japan's defeat in 1945, the Imperial Army discarded some 200,000 shells and bombs filled with an extremely lethal type of mustard gas through Kirin 吉林, Heilungkiang 黑龍江, and Liaoning 遼寧 Provinces, as well as in Inner Mongolia. Chinese authorities mobilized civilians to collect and remove these bombs to a site near the city of Tunhua 敦化 on two occasions between 1947 and 1969. Over 500 Chinese laborers and farmers suffered illness or injury after being exposed to the mustard gas during these operations; and about 300 of them died within two months. In all, the number of dead and injured comes to some 1000. And even today, the soil and water in and around that city are contaminated by this wartime Japanese gas. The Japanese government is not likely to offer victims compensation; indeed, it even refuses to admit that the Imperial Army actually used these chemical weapons.

General historical accounts of twentieth-century warfare hold that poison gas was used in World War I but not in World War II. As I have shown elsewhere, however, this is fallacious.² Imperial Japan relied on poison gas to a great extent during its Fifteen-Year war of aggression between September 1931 and August 1945. Among the "ABC" crimes against humanity committed in World War II--A-tomic, B-iological, and C-hemical warfare--Japan was the victim of Crime A, atomic warfare. But before we indulge in self-pity, we should recall that we perpetrated Crimes B and C, biological and chemical warfare, against China and other Asian neighbors.

During the Fifteen-Year war, the late Emperor Hirohito 裕仁 ordered the dispatch of chemical warfare units to China; and later, an Imperial Prince, Chief of General Staff Kan'in Kotohito 寬院宮 戴仁, authorized the use of poison gas itself against Chinese forces. At the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, it was alleged that Japan used poison gas in China on 1,312 separate occasions, producing 36,968 casualties of which 2,086 were battle deaths. Those figures were provided by the KMT government and, of course, did not include casualties incurred by Communist forces. In my research, I have documented that Japan made heavy use of poison gas in the following battles: at Hsü-chou 徐州, Wuhan 武漢, and Canton in 1938; at the Hsiu-shui 修水 River and against the South China Summer Offensive in 1939; in the Central China Winter Campaign of 1939-40; during the Hyakudan 百團 campaign

that began in August of 1940; and at I-ch'ang 宜昌 in Hopeh Province during 1941;

There are two noteworthy characteristics about the Imperial Army's use of gas during the war: its motivation and its choice of victims. First, Japanese war leaders thought of the Soviet Union as their chief enemy early in the war and used poison gas against Chinese largely for experimental purposes--to see what results might be obtained for possible use against the Soviets later on. And, early in the conflict, many Japanese units thought it beneath their dignity to use gas. But, from 1938 onward they came to rely on poison gas as a necessity in order to overcome Chinese resistance, particularly in North China against Communist forces.

Second, Imperial Army units brought supplies of chemical weapons to the Pacific theater as well, but these went almost totally unused, even on islands where Japanese troops died to the last man. No doubt, the Japanese war command hesitated to use these weapons against American units because they had the technological capacity to retaliate in kind. Chinese forces, on the other hand, never presented such a worry. However, Japan did use small amounts of poison gas against British Commonwealth forces in Malaysia.

Kyōdō disclosed these top-secret SDF activities in Northeast China just as the PKO bill was being deliberated in last year's Diet session; yet the LDP government and Miyazawa 宮沢 Cabinet managed to evade questioning on this issue. Should the Diet grant legal sanction to "dispatch troops abroad" once again, that move would create a decisive, qualitative change in our peaceful relations with Asian-Pacific peoples. As shown in South Korea's White Paper on Defense which warns of Japan's reemergence as a military power, neighboring countries are increasingly alarmed about Japan, who is fast attaining military predominance in the region.

Should the PKO bill become law, Japanese armed forces will again be permitted to make "advances" throughout the Asia-Pacific area. But wherever they may go, they will have to face the problem of Japan's war guilt. The Japanese government is now handing out large sums of foreign aid through the Overseas Development Agency; so foreign governments in the area will perhaps refrain from lodging official protests against such troop dispatches. But the peoples living under those governments still bear Japan malice for atrocities committed in the war; and, as can be seen from the reality of mustard gas in Northeast China, those peoples are being victimized even today. Up to now, Japan had expressed "remorse" but done nothing to atone for her war crimes.

Notes

1. This is adapted from my essay, "Han seiki no rekishi kara nani o mananda ka" 半世紀の歴史から何を学んだか [What have we learned from the last half-century of history?], Asahi jaanaru 朝日ジャーナル (December 13, 1991), pp. 23-24.

2. The paragraphs below derive from Awaya and Yoshimi Yoshiaki 吉見義明, "Doku gasu sen no shinjitsu" 毒ガス戦の真実 [The truth about poison gas warfare], Sekai 世界 479 (September 1985), pp. 68-84; Awaya and Yoshimi, "Kaisetsu" 解説 [Explanation], in Jūgonen sensō gokuhi shiryō shū, 18: Doku gasu sen kankei shiryō 十五年戦争極秘資料集 18 毒ガス戦争資料 [Collection of Top-Secret Documents on the Fifteen-Year War, 18: Documents Concerning Poison Gas Warfare] (Tokyo: Fuji shuppan 不二出版, 1989), pp. 3-32; Awaya, "Kyū Nihon gun no doku gasu sen" 旧日本軍の毒ガス戦 [The former Japanese army's poison gas warfare], Jinbun kenkyū 人文研究 108 (December 1990), pp. 145-58; and Awaya, Tōkyō saiban ron 東京裁判論 [On the Tokyo Trials] (Tokyo: Ōtsuki shoten 大月書店, 1989), pp. 243-68.