

*Grassroots Fascism:
The War Experience of the Japanese People*

by Yoshimi Yoshiaki with annotated English translation by Ethan Mark
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In *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People*, eminent Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki, eloquently translated here by Ethan Mark, undertakes a detailed and probing survey of the wartime experience Japanese Imperial subjects during the Asia-Pacific War of 1937-1945. Consciously positioning his work as a counter-narrative to top-down histories of the war that emphasized the actions and decisions of elites and that still predominated when this study was first published in Japanese in 1987, Yoshimi focuses exclusively on the memories and experiences of “common people,” which he defines as anyone who was not a military officer or a government official.

A work of almost staggering scope and breadth, *Grassroots Fascism* finds Yoshimi incorporating the viewpoints of a vast assortment of these non-elite actors, many of whom hail from demographics often overlooked within Japan’s expansive wartime empire, such as Taiwanese aboriginals, Korean conscripts, Ainu and Sakhalin natives, South Pacific islanders, and of course the ordinary Japanese citizens—many of them older and with well-established civilian careers—called up in the last, desperate days of the war to fight (and in many cases die) as poorly equipped foot soldiers

in theaters all over Asia. The result is a series of highly evocative vignettes of individual suffering, made only more searing, perhaps, because of Yoshimi's unfailingly clinical tone, that advance his largely unspoken aim of explaining why Japan must never go to war again; a message unspoken only because these painstakingly uncovered voices say it better than any scholar ever could.

Although the individual stories Yoshimi has selected are extremely engaging and even, at times, riveting, the overall organizational logic of *Grassroots Fascism* is a bit hard to pin down. The titles of the four chapters imply that the individual stories will be presented in chronological order, and to some extent they are, but because each story starts at the beginning and many continue all the way through the end of the war, there is much doubling back. Each individual's story covers around three to five pages and follows an identical format: first, the person's name, birthplace, and birthdate is given; next, a few sentences describe their education and what they were doing before the war; finally, Yoshimi provides a detailed account, drawing on their diaries or memoirs, of what they did during the war, typically ending either with their death overseas or their repatriation to the Japanese mainland. Altogether the book presents dozens and dozens of these accounts, strung together with no analysis or argument and not even any transitional text, other than a descriptive subheading such as "From Accessory Merchant to the 114th Infantry Regiment" (173) or "From Girls' High School Teacher to Fourth Mortar Battalion" (200).

However, this seemingly endless parade of personal accounts is lent some sense of coherence by Yoshimi's laser focus on a few central questions that he insists each account must answer. First, he desires to know what each individual thought of the so-called "holy war" that Japan was fighting in Asia and to what extent, and for what reasons, he or she supported it. Second, Yoshimi seeks to elucidate the ways in which each individual benefitted from and/or suffered from the war effort. Lastly, Yoshimi is especially interested to uncover mention of any wartime

atrocities committed by the Japanese that the individual may have witnessed or heard about, and what they thought about those atrocities at the time. When Yoshimi does surface a direct quotation from his source material, it is almost invariably in service of answering one of these three main questions. The answers he finds are exceedingly multifarious: while some people were excited and even ecstatic to fight a “holy war” in Asia, others were reluctant or despondent; while some avidly supported the war effort up to the moment of defeat or even beyond, others questioned it from the start or grew increasingly disillusioned over time; while some came through the war relatively unscathed and even benefitted in ways, others suffered greatly or were killed; and while some disbelieved reports of atrocities or sought to justify them by adopting a kind of “war is hell” philosophy, others were deeply scarred by the horrors they witnessed and in some cases even perpetrated.

Although it may seem odd to assert that such multivalent experiences of war would lead to more rather than less coherence, Yoshimi’s reluctance to categorize the actions and viewpoints of his subjects into anything other than vague chronological or geographical containers is actually a major strength of this study and underscores one of its major revelations, namely, that despite the great variety in terms of individual backgrounds and life experiences, everyone ultimately supported the war effort, albeit in their own way and for their own reasons, which ranged from devotion to family and community to love of the emperor, to a chance for excitement and adventure, to a desire on the part of ethnic minorities to feel included in the imperial project, and to feelings of superiority to other Asians. In many cases it was several or all of these. In other words, although the “fascism” in *Grassroots Fascism* may have had diverse and various “grassroots,” in the end they all came together to form a single patchwork lawn.

However, despite the color and richness of Yoshimi’s source base and the personal sagas contained therein, the scholarly impact of his study is somewhat attenuated by some significant methodological shortcomings.

In particular, Yoshimi's approach to his sources seems grounded in a style of "empirical" history that provides "just the facts" at the expense of analysis, and which seems to lead Yoshimi to accept sources at face value, to an extent that most historians today would no longer consider prudent. The vast majority of Yoshimi's sources are either diaries or memoirs. Whereas memoirs, being explicitly composed for public consumption long after events, are widely understood to be among the least reliable historical sources, diaries on the other hand, presumed to have been composed privately during or shortly after events, are typically viewed among the most reliable of historical sources. However, in *Grassroots Fascism*, Yoshimi draws upon these two types of sources interchangeably with little or no effort to distinguish between them in terms of their reliability. Moreover, even when he is using actual diaries, in almost all cases these are not original diaries but published editions prepared and edited for public or family consumption many years after the war. The reader will have great difficulty ascertaining the extent to which these published diaries may have been edited "for clarity" and thus may have allowed retrospective postwar viewpoints to seep into the framing and even the wording of quotations, because Yoshimi seems unaware that this might even be an issue. Although Yoshimi does at times point out where diary entries may have represented false consciousness or misinformation, in all cases he assumes the fundamental reliability of these sources as wholly accurate representations of what people were thinking not years later but at that very moment.

Yoshimi's use of these sources is potentially even further compromised by the fact that he personally interviewed several of his subjects, decades after events, to allow them to clarify what they had written down earlier, and also seems to have sought the permission or, at least, acquiescence of many of his subjects to use their diaries in his work, raising the possibility of introducing errors of memory or additional shaping of recollections for public consumption, as well as the possibility that Yoshimi himself may have felt obligated to portray his subjects in an at least somewhat positive

light. Indeed, all of the subjects in *Grassroots Fascism* ultimately come across as victims to some extent, and at least fairly sympathetic. Although many of them witness atrocities and in some cases are forced to participate in them, the worst actors are always observed at a distance, in third person, and the subjects themselves are never the main instigators. Atrocities always seem to happen at some other person's behest. Yoshimi himself, to his credit, clearly and explicitly rejects narratives of victimhood in his introduction and conclusion, but insofar as he relied so heavily on his subjects' own views of themselves, the cumulative effect of the many personal stories he presents is a narrative in which Japanese Imperial subjects are as much victims as the peoples they helped subjugate.

Another issue is the nature of Japanese wartime diaries themselves. As Aaron Moore has carefully chronicled in his recent study *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (2013), Japanese servicemen were encouraged and in some cases ordered to keep wartime diaries, as were many civilians. Since these diaries were understood as part of a national project to produce ideal imperial subjects, schoolchildren were trained to write diaries from an early age, people were provided models of "ideal" diaries to imitate, soldiers' diaries were subject to "inspection" by their commanding officers for the sake of ensuring ideological purity, and, in a fundamental sense, these diaries were widely understood to be more public in character than we might ordinarily expect from a private or "secret" diary kept by an individual of their own volition.

Insofar as these sorts of difficulties with sources commonly arise during historical inquiry, and in some cases are insurmountable, Yoshimi should not be blamed for having had to rely so heavily on published material. He may simply have lacked access to many diaries of the worst perpetrators of atrocities, or to secret unpublished diaries that were not already selected and curated for public consumption. But he might have at least acknowledged some of these issues within his text or given some other evidence that he was aware of them.

A second major issue is Yoshimi's treatment of fascism, or rather, the total lack thereof. Given the title "Grassroots Fascism," and the innumerable times the word "fascism" appears in the text itself, one would expect Yoshimi to provide some explication of what he means by this term and how it applies to his argument. All the more so because by the time Yoshimi was writing this book a robust body of scholarship had already arisen contesting the nature of "fascism" in wartime Japan and in some cases calling into question whether the term could even be applied. Yoshimi was surely aware of this scholarship, and of the fact that this term had become highly contested, yet he provides not even a bare-bones definition of the term, let alone any sort of theoretical exegesis. Insofar as Yoshimi provides a scholarly intervention on this front, it would be his frequent use of the term "imperial fascism" (*tennōsei fashizumu*), implying that there existed a Japanese version of fascism distinct from that found elsewhere, and that this distinction had something to do with the Emperor or with the so-called "emperor system" in Japan. However, because he never explains this term, we cannot be sure if it is meant to shoulder any theoretical burden or not.

For the most part, Yoshimi simply assumes that fascism existed in Japan, and asserts that when "ordinary" Japanese subjects supported the war, this was evidence of their "grassroots" support for "imperial fascism." But it is hard to see what is particularly "fascistic" about the words and behavior of these individuals. Although it is true that they all support the war effort, it is difficult to see how their beliefs should be distinguished from ordinary, run-of-the-mill patriotism or state nationalism. Insofar as every major combatant power in the Second World War sought to mobilize the total energies of their people in support of the war effort, the actions and thoughts of these individuals were hardly different from those of citizens and soldiers of the United States, Great Britain, or the Soviet Union—nations which have rarely if ever been called "fascist." It seems that the evidence Yoshimi has marshaled here fits better with the concept of "Total War"—a description of the total mobilization of the spiritual and

material resources of a nation that can be equally applied to all combatant nations—although in fairness to Yoshimi this concept was still being developed at the time *Grassroots Fascism* was first published.

As problematic as Yoshimi's non-treatment of fascism is, his notion of "grassroots" is equally under-explicated. Although Yoshimi's limiting himself to non-elites is made clear, his implied argument that fascism arose from the "grassroots" is not well-supported by the evidence he presents. Part of the difficulty is the way Yoshimi atomizes each individual's story into a standalone episode. He focuses intensively on their personal thoughts and views, but seems uninterested in providing any context for these views, and never once raises the question of how or where these views might have been developed or acquired. A typical understanding of fascism in Japan would emphasize the ways the top-down power of the state reached into every corner of daily lives and, in the words of Sheldon Garon, "moulded Japanese minds." Indeed, Yoshimi himself, almost accidentally, provides much circumstantial evidence for the ways in which these individuals were persuaded or even deceived by the state through propaganda, a culture of mutual surveillance, state-controlled women' and veterans associations, and the state-run ultranationalist education curriculum. But these external influences are all mentioned in passing, and never explored in detail.

Another issue is found in Yoshimi's treatment of atrocities. As mentioned, he is extremely interested in uncovering evidence or mention of Japanese atrocities against others, but he completely overlooks atrocities committed by others, especially the United States military, which he unfailingly portrays as kind and humane. Once again, this is not really Yoshimi's fault, as John Dower's definitive excavation of American wartime atrocities in Asia, *War Without Mercy*, was being written at the same time, but in retrospect Yoshimi's account seems a little too credulous of American wartime narratives and even, if anything, biased against the Japanese, which admittedly sounds strange to say, given Yoshimi's own politics.

Lastly, it bears mention that Yoshimi's exclusive reliance on certain

kinds of sources limits his ability to paint a comprehensive portrait of how Japanese imperial subjects supported the war effort. In particular, he seems overly interested in the diaries and recollections of male soldiers in the Imperial Japanese Army, especially in China. By my count, only two women were profiled. There were also no voices from the Imperial Japanese Navy, and very few voices from the home front. It seems logical that men called up as soldiers would find some way to rationalize and support the war effort, but it is less clear why older people, women, and children might have done so. Certainly these types of people were keeping diaries too, but perhaps Yoshimi did not happen to find them. It also would have been nice to hear more voices of the colonized. One of the striking findings of Yoshimi's study is the fact that so many colonized peoples also came to support Japan's imperial project. In addition to the stories of Okinawans, Ainu, Sakhalin Islanders, and Koreans who fought for Japan, we also hear mention in passing of Chinese, Indonesian, Filipino, and Burmese collaborators. It would have been nice to hear more of these voices, but Yoshimi was limited to Japanese-language sources. One of Yoshimi's most impressive discoveries was the story of a Chamorro secret agent on Guam, but the only reason he had access to this was because the man later immigrated to Japan and wrote his memoirs in Japanese. To be fair, Yoshimi did an excellent job seeking out the recollections of soldiers with a wide variety of backgrounds, and it seems almost perverse to complain about a study that incorporates so many different voices. Nevertheless, Yoshimi's study would have been greatly strengthened if he had been able to present the stories of an even wider assortment of peoples, and perhaps fewer Japanese soldiers in China.

Ultimately, however, these are all minor nitpicks at what is in fact a deeply researched, eminently readable, and at times even moving book, a book that was undeniably a product of its time, but remains relevant to our time, as well. Moreover, this English edition is blessed with a truly remarkable 40-page introduction by translator Ethan Mark that anticipates some of the methodological quandaries raised here and tries to address

several of them based in part on Mark's own nuanced reading of the text as well as interviews that Mark conducted with Yoshimi. The book is also greatly enhanced by Mark's extensive additional footnotes. Whereas Yoshimi's original text assumes a near-encyclopedic familiarity with the events and actors in the Asia-Pacific War, Mark provides detailed footnotes explaining almost every term and concept, along with citations to relevant secondary sources in English, thus allowing even non-specialists to fully engage with the stories of Yoshimi's colorful cast of characters.

The result is a much-welcomed addition to English-language scholarship on World War II in Asia that will be of great interest to an extremely wide variety of readers. *Grassroots Fascism* touches on almost every aspect of the Asia-Pacific War at some point, so specialists of every kind will find something of interest and relevance to their topic. Meanwhile, teachers will find the short, readable vignettes ideal for assigning to students, and general readers will find a highly accessible text of broad sweep and scope.

Timing is everything in history, but also in historical scholarship. As timely as Yoshimi's study was in 1987, when a Japan riding high on the Bubble Economy seemed eager to forget its wartime sins, we are perhaps even more fortunate to see the publication of this superlative English-language translation in 2015, just in time for the 70th anniversary of the end of the Asia-Pacific War, but also at a historical moment when the wartime generation has mostly passed on, a conservative Japanese government is seeking to revive Japan's military, and younger people in Japan are beginning to question whether Imperial Japan's original sins were as bad as they have been led to believe. As Yoshimi shows us in *Grassroots Fascism*, they were probably even worse, and every Japanese person alive at the time and many others throughout Asia as well were deeply implicated in an Imperial project that ultimately laid waste to everything it touched. As memories of the Second World War continue to fade, and the prospect of a new cold war in Asia rears its unwelcomed head, never has this insight been needed more.