

Japan :

Illustrated

Slices of Life

During the

Second

World War

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Year 2003/2004

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Introduction

We have decided to study life in Japan during the Second World War. In fact, the Japanese point of view is by far more interesting for us given that most Europeans only study western countries (France, Great Britain, the United States, Germany and Italy)'s version of the war and do not really study the difficulties the Japanese had to overcome or even the measures the government took during this conflict.

This lost of interest can be explained by the fact that measures were quite similar from one country to another, but the differences were significant with Japan. Furthermore, it was the war declaration of Japan that made the war break worldwide, so it is an important point of view to know in order to study the war.

Now the question is: how can images help to draw the different aspects of the Japanese life during the Second World War?

We will study the different measures the Japanese government set up during the war so as to explain the state of mind of the population. We will see in a second part the reaction of the people to these decisions and their living conditions in wartime.

Historical background

So as to understand well the reactions of the Japanese, we need to know the historical background.

In the 1930s, Japan was in a deep depression and people were increasingly dissatisfied with the government. Some militarists were attracted by the abundant natural resources of the Manchuria (a Chinese area) and used a false excuse to invade it. Because of Japanese blood's spilling, the Japanese government had to support the military and the country Manchuria was created. Chinese people began to resist fiercely, thus Japan and China began a war that dragged on over ten years.

In 1941, Japan carried out a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in Hawaii, declaring war against the United States and so Britain and other countries. That was the beginning of what was called the Pacific War.

The Japanese army had the advantage initially with good strategies and a better trained army, but then lost a succession of battles:

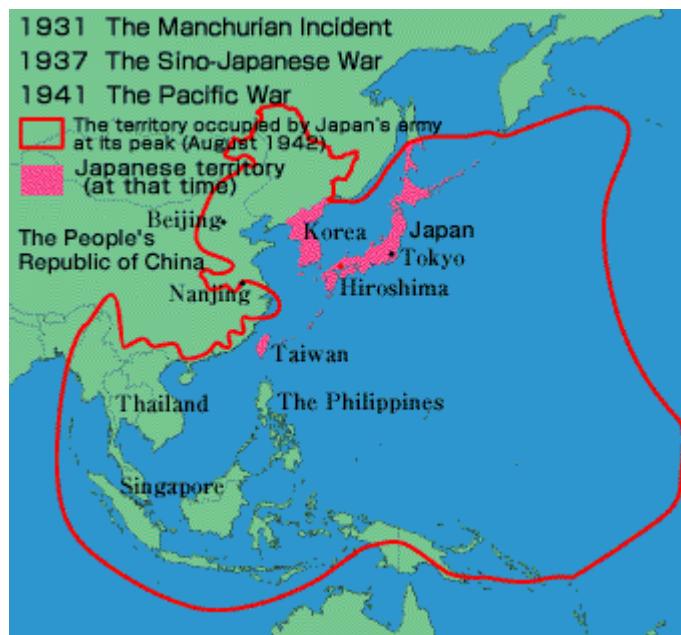
The first is the Coral sea battle in May 1942, then Midway in June: thanks to their knowledge of the Japanese secret codes, the Americans could avoid a Japanese trap and defeat it.

In 1944, American warplanes began invading Japanese air space and dropping bombs on cities. Moreover, Japan mostly relied on its navy to supply for the country, and the Japanese merchant fleet was an easy target for the American submarines.

As a consequence, Japan had big problems of fuel and pilots could not train themselves flying as often as they wanted, and the fleet could not go further than the Philippines' area.

In June 1945, the American air force was close to Japan and Truman, the President of the United States, decided to use a new weapon: the atomic bomb. The president feared that the war lasted because of the suicide planes. So as not to lost many American lives, he decided to use bombs. The first blew up on Hiroshima on 6th August, the second on Nagasaki on 9th August.

It was the end of the war, but the world was shattered: Europe needed to be rebuilt and an entire world had to be built up again.



Recapitulative map of the Pacific War

First Part: Measures taken by the Japanese government during the war

Although the Japanese government was focused on the army, measures that directly concerned the population were taken in the second year of the war.

As similar measures had already come into force during the Sino-Japanese war of 1937, the system was both very efficient and fast acting.

I The Different forms of rationing and their consequences

The government quickly encouraged people to save food, clothes, and other daily necessities. An austere lifestyle (a war lifestyle) was advised through slogans such as: "Luxury is the Enemy" or "Desire nothing until victory" (see II for more details).

Collects and substitute goods

As the army's needs were increasing, a metal collect was launched in 1941 in order to get materials that were essential to munitions factories. Every single thing made up of metal was collected, such as ashtrays, advertising boards, gold fillings and even temple bells!

More useful metal items were also taken, for instance streetlights or household pots and pans, so that there was a general lack of those products. Various substitute goods appeared to replace them: food rations were wrapped in paper, and emergency rations were put in ceramic containers. You could also find ceramic balance weights or wooden paperweights.

This substitute goods probably weren't handy or numerous enough, and a black market developed because of the general need of such essential products as charcoal or matches, that were also rationed.

This poster, issued in 1942,
embodied the order to collect metals



Clothing

Clothing also became hard, for clothes were rationed with coupons. 

Every month, one pair of socks was given for four people, one towel for fifteen, and so on...

Sometimes women had to make clothes themselves, and skin from frogs, snakes and whales were used to make shoes or accessories (instead of leather).



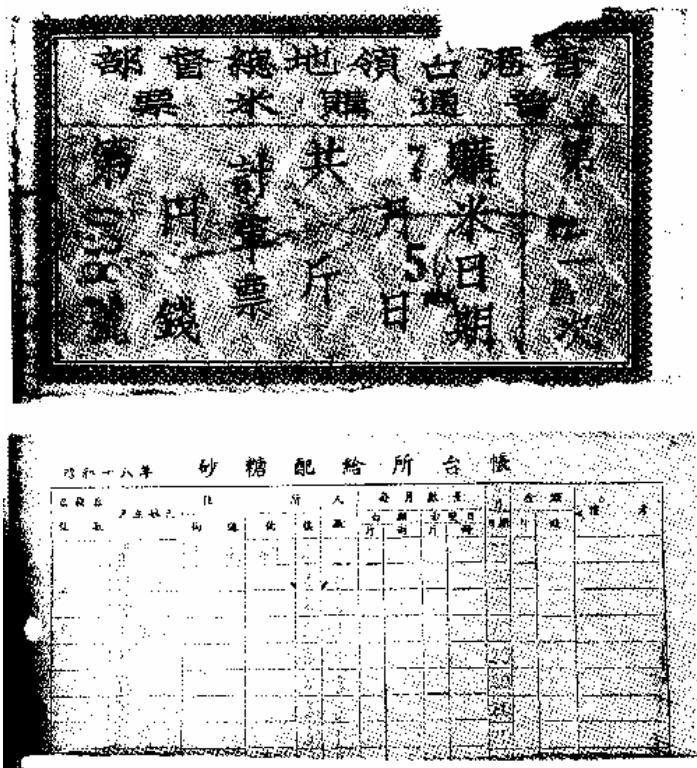
Moreover, the government maintained a control on the clothes people wore. According to a law of 1940, Men were to wear khaki uniforms and women baggy trousers. The government also regulated the type of hairstyles.

Food

As far as the food is concerned, the government proceeded in stages.

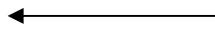
In 1939, the Japanese were encouraged to vary their diet, which meant trying to eat something else than rice (the basis of a Japanese meal).

Two years later, rice became rationed in the largest towns, and then in the whole country (about a cupful per person per day, or sometimes potatoes). As the government said, "If anything is lacking, it's ingenuity! ".



Fruit, fresh vegetables, salt, sugar, soy sauce and miso (soybean paste) supplies also became controlled. From February 1942 on, a central agency was set up to organize the food supply, yet the food that was given wasn't nutritious enough, and certainly not as good as white rice was.

Then on top of all that the government sponsored "No Meat Days" which took place six times a month. A formidable increase of whale meat consumption and prices followed.

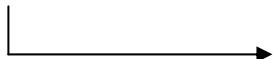


This paper was used in Hong Kong. It gave the person who owned it the permission to buy rice.

The situation was worsened by the fact that, as most farmers or farm employees had become soldiers, the food production decreased because of a shortage of workers. In spite of the government's efforts to make up for that loss (for instance, growing vegetables and hogs in schoolyards - see the photo), starvation spread across the country.

Diseases appeared, most of which were caused or worsened by anaemia. As the only way to treat anaemia is to eat nutritive aliments (which were hard to get), many people died of those diseases.

Hog farming in the playground certainly awoke children's curiosity.



The sharing out of food to families was assured by tonarigumi, neighbourhood associations composed of a dozen of households, which we will deal with in the second part.

The situation got worse and worse as the end of the war was coming, and finally the Americans were those who made the first step back to normality when they sent food supplies by aircraft after Japan's abdication.

II Propaganda

Japanese leaders organised a gigantic propaganda campaign, which was spread by many different means. As a matter of fact, almost all the countries at war had their own propaganda, yet the Japanese way has some particularities.

The two main aims of Japanese propaganda were: to "transform ordinary people into vital cogs in a war machine", and to make them hate the Allies (symbolized by the evil-looking American soldier).

At school

The boy on this poster is the archetype of the perfect boy.

He wears simple clothes and supports his country by holding the Manchukuo flag (symbol of Japan's victory over Manchuria)

Primary schools were very active indeed: children were taught patriotic songs, and history lessons were setting them against the "Enemy" through slogans such as "**Anglo-Saxons = blood-thirsty demons**". The whole educational system was reformed, and elementary schools changed their names into "kokumingakkô", which means "national schools".

Education in those schools gave no alternative to the young, easy influenced children. They were told about how evil Americans were trying to dominate Asia, and how brave Japanese soldiers were fighting them, for the peace and the unity of the world.

As an example, here is a short excerpt from The Glass Rabbit, a novel written by Toshiko Takagi, who was 12 at the time:

Everyone sang in a rousing tone of voice. We felt no hesitation, no artificiality whatsoever. We had been taught that Japan was fighting to protect the whole of Asia from the Americans and the British, that the children of Asia were our brothers and sisters, so we had to unite, one hundred million hearts as one, to defeat the enemy. We thought of our country's well-being and pledged our devotion to the emperor. And we really believed we would all grow up to become soldiers in order to defend our empire.

A sixth-grade boy gave a speech on our behalf. "Put up a good fight and overthrow the enemy. Leave the home front to us young citizens.



"We will defend it." Then we waved the little Rising Sun flags we had done out of paper.

Children were taught to respect soldiers, to pray for them. Kamikazes were heroes, and pupils were told that making sacrifices and enduring privations would help Japan win the war. Then, slogans like "**Do without until we win**" were more efficient, and even children put the nation's needs ahead of their own.

As Singapore was occupied by the Japanese, propaganda was also applied in the country's schools and some lessons were taught in the occupant's language. Bonuses and promotions were also awarded to those who decided to learn Japanese (instead of Chinese or English).

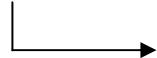
Posters

Do not forget that the government kept a tight control over the population all along the war, spreading more and more slogans and editing posters (see the appendixes).

Radio Programs

Other means of propaganda were radio programs, most of which were intended to American soldiers. Thus, female broadcasters were trying to demoralize them by praising the Japanese Army, encouraging GIs to desert, or else implying that the soldier's wives and girlfriends were being unfaithful, far away in their native country...

This woman seems ready to start the "Tokyo Rose" program.



However, these programs didn't have the effect they should have had. Most broadcasters were good neither at writing English nor at speaking it, so the programs turned out to be very funny for the GIs. Though the radio also employed native speakers to write and broadcast the programs, the result wasn't better.

Indeed, as the news program only announced Allies' defeats and Japanese victories, the American soldiers began to doubt, and by the end of the war it became obvious the programs were nonsense.

Yet the effect on Japanese people wasn't negligible, for at the end of the war there were still some who believed Japan had won the Midway battle.

Except for radio propaganda broadcasting, which was partly in English, the use of all foreign languages but German was forbidden, and Japanese celebrities were asked not to use English in their stage names.

Moreover, mixed marriages were discouraged by the 1940 National Eugenic Law, which also permitted the sterilization of the "disabled, insane and criminals".

In the meanwhile, as condoms were only given to soldiers (because of rubber shortage), the birth rate quickly increased, and the Health Ministry rewarded families with more than 10 children for "helping the war effort".

III The people stands up against the "enemy"

It appears that the Japanese government manipulated people's mind in order to make the war easier. Then, putting all those interesting ideas into practice, the population was made even more active in the war effort.

Bonds

As well as many countries at war, Japan created "wartime saving bonds", that people would buy to help the state finance the military expenditures, which were becoming more and more costly. This kind of system reminded the Japanese that the war was an everyday fight which wasn't to be given up.

These bonds were issued in 1942 →

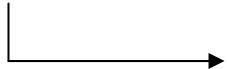


Simulations

Another way of keeping the population in a tight control was the simulations.

First, the Air Defence Law of 1937 implied preparation for air raids: shelters were built by the tonarigumi so that people could have a safe place when they left their home, and fire-fighting drills were organized. Everybody (even children) had to stand in line and to relay water with buckets. Some families also dug holes in their gardens in order to hide food in case of an air raid that would destroy their house.

A fire-fighting drill that took place around 1940



Second, in July 1944, some children from the 3rd to the 6th grades of elementary school were sent to relatives, and others to evacuation sites (rural temples or assembly halls), far from danger. They were told they had to bear their parents' absence and privations quietly, and Japan would win the war. Many of them never saw their family again.



These children are ready to leave for their evacuation site

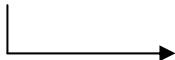


Mobilization

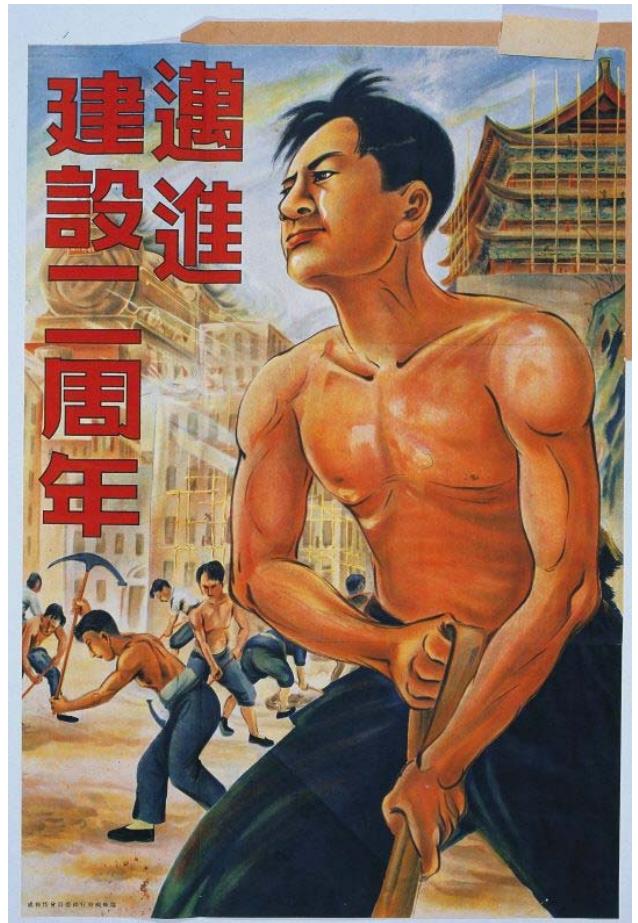
The National Mobilization order of 1939 permitted the government to take workers from civilian firms and make them work in military industries (mostly ammunition factories or new electric power plants, sometimes labour camps). This was done in 1943, and even the foreigners living in Japan at the time (mainly Koreans and Chinese) were made to work for Japan by force.

Only twenty- to forty-five-year-old men were concerned, yet as many had already become soldiers, most women were left alone to raise their children.

This man seems happy to give time and energy to his country...



... Yet these workers don't look as enthusiastic



Finally, the government kept a very tight control on the population all along the war. Indeed, people had already experienced a rationing period (during the Sino-Japanese war), and there was little resistance when propaganda came into action again.

We will now focus on the way people responded to the government's measures.

Second Part: How the population reacted to war measures

The Second World War, in continuation of the Sino-Japanese war, sparked off varied reactions among the population. Some people did their very best to help their country but others did not willingly obey the orders, and some even dared stand against their government.

I Patriotic reactions

Patriots could express themselves through many different means. First of all, those in the home front who formed associations like the women's one, then the neighbourhood association members and finally volunteers and soldiers from the suicide-troops who gave their lives to their country.

Women's association with sennimbari



In wartime, Japanese women often joined forces to wish the soldiers good luck. You can see these women working on the picture opposite. In fact those who were members of Patriotic Women's Association made **sennimbari**, big strips of white cloth decorated with one thousand red stitches sewn by one thousand people.

These sashes were presented to soldiers heading for the front in order to ensure good luck and long life. But they also guaranteed their wearer "complete immunity" from American bullets.

Originally, it was a strip made by the mother of the soldier, but as those ones were numerous, the family helped to sew it.

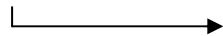
Nevertheless the members of women associations very often stood on busy street corners and asked everyone who passed by to make a single stitch so that a thousand people helped to make one belt.

During the second Sino-Japanese War, women asking for help with their *sennimbari* became a daily sight.

Tonarigumi

Another patriotic association (divided into more than one million little associations in 1944) was the *tonarigumi*. It was a neighbourhood grouping made up of ten to fifteen households.

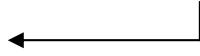
They were initially voluntarily formed for fire fighting and air-raid defence, but after September 1940 they became mandatory and all the Japanese were required to become members of *tonarigumi*. The opposite picture presents the national mobilization of the *tonarigumi* members.



These *chounaikai* (the other name of *tonarigumi*) were, in theory, volunteers associations; but in practice it was difficult for anyone to be well informed (of the news) if he was not a member of *chounaikai*. So even when it was not compulsory, people joined these associations to be "good neighbours". In fact, the government praised the patriots thus it was important for a Japanese to be faithful to its homeland.



Here is a photograph showing *tonarigumi* members using empty buckets during a fire drill. The women wear thin hoods in order to protect themselves from sparks. Originally created for fire fighting, the *tonarigumi* took other aims, as they became national associations.



Another example where we can see Setsuko's hood.



This association was used as a semi-official weapon of the government, with a kind of self-surveillance function. Their leaders were given an extensive list of duties that their grouping had to perform - circulation of government notices called *kairanban*, allocation of government bonds, distribution of rationed goods...but also providing moral advice.

As a consequence we can say that they were an effective means of social control given that they were used to keep control on people's mind (so as to avoid revolts...).



Besides, these associations were groups in which each member depended on the others, and if one member was found guilty of a misdemeanour, the entire association was punished.

In fact, members were "happy" reporting misdeeds to authorities such as the Thought Police or the feared military police, thus the *tonarigumi* was - across barriers of class and family - to involve the entire nation in civil defence.

On those days many people who lived in the home front participated to patriotic efforts, but some gave their lives to their country.

Volunteers and kamikazes

In schools, children were taught to respect soldiers and kamikazes became considered as heroes. As the war went worse for Japan in 1943 (after Italy surrendered), even college students (around **seventeen** years old) were sent to the front given that the country needed more volunteers.

As an example, here is a short excerpt from *The Glass Rabbit*, by Toshiko whose two elder brothers volunteered:

My two brothers volunteered that fall, one for the navy and the other for the army. They were first-and-second-year high school students. The clouds of war were beginning to gather over mainland Japan and, despite their youth, my brothers and their classmates volunteered to try and prevent the worst. Burning with youthful vigour and idealism, they stepped forward, saying very simply and artlessly that they would protect the country.

Wartime education made the young eager to go to the battlefield and fight for their country. Those teachings helped the army, which got many volunteers thinking they saved and protected their homeland.

Here is a propaganda poster showing a Japanese officer serving his country.



Besides, among these volunteers there were people ready to die for their country: **kamikazes**. These soldiers gave their lives in suicide acts in order to help their army to win the war as you can see it on the picture below.



A kamikaze charges at a ship that intended to shoot down him.



From *Kami*, which means divine and *kaze*, which means wind, the word *kamikaze* was typically Japanese and by its etymology could not be transcribed, which explains why the same word is used in very different languages.

As far as the Japanese word is concerned, kamikazes were pilots who killed themselves launching their planes - full of explosives - against American targets such as ships, military bases...

If these attacks were not as destructive as the Allies dreaded it, they impressed and morally affected the soldiers who could not avoid them killing American soldiers.

In Asia, the Allied pilots wanted a plane named P-80 in order to follow the suicide planes in their deadly vertiginous dives to charge down them.

Since 1943, the Japanese population had been fanaticised by the militaries in power and wanted to fight to the bitter end so kamikazes became more and more numerous until Hiroshima.

Even if patriots were numerous during the war, some people were discontented. Among them, opponents to the government who were dissatisfied with the way of life the State set up.

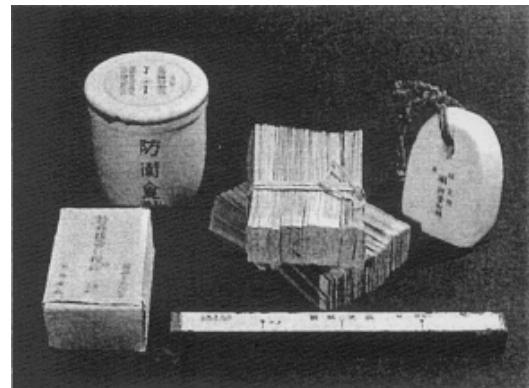
II Discontents and government's opponents

These opponents were often very different people who just did not like the way they were treated. In order to understand well this amazing variety we will study different cases. First the behaviour of Akiyuki Nosaka, a writer who experienced the war, during rationing measures; then the problems of the curfews for the tradesmen and finally the radio show " Tokyo Rose".

Rationing problems

As it is clearly mentioned in the first part, the government set up rationing during the war and food began to lack. Some substitute products were used (see the picture opposite) but it was not enough.

Those who worked or had enough money to get food did not really protest, but others that did not have this luck could not agree with the state's measures.



Some people who did not have a house or a job could not buy food, and thus had to steal some so as to survive.

As an example, we can mention the interview of Akiyuki Nosaka, the author of *Grave of the Fireflies*, in which he explains the difficulties he had to find some food and how his younger sister dies.

Very often, he had to steal some food to survive, but when he had some he ate it before giving it to his sister, so she became ill and dies from anaemia. But before that, he came to see a doctor but this one did not help him to have good food.

With this example we see that life was very difficult for those who could not buy food, or were not members of associations (like *tonarigumi*), and that there were few people who helped those in need. The State's measures were quite hard and it is not astonishing to see that some people died because of these laws.

Curfews : no more night life

Nightlife was also difficult because of the **curfews**. In fact, shops, restaurants or theatres were closed at nine o'clock and nobody could go out and have a moment to relax during the war.

This measure was a cause of discontent among the population and the government's popularity fell more and more as the war lasted.

The firsts to be struck were the shop owners. The luckiest had to close their store at nine p.m.; the others were forced to close it definitely, or saw their shop transformed into factories (of weapons, canned food for soldiers, etc...).

Here is a picture showing a food-canning factory used to supply the soldiers. →



It goes without saying that these tradesmen were not satisfied with these changes, especially since some lost their job and their means of living.

Among those tradesmen, we can include the restaurant owners. All the buildings had to close down their doors at nine, but restaurants had customers mostly in the evening or at night, which meant that this measure was extremely bad for them.

Leisure such as theatre or sports events (that often took place in the evening) were also disrupted. Some were postponed before the night, but they were mainly suppressed, the government considering that it was not important enough.

Indeed, theatre was not necessary to live, but if people could not relax in wartime it led to many discontents, and finally to protests or revolts.

Such measures as the curfew were very bad for the trade and increased **discontent** among the people.

Anti-propaganda with "Tokyo Rose"

As we said in the first part, Japan had set up **radio propaganda programs** in order to demoralize the American troops.

Among the most widely known and remembered broadcasters was "**Tokyo Rose**", though this woman did not really exist. Several women took the fictitious name of the Japanese broadcaster who intended to inspire homesickness to the GI's. Some of the most famous broadcasters were "Tokyo Rose", "Nancy Nank", "Ms Tojo" and "Orphan Ann".

The woman who was finally identified as "Tokyo Rose" was Iva Toguri D'Aquino, an American born of Japanese immigrant parents, who was trapped in Japan because of the beginning of the war (the government did not want to let foreigners leave their country).

Tokyo Rose: Iva Toguri D'Aquino →



She was ordered to write propaganda programs against Americans and even though she did not want to do it, she did not dare disobey fearing to end up in labour camps.

Her regular show was called "**Zero Hour**" and her humour was immensely popular with the GI's. In fact, her show became one of the most famous during this period.

Although its propaganda radio program aimed at demoralizing the American soldiers - the members of her country's army - it had the opposite effect. Her comical style was deliberate and instead of disillusioning the GI's, she encouraged them.

Indeed, she was really appreciated by the soldiers for her role in amusing and entertaining them. She also received much praise during the post war period as she kept her show on.

Conclusion:

Thanks to our description of life in Japan during this difficult period, you can now imagine how awful it was. Most of the population had to fight everyday for their life, particularly in the last years of war, and they could not let themselves sink into despair.

Yet the situation was quite similar in other countries at war. However odd what we described may seem, do not forget that the hardships Japan had to overcome were not so different from what happened in England, France or Germany.

Then, in post-war Japan, people began to think about what had happened, especially the atomic bomb. This gave birth to a general peace movement that still goes on nowadays.

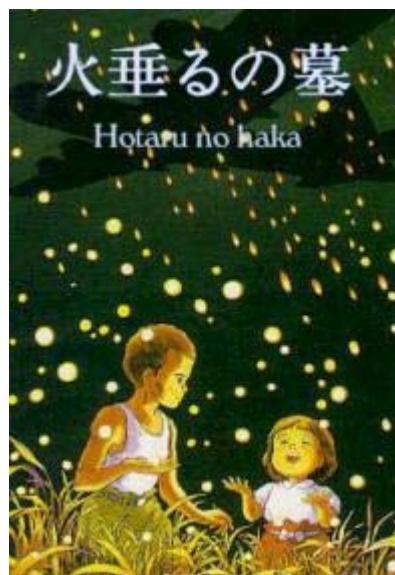
Instead of letting their past fall into oblivion, Japanese decided to use it to avoid errors in the future. Peace museums were built in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and some buildings in Hiroshima were left as witnesses of the past: half destroyed, but still standing.

A peace festival was also created in Hiroshima in 1985. Every two years, during this "International Animation Festival", prizes are awarded to animated films and short films from all over the world. As a matter of fact, this festival used to be part of the Cannes Film Festival.

In addition, children's animation and works by famous animators are presented to visitors, along with exhibitions and workshops.

Some people who had lived through war passed on their experiences through books, such as The Glass Rabbit by Toshiko Takagi or Grave of the Fireflies by Akiyuki Nosaka, which are still read by Japanese pupils.

We hope those photos and images helped you get a proper idea of what life was in Japan at that time. For more details, see the documents of the bibliography. We advise you the animated film Grave of the Fireflies, for images may be more eloquent than words.



Bibliography:

Books:

- The Glass Rabbit by Toshiko Takagi

The English translation (by James M. Vardaman, Jr) may be found at this address:
<http://members.aol.com/luvit2001/glassrabbit.htm>

- Grave of the Fireflies by Akiyuki Nosaka (published in 1967)

- ANIME Land, special issue #5 (June 2003)

Internet sites:

- www.suite101.com/article.cfm/1206/67724 (about radio propaganda)

— mdn.mainichi.co.jp – this is a daily news site, so you will not be able to find the article any more (about propaganda and tonarigumi)

- www.britannica.com (about national schools)

- www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp

- www.japonline.com (about rationing)

- www.hisgeo.com

- <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com>

- <http://objectifbrevet.free.fr>

Others:

- An e-mail and a letter from Miss Akiko Fujioka, working at the city hall of Hiroshima

— Grave of the Fireflies, an animated movie by Isao Takahata of the Ghibli studio (released in 1988), based on Akiyuki Nosaka's novel

Appendices

Here are some propaganda posters that were issued during the Second World War.





躍進新中華
天地常明朗



