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Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies: Selections from the Wartime Diaries of Ordinary Japanese (pp. 109-112)

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In this autumn of emergencies, when the life or death of the state is at issue, the weak have become food for the strong, and even the tobacconist is closed, and people are upset. The problem is how to survive in this bleak society. Standing on top of the rock of desperation, those of us who are old pray to Buddha and the gods, ... but at the moment our strength is exhausted, and joining our hands in prayer is the height of idiocy.

*Tamura Tsunejiro, Kyoto, November 11, 1944*

Many scholars know of Dr. Sam Yamashita through his research and writings on Tokugawa Era intellectual discourse. For the past few years, however, Yamashita has been reading, translating, and presenting papers at conferences on the Pacific War diaries of Japanese citizens. Containing extensive selections from eight “ordinary” Japanese, *Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies* is the published fruition of this time-consuming and valuable work.

In the introduction, “The Pacific War and Ordinary Japanese,” Yamashita provides a 40-page overview of historiography utilizing the writings of Japanese during the Pacific War that includes a concise overview of Japan during wartime; a preview of the chosen eight diaries; and themes connecting many of the diaries and diarists. Of the eight diarists, five are adults and three are children. Their ages range from 9 to 75. Four are male, four are female. Two are in the military. The introduction is so well researched and deftly written that any scholar or
student interested in Japan and the Pacific War will gain valuable insights from both the text and the extensive endnotes of this first chapter.

Yamashita includes an extensive discussion of ten themes among the eight diarists, from the first theme of support for the war, to social conflict when many Japanese lost faith in their leaders (especially after Prime Minister Tojo Hideki resigned after the loss of Saipan in the summer of 1944), and finally the reaction to the Emperor's acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration on 15 August 1945. Some of Yamashita's themes overlap, or are redundant, such as adult attitudes towards the war beginning to change by 1943; changing attitudes towards political leadership; losing confidence in the military during the last year of the war; and deterioration in home-front morale all seem to this reader as subsets of a singular theme of gradual discontent as the war grinds on and daily life becomes increasingly difficult and exhausting. Nevertheless, Yamashita's careful elucidation and discussion of these somewhat unwieldy themes concentrates attention to the connections between the diverse diarists.

The first diary is by Itabashi Yasuo, a Navy combat pilot who joined a "divine wind" (kamikaze) squadron. Despite oft-expressed bravado such as "Japan will definitely win," Itabashi is aware "the war situation has changed dramatically" and sometimes expresses a realistic fatalism: "I believe that 1945 is the autumn of emergencies when the Yamato race, one million strong, will chose death and make a last stand." Itabashi finally flew on his special attack mission on 9 August 1945, and was killed in action near Okinawa. In this collection of diaries of ordinary Japanese, he represents the young, proud, military officer who never questions his ultimate sacrifice in a lost cause.

Representing an irascible old man is Tamura Tsunejiro, who owns what appears to be a little-used billiards parlor in Kyoto. He often criticizes the rich, the lack of affordable food, and the government's conduct of the war. In a diary entry for August 2, 1944, Tamura noted an enthusiastic send-off with shouts of banzai for young conscripts headed to the war while "a soldier in his forties [was] leaving with no one to send him off. He was saying goodbye to his parents, wife, and children, who watched forlornly as the train disappeared in the east." Despite his often cantankerous commentary, Tamura's genuine concern for his family and
his neighbors shines through his diary.

In addition to Tamura, two women in Tokyo, Takahashi Aiko and Yoshizawa Hisako often mention American air raids and the problems these military bombardments of largely civilian areas caused for the urban population. Takahashi, who lived in California from 1917 until 1932, witnesses the Doolittle raid of April 18, 1942, the March 10, 1945 incendiary raid that killed nearly 100,000 people, and many other destructive air raids that constantly disrupted life in Tokyo. Critical of the Japanese government for continuing the war, Takahashi notes the reversal of fortune between urban and rural Japanese. "In the past," Takahashi writes, "the daily lives of farmers were not blessed in any sense, but now they suddenly hold the key to our lives—food—and sit in the kingly position of lords of production. By selling on the black market, they are enjoying extraordinary prosperity."

Two of the three child diarists, Manabe Ichiro and Nakane Mihoko, were sent away from their urban households to rural areas to protect them from American bombing raids and to provide at least a semblance of education no longer possible in many urban areas by late 1944. Twelve year-old Manabe wrote of food and standing in lines for food, yet he rarely complained of hunger. He notes that he shrunk 4 centimeters in height over a period of a few months. According to Yamashita, it is not clear whether he survived a bombing raid in Tokyo after he returned for a graduation ceremony in February 1945. The youngest of all the diarists is 9-10-year-old Nakane Mihoko, who spent from April 1945 to March 1946 in Toyama Prefecture before returning home to Tokyo. It is clear that Nakane and Manabe were required to keep diaries and their entries were intermittently read by teachers to correct kanji characters and presumably correct any defeatist thoughts young children might have. Although these child diarists lack the maturity and contextual knowledge of the war situation, their writings are an important subject leading to anthropological and psychological insights of how war and society is perceived by a country's youngest members.

As mentioned above, ten separate themes connecting the diaries seem unwieldy. The first of these themes, support for the war by all eight diarists, is questionable. Tamura Tsunejiro, Takahashi Aiko, and Yoshizawa Hisako—the three adult civilian diarists—are constantly
critical of the Japanese government's war effort and of the war's effect on society. Had the Kempetai (military police) or Tokkotai (thought police) read their diaries they would have been thrown in jail for "dangerous thoughts." Interestingly, Yamashita contradicted his written theme in Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies during an interview with Scott Simon of NPR when he stated, "Not all Japanese supported the war." Yamashita also asks, echoing Carol Gluck, "Were ordinary Japanese responsible for the war?" This question is never answered, but questions of collective responsibility are presented as discussions of war and society, not as a search for absolute guilt or innocence.

Some scholars and teachers might wonder if Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies is significantly different from Haruko and Theodore Cook's Japan At War: An Oral History, and the Frank Gibney and Beth Cary translated reminiscences in Senso: The Japanese Remember the Pacific War, each containing dozens of Japanese remembering their lives during the Pacific War. The answer is yes. Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies contains eight diaries from eight people totaling approximately 250 pages, and thus we have extensive readings and thoughts from each individual diarist. Moreover, the diarists in Yamashita's collection are writing and expressing themselves in real-time, contemporaneous with the Pacific War. The writers and interviewees in the previous collections are expressing themselves decades after the war, most in the 1980s; their experiences and thoughts have the benefit—and sometimes deficit—of historical hindsight. They know of the hard times for many Japanese during the Occupation, and the gradual re-emergence of Japan as a major economic power. The diarists in Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies know nothing of Japan's postwar era. For them, the war and social conditions during the war is the immediate present, not the past. In addition to the eight diaries, Yamashita's extensive introduction, annotations, bibliography, and glossary combine to make Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies a valuable addition to the literature on Japanese society during the Pacific War.

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