

The Tamogami Debacle: Dismissal of a Japanese General and the Danger of Indignation

Tahara Soichiro, Herbert P. Bix

The Tamogami Debacle: Dismissal of a Japanese General and the Danger of Indignation

Tahara Soichiro

Translation by John Junkerman

Introduction

By early November 2008, every major newspaper and mainstream television station in Japan had reported on the events surrounding Air Self-Defense Force Chief of Staff Gen. Tamogami Toshio: his dismissal from the Defense Ministry for provocatively contradicting national policy on the Asia-Pacific War and his later unrepentant testimony before a committee of the National Diet.



Gen. Tamogami enjoying the spotlight following his dismissal

Tamogami, a well known critic of Japan's official stance on the aggressive nature of the Asia-Pacific War, had won the top prize in a controversial essay contest sponsored by his friend, hotel and condo owner Motoya Toshio. Motoya had close ties to former LDP Prime Minister and tough-guy nationalist, Abe Shinzo. Several months before Abe announced his sudden resignation as Japan's leader, he selected Tamogami from the logistics section of the ASDF and parachuted him into the position from which he was discharged over a year later.

Further digging by Japanese journalists and parliamentarians revealed that the General relished his pedagogical role as head of the Joint Staff College. Notes from a speech he gave to fellow officers at an ASDF base in Saitama prefecture in January 2008 show him talking about US terror bombing of Japanese cities in violation of international law, railing against left-wing professors in the universities, chastising the Japanese mass media for lacking a nationalist perspective, and apparently unhappy that Japan does not possess nuclear weapons. (Mitake Katsuhisa, "'Shinryaku seitoka ronbun' no Tamogami Toshio, mae kubakucho tai'in muke tondemo kowa zen kokai, Shukan kinyobi (Nov. 14, 2008), pp. 21-22.)

At the Defense Ministry Tamogami arranged for his subordinate officers to hear lectures presenting the Yasukuni Shrine's propagandistic interpretation of Japan's lost war and its condemnations of the Tokyo war crimes tribunal. Tamogami's revisionist views of history

found a receptive audience and eventually led to his most spectacular act of disloyalty to the Constitution. For he emboldened some 95 SDF officers to enter the same essay contest in which he rejected the official government apology for aggression and colonialism, embodied in the famous 1995-statement of Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi.

It is this aspect of the Tamogami affair that writer and media commentator Tahara Soichi pointedly addresses in “The Tamogami Essay: The Danger of Indignation is the Heart of the Problem.”

Tahara’s commentary on the SDF officers’ “collective indignation” needs to be deepened and widened, however, if we are to pursue the underside of the SDF officers’ “victim-consciousness.” Anti-Americanism—complex and twisted, rooted in US behavior before and during the war, in the events of the occupation era, and in the direction that LDP politicians have taken ever since that party was founded in 1955—is that underside. Herbert Bix

On November 11, Tamogami Toshio, the former chief of staff of the Air-Self Defense Force [ASDF], was invited to testify in the Upper House of the Diet. I didn’t attend the Diet session myself, and I have only read the transcript, but I found the exchanges extremely vexing.

This was because it seemed as if the Diet members were simply giving an “audience” to Tamogami’s opinions, while he showed no evidence of wavering or flinching in the face of pointed questioning from the opposition parties.

The “Japan as

Victim” Theory

Tamogami submitted an essay to a contest sponsored by the APA Group and was awarded first prize. The essay was published on the group’s home page and distributed to journalists on the Defense Ministry beat, and that’s when it caused a stir.

“That war,” Tamogami asserted in his essay, “was not a war of aggression. Japan was dragged into the Sino-Japanese War by Chiang Kai-shek, and, if anything, Japan was the victim.” As to the Pacific War, “Japan fell into a trap laid by the US,” he argued.

As these assertions fundamentally contradict the government’s official perspective on the history of World War II, they were treated as a serious problem, and Tamogami was dismissed. Rather than being given a disciplinary discharge, he was allowed to retire and to receive his retirement bonus.

It is of course a serious issue for the serving ASDF chief of staff, identified by his own name and rank, to publish an essay that is completely in opposition to the government’s views, but, in fact it has since become known that a total of 94 active-duty members of the ASDF submitted to this essay contest.

This is a far more serious problem than the content of Tamogami’s essay itself. What Tamogami and the others engaged in was a premeditated act, with the full knowledge that it would become a political incident once it became public. Further, with 94 members of the ASDF submitting essays, there’s no way to counter the suggestion that this was a collective action.

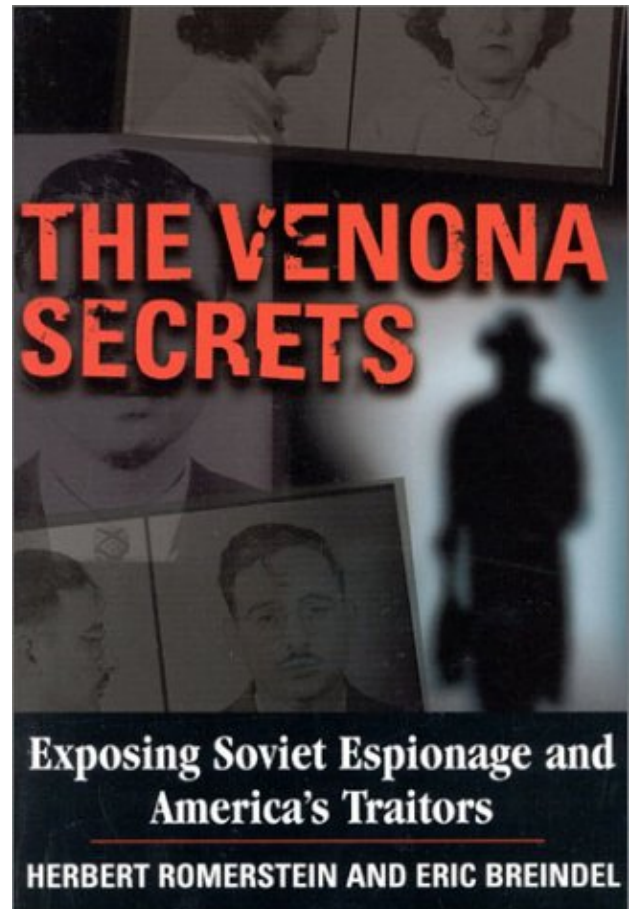
What Are the “Venona Files” Cited in the Essay?

Before I get to my main argument, I want to address some of the content of Tamogami’s essay.

In the past, it was common for essays written by leftists to be weakly grounded in facts and largely based on the writer’s personal take on certain events. Figures who were out of favor were simply branded “fascists.” Essays like this relied heavily on conspiracy theories.

Tamogami’s essay is precisely in the mold of these old leftist essays.

The grounds for his assertion that Japan stepped into an American trap in the Pacific War are the so-called “Venona files.” These documents, produced by the US National Security Agency, concerned Soviet telegrams intercepted during the 1930s and 1940s and later decoded.



The Venona Files

There were many Soviet spies working in the core of the American government during the Roosevelt administration. The Venona files revealed that [Harry Dexter] White was one of these spies. The second-highest official in the US Treasury Department, White is said to have drafted the Hull Note that precipitated the war between Japan and the US.

Tamogami seized on this to portray the Pacific War as an American conspiracy. To wit, “White was a Soviet spy, and thus the Japan-US war was a war initiated by spies in the US under orders from the Comintern (the international bureau of the Communist Party), and Japan was drawn into it,” he asserted.

But this is just one of the possible ways to interpret the Venona files. There has been a

great deal written about these files. Most commentators have concluded that White was indeed a Soviet spy, but this fact had little influence on the Hull Note.

Consider for example, the article entitled “The Impact of the Blow from ‘Venona’ to the Tokyo Trial View of History,” published by Aoyama Gakuin University Professor Fukui Yoshitaka (*Seiron*, May 2006), which Tamogami cites in his essay. Fukui concludes, “Even if White was involved in the negotiations between the US and Japan, it is difficult to state that this exerted a decisive influence on Roosevelt’s final decision to deliver the Hull Note.”

Seizing on just one piece of an essay and giving it a spin that suits one’s purposes is the epitome of the old-style leftist analysis. Now the right-wing camp is writing in the same mold the left used in the past.

Exasperation in the Ranks of the SDF and Police

These arguments aside, I consider the act of 94 SDF members writing essays frontally opposed to the government’s views as an act of collective indignation. It was a verbal coup d’état.

In fact, there’s a great deal of exasperation today within the Self Defense Force, as well as in the police forces.

To digress slightly, on October 26 the activist Amamiya Karin, having put out a call to “go take a look at Prime Minister Aso’s house,” led a procession of some 50 young unemployed and temporary workers.

They were warned in advance by a chief officer of the Shibuya police department to “not walk in the street, use bullhorns, or display any

banners,” since these activities would constitute a demonstration [and the group did not have a permit]. They were also warned that “a group of 50 in the vicinity of the Prime Minister Aso’s residence is not a good idea, so split into groups of 5 or 6 when you get close.”

The group began their procession in compliance with these warnings. But soon after they began walking, long before they reached the vicinity of Aso’s residence, three young people were arrested by public safety officers of the Tokyo metropolitan police, on charges of obstructing an officer. I watched footage of the arrest, and there was no obstruction. The arrest was made the instant one man raised a placard.

Video of Shibuya demonstration and arrest

Arrested while complying with the warnings of an officer of the Shibuya police department. Watching this scene made me think there’s a high level of exasperation in the ranks of the Public Safety Bureau of the police.

I sensed exasperation in the ASDF behind Tamogami’s essay, and I sense the same in this unjust arrest by the Public Safety Bureau.

In the US, Europe, China, and even in South Korea, military personnel are respected. When they walk the streets, when they ride the trains, they are shown respect.

But in Japan, members of the SDF are called “thieves of tax money” and made to feel small. For their part, SDF members have the strong conviction that “we don’t exist simply to be dispatched to the Sapporo Snow Festival and natural disasters, we’re here to defend the country.” And they feel exasperated with being unfairly disparaged and taken lightly.

The same exasperation is felt by the Public Safety Bureau. There is no left wing in Japan today. It was the job of the Public Safety Bureau

to suppress the left wing, and they were once a bold and proud outfit, but their status is now diminished. This causes exasperation.

That's why they made arrests at a small gathering of just 50 people, who were following the directions of a chief police officer.

I think this is very dangerous.

A Close Resemblance to Early Showa

The Tamogami essay was a verbal coup d'état, but what makes me feel a sense of crisis is that this verbal coup d'état could turn into the real thing in the not too distant future.

Many people are saying, "The present looks like the first decade of the Showa era." I think so too.

During the first decade of Showa [1926—1935], there was a long-lasting recession, people in northeast Japan were selling their daughters, many people did not have enough to eat. Corruption was rampant in financial circles, and politicians joined up with business and shared in the corruption.

Reacting against this "sleaze," the military led attempted coups on May 15, 1932 and on February 26, 1936.



Japan's foreign ministry surrounded by military mutineers in 1936

At the time, fearing for the future of Japan under the control of corrupt politicians and businessmen, a reform group emerged within the government bureaucracy. One of the leaders was Kishi Nobusuke.

The present resembles that era.

For example, while there's talk of "corporate social responsibility," price-fixing is an everyday occurrence, and tax evasion is practiced in the name of tax avoidance. There's been a steady succession of scandals regarding food, from products being sold past their expiration date to pork being passed off as beef.

Just what politicians are up to is beyond me. It's hard to figure out the difference between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the opposition Democratic Party. It appears to me that Prime Minister Aso has sidled up to the policies of the Democratic Party.

Last year, in the Upper House elections that the Democratic Party won decisively, their platform called for providing a trillion yen in subsidies for farmers, 2.6 trillion yen in childrearing allowances, and 15.3 trillion yen in tax revenues

to fund basic pension benefits.

The LDP criticized these proposals as ‘handouts.’ But now, under the Aso Cabinet, the LDP itself has proposed subsidies for farmers, childrearing allowances, and the distribution of 2 trillion yen in economic stimulus benefits to households. When the Democratic Party called for the elimination of freeway tolls, the LDP announced major reductions in the tolls.

The ruling party is cozying up to the leading opposition party. What’s the difference between the two parties? I have no idea.

On top of this, when the government announced the 2 trillion yen in benefits to households, opposition parties raised the objection that the rich and those with high incomes had no need for the payments. The government agreed, but then the question arose: Where to draw the line between those who are rich and those who aren’t?

There was talk about setting the demarcation through legislation, but this would take time and the benefit payments would be delayed. So it was decided to ask the wealthy to voluntarily decline the payment.

It’s likely that the bureaucracy is calling the tune here. No one but a bureaucrat would say, “It’s too time-consuming to decide this by legislation.” The structure of sleazy coziness between politics, the bureaucracy, and business is being exposed for all to see.

Members of the SDF and the Public Safety Bureau are government officials too, but among the bureaucrats are those who believe “the current bureaucracy is rotten,” and it is from this group that reform bureaucrats emerge.

This situation and the trend of events closely resembles the early Showa era.

Where Will Dissatisfaction Be Targeted?

No one needs to be reminded that a financial crisis hit the US in September and October, and that the wave of recession is spreading throughout the world. Japan is no exception, and the future is unclear. And while the future is unclear, we are told it is certain that economic downturns are in store for this year and the next.

Everyone harbors dissatisfaction. However, there is no target for that dissatisfaction.

For example, when Koizumi Junichiro announced, “I’m going to change the world! I’m going to change the LDP!” he set himself up as a target. But there is no one now who offers himself as a target. It’s hard to even figure out what the politicians are up to.

Within this context, the “uprising” by Tamogami and the 94 members of the ASDF is an apt symbol of the times. The attempted coup of May 15, 1932 too was preceded by an abortive revolt in March. The current action is the opening scene, along the same lines as the early Showa era, and it is extremely dangerous.

What would be the target of a coup d’état?

The attempted coups in 1932 and 1936 both targeted politicians, and a good number of political leaders were killed.

It’s possible that politicians would once again be targeted, but I think it might be the media this time.

There are those who are dissatisfied with what they see as the arbitrary reporting of the media. For example, the media has made a stink over the prime minister’s penchant for drinking at

expensive hotel bars. But who cares? There are countless examples like this.

Exasperation could well spread to everyone.

There is a range of developments taking place, and I think they bear a dangerous resemblance to the early years of Showa.

Ninety-four active-duty members of the ASDF writing essays constitutes an organized action. When Tamogami stated, during his Diet testimony on the 11th, “I didn’t direct them [to write essays]. If I had ordered it, a thousand would have written them,” this silenced the opposition parties. How pathetic.

The opposition was immobilized by Tamogami’s bluff. I think that’s dangerous. The focus has been on whether or not he broke the law, but that’s not the real problem here. This disturbance was a consciously executed act of defiance. The opposition has not awakened to that danger.

And that, in fact, poses the greatest danger.

This essay first appeared on the [nikkei BPnet website](#) on November 13, 2008. It was translated for Japan Focus by John Junkerman. Posted at Japan Focus on November 21, 2008.

Tahara Soichi, a critic and television commentator, was born in 1934 in Shiga Prefecture. After graduating from Waseda University, he worked for Iwanami Film Productions and TV Tokyo, before going freelance in 1976. Since 1987, he has hosted the monthly “Live TV Until Morning,” and since 1989, the weekly “Sunday Project” (both on TV Asahi). In 2002, he established the Ookuma Juku, an extension fellowship program to teach

the emerging leaders of Japan.

John Junkerman is an American documentary filmmaker and Japan Focus associate living in Tokyo. His most recent film, “Japan’s Peace Constitution” (2005), won the Kinema Jumbo and Japan PEN Club best documentary awards. It is available in North America from First Run Icarus Films.

Herbert Bix, author of Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan, which won the Pulitzer Prize, teaches at Binghamton University and writes on issues of war and empire. He is a Japan Focus associate.

Recommended citation: Tahara Soichiro, “The Tamogami Essay: The Danger of Indignation is the Heart of the Problem” The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 47-8-08, November 21, 2008.

On the Tamogami affair, see also Herbert Bix, [Tamogami's World: Japan's Top Soldier Reignites Conflict Over the Past](#).

See the Japan Times [interview](#) with the sacked Gen. Tamogami's of January 28, 2009.

See also:

Jennifer Lind, [Memory, Apology and International Reconciliation](#)

Herbert Bix, [Tamogami's World: Japan's Top Soldier Reignites Conflict Over the Past](#)

Takahashi Tetsuro, Kaneko Kotaro and Inokuma Tokuro, [Fighting for Peace After War: Japanese War Veterans recall the war and their peace activism after repatriation](#)