

British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 2, September 2024

The Prisoner of War and Civilian Internment Camp Encyclopedia

Takeo Sasamoto

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 13 September 2024

Citation: Takeo Sasamoto, 'The Prisoner of War and Civilian Internment Camp Encyclopedia', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.2 (2024), pp. 147-154.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The Prisoner of War and Civilian Internment Camp Encyclopedia

TAEKO SASAMOTO*

Independent Scholar, Japan

Email: kiki@ee.catv-yokohama.ne.jp

ABSTRACT

Despite their being around 180 prisoner of war and civilian internment camps in Japan during the Second World War, little is known about them and few publications trace their history. This paper explains the Japanese-language *Prisoner of War and Civilian Internment Camp Encyclopedia*, a product of over two decades of research by the POW Research Network Japan. This was the first comprehensive Japanese language publication on these camps and was released in late 2023. This note describes its background, sources, and structure, and the authors' hopes that it will become a key source for researching and learning about Japan's history of internment.

Introduction

Approximately 130 Prisoner of War (POW) camps and 50 civilian internment camps were established in Japan during the Second World War. The POW Research Network began investigating these camps from its establishment in 2002. In December 2023, the association published the results of their research in Japanese as the *Prisoner of War and Civilian Internment Camp Encyclopedia: Japan edition*.¹ The main motivation for this publication is that in Japan, the existence of POW and civilian internment camps is largely unknown, and there have been few explanatory works.² Likewise,

*Taeko Sasamoto is an independent scholar and co-founder of POW Research Network Japan. (Translated from Japanese by Daniel Milne).

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i2.1817](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i2.1817)

¹POWRNJ Editors Committee, *Horyō shūyōjo, minkanjin yōryūsho jiten: Nihon kokunaihen*, (Tokyo: Suiensha, 2023). We hope to publish this one day in English. Here we have referred to it using a provisional English title.

²Books on the topic in Japanese include: Komiya Mayumi, *Tekikokujin Yokuryū* 小宮まゆみ 『敵国人抑留』 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2009); Sasamoto Taeko, *Rengōgun Horyo no Bohimei* 笹本妙子 『連合軍捕虜の墓碑銘』 (Tokyo: Kusanone Shuppankai, 2004); Utsumi Aiko, *Nihon-gun No Horyo Seisaku* 内海愛子 『日本軍の捕虜政策』 (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 2005).

there are few comprehensive publications in English on this topic.³ We anticipate that this encyclopaedia, the first publication to cover all camps in a comprehensive and detailed manner, will become an important resource for understanding this significant aspect of the war, and a vital resource for learning about and contemplating war and peace.

Background to the Encyclopedia

The POW Research Network Japan was established in March 2002. Those who gathered were individuals who, for one reason or another, became aware of the existence of Allied POWs and Civilian Internees and developed an interest in the subject. For example, the author's own curiosity about Japan's history of internment was sparked when she encountered the Yokohama Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in Hodogaya Ward, Yokohama City. The author wanted to know who the interred were, and where and how they had died. Another member's interest was kindled when learning that there had been a POW camp in the town in which they were born and raised. While researching war crimes trials, some members learned that many of the war criminals tried after the war had been camp staff and employees of companies that had used POWs as labour in the camps. This prompted their investigation into why they had been prosecuted. Additionally, while investigating the forced labour of Koreans and Chinese, some members realised that Allied POWs were also used as labour in the same workplaces, prompting them to pursue further research.

Our members of course had been taught about the Asia Pacific War, including the damage caused by air raids and atomic bombs. However, we had little to no knowledge of the fact that the Japanese military had taken 160,000 Allied soldiers as POWs in occupied territories, that 36,000 of them were brought to Japan, or that enemy civilians were interned. We had been completely unaware of the countless victims that this entailed. While we were aware of the war crimes committed by the Nazis, we

³Roger Mansell's website is perhaps the best of several relatively comprehensive online sites on the topic. Roger Mansell, 'Center for Research: Allied POWs Under the Japanese', <http://www.mansell.com/>. Accessed 18 October 2023. Former POW William, F Wannoy's *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II: Statistical History, Personal Narratives and Memorials Concerning POWs in Camps and on Hellships, Civilian Internees, Asian Slave Laborers, and Others Captured in the Pacific Theater* (Jefferson: Macfarland, 1994) published under the penname Van Waterford is a pioneering work in English. More recent works include Anoma Pieris and Lynne Horiuchi, *The Architecture of Confinement: Incarceration Camps of the Pacific War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Sarah Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020).

PRISONER OF WAR AND CIVILIAN INTERNMENT CAMP ENCYCLOPEDIA

were taught nothing about the crimes and inhumane actions that had occurred in our own country.

Soon after defeat, Japan almost entirely incinerated the documents relating to POW camps and civilian internment camps. This was done in an attempt to evade prosecution in war crimes trials by destroying evidence. However, the Allied powers conducted thorough investigations and prosecuted numerous Japanese individuals in the post-war war crimes trials. This included not only the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, which tried war leaders like Hideki Tojo, but also Class B and C war crimes trials held across Asia, resulting in the indictment of 5,700 people. Of these, 17% were associated with POW camps. In the Yokohama Trials conducted within Japan, 528 of the 1,073 individuals prosecuted, and thirty-one of the fifty-one individuals executed – around 60% – were related to POW camps. This highlights how significantly the Allied powers prioritised the issue of POWs at the trials. Nevertheless, for Japan, this significant blemish in its history was kept under wraps and became a taboo topic that was never taught in schools. Unearthing this buried history has been our goal.

As we conducted our research, what struck us was the deeply rooted nature of the POW issue. It entangled not just those who lost their lives in the harsh conditions of internment, but also those who survived and returned to their homeland bearing deep emotional and physical scars, and harbouring anger and resentment towards Japan throughout the post-war years. Many of these scars have been passed down to their children and grandchildren. On the Japanese side, it has also left deep wounds. Japanese prosecuted for the mistreatment of POWs were part of a series of war crimes trials that have at times been criticised as simple instances of ‘victor’s justice.’ Those convicted of crimes carried the stigma of being branded as war criminals and many had to navigate a difficult post-war path. In particular, the families of those executed lost their primary breadwinner and struggled to make ends meet. The issue of POWs may be just one facet of that monstrous war, but even now, nearly eighty years afterward, there are many who continue to suffer. As we witness the protracted conflict in Ukraine and unsettling developments around the world, we of the POW Research Network are determined to understand what transpired during the Second World War and to learn from it.

In 2016 and fourteen years after the establishment of the POW Research Network, we launched a project to compile records of the approximately 130 POW camps and 50 civilian internment sites nationwide, which would become the core of the Encyclopaedia. Over twenty members volunteered as contributors, and dedicated seven years to research, writing and editing.

Materials and Information Sources

Our first challenge was to gather evidence. Due to the fact that Japanese records concerning POW camps and civilian internment were largely destroyed at the end of the war, as mentioned earlier, Japanese source materials are extremely scarce. The little available was often difficult to obtain, and we had to rely heavily on records held in the US National Archives (NARA) and other overseas sources. One of our members regularly travelled to NARA to copy and build an extensive collection of documents. In addition, we also made extensive use of a portion of NARA records made available on microfilm at Japan's National Diet Library's Constitutional Government Reference Room. POW diaries and memoirs also served as crucial sources of information. Furthermore, we had the good fortune to be able to conduct interviews with former POWs and their families. These interviews were held during visits to Japan, or we travelled to the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Australia to listen to and record their accounts.

Among records publicly available in Japan, an important source is the *Record on the Handling of POWs*, which was compiled in 1955 by Japan's Prisoner of War Information Bureau. We also made the utmost use of the few documents that managed to escape destruction in Japan. A further source of valuable information has come from local archives and from historians in towns that housed POW and civilian internment camps, including testimonies from individuals who worked at the camps or lived in their vicinity. Although very few traces of the former camps remain, we made sure to visit and conduct surveys of the sites and their surroundings, and to listen to the accounts of those involved and of locals alive at the time.

Structure of the Encyclopaedia

The encyclopaedia we have published is divided into three sections. In Section 1, Professor Aiko Utsumi, a leading expert in POW studies and co-chair of the POW Research Network, discusses the general issues related to POWs in an introductory chapter entitled 'POWs: The "Struggle" Over Their Treatment.' The section also includes a chapter outlining the editorial guidelines for the book and an essay entitled 'Downed U.S. Aircraft and POW Aviators during Mainland Air Raids' by the late Tōru Fukubayashi, who passed away in 2017 while the project was still ongoing.

In Section 2, we give an overall explanation of POW and civilian internment camps, along with a map indicating their location (Figure 1), followed by three-to-seven-page length summaries of each camp. We cover Only 30 of the 50 civilian internment camps (Figure 2) in detail, as the remainder interned only a few inmates (1-2 people) and were operational for a very limited period.

Map of the POW Camps in Japan's home islands during the Asia Pacific War

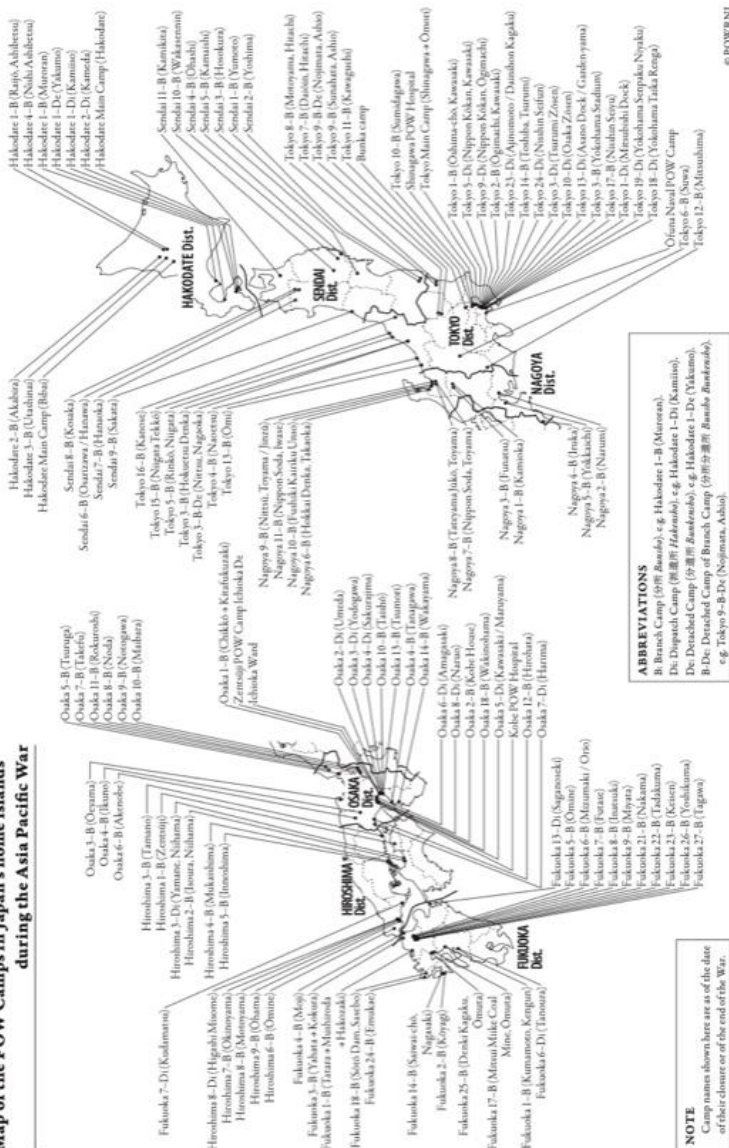


Figure 1: Locations of POW Camps in Japan.⁴

⁴Courtesy of the POW Research Network, Japan.

Map of the Internment Camps in Japan's home islands during the Asia Pacific War

NOTE

Camp names shown here are as of the date of their closure or of the end of the War.



Figure 2: Locations of Internment Camps in Japan.⁵

Interestingly, as the war situation deteriorated, some foreign nationals residing in Japan who were not citizens of enemy countries were forcibly evacuated from major cities to rural towns like Karuizawa and Hakone. The book includes an article about one of these forced evacuations, specifically that to Karuizawa.

⁵Courtesy of the POW Research Network, Japan.

PRISONER OF WAR AND CIVILIAN INTERNMENT CAMP ENCYCLOPEDIA

Articles on individual camps are generally structured as follows:

- Overview of the camp (location, companies who exploited labour, number of prisoners/internees at the end of the war or at the camp's closure, number of deaths while interned, and timeline).
- Lives of POWs and internees (composition of inmates, Japanese staff, living conditions, labour, meals, clothing, punishment and mistreatment, medical care and deaths, Red Cross relief, etc.).
- Conditions from the end of the war to repatriation.
- Japanese tried in war crimes tribunals.
- Post-war events (construction of memorials, visits by former POWs and their families, etc.).

When writing these articles, we endeavoured to describe the events as accurately and objectively as possible from both the perspective of the POWs and their Japanese captors. Furthermore, as the POW Research Network has been dedicated to fostering connections with former POWs and their families, all entries not only include information obtained through documentary research but also first-hand information gathered through these interactions.

Section 3 consists of a compilation of topics that could not be readily covered in detail in individual camp and internment articles in a series of columns. Among others, these include the Thai-Burma Railway; index cards; communications (letters, telegrams, radio); Red Cross parcels and their transportation; punishment of escaping POWs; airstrikes, atomic bombs, and naval bombardment; repatriation of POWs; Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemeteries, memorials at former POW camp and internment sites; and the Japanese Government's response to POW issues.

The encyclopaedia concludes with an organisational chart depicting the administrative management of POWs, a compilation of relevant laws and regulations concerning POWs, an overview of POW transfers, a list of POW transport ships, and a bibliography and reference index.

Uses of the Encyclopaedia

Despite the fact that these POW and internment camps were scattered throughout the Japanese home islands, they are not part of the national memory of the war. Their existence ranged from as long as three and a half years to less than a month, but we hope this encyclopaedia can reach as many Japanese people as possible to educate them about what occurred within these camps, how much the captives suffered, and to fully integrate the camp and its memory as a part of their local history. Furthermore, we hope that it helps to create an understanding of the magnitude and depth of suffering caused and that it is used as a tool to contemplate war and peace. We especially hope that this book will be utilised in educational institutions, from

elementary schools to universities, to ensure that this history is conveyed to younger generations.

While this book is labelled an 'encyclopaedia,' it can also be seen as a work of historical research that captures a key chapter in the Second World War. We believe it will prove to be an essential resource for researchers studying POWs and war-related topics both inside and outside Japan.