

[Posted at <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fl20070626zg.html> on June 26, 2007]

THE ZEIT GIST

The war according to Aso Co.

Family-firm history book produced on foreign minister's watch in '70s peddles Yasukuni line on WWII

By WILLIAM UNDERWOOD

Special to The Japan Times

"Japan the Tremendous," the new book by Foreign Minister Taro Aso, highlights the peaceful nature of postwar Japan and calls the country a "fount of moral lessons" for Asia. It might even help Aso become Japan's next prime minister.

But a 1975 book called "The 100-Year History of Aso" sends a different message about Foreign Minister Aso's view of World War II and his vision for Japan's future.

Taro Aso oversaw publication of the 1,500-page company history as president and CEO of Aso Cement Co.

Marking the centennial of the family firm,

the book suggests the United States tricked Japan into attacking Pearl Harbor and glorifies the Japanese war effort with little critical commentary.

The World War II chapter of "The 100-Year History of Aso" features the January 1940 address to assembled employees by company president Takakichi Aso, whose son Taro



Young members of Aso Mining's large Korean forced labor workforce pose in front of the Yamato dorm at the Atago Mine in 1943. Most Korean labor conscripts were never properly paid. PHOTO COURTESY OF EIDAI HAYASHI

would be born later that year. Aso Mining Co. was the family's core business then, supplying "black diamonds" from the Kyushu coalfields to fuel Japan's war machine.

"In our country labor and management are one, facing in the same direction — toward the emperor," Takakichi Aso solemnly told his workforce, stressing the sacred nature of coal mining and the urgent need to boost production. "If it is possible that anyone here does not understand this spirit of service to the nation, as a Japanese subject he should be truly ashamed."

The book notes in a section called "Aso Fights" that 1940 was also the 2,600th anniversary of Japan's mythical founding. It says the United States, Great Britain, France and Holland had surrounded Japan and were tightening the noose.

"Whether we liked it or not and even as the world busily tried to avert war," the Aso chronicle states, "the unfortunate year of Showa 16 (1941) was just like a pus-filled tumor that resists medical treatment and bursts open. Charging into an economic war to secure natural resources became unavoidable."

Top U.S. leaders had detailed knowledge of Japanese military plans before the attack on Pearl Harbor, according to Aso historians. Japan was purposely allowed to strike the first blow, so that "Remember Pearl Harbor" could become a rallying cry for Americans.

"This cleverly united American opinion for war against Japan," the book says. "But America lost the backbone of its Pacific fleet as a result. Moreover, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, expanding the conflict into a world war."

Aso Mining responded to this "most desperate crisis in Japanese history" by digging coal in record quantities. The company became like a "kamikaze special attack production unit."

"Coal is the mother of greater military strength," wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo is quoted as saying.

"In response to the enemy's materiel offensive, we will fight by means of increased coal production," said Nobusuke Kishi, then Japan's minister of commerce and industry. "All miners must come together in spirit and the patriotic mining industry must dash forward."

Tojo was executed as a Class-A war criminal in 1948. Kishi was imprisoned for three years as a Class-A war crimes suspect but never tried. He served as Japanese prime minister from 1957 to 1960, and was a main founder of the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Kishi's grandson, Shinzo Abe, is Japan's prime minister today.

Taro Aso aims to become the next prime minister and is the best-pedigreed politician in Japan. His grandfather was Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, the most powerful Japanese leader of the early postwar era, while his wife is the daughter of another postwar prime minister. Aso's sister is married to a first cousin of the current emperor. His great-great-grandfather was a chief architect of the modern Japanese state.

The 1975 book recalls wartime initiatives like the "Certain Decisive Victory Increased Production Campaign." Government slogans included "Planes, ships and bullets: all thanks to coal," and "One lump of coal equals one drop of blood."

Weekends disappeared during the move to a seven-day workweek, jokingly replaced by two Mondays and two Fridays. But coal production plunged as skilled miners became soldiers and were shipped out for overseas battlefields. Severe manpower shortages led to widespread use of forced labor in wartime Japan — including at Aso Mining.

Some 700,000 Korean labor conscripts were brought to Japan using varying degrees of coercion beginning in 1939. The Japanese military transported more than 30,000 Allied prisoners of war to Japan beginning in 1942, while nearly 40,000 Chinese arrived under similarly forcible conditions starting in 1943.

Aso Mining employed 7,996 Korean conscripts, according to one wartime government report. Recent estimates by Fukuoka-based historians peg the total at 12,000. Sixty-two percent of Aso's Korean laborers resisted conscription by fleeing their work sites, the highest percentage of runaways in the region. Most Korean conscripts in Japan were never properly paid for their work.

There were also 300 Allied POWs at the Aso Yoshikuma Mine in Fukuoka Prefecture. The evidence for this includes the Aso Company Report of January 1946 and other archival records, as reported in The Japan Times last month. The family firm, today known as Aso Group and headed by Taro Aso's brother, has never publicly commented on its POW

legacy. A spokesperson for Foreign Minister Aso addressed the issue for the first time last week (see story below).

The Aso corporate history contains a brief cryptic reference to wartime forced labor. As Japanese miners left for military service, the book says "people like Korean laborers and Chinese prisoners of war filled the void" in Japan's mining industry.

Although 6,090 Chinese forced laborers were used at 16 sites in Fukuoka, and 11 percent of them died, Aso Mining was not one of the five Japanese companies involved. It is unclear why the book mentions Chinese workers but omits Allied POWs, which Aso did use.

The Seoul government's Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization Under Japanese Imperialism has been vigorously researching wartime labor conscription since 2005. Assisted by Japanese citizens, commission members spent a week in Kyushu earlier this year, searching mostly in vain for information about Aso Mining's use of Korean conscripts.

Shortly after Taro Aso became foreign minister in October 2005, a South Korean truth commission official charged that Japanese firms were not cooperating in efforts to locate the remains of Korean workers still in Japan.

"The corporations' remains survey has been insincere," the official said. "It is also strange that the family company of the foreign minister, who should be setting an example, has provided no information whatsoever."

The World War II chapter of the Aso book concludes by describing the company's late-war mining venture on the island of Celebes, now part of Indonesia. Two hundred Aso employees were dispatched for the project at the request of the Imperial Navy and the Coal Control Association. Aso's hefty financial investment in the mine was lost due to Japan's defeat.

Photographs depict Aso workers doing calisthenics before entering the Kyushu mines, a site visit by top sumo wrestlers, and various aspects of coal and cement production.

Another photo shows two warplanes that Aso employees presented to the Imperial Navy through their donated labor. Lyrics of patriotic mining songs are provided.

It is not surprising that an account of Aso Mining's wartime activities includes the imperial ideology and spiritual mobilization so central to the period. It is also true that the Aso dynasty has made many positive contributions to the Fukuoka region since 1872, not only economically but in fields such as education and health care.

Yet the book's silence about the company's own use of forced labor, and the suggestion that Japan fought a morally just war it did not desire, are more troubling.

Taro Aso left the helm of the family business in 1979, after being elected to the House of Representatives and launching his political career. His recent string of provocative comments appears to be connected to the version of Japanese history found in the company book project.

Aso has infuriated Koreans by defending Japan's colonial rule and insisting that Koreans had voluntarily requested Japanese names. He has also described Chinese military spending as a "considerable threat" and called for Japan's emperor to visit Yasukuni Shrine.

The Aso company line on World War II closely resembles the revisionist narrative now being pushed by Yasukuni's history museum. It predates by three decades the current history textbooks that, according to Japan's neighbors, seek to whitewash Japanese war conduct.

Despite his reputation as an ardent nationalist and military hawk, Foreign Minister Aso serves as the point man for Japan's "values-oriented diplomacy." The policy stresses democratic values like freedom and human rights, while seeking a more proactive role for Japan on the world stage.

Readers of "The 100-Year History of Aso" may sense a mismatch between the man and the mission.

1946 Records Questioned

Foreign Minister Taro Aso now possesses the postwar records proving that Aso Mining used Allied POW forced labor, but his spokesperson has made conflicting statements about their meaning.

Last week I mailed the foreign minister both Japanese and English versions of the Aso Company Report, produced by his family's firm on Jan. 24, 1946. Ordered by Occupation authorities investigating war crimes against Allied prisoners, the report clearly shows that 300 POWs were assigned to the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine.

Ichiro Muramatsu, Aso's policy secretary, was then interviewed by telephone twice.

"The authenticity of the documents is very high," he said during a freewheeling, hourlong conversation on June 21. The report is written on company stationery and bears an official seal.

Muramatsu seemed to readily agree that the Australian, British and Dutch prisoners had dug coal for Aso Mining beginning in May 1945. But he questioned whether their work could be described as "forced labor," stressing that the Aso Company Report says wages were paid. Australian survivors of the Yoshikuma labor camp, however, have insisted they received no money from Aso.

"How was a POW any different from a conscripted Japanese worker?" Muramatsu asked.

Earlier this month, the compensation fund for Nazi-era forced labor set up by Germany's government and corporations finished paying out some \$6 billion to 1.7 million people living in 100 countries. Many of these recipients received wages during the war; some even lived in their own homes.

Muramatsu also said that Aso Mining Co. had no connection to Aso Cement Co., which was headed by Taro Aso during most of the 1970s. But the Web site for the Aso Group today highlights the historical continuity of the family's various businesses.

A shorter, less cordial phone call to Foreign Minister Aso's policy secretary took place on June 22. I asked Muramatsu to clarify whether the Allied prisoners performed "forced labor" at Yoshikuma and why they do not appear in "The 100-Year History of Aso."

Muramatsu then reversed his previous position, refusing to acknowledge that Aso Mining used Allied POWs at all. He said the contents of the 1946 Aso Company Report should be accepted or rejected in their entirety. With American war crimes investigators as its target audience, the report claims the Western prisoners were treated better than Japanese workers and thanked Aso Mining staff by giving them gifts after the war.

"Selectively using the records is dishonest," Muramatsu said. **(W.U.)**

William Underwood, a university professor in Fukuoka, completed his doctoral dissertation on forced labor in wartime Japan. He can be reached at kyushubill@yahoo.com.

Send comments and story ideas to: community@japantimes.co.jp

The Japan Times: Tuesday, June 26, 2007