

COUNTERPOINT

Who ever could make war if they saw it through children's eyes?

By ROGER PULVERS

The misery of war remains for many long years as scar tissue in the minds of children deeply traumatized by it. And yet, there are not many works of fiction or nonfiction that have conveyed the confusion and pain felt by such children.

In Japan, perhaps Akiyuki Nosaka's 1967 novel, "Grave of Fireflies," the heartrending story about a boy and his little sister caught up in the U.S. firebombing of Kobe in 1945, describes war's all-out assault on children best.

Now Chikuma Shobo has published, in a Purima Shinsho edition, a powerful work of nonfiction, Kazutoshi Hando's memoir about the U.S. firebombing of Tokyo, "15-sai no Tokyo Daikushu."

This book, whose title translates as "The Great Air Attack on Tokyo as Seen by a 15-year-old," takes us from the leadup through to the actuality of the American air assaults on Tokyo in 1944 and 1945 — specifically the massive firebombing of the capital's teeming downtown districts that began just after midnight on March 10, 1945 and killed more than 100,000 people.

Hando has written a number of books about World War II, from his study of the Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, through to his book about the 1942-43 Battle of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and his brilliant account of the decision to surrender, "Japan's Longest Day." This, though, is his first personal narrative, and it provides telling insight into what life for a child was like on the ground in Tokyo during the final years of the war.

The depiction of his father in this memoir shows that there certainly were sensible adults who considered Japan's war effort cruel and foolhardy.

"We've gone and started a damn stupid war," he said to his son, immediately after the announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack was made. "What's this country gone and done that for?!"

As for 11-year-old Hando . . . "I had no intention of telling anyone about what my dad said. And deep down, I despised him and thought, 'My old man's a traitor.'"

He explains in the book that, before the war, the word of your teacher was sacrosanct, and that he had been totally indoctrinated, like all Japanese children, to believe that the causes of his country were holy causes, that its forces were invincible, and that, as Gen. Hideki Tojo wrote in the February 1942 issue of the magazine "Boys' Club": "More than anything, you must all be deeply, deeply grateful from the bottom of your hearts that you had the honor to be born in this Japanese Empire."

The Hando family lived in the Mukojima Ward (present-day Sumida Ward) of Tokyo, one of the districts that was to be hardest hit by the airstrikes, incinerating any "honor and gratitude" that may have been left.

A historian by inclination, Hando takes us through the carnage in the South Pacific that led up to the fall of Saipan in the summer of 1944. This was to be the most decisive blow, as it made possible return bombing raids by B-29s on the main Japanese islands. When Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, the mastermind of U.S. indiscriminate bombing of civilians, took command of the air war in January 1945, the stage was set for the merciless rain of incendiary devices — white phosphorous bombs and napalm — on the Japanese populace.

Hando's father, reading about Japan's "overwhelming power," threw down the newspaper.

"Where's the overwhelming power," he said, "when they can't even feed the people, eh?"

The vast majority living in cities were subsisting on a diet of unpolished rice and scarce sweet potatoes.

In April 1944, the three younger children in the Hando family were evacuated, along with their mother, to a small town in Ibaraki Prefecture, leaving Hando alone with his father in Tokyo. Frustration among the patriotic was growing, and Hando felt it harshly when his middle-school teacher whacked him on the backside with a shovel because "your salute is too slack!"

Tokyoites were told to build dugouts, but it was impossible to dig the necessary one meter down in the low-lying neighborhoods beside the Sumida River.

"These dugouts aren't worth shit," said his father, hitting water as he dug. "Anybody'd be crazy thinking he was safe in one of these."

Hando was ordered to leave school and work at an ammunition plant, where, along with the other student laborers, he was forced to sing, "Our crimson student blood will burn . . . martyrs to the nation."

The descriptions of the bombings from the standpoint of this young victim begin with the first, at 1 p.m. on Nov. 24, 1944, and take us to the main airstrike 3 1/2 months later.

The low-lying region of the city was its most densely populated, and LeMay's assaults on these people were keenly designed to incinerate as many of them as possible. Hando's canny father recognized this at once.

"This is no ordinary raid," he said just after midnight on March 10. "We gotta leave everything behind and head upwind of the attacks."

Father and son fled, but were caught up in what Hando calls a "vortex of fire and smoke." In a touching detail illustrative of the teenage mind, he tells how he disobeyed his father and took his backpack — in order to save his precious collection of sumo-wrestler cards.

Scores of women pass by with babies, some of them dead on their unsuspecting mother's back. Charred corpses are strewn everywhere. Hando is separated from his father and manages to jump off the Hirai Bridge and onto a boat. But soon he offers a hand to a desperate woman in the water and, somersaulting into the river, is pulled in by her. Luckily, he no longer had his backpack on.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. The river was filled with drowning people. . . . People were clutching at anything that might save them. If I had still had my backpack, I wouldn't have been able to free myself from their clutches.

"I saw women holding babies, crouching on the shoreline, not having the courage to jump in to escape the raging fires at their backs. I thought . . . I too will be set on fire and be engulfed in a cloud of black smoke. . . . I just watched, not feeling anything anymore, as their bodies, in the blink of an eye, were wrapped in flames.

"Humans become victims in a war, but at the same time they can also be bystanders, or victimizers. . . . The awful truth of war, once it begins."

Fortunately, the author's father survived and the two of them made their way out of Tokyo, to be reunited with the other members of the family.

I came away from Hando's honest and moving account of war as seen through the eyes of a teenage victim with an overpowering sense of revulsion for the men and women who start wars, whatever the cause.

The traumatization of children — the deep scars we cut into their consciences — is a crime of the most heinous nature. And to think that children in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, to name only three current battlefields of inhumanity, are going through this misery this very day, only magnifies the revulsion . . . and the profound contempt I feel for those who make it possible.

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