Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation

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12 Oita’s Advisors to the Emperor

Never Surrender

While the citizens of Oita dealt with the double fear of continued air raids and the imminent invasion of American troops, six men met in Tokyo to decide Japan’s next steps, now that there was general agreement Japan could not win the war. These six men comprised the elite Supreme War Leadership Council, and they answered only to the emperor, who charged them to advise him on how to end the war. Amazingly, three of those six men hailed from Oita Prefecture. The debate was fierce, and the six men split down the middle. Three voted to accept the Potsdam Declaration conditions of surrender they had received in late July, before the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There was no way to continue at this point, they argued, if the country was to be saved at all.

The other three argued for continuing the war and for a life-or-death defense of the homeland. Their goal was to arm the entire populace and wear down the Americans as they invaded Japan proper while killing as many as possible. That way, they argued, Japan would achieve more favorable terms that would, at minimum, maintain the role of the monarchy and protect the life of the emperor. These three military leaders were not about to acquiesce to any forced unconditional surrender. It was the three Oita men who argued this position. They were General Yoshijiro Umezu, General Korechika Anami, and Admiral Soemu Toyada. Just outside this circle, but still involved in the discussion, was another man from Oita, former foreign affairs minister Mamoru Shigemitsu. A careful bureaucrat, the foreign minister favored a quick end to the war but had no vote in the matter. Thus, in the last days of the war, this small, rural prefecture provided half of Japan’s supreme military leadership and the head of the Foreign Ministry. It is, by any account, an extraordinary contribution from one prefecture. The personal history of these four men offers a glimpse into the lives of wartime Japanese leadership as nurtured by Oita Prefecture.

The Advisors

General Yoshijiro Umezu hailed from Nakatsu, on the northern border of Oita Prefecture. Born in 1882, he graduated at the top of his class from the Imperial Japanese Army Academy in 1903 and served in the infantry. Umezu
traveled to Germany and Denmark for further study, and was appointed military attaché to Switzerland from 1919 to 1921. He was sent to China in the mid-1930s to take command of the China Garrison Army and later to serve as commander in chief of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria. In 1944 he was appointed chief of the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff and a member of the Supreme War Council, where he argued for the continuation of the war up until the surrender. After the war, Umezu was found guilty as a war criminal and died in prison in 1949.1

General Korechika Anami was born in the small town of Takeda City in southern Oita Prefecture in 1887. This was the same city where the B-29 was downed and the survivors sent to Fukuoka for medical experiments. When the war finally ended, Anami was serving as minister of war. Like his fellow Oita natives Minami and Umezu, he graduated from the Imperial Japanese Army Academy and joined the infantry. He served as military attaché in France in 1925 and aide-de-camp to Emperor Hirohito from 1929 to 1930. Like Umezu, his military career focused for several years on the war in China. There he led Japanese divisions for much of the war, then transferred to Papua New Guinea in late 1943. Like Umezu, he joined the Supreme War Council in 1945. He committed ritual suicide on August 15, just after the emperor announced Japan’s surrender.2

Admiral Soemu Toyoda was born in 1885 in the town of Kitsuki. In 1905 he graduated from the Imperial Japanese Naval Academy. He traveled to Europe for the navy, serving as naval attaché to the United Kingdom from 1919 to 1921. Toyoda directed naval operations during several years of the war with China and eventually played a major role in the attack on Pearl Harbor. He ended the war as supreme commander of the Imperial Navy and, as such, was a member of the Supreme War Council. He was imprisoned for a while after the war, but never charged as a war criminal.

Mamoru Shigemitsu, born in 1887, also hailed from Kitsuki. A graduate of the Law School of Tokyo University in 1907, he entered the diplomatic corps and served in several countries, including as ambassador to the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. He also spent time in Germany, the United States, and China. In 1932, while attending a birthday celebration for Emperor Hirohito in Shanghai, a Korean nationalist detonated a bomb at the reviewing stand, killing and wounding several Japanese officers and officials.

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Shigemitsu had his right leg torn off, walking with an artificial leg for the rest of his life with a sharp limp and using a cane. Though an opponent of extreme militarism who was fearful of the consequences of expanding the war to the United States and Europe, he nonetheless supported the war effort and the central authority of the emperor until the end as foreign minister and advisor to the emperor. He went to prison as a war criminal, and upon release in 1950 began to rebuild his career in government. He eventually regained his position as Japanese foreign minister.3

That such a disproportionate number of elite military and bureaucratic leaders were born in the same generation in the same rural prefecture of Oita is both surprising and intriguing. It also calls into question the reasons for such concentration of power in one prefecture far from Tokyo. It is well known that the farming and fishing villages of Kyushu have traditionally provided a large number of soldiers and sailors to the Japanese military. Oita was no exception. But why so many from so small a place? We would ask the same questions if the United States secretary of state, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, head of naval operations, and commanding general of the United States Army concurrently all came from the same small coastal region of South Carolina or Georgia. Former prime minister Murayama, who served in the Imperial Army during the war, dismisses any special Oita character or inclination. “It is just a coincidence,” he argues. Perhaps. But it does raise questions that still intrigue us. One possible explanation grounded in the economic realities of the prefecture is provided by a local observer of the military history of Oita. “If one grew up in Oita at that time there were only three routes to a professional career. One was to become a teacher, another to become a bureaucrat, and last to enter the military. Joining the military was the most prestigious.”4 It must also be assumed that personal and family connections, loyalty to the local community, and mentoring based on a common hometown or prefecture could not have hurt. In the end, while it is most likely due to a combination of the three, it remains a striking phenomenon.

3 Bix, pp. 410, 541, 658, 610.
4 Interview with Masaaki Yano.