

Hidden Horrors: Japanese atrocities include evidence of cannibalism



“For the 10,000-odd soldiers of the Indian Army who endured extreme torture at the hands of their Japanese captors, cannibalism was the culmination. Evidence suggests the practice was not the result of dwindling supplies, but worse, it was conducted under supervision and perceived as a power projection tool.” ([War Crimes in WWII: Japanese Practiced Cannibalism on Indian soldiers](#), *International Business Times*, 2014)

On Dec. 25, 1942, the US Army’s Allied Translator & Interpreter Section (ATIS), obtained the diary of a Japanese commander whose entry on Oct. 19, 1942, documented starvation of his platoon, and noted that meat had been carved from a dead American prisoner: “This is the first time I have ever tasted human flesh—and it was very tasty.” (Interagency Working Group, National Archives and Records Administration, 2006; pp. 160—163)

In 1993, [Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes In World War II](#) by Toshiyuki Tanaka, a Japanese historian at Melbourne University, was published in Japanese (English translation, 1996). The book focuses on Japanese atrocities Australian territory and deep in the jungles of Burneo and Papua, New Guinea where thousands of Australian, British, Pakistani and Indian POWs were massacred, and some cannibalized.

Tanaka addressed five categories of Japanese war crimes and explores the broader social, psychological, and institutional culture, examining Japanese conduct within the context of dehumanizing institutionalized wartime brutality. He describes the plight of 2,000 Australian and British POWs who died at Sandakan Camp in Borneo, and the tortuous 160-mile death march which only six survived to tell what happened. He describes human experiments in which POWs were injected with pathogens and poisons; the massacre of civilians, mostly German clergymen, Australian and Chinese civilians. He describes the slaughter of 65 shipwrecked Australian nurses and the gang rape of 32 other captured nurses who were then sent to Sumatra to serve as prostitutes for Japanese soldiers, who are euphemistically called, “comfort women.” And he addressed accounts of cannibalism.

Tanaka indicated that he had collected at least 100 documented cases of Japanese cannibalism involving Australian and Indian soldiers, and refuted the Allies' contention that the Japanese resorted to cannibalism only when their food supplies were exhausted. "Tanaka said this [cannibalism] was done under the supervision of senior officers and was perceived as a power projection tool." (Manimugdha Sharma. [Japanese Ate Indian POWs](#), Used Them as Live Targets in WWII, *Times of India*, Aug. 11, 2014)

One of the first to level charges of cannibalism against Japanese soldiers

One of the first to level charges of cannibalism against Japanese soldiers was Jemadar Abdul Latif of the Indian Army who was rescued by the Australians at Sepik Bay in 1945. He alleged that Indian POWs and local New Guineans were killed and eaten by Japanese.

"At the village of Suaid, a Japanese medical officer periodically visited the Indian compound and selected each time the healthiest men. These men were taken away... and never reappeared." (*The Times of London*, November 5, 1946; Manimugdha Sharma. [Japanese Ate Indian POWs](#), Used Them as Live Targets in WWII, *Times of India*, Aug. 11, 2014)

Latif's charges were buttressed by sworn testimonies to the War Crimes Investigation Commissions set up by the Allies. Captain R U Pirzai and Subedar Dr Gurcharan Singh told the Australian *Courier-Mail* in August 25, 1945 that:

"Of 300 men who went to Wewak with me, only 50 got out. Nineteen were eaten. A Jap doctor—Lieutenant Tumisa, formed a party of three or four men and would send an Indian outside the camp for something. The Japs immediately would kill him and eat the flesh from his body. The liver, muscles from the buttocks, thighs, legs, and arms would be cut off and cooked." (Manimugdha Sharma. [Japanese Ate Indian POWs](#), Used Them as Live Targets in WWII, *Times of India*, Aug. 11, 2014; Jayalakshmi. [War Crimes in WWII](#): Japanese Practiced Cannibalism on Indian soldiers, *International Business Times*, Aug. 11, 2014)

These witnesses testified that a Japanese doctor, Lieutenant Tumisa, would lead a party of three or four to kill and eat the flesh of hapless Indian soldiers. Similar testimonies by POWs held at other prisons have also provided detailed reports about Japanese cannibalism, such as Havildar Changdi Ram and Lance Naik Hatam Ali, who also gave details of cannibalism practiced in their camps

"John Baptist Crasta of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, also a POW at Rabaul, wrote in his memoir (*Eaten by the Japanese: The Memoir of an Unknown Indian Prisoner of War*) about Japanese eating Indian soldiers. He was made part of the Allied investigation into Japanese war crimes later."

April 2, 1946, Reuters reported: "The Japanese Lieutenant Hisata Tomiyasu found guilty of the murder of 14 Indian soldiers and of cannibalism at Wewak (New Guinea) in 1944 has been sentenced to death by hanging, it is learned from Rabaul.

November 5, 1946, *The Times*, London: “At the village of Suaid, a Japanese medical officer periodically visited the Indian compound and selected each time the healthiest men. These men were taken away ostensibly for carrying out duties, but they never reappeared.”

“Based on their testimonies, several Japanese officers were tried. Lieut. Gen. Yoshio Tachibana, the most senior officer found guilty of cannibalism, was hanged.” (Manimugdha Sharma. [Japanese Ate Indian POWs](#), Used Them as Live Targets in WWII, Times of India, Aug. 11, 2014)

POW death rate under Japanese was seven times higher than under the Germans & Italians Tanaka suggests that the level of brutalities committed by the Japanese Army help to explain why the death rate for POWs under the Japanese was seven times that of the deaths of POWs under the Germans and Italians. He does not accept that starvation and diseases in tropical countries are the only explanation. Tanaka provides insights into the “emperor ideology” that dominated in Japan during this time and tries to separate this ideology from former periods in Japanese history. He shows that the corruption of the samurai class concept “Bushidou” that had been maintained during the nineteenth century had deteriorated to the point that soldiers had to be imbued with a “fighting spirit.”

“the concept for basic human rights, in particular for individual lives, was lacking among Japanese soldiers...they did what they thought would be done to them had the positions been reversed... Ideological pressure produced a blind obedience that went much further than the loyalty needed by a warrior from former times. Japanese soldiers also suffered from a radicalization evidenced by Japan’s decision to start a war without having plans on how to end it or to occupy New Guinea, for example, without further knowledge of the territory.”

Furthermore, Tanaka analyzes the psychological pressures that Japanese soldiers were under:

Rape has been “a device for maintaining group aggressiveness of soldiers...The need to dominate the enemy is imperative in battle with other men... The violation of the bodies of women becomes the means by which such a sense of domination is affirmed and reaffirmed” (p. 107, 108)

Tanaka explains that existing accounts of cannibalism make clear that its practice “was something more than merely random incidents perpetrated by individual or small groups subject to extreme conditions;” he classifies it as a sort of “group-survival cannibalism,” some driven by starvation, although instances of cannibalism occurred before there was a shortage of food.(p. 126) Tanaka highlights the fact that “discipline was maintained to an astonishing degree” (p. 127), thus, some soldiers participated in order to avoid being seen as traitors to group solidarity or even, in some cases, to avoid being eaten themselves by their own companions.

This underscores the inherent danger posed by a collective psychological tendency wherein an individual member in a closed dominant group feels obliged to accede to group pressures. [This was demonstrated in controversial psychological experiments by Stanley Milgrim in his “[Obedience to Authority](#)” experiment (1961), and by Philip Zimbardo in his infamous [Stanford Prison](#) experiment (1971)].

Hidden Horrors includes a chapter on Biological Warfare Plans. Although the Pacific front was spared biological warfare, plans were made and soldiers were trained for its eventuality. However, POWs at Rabau were subjected to experiments in which they were injected with various poisons or viruses to test their lethality.

Additionally, the extraordinary rate of deaths among Japanese soldiers due to starvation and tropical diseases led doctors to surmise that Japanese soldiers had also been subjected to such experiments. Tanaka suggested that it was as an example of victimizers being victimized; the way in which “those who are guilty are often the victims of war crimes themselves” (p. 134). Tanaka’s findings were later published by *The Japan Times* In 1997.