

# The Tamogami Affair

Japan's Rightists Have New Hero

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Japan once again is left in the painful position of having to examine its 60-year-old World War II record and the country's ultra-rightists have a new hero/martyr in Toshio Tamogami. The chief of staff of Japan's Air Self-Defense Force, Tomogami on October 31 was abruptly fired from the air force's top position after an essay he wrote defending Japan's motives and actions in World War II appeared on a public website.

Major Japanese military figures have been quoted before as blaming everybody else but the Land of the Rising Sun for the war. But beyond Tamogami's actions, however, Japan has been freaked out by the fact that dozens of other air force officers entered the contest that Tomogami won and wrote similar essays. A Ministry of Defense probe revealed that of 235 entries to the contest, run by a prominent real estate tycoon with ultra-rightist connections, 94 were submitted by air force officers, suggesting to some the existence of a radical cabal in the air force.

For his part, Tomogami remains defiant. Hauled before a committee of the opposition-controlled House of Councilors, the upper house of Japan's bicameral parliament last week, the former air force chief, whose reduction in rank to lieutenant general preceded his retirement, said he had committed no indiscretions.

*"I do not think there was anything wrong with what I wrote,"* Tomogami told the House of Councillors, and went on to call for revision of Japan's pacifistic constitution, arguing also that members of the military should be free to express their opinions in public.

His demotion automatically put him below the mandatory retirement age of 60 for air force officers, and he left the service two days after his sacking. Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada suggested that he voluntarily forfeit his retirement package worth about ¥60 million (\$600,000). In a polite Japanese way, the general said "fat chance". He also pockets the ¥3 million (\$30,000) prize he won from the essay contest.

The contest Tamogami won and that the other officers entered was sponsored by the APA Group, a real estate concern. The contestants were to write on the seemingly innocuous topic: "The True Outlook for Modern and Contemporary History." The word "true," however, is understood to be a code for a revisionist/nationalist interpretation of history.

The general argued in his essay that Japan was never an "aggressor nation" because Japanese troops were stationed in China and Korea in accordance with treaties and agreements. Japanese troops were drawn deeper into China because of terrorist acts and provocations by Nationalist Gen. Chiang Kai-shek, he wrote.

The Nationalists in China, he wrote, were theoretically in turn manipulated by the Comintern, an international Communist organization led by the former Soviet Union. The communists wanted the Chinese and Japanese to fight each other in order to give Mao Zedong control of China, he argued.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was the result of a devious trap laid for them by US President

Franklin Roosevelt, with a Soviet spy in the Treasury Department working to provoke war with Japan. For good measure he argued that Koreans and Taiwanese were grateful, or should be grateful, for infrastructure that Japan put in place during the colonial occupation.

None of what Tamogami wrote was particularly original – or accurate as plenty of historians and other have stepped forward to testify. It is standard ultra-right wing boilerplate, disseminated by conservative propagandists and even the museum which is attached to the Yasukuni Shrine in downtown Tokyo, which memorializes Japanese killed in foreign wars. But the fact that dozens of other Air Force officers not only agreed but put their views on paper has shaken the ministry of defense.

*“The impression conveyed is that these ASDF officers are heirs to the ‘young officers’ of an earlier era who exploited ideas of a ‘Showa Restoration’ in an effort to accelerate Japanese rearmament and expansion in the 1930s,” said Herbert Blix, biographer of the Emperor Hirohito. “The difference is that the uniformed officers of today are supposed to be under civilian control not in spiritual effort against the nation’s peace constitution,” he said.*

During World War II, the most radical elements in the military were in the army. The navy was far more moderate. An independent air force did not exist until the self-defense forces were created after the war. Yet none of the essay contestants was from the army or navy.

Of the uniformed essayists, 63 were said to have been stationed with Tamogami when he commanded the 6<sup>th</sup> Air Wing at Komatsu air force base in Ishikawa prefecture on the Sea of Japan, suggesting that they fell under Tamogami’s influence. The general has denied he ordered any airman to enter the contest. As none of the uniformed essayists won any subsidiary prize and none were published, there appears no further punishment for the airmen.

The president of the APA Group, Toshio Motoya, is a well-connected, successful construction and real estate mogul with pronounced right-wing views and undoubtedly a part of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s construction company support nexus. He has written several nationalist tracts under the pen name of Seiji Fuji, which he promotes on his company newsletter and website.

Last April he held a launch party for his latest tract: “Modern History the Media Doesn’t Report On,” where Tamogami appeared in uniform as a guest speaker. Also attending were two former LDP prime ministers, Shinzo Abe and Yoshi Mori plus some major Taiwan independence advocates such as former diplomat Koh Se-kai and, curiously enough, the speaker of the Philippine House of Representatives Jose de Venecia.

The APA Group has many projects in the prefectures near the Komatsu base, and Motoya seems to have taken Tamogami under his wing, sensing that he was willing to speak out on controversial matters. Earlier this year the general denounced a decision by the Nagoya High Court that concluded that the air force mission in Kuwait was unconstitutional. The government chose to overlook his statement.

Prime Minister Taro Aso won plaudits by its quick action in dismissing Tamogami. The action was especially welcomed by China and South Korea, which have looked on Aso with considerable suspicion, suspecting that he probably shares some of these right-wing views.

Indeed, many senior LDP leaders privately, and not so privately, agree with much of what Tamogami says. Former premier Shinzo Abe made no secret that he considered the Tokyo War Tribunal a sham and as premier he advocated revision of Article 9, the war-renouncing provision of Japan’s American-written constitution.

Whatever, his personal views, however, Aso seems to have learned from the pasting that the LDP got in the upper house election in 2007 (and may soon get in any general election) that the Japanese public is not so committed to constitutional revision and other conservative obsessions. In his short tenure he had done nothing advance any of these causes.

The issue would seem tailor-made for the opposition, except that they are also compromised by association with the APA Group. A photo taken at one of Motoya's launch parties shows the smiling face of Yukio Hatoyama, the third-ranking member of the DJP. Keiichiro Asao, a DJP member of the upper house and a shadow defense minister (!) has also attended one of Motoya's functions.

Both parties were conscious that the Diet hearing would provide a platform for the general and his views. They agreed to ask NHK not to broadcast the hearing. It was covered only by the print media. Tamogomi has the potential to become Japan's version of Oliver North, a highly decorated, straight-talking and patriotic air force officer victimized by politicians.

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