



**Ienaga Saburo.** *Japan's Past, Japan's Future: One Historian's Odyssey.* Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. x + 203 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-0989-4.



**Reviewed by** David Alexander (Hilton M. Briggs Library, South Dakota State University)

**Published on** H-Japan (November, 2001)

## A Historian's Story

### A Historian's Story

Scholars concerned with how Japan's involvement in the Pacific War is represented in Japanese textbooks will be interested in this book. It also will be of interest to those interested in how historians write history. The work is an autobiographical essay in which Ienaga describes how he became involved in his self-stated life work, the dispute with the Japanese Ministry of Education over the representation of Japan's involvement in the Pacific War in high school textbooks. The English translation also benefits from the introduction by Richard H. Minear that provides background information to help place the essay in its proper context.

Ienaga views a person's background as important in forming their consciousness (p. 32), and therefore describes what he believed to be significant in his own background. He was the son of an army officer. His father's status placed the family in the middle class, but Ienaga suggests that this was a marginal condition, particularly after his father's early retirement. The theme of Ienaga's sickly body, ultimately what would keep him out of military service, reinforces the sense of marginalization.

Ienaga's education also played an important role in shaping his way of thinking and determining the course of the actions he would eventually take. His primary school education during the period of Taisho Democracy was quite liberal, although the history textbooks of the time took a turn toward nationalism in their portrayal of creation myths as historic fact. Ienaga developed his interest in history and the desire to be a historian during his middle school years. He attributes this to the realization that he was not cut out to be a novelist, which is what he truly desired (pp. 64-65). (Again, marginalizing the image he portrays of himself.) It was during this period that Ienaga first read *The Age of Yamato*, and discovered that "history had to begin not with tales of the gods but with life in the Stone Age" (p. 66). This idea that history should be based on facts, and that deviating from the facts in order to create a greater sense of nation is not acceptable is one of Ienaga's key arguments. Nationalism was prevalent in Japan during the years of the Pacific War, and Ienaga was exposed to nationalist scholars during his high school and college years at Tokyo University. He repeatedly describes his leaning toward the "concept of national polity" and nationalism, but not quite being

able to accept it completely.

Ienaga's struggles with censorship began shortly after his graduation from Tokyo University in 1937. Employed by the Histiographical Institute of Tokyo University, Ienaga had intended to publish a section of his thesis as an essay in the institute's journal *Rekishi chiri*. As the essay discussed the mythology of the Japanese empire presented in the *Nihongi*, the editors asked Ienaga to withdraw the essay. Ienaga states, "So even though I was for going ahead, I thought I had to keep the complications from extending to my elders. I swallowed my tears and withdrew the essay" (p. 105). There came a point where Ienaga was willing to fight. That point was over the Ministry of Education's censorship of the history textbook Ienaga wrote for use in Japanese high schools. The source of the dispute was primarily Ienaga's representation of the Pacific War in the textbooks. Ienaga felt that students needed to know the "truth," and for him that meant knowing the grim reality of the suffering caused by the war. This issue is what drew the popular support that kept Ienaga going in the lawsuits. It was not, however, the principle point of the suits. Ienaga was arguing for his right as an individual scholar to write textbooks, and ar-

guing against the state's rights to influence the contents of education. Ienaga viewed the court battle as one of the constitutionality of the Ministry of Education's censorship of textbooks. Ienaga also discusses his involvement in the struggle at Tokyo University of Education over moving to a new campus. Here again, it is not the issue itself, but the question of who had the right to decide, that is at the heart of Ienaga's involvement. In this case, Ienaga believed the faculty had the right and that administration was taking that right away.

*Japan's Past, Japan's Future*, is in my view primarily a description of the struggle of one individual to legitimize his viewpoint and his right to contribute to society. In this respect Ienaga was not so different from many of the modern Japanese novelists that inspired him in his youth or of the leaders of the People's Rights Movement. These men were legitimate in terms of their rank in society and training, who after being pushed to the periphery, sought means outside of the established order to express their opinions. I think it was not coincidental that a scholar of history such as Ienaga mentions both modern Japanese novelists and the People's Right Movement in his essay.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

**Citation:** David Alexander. Review of Saburo, Ienaga, *Japan's Past, Japan's Future: One Historian's Odyssey*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5639>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).