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### A Last Great Secret Of World War II

David Turner, Correspondent

While Americans are familiar with German war crimes, they have a sketchy knowledge of those committed by the Japanese. Before World War II, the nation engaged in an orgy of looting and cruelty across Asia. During the war, they exploited 100,000 prisoners of war as slave laborers in Japanese factories. More than 30 percent of all American POWs perished in Japan's prison camps, compared with 4 percent in German facilities.

Unlike the Germans, the Japanese have failed to come to grips with the enormity of their crimes. This is partially due to the fact that after 1945, the United States allowed them to act as if all barbarous actions were due to a few "militarists" in the Japanese government. As Americans are once again wrestling with the contradictions of morality and realpolitik in foreign policy, the account of the U.S. rehabilitation of Japan after World War II, often at the expense of its own citizens, is a highly pertinent story.

Veteran correspondents Sterling and Peggy Seagrave explain why the American government has ignored those war crimes in their fast-paced and engrossing work, "Gold Warriors." The authors make it clear that in order to secure an anti-Communist Japan, the United States turned a blind eye to the nation's criminal activity. They also argue that the wealth Japan acquired in a systematic looting of Asian nations was used not only to build up postwar Japan but also to fund America's anti-Communist crusade. The Seagraves provide strong evidence of official collusion by the Central Intelligence Agency with the Liberal-Democratic Party of Japan to keep it anti-Communist whatever the human and moral costs.

Specifically, the work concentrates on Japanese treasure buried in the Philippines. Worth billions on the open market, "Yamashita's gold," named for the Japanese general ordered to bury it, became the subject of a comic race to find it - all 175 "imperial treasure vaults." The U.S. government tortured Japanese officials to discover it, yet only a fraction was recovered. Philippine Dictator Ferdinand Marcos ultimately spirited away what was undiscovered by the United States and Japan.

The Philippine gold, platinum and gems represented only a small percentage of the wealth Japan looted since the 1890s. The Seagraves paint a lurid portrait of Japan's ruling elite, the zaibatsu, profiting from stolen porcelain from Korea, priceless manuscripts from China, portraits and naturally precious metals. Given Chinese aversions to banks, the Japanese acquired more gold than was officially recognized by world markets. Japan resembled a giant vacuum cleaner in its thoroughness in picking areas like Hong Kong and Singapore of countless billions. In Manila they were so ruthless that they even pulled wood from floors of stately houses.

Japan's ruling house, the Seagraves assert, committed unspeakable crimes prior to World War II. The notorious "rape of Nanking" was not an isolated atrocity. To subjugate China, they used underworld leaders in Japan, the Yakuza, to flood the Chinese market with drugs. During the War, in order to extort money from wealthy Chinese citizens, they used terror. In Singapore, some 70,000 ethnic Chinese were executed by drowning, the Seagraves assert.

By 1942, so charge the authors, Japan's leaders realized that they would ultimately lose the war and began to hide assets acquired during their run of conquest. Emperor Hirohito, whom the Seagraves place in a category commensurate with Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, approved this plan. His brother Prince Chichibu oversaw the transfer of some gold to the Philippines under the cover of an operation known as "Golden Lily." Further bolstering this Imperial mandate was the inclusion of a prince, Tsuneyoshi Takeda, or Kimsu for short. At the end of the War in 1944, Hirohito personally approved the entombing of Japanese engineers in the vaults by way of explosives. It was mendacious ruthlessness and greed and not ideology that drove Japan's elites -- but they rank as war criminals equaling those of The Third Reich.

All of which makes the U.S. response to Japan mystifying to the Seagraves. They charge that the American government helped build the legend that Japan was down and out after the war. Instead, the Seagraves assert, most of Japan's factories remained intact because the American air campaign had targeted civilians rather than economic targets. In fact,

Japan retained billions in war loot, which is why it was able to bounce back quickly from the conflict. The U.S. government not only maintained this fiction but also through a 1951 treaty precluded any American civilian claims against Tokyo. The United States itself tapped the stolen loot both to influence internal politics and Japan and, through a scheme code-named Black Eagle, to fund anti-Communist movements around the globe.

Some weaknesses, however, are evident in the work. It makes a thin charge that Vice President Richard Nixon, in order to defeat John Kennedy in 1960, gave Japan back the control of its gold. As well, details about the burial of Yamashita's gold relies heavily on one Philippine eyewitness. At times they confuse the reader by suggesting that the CIA was in existence immediately after the war; however, it was founded in 1947 and did not exist in 1945.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the Seagraves have produced a stellar work that particularly sheds a light on Japanese war crimes. And even if only half is true concerning the United States, it catalogs a shameful episode on the part of the government against the interest of its own citizens who suffered at the hands of Japan during the war.

David Turner teaches history at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, W.Va.