

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE

History Standard Level Internal Assessment

Topic

Origins of Japanese military behaviour in the 20th century

Research Question

To what extent did bushidō influence Japanese military
behaviour during the Pacific War of 1941-45?

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A F T E R having been subjected to all the standard forms of torture they were taken, one at a time, marched blindfold for a considerable distance and then halted. The victim then heard voices and marching feet, the sound of a squad halting and loading their rifles as a firing party would.

A Japanese officer approached the American pilot and said, *'We are the Knights of bushidō, of the Order of the Rising Sun. We do not execute at sunset, but at sunrise.'*

The pilot was then marched back to his cell, and told that unless he talked before dawn he would be executed.

(Extract from evidence given before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East)¹

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¹ Russell, E. F., & Totani, Y. (2016). *The Knights of Bushidō: A History of Japanese War Crimes During World War II*. La Vergne: Skyhorse Publishing.

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Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The ethical system of the samurai, bushidō (literally translating to the ‘way of the warrior’) is one of the most ubiquitous yet unnamed facets of Japanese tradition that permeates today’s popular media, Diet discussions, debates, and proceedings of international diplomacy. Despite this, there remains a lack of consensus about the role it played as a martial ethic. Therefore, the following research question was formulated: **To what extent did bushidō influence Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War of 1941-45?** This investigation aims to bridge the gap in the understanding between established military patterns of behaviour and the impact of a national ideology in order to shed light on a topic that is rarely placed under objective academic purview, even though its high profile provides it the potential to create rifts in geopolitical relations today.

By virtue of the diverging arguments in ‘Inventing the Way of the Samurai’ by Oleg Benesch and ‘the Knights of Bushidō’ by Edward Russell, these two novels were chosen as sources for this investigation. Russell claims that aspects of Japanese military behaviour, such as the ill-treatment of prisoners of war (POWs), were a result of the bushidō code. Conversely, Benesch argues that bushidō had evolved during the Pacific War to complement the needs of Japanese nationalism during the Pacific War and function as a state ideology.

Inventing the Way of the Samurai by Oleg Benesch

Published in 2014, the **origin** of ‘Inventing the Way of the Samurai’ holds the comparative advantage of the benefit of hindsight as Benesch traces back the evolution of bushidō from ancient Japan to current times in great detail. Serving as an Associate Professor in East Asian History at the University of York, Benesch presently is an authority on Japanese history. Hence, his credentials lend value to the insight he shares. Furthermore, the valuable nature of the information that Benesch provides can be understood from his **purpose** of producing the only full-length academic study of bushidō currently available that was treated under a historical lens rather than a traditionally philosophical one.

However, the historical distance that Benesch inevitably found himself as a modern historian signifies an over-reliance on secondary sources, signaling a **limitation** in his work, especially

when he attempts to address a topic so intimately associated with the fervent cultural nationalism and strategic insecurity that only a native Japanese would understand. Lastly, the broad focus of his work, from the first explanations of bushidō in the Meiji Era to bushidō in sports, education, and Post-War Popular Culture, leads to the brevity of arguments regarding bushido in the context of Japanese military practices, a limitation of his **content**.

The Knights of Bushidō by Edward Russell

Russell personally investigated Japanese war crimes during the Pacific War as the chief legal adviser during the Tokyo tribunal, thus adding value to the **origin** of ‘The Knights of Bushidō.’ Providing contemporary perspectives through a post-Pacific War consideration of Japanese military behaviour, Russell’s **purpose** of presenting Japanese atrocities at the Tokyo Tribunal is of **value** to a historian. Russell not only objectively notes individual crimes but establishes a pattern of behaviour that points to its causation.

On the other hand, as a soldier and writer, Russell was not necessarily equipped with the skills required by a historian to construct accurate arguments about military history. Hence, his work was ripe with **limitations**. Notably, his work may have been sensationalized and monetized as there have been accusations made about his attempts to personally profit from his investigation of war crimes.² Lastly, the anti-Japanese mood that permeated the world at that point in time may have produced a limited analysis in his **content**, as Russell seems to be more focused on criticizing Japanese conduct in the Pacific rather than carefully rationalising the factors that led to it.

Word Count: 627

² “WikiVisually.com.” WikiVisually. Accessed January 25, 2021.
https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Edward_Russell%2C_2nd_Baron_Russell_of_Liverpool.

Section B: Investigation

Nationalist historians put forth the view that bushidō played a significant role in shaping Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War. They claim that ‘imperial bushidō’ served as an institutionalised martial ethic during the Pacific War. This is documented in ‘the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors’ of 1868 which emphasizes deference to the emperor, faithfulness, and the decisive power of spirit, precepts that reflect those of bushidō and were compulsorily memorised by all members of the Japanese military. The success of the indoctrination of Japanese soldiers of the national ideology of bushidō is evident from General Araki’s declaration that the mission of Japan was to “spread and glorify the Imperial Way to the end of the Four Seas. Inadequacy of strength is not our worry.”³ The sentiment is mirrored by writings such as ‘bushidō zensho’ and ‘shōnen bushidō shi’ that attribute Japanese military success at Singapore, Malaya, and Pearl Harbour to bushidō.⁴ As Historian Oleg Benesch has argued, ‘imperial bushidō’ operated as a regimented state-sponsored ideology to reinvigorate a sense of nationalism within the military and populace,⁵ in a period of emerging tensions between the Taisho and Showa and increased threat of total war from the Allies.

The influence of bushidō as a state ideology on Japanese military behaviour can also be seen in the ideals of self-sacrifice that were adopted during the Pacific War. Kamikaze attacks were organised where pilots crashed their bomb-laden planes to inflict damage upon Allied ships at the cost of Japanese lives. Notably, historian Robin L. Rielly has brought to attention the assertion of Inspectorate General of the Army Air Force, that “the basis of this kind of attack [kamikaze] will depend absolutely on the spiritual strength of our flying personnel,”⁶ thus implicating bushidō. Furthermore, authors of ‘the Archaeology of World War II Japanese Stragglers’ strengthen the argument that bushidō shaped Japanese military behaviour in the Pacific War⁷ by stating that “many Japanese soldiers did not surrender in Guam and elsewhere in the Pacific. They continued

³ Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The soldier and state: The theory and politics of civil military relations*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁴ Benesch, O. (2014). *Inventing the way of the samurai: Nationalism, internationalism, and bushidō in modern Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rielly, R. L. (2012). *Kamikaze attacks of World War II: A complete history of Japanese suicide strikes on American ships, by aircraft and other means*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

⁷ *The Archaeology of World War II Japanese Stragglers on the Island of Guam and the Bushidō Code*. (n.d.). BOYD DIXON.

to honor the bushidō code, believing that ‘to rush into the thick of battle and to be slain in it, is easy enough . . . but, it is true courage to live when it is right to live, and to die only when it is right to die’⁸.” Another prominent evidence of the manifestation of bushidō in the Japanese military lies in their treatment of Prisoners of War. Edward Russell, in the book, ‘The Knights of Bushidō’,⁹ charts the destruction of the Japanese and their apparent disregard for the humanitarian principles enshrined in the Geneva Convention, claiming that “the uncivilised ill-treatment of prisoners of war by the Japanese was a natural outcome of the ancient code of bushidō, which was inculcated into the Japanese soldier as a part of his basic training.” Russell substantiates his claim by narrating the murder of a captured member of the American aircrew by commander Komai in accordance with sentiments of bushidō that were perceived as “compassionate” by Japanese soldiers. Hence, Japanese military tactics and their treatment of Prisoners of War reflect closely bushidō’s ideals of self-sacrifice and loyalty to their nation.

Despite this, pragmatic historians claim that in relation to Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War, bushidō was incredibly idealized as an intangible warrior ethic. Historian James Dorsey provides evidence for this claim by pointing out bushidō’s glamorization of the supposedly “honorable” deaths of Japanese soldiers aboard four mini-submarines on their way to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941. In reality, these soldiers had died due to the mechanical difficulties of said submarines.¹⁰ Other historians also argue that it is inaccurate to link bushidō to Japanese suicidal tactics as there were more mundane pressures that played a role on the battlefield. Japanese soldiers during the Pacific War faced the fear of execution or ostracization if they returned to Japan as Allied prisoners, and experienced brutal beatings and capital penalties that were enforced to ensure compliance to the tactics of the Imperial Army.¹¹ Hence, other more immediate circumstances, such as the resentment of Japanese POWs for the food resources spent on them, played an imperative role in the adoption of ideals of self-sacrifice by Japanese soldiers, rather than bushidō.¹² Furthermore, historians and scholars who do argue that bushidō is the root of beastly

⁸ Nitobe, I. (2021). *Bushido: The soul of Japan*. Singapore: Origami Books Pte.

⁹ Russell of Liverpool, Edward Frederick Langley Russell. (1959). *The Knights of Bushidō; the shocking history of Japanese War Atrocities*. New York: Berkley.

¹⁰ Benesch, O. (2014). *Inventing the way of the samurai: Nationalism, internationalism, and bushidō in modern Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹¹ Carmichael, C. (2015). *The Routledge history of genocide*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

¹² Straus, U. (2016). *The anguish of surrender: Japanese POW's of World War II*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

and savage Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War tend to dehumanise the nation's people into bushidō-driven automatons, without understanding these other mundane pressures. This can be seen in texts on the subject bearing titles such as 'the Bushidō Code and a Belief in Japanese Racial Superiority: Catalysts for Brutal Treatment of American Prisoners of War' and 'Blood and Bushidō: Japanese Atrocities at Sea'. In particular, in the latter text, naval historian Bernard Edwards directly attributes the Japanese navy's barbaric slaughter of survivors from destroyed ships to the bushidō code. Evidently, in these texts, bushido is often used to rationalise shocking Japanese military behaviour, without a careful examination of other immediate circumstances that contributed to Japanese aggression.

Lack of agreement concerning bushidō's relevance in describing Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War also arises from a historiographical confusion of the meaning of the word. This is because bushidō originally existed as an ancient ethic that was exclusive to the samurai class in the Tokugawa and Meiji Era after it was born under the influence of Shintoism and Confucianism in the Edo Era.¹³ It was only during the Pacific War that bushidō underwent a type of historical revisionism to become 'imperial bushidō' or the state ideology that was so widely disseminated throughout the entirety of Japan.¹⁴ In the words of Historian Benesch, bushidō was appropriated for ideological service by the militaristic state during the Pacific War.¹⁵ Hence, some historians argue that it was not bushidō that shaped Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War, but a corruption of it. A proponent of this viewpoint is Historian Yuki Tanaka who stated in his book 'Hidden Horrors', that the original bushidō was an "honourable code teaching righteousness, courage, humanity, propriety, sincerity, honour, and loyalty," thus bearing no resemblance to the fanaticism and savagery of the bushidō exhibited by the Japanese soldiers during the Pacific War.¹⁶ The historical revision of bushidō by policymakers and propagandists has thus led to historians demeaning the role of the ancient samurai ethic of bushidō in influencing Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War.

¹³ Edgerton, R. B. (1998). *Warriors of the rising sun a history of the Japanese military*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

¹⁴ Benesch, O. (2014). *Inventing the way of the samurai: Nationalism, internationalism, and bushidō in modern Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

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¹⁶ Tanaka, T. (2018). *Hidden horrors: Japanese war crimes in World War II*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

To conclude, it seems fallacious to fanatically argue that bushidō created an ‘incontestably warlike nation’¹⁷ when the flexibility of bushidō theories had actually enabled the Japanese government to use them in a military capacity. Hence, although Japanese military behaviour during the Pacific War bears no resemblance to the bushidō of the Meiji and Tokugawa era, it is closely related to the institutionalised bushidō of the time. Therefore, the extent to which bushidō influenced the behaviour of the Japanese Army during the Pacific War depends heavily on the historiographical definition assigned to bushidō. The results of my analysis fall in line with that of Benesch who dubs the bushidō of the Pacific War as an ‘invented tradition’¹⁸ rather than an ancient Japanese tradition that had guided Japanese aggression, as Russell¹⁹ argued. This conclusion reaffirms my personal belief that the aggressive military behaviour of the Japanese Army during the Pacific War was not a result of an ancient Japanese culture, but a mixture of circumstances in the form of government directives and even pressures of the battlefield. However, it’s to be noted that the historiographical meaning of bushidō is still not agreed upon within the historical community and should be resolved to move forward in this debate.

Word Count: 1262

¹⁷ Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The soldier and state: The theory and politics of civil military relations*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

¹⁸ Benesch, O. (2014). *Inventing the way of the samurai: Nationalism, internationalism, and bushidō in modern Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The soldier and state: The theory and politics of civil military relations*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Section C: Reflection

Initially, I faced difficulty in attributing intangible cultural ideology to the course of tangible historical events. After all, there lies a logical fallacy in inferring behavioural norms of bushidō from legal or moral codes. As Karl F. Friday has written, it's no more accurate to infer from lawmakers and philosophers that samurai were shining examples of fealty than it is to conclude about the sexual behaviour of twentieth-century Georgians from sodomy state laws.

The collection of sources was another challenge as the topic of bushidō is one that is esoteric with many historians choosing not to refer to it due to its lack of historical definition. As Jeffery Mass surmised in 'Antiquity and anachronism,' there are certain areas of Japanese history that are underdeveloped, with scholar Basil Hall Chamberlain proclaiming, "the very word (bushidō) appears in no dictionary, native or foreign, before the year 1900." Additionally, there has been consternation over the validity of terms such as budō (the martial way) and otoko no michi (the manly way) as synonyms for bushidō. Following this, I faced difficulties with the Japanese language of untranslated primary sources. Instead, I had to refer to secondary sources that spoke about primary sources. This may have diluted certain areas of my analysis because a thorough knowledge of primary sources is crucial, especially when researching areas of history that are of psychological significance to a nation's people.

Lastly, narrowing down a timeframe was a difficulty that I experienced when conducting this investigation due to the very vastness of Japanese history. At first, I looked into the role of bushidō during the Russo-Japanese War, the first incidence of Japanese expansionist foreign policy. However, the lack of sources spurred me to look elsewhere. All in all, although working with an unfamiliar area of history was challenging, I gained a newfound appreciation for Japan and the intricacies of their culture.

Word Count: 311

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Appendix A



Japanese samurai in Armor, 1860s. Photograph by Felice Beata

Appendix B



In a scene from the 1957 film “The Bridge on the River Kwai,” British Colonial in a Prisoner of War camp confronts the camp’s Japanese Commander. He argues that his officers should not be forced into manual labour, as it opposed the humanitarian principles enshrined in the Geneva Convention. The Japanese Commander replied furiously and declares that he does not abide by Western laws; he adheres only to bushidō.²⁰

²⁰ Flanagan, D. (n.d.). Bushidō : The samurai code goes to war. Retrieved December 26, 2020, from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/07/23/books/bushidō-samurai-code-goes-war/>