

Let's All Commit Ritual Suicide!

By Karen Green

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Ordinarily, the ComiXology disclaimer that falls between the article title and its text annoys me by its placement, but here it's probably serving a pretty useful function.

Because, no, I'm not actually exhorting mass suicide. "Let's All Commit Ritual Suicide!" is the literal, somewhat mocking, translation of the title that has been rendered as [Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths](#) by Drawn & Quarterly in the first English translation of a work by manga giant [Shigeru Mizuki](#).

Now, manga is most decidedly not my area of expertise and writing about this work takes me a fair way out of my comfort zone. I grew up reading American and European comics, which have different traditions and conventions, and which often draw on a western artistic, literary, and cultural tradition with which I have a certain familiarity. But for me, reading manga is not merely a matter of learning to read backwards (it wasn't the right-to-left pages that threw me; it was the right-to-left dialogue in the panels...), it means learning to "read" a completely foreign culture. I doubt that the few manga novels I've read (this Mizuki, [Disappearance Diary](#), [Oishinbo](#), and...geez, I think that might actually be it) provided me with the interpretive chops I've managed to acquire in over 45 years' immersion in American comics, literature, and art.

As a result, to write about this book I had to fall back on my failsafes: scholarship and the kindness of strangers. Well, not complete strangers: two of Columbia's faculty from the [East Asian Languages and Cultures Department](#), Professors Hikari Hori and David Lurie, were kind enough to exchange emails with me during their summer leave in Japan. While they were both more familiar with Mizuki's most famous work, [GeGeGe no Kitaro](#), the story of a supernatural boy who tries to mediate in the relationship between humans and demons, and which was inspired by stories told him as a child by a woman in his town, they were still able to provide me with a certain context that proved incredibly useful. In fact, Professor Hori will be using this title in a future class syllabus, in her quest to examine, as she put it, "how various disasters are presented, memorized and interpreted in visual image--nuclear plant accidents, war, and tsunami/flood." Also useful were articles by [Roman Rosenbaum](#) and [Michael Dylan Foster](#), which provided me with biographical background and genre context not otherwise available to me.

But first: my own take. As you may have surmised by now, I take an interest in [war](#) and [protest](#). The advance press on this Mizuki edition was intriguing enough to push me past my manga uncertainty—Mizuki talks about the "blind rage" that surges in him whenever he writes about war, which definitely caught my attention—and the rewards were profound. Mizuki himself is a

fascinating character: having lost his drawing arm during World War II, he retaught himself to draw with his remaining arm, and went on to become one of the most famous manga artists in Japan. Apparently, the manga floor of large bookstores will have an entire separate section devoted solely to his work. He has a road named for him in his home town of Sakaiminato, and [statues of his Kitaro characters](#) line both sides of the street. A television series about him and his wife ran on Japanese television, based on her autobiography. What I'm saying is: he's big. And this book is the one he calls his favorite.

Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths, a title absolutely meant to be understood ironically, is a semi-fictionalized account of Mizuki's own experiences as a soldier in Papua New Guinea during World War II. It combines searing details with a combination of affectionate humor and nail-biting melodrama familiar to anyone who's ever watched Hollywood's wartime films. But it also serves as a corrective to them.

Again, if you've been reading these columns for a while now, you also know I'm a huge fan of old movies—but when it came to Hollywood's wartime efforts, I've tended to prefer the European theatre of war to the Pacific. I was always much more comfortable watching Nazis mowed down than Japanese, and I think even as a teenager I was made uneasy by the flagrant racism of the Asian roles. These wartime films emphasized the treachery and cruelty of the Japanese, as in a host of 1943 productions, from [So Proudly We Hail](#), based on the memoir of a nurse stationed in the Philippines, to [They Were Expendable](#), starring actual WW2 Navy veteran Robert Montgomery as a PT boat commander involved in the battles at Bataan and Corregidor, to [Air Force](#), about the crew of a Flying Fortress. The last of these contains the infamous line, spoken by George Tobias after shooting down an enemy plane, "Fried Jap, going down!"—a line, by the way, that has often been edited out of post-war broadcasts of the film.

Hollywood was a willing cog in the propaganda machine that supported the war effort, and it depicted America's soldiers as human but essentially virtuous, and America's enemies as insidious and essentially evil. More recent movies—most notably Clint Eastwood's paired films, [Flags of Our Fathers](#) and [Letters from Iwo Jima](#)—attempt to inject nuance into the wartime story most of us know. Reading Mizuki's story, it felt the like manga equivalent of *Letters from Iwo Jima*: a chance to see what the war was like for the other side, and to understand the searing toll it took on those who were involved.

The book opens with three pages of faces, identifying all the characters in the story. Mizuki draws his soldiers in a simplified, cartoony style and these pages serve as a useful cast list, one that I found myself consulting often. Some of his soldiers are drawn in a sort of overblown caricature—buck-toothed and bespectacled—that would rightly be decried as racist if sketched by westerners, and it can be difficult to keep track of all the players. This set of simply sketched-out faces is followed by an exquisitely realistic depiction of battleships in fleet formation—as densely drawn and delicate as a Doré engraving. This was one of the first things that struck me about Mizuki's work—the contrast between simplistic and realistic art, often in the same panel. Generally, these caricatured soldiers are drawn directly against an ultra-realistic background, and the effect is partly surreal, but partly also perhaps a commentary on the undignified, sometimes ridiculous existence of the average enlisted man. There is one exception to these cartoon soldiers: when they are killed, and their lifeless bodies heaped upon the field of battle, Mizuki

renders them carefully and in great detail, as if to honor them in death in ways they were not honored in life. In one panel, near the end of the book, as the troop prepares for their final charge, Mizuki renders the cartoony faces atop realistic bodies, perhaps acknowledging that they are dead men walking.

The lives of these soldiers are presented in episodic, tragicomic vignettes. The men often break out into song, and a set of Japanese war-song lyrics opens the story, as if as an epigram:

*Saying it's for the good of our country
Fool volunteering
For that rotten army
Leaving Sweet Sue behind in tears*

*Forced awake at the crack of dawn
Swabbing and sweeping
Pushed around by fools above him
Long days spent in tears.*

Another song recurs often enough to serve as a kind of Greek chorus: the "Prostitute's Lament." First heard from the comfort girls at the local brothel, it is repeated by the soldiers until it becomes a bitter commentary on their own lot, especially in its penultimate line:

*I am a blossom that falls in the red-light district
Wilting in the day, blooming at night
Can't hate nasty johns
Forced smiles for smug pimps
Why am I stuck working this shitty job
No way out, all for my parents.*

Mizuki's experiences during wartime left him with a lifelong contempt for the military and hatred of war. He depicts with great frequency the casual brutality that officers visited upon the enlisted men—the cry of "Rookies to the front!" during formations inevitably leads to random slaps and punches administered for little to no reason—and the small but satisfying revenge the men offered in return, such as peeing in the communal bathtub when the next bather was a superior. He offers stories of futile, meaningless deaths: one soldier dies while fishing; having shoved an entire fish into his mouth, the scales anchor inside his teeth and he chokes to death. The men dream of women but more than that they dream of leisure: mandatory visits to the brothel are sometimes seen as encroachments on time that could be spent sleeping.

The vignettes finally coalesce in the climactic plot point of the story—the assault on [Rabaul](#). Mizuki depicts an officer class in love with tradition, history, and honor, with tragic consequences. The troop's Major Tadokoro repeatedly compares his soldiers to the five hundred rebels who fought and died alongside the great 14th-century samurai hero [Dai-Nanko](#) at the Minato River, a common inspiration for suicide missions (I know this, by the way, thanks to the very useful cultural and historical notes in the back of this edition—also accompanied by an afterword by, and an interview with, Mizuki himself).

Tadokoro decides to form a "special attack unit" in an assault on Rabaul: a mission that can only end in their massacre. He informs headquarters, "I will lead my battalion into a suicide charge tonight" and the general at Rabaul announces the noble deaths to his own troops, as further inspiration and as a morale booster. A weird confluence of circumstances results in over eighty survivors, however, and the officers fear the shame that would accompany a correction to the report. The general at Rabaul learns of the survivors and considers them no better than deserters. The troop is shamed, and the two lieutenants who presided over their unexpected survival are strongly encouraged to commit hara-kiri. The only dissenting voice in all this noble reaction is the troop's doctor, who seems to speak for Mizuki himself: "This 'army' is the most diseased thing humanity has ever seen. This is not the way human beings should be." In the end, the troop goes out on yet another suicide mission, with far more...successful results.

The story is so human and its message so powerful that I hardly think I need to describe how the book can be used pedagogically. But, as I said, one important aspect is its effective counterpoint to the image of the Japanese at war that most Americans know almost instinctively. The tension between the arrogance and brutality of the officer class, and the good nature of the enlisted men, is not unknown in the American military, although the historical pressure seems to have been far more intense in the Imperial Army. But, beyond the story itself, as brilliant as it is, there is food for academic instruction in Mizuki's life itself.

For instance: in his process. Many manga artists use assistants to draw backgrounds, and Professor Hori told me that Mizuki hired assistants when he began publishing for weekly and monthly manga magazines in the 1960s. *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths* was published in 1973, and it may be that assistants were responsible for the actual artwork on those intricate and beautiful backgrounds. But surely it is Mizuki himself who conceives those particular backgrounds with specific intent, and decides when they are simple and when they are elaborate. And, in fact, the style of background in *Noble Deaths* looks suspiciously identical to that used in Mizuki's best-known work, *GeGeGe-no-Kitaro*.

Professor Lurie also noted that the history of Mizuki's career is a reflection of the history of manga in Japan (this made me think of the wonderful anime "[Millennium Actress](#)," a magical film by the late, great Satoshi Kon, in which a retired, reclusive, and legendary actress recounts her life story to a television interviewer: a life story that is also the history of Japanese cinema and of 20th-century Japan itself). I found this laid out in the Rosenbaum article: Mizuki began as a [kamishibai](#) artist--a form of sequential art that functioned like a pre-electricity slide show, with paintings on boards slid in and out of frames--and then graduated to [kashi-hon](#) manga--cheap books, rentable before the proliferation of either bookstores or libraries--and finally, in 1964, a full blown [manga-ka](#).

So, that's what this manga-ignorant writer has to say about this book. Now it's your turn: for those of you conversant with the manga tradition, what does Mizuki's work—and this book in particular—do that is distinctive and valuable? Let's have seminar in the comments section!

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