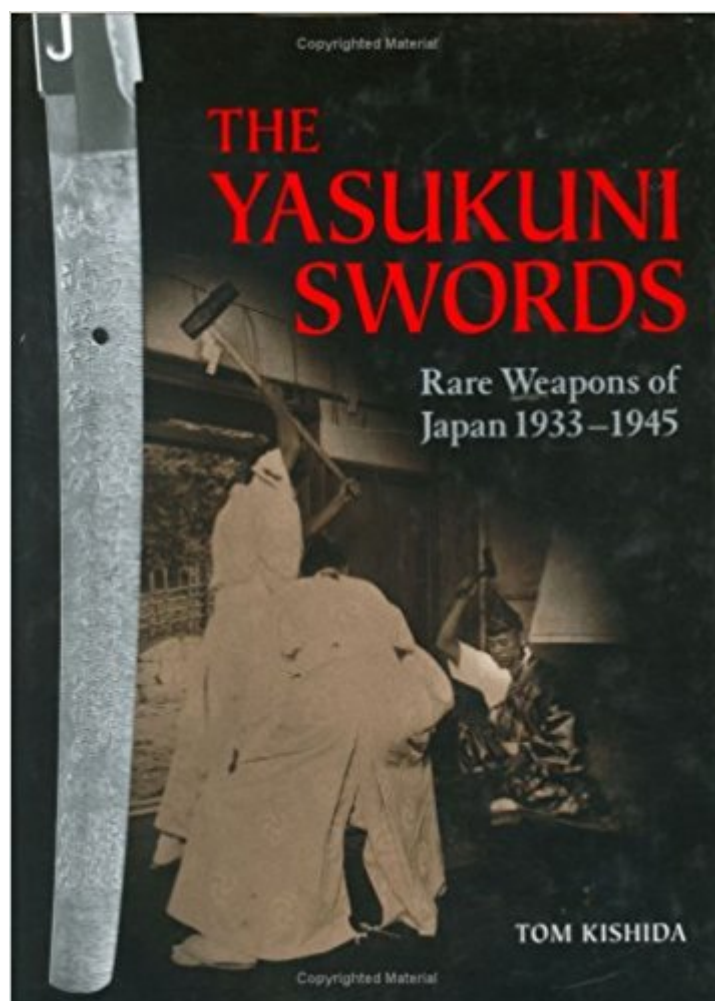


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The Yasukuni Swords: Rare Weapons Of Japan, 1933-1945



Synopsis

The 8,100 swords manufactured in the grounds of the Yasukuni Shrine between 1933 and 1945 are an exceptional legacy, as artifacts that preserved not only time-honored forging methods but the aesthetic and spiritual traditions of the samurai warrior. No other weapon in the world can boast of possessing such a high spiritual quality as the Japanese sword. For over a thousand years the sword was revered as the very soul of the samurai warriors who wielded it, commanding awe, respect, and an almost religious devotion. The tumultuous events of modern Japanese history and the nation's relentless drive toward technological advancement, however, irrevocably sealed the sword's fate, and, along with the samurai class, the sword became an anachronism, both culturally and militarily. As Japan entered a period of unprecedented Imperial expansion in the early twentieth century, the Japanese sword, despite its limited practical effect, became a feature of the soldier's arsenal—an echo of the mythical status it enjoyed in feudal times. The Yasukuni swords emerged during the build-up to World War II, in part to help meet the huge demands of the Imperial Army, but more importantly out of a desire to preserve time-honored forging methods, and to revive the spirit of the samurai. For these reasons, they were notably distinct from so-called "Showa-to," which were mass-produced and inferior in quality and artistry. All swords were banned in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and the decades that followed have seen a decline in the popularity of Yasukuni swords, largely because of their associations with that war and the military. Another factor has been the stigma attached to Showa-to, which has helped to stereotype wartime swords in general. Recent years, however, have seen a renewed interest in the surviving Yasukuni swords. Many collectors and appraisers have acknowledged the workmanship of these swords as displaying a perfect blend of technology and tradition, and a quality that can rival even that of the great classical smiths. In his tribute to the Yasukuni smiths, acclaimed photographer and sword enthusiast Tom Kishida has compiled an extensive study of these rare and exceptional swords, drawing on a variety of sources to shed light on this often little-understood chapter of Japanese sword history. With his unique eye for capturing the beauty of the blades in his photographs, he has provided the reader with the most lavishly detailed book on Yasukuni swords to date. This will be an important addition to the libraries of specialists and connoisseurs, and to those who wish to deepen their understanding of these fascinating wartime weapons.

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Customer Reviews

No other weapon in the world can boast of possessing such a high spiritual quality as the Japanese sword. For over a thousand years the sword was revered as the very soul of the samurai warriors who wielded it, commanding awe, respect, and an almost religious devotion. The tumultuous events of modern Japanese history and the nation's relentless drive toward technological advancement, however, irrevocably sealed the sword's fate, and, along with the samurai class, the sword became an anachronism, both culturally and militarily. As Japan entered a period of unprecedented Imperial expansion in the early twentieth century, the Japanese sword, despite its limited practical effect, became a feature of the soldier's arsenal; an echo of the mythical status it enjoyed in feudal times. The Yasukuni swords emerged during the build-up to World War II, in part to help meet the huge demands of the Imperial Army, but more importantly out of a desire to preserve time-honored forging methods, and to revive the spirit of the samurai. For these reasons, they were notably distinct from so-called "Showa-to," which were mass-produced and inferior in quality and artistry. All swords were banned in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and the decades that followed have seen a decline in the popularity of Yasukuni swords, largely because of their associations with that war and the military. Another factor has been the stigma attached to Showa-to, which has helped to stereotype wartime swords in general. Recent years, however, have seen a renewed interest in the surviving Yasukuni swords. Many collectors and appraisers have acknowledged the workmanship of these swords as displaying a perfect blend of technology and tradition, and a quality that can rival even that of the great classical smiths. In his tribute to the Yasukuni smiths, acclaimed photographer and sword enthusiast Tom Kishida has compiled an extensive study of these rare and exceptional swords, drawing on a variety of sources

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TOM KISHIDA was born in Taito Ward, Tokyo, in 1948 and graduated from Nihon University. He became a professional photographer and studied photography under Kenzo Takano. He is a member of the Japan Professional Photographers Society, and wrote and published in Japanese *Yasukuni Tosho* in November 1994. His highly advanced technique for photographing blades has been recognized by the British Museum as of sufficient quality for sword identification by professional appraisers. KENJI MISHINA was born in Fukushima Prefecture in 1951 and graduated from Kanagawa University. He went on to become a Japanese sword polisher and a student of Living National Treasure Kokan Nagayama. He has translated for Kodansha International *The Connoisseur's Book of Japanese Swords* by Kokan Nagayama, 1995, and *The New Generation of Japanese Swordsmiths* by Tamio Tsuchiko, 2002.

A very competent work supplying detail about the works produced in the Yasakuni forge during the second world war. The work is very detailed and comprehensive if lacking a little in description of the technical detail, i.e what made a Yasukuni sword so superior to others being produced at the time and has made them so sought after by collectors of swords from this period. The result of a great deal of study and research the book is well presented and fills a gap in publications on this subject.

Few things carry the taint of Imperialism like Yasukuni Shrine. Dedicated to war dead, the shrine became a symbol for the Emperor cult of WWII Axis Japan, with Class A war criminals such as General Tojo being honored there. In modern Japan, it is a last remaining relic, after State Shinto was banned by the US occupation forces, and even today an official visit by a government official creates an uproar in the Asian nations abused by the Japanese army. With this in mind, a book titled "The Yasukuni Swords" carries the same aura as a book titled "The Auschwitz Bayonets" or "The Mai Lai Guns." Even amongst Nihonto enthusiasts, WWII era swords were known for their inferior quality and mass production, handed off to soldiers before being sent off to slaughter. But this book, "The Yasukuni Swords: Rare Weapons of Japan 1933-1945" is not about ignominious history or

garbage blades. It is about the preservation of an ancient art, rescued from oblivion. In this case, it is the end, not the means that matter. By the time of the inauguration of the Yasukuni Forge, in 1933, there were less than 10 swordsmiths remaining in Japan. The sword-banning act of the Meiji Restoration had almost caused the extinction of perhaps the most refined tradition of swordcraft the world has ever known. Even of the 10, only one, Gassan Sadakatsu, was able to make blades of ancient quality. The military government in power, attempting to foster their aggression with the resurrection of the samurai spirit, gathered the remaining swordsmiths at Yasukuni Shrine, and established the forge. This is their story. Their story is fascinating indeed, as is the tale of the slow and painful resurrection of the swordsmithing art. Not only the smiths themselves, but all the accompanying crafts needed revival. The unique ore needed was in short supply, and the oral tradition of its processing was in the minds of 80-year old men. The blade polishers and the hilt wrappers all needed to be sought out and new craftsmen trained. Specific to the Yasukuni Forge, only traditional hand-craft was used, forging blades for officers and high-ranking Imperials, rather than the machine-forged blades of the common soldier during the war. In the end, up to 200 new swordsmiths were raised from the fires of the Yasukuni Forge, ensuring the survival of Japanese swordcraft for future generations. In addition to this fascinating history, "The Yasukuni Swords: Rare Weapons of Japan 1933-1945" catalogs the blades of that era, showing the distinct markings and techniques and rediscovery of the art. There are articles on the Yasukuni Forge from the 1940s, as well as modern essays on the blades. Photographs bring the whole history to life, and this is one of the most fascinating books I have read for some time.

Books on Japanese swords are by their nature scarce and expensive. Many of them are out of date, or of superficial scholarship. And many of the best ones are in Japanese, which makes it difficult for the English speaking collector/ enthusiast to use. But this book is an essential reference in this field of interest. Most books of Japanese swords cover the old historic swords. But since there are only so many of these surviving, a new market in swords made after the age of the Samurai have become popular. Hence the interest in swords made in modern times, but in the traditional manner. This book originally appeared in Japanese in 1998, and was translated in 2004. It covers the efforts in the 1980s to commemorate the traditional Japanese sword smithy and manufacturing unit that existed at Yasukuni Shrine from 1933 to 1945. Yasukuni Shrine was founded in the late 19th century in Tokyo to commemorate the spirits of Japanese war dead. A number of these smiths were located, and some made swords which were part of special exhibition. Eventually a special presentation sword was made by a group of these artisans, and given to the shrine marking the 50th anniversary. Most

of the production of these swords were given as presentation pieces to graduates of the Army and Naval officer schools. Also a number were ordered by the Imperial household. All of the swords made at Yasukuni were of the highest quality, and rigid quality control was enforced. The book is full of wonderful details about the smiths and artisans working in Yasukuni, the establishment and history of the unit, and its demise at the end of WW II. There are numerous pictures of these swords, their inscriptions, production notes, even the layout of the swordshop. There are also the basics about Japanese sword making and the traditional forge and tools involved. For a slim volume like this, there is an amazing amount of information and research packed into it. In all approximately 8100 swords were made at Yasukuni from 1933 to 1945. This is an excellent book and essential addition to anyone with an interest in Japanese swords, Japanese history, arms & armour, or WW II in the Pacific theatre.

The Japanese sword occupied a position in their military culture not unlike that of the engraved pistols in American culture. One important class of Japanese swords are the 8,100 swords produced on the grounds of the Yasukuni Shrine between 1933 and 1945. The group of swordsmiths collected there preserved the time-honored forging methods and the aesthetic and spiritual traditions of the samurai warrior. In the aftermath of World War II sword ownership was banned in Japan and many of these swords were destroyed. Others became war booty and were removed to the victor's countries. After the manufacturing of swords was allowed in 1954 many of the smiths began making swords again, but independently. This book is both a collection of photographs of Yasukuni swords and a story of the swordsmiths and the institution. It is a book that speaks of these historic swords with reverence.

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