Competing Narratives in Contemporary Japanese War Cinema

Comparing representations of World War II and the military in four recent films.

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Abstract

In Japan, the question of how to best remember the events of World War II is often a politically sensitive issue. Japan has occasionally been accused of glossing over its history of war crimes and acts of aggression in textbooks, official statements and other areas. This essay looks at representations of World War II and the military in contemporary Japanese war films, and discuss how they deal with these necessarily political subjects.

I use Akiko Hashimoto's categorization of Japanese war narratives - the hero, victim and perpetrator-narratives - to analyze and compare four movies released during the last five years. These movies are *The Eternal Zero*, *The Wind Rises*, *Kancolle the Movie* and *The Emperor in August*. I look at these films in the context of Japanese film history and current political debates around the role of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and similar issues.

Rather than any clear march towards nationalism, pro-militarism or any other political ideology, these films indicate that directors often avoid politically sensitive issues or taking explicit moral stances. There is often a lack of historical context to events portrayed. The dominant interpretation of history is the victim-narrative in Hashimoto's sense, while perpetrator-narratives are usually absent and hero-narratives are mostly visible in films that are heavily fantasy-based and removed from reality.

Keywords

Japan, war movies, war stories, World War II, military, army, JSDF, Article 9, Hashimoto, Miyazaki, Shinzo Abe, The Eternal Zero, The Wind Rises, Kantai Collection, Kancolle: The Movie, The Emperor in August
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Part 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The question of how Japan best should remember, apologize for or otherwise deal with its history of aggression during World War II has been a contentious issue both inside and outside the country for decades.¹ Newspapers and other voices in China and Korea - nations that were invaded by Japan both before and during the war - have accused the nation of not sufficiently acknowledging its history of war crimes and imperialism, contributing to some long-lasting tension between the countries.² Internally, these issues have been a political battleground, with some factions campaigning for stronger official apologies, and others arguing that Japan has already apologized more than is desirable. Japanese scholars like Akiko Hashimoto have described the nation's postwar memory as a sensitive, often divisive issue that is also deeply embedded in everyday Japanese culture and consciousness.³

Since the war, only one military force deployed strictly for self-defense purposes has been allowed – the jieitai, or JSDF (Japanese Self-defense Forces). The Japanese constitution was put in place at the beginning of the post-war American occupation and proclaims among many things a total prohibition of the right to use the military to settle international conflicts. This pacifist proclamation, known as Article 9, has also been a point of contention, with conservative or nationalist-leaning political groups attempting to re-interpret it or revise it in order to expand the role of the military.⁴ Public opinion on this issue, and its opinion and perception of the JSDF, is divided and intertwined with the memories of war and the long legacy of Japanese pacifism. At the moment of writing this article, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is proposing some amendments to Article 9 that do not have majority support of the public.⁵

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¹ Philip A. Seaton, Japan's Contested War Memories: The 'Memory Rifts' in Historical Consciousness of World War II, New York: Routledge 2007, 1-7


⁵ Hiroyasu Mizuno and Tomohiro Osaki, “Abe explains uncompromising stance on inserting ‘explicit SDF mention’ in Article 9”, February 2018,
These political issues can come to the surface in a wide range of cultural expressions and events. The annual August 15 memorial day for the war dead is one of them, where the prime minister's speech often becomes a point of debate. Another is children's history textbooks, occasionally accused of portraying the Japanese as nothing but victims during the war and of skipping over the more sensitive events. Then there is the whole field of art and entertainment, where portrayals of the war and the military cannot help but become a political issue. In this essay I want to look at contemporary Japanese war films as one of these fields where sensitive issues often come to the surface. I will look closely at a couple of recent films, released during the last five years, and discuss how they portray the military and the war in ways that reveal various political perspectives and cultural taboos, and how this intersects with the current debates and the legacy of a violent history.

1.2 Purpose and problem-statement

The relationship between the war, the military and Japanese cultural products is a complex and difficult topic. Apart from movies, many different media like video games, comics, TV-dramas, advertisements, theater productions and other live events have been discussed as expressions of a conflicted public consciousness. Hashimoto argues that they are often ways of dealing with a kind of trauma, a collective trauma that forms a part of the contemporary national identity. In films and other media, modern interpretations of the war fuse with the real memories of historical events. It is in this context that I want to look some of the war films that have been produced in recent years.

As political realities and public attitudes change, any study of this kind risks becoming dated. The debates around Article 9, on the role of the JSDF and over what the proper official stance towards historical war crimes should be are in no ways settled. Some express worries over how the prime minister has, supposedly, taken steps to slowly re-interpret Japan's role in the world and its tradition of pacifism, while others argue that growing tensions with countries like China will eventually require a stronger military. In this climate, a study that looks at the films made in the past few years becomes very relevant. The political attitudes in today’s


Hashimoto, 65-66
Japan have been described as slowly tending towards a kind of nationalism, pro-militarism and conservatism. Is there some truth to this at all, and if so, can a reflection of this be identified in contemporary Japanese war films?

Many questions appear while looking at this intersection of politics and films. How are war crimes and other war memories portrayed in the films? How is the military portrayed? Is it a force for good, evil or something in between? How can a piece of entertainment display disturbing or traumatic events in a way that doesn't alienate the audience? How much are filmmakers directly motivated by political concerns and how does this influence their movies? Are the war movies made only for artistic and commercial purposes, or are some of them produced as intentional propaganda? To narrow things down and bring some focus, I will formulate one question that needs to be answered, and one follow-up question: First, how do these politically sensitive issues - the role of the military and the memories of the war - play out in contemporary war movies? Secondly, does this reflect a political turn in Japan towards nationalism and pro-militarism?

I define “war films” here as films in which a modern, Japanese military force plays a central role. Philip Seaton, who has written about similar issues, discusses four categories of war movies:

- **Military action-adventures**, stories where the focus is on soldiers engaged in combat.
- **War dramas**, stories about the people involved in war that is not primarily action-focused.
- **Wartime dramas**, stories where the war is more of a background or setting for the story.
- **Postwar dramas**, stories about the ongoing effects of the war on soldiers or civilians.

There will be no need to discriminate among these various sub-genres. The important part is not what kind of story is told, but that the military must be clearly present and be a major theme of the movie. For this reason also, the films do not necessarily have to be realistic or historically accurate but can also be more fantastical, as long as a modern Japanese military force is a major actor in the narrative.

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8 Seaton, 154
I will generally attempt to explore the way political anxieties and public opinions are played out on film, but not so much the opposite relationship - I am not intending to explain the effects of these films on the audience watching them or how they might shape politics. It is outside the scope of this article to answer the question of how people are influenced by the cultural products they consume, and I am not interested in moralizing about people’s choice of entertainment. In other words, this article will mainly look at the relation politics → film, rather than film → politics.

1.3 Theory

The most important set of concepts for this article will come from Akiko Hashimoto's 2015 book *The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Japan*, which explores the long-lasting effects of the war and the contemporary debates that surround them. She investigates a wide range of cultural phenomena that force people to confront the past – children's books about Japanese history, documentaries, other kinds of educational material, various types of art and entertainment, memorial-day celebrations, official speeches and utterances by the government, testimonies from war veterans and interviews with the relatives of former war criminals. Hashimoto identifies three distinct narratives that have dominated the Japanese people’s interpretations of the past – the **hero, victim and perpetrator-narratives**. These perspectives offer very different ways of understanding the nation's role in the war, and are potentially mutually exclusive.

The **hero-narrative** seeks to regain a sense of pride by interpreting the actions of the military in a more positive light, for example as resistance against Western hegemony or examples of a heroic Japanese spirit. This can mean either ignoring the acts of aggression committed against China, Korea and other nations, or attempting to re-interpret the meaning of those acts.

The **victim-narrative** focuses on the hardship and suffering of the Japanese people during and after the war. This often means a focus on the suffering of civilians, not least those affected by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When Japanese soldiers are portrayed they are often seen as victims of forces beyond their control, like reckless government policies and distant bureaucrats. Stories from this perspective tends to see war as

9 Hashimoto, 6-19
a universal evil and have a pacifist message, but tend to gloss over the details of the Japanese people’s role in the war.

The **perpetrator-narrative** seeks to confront the atrocities committed by the country head-on. This can be done simply for historical accuracy, but also to bring some redemption and justice to the victims, perhaps with the feeling that a clear apology is the only way the country can move forward. These stories often focus on the acts of the military and the soldiers, but sometimes they also look at the popular support in the country for the military which was quite widespread.

These narratives are often easy to distinguish from one another, although they can also intersect and co-exist in a single piece of media. They are sometimes even described by Hashimoto as loosely correlating to different strands of political thought. Nationalists seek to unify the nation by interpreting the history in a more uplifting light (hero-narrative), progressives seek to atone and apologize for the past to foster healthier relationships with the other nations (perpetrator-narrative), and centrists take the more neutral stance that while war is a universal evil, the past is now in the past (victim-narrative). Most important for Hashimoto though is that one does not treat the Japanese people as a monolithic, homogeneous mass – something she accuses certain Western media of being guilty of.\(^\text{10}\) They are rather a polyphonic, heterogeneous group with often wildly diverse and incompatible ideas about war responsibility and with different interpretations of the past. The only common factor is living in a country where some of these issues have become taboos, meaning that they are often relegated to the back of people’s minds, producing a state of “knowing and not knowing” (a phrase she gets from British sociologist Stanley Cohen). This leads to the fact that the cultural products and phenomena that does deal with these issues become especially sensitive and controversial. She writes that these phenomena:

> are explosive precisely because they disturb this state of “knowing and not knowing” and reveal the dark side of the country’s history and its people. Carrying unresolved legal, religious, philosophical, and historical complexities as they do, the controversies themselves are in a sense epiphenomenal in terms of the underlying questions about the dark side of “our” moral identity as Japanese people.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Hashimoto, 4

\(^{11}\) Hashimoto, 55
I will look at contemporary cinema as one example of these phenomena where controversies are played out, and which disturb this half-conscious, half-unconscious state. The concepts of hero, victim and perpetrator-narratives will form the basis of my analysis as I interpret them and compare them with each other.

1.4 Method and selection of films

I will make a detailed study of how World War II and the Japanese military is portrayed in primarily four specific movies, all produced during the last five years, and compare them with each other from the perspective of Hashimoto’s categories. Each movie will be discussed in the context of the controversies and debates they have generated in the country or abroad, and how they can be perceived as controversial by people with different political views. Different ways of portraying the Japanese military and its soldiers will be discussed, and also how ideas of war, heroism or national responsibility are presented more generally. I will investigate how the films manage the often diverse attitudes of the audience, navigate various political taboos and/or propose certain world-views or visions of the nation.

The four works I will discuss in detail are:
- *The Eternal Zero* (Eien no 0, Takashi Yamazaki, 2013)
- *The Wind Rises* (Kaze Tachinu, Hayao Miyazaki, 2013)
- *Kancolle: The Movie* (Gekijō-ban KanKore, Keizō Kusakawa, 2016)
- *The Emperor in August* (Nihon no Ichiban Nagai Hi, Masato Harada, 2015)

All four of them are full feature length films – two live-action features and two animated works. They are all more or less economically successful films that attempted to have some mainstream appeal. The reason I have not chosen any smaller, more independently created movies is that I am interested precisely in how they anticipate this mainstream appeal and how they try to attract an audience that might have a wide range of political inclinations. These are all productions with significant box-office numbers, since I wanted to look at works that have been widely spread and might have left some mark on the general public consciousness. Most of them have created public debates and controversies in Japan or abroad, and not all of them have received critical acclaim. I have not selected these works based on historical accuracy, what kind of story they are telling or whether they are animated or live-action productions. As I noted above the important factor is that it deals with and offers an interpretation of the war and/or the military. Even though they often deal with historical events, they are also all works of fiction, not documentaries, since any kind of
documentary material would come with different expectations of historical accuracy and objectivity.

I have also tried to select works that to some degree cover all three of the narratives that Hashimoto uses: hero, victim and perpetrator. It is however a small sample size I am using and my study will be more of the qualitative kind than the quantitative. I will not really be able to tell, for example, which kind of narrative is the most widespread and which ones are not, but I will use some of the data produced by Philip Seaton and others to give some idea of what kinds of movies have been most common throughout Japanese film history to bring some context to the discussion of these contemporary movies.

After this introduction and before the final conclusions, the main body of this text will be devoted to analyzing these works and placing them in their context. Before that however I will give a very brief summary of the history of the Japanese military and its former imperialist ambitions in the neighboring countries, and how this has been dependent on a kind of nationalism as a political force. After this I will discuss how the war and the military has been portrayed in Japanese film and TV historically, right from the end of the war up to the beginning of the new century. Then I will go through the selected works one by one, whereby each film will get a short plot summary, a description of how the military/war is portrayed, a look at the public debates they might have caused and a discussion of their role in the wider Japanese political climate.

1.5 Previous research
The long-term effects of the war on Japan and how this expresses itself in various media and cultural products has been studied before, film being only one example of these media. Hashimoto devotes a few pages of her book to discuss a couple of films, like The Eternal Zero which I will also discuss. More important though is her comprehensive summary of postwar testimonials given by former soldiers and their family members, which gives a good view of the many different interpretations of the war that Japan has inherited. Her research about the official stances of the major national newspapers throughout history is also very informative. The research of her book thus serves as a good basis for anyone who wants to understand Japan's conflicted and complex relationship with history.
Aside from Hashimoto, Philip Seaton's *Japan's Contested War Memories: The 'Memory Rifts' in Historical Consciousness of World War II*, addresses similar issues and devotes some chapters to discuss Japanese films from 1972 to 2005. This is a well-researched study of the history of war movies and contains some interesting data that I will use. Aaron Gerow's, “Fantasies of War and Nation in Recent Japanese Cinema” is a paper that also deals with this topic and was published 2006. These studies are more than ten years old however, and at this point it seems that an update and a study that focuses on more recent films can be motivated.

The *Journal of War & Culture Studies* has produced a significant number of articles about Japanese media that touch on similar themes, some written by local scholars and others by foreigners. Among the most recent ones are Akiko Sugawa-Shimada's “Playing with Militarism in/with Arpeggio and Kantai Collection: Effects of shōjo Images in War-related Contents Tourism in Japan” which looks at how war memories are often romanticized in the film and TV industries. Another article, “Cooperation Between Anime Producers and the Japan Self-Defense Force: Creating Fantasy and/or Propaganda?” by Takayoshi Yamamura looks at the relationship and collaboration between the JSDF and the animation industry, and will be useful when I look at this industry in the discussion of *Kancolle: The Movie*.

Most of the movies I will discuss have also produced some academic studies on their own which I will occasionally make use of. It is perhaps no surprise that the Studio Ghibli production *The Wind Rises* seems to have produced the most research here. “What Will You Do If The Wind Rises?: Dialectical Cinema by Miyazaki Hayao” by Michal Daliot-Bul defends the movie against accusations of a pro-military stance, and Daisuke Akimoto's “War Memory, War Responsibility, and Anti-War Pacifism in Director Miyazaki's The Wind Rises” discusses the movie in the context of debates around Article 9.

**Part 2: Context**

**2.1 The modern military history of Japan**

Here I will give a brief summary of the history of Japan's military and its imperial ambitions. In short, modern Japanese military history could be summed up in four phases: the industrialization of the Meiji period (1868-1912) which was accompanied by a growing militaristic and imperialist ideology, the short-lived democratic and liberal Taishō period
(1912-1926), the even more militaristic beginning of the Shōwa period (1926-1945) and the essentially pacifist and peaceful postwar period (1946 to today).

While Japan has had imperialist ambitions much earlier throughout its history, the rapid westernization and industrialization of the Meiji period brought with it a more modern kind of expansionist ideology. This was partly because of the dramatic changes that had so quickly taken place in the country, where rapid social changes eventually prompted a traditionalist reaction which could easily morph into nationalist fervor.\(^\text{12}\) This was also inspired by the sort of nationalism and racialism that had taken root in many Western nations. At the time, European countries were scrambling for new colonies all over the world and Japan soon started seeing a similar kind of expansionism as necessary to compete with the Western world. Eventually the Japanese military attempted to gain dominance of Korea, which at the time was a tributary state of China. This lead to what is known as the first Sino-Japanese war, which resulted in Japan's victory in 1895 and essentially made Japan the dominant power in Asia. Rival ambitions in that area would eventually create tensions with Russia, leading to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, also to Japan's victory. With these victories Japan was now a major imperial power and was recognized as such internationally.\(^\text{13}\)

Those wars were successful but costly, and in the period that followed Japan's military lost some of its power and popular support. A period of increasing democracy and liberalism followed, but it would not last very long. The economic depression of the late 1920s led to mistrust against the established politicians and systems, and belief in peace, democracy and liberal values was steadily decreasing. Ultra-nationalist groups and other radicals were gaining confidence, and the military soon took advantage of this climate to regain its power. In 1932 assassins associated with the military murdered the current prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi.\(^\text{14}\)

The early 30s was marked by increasingly aggressive attempts to dominate Manchuria and take advantage of its natural resources. In 1932 the military established a puppet state known

\(^\text{13}\) Gordon, 121-123
\(^\text{14}\) Gordon, 189
as Manchukuo, causing condemnation from some Western countries. Domestically however, the military had widespread support among the general public and the major newspapers, which often cheered on these invasions with great enthusiasm. In 1937, the tension with China escalated into a full-scale invasion of Beijing and later also Shanghai. In the aftermath of this, the Japanese military occupied the city Nanking for two months - an extremely brutal occupation in which up to 300,000 Chinese civilians were tortured, murdered or raped. This has been known as the Nanking Massacre, an incident which is still occasionally denied by ultra right-wing or nationalist groups in Japan.

By 1940 Japan was also colonizing several other nearby places like French Indochina and Dutch Indonesia, largely as a hunt for natural resources which had been draining. As these colonies were usually already colonized by European states, Japan began to fear a military reaction from the West, in particular the United States. The atrocities of the Nanking Massacre had also started to leak out and portrayed the Japanese in a negative light. Eventually the Japanese military figured that the best way to prepare for this would be to go on the offensive, and in December 1941 they launched a surprise attack on the US navy base at Pearl Harbor and several other places. The attack did not cause as much damage as was hoped for however, and the resulting war was long and draining. The allies imposed a massive economic blockade which starved Japanese civilians in large numbers, and most of the major cities were heavily bombed. The suicide bombers known as Kamikaze pilots were first deployed in 1944 as a desperate response to the failing war. The end didn’t come until the allies issued a final ultimatum in July 1945, after which they dropped the nuclear bombs in August on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan finally accepted the American demands for surrender in September. The allies then occupied Japan until 1951, installing a constitution which explicitly prohibits a military engaged in international conflicts. In 1954 the Japanese Self-defense Forces or JSDF was established, which has occasionally been taking part in international peacekeeping missions with the UN. The exact role and legal status of the JSDF has been debated and continues to be a controversial matter.

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15 Gordon, 189
16 Gordon, 208-209
17 Gordon, 223-224
2.2 Competing narratives of the war

The allied occupation (1945-1951) was characterized by a desire to look forward rather than backward, both for the occupiers and the occupied. The Japanese were not allowed their memorial Shinto ceremony for the war dead until 1952, when the occupation was officially over and the conservative Liberal Democratic Party had taken power. This party was also determined to let economic development take priority over retribution or apologizes for any past events. While Japan did experience impressive economic growth during this period, the conservative nature of the party also created a climate were war crimes were swept under the rug or occasionally even painted in a heroic light. Using Hashimoto's terms, we could say that it was in this time that the official version of the story first became tilted towards the hero and victim-narratives rather than the perpetrator-narrative.

The public perception of the war has since then been quite varied throughout history. Opposition to the official narrative existed early on, not least from parties and groups on the left and in the 60s and 70s antiwar movements. In the 80s and 90s, there were large and often successful attempts to create awareness and to demand official apologies for Japan's war crimes. Domestic controversies, for example the debates over misleading history textbooks, became known internationally. In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was something of a neo-nationalist backlash to this trend, in which some influential right-wing groups managed to make some revisions to, among other things, the Japanese Basic Law of Education. Lines about the "ideals laid forth in the constitution" were swapped for additions about "inheritance of tradition". It's not immediately obvious in which direction Japan has been heading since then. In 2013, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo removed a phrase in Japan's official commemorative statement about "colonial rule and aggression", to the more neutral "vow never to wage war again".

2.3 Portrayals of the war in film since the occupation

In Philip Seaton's summary of the history of Japanese war films, he estimates that at least 235 films have been made in the period between 1946 and 2001, or a little more than 4 films every

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18 Hashimoto, 53
19 Hashimoto, 16-17
20 Hashimoto, 17-18
21 Hashimoto, 59
The number of war films released throughout history has generally followed the same ups and downs as Japan's wider film industry, and has in this sense not been affected by shifting political moods. The 50s and 60s were productive years for the industry and so a lot more war films were released then than in, for example, the 80s and 90s. The content of these films however seems to have followed the political mood of the country quite closely. During the time of the occupation, there was a general hostility against the military and a strong desire for peace, leading most war films to have a clear anti-war and anti-military message. The allied occupation had also enforced quite strict censorship laws that explicitly prohibited films about the military, except when militarism was shown to be "evil".

This started to change almost immediately after the occupation however, especially when the conservative party had begun to take more control of the general narrative. This was also the time when Japanese B-movies had their boom, which were often action movies about Japanese air forces or navy fighters. These were somewhat cheaply made and formulaic films which often took the opportunity to glorify soldiers or the military, probably as much for the entertainment value as for any political motivation. In the large majority of cases they focused on the Pacific War rather than, for example, the war in China. One film with an unusually high budget was the 1953 production *Eagle of the Pacific*, by Honda Ishiro, otherwise most famous for later directing the first *Godzilla* movie. This film focused on Yamamoto Isoroku, a commander of the Japanese Navy who helped plan the attack on Pearl Harbor. While the main selling points of the movie were likely the realistic action scenes and detailed plane models, the film definitely tried to portray the military in a heroic light and to stir up a sense of patriotism. Several other war movies followed similar patterns and were popular with the audience - which were also, as Sandra Wilson points out, about 80% male at the time. Exceptions to this trend existed however, such as Kobayashi Masaki's critically acclaimed 1959 trilogy *The Human Condition*.

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22 Seaton, 153
23 Seaton, 155
24 Sandra Wilson, “Film and Soldier: Japanese War Movies in the 1950s”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no.3 (2013)
25 Seaton, 155
26 Wilson, 539
27 Wilson, 543
The number of war films dropped quickly in the 70s as the film industry came in competition with television. The formulaic, often cheaply made war movies of the previous decades suddenly became less profitable. Moreover, the political climate had been more progressive since the 60s and there was more awareness of Japan's role in the war, so now there was also an audience for more realistic and self-critical war movies. More independent and avant-garde minded directors like Nagisa Oshima, Kihachi Okamoto and Shohei Imamura made challenging and disorienting films for a politically conscious audience. In *Human Bullet* from 1968, Kihachi Okamoto creates a parody of the kamikaze pilots that in the past had commonly been glorified or portrayed as typical action heroes. In contrast to this, the main character of this film behaves in a very exaggerated and artificial manner, with the director clearly ridiculing his ideology of sacrifice, and intentionally using various devices to alienate the audience. In her book on 60s and 70s Japanese avant-garde films, Isolde Standish argues that the socially constructed and unreliable nature of memory was a common theme in these movies and that they often attempted to subvert the versions of history presented in popular genre films.

Seaton describes the 80s as the golden age of Japanese war cinema, with an exceptionally large number of critically acclaimed productions being produced at this time. Some of the directors of the previous centuries were still active and made some of their most ambitious movies. Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence* (1983) was a British-Japanese production with David Bowie playing the main role as a prisoner in a Japanese war-time prison camp. Another trend was films about the Japanese victims of the atom bombs, such as the animated *Barefoot Gen* from 1983 which portrayed the bombing of Hiroshima in a very graphic way. Other films took a clearly nationalistic approach, like *The Great Japanese Empire* from 1982, which depicted the attacks on Pearl Harbor in a heroic way. In sum, the war films of the 80s were a mix of perpetrator, victim and hero-narratives. The 90s continued in a similar manner, but with the number of box office successes and critically acclaimed productions dwindling.

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28 Seaton, 155
30 Seaton, 155
31 Seaton, 157
The neo-nationalist backlash of the late 1990s and early 2000s could also be seen in cinema to some degree. The box office success *Pride* from 1988 had clear nationalist sympathies, and depicted Tojo Hideki (general of the Imperial Japanese Army and Prime Minister for much of World War II) in the war crime trials as a victim of an unfair judicial process. The peak of this nationalist trend seems to have been around 2005, when several movies about kamikaze pilots and other war stories were produced. *Lorelei: The Witch of the Pacific Ocean* (Shinji Higuchi, 2005) offers an imaginary version of history in which the military saves Japan from a third atomic bomb dropping. The film was described as overly nationalistic by foreign media while Koji Yakusho, the lead actor of the movie, preferred to call it patriotism. In general there seems to have been two important trends in war movies of the 2000s. The first trend is films that revel in these kinds of imaginative and almost completely fictional war stories, *Lorelei* being one example of this, and Junji Sakamoto's *Aegis* from the same year being another. The other trend has to do with the fact that, as Hashimoto points out, the number of veterans and other people that were actually alive during the war has been declining since the 90s. This has created the need for films aimed towards people for whom knowledge of the war comes from second-hand sources and who might not have as strong a relation to it as previous generations did. The first movie I will discuss in detail, *The Eternal Zero*, in which the modern-day protagonist tries find out the truth about his war pilot grandfather, is an example of a movie clearly made for such audiences.

**Part 3: Analysis**

**3.1 The Eternal Zero**

By what seems to be a coincidence, the year 2013 saw the release of two controversial, but also economically successful movies about the “Zero” aircraft fighters used by the Japanese in World War II. Hayao Miyazaki, most famous for his Studio Ghibli productions, directed *The Wind Rises*, an animated story about Jiro Horikoshi, the real-life engineer behind the Zero planes. A few months later, Takashi Yamazaki released his movie *The Eternal Zero*, which tells the story of an army soldier piloting precisely such an aircraft. The Mitsubishi A6M "Zero" plane was arguably the most advanced fighter aircraft in the world when it was built in 1940.

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33 Hashimoto, 66
1940, and was used by the Imperial Japanese Navy from that time until the end of the war, most famously for the kamikaze suicide missions.\textsuperscript{34} For some Japanese people this has been a source of national pride, while others see it as a destructive symbol of war and militarism. As the plane is often associated with the Imperial Japanese Army it is probably not surprising that both movies attracted some controversy and skepticism. More surprisingly, one of the loudest critics of \textit{The Eternal Zero} was Hayao Miyazaki himself, who criticized it as “a pack of lies” and as a revisionist movie that glorified the kamikaze pilots.\textsuperscript{35} Whether this criticism is justified or not, and whether a similar critique could not also be made of Miyazaki's own movie, are questions without any simple answers.

\textit{The Eternal Zero} is set in present-day Japan and follows the 26-year-old Kentaro Saeki who attempts to uncover the truth about his grandfather, Kyuzo Miyabe. Kyuzo was a wartime pilot who eventually became a kamikaze fighter, but who for initially unknown reasons left behind a reputation as a "coward" in battle. Kentaro makes visits to a couple of veterans and other people who knew his grandfather, and to tell this story the film cuts between this present-day investigation and flashbacks of the war. Eventually Kentaro learns that his grandfather's reputation as a coward was a result of his unwillingness to sacrifice people in battle and to waste more lives than necessary. Kyuzo is presented as a man who was primarily concerned with getting back to his family and loved ones, and who also attempted to convince his comrades of the value of life. It is a somewhat melodramatic story which spends a lot of time to show us the goodness of Kyuzo and his concern for his friends. Outside this, it is primarily an action-movie which focuses on CGI-heavy military combat and airplane battles.

Seeing that Kyuzo is described as hoping for a quick end to the war and as being a proponent of peace, the film can somewhat convincingly claim to be an anti-war film. Kyuzo is also mainly concerned about his family and friends rather than the glory of the nation, perhaps also letting the film escape accusations of nationalism. This isn’t completely true though as the film does sneak in some lines about "loyally protecting the nation" near the end and other short messages about protecting Japan, but the emphasis does lie on more personal themes.

like family and friendship. The battle scenes are clearly made to be spectacular and fun however, and they don't fit very well with the frequent attempts to convey an anti-war message. The result is a bit of a contradictory film which seems to want to have it both ways, both the action-packed fun of airplane battles and serious-sounding speeches about the tragedy of war.

The background to this film might be more worrying than the actual contents of it. The film was based on a novel by Naoki Hyakuta, who has a reputation as an ardent right-wing nationalist, having for example denied that the Nanking Massacre occurred at all. When Hayao Miyazaki criticized the film as glorifying the war, Naoki responded that while he was “thoroughly opposed to war and kamikaze attacks”, Miyazaki could not have read the novel or seen the film and must in fact not be "right in the head". He went on to describe himself as a "simple patriot" who only hated "anti-Japanese or traitorous sentiments". Strangely enough, Naoki was handpicked by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to sit on the board of Japan's public broadcasting organization NHK, a decision which caused criticism considering his political views. Abe was also a fan of the movie-adaptation, describing himself as being moved by it. When the film was released, the tag-line of the movie did seem to reach for a sense of patriotic pride in its soldiers: “What America feared more than anything else were the demon called the Zero and a single coward.”

Considering the novel on which it was based, the movie does not seem as nationalistic or pro-militaristic as one might have feared, and it could even claim to have anti-war as its principal message. The reasons for the difference between the novel and film could be many, but one important factor is likely that any overly strong political overtones would limit its potential audience. This was a mainstream movie with a large budget, and it contains many crowd-pleasing elements like action scenes and love stories. It was also a big success and became the second highest grossing Japanese film of that year. As Hashimoto points out, the Japanese

public has mixed and contradictory opinions and thoughts about the war, and for this reason it is easy to see how more universally accepted themes like family and friendship could attract a larger audience. People with different world-views and politics can all enjoy the film as long as it doesn't explicitly affirm any explicit political opinions. Novels are less risky to produce financially than mainstream movies, and for this reason the original novel and its author can afford to be much more political.

Rather than any overt nationalist messages, the more problematic aspect of the film might instead be its complete lack of context. The Japanese motivation for engaging in the war is never explained, and the conflicts that are going on outside the Pacific War are never mentioned. We don't see any other nationalities represented than the Japanese except for a short clip of American soldiers right before their ships are shot down by Japanese airplanes. We also don't see the suffering of the Americans caused by these attacks, but when a Japanese ship is shot down by Americans we see the pain and damage in great detail. It's really up to the audience to piece together the rest of the puzzle and it would probably be easy to come out of the movie with the impression that the Japanese soldiers were just defending themselves from foreign attacks. This vagueness and lack of context again makes the film possible to enjoy for a larger audience, that likely has different perceptions of the war and different political inclinations.

Using Hashimoto's categories, the film could probably best be described as a mix of victim and hero narratives, with an emphasis on the first, and there is not really any sense of Japan's role as perpetrators of the war. The Japanese fighters of the Zero planes seem to be caught up in a war they never wanted to be in, making them victims, but are also portrayed as courageous and skillful in battle, allowing the audience to interpret the movie as a hero-narrative as well. Miyazaki's claim that the film glorifies the kamikaze pilots is not wrong, but the main character is mainly portrayed as “good” for wanting to end the war, not for his sacrificial spirit or for being on a quest for glory. Miyazaki on the other hand has made a very different kind of war film, though set in the same time-period, and for this reason it will be interesting to compare the two.

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3.2 The Wind Rises

In Miyazaki's *The Wind Rises*, which according to himself was supposed to be his last film, we follow the story of the real-life engineer behind the Zero model and other airplanes used around the time of the war, Jiro Horikoshi. The film is a mix of historical accuracy with some added fictional elements and characters. Horikoshi grows up with a fascination for aircrafts but due to his bad eyesight he can not fly them, so instead he goes for a career as an engineer and constructor of them. In common Studio Ghibli style the story often mixes dreams with reality, and in his daydreams Horikoshi meets the Italian aircraft designer Giovanni Caproni, who inspires him and encourages him to follow his goals. At the same time, the story is set in a very bleak period of Japan's history. Early on in the film we see the devastating Kanto earthquake of 1923, see Japan go through its economic depression and eventually reach the early years of World War II. There is also a quite gloomy love-story in focus with a woman who has been affected by the tuberculosis epidemic. The message about dreams and imagination is a common theme for Miyazaki, but otherwise this is probably the least childlike and most adult movie he has made so far.

The film was very successful, being the highest grossing film in Japan of 2013, and receiving critical acclaim both in Japan and abroad.\(^3^9\) It got several awards, and also an Academy Award nomination. Just like *The Eternal Zero* however, the film created controversy even before the film was released, only in this case the director got criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. Some voices in South Korea argued that by making Jiro Horikoshi the hero the film glorified a symbol of the Japanese military, and they also pointed out that some of the people who actually helped constructing these aircrafts were forced laborers from Korea.\(^4^0\) Miyazaki then met with some South Korean reporters and argued that Horikoshi had historically been an opponent of the war rather than a proponent of it. Even more negative voices were heard from Japanese nationalist and right-wing groups, who interpreted the film as being too critical of Japan's role in the war, and called the director a "traitor" and "anti-Japanese". Miyazaki has never been shy to speak about his political opinions, and has described himself as a pacifist. During the release of this film Prime Minister Abe was already

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engaged in his efforts to revise the pacifist point in Article 9 of the constitution, prompting Miyazaki to write an open letter where he warned against a lack of historical knowledge and awareness in the current government, writing that "People who don't think enough shouldn't meddle with the constitution." This further angered some already critical right-wing voices in the country.

So does the film have this historical accuracy and firm anti-war stance that Miyazaki claims his government lacks, or can the film be said to in some sense glorify certain aspects of the war, as Korean critics argued? First we should probably note that this film stands out as Miyazaki's most personal film. 2013 also saw the release of *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*, a documentary about Studio Ghibli and the creation of *The Wind Rises*, in which many parallels are drawn behind Jiro Horikoshi's obsession with aircrafts and Miyazaki's obsession which his own film-making craft. Miyazaki is presented as a somewhat eccentric figure who values his work more than anything, and the film implies that this makes him sympathetic to someone like Horikoshi. This is also how Horikoshi is portrayed in *The Wind Rises* - as someone who follows his dreams obsessively to the point of forgetting the world around him. The problem with this is of course that he never really reflects on his own role in the war and how his own constructions are being used as weapons in Pearl Harbor and other battlefronts. And the film doesn't exactly blame him for this, at least not explicitly. We do get some hints of what the aircrafts are used for, but it is mostly up to the audience to decide if we should hold him accountable for it or not. The Zero fighter planes are also clearly romanticized in the movie, almost as much as in *The Eternal Zero*, and they are frequently depicted as being beautiful and elegant. This is not very surprising due to Miyazaki's life-long enthusiasm for airplanes, as have been visible in his earlier films like *Porco Rosso*, and this enthusiasm for especially the technical side of aircrafts is often on display here as we get to follow the various stages of design and development of them in great detail. The film often creates a harsh visual contrast between the elegance of the planes soaring the blue sky, as envisioned in Horikoshi's dreams, and the gloomy reality of the poverty and misery in the real-life state of the country.

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The film does definitely attempt to convey a general anti-war message, staying true to Miyazaki's pacifism, and to its credit it also shows us more of the historical context behind the story than *The Eternal Zero* does. For example, Japan's alliance with Germany is put on display when Horikoshi goes to a German military base to study their aircrafts. In one quite surprising scene, while staying at a resort with his tuberculosis-inflicted love interest, he meets with a German man named Castorp who is secretly opposed to the Nazi regime. Castorp quietly alludes to several of Japan's not-so-heroic historical actions, mentioning a "war in China" and a "puppet state in Manchuria". This scene alone could probably qualify the movie to be put in the perpetrator-category in Hashimoto's sense, although it is a very quick scene that would probably not educate anyone who was not already familiar with the history. There are also moments when Horikoshi's daydreams turn into nightmares, and vague images are shown of the fire and destruction caused by the aircrafts in the war. One could certainly make the case however, that the film ultimately absolves Horikoshi of any responsibility, and that in the end he is shown to be right in following own personal obsessions and dreams. Comments by Miyazaki seem to confirm that this is his personal opinion on the matter, saying in an interview that Horikoshi "wasn't thinking about weapons – really all he desired was to make exquisite planes", and he even added that the Zero aircrafts "represented one of the few things we Japanese could be proud of – they were a truly formidable presence, and so were the pilots who flew them".42

There are thus several interesting similarities and differences with *The Eternal Zero*. The main character in *The Wind Rises* film is not entirely unlike the kamikaze pilot in *The Eternal Zero*, both being sympathetic figures that are caught up in the forces of war, and with both films focusing a lot on their family lives and personal relationships. The focus on such personal themes lets them be the heroes of the movies while not necessarily being heroes of the nation or the war. While both movies focus more on personal issues than politics, Miyazaki's movie provides more context to the war, including some mentions of Japan's war crimes. This makes it impossible to see the movie as a hero-narrative, while the lack of context in *The Eternal Zero* makes this interpretation possible. At the same time, both movies are clearly romanticizing the Zero fighter planes to a significant degree. Both are blends of history and fiction, but *The Wind Rises* is much less focused on action-scenes than *The

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Eternal Zero, so only the latter could really be described as trivializing the war or portraying it in a fun way. For a movie which differs a lot from both of these two, and leans much more towards the fictional side of things rather than the historical, I will now look at Kancolle: The Movie, and also some similar works.

### 3.3 Kancolle: The Movie, and other animated works

The previously discussed films are both blends of historical accuracy and fictional narrative, but many of the war films of the last years seem to put their emphasis on the fictional, imaginative side of things. This can probably be seen most clearly in the animation industry, which has produced a number of quite idiosyncratic interpretations of military and political history, to say the least. In the 2010 TV-series The Legend of Koizumi, political figures like Shinzo Abe and Adolf Hitler solve international conflicts by playing high-stakes games of Mahjong with each other. In the Hetalia franchise, which has a large female audience in Japan, handsome young men are personifications of nation states like Japan, Germany and the US, and its story portrays the conflicts of World War II and other historical events as a light-hearted sitcom or situational comedy. In Girls und Panzer, a TV-series running from 2012 to 2013, World War II-era battle tanks are used by high school girls for tank warfare as a competitive sport. One could list several other examples that go on in a similar fashion.

The Kantai Collection-franchise, or KanColle for short, in which the historical battleships and other navy vehicles from World War II are anthropomorphized as young girls, is thus not a unique example, but perhaps only stands out most clearly for its huge popularity. The original web browser game had 3 million users in 2015, and it inspired a large franchise with novels, comics, a TV-series, a feature film and other media. In the game, the player would take control of a fleet of these weapons/girls, all of which are meticulously designed to resemble the historical models on which they were built.  

When seeing the 2016 animated film Kancolle: The Movie it is clear that is has been made to attract the fans already familiar with the original games, as the context behind the story isn't really explained in detail. For this reason it can be hard to follow for a new audience, and

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43 Valtteri Vuorikoski, Discourses of war and history in the Japanese game Kantai Collection and its fan community, Masters Thesis, University of Helsinki, 2017, 4-10
there is not really much time spent on introducing the world or the characters. The story takes place right after the end of the TV-series, which ended with a battle inspired by the historical Battle of Midway of the Pacific War. We follow a fleet lead by a character named Nagato, who is both named and carefully modeled after the historical Japanese battleship Nagato, made for the Imperial Japanese Navy and used in the Battle of Midway among other important battles. In fact, every single one of the protagonists in this all-female cast are modeled just like this, by meticulously re-designing real battleships as girls, with many of them having personal anecdotes and back-stories connected to them that reference events from World War II.

Despite these clear references to actual history, most of the story takes place in a rather vaguely described fantasy world. The villains are equally vaguely described as monsters that “came from the depths of the sea” and it's not immediately clear if they are supposed to represent the Allied nations or anything similar. This vagueness is likely by design and is probably also a part of the reason for the large number of fan-created comics and other media that have been made by the series’ fan community. A vague story and background can allow the audience to interpret it in their own way and to unleash their creativity. It’s not surprising however that the story is often interpreted precisely as a kind of re-imagining of World War II in these fan-works. The fact that maps of various battles in the Pacific War are referenced both in the games and the films lends the otherwise vague story to such an interpretation.

The franchise does contain elements of some of the seedier aspects of Japan's game and animation culture. For example, the character's clothes get progressively ripped off after being damaged in the games, and the player can even marry one of the young girls. Most of the criticism of *KanColle* however has been about the fantastical and, for some critics, revisionist approach to Japanese war history. A 2013 article in the Korean newspaper *Hankook Ilbo*, argued that the franchise glorifies the Imperial Japanese Navy, trivializes the horrors of the war and is a troubling example of a right-wing political trend among young people in Japan. *The Japan Times* on the other hand published an article arguing that any relation to real-life

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44 Vuorikoski, 84-101
politics was negligible and that the series’ success was largely due to a successful mixed-media strategy by the creators.45

Without reading the minds of the creators, it is impossible to know exactly what the intention behind *KanColle: The Movie* and its wider franchise is, and the same goes for the other works I mentioned in the beginning of this section. As I see it, there are at least four ways to understand and interpret these kinds of fantasy-based interpretations of war history. The first would be the least charitable one, which is to see it as a kind of right-wing revanchism and historical revisionism, created to pander to the fantasies of nationalists and militarists. *KanColle* for example imagines its own version of the Battle of Midway, one of the crucial turning points in the Pacific War, but in this version the Japanese battleships lead them to victory rather than defeat, and one could certainly argue that this is a kind of historical revanchism. The second interpretation would be that the series simply trivializes the war and distances us from it in a way that might be problematic, but not necessarily on purpose. The third and more charitable interpretation would be to argue that the series doesn't have much to do with the war at all and is in fact nothing more than a piece of entertainment, with the battleships and similar elements being used for fun rather than for politics. The fourth, and even more charitable interpretation, is that the series actually appropriates things like battleships and aircraft carriers away from the Japanese right-wing into a new context where everyone can enjoy them. It's not necessarily the case that people who are enthusiastic about battleships and similar vehicles, even those used for war, are also advocates for any pro-nationalist or pro-militarist ideologies.

It's necessary though to put the series in the wider context of the Japanese entertainment industry. Japan is a country where pop-culture tropes and symbols, especially those related to comics, animations and video games, are frequently employed for uses beyond mere entertainment. In an article in The Diplomat called “Japan: The Manga Military”, Matthew Brummer writes about how the Japanese Self-defense Forces and other institutions have made use of cartoon characters for propaganda and to spread political messages.46 For example, the


JSDF has made use of "cute" cartoon imagery in its recruiting campaigns. Similarly, a symposium for defense technology associated with the Ministry of Defense used female characters in their advertisements that would be right at home in the KanColle series. Female characters help to paint these institutions in a harmless way while also working to attract a male audience, and the military institutions have obviously understood that this helps to boost their image among a significant portion of the public. The JSDF also produced a cartoon on its own aimed at young children, in which a blue mechanical bird tells us why the military is a force for stability and peace.47

According to Takayoshi Yamamura, collaboration between the JSDF and the entertainment industry, especially the animation industry, has existed since at least the 80s and has become increasingly common in recent years.48 This does not however necessarily point towards a resurgence of militarism or any similar ideology. For Yamamura, these collaborations are primarily driven by market forces rather than attempts of spreading propaganda. Fans and audiences have for example longed for more realism and accuracy in films and animation works, and for this reason the JSDF and other real-life organizations have offered to appear more often in cinema and TV-series. The JSDF can provide their expertise and the films can then depict battles with realistic weaponry and other military equipment. On the other hand some productions that have been made with help of the JSDF does seem to have a somewhat militarist bent, like the 2015 animated TV-series Gate: Jieitai Kanochi Nite, Kaku Tatakaeri (translated as Gate: Thus the Japanese Self-Defense Force Fought There). Based on a novel by a former member of the JSDF, the series portrays the modern military as heroes fighting monsters in a fantasy world. There are also occasional appearances of other countries, which are usually depicted as annoyances or obstructions to the Japanese military. After the success of the series, the JSDF used some of the characters from the series in their recruitment posters.49

In conclusion, it is never easy to determine why these kinds of films and TV-series are produced and enjoyed - whether it is for some specific political motivations or simply because people find war and military themes entertaining. While looking at *Kancolle: The Movie* we should remember that enthusiasm for weaponry and military combat does not necessarily come with any far-right ideology. In Valtteri Vuorikoski’s study on the *KanColle* franchise, he finds that most of its fans do in fact not interpret its themes as nationalistic or pro-militaristic, but that these interpretations could potentially be made as well. There is also no doubt that while the series often references historical events, it consistently ignores any details that would make Japan look like a perpetrator. If Korean commentators feel uneasy with the lighthearted or trivial utilization of these wartime elements for entertainment, this should perhaps not be ignored either. In any case it is certainly a hero-narrative we are following here, just like most other series named in this section are hero-narratives. It is probably not a coincidence that the war stories most distantly removed from reality, who are the most deeply embedded in fantasy also are the ones that can allow themselves to be hero-narratives without any caveats. A simple hero-narrative set in the real world would likely be much more controversial than this heavily fantasy-based story. To contrast this with a movie that takes a much more realistic approach, I will now discuss the historical drama *The Emperor in August*.

### 3.4 The Emperor in August

*The Emperor in August* is a historical drama from 2015 written and directed by Masato Harada, and a remake of the 1967 film *Japan's Longest Day*. It follows the emperor, the government ministers and various military generals during the last few days of World War II, as they have to decide to either surrender to the Allies or keep fighting. Summarizing the plot of the movie would sound almost like a history lesson here as Harada has attempted to make a movie that shows what happened with great detail and accuracy. In short, the main focus is on Emperor Hirohito, who wants to end the war and make a peace deal, and thus assigns the retired politician Kantaro Suzuki as Prime Minister so he can set up a cabinet with this goal in mind. Suzuki in turn appoints General Korechika Anami to represent the military in the cabinet, and these three historical characters - Hirohito, Suzuki and Anami - function as something like the protagonists of the movie. On the other side there is the army and navy generals, who mostly refuses the peace deal and whose opposition to it creates a stalemate in the diplomatic decisions. Most of the time the movie depicts various ministers and generals politely discussing the next government action with each other, and with the large number of
historical characters and complex twists and turns of the narrative the movie can be somewhat challenging to follow and will likely be appreciated best by people who already know some of the historical background. More action happens later in the movie however, as General Hideki Tojo of the army instigates a revolt against the cabinet together with a couple of young and fanatic military leaders.

Despite its low-key presentation and complex subject matter, the film was number 8 at the box office in Japan and did get quite a lot of attention in international media. Compared to the previously discussed movies, The Emperor in August does not seem to have stirred up much controversy, and it got a generally positive reception in Western media outlets. The South China Morning Post complained however about a lack of a "clear moral stance" and noted that Japan's role as a perpetrator is never really acknowledged.\(^5\) This could be a problem for Masato Harada, who has expressed a desire to educate young Japanese citizens about the history with his film, and to provide a more realistic portrayal of the war than they usually see.\(^5\) He has also claimed that this is an anti-war movie, while also admitting that he omitted some details about the emperor and his family in order not to upset right-wingers.\(^5\)

Looking purely at how the military is portrayed, the film could somewhat credibly claim to be anti-war and anti-militarism, as Hideki Tojo and the other military leaders are essentially the villains of the story, although they are mostly presented as young and hot-headed rather than cruel or violent. In contrast Emperor Hirohito and Prime Minster Suzuki are depicted as mild-mannered and family-oriented wise men, and it is clear that the director takes their side. On the other hand, the reasons for ending the war here are purely about the survival of Japan and the overwhelming force of the Allies, so there is no direct remorse expressed by the characters or any statement that the military should not have started a conflict in the first place. Of all the movies I've discussed, this is the only one where politics is clearly the central theme of the

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movie rather than, for example, the personal life of the main characters, and this makes the omission perhaps even more glaring. Harada would perhaps argue that this is because the movie focuses so strictly on just these few, important days, rather than the war as a whole, but while this might be a valid defense, the lack of context to these days makes it difficult to understand what “anti-war” is supposed to mean. For example, is Emperor Hirohito only against the war because they are just about to be defeated in it, or because he is opposed to wars in general? The critique in Chinese media that it lacks a "clear moral stance" seems valid in this sense.

One could also question the characterization of the protagonists, but this would take us to some thorny historical questions that historians sometimes disagree on. Was for example the emperor the wise, essentially peace-oriented man that the movie depicts him as? In history books and other places he is often presented as a somewhat passive man, distant from the war and more interested in his hobbies, like the science of jellyfish. It's also likely however that he followed the war very closely, including Japan's excursions to Nanking and other places without objecting or taking action, and in the post-war period he was not always clear about his opinions on Japan's responsibility in the war. The aging General Anami is presented as a principled war veteran most concerned with staying loyal to the emperor, but in reality he would likely also have been prosecuted for war crimes had he not committed ritualized suicide at the end of the war. Of course, this does not rule out that he actually was a principled and loyal man in reality as well, just like the emperor might very well have been a primarily peace-oriented man. A film like this has no choice but to make its own interpretation of the characters, based on often conflicting historical sources, and there's nothing objectionable about that. But the director has also needed to decide which known anecdotes or historical details to include or leave out, and the film does not mention any uncomfortable facts about its main characters.

In the Eternal Zero and The Wind Rises, there is something of a split between the main characters and the Japanese government. Both the kamikaze pilot and the aircraft engineer are essentially removed from politics, caught up in the war and the distant decisions of the

government, which are never really visible on the screen. That's why they can be described as victim-narratives in some sense, both being films about characters caught up in forces beyond their own control. Hashimoto's categories have to be applied a bit differently in *The Emperor in August*, since a similar split here is in the Japanese government itself. Japan is not really the hero, victim or perpetrator in the war, but is rather caught up in internal divisions between factions of different political motivations and ideologies. Military leaders like Hideki Tojo are shown as pushing for more fighting, and could therefore be considered perpetrators, although they are never directly blamed for any war crimes or attacks against other nations. Emperor Hirohito, Prime Minister Suzuki and General Anami are seen as more interested in their personal and family life, making them look like victims to the harsh realities of politics and war. Without any background knowledge it would probably be easy to come out of the movie theater with the understanding that Japan was primarily the victim in the war, since the events that forced Japan to surrender, like the atomic bomb droppings and the threat of a Soviet invasion, are discussed without any context. On the other hand, the fact that the military is shown as reckless and prone to violence would also allow for a light perpetrator-interpretation of the movie.

**Part 4: Conclusions**

4.1 Hero-narratives

In Hashimoto's usage, the hero-narrative is a kind of interpretation of history where a nation's actions are seen as justified and worthy of celebration. In order to describe a war film as a hero-narrative, what matters is that the military should be fighting for a just cause and that the nation should be on the right side of history. What does not matter is whether the movie has a "good" protagonist or not, and for this reason, a film like *The Wind Rises* is not a hero-narrative even though its main character is sympathetic and is the "hero" of the movie in this sense. For Hashimoto, the hero-narrative is the kind of story that mostly appeals to right-wing nationalist and other far-right groups, but as these are still somewhat marginal political views, an unambiguous and explicit hero-narrative is not common in mainstream cinema. Based on the films discussed in this article, I would argue that there are two main ways that a movie can still get away with certain types of hero-narratives - by blending the story with heavy doses of fantasy, like in *Kancolle: The Movie* and by making the background to the story vague enough, like in *The Eternal Zero*. 
Of the movies I have discussed, the one that could most easily be described as a hero-narrative is *Kancolle: The Movie*, where we are essentially meant to cheer for a force which is either the Imperial Japanese Navy, or something which closely resembles it. This was also the most fantasy-based movie, and a historical background can here only be seen in the details, like the names of certain weapons and locations. As I noted in the chapter on the history of Japanese war films, a trend of making very fantastical, almost purely fictional interpretations of World War II has been visible since the 2000s, and a quick look at especially the animation industry would suggest that this trend has been continuing. By setting the story in a fantasy-world the directors can allow themselves to make a much less careful or apologetic narrative, and the audience can enjoy things like weaponry and military combat without feelings of guilt.

The novel behind *The Eternal Zero* was famous for its strong nationalist tone and its author was a controversial political voice, but the movie is much vaguer, and here Japan's role in the war is neither condemned nor approved. We are supposed to cheer when the hero shoots down American navy ships, but for all we know this might be strictly for self-defense purposes. This allows for the interpretation of a hero-narrative, enjoyable for a "nationalist" audience, while a more generous person could see it as a more politically neutral victim-narrative. Some very quick and subtle lines near the end about protecting the future of Japan have a mild nationalistic tone, but in the end any hero-narrative is implied rather than stated out loud, and it's certainly not unthinkable that this vague approach is by design.

### 4.2 Victim-narratives

A film with a victim-narrative emphasizes the suffering of the people in the nation, whether they are civilians or are directly involved with the war. In Hashimoto's book, she reviews 430 testimonies from former soldiers about their experience and memory of the war, and finds that most of these soldiers describe themselves as powerless victims. Most tend to focus on the violence and despair they personally suffered, while only a much smaller number remember themselves as heroes or perpetrators. This interpretation also seems to have carried over to later generations to some degree, and in general it's not hard to see how a victim-narrative is less controversial to adopt rather than a hero or perpetrator-narrative. And it is certainly not

54 Hashimoto, 22
wrong to say that most people were victims in some sense, even if they might also have had responsibility for what happened. A victim-narrative focuses on what most (though not all) people can agree on - that being caught up in war will be a horrific and traumatic experience - and for this reason it is also the most politically correct and safe way to interpret what happened.

It is probably for this reason that in most of the films I have discussed, the main characters are portrayed as victims of the forces of war. In *The Eternal Zero*, the grandfather Kamikaze-pilot is caught up in the war without any enthusiasm, and his primary concern is getting back to his family and friends. Jiro Horikoshi in *The Wind Rises* is also caught up in forces beyond his own control, and his love-interest falls victim to tuberculosis due to the poverty and devastation that plagued the country. In *The Emperor in August*, Emperor Hirohito and other important characters are portrayed as family-oriented men who get caught up in politics and military affairs against their will. A common thread here is how family and friends are important for all of the characters, and how they work or fight to defend them. This is probably no coincidence - by making the characters fight for people close to them, they can be the "heroes" of the movie in a conventional sense, while also keeping the movie a victim-narrative rather than a hero-narrative in Hashimoto's sense.

Even if the main characters are victims, this does not mean that the film always portrays Japan the nation as a victim. In *The Eternal Zero* and *The Emperor in August* the question of which countries were responsible for the war and which were victims is left unstated, and we do not really get to know the director's opinion on the matter. On the other hand, as only the suffering of the Japanese people is visible, it's certainly easy to reach for a victim-interpretation of the story. Films with an underlying sense of victimhood also tend to include a (sometimes very vague) anti-war message, something which can be seen to various degrees in *The Eternal Zero*, *The Wind Rises* and *The Emperor in August*.

### 4.3 Perpetrator-narratives

A perpetrator-narrative confronts the worst parts of a nation's history, in an effort to bring truth to light or some redemption for the victims. In Japan, the public has diverse and contradictory opinions on the nation's responsibility in World War II, and this split is often seen in polls and other studies. For example, a survey in the newspaper Yomiuri showed that 34% saw the Pacific War as an act of aggression from Japan, and another 34% believed that
the war in China was an act of aggression, but not the Pacific War.\textsuperscript{55} Explicitly stating a perpetrator-narrative can also draw loud critical voices from right-wing nationalists, as can be seen in the negative reaction towards Hayao Miyazaki and his film. Like the hero-narrative, the perpetrator-narrative is less politically correct than the victim-narrative, and for this reason it is also less visible on film.

Of the movies explored here, it is indeed only \textit{The Wind Rises} which has an unambiguous perpetrator-narrative, and even here it is only visible in a short, almost miss-it-if-you-blink scene. In fact, the dialogue between Horikoshi and Castorp at the sanatorium is the only time that Japan's invasion of China and other acts of aggression is mentioned explicitly in all of these movies, and for this reason it's almost shocking to see it. In \textit{The Emperor in August}, there is very little context outside of what occurs during the last few days of the war, but since the military is shown to be fiercely motivated to keep the war going, a mild perpetrator-interpretation is also possible of the movie.

There is no reason to think that the political climate in Japan is the only cause for a lack of perpetrator-narratives however, as it is also possible that the perpetrator-narrative simply doesn't lend itself as well to entertainment. Most mainstream movies want to have likable and sympathetic main characters, and it's not hard to see how this could be difficult to incorporate into a perpetrator-narrative. Philip Seaton also points out another problem here - how can directors portray things like violent invasions and occupations in a way that doesn't just become exploitation or sensationalism? A movie about something like the torture and human experimentation going on in Unit 731 in Manchukuo might easily turn into a gross-out exploitation movie, and dealing with these issues in a way that is sensitive to the victims is not necessarily an easy thing. For this reason, a more comprehensive study should perhaps also look at documentaries and other non-narrative works to make a fairer conclusion on the number of perpetrator-narratives in Japanese media.

\section*{4.4 Trends in contemporary Japanese war films}

The dominant narrative in these movies is the victim-narrative, which is present in all films discussed except \textit{Kancolle: The Movie}. This movie is the only unambiguous hero-narrative, but also the least realistic and historical one. A perpetrator-narrative can be seen in \textit{The Wind}

\textsuperscript{55} Hashimoto, 19
Rises, and to a small degree also in *The Emperor in August*. Different categories can also co-exist in a single movie, like in *The Wind Rises*, which focuses on the suffering of common people but also mentions the responsibility of the Japanese government. This possible co-existence of the different narratives is something that Hashimoto mentions herself, and for her this is in part because these different elements can in fact also co-exist in a single person.\(^56\) Indeed, it might not be directly wrong for example to describe a soldier as both a victim, being forced to take orders from above, and a perpetrator, ultimately being the one who carries out the acts. Regardless, Hashimoto's categories are a very useful lens to look through when comparing Japanese war movies, and they help to make visible the various competing visions of the past that exist in the consciousness of the filmmakers and their audience.

To answer one of the questions from the beginning of this article, it would be much too strong to say that these movies reflect any general political shift in Japan towards nationalism or pro-militarism as some Western media has worried about, or any other political direction for that matter. Strong hero-narratives that justifies war has only been visible in very fantasy-based works like *Kancolle: The Movie*, and it is more common for historical films to express the feeling that war is a negative force. If there is a worrying trend, it is rather the frequent lack of any context that has been seen in most of these movies. This reluctance to make clear statements about Japan's responsibility in the war is glaringly obvious in all of these movies except for Miyazaki's. How much of this is because of political reasons and how much of it is driven by market demands and the desire to entertain the audience is not clear, but it is clearly unnerving to some people in countries like China and Korea. Some people have argued that the current Japanese film industry is very harsh for new directors and that it mostly favors formulaic and very large-budget mainstream productions.\(^57\) In such an environment it is not surprising that most films take the safe route and avoid the narratives which could alienate audiences or upset people with specific political views. In order to get films that address complex issues like war, history and national responsibility in new and less politically correct ways, creating an economic climate which can better support low or mid-budget productions might be a solid first step.

\(^{56}\) Hashimoto, 80
Sources:


