



Surviving **Tumultuous** Times with the Power of History

The Onin War × World War I: Confronting the Chaos in Times without a Hero

Goza Yuichi vs. Hosoya Yuichi



Section of the “*Shinnyodo engi*” hand scroll depicting an Onin War battle at Shinnyo-do temple (Shinsho Gokuraku-ji Temple) in Kyoto, painted by Fujiwara Hisakuni (?-?) in 1524

Source: Via Wikipedia, Public Domain

Why is the Onin War Important Today?

Hosoya Yuichi: I heard that *Onin no ran: Sengoku jidai wo unda tairan* (The Onin War: The Civil War that Produced the Warring States Period) sold more than 200,000 copies in four months after it was published. Now that books are not selling well, this is a remarkable achievement. Why are so many people paying attention to a book about a war that began 550 years ago that is notorious, but whose cause and results are unclear? What do you think about the readers’ reaction?



Hosoya Yuichi,
Professor, Keio
University

Goza Yuichi: I might be the most surprised. There are many history buffs in Japan, but I think they basically love tales of heroes, such as Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Tokugawa Ieyasu and Sakamoto Ryoma. When you go to a bookstore, you will see books or magazines about business skills learned from Oda Nobunaga. These are stories about particular historical figures controlling a situation, carving out an era by themselves and making progress. I guess those stories about heroes lack realism now. I think that the vague Onin War without a hero matches the current uncertain atmosphere.

Hosoya: I think “realism” is certainly a keyword. Why is *Onin no Ran* so realistic? I consider the following three factors. First, the book is based on a firm academic documentation. Instead of relying on stereotypes such as the historiography of class struggle, the story properly follows the latest researches and demonstratively describes what actually happened. Second, as many have already said, in this book the development of the Onin War is described through the diaries of two Buddhist monks from Kofuku-ji temple, that is, from the third-person point of view. I think it is very realistic that the story looks at the war in Kyoto from the perspective of Nara. It is an exquisite sense of distance, isn’t it?



Goza Yuichi,
Assistant
Professor,
International
Research Center
for Japanese
Studies University

Goza: If you go too far away, it will become another person’s affair; if you come too close, you will become involved and you will miss the whole picture. In addition, the two Buddhist monks, Kyogaku and Jinson, have a striking contrast in character. Kyogaku is positive, but acts based on makeshift measures and the lack of a long-term view. Jinson is passive and approaches things from the perspective of an onlooker, and is consistently cool. Previous studies are mainly based on *Daijoinjishazojiki*, which was Jinson’s diary. If you only refer to a particular person, your perspective will be skewed. Although the two Buddhist monks lived during the Onin War, they did not know what would happen next. They did not know that the Onin War would continue for eleven years and who would win, the *togun* (eastern army) or *seigun* (western army). The two Buddhist monks made many predictions, but they turned out to be incorrect. They were also confused by false information and rumors. I wanted to focus on this point.

Hosoya: I see. Third, as you mentioned the word “vague,” the story describes what remains still unclear. Many things in the world are actually unclear. Fundamentally, I guess you are not sure why *Onin no Ran* is selling well. You just explain it because people tell you to. [Laughs]

Goza: You got it. [Laughs]

Hosoya: I think that most things in the world happen by chance, because of good timing or a fortunate series of events. People usually try to explain them after they happen. Let me discuss another topic. I meet many people to ask them why the UK decided to leave the EU. Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon, which was agreed upon in 2007, stipulated the regulations for leaving the EU. I met a British former Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs who had written that

Article. He said, “Many people have discussed the reasons why the UK decided to leave the EU after it happened. But in most cases, the reasons are unclear. For example, the EU was established by the Maastricht Treaty. Many people wrote books about why it was concluded, but none of those explanations are correct.”

Goza: What is correct?

Hosoya: The diplomat said, “At the most important moment of the summit meeting for drafting the Maastricht Treaty, France was supposed to be opposed, but President François Mitterrand did not disapprove it. Why? Because he had attended many meetings until late at night every day, he took a nap at the most important moment.” [Laughs]

Goza: Really?

Hosoya: This means that a historic moment was unexpectedly made by a trivial thing and by chance. The point is that history moves vaguely.

Goza: I can see it very well. If the Onin War has something in common with today, it is complicated, difficult to understand and chaotic. When the publishers asked me to write *Onin no Ran* as a *shinsho*-sized edition, I understood that they expected me to explain clearly the Onin War that was complicated and difficult to understand. Therefore, of course, I made inventive efforts. However, I was also aware that if I tried to be too simple or too graphic or if I gave a simple explanation that the Onin War was caused by *A* with the result of *B*, it would be nonsense.

In What Ways is the Onin War Similar to World War I?

Hosoya: In *Onin no Ran*, you mention World War I as being another conflict that was structurally similar to the Onin War. This expresses the broadness of your perspective, and is also one of the reasons why I—as someone who specializes in international history—was pulled out to participate in this discussion with you. [Laughs] What was your original motivation for thinking to cite World War I as an example?

Goza: That’s another simple one. The reason [that I chose to cite World War I as an example] is that it was in 2014 that I was asked to write the book, which marked the milestone of exactly 100 years since the outbreak of World War I. Various commemorative events were held, and several

books were released, but one thing that was emphasized through it all was that nobody thought things would turn out the way they did, and there was no leader who could control the situation. I thought that if that was the case, then surely it was the same as the Onin War.

Hosoya: When thinking about history, I think that relativizing the particular era that you are considering is a very useful approach. Of course, specific historical events only occur once, but when we consider the dynamic that drove the events of that era, there are always things that become apparent when we look for similar events or phenomena.

With World War I, as was also the case with the Onin War, there were almost no leaders who were able to control the events of the time. If we consider World War II, leaders such as Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin displayed their leadership abilities, led their respective nations to victory, and built the postwar world that we now live in. But in the case of World War I, there were no such heroes. Figures such as US President Woodrow Wilson are symbolic of this, in that he failed to ratify and join the League of Nations that he himself helped to create, and ultimately became physically unfit and resigned.

On the other hand, World War I was certainly a turning point in history. The war marked the beginning of the end of the age in which the world centered around imperial and aristocratic Europe, and a shift towards a new ideology and a central focus on the United States.

The view that the Onin War was a turning point in Japanese history is not limited only to the prewar oriental historian Naito Konan. What makes the Onin War an important turning point?

Goza: The biggest reason is that the Onin War led to the collapse of the political structure and political order centered around Kyoto, which had continued for many years until that time. The war marked the beginning of the *Sengoku* period (the Warring States period), with powerful *sengoku daimyo* (feudal warlords) appearing throughout Japan and ruling over their respective localities. This scattering of daimyo was eventually reorganized into the feudal political system (called the *bakuhau taisei*) during the Edo Period, and Japanese society continued to function under local government rule until Japan became a centralized national government state as a result of the Meiji Restoration. The Onin War was the initial starting point for this.

Hosoya: It certainly does overlap with World War I. After the war, the old world order that was driven by the five major European powers broke down, and Japan and the United States came to the fore. The future of the world could no longer be decided by the European powers alone. That being said, the new world order was not yet determined either.

One of the major driving principles for the creation of a durable international order is to share common interests and common values with respect to that order being maintained. In the case of Europe, there was a general understanding and assumption with regard to imperialism and the aristocratic system. But this was destroyed by World War I, and by the Russian Revolution. The problem was that after the old world order broke down, a new world order was not born for some time. This meant that there was no choice but for an age of disorder and chaos to come in-between.

Goza: And this present day and age is also exactly just that.

Hosoya: That's right. Currently, a massive shift in the world's "tectonic plates" is taking place. We are no longer in an age that can be ruled by Europe and the United States alone. Although, that being said, it's not the case that countries such as China and India have either the self-awareness or real power to take responsible action themselves, either. This age of chaos will probably continue for least some time into the future.

The important things in times of confusion such as this are the balance of power and military strength. When order is being maintained, a certain degree of normality is present, and it is possible to reach various agreements and to cooperate and harmonize based on that. However, without such norms, it becomes a case of the strong being regarded as correct. The significance of possessing military strength will become considerably greater than it has been until now. The debate regarding the necessity of the US-Japan alliance and security-related legislation is an extension of this fact. As you criticized in your previous book, *Senso no Nihon chusei-shi* (Dissecting Warfare of Medieval Japan, published by Shinchosha), pacifism means attempting to apply one's own values in any situation, with no consideration for the prerequisite of how the times are changing.

Goza: After a major war, it is only natural for strong feelings of wishing to evade further conflict to arise. But it is necessary to consider the danger that these feelings do not cloud your vision with regard to war itself.

Hosoya: The same thing can be said of World War I. After the war, an intense pacifism took hold in Europe, and as a result the leaders of the time made the terrible choice that they should appease and compromise with Hitler if the alternative meant facing another war. Isn't it also the case that people thought the same way after the Onin War, too?

Goza: Yes, that's right. I think that in some aspects, the fact that the Hosokawa Clan, who had supported the Ashikaga shogunate militarily, exercised restraint in the use of military force after the Onin War would invite the emergence of new powers. Until the Onin War started, the balance of power between powerful *shugo daimyo* (provincial military governors) such as the Hosokawa, Yamana, Hatakeyama and Shiba clans enabled a certain level of political stability to be achieved. But the Onin War destroyed the balance of power that had existed until that time, allowing the emergence of new powers: the so-called *sengoku daimyo*.

Although the *Sengoku* period is popularly believed to be an age where famous warlords such as Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin were active, in reality it took quite a long period of time before they actually appeared. The Onin War ended in 1477, but it was not until around the 1520s (around half a century after the end of the war) that *sengoku daimyo* like Takeda and Uesugi became key players. Furthermore, it wasn't until 1554 that the tripartite alliance was formed between the Takeda Shingen (the governor of Kai province), Hojo Ujiyasu (the governor of Sagami province) and Imagawa Yoshimoto (the governor of Suruga province), thus helping to establish a balance of power. The age of chaos continued for a long time before this stage was reached.

Hosoya: Can those aspects of it also be compared to the new order created by the Congress of Vienna after the end of the Napoleonic Wars?

Goza: If I went too far, it seemed likely that I would be told "that's not an appropriate comparison," and so I didn't write about it in *Onin no Ran*, but I believe that the Ashikaga shogunate itself was similar to the Vienna System. What it means is that after the end of a major war—the *Nanboku-cho* civil war—that devastated the whole of Japan, the Ashikaga shogunate created a system that would prevent major wars from occurring. The fundamental concept of this system was to make powerful *shugo daimyo* live in Kyoto.

The *shugo daimyo* were retainers of the shogunate, but particularly during the *Nanboku-cho* (or "Northern and Southern Courts") period when *Nancho* (or the Southern Court)—which was the mortal enemy of the shogunate—existed, disgruntled daimyo continued to form ties with the Southern Court and mount insurrections against the shogunate. Therefore the shogunate gathered the powerful *shugo daimyo* together in Kyoto to prevent them from forming military cliques in outlying regions.

This system worked well for a period of around twenty to thirty years, beginning in the early 1440s. The *shugo daimyo* who were gathered together in Kyoto reconciled their respective interests through consultation and agreement. I think that this has some aspects in common with the Vienna System. If we speak in terms of the three principles of order—balance, concert and community—

that you identified in your book, *Kokusai chitsujo* (*International Order*, published by Chukoshinso), then it was a “concert” system.

Hosoya: I see.

Goza: But the sixth shogun, Ashikaga Yoshinori, put an end to this system of group consultation. Because the shogun was unable to overturn decisions made by unanimous agreement between the daimyo, this system posed an extremely bothersome obstacle to him. When a problem arose, Yoshinori consulted with the daimyo individually. As a result of this, horizontal connections between the daimyo themselves were cut off. In the short term, this system worked to the shogun’s advantage, but eventually the shogunate became very unstable. Later, when Yoshinori was assassinated, the following shogun was forced to conduct politics based on the existing balance of power. When this balance of power collapsed, the resulting conflict that occurred was the Onin War.

Hosoya: What’s particularly interesting is the question of when that concert system collapses. In *Onin no Ran*, too, you also emphasized the fact that everything is not necessarily determined by the foolish actions of a single individual.

In France, there was a historian named Pierre Renouvin. When discussing the origins of World War I, Renouvin not only identified the actions or failures of specific individuals, but also pointed out that there were massive social forces at work in the background. In French he called them “*forces profondes*,” or “deep forces.” One interesting thing to consider when thinking about this is that the two Balkan Wars took place directly before World War I. At the time, the five major European powers avoided all-out war through a concerted system. The success of this system led to the optimism and extravagant thinking, after the Sarajevo incident (the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand), that there was no way that it would escalate into a war. When the war began in June 1914, everyone thought—optimistically—that it would be over by Christmas. The massive dynamics that cause wars to spread and expand cannot be seen simply by looking at individual events.

This might be a non-academic question, but were these kinds of massive “*forces profondes*” at work in the case of the Onin War, too? In depicting the Onin War, in the process as it began, did you feel any kind of invisible dynamic at work?

Goza: Yes, I did. The established theory at recent academic society meetings on medieval history says that even prior to the Onin War, the order that underpinned the shogunate itself had become

very unstable. Local disputes were occurring throughout the land. What had an even greater impact was the occurrence of *tsuchi ikki* (peasant uprisings) and *tokusei ikki* (uprisings demanding the issuance of a *tokuseirei*, a decree ordering the return of land and cancellation of debts). Directly before the Onin War, the situation had escalated to such an extent that these uprisings struck Kyoto on an almost annual basis. Every time an uprising occurred, the shogunate would suppress it. But that didn't become a solution to the root of the problem. For the people of the time, starving people surging into Kyoto was an everyday situation. In retrospect, when it had reached that point in time, the ruling system of the Ashikaga shogunate was already in a state of malfunction, and seemed likely to collapse at a single push. The Onin War was that push; but neither the eighth shogun Yoshimasa or the other daimyo thought that it would be the final push.

Hosoya: I said earlier that when a massive structural change takes place, everything is not necessarily determined by the actions of a single individual. But what's interesting is that, at such times, obtuse or thick-witted individuals are needed as actors. In the case of the Onin War it was Ashikaga Yoshimasa, and in World War I it was figures such as Tsar Nikolai II of Russia and Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria. What these people have in common is that they all lived in their own narrow little world. Because they were shut away at court, only having contact with a limited range of people, they were frighteningly unperceptive of what was actually going on in their countries. If we carry this over to the present day, I believe that Hillary Clinton showed the same kind of obtuseness (during the US presidential election). There is a region of the United States known as the "Rust Belt" (a reference to the deindustrialization of once prosperous industrial areas), which includes cities such as Detroit and Cincinnati. During her campaign, Hillary hardly visited the Rust Belt at all. This was in stark contrast with Donald Trump, who visited the Rust Belt on a seemingly weekly basis. Last year, I met with people from Hillary's election campaign office. I felt the same thing then. In the capital city of Washington DC, 91% voted for Hillary. In New York, too, 87% voted for Hillary. What I'm saying is, if you are in Washington DC or New York, you cannot see the massive structural changes that are taking place in the United States as a whole. And it's not only Hillary. Newspaper reporters and experts always meet with people in places like Washington DC and New York. I think that, probably, it's when massive social discontent and—even before that—movements to destroy the established world order are combined with obtuse or thick-witted leaders who are unable to perceive those changes that history begins to move.

Goza: Yes, I understand what you are saying very well. If you watch an old-fashioned historical drama, you get an image of samurai warriors being quite Spartan: strong, simple and sincere. But

in actual fact, the *shugo daimyo* of the *Muromachi* (Ashikaga) period read poetry with the court nobility and Buddhist monks in Kyoto, and were more aristocratic than warrior-like. It's quite dubious as to what extent they truly grasped what was going on in their own provinces. I think that it was those kind of aspects that led to this kind of obtuseness.

We Cannot Make a Clear Distinction Between Wartime and Peacetime

Hosoya: In the case of the Onin War, various game changing factors were jumbled and compounded together, and interacted in various ways, and so I think that it is not a war that can be depicted in a linear or one-track manner. Even if we don't know exactly when it ended, in hindsight, we can see that something caused the war to end, and that this follows on to the subsequent era.

Goza: The fact that the Onin War did not end properly, with proper closure, is very important. Sixteen years after the end of the Onin War, a kind of *coup d'état*—known as the Meio Coup—took place. It was the first case that the shogun's retainers replaced the shogun. Recently, some have expressed the opinion that in fact it was this Meio Coup that was the definitive incident that destroyed the authority of the Ashikaga shogunate, and that marked the beginning of the Warring States period. Directly speaking, that might be so. But the reason why a *coup d'état* such as the Meio Coup occurred was that the Onin War was not ended properly.

Formally, historians consider that the winner of the Onin War was *togun*, but it wasn't the case that *daimyo* who participated in *seigun* were executed, or faced other extremely heavy penalties. They simply became weary of battle, and returned to their own provinces. *Togun* simply chased *seigun* away in order to end the fighting in Kyoto, and *seigun* did not particularly acknowledge that they had lost. With things as they were, there would be no process of attempting to create a new postwar order. This is what brought about the long age of chaos and confusion that followed. I think that postwar order can only be created by strict termination and proper handling of matters at the end of the war, as was the case with World War II.

Hosoya: That's an interesting point. Only, I think that—when viewed from a world historical point of view—World War II was quite an exceptional war. In other words, there was an easily understandable evil figure, Hitler, to whom it was reasonable and appropriate to apply the justice of the Allies. What's more, the war ended in unconditional surrender. This distorts our historical perception in some ways.

Wars basically tend to end in an unclear manner, as was the case with the Thirty Years' War that was fought primarily in Germany during the seventeenth century. One reason as to why these wars end is fatigue.

Goza: Yes, that's right.

Hosoya: Another reason that arose frequently in Europe was plague. When sanitary conditions worsened due to war, plagues would spread, and it would become difficult to continue waging war. The same applies to World War I. Furthermore, World War I did not end with Germany's unconditional surrender, but with an armistice agreement. Eight months prior to Germany's acceptance of the armistice agreement, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed, whereby Germany had defeated Soviet Russia. Why was an armistice called? It was because Kaiser Wilhelm II (emperor of Germany) had run away to Holland (the Netherlands). As with Japan, supreme command of Germany rested not with the government but with the emperor, and so they could not continue the war without him. Because of this, they had no other choice but to stop fighting. When the war ended, some Germans—including Hitler—misunderstood the situation, believing that Germany had in fact won the war. After all, their national territory had not been attacked even once.

Goza: In fact, they had plundered the territory of Soviet Russia.

Hosoya: That's right. In spite of that, before they even realized it they were branded as the losers, and what's more they were being villainized. It was from the feelings of discontent over this that Hitler emerged. It is a classic example of how the way in which a war ended left behind the roots of serious problems for the future. In his work *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Immanuel Kant said that an armistice agreement was no more than a rest period to prepare for the next war. For us today, knowing about World War II, this is a difficult statement to understand. But as can be seen from the Thirty Years' War, the War of the Spanish Succession, or even from World War I, Kant's sense of things was that as plagues broke out, emperors disappeared, and the common people became tired of fighting, wars would end as a temporary rest period. People would then regather their strength before going on to fight the next war.

Surely it is this sense of things that is close to the global situation of today. When did the Ukrainian Crisis begin? We're not really sure. What about the disputes in the South China Sea? How about the Senkaku Islands? What I'm saying is, exercising military strength is just an extension of everyday politics, and is not anything special.

Goza: You mean it's not a case of switching from ordinary times to emerging situations.

Hosoya: Yes. We now live in an age where we cannot have a historical perspective like that of World War II, where we can make a clean distinction between wartime and peacetime; but one like that of the Onin War, where wars end without us really understanding why they even began. I'm not sure how consciously aware the readers of *Onin no Ran* are of it, but I think that they share a common feeling; that in this vaguely uncertain and insecure age, wartime and peacetime are somehow connected.

Goza: Certainly, the textbook-based understanding is that the Battle of Goryo (new year 1466) marked the beginning of the Onin War. But Ashikaga Yoshimasa, Kyogaku and Jinson all regarded the battle as being merely an extension of several feuds and conflicts that had occurred several decades earlier. They did not recognize that what was happening was fundamentally different from what had occurred previously. It was for this reason that their sense of crisis was so weak.

Hosoya: In the present day, too, I think that we should not take a dualistic view of war, that things progress from an age of order to an age of chaos and then back to an age of order, but rather a monistic view; that order and chaos are intermixed.

Even in a state where war and peace—or order and chaos—are intermixed, a strong spirit is necessary to maintain peace, or to maintain order. We must learn to coexist with things such as insecurity, uncertainty and chaos. If we turn around and think hard about it, in the way that you [Mr. Goza] have reexamined the Onin War through the eyes of two Buddhist monks, then surely it is important for us to look again at current issues such as the Trump Administration, the situation in Europe, and the disputes in the Ukraine, too.

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GOZA Yuichi, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, International Research Center for Japanese Studies

Born in 1980. Graduated from the University of Tokyo Faculty of Letters in 2003. Received a Ph.D. (Literature) from the University of Tokyo in 2011. His specialized field is Japanese medieval history. His publications include *Nihon chusei-shi no ryoshu ikki* (The Samurai alliance in Medieval Japan —A study on the structure and the function of Ikki), *Senso no Nihon chusei-shi* (Dissecting Warfare of Medieval Japan, won the Kadokawa Culture Promotion Foundation Academic Award).

HOSOYA Yuichi, Ph.D.

Professor, Keio University

Born in 1971. Graduated from the Rikkyo University, Faculty of Law. Received Ph.D. from Keio University. His specialized field is international history and international politics. His publications include *Sengo kokusai chitsujo to Igrisu gaiko* (*The Postwar International Order and British Diplomacy*, won the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities), *Rinriteki na senso* (*Ethical Wars*, won the Yomiuri-Yoshino Sakuzo Prize).
