

The Eternal Zero: Propaganda in the service of present day militarism

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The Eternal Zero (Eien no Zero), directed by Takashi Yamazaki and written by Naoki Hyakuta, was released in Japan in late December 2013. Topping the charts for at least eight weeks in a row, it has since earned over 8 billion yen at the box office and entered the list of the 10 top-grossing Japanese films of all time. Hyakuta's 2006 novel, on which the film is based, reportedly sold over four million copies.

The movie has certainly struck a chord with layers of its audience. It was carefully scripted to magnify its propaganda value by pulling deep emotional strings—particularly family ties. Even though clearly designed to promote patriotism and militarism, the message of *The Eternal Zero* is not of the crudest variety. Over two-and-a-half hours, it meanders and leaves some things understated, but ends with the unmistakable glorification of Japanese militarism.

The Eternal Zero is conceptualized as a lecture about World War II from the generation that lived through it, to the present Japanese youth, who are perceived by the right-wing conservatives, such as Hyakuta, as insufficiently patriotic. The film is pitched at young people today, and, through its historical falsifications, seeks to draw them in.

The story unfolds in 2004, when two siblings, Kentaro (Haruma Miura)—an aspiring lawyer who has failed the bar exam for four years in a row—and Keiko (Kazue Fukiishi)—a freelance writer—start researching the life of their grandfather. He died in World War II as a member of “tokkotai,” or the special attack units, also known as kamikaze suicide pilots. As their inquiry proceeds, the film flashes back to the past and the resulting two-fold narrative switches between the present and World War II.

The two manage to find several wartime associates of their grandfather, Kyuzo Miyabe (Junichi Okada of the Japanese pop band V6). However, Kentaro and Keiko are visibly taken aback when other former pilots express scorn and hatred for Kyuzo—“the shame of the imperial

navy” and “the biggest coward” of all. “While we all entrusted our lives to the country,” one said, Kyuzo was determined to stay alive and sometimes skirted battles to accomplish this. At the same time, it is clear that Kyuzo was a veteran pilot with an unmatched flying technique.

As Kentaro and Keiko continue their interviews, they speak to someone who provides a more subtle appraisal of Kyuzo. Isaki, a former subordinate of Kyuzo and now a terminally-ill cancer patient, explains the main reason Kyuzo firmly decided to return from the war alive—his deep feelings for his young wife and a newborn daughter, the mother of the two protagonists.

However, when the Japanese army resorts to the desperate measure of suicide flights in order to stave off defeat in late 1944, Kyuzo volunteers for the “tokkotai” and apparently of his own volition adds his name to one of the suicide missions. A good part of the film probes this change of attitude and the reasons for it.

The reasons, though, do not ring true, and, as a result, the central character of Kyuzo Miyabe is poorly done and lacks credibility. In the first half of the movie, he is portrayed as a bit of rebel. He opposes various directives and expresses disagreements, but only on tactical issues like efficiency. He does his utmost to save the lives of other pilots, but only because he considers they will be of more use to the nation if they survive the war.

One scene particularly strains credulity. Kyuzo opposes an officer's attempt to shame a trainee, who crashed during a training flight, as a traitor for destroying the valuable plane. Kyuzo is badly beaten, but keeps his position and earns the respect of his colleagues for speaking out.

Insubordination is not tolerated in any military apparatus. Such a lax approach in the Japanese imperial army to opposition from the ranks, especially in one of its most fanatical units, is to whitewash the methods used to instill fear. Moreover, what exactly enabled Kyuzo to

withstand the military indoctrination and drove him to actively stand up to it? The issue is never explained or explored. The audience is simply expected to go along with it.

The scene in which Kentaro, Kyuzo's grandson, tries to argue the righteousness of "tokkotai" with his largely disinterested young friends is completely contrived.

Kyuzo's last act, presented as a moment of great heroism, is to fly his plane right into an American aircraft carrier. Stripped of its mawkish, tear-jerking moments, Kyuzo "chooses" to carry out the mission because only the best of the best pilots can accomplish such a feat. His smiling face is meant to convey the highest determination in consciously sacrificing one's life for the country—ultimately the film's message.

If Kyuzo can save the life of another young pilot in doing so, all the better. This provides the happy ending, with several pilots in Kyuzo's debt helping his struggling widow in various ways in post-war Japan.

To say the least, *The Eternal Zero* leaves a bad aftertaste. The film's glaring internal contradictions are produced by the fact that it is intentionally ripped out of any historical context—it is a work of historical falsification.

In the opening scene, Kyuzo criticizes the attack on Pearl Harbour, but in the end he crashes his plane into a US ship. There is not even a hint of the god-like veneration of the Emperor, the ruthless police-state measures of the militarist government, or the reactionary attitudes of the army brass. What led to the war and how it ended is completely unexplained. Nothing is shown of the atrocities carried out by the Imperial army.

The film lacks artistic integrity precisely because it is, in the final analysis, a piece of propaganda aimed at deluding the young generation about World War II. Japanese imperialism was driven to wars of conquest in the 1930s—invading Manchuria in 1931 and China as a whole in 1937—as a result of the economic devastation caused by the Great Depression. Exports halved and gross domestic product plunged by 20 percent by 1931.

In its drive to subordinate and exploit China, Japan ran up against the United States, which had long prosecuted an "Open Door" policy to achieve its own hegemony in China and Asia. The US threatened Japan with embargoes that would have cut off essential supplies of energy and raw materials. It is no coincidence that the Japanese fleet set sail for Pearl Harbor on the very day the US issued a final ultimatum demanding complete Japanese withdrawal from China and Indochina in late November 1941.

No film is required to be an historical analysis, but it should bear some relationship to the truth. *The Eternal Zero* is focused entirely of the sphere of the individual, precisely to avoid any examination of the historical issues. It is part and parcel of the current campaign of historical revisionism that seeks to whitewash the crimes of Japanese imperialism, including against the Japanese working class, during the 1930s and 1940s.

The Eternal Zero was released just days before Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the notorious Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead last December. Abe's visit signaled the intensification of the revival of Japanese militarism. Abe and his wife both praised the movie, which is also recommended by the Ministry of Education.

Hyakuta, a TV writer, is close to Abe. An outspoken ultra-nationalist, Abe appointed him last November to the board of governors of the public broadcaster NHK. Last month, while campaigning on behalf of a far-right militarist candidate for Tokyo governor, Hyakuta explicitly defended the attack on Pearl Harbor: "Japan has been criticized for going into war without a formal declaration, but in 20th century wars, there were very few in which such declarations were made before fighting broke out."

Hyakuta also claimed that the Nanking (Nanjing) massacre, one of the worst atrocities of the 20th century, in which the Japanese army slaughtered up to 300,000 soldiers and civilians, "never happened."

The film *The Eternal Zero* is part of this ideological campaign to prepare for new wars and new atrocities.



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