

The Great Zoo Massacre: Ôdachi Shigeo and the Logic of Sacrifice in Wartime Japan

Ôdachi Shigeo, Tokyo's powerful Governor General and future Home Minister, faced a difficult situation in the summer of 1943. Having just returned from his post as Imperial Mayor of Occupied Singapore (Shônân), where he had watched the Japanese empire expand and then begin to contract with terrifying speed as the weight of American industrial capacity swung behind the war effort, Ôdachi knew that the triumphalist news stories of the day were woefully out of touch with reality. The Japanese empire was on the verge of horrific collapse, and the mass death and brutal hardships of the frontlines would soon be visited upon the capital's populace. As the official charged with steeling Tokyo's women and children for the arrival of Allied bombers and troops, Ôdachi was confronted with the question of how to mobilize a population numbed by years of propagandist exaggeration and exhausted from long-term material deprivation. His answer was one of the most surreal and best remembered events of the Pacific War: the mass mediated ritualized slaughter of Tokyo's wildly famous zoo animals.

The slaughter was choreographed to shock depleted Tokyoites into a higher level of ideological compliance, suppress dissent, and instill a heightened sense of emergency through a conscious rupture of everyday conventions. Arguably rational only within the context of total war and impending total defeat, Ôdachi's diaries and official memos illustrate not only the logic of sacrifice in a society in crisis but also the sacrifice of logic to the dictates of blinkered military strategy and illusory victory.