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Feeding hope, starving resistance: the rhetoric of food in the American psychological warfare against Japan

Felice FARINA

ABSTRACT: *This study examines the United States' psychological warfare campaign against Japan during Operation Starvation (March-August 1945), focusing on leaflets that warned of imminent starvation resulting from the mining blockade and encouraged surrender for food supplies. From early in the war, the Japanese government promoted propaganda urging a frugal lifestyle to support the war effort. Both American and Japanese messages presented citizens with a choice: endure hunger to support the war or surrender for food. While Japanese food propaganda has been studied, American efforts have received less attention. This study highlights the crucial role of food rhetoric in depicting America favorably and the Japanese government negatively.*

ABSTRACT: *Questo studio analizza la campagna di guerra psicologica condotta dagli Stati Uniti contro il Giappone durante la cosiddetta Operation Starvation (marzo-agosto 1945), concentrandosi sui volantini che avvertivano della carestia imminente causata dal blocco navale e incoraggiavano la resa in cambio di rifornimenti alimentari. Sin dalle prime fasi della guerra, il governo giapponese aveva attuato una strategia propagandistica attraverso cui invitava la popolazione a condurre una vita frugale per sostenere lo sforzo bellico. Sia i messaggi americani che quelli giapponesi ponevano i cittadini di fronte a una scelta: sopportare la fame per continuare a sostenere il conflitto o arrendersi per ricevere cibo. Mentre la propaganda alimentare giapponese è stata oggetto di studio, quella americana ha ricevuto meno attenzione. Questo lavoro evidenzia l'importanza della retorica legata al cibo nel dipingere positivamente gli Stati Uniti e negativamente il governo giapponese.*

1. Introduction: food and propaganda in the Pacific War

Food has always played a crucial role in armed conflicts, directly influencing military strategies, economies, and the resilience of the populations involved. From provisioning troops to food propaganda, from blockade strategies to the dilemmas of distribution during shortages, food emerges as a critical factor that goes beyond mere sustenance and, in some cases, has even determined the outcome of conflicts. While in ancient times, the pivotal role of food was often more apparent, serving as the primary cause of wars through conquests of new territories, securing trade routes, or appropriating enemy resources, academic literature has also highlighted the crucial importance of food in modern wars¹. The Pacific War was no exception. Fully aware of Japan's

¹ See: OFFER, Avner, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989;

struggle to secure stable food supplies for both its military and civilian populations, the United States chose to take advantage of their enemy's vulnerability, ultimately aiming to compel Japan to surrender. The mining campaign, which began in the spring of 1945, had among its military objectives the prevention of food imports into Japan. Dubbed «Operation Starvation», this strategy unfolded between March 27 and August 5, 1945, severely hindering Japan's ability to import food from its colonies and other occupied territories. The military operations and material damage caused by Operation Starvation have been the main object of a vast body of literature on the Pacific War and the American strategy. However, there is another aspect that has not received the same level of attention and will be the focus of this study: the psychological warfare campaign². The goal of the Americans was not only to damage Japan materially and deprive it of the resources it needed to continue the war, but also to target it psychologically, undermining the morale of both the military and the civilian populations in a bid to break their will to resist.

Psychological warfare had already been employed in the European theaters of war, taking the form of radio broadcasts³, books⁴, and the distribution or dropping of leaflets⁵. In the Japanese context, psychological warfare activities had been ongoing since the outset of hostilities. However, it was only in the spring of 1945, with the escalation of the B-29 mining campaign, the implementation of Operation Starvation, and the surrender and occupation of Okinawa, that psychological warfare against Japan reached its peak. By dropping millions of leaflets, the Americans sought to persuade both the Japanese military and civilians that further resistance was futile, that they had been misled by their government, and that victory for the United States was imminent.

In this work, we will focus on food, one of the most emphasized aspects in the leaflets. Indeed, one of the primary rhetorical strategies employed in these leaflets was emphasizing the imminent threat of starvation caused by the mining blockade, while simultaneously urging the Japanese to

COLLINGHAM, Lizzie, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food*, London, Penguin UK, 2011; CWIERTKA, Katarzyna J., *Food and War in Mid-Twentieth-Century East Asia*, London, Routledge, 2016; WILT, Alan F., *Food for War: Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001; DRUELLE, Clotilde, *Feeding Occupied France during World War I: Herbert Hoover and the Blockade*, London, Springer, 2019.

² Among the studies on the psychological warfare campaign against Japan, there are: LAURIE, Clayton D., «The Ultimate Dilemma of Psychological Warfare in the Pacific: Enemies Who Don't Surrender, and GIs Who Don't Take Prisoners», in *War & Society* 14, 1/1996, pp. 99-120; SCHONBERGER, Howard, «Dilemmas of Loyalty: Japanese Americans and the Psychological Warfare Campaigns of the Office of Strategic Services, 1943-45», in *Amerasia Journal*, 16, 1/1990, pp. 21-38; PORTER, Patrick, «Paper Bullets: American Psywar in the Pacific, 1944-45», in *War in History*, 17, 4/2010, pp. 479-511; TSUCHIYA, Reiko, *Tainichi senden bira ga kataru Taiheiyō sensō* [*The Pacific War as Told by Anti-Japanese Propaganda Leaflets*], Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2011.

³ BEASLEY, Berrin A., «Hier 1st 1212: Operation Annie, World War II Allied Psychological Warfare, and the Capture of the Rhineland», in *Journal of Radio Studies*, 8, 1/2021, pp. 104-121.

⁴ HENCH, John B., *Books as Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets in the Era of World War II*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2016

⁵ HERZ, Martin F., «Some psychological lessons from leaflet propaganda in World War II», in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13, 3/1949, pp. 471-486.

surrender in order to obtain the food they needed. The Japanese population thus found itself facing a dilemma. On one hand, their government's propaganda assured them that enduring sacrifices would eventually lead to victory. On the other hand, according to American propaganda, surrendering would bring an end to these sacrifices and the prospect of receiving food aid from the Americans. Scholars, both Japanese and foreign, have extensively studied the Japanese government's food propaganda, revealing its influence in fostering loyalty among the Japanese population and motivating them to make sacrifices for the war effort⁶. However, the same level of attention has not been given to American food propaganda in Japan.

Utilizing the digital repositories of wartime propaganda leaflets from Waseda University (Wartime Propaganda Leaflets Database) and the U.S. Naval Academy (World War II Collection - American Propaganda in Japan), this study aims to shed light on the fundamental role played by discursive strategies concerning food in American leaflet propaganda against Japan, whose main objective was to portray a favorable image of America while also cast a negative light on the Japanese government's handling of food-related issues⁷. In particular, we will examine how American rhetoric relied on exposing the folly of the Japanese government's policies, which led to widespread hunger, while simultaneously showcasing American benevolence by promising to provide food to everyone upon Japan's surrender.

The first section will explore the so-called «food problem» in Japan, explaining why food was a particularly sensitive issue in the country. The second section will provide an in-depth analysis of Operation Starvation, with a specific focus on its psychological warfare components. Finally, the third section will examine the leaflets disseminated across Japan, concentrating on those that addressed the food issue.

⁶ See: GARON, Sheldon, «Luxury is the Enemy: Mobilizing Savings and Popularizing Thrift in Wartime Japan», in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 26, 1/2000, pp. 41-78; ID., *Saving for "My Own Good and the Good of the Nation": Economic Nationalism in Modern Japan*, in WILSON, Sandra (ed.), *Nation and Nationalism in Japan*, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 97-114; SEATON, Philip, *Japanese Society at War*, in BARTROP, Paul R. (ed.), *The Routledge History of the Second World War*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2021, pp. 271-286; ODA, Yoshiyuki, *Zeitaku wa teki da - Chochiku setsuyaku no shōrei* [Luxury is the enemy. The promotion of saving and frugality], in TAMAI, Kiyoshi (ed.), *Shashin shūhō to sono jidai (jō)*, Tokyo, Keiō Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2017, pp. 77-117; INOUE, Toshikazu, *Risō darake no senjika Nihon* [Wartime Japan filled with ideals], Tokyo, Chikuma Shinsho, 2013; SAITŌ, Minako, *Senka no reshipi* [The recipes during the war], Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, 2015; KUSHNER, Barak, *The Thought War. Japanese Imperial Propaganda*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2006.

⁷ Waseda University, *Wartime Propaganda Leaflets Database Archive*, URL: < <https://prj-bira.waseda.jp/> > [access 7 July 2024]; U.S. Naval Academy, *World War II Collection - American Propaganda in Japan*, URL: < https://usna.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/collectionDiscovery?vid=01USNA_INST:01USNA&inst=01USNA_INST&collectionId=81101729260006751 > [access 7 July 2024].

2. The food problem in Japan

In the early Meiji period (1868-1912), the primary goal of the new Japanese state was to eliminate the unequal treaties and transform Japan into a modern nation. To achieve this, the Japanese government adopted a modernization strategy known as *shokusan kōgyō* (production promotion), aimed at strengthening national security through industrial development. A key component of this strategy was the modernization of the agricultural sector through the application of Western agricultural technologies and methods. The primary objective of this new policy, known as *kannō seisaku* (agricultural promotion policy), was to transform traditional Japanese agriculture by encouraging the cultivation of cash crops such as tea, silk, wool, and wheat, which were in high demand in international markets. The policy aimed to boost agricultural exports, thereby generating foreign currency to finance the modernization and industrialization of the Japanese economy⁸.

Initially, this strategy appeared to be successful, and Japan became an exporting country for agricultural products. However, by the end of the century, the situation changed drastically. Due to the significant demographic increase that the country experienced at that time, Japan found itself entrapped in what can be termed a classic Malthusian situation: a population expanding at a faster rate than agricultural production. By 1890, the nation's domestic agricultural output had become insufficient to meet the dietary needs of its people, compelling Japan's evolution from a net exporter to an importer of agricultural commodities⁹. This transformation marked the beginning of Japan's dependence on agricultural imports, which was referred to as the *shokuryō mondai* (food problem) or *jinkō shokuryō mondai* (food and population problem), emphasizing the intricate connection between food supply and demographic trends. Within this context, the government directed its efforts towards augmenting production, both domestically and in the territories incorporated into the newly formed Japanese Empire, while also exhorting emigration of Japan's rural population within the empire. However, Japan's aspirations to create a fully self-sufficient empire remained unfulfilled. Nonetheless, until the 1940s, scarcity was not a pressing concern for the government.

The landscape shifted dramatically with the outbreak of the Pacific War following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Recent studies by Japanese historian Unno Hiroshi have shed light on the important role which food played in the decision-making processes of Japanese

⁸ SASADA, Hironori, *The Origin of Japan's Protectionist Agricultural Policy. Agricultural Administration in Modern Japan*, New York, Routledge, 2024.

⁹ ŌMAMEUDA, Minoru, *Kindai nihon no shokuryō seisaku. Taigai izon beikoku kyōkyū kōzō no hen'yō* [Food policies in modern Japan: Transformation of the structure reliant on imported rice supply], Kyoto, Minerva Shobō, 1993.

policymakers, both in initiating and concluding hostilities¹⁰. Through a thorough examination of primary sources, he reveals how the declining rice production in Korea in 1939 and the subsequent rice shortage in Japan served as a catalyst for the invasion of Indochina¹¹. Discussions preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, as well as throughout the conflict with the United States, also included considerations on Japan's food situation. However, as Unno demonstrates, these considerations tended to be overly optimistic¹². It was only during Koiso government (July 1944–April 1945) that the true severity of the situation was acknowledged, albeit too late to implement effective remedies¹³.

The war severely worsened Japan's food production capacity. Between 1941 and 1945, food supplies declined sharply, with per capita consumption dropping from 2.000 to 1.680 calories per day – barely at subsistence level, with urban areas suffering the most¹⁴. Agricultural production was hit by labor shortages as two million workers shifted to war industries¹⁵ and many young men were conscripted, with 23 percent of military recruits coming from agriculture¹⁶. Fertilizer production also plummeted due to import restrictions, falling from 3.5 million tons before the war to just 630.000 by 1945, further straining food production¹⁷. But probably, Japan's greatest challenge was its lost ability to import food from overseas to compensate domestic shortages. The loss of 285 merchant ships in the war's first two years, along with bombings on ports, crippled rice imports from Southeast Asia and Taiwan by late 1944¹⁸. The destruction of maritime routes also disrupted internal food distribution, leaving urban populations with dwindling supplies¹⁹. The fishing sector, another key food source, was severely impacted by labor shortages due to military enlistment. Fishing employment fell from 1.1 million in 1936 to 721.000 by 1945, while the requisitioning of boats and shortages of essential materials caused a 50 percent drop in fish catch, further worsening Japan's wartime diet²⁰. Japan's worsening food crisis required strict rationing and price control. As early as the Sino-Japanese War of 1937, the government began regulating food production, distribution, and consumption. These efforts culminated in the 1942 Food Control Law (*Shokuryō kanri-hō*), which established the Food Control System (*Shokuryō kanri seido*) and created state-

¹⁰ UNNO, Hiroshi, *Shokuryō mo daijōbu nari. Kaisen shūsen no ketsudan to shokuryō* [«Food is Fine». Food and the Decision to Start and End the War], Tokyo, Nōrin tōkei shuppan, 2016.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 17–36.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 43–69.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 297–331.

¹⁴ THE UNITED STATES STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY (USSBS), *The Japanese Wartime Standard of Living and Utilization of Manpower*, Washington D.C., Manpower, Food and Civilian Supplies Division, 1947, p. 100.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 10

¹⁶ JOHNSTON, Bruce F., *Japan Food Management in World War II*, Wisconsin, Stanford University Press, 1953, p. 94.

¹⁷ USSBS, *The Japanese Wartime Standard of Living*, p. 10.

¹⁸ JOHNSTON, Bruce F., *op.cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁹ COLLINGHAM, Lizzie, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food*, London, Penguin UK, 2011, pp. 286–287

²⁰ JOHNSTON, Bruce F., *op. cit.*, p. 130.

controlled corporations to manage food supply. The system regulated rice pricing, controlled distribution through licensed traders, and restricted external trade of rice²¹. Rations were allocated based on age, occupation, and gender, with set allotments for rice, meat, fish, miso, and soy sauce.²² As shortages worsened, distributions were progressively reduced.

The government also launched aggressive campaigns urging Japanese citizens to produce as much food as possible, utilizing even uncultivated lands, and to consume food sparingly. In terms of dietary habits, the population was first called to engage in *setsumai* (rice-saving), meaning to economize on rice consumption as much as possible²³. In 1940, as part of the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement, the *setsumai* movement began, and a weekly *setsumai* day was encouraged²⁴. Through newspapers and magazines, Japanese housewives were encouraged to economize on the amount of rice prepared in various ways: reducing the amount of rice cooked by 20 percent; preparing a meal without rice; substituting rice with other grains; or mixing rice with products such as potatoes or soybeans²⁵. This kind of propaganda intensified from 1943 onward, entering what literary critic Saitō Minako has termed the «rice-saving period» (*setsumai jidai*)²⁶. More specifically, the government tried to convey the idea that the outcome of the war was strictly related to food supplies. Using propaganda newspapers, like *Shashin Shūhō*, it was illustrated that a constant and secure food supply was necessary to win the war, and conversely, the lack of food would lead to defeat, as happened to Germany in the First World War²⁷. For this reason, Japanese government propaganda urged the population to make a collective effort to conserve food by promoting the idea that saving rice was not only a healthy and enjoyable practice but also a patriotic duty, essential for securing victory against the Allies and bringing glory to the nation²⁸.

3. Mining campaign and psychological warfare against Japan

By July 1944, the Allied Forces in France had secured their position, and reinforcements were arriving to support an early breakout from the Normandy beachheads. This marked a turning point, as Allied leaders could now look ahead to the end of the war in Europe, potentially within months

²¹ FRANCKS, Penelope, «Agriculture and the State in Industrial East Asia: The Rise and Fall of the Food Control System in Japan», in *Japan Forum*, 10, 1/1998, pp. 1-16, p. 3.

²² YAMASHITA, Samuel Hideo, *Daily Life in Wartime Japan, 1940-1945*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2017, pp. 37-39.

²³ ODA, Yoshiyuki, *Shokuryō zōsan, kyōshutsu seyo* [Increase food production. Make your contribution], in TAMAI Kiyoshi (ed.), «*Shashin shūhō*» to sono jidai. *Senji Nihon no kokumin seikatsu* [“*Shashin Shūhō*” and that time: Civilian Life in Wartime Japan], Tokyo, Keiō Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2017, pp. 43-76.

²⁴ SAITŌ, Minako, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 30-39.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

²⁷ ODA, Yoshiyuki, *Shokuryō zōsan, kyōshutsu seyo*, *cit.*, p. 45.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

rather than years. With resources becoming available for transfer to the Pacific, the focus shifted to planning for the defeat of Japan as quickly as possible. In late July 1944, President Roosevelt traveled to Honolulu to meet with his top commanders in the Pacific, General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz. One of the main topics of discussion was the strategy for defeating Japan: either a large-scale invasion, similar to the Normandy landing but preceded by extensive bombing and blockade, or a strategy of intensified bombing and blockade without invasion. The Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, General George C. Marshall, strongly advocated for an invasion of Japan. However, Admirals Nimitz and MacArthur disagreed, arguing that Japan's offensive capabilities had already been significantly weakened by naval defeats, the loss of its merchant fleet, and restricted access to vital resources, making an invasion unnecessary²⁹. Despite the unresolved debate on whether to invade Japan, new options emerged. The introduction of B-29 aircrafts, with their long range and large payload capacity, presented the possibility of conducting a massive aerial mining campaign in Japan's home waters. The Naval Mine Warfare Section of Admiral Nimitz's headquarters proposed this approach, suggesting an initial phase of 150 B-29 sorties per month from January to March 1945, increasing to 1500 mines per month from April when new effective types of mines would become available³⁰. This plan was accepted by the Air Forces, and preparations began for operations to commence in the spring of 1945.

The B-29 mining campaign started on March 27, 1945. The three principal strategic objectives were:

1. to prevent the importation of raw materials and food into Japan;
2. to prevent the supply and deployment of Japan's military forces;
3. to disrupt Japan's internal marine transportation within the Inland Sea.

As clearly stated in an Air Force Report, through the campaign

the enemy population would be reduced to starvation. The effect of starvation would combine with the incendiary raids to reduce the civilian will to wage war. Therefore, the operation was called STARVATION [*in upper case in the original text*]³¹.

It is noteworthy that, unlike the typical practice of giving military operations coded and implicit names, they chose one that was both explicit and brutal. The report also stated that about 20 percent of Japan's food was imported. Given Japan's nutritional standards at the time, a 20 percent

²⁹ SALLAGAR, Frederick M., *Lessons from an Aerial Mining Campaign (Operation "Starvation")*, Rand Report 1322 - PR, April 1974, p. 16.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³¹ U.S. Army Air Force, A-3 20th Air Force, *Starvation. Phase Analysis of Strategic Mining Blockade of the Japanese Empire*, 1945, p. 3

disruption in its food supply would push a large part of its population from a mere subsistence to starvation³².

The operation was conducted in five phases from March 25 to August 5 1945, when more than 12.000 mines were deployed around Japan bringing to a blockade of the ports of the Shimonoseki Strait and the Inner Zone³³. For the United States, the Operation was a clear success: in the last five months of the war more than one million tons of Japan's shipping was sunk or damaged, while only fifteen B-29 aircrafts out of 1,529 were lost³⁴. The campaign resulted in Japan's complete inability to import food from outside or even to move supplies from wealthier regions to those in greater need.

One of the objectives of Operation Starvation was not only the material destruction of Japan, but also the demoralization of the Japanese population through psychological warfare operations. These efforts aimed to instill a sense of helplessness, thereby undermining morale and weakening the enemy's will to continue fighting. Leaflets were the primary tool employed during this phase. The Office of War Information (OWI), an American agency created in 1942 with the aim of launching and managing propaganda campaigns during the war, set three main objectives of psychological warfare: (1) to decrease fighting spirit and effectiveness; (2) to increase surrenders so that prisoners could be obtained for interrogation by intelligence officers; (3) to reduce the Japanese practice of resisting to the last man, and thereby minimize Allied casualties³⁵. More specifically, according to the OWI, an effective leaflet needed to be written following four general guiding principles: *simplicity*, i.e. each leaflet should present only one general idea; *concreteness*, i.e. abstract words and concepts should be avoided; *repetition*, the single, main general idea should be hammered into the mind of your leaflet over and over again; and *action*, i.e. the leaflet should leave the reader with the conviction that some form of action was required³⁶. According to accounts from the first Japanese prisoners captured in 1944, the issue of food scarcity was the greatest concern among soldiers, second only to the course of the battles³⁷. For this reason, American propagandists exploited the theme of food scarcity in the leaflets, emphasizing how Japanese soldiers in areas liberated by the Americans were now receiving abundant food supplies and medical attention. In the next session, we will examine the leaflets that addressed the theme of food, analyzing the key rhetorical strategies employed by the Americans.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³³ THE UNITED STATES STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY (USSBS), *The Offensive Mine Laying Campaign Against Japan*, Washington D.C., 1946, p. 1.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

³⁵ OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION (OWI), *Leaflet Newsletter*, 1, 11, September 1, 1945, p. 3.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 29-33.

³⁷ GILLMORE, Allison B., *You Can't Fight Tanks with Bayonets. Psychological Warfare against the Japanese Army in the Southwest Pacific*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1998, p. 85.

4. Leaflets on Japan: the food propaganda

The use of propaganda leaflets dropped from balloons as carriers in warfare first appeared in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War³⁸. However, it was during World War I that the practice of dropping leaflets over enemy territory became widespread, with many nations employing both balloons and aircraft for this purpose³⁹. Following their effectiveness in World War I, leaflets were again used as a key tool of propaganda during World War II. Historian Allison B. Gillmore has provided a detailed analysis of the leaflets dropped by the Allies as part of their psychological warfare campaign against the Imperial Japanese Army. Gillmore classifies the leaflets into four categories: *divisive propaganda*, which sought to exacerbate existing tensions within Japan's armed forces; *subversive propaganda*, aimed at undermining soldiers' confidence by challenging their core beliefs about the legitimacy of their cause and the competence of their leadership; *enlightenment propaganda*, intended to offer Japanese troops a clearer understanding of the Allies and their war objectives; and *propaganda of despair*, designed to convince Japanese forces that Japan was losing the war by emphasizing the overwhelming material superiority of the Allies⁴⁰. More broadly, the dominant message conveyed through these leaflets was the material superiority of the Allied powers, and the consequent impossibility for Japan to win the war solely relying on the power of its soldiers' spirit⁴¹.

During the last months of the Pacific War, the OWI printed and dropped around 100 million leaflets in Japan during the Operation Starvation⁴². The Wartime Propaganda Leaflets Database of Waseda University and the World War II Collection – American Propaganda in Japan of the U.S. Naval Academy have collected around 200 types of leaflets created by the Honolulu Branch of OWI, which was tasked with producing propaganda and informational materials for dissemination in the Pacific theater. Of these leaflets, about forty mention food. A preliminary distinction can be made based on the target audience of the leaflets, distinguishing between those aimed at Japanese soldiers – referred to as *tactical leaflets*, according to the classification proposed by Nat Schmulowitz and Lloyd D. Luckman, two librarians at the San Francisco Library who studied the American propaganda material in the 1940s⁴³ – and those intended for the civilian population, referred to as *strategic leaflets*. A third category include leaflets aimed at both audiences or without a clearly defined target. However, despite these distinctions in intended readership, the content of the

³⁸ BAUS, Herbert M., ROSS, William B., *Politics Battle Plan*, New York, McMillan, 1968, p. 336.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 336-338.

⁴⁰ GILLMORE, Allison B., *op. cit.*, pp. 114-124.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁴² WINKLER, Andrew, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978, p. 79.

⁴³ SCHMULOWITZ, Nat, LUCKMANN, Lloyd, «Foreign Policy by Propaganda Leaflets», in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 9, 4/1946, pp. 428-429, 485-493, p. 429.

leaflets shows little substantial variation and tends to follow similar rhetorical patterns. In terms of content, it is possible to identify four main themes or rhetorical strategies that tend to recur. These recurring themes include: accentuating the generosity and benevolence of the Americans towards captured soldiers in liberated areas; promising similar benevolent treatment upon surrender to the soldiers still fighting in Japan; citing the Americans' generosity during the 1923 earthquake as proof of their sincerity; and forecasting severe famine conditions if the war were to prolong. In particular, the first two themes are the most utilized, being present individually or together in almost all the food-related leaflets. Using Gillmore's categories, we can affirm that this type of message falls under enlightenment propaganda, as it seeks to shape a different image of the Allied Forces, not as fierce enemies, but as people capable of helping the Japanese. Additionally, it can be also classified as divisive propaganda, as it aims to encourage the surrender of as many soldiers as possible and turn them against their superiors.

The leaflet n. 103, addressed to Japanese soldiers and which shows on the front a picture of Japanese soldiers playing a game with American marines, said:

Your leaders have told you so many false stories about American cruelty that you fear and hate us. You have apparently forgotten about America's aid to Japan during the great earthquake disaster of 1923, and the long tradition of American kindness and generosity. Don't be deluded by falsehoods! Your soldiers who came over to us on Saipan, Tinian, and Guam received food, water, clothing, and medical treatment, and they are now safe and happy. When you cease fighting and come over to us, we will treat you similarly⁴⁴.

The leaflet includes all the main rhetorical strategies of American propaganda. It reassures Japanese soldiers by challenging the false propaganda («false stories») about American cruelty, reminding them of America's aid during the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake and its tradition of kindness. It cites the humane treatment of Japanese soldiers who surrendered, noting that they received food, water, clothing, and medical care, and «are now safe and happy». The message finally encourages surrender by promising similar humane treatment to those who cease fighting.

The same arguments can be found in other leaflets, like the 805:

We will give you food, water, and medical treatment. We are not barbarians! We are still the same generous and kind Americans who aided your people during the dreadful earthquake disaster in 1923. Come and share our food and water.

Or the 518:

⁴⁴ We use here the official translation in English available in the U.S. Navy Academy archive.

America treats those who come over to us well. America's human feelings are well known in Japan. At the time of the Great Earthquake in 1923 America supplied millions of dollars and large quantities of medical supplies and food to Japan. It is well known that America has gladly given medical services and food to all nations in time of need. The American spirit is one of humaneness. So to those who are with us is given the best of food, clothing, and shelter.

By promising food, water, medical care, and shelter to those who surrender, the two leaflets aimed to persuade soldiers to cease fighting. They both emphasize the humanitarian nature of the American forces, seeking to present the Americans as a force that cares for the well-being of soldiers rather than as enemies bent on destruction. By stating «We are not barbarians,» the leaflet 805 explicitly refutes the image of American cruelty that had been propagated by Japanese wartime propaganda.

A noteworthy aspect is that the American propagandists prepared leaflets directed not only for the military but also for the civilian population. Two examples are the leaflets 509 and 515:

(509) Japanese Civilians! In spite of what you have been told, Americans have no quarrel with civilians. On Saipan alone, 18,125 civilian men, children, and women came over to us and are now safe and happy under the kind care of Americans. Only a few who believed false stories of cruelty perished foolishly. Do not believe falsehoods about American cruelty. See for yourselves! Select representatives to come forward and observed the treatment they will receive. Then these representatives can return and guide you to safety. You will receive food [«*delicious food*» or «*oishii tabemono*» in the Japanese version], water, clothing, and medical treatment. Come during daylight and wear white or colored clothes. We do not wish to mistake you for troops. Come quick! You will be treated well!

(515) Japanese Civilians! On Saipan, in addition to officers and men, 18,125 civilians accepted the generosity of the American forces. Those civilians were given food [«*plentiful food*» or «*jūbun na tabemono*» in the Japanese version], water, clothing, and medical treatment. You will be treated similarly if you come over to us. Do not believe false stories that you will be mistreated and killed. If you destroy yourselves, you will die in vain! Come over to us! Don't throw away your lives foolishly!

Both leaflets were addressed directly to civilians («Japanese Civilians» or *Nihonjin shimin* in the Japanese version). They both refute Japanese propaganda by highlighting the large number of civilians (18,125) who safely surrendered in Saipan, reinforcing the idea that Americans do not harm non-combatants and provide them food and other necessities. It is noteworthy that, while the English version simply uses the term «food,» the Japanese version of the leaflets employs adjectives such as «*oishii*» (delicious) and «*jūbun*» (sufficient, abundant) to describe «*tabemono*» (food) in leaflets 509 and 515, respectively. This difference could suggest a strategic effort to

enhance the persuasive impact by appealing to the sensibilities of the enemy in their native language.

Not all the leaflets had this reassuring tone. In other ones, the propagandists took a distinctly harsher approach, focusing on instilling fear of a bleak future rather than offering hope through the prospect of surrender. In this sense, the text of leaflet 801 is highly sensitive. It highlights the futility of fanatical death on the battlefield, which ultimately leads only to starvation and disease. At the same time, it casts surrender as the sole lifeline, the only chance to obtain food and survive. It reads:

[Y]ou are here on this miserable island awaiting only death by starvation and disease. For you there will be no spring – no rebirth in a new season. [...] Cease your futile resistance and come over to us. We will feed you and care for you. Then when the spring comes, you too will be reborn.

In a comparable approach, though expressed in a more direct and less nuanced tone, leaflet 1001 delivers its message with blunt forcefulness, stating:

Do you intend to continue living like the beast of the jungle? Do you really enjoy wasting away by starvations, thirst, and disease? [...] Come over to us as did your brave soldiers elsewhere. We will feed you and give you water.

The prediction of looming food shortages, however, is conveyed more explicitly and with a sense of urgency in leaflets 2010 and 2017, where the focus shifts to the practical consequences of prolonged conflict:

(2010) With every war comes disease. Water lines and electricity will be destroyed by bombs. Food will become scarce. Thus, you will weaken and become sick.

(2017) Buy articles you need now and buy articles for future use. The remaining supply is low. As a result of bombing by America, many of your stores will close their doors while others will be open only for limited periods. Buy food, clothing and other necessities to tide you over these periods. Money will not satisfy your hunger or clothe you.

Among the various leaflets distributed, one stands out for its explicit focus on the issue of food: leaflet number 1006. This particular leaflet draws attention not only through its compelling message but also through its striking visual imagery. On the front, it prominently features a lavish plate of sushi – a visual representation intended to evoke memories of a time when food was abundant and readily available in Japan (*fig. 1*). This image serves both as a poignant reminder of

what has been lost due to the devastations of war but also as a suggestion of what could be reobtained through surrender. Accompanying this evocative image, the leaflet reads:

Your island has been isolated and cut off from all aid and supplies. You have almost no food and are slowly starving to death. You are as human as we are, and the thought of your hunger is far from pleasant. If you are hungry and wish to have good food, indicate that fact by displaying a large visible cross along the southeast intersection of the airfield runway. We will then be able to help you.



Fig. 1. Front of Leaflet 1006.

Source: U.S. Naval Academy, *World War II Collection - American Propaganda in Japan*.

The use of food-related propaganda through leaflets gained increased significance with the launch of Operation Starvation. At the outset of the campaign, the 20th Air Force Planning Division conceived the idea of employing psychological warfare via B-29 bombers, aiming to highlight the issue of food shortages by bringing the specter of starvation directly to the Japanese home front. Initially, however, the plan was rejected because it was believed that the success of a mining campaign relied primarily on secrecy and thus could not be compromised by overt propaganda. However, it soon became evident that the Japanese were already aware of the mining operations, and that the campaign's primary goal was not solely material disruption, but also psychological pressure⁴⁵. As secrecy was no longer deemed essential, authorization to proceed with the psychological warfare strategy was granted on May 29, 1945. The approved leaflet campaign was designed to convey the following key messages:

- 1) Japanese food supplies were rapidly being depleted by American fire raids;

⁴⁵ U.S. Army Air Force, A-3 20th Air Force, *Starvation. Phase Analysis of Strategic Mining Blockade of the Japanese Empire*, 1945, p. 48.

2) the Japanese homeland was unable to produce and distribute sufficient food to sustain its population;

3) the importation of food had become impossible due to the minefields laid by B-29s, which blocked harbors and shipping lanes across Japanese waters;

4) the government's insistence on risking ships through the minefields to supply iron and coal to the war effort resulted in substantial shipping losses;

5) if this rate of loss had persisted, it would have been impossible to feed Japan's starving population even after achieving peace due to the scarcity of ships;

6) ultimately, if the current policy had continued, the entire Japanese population would have faced inevitable and disgraceful starvation⁴⁶.

The Psychological Warfare Section of the Commander in Chief Pacific (CINPAC) Fleet Headquarters prepared a set of four propaganda leaflets focused specifically on the theme of mine warfare. Four and one-half million copies of the first three leaflets were widely dropped over the entire Japanese homeland during the final phase of the mining campaign. The fourth leaflet was still in preparation when the war ended⁴⁷. In particular, the first two leaflets aimed to illustrate to both Japanese civilians and military personnel the impact of bombings and mine campaigns on Japan's ability to maintain food supplies, blaming the militarists for bringing the population to the brink of starvation. The first leaflet depicted an image of a sinking ship with the Japanese inscription *Kiesaran to suru issyun, sensō no gisei toshite*, in English "Casualty of war. The moment before sinking"⁴⁸. On the back side, the message read:

One of the excuses the militarists gave you for beginning this war was that it was essential to ensure the supply of food from overseas. And so you have been at war for many years. Now, however, the militarists are saying that your food supplies have sunk to an unprecedented low, and that, in the future, food rations will become smaller and smaller. The militarists are, however, concealing the fact that their blunders are sacrificing the people of Japan. What has happened to the ships which in peacetime transported provisions to Japan? Many ships carrying war materials have been sunk by American submarines and planes. Moreover, the B-29 have laid mines in the various harbors and coastal waters. A new threat to shipping has thus been added. *How long will you allow the militarist wantonly to drive the people of Japan to starvation?* [emphasis added]

The second leaflet, bearing a more explicit image, depicted a half-naked Japanese man with a severely emaciated physique, due to the lack of food (fig. 2). In this case, the reference was to

⁴⁶ U.S. Army Air Force, *Starvation*, p. 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

Japanese soldiers «who have been abandoned on isolated Pacific Islands where they do not receive one grain of rice»⁴⁹. The third leaflet makes no explicit reference to food but paints a disastrous future for Japan, where American mines will have sunk the entire Japanese fleet, rendering it impossible to import any necessary resources (fig. 3)⁵⁰.

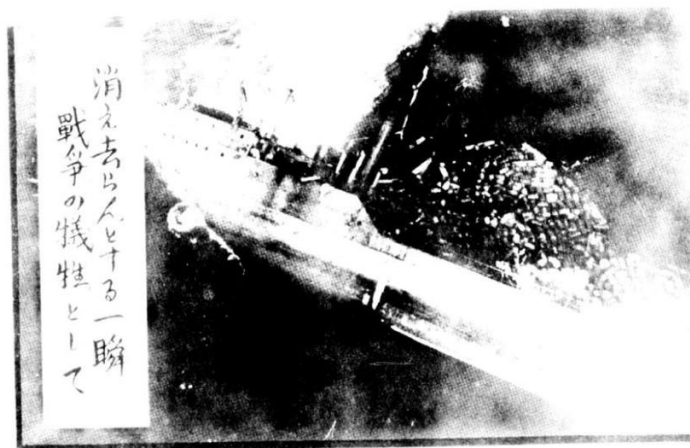
Fig. 2. Image of one of the four set of leaflets prepared by CINPAC

Source: U.S. Army Air Force, *Starvation*, p. 49.



Fig. 3. Image of one of the four set of leaflets prepared by CINPAC.

Source: U.S. Army Air Force, *Starvation*, p. 49.



5. Conclusions

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

When it comes to the analysis of propaganda, one of the most challenging aspects to evaluate is its impact, particularly when attempting to measure the effectiveness of leaflets during wartime. Propaganda operates within a complex framework of persuasion, often employing various rhetorical strategies that appeal to a wide range of emotions, beliefs, and biases, which can vary significantly from one individual to another. Furthermore, the effectiveness of propaganda often extends beyond its immediate dissemination. It has the potential to influence long-term attitudes, behaviors, and cultural norms in ways that may not be immediately observable. However, it is possible to identify several key elements that can provide insights into the effectiveness of the psychological warfare conducted by the American forces. In the Office War Information's *Leaflet News Letter* dated June 29, 1945, which was published just one month after the initiation of psychological warfare via B-29s, it was documented that a vast quantity of leaflets had been disseminated among the civilian population in Okinawa. Notably, the report highlighted a concerning trend within the Kerama Islands, the only location where leaflets were not dropped, which was a significant increase in suicide incidents⁵¹. This observation suggests that the leaflets may have effectively persuaded other inhabitants of Okinawa that the American forces would not subject them to cruel treatment, even though it is not possible to determine to what extent the promise of food may have played a role in this perception.

Another element that can be considered as a factor demonstrating the effectiveness of the American strategy was the counterpropaganda by Japan. Radio broadcasts announced that individuals who found leaflets had to turn them into the nearest police station⁵². Furthermore, the American leaflet strategy was regularly ridiculed, and reassurances were given that Japan had enough food to fill everyone's stomachs⁵³. On July 5, 1945, when the food situation had reached a critical level that could no longer be concealed, the Minister of Agriculture Yamazaki Tatsunosuke, in a lengthy radio address, attempted to portray the food shortage as a consequence of the war against the United States rather than the result of a series of mistakes made by the government. He urged the people to carry on despite a diet which: «cannot be said to be enough in calories...By covering up the fact that you are hungry, you are a Samurai⁵⁴».

Most likely, however, the demonstration of the success of psychological warfare is illustrated by the testimonies of individuals who experienced it firsthand. In June 1947, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey conducted a study to evaluate the impact of American strategy on Japanese morale. This comprehensive study involved hundreds of participants, including civilians and military personnel, and sought to analyze the trajectory of Japanese health and morale across various stages of the war. Regarding the impact of the leaflets, the study asserts that they proved

⁵¹ OWI, *Leaflet News Letter*, 1, 8/29 June 1945, p. 10.

⁵² OWI, *Leaflet News Letter*, 1, 6/1st June 1945, p. 3.

⁵³ OWI, *Leaflet News Letter*, 1, 10/27 June 1945, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁴ Cited in USSBS, *The Effects of Strategic Bombing on Japanese Morale*, June 1947, p. 124.

to be a successful tool in the American strategy. The study calculated that nearly half of the population in Japan (49 percent) had been reached by at least one leaflet, and that over half of these individuals remembered the content three months after the end of the war⁵⁵. Among those surveyed, detailed statistical information on specific leaflets was not readily available. However, when asked which types of general contents were most frequently remembered, 11 percent of respondents recalled the promises of good treatment upon surrender, and 5 percent mentioned specifically the lack of food and supplies in Japan⁵⁶. What emerges clearly from the study is that the Japanese population was profoundly demoralized by the scarcity of food, leading to a growing reluctance to sustain the war effort. Sixty-four percent of the population stated that they had reached a point prior to surrender where they felt personally unable to go on with the war. Of these, less than one-tenth attributed the cause to military defeats, while one-quarter attributed the cause to shortages of food, which was the second cause after the air bombings⁵⁷. The statements of a middle-aged machinist exemplified the prevailing sentiment:

[T]he food rationed to us was not enough to keep us working. We could hardly stand it. The government kept telling us that we would defeat the United States forces after they landed here, but as my house was burned down and I had no food, clothing, or shelter, I didn't know how I could go on⁵⁸.

Nevertheless, while the responses collected during the survey provide valuable insights, they do not enable us to discern the extent to which the food-related leaflets may have influenced the morale of the Japanese population and convinced them of the generosity offered by the Americans. As we have seen, Japan's food situation was precarious even before the March 1945 Operation Starvation, and likely so before the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor as well. What is certain, as evidenced by the psychological warfare that we tried to analyze in this article, is that the Americans were acutely aware of this profound vulnerability within Japan, and they strategically aimed at their stomachs to illuminate the folly of their government's decisions and showcase America's benevolence.

However, it did not take long for the Japanese population to recognize the propagandistic intentions behind these messages. Throughout the initial year of the Occupation, American authorities not only failed to adequately address the critical food shortages but also, driven by a punitive mindset towards their former enemy, actively obstructed Japan's efforts to import food or receive humanitarian aid, worsening an already severe crisis. It was only in the summer of 1946,

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

when widespread food riots threatened the stability of the occupation and raised fears of a potential communist uprising, that the importation of food and the implementation of food aid programs were authorized. Over time, these measures helped alleviate the food crisis, gradually transforming the severe shortages and hunger that had plagued the wartime years into memories of the past.

THE AUTHOR

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