

Constantine Vigderman

May 4, 2006

Jpnt 179: Final Project Paper

Conflict and Philosophy: Osamu Tesuka's *Adolf*

As a national hero and the “God of manga”, Osamu Tesuka’s influence on the cultural landscape of Japan is undeniable. One example of the depth and power of his work is the World War II five volume manga entitled *Adolf*. The plot follows the actions of Sohei Toge, a Japanese reporter, and three different Adolfs through their lives and deaths, from 1936 to 1983. The mangaka explores a wide range of themes such as racism, warmongering, growing up, and nationalism. Tesuka’s philosophy of pacifism, ‘humanism’, and his idea of justice are ever-present through every volume. The story itself is told with great attention to realism. The drawings are dynamic and beautiful. When Tesuka deviates from a realistic style, it is almost always to great purpose or effect. Thematically exploring the plot, style, and various settings of the manga will lend great insight into Tesuka’s outlook. An understanding of his philosophy allows the reader to appreciate the work as a whole, and fulfills the purpose of the author in creating the manga:

“This story will be read by millions of “Adolfs” all over the world. I intend to call it, simply, “Adolf”. And the children of these millions of Adolfs will pass this story on to their children...and they in turn will pass it on to their descendants, so that billions all over the world...may give some thought to what this thing called “justice” really is....”<sup>1</sup>

Tesuka, speaking through the main character Sohei Toge, reveals the purpose of the series. But in order to understand his idea of justice and how it relates both to the work

---

<sup>1</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 251-252

as a whole and how it is meant to be perceived by the readers, an exploration of the manga itself is necessary.

At a glance, the plot of *Adolf* revolves around an incriminating set of documents. These documents supposedly prove that Adolf Hitler is part Jewish. Various factions want to control said documents for personal or political gain. Others want to destroy them in order to protect their party and the Fuhrer. Our hero's, Sohei Toge's, brother comes upon these documents as part of his association with the communist movement as an exchange student in Germany. He is killed over the documents and Toge vows revenge. These documents do nothing but harm Toge. In pursuit of his revenge he gets tortured, significant people die, and he becomes incapable of love. Hounded by the Japanese secret police, he lives like a bum for his precious documents. Ironically, in the end the documents become useless; Hitler's regime crashed without their help. To Toge, however, happiness was only possible when the ghost of his brother was put to rest; when the documents themselves were put to rest much like his brother; in an unmarked grave in a garden.

The struggle over the documents occurs during the era of Hitler. They are discovered in 1936 and finally burned in 1945. During this time period Tesuka graphically portrays World War II.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup> These images are drawn realistically, with a great attention to detail, and a focus on the destructive power of the war machine. Particularly effective is the use of sound effects to denote bombs dropping and exploding. The fire bombings of Kobe are drawn especially poignantly and in greater length and

---

<sup>2</sup> *An Exile in Japan* 154, 155

<sup>3</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 200, 201

<sup>4</sup> *Days of Infamy* 134-138

<sup>5</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 40, 41, 110-120, 146-156

detail. This is probably due to Tesuka's own experiences in his youth of the American bombings of Japan.

The other setting, in volume five, is Israel and surrounding Arab villages during the first Intifada. Once more Tesuka portrays war as negative and bloody. The climax of the last volume and arguably the series is the final, violent showdown between Adolf Kaufmann and Adolf Kamil; childhood friends and protagonists.<sup>6</sup> The PLO takes the place of the SS as the enemy. Arabs are portrayed extremely negatively. They are warmongers and terrorists who train children from birth to be cold-blooded killers of Jews.<sup>7</sup> This is not a politically correct or accurate portrayal of the situation. From Tesuka's perspective and the perspective of the manga it is understandable. Tesuka, as a survivor of WWII, seems to be a Jewish sympathizer and a Zionist. The depiction of the Palestinians may be born out of ignorance or simply used as a device to further the plot and repeat the general theme of the destructive power of racism and nationalism.

The world of *Adolf* is characterized by violence, hate, war, and death. The main character, Toge, is tortured multiple times; by the German and Japanese secret police. Every class of society and every generation are racist in some way. Children inherit this sensitivity and verbalize it.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps nothing demonstrates the permeation of violence based on race in *Adolf* better than the murder scene of Adolf Kamil's dad by Adolf Kaufmann.<sup>9</sup> Kaufmann used to be a pure and innocent child. In volume three that purity is viciously assaulted and ultimately defeated by the crush of propaganda fueled by racism. When Kaufmann commits that first act of murder he becomes irretrievably lost.

---

<sup>6</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 240-246

<sup>7</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 226

<sup>8</sup> *A Tale of the Twentieth Century* 118

<sup>9</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 150-153

The reader cannot but pity him. Time and again, insanity and anguish grip his features. He is not a total SS drone. He thinks for himself, but he is so far gone into the web of hatred that he cannot be redeemed. Despite his fall, conscience did not abandon him and tortures him. One example of this is the music of the violinist that he killed plays incessantly in his mind, demonstrating the fragile balance of madness, hatred, and a not insignificant morality inside of him.<sup>10</sup>

The corruption and devastation caused by prejudice and patriotism are consistent and powerful thematic elements within the manga. Literally every chapter is marked by the appearance of one of these themes. This comes as no surprise. Both WWII and the Arab/Israeli conflict were based upon race and ethnicity to some degree. Nationalism leads to prejudice, prejudice leads to violence, and violence leads to torture, death, and genocide. Race is a defining characteristic of every character. A German will almost always turn out to be evil. If a Jew is shown, something bad has or will happen to that person. Japanese people vary the most and are caricatured the least, but are still hyper-aware of the racial issues surrounding them.

An examination of the race of the four main characters and its role is a good way to demonstrate the tension and conflict brought about by prejudice in the manga.<sup>11</sup> One of the driving forces in the story is the possible Jewish heritage of Adolf Hitler. During WWII such propaganda was spread by the allies to undermine the German Reich. In the manga it is taken as fact and known by many people. Race is what drove Hitler to power,<sup>12</sup> tore apart his soul and may have driven him to madness while he was in power<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> *Days of Infamy* 204-206

<sup>11</sup> I dealt with other issues regarding the characters in my first paper. It is attached it as a reference but I didn't feel the need to rehash my points here.

<sup>12</sup> *An Exile in Japan* 149

<sup>14</sup>, and lead to his murder.<sup>15</sup> As an aside on the murder, it is representative of Tesuka's amazing attention to detail. Hitler was shot in the right side of his head but the gun was placed in his left hand. It is immediately recognizable that he was murdered. Prejudice is both the driving force of the war and, through the documents, the way out of the war. Hitler's ethnicity gets numerous people tortured or killed, including him.

Adolf Kamil is a German Jew living in Japan. As a young child he is already exposed to race relations as the Japanese kids pick on him and his friend Kaufmann.<sup>16</sup> The sense of alienation grows as the world marches steadily towards war. His relationship with Kaufmann is strained from this war and his father along with the censure of the Jewish community. Despite everything, he still manages to maintain his friendship with Kaufmann until the brutal rape of Elisa. Perhaps it was that event that finally pushes Kamil over the precipice, and he stops being part Japanese and completely embraces himself as ethnically and racially Jewish. This leads him to Israel and a career in the military. The war with the Arab countries permanently taints Kamil, and like all the other soldiers in the manga he dies a violent death. After he retires from the military he loses his life in a suicide bombing. Tesuka did not let him go peacefully, even though he easily could have. The violence of Kamil's life and deeds precluded the chance for a quiet death.

Adolf Kaufmann is a half-German, half-Japanese boy living in Japan. As a boy, his German father dominated his mother and tried to raise his son as completely German.

---

<sup>13</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 234-235

<sup>14</sup> *Days of Infamy* 164

<sup>15</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 141-142

<sup>16</sup> *A Tale of the Twentieth Century* 118

In the Hitler Youth, he is taunted for his heritage.<sup>17</sup> After all, purity is one of the main facets of the German master race theories. In talking with Hitler, Tesuka expresses what he believes is a common misconception about Japan; that all Japanese women are Geishas.<sup>18</sup> He also points out the common doctrine that Hitler held about Japanese; that they are a second class race incapable of creative thought. The irony is that Japan was an important ally of Germany in the Second World War. Kaufmann's race does not stop him from ascending the ranks of the SS, but it is constantly mentioned. The specter of ethnicity haunts his life. The fact that his mother is Japanese and changes her citizenship back to Japan bothers him immensely. The fact that his step-father is Japanese is irreconcilable in his mind.

Ironically, out of desperation Kaufmann begins to fight for another, similar cause after the fall of the Third Reich. This marriage of convenience led to a wife and a daughter, both ironically not Aryan. This cooperation lasted until the murder of Kaufmann's wife and daughter at the hands of Kamil. He betrayed his allies to get revenge. When they came after him they remarked that "he turned out to be German after all" and that "he never had it in him to be an Arab."<sup>19</sup> As everywhere, race is the perpetrator and instigator of violence. Kaufmann comes to terms with his mixed background by completely supporting the Nazi party. Ironically, this action is described as a Japanese trait.<sup>20</sup> No matter where Kaufmann goes or what he does, he is haunted by acute awareness of ethnic background and the prejudice that comes with it, and that he brings himself.

---

<sup>17</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 116

<sup>18</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 209-211

<sup>19</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 237

<sup>20</sup> *Days of Infamy* 160

Sohei Toge is both the main protagonist and the only racially pure male protagonist. Although bitterly involved in the turmoil and often affected by racism he does not allow it to cloud his judgment. He opposes injustice from both Germany and Japan. His campaign against Hitler is more about revenge and overthrowing the corrupt regime than any ethnic question. Nowhere in the manga does Toge use race to justify his actions, nor does he seem as acutely aware of it as most of the other characters. Toge speaks for Tesuka himself and represents the types of character traits that Tesuka admires. Loyalty to friend and family over nation, the will to go on, and fighting only out of self-defense, these are things that Tesuka respects. As such, Toge survives the manga and gives us a chance to read it. Elisa is the only other character to survive like this. She too is innocent of race and innocent of war. She also marries Kamil, a member of her own ethnicity. The war does rape her though, literally and figuratively; it killed her family and in a macabre and powerful scene stripped her of her virginity and innocence.<sup>21</sup>

Given the failure of every mixed marriage and the internal anguish of every mixed-race character, could Tesuka be opposing mixed-race marriages? Is he a racial purist? While possible, the events of the manga do not completely support that view. The failures and anguish suffered by the characters are not because of their ethnicity. Problems occur out of a focus on and obsession with race, not the actual race itself. Nevertheless, all ethnicities and nationalities are distinguishable by the way they are drawn. There are numerous indictments of German men marrying Japanese women. But again, the Germans are the ones making such statements, and they do not necessarily correspond with Tesuka's point of view. In fact, their nationality, ironically enough, makes it less likely that they represent Tesuka's philosophy.

---

<sup>21</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 66, 67

What is the philosophy that Tesuka is proposing? Some call it Humanism, but as Thorn points out this is completely inaccurate.<sup>22</sup> Humanism puts humanity on a pedestal, but Tesuka believes that humankind is arrogant and not respectful enough of the environment. Thorn's description of Tesuka as a modernist is not accurate enough. More to the point, Tesuka is a pacifist and most likely a Zionist. He abhors war and its roots: racism and nationalism. He believes in 'seigi', justice for everyone. Hints of this philosophy permeate the work.

His Zionism is implied in the negative way he portrays the PLO. He clearly believes in the need for a Jewish state. In fact, he expresses this clearly through Kamil and Elisa's conversation overlooking Kobe.<sup>23</sup> Further proof is offered on pages 210-212 of *1945 and All That Remains*. Israel is made out to be a righteous defender against the Arab threat. The Jews depicted are smiling while the Arabs look menacing and hold guns. "Each people upheld their own concept of justice" but it is clear which 'concept' Tesuka supports. Throughout the manga, only violence in self-defense has been justified. Of course nothing is that simple, and the deaths of women and children in Israeli raids on Arab towns only serves to demonstrate that no matter what conception of justice you may hold, war will corrupt it.

Tesuka does not believe in either nationalism or patriotism. Rather he believes in humanity. In this way he is a 'humanist'. Elisa frowns on the patriotic parade held by Japan to honor its supposed 2,600th anniversary. She likens it to a Nazi rally.<sup>24</sup> The mangaka's words can also be heard through Sochio: "Patriotism...it's all propaganda...an excuse to fight another war....No! I'm not going to have anything to do

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 7

<sup>23</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 254

<sup>24</sup> *The Half-Aryan* 241



with patriotism that feeds off hatred and discrimination!”<sup>25</sup> Truly, all the patriotism depicted in the manga is based off prejudice and racism. Nationalism is no better; it destroys the family. Yuri and Adolf Kaufmann could not overcome her remarriage and the changing of her citizenship back to Japanese. In the end, Kaufmann has to choose between his nation and his family.<sup>26</sup> This final chance at redemption is turned down; Germany becomes Kaufmann’s family, and he shares in its destruction. The Honda family is also destroyed by the split affiliations of its members.<sup>27</sup> Much greater than race or nationality is the power of love. Page 47 of *1945 and All That Remains* is a good demonstration of this sentiment. Toge discredits Kaufmann’s frantic racist arguments simply by referring to his love to Yuri. Devotion to a nation is meaningless compared to devotion to people as Kaufmann discovers when the Reich falls. He has devoted his life to ‘nothing’.<sup>28</sup>

These ideas tie into Tesuka’s overarching conception of justice. The Japanese word used is ‘seigi’. “Seigi suggests a broader sort of rightness, a Buddhist sense of peace and calm, a Confucian concept of things being in their proper place.”<sup>29</sup> Revenge is not factored into this definition. In fact revenge is specifically denounced throughout the text. Getting revenge never leads to satisfaction for the person. To be just is to be good to yourself and to others. Thoughts of race and nationality replace thoughts of other people. They lead to injustice. *Adolf* is story of things being in the wrong place. Toge, and through him Tesuka, uses the stories of the three Adolfs to demonstrate the affects of injustice on the world.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Days of Infamy* 44

<sup>26</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 87

<sup>27</sup> *Days of Infamy* 109, 110

<sup>28</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 178

<sup>29</sup> *1945 and All That Remains* 11

Through a realistic, interpretive, and an often funny style; through fast paced action and grim imagery; through a powerful story with a powerful message Tesuka's *Adolf* series becomes a powerful indictment of war and its causes; nationalism and racism. He wishes for a world of peace and justice, where the person is judged before their background. His characters, especially the character of Adolf Kaufmann, are potent examples of the corrupting influence of patriotism, propaganda, and discrimination. Millions of Adolfs have read the volume and billions more should. The message that Tesuka sends is still very much unheard. Things have changed since Tesuka first published his work, but the issues he brings up remain just as timely and significant. The conflicts that Tesuka portrays; hatred, rape, murder, genocide, still hold power over the human race. 'Seigi' is a long way off.

Bibliography

Osamu Tesuka. *ADOLF: A Tale of the Twentieth Century*. Trans. Yuji Oniki. San

Francisco: Cadence Books, Inc. 1995.

*ADOLF: An Exile in Japan*. Trans. Yuji Oniki. San Francisco: Cadence Books, Inc. 1996.

*ADOLF: The Half-Aryan*. Trans. Yuji Oniki. San Francisco: Cadence Books, Inc. 1996.

*ADOLF: The Days of Infamy*. Trans. Yuji Oniki. San Francisco: Cadence Books, Inc.

1996.

*ADOLF: 1945 and All That Remains*. Trans. Yuji Oniki. San Francisco: Cadence Books,

Inc. 1996.