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Shinsengumi: The Shogun's Last Samurai Corps



Synopsis

Shinsengumi: The Shogun's last Samurai Corps is the true story of the notorious samurai corps formed in 1863 to arrest or kill the enemies of the Tokugawa Shogun. The only book in English about the Shinsengumi, it focuses on the corps' two charismatic leaders, Kondo Isami and Hijikata Toshizo, both impeccable swordsmen. It is a history-in-brief of the final years of the Bakufu, which collapsed in 1867 with the restoration of Imperial rule. In writing Shinsengumi, Hillsborough referred mostly to Japanese-language primary sources, including letters, memoirs, journals, interviews, and eyewitness accounts, as well as definitive biographies and histories of the era. The fall of the shogun's government (Tokugawa Bakufu, or simply Bakufu) in 1868, which had ruled Japan for over two and a half centuries, was the greatest event in modern Japanese history. The revolution, known as the Meiji Restoration, began with the violent reaction of samurai to the Bakufu's decision in 1854 to open the theretofore isolated country to "Western barbarians." Though opening the country was unavoidable, it was seen as a sign of weakness by the samurai who clamored to "expel the barbarians." Those samurai plotted to overthrow the shogun and restore the holy emperor to his ancient seat of power. Screaming "heaven's revenge," they wielded their swords with a vengeance upon those loyal to the shogun. They unleashed a wave of terror at the center of the revolution - the emperor's capital of Kyoto. Murder and assassination were rampant. By the end of 1862, hordes of renegade samurai, called ronin, had transformed the streets of the Imperial Capital into a "sea of blood." The shogun's administrators were desperate to stop the terror. A band of expert swordsmen was formed. It was given the name Shinsengumi ("Newly Selected Corps") - and commissioned to eliminate the ronin and other enemies of the Bakufu. With unrestrained brutality bolstered by an official sanction to kill, the Shinsengumi soon became the shogun's most dreaded security force. In this vivid historical narrative of the Shinsengumi, the only one in the English language, author Romulus Hillsborough paints a provocative and thrilling picture of this most fascinating period in Japanese history.

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Customer Reviews

"So, what do the Hell's Angels and the Shinsengumi have in common? They both had a propensity for violence, a strict internal code of conduct, and an alarmingly excessive reaction to insult, real or perceived. Also, they probably would have slaughtered each other on sight." â "Goodreads

Shinsengumi: The Shogun's Last Samurai Corps is the only English-language history of the shogun's notorious hit-squad in Kyoto during the final years the shogun's government. It is my most controversial book. I think that much of the controversy is due to the language. I experimented in this book, repeating certain phrases to stress certain characteristics of the Shinsengumi leaders, including their "propensity to kill." Readers either love it or slam it. But I stand behind my original language and would not change a single word. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Unfortunately I must agree with most other reviewers. The writing style is beyond redundant (propensity to kill, anyone?), and the text is sometimes too opinionated. It is still a good read if you are interested in the subject; especially since there aren't many other books available it seems, but due to the hammy writing it does appear to be a longer book than it actually is. In the hands of a more skilled and objective author this might have been a real gem.

I'm not too sure how to describe this book. First, let me say that I did enjoy the story. For those only marginally acquainted with the subject, the Shinsengumi were supposed to be a pseudo-police force to protect the Shogun at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate. They failed, on many levels. The Shinsengumi have a special place in the hearts and history of the Japanese - the closest parallel I can think of is the Texas Rangers, and even then that is not a good comparison. The Shinsengumi have been portrayed in film and anime (most notably Rurouni Kenshin for anime and, well, Shinsengumi with Toshiro Mifune for film); it's through anime that I became interested in knowing more. The good parts: There is a lot of information here. This is the scholarly part. Mr. Hillsborough

does a good job of telling the story of the Shinsengumi, explaining the historical setting and giving insight into the characters and their motivations. Footnotes and textual explanations while not copious are sufficient. The bad parts: somehow, even though we are talking only a period of some 6 years the story seems short, almost a sketch. Dry. Bring a bottle of water with you dry. And, one of the most dramatic moments of the Shinsengumi - one of the most dramatic moments in Japanese history, the incident at Ikeda'ya - is pretty unsatisfying. Accurately portrayed I have no doubt but somehow lacking. For a student of Japanese history and culture, this is a good book and does the job well and I do recommend it for this reader. For the casual reader in Japonica, maybe not so much.

Despite the convoluted nature of the material, Hillsborough's historical narrative is easy to understand and enlightening. I can finally wrap my head around the Shinsengumi and start of the Meiji Era. However, Hillsborough's dislike of the Shinsengumi and constant repetition of certain phrases, like "propensity to kill," quickly became grating and tested my patience. Luckily, the overall quality of information won out and anyone hoping to learn about the infamous shinsengumi should give this book a read.

Don't accept a party invitation from Kondo and Hijikata! In the anime Gintama, the Shinsengumi patrols the street of Edo overrun by aliens. In the film Assassination, the main character Kiyokawa asks who were the two men behind Serizawa? In response he is given the names of Kondo and Hijikata. To which Kiyokawa notes that they appear to be excellent swordmen. In the anime Hakuoki, the Shinsengumi are a reverse harem of pretty boys to the main female protagonist Chizuru. But who are they in reality? This is a question that Romulus Hillsborough asks in his book: Shinsengumi: The Shogun's Last Samurai Corps. Gathering information from written histories, passed down tales and written memoir of the survivors (both Shinsengumi and their enemies), Mr. Hillsborough traces the history of Kondo Isami and Hijikata Toshizo from their birth and upbringing to their reign as the most feared troops of crumbling Tokugawa shogunate to their eventual death (the former by execution and the latter by battle). Interspersed among Kondo and Hijikata's histories, are lives of others of this infamous troop (Okita, Nagakura, Shimada Kai to name a few). Mr. Hillsborough does an excellent job of bringing the history to life. While the Appendix, Glossary and Index allows for quick look up and reminder of facts. I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in the history of this turbulent time in Japanese history especially if they want to know more about the Shinsengumi. As for the title of this review, you will need to read

the book to find out why.

The material is enlightening and the story is interesting but the author's tone is disgraceful. Hillsborough is clearly biased against the Shinsengumi and has no qualms about displaying that bias in his work. It is my opinion that regardless of the author's feelings on their subjects that they should do they're best to treat them with compassion and understanding, something that Hillsborough fails to do at every turn. Also as one reviewer pointed out his style becomes repetitive, especially in the case of his obsession with "the propensity to kill", as if the concept of violence was completely alien to the average samurai.

The topic is fascinating but this book is written like school paper, trying to harp on some point from page one without really ever proving it as anything other opinion. As a result, the chronology of the events discussed is all but impossible to detect if you do not have previous knowledge of the era's history. A real shame because there is little else written in English, from a historical perspective, on the Shinsengumi

If you have no idea who the Shinsengumi were and perhaps never even heard of them, then maybe you will glean a little bit of information from this text. For the most part it is underwhelming, lacks critical information and is poorly written. For each point or event the author skims past, there are numerous pieces of critical or supporting information that was left out, making the text very shallow and nowhere near as informative as it could be. Personally, I got nothing out of this text, but I am glad I didn't buy the hardcover when it first came out, because even \$10 for the paperback makes me feel like I was robbed.

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