Modern warfare could well be summed up in two phrases: annihilation and humanitarian concern. Never before have these two contradictory impulses been so prevalent and never before have they clashed so violently. On the one hand, fulfilling the dictum of killing in battle has become easier than ever. It was the industrial revolution that brought about the mass production of efficient means of transportation, better logistics and increasingly more effective weapons with longer range and unprecedented destructiveness. As a result, wars have grown more intense, with greater numbers of participants, and far more casualties than ever. On the other hand, and partially to offset the unprecedented carnage which wars produce, conduct in combat has become more regulated and is accompanied by a growing demand for humanity. The dead in modern wars are usually buried in well kept cemeteries and the wounded receive effective medical treatment, to the extent that their mortality rate in battle has decreased markedly.

Even more conspicuous is the transformation during the last 150 years in the attitude to defeated soldiers who have surrendered and the treatment of POWs. Their lives are usually spared; moreover, according to various conventions designed specifically to ameliorate their conditions, the POWs’ captors are required to provide them with adequate food and accommodation and even pay for their labour. This attitude to POWs is without parallel in the past. Until the mid-nineteenth century no clear policy had existed as to how to deal with surrendering enemy soldiers, either in the heat of battle or soon after victory. These soldiers were often summarily executed, put to work as slaves, or imprisoned until ransom was paid for their release. Alas, the great hopes in regard
to the treatment of POWs stirred by the international conventions have not always come true. Certain nations have been reluctant to follow the conventions, and worse, in some conflicts they treated their enemy prisoners with exceptional cruelty, often resulting in their death.

Among those nations who defied the new gospel of humaneness to POWs in modern times, Imperial Japan seems to hold a special but not necessarily unique place. During the Second World War in particular, Japanese treatment of Allied POWs was notorious for its cruelty and inhumanity. Ever since that war, negative images of the Japanese attitude to POWs have been sustained through scholarly books, personal memoirs and, above all, countless popular films and novels. There is more than a grain of truth in these images, but it is less known that they emerged rather late and do not necessarily reflect earlier military conduct of the Japanese. Surprisingly, before the eight-year conflict that encompasses the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Pacific War (1941–5), Japanese treatment of POWs, Europeans in particular, was regarded as benevolent and even chivalrous. The transformation of these images is intriguing but so is the reality.

This chapter focuses on the actual behaviour and attitude to POWs held by Japan, rather than on its images. It is based on a systematic analysis of the treatment of POWs in six major wars fought by Imperial Japan from 1894 to 1945. With these data at hand, this chapter aims to uncover the determinants of the Japanese treatment of POWs, the motives for the above transformation, and their implications for national identity and attitude to self and others.

**TREATMENT OF POWS AND ITS PREDICTORS**

The quality of a belligerent’s treatment of POWs it holds is a cardinal issue in assessing its compliance with international conventions and enforcing their terms. Regrettably, this is not a simple task, especially in wartime, since many of the actions against POWs are conducted out of sight of neutral observers and tend to remain unreported. Moreover, treatment of POWs includes a complex array of quantifiable and non-quantifiable aspects that together affect the prisoners’ wellbeing during and after imprisonment. It begins at the moment of surrender, when the captors’ responses may range from organized and careful transport of the POWs to the rear at one extreme to wilful killing immediately or soon after capture at the other. If killings do take place, their percentage is an important, albeit rarely available, indication of the attitude to POWs and their initial treatment.

During incarceration, multiple behavioural facets may provide additional indications of the quality of treatment. They may be broken down to more mundane aspects, such as medical care, quality of food and especially the daily calorie intake available to the prisoners, as well as the availability or deprivation of mail, payment for work, or any other rights prescribed by the conventions signed by the belligerents. Side by side