

Samurai Swords for the Material Battle

Gendaito of the Taisho and Early Showa Period
(1912 – 1945)



Otto Maxein

Foreword

Japanese swords have an excellent reputation among connoisseurs. The complex processes during forging or the individualization of a cutting edge through the application of an aesthetic hamon fascinate far beyond the borders of Japan. To this day, the samurai sword is so deeply rooted in Japanese culture that it is inseparable from it. The Japanese swordsmiths have always played a major role in this.

But what drove soldiers, long after the era of the samurai, to go into the material battles of the Second World War with the drawn sword? In a conflict that was fought with means that made a fight with the blade not only hopeless, but downright suicidal. Why was it important for pilots to take their swords on board their planes, even though there was no practical use for them there? What was inherent in these blades that they exerted such fascination and effect on their bearers? What makes the swords forged at Yasukuni Shrine or the swords of the two generations of Minamoto Yoshichika special? How do they clearly stand out from the mass of swords forged during the Taisho and early Showa period? What makes them swords worth preserving? And what is the truth of the saying "The sword is the soul of the samurai"?

The author explores these questions in his book. He deals with the subject with great attention to detail. He explains, without glorifying, what makes the fascination of these weapons and takes the reader with him into the material battles of the Second World War, in which the samurai sword played a more important role for the imperial soldiers than one would assume at first glance.

Oliver Gerigk

Index of Contents

Dedication

Special Thanks

Syntax, Formatting

Image Material, Own Photos

Samurai Swords for the Material Battle

Minamoto Yoshichika Shodai and Nidai

Minamoto Yoshichika Shodai

Minamoto Yoshichika Nidai

Coronation Tachi by Minamoto Yoshichika

Tamahagane or „Jewel Steel“ A Historical View

The Symbol of the Broken Sword

The Japanese Sword as an Art Object

Art Swords for the Hardest Close Combat

Minamoto Yoshichika, Shodai and Nidai Picture Section

Shodai Minamoto Yoshichika with Cutting Test by
Hakudo Nakayama

Nidai Minamoto Yoshichika in Gunto Koshirae

Nidai Minamoto Yoshichika in Kai-Gunto Koshirae

The Yasukuni Shrine

Yasuoki

Gunto, its Place in the Imperial Army and its Importance
in Battle

Gunto, its Place in the Imperial Army and its Importance
in Battle Picture Section

Kamikaze

Shimpu Tokkotai

Missions of the Shimpu Tokkotai Picture Section

Glossary

List of References, Print Media

List of References, Wikipedia

Other Internet Sources

**In Grateful Memory of My Father
Otto Rudi Maxein**

(* 11.06.1917, † 06.05.1990)



I dedicate this book to my father, who survived the Second World War as a front-line soldier from the Polish campaign to his capture at the end of the war. As a tank hunter, he took part in several major tank battles in the East, was wounded and was awarded the medal Winter Battle in the East 1941/42, called "Frozen Meat Medal" by the fighting soldiers, the Iron Cross and the Bronze Close Combat Clasp, which means that he has participated in at least 15 hand-to-hand fights. It was only now, long after his death, through reading Erich Maria Remarque, Edlef Köppen and Andreas Engermann that I realized what almost unimaginable hardships he must have endured, what brutal dehumanization he must have experienced in hand-to-hand combat man-to-man.

Like all soldiers of the fighting troops, he went through hell and experienced the horror of war in his own body and soul. Nevertheless, I remember my father as a life-affirming person who, after his release from war captivity, looked ahead like hundreds of thousands of other war repatriates and made his contribution to the reconstruction and economic miracle of the young Federal Republic of Germany. To him and my dear mother I owe my sheltered, happy childhood and carefree youth.

My father accompanied my wild years with indulgence and understanding. Friends were the most important thing to me during this time. So when I once called him my friend, he answered with a smile: "I am not your friend, I am your father." Today I know what he wanted to tell me. Many a "friend" has disappointed me in life - my father never did! I have learned a lot for life from him and much of what makes me what I am today I owe to him. His upright character and his moral courage are still my role model and orientation today. I am proud of my father and love him - beyond death. Unfortunately I never told him that. I hope he knew it.

Otto Willi Maxein

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No reference book can do without valid sources and extensive research. This is especially true for topics that have not yet been conclusively covered in the relevant literature. Here, the support of third parties is needed, who help to close gaps in knowledge or who provide visual material to be integrated into the work. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank all supporters who have given me advice and support and made this book possible in its present form!

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Otto Maxein, "A lucky day mid-autumn 2020"

Syntax, Formatting

A special feature of the German text edition with regard to Japanese nomenclature is the use of upper and lower case letters, since in the Japanese script, as in other written languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese, etc.), the distinction between upper and lower case letters is unknown.

It was simpler in the English text output, because in English, too, lower case is used at first except at the beginning of the sentence. Exceptions apply e.g. to proper names, salutations, geographical designations or in headings.

In accordance with the English text edition, terms of the Japanese nomenclature are also written in lower case in the German text edition, except at the beginning of the sentence. Exceptions are terms that are capitalized in accordance with German spelling, insofar as this appears to make sense in the context due to the way the language is perceived.

In translations, names and terms related to Japanese sword terminology have been adopted according to the spelling of the sources for the sake of translation accuracy.

Words printed in italics in the continuous text are either proper nouns or serve to emphasize certain terms or originate from Japanese nomenclature. Explanations can be found in the glossary. Furthermore, captions are printed in italics to distinguish them from the body text.

Image Material, Own Photos

Photos on pages [22](#), [41](#), [42](#), [43](#) and [44](#) courtesy of Kazushige Tsuruta-San, Aoi-Art, Tokyo, Japan. The “Japanese Sword Shop Aoi-Art” and the “Japanese Sword Online Museum” are always worth a visit to the website of Kazushige Tsuruta-San. The remaining images are either from press or state archives and are expressly marked “public domain” or are in the possession of the author with corresponding rights of use or as originals.

A sometimes severely reduced image quality is due either to natural aging of the image material used or to the resolution of some image files being too low for printing. In view of the book title, these images were nevertheless included because they seemed suitable for visualizing the topic and have lost none of their expressiveness despite the reduced image quality.

Lovers of Japanese blades know that their observation requires the right light. For example, when examining the tempering line, we need a specific light source to guide the blade along. A photograph, on the other hand, is a snapshot and always captures a blade in the light of a single moment. I photographed my swords shown in this book myself. Thus I spent many days - my wife claims weeks - patiently experimenting and learning to live with compromises. The photos therefore give only a very distant impression of the beauty of the blades and their inherent activities. But anyone who knows Japanese swords knows anyway that they must be taken in hand and studied in the right light for them to reveal themselves to us in all their beauty and perfection.

Samurai Swords for the Material Battle

Gendaito of the Taisho and Early Showa
Period (1912 - 1945)

In no other culture has a weapon in the course of its history attained such a high spiritual and social significance as the samurai sword in Japan. For more than a thousand years it was not only considered the soul of the samurai, but as a feared weapon of an elitist and death-defying warrior caste it was the all-controlling status symbol, which the Japanese paid awe, respect and almost religious submission to. Triggered by the *Meiji Restoration* and Japan's path to modernity, social change and the striving for progress at the end of the 19th century sealed the fate of the samurai and their swords, which henceforth seemed like anachronisms and relics of a past epoch.

But although samurai swords, like infantry rapiers or cavalry sabres in Europe, had lost their importance as weapons of war with the introduction of machine guns and tanks, the belief in the spiritual power of the samurai sword was so deeply rooted in Japanese thinking that after their initial exile at the beginning of the *Meiji Restoration*, these swords experienced a military renaissance during the *Taisho* and *early Showa period*. In addition to the countless machine blades that were made in Japan for parade purposes or for lower ranks, the demand of Japanese officers for new swords traditionally forged in the spirit of *bushido* revived an ancient craft.

Experienced swordsmiths were activated throughout Japan, training swordsmiths in various forging centers and forging their own swords. Among the most famous places of activity were the *Minatogawa Shrine*¹ in Kobe on the banks of the Minatogawa (Minato River), where swords were forged for the Imperial Navy, and the *Yasukuni Shrine*² in Tokyo, where enormous efforts were made to revive the spirit of the samurai by returning to traditional forging methods in the *Yasukuni-to*. There were also other focal points for the mass production of army swords, such as the city of Seki in Gifu Prefecture. However, it should be noted that the vast majority of swords produced in Seki were sufficient as weapons, but could not meet the high standards of the Japanese sword as an art object.

This is true for swords of all epochs. Not every samurai sword that suitable as a weapon was artistically valuable, although it is often the case that the artistically perfect blade is also the better one for practical use.³ It is also true that the *gunto*, which were traditionally forged by Japanese swordsmiths until the Second World War, were probably the last samurai swords with which Japanese soldiers went into battle for the emperor and the empire and, as once like the samurai, serving fulfilled their duty. Thus the *gunto* of the Taisho and early Showa period mark a historical turning point in the history of samurai swords. The blades of Yasuoki and the two generations of Minamoto Yoshichika, forged during this period and presented in this book, bear witness to the undisputed mastery of these smiths and their high claim to provide Japan's "last samurai" with swords that were not mere weapons, but ideally combined weapon and work of art in one and the same blade.

¹ <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minatogawa-Schrein>

² <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasukuni-Schrein>

³ Hagenbusch, Michael, Beitrag im Katalog zum Ersten Europäischen Symposium „Die Kunst der Samurai“, Deutsches Klingen-Museum, Solingen 1984

源義親

Minamoto Yoshichika Shodai and Nidai

Minamoto Yoshichika is counted among the few important swordsmiths of the Taisho and Showa Period. His swords were known for their exceptional sharpness and combat capability and were worn by the Imperial Guard and famous swordsmen. At the coronation of Emperor Hirohito in 1928, he was one of a small group of swordsmiths who were selected among the best in Japan to forge the swords that, following an old tradition, were presented to high dignitaries during the coronation ceremonies. Nevertheless, there are occasional attempts to relativize the significance of his work by the objection that he is said to have forged swords from *western steel*.

This is to imply that swords of Minamoto Yoshichika are not genuine *nihonto* or *gendaito* because they were not forged from *tamahagane*. If this were true, Emperor Hirohito, who certainly had more sword education than many a self-proclaimed expert in the western hemisphere, would have lost face the moment he called Minamoto Yoshichika to Tokyo and to become the Imperial Swordsmith. In addition there are authorities in the motherland of the Japanese sword which decide competently whether a traditionally forged sword also fulfills the artistic demands of a Japanese sword and is thus recognized as a sword worth preserving or not. These are primarily the two major Japanese sword societies *Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai (NBTHK)* and *Nihon Token Hozon Kai (NTHK)*.

Minamoto Yoshichika's swords have received expertises (*origami*) from the *NTHK* as well as from the *NBTHK* and *Fujishiro* and are recognized by the leading sword authorities of Japan without any doubt as genuine gendaito.⁴ In TOKO TAIKAN Minamoto Yoshichika is listed on page 758 under YOS1067, his swords are classified as "*Highest Grade Gendaito*".⁵ In addition to the high distinction Minamoto Yoshichika received through his appointment as Imperial Swordsmith, his position as an eminent swordsmith is further evidenced by the fact that he is the only swordsmith of the Taisho period to have been included in *Fujishiro's* authoritative encyclopedia "*Nihon Toko Jiten, Shinto-hen*".⁶

Although Minamoto Yoshichika has gone his own way to produce powerful sword blades with special cutting ability⁷, he has used the traditional techniques of Japanese swordsmiths (*katana-kaji*) to create high quality gendaito⁸, that are sought after by collectors today.⁹ Not least because it is now known that blades from Minamoto Yoshichika can compete even with high quality swords from the *Kamakura* and *Muromachi* period.¹⁰

But before we go back to the objection mentioned at the beginning which is ultimately aimed at the dispute between "*tamahagane*" and "*western steel*", let us talk about the swordsmith and his work, as far as research on the life and work of Minamoto Yoshichika has revealed.

⁴ Stein, Richard, Japanese Sword Guide,
<http://www.japaneseswordindex.com/yoshchik.htm>

⁵ Tokuno, Kazuo, TOKO TAIKAN, YOS1067, 2004

⁶ Fujishiro, Yoshio, Nihon Toko Jiten, Shinto-hen, Tokyo 1961

⁷ Slough, John Scott, An Oshigata Book of Modern Japanese Swordsmiths 1868 – 1945, Rivanna River Company, 2001

⁸ <http://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/rare-mint-antique-japanese-samurai-katana-sword>

⁹ Couch, Paul and Matsuoka, Yumiko, Thoughts on Nihonto – Gendaito, ISF-AL/GA Newsletter, May 2002, Vol. 3, Issue 3

¹⁰ <http://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/rare-mint-antique-japanese-samurai-katana-sword>

Minamoto Yoshichika, Shodai

Minamoto Yoshichika came from *Shibamishima, Japan*. His civil name was *Mori Hisasuke*.¹¹ A different spelling can be found in John Scott Slough's book "*An Oshigata Book of Modern Japanese Swordsmiths 1868 - 1945*". Here Minamoto Yoshichika is listed on page →. His swords are classified as "*High Grade Gendaito*" and their value is estimated at 1.5 million Japanese Yen. Alternatively we find here the spelling *Mori Kyusuke* for his civil name.¹²

Minamoto Yoshichika is said to have called himself the last descendant of Sanjo Munechika from Yamashiro (ca. 987).¹³ Even if one comes across this reference again and again, researches for this could so far not produce a secured proof. Despite this, Minamoto Yoshichika is one of the few swordsmiths of the Taisho and Showa period who is considered one of the most important swordsmiths of his time by the leading authorities and experts on the subject.¹⁴

During the Meiji and Taisho period, Minamoto Yoshichika worked in Musashi Province. In 1926 he followed the call of Emperor Hirohito to Tokyo, where he forged swords as an imperial artisan by order of the emperor.¹⁵ Most of his famous works come from the Taisho and early Showa period. He preferred to work in the *Bizen-den-gunome-choji* style and his blades are known for their exceptional sharpness and cutting ability.

Minamoto Yoshichika forged swords for the court and the Imperial Guard. But also famous martial artists and swordsmen of the early twentieth century preferred his blades. So, one of the swords preferred by *Hakudo*

*Nakayma*¹⁶ came from the forge of Minamoto Yoshichika. *Hakudo Nakayma* (other spelling *Hiromichi*) was the most famous sword fighting master of his time and is one of only ten *Budo Grand Masters* who were awarded the title *Meijin* (“Brilliant Man”),¹⁷ the highest distinction in Budo. At the Toyama Military Academy, *Hakudo Nakayma* was a member of the commission that created the curriculum for sword fighting. He was also the official sword fighting instructor of the Japanese Navy and Imperial Guard. *Hakudo Nakayma* was born in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture on February 11, 1873, and died on December 14, 1958, at the age of 85. He found his final resting place at Tenshin Temple in Minato District, Tokyo.



A rare contemporary document: the picture from the photo album of a Japanese soldier shows Hakudo Nakayma, Budo Grand Master and sword fighting instructor of the Imperial Guard, together with members of the Imperial Guard.

Minamoto Yoshichika's clients knew that he forged sharp and highly resilient swords for the toughest hand-to-hand combat man-to-man for life and death. They differ clearly from the long and wide blades with spectacular *hamon*, as we often find today among laido students. Instead, his work resembles slim *koto* blades with functional *hamon*. Despite their low weight they convince with high torsional strength, perfect balance and impressive handling, but more about this later.

A certain number of swords forged by Minamoto Yoshichika have been subjected to a cutting test (*tameshigiri*) by

Hakudo Nakayama. On swords that have been tested by him, we find the stamp “*Hakudo Tameshigiri Sho*” on the tang.¹⁸ Most swords of the Imperial Guard are forged by Minamoto Yoshichika and tested by *Hakudo Nakayama*. The following incident is handed down:

Obata Toshishiro, a well-known author, practicing swordsman and expert on the subject, reports that he found a noteworthy text in his Willis Hawley collection, from which it is clear that *Hakudo Nakayama* tested swords for the Imperial Guard on pigs, with the blades cutting smoothly through the bodies. It is said that he demonstratively cut through the hip bones of a pig with a sword to prove to Vice Admiral Oyamada how a really sharp sword should cut.

When the admiral inquired about the swordsmith, *Hakudo Nakayama* explained that the sword came from the forge of Minamoto Yoshichika. Thereupon Admiral Oyamada issued a decree that all swords of the Imperial Guard must be forged by Minamoto Yoshichika from now on and must be undergo a cutting test seven times by *Hakudo Nakayama*. *Obata Toshishiro* states that a total of 490 of these swords were tested and accepted for the Imperial Guard by *Hakudo Nakayama*.¹⁹

This number alone, only 490 swords of Minamoto Yoshichika were tested and accepted by *Hakudo Nakayama* for the Imperial Guard, makes clear why these swords are extremely rare and are sought after by serious collectors worldwide. This becomes even more impressive when one compares this small number of swords with the well over one million Japanese swords that were brought to the United States by American soldiers after the war.²⁰ John M. Yumoto's estimate of 250,000 to 350,000 swords that were brought to the United States does not change much. Even so, the hit rate to find another blade of Minamoto Yoshichika

would be only 1.4 ‰ (per thousand).²¹ In fact this chance should be much lower, since these blades, as far as they still exist, have long since passed into private ownership. This thesis is further supported by Obata Toshihiro's remark in his article *"Swords and Tradition"*, according to which he personally knows only three swords by Minamoto Yoshichika with a cutting test by Hakudo Nakayama, which appeared in the USA.²²

In view of such numbers it becomes clear how difficult it is meanwhile to find a Minamoto Yoshichika with cutting test. It might be even more difficult to find a blade signed with Nidai Minamoto Yoshichika, because swords signed with Nidai Minamoto Yoshichika are simply even rarer.

¹¹ Stein, Richard, Japanese Sword Guide,
<http://www.japaneseswordindex.com/yoshchik.htm>

¹² Slough, John Scott, An Oshigata Book of Modern Japanese Swordsmiths 1868 – 1945, Rivanna River Company, 2001

¹³ Stein, Richard, Japanese Sword Guide, siehe Referenz-Nr. 11

¹⁴ JSS newsletter, in extracts published on
http://www.nihonto.com.au/html/minamoto_yoshichika_tachi.html

¹⁵ <http://www.samuraisam.net/tachiofyoshichika.html>

¹⁶ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakayama_Hakudo

¹⁷ <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meijin>

¹⁸ Stein, Richard, Japanese Sword Guide,
<http://www.japaneseswordindex.com/yoshchik.htm>

¹⁹ http://www.nihonto.com.au/html/minamoto_yoshichika_tachi.html

²⁰ Sly, Christopher, More Thoughts On Gendaito, Sept. 1992, updated by Bowen, Chris and Massey, Denny, March 2015,
<http://www.nihontocraft.com/Gendaito.html>

²¹ Yumoto, John M., Das Samuraischwert, Ein Handbuch, Ordonanz-Verlag Strebel GmbH, Wiesbaden, 2004

²² Obata Toshishiro, Swords and Tradition,
<https://kenjutsu-ryu.livejournal.com/29096.html>

Minamoto Yoshichika, Nidai

It is considered certain that there was a second generation Minamoto Yoshichika, Nidai Minamoto Yoshichika. Nidai Minamoto Yoshichika was the natural son of Minamoto Yoshichika and worked with his father during the Taisho and Showa period. Nidai's style is similar to that of the Shodai, but the son forged more expressive blades. The *hamon* is more active with countless *ashi* and *yo* in *ko-nie*, while the *hada* is predominantly dense *masame*. Blades of the Nidai show *utsuri*.

Although the aesthetics of his blades inspire enthusiasm and the quality of his work leaves no doubt as to his mastery, the life and work of Nidai has remained largely hidden from the public until today. Even in the relevant literature there is little to read about it. One reason for this may be that works by Nidai are rare and in the meantime are hardly offered at all. *Richard Stein* writes about this on his renowned and recommendable website "*Japanese Sword Guide*": "Examples of the work of the second generation with the inscription "Nidai" at the beginning of the signature are rare." Stein further emphasizes: "The works of the two generations Minamoto Yoshichika must not be confused with swords from the *Showa Era*, which are signed "*Noshu Seki ju Yoshichika*". These smiths belong to the insignificant swordsmiths."²³ An unknown number of swords signed "Minamoto Yoshichika" are said to have been forged together by father and son. This practice was not uncommon, as outstanding swords were often forged in collaboration between two masters. But this could have meant that a part of the son's work was absorbed by the father's work. After the death of his father, Nidai Minamoto