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Tokyo Rose: The Woman Wrongfully Convicted of Treason

Looking back on the 1949 treason trial and conviction of Iva Toguri, who came to be known as the notorious "Tokyo Rose" radio propagandist during World War II, scholars and historians say it was the U.S. government that betrayed Toguri, not the other way around.

NICHOLAS IOVINO / November 18, 2020

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SAN FRANCISCO (CN) — Looking back on the 1949 treason trial and conviction of Iva Toguri, who came to be known as the notorious "Tokyo Rose" radio propagandist during World War II, scholars and historians say it was the U.S. government that betrayed Toguri, not the other way around.

"There was a myth of Tokyo Rose," U.S. District Judge Jon Tigar said during a virtual panel discussion on the historic trial Wednesday. "She was a convenient foil."

There was no real person named "Tokyo Rose." The radio broadcasts aimed at demoralizing American soldiers serving in the Pacific featured the voices of about 20 different women. "Tokyo Rose" was a name invented by U.S. soldiers who liked the Japanese radio show because it played popular American music and amused them with outrageous claims, according to author Michael Weedall.

Iva Toguri, who would later become known as "Tokyo Rose," was born in Southern California on July 4, 1916, to parents who emigrated from Japan. She graduated from UCLA with dreams of becoming a medical doctor. In December 1941, Toguri was visiting her sick aunt in Japan when Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor and war broke out, leaving her stranded in enemy territory.

According to Weedall, author of "Iva: The True Story of Tokyo Rose," a historical novel based on Toguri's life, Toguri refused to become a Japanese citizen and was denied a ration card because of her "outspoken loyalty to the U.S."

She was forced to buy food at inflated prices on the black market and eventually took a job at Radio Tokyo, where she played records and told jokes as "Orphan Ann" for a broadcast show called Zero Hour. American prisoners of war were also forced to work for Radio Tokyo, and according to Weedall, Toguri helped them sneak food and medicine into POW camps.

According to Naoko Shibusawa, a history professor at Brown University, American POWs working at Radio Tokyo convinced Toguri that she could undermine Japan's propagandistic aims by playing good music for American soldiers and entertaining them. After the war, Commander Robert Eichelberger of the Eighth Army met Toguri and thanked her for "cheering up GIs" during the war, Shibusawa said.

But when Toguri gave an interview that led to a published story in which she described being Tokyo Rose, the publicity prompted the U.S. military to detain her for a year while they investigated her wartime activities. They found no evidence of treason and released her.

When she applied to return to the U.S., radio commentator Walter Winchell got wind of her plans and used his influential newspaper column and radio show to argue that she should be charged with treason.

With pressure mounting on President Harry S. Truman's administration amid accusations that he was "soft on traitors," federal prosecutors reopened the case and brought Toguri to the U.S. to stand trial, according to Charles Wollenberg, a history professor at Berkeley City College.

Because the government lacked hard evidence, it relied heavily on witness testimony during the trial. Among the few recordings and transcripts of Toguri's broadcasts, "none showed her doing more than being a disc jockey introducing

American popular music and telling corny jokes," Wollenberg said.

Wayne Collins, the lawyer who represented Fred Koramatsu in his unsuccessful challenge against Japanese internment camps in the Supreme Court, defended Toguri during the trial in San Francisco.

Collins' son, Wayne Collins Jr., is one of the panel members who discussed the trial on Wednesday. He described tactics prosecutors used to pressure witnesses to testify against Toguri and to intimidate witnesses so they would not testify in Toguri's defense.

"Nobody went into that courtroom as a witness for the prosecution that wasn't under terrible pressure to perjure themselves," Collins said.

More than 20 years after the trial, two witnesses confessed to a Chicago Tribune reporter that they lied on the stand and had been pressured by the government to do so, according to Wollenberg.

But the most egregious conduct came from the judge, Wollenberg said.

U.S. District Judge Michael J. Roche limited what arguments the defense could present to the jury. He told jurors they could not consider that Toguri had been giving food and medicine to American POWs or that she was ordered by the Japanese military to participate in the broadcasts.

After a 12-week trial, the jury was split with nine jurors favoring conviction and three against, but the judge refused to throw out the case.

"Instead of declaring a mistrial, Judge Roche gave them a lecture saying the government had spent 13 weeks on this trial and spent $700,000 on the case," Wollenberg said. "He in effect said the jury was obligated to come up with a verdict."

At the time, it was the most expensive prosecution in U.S. history.

Judge Tigar noted that giving a jury an instruction like that today would be considered unconstitutional.

The jury eventually came back and convicted Toguri of one count of treason. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison, fined $10,000 and lost her U.S. citizenship. Her lawyer, Collins, would spend the rest of his life trying to get the conviction overturned.

According to Wollenberg, Toguri's trial is a perfect example of how to not run a justice system.

"There was nothing in this whole set of procedures that had anything to do with

justice," Wollenberg said. "It had all to do with politics, racism and sexism."

Tigar said Toguri was punished for her patriotism.

"All she ever did was play records, tell jokes and make Americans feel a little bit better about where they were," Tigar said.

Toguri was released from prison after six and a half years for good behavior. She spent another year fighting deportation and, after winning that fight, joined her relatives in Chicago where she managed her family's gift shop.

In 1977, President Gerald Ford pardoned Toguri during his last few days in office. She died in 2006 at the age of 90.

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