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Be Good: Hatred and Hope in the Letters of Gerald Koster

Abstract

To tell an informative story about someone's life is difficult at the best of times. Gerald "Gerry" Koster's correspondence during his last year of service in the US Navy towards the end of the Pacific War can thus only paint an incomplete portrait of who he was and what exactly the war meant to him. Nevertheless, there are things that his letters can teach readers, not only about Koster's role and daily activities in the military, but about his personal character and how that manifested in his interactions with the defeated Japanese and his family. And perhaps, through his personal character, it is possible to discern something larger about the culture of his specific time and place in history.

Keywords

WWII Correspondence, Letters, Navy, Occupation of Japan, Pacific War

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

Comments

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Be Good: Hatred and Hope in the Letters of Gerald Koster

By Steven Landry

History 300: Historical Methods

Professor William Birkner

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To tell an informative story about someone's life is difficult at the best of times. Gerald "Gerry" Koster's correspondence during his last year of service in the US Navy towards the end of the Pacific War can thus only paint an incomplete portrait of who he was and what exactly the war meant to him. Nevertheless, there *are* things that his letters can teach readers, not only about Koster's role and daily activities in the military, but about his personal character and how that manifested in his interactions with the defeated Japanese and his family. And perhaps, through his personal character, it is possible to discern something larger about the culture of his specific time and place in history.

Koster wrote the 15 letters that make up this brief snapshot of his life to his parents and his high schooler sister Phyllis in West Toledo, Ohio, from July, 1945, until his discharge in January, 1946, and their contents make scant mention of his daily duties or role in the war effort. However, he clearly stated that he had enlisted "of my own free will" in 1943, and that he served on the newly commissioned battleship the *USS New Jersey*, which saw extensive action with the Fifth Fleet during such engagements as the Battle of Leyte Gulf and the invasion of Okinawa. At the time Koster returned from home leave at the end of June, 1945, she "was overhauled at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, from which she sailed 4 July for San Pedro, Pearl Harbor, and Eniwetok bound for Guam." For the rest of Koster's service, and to his utter consternation, the *New Jersey* was engaged in nothing productive that he could see.¹

Koster wrote very little about his responsibilities in the Navy in his last 15 letters. Most likely, he either did not want to trouble his family with the details, or he had already done so during the previous years of service. For the most part, he preferred to talk about his leisure activities, such as watching movies at night and listening to records that his sister sent him. In one letter to his sister he praised the film *Destination Tokyo* and said the song "Whispering" was the favorite of his collection. In all, he seemed to be a fan of war films, comedies, and jazz music. He managed to pass an exam for a promotion

¹ Gerald Koster to his parents, September 10, 1945; Idem, October 3, 1945; Idem, October "15," 1945, Box MS-084, Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College; Elmer Daves, "USS New Jersey: Battleships are Forever!" *Sea Classics*, June, 2003, 20-23, <http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/236044918?accountid=2694>.

to Fire Controlman Third Class, which is an NCO rank focused on maintaining the machinery on a ship, but by that point the war had already formally ended.²

When he *did* mention his service, it was almost exclusively to his parents, and the aspects he mentioned were almost always complaints, especially after the War Department eased censorship in September. Now that there was “no more censorship,” Koster could finally “write what I want,” which is to say he had free rein to rail against the many flaws he perceived in naval administration. He would not yet be mustered out because “the point system the navy has now isn’t worth a damn.” One could only go home after earning a certain number of points, and yet despite his years of service, he still did not meet that threshold. His frustration knew no bounds. He went so far as to declare in early October that “If this navy isn’t the same as [the] dictatorship of Hitler then I don’t know what I’m talking about.” Later that month, he unloaded his frustration with the US Congress’s inability to muster out its servicemen:

It’s not fair to us. I enlisted of my own free will, fought this damn thing so people can make money and then some guy comes in around August with a wife, doesn’t do a damn thing & he will get out before me. They wonder what makes us bitter. Ha. It will be a cold day in Hell before I vote for any of them guys. Someday I’ll get back at them.

Koster was hardly the only sailor to feel shortchanged by the point system; indeed, “small but well-organized groups” with a particular attachment to the men still in uniform after the war’s end led a successful lobbying of Congress throughout the second half of 1945 so that the necessary points needed for a discharge decreased from 80 in September to 50 in December. However, it is less clear whether his fellow servicemen also felt disillusioned enough to compare their own government to the murderous regime that tens of thousands of their comrades had just died to destroy.³

² Gerald Koster to Phyllis Koster, September 30, 1945; Gerald Koster to his parents, August 18, September 7, 1945, Box MS-084, Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

³ Gerald Koster to his parents, September 10, 1945; Idem, October 3, 1945; Idem, October “15,” 1945 Box MS-084, Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College; R. Alton Lee, “The Army “Mutiny” of 1946,” in *The Journal of American History* 53, no. 3 (1966): 559, doi:10.2307/1887571.

In the same October letter in which he had compared the US bureaucracy to Nazism, he declared that President Harry S. Truman had “really made all of the navy men in the Pacific’s shit list” because of “that shit with the *Missouri*. . . . The whole [works?] stink,” he continued: “Bunch of damn Jews. When I came in here I at least expected to be treated like a man not a miserable dog.” The incident Koster was referring to was the formal Japanese surrender ceremony on September 2, 1945 for which Truman had selected the *USS Missouri* as the site. Like some other sailors, Koster felt betrayed by this decision, as the *Missouri* had not experienced as much action as ships like the *New Jersey* or the *South Dakota*, where the ceremony was originally supposed to occur. Many of the servicemen on these more battle-hardened vessels not only felt that they deserved the honor more than the *Missouri*, but that the president’s decision was favoritism. After all, Missouri was Truman’s home state and his daughter had personally christened the ship. Still, although other sailors expressed complaints about the change of venue for the surrender, it remains an obscure aspect of the period, and Koster’s exasperated characterization of being “treated like a dog” likely says a lot more about his personal temperament than it does about the overall feeling of the Navy, especially in conjunction with his intrusive anti-Semitism.⁴

One of the most striking things about Koster which these letters illuminate is the way he communicated with his family. The above anti-Semitism is one example of the uglier side of his personality that he always reserved for his parents, and never for his sister, whom he seemed to want to shield. There is often a clear contrast in the tone and content of the letters he wrote to his parents and to his sister around the same time. In July, 1945, he wrote to his sister about his feelings after just having returned to duty from his home leave: “Boy, I never hated to leave any place so bad before in all my life. Guess it’s because I was home longer and got more used to the good old civilian way of living.” For the most part, however, the letter’s tone was reassuring. He broke the ice by recounting an amusing incident

⁴ Gerald Koster to his parents, October 3, 1945; Karen Schmidt, “It’s 50 Years Later, and He’s Still Mad” *Hartford Courant*, 2 Sept. 1995, www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-1995-09-02-9509020218-story.html. I would never have found out about the *Missouri* controversy or found the above article without the help of Reddit user u/ParkSungJun.

from his trip back to the *New Jersey* after his leave, where he and some friends “had enough whisky and beer to float our car.” More directly, he expressed hope that “some day we will be able to spend more time together,” and that that day “won’t be [too] far away either... the way [they’re] kicking [the] hell out of the Japs now.” The letter also revealed an interesting family dynamic between the two. Upon hearing that she had lost weight recently, Koster offered his sister \$20 if she could get her weight down to 130 pounds: “Now’s the time to do it kid. No kidding.” It was unclear at first whether this remark is jocular in nature, but the fact that he continued to bring it up in future letters indicates that he was serious. The letter to his parents on the same date contained similar information as the first, for example that he and his shipmates had recently bought a new record player, and that any gifts from home like food or records were greatly appreciated. But there was a subtle difference in the tone of the letter compared to what he wrote to his sister. Although Koster was confident that the US was “sure giving the Japs hell now” and that the war would end soon, he admitted that he was “getting tired of this same old shit.” This sentence was the first indication that he felt more comfortable being candid with his parents about his more viscerally negative feelings. This trend continued throughout the correspondence, where Koster restricted his more crass and angry comments to his parents’ letters, and more sentimental and wholesome content to his sister’s. He also tended to discuss his military activities more with his parents than his sister, with whom he preferred to discuss life back home and altogether lighter subject matter⁵

One example of these different approaches came shortly after Japan’s surrender in August, 1945. In both letters he was understandably jubilant that the war was over but still expressed his disappointment that he could not return home immediately. In his letter to Phyllis, he admitted that although “this damn war is finally over,” he doubted he would be able to return “for a long time yet.” More subtly, he noted in the beginning of the letter that he was “ok as far as health goes,” implying that he may not have been so “ok” in other respects. But he spent most of the letter by far discussing less serious matters, like asking

⁵ Gerald Koster to Phyllis Koster, July 20, 1945; Gerald Koster to his Parents, July 20, 1945, Box MS-084, Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

Phyllis about whether she was “busy getting clothes and books” ready for the upcoming school year. He asked about other people back home, like “Glen,” from whom he had not received any news yet (“that darn screwball”). In contrast, the letter to his parents from around the same time went into much more detail about his life in the service, including about when he first heard of the surrender. The military was still censoring mail at this point, so he could not go into much detail about his misgivings, but he did leave more of a hint to his parents about how his time in the Navy was affecting him than he had to his sister. “Just think when I do get out of here I’ll be able to live again.” After all, in the service “you just exist.” He added, wryly, “Oh hell it’s a great life.”⁶

Admittedly, Koster did not always restrict the contents of his letters based on the person to whom he was writing. Indeed, less than two weeks after the August letter to his sister, he went into chronological detail about where he had been stationed recently and about his promotion to Fire Controlman Third Class. But these details were not specific and lacked emotional connections: he did not express his many negative feelings about his service and role in the Navy, and he quickly pivoted to talking about his usual sisterly subject matter of home life. He playfully teased his sister for having recently gotten seasick: “Let’s not have none of that. How would you like to be rocking like that for twenty seven months like your bro, eh,” and continued to offer her cash if she could lose some weight: “You really would be a knock out if you lost some of your weight.” In a postscript, he thanked her for sending him some records. In an October letter to her, he focused almost entirely on lighter material, like his habit of watching movies “every nite on main deck if weather permits,” or about his hopes that he would be able to come home in time to ice skate with her. At this same time his letters to his parents were getting much angrier and much darker.⁷

The October 3rd letter in which Koster complained about the *Missouri* incident and compared his government both to Nazi Germany and to a “bunch of damn Jews” also contained a lengthy account of his

⁶ Gerald Koster to Phyllis Koster, August 27, 1945; Gerald Koster to his parents, August 18, 1945, Box MS-084, Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

⁷ Gerald Koster to Phyllis Koster, September 7, 1945; Idem, October 20, 1945, Box MS-084, Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

time ashore in the newly occupied Japan. He marveled at the bombed remains of the cities, but hardly expressed sympathy for the defeated country. In fact, his actions and impressions of the Japanese were nothing short of gleefully callous:

Man the more I see these slant eyed sawed off devils the more I hate them. About six out of every ten wear those [horn-rimmed] glasses & have buck teeth just like the movies. We go down the street four abreast and those who can't get out of our way we knock out. ... We take what we want. ... The women sure are funny. The clothes they wear. Wow. Like [coveralls?]. We went in a public bath house. Saw a couple tender little chicks. Ha. Some grabbed a bucket and ran, the rest just looked at us and kept scrubbing away bare assed in front of God and everybody. ... Guys make them [fan] them and everything else. Pull them around in carts. Run off with their bicycles & what have you. Boy they stink worse than a Negro. Could hardly stand it for a while. I'll never understand how they got as far as they did in this war. If we [didn't have] the Germans we would have kicked them in no time.

It is significant that Koster not only held these views and took these actions but also felt comfortable writing them down in a letter to his parents. He apparently did not expect a letter containing racism against African Americans and Japanese, anti-Semitism, a comparison of the US to Hitler's dictatorship, and admissions of cruel and misogynistic treatment of the vanquished Japanese to cause his parents any distress. That means that either his extended time from home had desensitized him to accepted norms of conversation, or that his parents held similar views and would have seen little to which to object. It is apparent that Koster must have felt shame on some level, however, as his letters to his sister contain no such screeds about his government, "the Jews," or his voyeuristic bullying. Maybe he felt that she was not mature enough to handle adult conversation, or perhaps he did not want to stain her innocence with the hatred and bitterness which the war had engendered in him.⁸

Koster's bigoted attitude towards the Japanese was immensely common among Americans of this period, especially for servicemen. Far more than the Germans or Italians, the American public variously viewed the Japanese as apelike, childish, sub-humanly weak, and inhumanly strong. "They were perceived as a race apart, even a species apart—and an overpoweringly monolithic one at that." American servicemen often felt little need to treat their defeated foes as equal adversaries during the war, and in

⁸ Koster to his Parents, October 3, 1945.

spite of official government orders to desist, servicemen mutilated countless Japanese bodies and looted body parts like ears, scalps, and fingers. This type of “souvenir-hunting” was so common and mainstream that *Life* magazine published without comment a photo of a woman drafting a thank-you letter to her lover who had sent her a Japanese skull as a keepsake. Indeed, Koster himself makes note of his many souvenirs in the same October 3rd letter: “A Jap gas mask, fan, postcard, [shells?] name plates, a canteen, telephone book & some other junk.” For the most part, the handwriting in his letters is exceptionally clear, but there are occasional ambiguities, including in the case of these “shells.” Since his other listed souvenirs are inanimate objects, shells seem to be an appropriate interpretation. But the word looks like something far more sinister. It could say “skulls,” and with the consensus of American servicemen at the time that “Japs” were not even truly human, these would also appear to be “inanimate” souvenirs. Of course, although skull harvesting was the most notorious aspect of “souvenir-hunting,” it was also the rarest, as they were “cumbersome to carry and the process of removing the flesh from a severed head” was smelly and time-consuming. As such, “shells” is the most likely word Koster wrote. Even still, this list of souvenirs came in the same paragraph as his proud admissions to assault and voyeurism and in the same letter as his racist and anti-Semitic outbursts, so such a souvenir might not be out of character. The fact there is even any possibility that he meant skulls is indicative of the particularly brutal character of the Pacific War, even if Koster himself did not partake in the most barbaric acts.⁹

Koster’s cruel and dishonorable behavior towards Japanese civilians was also hardly unique among the victorious Americans. The early months of the occupation were filled with wanton looting, destruction of property, and the rape of several Japanese women. Contemporary media attention tended to ignore such trespasses, in part because journalists still had to comply with censorship regulations, though servicemen like Koster could write freely after September 5. It would take months before reports of misconduct began to surface and the occupation became more orderly. One of the potentially unsavory

⁹ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) 8, 65; Gerald Koster to his parents, October 2, 1945. For a longer description of the dehumanizing manner in which Americans viewed the Japanese, see Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 77-200. The *Life* photograph appears as Appendix II.

aspects of the occupation that Koster mentions to his sister came on October 20, in which he enclosed a picture of “my little Jap gal.” He never hints at the identity of this woman in any of his letters, either to Phyllis or to his parents, and since the photograph itself is missing from his correspondence collection, it is impossible to assess her clothing or countenance. As such, one must speculate about her identity. It is possible that she was a genuine romantic interest, but not only did Koster often mention his sweetheart Audrey back home, but his vituperatively racist attitude towards the Japanese makes a respectful, loving relationship unlikely. Another possibility is that this “Jap gal” was a prostitute, which the defeated government had subsidized early into the defeat as the Recreation and Amusement Association to serve as a “buffer protecting the chastity of the ‘good’ women of Japan” from the “Western barbarians.” If Koster’s “gal” was one of these “Okichis of the present era,” it is hard to understand why he would send a photograph of her to his sister, whom he had otherwise shielded from the ugliness of his service. These “Okichis” often doubled as office clerks or waitresses, and there might have been some other explanation written on the back of the photograph; but without the actual photo, it is impossible to know for certain who she was.¹⁰

Koster finally earned enough points for a discharge in January, 1946, and on the 28th he sent his last letter to his sister before being mustered out. It was by far his shortest letter, and mainly just informed her that he would be home soon and that he was sending her souvenirs. “Oh happy day,” he said. “Will see you soon and it will be for good,” he continued. After three years aboard a well-decorated battleship, after serving for longer than he had wanted for a government which he regarded as betraying him, he could finally put everything behind him and return to Ohio to live again. Germany would be split in two, Japan would be occupied for half a decade in its transition to democracy, and the United States and the Soviet Union would begin a rivalry that would bring the world to the brink of total destruction. Koster did

¹⁰ Susan Carruthers, *The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 88-89; Gerald Koster to Phyllis Koster, October 20, 1945; John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 126-127. “Okichi” was the name of a possibly legendary *geisha* who was pressured into being a comfort woman to an American diplomat to improve relations between the two nations after Commodore Perry had forced the country open in 1853.

not know of these developments when he set out on his journey home, but he and tens of thousands of his fellow servicemen would have to reckon with the new world that their war had left behind. What Koster *did* know was the hate and anger the war had provoked in him, the sheer destruction in life and property that bombing had caused in Japan, and the fact that the Japanese whom he and his country so despised were now at America's mercy. Whether America would follow Gerald Koster's path of hatred and bitterness was not yet clear. Perhaps the simplest and most proper solution lay in the more hopeful image of the world that he had cultivated and defended in his younger sister: "Bye. Be Good," he closed his letter.¹¹

¹¹ Gerald Koster to Phyllis Koster, January 28, 1946, Box MS-084, Musselman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg College.

Appendix I: Gerald Koster to his parents, October 3rd, 1945

Dear Mom & Dad,

Well, I guess I'm not an orphan after all. [Though] I was beginning to feel like one. The last letter I got from you was Aug 21st. Practically an antique. Boy was I ever glad to get these two today. Were postmarked 7th & 17th. Sure happy to know [you're] all ok. I'm alright but sure getting tired of this outfit.

So the weatherman has been treating you to a little cool chill. I bet we are getting the same here. Right in [line?] only four thousand miles in between. This climate sure is wonderful to us after all that hot weather we had before we came up here. In order to sit at the movie comfortable I wear my heavy jacket at night and sleep with a blanket on. Really is nice.

Boy I guess you have been busy alright. Suppose the school kids keep you going. Sounds good to hear you say [you're] getting more customers. So you got all your [shelves?] up. Bet does make more room. Have you all the painting done yet? Sis was sort of telling me about [him?]. Ha. Boy how I only wish I could be there instead of here in this damn hole. If this navy isn't the same as [the] dictatorship of Hitler then I don't know what I'm talking about. I'll give you the straight dope on this after I get out. Sure anxious to do that Don't know what the story is yet on if & when I'll come home. Expect to stay here around three months. But when I do come we will make up for lost time. Get every thing in shape so we can take a few fishing trips. Boy I can hardly remember the last time I did that. Getting all the meat you want eh. Have you a contract with the high school this year?

I heard from Marv that he had made it home again and from Katy that she is up & around. So [illegible] is home again. Boy oh Boy he sure gets the old leave. When does he expect to get out?

There's not much doing here. We're about as useless out here as a left-handed monkey wrench. Boy we really got one raw deal out here. To top it all off Truman comes along with that shit about the *Missouri*. Boy he really made all of the navy men in the Pacific's shit list. I'll never vote for him if he was president for a hundred years. The whole [works?] stink. Bunch of damn Jews. When I came in here I at least expected to be treated like a man not a miserable dog. In a little while I'll be off & really tell you something but had better not get started on this. Marv thinks he has hate for the army in those few months. Mine has been building up for three years. The best ones of my life. Besides, I have been on the beach a couple of times. Tokyo, [Yokosuka] and Green Beach. (Used for recreation [parties]). They are really bombed up. Boy they sure know what "Boeing 29" (As they call it) means. At Tokyo I went to the grounds of the Emperor's Palace. Could see it alright. Like to have kicked him in the ass. Man the more I see these slant eyed sawed off devils the more I hate them. About six out of every ten wear those [horn-rimmed] glasses & have buck teeth just like the movies. We go down the street four abreast and those who can't get out of our way we knock out. Just to see them and their equipment makes me bail. We take what we want. What [peeved] us the most is when looking at truck, car and airplane motors and things you see "made in U.S.A." That's the last straw. These trains all came from England. Boy [they're] sure going to have to go some to get me to fight another war for them. The women sure are funny. The clothes they wear. Wow. Like [coveralls?]. We went in a public bath house. Saw a couple tender little chicks. Ha. Some grabbed a bucket and ran, the rest just looked at us and kept scrubbing away bare assed in front of God and everybody. Got a few souvenirs. A Jap gas mask, fan, postcard, [shells?] name plates, a canteen, telephone book & some other junk. Oh yes a bottle of perfume. "Sho" Guys make them [fan] them and everything else. Pull them around in carts. Run off with their bicycles & what have you. Boy they stink worse than a Negro. Could hardly stand it for a while. I'll never understand how they got as far as they did in this war. If we [didn't have] the Germans we would have kicked them in no time.

Well I guess I'm getting near the end of my line. So far the [Detroit] Tigers have won only one game of the series. They had better get hot, cause my money's on them.

Keep up the good work and let's hope it won't be [too] long before I can come home & take my place there. It well seems good to live again instead of just existing. Here's hoping I won't have to wait so long this time for a letter from you. Please write after. Bye now & take it easy.

Love,
Your son,

Appendix II: *Life*, May 22, 1944, 35.

“Arizona war worker writes her Navy boyfriend a thank-you note for the Jap skull he sent her.”



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