Bataan Death March took place in the Philippines in 1942 and was later accounted as a Japanese war crime. The 60-mile march occurred after the three-month Battle of Bataan, part of the Battle of the Philippines (1941–42), during World War II.

The march, involving the forcible transfer of 75,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war captured by the Japanese in the Philippines from the Bataan peninsula to prison camps, was characterized by wide-ranging physical abuse and murder, and resulted in very high fatalities inflicted upon the prisoners and civilians along the route by the armed forces of the Empire of Japan. Beheadings, cutting of throats and casual shootings were the more common actions—compared to instances of bayonet stabbing, rape, disembowelment, rifle butt beating and a deliberate refusal to allow the prisoners food or water while keeping them continually marching for nearly a week in tropical heat. Falling down or inability to continue moving was tantamount to a death sentence, as was any degree of protest.

Prisoners were attacked for assisting someone falling due to weakness, or for no reason whatsoever. Strings of Japanese trucks were known to drive over anyone who fell. Riders in vehicles would casually stick out a rifle bayonet and cut a string of throats in the lines of men marching alongside the road. Accounts of being forcibly marched for five to six days with no food and a single sip of water are in postwar archives including filmed reports.

The Bataan Death March began as a plea for life. Men were tired, weak, and lacking food. The 70-mile march from Mariveles (on the tip of Bataan) to San Fernando was a trial that tested a man, broke him, or got him killed.

On April 9, 1942, American and Filipino troops on the Bataan Peninsula on West Luzon Island in the Philippines decided that they would not survive much longer in their fight against the Japanese. They were low on food, ammunition, and morale, and men were dying from lack of nourishment more than enemy fire. In the afternoon of the 9th, they turned themselves over to the Japanese by raising white flags, T-shirts, and whatever other white articles they had to let them know they were finished with fighting.

When Lt. General Masaharu Homma took the soldiers prisoner, he discovered that there were many more men than he had anticipated, and he was unable to transport all of them by truck to the prison camp in San Fernando. The only way to get the men to the camp was to make them march the 70 miles. The Japanese High Command advised him that it should only require a few days, but the men taken as prisoners of war were not in good health and were malnourished. That set the stage for an onslaught of inexcusable brutality.

By that time, the Japanese were flush with victory over the foreign meddlers they had been contending with for so many years, and were ready to show that they were the superior power in Asia. They committed random beatings and killings of all kinds. They killed men without provocation, or if a guard felt that someone had looked at him the wrong way, he was at liberty to bayonet him to death. If a prisoner was found with a souvenir, he was shot immediately because his executioners assumed that the only way to obtain such an item was to kill a Japanese soldier.

At one point, 30 POWs attempted to fill their canteens on the side of the road. That was not what the Japanese had in mind. As
the men were filling their canteens, the Japanese set up machine guns and shot them on the spot. Other men were allowed to get water, but when they got to it, it was filled with maggots. That was pure torture because there were water spigots nearby with clean water. Anyone who tried to drink water who was not allowed to was shot. When the men were allowed to rest, they were forced down on burning hot pavement, and those who fell behind even a few yards were bayoneted and shot.

On the march, the men witnessed arbitrary executions of their fellow American and Filipino soldiers and of Filipino civilians who had offered food or water to the marchers. Bert Bank remembers:

One of the POWs had a ring on and the Japanese guard attempted to get the ring off. He couldn’t get it off and he took a machete and cut the man’s wrist off and when he did that, of course, the man was bleeding profusely. [I tried to help him] but when I looked back I saw a Japanese guard sticking a bayonet through his stomach.

On the second day, a fully pregnant Filipino woman threw some food out... this POW in front of me picked up the food and started eating it; and a Japanese guard came... and decapitated that POW... and then he went and cut the stomach out of the Filipino woman. She was screaming “Kill me, Kill me,” and they wouldn’t do it.

It also became clear after the war that the Japanese were responsible for horrific abuses of POWs aboard tankers leaving the Philippines and bound for Japan. These tankers became known as hell ships. The Japanese put masses of men in the holds of tankers and gave them little food, light, room or water. The men died at an alarming rate — of suffocation, thirst, and madness. They also died of allied bombing, since the hell ships were not marked with a white cross, as specified by the Geneva Conventions, to indicate POWs were on board. The men who survived these tankers became slave laborers in Japanese mines and factories.

Throughout the Pacific theater, the Japanese treated POWs and civilians barbarically. Survivors of camps in Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Burma and Laos all reported experiencing tremendous cruelty, torture, disease and starvation. It is an astounding fact that while POWs died at a rate of 1.2% in Germany, they died at a rate of 37% across the Pacific.

At the end of the war, war crime trials were held in Tokyo and throughout the Pacific to attempt to serve justice to the perpetrators of these atrocities.

In 1946, General Homma was held responsible for the brutal treatment of the soldiers. He was tried, convicted, and executed that same year. Testimonies of the survivors of the incident helped to convict the general of his war crimes.

Questions:

1. How does the Bataan Death March fit in with other experiences we have learned about in WWII?
2. Why do you think the Japanese soldiers treated their prisoners this way?
3. Why did the Japanese attack civilians as well as POWs?
4. How do you think the U.S. public will respond to these actions? What effect will this have on the public opinion on the war with Japan?