

What defined war memories in Japan during the postwar period and what impact did they have on Japan?

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Abstract

This essay aimed to explore what defined and shaped Japanese war memories in the postwar period. Like the experience of war itself, Japanese war memories are diverse. Although there can be no monolithic definition of war memories in postwar Japan, there were features of the Japanese experience that played an important role in shaping and defining their memories of war. This essay argues that defeat, notions of victimhood and the Tokyo War Crimes tribunals were key features of the postwar experience that defined Japanese memories of war. It also sought to examine how war memories impacted Japan and argues that despite the diversity of war memories, they were responsible for creating Japan's commitment to peace and democracy.

Characterising Japanese war memories in the wake of the Second World War is no easy feat. Much like the experience of war itself, there is no monolithic definition of war memories. The orthodox understanding of Japanese war memory during the postwar period claims that Japan failed to acknowledge and address both its role as an aggressor and the atrocities it committed.¹ However, this view oversimplifies and fails to take into account the diverse

¹ John Dower. 2012. *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World*. New York: The New Press, p. 105.

range of experiences and interlinked factors that shaped war memory in the postwar period. John Dower characterised this complex and diverse nature perfectly by describing war memory in Japan as a kaleidoscope.² Despite such variety, major features of Japanese experience did define and shape war memories during the postwar period. This essay examines the impact of three of these features – defeat, notions of victimhood and the Tokyo War Crimes Trials – in defining the range of war memories in the postwar period. Next it explores how Japan's experience and memory of war impacted its commitment to peace and democracy that has formed the basis of its identity and policy since the postwar period.

The defeat of Japan in 1945 had a profound impact on the development of its people's war memories in the postwar period. Defeat and demoralisation were the defining characteristics of postwar society.³ The war took its toll on citizens and by 1945 war weariness had well and truly sunk in. When the US-led Allied forces occupied Japan, they encountered not a resistant nationalistic nation as they had expected, but rather 'a populace sick of war ... all but overwhelmed by the difficulties of their present circumstances in a ruined land'.⁴ Japan had to come to terms with defeat. Most significantly it had to adapt the rhetoric of war into the rhetoric of the postwar, reconciling the fantasy with reality. The Asia-Pacific War had been presented as pure and noble, a kind of 'holy war' in which the Japanese people fought for their position in a future gloried world.⁵ This illusion 'fostered by political propaganda' emphasised 'the beauty of sacrifice, emperor worship, military valour' and presented the Japanese people as 'a race descended from the gods'.⁶ However, the reality of war and defeat, and the hardships of the postwar period eroded these idealistic images. Acknowledging defeat was 'traumatic' for the people, and this was reflected in a rhetoric of despair that emerged.⁷ Memories of war were tinged with the 'shame and dishonour' of unconditional surrender and the shock of defeat, but more significantly with the profound sense of exhaustion and despair that

2 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 106.

3 John Dower. 2000. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of WWII*. WW Norton & Company/The New Press, p. 24.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 104.

6 Ian Buruma. 1994. *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*. New York: Meridian, p. 53.

7 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 104.

plagued the population.⁸ This was known as the *Kyodatsu* condition. People of the postwar were known as the *Yakeato seidai*, or the burnt-out generation reflecting the ‘nihilism and despair’ that characterised literature and other popular culture of the era.⁹

Defeat and the challenges of living in postwar society fostered a desire in Japanese people to distance themselves from memories of the war – to ‘forget the past and to transcend it’.¹⁰ In the immediate postwar period, living conditions were so bad it was easy to forget the recent past and focus instead on present survival.¹¹ In addition, during the occupation both Japanese and US-led Allied forces actively worked on ‘reconceiving recent Japanese history’.¹² They worked with three major principles: that Japan could be reborn and ‘history could begin as if anew’; that the recent war was a ‘heroic narrative’ with clearly identifiable victims and villains; and that Japan’s journey to modernity had gone wrong, but could now be set right. These principles worked together to try and separate the war from the present in people’s minds, creating a national approach of ‘historical discontinuity’.¹³ One of the other key ways defeat defined people’s memories of war was the question of how to approach the war dead, or as Dower puts it: ‘What do you tell the dead when you lose?’¹⁴ This was the question that preoccupied most Japanese as they ‘tried to absorb the issues of war responsibility, guilt, repentance, and atonement’, grappling with the conflict between an ‘intimate sense of bereavement’ for those who died in the war, and the fact that because of defeat these people could not really be seen as ‘heroes’.¹⁵ The challenges of coming to terms with defeat, and surviving immediately after the war, were a strong defining influence on the variety of Japanese war memories that developed in the postwar period.

Similarly, the notions of victimhood that emerged in the wake of defeat shaped the development of Japanese war memories. The ‘pervasive sense of victim consciousness’ in postwar Japan influenced people’s recollections of the

8 Ibid., p. 104.

9 Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, p. 51.

10 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 24.

11 Carol Gluck. 1993. ‘The Past in the Present.’ In *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon. University of California Press, p. 69.

12 Ibid., pp. 69–70.

13 Gluck, ‘The Past in the Present’, p. 76.

14 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 486.

15 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 486; Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, pp. 108, 119.

Asia-Pacific War.¹⁶ First, there was a sense of victimhood created by US attacks on Japan during the war, which were made more painful by defeat. People who survived carried the death and destruction of the US bombing raids on 66 cities with them ‘as an intimate memory’.¹⁷ However, most significant in shaping this sense of victimhood were the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hiroshima, in particular, is often seen as the ‘supreme symbol of the Pacific War’, encapsulating ‘all the suffering of the Japanese people’.¹⁸ As the only country to have suffered atomic warfare, Japan had the opportunity to feel a unique sense of victimhood, which in turn fixated its people’s memory on their own war experiences and suffering rather than acknowledging their nation’s victimisation of others.¹⁹ Perhaps more significant though, Japanese people’s sense of themselves as victims of their war-hungry, militarist leaders. This perception of being deceived, brainwashed and manipulated by the state allowed many people to become immune to feelings of responsibility for the war, adopting the stance of an ‘innocent bystander’.²⁰ Finally, many Japanese people also saw themselves as victims of the hardship and poverty of the postwar period. Suffering and survival in the present allowed a kind of ‘historical amnesia’ to overtake Japan, which meant that even when the suffering of Japan’s victims was exposed it seemed ‘remote and abstract’, and hence easy to ignore.²¹

Although notions of victimhood were very dominant in the immediate postwar period, they did not always overshadowed memories of Japan’s aggression and war atrocities. During the Tokyo War Crimes trials, the United States actively tried to suppress general knowledge about the extent of Japanese war crimes, which meant that people were unable to wholly confront the past.²² However, as time went on and more people were exposed to the reality of Japanese savagery and aggression during the war, there were attempts to have these acknowledged more publicly. The most famous example is the Ienaga Saburo textbook controversy, in which the government tried to suppress publication

16 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 106.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

18 Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, p. 92.

19 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 144.

20 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, pp. 504–5; Futamura Madoka. 2006. ‘Individual and Collective Guilt: Post-War Japan and the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal.’ *European Review* 14(4): 474.

21 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, pp. 29–30; Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 120.

22 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, pp. 123–4.

of information about various atrocities, arguing that they were too ‘one-sided’ and presented a negative image of the war.²³ Another significant example is the peace activists who fought to have Japanese aggression included alongside the horrors of Hiroshima at the Peace Memorial Museum in the 1980s.²⁴ Even though they were not successful in this, by the end of the postwar period, most Japanese people did acknowledge Japan’s role as an aggressor.²⁵ Nagasaki and Hiroshima were still regarded by most Japanese as the ‘preminent moments of atrocity’ in the Asia-Pacific War, but greater exposure of Japanese atrocities did reshape war memories.²⁶ Notions of victimhood, despite being challenged by knowledge of Japanese atrocities, certainly were a key factor that helped define memories of war in Japan during the postwar period.

A third factor that contributed to the variety of Japanese war memories in the postwar period were the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, which also helped solidify desires to split from the past and feelings of victim consciousness discussed above. The trials and the way they were publicised allowed people to distance themselves from the past and from Japanese war atrocities. This sentiment is reflected in an editorial published in *Asahi Shimbun*, which claimed that ‘this trial demands the complete burial of the Japan of the past, which was coloured by the militarism that was cultivated by the defendants’.²⁷ The trials also reinforced the notions of victimhood in the population. By implicating only the military elite, the trials served to fuel the ‘nation’s anger towards and sense of detachment from wartime leadership’ who they saw as deceitful.²⁸ However, the trials also developed victim consciousness in another way. The deep sense of suffering and victimisation created by the horrors and memories of the Second World War and the challenges of the immediate postwar period were intensified by the sense that Japan was being ‘judged by standards that other nations do not apply to themselves’.²⁹ The trials, and what became known as ‘Victor’s Justice’, were seen as a hypocrisy.³⁰ After all, the US terror and atomic bombings could also be judged as crimes against humanity, but it was not on trial. This disparity in justice set against the backdrop of suffering

23 Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, p. 189.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 1067.

25 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 110.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

27 Quoted in Futamura, ‘Individual and Collective Guilt’, p. 473.

28 Futamura, ‘Individual and Collective Guilt’. P. 473.

29 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 562.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 473–4.

in the postwar period reinforced ideas of victim consciousness and gave the impression that all of Japan was on trial.³¹ The Tokyo War Crimes Trials had a significant impact on defining Japanese war memories by reinforcing notions of victimhood and allowing people to distance themselves from the past.

The final section of this essay explores one very defining characteristic of postwar and contemporary Japan – its commitment to peace and democracy, which developed in response to memories of war. The Japanese peace movement began to take shape between 1949 and the mid-1950s. It was born out of ‘vivid’ memories of ‘the old war’ combined with the confrontation of the reality of the Cold War.³² After experiencing defeat, victimisation and ‘an overwhelming sense of powerlessness in the face of undreamed-of weapons of destruction’, Japan adopted ‘a new kind of antimilitary nationalism’.³³ Expressions of this were found at all levels of society and influenced most postwar politics.³⁴ Arguably most significant was the official renunciation of war found in Article 9 of the new Japanese Constitution. Peace became central to Japanese national identity. For example, people were able to internalise their national experience as ‘unique victims of the A-bomb’, and project their commitment to pacifism and a non-atomic peace universally as ‘apostles of the Hiroshima spirit’.³⁵ This commitment to peace and democracy allowed people to reconcile with their memories of war. For some this was ‘the only conceivable way by which the living could assure the dead that they had not perished in vain’.³⁶ It was the experience and memories of war and defeat, and that allowed ‘the great mantra of postwar Japan’, its commitment to peace and democracy, to develop.³⁷

Japanese experiences and memories of both the war and postwar periods are diverse. Therefore, there can be no monolithic explanation of what defined war memories in Japan during the postwar period. However, a range of major factors did influence and shape war memories in Japan during the postwar period. This essay examined three of these factors. The experience of defeat and all this entailed, notions of victimhood, and the Tokyo War Crimes Trials all

31 Futamura, ‘Individual and Collective Guilt’, pp. 475–6.

32 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 155.

33 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 494.

34 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, pp. 130, 142.

35 Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, p. 104.

36 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 130.

37 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 30.

played very important roles in defining memories of war in Japan. They did not create a single memory, but rather helped define what John Dower described as the 'kaleidoscope of war memory' in postwar Japan.³⁸ Finally, these three factors and the way they influenced memory helped forge Japan's commitment to peace and democracy, which formed the basis of its national identity and policy in the postwar period and into the contemporary world.

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38 Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering*, p. 106.

This text is taken from *Merici, Volume 2, 2016*, edited by Matthew Rogers,
published 2017 by ANU eView, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.