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[*This is one of a series of articles on Japanese thinking about war, war responsibility, Yasukuni shrine, and Japan's place in East Asia. Others include Yomiuri Shimbun, Yasukuni: Behind the Torii, Herbert Bix, Japan's Surrender Decision and the Monarchy, Yomiuri and Asahai, Yasukuni Shrine, Yasukuni Shrine, Nationaliism and Japan's International Relations, Laura Hein, Remembrance of World War II and the Postwar in the United States and Japan Remembrance of World War II and the Postwar in Japan and the United States, and John Breen, Yasukuni Shrine: ritual and memory*. The series as a whole highlights deep divisions in Japanese thought both about the assessment of the war and the implications of that assessment for the future of Japan's role in East Asia.]

Koga Makoto, the former secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party who heads the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association, must be feeling confounded.

Koga Makoto

When Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro began his visits to Yasukuni Shrine, they were meant in respect to the war dead and their bereaved families. He probably did not think the visits would so complicate Japan's relations with China and South Korea.

Things are now so divisive that Koga said June 11: "It is also important that the spirits of the war dead rest in peace," implying that he hoped Koizumi would stop his visits to the shrine. But his comment angered the association, which then called on nationwide branch managers to help contain the damage.

Why would Koga risk making such a statement? He is well-known for his pro-Chinese views. But his words must also reflect his personal situation. Koga, too, lost a family member in World War II.

Koga's father was a soldier drafted in the Pacific War who died a hero's death on Leyte Island in the Philippines. Koga, who was 2 years old at the time, does not remember him.

'Why am I here?'

Two years ago, Koga went to Leyte. While praying at the trenches where Japanese soldiers had holed up, he thought about what must have gone through his father's mind as he faced death, Koga wrote in an article in the February issue of Shokun! magazine.

"'Why am I here on this southern island, far from my motherland Japan, having been called up with a single summons for military service?'" Koga wrote of his father's thoughts.

"'We have no food. We have old guns, but we have no ammunition. Why am I here and why must I die?' Having come face-to-face with the cruelty and folly of war, my father must have been seriously disturbed.

"It all boils down to poor political judgments. It is nothing but poor political decisions that lead a nation to take the wrong course, causing many innocent people to go down with it."

Yasukuni Shrine and its supporters see the Pacific War as "a war of self-defense to liberate Asia." But Koga's words show a different view. They reveal his deep resentment of Japan's national wartime leaders.

I think Koga is unhappy that Class-A war criminals are enshrined in the same place as the brave people who fought and died for their country.

The organization that later became the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association was formed in 1947. One of its newsletters at the time printed this comment by its director: "Our fathers, husbands and sons who perished in the war did not go to war of their own free will. They had no choice but to follow orders to go to battle, and they died."

Even today, many bereaved families must feel the same. Yet the association does not oppose enshrining Class-A war criminals with other war dead.

Itagaki Tadashi, a former director of the group who later served 18 years in the Upper House as an LDP member, is emblematic of such mixed feelings. He is the second son of Itagaki Seishiro (1885-1948), a general in the Imperial Japanese Army who was the wartime minister of the army. He was executed as a Class-A war criminal.

Itagaki Seishiro

At the urging of the Cabinet of Nakasone Yasuhiro, Itagaki moved to support plans to enshrine Class-A war criminals separately. But he has always firmly held that "the Tokyo war crimes tribunal was unacceptable." Within the LDP, Itagaki was harshly critical of Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi 's formal apology for past Japanese aggression, made in 1995 to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the war.

The argument that the conflict was "a war of self-defense to liberate Asia" consoled bereaved families who did not want to believe that their husbands and fathers had died in disgrace. Such mixed feelings have continued to plague the association's members.

I can recall a time when a Class-A war criminal was head of the association. That man was Kaya Okinori (1889-1977), who led the association for 15 years from 1962. He was finance minister in the Tojo Hideki Cabinet when war broke out between Japan and the United States. Kaya was sentenced to life in prison.

But after serving 10 years, he was released on parole and eventually made a smooth political comeback. Kaya was a political heavyweight who eventually led the LDP Policy Research Council and held the post of justice minister.

Kaya surely was among those who led the association into claiming Japan's war was "a just war." Or so I thought, until I read his memoirs and looked up old news stories about him.

To my surprise, he had called the Japan-China war "meaningless" and repeatedly condemned Japan's war against the United States as reckless.

As Tojo's finance minister, Kaya, who had been a ministry bureaucrat, opposed attacking the United States. But in the end, he caved in to Tojo and the military. Kaya later repeatedly blamed himself, saying, "I deserve to commit hara-kiri for my war responsibility, no matter how much I opposed war."

Kaya also pointed out that the Tokyo tribunal had many problems. But on the other hand, instead of having foreign countries put Japan on trial, he wrote, "the Japanese should judge their war responsibility themselves. There are people whose responsibility is grave because they seriously tainted Japanese history and put the people through great misery. I am one of them."

He also wrote that "as a Japanese, it is extremely regrettable that the people themselves could not judge the responsibility of their wartime leaders."

Atonement

Kaya said he agreed to take the top post of the association as a way to atone for his sins. He played a positive role by ensuring higher pensions were paid to bereaved families. While he also showed signs of being out of step with current thought by campaigning for state protection of Yasukuni Shrine, he continued to refuse any honors, and he blamed himself until his death in 1977.

The following year, Tojo and other Class-A war criminals were enshrined in Yasukuni. What would Kaya have said if he had known what happened?

Today's association leader, Koga, lost his father in the war, while Kaya owned up to his responsibility for allowing that war. Although they came from positions far apart, they seem to have shared the same feelings.

For people who insist the war was fought in self-defense, I recommend Kaya's book, "Senzen Sengo Hachiju-nen" (Eighty years before and after the war, published by Keizai Oraisha). While it is out of print, it is worth searching for. "Kataritsugu Showa-shi 2" (Passing down Showa history 2, published in Asahi Bunko by The Asahi Shimbun) also clearly describes Kaya's ideas on war.

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