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Remembrance of World War II and the Postwar in the United States and Japan

By Laura Hein

One of the central lessons of the literature on the invention of tradition is that historical symbols are always available for reinterpretation in a variety of ways. Yet, there are some facts that are still rooted in the incontrovertible logic of the human life span. The sixtieth anniversary of anything means that those who were active participants are no longer making decisions in public capacities although some of them are still here. For example, this spring Lisa Fittko, who had helped such figures as Hannah Arendt and Marc Chagall escape Europe, died at age 95. Like the people she guided across the Pyrenees, she eventually settled in the United States and helped institutionalize the European war in American memory.

The deaths of the participants, however, do not mean that controversies that are rooted in World War II will go away. I think that many Japanese officials have hoped that criticism from Asia would fade away when the generation that remembers wartime oppression is finally gone. This is a big mistake, as anyone familiar with lore over the Serb defeat in 1389 (or any number of similar examples) could have told them. Rather, the shape of the controversy will shift -- in ways that participants often are not even aware of -- as historical memories of specific individuals are replaced by second-hand interpretations and new issues color our understanding of the past in new ways.

Which aspects of the war seem to be in play at the moment in contemporary Japan and the USA? Why?

To start with the United States, I am struck by the extent to which American preoccupation with the atomic bombings of 1945 does not go away. Moreover, the precise focus of American engagement has not changed either -- in my experience, Americans almost always want to talk about the decision to drop the atomic bombs on civilians, including the personal thought processes of specific individuals, notably J. Robert Oppenheimer and Harry S Truman. In 1995 I started to wonder why these questions were of such enduring interest to Americans in contrast to the many other war-related subjects that could have attracted their attention.

Ten years later, I can report that U.S. interest in Oppenheimer, in particular, has not changed -- in fact, his personal life history is being transposed into art in a variety of ways. I recently saw the world premiere of a play "The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer." Also, my Northwestern Music Department colleague, John Adams, is writing an opera about him.[1] By contrast, Japanese interest in the decisionmaking surrounding the use of the bomb is far more modest, compared to other aspects of its history, notably the killing of large numbers of civilians. One partial exception is Tsuda Mutsumi, a contemporary artist based in Osaka, who includes in her art related to the atomic bombings, a photo of Oppenheimer as a young man with his biographical details in the Japanese language superimposed on his face. Even so, Tsuda's main interest is the experience of atomic bomb survivors and people whose lives were disrupted by the war.[2]

This American focus has always seemed to me to be a way of evading attention to the human consequences on the ground in August 1945.[3] David E. Nye argues that this evasive tactic is central to the "American penchant for thinking of the [human] subject as a consciousness that can stand apart from the world and project its will upon it." This national fantasy, which he terms the "technological sublime," allows Americans to bask in the notion that they, as sovereign individuals, are in control. Oppenheimer, who famously quoted Hindu scripture when the test bomb exploded at Alamogordo, "I am become Death, destroyer of worlds," is emblematic of this sense of control. Yet, nuclear proliferation is so dangerous a threat to the world today that assertions of control are psychologically futile no matter how often Americans indulge in them. As Nye also argues, the "collective sense of achievement, another hallmark of the technological sublime, is radically undercut and destroyed" by the destructive power of the bomb, meaning that Americans go back to the moment of its invention over and over again, hoping to find a way to continue to enjoy the achievement but somehow domesticate the danger of atomic power.[4] They vainly seek two things: reassurance that using the bomb against civilians was the right thing to do and reassurance that the same technology, now a thousand times more powerful, will not in the future be used against us. In other words, remembrance of the atomic bombings in 1945, such as at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum's Enola Gay exhibit, will continue to be controversial within the logic of American memory itself, as it always has been.

In some ways, the situation is very similar on the Japanese side, in that much of contemporary remembrance is focused on domestic aspects of past events, with a significant official and popular insistence that only Japanese perspectives are valid. In Japan, the dominant story of the war cannot be that of technological power. Rather, far more like British than American remembrance, the primary focus is on the stoic and resilient population who carried on despite great hardship. That means, for example, attention to the experience of the Tokyo and Osaka fire-bombings and those of more than sixty other cities bombed near the end of the war, a topic of little interest to Americans.[5] Yet, attention to those civilian tragedies undercuts as well as reinforces national remembrance. By spring 1945, not only was the Japanese military unable to protect the civilian population from aerial attack, but nearly all informed people knew that the war had already been lost. In retrospect, the crucial question for many Japanese is: why did Japan's leaders not surrender in February, when its navy and air force were already in ruins and before Japan's cities went up in flames? The last months of the war were deadliest for civilians and soldiers alike. This questioning of the wartime government's attitude toward its own subjects has been intrinsic to Japanese memory since 1945 and so is unlikely to ever disappear from domestic debate.

Yet the war was an international event and controversy will continue for that reason too. Many people, both Americans and others, cannot accept the implied argument of the above U.S. narrative that the Japanese dead have no right to be part of American memory. The dead were also people -- and precisely because they too were individuals -- their separate and collective fates deserve remembrance. In Japan, the problem for Japanese who wish to ignore non-Japanese suffering is exactly the same as it is for Americans who want to speak only of the decision to drop the atomic bombs and not of having dropped them upon people. Both maneuvers involve a refusal to grant other people the right to participate in choosing the important questions.

Indeed, those who are inspired by the victims of America's and Japan's wars are likely to push even harder for the right to contribute

to framing future discussion. Those acts of imaginative connection often cross national lines -- precisely because they take place at the level of individuals. This is why, for example, Japanese government insistence that the legal claims of former forced laborers are illegitimate because individuals have no independent standing in international law is simply not effective. While this argument may prevail in law (although I doubt it will), it is entirely beside the point in the arena of international public opinion. In Japan, it is not hard to make the imaginative jump that recognizes the extent to which Asian suffering was caused by the same callousness on the part of the Japanese state that led to Japanese suffering. And for Americans, who have been accustomed to imagine their community of interest with the people Lisa Fittko guided across the Pyrenees since the 1940s, it seems less and less appropriate to draw the line there without including Asian victims too.

Another implication of the passing of individuals who remember the war is that the distance between 1945 and the present is diminishing in our imaginations. Because of this, I expect to see growing attention to postwar settlements as well as to wartime and colonial legacies. For example, Tessa Morris-Suzuki's recent Japan Focus essay pointed to Japanese official efforts to pressure Zainichi Koreans to go "back" to North Korea just before Japan's 1965 resumption of diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea,[6] so that they would not gain any new rights when the treaty went into effect. They had already been denied Japanese citizenship in 1952. The fact that wartime issues, such as the citizenship of Koreans resident in Japan, were not fully resolved in 1945 provided an opportunity for postwar discriminatory power politics -- a topic that deserves its own attention. More recently, anxiety in Japan about growing Chinese economic and military power has become a persistent sub-theme in Japanese war memory, something that was not true as late as 1995.

Yet, in other ways, the postwar world is receding from view: for example, the idea has receded that science and social science -- that is rational modernity -- will bind up the wounds of war and make a better society for all. People simply do not believe this in the same way that they did in the early postwar years, partly because celebration of science became the rationale for many injustices. Yet this universalist idealism was the basis for many of the efforts that rebuilt the globe in better ways after the war. After World War II most Americans, embracing the New Deal legacy of the 1930s, believed that a social safety net was the basis for a better society, while most Japanese were committed to an educational ethos that emphasized opportunity for all and a curriculum based on international goals of peace, social responsibility, and cultural engagement. Moreover, this shared respect for science and rationality was an important avenue by which Americans and Japanese reconciled after the bloody war.

That universalist ethos is ebbing away and is also being forgotten. Instead appeals to smaller communities -- particularly nationalist, religious, and ethnic ones -- are paramount. What is lost is the social commitment to recognize the structural impediments to decent lives for all citizens. Our governments are now run by people who are hostile to these postwar ideas -- especially in the United States but elsewhere as well. The career of Ishihara Shintaro deftly illustrates the shift. Although he went down to ignominious defeat when he first ran for Governor of Tokyo in 1972, he won easily in 1999, despite or because of his xenophobic statements that targeted Asian residents and asserted that such events as the 1937 Nanjing Massacre never took place. This was less because Ishihara had changed than because Japan had. In this sense, in both countries, the postwar -- but not the war -- may now truly be over.

Notes

[1] "The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer," Director Nic Diamond Playwright: Carson Kreitzer at Next Theater, Evanston IL, March 2005. "John Adams has brought contemporary history to the opera house with such music theater works as 'Nixon in China' and 'The Death of Klinghoffer.' His 'On the Transmigration of Souls' was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic to commemorate the victims of the September 11 World Trade Center attacks. He is presently at work on his third opera, 'Doctor Atomic,' based on J. Robert Oppenheimer and the scientific and moral crises surrounding the creation of the world's first atomic bomb in 1945." NU Observer on line, February 17, 2005, accessed March 21, 2005. Also note American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer, by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, 2005.

[2] Tsuda gets ideas for her art by interviewing atomic bomb survivors and descendents of people from various parts of the world whose lives were disrupted by the war. See http://www.afterhiroshima.org/tsuda.htm. Accessed March 21, 2005.

[3] This is particularly striking because one of the key points they debate is whether the use of the bombs was necessary to bring Japan's wartime leaders to surrender -- something that we CANNOT learn simply by focusing on the American side. Yet many people continue to try. For a sobering analysis of Japanese decision making in August 1945, see Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration," Pacific Historical Review 67.4 (1998): 477-512.

[4] David E. Nye, American Technological Sublime, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994. Quotes on pp. 282, 225, 228.

[5] In fact, attention to this subject has grown markedly in the last decade in Japan, underscoring my point that such issues do not automatically fade away with the deaths of survivors.

[6] "Japan's Hidden Role In The 'Return' Of Zainichi Koreans To North Korea" by Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Feb. 07, 2005.

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