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The Russo-Japanese War and the Iraq War

by Akira IRIYE

The diary of Victor Klemperer, who had repeated tragic experiences in the 1930s as a German Jew, provides a valuable record of that epoch. In the diary he frequently asks why "extreme nationalism" has become so rampant in Germany and some other countries at a time when "modern technology annuls all frontiers and distances." Klemperer remained basically optimistic, and he wrote in late 1938 that nationalism was "already a thing of the past" and that its appearance in such extreme forms was perhaps its "last convulsive uprising".

It is interesting that, even as he experienced terrible persecution as a result of Nazi racial policies, he did not ascribe all of that to Nazi racism but comprehended it in the framework of the contradiction between nationalism and what today would be globalization – globalization not just in the sense of global economic transactions but of various kinds of transnational interconnections. It would seem that even in the dark decade of the 1930s such a perspective was quite influential inside and outside Germany. That is why, when the Second World War ended, the principle of international cooperation was emphasized once again and the UN was established as its institutional expression. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the tides of globalization continued to become stronger, "extreme nationalism" has not yet become "a thing of the past".

I was reminded of the Klemperer quote when I read The Iraq war and its Consequences, a recent collection of essays by Nobel Peace Prize winners and some others. Already in 2001, individuals and groups that had received Nobel Peace Prizes issued a joint statement that expressed their concern over U.S. military action in Afghanistan. In the new book, the majority of these people express their criticism of the Iraq War. They are concerned that the United States has tended to ignore world public opinion in its attempts to safeguard its interests through unilateral action, with the result that the international community that had seemed to have at last come into existence thanks to the efforts by so many countries, groups, and individuals appears to be on the verge of disintegration. Since the United States has been an ardent promoter of globalization, its neglect of international opinion becomes all the more serious.

To be sure, we cannot equate the American proclivity to pursue national interests unilaterally with Klemperer's "extreme nationalism". Granted that the United States government and popular opinion became more nationalistic after 9-11, it has not come to the point of persecuting minority people and their views as happened in Germany in the 1930s. However, American leaders evince no strong will to extend transnational technological and commercial ties to political and social spheres, despite the fact that, after 1945 at least, this became the most important agenda in international relations. Following the example of the United States, many other countries now seem to be placing national interests first. Japan is no exception.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the start of the Russo-Japanese War, and numerous events have been organized in Japan to recapture its "glorious" moment. But it would be deplorable if such commemoration merely promote nationalism and a nation-centric perspective. The history of the first half of the twentieth century, beginning with the Russo-Japanese War, was one in which the promotion of national interests led to clashes among the powers, with tragic results for humanity. Reflecting on those events, after 1945 earnest efforts were made to mitigate nationalism, promote international understanding, and reinforce cross-national relationships.

The United States sympathized with and promoted these efforts. Its basic vision during the occupation of Japan was internationalism, and the new constitution reflected that spirit. Postwar Japan, too, stressed international understanding and closely identified itself with the United Nations. And by welcoming global ties and promoting cultural exchange, Japan clearly demonstrated its internationalist orientation.
This is a valuable legacy. After the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had put itself in opposition to the emerging internationalist developments, advocated "extreme nationalism," and contributed to the disintegration of world order. But after the Second World War, for nearly sixty years Japan kept in view the international community and tried, however inconsistently, to strengthen ties with all countries of the world. These efforts must have been welcomed by the vast majority of them.

Yet today, Japan seems intent upon following the U.S. government's example in going against the current of internationalism and placing national interests above all other considerations. The movement to revise the constitution also seems to be derived from this sort of nationalism. That is clearly unfortunate, as such a course will contribute to dividing the world politically, even as it is being interconnected through forces of globalization.

To be sure, the United States has been proclaiming universal principles such as the spread of democracy as it has fought in, and occupied, Iraq. However, universal principles must be promoted in cooperation with other countries; it is a logical inconsistency to spread universal values unilaterally. We should realize that global movements are evolving in opposition to unilateralism, as pointed out by Mary Ellen McNish, General Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, one of the groups awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in The Iraq War and Its Consequences. She holds that whatever is done in Iraq will be meaningless unless it is carried out in a global and international framework.

Just as the problem noted by Klemperer was resolved in a most horrendous way, the human race may repeat the same tragedy if we make a similar mistake in answering the question: is the world moving in the direction of increasing nationalism or will it move toward a more transnational future? Both Japan at the time of the Russo-Japanese War, and the United States in the Iraq War, chose the wrong answer and had to face serious consequences. But the United States will some day surely return to the path of internationalism. It is nothing short of national folly for Japan to do otherwise.

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