

Japanese Memories of the Asia-Pacific War: Analyzing the Revisionist Turn Post-1995

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This essay begins with three notable incidents of recent years, which are indicative of contemporary trends in the politics of war memory in Japan. The first is associated with the Abe administration's 2015 passage of the Collective Self Defense Bill: an interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which allows the Japanese Self Defense Forces to engage in military affairs when an ally of Japan is deemed to be under threat. The second is a part of the controversies on the "comfort women," the systematic sexual slavery conducted at military brothels, which was implemented and managed by the Japanese military and government during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45). The third concerns a municipal museum dedicated to the local experience of the Asia-Pacific War.

Incident 1: In October 2015, a Tokyo branch of national bookstore chain Junkudō was pressured into cancelling its "Fifty Must-Reads for Freedom and Democracy" book fair. This, in response to complaints that the selection was biased. The bookstore resumed the fair a month later with a new title "Forty-Nine Titles to Think About Democracy Today." As many as forty of the original fifty books had been replaced with new titles. Among the books that were pulled were those by liberal intellectuals who had voiced concerns and criticisms of the ways that the Abe administration forced passage of the Collective Self-defense Bill.¹



"Fifty Must-Reads for Freedom and Democracy" book fair
"Forty-Nine Titles to Think About Democracy Today" book fair

Incident 2: In August 2014, former *Asahi* newspaper reporter Uemura Takashi became embroiled in an intense controversy over several articles on the "comfort women" issue,

which he had authored in 1991. The articles are considered to provide key evidences of the Japanese government's involvement in the "comfort women" system. Conservative critics accused Uemura of fabrication. The controversy is still ongoing, and has cost Uemura an academic position. He and his family continue to receive death threats.²



Former *Asahi* newspaper reporter Uemura Takashi showing the "comfort woman" article from 1991

Incident 3: In April 2014, Peace Osaka, a municipal museum dedicated to the Japanese experience of the Asia-Pacific War, closed its doors in order to overhaul the entire exhibit. The museum had displayed, in addition to local experience of the Allied air raids, aggressive acts committed by the Japanese military in China. The transformation was a result of continuous attacks by the revisionist right, which argued that the museum must present a history that Japanese youths can be proud of. The museum reopened a year later featuring a narrative of the Asia-Pacific War completely devoid of Japan's aggressions in Asia.³ Several other municipal museums dedicated to local experiences of the war have also removed displays of Japanese atrocities under similar

pressure.



Activists protesting the "renewal" of Peace Osaka, April 30, 2015

The three episodes illustrate ways that memories of the Asia-Pacific War are politicized in line with resurgent nationalism in Japan today. In many of these cases, war memory has become a political position that one must take, polarized between two options: the Asia-Pacific War was a war of imperialism and aggression, or it was a war of self-defense from Western imperialism. How to remember this war has always been a politicized issue in Japan, but the trend has certainly intensified in the last two decades, especially since 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end. In the cases of the bookstore and the museums, we see instances where the extreme right succeeded in pressuring municipal and private groups to

alter their narrative portrayal of the past. The instance involving the former *Asahi* reporter demonstrates how issues associated with the wartime past have been reduced to a political position. There are many other situations where even personal memories of the war have been simplified into a black-and-white stance on whether Japan's war was one of aggression.

This essay will analyze this recent trend in Japanese war memory through three avenues: 1) the 1995 paradigm: the conservative turn in the mid-1990s as a reaction to the series of official apologies that were issued by the Japanese government for the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war; 2) "postmemory": the shift in war memory in recent decades influenced by the rapid decrease in the number of war survivors; and 3) memory activists: an examination of whose memories—and what kind of memories—are actively being remembered today. Through these three themes, the essay explicates the unresolved nature of Japan's relationship with its wartime past. In particular, the victimhood consciousness held by a large majority of Japanese, as well as the failure by relatively liberal administrations to systematically resolve the issues through research, outreach, and education, have hampered Japan's efforts for reconciling with its history.



Displays that were eliminated with the "renewal"

Politics of Apology and the 1995 Paradigm

Japan has had to deal with the issue of official apologies since the end of the war. In the early postwar decades, apologies at the state level were only issued to specific nations such as Burma (1957) and Australia (1957), or on particular occasions such as the normalization of international relations (South Korea, 1965; People's Republic of China, 1972). International scrutiny on Japan's attitude towards its wartime past intensified in the 1980s alongside the increased focus on the Japanese government's relationship with Yasukuni Shrine, the highly politicized institution where spirits of all military dead from modern Japan including fourteen Class A war criminals are memorialized.⁴ Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's official visit to the shrine on August 15, 1985 especially raised concerns in Japan's neighboring countries and brought attention to the issue of Japan's war responsibility. Also in the 1980s, ways that the Asia-Pacific War—and especially the China campaign—was depicted in Japanese textbooks caused tensions between Japan and its East Asian neighbors.⁵ In the early 1990s, the issue of the "comfort women" reemerged, when *Asahi* newspaper reported on its front page that historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki discovered "comfort women"-related documents in the Ministry of Defense archives. The authors of the article urged the Japanese government to apologize and pay reparations to the women.⁶ Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi and Foreign Minister Kōno Yōhei issued several statements that included apologies to the women.

The shift in Japan's political climate in the mid-1990s—the years leading up to the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in August 1995—also affected the government's official stance towards war responsibility. The Liberal Democratic Party, which had consistently been the majority party since 1955, yielded its status first to the newly formed Japan New Party (Nihon Shintō) headed by Hosokawa Morihiro

in August 1993, then to the short-lived Japan Renewal party (Shinseitō) of Ozawa Ichirō in April 1994, and finally, to a coalition government headed by the socialist Murayama Tomiichi in June 1994. Hosokawa and Murayama in particular issued several notable apologies, which included acknowledgement of the pain and suffering that the actions of the Japanese military inflicted on people of Asia, as well as admission of the Japanese government's involvement in the "comfort women" system. Murayama established the Asian Women's Fund, a private foundation whose goal was to pay reparations to the women and raise awareness of the issue.⁷ Opinion polls from the time reveal that the majority of Japanese approved these official statements.

Yet, these apologies were quickly overshadowed by the Japanese government's sharp turn to the political right in succeeding years. As early as 1996, LDP lawmakers tied to conservative lobbyist groups assumed the premiership and other key government positions.⁸ These government officials resumed the practice of paying official tribute at Yasukuni Shrine. In 1997, they established the multi-party coalition "Association of Diet Members Who Jointly Pay Tribute at Yasukuni Shrine." These were possible because there was public support for these lawmakers.



Association of Diet Members Who Jointly Pay Tribute at Yasukuni Shrine (photograph from 2013)

These neo-conservatives maintain that the history of modern and contemporary Japan should present the kind of narrative that Japanese youths can be proud of—that is, a narrative devoid of any wrongdoing by the Japanese state or the military. According to this narrative, the Asia-Pacific War for Japan was either a war of self-defense, or a war to liberate Asia from Western imperialism. There are several examples of institutional efforts to advocate this kind of history. In 1996, several scholars founded the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform that sought to promote a nationalistic view through history education. Their version of Japanese history was cleansed of Japan's war crimes and situated wartime Japan as the liberator of Asia from Western imperialism. 1997 saw the establishment of Nippon Kaigi, a "private organization for policy promotion and popular movement aimed at the reconstruction of a beautiful Japan that we can be proud of."⁹ In 2002, Yūshūkan, the military museum owned and operated by Yasukuni Shrine, reopened its renovated and expanded facility with a brand new exhibit that featured a revisionist narrative

of Imperial Japan.¹⁰ The popularity of publications by ultranationalist cultural producers such as the graphic novelist Kobayashi Yoshinori, commentator Sakurai Yoshiko, and writer Hyakuta Naoki illustrate the kind of narratives appreciated by many Japanese today.¹¹ Attacks on museums such as Peace Osaka started in the mid-1990s. Mainstream popular culture, films in particular, typically do not go so far as to justify the war itself, but they often aestheticize sacrifice and honor without specifically addressing the political implications of the war or crimes and atrocities committed. The subtext here is Japan as a nation that all Japanese can be proud of—a narrative that presumably appeals to many who have grown tired of criticisms from the rest of Asia.



History and Civics textbooks published by the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform

Following this shift to the right in the representations of Japanese history was the simplification of the issues associated with war memory. There have always existed debates about Japan's role in the Asia-Pacific War. But by the 21st century, the points of contention in these controversies had shifted dramatically from the specific to the symbolic. For example, in the case of the "comfort women" issue, the original debate focused on the number of women involved, what kind of treatment they received, and, most importantly, whether or not the Japanese wartime government was involved in the setting up of the "comfort" stations and recruiting the women. The most heated debate that ensued in the recent years revolves not around issues, but rather, individuals—Japanese nationals who argue that there existed a Japanese state-controlled

systematic sexual slavery in East and Southeast Asia during the war: Uemura Takashi, the former *Asahi* newspaper reporter who broke the news containing critical information about this systematic slavery, and Yoshimi Yoshiaki, the historian who uncovered archival evidence of state support of this system. The current debate is on the character and integrity of the two men, rather than on the issue itself. The debate has also extended outside Japan and Korea, to erecting memorials dedicated to the “comfort women” in expat communities in the United States and Canada, and to depiction of the subject matter in American textbooks.¹² In the case of Yasukuni Shrine, focus of the associated controversies has shifted from specific issues such as the attempts of the Liberal Democratic Party to reinstate state support of the shrine, to more ambiguous ones including the alleged pain and suffering that a prime minister’s visit to the shrine has caused to specific individuals.¹³ While these debates are rooted in the historical past, it is also clear that the focus has shifted to matters that have little to do with specific occurrences in the past. Similar shifts can be observed in other controversial matters including Japanese military’s aggressive acts in Asia such as the Nanjing Massacre.

I suggest that this recent shift can be understood as a reaction to the period of apologies of the mid 1990’s—apologies that were, in the words of historian Yoshida Yutaka, “not backed by a solid understanding of the wartime history,” but rather, presented to support a necessary shift in Japan’s international policy.¹⁴ Yoshida argues that such apologies in particular, and popular opinion on Japan’s war crimes more generally, were not so much a result of changing historical consciousness as they were a reaction to international criticism.¹⁵ Just as the apologies were a political move in response to international pressure, the revisionist trend of recent years can be considered a reactionary move on the domestic level.

There certainly were geopolitical pressures that culminated in the 1995 apologies, the most influential of which was the collapse of the Cold War structure in Asia and the rise of China. During the Cold War, disagreements over war memory remained, for the most part, a domestic issue in Japan. But the demise of the global Cold War structure had profound implications for Japan, for it brought renewed attention to unresolved tensions with the Asian lands it had invaded prior to 1945. The 1989 death of Showa emperor, the supreme commander of the Asia-Pacific War who was nevertheless never tried in the Tokyo War Trials or deprived of his throne, also shifted the landscape of war memory in Japan.

By the 1990s, individuals (rather than states for whom issues of responsibility and compensation seemed to have been settled through war crimes tribunals and normalization of international relations) had begun to make claims in court for apologies and compensation.¹⁶ Former “comfort women” from South Korea began to speak about their experiences in the early 1990s leading to lawsuits against the Japanese government. Korean men also filed suits against Japanese corporations for their harsh forced labor during the war as colonial subjects. The 1997 publication of Iris Chang’s *Rape of Nanking* also highlighted Japanese atrocities in East Asia.¹⁷ International pressure, especially from China and South Korea, compelled Japan to contend with war memory from a global perspective. This provoked Japan to nationalize its war memory and to seek to impose a unified voice.

In this context, the mid-90s apologies can be understood as a strategy for improving Japan’s foreign relations with China and South Korea, rather than a full acknowledgement of wrongdoings in the wartime past. Another point worth considering is the ways that war memory was shaped immediately after 1945. The US-led Allied Occupation reframed

Japanese war memory as one that can be described as “victim’s history”: by identifying individuals that were responsible for the war through the Tokyo Trials, and especially by allowing the emperor to evade prosecution, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) created in Japanese society an environment that was easier for them to occupy and manage. In the process, however, a feeling of “being deceived (*damasareta*)” by the wartime government permeated the immediate postwar period, and allowed the general public to not only welcome democracy, but also leave issues of their own war responsibility unquestioned.¹⁸ Victim’s history has played a role of a powerful unifier in Japanese society, presenting a situation that demonstrates the timelessness of Ernest Renan’s apt observation on nationalism: that “shared suffering unites more than does joy.”¹⁹

The Japanese public, then, embraced the official apologies of the mid-1990s not because they felt responsible, but because the official apologies reinforced their understanding that it was the government’s responsibility to apologize, to compensate, and to work on reconciliation with its wartime foes. It is also worth mentioning that the Japanese government did not endorse their apologies domestically by educating, or having a dialogue with, the general public on issues of war responsibility. In this scenario, where the apologies occurred as more or less superficial measures, it is possible that the persistence of international criticism resulted in yet another reactionary response—a denial of war crimes more generally.

This all suggests a kind of reactionary nationalism: the reinterpretation of the past as a political position. If the apologies of the mid-1990s came as a result of international pressure, the succeeding turn to the right can be considered a response by frustrated domestic voices. War memory thus became politicized. In the process, the complex

relationships that the Japanese had with the fifteen-year war—ranging from those who were indeed perpetrators, those who committed crimes under pressure, those who took advantage of the war for financial gain or promotion of their cause, those who truly believed that the war was a holy war including children who were thoroughly educated to celebrate Japan’s militaristic nationalism, and others who were simultaneously perpetrator and victim—have been reduced to political positions. One notable consequence of such political positioning is that those who supported one side or the other soon found themselves unwilling or unable to express critical views of methodologies or tactics utilized by those within their groups.

The Postmemory Generation and the Issue of War Responsibility

Over seventy years has passed since the end of the war, and the large majority of Japanese today have no firsthand experience of the war. This section focuses on the generations born after 1945—those with no experience of the war—in order to engage further with this problem of war memory. The ongoing, persistent international criticisms—especially those from China and South Korea—have had a particularly strong impact on the generations born after 1945, who feel that they should not have to be responsible for what happened before they were born. For example, in 1995, then member of the Lower House Takaichi Sanae, who was born in 1961, publicly asserted that she was under no obligation to contemplate (*hansei suru*) Japan’s war responsibility since she was not even alive at the time.²⁰ Takaichi’s statement drew a variety of responses. Liberal media outlets, including the *Asahi* newspaper, condemned her point of view.²¹ At the same time, many Japanese from her generation—including those who acknowledge Japan’s wartime crimes—admitted to holding similar sentiments.²² This latter response suggests a

trend more complex than that of a generation refusing to bear responsibility for something that had happened before they were born. Many who do acknowledge Japan's war crimes believe that the Japanese state has an obligation to pay for its wartime injustices, but feel no need to take responsibility for the actions themselves as individuals.²³ Such sentiments continue to fuel victim's history.

Takaichi Sanae, as well as the majority of scholars, activists, and cultural figures who have been promoting revisionist views of Japan's wartime past, belong to the generations that have come to know the war through what Marianne Hirsch has coined "postmemory"—a memory without experience that is inherited through the environment in which one grows up. Unlike their parents and grandparents, those who belong to the postmemory generation never directly experienced war. Rather, they have grown up "dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation [and] shaped by the traumatic events that can be neither understood or recreated."²⁴ Hirsch, who has examined literature and other forms of culture produced by the children of Holocaust survivors, argues that the descendants of those who have "witnessed massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they identify that connection as a form of *memory*, and that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transferred to those who were not actually there to live an event."²⁵ But of course, received memory is different from that of actual witnesses and participants. And received memory continues to be reshaped by the society in which the recipients live. Or perhaps it is not memory that is received. Eva Hoffman, who has also examined children of Holocaust survivors, suggests that what the children inherit is not memory, but rather, what she calls "the emotional traces of the parents' experiences."²⁶ Whether memory or emotional

traces, what is received by the succeeding generation continues to be reshaped by the society in which the recipients live.

Hirsch and Hoffman are talking about the familial transmission of the Holocaust experience. But the transmission can also be social, as was the case in Japan. For example, those who experienced childhood in 1970s and 80s Japan typically grew up surrounded by narratives that situate Japan and the Japanese as victims of war. Required readings for summer vacations often presented narratives from Japan's home front: war orphans, destroyed cities, Hiroshima survivors who feared the physical aftereffects of massive radiation, and animals that had to be sacrificed for the war effort. Television dramas featured young protagonists that had lost everything. Even the kinds of works problematized by conservatives such as *Hadashi no Gen* [Barefoot Gen] depict people as victims of the wartime government.²⁷

These popular cultural representations, in turn, tied the young readers' parents and grandparents' narratives to a larger past that was the history of Japan. Narratives of those who experienced hardships and loss of the wartime home front, whose personal experiences were to serve as a lesson for peace, dominated the childhood of many Japanese. The primary voice was that of the former victim (those of the parents and/or grandparents' generation) preaching that war is bad and therefore we must promote peace. The perpetrator was never identified in the original narrative—the war was something that came and went, like a natural disaster.

Through the experience of growing up surrounded by these narratives, the postmemory generation has come to inherit their parents' generation's trauma—the trauma of an all-out war, of hardship and loss. For the postmemory generation, however, this is an elusive trauma without a specific hardship or

loss. Through this process of inheritance as postmemory, the war trauma has become the trauma of their people, which they too have come to embody through the environment that they have grown up in, a part of their identity. But the postmemory generation has also inherited another kind of legacy from the war—that of war responsibility. In the post 1995 society, they have encountered constant chatter about Japan's war responsibility, of their war guilt. The inherited trauma of wartime hardship, then, is deeply intertwined with a pressure of guilt. In attempts to rectify the guilt and the resulting trauma, many have come to embrace the victim's history in which at least ordinary Japanese are not to be held responsible. Others have turned to revisionist history that echoes the wartime state propaganda that asserted Japan fought the Asia-Pacific War out of self-defense, a narrative that absolves all Japanese, including political leaders, from war responsibility.

Of course the "postmemory generation" is not singular. And even among the supporters of revisionist history, the understanding of the fifteen-year war as well as of the current East Asian memory wars differ typically based on how far removed one is from the war. Unlike the generation that experienced the war, or that were personally acquainted with people who experienced the war, most who are in their thirties or younger today have not experienced specific, personal losses that can be acknowledged or compensated. For this generation, the issue is based on abstract concepts such as responsibility and guilt. As a result, they tend to welcome symbolic gestures that allow them to feel that they are not responsible.

Memory Activists and Victim's History

One key reason for the persistence of the memory wars in East Asia is the presence of what I have been referring to as victim's history. According to this history, ordinary

Japanese not only *do not* bear any responsibility for any aspect of the fifteen-year war, but they were in fact victims of both their own government and the Allied air raids (or the atomic bombs or the land battle in Okinawa). The Tokyo Trials that identified war criminals reinforced this belief. But with the Trials long over and those who were found guilty no longer alive, there is no one left to take responsibility for the war. Of course this victim's history is not really a productive way of thinking about the past. For, as historian Carol Gluck has argued, it takes more than the top political and military leaders (in the case of Japan, the emperor and the convicted war criminals) for a nation to wage a total war. In other words, all Japanese bear some degree of responsibility.²⁸

But here, I would like to turn to the question of where and how this victim's history emerged. Put another way, when the Japanese think of their wartime experiences as that of victims, whose voices were being heard, whose memories are now being remembered? Whose memories are we relying on now?

The primary way that the Japanese "remember" the war is as victims on the home front, especially of the Allied air raids, which destroyed nearly two hundred cities and killed approximately 330,000 people.²⁹ A concerted effort to collect and preserve memories of local air raids began in the 1960s. In many cities, groups for collecting and recording survivor memories organized in the 1970s. The Tokyo Association to Record Air Raid Experiences (Tokyo Kūshū o Kirokusuru-kai), founded by four survivors of the March 10, 1945 Tokyo air raid—writers Saotome Katsumoto and Arima Yōrichika, cultural critic Matsuura Sōzō, and historian Ienaga Saburō—began its activities on August 5, 1970.³⁰ Similar groups quickly followed in several other cities. Most of these groups characterize themselves as the victims of the wartime government, believing that collecting and relaying their wartime suffering to succeeding generations translates to peace

promotion.

One impetus for the collection of air raid memories was America's war in Vietnam. News reports that American bombing on North Vietnam was creating numerous civilian casualties prompted the April 1965 establishment of Beheiren, or the Citizen's Alliance to Bring Peace to Vietnam. In the midst of the war, in January 1970, Prime Minister Satō Eisaku allowed the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the US [Anpo Treaty, originally concluded in 1960] to be automatically renewed, further fueling Japan's anti-war movement. Since the treaty enabled the United States to use Japanese land and facilities for military purposes, many Japanese felt a sense of responsibility towards the war in Vietnam. Planes that bombed Northern Vietnam typically took off from American bases in Okinawa, and Japanese factories were produced weapons, ammunitions, and herbicides for the war, while forty percent of planes using Haneda International Airport in Tokyo at the time were chartered by the US military and three-quarters of wounded American soldiers received treatment in Japan.³¹ According to an *Asahi* newspaper poll of August 24, 1965, 75 percent of the respondents were opposed to the war in Vietnam, with only 4 percent in support, and 54 percent thought Japan to be in danger of entanglement in the conflict.³²

For the men and women that had lived through the Asia-Pacific War, personal experiences of air raids were a powerful impetus to collect memories as a way to oppose the war in Vietnam and promote peace. Many who lived with vivid memories of running through incendiary bomb showers and witnessing mass death felt a particular obligation as well as authority to protest against the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam.³³ Their sense of victimhood was key to their thought process. In order to promote real peace, they argued, it was necessary to fully understand the victim

experience. In their view, those born after 1945 (the postmemory generation), who had grown up in an environment with no trace of the devastation caused by the war, especially needed to learn from their collection of victim memories before they could oppose the war in Vietnam. Air raid survivors were also apprehensive that memories of the Japanese war experience were fading (*sensō taiken no fūka*) alongside the dramatic societal changes during Japan's high economic growth period of the 1960s. Many concurrently worried that war memories were starting to become aestheticized, as narratives lionizing Imperial Japan's military death began to appear.³⁴

At the time, however, there were multiple, competing interpretations of the war. For example, in 1966, Oda Makoto, novelist, chairman of Beheiren, and a child victim of the Osaka bombing of 1945, wrote a scathing critique of war experience narratives that were constructed from the viewpoint of the victim. He argued against victimhood consciousness and called for a "personal sense of involvement [in the war] and responsibility [for the involvement]."³⁵ There also were generational rifts during this period, with some youths accusing the generation that lived through the war of collaborating with Japanese militarism. The notorious 1969 vandalism at Ritsumeikan University of the Wadatsumi statue, which commemorates fallen student soldiers, is one manifestation of this rift.³⁶

At least during this time period, it was possible for generational differences in the remembrance of the war to coexist, and there were efforts to discuss, communicate, and reconcile these differences at least within Japan. There was no need for a unified collective Japanese narrative of the war in the Cold War geopolitical order. But what I want to point out here is that efforts were made to record and preserve numerous voices from the home front, of the air raids, and of Japanese suffering in the final months of the Asia-Pacific

War.

In addition to the collection and preservation of memories, these memory activists took on the task of collecting artifacts associated with air raids. Many such collections developed into municipal peace museums, of which Peace Osaka mentioned earlier was one. Some wrote memoirs, children's books, and novels based on their experience. War-themed commercial films and television dramas with a focus on the home front experience also began to receive attention in the 1970s and 80s. Other kinds of war stories, especially from the battlefields, existed, but for the most part, these were not personal narratives, but rather, popular military histories involving battle strategies, fighter planes and aircraft carriers. Primary voices came from the home front.³⁷ Most depicted the air raids without identifying the perpetrator.

These home front narratives of air raid experience that situated the Japanese as victims ironically resonated with the way that the US framed Japanese war memory during the occupation period—the Japanese were the victims, of their own government, of aerial bombing of their cities. More specifically, the Japanese were the victims of “the war”—not the “Greater East Asia War,” as Japan's wartime leaders called it, not the “Pacific War,” as SCAP renamed it, not the “Asia-Pacific War,” generally accepted today in intellectual communities, but a generic war. A generic evil.

The proponents of the victim's history are also proud supporters of Article 9, as the non-war clause of the Japanese Constitution completes their redemptive myth. The generation growing up in the 70s and 80s was told that the peace and prosperity that Japan enjoyed came as a result of the suffering and loss experienced by the wartime generation. For Japan to rise up from the ashes like a phoenix, the war was necessary, they were told. The redemptive myth held strong, until Japan's economic bubble burst in the early 1990s.

The generation that came of age during and after the mid-1990s—the time of official apologies, the time when criticisms from East Asia crescendoed—never experienced the economic progress or the prosperity that Japan enjoyed for decades after the war. For many in this generation, Article 9 does not symbolize the redemptive myth, but rather, stands in the way of Japan's path to becoming a “normal country” with its own military. This is not to say that all Japanese that belong to this generation support the revisionist narrative. Many from this generation consider Article 9 a source of pride, a quality that allows their country to be exceptional. But here, too, it is about political positions: Article 9 for the supporters symbolizes peace. Peace as a generic good; peace as an antithesis of war as a generic evil.

Postwar responsibility

The concept of “postwar responsibility” offers some possibilities for escaping this reactionary trend.³⁸ This concept is concerned not so much with accepting responsibility for the war and its associated crimes, but rather, for the postwar responses. The “responsibility” in this approach is therefore not for the acts committed during the war, but for ending the present international tension resulting from the unresolved issues from the war, which can only be successfully executed through reconciliation. Of course the issue of who is responsible still remains unresolved and scholars differ on this point. Renowned historian and activist Ienaga Saburō, for example, has argued for a collective responsibility that transcends experience or age groups: that since the postwar generations have benefited from the peace and prosperity built on the Japanese war experience, it is necessary for all Japanese to bear responsibility.³⁹ Others argue that responsibility is not based on nationality, but should be founded upon a critical assessment and understanding of Japan's imperial past: that postwar generations should not be forced

to inherit war responsibility without rational reasoning or acceptable explanation.⁴⁰ While many scholars have actively, and often transnationally, contributed to the discourse on Japan's war responsibility in recent years, it seems that the concept of people's responsibility has yet to take hold among the general public in Japan.⁴¹ Further, there is no safe public space for education on war responsibility since the topic is always heavily politicized. War responsibility has become a political position rather than a problem that needs to be understood, acknowledged, and resolved.

Another way to think about war responsibility is through the concept of citizenship. Citizenship entails both rights and responsibilities. It is thus possible, on the one hand, to argue that as citizens, all Japanese—including those who were born after the war—need to bear responsibility for Japan's wartime past. But on the other hand, it is also possible to argue that in wartime Japan, most people (and women in particular) were not full citizens of Japan, when we take into account the extremely limited nature of democracy prior to 1945. Or, perhaps we can think about the concept some political theorists call "individual national responsibility," which is responsibility for acts performed by others (dead or alive) who belongs (or belonged) to the same nation.

In the summer of 2015, the seventieth anniversary of Japan's defeat, tens of thousands of Japanese protested in front of the National Diet Building to oppose Abe's reinterpretation of the Collective Self Defense Bill. The protest was led by the SEALDs, a student group that spearheaded a number of anti-defense bill activities. They were standing up against the conservative turn that had been the norm for two decades since 1995. The protest has now expanded into an anti-government and anti-war rally more generally.⁴² But this ongoing activism in its current form, in which protestors

single out top lawmakers as the culprit, remains within the framework of victim's history. The protestors merely criticize government policies and strategies and accuse lawmakers of deception without offering possible solutions or, perhaps more importantly, publicly engaging in a self-reflective analysis by asking the important question: "why and how did we arrive at where we are today?"

Nevertheless, this kind of activism has much potential to transform into a demonstration of postwar responsibility. What is needed here is a more inclusive approach to these anti-war protests—an approach that includes consideration for the pain of others, of people who might become enemies if Japan were to take up arms; an approach that includes a reflection on Japan's past deeds. If Japanese people are not to take up arms because they do not want to go to war, or because they do not want their loved ones to go to war, the intent can and should also be expanded to potential opponents: an intent not to go to war because the act may inflict injury on citizens of other nations. And by extension, it is also possible to argue that Japanese people should not go to war so that they would not have to injure citizens of other nations, as they had done during the fifteen years between 1931 and 1945. An anti-war protest by Japanese youth that includes such demands is a much more powerful statement of acknowledgment and responsibility than any words a sitting prime minister can utter.



SEALDs (Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy)

SPECIAL FEATURE

Nationalism in Japan

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Notes

¹ *Tokyo Asahi shinbun*, November 5, 2015; November 13, 2015.

² Uemura Takashi with Tomomi Yamaguchi, "Labeled the reporter who "fabricated" the comfort woman issue: A Rebuttal", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 2, No. 1, January 12, 2015.

³ Akiko Takenaka, "Reactionary Nationalism and Museum Controversies: The Case of 'Peace Osaka'," *The Public Historian* 36.2 (Spring 2014), 75-98; Philip Seaton, "The Nationalist Assault on Japan's Local Peace Museums: The Conversion of Peace Osaka", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 30, No. 2, July 27, 2015.

⁴ Akiko Takenaka, *Yasukuni Shrine: History, Memory, and Japan's Unending Postwar* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

⁵ Laura Hein and Mark Selden eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000).

⁶ *Asahi shinbun*, January 11, 1992.

⁷ The foundation closed on March 31, 2007 but still exists today [in the form of a digital museum](#).

⁸ Hashimoto Ryūtarō, who succeeded the socialist Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi on January 11, 1996, had—until shortly before he assumed premiership—been the president of the Japan Bereaved Families Association (Nippon Izokukai), the powerful lobbyist group with strong ties to Yasukuni Shrine.

⁹ From [official website](#).

¹⁰ Takenaka, *Yasukuni Shrine*.

¹¹ Kobayashi Yoshinori has authored a number of popular graphic novels that explain key postwar issues such as war responsibility, Yasukuni Shrine and the imperial family. Journalist and commentator Sakurai Yoshiko is a prolific author of texts that promote neo-conservative views of Japan. Hyakuta Naoki is the author of the best-selling novel *Eien no zero*, which depicts a young man's journey to learn about the military life of his late grandfather who was a tokkō pilot. He is also known for his friendly dialogues with Prime Minister Abe Shinzō.

¹² For more recent developments, see, Norma Field and Tomomi Yamaguchi, Introduction, "'Comfort Woman' Revisionism Comes to the U.S.: Symposium on The Revisionist Film Screening Event at Central Washington University', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 21, No. 1, June 1, 2015; Tomomi Yamaguchi and Norma Field, "The Impact of 'Comfort Woman' Revisionism on the Academy, the Press, and the Individual: Symposium on the U.S. Tour of Uemura Takashi", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 33, No. 1, August 17, 2015.

¹³ The shrine was owned and operated by the Japanese state until February 1946, when it became a private institution to satisfy the SCAP issued Shinto Directive, which separated Shinto from the Japanese government. For details on the lawsuits that resulted from the "pain and suffering," see Takenaka, *Yasukuni Shrine*.

¹⁴ Yoshida Yutaka, *Nihonjin no sensōkan: sengoshi no naka no hen'yō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), 7.

¹⁵ Yoshida Yutaka, *Nihonjin no sensōkan*, 7.

¹⁶ Carol Gluck, "Sekinin/Responsibility in Modern Japan," in Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing eds., *Words in Motion: Toward A Global Lexicon* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 97.

¹⁷ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁸ Yoshida, *Nihonjin no sensōkan*, 55.

¹⁹ Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" [lecture](#) delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882.

²⁰ *Nihon keizai shinbun*, March 17, 1995.

²¹ *Tokyo Asahi shinbun*, March 18, 1995.

²² "Editorial," *Kikan sensō sekinin kenkyū* no. 11 (Spring, 1996), 2-9. Takaichi currently is Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications in the Abe administration. Her comment may have been a result of her conservative leanings, but the youths' identification with her

statement is worth noting.

²³ According to a 2005 poll by the conservative *Yomiuri* newspaper, only 5 percent responded that the general public bore some responsibility for the war. A 2006 poll by the liberal *Asahi* newspaper yielded somewhat different results: 39 percent believed that the general public had some responsibility, while 43 percent responded that they were not responsible at all. But respondents to both polls placed the primary blame on the military and political leaders. *Yomiuri Shinbun Sensō Sekinin Kenshō Iinkai* ed., *Kenshō sensō sekinin* vol. 1 (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 2006), 208-9; *Asahi Shinbun Shuzaihan, Sensō sekinin to tsuitō* vol. 1 (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 2006), 230-31.

²⁴ Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," *Poetics Today* (17.4): 659-86; here, 662.

²⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3.

²⁶ Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

²⁷ In 2012, Matsue City Board of Education made a recommendation to local elementary and junior high schools to remove the graphic novel series from school libraries in response to complaints from members of citizens group Zaitokukai, a group that seeks to eliminate what they consider as privileges extended to Korean residents of Japan. Similar requests also occurred in Tottori City and Izumisano City around the same time. Most schools initially complied to the requests, but subsequently returned the books to their open stacks.

²⁸ Carol Gluck, "The Idea of Showa," in Gluck and Stephen R. Graubard eds., *Showa: The Japan of Hirohito* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 1-26.

²⁹ Detailed information on the air raids is available [at the online archive](#).

³⁰ For the early history of the group, see [here](#) [last accessed August 1, 2014].

³¹ Oguma Eiji, "Minshu" to "aikoku": *sengo Nihon no nashonarizumu to kōkyōsei* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 2002), 588-589.

³² Oguma, "Minshu" to "aikoku," 589.

³³ Koyama Hitoshi, *Nihon kūshū no zen'yō: Mariana kichi B29 butai* (Tokyo: Tōhō shuppan, 1995), 252.

³⁴ Oguma, "Minshu" to "aikoku," 589.

³⁵ Oda Makoto, *Betonamu no Amerikajin* (Tokyo: Gōdō shuppan, 1966).

³⁶ On May 20, 1969, members of Ritsumeikan University Zenkyōtō (United Front of All Students) vandalized the Wadatsumi statue that commemorates the student soldier war dead arguing that the generation that lived through the war had collaborated with Japanese fascism. "If you were against war, why didn't you throw away your guns? Why didn't you run away from the battlefield?" they protested. Oguma "Minshu" to "aikoku," 595.

³⁷ For an analysis of personal war narratives from the battlefields, see Narita Ryūichi, "Sensō keiken" no sengoshi: *katarareta taiken, shōgen, kioku* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2010).

³⁸ The word postwar responsibility has existed since the 1970s, but it has been mobilized in the last two decades to result in a flurry of publications that use the term in order to interrogate ways to conceive of innovative ideas for breaking through the stagnant postwar. For recent discussions on postwar responsibility, see, for example, Ōnuma Yasuaki, *Tokyo saiban, sensō sekinin, sengo sekinin* (Tokyo: Tōshindō, 2007); Takahashi Tetsuya, *Sengo*

sekinin ron (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2005); and Kōketsu Atsushi, *Watashi tachi no sensō sekinin: “Showa” shoki 20 nen to “Heisei” ki 20 nen no rekishi teki kōsatsu* (Tokyo: Gaifūsha, 2009).

³⁹ Ienaga Saburō, *Sensō sekinin* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2002).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Kōketsu Atsushi, *Watashi tachi no sensō sekinin* (Tokyo: Gaifūsha, 2009), and Takahashi Tetsuya, *Sengo sekinin ron* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2005).

⁴¹ Examples of transnational scholarship include Daqing Yang et al. eds., *Towards a History Beyond Borders: Contentious Issues in Sino-Japanese Relations* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012); Hasegawa, Tsuyoshi and Togo, Kazuhiko. *East Asia’s Haunted Present: Historical Memories and the Resurgence of Nationalism* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008); Kawakami Tamio et al. eds. *Kaikyō no ryōgawa kara Yasukuni o kangaeru: hisen, chinkon, Ajia* (Tokyo: Oruta Shppanshitsu, 2006).

⁴² SEALDs has announced its official dissolution on August 15, 2017, but members assert that they will continue their political activism in different forms.