War Memory in Japan

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The twentieth century was a century of unprecedented progress and development. The technological progress alone was staggering. In travel, we invented both the first airplane and also the first spaceship to land on the moon. Our standard of living rose phenomenally as we moved from agricultural production to industrial, postindustrial, and now computer-driven production. Information that spread through radio, television and telephone now travels through the Internet. In the world of medicine, fatal diseases became curable, and short life expectancy became longevity.

But the twentieth century is also remembered as the bloodiest century in human history. Why? Because we experienced two major world wars. World War II especially was a "total war," with both military and civilians involved, and everybody affected. The technological advance that helped to prolong our lives also helped create effective weaponry that killed tens of millions of lives.

World War II was a war of monstrous scale. The total casualties reached sixty million people. Of them, twenty-five million were Soviets, fifteen million were Chinese, six million were Poles and six million were Jews. Furthermore, four million Germans died, as well as two million Japanese, four hundred thousand British, and two hundred thousand Americans. What happens after an extraordinary war like this? How do people come to terms with this monumental carnage? How does the experience of war affect a nation's identity, self-image, and sense of responsibility?

In an international survey by the NHK-BCRI that compares people's attitudes toward war in five countries, people in Japan, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and South Korea were asked, "What would you do if their country were attacked or invaded? Would you volunteer to fight to defend your country?" Over half of Americans, Koreans and British said absolutely yes, they would volunteer to defend their country, but the answers were very much lower in Japan and Germany. In these two countries defeated in World War II, those who said they would voluntarily take up arms to defend their country comprised only ten to twenty percent. For them, the prospect of fighting a war is obviously more problematic than for others.

This is the legacy of defeat, the legacy of having been responsible for starting the war, for having caused the enormous human and physical destruction, and the unspeakably brutal and diabolical massacres.

Does this mean that the experience of WWII has turned a defeated country like Japan to a pacifist, anti-militarist, peace-loving nation? Let's look at the Japanese case. First, we find that the Japanese take enormous pride in Article 9 of the Constitution, which renounced the right to wage war:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

Second, there is also a deliberate discourse of peace in Japan that is common and central to its national self-definition. Preambles in the various documents that represent Japan describe the nation as a "peace nation" or a "peace-loving" nation (heiwa kokka). This rhetoric of peace tends to dominate Japan, in the Constitution, in the media, in public policy, and in school textbooks.

However, there are other aspects that complicate this picture. Even though Japan renounces war in its Constitution, it has a viable military unit called the "Self-Defense Forces," complete with an army, navy, and air force. As a "peace nation" Japan prides itself on containing its defense expenditure, which means containing it to one percent of GNP (Gross National Product), yet the total defense spending in absolute terms is the fourth largest in the world.

How did this state of the nation come about? To answer this question we need to look beneath the surface, and look back in history over the course of the past fifty years. We need to look for the motivation that led Japan to develop its self-image as the "peace-loving" nation.

To understand the fundamental motivation of a defeated nation like Japan, it is important to focus on the idea of recovery. This is the notion that you've had a setback, you've incurred some losses, and now you have to exert extra effort to make up for these losses. From this perspective, Japan has indeed been very active in recovery work over the past decades. First, there was much economic recovery to do. Japan put a great deal of effort in bringing recovery to its economy. This was especially true in the immediate postwar decades. Japan achieved spectacular double-digit economic growth, which became known as the "economic miracle." Second, there is another kind of recovery that is as important as economic recovery. This is the moral recovery: the recovery of national dignity and honor, and the re-establishment of "good standing" in the world.

How did the Japanese go about their moral recovery, and how did they formulate their postwar identity and their new self-definition from it? The Japanese sought this goal-the recovery of their dignity and moral standing-by promising peace, by promising to become a peaceful, reliable, and trustworthy nation. That is, Japan adopted peace as their atonement for the past and as a way to redeem itself in the eyes of others, and themselves. The pledge for peace and the renunciation of war and arms, Article 9 of the Constitution, became the supreme act of redemption for the Japanese: their ticket to recovering their standing in the world. It did not matter that this pledge was originally written by the Americans; once it was written and adopted, Article 9 and the act of renouncing war took on its own meaning for the Japanese.

In 1997, sixty-nine percent of Diet members still opposed amending the constitution and cited their pride in it as their reason for opposing a change. The discursive practice of peace has occupied a central place in Japan's national identity through the end of the twentieth century. The majority of the Japanese believe that their declaration of peace is absolutely unique, but in fact, as many as 124 nations in the world have, in one way or another, included clauses in their constitution that applaud peace and denounce war.

However, since the first Gulf War, Japan has been reconsidering its long-standing peace strategy; but as of yet, there is no dominant alternative that replaces the old one. This is the problem that lies at the heart of the current political controversy about national defense. In the post-Cold War, post-9/11 world, a new vision to replace the peace strategy is difficult to find.

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