WAR AND MILITARISM IN MODERN JAPAN

ISSUES OF HISTORY AND IDENTITY

Edited by

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GLOBAL
ORIENTAL

Introduction

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The theme of war and militarism in modern Japanese history has attracted significant interest, manifested in academic circles in a voluminous body of literature. Notable topics within this theme include explorations of the roots, causes, characteristics and legacies of Japanese imperialism and colonialism; the stories of armies and battlefields; and the effects of war and militarism on both wartime and post-war Japan. Recent studies show also a growing interest in the place which the militarist past occupies in post-war Japan's 'memory' and 'identity'.

The present volume brings together recent scholarship on issues of both history and identity in an attempt to enrich our understanding of the history-identity connection in Japan, while contributing as well to the scholarly understanding of this nexus in general. In order to make sense of the history-identity nexus with regards to the theme of war and militarism in modern Japan, the book is divided into three parts: the first part presents up-to-date historical analyses of topics on war and militarism in modern Japan; the second part is dedicated to research that sheds light on the features of identity by inferring from war-related historical events and phenomena; and, the last part critically explores conscious and intentional acts of identity formation that were affected by the history under discussion. Indeed, aspects of Japanese identity are at the centre of the latter two parts, yet the identity issue is expanded by the treatment of two other pertinent identities – Jewish and Korean (Chapters 8 and 14). Finally, although the volume is thus divided, I hope that the fourteen essays that constitute it will be seen as forming a terrain where concepts about war and militarism in Japan's history and related concepts about identity negotiate with each other. I wish to highlight several key points in this regard.

RISE OF THE MILITARY AND FALL OF JAPAN

The book opens with an analysis of a historical process that stands at the core of our field of discussion: the growing role of the military in Japanese politics. Apparently, this crucial process can be traced back to as early as the decade that followed Japan's victory over Russia in 1905. From an historical perspective, as Ian Nish demonstrates, the tugs-of-war that took place during this period not only between the military and the civilian leaders but within the army as well, signalled the path which Japan was soon to follow. Most importantly, Nish emphasizes that Japan took the path of 'limited incursions' while being aware of the risks involved. Thus, as Japan continued to experience the growing influence of the military, it also became clear that there were divergent views within the military.

Yet later, as compared with the period that Nish discusses, the military groups no longer sought to present a united front against the civilian leaders. This was demonstrated by the actions of rebellious radical officers during the 1930s, actions that peaked in the *Ni-ni-roku Jiken* (February 26 Incident) of 1936,[1] which had an immediate effect on Japan. In the aftermath of the incident the army pressed for larger budgets – claiming that this was essential in preventing similar rebellions in the future – and its involvement in both domestic and foreign affairs increased (Shillony 1997: 210). This, however, still did not mean that the military now spoke with one voice. As has already been observed (Medzini 2006: 104), during the first days following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident there were high commanders that pressed for rapid advancement into China while others called for much more cautious moves. In addition, as Naoki Maruyama shows (Chapter 2), two seemingly different approaches within the military developed against the backdrop of Japan's improving relations with Germany. One approach advocated military alliance between the two nations, while a second approach, which was supported by several business groups, attempted to improve Japan's deteriorating relations with the US by showing support for the Jewish community in Manchuria. Yet, Maruyama asserts, the Jewish card was finally taken out of the equation once Japan had clearly sided with the Axis powers in September 1940, when American capital and favourable American public opinion were no longer pursued.

Eventually, during the Second World War the military gained unprecedented influence since Japan, in the words of Ben-Ami Shillony, was engaged in a life-and-death war. The regime during this period was based on repression and total mobilization (1997: 231). Was it the decades-long growing military sway on politics, which peaked in the early 1940s, that finally led to Japan's defeat? Mark Peattie (Chapter 7) agrees that among other commonly-acknowledged factors, the lack of civilian critics that were able to curb the military leadership resulted in wartime decision-making that was 'often un-tethered to reality'. However, this

was merely a manifestation of a much more profound cause. Japan's defeat, as Peattie suggests, was a result of a series of weaknesses that an ill-suited cultural warrior tradition had exacerbated. Enthralled by the idea of the 'Japanese spirit', which was drawn from an idealized past, Japan failed to come closer to reality when creating images of itself and of its enemy 'other'. Thus, identities, or perhaps more accurately put-perceived identities – do not only matter from theoretical perspectives, but from practical aspects as well.

IDENTITIES IN ACTION

The way the past is conceived is crucial for defining and establishing the collective's identity. Therefore, both identity – which is basically 'a sense of sameness over time and space' (Gillis 1994: 3) – and history are often well placed in the eye of the storm of inter-collective relationships, academic discourse, or both. The past of a certain collective – constituted and defined by members who view themselves as belonging to the same nation, country, social group, etc. – is, I argue, a rich repository of people, events and processes that can basically be approached in three ways. First, by means of an academic approach, which strives to be objective and employs methodological tools, historical evidence and common sense in order to interpret, explain and understand. Second, a consciously selective approach often taken by groups within the collective in an attempt to promote preferred values, agendas and interests. Third, employing the first approach to make sense of the second; in other words, attempting to understand why and how a collective grasps and represents its past in a certain way, and what are the related trends, shifts and power struggles involved.

To be sure, all three approaches should not be regarded as flawless or non-controversial. And, to make matters even more complicated in this regard, one should not neglect the existence of private narratives of the past, which either support or challenge the master narrative(s) or simply subsist beside them without taking part, at least in a palpable manner, in the dynamics of collective identity formation.

Several thoughts come to mind when these observations are applied to the theme of the present volume. To begin with, a rich body of literature on Japanese empire-building supports the idea that Japan had systematically constructed and used identity moulds to advance the national cause. Indeed, claims Jennifer Robertson (Chapter 3), the Japanization of Asia was pursued through means that included, for example, education and religion. Yet one more overarching means was employed as well: entertainment. The theatre was thus a highly appreciated site for creating a 'superior us'-'inferior other' dichotomy in the service of the imperialist project. Robertson's emphasis on the role of the Takarazuka theatre 'in creating a vision of a global hierarchy headed by Japan' directs our attention back to Peattie's assertion that Japan's misleading concept about itself and its enemy navigated it towards defeat.

The formation of these perceptions is illuminated by Rotem Kowner's historical analysis of shifts and trends in Japan's treatment of its POWs (Chapter 6). Since Japan for decades continuously shaped and re-shaped images of itself and its enemy, Kowner concludes that among several possible determinants, the variance in the treatment of POWs was mainly the result of interaction between the perceived identity of the enemy and the perceived identity of Japan's reference group. These two determinants, as Kowner points out, are constructs that tend to be detached from reality.

The idea that the gap between reality and images of self and other is in itself a powerful propeller of historical processes is thus highlighted again, and encases a notion regarding yet another peculiar tension. This is the uneasiness that often characterizes the relations between the collective, or the master, narrative and the personal experience. In the course of everyday life there is a memory which is produced and circulated in personal narratives through everyday speech, anecdotes, letters, diaries, etc. It produces a history that is usually 'held to the level of private remembrance' and yet is affected by the dominant historical narrative, which commonly silences it (Popular Memory Group 1982: 210–11). The Japanese-American families that were divided in the Second World War are a case in point. According to Harumi Befu (Chapter 10), pivotal events in the lives of the people involved in this complicated situation were ignored by the master narrative(s) of the war either because they had no relevance to it, or because they had contradicted it. 'Should master narrative not reflect the experiences and voices of the people who make history . . .?', Befu asks rhetorically.

At the same time, the inverse phenomenon occurs when personal experiences are deliberately turned into a master narrative, and the collective is muted. A common notion is that post-war Japan blamed the military leaders for leading the country towards catastrophe (Shillony 1997: 305). This is an act of self-exculpation that is based on distending the role of the individual up to a point where the individual becomes the mover of the collective's history while, at the same time, he is being detached from that collective. As Sigal Ben-Rafael Galanti demonstrates in Chapter 9 by analysing discussions held in the House of Representatives, Japan's elected lawmakers have already established such a master narrative as early as the summer of 1946. Thus, the wall-to-wall agreement on the importance of democratization, argues Ben-Rafael Galanti, by no means reflected a deep self-criticism of the past.

Finally, a unique aspect regarding the role of the personal experience within the collective during a critical moment in Japanese history involves an identity which is not Japanese. It is known that hundreds of Jews took part in the Manhattan Project. Did a Jewish background and Jewish ethics play a role in these scientists 'behaviour and attitude towards the use of the most destructive weapon mankind has ever devised', wonders Meron Medzini (Chapter 8).[2] Apparently, not only is there no evidence for such influence, but given contemporaneous historical conditions, as Medzini suggests, these scientists may even

have 'attempted to downplay their Jewish origins'. Identities are thus formed and come into play through intentional acts of construction and suppression. In the post-war era this selective process of identity formation has become one of the most contentious, and politically and emotionally charged issues for both Japan and its neighbours.

REPERCUSSIONS

One sense in which the Japanese defeat in 1945 was a turning point in the country's history is that it became the prism through which Japanese intellectuals, politicians, writers, artists and others came to examine their nation's history of war and militarism and attempted to understand and define 'Japan'. The endeavour has been contentious, incorporating different ideological views, political interests and artistic styles and influences, and with the changes in times, it has also witnessed shifts and trends accordingly.[3]

Following defeat, the war experience featured prominently in the works of a long line of writers such as Noma Hiroshi, Dazai Osamu, Shimao Toshio, Ōoka Shohei, Ibuse Masuji, the ultranationalist Hayashi Fusao and many others. As both particular and universal values were being explored, some works dealt directly with the war, while in others the history of war and militarism was more an inspiration affecting contents and artistic styles. For example, one dramatic historical event, which kept resonating in the post-war era inspiring many known Japanese writers and film-makers to treat both particular and universal values, was the February 26 Incident. As a phenomenon that reflected, and was part of, global trends during the 1960s-1970s, contends David Goodman (Chapter 5), works about the incident were a contested site for dealing with the idea of 'revolution' and its meanings.

Furthermore, among the writers operating in the three decades that followed the defeat, the one who stood out by earning himself the reputation of being totally committed to his post-war beliefs was Mishima Yukio. Mishima earned this reputation through both his writing and his conduct, and it seems that the February 26 Incident had profoundly influenced him in his later years. According to Goodman (Chapter 5), 'in the last decade of his life the February 26 Incident ran like a leitmotif' through his work, and furthermore, 'the circumstances of the revolt would provide the *mise en scène* for his drama of self-immolation'. On a similar note, Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit (Chapter 4), too, emphasizes that Mishima was an 'extremely self-conscious and analytical artist'. Yet viewed from a different angle, a close look at his works allows Hijiya-Kirschnereit to draw a complex picture of Mishima the writer, and to argue that 'in contrast to many post-war authors, he hardly ever deals with the subject of war' in his literary works. The war in his literature, she contends, matters mainly for its aesthetic aspects – triggering moods and attitudes rather than functioning as an historical event that determines the course of the narrative.

At this stage, by approaching the identity issue from a wider perspective, it may be said that for post-war Japan and its neighbours the history of war, imperialism and colonialism converged with contemporaneous conditions and visions of the future to shape and reshape identities of self and other. As already noted, a dominant Japanese narrative attempts to free the collective from any blame concerning the pre-1945 past. History education in Japan, for example, above all values uncritical conformity (Barnard 2003: 171), as high-school history textbooks 'encode an ideology of irresponsibility' (Barnard 2003: 153). Within this context, irresponsibility has been strongly supported by the notion of victimhood: in a narrative that represents Japan as a victim, there is no place for painful self-contemplation of past wrongdoings, thus no act of assuming responsibility is called for. 'The emphasis on victimhood', writes Roni Sarig (Chapter 11), 'helped create the discourse of universal peace, and of Japan as a peace-loving, pacifistic nation'.[4] This sense of victimhood is anchored in the memory of the atom bombs, and the symbol of this notion has become the young girl Sadako Sasaki. Through the figure of Sadako, as Sarig's comparative analysis demonstrates, a narrative of victimhood became associated with a narrative of heroism that is devoid of violence, and the girl was turned into a myth that although is universal in its essence, is simultaneously a 'part of the controlling discourse in society'.

How, in this dominant narrative, is the image of the main culprit – namely, the military – constructed? In the post-war anti-militaristic environment, asserts Eyal Ben-Ari (Chapter 12), the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) has distanced itself from the Imperial Army and Navy by silencing their deaths and the deaths they caused. Moreover, by way of adopting the cultural script of a 'good' military death as it is found in other advanced democracies, the SDF establishes the armed forces of these democracies as its reference group in the place of its imperial predecessors. 'Good' military death, however, can be understood and represented in other ways as well. In the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, which, too, is considered a site where Japanese historical aggressiveness and war responsibility are effaced (see Takahashi 2008; Breen 2008), all that is associated with death in battle is replaced with a story of 'glorious death' (Takahashi 2008: 116-20). 'Good' military death as represented within the context of Yasukuni Shrine thus takes on a nationalist(ic) meaning which, in turn, challenges the pacifist anti-militaristic framework of the narrative of victimhood and lack of responsibility described heretofore. In short, although responsibility is still denied, the military is no longer the villain.

Yet lack of responsibility is by no means a consensual notion in Japanese society. The issue of history textbooks, for example, has been seriously debated and kept in the spotlight through the famous struggles of the historian Ienaga Saburo and his supporters.[5] Similarly, one recent study argues for strong popular resistance in Japan to the official renouncement of war responsibility (see Saaler 2005: 124-70). Finally,

there is a broader debate in this regard – a debate related to the 'normalization' of Japan.

The discourse of servicemen on the normalization of the SDF (Ben-Ari, Chapter 12), demonstrates the context in which the issue of Japan's normalization is commonly discussed, namely, the context of the country's international security policy. To be sure, this context frames domestic debates concerning the definition and roles of the SDF, and the revision of the constitution. Yet, as Mariko Tsujita points out (Chapter 13), 'normalization' is also a process by which Japan revives and re-cherishes its traditions, accepting them 'as integral to its identity'. This demonstrates an effort to revise the 'one-way road of growth and development', which Japan has taken following the trauma of the war. However, given also the existence, if not the rise, of nationalistic sentiments in Japan, Tsujita identifies a fragile balance between normalization and these sentiments. The collapse of this balance, she warns, 'might lead to the post-modern democratic totalitarian state'.

Among Japan's neighbours there also are fears concerning the meaning and the consequences of 'Japan's normalization'. In China, for example, some interpret Japan's normalization as being 'closely associated with the re-emergence of extreme militarism', while others assert that it is linked to a kind of nationalism that enables Japan to whitewash its history of the war (Katsumata and Li 2008). Moreover, in both China and South Korea demonstrators and the governments occasionally protest against what they perceive as signs of self-exoneration and the rise of nationalism in Japan. Such acts derive from candid viewpoints and from truly painful memories, yet they are not always devoid of political interests. As I argue in Chapter 14, a process of identity formation through the construction of a master narrative that refers to victimhood and that heavily relies on the idea of struggle and valour has taken place in post-colonial South Korea. Most importantly, the theme of Japanese colonial brutality has been used not only to define a post-colonial identity in the context of South Korea's relations with its former colonizer, but also under the conditions of both post-war inter-Korean relations and domestic developments.

FINAL REMARKS

Gaps between reality – or, sometimes, between an honest and brave attempt to remain close to reality – and constructed images of self and others, take part in shaping history. Thus, to analyse how collectives define themselves and their others, why they choose certain ways do so, which techniques are employed in the process, and what challenges the master narratives face, is to shed light on historical events and processes. In short, understanding identities is an essential facet in the historical enquiry. What follows aims to underscore that views, interpretations and representations of Japan's history of war and militarism – although they should not be regarded as a single causal factor – have been central

to the social, political and cultural developments that have taken place in both Japan and its neighbours. There is nothing to suggest that this will not continue to be the case in the decades to come. Finally, by raising the above points and thus explicating the format of the present volume, I intend to emphasize the rich terrain where history meets identity, a terrain that the following chapters form. It is my hope that this rich terrain will also inspire the reader to come up with yet more related observations.

NOTES

* I thank Shakhar Rahav for his careful reading of an earlier version of this chapter.

[1] For a commonly cited work on this incident, see Shillony (1973).

[2] Two Jewish scientists mentioned by Medzini – Lise Meitner and Otto Frisch – played a leading role in the actual identification of nuclear fission. During the 1930s, co-discoverers of nuclear fission, German chemists Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann, collaborated with Meitner. In 1938, she escaped from Germany to Sweden, yet Hahn and Strassmann continued to consult with her. In January 1939, after Meitner had consulted the physicist Frisch, her nephew, the two concluded that Hahn and Strassmann had indeed succeeded in splitting the atom (Kort 2007: 15).

[3] For an illuminating discussion on these developments, see Lida (2002).

[4] In *The Legacy of Hiroshima: Its Past, our Future* Shohno Naomi contends: 'We must discard absolute values regarding the nation, revise our ethical principles, and build a truly humane world order' (1986: 132).

[5] For a recent comprehensive work on Ienaga, see Yoshiko (2008).