

A K I K O H A S H I M O T O

The

LONG DEFEAT

CULTURAL TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND
IDENTITY IN JAPAN



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*Cultural Trauma, Memory,
and Identity in Japan*

Akiko Hashimoto

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Acknowledgments

This book is a result of my longtime interest in the defeated nations of World War II. As an adolescent moving with my family, I shuttled between the cultures of both the losers and the winners—Japan, England, and Germany—and could not help but notice how “the war” seemed to influence the way people carried themselves. Many questions stayed with me from that time, and this book is part of my attempt to answer them.

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THE LONG DEFEAT

Cultural Memory in a Fallen Nation

Growing up in Tokyo in the 1960s, my daily trip home from grade school took me through a crowded walkway at Shinjuku station bustling with small shops and kiosks. It was a long, busy passageway that connected a new subway line and a suburban line at one of the largest commuter hubs of the city. Sometime in the early 1960s, this walkway came to be lined everyday with amputated middle-aged men wearing tattered cotton military uniforms that revealed conspicuously their missing arms, artificial legs, glass eyes, and other disfigurements. Some would sit still on the ground or keep their heads bowed—motionless as commuters hurried by. Others played melancholy, amateurish tunes on a harmonica or an accordion. It took some time for me as a child to realize these men were there to collect money from the passersby, and that their war misery was on display, in a sense, for that purpose. These traces of war were easy to find when we children looked around and paid attention. Sometimes we saw them in plain view, like the panhandling veterans. Other times we caught or overheard woeful stories in family conversations—air raids endured, properties destroyed, relatives lost. As children we did not know how the Asia-Pacific War came about, or what exactly to make of it, but we understood that it was the single most destructive ordeal that the adults had experienced. Something dreadful had happened. Early images and perceptions like these would ultimately color our understanding of the war as a national trauma.

How do memories of national trauma remain so relevant to culture and society long after the event? Why do the memories of difficult experiences endure, and even intensify, despite people's impulse to avoid remembering dreadful pasts and to move on? This book explores

these questions by examining Japan's culture of defeat up to the present day. I survey the stakes of war memory after the defeat in World War II and show how and why defeat has become an indelible part of Japan's national collective life, especially in recent decades. I probe into the heart of the war memories that lie at the root of the current disputes and escalating frictions in East Asia that have come to be known collectively as Japan's "history problem."

Memories of difficult experiences like war and defeat endure for many reasons: the nation's trajectory may change profoundly, as it did when Japan surrendered sovereignty in 1945; collective life must be regenerated from a catastrophic national fall; and losers face the predicament of living with a discredited, tainted past. In this process, the vanquished mobilize new and revised narratives to explain grievous national failures, mourn the dead, redirect blame, and recover from the burdens of stigma and guilt.¹ The task of making a coherent story for the vanquished is at the same time a project of repairing the moral backbone of a broken society. This precarious project lies at the heart of Japan's culture of defeat, a painful probe into the meaning of being Japanese. Understanding this project is crucial for assessing Japan's choices—*nationalism*, *pacifism*, or *reconciliationism*—to address the national and international tensions it faces today.

The influence of defeat on Japan's postwar culture has been immense, long-lasting, and complicated.² Japan lost sovereignty after surrendering in 1945, and it was occupied for seven years by the winners, who imposed radical reforms in nearly all aspects of society from governance and law, to economy and education. Japan's perpetrator guilt in the war was defined explicitly at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials (1946–1948), which indicted Japan's military leadership for committing crimes against peace and other violations of war conventions. At the same time, the tribunal and numerous other war crimes trials in Asia overlooked the possible guilt of many others in the military, bureaucracy, government, business, and—controversially—the Emperor. Since then, long-standing fissures have emerged within Japanese society over who was responsible for the war and who was guilty. These fissures continue today. Underlying the fissures are two fundamental questions: *Why did we fight an unwinnable war? Why did they kill and die for a lost cause?* In answering these questions, people bring different narratives to bear, debate different rational positions, and opt for different solutions; but ultimately, the answers are formed by personal and political reactions to the memories of massive failure, injustice, and suffering. At the heart of these debates are concerns not only about war responsibility but also about national belonging, the

relations between the individual and the state, and relations between the living and the dead.

Japan's war memory is one of the most crucial issues of the global memory culture on wars and atrocities that has surged since the 1990s. There are many volatile, unresolved issues: the territorial disputes with China, Korea, and Russia;³ the treatment of war guilt and war criminals at commemorations ("the Yasukuni problem");⁴ and the claims for compensation and apology by wartime forced laborers, forced sex workers ("comfort women"),⁵ and prisoners of war (POWs). Conflicting memories of the troubled past that underlie them also fuel Japan's national controversies—called the "historical consciousness problem" (*rekishi ninshiki mondai*). Far from arriving at a national consensus after seventy years, the cleavage separating different war memories and historical claims deepened in the 1990s with many disputes: the mandate to use patriotic symbols (the national flag and anthem)⁶ and inculcating patriotism in schools; the treatment of Japan's atrocities (e.g., the Nanjing massacre) in textbooks and popular culture;⁷ and the claims for compensation and health care by the victims of air raids and atomic bombings.⁸ These issues continue to test the core of Japan's postwar identity and culminate today in the critical question of remilitarization, altering the pacifist constitution that has anchored national life since 1947.

The difficulty of coming to terms with national trauma is known to many national cultures that have been transformed by memories of catastrophic military failure: examples include postwar Germany and Turkey, post-Algerian War France, and post-Civil War and post-Vietnam America.⁹ Facing the challenges of culpability for death, violence, and loss, some nations have responded by mythologizing the lost cause as in the post-Civil War American South;¹⁰ some by martyring the dead soldiers as in post-World War I Germany;¹¹ while others have chosen to focus on recovery through radical reform, as in post-Ottoman Turkey.¹² Research suggests that nations suffering the crisis of defeat or conquest respond with persistent attempts to overcome humiliation and disgrace, although they differ in approach. This book surveys Japan's case after World War II, building on German historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch's work *Culture of Defeat*.¹³

By tracing the many ways in which the vanquished recount their war memories to postwar generations, I move beyond established methods that focus on formal policies and speeches and instead examine the textures of historical and moral understanding in the everyday life of the broader postwar culture. I survey the narratives of war that circulate in families, popular media, and schools to

assess how people have come to terms with the difficult national legacy of trauma, loss, guilt, and shame. I focus mainly on the decades between 1985 and 2015, when war memory took a transnational and global turn. My analysis finds that Japan's war memories are not only deeply encoded in the everyday culture but are also much more varied than the single, caricatured image of "amnesia" depicted by Western media. I suggest that there is no "collective" memory in Japan; rather, multiple memories of war and defeat with different moral frames coexist and vie for legitimacy. I make this case by identifying different trauma narratives that emerged for different social groups with diverse political interests. I then extend this inquiry to probe how negative memory influences and motivates postwar national identity.

Cultural Trauma, Memory, and National Identity

Maurice Halbwachs suggested that collective memory is always selective according to different conditions of remembering the past.¹⁴ Memories are not fixed or immutable but are representations of reality that are subjectively constructed to fit the present. The struggle for control over memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay between social, political, and cultural interests and values in particular present conditions. Memories of wars, massacres, atrocities, invasions, and other instances of mass violence and death become significant referents for subsequent collective life when people choose to make them especially relevant to who they are and what it means to be a member of that society. Some events become more significant than others because we manage to make them more consequential in later years to better understand ourselves and our society. Jeffrey Alexander has called this process "cultural trauma," which occurs "when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."¹⁵ The horrendous event emerges as a significant referent in the collective consciousness, not because it is in some way naturally ineffaceable but because it generates a structure of discourse that normalizes it in collective life over time.¹⁶ In the process, the memory of the event is made culturally relevant, remembered as an overwhelmingly damaging and problematic collective experience and incorporated, along with all of its attendant negative emotions, as part of collective identity.¹⁷

Those persistent negative emotions are the most powerful motivator of moral conduct and are critical for understanding how cultural trauma is regenerated over time.¹⁸ Cultures remembering negative historical events are driven to *overcome* the emotions and sentiments that accompany them. Those sentiments have been continually reinscribed in memory and passed on to successive generations. They include the desire to repair a damaged reputation; the aspiration to recover respect in the eyes of the world; the wish to mourn losses and recover from censure; the longing to find meaning and dignity in the face of failure; the hope to shield family and relatives from recrimination; and the urge to minimize the event or pretend it never happened. Satisfying these yearnings and hopes is a long, ongoing project not only to refashion memories but also to mend a broken society. In this recovery project, memories are realigned and reproduced—to heal, bring justice, and regain moral status in the world—with varying degrees of success. Understanding this repair project is crucial to explaining the persistence of the cultural trauma, the culture of defeat, and also Japan’s “history problem.”

Today we live in an emerging “culture of memory” where remembering the national past has become vitally relevant for living in the present.¹⁹ Oral history movements, new museum and memorial constructions, and political movements to right past wrongs have proliferated around the world especially since the 1980s. They are all examples of a trend in which remembering the past has become a crucial experience for forging collective identity.²⁰ The 1990s through the 2010s—the period covered in this book—has also been a crucial time for Japan to look anew into the national past to envision its future. This has reignited past political feuds and old controversies over how to narrate national history, and reawakened the public consciousness that continues unabated through today. The post–World War II generation, now two-thirds of the population, has entered the fray as new stakeholders to play their roles in framing the national script. The different positions of the generations have meant that people bring more diverse motivations to reframe the history of the lost war. At the same time, rapidly changing geopolitics has brought new uncertainties about unresolved war issues vis-à-vis Japan’s Asian neighbors, such as the spiraling lawsuits filed against Japan for compensation claims, demands for apology,²¹ and the contested descriptions of events in history textbooks. These issues and others refueled since the 1980s prefigured Japan’s history problem, the ramifications of which underlie and aggravate many of Japan’s most vexing challenges in its international relations today: the rising popular antagonism toward

Japan in East Asia; the increasingly provocative territorial skirmishes with China, South Korea, and Russia; and the persistent belligerence from North Korea.

The culture of memory arises at a significant time of growing awareness that historical knowledge is neither fixed nor uniform. Universal claims for truth are increasingly suspect for many in late modernity, posing challenges to the act of framing a national metanarrative. There is increasing recognition that historical representations have become subjective, political projects in this search for usable pasts.²² It seems no longer possible today to produce a single, definitive public history shared commonly and objectively within and among nations.²³ This poses a special challenge in East Asian societies like Japan where legitimate and valid knowledge of national history has heretofore been centralized by the state.²⁴ In a post–Cold War world that requires a broader reorganization of knowledge, the contradiction between the historical relativism that has emerged in the global arena on the one hand, and, on the other, the goal of official history which is to inculcate a particular truth has become increasingly acute.²⁵ In these times of flux, it is not surprising that Japan has seen a surge of acrimonious disputes and, indeed, a rise in neonationalism among those who perceive global change as threatening to their self-identity.

Contentions over war memory across the East Asia region strike at the core of Japan's project to recover its moral foothold in the long wake of its calamitous defeat. Several issues stand out as particularly inflammable: the redress for wartime sexual forced labor ("comfort women"); the culpability for brutal massacres (especially the Nanjing massacre); and the attempts to rehabilitate the perpetrators and war criminals as martyrs (the Yasukuni Shrine). Predictably, this type of project is fraught with deep fissures among stakeholders who embrace diverse perspectives and goals. The carriers of memory—Japanese intellectuals, educators, politicians, lawyers, commentators, media critics, activists, and others who retell the past—assign different meanings to the national fall, complicating the prospect of forging a unified national metanarrative.

My analysis of the deep fissures in Japan's postwar memory builds on German sociologist Bernhard Giesen's typologies that illuminate the different constructions of trauma narratives in civil society.²⁶ I propose that there are three categories of conflicting trauma narratives vying for moral superiority within the complex landscape of cultural memory in Japan. They are different in how much they emphasize human failures and how they depict the moral character of *heroes*, *victims*, and *perpetrators* of the war. They are also different in how they