What Difference Did the War Make to Japanese Nationalism?

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Japanese nationalism was widely blamed as the explanation for and cause of the war in the Pacific, in a way that does not apply to Germany and the war in Europe. Notions of German nationalism were significantly qualified by the idea that Hitler as a monstrous individual and the Nazi Party as an evil group, rather than all Germans or German society broadly, were responsible for the war. But in Japan there was no party or group that could be identified as the source of militarism, other than the military itself. Hirohito as emperor and Tōjō as prime minister were reviled by Japan's enemies, but they were not seen as the equivalent of Hitler or Mussolini as leaders. After the war ended, politicians and the public in some countries feared a resurgence of Japanese nationalism, probably more than a resurgence of German nationalism was feared in Europe: the forces which were blamed for nationalism in Germany, that is, Hitler and the Nazi Party, had been destroyed, but in Japan some of them continued in power, including Hirohito, who remained on the throne. Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines remained explicitly concerned about a resurgence of Japanese nationalism well after 1945. Britain and the US were far removed from the Pacific and preoccupied with their own regions. China and Korea were immersed in civil war, while Indonesians felt in some degree positively towards Japan because of its contribution to struggles for independence from the Dutch. For a number of years, politicians and the press in Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines continued to voice concern that Japanese militarists were just waiting for their chance to come back. The assumption was that nothing much had changed about Japanese nationalism; only external factors would keep it at bay.

In reality, however, the war changed Japanese nationalism radically. In this paper I address the question of what did change. I define nationalism simply as discourses that give primacy to the nation above any other form of collective identity. I identify three major strands in pre-war discourses of nationalism, and trace what happened to them, in order to assess the effect on them of the Second World War.

1. Japan as a 'Great Nation'

The idea that Japan was a 'great nation' was elaborated from about 1890 onwards.[1] It was a counterpoint to earlier concerns about Japan's weakness and vulnerability in the face of Western imperialism, and it continued to develop despite residual insecurities of various kinds. It was evident in the press, in political pronouncements, in self-presentation at museums and in industrial expositions, and in substantial written works by Japanese intellectuals. It called attention to Japan's rapid modernisation, establishment of the first parliament and constitution in Asia, unusual status as an independent Asian nation rather than a European colony, victory over China in war in the mid-

[1] See Sandra Wilson, "The Discourse of National Greatness in Japan, 1890–1919," *Japanese Studies* 25, no. 1 (May 2005): 35–51.

1890s and over Russia ten years later, status as a victor nation in the First World War, and acquisition of Taiwan as a colony in 1895 and of Korea in 1910. In the 1930s the idea of national greatness was joined by a public elaboration of the idea that Japan had a unique national essence (*kokutai*). This was a supremely vague doctrine, but it basically claimed an unmatched connection between the people and the state, usually through devotion to the emperor, and therefore a unique national identity. By the late 1930s the discourse of Japan as the great nation had expanded to the point where the nation-state was portrayed as the natural leader of Asia and the necessary agent to conquer European imperialism in the region.

The old discourse of national greatness was fatally undermined by defeat in war. In the circumstances of 1945, with people hungry, cities in ruins, the military defeated, and about 2.7 million servicemen and civilians dead, or 3–4% of the 1941 population,[2] it was impossible to claim that Japan was a great nation. Not only that, but Japan had lost its empire overnight, and was itself under occupation by foreign powers. General Douglas MacArthur told the press in September 1945 that 'Confinement of Japan to the four main home islands would prevent the reconstitution of the nation as a leading world power,' adding that 'Japan would be reduced to a fourth-rate nation.'[3] In May 1951 he told a joint session of the US Senate that if Anglo-Saxons, including the recently defeated Germans, were considered in terms of their development as a race to be the equivalent of a 45-year-old person, then the Japanese would be 'like a boy of twelve.'[4] These remarks were very much taken to heart in Japan, and are still remembered today.

Not everything about the old discourse of the great nation was abandoned. Most fundamentally, the idea of nation itself survived. The nation was still a very real presence in people's lives. Everyone had in common the recent experience of a long and terrible war. In wartime more than any other time, nationalism had become everyone's business. It had not been possible to ignore the things that were done and the sacrifices that were called for in the name of the nation, and after defeat, these habitual categories of thought were not easily abandoned.[5] Now, with Japan under occupation by foreign troops for the first time in its history, and with privation and poverty still a daily experience, questions about what sort of a nation Japan was and what its future role could be continued to have an immediacy that would be lost in more normal times. Moreover, occupied Japan still was a unified nation, unlike Germany and Austria, which had been partitioned by the victorious Allies. In Japan as elsewhere, leftover wartime issues also presented constant reminders of common membership of the nation: the return of Japanese servicemen and civilians stranded overseas, for instance, remained a political and social issue for years after the end of the war. One of the most striking things about nationalist discourses in the first years of the Occupation is that they survived in such recognisable form. The terrible experience of war did not lead to any widespread rejection of the idea of the nation-state or of the key concepts associated with it. Most commentators implicitly accepted that the nation would and should continue to be the primary unit of organisation, and energetically set about

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2 John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York, W.W. Norton/New Press, 1999), p. 45.

3 "Japan Will Be Fourth-Rate Power—General MacArthur," *Argus* (Melbourne), 13 September 1945, p. 20.

4 Quoted in Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 550.

5 On this point see ibid., ch. 5 and Oguma Eiji, *'Minshu' to aikoku: Sengo Nihon no nashonzarizumu to kōkyōsei* (Tokyo, Shin'yōsha, 2002), ch. 2, 3.

to redefine and refashion the idea of the Japanese nation, of national mission and of the Japanese ethnic group.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, there was confusion about what Japan's role in the world should be, and whether it was right or permissible to be patriotic or not, and if it was permissible, what it would mean to be patriotic in the post-war world. Again, habitual categories of thought were not easily abandoned. It is often stated that Japan took on the role of the model of pacifism, finding its identity in rejecting war and embracing peace. But although the highbrow journals began to espouse this idea straight away, the grassroots pacifist movement did not get going until well after the end of the Occupation, and in any case, pacifism was not universally embraced. In 1948 about 500 young, mostly rural women working at cotton spinning mills responded to a survey. 22% of the respondents actually favoured another war, because they saw it as the best way to restore Japan to the powerful position it had enjoyed in the past, but had since lost.[6]

Effect of the Korean War

But by the time the Occupation ended in 1952, the dominant discourses about Japan's role in the world and what sort of nation it should be were much more settled than they had been in the early years after defeat. The major reason for this was the Korean War of 1950–52. The literature on Japan and the Korean War establishes several things: the crucial economic boost provided by the war, the impetus to an early peace settlement, and the alteration in the relationship between the Japanese government and the Occupation authorities as the Americans became more involved in events in Korea than in Japan. In addition, however, the Korean War played a crucial role in clarifying questions about Japan's post-war identity and role. For a start, it resolved any lingering tensions within the Occupation machinery and authorities in Washington about what should happen in Japan. Briefly, the disagreement between those who wanted fundamental reform in Japan and those who wanted to incorporate Japan immediately into the non-Communist camp, and therefore were prepared to scale back reform, was resolved in favour of the latter.

Within Japan itself, three effects of the Korean War on discourses of nation can be identified. First, it legitimised the Occupation, and eventually, the military alliance signed in 1952 with the United States, because it seemed obvious that Japan's region was a dangerous place and that Japan needed the United States as a powerful ally. So the possibilities for Japan's future role were significantly reduced: criticism of the US alliance was greatly undermined. Ultimately, any frustration and discontent with the Occupation were defused, and 'the Occupation came to be seen as necessary'.[7] Second, the Korean War cast doubt upon a connection that had come to seem automatic—the equation between pacifism and prosperity. It had appeared as though prosperity required peace and that war brought ruin, at least to Japan. Though Japan did not fight in this new war, it was heavily involved as a supplier of goods and services, and it was evident from the start that the war was providing substantial stimulus to Japan's struggling economy: in Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru's famous phrase, the war was the 'gift from the gods.' So war did not have to make you poor. This was pointed out very clearly by a young farmer

[6] "Heiwa no tame no kyōiku: Zadankai," *Sekai*, no. 43 (July 1949): 35–36.

[7] Comment by Iguchi Takeo, in William F. Nimmo, ed., *The Occupation of Japan: The Impact of the Korean War* (General Douglas MacArthur Foundation, 1990), pp. 24–25.

in Nagano Prefecture, who said in 1952: 'America blew up power stations in Korea and the price for this year's spring silkworms was good. I wonder if they'd do it again when the summer silkworms are ready?'[8] Third, the Korean War placed discussions of Japanese national identity unequivocally in an international context. Now, the broadest international issues were seen as critical for Japan. In public debate there was still confusion about what Japan's new role in the world could or should be, but at the same time there was a new appreciation from the early 1950s onwards that it could only be understood in a wider context. It might have been partly a matter of pride. No longer international outcasts, the Japanese people were now necessary to the United States and the so-called 'free world'.[9]

At the same time, growing awareness of the implications of the Cold War brought many new questions about what might happen in a third world war, which seemed a real possibility, and what exactly a constitutional peace clause meant in practice. Discussions of national identity over the next few years were marked by a distinct sense of Japan's vulnerability in the face of these new conditions, but also by an acknowledgement that Japan's role in the world could not be understood outside the framework of the Cold War. The Cold War continued to provide one of the main anchors of perceived national identity until it ended in 1989, and the debate about national identity after 1989 in some ways resembles the early post-war period with its confusion and lack of certainty.

National Identity

Expansionist versions of Japanese culture evaporated after 1945, and very rapidly, Japanese culture began to be constructed as a matter of blood ties and common language. At the same time, this version of Japanese culture was projected backwards, so that memories of the more inclusive, pre-war versions of Japanese identity, which had accommodated the idea that Chinese and Koreans could and should become 'Japanese', were quickly forgotten.[10] One residual element of the discourse about Japan as a great nation, however, was the attachment to the idea of a national essence. Hardly anyone any longer believed in the old rhetoric of *kokutai*, but many commentators felt there must still be some sort of a 'national essence', and showed a continuing propensity to believe that the Japanese were a completely distinct ethnic group. There was also a continuing interest in patriotism and loyalty, but confusion about where such feelings ought to be directed, now that the old targets, like the state and the emperor, were damaged or less credible. As one academic asserted, all peoples needed a sense of continuity, or they died out. Formerly the Japanese self-image had been based on military activity, and now there had to be something else to replace that, he believed. No-one could quite decide what should take its place, and his only suggestion in this particular press discussion was that perhaps the Japanese could base a new morality around their national attachment to miso soup.[11] Ultimately, the lack of other credible symbols and targets of national loyalty may have paved the way for the rise of *Nihonjinron*, or theories of the Japanese as a unique people, which were such a feature of standard

8 "Sōsenkyo no shiori sono ni: Nōson no seinen wa nani o kangaeteiruka," *Shūkan asahi*, vol. 57 (7 September 1952), p. 6.

9 John Bowen, *The Gift of the Gods: the Impact of the Korean War on Japan* (Norfork, VA: Old Dominion Graphics Consultants, 1984), p. 3.

10 Oguma Eiji, *Tan'itsu minzoku shinwa no kigen: 'Nihonjin' no jigazō no keifu* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 1995).

11 Nakaya Ukichirō, in "Nihon no bakkubōn: Nihon no atarashii aikoku dokuritsu no seishin wa nanika (zadankai)," *Bungei shunju*, vol. 29 (March 1951): 45, 54.

nationalist discourses from about the 1970s onwards.[12] The rise of Japan as an economic superpower after the late 1960s also enabled the return of a new version of the discourse of Japan as a great nation, a discourse that had been notably absent since Japan's defeat in 1945.

2. The Military as Representative of National Values

A second strand of the dominant version of pre-war nationalism was the idea that the military best represented Japan's national values. Military success was very important to mainstream Japanese self-images from the 1890s onwards. Not only had Japan beaten China and Russia by 1905, but it had also had a positive and profitable experience on the Allied side in the First World War.[13] Japan was formally allied with Britain but did almost no fighting. On the other hand it profited by trading with Asian nations that were cut off from their European imperial masters from 1914 to 1918, expanded its own imperialist privileges in China while the European powers were otherwise occupied, and sat as a victor at Versailles. Of all the major nations, Japan alone went in to the 1930s with a positive assessment of war as a national instrument, because only Japan (and perhaps America to some extent) had such a minimal sense of the costs of the First World War. The huge costs of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, moreover, were long since forgotten.

The Japanese military was thoroughly discredited by defeat in the Second World War, at least at first. Returning soldiers were heckled and treated with disgust. It was not just that they had lost the war: by 1946, the Japanese public had begun to find out about atrocities in China and Southeast Asia, and often assumed that returning veterans must have done terrible things.[14] No-one any longer wanted to argue that the military represented the national virtues. But change was evident by the early 1950s.[15] Former members of both the army and the navy resumed activity in politics at local, regional and national levels. Some were elected to the national parliament with record numbers of votes. Former colonel Tsuji Masanobu, architect of the 1942 Japanese conquest of Singapore, was elected to the Diet in 1952 and again in 1953, 1955 and 1958, with large numbers of votes. Other prominent military men followed him into politics. The apparent electoral appeal of candidates who were former military officers does not mean that the public was militarist. The ex-soldier candidates usually took care to distance themselves from pre-war jingoism, concentrating instead on 'restoring traditional national virtues, pride in one's country, and respect for established social patterns.'[16] Many emphasised democracy and people's rights for good measure. What seems to have attracted voters is the former military men's continuity with the past, and their perceived embodiment of admirable personal qualities. Although voters may have despised the actions of the old military as a whole, they

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12 Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of* Nihonjinron (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001), ch. 5.

13 Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914–1919* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999).

14 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, pp. 58–61.

15 This section draws on Sandra Wilson, "War, Soldier and Nation in 1950s Japan," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2008): 187–218.

16 Ivan Morris, *Nationalism and the Right Wing in Japan: a Study of Post-War Trends* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 230.

trusted some former soldiers as individuals. Certain military men still appeared to represent qualities such as sacrifice, loyalty and bravery, and these remained important values in the 1950s, in Japan as elsewhere. In fact it is hardly surprising. If military men had vacated politics, their absence would have left a considerable void, in terms of people with experience of politics and of leadership. Military men still represented leadership and service as few others did, and such perceptions did not vanish overnight.

There are also other indications that attitudes to the military changed in the 1950s. An ex-servicemen's association was formed in 1956, with a stated initial membership of over 800,000. Its inauguration ceremony began with a requiem service for the war dead. By 1958 the reorganised association, with membership over one million, was one of the biggest political pressure groups in Japan, agitating on matters like pensions for former soldiers and revision of the 1946 constitution to allow for military action.[17] Blockbuster movies about the war appeared and were seen by very large audiences. People wanted to see movies about the war for much the same reasons as they did in other countries: because they were exciting and spectacular, and presented dashing leading men. The large audiences for war films also offer evidence that nostalgia for the war was already manifest in the 1950s. Social researchers noted that viewers applauded when kamikaze pilots appeared, urging them on to hit their targets. They also applauded just at the sound of certain words not heard since the end of the war, like '*Zerosen*' (the Zero fighter).[18] Two very popular movies were made in the 1950s about Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, architect of both Pearl Harbor and the Battle of Midway[19] (and two more have been made since). Yamamoto was a particularly good candidate for a popular treatment of the war. It was well known that he had advised against going to war with the US, so he was not stupid, and he was not a warmonger; but once the war started, he fought bravely and well, so he was patriotic; and he was fortuitously shot down by the Americans in an ambush in 1943, so he did not have to face a war crimes trial. Attitudes to convicted war criminals, too, were changing by the early 1950s. Although all war crimes suspects had initially been despised, there was a growing tendency to separate out the trials of major leaders, the Tokyo trials, from the much more numerous trials of ordinary Japanese soldiers which had taken place all over Asia and the Pacific in the post-war years. By 1952, a major public campaign had begun on behalf of ordinary soldiers convicted by the Allied powers, to get them sent back to Japan if they were still in foreign jails, and eventually to get them released from prison. The basic contention of participants in this campaign was that ordinary soldiers, in contrast with political and military leaders, had simply been doing their jobs in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and should not be punished further.[20]

None of this means, however, that any mainstream nationalist discourses advocated returning the military to a central place in perceptions of Japanese identity. People elected military men to

[17] Ibid., pp. 238–40, 243; "Ikiteiru rōhei" (cover story), *Shūkan asahi*, 16 December 1956, pp. 6–7; "Zadankai: Sayonara 1958 nen: Kotoshi wa konna toshi deshita . . .," *Shūkan asahi*, 28 December 1958, p. 34.

[18] "Sensō eiga to taishū," *Shūkan asahi*, 26 July 1953, p. 14; "Eiga 'Nihon kaku tatakaeri' o mite," *Shūkan asahi*, 16 September 1956, pp. 4–5.

[19] *Taiheiyō no washi*, dir. Honda Ishirō, 1953; *Gunshin Yamamoto gensui to Rengō kantai*, dir. Tazaki Jun, 1957.

[20] Sandra Wilson, "The Shifting Politics of Guilt: the Campaign for the Release of Japanese War Criminals," in *The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia: De-imperialization, Postwar Legitimation and Imperial Afterlife*, eds. Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 87–106.

politics for their personal qualities, which they had proved in war, and when that generation passed, no equivalent people took their place. Audiences watched war movies because they were nostalgic about a past experience, not because they wanted to resurrect a Japanese empire. In fact, viewers often commented that the movies had reminded them how horrible war was. People campaigned for convicted war criminals because they thought they were getting a rough deal. Once the war criminals were released from prison, they were largely forgotten. Article 9 of the Japanese constitution technically forbids Japan to go to war or even to maintain a military. This constitution was written secretly by the American occupiers and forced on Japanese politicians, but the majority of the Japanese public has become very attached to it. Even those who do want to change Article 9 are usually motivated by a desire to enable the Japanese military to take part in peace-keeping operations like the military forces of most other advanced countries.[21]

3. Faith in the Japanese State

Defeat in the Second World War drastically undermined people's faith in the Japanese state as representative of the nation. The state had got the people into a terrible war and had been responsible for defeat as well, and then had been unable to forestall foreign occupation and the loss of Okinawa to American administration. In many people's eyes, the Japanese state was more or less a failure. Ever since the middle of the 19th century, the state had been the major agent of nationalist discourses in Japan, and it is very difficult at any time in the next few decades to identify the points of separation between conceptions of nation and conceptions of state. Perhaps it is in the immediate post-war period that nationalist discourses came closest to separating nation and state, with continuing faith in the idea of a distinct ethnic identity but great loss of faith in the state as its representative.

The prestige of the state took another major blow in 1960, with the massive civil campaign against the renewal of Japan's security treaty with the United States.[22] Only after that did the public renovation of the state begin. Economic growth was one of the main drivers. Macroeconomic growth was a 'national project' in Japan, as Scott O'Bryan has pointed out. It required national leadership and in turn it strengthened national leadership. Major policies, including the income-doubling plan announced by Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato in 1960, required intervention by the central state in regional economies, and were successful. However uneven its effects, economic growth was evident to everyone by the 1960s, and most people approved of it and associated it, correctly, with the central state.[23] Not to be underestimated, also, is the role of public spectacle. The Japanese government staged a very successful Olympic Games in 1964, which was followed six years later by Expo '70 in Osaka. They were the most self-conscious displays of 'nation' in Japan since the Second World War. The great majority of Japanese households watched the opening ceremony and other popular parts

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[21] Keiichi Tsunekawa, "Dependent Nationalism in Contemporary Japan and its Implications for the Regional Order in the Asia Pacific," Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Working Paper No. 133 (August 2006).

[22] George R. Packard II, *Protest in Tokyo: the Security Treaty Crisis of 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); Wesley Sasaki-Uemura, *Organizing the Spontaneous: Citizen Protest in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

[23] Scott O'Bryan, *The Growth Idea: Purpose and Prosperity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 178–79.

of the Olympic Games on television, and an astonishing 50% of the population is estimated to have travelled to Osaka to see Expo ’70.[24] These spectacular events helped to rehabilitate the post-war Japanese state, making it seem as though the state was good for something after all. It became easier to see it as a benign entity dedicated to the people’s welfare and the national interest, rather than a coercive entity that sent people to war and then signed them up to dangerous military agreements afterwards.

War and defeat changed Japanese nationalism. The discourse of the great nation was radically challenged, and did not return until the 1970s. When it did reappear, it was based on economic success and presumed ethnic homogeneity; very few claims were made to power on the world stage. Though military men returned to national life, the military path to national identity was unequivocally closed, and has never again been advocated in any serious way. Faith in the state was badly dented. Subsequent events, especially the Security Treaty crisis of 1960, exacerbated the perceived gap between state and nation, and it took 20 years for the state to re-establish its credibility with the Japanese people.

[24] Christopher Brasher, *Tokyo 1964: A Diary of the XVIIIth Olympiad* (London: Paul, 1964), p. 17; H. Katō, “Japan,” in *Television: An International History*, ed. Anthony Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 295; Kobayashi Kazuo, “Tōkyō Orinpikku,” in *Sengoshi daijiten*, eds. Sasaki Takeshi et al. (Tokyo, Sanseidō, 1991), p. 651; Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945–70* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 143; Handō Kazutoshi, *Shōwashi: Sengohen 1945–89* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2006), p. 523; Yoshimi Shun’ya, *Banpaku gensō: Sengo seiji no jubaku* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2005), p. 84.