2,466,000 Noble Souls: Yasukuni as War Memorial

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Introduction

Founded in the year following the Meiji Restoration, Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo’s Chiyoda Ward has come to symbolize for many both what is right and what is wrong about Japan’s vision of its place in the world. This has lead inevitably to the politicization of many aspects of the shrine and practices that relate to it. Most familiar of these are the visits to the shrine of Japanese Prime Ministers and the enshrine-ment of war-dead, including convicted war criminals. These issues engender strong reaction from far and wide.

While nominally a shrine, Yasukuni functions more as a war memo-rial, and focusing on this, I will contrast its history and function with those of war memorials in other countries. More specifically, I will ex-plore these questions: What is the main function of a war memorial? Is Yasukuni functionally distinct from war memorials in other coun-tries? What does it share, and what distinguishes it from, for exam-ple, Arlington National Cemetery, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or the Cenotaph in London? Can we make a meaningful distinction be-tween war graves in Flanders and Yasukuni? And where, among all these questions, do the feelings of the relatives of the fallen come in? Finally, can a religious institution, namely a shrine, be separated
from a war memorial when both exist in the same physical space? Before considering the situation as it pertains to Yasukuni, we must consider what indeed a war memorial is, and this requires some consideration of the history of war memorials and indeed, the history of modern warfare itself.

**War Memorials: A Brief History**

In a sense, war memorials have existed for thousands of years. Egyptian pharaohs and ancient Greeks built obelisks and columns to commemorate military victories. Trajan's column in Rome glorifies that emperor's victories in Romania, and Mayan stelae in Palenque and Tikal celebrate victories in long-forgotten wars. Statues of kings, generals and emperors are war memorials of sorts, but they celebrate the individual or the battle rather than all the soldiers who gave their lives. Most of them might better be described as monuments rather than memorials. According to Mosse, the modern concept of the war memorial began with the French Revolution, wherein for the first time, armies consisted of significant numbers of volunteers. Prior to that time, armies were largely comprised of mercenaries, vassals, or conscripts press-ganged into service. With volunteer armies came the idea of fighting for a nation rather than for an individual ruler or for money, and out of respect for this idealism came the sense of obligation to those who had fallen in battle. Out of this sense of obligation, and perhaps also out of a sense of shame in following the tradition of letting dogs and vultures deal with the remains of the fallen, the military cemetery came into being.
Mosse traces the development of cemeteries and memorials through the 19th century CE, and while trends and styles are expressed in different ways in different countries, that need not concern us here. What is important is that there seemed to be a universal response toward the commemoration of war dead across Europe. According to Mosse, nations create a generic fictional account of wars in order to mask the unacceptable horror of accurate recollection. He sees the First World War as being instrumental in amplifying this fiction to mythic proportions.

From its beginning in the summer of 1914 to the armistice in November of 1918, 8,500,000 soldiers died. This was more than the aggregate combat deaths in all previous major wars back as far as the Napoleonic Wars. In France alone, 1,300,000 are estimated to have died. To put this number in perspective, an average of more than 850 French soldiers died each day of the conflict. This is almost three times the rate of US combat deaths in World War II. The scale of death meant that the number of bereaved was enormous. Almost every family had lost a father, son, husband, brother, or friend. Concomitant with overwhelming grief was perhaps a natural questioning of the justification of the war and its motivation. Indeed, perhaps there also existed a doubt about the viability of the nation state itself. The scale of death and destruction on all sides was horrendous, but perhaps these doubts were particularly acute in the defeated nations.

How is a nation to deal with this grief and self-doubt? According to Mosse, war memorials became ubiquitous features across Europe in
the propagation of 'the Myth of the War Experience.' Memorials and cemeteries helped to enforce a collective memory of the war, which in turn provided social cohesion. The grief of individual families was transformed into the grief of the nation. Did the grief drive the myth, or was the myth instrumental in directing and controlling the grief? Mosse would suggest the latter; for as Connerton points out, the creation of a collective national memory is as much a political process as a social one.

How was this myth created? First, there was the scale of memorial and cemetery construction. Memorials were built in most communities, even in small villages, and the sheer area occupied by military cemeteries had never been seen before. Second, in a break from previous practice, the names of individual soldiers—all of those who could be identified—were inscribed on memorials and grave crosses, and recorded in honor-rolls. Until this war, individual soldiers had only been commemorated in this way for valor or some other exceptional conduct, but now, participation alone guaranteed commemoration. However, this new individuality in death was diminished and the community of the dead emphasized by an overwhelming uniformity in the style of inscription. On any particular memorial, names were inscribed in small letters of uniform height regardless of rank. Row upon row of identical white crosses were laid out in military cemeteries; again, small in scale and simple. There was a democratization in death that supported the idea that the family’s loss was indeed the nation–family’s loss. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this notion were the tombs of unknown soldiers that appeared at this time.
The very lack of an identity allowed all to claim the unknown soldier as a brother, son, or husband. As Clark states, war memorials are a way of nationalizing very personal forms of grief.

Essential to the ‘Myth of the War experience,’ in Mosse’s analysis is something he refers to as ‘the Cult of the Fallen Soldier.’ The soldier is portrayed as a heroic figure often expressed in classical form and accompanied with a religious motif such as a crucifix or pieta, or the fallen soldier in the arms of Christ. By controlling the images associated with war, governments can influence the way in which wars are remembered. This is important, not only for the reasons of social cohesion mentioned above, but also because the nation must make the sacrifice meaningful. Implicit in this, of course, is the notion that the sacrifice might be requested again. Barthel describes this as a pact between the dead, the living, and the unborn.

It appears then that a war memorial has two main functions. The first is to act as a focus for the expression of personal and collective grief. The second is as a device for deflecting grief, anger, or other negative (from a nationalist point of view) emotions and transforming them into a memory of war experience that supports a nationalistic ideology.

**Yasukuni: The First Modern War Memorial**

Yasukuni shares many of the above functions, and its broad mechanism for implementing them is similar in many respects to the war memorials that appeared in Europe following World War I. First,
Yasukuni is constructed on an epic scale: it sits on top of Kudan hill, close to the Imperial Palace, occupying a large area in central Tokyo. The approach to the shrine is through the largest torii in the country. Second, the equality and uniformity in death is maintained. There are no statues to heroes at Yasukuni. Similar to the row upon row of simple grave markers in European military cemeteries, names of the dead are recorded on simple lists. Furthermore, a certain anonymity is maintained through the sheer number of them. Ceremony and pageantry also find points in common between European war memorials and Yasukuni. Armistice Day, November 11, marks the day on which veterans, politicians, and other mourners visit war memorials in Europe and its former colonies. August 15 has the same significance in Japan. Finally, in the same way that large war memorials such as the cenotaph in London are duplicated in miniature in tens of thousands of villages throughout Europe, Yasukuni is mirrored by affiliate Defense of the Nation Shrines at the prefectural level, and chukonhi stone markers, at the local level in Japan.

In certain ways Yasukuni appears to be an extreme example of Mosse’s myth. Whereas in Europe the myth appears to have emerged in full following, and in response to, the First World War; in Japan, it seems to have been an instrument of Meiji ideology from the first. The myth was invigorated perhaps by the Russo-Japanese war, in which more than 80,000 Japanese died, and by the end of the Pacific War, it had become a central feature of propaganda designed to maintain morale in the face of defeat. In the case of Europe, it is difficult to say whether or not the Myth of the War Experience was a willful
exercise in propaganda from the first, or an example of governments taking advantage of a phenomenon that arose naturally and spontaneously out of a massive outpouring of public grief. Quite probably, elements of both explanations are valid. In Japan, by contrast, it seems that the Myth of the War Experience was deliberately created, maintained, and promoted by the authorities.

**War Memorials and Historiography**

Since the Second World War, war memorials have increasingly begun to augment the traditional functions discussed above with attempts at direct and overt expressions of what constitutes official history. These expressions are most commonly seen in the form of a museum attached to the memorial. The origins of these museums are often explained in terms of the wishes of soldiers. The Official Australian War Historian of the First World War, Charles Bean, felt that the inclusion of a collection of relics was important to the understanding of wartime experience:

> It had always been in the mind of many Australians soldiers that records and relics of their fighting would be preserved in some institutions in Australia, and to several of us it had seemed that a museum housing these would form the most natural, interesting, and inspiring memorial to those who fell.

The selection and presentation of such relics in museums, whether attached to war memorials or not, is an unavoidably political act, the exercise of which contributes to a particular view of history. That such
selection and presentation can cause controversy is hardly surprising. A notable example is the controversy surrounding the exhibition of the Enola Gay at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC in 1995. The initial exhibition was to have featured a comprehensive view of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. It would have portrayed the experience of Japanese victims of the bombing as well as the technical achievements and furtherance of Japan's rapid capitulation. Groups of US veterans and their relatives objected to the inclusion of a Japanese point of view as a distraction and insult to those US forces members who had taken part. In the end, the exhibit was reduced in scope and the fuselage of the Enola Gay exhibited essentially without historical comment: a victory of commemoration over history.

Yasukuni and its attached museum, Yushukan, leave no ambiguity about which version of history they wish to portray. The following passage from Yasukuni's website sums up its political stance quite clearly:

*War is truly sorrowful. Yet to maintain the independence and peace of the nation and for the prosperity of all of Asia, Japan was forced into conflict. The precious lives that were lost in these incidents and wars are worshiped as the Kami (Deities) of Yasukuni Jinja.*

*Allow me to say a little about the Greater East Asian War that ended 50 years ago. When the American forces invaded Okinawa*
they were met by soldiers of Japan, among whom were also intermediate school students. To protect their native Okinawa some 1,600 male intermediate school students fought side by side with soldiers of Japan as the Tekketsu Kinno Tai. They came from 9 schools in Okinawa that included the Okinawa Normal School, the First Prefectural Intermediate School and the Second Prefectural Intermediate School.

In addition, the Himeyuri Butai and the Shiraume Butai composed of some 460 female students coming from seven schools including the First Prefectural Women’s High School, Second Prefectural Women’s High School, and Shuri Women’s High School. These students served as nurses at the front lines. They moved through the battlefields carrying food and ammunition. Nearly all these students perished in the Battle of Okinawa. Now resting in peace, they are enshrined in Yasukuni Jinja.

Some 1,500 peoples lost their lives when the Tsushima Maru, a transport ship, was torpedoed and sunk by an enemy submarine while transporting evacuees from Okinawa to Kagoshima. Included among them were 700 elementary school students.

There were also a large number of students who had lost their lives in air raids on the factories that they worked in. Due to the war, these students postponed their studies to help with manufacturing work.

On August 20, 1945, despite the end of the war, Soviet troops sud-
denly invaded the territory of Japan. Under siege, a female telephone operator in Maoka of Karafuto (Sakhalin) ended her report: “Everyone, this is our last and final transmission. Goodbye to you all.” Shortly thereafter the female operators took their own lives.

Among the Kami of Yasukuni Jinja are military nurses who in their Red Cross insignia uniforms worked gallantly in the face of air raids on the homeland to save the wounded. They were “the mothers and sisters of the battlefield.” In addition, the workers on the military transport ships who perished as their ships carrying supplies to the South Pacific were sent to the bottom of the seas, the military correspondents and cameramen felled by enemy fire while working at the front—they are noble souls who offered their lives for their motherland. They are revered as the Kami of Yasukuni Jinja.

Moreover, there were those who gave up their lives after the end of the Great East Asian War, taking upon themselves the responsibility for the war. There were also 1,068 “Martyrs of Showa” who were cruelly and unjustly tried as war criminals by a sham–like tribunal of the Allied forces (United States, England, the Netherlands, China and others). These martyrs are also the Kami of Yasukuni Jinja.

Apart from the references to the vulnerable: students, girls, evacuees, telephone operators, mothers, sisters, correspondents and photographers; and apart from the noble acts: nursing, carrying food, even
suicide; this reference is notable for what is not mentioned: slave labor, comfort women, chemical and biological experiments on humans, and genocide. It is difficult to view this as anything but the glorification of war.

The essential thesis in *Fallen Soldiers* is that the commemoration of the fallen through rites and ceremonies on certain special anniversaries amounts to a secular religion that at the least transforms and ameliorates the collective memory of the horror of war and potentially glorifies it. Taking on the attributes of a religion means that history becomes a matter of doctrine and faith and is insulated from doubt and inspection. Commemoration as religious practice is particularly significant in Japan when commemoration itself takes place in a religious context—namely a shrine.

The commemoration also becomes problematic in Japan’s case in view of its surrender and the subsequent trial and conviction of political and military leaders for war crimes. In 1978, 14 class A war criminals, including the executed wartime leader Tojo Hideki, were enshrined at Yasukuni. How is it possible to transform such commemoration into something that speaks positively to Japan’s past? The conventional view of history after all is that of the victors; the leadership of Japan was taken over by a small unrepresentative group of militarians, who then led the country in perpetrating an aggressive war upon its neighbors, which led to untold suffering at home. In recent years however there has been an increasingly visible shift in the interpretation of these ‘historical facts.’ One way that Yasukuni and the
attached Yushukan attempt this is to classify the Tokyo War Crimes Trials as nothing more than victor's justice. This reinterpretation suggests that Yasukuni is performing a secular rather than religious function.

Conclusion

Yasukuni Shrine and the attached Yushukan demonstrate many parallels with European war memorials. Moreover, Yasukuni predates the modern European war memorial by 50 years. Yasukuni of course also functions as a shrine, but this function would appear to be secondary, or more cynically, a way to cloak and protect its political function. Yasukuni is conveniently a private religious institution, thus engendering two advantages: first, as a religious institution, it is protected by Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution; second, as a private institution, the government has no power to dictate to the shrine. Thus, Yasukuni's private religious status suggests that it is unlikely to be replaced as Japan's de facto main war memorial by Chidorigafuchi or other secular memorial.

Notes

1) Mosse (1990, 15-19)
2) I was tempted to write Europe and North America. While Mosse does touch on memorials in the USA, in particular with reference to the Park Cemetery movement, his book is overwhelmingly Eurocentric, with its focus firmly fixed on Germany and France.
3) Connerton (1989, 1)
4) Clark (1997, 118)
5) It is interesting to consider this control of the imagery of war by government. One reason for the unpopularity of the Vietnam War and the rise of the at-
tendant anti-war movement was the graphic and sometimes horrific images of that war that were wildly published. Contrast that with the control over the images from the current US action in Iraq, where initially, only embedded journalists were able to accompany the military, and where images of coffins and body bags have been strictly censored.

6) Barthel (1996, 80)
7) Field (1991, 120)
8) Bean (1948, 5)
10) http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/
11) Mosse (1990)

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