Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Next Page: Conflicted memory over Japan in World War II

In a new book, Akiko Hashimoto explores Japan's struggle to understand WWII and chart a new course

December 20, 2015 12:00 AM



By Akiko Hashimoto

Seventy years after the end of World War II, coming to terms with the trauma remains a protracted, painful process.

For those who grew up in Tokyo in the 1960s, as I did, traces of the war were easy to find when we looked around and paid attention. Sometimes, we saw them in plain public view — panhandling veterans with tattered uniforms, missing arms, artificial legs, glass eyes and other disfigurements.

At other times, we heard or overheard woeful stories in family conversations — air raids endured, property destroyed and relatives lost. As children, we did not know how the war came about. Nor did we know what exactly to make of it, but we understood that it was the most destructive ordeal that adults had experienced. Something dreadful had happened. Early images and perceptions such as these ultimately would color our understanding of the war as a national trauma.

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 noticing how "the war" seemed to influence the way people carried themselves. Many questions stayed with me from that time, and my new book, "The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory and Identity in Japan," is part of my attempt to answer them.

•

We can see the effects of the national trauma of defeat in many cultures.

Postwar Germany and Turkey, post-Algerian War France and the post-Civil War and post-Vietnam United States all have been transformed by memories of catastrophic military failure.

Facing the challenges of culpability for death, violence and defeat, some nations have responded by mythologizing the lost cause, such as in the post-Civil War American South, or by treating fallen soldiers as martyrs, as in post-World War I Germany. Others have chosen to focus on recovery through radical reform, as in post-Ottoman Turkey. 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.

My book surveys Japan's case after WWII. It is about coming to terms with mass death, suffering and injustice and about redefining national identity.

In East Asia today, memories of the war and its atrocities have become crucial, contentious issues, especially in geopolitical relations involving Japan, the Koreas and China. My book explores the divisive war memories that lie at the root of these nations' intense disputes on remilitarization, reconciliation and surging nationalism, all of which have escalated frictions over the unfinished business of the war and contributed to Japan's "history problem."

War memories in Japan are deeply encoded in everyday culture, and they are also much more varied than the single, caricatured image of Japan's "amnesia" depicted by Western media. In fact, the culture of defeat in Japan embraces diverse trauma narratives — of heroes, victims, and perpetrators — that serve to explain grievous national failures, mourn the dead, redirect blame and recover from the burdens of stigma and guilt. Making a coherent story of defeat is at the same time a project of repairing the moral backbone of a broken society.

In Japan today, the question of how to overcome defeat lies directly at the root of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's brazen push to revise the role of the military — elevating the Self Defense Forces to a full military — and related protest movements. Many current political problems, including the deteriorating geopolitical relations with China and the Koreas, are fueled by the contentious meanings of defeat that remain unresolved.

The current political contention over war memory across East Asia is grimly complicated by longstanding divisions in Japan's project to recover its moral footing in the aftermath of imperial incursions in China and Korea. Several issues stand out today as particularly inflammatory: the redress for wartime forced sexual labor ("comfort women"); the culpability for brutal massacres (especially the Nanjing Massacre); the attempts to rehabilitate the perpetrators and war criminals as martyrs (Yasukuni Shrine); and the territorial disputes over the border islands. The issues are fraught with deep conflict among stakeholders not only internationally, but also nationally.

•

Moving beyond this 70th anniversary, former adversaries of the Asia-Pacific War face crucial choices for the future of the East Asia region. The mounting tension centered on war memory politics today among Japan, China and the

Koreas is not only about righting past wrongs but also about jockeying for position in the shifting geopolitics owing largely to the rise of China and the continuing belligerence of North Korea. In this context, Japan faces diverging choices for national policy and moral purpose in moving forward: nationalism, pacifism or reconciliation.

Japan's widely reported struggle today over remilitarization is fought precisely by these nationalists, pacifists and reconciliationists whose divergent understandings of Japan's war and defeat exactly parallel the three war trauma narratives discussed in this essay. For the nationalists — who tend to espouse the heroic narrative of the lost war — the most direct route to overcome the trauma of defeat is to reinterpret or revise Japan's "Peace Constitution," strengthen Japan's military and become a power to be reckoned with in the world.

For the pacifists — who tend to emphasize the victim narrative of annihilation — the most effective pathway to overcome defeat is to uphold anti-militarism, preserve the Peace Constitution and strengthen Japan's anti-nuclear influence worldwide. Finally, for the reconciliationists — who tend to embrace the perpetrator narrative of the war — the most appropriate approach to move beyond defeat is to promote diplomatic resolutions and strengthen relationships with inherited enemies in East Asia, to foster trust and overcome the vicious cycles of resentment.

We can better understand the proponents of these three ways forward by recognizing that, for many Japanese, the debate also is about defining the humiliating legacy of our fathers and grandfathers — their mistakes and failures. War memories, like mine, ultimately are family memories, and the questions are personal: What did our fathers and grandfathers do during the war? Did they act honorably at their time of reckoning? Do we portray them as innocent or guilty? Do we protect or incriminate our own family members? We can better understand the emotional import of the cycles of resentment by taking account of family memories.

It behooves us to remember that in a global culture, national memories of war no longer are self-contained, and forgetting is no longer an option. The new international world order demands imaginative concessions and innovative compromise to break the logjams of historical grievances.

Akiko Hashimoto (ahash@pitt.edu) taught cultural, comparative and global sociology at the University of Pittsburgh for 25 years. She has lived and studied in Japan, Germany, England and the United States and has a longstanding interest in the different ways people identify with their cultures and histories. She currently is visiting professor at Portland State University and a faculty fellow at the Yale University Center for Cultural Sociology. "The Long Defeat" was published by Oxford University Press.

http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2015/12/20/The-Next-Page-Conflicted-memory-Akiko-Hashimoto-book-explores-Japan-s-struggle-to-understand-WWII-chart-a-new-course/stories/201512200011