

***Kioku: An Analysis on How the Memory of World War II Remains Influencing  
Social and Political Aspects in Japan \****

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**Abstract**

On 15 August 1945, the Japanese people listened on the radio, through the words of Emperor Hirohito himself, the unconditional surrender of their country. The World War II (WWII) was then coming to an end at the Pacific theater. However, the end of the war created fertile soil for various memories about the conflicts that happened in the region between 1894 and 1945. The complex framework of Japanese memories became a big ideological conflict inside and outside Japan. Its effects are currently characterized by two points: the differences between the appropriation of facts; and the link between past and present. Currently, it is possible to observe such appropriations in various aspects. Memory was, from the immediate end of the war until the present moment, a determinant of Japanese politics. The main factors of influence by this memory are the complex variety of ideologies between identity groups formed inside the country and the memory representations by its neighboring countries about the WWII. Therefore, this research aims to analyze how, nowadays, the continued transmission of those war memories indicates that a final reconciliation among Japan and its neighbors, about the WWII, is still far from being reached. This objective passes through the analysis of the relation between memory and history, the analysis of WWII events, the framework of memories inside Japan and regionally, also the overview of the current ideological conflict and the attempt of pointing to a way of getting closure on the matter.

Keywords: Memory; War; Japan; Politics; Society; Ideology; World War II

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## **Introduction**

The WWII had an official end in 1945. However, the memory of the war's events has been, from the immediate end of the conflict until the present moment, a determinant of many political and social interactions. Germany and Japan, as the main aggressors of the war, remained afterwards as the actors whom generated most of the traumatic memories and should mandatorily perform atonement policies.

Germany officially addressed memory issues many times and made the historical burden a little lighter for the country. One of the most famous cases related to the memories of war and apologies happened in 1970, when the West Germany chancellor knelt before the monument marking the Warsaw Ghetto. After the symbolic act by Willy Brandt before the marks of the holocaust and the Jewish people, the position of regret by Germany became concrete for the entire world. According to Resende and Budryte (2013), "it's not surprising, then, that images of Willy Brandt's kniefall have had a major political impact. Because of its visual power, the apology received immediate media attention across Europe, and indeed the world." (p. 55)

Japan on the other hand never openly addressed the memory issues. Several reparations were paid over the years and many speeches on the matter were made, but the government never presented an official positioning on the war memories related to the country. Every day the news shows that war memory is very present in Asia. A number of articles and new developments happen on the daily basis, showing the importance of the subject for the Japanese society and also for its neighboring countries.

During the last months, the visit by the US president, Barak Obama, to Hiroshima created a wave of demonstrations and opinions on the memory of the atomic bombing of Japan. Also, the recent talks between Japan and the Republic of Korea also brought to the table a fresh debate on the solution of the "comfort women" issue, between those favorable to an agreement and those who believe that the issue is far from an end. Cultural productions on the matter are also very common and their releases keep the memory of Japanese acts during the war alive. Inside Japan, issues related to Japanese war dead and the domestic consequences of war also feed the permanence of these memories as causes for a permanent ideological conflict.

The permanent remembrance of WWII events brings the past to the present and constantly affects this present with the past. This presence of the past is the key for most of the existent political obstacles, especially in Japan. Therefore an analysis of the relation among memory, the region's history and the present consequences of this relation is vital for a better understanding of the situation in Asia.

## **Memory and History**

According to Rousso (1996), memory is the presence of the past. Le Goff (1994) also defines memory as the very origin of History, as it serves the present and the future, saving the past. The importance of memory for the historical and historiographic processes is the connection between remembrance and the very historical event.

Violent events, as conflicts between countries, are always important sources for

several memories; and these memories are determinant factors for social, political and economic positions taken during the following decades.

It is important, however, to highlight the issues related to the study of memory: memory's capacity of adapting; memory's characteristic of being produced in the present; and the oblivion. Memory is always adapted according to the point of view and ideology of its narrator. The production of any kind of memory is also always connected to the time when its narrator lives, always a present time, which influences directly its narrative. Another issue that makes the historiographic work based on memories very complicated is the phenomenon of the oblivion, because everyone can be subject of forgetting details about events.

These challenges of studying the memory of events connect this subject directly to a very specific field. Memory is one of the greatest themes of the History of the Present, considering that the present is basically the time when these memories are formed and reproduced, a time of memory. Events from the past become present events through memory.

The History of Present, therefore, works on the analysis of how past makes itself present in current societies. According to Bédarida (1996), this field of historiography aims to understand the present through the past and the past through the present.

However, the complexity of a relation between past and present lays on a complexity related to memory that goes beyond the challenges already quoted. Memory is always fragmented in several different understandings, according to the events that gave origin to this personal remembrances. The WWII was a very fertile soil for a great number of different memories and it is vital to know some of these turning points to understand how they influenced what we can call a patchwork of memories.

## **World War II**

The official beginning of war in Asia happened in 1937. However, the instability and the conflicts that took Asian countries to the so-called Pacific War started 44 years earlier, in 1894. Japanese imperialism, as it was by the end of the war in 1945, was then the main reason for the crisis.

The first conflict at the region, from which the violence escalated, was the Sino-Japanese War, in 1894. In 1904, 10 years later, happened also the Russo-Japanese War. By the end of this second war, Japan and China signed the Shimonoseki Treaty that took to the annexation of Korea in 1910.

After the Word War I, Japan joined the League of Nations as one of the war winners. However, the policies against imperialistic aggressions adopted by the League were not positive for the Japanese militaristic position at the time. Therefore, Japan left the League in 1923, after a military joint assumed and gained power at the government of the country.

In 1931, Japan invaded for the first time the region of Manchuria, North of China. The first invasion of the Chinese territory marked the beginning of a new imperialist wave by Japan over Asian countries. Following the similar policies adopted in Europe by

Germany and Italy, Japan joined the Axis in 1936 and invaded Manchuria definitively in 1937. The alignment and the acts of aggression were considered official acts of war.

Differently from its official and small territory, Japan expanded and dominated most of Eastern Asia during the war. In 1940, French Indochina and neighboring countries were invaded. The Japanese expansion created a deep concern by Western powers that followed the developments in Europe and then started to see the same happening in Asia. Therefore, Western powers, mainly the US, imposed economic embargoes to Japan in 1941.

In the same year, Japan attacked the North-American military base of Pearl Harbor, as a demonstration of power. The US entered the war right after the attack.

During the year of 1942, Japan continued the territorial expansion and invaded the Gilbert Islands, Philippines, Mariana Islands, Borneo, Thailand, Hong Kong, Manila, Papua New Guinea, Singapore e Sumatra. In the same year, the territories of Australia, Sri Lanka and Canada were not invaded, but suffered Japanese attacks. At the same time, the Allied forces advanced and landed in Guadalcanal.

After two years of embargo, the Japanese empire found itself in a deep crisis. The strategy to keep the the Japanese advance over Asia was discussed during the Greater Eastern Asian Conference, in 1943. However, the Allies continued to advance over the territories invaded by Japan.

In 1945, the US forces landed in Japanese territory. The invasion of Japanese territory was the final stage of the Japanese defeat. The violent clashes in Okinawa showed how weakened were the Japanese troops. Even though, in the same year the US forces performed the first atomic bombing of human history in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The atomic bombings gave no options to the Japanese empire but the unconditional surrender, announced on the radio by the Emperor Hirohito himself.

After the end of the WWII, the trauma caused by its events was inevitable. The Japanese population, right after the war, could be defined as a population obligated to embrace defeat and recover a country unstable and destroyed by the Allied advance. (Dower, 2000) At the same time, the neighboring countries were deeply marked by the Japanese advance over the region.

### **A Thousand Memories**

The French opinion on the heroic aspect of the Resistance and the disdain by Koreans about compatriots dead fighting for Japanese forces, as well as the German alleged lack of knowledge on the holocaust and the Japanese vision of noble fight for Asian prosperity during the war, are parts of the great patchwork of memories related to the WWII. All the intense experiences brought by the war were the main cause for the formation of a number of different interpretations. Several groups of memory were born inside and outside Japan, all of them presenting different objectives and positions.

According to Seraphim, the memory inside Japan, from a public point of view, the so called unofficial memory, was created under the historical circumstances of the post-war. A number of groups were formed immediately after the war and some of them are very active until the present days. Some of these groups are: the Association of Shinto Shrines, the Japan Association of War-bereaved Families, the Japan Teachers' Union, the Japan-China Friendship Association, Japan Memorial Society for the Students Killed in the War. These were the first associations to create an effective selection of memorable facts, forming identity groups inside the post-war society. (2008, p. 16)

After the first post-war decades, the new generations brought the concern of keeping alive the memory of the war, connecting past and present over and over again. These memories, kept alive by these groups over the years, became legitimate motivations and a base of arguments for political achievements. (Seraphim, 2008, p. 37)

At the same time, the Japanese government had the necessity of creating an official version of the war memory. The official memory was established in Japan after the end of the US occupation, from 1960, following a liberal line and aiming to unify the population under a new national unity. This variation of memory created an unquestionable version of "produced amnesia." (Dower, 2000)

The recovering and growth of Japan gave strength to a new nationalist speech. During the 70s' the support to a great Japan were reborn and a war memory "erasing" the Japanese role at the conflict gained power.

This change was fundamental for a wave of complaints from another memory groups. Outside Japan, many groups of memory were also created. Countries like China, Korea (both, North and Southern territories), Philippines etc. were direct victims of the Japanese actions during the war and the memories formed inside these countries were also very strong.

The neighboring memories about the war also had origin in several events of the conflict. During the war, the Japanese troops were responsible for acts considered as war crimes, sexual slavery, local population exploration and cultural imposition. This foreign variation of war memory became one of the most evident aspects of the Asian war memory internationally.

### **A Current Conflict**

The activity of the different memory groups and the variation of interpretations brought the war to the present. Therefore, ideologically, the WWII never had an end in Asia.

Currently, four main topics are fundamental for this ideological conflict: the Yasukuni Shrine, the Japanese History Textbooks, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese government's position.

Yasukuni Shrine was created during the Meiji Era as a memorial for all the people who died fighting for Japan. After the war a number of Japanese military were considered war criminals according to the so called Tokyo Trials, however their names were enshrined at Yasukuni.

The polemic around Yasukuni assumes different aspects inside and outside Japan. Inside Japan, the shrine represents for part of the population the honor of the country and, at the same time, for another group the place represents the sadness of war. Outside the country, Yasukuni represents the terrible years of aggression and a tribute to those countries tormentors.

Japanese textbooks are also a polemical subject. Memory groups are always contesting the content of such books, with the accusation of transmitting a wrong version of the war history. The books bring a resumed version of facts, excluding the Japanese crimes most of the time.

The polemic around the textbooks is mainly related to the neighboring countries in Asia that demands a better transmission of information about the tragedies of war.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is one of the most discussed topic around the world. Inside Japan, this topic divides the society between pacifists and nationalists. The Japanese positioning as an aggressor that caused the war and the final catastrophe of it goes against the interpretation of Japan as a victim of the US criminal bombing.

Lastly, the Japanese government position is also a polemical matter towards the country's international relations. Controversial remarks by Japanese politicians, as acts related to war events or visits to Yasukuni, cause enormous dissatisfaction by neighboring countries and pacifist groups. At the same time, the government also disappoints great part of the Japanese population with atonement policies.

Consequences of this conflict are clearly seen inside Japanese politics, international news and even on international politics. For the last 15 years, Japan had a total of 8 prime ministers. The popularity of Japanese politicians is affected by war memory issues.

Japan is also constantly attacked at international arenas because of war memory clashes. The attempts to reform the United Nations Security Council are a clear example for this conflict, considering that China always blocks Japanese aspirations to a permanent seat in the Council. The arguments are always related to the behavior of Japan during the war.

## **How to Get Closure?**

One of the most difficult, although important, questions is how to give an end to this war memory conflict. As the memory debates go on, war memory is transmitted and the cycle of hate goes on.

The last months were marked by an increase of hate speech occurrence in Japan, racist signs were always common in China and provoking outdoors were allocated in front of the Japanese embassy, in Seoul, Korea.

There are two hypothetical situations to be considered for a possible closure driven by Japan. One considering a complete apologize and a second when Japan completely ignores the current issues and moves on without apologizing. These situations generate a number of questions.

If Japan makes everything possible to apologize for its acts of war, just like Germany did especially from the 70s`:

- Will the victims (the so-called comfort women, neighboring populations etc.) be satisfied?
- Will the Japanese population support the government?
- Will this ideological conflict be over?

If Japan does not make an effort in apologizing and moves on:

- Will the acts of war, crimes and policies be forgotten some day?
- Will the country assume a new nationalist and military rise?
- Will this ideological conflict be over?

These questions, for both situations, have the same negative answers.

## **Conclusion**

Memory and history keep the past alive, especially in places that suffered with violent conflicts. This war memory causes constant clashes between groups all over the world, especially in Asia.

The Japanese actions during the war marked the population of its neighboring countries and also the Japanese population. The last seven decades represented a constant clash between different memories about the first half of the XX century.

The Asian war memory about WWII became a Godzilla over the years and we are far from finding a hero to kill the monster.

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