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## Between Guilt and Shame: German and Japanese Memories of War\*

Very often, when I tell German people about my interest in how Germans remember the war, compared to the Japanese, the reaction goes something like this: "We are of course quite different from the Japanese. We have coped with our past; we have done *Trauerarbeit*; they have forgotten all about it."

There are times I think this is right. In Berlin, for example, in the summer of 1990, I saw an announcement in the newspaper about a lecture by Margarete Mitscherlich to be held at the *Jüdisches Gemeindehaus* about »Erinnerungsarbeit — zur Psychoanalyse der Unfähigkeit zu trauern". I thought it would be easy to get a seat. The opposite turned out to be true. Not only could I not get a seat. There was a queue halfway to the Ku'damm. It was almost like a pop concert, this talk about collective *trauern*. Such a scene would be unthinkable in Tokyo.

I can also make another comparison between Germany and Japan which would seem to confirm the German capacity to mourn and the Japanese problem with their past. It has much to do with mourning, in fact. In November 1988, the president of the *Bundestag*, Philipp Jenninger, commemorated the anniversary of the *Reichskristallnacht* in what appears now a perfectly rational historical way. But so sensitive were many Germans, especially on the left, to the conservative incapacity to mourn that Jenninger was roundly condemned. He was insensitive, he was not unambiguous enough in his condemnation of the past, in short, he did not mourn enough. He lost the support even of his own party. He had to resign.

One month later, that same year, the mayor of Nagasaki, Mr. Hitoshi Motoshima, was asked a simple question by a city councillor, who was a member of the communist party. The question was whether emperor Hirohito had had any responsibility for Japan's war in Asia. This was both a pertinent and a highly sensitive question at the time, since the emperor was lying on his deathbed. Motoshima, like Jenninger, a conservative politician, answered that after much reflection, he had to conclude that the emperor did indeed bear some responsibility for the war. And in a

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press conference, he added that if only the emperor had ended the war sooner, both Hiroshima and Nagasaki would have been spared their fates.

The consequences of his statement were no less dramatic than what had happened to Jenninger. Several conservative associations of which Motoshima was a prominent member threw him out. The Liberal Democratic Party, which has governed Japan almost without interruption since 1945, and which backed Motoshima for office, asked him to withdraw his statement, and, when he refused, disowned him. Groups of extreme right-wingers issued death-threats. A year later the threat was actually carried out: Motoshima was shot in the back and barely survived.

In both the Jenninger and the Motoshima case, taboos were breached. Jenninger groped for historical explanations for Nazi atrocities, explanations which appeared like justifications; Motoshima challenged the innocence of the emperor, a dangerous thing to do, since this challenged one of the most important institutions to survive the war. What is interesting is how the liberal intelligentsia reacted to the two cases. In Germany, both *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit* condemned Jenninger and once again chastised Germans for insufficient *Trauerarbeit* and reflection about the past. In Japan the intellectuals remained silent, and much of the press muttered about the mayor's tactlessness and lack of timing, (Jenninger was accused of this, too, of course.) The issue of free speech was barely mentioned and the lack of Japanese historical introspection not really at all.

Many ordinary Japanese citizens, however — housewives, peace activists, army veterans, students, etc. — did react, in personal letters of support to the mayor himself and in the letter columns of major newspapers, such as the *Asahi Shimbun*.

Which brings me to my point. Have the Germans really faced their past any better than the Japanese, and, if so, are there cultural or political reasons for it? It is sometimes suggested that the different responses to their respective pasts, in Germany and Japan, are due to a basic cultural difference. Germany, so one is told, is a Christian culture, and thus a guilt culture. The descendants of Luther and the Pietists feel a need for confession to exculpate their sins. Indeed, confession might actually make people feel slightly superior — more moral for having sinned and then owned up to it.

The Confucianist Japanese, on the other hand, do not feel the eyes of God so much as the eyes of their neighbours. They belong, so it is said, to a shame culture. As long as one's sins are not exposed, there is no need to feel guilty. This is true of the nation as well as of individuals who identify with it: why bring on shame by confessions; it is far better to remain silent. Indeed, by speaking too openly, as Motoshima — a Christian, by the way - did, you bring shame upon others.

It all seems to fit perfectly — too perfectly. For what about the fact that during the first decade after the war, few Germans felt any urge to confess; they too kept quiet and wished to forget. It was the generation of '68 that began to ask awkward questions. The same was true to some extent in Japan, where the student rebels of the 1960s saw the sins of their fathers reenacted by the Americans in Vietnam.

In any case, what about the many ordinary Japanese who were glad that Motoshima spoke out and voiced their support for him? What about the old soldiers who are now emerging to tell their stories of atrocities committed in China, so that young people won't forget? Too late, perhaps, but still, if shame had been all-important, they would not have spoken at all. In fact, shame and guilt are not easy to disentangle. It is partly shame after all, national shame, which keeps generations of Germans busily doing their *Trauerarbeit*, lest other countries accuse them of being soft on the Nazi past. Among many differences between Germany and Japan is the fact that Germans are scrutinized by the outside world to an extent that is unthinkable in Japan. For one thing, not enough people read Japanese to know what people think over there.

No, I think we must think of other reasons why there is more *Trauerarbeit* in Germany than in Japan, why there are no Japanese Mitscherlichs, or why no Japanese politician has ever gone down on his knees in Nanking, as Brandt did in the former Warsaw ghetto. It is true that Japanese officialdom has done little to mourn the past. It is also the case that Japanese intellectuals have not been inclined to stick their necks out and upset officialdom. This is not because there are no different opinions in Japan about the past. On the contrary, it may be because opinions are so utterly opposed to one another, that there is no room for fruitful debate. In any case I think a cultural inability to feel guilt is not the explanation.

If there is one symbol of mourning the war in Japan, it is not Nanking, or Bataan, and certainly not Pearl Harbour: it is Hiroshima. There are probably more books and movies in Japan on Hiroshima, and to a much lesser extent Nagasaki, than on any other wartime subject. It is the symbol to wipe out all other symbols, the symbol of unique Japanese suffering. Many of these films and books about the nuclear bombings were written and produced by leftists, some of whom had, during the war, made anti-American propaganda for the Japanese army. In both cases the target was pretty much the same: the white American imperialist. And if this sounds odd, there are plenty of examples of this symbiosis between Left and Right in Germany, too. Think of Heiner Müller, quoting with approval from the works of Ernst Jünger and then blaming Auschwitz and Hiroshima on capitalism.

Really, to understand the difference between the Japanese and German

approaches to the past, one must first look at the nature of the past itself. In 1945, the planners of the Tokyo War Crime Tribunal made the big mistake of thinking it could be modelled after the trials in Nuremberg. General Tojo was thought to have been a kind of Hitler; the Nanking Massacre was equated with Auschwitz; and the Japanese generals and politicians were accused of having plotted, Nazi style, to conquer the eastern half of the world.

Reality was a bit different. First of all there was no Nazi Party or its equivalent in Japan, which took power and dictated policy. There was no break in political continuity, comparable to the sudden transition from the Weimar Republic to a gangster regime. Japanese cabinets, filled with grey eminences, came and went. Japanese bureaucrats stayed and Japanese generals, more and more, forced the decisions. They in turn were often pushed along by middle-ranking officers in the field in China and Manchuria. The atrocities committed in China were bad enough: in Nanking alone 200.000 men, women and children might have been brutally murdered. Medical experiments of the most gruesome nature were perpetrated on POWs, Chinese civilians, and others, mostly, but not exclusively in Manchuria. Then there was massive use of slave labour, Korean, Chinese and Southeast Asian, which caused hundreds of thousands of deaths. These facts are known in Japan, but not much discussed, in the media, at schools, or in films and books.

There was, however, never a centrally planned genocide, comparable to the Final Solution. The military atrocities in China and Southeast Asia can be, if not dismissed, at least explained as the unfortunate consequences of war. Every Japanese will readily agree that war is a terrible thing: Nanking, My Lai, Iraq, Hiroshima; all were terrible things; let us pray for world peace. And that is that.

A similar attitude to the Holocaust is impossible in Germany. However much some historians might try to relativize the uniqueness of the Holocaust by shifting it closer to the mainstream of wartime history, this simply cannot be done. The crime was too big, too systematic. It cannot be treated as the inevitable result of war, since it was planned as a kind of parallel war. Auschwitz cannot be confused with, say, the battle of Stalingrad, or the bombing of Dresden.

Nor can the German invasion of its neighbouring countries be seen as a war of liberation, even though it may have been regarded that way by some of the smaller republics in the clutches of Stalin. The Japanese, on the other hand, were attacking, apart from China, European and American colonies and at least in the beginning, their Asian liberationist propaganda was persuasive to many colonial subjects. Again, it is easier in Japan today to muddle the moral issue of having waged an aggressive war

by claiming that, yes, there had been atrocities, but after all, didn't we Japanese also free the Asians from their Western oppressors? And, yes, it may be so that civilians suffered under Japanese attacks, but were not far more Japanese civilians victimized by the American bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Finally, there was the role of the Japanese emperor. Emperor Hirohito might have been divine, but he was not a dictator. There is no evidence that he ever ordered his generals or politicians to follow any particular policy, except possibly once: to surrender in 1945. He certainly was no Adolf Hitler, except in one important respect: his divine presence, which was used to justify every act, however atrocious, that took place in the Japanese war, turned his people into moral cretins, or if you prefer General MacArthur's phrase, 12-year-old children. The Mitscherlichs have described Hitler as "an object on which Germany depended, to which they transferred responsibility, and he was thus an internal object. As such he represented and revived the ideas of omnipotence that we all cherish about ourselves from infancy." If true, the same could be said about Hirohito, not the man, of course, but his institution. It didn't matter who sat upon the Chrysanthemum throne, a ruthless war criminal, or a gentle marine biologist, his function was the same.

And it was precisely General Douglas MacArthur's policy after the war to protect this institution. As supreme commander of the US occupation of Japan, he decided that a sense of continuity was needed, as it were, to cope with *Stunde Null*. To rebuild Japan from the ashes of its own militarism would be hard enough. And continuity, in MacArthur's opinion, meant retaining the emperor, as a constitutional monarch, divested of his divine attributes. To accomplish this, MacArthur had to make sure the emperor couldn't be burdened with any guilt for the war. Hence, emperor Hirohito was carefully shielded from the proceedings at the Tokyo War Crime Tribunal, where men were being tried for actions that were carried out in the emperor's name. As a result, men were hanged for being formally responsible for crimes, for which the emperor himself held the highest formal responsibility. No wonder, then, that the whole idea in Japan of who was responsible for what happened in the war became fuzzy in the extreme.

MacArthur went further than that, however. Since the "militarists" — meaning the armed forces — were entirely blamed for the war, it was a relatively easy thing to impose on the war-weary Japanese an American-made constitution, which outlawed both the maintenance of Japanese armed forces, and the use of armed force in foreign policy. In effect, Japan became a less than sovereign nation. Lacking the national right to have an army and wage war, Japan had to rely entirely on the US for its security.

The pacifistic Left was quite happy with this: Japan was to be the exemplary nation of peace, and Hiroshima would be its pacifistic symbol. The Rightwingers were not so pleased, for they felt that Japan had been humiliated and robbed of its national identity by the American victors. But then the Right had little credit in those early days.

Then, the same thing that had happened in Germany, occurred in Japan: the Cold War began; the US needed a staunch ally in the East against Red China and North Korea; Japan had to be persuaded to rearm, accusations of war crimes against high officials were dropped. The Left protested. The Right was beginning to feel better. And, strictly against the spirit and the letter of the new Constitution, a pseudo army was formed, called the Japan Self Defense Forces. In effect, the Americans put pressure on the Japanese to subvert their own constitution. Compare this to Germany. Here, the SS, not the *Wehrmacht* was blamed for the wickedness of the Nazi war, which made it easier to build up the *Bundeswehr*. The Germans also wrote their own constitution. And Adenauer was smart enough to demand full national sovereignty in exchange for complying with American demands and joining NATO.

Japan never joined anything like NATO. The Self Defence Forces are still not allowed to be sent overseas, and Japan is constitutionally unable to wage war. So unlike the Federal Republic of Germany, Japan is not a fully sovereign nation and still stuck with a foreign constitution, which keeps the country dependent for its security on the United States.

This has had an enormous effect on the way the Japanese think of their wartime past. Indeed, the complete lack of basic consensus on the constitution reflects the lack of consensus about the war. This lack of basic agreement is comparable to German attitudes to World War I. In a way, the Pacific War was Japan's Great War. After all, how Germans felt about the Weimar constitution also reflected their attitudes to the First World War.

The Japanese left, including many academics and intellectuals, believe that the war was the result of the emperor system, and the feudal-militarist tradition, which was never swept away by a bourgeois revolution. Which is why the Left want to keep the peace constitution, for otherwise the feudal-militarists would take power once again. Leftists also feel deeply betrayed by the US, not only for allowing the conservative establishment to re-establish itself in Japan, and for encouraging the buildup of a Japanese army, but for violating the Hiroshima spirit by using armed force itself, in Korea, in Vietnam, in Iraq.

The Right think that the war was fought for national survival; that it was forced on Japan by hostile Western powers, especially the US. The war in China and the Korean peninsula was justified as a war against com-

munism. And after 1945, the Americans robbed Japan's national identity by imposing a foreign constitution, and by burdening the Japanese people with unjustified guilt by enforcing victors' justice at the Tokyo Trial Tribunal.

The mainstream of the Liberal Democrats are probably content to let things muddle on, do as Washington says, even if it means bending the constitution a little to achieve this. Because the left, understandably, uses the wartime past, the lessons of Hiroshima, the crimes of militarism, etc., as arguments against any rightwing attempt to touch the constitution, the right responds in kind with strong doses of historical revisionism. If the leftwing Union of School Teachers emphasizes the horrors of Nanking, or the treatment of Korean slave workers during the war, the reactionary Ministry of Education censures school textbooks and changes phrases like "invasion of China" into "advance into China". Just as is true in Germany, the left stresses lessons from the war, while the right extolls patriotism and every nation's right to be proud of its past. And the conservative mainstream, meanwhile, prefers to say nothing much at all. As a former Japanese prime minister put it: invasion or advance, that is for future historians to decide.

History in Japan, in other words, is hardly forgotten. It has become highly politicised in a battle over something as fundamental to a nation as its constitution. The camps are so far apart there is not even room for a *Historikerstreit*. Germans, at least, are agreed that Hitler was a bad man, that the Nazi regime was a criminal one and that the Holocaust cannot be justified. Just as they are in principle agreed on the postwar constitution. Details and emphases can only be discussed reasonably when principles are agreed upon. Japan, for all the reasons I have mentioned above, is not in that happy situation. From this one might learn a lesson, not often drawn from the belligerent past. It is usually said that a nation which has unleashed terrible wars, such as Germany, such as Japan, must honestly master its past before it can be trusted with full sovereignty again. I believe that the example of Japan shows that precisely the opposite is more likely to be true.