

THE ROUTLEDGE HISTORY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Edited by
Paul R. Bartrop

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Philip Seaton

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Framing Japan's wars

The term Second World War (*Dai-niji sekai taisen*) is rarely used in Japan regarding the conflicts that Japan fought in during the 1930s and 1940s. This Eurocentric term typically refers to the conflict triggered by the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939. Japan was involved in various armed conflicts on the Asian mainland from 1931, which developed into full-scale war with China in 1937. From September 1939 to the signing of the Tripartite Pact on 27 September 1940, there were two separate conflicts running in parallel in Europe and Asia: the wars of German eastward (and, from 1940, westward) expansion and Japanese westward expansion into the Chinese (and, in September 1940, Indochina) continental mainland. It was not until the German declaration of war on the United States on 11 December 1941 after Pearl Harbor that the “separate and localized fighting in the Far East and Europe now merged into a truly global struggle, World War II.”¹

There is debate regarding when “the war(s)” that culminated in Japan’s defeat in 1945 actually began. War was not officially declared until Japan attacked the United States and United Kingdom and named it the Great East Asia War (*Daitōa sensō*). The fighting in China after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 1937 was called the “China Incident” (*Shina jihen*) to avoid the international ramifications of a declared war.² Likewise, the 1939 Nomonhan Incident, the 1932 Shanghai Incident, and the 1931 Manchurian Incident were armed conflicts without being named wars. Using the logic that the Great East Asia War became necessary to continue war in China through the acquisition of raw materials in southeast Asia following the American oil embargo of 1941, Japanese progressive historians critical of Japan’s aggressive expansionism have used the term Fifteen-Year War (*Jūgonen sensō*) to refer to the period 1931–1945.³ Nationalist historians, meanwhile, use the wartime term Great East Asia War. They see the conflict as a “holy war” (*seisen*) to resist colonization by aggressive Western powers and liberate Asia from Western imperialism (*Ajia kaihōron*). Hayashi Fusao called it the East Asian Hundred Years War (*Tōa hyakunen sensō*) starting in the 1840s, when Japan’s isolation felt threatened following the Opium Wars.⁴ Pacific War (*Taiheiyō sensō*) is seen as a term imposed during the American occupation that sidelines conflict before Pearl Harbor. Asia-Pacific War (*Ajia taiheiyō sensō*) has also become common nomenclature.

Whether Japanese historians are critical of Japan’s war(s) or defenders of it, the war is widely seen as the culmination of a decades-long struggle among empires. In

Europe, the Second World War tends to be framed as a struggle between alliances: Allied vs. Axis. Imperial elements are acknowledged – such as South African pilots fighting in the Battle of Britain – but ultimately sidelined within narratives of national struggle. In this national framework, the war resulted from unresolved issues from the First World War, with Nazi Germany seeking to reverse the humiliations of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Japan is also incorporated into this Eurocentric alliances explanation. It had only a marginal role in the First World War but fought on the side of its ally Britain (seizing German territory in the Far East) and sat with the victors at Versailles. By the late 1930s, however, relations with the United Kingdom and United States had soured and Japan joined Germany and Italy in the Tripartite Pact. Within victor's history, Japan switched sides from Allied to Axis, good guy to bad guy, victor to loser.

However, this “switching sides” framework is not how the war has been seen in Japan, either at the time or in contemporary memory culture. Changing relations with far-off powers are of secondary importance to the constancy within Japan's East Asian geopolitical situation. From the mid-19th century, this was the fixation on control of Japan's near overseas – initially Ezo and the Ryūkyū Kingdom (now Hokkaido and Okinawa, respectively) and then the Korean peninsula – as essential for securing the Japanese heartlands of Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku. This was the Japan unified politically at the end of the 16th century and ruled for 250 years in relative isolation under the Tokugawa shogunate. From the 1860s, Japan chose to modernize and join the club of imperial nations. When Western powers supported Japanese imperial ambitions, as Britain did during the colonization of Korea early in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Japan had allies.⁵ When ambitions clashed, there was war. The Axis Alliance of 1940, however, resulted in little material cooperation between Japan and Germany/Italy. Japan's default position in the first half of the 20th century was nominally allied but effectively alone, while fighting to promote and defend its interests in Asia.

Ever-present during the long road to war with the United States and United Kingdom in 1941 was the regional rivalry with Russia, then the Soviet Union, and China. China had been the regional political and cultural hegemon for millennia. Japan turned on China in the late 19th century as part of the drive to modernize and achieve great power status. The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 enabled Japan to wrestle control of Taiwan and the Korean peninsula from China. A decade later, Russia's ambitions in Manchuria and Korea were ended by the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War. These rivalries formed the backdrop to all conflict until 1945.

Likewise, China and the Soviet Union are central to discussions of when Japan's wars ended. Emperor Hirohito's radio address at noon on 15 August 1945 is the symbolic moment in Japan when the war ended. However, after the Soviet Union joined the war on 8 August, fighting continued in Karafuto (Sakhalin) until 23 August; and the occupation of the Southern Kuriles continued, even after the signing of the official surrender on 2 September. Around 600,000 Japanese soldiers were interned in Soviet labor camps, where 10 percent died in captivity after Japan's surrender. The last of these soldiers returned home in 1956.

Meanwhile, the political situation in China shaped both the creation of “democratic Japan” during the Occupation and the justice enacted at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (Tokyo Trials). The Chinese Civil War, which started

in the 1920s, restarted after Japan's defeat in 1945. It culminated in the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. During the nascent Cold War, fear of communism in Asia shifted American priorities from trying erstwhile enemies to rehabilitating Japanese war criminals as anti-communist allies.⁶ The Tokyo Trials concluded in 1948 with the execution of seven wartime leaders convicted of class A war crimes, including wartime leader Tōjō Hideki. However, when they were quietly enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine in 1978, they joined the souls of the other 2.3 million Japanese military personnel who had perished "during the war." The deaths of *hibakusha* (atomic bomb victims), many of whom died months or years after the war as a direct result of radiation exposure in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, also complicate any discussion of when the war "ended."

The trend in historiography regarding the Second World War in Asia, therefore, is for flexibility regarding naming, starting points, and ending points. Emblematic of this approach is S.C.M. Paine's *The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949*, which situates the Second World War in the geographical and temporal contexts of China–Russia–Japan rivalry and its connection to global conflict in the 20th century.⁷ Consequently, in this chapter, life on the Japanese home front is examined in an elongated and unspecified period from the road to war to its aftermath.

“The Dark Valley”? contested memories, contested history

Japan's actions in the Second World War generate considerable domestic and international debate, known as the “history issue” (*rekishi mondai*) or even “history wars” (*rekishi sensō*). Japanese memories are contested because of divergent judgments regarding Japanese war responsibility within Japanese society.⁸ It is helpful to think of “the war(s)” as multiple overlapping conflicts, each of which generates its own set of memories and war responsibility discourses:

- Colonization of neighboring countries/territories (e.g., Korea, 1910).
- Invasions of Asian neighbors (e.g., China, 1937).
- Liberation/occupation of Western colonies (e.g., Indonesia, 1942).
- Conflicts with other empires in their colonies (e.g., the United Kingdom in Singapore, 1942).
- Attacks on Allied nations (e.g., the United States at Pearl Harbor, 1941).
- Attacks by Allied nations (e.g., the Soviet declaration of war, 1945).

These are perceived differently within individuals' historical consciousnesses depending on their family/local histories and ideological inclinations. As a basic principle, however, nationalists consider all the aforementioned conflicts as “holy wars” of Japanese survival and Asian independence from Western colonialism; progressives consider them aggressive wars of Japanese imperial expansion. Between these two poles, there are multiple shades of gray, although there is more willingness among Japanese people to consider actions against Asian countries (the former three) as aggressive than actions against other imperial powers (the latter three).

Another important phenomenon is victim consciousness (*higaisha ishiki*), which arises out of the feeling that while the military bears responsibility for waging an unwinnable and/or aggressive war, ordinary Japanese people suffered as a result.

A total of 3.1 million Japanese died, 2.3 million in the military and 800,000 civilians. Of these, 200,000 soldiers and 500,000 civilians died in the home islands, mainly in land battles (Okinawa, Karafuto/Kuriles) and air raids/naval bombardment (including the A-bombs) during the last 12 months of the war.⁹ Publicly articulated memories of personal war experiences tend to focus on traumatic instances of war violence largely decontextualized from broader historical processes.¹⁰ There were great testimony collection projects in the 1970s (such as the people's history movement and air raid testimony collection projects) that underpinned the peace museum building projects of the 1990s.¹¹ But postwar memories are refracted through the knowledge of Japan's defeat, and memories of later suffering override memories of earlier war enthusiasm. The war years get depicted as a period when the lives of ordinary people gradually and somehow inevitably slid toward a moment of personal and national trauma.

This narrative mode of wartime history has become associated with the epithet "the dark valley" (*kurai tanima*).¹² This characterization has been challenged in recent scholarship, although the "dark valley" narrative mode remains common in Japanese-language depictions of the war on the home front. There are two main versions. The progressive version, exemplified by Ienaga's *The Pacific War* and Yoshi-mi's *Grassroots Fascism*, criticizes the military's aggression and oppression of the war years.¹³ Atrocities committed by the Japanese military are described in detail, alongside accounts of repression, propaganda, and support for the war on the home front. Finally, there are descriptions of Japanese civilian suffering in air raids and battle zones during the closing stages of the war. The conservative version omits much of the history about non-Japanese suffering and refers more to the "control" the military exerted over the home front. The depiction of Japanese civilian suffering is largely the same as the progressive version, albeit with additional focus on the stoicism and sacrifice of ordinary people in desperate times.

Showakan

A representative example of the "dark valley" narrative is presented in the exhibits of Showakan (National Showa Memorial Museum) in Tokyo. This museum, funded by central government and run by the Izokukai (War Bereaved Association), is effectively the official government narrative regarding the Japanese civilian experience of the war. It is conservative according to the schema outlined earlier.

Upon entering the exhibition, there are displays titled "Parting from family" and "Letters to the home front."¹⁴ This establishes the military campaigns as taking place elsewhere – beyond the sight of most Japanese during the war and beyond the remit of the museum. Display items include *senninbari* (sashes with 1,000 stitches sewn by women to protect a soldier at the front), rising sun flags with messages written by well-wishers, and "comfort parcels." These are the iconic items that connected soldiers with the home front. There are also letters and postcards expressing the appropriate love for nation and family that enabled them to pass the military censors. After this, there are no further links to overseas battlefields until the end, when the ongoing work to repatriate the remains of soldiers who fell overseas is described.

Showakan, therefore, depicts the home front. Exhibition 1, "Family life around 1935," paints a picture of Japan as a relatively poor nation. There were few electrical

goods, although many houses had electric lights and radios. People still largely used coal or firewood as fuel and drew their water from a well. Exhibition 2, "Life under Wartime Government Control," presents an image of wartime austerity. The National Mobilization Law was enacted in 1938; and an austerity day was introduced on the first of each month from 1 September 1939, when people were expected to eat the patriotic and spartan "*Hi no maru bentō*" (rising sun lunchbox, with a red pickled plum in the middle of white rice). A billboard of a slogan from 1939 is displayed: "*Nihonjin nara zeitaku wa dekinai hazu da!*" (If you are Japanese, we expect you cannot afford luxury). This was shortened to "*Zeitaku wa teki da!*" (Luxury is the enemy) the following year. The museum explains how government controls reached into every part of people's lives. By June 1941, just before the American oil embargo, buses were already being converted to run using coal and firewood. In June 1940, the rationing of sugar and matches began. It was followed in April 1941 by rationing of rice, wheat, flour, and alcohol.

In Exhibition 3, the focus switches from mothers to children. There are schoolbooks and toys from the war years, and a photograph from 1942 shows kindergarten children playing "pretend war" (*sensō gokko*). All elementary schools were renamed "National schools" (*Kokumin gakkō*) from April 1941, and the curriculum prepared children for their primary wartime roles: soldiers and mothers. As the war situation worsened, education was disrupted. From June 1943, classes could be commandeered for war work; from 1944, the evacuation began of over 400,000 children from major cities expected to be targeted in air raids; from March 1945, all classes were canceled, and children worked directly for the war effort.

The first air raid on Japan was the Doolittle Raid of 18 April 1942. Damage and casualties were light by the standards of later raids, but the raid clarified the risk of direct attack at a time when the newspapers were dominated by stories of military victories in the Pacific. Air raid drills had begun in April 1937 with the passing of the Air Defense Law. Ultimately, the bucket relay drills, and rudimentary air raid shelters built in people's gardens, proved of little use against incendiary bombing specifically designed to burn Japan's densely packed wooden urban areas to the ground. After the fall of Saipan in July 1944, B-29 Superfortresses were within range of the home islands. Exhibition 4, "Home front preparation and air raids," displays protective clothing worn by civilians, an incendiary bomb case, and other photos/artifacts. There is a shelter reconstruction, and via a touch panel visitors access data, images, and testimonies from the approximately 70 cities suffering major air raids.

In the stairwell going down to the next floor are exhibits relating to the emperor's radio address on 15 August. Visitors listen to a recording of the broadcast while looking at photos from 1945 of people gathered around the radio, ashen faced as the reality of defeat sinks in. Exhibition 5, "Rising from the ashes," chronicles the struggle for survival in burnt-out cities after the surrender, with photos of people living in makeshift housing and slums. War damage left a shortage of 4.2 million homes. In Tokyo, 56 percent of houses had been destroyed. People survived by trading at black markets. Meanwhile, 6.5 million were returning to Japan from former imperial possessions. Exhibition 6, "Bereaved families," focuses on the plight of widows, who lost their pensions in February 1946 following an occupation forces directive. Until pensions were reinstated after the occupation, many widows eked out a living doing work for which they would be paid less than men. Exhibition 7, "Childhood and postwar

years,” shows children getting back to school, often in the open air as buildings had been burned down. Until new textbooks could be produced, the wartime books were used, with sections deemed unsuitable by the occupation authorities blacked out with calligraphy ink. There were also an estimated 120,000 war orphans. Finally, Exhibition 8, “Postwar economic recovery,” shows that, by the mid-1950s, Japan had recovered enough for people to aspire to own a black-and-white television, washing machine, and refrigerator.

Toward a counternarrative

The Showakan narrative follows a “dark valley” trajectory. Japanese civilians were drawn into the war, placed under increasing restrictions, and ultimately faced direct attack as Japan slid toward defeat. Despite devastation and immense hardship, Japan rose from the ashes to rebuild a peaceful postwar society. While Showakan has the most comprehensive displays of this history, the previous narrative is told in abridged form at numerous other peace and local history museums.

However, this narrative may be challenged on various grounds. First, Showakan uses a postwar nation-state frame delineated by the contemporary geographical boundaries of Japan instead of the area considered Japanese territory during the war. Japan during the war was a multiethnic empire in which all subjects had Japanese nationality (*Nihon kokuseki*) but family registers (*koseki*) were used to distinguish the citizenship rights and responsibilities of those from “Japan proper” (*naichi*) and “outer lands” (*gaichi*), including Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria, Karafuto, and Micronesia.¹⁵ Migration between the center and colonies meant that on the eve of the Pacific War, there were 1.2 million ethnic Japanese in Korea, Taiwan, and Karafuto and 800,000 Koreans and 30,000 Taiwanese in the home islands.¹⁶ The Japanese “home front,” therefore, is a multiethnic, not monoethnic, story.

Second, Showakan’s narrative creates an artificial distinction between the “home front” and “the front” by ignoring instances when land fighting took place on Japanese soil with significant civilian populations. Civilians were caught up in land fighting in Micronesia (May–July 1944), Okinawa (April–June 1945), and Manchuria, Karafuto, and the Kuriles (August 1945).

Third, civilians are portrayed as passive and under state control. This facilitates their presentation as helpless victims, particularly in the face of bombs dropped from the skies. But home-front civilians were also active agents. They contributed to the war effort or even willingly took part in the persecution of others, for example, by managing sites of forced or POW labor. And the empire would not have existed without the settlers who colonized, worked in, and administered annexed land.

Finally, cultural historians working with wartime media and documents – particularly newspapers, magazines, and personal diaries – have not disputed the inroads that state controls made into people’s everyday lives in the 1930s and 1940s, but they have asserted that the war years were not relentlessly “dark.”¹⁷ Consumer and cultural life on the home front remained buoyant despite widening rationing at least until 1942–1943, after which military reverses from the Battle of Midway onward started to have tangible effects.

The remainder of the chapter addresses these omissions by overlaying other aspects of Japan’s war on the home front onto the Showakan narrative. In particular,

it engages literature on wartime tourism, consumerism, and the environment, which paints a rather different picture of the war before 1943.

The China War

Victory in the Russo-Japanese War had not given Japan the security it sought. If anything, Russia's post-defeat turmoil created a grave new threat: communism. By the time of the Manchurian Incident, draconian government controls on domestic dissent were already in place. Under the Peace Preservation Law of 1925, government critics, particularly communists, were being arrested and tortured and dying in police custody. For example, proletariat author Kobayashi Takiji, a strong critic of Japanese imperialism in novels such as *The Crab Cannery Ship*, died under police torture in 1933.¹⁸ Even before the 1930s, the use of the military in garrison towns to crack down on protests has led Oleg Benesch and Ran Zwigenberg to question whether the "Taisho democracy" – the reign of Emperor Taisho (1912–1926), which is associated with the flourishing of party democracy and extension of male suffrage in 1925 – might be better termed "Taisho militarism."¹⁹ Dissent was ruthlessly put down in colonized areas, too. The suppression of the 1 March 1919 Movement remains particularly important within contemporary Korean memory.²⁰

With casualty levels still relatively low, life on the home front continued largely unaffected by the incidents in Manchuria (1931–) and Shanghai (1932). There was no mass call up or mobilization for total war. Koizumi Kishio's "100 Views of Great Tokyo in the Shōwa Era," a set of woodblock prints produced across 1928–1940, depicts scenes of golf, fish markets, parks, shrines, and other aspects of Tokyo life during the 1930s. Beyond a few images of soldiers in uniform and "thrilling" live fire exercises from June 1937, the image of the home front on the eve of full-scale war is serene.²¹ But life was tough for many, particularly in rural areas. Conscription could entail a release from grueling farm work, and despite the hardships of military life, recruits received clothing, food, a salary, and social respect.²² Death on military service, meanwhile, afforded honor to the family. In 1936, the magazine *Shufu no Tomo* (*Housewife's Friend*) published an interview with members of "Yasukuni families," who described weeping with joy as the emperor bowed and paid respect to their fallen kin at Yasukuni Shrine. Takahashi Tetsuya comments:

These people were from the lower levels of society and if there had been no war, there would probably have been no chance of them ever leaving their home regions. But because these people had lost sons or family in the war, they were invited to Tokyo at the government's expense, praised as "honoured bereaved families" and even got to see the emperor, the "son of heaven" (*tenshisama*), at close quarters. The emotions expressed by all the old ladies of "gratitude" and "being too much to bear" are not something to be dismissed as *tatema*: they reflect reality.²³

The "spiritual mobilization of the people," therefore, deepened in a period when the military acted with increasing impunity.²⁴ The 1930s contained numerous political assassinations by military radicals; and with senior army and navy officers

guaranteed positions in the cabinet, they could bring the government down at will. Nevertheless,

latent nationalism, resentment over America's treatment of Japanese immigrants, the increasingly unified British and American resistance to Japanese actions in China, and the suffering of many Japanese during the depression, came together to create a climate of support for the military.²⁵

Tourism and leisure were also mobilized for the imperial project. Japan's first commercial overseas tour to Korea and Manchuria was organized by the *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper in 1906. It sold out in five days, sparking Japan's imperial travel boom.²⁶ The first school trip (*shūgaku ryokō*) to the colonies was also in 1906. In 1930, a total of 10,677 students in 213 groups visited Korea and Manchuria. Such trips had a strong military focus, either in the activities (including marching practice), the sites visited (particularly sites of Russo-Japanese War battles), or the cooperation of the military in organizing and/or accompanying the trips.²⁷ The 1930s was also when Japan's national parks were established, both in the home islands and the colonies.²⁸ Promoting the great outdoors encouraged people to be healthy, a policy commensurate with educating citizens to serve the nation as either soldiers or "good wives, wise mothers" (*ryōsai kenbo*).

Full-scale war started with China in July 1937, and the country went on a total war footing. During the advance to Nanjing throughout the autumn, the Japanese media was full of bellicose and racist rhetoric whipping up support for the war effort. The most infamous example is the "100-man killing contest" between Mukai Toshiaki and Noda Tsuyoshi, which was declared a draw after it could not be determined who had killed 100 Chinese with their swords the quickest. This incident achieved international notoriety, and both men were executed as war criminals after the war. Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi concluded that the contest was "fictive, though not *wholly* fabricated."²⁹ But regardless of what really happened during the killing contest, the story is significant for its insights into the mood on the home front. Rather than any attempt to cover up the sort of wanton killing that earned the Imperial Japanese Army such an infamous reputation in China and beyond, in 1937 the Japanese public was being fed atrocity stories as propaganda-cum-entertainment as part of what Benjamin Uchiyama has termed the "thrills and kills" of "carnival war."³⁰ Racist disdain for Chinese was normal in both public and private.³¹ When Nanjing fell in December, people on the home front celebrated by holding lantern parades. It is commonplace for narratives today that mention the euphoric mood in December 1937 to add disclaimers that the people on the home front "were not told about" what was really going on in Nanjing – for example, touch screen exhibits in the "Hiroshima History" section of the renovated Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum opened in 2019. But the nature of war reportage in 1937 indicates that the media and large sections of the public were not squeamish about the mass killing going on during Japan's "holy war" in China.

With the beginning of full-scale war, domestic opposition to the military was quashed. In one prominent case, Yanaihara Tadao was forced out of his job as a professor at Tokyo Imperial University after a speech criticizing the war.³² Opponents of the war either "converted" or hid their views to survive. Anonymous anti-war graffiti might still appear, but public statements against the war were now dangerous.

However, as long as cultural and economic activity could be cast as patriotic or contributing to the war effort, it continued largely as before, despite rhetoric of luxury being the enemy.³³ This included travel. Soyama Takeshi writes:

It is generally thought that the number of schools conducting *shūgaku ryokō* to Manchuria and Korea declined after the Manchurian (Mukden) Incident in 1931, and the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, but it is clear that these conflicts rather boosted Japanese interest in China and the continent.³⁴

Between 1930 and 1939, the number of Japanese travelers to Manchuria doubled to just under 1 million.³⁵ The Japan Tourist Bureau (JTB) even published a Nanjing guidebook and opened a Nanjing Bureau in 1939, just 12–18 months after one of the wars in China's most infamous atrocities.³⁶

As well as tourism, the war triggered other consumerism, particularly among groups like well-paid munitions workers, who earned a reputation for being playboys and flaunting calls for wartime austerity.³⁷ The war situation was not yet so severe that women needed to be commandeered for war work. Women were expected to be involved in the various patriotic associations that were amalgamated in 1942 into the Great Japan Women's Association (*Dainippon Fujin Kai*), but their contribution to the war effort remained framed in terms of spiritual support for their menfolk (such as collecting stitches for *senninbari*), motherhood (rearing future soldiers), and managing the household.³⁸ It was not until August 1944 that women – and even then only unmarried women and widows – were mobilized for war work.³⁹

After the fall of Nanjing, the war in China got bogged down and there were fewer clear-cut victories to report. When there was bad news, such as the army's humiliation at Nomonhan in the summer of 1939, it was kept out of the media or reported in misleading ways. There was a growing sense that the war would be protracted, but the prevailing mood was still support for the war. As 1939 turned to 1940, the Asian front, like the European front, was in a lull.

In 1940, Japan celebrated the 2,600th anniversary of the creation of the imperial line and, therefore, the Japanese empire. Kenneth Ruoff's history of this wartime celebration indicates how the war had not yet had any severe effect on home-front life, despite rationing and slogans against "luxury." By contrast, Japan was in a consumer boom. In 1940, the largest 78 magazine titles recorded their highest ever sales on the back of historical writing and essay contests to coincide with the anniversary.⁴⁰ Department stores attracted millions of customers to their free exhibitions and saw expanding sales amid "increased purchasing power" generated by the war procurement boom.⁴¹ Furthermore:

The role of the 2,600th anniversary celebrations in spurring travel to national heritage sites by people from within Japan proper, by settlers and "locals" from Japan's external colonies, and by residents of foreign countries (some of whom were of Japanese ancestry) resulted in 1940 being the peak year for travel in Imperial Japan.⁴²

This consumerism was a continuation of the trends of the 1920s and 1930s, when the "modern boys" and "modern girls" set the fashions in Ginza; young unmarried

women worked in greater numbers in Tokyo's office districts; and jazz, Charlie Chaplin films, and café life were all the rage.⁴³ Uchiyama argues that "carnival" and consumerism were a "safety valve" that served "to allow the masses to vent and dissipate discontent in order to consolidate war support."⁴⁴ Maintenance of consumer life was integral to maintaining morale on the home front. Both would collapse after 1943.

The year 1940 was also significant for the edict requiring Koreans to adopt Japanese names and use the Japanese language as part of the policy of *naisen ittai* (unity between Japan and Korea).⁴⁵ Despite being subjects within Japan's imperial family, as discussed earlier, family registers were used to ensure that Koreans had inferior status within the imperial hierarchy. This manifested itself in various places, including tourism encounters, where Koreans were either objectified as inferior others for visitors from "Japan proper," or, if fellow travelers, assumed to belong in lower class accommodation.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, intermarriage was encouraged as a way of melding together imperial subjects under the *naisen ittai* policy, albeit not very successfully.⁴⁷

The treatment of Koreans as Japanese subjects also means that three issues today seen as international legacies of the war were home-front issues at the time: forced labor, recruitment of "comfort women," and conscription. Many Koreans had moved to the Japanese archipelago to work following Japan's annexation of the peninsula. As the war situation deteriorated, more were conscripted for war work. Ultimately, around 700,000 Korean civilians and 40,000 Chinese forced laborers were brought to Japan during the war and toiled in mines and on construction projects.⁴⁸ Many died in the brutal conditions and at the end of the war in Allied bombing. Likewise, the recruitment of Korean women as comfort women remains a deeply divisive issue. Women of many nationalities, including ethnic Japanese, worked in brothels or "comfort stations," enduring conditions that frequently equated to sexual slavery. And Koreans could volunteer for the army from 1938 but were conscripted from 1942. As in "Japan proper," enlistment could be a way to escape rural destitution, particularly in 1939, when there was severe drought in Korea.⁴⁹ However, Koreans (along with soldiers from Taiwan) lost their pension rights when they "ceased being Japanese" after September 1945. Yet, in a clear double standard, the estimated 50,000 soldiers from Korea and Taiwan who died in the war remain enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine on the basis that "when they died they were Japanese," despite requests by some relatives to have the souls removed from enshrinement.⁵⁰

The Pacific War

In the summer of 1941, Nazi Germany held the upper hand in the war in Europe and Japan was bogged down in the China War. The United States responded by imposing an oil embargo on Japan. Negotiations to avert war failed, and the Pacific War began with Japan's simultaneous invasion of the Malayan Peninsula (8 December 1941) and the Pearl Harbor attack (7 December 1941). Not all in Japan, however, shared in the jubilant mood. In both private and public, voices questioned the wisdom of war with such powerful enemies.⁵¹ The risks quickly became apparent. The Doolittle Raid (18 April 1942) hastened military planning for the fateful Midway operation that would all but end the Japanese navy as a formidable fighting force. Japan lost control of the seas, supply routes from colonies to home islands were severed, and travel between the colonies became perilous.

Events in 1943 indicated the war was not going well. In April, Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, the architect of the Pearl Harbor raid and a national hero, was killed in action. He was given a state funeral as Japan's most senior victim of the war to date. In the summer, Ueno Zoo in Tokyo started killing its animals. The zoo had attracted over 3 million paying visitors in 1942, its 60th anniversary year, but the fear of dangerous animals escaping during air raids and the worsening war situation precipitated the decision.⁵² Then, in October, the draft was extended to all university students in the humanities and social sciences (*gakuto shutsujin*). The stories of these students who left their studies to go to the front gained prominence in the postwar when their memoirs and letters were published in the collection *Kike wadatsumi no koe* (*Listen to the Voices from the Sea*).⁵³ Newsreel footage of students marching in the rain at Meiji Jingu Gaien Stadium in Tokyo is one of the most famous images of the war years in Japan, but in October–November 1943 there were similar parades in Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria, as well as in Tokyo for Nisei (second generation) Japanese from overseas. The reason for the shortage of soldiers was indicated by the coining of new wartime jargon, *gyokusai* (literally, shattered jewel), which was first used in May 1943 to describe the last stand or “banzai charge” by the garrison in the Aleutians.⁵⁴

Amidst worsening news, people tried to continue life as normal on the home front. However, the war's effects on sporting events form a barometer of the deteriorating situation. The first casualties were international sporting events: both the summer (Tokyo) and winter (Sapporo) Olympics were scheduled to be held in Japan in 1940 but were canceled because of the war situation in Europe. Within Japan, professional baseball continued until 1944, by which time many of its stars had been drafted and killed in action. Professional sumo continued almost uninterrupted into 1945, until the May tournament was disrupted when air raids damaged the arena and killed two of the wrestlers.⁵⁵ Other forms of entertainment did their best to continue through the war years, too. Comic storytelling and comedy double acts (*rakugo* and *manzai*) remained popular and were integral to both morale and propaganda.⁵⁶ Kabuki also continued throughout the war. In Kyoto, which was spared Allied incendiary bombing, regular performances continued until war's end, although troupes in Tokyo and Osaka had to go on tour after their theaters were burnt out in 1945.⁵⁷ The major cinema studios continued to train stars and cultivate cinematic celebrity until very late in the war, when film stock shortages and government controls severely strained industry–government relations.⁵⁸

Adding to Japan's problems from 1943 were natural disasters. There were major earthquakes in 1943 (Tottori, 1,083 killed); 1944 (Kii Peninsula, 1,223 killed); 1945 (Mikawa, 2,306 killed); and 1946 (Showa Nankai Trough, 1,330 killed). The three during the war were kept out of the media to avoid damaging morale, but the 1945 earthquake heavily damaged aircraft production in the Nagoya area.⁵⁹ The archipelago was also battered by typhoons, often with more deadly consequences than usual because of restrictions on reporting weather conditions for security reasons. Environmental damage was also man-made. Extensive deforestation (15 percent of total forest area) occurred as Japan lost control of sea lanes and turned to its domestic timber supplies. While fish stocks around Japan recovered somewhat as Japan's fishing fleets succumbed to the conscription of their crews and submarine attacks, domesticated land animals declined precipitously in number, and songbird species were hunted for food.⁶⁰ The desperate war situation also led to unsafe industrial practices. Mining and

construction accidents were common. Increased chemical discharges at the Kamioka mine in Toyama prefecture continued to poison local residents well beyond Japan's surrender.⁶¹ An indication of the overall decline in the nutritional and environmental situation was the reduction in average height of 14-year-old boys from 152.1 centimeters in 1939 to 146 centimeters in 1948, and from 148.7 centimeters to 145.6 centimeters among girls over the same period.⁶²

From the middle of 1944, Japanese civilian populations came under direct attack when the Allied "island hopping" campaigns reached Micronesia. As many as 10,000 civilians may have died on Saipan, with many choosing to take their own lives by jumping off cliffs to their deaths.⁶³ Thereafter, air raids began on the home islands. The next civilian population to be caught up in the fighting was Okinawa. Children could not be evacuated from the islands after the sinking of the *Tsushima-maru* on 22 August 1944, in which 80 percent of the 1,788 people on board, of whom 1,661 were children, perished.⁶⁴ With nowhere to flee, Okinawan civilians were caught up in the "Typhoon of Steel" that ravaged the islands from April to June 1945. Around a third of the civilian population of Okinawa died. Elsewhere, Japan's major cities were targeted by air raids, blockade, and naval bombardment. Civilian defense units conducted drills with bamboo spears and prepared to use the same suicidal tactics employed by the kamikaze pilots during the expected land invasion.⁶⁵ But in the face of atomic attack and the Soviet offensive in Manchuria that quickly routed what remained of the Japanese military, the emperor used his casting vote at the Imperial Conference on 10 August to accept the Potsdam Declaration. On 15 August, people kneeled and wept in front of their radios as they listened to the emperor's broadcast.

Japan's unending postwar

While the fighting stopped relatively quickly in many theatres of the Asia-Pacific War, for many, their war was just starting. Karafuto has an ambivalent position within Japanese war history. Acquired from Russia in 1905, Karafuto was a settler colony and full prefecture of Japan (from 1943) with a majority ethnic Japanese population. Most deaths in Karafuto occurred after 15 August, and in the postwar settlement, Karafuto was ceded to the Soviet Union. As in Saipan, Okinawa, and Manchuria, civilian suicides loom large in narratives of the fighting. In Karafuto, the nine telephone operators of Maoka post office who committed suicide on 20 August have become icons of virtue and self-sacrifice in both memorial sites and cinema.⁶⁶ The 17,000 Japanese residents of the Kurile Islands, meanwhile, found themselves living under Soviet occupation until they were deported to Hokkaido in 1947.

After Japan's surrender, the 6.5 million Japanese people living or stationed overseas at the end of the war needed to be repatriated. Many had lost all they possessed. They returned to a devastated land where, as active agents of Japan's disastrous imperial project, they did not necessarily receive much sympathy.⁶⁷ However, subjects of the defunct multiethnic Japanese empire who did not fit neatly within a monoethnic bracket created by the postwar Japanese nation-state often found "repatriation" impossible. Koreans stranded in Sakhalin, Japanese women married to Korean men in Korea, Japanese orphans in Manchuria taken in by Chinese families (*zanryū koji*), and other stranded groups waged decades-long postwar struggles to gain the right of "return."⁶⁸ And many never made it home. Death rates among settlers were

particularly high in Manchuria: “of the 223,000 settlers resident in Manchuria at the end of the war only 140,000 (63 percent) ever returned to Japan. More than a third of the settlers – 78,500 people – died in the wake of defeat, most due to starvation or illness.”⁶⁹

As John Dower’s seminal history of the occupation years, *Embracing Defeat*, depicts, for the first few years after the war, people did what was necessary to survive.⁷⁰ Life gradually returned to peacetime normality, and many members of the wartime political establishment returned to public office with tacit American approval, even if they had been active wartime leaders, such as Kishi Nobusuke, a wartime cabinet minister who became prime minister in 1957. With China turning communist in 1949, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, and deepening nuclear confrontation during the Cold War, when the occupation ended in 1952 the United States needed Japan firmly within its sphere. Ironically, war on the Korean peninsula, just five years earlier a Japanese possession, had been vital for postwar Japan’s economic recovery. By 1956, the government felt bold enough to announce in a white paper that the postwar was over (“*Mohaya sengo de wa nai*”) as Japan entered its period of high economic growth. Seven decades later, however, with numerous American military bases still in Japan, a domestic “culture war” over the meanings of the conflict for Japanese, ongoing territorial disputes with China, South Korea, and Russia, and often fractious relations with Asian neighbors over unresolved war responsibility issues, Japan still refers to being in its postwar era.⁷¹ As alluded to in this chapter, this is down to the intractable problem of forging histories/memories of the conflict that would allow the war to “become history” and be consigned to Asia’s past, rather than remaining stuck, as it is, in Asia’s geopolitical present.

Notes

- 1 S. Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931–1945*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 143.
- 2 See the chapters by Carlson, Mulready-Stone, and Frank, this volume.
- 3 Prominent scholars either using the term or drawing on its insights include Eguchi Keiichi, Ienaga Saburō, and Yoshida Yutaka. For a critique of this term, see B. Uchiyama, *Japan’s Carnival War: Mass Culture on the Home Front, 1937–1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 5–7.
- 4 F. Hayashi, *Daitōa sensō kōteiron (In Defense of the Great East Asia War)*, Tokyo: Chūkō Bunko, 2014. Hayashi’s book was originally published in two volumes in 1964 and 1965. Ienaga comments: “Although the book may be dismissed as stupid and unscholarly, a ghost from the militarist 1930s and 1940s appearing in Japan’s bookstores in the 1960s was significant.” Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931–1945*, p. 253. The book remains in print to this day as a seminal work within nationalist history.
- 5 D-Y. Ku, *Korea Under Colonialism: The March First Movement and Anglo-Japanese Relations*, Seoul: Seoul Computer Press, 1985, p. 19.
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- 16 K.J. Ruoff, *Imperial Japan at its Zenith: The Wartime Celebration of the Empire's 2,600th Anniversary*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010, p. 148; Morris-Suzuki, "Migrants, Subjects, Citizens," p. 3.
- 17 Ruoff, *Zenith*; Uchiyama, *Japan's Carnival War*.
- 18 T. Kobayashi (trans. Ž. Cipriš.), *The Crab Cannery Ship and Other Novels of Struggle*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.
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