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NATIONAL IDENTITY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY
AND HISTORY WARS IN EAST ASIA

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Abstract: *The article addresses the phenomenon of “history wars” between China and the Republic of Korea, on the one side, and Japan, on the other, which broke out after the cold war around the historical interpretation of Japan’s expansionist policy on the mainland, especially in the period of WWII. The aim of the article is to examine the origin, the ethical and the political underpinnings of “history wars”, specifically in the context of collective memories of WWII and the national identities in the three countries.*

While South Korea and China perceive the period of Japan’s imperialist expansion in the 20th century through the dualistic prism of the relationship between the victim and the criminal, in Japan the policy on the mainland, although considered to be “erroneous”, is not subject to unconditional condemnation on the grounds that at that time all the imperialist states acted the same way. Besides, the discourse of victimhood based on war sufferings of the Japanese people is in conflict with the wounded feelings of the East Asian nations.

The countries of East Asia continue to rely on collective memories of war for the construction of national identities. Each country’s understanding of war history involves a considerable component of traumatic consciousness. The article articulates the role of patriotic education and the policy of creating museums, historical memorials in the three countries in conducting “history wars”. The authors insist that the interplay of domestic discourse and international memory politics has become a durable source of paramount tension in the international relations of the region.

Keywords: East Asia, national identity, history wars, historical memory, cultural trauma, victimhood, Yasukuni Shrine, Nanjing massacre, comfort women.

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After the end of cold war the rise of nationalism in East Asia was accompanied by growing conflict among East Asian nations over the issues of historical past. Differences in views about shared historical past, along with other contradictions, have led to “history wars”, which manifested itself in disagreements on interpretations of the past events, mutual accusations and demands for apologies [Duus, 2017, p. 10–11].

Tension in relations between the PRC and the Republic of Korea with Japan started to grow especially in the 2010s, when the generational change entailed a renewal of the socio-political discourse around the war history issues. The new generation of leaders who came to power in these countries after the end of cold war began to advocate a revision of the predominant historical narratives and the establishment of more “nationalistic” visions of history that would allow strengthening their legitimacy and increasing support ratings among the electorate.

Generally speaking, “history wars” are disputes not so much about the facts of the past, but about what should become part of historical narratives, how should specific events be called and evaluated, and what messages should these narratives bring to current generations. The problem is thus not in the past historical events *per se*, no matter how hard and complex they are, but in their interpretation.

In historical narratives, a key role is played by the policy of “saving face”, which makes compromise and “non-standard” thinking much more difficult. In the traditional Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures, the emphasis on “saving face” prioritizes formal ritual in typical social interactions. Problems in relations between Japan and its neighbors, including those related to different historical narratives, can partially be explained by the unrealized “face expectations” which are apparently one of the reasons for the lack of trust between the countries of the region [Moore, 2010, p. 297–298].

The persistency of conflict around history issues between China, Japan, and Korea is often explained by the realistic logic, which addresses current changes in the regional balance of power that give birth to growing military-political rivalry. However, within the framework of the constructivist logic, struggle evolves not between states, but between their identities [Li, 2018, p. 48]. Countries perceive the partner’s efforts to create its national identity as a challenge to their own identities and mobilize historical knowledge to justify their “sovereignty” over the conflict-prone past. Thus, conflict arises from the struggle of identities on the level of national consciousness.

A strong point of contention lies in fundamental differences in the historical narratives of all the three countries, where a wary and sometimes hostile attitude towards each other prevails. The arsenal of painful or tragic events that can be interpreted as offence of national pride is quite wide, and a plenty of them can be used to justify certain political statement or accusation. The preservation of deep and painful memories of the past on the level of mass consciousness generates paramount tension in the mutual relations between Japan, China and Korea.

This paper addresses a specific aspect of “history wars”, related to confrontational relations between China and the Republic of Korea, on the one side, and Japan, on the other side, over the controversial history of the first half of the 20th century, namely, Japan’s expansionist policy on the mainland, especially in the period of WWII. The aim of this article is to examine the origin, the moral and the political underpinnings of “history wars”, specifically in the context of the collective memories of WWII and the national identities in the three countries.

CULTURAL TRAUMA AND REQUEST FOR APOLOGY

Each nation forms its own idea of the historical past. In other words, historical narratives are the product of nation’s “historical optics”. The British historian R.G. Collingwood insisted that every history is written from the point of view of a particular present [Collingwood, 1946, p. 282–302]. Thus, every new generation writes its own history, based on its own experience and its own “historical optics”.

With regard to East Asia, it is relevant in this connection to note the seemingly paradoxical fact that the perception of “historical truth” changed along with generational shifts. In the first postwar

decades, when numerous witnesses of the Japanese militarist rule were alive, the anti-Japanese rhetoric was not in wide use both in Beijing and Seoul. Emotions based on the dreadful memory of recent historical past were muted for the sake of political expedience. In Communist China of the 1950s–1960s, criticism of Japan and even a reminder of the sufferings by the Chinese people were considered “tactless”. The reason for Beijing’s unwillingness to additionally annoy Tokyo was that the PRC pursued the goal of breaking out of diplomatic isolation and gaining recognition from Western countries, including Japan. Besides, in the paradigm of communist ideology, there prevailed the idea of dividing responsibility between the people and the ruling authorities. According to this view, the Japanese were themselves a victim of a relatively small clique of militarists, so it was improper to blame the entire people for crimes. This idea was reproduced in the speech by Hu Jintao at a meeting marking the 60th anniversary of the Victory on September 3, 2005. Hu stressed that “it was only a small group of Japanese militarists who planned and launched the war” and that “many Japanese from all walks of life faced squarely the historical fact that Japanese militarists had launched the war of aggression against foreign countries and strongly denounced the atrocities Japanese aggressors had committed in China” [Hu Jintao, 2005].

Self-restraint in the criticism of Japan in the cold war period was designed to create a favorable impression of Communist China in Japan and promote “people’s diplomacy” between the two nations in the absence of official relations [He, 2007, p. 47]. Besides, Mao Zedong explained that only the Japanese invasion made it possible to build a broad united front and mobilize the masses (he used the word *thoroughgoing political mobilization*) [Mao Tse-tung, 1938]. In 1972 Mao Zedong even rebuked an apology from the Japanese prime minister Tanaka for the invasion and instead thanked him for Japan’s actions as it “destroyed the Kuomintang” and helped the Communist Party come to power [Yi, 2017, p. 32].

In the Republic of Korea, criticism of Japan during the period of authoritarian regimes in the 1960s and 1980s was not welcome for the reason that the country was in a desperate need for Japan’s economic assistance. The democratization of the country in the late 1980s and the growth of its economy made it possible for South Korea to feel more confident, so the new vision of the history of WWII was now required as a leverage in Seoul’s relations with Tokyo.

Tension around the issues of history as a serious international problem sparked only in the first decade of the 21st century, when the socio-political discourse in China and South Korea changed due to generational and political shifts, as well as the changes of political leaderships. New leaders tried to take advantage of the problems of the historical past for achieving political dividends¹. Seeking new ideological pillars for supporting their domestic legitimacy, they tried to redefine historical narratives and turned to a more distinct anti-Japanese rhetoric. After 1980s, i.e. in the post-reform period, the new memory of the war focused on patriotic narrative of heroic resistance and put the emphasis on Japanese atrocities [Coble, 2007].

According to South Korean researchers Ja-hyun Chun and Young Chul Cho, South Korea and China perceive the period of Japan’s imperialist expansion to the mainland through the dualistic prism of the relationship between the victim and the criminal [Ja-hyun Chun, Young Chul Cho, 2016, p. 95]. This view has clear moral dividing lines: Korea and China are the victims, and Japan is the perpetrator. From this perspective, the defeat of China by Japan in 1895 and the subsequent annexation of Taiwan, the annexation of Korea in 1910, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and China in 1937, and other facts of Japanese aggressive behavior on the mainland are evidence

¹ This was confirmed by the deliberately anti-Japanese line of the President of the Republic of Korea, Park Geun-hye, who came to power in 2012. She had to demonstrate an ostentatious rigidity towards Japan in order to get rid of the label of the daughter of a “traitor” (her father, Park Jung-hee, signed a treaty with Japan in 1965, which was later perceived by the South Korean public as humiliating).

of Japan's consistent imperialist policy. At the same time, the Nanking massacre and the biological and chemical experiments of the Japanese detachment 731 are considered as state crimes against humanity. It should be noted that Beijing and Seoul hold the view that since the Tokyo Tribunal was organized by America and its allies, it did not become a real trial of war criminals, focusing on Japanese aggression against the West, not the Asian countries. Therefore, the Chinese and Korean "historical optics" were not recognized and not reflected in the decisions of the Tokyo Tribunal.

Meanwhile, in Japan since the return of Abe to the Prime-ministerial position in 2012, the conservative "historical optics" that dominates in the official discourse² is not dyadic with its Asian neighbours³. Rather, Japan understands its military past through the prism of its relations with the West, especially with the United States. From this perspective, Japan fought for its independence against the encroachments of Western imperialism, seeking equality with the West, and although it hurt the Asian neighbors, its behavior was no worse than that of any other colonial power. In the interests of national survival Japan had no choice but to catch up with the West and become part of it through accelerated modernization, accepting the rules of the epoch. Subsequently, modernized Japan attempted to defend its national interests, liberate Asia from Western imperialism and create a Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere. While Japan's decision to fight the United States was a disastrous mistake, its military expansion into East Asia is not subject to unconditional condemnation on the grounds that at that time all the imperialist states acted the same way. According to M. Tsujita, although the wartime period was extraordinary in its extreme form of totalitarianism, Japan fundamentally remained consistent with its ambition to be equal with world powers and to enhance the status of Japan in the eyes of other nations around the world [Tsujita, 2009, p. 189].

In such "historical optics" there is practically no space for the Asian peoples who suffered from the Japanese aggression. East Asia was not a subject of international politics, but rather an additional element in Japan's relations with the West. After the war, many Japanese held the view that they were defeated by the Americans, and not at all by the Asian nations. In other words, Japan's place and role in World War II is considered mostly in the paradigm of its conflict with the West over regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, Japan's repeated apologies to its Asian neighbors for the sufferings caused to them are psychologically perceived not as repentance for what it has done, but as an acceptance of the inevitable for the losing side reality, in which its guilt is determined by the "justice" established by the Western winners. This logic allows Japan feeling its moral rightness.

Special attention in this view is drawn to the last year and a half of World War II, when the territory of Japan was subjected to massive air strikes by the United States, and when the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the post-war Japan a national discourse of victimhood emerged, in which the Japanese people were the victims of the militaristic clique, and by their suffering on the final stage of war they washed away their historical guilt for the "past mistakes". The formation of this view in Japan was facilitated by the decisions of the Tokyo Tribunal, which placed responsibility for the outbreak of war and the war crimes on the Japanese military and political leadership, absolving from responsibility the Japanese citizens who were deceived by their leaders. Besides, Tokyo Tribunal is frequently called "the justice of the victors", demonstrating its low moral authority among the Japanese [Jansen, 2000, p. 673].

² Conservative views on Japan's war history are outlined in Shinzo Abe's *Utsukushii kune-e* ("Towards a Beautiful Country", see: [Abe, 2006]). For a detailed analysis on these views see [Streltsov, 2020(2), p. 78–97].

³ The author deliberately avoids mentioning the narrative of "the progressive tradition" in Japan, as this tradition does not have a sounded effect on Tokyo's policy towards its mainland neighbours. In the opinion of "progressives", the civilian population suffered enormous losses from the war, including the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It should be noted that the "progressives" consider primarily the ordinary Japanese, not other Asian peoples, as the main victims of the militaristic regime [Dian, 2015, p. 369].

The victimized mentality gave rise to a comfortable feeling of self-pity among the Japanese, weakening the feeling of guilt and hindering the search for the “historical truth”. Historical memory is focused primarily on the sufferings of the Japanese people, not their Asian neighbors. The discourse of victimhood shaped a basis for the pacifist consensus in the post-war Japanese society. The idea that all wars are bad and that everyone suffers from their consequences allows avoiding a dividing line between the aggressor and the victim. According to Ja-hyun Chun and Young Chul Cho, Japanese pacifism is “a high-minded way to dull the pain of historical guilt” and even a way to “turn national guilt into a virtue” [Ja-hyun Chun, Young Chul Cho, 2016, p. 97].

The victimized historical memory of Japan is in conflict with the victimization complex of the East Asian peoples. It is this interplay of domestic discourse and international memory politics that generates Japan’s “history wars” with its neighbours. Obviously, Japan’s “historical optics” is almost impossible to reconcile with the historical views of Korea and China, according to which Japan is the culprit of state-sanctioned crimes.

It is worth noting that in the conflict of historical narratives, the main criterion in assessing the appropriateness of Japan’s behavior by the East Asian nations lies in ethical, not in legal categories. It is interesting to recall that it was from a moral standpoint that Japan’s actions were evaluated in the Cairo Declaration of 1943, signed by the U.S., Britain and China, which states that Japan should be expelled from the territories “she has taken by violence and greed”⁴.

Through the eyes of Seoul and Beijing, the centrality of moral responsibility in the assessment of Japan’s militaristic policy necessitates for Japan to unequivocally condemn its past actions and sincerely apologize to its Asian neighbours in a form that should satisfy its victims.

Generally speaking, an apology requires both parties to agree that a misdemeanor was committed, and the party who committed the misdemeanor admits that it did so. As Stanford University’s prof. P. Duus put it, an apology establishes a moral hierarchy in which the aggrieved victim is morally superior and the perpetrating victimizer morally inferior. The injured party may regard the apology as insincere, insufficient, or unsupported by actions and, therefore, not subject to satisfaction. In this case, the “apology diplomacy” leads not to reconciliation, but to even a greater confrontation, creating a downward spiral where the victim insists on more and more apologies, and the apologizer feels resentful that he is constantly forced to do what he has already done over and over again [Duus, 2017, p. 2–3]. For this reason, repeated attempts by the Japanese leadership to solve the problems of the historical past in relations with its neighbours by formally expressing apologies have proved fruitless [Streltsov, 2020(1), p. 29–61].

PATRIOTIC EDUCATION AND HISTORICAL MEMORIALS

In early 1990s the Chinese government launched a patriotic education campaign that emphasized the CCP’s historical role in combatting the imperialism of foreign powers. This campaign was a reaction to the growing discontent among the Chinese youth with the progress of political reforms in the country, which became evident in the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 [Zhao Suisheng, 1998, p. 287–302]. The ruling party led by Deng Xiaoping began to pay special attention to strengthening the patriotic education of the masses with a strong nationalist component, which was necessary during the crisis of socialist ideology after the start of reforms [Perminova, 2020, p. 3].

The patriotic education campaign was initially not aimed at promoting anti-Japanese sentiment among the masses. Rather, it was intended as a way to strengthen popular support for the party and its goals of economic development, national unity and strong statehood [Reilly, 2011, p. 471]. But gradually the anti-Japanese vector of this campaign was becoming more and more obvious.

⁴ Cairo Communiqué. https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/shiryō/01/002_46/002_46tx.html (accessed: 25.04. 2021).

The period of Japanese military occupation was incorporated into the narrative of the “century of humiliation”, which refers to the period from the end of the Opium War in 1839 to the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. War against Japan was thus presented in the broader context of the century-and-a-half old war struggle with the liberal West, from which China emerged victorious in 1949 [Fitzgerald, 2015]. China constructed its national identity by appealing to the threat of a repeat of the period of national humiliation, declaring Japan as the main source of such a threat. The new history books proclaimed not the Kuomintang, as it had previously been, but the Japanese militarism as the main enemy in the struggle for national liberation. Compared to the earlier narratives which had considered the “war of the anti-Japanese resistance” as only an episode in the liberation struggle of the Chinese people, this resistance was specifically highlighted as the main event of WWII for China. The “Japanese imperialist aggressors” were declared the main villains, replacing the imperialist powers of the West and the “national traitors”. Much more attention was paid to the Nanking incident and other atrocities of the Japanese military.

Special efforts were devoted by the government of the PRC to creating historical memorials. Visiting these mnemonic memorials has become a regular part of secondary school curriculums. By the mid-1990s, a network of 100 historical memorials was organized – battlefields, memorial halls, museums, and monuments. Twenty of which were dedicated to the war of the anti-Japanese resistance [Duus, 2017, p. 10].

The largest among them are the Memorial Hall of the People’s War of Resistance against Japan (*Zhongguo renmin kang Ri zhanzheng jinianguan*), the Memorial to the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre by the Japanese invaders (*QinHua Rijun Nanjing datusha yunan tongbao jinianguan*), the Exhibition Hall of the Crimes of the Imperial Japanese Army Unit 731 (*QinHua Rijun di qisanyao budui zuizheng chenlieguan*), and the Museum of the History of September 18 (*Jiuyiba lishi bowuguan*). All of them were created in the 1980s and 1990s. The establishment of these memorial objects reflected an ideological transition in the education of the masses, the main focus of which was shifted from criticism of the Kuomintang, where the class struggle plays a key role, to patriotic education, in which the main focus was put on the crimes of the Japanese militarists in China.

In 1985, the Nanjing Historical Memorial, dedicated to the memory of the victims of the “Nanjing Massacre” of 1937, was opened. Its motto was the slogan “Remember history”. Oblivion of historical events has come equated with treachery. Since the 1990s, the museum has been used as a model in the patriotic education campaign run by the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China.

In Wanping, near the famous Lugou Bridge (known in the West as the “Marco Polo Bridge”), where the new Sino-Japanese war broke out in May 1937, there is a Memorial Hall of the People’s War of Resistance against Japan. The hall, dedicated to the atrocities of the Japanese army, contains a diorama including three-dimensional scene with the bloodied bodies of women and children in front of a large image of the battlefield, littered with corpses to the horizon.

Another example is the Museum of the History of September 18⁵, which was opened on this date in 1991 in commemoration of the “Mukden incident” – the sixty-years old events when the Japanese army invaded Manchuria. The exterior of the museum contains a huge sculpture in the form of an open calendar, on which the date of September 18 is inscribed. At the back of the museum building, a huge bronze bell was installed with four Chinese characters *Wuwang Guochi* (勿忘國耻), which means “Never forget the national humiliation”. Not far from the bell lies a huge marble stone with the dictum of the President of the People’s Republic of China Jiang Zemin “Never forget September 18”. The memorial particularly appeals to the feelings of national pride of the Chinese. The architect’s idea is that future generations should not forget September 18th as the date representing the start of a new stage in the history of “national humiliation”.

⁵ www.918museum.org.cn (accessed: 25.04. 2021).

Since the 2000s, the idea of shared memory of the anti-Japanese resistance has been used to establish historical ties between Taiwan, Hong Kong and the mainland, and thus draw attention to their shared identity and political destiny. For example, in the fall of 2005, the National Museum of China put on a highly publicized exhibition dedicated to the anti-Japanese resistance struggle of Taiwanese compatriots [Denton, 2007].

The “anti-Japanese” element of historical education in the PRC has been significantly intensified after the return to power in Japan in 2012 of the cabinets of Shinzo Abe, who is considered in China to be “revisionist”. Japan’s authorities were sharply blamed for whitewashing their own dark past. When Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China declared two new anti-Japanese national holidays (the commemoration of the Nanjing incident and Victory Day over Japan). In addition to the official ceremonies, a number of creative events were launched to update the historical memory of the period of Japanese aggression. For example, the social media department of the Chinese state-run newspaper “People’s Daily” introduced in 2014 an online game called “Shoot the Devils”, which invites players to remember history “by shooting the Japanese devils” – 14 Japanese Class A war criminals who received a guilty verdict at the Tokyo Tribunal. “The purpose is to expose the crimes of the Japanese invaders through the much-loved game form and make netizens remember history and cherish peace”⁶, its developers said. Another example was the “Shooting Japanese devils” amusement, held in honor of the 70th anniversary of the victory in the theme park of the city of Bizhou, Shandong Province: children could shoot with water pistols actors dressed in Japanese military uniforms of the 1930s⁷.

South Korea also pays great attention to patriotic education. The memorials pay tribute to various events and facts that testify to the humiliation of the Korean people during the Japanese colonial rule. Especially strong emotions are aroused in South Korea around the period of war of 1937–1945, when Tokyo repeatedly strengthened the line for the assimilation of Korea into the Japanese Empire. The campaign of patriotic education, which focuses on the liberation struggle against the Japanese invaders, continues to enjoy the official support from the government. This motif is in the center of the historical composition of the Independence Museum (the Independence Hall of Korea), which illustrates the main stages of the independence movement, including the March 1 Movement and the activities of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai. The exposition reflects Japan’s discriminatory policies against Koreans and various crimes committed by the Japanese authorities during the colonial rule, including the massacre of Koreans during the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and the suppression of anti-Japanese protests in Korea [Hong Kal, 2008].

Similar to China, in Korea the “history war” with Japan received a new impetus after 2012. In 2013, the Government of the Republic of Korea initiated the opening in Harbin of the memorial museum of Ahn Jung-geun, a Korean nationalist who assassinated Ito Hirobumi in 1909 [Rauhala, 2014]. At the International Manga Congress in France France’s Angoulême International Comics Festival in January 2014 a special exhibition of Korean wartime sex slave comics titled “Flowers that Never Wilt” was presented, featuring scenes of violence against innocent Korean women who were forced to satisfy the sexual needs of the Japanese military⁸.

It is noteworthy that the museums of the Republic of Korea and the People’s Republic of China have started to coordinate their work in order to more convincingly demonstrate the contribution of the two peoples to the fight against Japanese aggression. So, in January 2021, the Historical

⁶ <https://world.time.com/2014/02/28/japanese-war-criminals-targeted-in-online-game/> (accessed: 25.04.2021).

⁷ <https://shanghaiist.com/2015/07/06/kids-shoot-down-japanese-devils-shandong-theme-park/amp/> (accessed: 25.04.2021).

⁸ Special Korean comics exhibition “Flowers that Never Wilt” at the 2014 Angoulême International Comics Festival. KBS World, 2014, March 4. http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=culture&id=&board_seq=12930&page=4&board_code=trendkorea (accessed: 25.04.2021).

Museum in Cheonan (ROK) announced its intention to create a memorial hall in honor of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992, which would reflect the joint struggle of the Korean and Chinese peoples against Japanese aggression before and during World War II [Ji Yuqiao, 2021].

The practice of patriotic education through historical memorials is widely used in Japan, where more than 220 museums touch upon the wars that the country fought between 1868 and 1945. The variety of expositions and different methods of their presentation suggest that the Japanese society is still in search of a consensus on the issues of war history [Yoshida, 2007].

The most famous historical complex, which is considered an expression of right-wing nationalist views on war history, is the Yushukan Museum, created at the Yasukuni Shinto Shrine. The shrine houses the souls of Japanese soldiers and civilians who died in past wars. The official website of the shrine states that the souls of all people who rest in it are equal and are revered as respected deities, regardless of their rank or social standing, and that the souls of those who were labeled war criminals and executed after being tried by the Allies are also among the venerated⁹.

The practice of visiting the shrine by acting prime ministers, which began in 1951, numbered 64 such visits by 2013 [Lewentowicz, 2013, p. 2]. Japanese politicians, including those in the rank of member of cabinet, continue to visit the shrine quite regularly. For example, on August 15, 2020, on the anniversary of the end of the war, four members of Abe cabinet visited the shrine for the first time in four years. From the point of view of Japanese prime ministers, visits to the shrine are nothing more than a tribute to the memory of hardships and sorrows of the past war, which has nothing to do with honoring the past “imperial glory” [Tamaki, 2009]. Through the eyes of China and the Republic of Korea, visiting the shrine by the head of cabinet is actually equivalent to officially honoring war criminals, as well as legitimizing the crimes they committed. These countries believe that by their visits Japanese prime ministers negate the repeated apologies made by Japan to the peoples of Korea and China.

The exposition of the Yushukan Museum is largely aimed at embellishing the military past of Japan, romanticizing the actions committed by the Japanese military, including those on the mainland. The museum’s educational mission is to foster a sense of lost pride in the country’s “glorious” history, including the wars waged by Japan in the recent past [Hong Kal, 2008].

Other Japanese historic museums do not take such an openly apologetic position. In keeping with the post-war pacifist tradition, the museums generally assess Japanese colonial expansion and the aggressive course of the Japanese political leadership from the critical angle. However, by the end of the 1990s, a remarkable shift had occurred in the ideological and political underpinning of the newly created museums: they began to avoid unambiguous assessment of the events of the past. A symbolic event was the situation with the first national peace memorial, which was eventually named the Showa Era Museum and opened in 1999¹⁰. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare originally intended to create a memorial in commemoration of 3.5 million Japanese who died during the war. However, the Communist and Socialist Parties of Japan insisted that the memorial should recognize the damage caused by the Japanese empire to other Asian countries. The result was a compromise: the new museum memorialized the suffering of all Japanese, both during and immediately after the war, but displayed artifacts with minimal commentary. At the same time, the collection of museum documents and the museum’s library present a variety of points of view on the war: from the version that the war contributed to the national liberation of Asia, to its critical interpretation, based on a detailed description and unequivocal condemnation of the atrocities of the Japanese military.

⁹ <https://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/about/history.html> (accessed: 25.04.2021).

¹⁰ <http://www.showakan.go.jp> (accessed: 25.04.2021).

The countries of East Asia continue to rely on collective memories of war for the construction of national identities. Each country's understanding of war history, as can be seen from this paper, involves a considerable component of traumatic consciousness. National trauma in South Korea and China is rooted in the cruel legacy of war, where Japan is declared the main culprit of the people's sufferings, so the Japanese leaders are pressed to apologize again and again. Japan on its side relies on the discourse of victimhood and feels an "apology fatigue", clearly expressing its reluctance to continue this practice. For example, prime minister Shinzo Abe, delivering an address marking the 70th anniversary of World War II's end for Japan in August, 2015, said he doesn't want future generations to be "predestined to apologize" for the war¹¹.

Since historical issues are central to the definition of national identity, "history wars" in East Asia are likely to continue in the foreseeable future, with practically no chance for final resolution. The main danger of history wars is that they feed stereotypes that can escalate into ethnic hatred with mutual demonization of the warring parties. Thus, history wars will definitely remain one of the most fundamental obstacles to expanding cooperation in East Asia.

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