

Beyond Eurocentric Curricula: Historical Background

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I. Views on World War II

Since we adopted the term of “**Asia Pacific War (1931-1945)**” for our Resource Guide for Teachers (*Human Rights in the Asia Pacific 1931-1945: Social Responsibility and Global Citizenship*. .BC Ministry of Education, Victoria, 2001.), I would like to make a brief comment on this concept: It is commonly assumed that WWII lasted from 1939 to 1945, i.e., **World War II** started with Nazi Germany's invasion in Poland in 1939 and lasted until 1945. When we talk about World War II, we usually visualize the war theatre in Europe - the fall of France, battle of Britain, Normandy, Stalingrad, etc. However, different from World War I, the war theatre became world-wide to include Asia and Africa. The nature of the war became more complex as the players were not only imperialist powers, but also the Soviet Union, and various peoples struggling for liberation and independence.

A common term describing the World War II in Asia has been the "**Pacific War**". With this term the conflict between Japan and the US, Britain, France and Netherlands has been more emphasized and the war with China is less emphasized.

During the war the Japanese government and military called it "**Great East Asian War**." Japan's proclaimed war aim was to liberate Asian peoples from the yoke of the Euro-American imperialism and to establish the so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which was a thinly disguised Japanese colonial empire. Under this slogan Japan tried to recruit the co-operation of peoples they had occupied in order to achieve a monopoly for exploitation of the resources in their lands and to suppress nationalist liberation movements. .

Chinese Scholars' Discussion: In the mid-1950's there was an interesting discussion among Chinese historians about the origin and characteristics of WWII. Chinese historians were critical of the Euro-centric understanding of the war. Instead, standing on a global point of view, they emphasized the struggle of the Chinese people engaging in a long-term anti-Japanese campaign, as China was a main war theatre along with the Soviet Union.

Regarding the origin of WWII, in contrast with the prevailing view of September 1939 as the beginning, they presented different views: either September 1931 (Japanese invasion of Manchuria), 1935-1937 (Italy's invasion in Ethiopia, Germany's armed intervention in Spain, Japan's full scale invasion in China) or July 7, 1937 (Marco Polo Incident). As characteristics of the war they emphasized the world wide anti-fascist popular struggles. These arguments were presented from the Chinese point of view as criticism of and independent from the interpretations of the war from the cold war complex, either critical

or apologetic of the US and/or Soviet diplomacy relating to the war.*

*Takashi Saito. *Dainiji sekaitaisen zenshi kenkyu* (A Study of Pre-History of World War II.) Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1965, pp.302ff. Shinichi Arai. *Dainiji sekai taisen* (Second World War) , Univ. Tokyo Press, 1973. pp.9-10.

Now we can see that the concept of Asia Pacific War is closely connected with the Chinese and other Asian people's struggles of liberation.

In recent years, many scholars accepted the term **Asia Pacific War** instead of **Pacific War** for the period of armed conflicts starting with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. However, under the concept of Asia Pacific War, we are covering the period starting from the Manchurian Incident of 1931 considering the continuous military clashes between Japan and China

Even some Japanese military leaders in the early 1940's viewed the events starting from the Manchurian Incident in 1931, as a series of Japan's armed clashes with other nations, inseparable and continuous, all part of the same war. At the International Military Tribunal, Japan's aggression was regarded as starting in 1928 when Chan Tso-lin, military governor of Manchuria, was assassinated by the Japanese military.

Incident vs. War

It is interesting to note that in the 1930's, when the Japanese government and military commenced their acts of aggression in China, they called these "**incidents**" rather than acts of war. By doing so they considered themselves no longer bound by recognized international rules of war. This became a pretext for the atrocious treatment of POWs.

In 1942, Tojo, as the Minister of Army, spoke to the commanders of POW camps: "In Japan, we have our own ideology concerning POWs, which should naturally make their treatment more or less different from that in Europe and America... you must not allow the prisoners to lie idle doing nothing but eating freely for even a single day." Further, the treatment of POWs was utilized to promote racist- colonialism principles:

The Japanese military preferred to assign Koreans and Taiwanese, people from colonies, to perform lower level duties such as guards in newly set-up POW comps: "In order to make a good influence on colonial rule, we intend to induce these peoples to be conscious that it is a distinct honor for them to participate in the construction of the Greater East Asia as a member of the Imperial Army and a loyal subject of the Emperor.".*

*Shinichi Arai, "Japan's War Aims and Racism," *Canadian Conference on Preventing Crimes Against Humanity*, March 21, 2003, Vancouver, BC..

II. International Military Tribunal (1946-1948) - the lack of attention to Asia

Events in Asia were barely recognized in the deliberations of the US-led International Military Tribunal held in Tokyo. Even though 11 nations of the Far Eastern Commission

in charge of the occupation of Japan, including Canada, were involved with and represented in the tribunal, all the judges including presiding judge and chief prosecutor were appointed by the SCAP, i.e., Douglas McArthur. Among them there were only three Asian countries, namely, the Republic of China (Kuomintang), Philippines and India. The rest were Britain, the US., France, Netherlands, Soviet Union, Austria, New Zealand and Canada. With this constitution of judges and prosecutors, it may have been inevitable that damages suffered by peoples in the Asia Pacific region were not seriously looked into. For example, military sexual slavery was not investigated in Tokyo. .

Because of the dominant position of the US in this Tribunal, no one was prosecuted for the notorious biological warfare because of the immunity granted to the officers of Unit 731 as the US was more interested in obtaining the information rather than in prosecuting the perpetrators. Also, the Emperor was not prosecuted.

Lack of attention to crimes against humanity

It is interesting to note that among 25 defendants who were found guilty in Tokyo, there was no one charged with "crimes against humanity." Even though Iwane Matsui, Commander of the South China Army, received a death sentence for his responsibility for the Nanking Massacre, he was found guilty not for crimes against humanity, but for negligence, i.e., not preventing conventional war crimes.

"Crimes against humanity" include such inhuman acts as murder, extermination, enslavement and deportation against civilians regardless of their nationality before and during the war. Considering the nature of these crimes, many victims were "Japanese nationals" from former Japanese colonies. Inhumane abduction and forced labor suffered by peoples in Korea and Taiwan were not prosecuted at the tribunal.

Early termination of the tribunal.

Compared with the prosecution of war criminals in Germany, the military tribunal in Tokyo was terminated after the execution of seven major war criminals in 1948. As a result 17 A class defendants were released without a trial. Nobusuke Kishi was among them, he later became the Prime Minister. In Germany the military tribunals continued. Further, many crimes against humanity were tried at the German Criminal Court.*

*Shinichi Arai, *Senso sekinin ron* (On War Responsibility), Iwanami-shoten, 1995, pp. 163ff.

For the past 10 years there have been many civil lawsuits filed at the Japanese courts by the victims of crimes against humanity. If the crimes against humanity such as forced labor had been prosecuted at the international military tribunal, the claims by the victims from China and former colonies could have been more easily established.
