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The Arguments on War Experience in Postwar Japan and “Criticism of Victim Mentality”

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The starting point of the argument over “reconciliation” is probably to examine how the “memory of war” and war responsibilities have been discussed. Although “reconciliation” is often constructed through communication between those concerned or in the political negotiations between the nations concerned, the basis of the arguments on it should be “memories on violence” and “recognition of responsibility.” This paper examines how the “responsibility for violence (against Asian people)” and “criticism of victim mentality” have been discussed in postwar Japan and what the social background of the issues was.

The issue of “violence” and the Vietnam War

It is often pointed out that postwar Japan lacked the awareness of “responsibility for violence.” Nevertheless, in the late 1960s, the “responsibility for violence” was frequently argued. In particular, Makoto Oda’s “Nanshi no Shiso (the thought of miserable and meaningless death)” (1965) had a great impact.

In “Nanshi no Shiso” (published in *Tenbo* in January 1965), Oda emphasizes the necessity of recognizing *Nanshi* (miserable and meaningless death in war) rather than *Sange* (heroic and beautiful death in war). Oda, who spent his boyhood in the late war period, saw countless people burned in repeated air raids on Osaka. He could not understand why such charred death from air raids would contribute to achieving the “Ideal of the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” and serving the Emperor. For Oda, the death in the war was far from heroism and beauty.

Nevertheless, for Oda, war victims were not completely unrelated to “praise of war” or “violence (against Asian people).” *Nanshi* (miserable and meaningless death) of soldiers was closely related to harm and violence by them.

The modern history of Japan, which led to the “Defeat” in 1945, was the history in which people were killed, burned, and robbed of things after they killed, burned, and robbed other people of things. In its history, the Japanese were not just victims. Obviously, they were also perpetrators. It is not true that they were both victims and perpetrators. They became perpetrators because they were victims. This will easily become apparent if you think about soldiers who

were called up and sent to the front. They were victims from their points of view, but what did they do in the battlefields? They shot guns and killed “Chinese people.” In this meaning, they were undoubtedly perpetrators. They became perpetrators (Oda, 2008: 306).

Oda argued how the experience of “victim” drove the “harm” violence.

We can see the influence of the Vietnam War behind this argument. The US bombing of North Vietnam was reported daily in newspapers and TV news in Japan. It reminded Japanese people that the USA had repeatedly conducted air raids against Japan 20 years ago. Meanwhile, Sasebo and Okinawa served as rear bases for US troops to attack Vietnam. This led to the recognition of not only Japan’s postwar cooperation with the war but also the former Japan’s “violence against Asian people.” At the same time, some topics began to be discussed, such as the Japanese Military’s responsibility for “mass suicide” in the Battle of Okinawa and prewar Japan’s colonialism, which produced Korean A-bomb survivors.

War experience and the struggle between two generations

However, we should not ignore the fact that such issue of “violence” sometimes had the function of blocking the narrative of the mid-war generation’s experiences.

The 1960s was a period when the mid-war generation (aged about 20 years at the end of the war) reached middle age and had a social influence. In the Nihon Senbotsu Gakusei Kinenkai (Japan Memorial Society for the Students Killed in the War), which led the anti-war/peace movement in the first half of the postwar period, Shunsuke Tsurumi, Takeshi Yasuda, Kiyoshi Watanabe, Bunso Hashikawa, and other members of the mid-war generation frequently argued their war experience.

They often focused on their war experience itself and argued their complex feelings such as remorse, shame, hatred, and anger. They refused not only to romanticize the war dead through comfortable stories but also utilize the war dead and the war experience for the “anti-war” ideology. Takeshi Yasuda¹, in particular, had the strong opinion that the war dead should not be worshiped or honored at Yasukuni Shrine and, at the same time, disliked the tendency of conveniently using the war dead for the anti-war movement (Yasuda, 1963, 1969). As social movements, such as the 1960 “Anpo” Struggle (the struggle over Japan-US Security Treaty in 1960) and the movement against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, became larger, arguments on war experiences were often linked to these political issues. The antipathy for this linkage was clearly seen in the mid-war generation.

But this attitude of the mid-war generation aroused the younger generation’s antagonism. Since the younger generation played a main part in anti-war movements and student political movements, they often felt that the mid-war generation’s attitude was apparently negative against their movements.

In addition, it seemed to them that the mid-war generation ignored the arguments of the younger generation, who did not have war experience. Whether one has war experience or not often leads to hierarchy in discussion. Even if the younger generation had a strong interest in “war,” it seemed to the mid-war generation that the younger generation’s argument was nothing more than one which lacked the base of experience.

Apart from whether the mid-war generation thought so or not, the younger generation often felt that the mid-war generation denied their argument only because they did not have war experience. Actually, in the symposiums and other meetings of Nihon Senbotsu Gakusei Kinenkai in the 1960s, the younger generation showed their anger over the attitude of the mid-war generation, and the controversies between both generations were intense (Fukuma, 2009).

This was the one of the reasons why the agenda of “violence (against Asian people)” and “criticism of victim mentality” became large. The younger generation often criticized that the mid-war generation stayed in “victim mentality.” Certainly, the younger generation did not have war experience. However, this also meant that they did not have the experience of committing war crimes. Whether the mid-war generation directly used violence against Asian people or not, the wartime generation was a member of the former Japanese Military, which committed various violence. In terms of “responsibility for violence,” the younger generation without battlefield experience was able to take a higher position than the mid-war generation with war experience.

However, it cannot be said that the argument of the mid-war generation was confined to “victim mentality.” Shunsuke Tsurumi and Kiyoshi Watanabe often argued the violence of Japanese soldiers against Asian people while referring to their war experiences. Takeshi Yasuda, admitting that the violence of the Japanese Army had existed, often talked about his remorse for his experience and anger over war. However, the younger generation criticized the “victim mentality” of the mid-war generation. In these controversies, the mid-war generation (especially Takeshi Yasuda) stuck to the war experience that could not be easily explained as if they ignored the argument of the younger generation.

It was not true that the mid-war generation did not discuss the “violence” after these controversies. Takeshi Yasuda rarely talked about his war experience in or after the 1970s (and the main topic of his articles changed to different themes, such as the tradition of popular art). Meanwhile, the former peasant soldier Kiyoshi Watanabe frequently argued the Emperor’s war responsibility in his books and at the meetings of Nihon Senbotsu Gakusei Kinenkai in or after the 1970s. He pursued not only the war responsibility of the Showa Emperor but also his own war responsibility, because he had spontaneously volunteered for the Navy to serve “His Majesty the Emperor.”

Furthermore, he also argued war crimes that he might have committed even if he did not actually do so. Since Watanabe served in the Navy, he never did violence to local people on the Chinese front and other battlefields. However, he said that he might

have done the same thing if he were in those battlefields (Watanabe, 1981, 2004). Watanabe and other members of the mid-war generation argued responsibility for not only the actual violence they had committed but also the violence they might have committed if they were in different places.

Questioning of the structure where the violence was considered “correct”

The “violence” of the Japanese Army and its soldiers was often argued in or after the 1980s. In the controversies on the war, such as the history textbook issue in 1982 (whether “expansion” or “invasion” into the continent), the issue of the Prime Minister’s official visit to Yasukuni Shrine, and the controversy on the Government of Japan’s official apology in 1995, some media denied the facts of the “violence” and praised the former Japanese Military. Meanwhile, other media criticized these opinions and focused on Japan’s “violence” and colonialism. The arguments of both sides became more and more active as the controversies over recognition on the war became heated up.

In other words, we can see a strong binary opposition between “violence” and “honoring” rather than “violence” and “victim.” The debate over the “war” was often heated up, but this led to the situation where people consumed only their favorite argument. It was probably true that the mutual understanding beyond their stance was made difficult by these controversies.

Nevertheless, to put it another way, it is undeniable that such controversies made active the arguments to examine the historical fact of the “violence.” It is often pointed out that “victim mentality” has been dominant in postwar Japan. However, an overemphasis on it may lead to the ignorance of various thoughts about the “(responsibility for) violence” that have emerged since the late 1960s. Moreover, it may lead to the difficulties of accumulating arguments while referring to the former discussions critically.

Rather, through the postwar history of arguments on the war (experience), we can see the significance of questioning how much we have understood the problem of the “violence” as our own. The issue of “violence” and “criticism of victim mentality” sometimes had the function of blocking the narrative of the mid-war generation’s experiences. Whether the younger generation intended to do so or not, it was logical that the younger generation (who did not have the experience of committing “war crimes”) blocked the utterances of the mid-war generation who had war experience (which might have some relation to “violence”). It gave an advantage to the younger generation in the discourse sphere on the war.

Nevertheless, the fact that the issue of Japanese violence against people in Okinawa and East Asia and Allied POWs has been argued (even if there are some limits) is significant. However, there seems to be little fear or doubt that we might have committed the same violence if we were in the same situation.

It may be easy to condemn the wartime violence from the point of view of postwar “correctness.” However, for the people who committed the wartime violence, it was not necessarily an “atrocious.” It might have been an “ordinary” action and even a “correct” action. If so, replacing one “correctness” with another “correctness” is not adequate.

How was “the situation where the wartime violence looked correct” constructed? What was the social mechanism that brought about such situation? To think about these questions deeply is probably the starting point of the debate over “responsibility.” In other words, it also means to ask oneself the following question — “if we are thrown into the same situation, can we affirm that we will never do the same violence?”

Needless to say, efforts to hear victims' indescribable suffering and understand the horror of violence should be continued. The responsibility of the postwar generation also has begun to be argued.

However, in addition to that, analyzing the “logic of perpetrators” where violence did not look like violence is probably important. It is often pointed out that the background of the wartime violence is closely related to reckless marches ordered by a commander (who strongly sought his promotion) and less importance placed on food supply. It suggests the disease structure of the former Japanese Military².

The fact that lower peasant soldiers were voluntarily engaged in plunder and violence in the battlefield and were “diligent in military service” was related to their poverty, economic inequality, and inferiority complex about low education in prewar Japan. Hence, it is necessary not only to pursue “correctness” but also to analyze the social structure (“military and society” or “society of military”) that led to the recognition that such “perpetration” was “correct.” If such problems are left ignored, it cannot be denied that the “correctness” that once produced violence may prevail again.

On thinking about “reconciliation”

These issues are probably important in considering “reconciliation.” Since “reconciliation” is based on communication between the victim and the perpetrator, imagining the absolute standards and solutions is difficult.

It is unlikely that all victims fully agree to the conditions for “reconciliation.” A sincere apology and compensation are essential to “reconciliation,” but it is difficult to make up for the victims' deaths and traumas. I do not have a good idea of how to solve these problems, but it is probably true that “how to build a society that does not lead to the same violence” is the starting point of the argument of “reconciliation.”

We should start with arguing why the violence was considered “correct,” rather than replacing one “correctness” with another “correctness.” Moreover, it may lead to not only the issue of the Asia-Pacific War but also that of the Vietnam War and other wars.

“Reconciliation” is often affected by diplomacy and domestic societies. Through various negotiations, a point of compromise may be found, but this is not probably a perfect solution. However, what we should do is to keep considering why “the violence

used to be considered correct.” This may not accomplish “reconciliation,” but there could be no “reconciliation” without considering it. I hope that these arguments will be further deepened as a basic approach toward reconciliation.

* This article is based on the report that I submitted to the conference “Challenge of Reconciliation Studies” (organized by the “Creation of Reconciliation Studies” project held at Waseda University on March 3–5, 2020), although I could not attend it because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ Yasuda, who was conscripted into the Japanese Army when he was a student at Sophia University, was exposed to severe violence in the Japanese Army and, at the same time, had a feeling of shame and remorse over his own action. He described his complex feelings in his *Senso Taiken* (1963).

² In addition, the units (the first and third regiments of the infantry, etc.) that had revolted against the Japanese government and army in the 2.26 incident (in 1936) were forced to “clear their reputation as rebels,” and even soldiers who were conscripted into the army after the incident were frequently ordered to “die for the nation.” Those soldiers who became desperate caused massive violence across mainland China.

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