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Japan's Grassroots Pacifism

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by Mari YAMAMOTO

Remembering the war in the Japanese way

Much English writing about pacifism and peace movements has focused on the ideas and activities of Europeans and Americans. While attention has been paid to Mohandas Gandhi, peace movements in other parts of the world have been largely ignored. Like most Western peace activists, however, Gandhi was an exceptional figure in Indian society, far from the political mainstream.

In contrast to most other societies, there has been a widely shared public consensus in Japan throughout most of the post-war years that the Japanese government should abide by the pacifistic guidelines decreed by its Constitution, which forbids Japan from waging wars or maintaining armed forces. This charter won approval ratings of 70-90 per cent in public opinion polls taken from the 1960s through the 1980s. These figures demonstrate that a wide sector of the general public in Japan, although not engaging in any political activities, shared pacifist views that are minority opinions in the rest of the world.

Few countries rival Japan in the extent and scope of grassroots peace movements. In Grassroots Pacifism in Post-War Japan: The rebirth of a nation. I seek to explain why pacifist sentiment flourished and analyze the significance of the vigorous peace activities staged by ordinary Japanese in the first 15 years following the end of World War II. The book traces the origins of pacifist thought that helped to mold popular attitudes throughout the postwar period. It?shows that the depth of feeling among Japanese about their war experience greatly influenced the nation's diplomatic and other policies. But the qualities unique to Japan’s grassroots pacifism also constrained the development of both peace movements and peace thought in later years. In this article, I examine the postwar Japanese peace movement/pacifist thought, both their weaknesses and achievements, and suggest possible ways to break the impasse of the current peace movement.

The idea of pacifism came to the fore in Japan much later than in Europe and developed under quite different circumstances. Martin Ceadel traces what he calls two strands of proto-pacifist thought, Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism, to eighteenth century Europe and argues that these fused in Britain as rational Christianity and began to evolve into liberalism. Since then, peace activities flourished in countries, mainly Britain and the United States, where Protestantism and liberalism as well as a free enterprise economy provided a favorable setting. The type of pacifist attitude nurtured in the two countries, as Charles Chatfield argues, was historically oriented to liberal values – the primacy of the individual, distrust of economic and political concentrations, the value of voluntary association, and appeal to experience and reason.

Political ideologies such as socialism and anarchism further enriched Western peace thought in the late 19th century. From the inter-war period, more activists tried to justify

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their pacifist stand not on the basis of religious faith but as a response to the human suffering caused by the war. While pacifist thought thrived in Europe and its extensions, it always remained a minority perspective as nations marched repeatedly to war.

The reaction of the Japanese to defeat in World War II was similar to the despondency widely experienced by Europeans in the wake of World War I. Although it took a toll mainly on the lives of soldiers at the front and civilian casualties were far fewer than in World War II, the First World War left many people wondering in the name of what honorable cause such carnage had been carried out. Though somewhat similar to the European experience in this respect, the kind of pacifism that became prevalent among Japanese after World War II also reflects Japan's political and historical traditions and values.

Japan's nascent peace movement shortly after the war drew inspiration from the literary accounts of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by such writers as Ota Yoko and Nagai Takashi. The power of their writings was doubtless intensified by the fact that tens of millions of Japanese in other cities had also experienced the flames of war and the deaths of family and neighbors in the firebombing of 64 Japanese cities, that Japan lost three million lives in the war, and the nation was left in ruins. Collections of writings by young soldiers who were university students posthumously published after the war, like "Kike Wadatsumi no Koe (Listen to the Voices of the Sea)," also gave a powerful impetus to Japan's peace movement, driven by grief over the loss of loved ones and survivor's guilt. A flood of literary and media accounts of the war that focused on popular suffering did much to shape the outlook on war and peace issues throughout the postwar era.

The tradition lives on in Japan's mass media. Every year Japanese TV devotes significant air time to programs on the war during the first two weeks of August, commemorating the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and recalling Japan's defeat in the war. The Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), (Japan's public network and most influential station) takes the lead in this.

On Hiroshima Day on August 6, 2004, one NHK documentary chronicled the postwar rehabilitation of the city using aerial and other photos obtained from the U.S. National Archives. Those pictures showed the city teeming with makeshift or newly built houses less than two years after the atomic bombing, attesting to the resilience of the people in the wake of the devastation.

On Nagasaki Day on August 9, NHK broadcast a program about a 77-year-old woman, who was born deaf and witnessed the atomic bombing in Nagasaki. The woman goes on frequent speaking tours to recount the tragic aftermath of the bombing through the use of sign language. The focus of her silent narrative is the images of bodies disfigured beyond recognition and dying victims crying for help. This program was followed on August 13 by another documentary about Japanese soldiers, who were ordered to fight an un-winnable battle in China and who died after suffering great hardship as mere cannon fodder.

Another documentary aired the same day was dedicated to the Japanese civilians and soldiers who traveled at sea during the war and whose boats, were attacked and sunk. The remains of many were never found so their boats became their coffins. The documentary focused on one man who makes model ships that he presents as gifts to console the bereaved families.

On 14 August, another documentary played a phonograph record made by a Japanese company in Manchukuo, which brought alive the voices of ordinary Japanese, who lived there during the war. The program also told of

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the tragic fate of Chinese conscripted laborers, who were forced to work at Japanese-operated mines. The record played a farewell statement of one young Korean, who volunteered to fly a suicide mission as a kamikaze pilot. His father had been opposed against his son fighting in Japan's war but the young man flew to certain death in the abortive hope that the Japanese government would pay his poor family generous compensation if he died in the war.

The documentary broadcast on the day of Japan's surrender on August 15 was about the wartime indoctrination of Japanese schoolchildren who had been prepared by their teachers to attack the invaders who were expected in the coming months. The program showed children working in munitions factories. The children, now pensioners, generally expressed chagrin about how easily they had been mesmerized by wartime propaganda.

Each of these programs offered fresh insights into the war by looking at it from the perspective of ordinary Japanese, emphasizing the psychic and existential landscape of the wartime generation and the suffering experienced by Japanese as well as by Chinese, Koreans and other victims of Japan's fifteen year war. Throughout the postwar years, most Japanese TV programs commemorating the war's end have similarly focused on the human tragedy of war.

August 15 is known as "shusen kinenbi", the anniversary of the end of the war. It is a solemn and somber occasion when many Japanese question whether there was any positive meaning to their loved ones' deaths and the nation's suffering. Many express contrition about the millions of lives squandered among Japanese, among the conquered nations of Asia, and their Western adversaries, and vow never again to embark on aggressive war. In Japan's collective discourse on the war, there is no equivalent to the victorious Allied nations' heroic narrative of perseverance and self-sacrifice producing a positive outcome. In the new millennium, however, such views clash with those of Japanese neonationalists who proclaim the "positive" aspect of Japan's war and press for a more aggressive Japanese foreign policy as seen, for example, in the dispatch of Self-Defense Forces to Iraq in 2004.

Defeat as a Force for Reform and Redemption

The grassroots peace thought that informed the peace movement, however, did not draw its inspiration entirely from the tragic narrative of personal suffering during the war. Equally important, as John Dower argues in his prize-winning book, Embracing Defeat, the shattering experience of defeat and the subsequent period of material privation and demoralization became "the touchstone years for thinking about national identity and personal values."

Many non-Japanese, above all the victims of Japanese militarism and colonialism in Korea, China and other Asian nations, but also many Americans and Europeans, believe that most Japanese have failed to recognize, still less come to terms with, their country's war crimes. I believe that the Japanese attitude in this regard is more complex.

As detailed in Eiji Oguma's important book Minshu to Aikoku (Democracy and Patriotism), the nation's defeat in World War II prompted many intellectuals to seriously question whether the failure to prevent Japan from starting the war and the fact that the vast majority of Japanese never seriously resisted wartime policy was indicative of an innate pathology.

This mordant sense of contrition was shared by a wide section of the public. The shift from wartime support for Japan's militaristic cause to the nation's pacifistic policy after the war

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was often accompanied by a painful reflective process, for example, among youths, who had zealously embraced wartime Japan's "mission to liberate Asia from Western colonialism," or teachers who had exhorted their students to fight for their country. Conscientious citizens were compelled to admit they had erred grievously in letting countless lives be squandered as they went through a traumatic ideological shift to embrace postwar norms of "peace and democracy."

The experience prompted many Japanese to explore new values and to reform society in accordance with those values. The very trauma suffered in the catastrophic end to the war spurred many to a work for social reform. Grassroots volunteerism and political activism were never more vigorous in Japan than they were in the early postwar era. Active participation in peace and other social movements allowed ordinary Japanese to relish their newly gained freedom to protest against the government. The excitement and the deep reflection many experienced amid bewildering change in all facets of postwar society transformed the attitudes of many Japanese.
As John Dower notes, peace together with democracy, became the great mantra of post-war Japan. Most social movements were staged in the name of peace in the early post-war years. The peace movement took shape in tandem with other activities to promote democratic, economic and humanitarian issues, serving as a popular lever that helped to eliminate constricting elements in Japanese society and open new social terrain in postwar Japan.

Postwar Peace Activities of Organized Labor and Women

Grassroots Pacifism examines how two groups of people, namely male labor union members and housewives, the backbone of the peace movement, grappled with the transition from wartime ideology to the post-war system of values.

Following war's end, the labor movement attracted a significant number of young men, who as school children or soldiers had been socialized in the goal of liberating Asia from Western colonial rule. In the wreckage of defeat culminating in Japan's surrender, young men suffered moral dislocation. Some would eventually channel their fury and grief over the loss of loved ones into new labor and political movements.

Takada Yoshitoshi, who broke down in tears at the emperor's announcement of surrender, was distraught at what he regarded as 'the demise of the nation.' He said, however, that

After [Japan's] defeat, the transition from right-wing to left-wing ideology took place quite smoothly because the nationalistic romanticism I embraced as a military pilot transformed into another kind of romanticism that drove me into the post-war left-wing movement to rebuild the nation. The nagging sense of guilt I felt toward friends who had died in the war prodded my efforts to rebuild the nation.

Anger at the wartime establishment and survivor's guilt prompted another youth, Otsuka Masatatsu, to join a postal workers' union shortly after the war:

My six months as a soldier was etched deeply in memory. Giving up my plan for an academic career, I became involved in the labor movement out of anger at Japan's dehumanizing pre-war society and because I believed it was my duty to dedicate myself to those who had died during the war. To work for perpetual peace and reform of the society that had resorted to war was the historic mission assigned to survivors of the war and especially to my generation.

Young unionists, many influenced by Marxism, believed that poverty and unemployment,

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which lay behind the war drive, stemmed ultimately from capitalism and their efforts to eliminate the evils of the system, were carried forward through the peace movement.
The key political battles fought by organized labor in the early postwar years yield important clues for understanding the nature of union activity. Both union leaders and many rank-and-file workers saw in unions a base from which to launch a social movement to tackle issues transcending the direct interests of individual unions and workers. As a result, organized labor became actively involved in a wide range of political campaigns and the peace movement loomed particularly large on their agenda.

Organized labor made considerable strides by winning key labor disputes in the immediate wake of the war's end with the active backing of the U.S. occupation authorities. As the Cold War deepened in the late 1940s, however, the occupation forces began cracking down on radical labor and further tightened control over organized labor after the outbreak of the Korean War.

Many labor leaders played an active role in the nationwide peace movement that emerged in the 1950s. The victories attained in such political battles as the anti-U.S. military base struggle in Sunagawa on the outskirts of Tokyo in the late 1950s and the campaign against the police duties law of 1958 boosted labor's confidence. Such successes made unionists believe another major victory was within their reach at the time of the Ampo struggle of 1960, in which unionists and other activists, together with the Socialist and Communist Parties and student activists, staged massive protests against the Japan-U.S. security treaty. The radicalization of organized labor reached its zenith and some union officials claim labor organizations mustered about 80% of demonstrators around the parliament building, whose number is said to have totaled over 300,000 at the height of the struggle on June 18, 1960.

The militant ethos engendered by the union-led peace movement helped ordinary workers acquire awareness of their rights vis-à-vis management and the state and to shed submissive attitudes conditioned by the authoritarian mores of prewar Japan. The organizational muscle labor unions provided also proved crucial in assisting the nationwide spread of peace activities at the time of the antinuclear movement from the mid-1950s forward.

Unlike workers' peace activities that relied on the organizational muscle of large labor unions, women's peace efforts were conducted predominantly by grassroots activists. A study of women's involvement in the peace movement in the formative years of the early post-war era yields precious insight into the dramatic reversal of the dominant value system.

Postwar reforms brought far-reaching changes in women's lives in two respects. Firstly, pacifism became the official tenet of the postwar government whereas in the past women had been indoctrinated to surrender their children for the government's war effort. Secondly, women got the vote and were called on to measure up to the role of an independently minded citizen on an equal footing with men.

Ordinary housewives gained prominence in the antinuclear movement from 1954, which responded to the U.S. hydrogen bomb test conducted in Bikini Atoll. Prior to that, female participants in the peace movement were limited largely to intellectuals and members of leftist political parties and labor unions.

The genesis of housewives' peace activities dates back to several years preceding 1954. The Korean War that broke out in 1950 galvanized schoolteachers, including many women, into vigorous peace activities as they vowed never to send their students to war again. Teachers across the country

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subsequently began networking with schoolchildren's mothers to win them over to their pacifist cause and these networks later served as an important vehicle for staging nationwide peace activities. Many mothers also became actively involved in PTAs because they were deeply concerned about their children's well-being during the difficult early postwar years. Moreover, as the material privation in the immediate wake of the war's end began to ease in the early 1950s, many Japanese began to take stock of the consequences of war, leading many to form study groups to learn about social issues or write essays on their lives.

Such grassroots activities raised consciousness. The March 23, 1952 issue of one of the most widely read, The Asahi Shimbun, reported a sharp increase in letters to the editor sent by women. The phenomenon of so-called "Mrs. Letters to the Editor," who regularly contributed their opinions to newspapers, was indicative of growing female awareness of political issues. The growth of postwar political consciousness made it possible for women to take instant action when news of the Bikini incident broke.

The tragedy of Bikini, whose victims included both Bikinian natives and Japanese fishermen, led women to convene a national rally of female grassroots activists, called Mothers' Congress (Hahaoya Taikai), one year after the fatal hydrogen bomb test. The rally, which brought together women across the country, opened with a collective tearful catharsis, in which they poured their hearts out about their own suffering.

As they subsequently tried to develop their peace thought, women attempted to rationalize their desire to attain happiness in a peaceful world by deconstructing the old wartime ideology that had exhorted them to become loyal wives, mothers and subjects who would sacrifice everything for their country's good. This reflective process led women to wake up to the issue of their own basic human rights. One housewife, Makise Kikue, looked back at the way women had unwittingly contributed to Japan's slide into war by dutifully serving their husbands and children.

We want to cast off (so-called) women's virtues such as obedience, self-effacement, readiness to dedicate and sacrifice oneself, patience and stoicism, so that we can become true human beings. We want to establish relationships with other members of our families that will not make us give up becoming a true human being for the sake of being an [exemplary] woman or mother.

This kind of down-to-earth popular wisdom, which could be termed people-first pacifism, restored a significant degree of sanity and a humane quality to the nation's thinking.

Triumphs and Failings

In the wake of defeat, the Japanese government sought to impose its own interpretation of the war and deflect public criticism of its wartime policy using the catchphrase "ichioku sozange," exhorting the people to ask the emperor's forgiveness for failing to win the war. Officials and politicians also attempted to revive patriotism and wartime deference toward the authorities. These efforts, however, achieved at best mixed results in the face of popular resistance on the part of ordinary people who repeatedly expressed a deep longing for peace.

While growing pacifism and various anti-war and anti-nuclear actions directly countered official propaganda, grassroots pacifism was not without serious limitations. For example, the fact that pacifist policy was institutionalized through the Constitution helped to generate complacency among ordinary Japanese that made them consider it natural that their government should stay out of any armed conflict outside Japan, even without political pressures to prevent such action. With pacifism

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constitutionally enshrined, many Japanese took for granted the belief that human life should be valued above all else.

The point would be addressed in the 1960s during the Vietnam War as antiwar activists tried to devise new methods of protest through which they tried to act as individuals without relying on the institutional guarantee of state pacifism proclaimed by the Constitution. Japanese activists drew inspiration from civil disobedience pioneers such as Henry Thoreau, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the direct action practiced by the American New Left and Britain's Committee of 100. Young activists linked Japan's war crimes during World War II with their country's complicity in the Vietnam War and criticized older generations' neglect of their own war responsibility.

The achievements of Japan's postwar peace movement are impressive. Although the government concluded the Japan-US security treaty and established the Self Defense Forces (SDF) in 1954, it pledged not to send the SDF abroad, adopted the three nuclear principles not to manufacture, acquire or admit onto Japan's soil nuclear weapons in 1967, and banned arms exports in 1976. Above all, Japan reversed the pattern of aggressive warfare that had extended throughout the period 1894-1945. For the next six decades Japan would remain at peace.

Because of constitutional restrictions and the vigilance of the peace movement, Japan had to focus its efforts on economic initiatives such as overseas assistance projects. Japan has neither exported arms nor engaged in military actions abroad. Japan thus created a new paradigm of a major power whose economic prowess was not translated into military aggression, albeit a nation that has provided direct financial material support for every American war since Korea.

The first phase of the Japanese peace movement lasted until 1960, during which grassroots activism helped to establish the postwar value system as widely accepted norms. The response to the Pacific War, and particularly to Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a new discourse of nuclear pacifism that helped inspire the global antinuclear movement.

The second phase encompasses the anti-Vietnam War movement and subsequent several years, in which antiwar campaigners went on to undertake new grassroots initiatives including civil disobedience and emphasized Japan's war responsibility. As they reflected on the diverse ramifications of the war, activists awoke to the plight of other Asians, many of whom suffered as a result of Japan's economic activities abroad and this realization served to ignite a variety of NGO activities.

The third and final phase began around the Gulf War. Ideologically, Japanese activists since the 1990s appear to be contributing little original pacifist thought. Numerous conflicts including those in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq came and went. Meanwhile, the Japanese peace movement has done little to build upon its past achievements. It remains to be seen whether today's activists will come up with a viable paradigm or vision predicated on the unfolding changes in the world we live in at a time when the Japanese government is directly challenging the foundations of the peace constitution and postwar pacifism.

At least three issue areas seem critical to the Japanese peace movement. Firstly, because of its heavy emphasis on the human tragedies of war, Japanese grassroots pacifism failed to envision a paradigm that would encompass a wider range of humanitarian issues related to the basic human rights aspect of peace. Issues that have been overlooked include civil liberties to be defended against state repression, the death penalty, foreign refugees, illegal aliens and globalization. A pacifism that effectively

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engages these issues, would likely engender an intellectual climate congenial to pacifist causes and common ground for cooperation with activists abroad.

Secondly, pacifists need to put forward concrete strategies on how to realize or move closer to realizing the imperatives of the Constitution's Article 9, which forbids Japan from resorting to war and possessing armed forces. The issue is particularly timely at a time of heightened tensions between Japan on one hand and North Korea and China on the other. The question is whether pacifists are able to contribute effectively to conflict prevention and the creation of new forms of community as alternatives to war

Thirdly, peace movements in Japan have been organized primarily to oppose Japanese subordinate cooperation with U.S. war efforts and have paid little attention to conflicts in far corners of the world in which the Japanese government is not directly involved. Such conflicts pose questions such as whether the SDF may in the future be deployed in such areas. Japanese pacifists can extend their reach by tackling these concrete issues.

Mari Yamamoto wrote this article for Japan Focus. It was published on February 24, 2005. Mari Yamamoto is the author of Grassroots Pacifism in Post-War Japan: The rebirth of a nation (Routledge/Curzon 2004).

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