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Nations in the Looking Glass: The War in Changing Retrospect, 1945-2005

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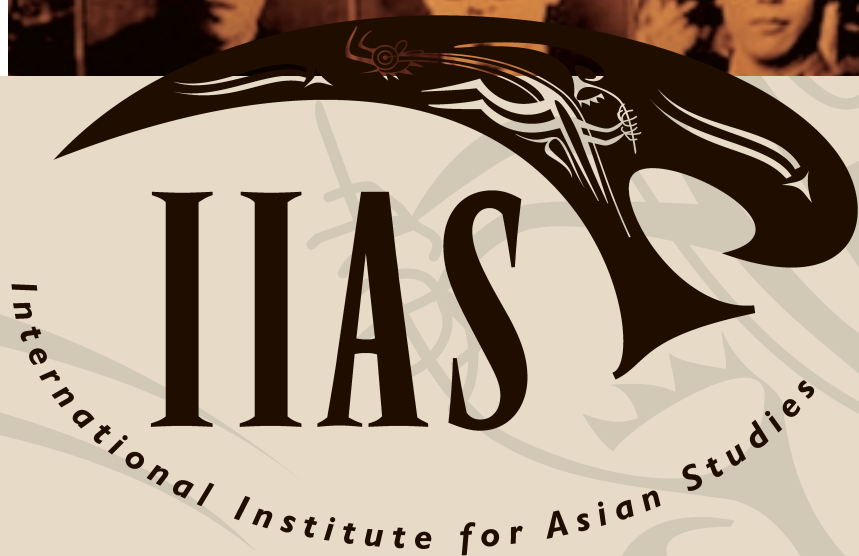
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Memorial photos of kamikaze pilots, Yasukuni Shrine. Courtesy of the Yasukuni Museum at Yasukuni Shrine. Photograph by Michael Buchsteiner.



38 The Asia-Pacific War Sixty Years On



NEWSLETTER

Special issue
The Asia-Pacific War: history & memory
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Nations in the looking-glass: the war in changing retrospect, 1945-2005

Introduction

Ethan Mark
guest editor

In the beginning, it was simple. Or at least it seemed that way from so many different national vantages that it was hard to dispute. The war in Asia had been a war between 'good guys' and 'bad guys,' and while opinions in different places varied on who exactly to count among the good guys, in places as politically and socially diverse as China, Indonesia, the Soviet Union, India, the United States, Korea, and the Netherlands, there was strikingly little disagreement over who the bad guys had been, at least at the national level. Even as the fragile 'anti-fascist' alliance of the wartime Allies (and their colonial subjects) gave way to the stark global oppositions of the Cold War, even as bitter colonial wars flared up in Vietnam, Indonesia, and elsewhere, anti-colonial nationalist leaders, (former) imperialists, peasants, government officials, businessmen, capitalists and communists around the globe - including a substantial number of Japan's own citizens - could agree on this as few other things: Imperial Japan had been the villain of wartime Asia. Promising to lead Japan and Asia to a brighter future free of Western domination, but harbouring a hyper-imperialist and 'ultra-nationalist' sense of racial and cultural superiority and a brutal indifference to human life and dignity, the marauding Japanese - like their fascist allies in Europe - had brought only oppression, death and destruction to Asia and, ultimately, to themselves. Against these enemies of civilization, free-

dom, and progress, war with the Western Allies and resistance from the peoples of Asia had been the only possible recourse.

There were, of course, from the beginning, major differences in how the war was narrated, interpreted, and explained. The early, momentous decision of the American occupation authorities to retain the Japanese emperor, with a corresponding narrative that essentially included him as one of the war's 'good guys', provoked dissent worldwide, and - as noted by several of the contributors to this special issue - left a deeply ambiguous legacy on the question of Japanese war responsibility within Japan itself. Another area of immediate disagreement involved characterizations of Japan's Western opponents. In such venues as the Tokyo war crimes trials, spokesmen for the victorious Western powers - carrying on in the vein of Allied wartime propaganda - comfortably cast the Asia-Pacific War in the black and white terms of a struggle of 'civilization' versus 'barbarism', of 'democracy' versus 'fascism', of 'freedom' versus 'tyranny'. But while they largely agreed with Allied characterizations of wartime Japan, many outside the West, as well as those to the left of the political spectrum the world over, were more skeptical regarding the West's own aims and motives in Asia before, during, and after the war. Missing from this story, for them, was an acknowledgement of the fundamentally imperialist identity of the combatants on both sides, and the fundamental nature of the

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war in Asia, as such, as a showdown *between imperialists* over territories and peoples that neither side in fact had a right to claim.

This difference in perspective reflected stark divisions between the worldviews of (former) Western colonizers – who preferred to treat imperial Japan as a purely exceptional case, thus maintaining a healthy distance between its aggressive history and their own colonial pasts and presents – versus (former) Asian colonized, who could not help noting the ironies of such an exercise. It was also a reflection of the gap between the worldviews of liberal capitalism dominant in the Anglo-American metropolises, versus those of Marxism-Leninism (in particular its critique of imperialism) more influential elsewhere, including much of the colonized world.

In the aftermath of the war, there were also profound differences between societies' relative emphases on the war experience and its meanings. In places such as Indonesia and Vietnam, armed conflicts with returning Western colonizers and the priority on national unity very quickly made the Japanese occupation period seem yesterday's news, relegating its historical significance to that of a mere interlude or preliminary to what now came assuredly (back) into focus as the 'main story' in national terms: the ongoing, ultimately triumphant, struggle for independence against Western domination. Portia Reyes' contribution to this issue reveals how the Japanese occupation period was soon represented as an 'interruption' in the dominant Philippine national story, and as Rana Mitter observes in his essay, a similar process of narrative backgrounding occurred in postwar China, albeit with largely internal causes: the great domes-

the war in Asia was a showdown between imperialists over territories and peoples that neither side had a right to claim

tic showdown between the communist and nationalist forces that followed on the heels of the Japanese occupation quickly pushed the events of the Sino-Japanese war period to the sidelines of historical narrative. This does not mean that the Japanese period was forgotten, but rather that its narratives and meanings were subordinated, reduced and compressed into a national history whose main thrust and climax lay elsewhere. In Japan itself, in contrast, the war remained 'the' inevitable turning point in narratives of identity and history, perennially marking the boundary between past and present in national as well as individual terms. This is not to say that stories of the war in Japan were any less simplified, reshaped, suppressed, or otherwise subordinated to postwar political considerations, but rather simply to highlight the relatively heightened degree of narrative and political weight attached to such retellings.

Postwar pathologies

Amidst these and other local variations, around the globe there remained certain striking formulaic similarities in how the story of the Asia-Pacific War was told in the postwar, spanning every manner of political and cultural boundary.

Probing Western weakness: a racy Japanese propaganda leaflet attempts to undermine Allied soldiers' will to fight

The first of these was a general tendency to explain Japanese wartime actions in terms of Japan's presumed 'exceptional' nature and/or cultural and institutional 'immaturity'. Even among the most thoughtful and informed observers in different parts of the world – at different ends of the political spectrum – there was a common assumption that Japan's behavior in Asia had been, first, unusual in its oppressive-

nationalist elites seeking to throw off colonial domination and consolidate their political hegemony favoured stark, heroic narratives

ness and brutality; and second, that this had been fostered by a certain 'incompleteness' in Japan's development as a modern nation-state and society, a situation that had allowed, even encouraged, the persistence of certain 'pre-modern' or 'semi-feudal' cultural peculiarities distinctive to Japan. Qualities frequently mentioned in this context included blind obedience to authority, racism, xenophobia, provincialism, conformism, anti-individualism, readiness for self-sacrifice, and a tendency to violence.

Within this general interpretive pattern, dominant around the globe at least through the 1970s, there were, of course, great differences of emphasis. Most scholars of Japan agreed, for example, that the imperial state had been a major culprit in determining Japan's disastrous course, monopolizing and dictating the terms of national loyalty, militarizing Japan's masses, and inhibiting the development of independent institutions of bourgeois civil society and independent thinking as seen in more advanced parts of the world – assisted in this aim, again, by the persistence of 'feudalistic' attitudes among the Japanese people. Japanese scholars generally saw the war as an inevitable consequence of fundamental social deficiencies dating back to the nature of the 1868 Meiji Restoration, and indeed continuing into the postwar present. Reflecting a dominant Marxian bent, most of these did not stop at the villainy of the state or the military as such, but attempted to explain Japan's disastrous imperial course by focusing on the specific needs of an expanding but immature Japanese capitalism and its interdependent relationship with 'semi-feudal' landed and military interests from the time of the Meiji settlement onwards. They saw the military showdown with the Western powers in the Pacific as a reactionary attempt to shore up this 'emperor system' (*tennōsei*) in crisis, in the context of a global crisis of capitalism. In contrast, mainstream Anglo-American scholars of the 1950s-70s such as Edwin O. Reischauer were more sanguine, arguing that Japan's prewar development had shown signs of promise in a healthy, democratic, liberal capitalist direction, only to be hijacked by militarist thugs who took advantage of a subservient public, social instability due to the growing pains of economic development, and as-yet insufficiently autonomous public institutions.

Whatever the great differences between these dominant Japanese and Anglo-American storylines, one ironic correspondence between them was that by placing the onus of the war on Japan's 'ruling classes' (variously defined) in combination with a certain general social and cultural underdevelopment, both narratives in their own ways carried on in the vein of the Tokyo war crimes trials in casting the Japanese people as victims of a sinister state, effectively absolving the mass of the Japanese people from direct responsibility for the war. The war remained not so much something that ordinary Japanese had done to others, but rather something that had been done to, or happened to, ordinary Japanese. Throughout the postwar period, this problem of what Carol Gluck has called 'history in the passive voice' helped undergird a pervasive Japanese reticence regarding questions of war responsibility. The fact that Japan's citizenry remained the only people of the world subjected to the unspeakable horror of two atomic bombings added ammunition to a sense of general victimhood.

Further to the political right, the tendency to reticence on Japan's own war culpability was also fueled by conservative domestic interests including politicians and bureaucrats as well as veteran's and 'bereaved family' groups – important constituencies of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party – who maintained that the vilification of wartime Japan at the hands of historians, social activists, and governments the world over represented a distortion of history, little more than 'victor's justice', propaganda spread by Japan's enemies both internal and external. As Peter King's essay here further explores, the combined result has been a Japanese state and society that has had notorious problems in coming to terms

with the war in any unambiguous sense, problems that continue to dog Japan's relations with its immediate Asian neighbours in particular.

Yet as Rikki Kersten also observes in this issue, the distressing dominance of this official conservative line should not be allowed to obscure the longstanding existence of less visible domestic voices of opposition on the war responsibility front, including progressive intellectuals who sought, from as early as the 1950s, to transcend the troubling passivity common to both right and left-wing historical paradigms and seek the way forward to a more responsible and autonomous public life through a discourse of individual subjectivity. Still, until more recently, the main subjects of these debates on subjectivity remained Japan's intellectual elite, with the implied immaturity and passive victimhood of the Japanese masses in the war period remaining an inevitable byproduct.

Loaded narratives

Whatever their shared shortcomings and omissions, these competing historical narratives were invested with an energy and urgency that betrayed them as much more than a simple academic exercise. Indeed it can be argued that where the Asia-Pacific War was concerned, the difficulty in moving beyond starkly opposed, simplistic narratives of villains and victims – or, in the case of state-approved textbooks, beyond a deafening silence on the whole subject – was testimony *not* to any characteristic Japanese inability to deal in a sophisticated way with the past, but rather to the continuing, profoundly contentious *political implications* carried by these narratives in the making of postwar Japan and its national identity. In sum, how you characterized the prewar order – who your victims and villains were, what aspects of the system you identified as the true culprits of the war – was also, inevitably, a commentary on the postwar order, on where Japan should go from here.

All the more so in a cold war world in which stark national choices had to be made. If the global capitalist system in general and Japanese capitalism in particular had been at the heart of the wartime fiasco, for example, then it hardly made sense to maintain a close postwar alliance with the capitalist U.S., or to be content with the relatively cosmetic changes the U.S. had made to the Japanese capitalist system during its occupation – all the while continuing to maintain a dangerous distance between Japan and its Asian neighbours, most importantly China. And vice versa. Thus were postwar politics and historical narrative inexorably intertwined, leaving very little room for nuance or ambiguity, a situation in which the state and its representatives often took the easiest path by saying little or nothing at all. Cary Karacas' essay here, sketching the convoluted history of a monument to the victims of the 1945 Tokyo firebombing, is a vivid illustration of the tortured, contested nature of such attempts at representation in postwar Japan.

While fingers thus remained for the most part deservedly pointed at Japanese for failing to take an objective reckoning of their wartime past, however, it was also difficult to see the global postwar landscape of history and memory as an entirely level playing field where 'coming clean' was concerned. For while many eyes focused on Japan, distortion, manipulation and simplification of the wartime experience for political purposes – albeit with varying levels of devotion to scholarly 'objectivity' – was in fact globally endemic in a postwar, cold war world of nation-states attempting to (re-) establish legitimacy and superpowers battling for new influence. The Tokyo war crimes trials offered a blatant early example – even now providing ammunition to Japan's revisionist right wing – by insisting, against most of the historical evidence, on the existence of a long-term prewar Japanese plot to take over Asia and ultimately the world, while refusing to acknowledge any wrongdoing or culpability for the war on the side of the Western powers.

But there were more subtle transgressions as well. As historian John Dower revealed in a feisty 1975 critique of the postwar American Japan studies establishment, for example, it was more than coincidental that American scholars such as Reischauer had offered a narrative of Japan's war as a mistaken detour on an otherwise steadily ascending path towards a successful, democratic modernity. For, as Dower showed, these scholars were convinced of the merits of the American (liberal capitalist) social model, eager to see it fostered in Japan, and thus determined not to leave the writing of Japan's modern history to 'ideological', 'biased' left-wing Japanese scholars who, they believed, sought to employ history to undermine the U.S.-sponsored postwar order, the U.S.-Japanese alliance, and, ultimately, the American position in Asia.



Courtesy of Hans Moonen's collection of propaganda leaflets of the second world war at <http://members.home.nl/~wvzpropaganda/translat.htm>

Meanwhile, in the many new Asian nations emerging from the wartime wreckage, the subordination of historical narratives of the war period to political considerations and the 'national interest' was, if anything, more pronounced. For nationalist elites seeking to throw off colonial domination and consolidate their political hegemony in societies in which the colonial period, the war, and its aftermath had left socially divisive legacies along lines of class, culture, ethnicity, and politics, there was a high premium on stark, heroic 'us' versus 'them' accounts of Japanese 'oppression' versus national 'resistance'. The heady optimism of independence – along with the near universal postwar equation of anti-colonial nationalism with the world-historical forces of human liberation and progress – only provided further ammunition to the creation of black-and-white narratives, with the emergent anti-colonial nation as their heroic subject.

Within this uncompromising framework, there was little room to contemplate the war's more ambiguous, multiple experiences, meanings, and legacies. In places such as Indonesia, scholars and popular interpreters alike incorporated the Japanese occupation period into the new national mythology as a sort of divinely ordained national trial-by-fire, from which the nation was destined to emerge like a boomerang against the returning Western imperialists, stronger and more united than ever. Prominent people who had openly supported the Japanese and were politically expendable, like Jorge Vargas in

the overall trend has been a slow but steady de-mythologizing of the nation as historical subject

the Philippines, faced condemnation as 'traitors' and 'collaborators'. But as Kyu Hyun Kim observes in this issue in the case of South Korea, the compromisingly close wartime association of many members of now dominant social classes with the Japanese 'enemy' – including subsequent national leaders such as Suharto and Park – was a subject that most contemporary students of history preferred to shy away from. Where the nationalist interaction with the Japanese had been too prominent to be ignored – as in the case of Sukarno and Hatta in Indonesia – nationalist interpreters often sought to turn this sort of potentially divisive historical legacy into another nation-building strength, by presenting wartime association with the Japanese as a purely *strategic* and ultimately fruitful maneuver, proof of the infallible political and historical sense of the nation's leadership. The narrow, unforgiving parameters of 'collaboration' and 'resistance' allowed little room for anything in-between.

But how to contain the problem of 'collaboration' and secure nation-building lessons from the war experience when, at least from the standpoint of the postwar rulers, the entire nation itself had been on the 'wrong side' in the war? As Mike Lan-shih Chi demonstrates here in the case of Taiwan, the answer was to import a nationalist mythology from the mainland, effectively erasing the Taiwanese people from their own wartime history in the process. Ironically, the exigencies of nation-building seeped into wartime narratives across the geographical and political divide of the Taiwan Straights as well: As Joshua Howard observes in his contribution to this issue, even in the ostensible 'workers state' of the People's Republic of China, narratives of unified national resistance against the Japanese served to obscure a dynamic wartime history of class struggle and contestation in the urban areas under nationalist control.

The war in the post-postwar

In more recent times, as the standpoint of Chi, Kim, and other contributions to this special issue illustrate for different national contexts, the passage of the wartime generation from the political stage, the end of the Cold War and concomitant weakening of political orthodoxies, and the transition from postwar to 'post-postwar' national orders in more general political, economic, social, and cultural terms, has brought a new openness to re-interpretations of ourselves, societies, and the world, inevitably opening up new angles and vantages on history as well. Across the globe, rising demands for social and political inclusion among newly assertive groups traditionally left out of the nation-building game, such as women and minorities, have prompted the construction of more inclusive and heterogeneous histories. While varying widely from place to place, the overall trend has been a slow but steady de-mythologizing of the nation as historical subject, and the pursuit of alternative historical narratives, processes and actors

formerly excluded from view. This has included increased attention to cross-border, 'transnational' historical processes and interactions, to the lives of ordinary people, to moral ambiguity, and to identity as shifting, multiple, negotiated, inter-dependent, and contingent.

Nationalism remains, of course, a profoundly powerful force in a world of competing nation-states, no more so than in the postcolonial world. But even here, postcolonial nationalism's failure to fulfill its early transcendent, unifying promise and the passing of the old guard has encouraged a new willingness to critique and transgress the rigid, static boundaries and categories of orthodox nationalist thinking, and nationalist histories. Indeed, given the special vantage of postcolonial social contexts on the colonial relationship and its ambiguous transnational legacies, it is perhaps not surprising that the expanding field of postcolonial studies, pioneered and spear-headed by scholars of the South Asian subcontinent, has been at the cutting edge of many of these historiographical innovations.

These developments have had important implications for the study of modern Asian history, including the Asia-Pacific War period. One result has been the highlighting of interactive, transnational workings of social and cultural formation in Japan's colonial encounters, moving beyond stark categories of oppression, resistance, and 'collaboration' to discover interests and processes that embraced people and institutions on both sides of the line dividing nation from nation and colonizer and colonized. In the case of modern Japan specifically, growing scholarly skepticism regarding nation-centered narratives generally has been expressed in a growing identification of, and assault on, 'Orientalist', exceptionalist assumptions about modern Japan that were, as noted above, near-universal to the discipline through the early postwar period.

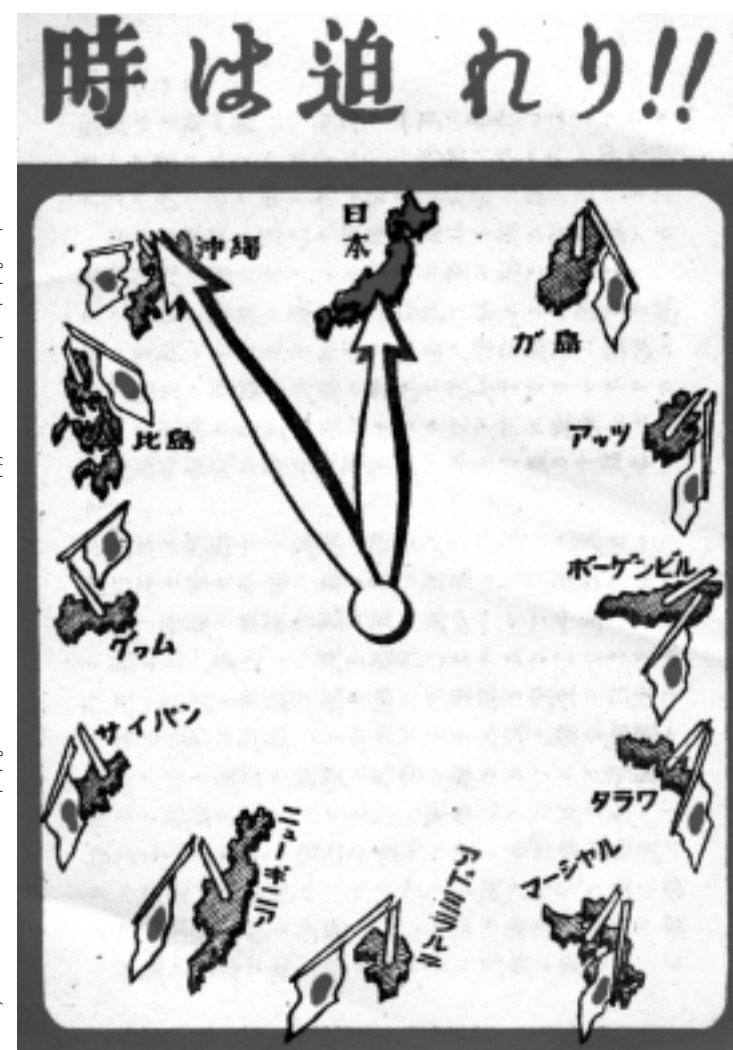
Studies such as Louise Young's path-breaking *Japan's Total Empire*, for example, offered an exploration of Japan's 1930s and 40s colonization of Manchuria, not as a result of Japan's inherently exceptional, aggressive, underdeveloped qualities as a 'late modernizer', but rather as a result of Japan's very modernity. Manchukuo thus appears as an illuminating local inflection of the modern processes and inter-workings of industrial capitalist development, the state, mass society, and empire-building - in sum, as a site of *modern global history* in the making. Here, as in Yoshimi Yoshiaki's path-breaking *Grass-Roots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People* (*Kusa no ne no fashizumu: Nihon minshū no sensō taiken*), the history of the war is told from the social 'bottom up' as well as from the 'top down,' revealing Japanese from all walks of life not only as passive victims, but also as active participants in the war effort, thus treading a field of moral and political ambiguity previously off-limits on both right and left in Japan.

Whether focusing on the war experience itself, or on ways in which that history has been narrated in the postwar, many of the essays collected in this special issue reflect the contemporary trend of strategically focusing on history's hidden 'grey areas', 'margins', 'intersections' and 'border crossings'. In their own ways, Owen Griffith's consideration of prewar Japanese children's literature, Yiman Wang's essay on the actress Li Guo Ren/Yamaguchi Yoshiko, Katarzyna Cwiertka's discussion of the war's legacy to Japanese eating habits, Remco

many of the essays collected here reflect the contemporary trend of focusing on history's grey areas, margins, intersections and border crossings

Raben's assessment of Japanese attempts to establish legitimacy in Borneo, Christian Uhl's considerations on the 'Kyoto School', Steven Murray's analysis of Pelilieu residents' memories of the Asia-Pacific War, and Pei Yin-Lin's treatment of unheralded Taiwanese wartime literature, highlight the logic of this shift in emphasis. Each represents an attempt not simply to illuminate areas and linkages excluded from view in conventional, nation-centered narratives, but to offer, in so doing, new angles on, and constructions of, the 'main story' of the war and its aftermath in the Asia-Pacific.

Sixty years on - with the arrival of the post-postwar order, and the consequent, inevitable loosening of the postwar order's political and cultural hold over our view of the world - it might not perhaps be overly optimistic or self-absorbed to argue that these are encouraging times for the fashioning of new, more



Courtesy of Hans Meenen's collection of propaganda leaflets of the second world war at <http://members.home.nl/wz2propaganda/translat.htm>

'Shock and awe' circa 1945: a chilling American propaganda leaflet ticks off islands already captured and warns Japanese on the mainland that 'the time is nigh'.

nuanced and sophisticated perspectives on the Asia-Pacific War and its legacies. But around the globe, contemporary politics and worldviews have always intervened, and will inevitably continue to intervene, in shaping depictions of this most profound of modern conflicts. The ratcheting contemporary tensions between Japan and China over the wartime past indicate that Chinese and Japanese neo-nationalist sentiments may be at a postwar peak. Of course this development says much more about changing contemporary domestic and regional power balances than about the war experience itself. And indeed, if there is any clear 'take home' message to be learned from examining the changing, varied, but also sometimes similar ways of telling the story of the war around the globe over the last six decades, it is to confirm Benedetto Croce's timeless maxim: All history is, in the end, a history of the present. <

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