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, freedom, 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 war.
The war in Asia was a showdown between imperialists over territories and peoples that neither side had a right to claim.

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 oppressiveness 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 'tribal' elements distinctive to Japanese civilizational realities 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 between scholars of Japan against whom, 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, excusing the institutionalization of independent movements, justifications of bourgeois civil society and independent thinking as seen in more advanced parts of the world — assisted in this aim, by the persistence of 'feudalistic' attitudes among the Japanese masses, scholars generally saw Japanese 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 Marxist bent, most of these did not stop at the vilification of the state or the military as such, but attempted to explain Japan's disastrous imperial course by focusing on the specifically needed explanation but immature Japanese capitalism and national identity in the context of the Meiji system's own core. They saw the military showdown with the Western powers in the Pacific as a reactionary attempt to shore up this 'emperor system' in crisis, in the context of a global crisis of capitalism. In contrast, mainstream Anglo-American scholars of the 1950s-70s (such as Edmund O. Reischauer) and, more recently, argue 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.

Postwar pathologies

Amidst these and other local variations, around the globe there remained certain striking formulaic similarities in how the story of the China-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 any question of culpability due to the growing pains of economic development, and, ultimately, the American position in Asia.

All the more so in a cold war world in which stark national choices had to be made: If the liberal capitalist system in general and Japanese capitalism in particular had been at least partly to blame for the wartime fiasco, for example, then it hardly made sense to maintain a close postwar relationship with the capitalist U.S., or to be content with the relatively cosmetic changes the U.S. had made to the Japanese political 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. Gary K. Lucchesi’s 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 ‘liberal and feminist’ narrative of victimhood and summary judgement 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 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 concerns regarding the normalization of bilateral and multilateral relations 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 around 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, even the memory of the most heroic of Japanese features of the 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.

But for the more subtle transgressions as well. As historian John Dower revealed in a feisty 1997 critique of the post-war American Japan studies establishment, for example, it was much more than coincidental that American scholars such as Reischauer had been, in effect, the ones to ‘set the agenda’ and the way that ‘tak enet 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 capitalistic order, essentially a commitment to the Western order, 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.
Meanwhile, in the many new Asian nations emerging from the wartime wreckage, the subordination of historical narratives to the war period to post-war 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, both before and after, 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’ to the Japanese occupation, 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 ammunitions to the creation of black-and-white narratives, and with the emerging anti-colonial nationalism as their heroic subject.

Within this uncompromising framework, there was little room to entertain the complex, 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 were politically expunged, like Jorge Varas in the Philippines, faced condemnation as ‘traitors’ and ‘collaborators’. But as Kyu Hyun Kim observes in this issue in the context of South Korea, the compellingly close wartime association of many members of now dominant social classes with the Japanese occupation force – a situation national leaders such as Sukharto and Park – was a subject that most contemporary students of history preferred to shy away from. Where the nationalist interactions with the Japanese had been too pro-Augustus, or too pro-Augustus-ian, 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 strategy, 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 wartime experience when, at least from the standpoint of many postwar rulers, the entire nation itself had been on the ‘wrong side’ in the war? As Mike Lashin 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 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, Yumae Wou’s essay on the actress Li Guo Ren/ Yamaguchi Yoshiko, Katarzyna Cewińska’s discussion of the war’s legacy to Japanese eating habits, Remco Raben’s assessment of Japanese attempts to establish legitimacy in Korea, Christian Uhl’s considerations on the ‘Kyoto School’ and Steven Mollenkopf’s analysis of the political resonance of narratives 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 map these grey areas and linkages, but to reconceptualize, 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 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 influence, in shaping depictions of this most profound of modern conflicts. The conflicting 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.

For further reading: