

America's Wars in Asia

A Cultural Approach to History and Memory

By Philip West
Steven I. Levine and Jackie Hiltz, eds.

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America's Wars in Asia is a complex human reflection of the American war experiences in Asia since 1941. As its subtitle proclaims, it is a collection that focuses on cultural dimensions of these wars. The editors, fully aware of the difficulty of objectively reviewing the fresh memory of the human enmity and of the need to balance an overall view of the wars, aimed to avoid arbitration and show the complexity and diversity in the memory of the wars. The introduction categorizes the seventeen collected articles into five cultural approaches to these wars: analysis of cultural artifacts or productions; relocation of these wars in the histories and cultures of the Asian countries rather than in their relations with the United States; reaffirmation of the value in memory; meditation upon symbolic representations; and concerns with the local and the particular.

In discussing American memory and views of the wars, Edward T. Linenthal's article shows that the process of memorialization could be anything but a single-minded expression of consensual feelings. From different individual perspectives, *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum could be seen as both a savior and a destroyer, or merely a triumphalist symbol, or an offense to the heroic memory of the war. For Harry Summers, Jr., the U.S. was in actuality merely a junior partner in the so-called "America's Wars," which American ethnocentrism glorified and were fought mainly for the sake of the U.S. economic interests. Rey Chow believes that ongoing ideological mechanism in Western treatments of non-Western "others" for centuries was a xenophobia that instigated the U.S. to exert war to expel an imagined dangerous otherness from its own orbit. American feelings toward Vietnamese and Asians, according to David Trask, resembled their attitude toward native Americans. To Americans inculcated with the Western value of controlling nature, the creation of a "civilized" person offset the violence of destroying a savage culture.

On the Asian side, according to John W. Dower, America's scientific prowess, represented by the bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese memory, offered them an explanation for their defeat and quickly led to their determination to build Japan on science. The Japanese victim-consciousness, derived from acute memory of the bombs, became a way of forgetting the numerous war atrocities committed by the Japanese themselves. Tadao Sato's

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study of postwar Japanese films criticizes some Japanese perspectives that underscored the tragic penalties paid by the Japanese people while neglecting their own responsibility. Many Japanese believed that Japan started the Pacific War not because it expected victory but because of its suicidal mentality and mistaken pride: it could not accept the collapse of its ideology that Japan was the leader of Asia in confrontation against the West. Kentaro Awaya exposes the injustice of the war through the lens of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. Pingchao Zhu and James Z. Gao recall that the Chinese account of the Korean War was heavily influenced by and fluctuated along with the ongoing political conflict and changing realities at home.

In an attempt to address the tragedy wrought by the wars, James Soular introduces American and Vietnamese poetry of witness that daringly confronted the brutal side of man's nature and claimed that ambition, hatred and greed are our enemies. Merrel Clubb's journal of war asserts that most wars were fought for wrong reasons and that war itself is an atrocity. Van Jay Symon's analysis of an Asian film and novels concludes that it was war that transformed a human being into a beast and forced individuals confronted by it to adapt or perish. Retelling his own experience, Ahn Junghyo denounces war as fundamentally a human pathology camouflaged by a beguiling rhetoric. The Korean in Vietnam did exactly what the American did in Korea: romanticize the war and commit war crimes.

Thanks to its cultural approach, the book provides us with multiple perspectives and provokes us to rethink these wars in more depth and more breadth than any other book to date. The reading of the book might have been easier had the articles been arranged according to each of the wars rather than forms of recollection. There are also a couple of articles that may disappoint readers with their technical analysis of works of fiction, long citations, and few insights. The collection on the whole is an ideal textbook for courses on Asia-U.S. relations and war history. The book is also useful in assisting students' understanding of diverse perspectives about historical events and cultural approaches to history. ■

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