

Japan's leaders must draw lessons from wartime past



Luo Linquan
Opinion

The Japanese government has never faced up squarely to the losses and miseries it inflicted on its neighbours

How would you feel about the sight of the incumbent German chancellor paying homage to Adolf Hitler, out of apathy and disrespect to those victimised by the Nazis during the second World War?

Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's homage to the Yasukuni Shrine on December 26th, 2013, besmirched the memories of Asian peoples who suffered unspeakable losses and miseries from Japan's aggressive wars. Anyone with memories or knowledge of the painful anti-fascist struggles would find it easy to understand their disappointment and indignation at Abe's flagrant act.

The Yasukuni Shrine was a spiritual instrument and symbol of Japanese militarism in Japan's wars of aggression and colonial rule, and it now enshrines 14 class A war criminals and over 1,000 class B and class C war criminals convicted by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East.

The atrocities committed by Japanese militarists in the eight years (1937-1945) of Japan's aggressive war against China – massacres, torture, rape and live human experiments of biological warfare – constituted a man-made disaster for the Chinese nation, and many other Asian

nations were devastated and ravaged in the same dark period. Many people still have bitter memories of losses suffered in Japan's military attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, Burma, Singapore and so on. Even British troops suffered thousands of casualties in the Pacific War. No one would wish to see such calamities repeated in human history.

The German government and the German people deserve a great deal of respect for their attitude towards history. Germany's repentance and apologies were an essential contributing factor in the genuine reconciliation in Europe, as well as the restoration of faith in peace and a shared future in the hearts of European peoples.

In contrast, the Japanese government has never faced up squarely to Japan's war-waging and misery-inflicting past, has never conducted conscientious introspection and earnest reflection; nor has it made an official apology.

The Yasukuni Shrine, where militarism is advocated and war criminals are honoured, received 60 visits from Japanese prime ministers in the four decades after the end of the war (1945-1985), including six visits deliberately made on August 15th to mark the date when Japan surrendered.

In stubborn denial of truth, a handful of extreme rightist forces blatantly altered history course books, seeking to depict the Japanese wars of aggression as the "liberation of backward nations", and attempting to reinterpret bloody massacres as "a self-defensive holy war".

Abe's visit to the shrine was a cause of grave concern, because he openly questions whether Japan should be defined as an "aggressor", attempts to portray China as a threat and has voiced his wish to amend Japan's postwar pacifist constitution.

On May 12th, 2013, he posed for a photo in a military jet marked with the provocative number 731 – the code of an infamous Japanese biological warfare research facility performing human experiments in China during the war.



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I harbour respect and appreciation for Japanese culture, which has thrived with numerous Chinese elements learned from China's Tang Dynasty. I know that a majority of the Japanese people have a clear and sober understanding of Japanese history, and that they have an earnest yearning for lasting peace. However, I can hardly hide or stay silent about my profound disappointment with the Japanese leaders, who neither have shown penitence nor have the decency to admit past wrongdoings, draw lessons from history, or strive for forgiveness. Shaking with righteous anger, I cannot but join those with conscience and integrity in opposing

and condemning the flagrant, provocative act of a head of government paying homage to the souls of militarists and war criminals.

The resurgence of militarism in Japan, as evidenced by Abe's track record, not only appals those Asian nations once gravely victimised by Japanese militarist expansion, but also further diminishes the chances for a genuine Asian reconciliation. For those who cherish peace and uphold justice, this evil trend should be a cause for alarm.

Among the many qualities shared by the Irish and Chinese peoples is a deep love of peace. Both were victimised by foreign aggressors – imperialists and colonialists. Both understand that without a correct attitude toward history, there can be no lasting peace to speak of. Queen Elizabeth II touched millions of Irish souls by visiting the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin on May 17th, 2011, laying a wreath and bowing to honour those who died for Irish freedom. This historic gesture played a remarkable role in reconciliation between the Irish and the British. Asian peoples also deserve closure. It does not take a great stretch of imagination to see that a similar gesture by a Japanese prime minister would considerably improve Japan's relations with its neighbours.

Together with an unreserved, sincere apology, it would perhaps help heal the terrible wounds that have been repeatedly ripped open by Abe and some of his predecessors in the past seven decades.

Whether the Japanese prime minister and other senior political figures should visit the Yasukuni Shrine is a major issue of right and wrong that bears on humanity's struggle against aggression, evil and darkness.

In light of Abe's lamentable choice, I hope that the Irish people, like the many peace-loving Asian people, will speak out of integrity and indignation and make their voices heard.

His Excellency Luo Linquan is Chinese ambassador to Ireland. A slightly longer version of this article is available online.