CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PACIFIC WAR

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Introduction

The inclusion of a chapter on ‘The Pacific War’ in a textbook on the global challenges and peace might give the reader a certain feeling of being ‘out of place’. The word ‘global’ is associated with the age in which we live today, and the Pacific War is the only case study among six selected in this book that is not, relatively speaking, a contemporary issue. The case, of course, is not included simply to cover the area of East Asia as ‘equally’ as other regions. And it does not mean that it would not be possible to historicise some contemporary conflicts through the trajectory of events from World War II or even before it. Nevertheless, reasons for including this case are much more complex in the age of global economic and political hegemonies to which we are witness today.

The Pacific War (Taiheiyō sensō) is a term used for the war fought in East Asia, and signifies only fighting between the United States (US) and Japan that started after the Japanese Imperial Army attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The US occupation forces deployed the term in 1945 in order to replace ‘the Greater East Asian War’ (Daitōa sensō)—a term that the Japanese government used to emphasise its ‘liberating mission’ in Asia, and the final goal of the war—the creation of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. However, by December 1941 the conflict in East Asia had already lasted for a decade. It had started with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the formation of its puppet government, Manchukuo, in September 1931 and was transformed to a total war with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the start of the full-scale Japanese invasion of China in 1937, known as The Second Sino-Japanese War. In this context, names such as ‘The Asia Pacific War’ (used in the late 1980s) or ‘The Fifteen-Year War’ (Jūgonen sensō, a term used first by philosopher Tsurumi Shunsuke in the 1950s)
are considered to emphasise better that Japan was not only involved in the war with the US, but with China, Korea, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and other places in Asia and the Pacific. Both terms suggest more sensitivity to the issue of the war, and assign more responsibility to Imperial Japan that postwar Japan has never properly addressed, all being a result of specific domestic and international circumstances under the US occupation policy (1945–52), as well as the later course of events.

The unresolved issues from the Asia Pacific War such as war responsibility, war reparations, individual compensation and ‘the problem of the recognition of history’ (sensō ninshiki mondai) burst to the surface in the 1990s when right-wing tendencies to revise history in Japan became amplified. This was concurrent with requests on the side of the progressive intellectuals to redress the victims, most famously those of the sexual slavery practice of the Japanese military in the occupied regions, popularly labelled the ‘comfort women’ issue, but there were many other war-related issues that were raised as well.

The chapter’s main concerns are to reveal the circumstances in which Japan failed to recognise its colonial and war responsibility in regard to its Asian neighbours. In the official war narrative in which both sides—the US and Japan—emphasised the war as their mutual conflict, Japan’s colonial past in Asia was mostly concealed. While Japan’s defeat was mostly understood as a defeat by the US and has been inextricable from Japan’s postwar pacifism, Japan’s colonial past has been rapidly forgotten. This fact is considered to be crucial in creating a certain space for the continuity of the prewar and war state with the present state (Dower 1979; Igarashi 2000: 13; Katō 2000: 94). In this context, the chapter will discuss issues of Hiroshima’s peace politics and debates on Japan’s pacifist constitution, particularly Article 9, which is becoming more and more controversial in an increasingly ‘globalised world’ in which concepts of the nation-state’s sovereignty are losing their meaning in light of the contested human security agenda and ‘responsibility to protect’ discourse.

Therefore, the main question in the chapter is how did post-war Japan’s oblivion of its inconvenient past in Asia happen, and what were the circumstances that caused this ‘nearly total amnesia of empire?’ (Katō 2000: 5).

1. Setting the Stage

Since Tokugawa Japan opened its doors to the outside world under the pressure of Commodore Perry’s ‘black ships’ in 1853, Japan realised that