



WW2: what to remember

In 2017, we remembered the 75th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore. In our February and March issues, we looked at what the event meant to people at the time and how its memory is preserved. On these pages, What's Up editors reflect on some important lessons from World War 2.

The destructive power of racism

Why did the Japanese invaders treat people so badly? Historians tell us that many Japanese had been taught that they were superior to other Asians. As a result, they felt that they had a right to rule over their neighbours.

When we think of weapons of war, we usually picture tanks, fighter planes, missiles and battleships. But, World War 2 was also the stage for a very different kind of weapon: racism.

Both the Germans and the Japanese used racist ideas to convince themselves that it was morally acceptable to wage war against their neighbours and massacre people of different cultures. Wartime Germany's Nazi ideas treated the Aryan race (referring to a pure German race) as superior to all others. The racist **propaganda** was so effective that many Germans were willing to follow Adolf Hitler's orders to exterminate Jews, resulting in the deadliest **genocide** in human history.

Similarly, the Japanese were taught to think of themselves as superior to their Asian neighbours, such as Korea and China. Japan modernised rapidly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It began to look down on its neighbours, believing it had a superior civilisation.

However, when the Japanese Empire decided to expand, it acted as if it was on the side of fellow Asians against their European colonisers. Many of the propaganda leaflets the Japanese distributed showed Asians being abused by whites. For instance, one leaflet had a cartoon of British soldiers taking away local Asian women against their will.

After the Japanese conquered their neighbouring countries, though, they did not hide their arrogance for long. It became clear that they deemed other Asians inferior. For instance, Japanese theatre troupes that went to China to entertain the Japanese troops there made fun of Chinese people.

Minds poisoned

Much worse than that, Japanese forces were also guilty of shocking war crimes in Singapore and other Asian countries they occupied. This showed how the Japanese considered themselves separate and superior, as if other peoples didn't deserve any dignity.

After Japan's defeat, the international tribunal investigating the empire's atrocities said, "The mind of the Japanese people was systematically poisoned with harmful ideas of the alleged racial superiority of Japan over other peoples of Asia and even of the whole world."

Human experiments

Medical doctors in the Japanese army took part in developing biological weapons even though germ warfare had already been banned in 1925. Deadly human experiments were carried out in occupied Manchuria from 1933. Dozens of germ warfare bases were set up in China and Malaya.

Later, one member of the biological warfare team explained why they felt no pity for their victims. "After all, we were already implanted with a narrow racism.... We **disparaged** all other races. ... If we didn't have a feeling of racial superiority, we couldn't have done it," he said.

Only later did he and others realise the horror of what they had done. "We, ourselves, had to struggle with our humanity afterwards. It was an agonising process. There were some who killed themselves, unable to endure."

MYTH VERSUS REALITY



A 1943 Japanese propaganda booklet shows Asians of different cultures living harmoniously under Japanese rule. In reality, the Japanese were taught to think of themselves as culturally superior.



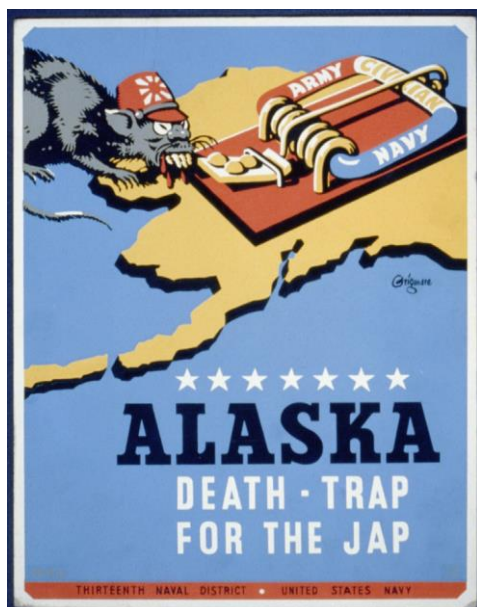
This is the site of the notorious Unit 731 facility in Harbin, China, where the Japanese army developed biological weapons. The military experimented on helpless Chinese prisoners. [Photo: WIKIMEDIA]

Not just the Japanese

Racism was a weapon also used by the British and Americans who were fighting the Japanese. In fact, anti-Asian prejudice was being spread in the West long before World War 2. In the United States, people talked about the “Yellow Peril”. During the Pacific War, a lot of the Allied propaganda was extremely racist, often showing the Japanese as animal-like.

These attitudes made the Pacific War extremely brutal. “Race hate fed atrocities, and atrocities in turn fanned the fires of race hate,” writes historian John Dower.

At the end of World War 2, governments got together to form the United Nations, promising honour as human beings as equal in their worth. The UN condemns racist propaganda that tries to convince people that they are racially superior to others. World War 2 teaches us that such ideas can result in terrible cruelty and violence.



A US Navy poster showing the Japanese as a rat.

VOCAB BUILDER

propaganda (say “prop-uh-gan-da”; noun) = a flood of information pushed by a government to make people think a certain way.

genocide (say “jen-o-syd”; noun) = a mass murder that aims to wipe out a whole community.

disparaged (say “dis-pair-aij’d”; verb) = speak about people or things as if they are worthless.

Remember war, build peace

Learning the history of war helps peace, but only if we do it right.



The United Nations headquarters in New York. The UN was set up after World War 2 ended, so that such a disastrous event would never happen again.

[Photo: Cancillería Ecuador]

Wars are an important part of a country's history. Stories of past wars remind the present generation of their forefathers who willingly sacrificed their lives for their country. Many nations were born in wars of revolution—the Americans, for example, had to fight Britain to win their independence; and the Indonesians had to fight the Dutch. Naturally, such wars are celebrated as glorious events.

Sometimes, however, the way nations remember past wars creates problems in the present. It can cause hatred to linger, and make future wars more likely.

How should we remember periods of war? Here are some tips.

We need to know

Historians hope that future wars can be prevented by keeping the memory of past wars alive. If people remember how terrible wars were, then perhaps they would try harder to avoid them. One way to do this is through annual remembrance ceremonies. In Singapore, Total Defence Day is observed on the anniversary of the Fall of Singapore to the Japanese. Remembrance Sunday is held in November, marking the anniversary of the end of World War 1.

What we remember

War memories stand out more than peace-time because our brains tend to remember horrifying details more vividly. This also means that of all the things that happen during wartime, it is the most gruesome and revolting war stories that make the deepest impression. In reality, every war also has stories of kindness, courage, and compassion, and these stories deserve to be kept alive as well.



Mamoru Shinozaki, a Japanese officer, saved many locals' lives in Singapore during the Occupation. He is an example of someone who did not deserve to be condemned for the crimes of his countrymen.

[Photo: WIKIMEDIA]

Zoom out

The tricky part about war stories is that they don't always give us the larger picture. For example, when we zoom out, we find that not all Germans were Nazis. In fact, there were Germans who risked their lives to save Jews and others from the Nazis. Similarly, not all Japanese were part of the Kempetai; there were Japanese who helped others escape the Kempetai, like Mamoru Shinozaki whom we wrote about in our March issue.

If we don't zoom out, we may condemn all the people belonging to a community or race for what was done by one group in the past. Then, instead of helping to prevent future wars, war stories might just fan flames of hate for generations to come.

When we remember the war the right way, it's easier to deal properly with the past:

Punish only the guilty

The International War Crimes Tribunal exists to pursue real culprits of war crimes. We can do our part to make sure that war stories do not condemn all the members of another community who were not responsible for war atrocities.

Recognise the real enemy

Although most people are inherently good, there are some among us who commit cruel and evil deeds. Our rules and laws prevent them from hurting us, and it is easy to think of such individuals as the real enemy. However, they are not: the ultimate enemy is hate. This is what each of us must fight both within ourselves, and in our communities.



Doves symbolising peace being released at the Civilian War Memorial by Singapore leaders, members of the Singapore Chinese business community and a member of Britain's royal family. [Photo: Ministry of Information and The Arts Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore]

Open trade: one way to prevent war

Japan had to learn the hard way that trading with others beats fighting others as a way to succeed.



1976: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew tours a factory in Marsiling set up by Seiko of Japan. Japanese companies helped create many jobs in independent Singapore.
[Photo: Ministry of Information and The Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore]

Today, thanks to trade, Japan is one of the world's biggest economies. While it relies on imports such as fuel and machinery, Japan is renowned for its exports of cars, electronics, anime and other high-quality products. A huge quantity of trade goes in and out of Japan every day.

In the run-up to the Pacific War, however, Japan—and the world—had different ideas about how to prosper. Major powers felt that they had to control their resources jealously behind closed doors. They also believed that if they needed lots of something from another place, they had to rule that place. Thus, they would have to colonise or conquer other countries to get rich.

Economic reasons for war

By the end of the 1930s, the Japanese were already in control of Manchuria, Korea, and large parts of China. But, the Japanese military was not satisfied. Japan also did not like the fact that it depended on oil from the United States and rubber from British Malaya. These two Western powers were trying to restrict the Japanese Empire's expansion.

Meanwhile, Japan's war in China was draining its resources. The military then decided it needed to conquer Southeast Asia to get hold of the Dutch East Indies' oil

and British Malaya's rubber. It also set its sights on the Philippines' agricultural resources.

In 1940, the Japanese government announced the idea of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. It claimed it wanted to help its neighbours prosper without having to depend on the West. Unfortunately, the Japanese also believed they had the right to lead the Co-Prosperity Sphere – by force if necessary. Japan felt that it had no choice, as the US was refusing to trade with Japan.

Japan, like Germany in Europe, had to discover the hard way that warfare was not a smart way for a country to get wealthy.

Their aggressive policies were disastrous—not just for their neighbours, but also for themselves. By 1945, they had lost everything. Both countries' proud capitals, Berlin and Tokyo, were controlled by the very people they had tried to conquer. They ended up much poorer than they were before World War 2.

After the war, most countries got wiser. They realised that the best way to prosper was together with their neighbours—and not at the expense of their neighbours. Germany got together with France. Despite having fought numerous wars against each other over the centuries, Germany and France formed the core of what became the European Union. They started by cooperating to produce coal and steel together.

Similarly, Japan is a friend of Singapore and the rest of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. When Asian countries were hit by the economic crises in the late 1990s, Japan offered major support to them. These actions were the opposite of its economic policies in the period before World War 2.

Close ties with Singapore

In the 1970s, Japan became Singapore's largest foreign investor and trading partner. Today, there are many Japanese companies that have factories and offices in Singapore where both countries' employees work together.

In a 2016 letter to his Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong observed, "We cooperate closely in many areas—trade and investment, third-country training programmes, health care, cultural exchanges, among others.

"Our economic relationship is particularly significant. Japanese companies have been investing in Singapore since the 1960s and played a key role in Singapore's development."

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