

Differences in Data Presentation on the World War II in History Textbooks in the US, Japan,  
Germany, and Russia

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World War II is justly considered to be one of the most horrific, intense, and influential periods in world history, let alone the twentieth century. The nations who were on both sides of the aisle of the conflict treat the causes and dispositions of it, the events of warfare itself, interbellum governmental decisions, and the life of ordinary people in conditions of war with particular attention and respect—each for different reasons. While modern-day representations of World War II's events is generally aligned between historical communities across the world, simplified narration on this history in school textbooks tend to differ, as each nation has its reasons to add accents on an event it deems more relevant and leaves others out of attention.

In this paper, the representation of WWII history in these textbooks in the U.S., Russia, Germany, and Japan will be analyzed and compared. It appears that the process of selection has much to do with the sense of national identity, as well as the political thinking of the time of publication. When textbooks are conducted as narration addressed for children, history is used to establish a nation's vision of recent history and justify a contemporaneous political state of affairs.

As a victor in the war as well as a country that was dragged into it rather from necessity than from imperial ambitions, the U.S. had the luxury to represent the history of the entire series of warfare without significant distortions. An exception was the narrative of Hiroshima's and Nagasaki's events that always were taught with preceding moral justifications in forms of reflections upon high Japanese patriotism, the non-desire to surrender, and the estimated

casualties on both sides in the case of a full-blown operation of an occupation of Japan (Foster, Nicholls, 2005). As for another major difference between the 1950s and contemporary representations of WWII that were slowly changing over seventy years, there is an infamous narrative of Japanese internment. According to Ogawa (2004), until the year 2004 “the most coverage among the historical events regarding Asian Americans in textbooks published between 1994 and 1996” (p. 36). This was a result of the decades-long campaigns of Japanese American activists for historical justice—the aim of which was to point towards human rights violations while U.S. officials were prone to forget them. This pattern of gradual critical revision of the history is characteristic for American pedagogic historiography in general.

Japanese historiography became a topic of controversy, as more and more historians and critical theorists paid attention to the big picture that was drawn through data and narratives in local, state-approved textbooks. The controversy arose not from the exclusion of crucial information, but rather from the tone and choice of words with which tragedies, such as the Rape of Nanking, were described. Hashiba (2010) describes:

The Japanese perpetrators of the massacre are hardly ever present on “an individual human level” (e.g., “the Japanese”) but only on an “organizational level” (e.g., “the military”). ...Only one textbook out of the corpus of 88 textbooks attributes the massacre’s killing to a human-level actor, that is, the soldiers of the Japanese army. (p. 150).

The controversy that started around a representation of the Rape of Nanking continued upon closer examination. The accusation from both international and Japanese historians arose

on implicit nationalism of the description of Japanese WWII participation, the glorification of Emperor Shōwa's generals and ministers, and disturbing naturalizations of gender relations during WWII occupation of China (Barnard, 2013). Each of these points was eventually fixed in the following editions of criticized books, yet the Japan-centric representation of WWII and positive coverage of Emperor Hirohito's merits was preserved due to the immense importance of the royal dynasty for the Japanese approach towards national identity.

Germany in the postbellum period was divided into areas of occupation controlled by allied nations, which in their turn form the opposite political blocs NATO and the Warsaw Pact. As a result, the main representational difference concerned a general approach to the philosophy of history (the capitalist narrative versus Marxist material dialectics of history) as well as towards the assessment of the contribution of allied nations towards the defeat of the Nazi regime. West German historiography after WWII was generally concentrated on the reflections on how the rise of the Nazi Party was possible and what ethical and existential lessons the nations could bring out from a crushing sense of grief and sorrow. In opposition to this, East Germans were incentivized to accept the reevaluated nationalism based on class struggle under similar oppression. Thus, in relation to WWII's events, according to Dierkes (2010),

The narrative of the rise and defeat of fascism in Germany focused on the materialist basis of this development and on a dialectical opposition between progressive and reactionary forces. ... The East German nation-state was defined as an anti-fascist state from the outset, and thus denied all responsibility for atrocities committed. (p. 58).

Eventually, the West German approach ended up dominating after the unification of Germany and serves as the main approach to the topic of WWII even today.

The last country on the list, the Russian Federation, has a legacy of the Soviet Union that turned the victory over Nazism into a grand narrative of Victory Day—one of the central celebrations in the secular Soviet calendar, complete with nationwide military parades, official ceremonies, and massive celebrations (Bogorov, 2012). During the 2000s, the ‘cult of the Victory’ that was gradually declining with the death of the majority of the WWII veterans was revitalized by Putin’s government, where it was used as a part of the integral element of Russian national identity. WWII, more known in Russia as ‘The Great Patriotic War of 1941 to 1945’, alongside with a reevaluation of both czarism and Stalinism, were reexamined in a new series of school history textbooks issued in 2007 in a much more heroic and sympathetic manner than it was before Putin. By doing so, the new long-term international direction was manifested: “The central theme of these earlier textbooks on the history of Russia in the 20th century was one of deep anti-Westernism” (p. 4). Accordingly, the symbols, events, and traditions of WWII and the postbellum period are still used as valuable political capital.

Each of the major forces in WWII used school history books to establish a narrative about the events that explained the event from a certain nation-centric perspective. Aside from ascribing importance, textbooks also use value and moral judgments in order to either critically evaluate a country’s contribution to WWII, or explain its relevance to the current political state of affairs. As a result, the narration of WWII in school history books represent both the strengths and dangers of the approach to history and serve as a great illustration of the ways competing

views on the same historical events emerge, and how each narration is built on equal or at least similar sets of facts and historical evidence.

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