

Review of Aldric Hama's Essay "The Buildup to the 'Greater East Asian War' from the Japanese Perspective"

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Aldric Hama's essay, "The Buildup to the 'Greater East Asian War' from the Japanese Perspective", notes how differently the people of Japan and the West view the origins of World War II, and attempts to explain this vast discrepancy in perceptions. The Western image is, in a word, a regurgitation of the opinions put forward at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the IMTFE or Tokyo Trials) that World War II was an illegal war of aggression launched by Japan's militarist faction in order to dominate East Asia and the rest of the world. Although it is true that Japan did ultimately initiate the Greater East Asian War, the series of events that led Japan to the war were not at all conveyed in an accurate manner by the IMTFE. Mr. Hama's essay makes this point very clear.

Where does the discrepancy lie? Essentially, the IMTFE believed that it was principally Japan's aggressive attitude toward China that led to the war and strongly focused on this point. However, Mr. Hama points out that, from the Japanese perspective, Japan's central preoccupations during the first half of the twentieth century, said to be the period in question, were actually to raise the standard of living of the Japanese people and improve its unequal relationships with the Western powers.

Mr. Hama has combed through a great many works of history, and he provides a succinct account of the words and actions of contemporary leaders as well as the historical facts illuminating the discrepancy between the Japanese and Western perspectives. Those like myself who are not under the influence of the masochistic view of Japanese history will find Mr. Hama's arguments very compelling. And yet, even those Japanese who are thoroughly steeped in the masochistic view still do not adhere to an interpretation of history as simplistic as that advanced by the verdict of the IMTFE, and so they, too, will find it interesting to read Mr. Hama's elucidation of the relevant historical facts and of the stances of the key figures of the time.

It can be said in broad terms that Japan's relations with China in the first half of the twentieth century were part of the reason for the Greater East Asian War, but, as I indicated above, they were far from the central reason. Still, it is true that Japan was forced to get involved in China and thus was caught in a quagmire from which it could not extricate itself. However, the other Western powers were also strongly involved in China during the same period, and each had its own unique interests there. They saw Japan's involvement with China in the context of their own involvement and interests. Nevertheless, deep misunderstandings arose in the way that they understood the situation. The country that, right from the start, committed the greatest errors in regard to China was the United States, and Mr. Hama concludes that America is continuing to make the same errors right up to the present day.

This conclusion is quite persuasive, but there may have been a better way of presenting it. It is possible that Mr. Hama's essay would have been easier to understand if he had described the motivations of each of the Western countries, including the United States, Great Britain, and other European countries, under separate headings rather than discussing them collectively, and then had traced the sequence of events chronologically. When the important countries are dealt with individually, the key player is of course the United States. When discussing the United States, it may have been clearer if Mr. Hama had explained America's oversized influence in the region, then how America acquired such great misconceptions about China, and in turn how this caused America to view Japan's involvement in China through the prism of these misconceptions.

To set the record straight for people in the West, the essay includes a fine account of the Westerners who did understand Japan's real intentions towards China. However, if Mr. Hama had divided the text by country and rearranged it into a clearer chronological order, it may have been easier to expose the areas where the Japanese side also should have done things differently in its interactions with the nations of the West, such as, for example, Japan's failure to engage in effective counter-propaganda.

Mr. Hama's essay also occasionally touches on current problems, even making reference to the policies of US President Donald Trump, but the biggest mistake made by the United States and other Western countries since the end of World War II was probably their response to the Tiananmen Square Protests that broke out near the end of the twentieth century. They expected that once they had invited China to join the capitalist world and helped to make China a rich country with a free market economy, China would soon embrace the system of international law and grow into a benevolent superpower playing a healthy leadership role in the world. Unfortunately, that was not to be. It was already conspicuous in the first half of the twentieth century, and likewise in the second half following World War II, that China still remains imbued with Sinocentric ideology deeming the Chinese as the rightful rulers of the world and other countries as inferior. It seems that Westerners are only now in the twenty-first century beginning to realize how wrong they have been about China.

In closing, I would like to introduce two informative books concerning this last point. On China's failure to free itself from the Sinocentric worldview, see Ko Bunyu's *Ko Bunyu no "Rekishi to wa Nanka"* [Ko Bunyu's "What Is History?"]ⁱ published by Jiyusha. On America's misreading of China's intentions, I recommend Michael Pillsbury's *THE HUNDRED-YEAR MARATHON: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* published by Henry Holy & Co., NY, 2015.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ It is under translation work by SDHF.

ⁱⁱ [China 2049 – China's Secret 100-Year Plan to Conquer the World] translated into Japanese, published by Nikkei BP Sha, Tokyo in 2015.