

The Greater East Asia Conference which I remember

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I was a freshman of middle school when the Greater East Asia Conference took place. It has often been said that Japan went to war only because it wanted to lay hands on natural resources of Asia. That is incorrect. Of course, Japan was eager for natural resources. But there were more important purposes of the war. The Greater East Asian War had broken out two years before the Conference, when I was a fifth-grader. Immediately before the outburst of the war, we were taught a song. I am reminded of its words: “We are going to crush their 100-year ambition to invade and control East Asia.” It was in October of the sixteenth year of Showa, 1941. That was why we understood that we were fighting in the cause of the liberation of Asia.

It is strange that, after the war, we have seldom heard the name of the Greater East Asian Conference. It seems that we ourselves have stopped talking about it. On one occasion, I happened to go abroad with Mr. Fukada Yusuke, the famous writer, who was at that time an executive official of Japan Air Lines. Then I told him that people remembered little or nothing about the Greater East Asian Conference. He said he too thought so. It was not long before he wrote a detailed book on the Conference, which did it full justice. It was the first book that had had to do with the matter after the war.

I was at a loss how come the Conference was not generally known, which puzzlement led me to conduct an investigation. There are many kinds of encyclopedias published in the post-war Japan. I consulted many of them and looked for the headword “Greater East Asian Conference,” which I could not find. Although there existed some references to the Conference in the illustrative texts, yet each of such references usually consists of no more than a few lines. On the other hand, the meetings and conferences on the side of the Allied (the United Nations) are thoroughly explained, each extending over dozens of pages. I couldn’t help but sigh out, “It cannot be helped!” After all, such was the reality of the post-war days.”

“Koji-en”(“Wide garden of words”) is one of the most reliable and popular dictionaries of the Japanese language. It is an excellent dictionary, but when it comes to modern and contemporary history, I dare say, it often talks nonsense. I once wrote, under joint authorship with the late Professor Tanizawa Ei-ichi, a book entitled, “Lies found in Koji-en.” This dictionary had not touched on the Conference until recently. It was only when its sixth edition came out that we found it included the headword “Greater East Asian Conference.” To our disappointment, it consists of no more than

three or four lines, and gives something in the lines of “the meeting of Japan and the governments of her friendly countries.” What an absurd story the dictionary made up! Whether friendly or not, there were few, if any, independent countries in Asia, except China under Chiang Kai-shek (Chiang Chieh-shih/Jiang JieShi). The other parts of Asia had been totally colonized.

I found an interesting fact about its editorial policy. It is true that Koji-en carries an account of the fact that the Conference took place. Nonetheless, it never mentions the names of those present. As a general rule, it did run through the list of historical heroes. For instance, the ten brave warriors of the Sanada Family around 1600 are well known. Like almost all other children, I memorized their names like Sarutobi Sasuke and Miyoshi Seikai-nyudo. These names appear in the dictionary but why the names of those who attended the Greater East Asian Conference do not?

I’ve already forgotten some names of the ten brave warriors, but still now I keep by heart the members attending the Conference. Tojo, from Japan. And let me enumerate them from north to south. First, Zhang Jinghuifrom from Manchuria (Manzhouguo/Manchukuo), second, Wang Ching-wei (Wang Qingwei) from China, and third, José Paciano Laurel from the Philippines. Among others were Prince Wan Waithayakon from Thailand and Ba Maw from Burma (Myanmar). And last but not the least was Subhas Chandra Bose from India. He represented India as an observer, his country not being independent at this time, though a provisional government had been formed. He made the closing speech at the Conference, which meant he was never made little of by other members.

Sukarno from Indonesia came but he wasn’t allowed to attend the Conference, because his country was not yet an independent country. Surprisingly enough, His Majesty the Emperor did him a favor by granting him an audience. He was moved by his Majesty’s exceptional kindness, which turned him into a Japanophile, though it seems that he was attracted to Japan from the first. Everybody knows he got married to a Japanese woman after the war while he was president of Indonesia.

The plan of the Greater East Asian Conference originated with Shigemitsu Mamoru, who served as the third foreign minister of the Tojo Cabinet. He insisted that Japan should explain to the world the purpose and ideal of the Greater East Asian War. Prime Minister Tojo agreed with his idea and His Majesty was very pleased with his suggestion. All concerned agreed to make it clear that Japan didn’t go to war because it wanted to gobble up natural resources in Asia. Nor did it intend to invade other countries. Generally speaking, when a country resorted to arms, its aim was to establish colonies and gain resources. That’s why Western countries thought Japan

gave rise to war for the same purpose. That was not correct. In Japan, even middle school students were singing, “We are going to crush their 100-year ambition to invade and control East Asia.”

If the Conference had been held in 1942, how much better things would have gone! It was a year too late. Shigemitsu was appointed foreign minister in spring 1943 and he lost no time making a blueprint of the Greater East Asian Conference. At this time, the main battlefield was the Solomon islands. Japan had already lost the Attu Island, all the officers and men killed in the last decisive suicide attack in that battle. For all that, as the island was situated outside the Absolute Defense Lines, Japanese were not yet so much worried about the future of the war. Nonetheless, sensible or sensitive countries were so apprehensive that some of them hesitated to send very important politicians. For instance, Thailand was represented by Prince Wan Waithayakon, instead of Prime Minister Luang Pibul Songgram.

As most of those representing Asian countries were politicians, it seems that it dawned on them that Japan was in danger of losing the war. Nonetheless, they got together perhaps because they felt it up to them to accomplish their mission. It must have been this Conference that prompted the United States and the British Empire to hold the Cairo Conference. Of course, Churchill and Roosevelt were present. Japan also invited Chiang Kai-shek (Chiang Chieh-shih/Jiang JieShi). Chiang had not attended the Greater East Asia Conference. But the American and British leaders were worried that he might surrender to Japan. That was why they wanted curry favor with Chiang and planned to convene the Cairo Conference. This Conference, unlike the one held in Tokyo, can easily be found in today’s dictionaries.

The winners of the war, including Americans and Britons, didn’t want the world to understand the importance of the Greater East Asia Conference. That was why they tried to keep unknown the fact that Shigemitsu projected it, that Tojo gave his approval and that His Majesty was very pleased. The leftists of Japan, who at first (during the early post-war days) were pro-Americans, agreed to draw a veil over the fact. At the signing ceremony aboard USS Missouri held immediately after the surrender, Shigemitsu signed the Instruments of Surrender. Then he composed a tanka, Japanese traditional short poem, which said,

“If only my motherland prospered forever, I wouldn’t mind being despised by people for this signature.

He conveyed in verse his feelings that Japan would be reconstructed so successfully that the people could afford to despise him as good-for-nothing. He was a patriot in the true sense of the word!

Let me talk further about Shigemitsu's importance. He was adjudged guilty at the Tokyo Trials or the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. However, he was sentenced to imprisonment, penalty of death commuted by one degree. He made a comeback and became the vice prime minister and foreign minister of the Hatoyama Cabinet. You must not confuse this Hatoyama with the recent prime minister, his grandson who was a shame to our motherland. When Japan joined the United Nations in 1956, Shigemitsu went to the UN Headquarters in New York as a Japanese representative and made a speech at its General Assembly. He said that Japan intended to become a bridge connecting the entire world. He won the plaudits of the whole house. Saying that he had achieved all his mission trusted to him by his motherland, he came back to Japan. It was not long before he was taken ill and died. When hearing the news of his death, the United Nations decided to offer him a silent prayer.

What it means is that there were no such "war criminals" in the Tokyo Trial. The Trial had found him guilty as Class A war criminal and yet the United Nations offered him a silent prayer. His existence is enough to overturn the Tokyo Trial view of history. Still, even among Japanese people are some who blame Class A war criminals for their responsibility for the war. On the other hand, his adorers created the "Shigemitsu Prize." They believed that it was absolutely necessary to give homage to him.

It was Fukada Yusuke that received the prize first. Nonetheless, The Greater East Asia Conference is now seldom talked about, though some people of my generation are sometimes reminded of it. The fact makes it all the more pleasant for me to see the 70th anniversary of the Conference take place this way and that splendidly. I am beside myself with movement when I think of the excitement I felt as a sophomore of middle school. I hope those engaged in diplomacy will negotiate with their counterpart all over the world with the spirit of the Conference at the bottom of their heart. Of course, I know that we should be careful not to bring about unnecessary troublesome problems.