

The Victim as Hero

Review >
Japan

The great merit of *The Victim as Hero. Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* lies in its synthesis of sources of the peace movement and the light it sheds on the notion of Japanese self-victimization from various political and historical perspectives. Its relevance lies in its comprehensive description of the political role of the victim narrative in Japanese post-war state policies. In short, it is a systematic account of the pacifist movement and its co-optation by state nationalism. The book is of great value to anyone interested in the history of Japanese political attitudes toward the Pacific War and the way it influenced the educational system.

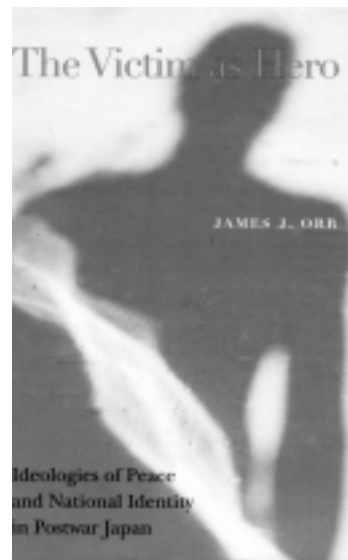
By Margaret Sleeboom

The style of the book is fluent and clear, even to readers without any background knowledge of Japanese history. For specialists, however, the book's many repetitions of the same theme may become tiresome, especially to readers who have studied works that discuss similar themes of post-war memory. The book consists of seven chapters, five of which carry the main body of the argument. It is a historical work in the sense that the five main chapters follow a temporal order, but it is also a thematic work. It begins with a discussion of the American occupation and the Tokyo War Crime Tribunals and continues with a debate on the role of victimization in the Anti-nuclear Peace Movement and the textbook issues. The book follows with a discussion of the theme of victimization in the world of literature and film, and finishes with a critical analysis of the politics of compensating war victims.

The theme of war victimization in Japan is certainly not a new one. It is, therefore, a great shame that the author does not make any mention of two clearly relevant and widely read (at least by modern Japan specialists) works, discussing the same theme of national self-victimization. The first, *Interpreting history in Sino-Japanese relations: a case*

study in political decision-making by Caroline Rose (1998), discusses war victimization from Chinese and Japanese points of view on the textbook issue. She concludes that matters of war memory cannot be understood outside the realm of current foreign policies, while at the same time patterns found in such political behaviour are not unique to the nations involved but are shared with the formulation of international policy in general. The second book, *The Wages of War* by Ian Buruma (1995), compares war memories from Japanese and German perspectives, charting how the legacy of shame has in various ways shaped political movements and government policies to the present time. I believe that the element of comparison in these books puts into perspective what is, on first sight, the unique contrast of the combination of Japanese pacifism and its inability to face up to the reality of aggressive behaviour in its national history.

The main argument of the book focuses on the notion that the development of victim consciousness (*higaisha ishiki*), instead of just being a conservative tactic to avoid responsibility, is an essential part of the Japanese pacifist national identity. Orr shows how post-war Japanese elites and American occupying authorities set the stage for a narrative in which the Japanese people - the



Emperor and the Japanese civilians - had been victims of the aggression of the military. The state and the ultranationalists were blamed for Japanese warmongering, so that the Japanese and the various elements of their culture were spared the painful confrontations with their Asian war memories, which the German people have undergone about their role in the Second World War. This lack of public acknowledgement of the consequences of the past for other Asian victims was also a lack of self-reflection, by the communists and new-born democrats, on the responsibility of the Japanese people for the war. It also explains the post-war mythology

of the Japanese as innocent victims, which in time became widely accepted as fact in public discourse.

The main aim of *The Victim as Hero* is to show how the theme of victimization has been used by groups across the political spectrum. In other words, the notion of victimization has not just led to the avoidance of responsibility, but also to conscientious civic activism. As such it became part and parcel of Japanese nationalist ideologies in different camps. Orr thus shows how defeat in the Pacific war led to pacifism among various layers of the Japanese population. By describing how this pacifism was incorporated as a collective sense of victimization in a newly constructed form of national identity, Orr succeeds in illuminating the link between pacifist victimization and post-war nationalism.

Orr did not give much consideration for the arguments, put forward by Japanese scholars, which maintain that in a world of colonialism, imperialism, and widespread war, many people did indeed experience fear. Japanese aggression was not expressed in an era of world peace, but in a world in turmoil. Disregarding both the motivation of ultra-nationalist politicians and warmongers, and the aggression in China, Korea, and Taiwan, many people thought that through fighting one could avoid becoming a victim. The fact that philosophical and Marxist debates on 'subjectivity' ideologically depict the Japanese as being too passive, and criticized them for being irresponsible in maintaining an ideological distance from the state, does not take away the historical reality that many Japanese indeed became victims. The question is of what.

Though I read the book with great pleasure, I did not think Orr's reference to cultural practices of 'indulging' (p. 11-13) was very helpful in explaining the ease with which a war victim consciousness could thrive in Japan. The political and ideological factors Orr describes are far more convincing than the half-hearted attempt at cultural generalization. Anyway, any such attempt should be accompanied by careful intercultural comparison. More suitable would have been a more careful weighing of the relative importance of factors that shaped the Japanese war victim consciousness at two levels. At a temporal level, Orr could have compared the way in which the war was remembered by those who had actually lived through it with the victimization consciousness of those born after the war. At a synchronic level, Orr could have added a differential analysis of the various factors (political and educational factors, social movements, or the Japanese national psychology) he found relevant to understanding the formation of post-war notions of victimization. <

- Orr, James J., *The Victim as Hero. Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (2001), 221 pp., ISBN 0-8248-2435-0, Endnotes, Bibliography, Index

Dr Margaret Sleeboom is a research fellow at the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS, Leiden), where she is currently engaged in establishing a research programme on Genomics in Asia. She completed her PhD thesis on nationalism in academic circles in 2001. E-mail: m.sleeboom@let.leidenuniv.nl