

Since the mid-1990s, Japanese and American museum curators have experienced a firestorm of criticism for their exhibits on the Second World War, highlighting the relationship between museums, their audiences and the professional responsibilities of curators.

# Curating controversy: exhibiting the Second World War in Japan and the United States since 1995

LAURA HEIN

Until the public battle over the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's 1995 exhibit on the Enola Gay airplane and a series of conservative attacks on Japanese peace museums that began in 1996, curators had faced little criticism over exhibits related to the Second World War in either the United States or Japan. Both countries have many museums that unabashedly celebrate military actions. Usually founded by military units or veterans groups, they emphasise military strategy, the heroism of commanders and soldiers, and the ingenuity and sheer force of military technology. Other museums reject the legitimacy of war altogether. The oldest and best-attended of these is the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. While there is nothing on the scale of the Hiroshima Museum in the United States, the Peace Museum in Chicago proclaims a very similar message.

The Japanese municipal museum with one of the most profoundly self-critical analyses of the Asia-Pacific War is the Osaka International Peace Center, or Peace Osaka, which opened in the Osaka Castle Park in 1991. (The Okinawa Peace Memorial Museum is similarly critical.) The museum evolved out of efforts by local citizens groups to remember the impact of the war on Osaka, particularly the approximately fifty American air-raid attacks. In order to explain why the city was attacked so many times, the planners agreed on an exhibit that portrayed Japan as not only the victim but also the aggressor in Asia. The exhibit also explained that Osaka Castle Park was used as a munitions factory during the war. While this information was absolutely accurate, mention of it acknowledged that Osaka had been a military as well as a civilian target, potentially justifying the American bombardment. Their fundamental message was that war should always be avoided.



In 1996, conservative groups began attacking Peace Osaka. While the museum had opened with wide support within Japan, the museum currently makes little effort to mobilise this substantial political constituency, and instead tries to avoid controversies at any cost. For example, Peace Osaka has prohibited their own oral history narrators from talking about subjects other than

their personal experiences. It has also withdrawn educational worksheets for school children after receiving criticisms that they were 'too biased'. The museum staff obviously has decided on a defensive posture to maintain the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

## Curators and their audiences

Other museums have handled the problem of criticism in a variety of ways. One is to limit war-related exhibits to uncontroversial aspects of any given subject. This often means focusing on the experience of civilians and emphasising daily life on the home front or front lines rather than battle strategy. A second common strategy in both countries has been to present a pastiche of individual experiences rather than one overarching narrative - collecting memories rather than collectivising them. This strategy has been particularly useful for acknowledging the sensitive history of race relations in the United States. Curators can no longer choose one white soldier to stand in for everyone; the simple act of organising an exhibit as a collection of varied stories immediately highlights the specific experiences of non-whites. American museum exhibits on the Second World War now routinely discuss what the D-Day Museum in New Orleans calls the 'lamentable American irony of World War II', that the armed forces were racially segregated throughout the war.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, 'A More Perfect Union' at the National Museum of American History, which opened in 1987, treated wartime internment of Japanese Americans as a violation of civil rights that diminished constitutional protections for all Americans.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, the controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit spurred museum professionals to negotiate more with the public. Many of them have concluded that there is a single correct interpretation of an event as major and complex as the Second World War. As Lonnie Bunch, now Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, explained, "Museums must not look to educate visitors to a singular point of view. Rather the goal is to create an informed public."<sup>4</sup>

This attitude is less prevalent in Japan, in part because most peace museum staff members are not professional museologists, especially those at public museums. Rather, they are career civil servants, who just happened to be appointed to the curatorial division of a peace museum as a part of their regular rotation through local government, doing such jobs as issuing vehicle licences and managing national health insurance. They knew little about operating a museum or the history of the war, making it difficult for them to defend their institutions. While many Japanese museums provide personal testimony for visitors' perusal, they generally present personal narratives as illustrations of a typical experience rather than using a set of them to

sketch out the full range of differing individual experiences. The Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum is a significant exception, in that it has incorporated the oral narratives of forced labourers from Korea.



## Confronting irreconcilable differences

Yet, while essential, reshaping the museum-audience relationship into a more collaborative endeavour will never be enough. The real challenge is to negotiate between irreconcilable groups within the public. In both nations, the ugliest fights have occurred when the audience in question is young people. Rather than allowing them to reach their own conclusions about the war, both American critics of the Enola Gay exhibit and Japanese ones of Peace Osaka wanted sole interpretive authority. American veterans who opposed the original Enola Gay exhibit resisted displaying Japanese civilians in a sympathetic manner - people who indisputably had been harmed by American state action - because they feared that viewing it would turn young Americans against their own government. Tom Crouch, one of the Enola Gay curators, recalls that one of the key moments in the negotiation process with the American Legion occurred over precisely this point. A Vietnam War veteran told Crouch that he had given the first script of the exhibit to his 13-year-old daughter to read and she had been horrified by American use of the bomb on civilians. The veteran then told Crouch "I can't let you mount an exhibit that does that."<sup>5</sup>

In Japan, too, most controversies about war memory focus on shaping the attitudes of young people. Initially Second World War museums were peripheral to this issue, because so many of them were originally conceived of as a religious memorial or to console survivors. Yet an increasingly large share of Japanese history museum-goers are school children. Echoing the anxieties of their American counterparts, Japanese critics of peace museums fear young Japanese will accept what they think of as a "Tokyo Trials view of history". In both cases, the critics argued that the state has the right to present its own actions in the best possible light to its own younger citizens, even by withholding information that has been common knowledge for decades. More fundamentally, in both nations these celebrants of state power deprive young people of the opportunity to engage exhib-

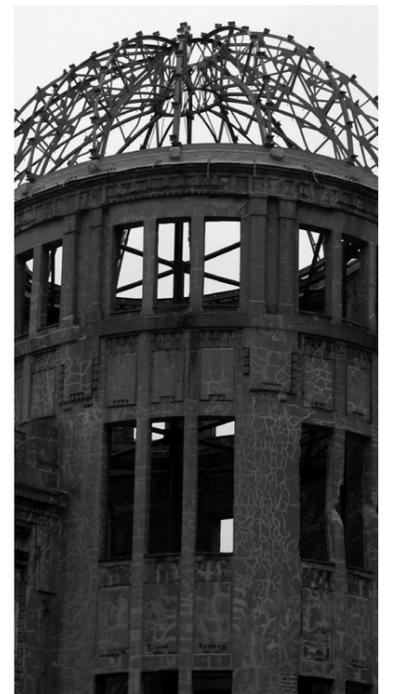
its through their own ethical and historical questions, leaving them ill-equipped to face a morally ambiguous world.

Museum exhibits on the Second World War have another largely neglected audience - international visitors. Japanese museums try harder to accommodate foreign visitors than do American ones, for example with bilingual or multilingual signage. The Hiroshima Museum demonstrates its concern for international visitors by offering no opinion on whether the United States committed a war crime. The museum's silence is almost certainly out of sensitivity to American attitudes. Because, in contrast to the United States, the near-universal opinion in Japan is that the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were clearly war crimes under the definitions incorporated into law at the Nuremberg and Tokyo War Crimes Trials.

By contrast, American Second World War exhibits have not included foreigners in the same way that they have come to include the perspectives of non-white Americans. Yet the simple act of shifting one's imaginative focus to individuals rather than nation-sized protagonists makes the nationality of those individuals seem far less important. The National D-Day Museum in New Orleans collects reminiscences of the war from all participants - including Japanese, Filipino, and Chinese - not just American, and acknowledges that racism played a large role in intensifying the violence on both sides in the Asia-Pacific theatre. Moreover, attention to the humanity of Japanese-Americans automatically calls attention to Japanese nationals, since immigrants were not permitted to become U.S. citizens because they were not white.

Further, simply documenting the troubling history of global genocide, war crimes, state terrorism, and systematic cruelty itself encourages comparative thinking. The International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, a "world-wide network of organisations and individuals dedicated to teaching and learning how historic sites and museums can inspire social consciousness and action," explicitly presents the subjects of state terrorism, human trafficking, and racism, among others, as equivalent across national boundaries. This website links thirteen museums, including the Terezin Memorial in the Czech Republic, the District Six Museum in South Africa, and the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. While each museum focuses on a specific history of persecution, the international coalition effectively uses the global technology of the world wide web to pose the question of comparability of experience across national borders.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, to return to the history of the atomic bomb, many Americans have never been comfortable with the official narrative because it never fit well within a framework



of proportionate retribution. Indeed, people come to look at the Enola Gay airplane because they already see it as a complex symbol. If, as museum professionals now emphasise, visitors bring their own meaning to exhibits, display of the Enola Gay will forever provide an invitation to debate the moral and strategic legitimacy of the use of the bomb in August 1945 even though the exhibit itself attempts to assert only one point of view. ■

Laura Hein,

Department of History,  
Northwestern University,  
l-hein@northwestern.edu

## Notes

- 1 Akiko Takenaka interview with Ltsuki Kazuko, February 3, 2005
- 2 See website of the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans at <http://www.ddaymuseum.org>
- 3 <http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/index.html>  
This exhibit is now only on line.
- 4 Lonny Bunch, *Fighting the Good Fight*, Museum News, (March-April 1995), 32-35, 58-62.
- 5 Tom Crouch interview with Laura Hein, June 29, 2004.
- 6 <http://www.sitesofconscience.org>.

This is a much abridged version of 'Exhibiting World War II in Japan and the United States since 1945', Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka, *Pacific Historical Review* 76.1 (February 2007): 61-94.