

The national identity of japan history essay



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This report aims to explore the national identity in Japan. Under the broad category of Social effects, our group is splitting it into Education and Poverty.

Even from the Tokugawa Period, the Japanese have always regarded themselves as superior towards foreign countries and saw westerners as crude 'barbarians'. This opinion of the westerners being inferior to them remained even after Japan had acknowledged their capability in terms of technology and democratic system.

Despite the initial inferiority to the westerners in terms of technological military power, they have proven their competence in their victory against China in 1895, which provided them with a surge of self-confidence for the nation. Japan was also the first Asian country to claim victory against one of the white great powers during the war against Russia in 1904. This only contributed to a boosting effect on Japan's national pride.

After having tested the limits of their power, Japan's confidence and ambition grew and they sought to expand their territories by invading into China as well as other lands such as islands in the western Pacific. They then saw themselves as superior among the Asian countries and hence deemed themselves as leaders of the Asian countries since they believed they too had the right to acquire and maintain colonies in Asia. This brought forth the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in which Japan aspired to lead the rest of the Asian countries, free of western powers and their influence. Japan then proceeded to take over the Dutch East Indies, the British Colonies of Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore and Burma, and the American-controlled

Philippines. Despite, their power, much hostility was displayed towards the Japanese due to their severe and cruel treatment during this period.

Japan's supreme reign did not last long and it gradually fell apart since the Zone of Absolute National Defence was attacked in the Marianas in 1944 and the Saipan lost as a result. Series of devastating defeats in the Pacific, ensuing attacks on a number of Japanese cities and Russia's declaration of war on Japan did nothing but contribute to the vanishing of Japan's self-confidence and military euphoria. The two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 dealt the final blow to Japan and left them with no choice but to surrender.

After the war ended, Japan was left in shambles. The industries and transportation network in all the large cities, with the exception of Kyoto were severely damaged. People had to cope with severe food shortage, which lasted a few years. Not only were buildings and infrastructure destroyed, many human lives were loss, especially after the two atomic bombs. In addition, the economy in Japan was almost totally paralyzed from wartime destruction, rampant black marketing and runaway inflation. Japan lost all of its territories it had acquired since 1894 and they were not allowed to maintain an army or to ever lead a war again.

In short, after the war, Japan was left with a bruised ego, cities to rebuild and people in misery. At this period of time, the National Identity of the Japanese was disastrous. It would surely be an obstacle for them to overcome and to rise up against these challenges to build a renewed sense of national identity in Japan.

In this report, we hope to explore Education and Poverty aspects of National Identity.

Education (Before and After World War II)

Education in Japan was needed to restore national identity after World War II. The following information seeks to compare the national identity during and after World War II.

World War II Education Policies (Meiji Period):

The Showa Period saw a rise in militarism and thus, national identity.

Education played an important role in helping the nation to prepare for war.

During this period, instructors from the military were sent to schools to promote militarism. In the 1930s, the military almost established complete control over the government. The military intensified the indoctrination of education and media. By these steps taken, the students and Japanese people were influenced into thinking and believing that militarism and war could purify one's self, nation and the whole world. Military personnel occupied most of the important offices. (4)

Especially after the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the curriculum and things taught in textbooks gradually became increasingly nationalistic. National education was promoted and nationalistic feelings hoped to have been aroused from there. After the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the curriculum of national education being taught was revised to become even more militaristic. Eventually, compulsory reading materials including

the Kokutai no Hongi (1937) were put in place. Kokutai means “ national identity or national essence”. This means that the book was about national identity and the importance of it. These reads ensured that nationalistic feelings would be aroused, increasing national identity. to ensure that everyone had a chance to read this propaganda book, the book was circulated in millions of copies island-wide and around the empire.

Although it seemed impossible, the military managed to strengthen the nationalistic and militaristic indoctrination after the start of the Japanese Occupation in 1941. Basically, the military government hoped to preach and teach the traditional national political values, religion and morality. All these values were present during the Meiji period and they hoped to restore the values once again. Even as modernisation began to take place, the Japanese ensured that their national idiosyncrasies were preserved and deeply rooted into their hearts and minds. After all, they were still cultural Japanese.

During the Showa Period, conservatives in Japan wanted an independent Japan. A lot of emphasis was placed on Emperor worship. The students and people of Japan saw the Emperor as a God. They believed in him and felt attached to their almighty Emperor. Besides Emperor worship, it was essential to remain loyal to the most important values of the nation. Emphasis was also placed on ancient military virtues as well. This is because the ruler was the military. Hence, they enforced the military values and required everyone to know them.

Post World War II Education policies (After 1945):

In 1946, the Emperor was forced to step down. Previously, Japanese saw him as a God. It was a huge part of their National Identity. Now that they had no God to look up to, something needed to be put in place to restore that gaping hole in the hearts of the Japanese to make them believe in Japan and to have a common sense of national identity again. (6)

The defeat in WWII brought about cataclysmic change in Japan. The American Occupation government set an education reform as one of its primary goals, to eradicate militarism and to take a democratic approach. It especially emphasized on " education for citizens".

National education comprised of the community, the school as a whole, and school subjects.

Japanese education after WWII is the " new" education, where " new" means both " different" and " democratic". (1)

In order to rebuild japan's national identity, education was a powerful tool in shaping younger generation of Japanese.

Textbook

There have been controversies about the government-approved Japanese history textbooks. Many international observers accuse the textbooks of distorting actual historical facts. The Japanese government changed the textbook after the end of World War II. Emperor-system morality was no longer the emphasis in the textbook. The principle of democracy and peace was introduced. The " age of god" in Japanese history textbook was replaced by the " life in the stone age". Through learning the activities of the common

people in the history, the younger generation of Japanese will no longer view their emperor as the invulnerable god. The emperor only acts as a figurehead of the country. The loyalty to the emperor has successfully converted into the loyalty to the nation.

The national record about World War II was whitewashed in order to ensure a sense of patriotism and pride in Japanese schoolchildren, as the Japanese government believed that this was of higher priority than historical accuracy. The government knew that they needed to preserve the national psyche of its young. The Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform emphasized on all the achievements of the Japanese prior to World War II in Imperial Japan. There was also reference to the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, recounting it in a positive light. The textbooks also placed emphasis on the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to allow the students to feel for their ancestors who suffered for Japan.

Till now, many Japanese still believe that the war was necessarily in order to liberate Asian countries from western colonisation and to find living space for Japanese.

Social studies education

After World War II, Japanese schools were reformed and modelled after American schools. They then came under the control of a highly centralized Ministry of Education. (3) The Ministry of Education then established the Courses of Study to educate the students on democratic citizenship. Social studies education was the core of the new education. National education was mainly implemented as integrated social studies.

Social studies education was introduced in the schools with social life and society being taught during the lessons. Teachers and students in the classroom learnt about the various problems in the society and gained experience in solving the problems. Typical social studies practices were “yubin-gokko (playing the post)” and “yamabiko-gakko (echo school)”. The teacher usually organizes a postal structure as an activity for school children to experience. Through this, the students subconsciously learn commonsense knowledge while carrying out the social studies practices. This allowed the students to learn about “their own society” and develop “the attitude and skills to participate positively in their society in order to build a democratic society” (Ministry of Education, 1948, p. 13). Through learning about their society and community, the students were then able to develop a strong sense of belonging towards the nation.

Equality and uniformity

There was an emphasis on the uniformity in Japanese schools since the olden times. School children were taught cooperative behaviour and functioning in groups. The school curriculum was the same for all students. For example, music teachers are told which songs to teach in each grade. Hence, everything became standardized. They even had phrases for it: ‘we are all is one silk sheet.’ Japanese do not recognize diversity. Hence, their community is closely bonded. (5)

Education after World War II promoted equality and the free give-and-take of ideas that supported a democratic society:

Manners that encourage equality, the give-and-take of democratic government, the ideal of good workmanship in daily life – all these are morals in the wider sense. They should be developed and practiced in the varied programs and activities of the democratic school (The United States Education Mission to Japan, 1946: 58)”.

To add on to that, the new Fundamental Law of Education, established in March 1947, reflected the widespread desire for a shift towards the promotion of individualism:

Education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of the people, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual values, respect labour and have a deep sense of responsibility, and be imbued with the independent spirit, as builders of the peaceful state and society (Passin, 1965: 302). (2)

Poverty (After World War II)

Poverty was also another issue that Japan was faced with after World War II.

People who lived in Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered the bombings of the atomic bombs during World War II and that also contributed to the devastating situations in both the cities. Approximately, 1. 74 million Japanese servicemen and 1 million civilians died because of the war, which means that 3-4% of Japan’s population are killed at that time as Japan had a population of about 74 million in 1941. Around 4. 5 million servicemen were wounded or ill and 300, 000 became disabled after the war.

Both rural and non-rural living standards have fallen drastically compared to the living standards of the pre-World War II period. The rural living standards have fallen to 65% of the pre world war living standard and in the non-rural areas; living standards have fallen to 35% of the pre world war living standard. Many major urban cities, including the cities that have been bombed - Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have been heavily destroyed and 30% of Japan's urban population have been homeless. For example, in Tokyo, Japan's largest city, 65% of the homes are destroyed. This resulted in around 71% of Tokyo's population leaving Tokyo to seek for a better living. In Osaka, 57% of the people were rendered homeless and in Nagoya, 89%. In 1948, more than 3.7 million families were lacking homes to stay in and the government had to face the challenge of providing houses for these homeless families. (9)

Many factories are destroyed and severely damaged, which caused the economy to cripple after World War II. This resulted in many the severe food shortages that many people faced and it was so serious that people take trains to the countryside and used their old clothes to trade for food like sweet potatoes. They were so desperate for food and there was severe starvation among the people. People were dying from the lack of food to eat. Some people were so hungry that they resorted to stealing food. Even so, many Japanese starved to death. The government also put in efforts to distribute the basic foodstuffs and necessities to the starving population, however, despite their efforts, the situation remained unsolved for years and the situation in Japan remained in chaos for years. (7)

Between 1946 and 1947, the food delivery system unfortunately broke down and the food rations dropped to one quarter or even one third of the requirements. The residents in Tokyo did not receive a full month's ration for at least six months of 1946. In these two years, the food deliveries were usually late for one to two weeks. More than 15% of the civil servants were absent from work in order to hunt for food, as they could not bear the hunger any more. The desperation to search for food was so severe that the Tokyo metropolitan police even provided " food holidays" for their employees so that they could search for food and this holiday was awarded to the employees on a monthly basis.

Leftovers from eating places and even garbage of the restaurants, which the rich could afford to dine in, became places to seek leftover food to eat. People will just pick up and eat any food they can find, without even considering if the food is poisonous and fine to consume. Due to this, a widespread of diseases hit Japan in 1949 or later. The diseases had actually start to spread during World War II, but due to the unhygienic conditions that the Japanese lived in the post war period, the diseases spread at a shocking rate. The disease that most people suffered and died from was Tuberculosis. One out of ten Japanese who contracted Tuberculosis died. In 1947, more than 146, 000 Japanese have been reported to die from Tuberculosis and this situation merely improved until 1951, where the death rate from the diseases dropped to below 100, 000.

The numbers of crime rates have risen, so as the number of people who were addicted to drugs and alcohol. People thought that by taking alcohol and drugs, they would break free from their sufferings. However, that was

not the case. The number of cases of deaths and permanent blindness caused by alcohol had also risen to an alarming number. (9)

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a group, we agree that the government's measure to restore national identity in Japan was effective to a certain degree. Although some of their means may be seen as inappropriate such as the alterations of facts in the Japanese History Textbooks, we cannot deny that it contributed to restoring Japan's national Identity after WWII and that there were also other methods the government used to overcome many challenges and tumultuous times that they had faced. We feel that Japan's identity had indeed been restored.