

Workshop I, Section 1: “History and Society”

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Closely related to the main topic of NASSS 2010, “Toward a Common Memory of Our Past”, this section focused on the importance of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in postwar U.S.-Japan relations. The presentation by KAWAGUCHI Yuko introduced the activities of Methodist pastor Tanimoto Kiyoshi, a survivor of Hiroshima, in initiating the International World Peace Day Movement in 1948 and in linking the Japanese pacifist movement with the world peace movement.

In a world, where apologies concerning historical injustices are still being demanded from former enemy states, the decision to use atomic weapons against Japan in 1945 is still highly contested, and even more so the fact, that the U.S. has not apologized to Japan for the atomic bombings. The issue of an apology is, first of all, one of international relations, but interestingly, as Lisa Yoneyama also had pointed out in her keynote speech, we can identify similar patterns of argumentation across borders. For example, in the United States, “opponents of (the Enola Gay) exhibition [i.e. opponents of a more critical view towards the decision to drop the atomic bombs] also oppose affirmative action, immigration, and gay marriage.” (Yoneyama: keynote speech) Similarly, in Japan, the advocates of “historical revisionism,” which oppose Japanese apologies for the war, also fervently fight against feminism and gender equality, against the foreigners’ rights to vote, and they advocate a hardline course in foreign policy.

The discussion focused on the question of whether Tanimoto’s activities have to be seen, above all, in the framework of U.S.-Japan relations, or rather in a transnational framework. Tanimoto could probably not have succeeded without the support of his former American colleagues, who publicized his activities in the United States intensively and, without whom, he probably would not have succeeded. On the other hand, his activities are characterized by a strongly universal character, and his major achievement is the linking of the Japanese peace movement with the World Peace Day movement. This movement is of course a transnational phenomenon, which spread to 28 countries as early as in 1948, as we have seen in Kawaguchi’s paper. In a highly nuclear-armed world, Hiroshima until today remains an important symbol of nuclear disarmament and the global peace movement.

In current U.S.-Japan relations, Hiroshima remains a thorny issue, although

it is, for the sake of not endangering the U.S.-Japan military alliance, rarely discussed in the public. Exceptions are usually not appreciated, as the case of former Minister of Defense Kyuma shows, who had to resign due to a remark that was widely understood as relieving the U.S. of its responsibility. No need to mention that in his official capacity, the Japanese Minister for Defense would be in an even more difficult position, had he harshly criticized Japan's main military ally's former actions, but the case shows, that the issue is still an extremely sensitive one in Japanese society.

Time might not yet be ripe for a full-fledged apology for the atomic bombings from the United States, and some say it might be counterproductive, since an apology might cause a conservative counterattack, just as the changes in Japanese history textbooks in the 1980s were a major cause leading to the formation of the ultra-conservative movement of "historical revisionism" in the 1990s. The visits of U.S. ambassador John Roos to the commemoration ceremonies in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 2010, however, might a step into the right direction. Japanese media reported intensively and favorably about the first U.S. ambassador participating in these ceremonies. Symbolic acts like these have to be planned carefully, but in the long run they undoubtedly contribute to progress in processes of reconciliation.