

Let old wars be history

The death of Japan's Emperor Hirohito has revived a lot of old charges that he was a war criminal. These claims came just when many nations who fought Japan in the last war are wrestling with the thorny moral and political problem of how to respond to Hirohito's impending funeral.

Last weekend, for example, the *Sunday Sun* ran a series of reports alleging that Hirohito had personal knowledge of criminal germ warfare experiments on Allied prisoners during World War II. In my view, these reports were nothing more than a flimsy concoction.

I have still not seen any hard evidence that Hirohito was directly involved in war crimes.

As a former soldier, however, I can well understand the anger of veterans who are demanding that Hirohito's funeral be boycotted. The Imperial Japanese Army committed beastly and unpardonable crimes against both enemy prisoners and conquered civilians. All that one can say in the way of mitigation is that Japanese soldiers and civilians expected exactly the same treatment from their enemies as a natural part of war.

What's also disturbing is that modern-day Japan continues to gloss over or evade outright the crimes that she committed during the war. China, for example, complains regularly that Japanese textbooks hide the extent of Japan's brutal behavior from students. Japanese need to be reminded. But before we burst with self-righteousness, recall that our western dignitaries paid their respects at the bier of wartime ally Josef Stalin, the man who murdered ten million people — or more.

I'm also fed up with the continued portrayal of World War II as a simple struggle between light and dark. Future historians, I think, will look back on the war in Asia and see it as an imperial struggle pitting the Japanese Empire against the British Empire, the French Empire and the Dutch Empire, not to mention the small U.S. Empire.

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Many colonized Asians initially regarded Japan as a liberator from western imperialism — just as Ukrainians looked on the Germans as liberators from Soviet oppression — until both Japanese and Germans showed themselves to be brutal fanatics.

If the Axis had won the war, the men who organized the razing of Dresden and Hamburg, or the merciless firebomb raids on Tokyo that killed more civilians than the A-bombs, would have been tried for war crimes. Stalin would occupy the role of chief demon now held by Adolf Hitler.

It's time to bury World War II. That's the real symbolic meaning of Hirohito's funeral. Modern Japanese bear a deep, collective shame for the war. There is a powerful consensus among Japanese that any resurgence of militarism must be prevented. The samurai sword has been permanently exchanged for the briefcase.

While I agree with those who say we should never forgive evil, I also think they are missing the point of the upcoming Tokyo funeral. It is not really the funeral of a man, or a guilty old war criminal, but Japan's symbolic emergence into a new era, a new century. In another decade, there will be few people left anywhere who fought in the war. For the next generation, World War II will be as remote as World War I is for us today.

Our representatives at the funeral will be there to pay tribute to the miracle of modern Japan, a nation that raised itself up from the ashes by sheer willpower and hard work. To a nation that somehow managed to adopt all the methods of western industrial and commercial society without losing its soul — as so many other non-western nations have done.

It's also important that we remind Japan it is an integral part of the western alliance. Neither Canada nor the U.S. can do without Japan, just as we cannot do without North America. Like it or not, our economies have intertwined, even if our cultures have not.

Continuing to bash Japan for events that happened a generation ago is self-defeating. Japan is now ready to emerge from the psychological detention centre in which guilt for the last war has kept it a prisoner. Germany, at least the western part, still remains locked up, crippled by the frightful memories from the past.

The Germans will need another generation before they can shrug off the past and hold their heads high. Japanese are ready today.

The best solution to the funeral problem, I think, is to adopt a very Japanese approach. Smile, bow and show respect to the old, fallen symbol of the Japanese people — and to the new emperor. But also remind the Japanese very politely that we have forgotten nothing.

Berry's World

