

## **Launch of the Singapore War Crimes Portal**

### **Bukit Timah Campus**

**29 August 2016**

Ladies and gentlemen

It is said that history is written by the victors. Not always. Sometimes history is written by the losers. They create myths about their defeat.

Almost a century ago Germany lost World War I, the so-called War to End All Wars. In March 1918 the German army started one last great offensive on the Western Front, the so-called Kaiserschlacht. That big push failed and the Allied armies went onto the offensive themselves in August 1918. The Allied Hundred Days' Offensive pushed the Germans back to their frontiers and broke their will to fight. The army and navy mutinied and the royal families of the German states abdicated. The War came to an end at 11 am on 11 November 1918, Armistice Day.

The victors were not magnanimous. The French in particular wanted revenge for the humiliation they had suffered a generation before during the mis-named Franco-Prussian War. That war had led to the collapse of the French Second Empire and the exile of Emperor Napoleon III. The German Empire, the Second Reich, was proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors of the palace of Versailles in January 1871.

It was France that had declared war on Prussia for a trivial reason, because it was felt that the honour of France had been insulted. But the French post-war losers' myth was that the Germans were to blame. That fed a generational grievance and desire for revenge. When it came time to conclude a peace treaty after the German capitulation in World War I the French saw a chance to get their own back. *Vae victis*, woe to the vanquished. Crippling reparations were imposed on defeated Germany. There was a war guilt clause branding Germany as an aggressor. In 1919 the Treaty of Versailles was signed in the very same Hall of Mirrors in which the Second Reich had been proclaimed in 1871. There could be no doubt about the desire to humiliate Germany.

One of the most corrosive post-defeat losers' myths in Germany was the Dolchstoßlegende, the stab in the back. The Germany army was undefeated in the field, it was said. Allied troops had not crossed the frontier. It was the politicians who had stabbed the soldiers in the back by losing their nerve and capitulating. French revanchism and vindictiveness embittered the vanquished. This led to the rise of Nazism and the Third Reich. It led to a third round of war between France and Germany (the fourth, if you count the Wars of Liberation that expelled the French from Germany during the Napoleonic Wars). That cataclysm devastated Europe thoroughly.

If it's not immediately apparent what all of this has to do with why we're gathered here today, I beg your indulgence a little longer.

Japan was one of the victors of the First World War. At the Peace Conference, the Japanese proposed a racial equality clause. The Western powers rejected it. There was no racial equality provision in the Treaty of Versailles. Three years later in 1922 the big powers concluded the Washington Naval Treaty to put a brake on the naval arms race. The ratio of capital ships among Great Britain, the USA and Japan was set at 5:5:3. Japan's status as a second-rank power was cemented.

What lessons did Japan take away from its history of contacts with the Western powers from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the Washington Naval Treaty in 1922? The main lesson apparently was that it would not be taken seriously as an equal by Westerners unless it was equally adept at imperialism. The Sino-Japanese War of 1894 had demonstrated to the world the weakness of China. The Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and the conquest of Tsingtao from Germany in 1914 showed that the Japanese were just as good at making war as the Europeans. In 1932 they detached Manchukuo from China, setting up a nominally independent Manchurian state under the last Emperor of the Qing Dynasty, Pu-Yi. In doing this they acted no differently from the British and French, who had progressively lopped off parts of the Chinese Empire in the nineteenth century and had subjected China to semi-colonialism. Manchukuo was just the appetizer. The main course was yet to come.

Contrary to the Occidentally-oriented view of Western writers, World War II in Asia did not begin with the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. It began when the Japanese Kwangtung Army instigated hostilities against China in 1937. Shanghai fell shortly thereafter despite the determined resistance of the Chinese army. The capital Nanjing was taken and pillaged; the infamous Rape of Nanking, which some Japanese deny. China had been resisting Japanese aggression for four years at great human and material cost before the USA and the European powers were sucked into the maelstrom. A million Japanese troops were tied up in China during the course of the war; troops who might otherwise have been available for the conquest of New Guinea and even perhaps an invasion of Australia. Chinese divisions fought in Burma when the Allies went onto the offensive. Westerners tend to forget all this when speaking of World War II in Asia. To most people in the West, the war was won by the Americans, British and Australians. The truth is that the brunt of the fighting and dying had been borne by China. The Chinese people suffered from Japanese aggression more than any other nation. This makes the historical treatment of the War a particularly touchy subject.

The Japanese ostensibly came as liberators. Unlike the Western powers they didn't incorporate all the conquered territories into a Japanese colonial empire. In China, a government was established in Nanjing under Wang Ching-Wei, an associate of Dr Sun Yat Sen who at one time held high office in the Kuomintang. Wang Ching Wei's regime claimed to be the legitimate successor of Dr Sun. It flew the same flag as the Nationalist government in Chongqing.

At various points during the war, Japan gave independence to Burma, Vietnam, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines. To anti-colonialists all over Asia it was clear that the Europeans hadn't fought to liberate Asians from the Japanese; they had fought to hold on to their Asian colonies in order to continue exploiting them. After Japan's defeat the French and Dutch were forcibly ejected from Indochina and Indonesia by nationalist freedom-fighters. It has been said with some justification that without Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam would not have broken free from European colonial rule.

As for India, the Japanese encouraged the formation of the Azad Hind Fauj, the Indian National Army or INA. The INA recruited not only Indian prisoners of war in Singapore but also members of the local Indian community. The all-women Rani of Jhansi Regiment was raised in Singapore and Malaya. The formation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India) was proclaimed right here in Singapore, in the Cathay Building on 21 October 1943 by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The INA actually managed to penetrate into British India, in Manipur, where it was practically annihilated at Imphal. After the War three senior officers of the INA were tried in Delhi. Among the defence counsel was Jawarhalal Nehru. They were convicted of waging war against the King-Emperor. The Indian Navy mutinied. The public outcry in India was such that the sentences were commuted. Subhas Chandra Bose, considered a traitor by the British, is a hero in his own country. The international airport at Kolkata is named after him.

The Allies insisted on retribution. War crimes trials were held in Tokyo. The moral authority of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East was gravely compromised by the presence of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had invaded Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in 1939. The Finns fought them vigorously and retained their independence; the Baltic States were swallowed whole and only escaped when the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s. The Soviets collaborated with the Germans to partition Poland in 1939, stabbing the Poles in the back from the east when they were resisting the Germans in the west. What moral standing did they have to sit in judgment on Japan for waging a war of aggression? It wasn't just the defendants who asked this. The Malayan Law Journal which had started publishing again shortly after the return of the British raised this uncomfortable question. For that matter, how could the European colonial powers legitimately complain when all that Japan did was to emulate them? The Indian Judge Radhabinod Pal dissented from the judgment to condemn the defendants; he was the only one to do so.

Now we come to the losers' post-war myth. It is this: that Japan was a victim of victors' justice and double standards. That Japan fought the war in order to liberate Asians from Western colonialism. That the stories of atrocities like the Rape of Nanking were just propaganda. This myth surfaces every now and again, in

textbooks and speeches in Japan. When that happens, it causes outrage in China and Korea. I visited the military museum at the Yasakuni Shrine in Tokyo. It was disturbing. There wasn't any feeling that Japan had done anything wrong in invading China and Southeast Asia.

This isn't just a matter of academics quibbling over differing views of dead history. That history is still significant today because the apparent lack of contrition on the part of some segments of Japanese society impedes the fostering of trust among the former combatant nations. The problem is that in Asia World War II didn't end neatly. The Nationalists and Communists in China picked up where they left off and were soon fighting each other again. When the Communists won the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Nationalist government withdrew to Taiwan, protected by the Americans. The front line of the Cold War ran from Japan through Korea to Taiwan and southwards through Southeast Asia.

It was in Asia that the Cold War turned hot when the North Koreans invaded South Korea in 1950. A UN army led by the Americans pushed the North Koreans all the way to the border with China. Then the Chinese attacked and forced the UN armies to retreat. The Korean War ended in a stalemate along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. It's officially still not over yet. Japan was on America's side in this war. It was the base from which the UN armies in Korea were supplied. To the Communist Chinese, Japan was still the enemy. Japan remained the enemy throughout the Cold War. In the eyes of the Communists, there has been no true reckoning for the sins of the past. This makes the present more perilous.

Japan and China today are embroiled in a territorial dispute over some small islets in the East China Sea: the Senkoku Islands occupied by Japan. The Chinese assert their claims of sovereignty over what they call Diaoyutai by intruding into the waters and airspace around the islands. The Japanese scramble fighters to intercept the intruders and send coastguard vessels to protect their sovereignty. The potential for armed conflict is frighteningly real. Does anyone seriously want war over rocks in the sea? Nobody may desire war, but countries stumble into hostilities because they don't trust one another. In 1914 the great powers of Europe sleepwalked into a war that no one expected or really wanted. We would be irresponsibly complacent to

think it could not happen in Asia tomorrow. To avoid this terrible eventuality, China and Japan need to sit down together, talk frankly and find a sensible *modus vivendi*. But they won't. There isn't the degree of trust between them that would allow it to happen. And part of the reason for this is the post-war myth that Japan wasn't really blameworthy for what they did during the War.

Which brings me to why we're here today: to launch the Singapore War Crimes Portal. This invaluable resource allows everyone to easily access the records of the War Crimes Trials in Singapore. Unlike the Tokyo trials, there is no moral ambiguity here. These were men accused of heinous acts of violence against civilians and prisoners of war. They tortured and murdered their victims. The sentences handed down were not instances of victors' justice; it was justice for the innocents who were killed and maimed during the Japanese Occupation.

We launch the War Crimes Portal not to embarrass our Japanese friends. We do this because it is necessary to record and remember what happened. We remember because we do not want to repeat the disastrous mistakes of the past. So many of us have visited Japan and enjoyed the warm hospitality of the Japanese people. Japan has been a good world citizen for the last seven decades. The Japanese people are among the most pacifist on this planet. But we remember that it was not always this way. We remember that a fanatical, militarist clique propelled a great nation down a road that led to ruin and destruction for her people and misery and death for millions of others.

Historical amnesia is no basis for true rapprochement. Every August there are events commemorating the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The sufferings of the survivors are highlighted. There is usually no historical context. Watching Japanese television, one gets the impression that the bombings were a natural disaster of some sort, like an earthquake or tsunami. They were not. They were the consequence of the actions of the Japanese military.

There was a very good Japanese film released last year directed by Harada Masato, called 'The Emperor in August' in English. It chronicled how a fanatical clique of army officers tried to stop the Emperor from broadcasting his surrender message to

the people. Even with defeat staring them in the face these militant militarists wanted to go on resisting to the bitter end. Fortunately for us in Singapore they failed in their attempted coup. If the Japanese hadn't surrendered when they did, you can be sure they would have fought to the death in the ruins of Singapore city. A hundred thousand civilians died in Manila in 1945 when the Japanese army and navy refused to obey an order to evacuate the city. That would have been Singapore's fate. If it hadn't been for the atomic bombs there is a good chance that we wouldn't be here today.

The War Crimes Portal is not a propaganda weapon to use against Japan. In East Asia – in the People's Republic of China, in Korea – it seems that history is being used to stir up grievance and nurture distrust. If we have learnt nothing else from the experience of the French and Germans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it should be that it is dangerous to keep scratching at the scabs of old injuries.

Lasting peace requires reconciliation. Forced apologies are useless; they do not satisfy the victims and only breed resentment among those who bear no guilt for the sins of their forefathers. But reconciliation requires a knowledge of history, no matter how uncomfortable, and a sincere acknowledgement of past misdeeds on the part of the perpetrators and their descendants. Reconciliation also requires forgiveness on the part of the victims and their descendants. Otherwise we descend into what in English is called a vicious circle. In German they have a much more evocative word for it: *Teufelskreis*, a Devil's circle, where the perpetrators will not admit their wrongdoing, which makes it hard for the victims to forgive, which then makes the perpetrators more intransigent, which in turn fuels hatred among the victims.

In criminal law remorse is a powerful mitigating factor. The victim can more easily forgive the perpetrator if he has shown genuine contrition for what he has done. Contrition requires a frank acknowledgement of moral blameworthiness. Acknowledgement of the injury that has been inflicted on the victims is based on knowledge of what was done. The War Crimes Portal gives access to the cases that document what happened. It is an antidote to the losers' myth that they have nothing to be contrite about.

The Germans have been exemplary when it comes to remembering past misdeeds and expressing remorse. On 7 December 1970 Chancellor Willy Brandt spontaneously fell to his knees before a memorial to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, demonstrating publicly to the world Germany's contrition for what Germans had done in the countries they occupied. The supreme irony was that Willy Brandt was an anti-Nazi who was in no way responsible for the crimes perpetrated by his countrymen. Outside the south-west entrance of the Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn station in Berlin is a plaque listing the names of the death camps. The plaque reads: 'Orte des Schreckens, die wir niemals vergessen dürfen' – the locations of the horrors, that we must never be permitted to forget.

Back to the Germans and French. 2016 is the centenary of the battle of Verdun. Over 700,000 French and German soldiers died. On 25 September 1984 German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterand held hands in a gesture of friendship and reconciliation at a memorial service in Verdun. In May this year President François Hollande and Chancellor Angela Merkel commemorated the battle together by laying wreaths and paying tribute to the war dead of both nations. France and Germany have broken the *Teufelskreis*. Germany has admitted its responsibility for the injuries inflicted on its neighbours during World War II. Germany's neighbours have forgiven the past. War in western Europe is now unthinkable. My German friends tell me with satisfaction that for the first time in generations they are not soldiers.

In Singapore we were badly scarred by the War and Occupation. Practically every Chinese family was touched by the Sook Ching operation. My wife's grandmother's brother was rounded up by the Kempeitai. He never came back. But despite the horrors documented in the War Crimes Portal we too have forgiven – not forgotten, for every year on 15 February there is a ceremony of commemoration for the civilian victims at the War Memorial in Beach Road. We in Singapore have made our peace with the past. The Japanese are our friends. They are our guests. We welcome them to live and work among us.

But Singapore is not the problem. The problem lies north of us, in the South China Sea and especially in the East China Sea and the Korean Peninsula. It took France



and Germany more than a century and millions of dead to find a way to live in peace. Do we need bloodletting on the scale that Europe suffered before the countries of East Asia learn to live with one another without the threat of war? To ignore the grim lessons of history is to dishonour the memory of the millions of men and women who were killed during in World War II.

This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbour. Come December 7 there will be ceremonies to commemorate this. The French and the Germans used the commemoration of the battle of Verdun to demonstrate their reconciliation. Might we hope for the same among the former foes in World War II? Only then will the unquiet ghosts of war finally be laid to rest.