Historical memory exists within a country, or a people, or a nation as a touchstone for a collective identity. Collective identity is a means of mobilizing people by bonding them with a larger group in a shared identification that serves to define the group and give the group direction and purpose. It can provide a worldview for the group that offers a structure, defining friend and enemy. Collective identity formation often involves inventing a shared history, and creating memory is the means of structuring historical events into a meaningful or purposeful narrative, but when history and memory begin to interact, both sequentially and simultaneously, on several levels, we are dealing with the manifestation of historical memory. Historical memory is shaped by interpretations of the past and their meaning to contemporary life. Depending on the particular historical memory being addressed, historical memory plays a role in interstate relations as a political-strategic tool of diplomacy. Historical memory can encompass entire continents or regions where events of enormous significance have transpired. Historical memory can involve what Eric Langenbacher of Georgetown University has described as "memory regime competition," the difference between coming to terms with the past and a consciously constructed image of the past.[1]

This brief preface on collective memory and identity outlines much of what is unnecessarily unsaid by the editors of this collection of essays. The key terms of "memory," "identity," and "historical memory" are used, and indeed, represent the central point of this collection, but no context is established, leaving the reader (unless already familiar with the concepts and the literature) somewhat high and dry. The essays are divided into four parts, two presenting different perspectives on the role of either collective memory or historical memory, one addressing paths to reconciliation, and one examining the psychological response to different kinds of memory. With the exception of the part addressing paths to reconciliation, the essays themselves do not fit comfortably in their places.
Daniel Chirot sets the stage with an unintentionally moralistic and condescending rumination that finds no country involved in World War II escaping condemnation for avoiding questions of guilt, apology, and reconciliation. He calls for an "honest appraisal of the past rather than a nationalist distortion" and accepts that while controversies about the past are inevitable, there are "realities that cannot be negated" (p. 10). It is not clear how one discerns controversies from unvarnished realities. Nonetheless, Chirot stresses that historians are responsible for providing "the raw material that honest intellectuals and political leaders will use when they finally come to accept the necessity of facing the past" (p. 42). Like Diogenes, Chirot seeks those honest intellectuals and politicians who will make the proper use of real history written by historians who unblinkingly face an objective truth.

Daniel Sneider, exploring Northeast Asia wartime memories, provides some valuable perspectives on why historical controversies have become so prominent in relations between China, Japan, and South Korea. He recognizes that these countries are plagued by a less-than-complete view of the past and that a number of multiple memories are in contention and serve as a source of national tension and potential conflict. Sneider astutely notes that these political-strategic battles over history are coming to the forefront as the world moves into a post-Cold War environment. The historical narratives of the three countries were largely kept static throughout the Cold War, but in a globalized world, public culture is demanding that the contours of historical memory be shaped to adapt to a new collective memory suitable for a global, rather than a national, audience. The current battle in world opinion is over what is to be remembered and how it is remembered. Japan has been reluctant to move in this direction, to the extreme frustration of not only its former victims of aggression but also the global audience. Sneider observes that "Asia has barely begun to reconcile over the war" (p. 75), and he believes it is essential that Japan must take steps to acknowledge its responsibility for the war and the suffering it caused to begin the reconciliation process.

In part 2, Thomas Berger addresses the salience of history and historical justice issues with the onset of the global spread of human rights norms. National historical narratives are increasingly required to be acceptable across national boundaries. This new condition, he perceptively indicates, has a number of pitfalls for politicians (honest or otherwise) to use historical memory as a means of establishing or furthering a collective identity. Not only can domestic social and political changes imperil the accepted narrative on which the collective identity is based, but more often in the modern world, international political conditions can create new pressures to change the accepted or constructed narrative supporting a particular collective identity. Julian Jackson expands on the themes introduced by Sneider and Berger and notes that in Europe after the Cold War, France and Germany reconciled and became strong partners in building a new Europe. The end of the Cold War did nothing of the sort for Asia, where there has been no attempt at reconciliation or acceptance. For France, the collective memory of the war, the surrender to Germany, and the occupation have been key issues of French collective identity since the end of the Second World War, influencing political-strategic decisions over the past fifty years. France relied on repentance as its collective identity, especially in relation to the role the Vichy government played in the Holocaust. But in recent years, political leaders have tried to shake France free and embrace a more confident nationalist identity by shaping historical memory. But as Jackson notes, French political leaders have at times entangled themselves in choosing to emphasize only portions of a patriotic historical narrative; either when challenged or when other historical details are filled in, the narrative potentially becomes counterproductive by creating unwanted controversies over memory and identity.

In part 3, Gi-Wook Shin continues Jackson’s theme and focuses on the failure of Asian states to reconcile. He identifies the problem as one of layered history. From colonialism to regional, then global war, then to Cold War, and finally to a globalized multipolar world, the Japanese, Chinese, and South Koreans have been unable as countries or as people to disentangle the many threads of history, experience, and memory. Shin presents a solution to this interstate dilemma, offering that the United States can play a key role. What is required is that the political leaders of the United States, Japan, South Korea, and China offer apologies to each other, in what Shin describes as a “self-critical and self-reflective approach” (p. 178). President Barack Obama should visit Hiroshima and apologize; the prime minister of Japan, Shinzō Abe, should travel to Nanjing to offer apologies for the atrocities committed there in 1937. Interestingly, the recent visit by the German foreign minister, the Japanese foreign minister, the British foreign secretary, the Canadian foreign minister, and the US secretary of state to the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima represents the kind of symbolic political gesture Shin envisions. Shin believes that actions like these will help Japan “explore
with greater sincerity and depth their own record of the past and overcome their sense of victimization” (p. 81). In making this proposal, Shin echoes Chirot—an honest politician would take these actions—but he does not address the obvious follow-on questions that instantly arise from such an action: at what costs to national identity, collective memory, and personal politics?

In part 4, Gilbert Rozman’s essay answers these questions with a broad review of conditions that have shaped the contours of historical memory and contested history in Asia for decades. He sees no end in sight as long as politicians use historical memory for political advantage. Also in part 4, Igor Torbakov offers a solution to historical controversies based on a “broad and respectful dialogue between national memories and historical narratives” (p. 252). Torbakov acknowledges that authoritarian states are far less eager to embrace changes in their historical memories for fear of losing control of the population. For both Russia and China, history tends to be immutable, locked in a collective memory and national identity that accepts no deviation. This has caused problems especially for Russia in the post-Cold War world. Its view of itself as a great power and its historical memory as the victor in World War II and the liberator of Eastern Europe from the Nazi German fascist beast has been challenged by both former Soviet republics, namely Ukraine and Georgia, and its former satellites, namely the Baltic states and Poland. Each country has established a national identity based on a newly constructed history in which Soviet occupation is portrayed as a time of bitterness and stagnation. Their national identities have been formed with a distinct and obvious separation from the old Soviet identity and with the Russians serving as the other—the anathema to their newly constructed national identities. Torbakov presents these conditions of contested historical memory as an aspect of power relations—what he calls history as politics. Not only have the countries of Eastern Europe used history as a political weapon of nationalist defiance against Russia, but they have also cleverly used the Yalta agreement, in which the United States and Great Britain acquiesced to Joseph Stalin’s occupation and control of Eastern Europe, as a historical memory of betrayal and abandonment to play on the sense of guilt that has led to a strong effort by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union to integrate Eastern Europe into the European community. But, as Torbakov notes, two can play at this game. Russia has moved to a much more assertive and aggressive national identity, supported by a revamped historical memory that downplays Stalin’s appalling cruelties to the Soviet people and highlights his leadership and stalwart promotion of Russian national interests. In fact, the Russian incursion into Crimea and the support to western pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, who consciously revive the Russian historical memory of World War II by describing the government of Ukraine’s soldiers as fascists, is instructive and points to the wisdom of Torbakov’s observations.

While somewhat uneven and repetitive, this collection of essays emphasizes a salient point that perhaps should have served as a thematic unifier. The point is that history matters in today’s world more than ever before. The post-Cold War world has created a new venue for the uses of history in shaping collective memory and also contributing to worldviews and understanding. History already is, and will be, the cause of conflicts, and perhaps wars, in the future. Crimea and Ukraine are the harbingers of the use of history as politics. “Memory regime competition” is not an abstract academic idea; it is real and should play a part in national strategies. Historians have a greater responsibility than ever before in crafting historical narratives that can find the precarious balance between national identity and collective memory that is acceptable to a global audience. History is on the march in Northeast Asia and Eastern Europe with enormous consequences for the future. As this collection of essays indicates, historians have a great and noble challenge ahead.

Note


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