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August 15, 1945 — the Date of the End of World War II

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1. Introduction

World history classes provide a forum in which three types of history jostle together. The first type of history is official history; the history represented in textbooks and the history that represents the official government view. The second is private history, which refers to the students' individual and family histories. Official history and family history sometimes overlap, and sometimes they clash. For example, the Japanese government's appraisal of the actions of the Japanese forces during the Battle of Okinawa, which took place toward the end of the Asia Pacific War, differs considerably from the appraisal among Okinawans. This being the case, rather than leaving these two histories in a state of antagonism, it is important to build a bridge between the two. This is the third type of history, namely public history.

The aim of public history is not to find an easy compromise between two opposing views. Rather, the purpose is to provide a space for parties with different perspectives to exchange ideas, sometimes with the mediation of a third party, and attempt to understand where the other is coming from in a calm manner. The key is to build up a rapport through persistent and patient dialogue rather than hurrying toward a conclusion. Given that history classes should be the place for students and teachers to learn about and discuss history together, I believe that they should also provide some space for public history as necessary.

Today, the majority of Japanese people consider "August 15, 1945" to be the date when the Second World War (Asia Pacific War) ended. In this report, I introduce a lesson plan on the end-of-war day. To this end, I've drawn to a large extent from Prof. SATO Takumi's "*Hachigatsu Ju Go Nichi No Shinwa Shusen Kinen Bi No Media Gaku*" [The myth of August 15: A study of the media's portrayal of the day the war ended, enlarged edition] (Chiku Ma Gakugei Bunko, 2014).

2. Questionnaire on the End of the War

Before starting the lesson on the end-of-war day, I conducted a questionnaire among the students (164 2nd year high school students).

Questionnaire A

- On what date do you think the Second World War (Asia Pacific War) ended? Why do you think that?
(Month) _____ (Day) _____ 1945

Results

August 14: 11 (7.0%)	August 15: 90 (57.3%)
Sometime in August: 26 (16.6%)	September 2: 7 (4.5%)
Don't know/other: 23 (14.6%)	

Based on the results of Questionnaire A, I conducted a second questionnaire B.

Questionnaire B

Q1: "The point at which a war ends is a diplomatic matter. Therefore, it is unthinkable by international standards to prioritize the day an announcement of surrender was made to the Japanese public (August 15) over the day a declaration of surrender was issued to the Allies (August 14)." What do you think about this statement?

Q2: Today, Japan considers August 15 to be the day that the war ended. Why do you think this is the case?

Q3: Considering your answers to Questions 1 and 2, what do you think the official end-of-war day should be?

The Results for Question 1 (the view of Prof. SATO) tallied with the results for Question 3:

(a) Q1: "Disagree" Q3: August 15.....	54 (35.3%)
(b) Q1: "Agree" Q3: August 15.....	30 (19.6%)
(c) Q1: "Agree" Q3: August 14 or September 2.....	31 (20.1%)
(d) Q1: Reserve judgment.....	38 (24.8%)

As shown above, some students disagreed with Prof. SATO's view and insisted that August 15 is the day the war ended (a), and some agreed that, from a diplomatic point of view, it should be August 14 or September 2 (c). Both of these positions are logically consistent. However, there were also students who accepted Prof. SATO's view, but paradoxically clung to the August 15 as the date the war ended (b). The students who held this contradictory position were by no means few in number. The frank truth is that this contradictory stance is reflective of the sentiments of the Japanese public at large. And the proportion of students who reserved judgment (d) was roughly 1/4 of the whole.

3. A Lesson on the End of the War

In the class dealing with the end of the war, I set the students a number of questions on the end of the war, and required each student to write down their opinions on the questions.

(1) Should Japan's official end-of-war day be established according to international norms?

At the start of the class, I announced the results of Questions 1 and 3 in Questionnaire B (the questions concerning setting Japan's official end-of-war day based on international norms). I then asked the students to consider Prof. SATO's view once again.

The numbers in favor and against Prof. SATO's view remained much the same as before. However, there was one notable change this time round; in their comments, some students suggested a "twin-track approach for the domestic level and the international level." The respective numbers are shown below.

- A: I definitely agree (43)
- B: If I had to choose, I'd agree (7)
- C: If I had to choose, I'd disagree (15)
- D: I definitely disagree (41)
- E: Twin-track approach for the domestic level and the international level (15)
- F: Reserve judgment (26)

(2) On the “correct” end-of-war date

Next, I provided the students with a chronology of the events around the end of the war as reference material for considering the end-of-war day.

The U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and on Nagasaki on August 9. Subsequently, there emerged the “nuclear bomb myth” – the notion that Japan lost its will to fight and decided to surrender on account of the nuclear bombing. In fact, the event that really shocked the Japanese government to the core was the Soviet Union’s declaration of war against Japan on August 8, and their subsequent invasion before dawn the following day. The Japanese government’s plan to go between for peace with America and Britain with the mediation of the Soviet Union was thrown into disarray, and there was now even the possibility of an internal revolution.

On the morning of August 10, the Japanese government communicated to the Allies (America, China, Britain, Soviet Union) via neutral Switzerland and Sweden that it was prepared to accept the Potsdam Declaration. On the afternoon of the same day, the NHK overseas broadcasting bureau conveyed to overseas countries Japan’s acceptance of the Declaration. However, at this point in time, the Japanese government had included a condition; that the sovereignty of the emperor be maintained. Consequently, the Allies turned Japan down on August 12. The Japanese government continued below-surface negotiations with America, and officially signed the Potsdam Declaration on August 14, having secured an agreement to maintain the emperor system. On the evening of August 14, Emperor Hirohito signed an Edict of Surrender, and later that night, the Japanese government announced to the Allies its agreement to the Declaration.

The Japanese public was notified of Japan’s capitulation on the afternoon of the following day (August 15), in the *Gyokuon-hōsō*; the radio broadcast of Emperor Hirohito reading out the Imperial Rescript on the Termination of the War. There can no mistaking the fact that the Imperial Rescript Emperor Hirohito read out was dated August 14. Around half a month later, representatives of the Japanese government signed the Instrument of Surrender aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay on September 2.

I also gave the students a brief overview of the actions of the Japanese forces during this time. After the Imperial Rescript of Surrender was read out, Imperial Headquarters banned all offensive operations. On August 19, it issued the order that the homeland units cease all hostilities, and this order was executed on August 22. The ceasefire order for units in Hokkaido and overseas was issued on August 22 and executed on August 25 (except in the case of forces in mainland China).

With regard to the fighting that took place on Japanese soil, the Battle of Okinawa, which had begun in late March 1945 and engulfed many of the residents, concluded after the Japanese forces on Okinawa ended their systematic resistance on June 25. In contrast, on the Kuril Islands (known as the Chishima Islands in Japan), which were invaded by Soviet forces, full-blown hostilities continued even after August 15, and did not cease

until early September. I asked the students to think about what meaning August 15 holds for the people of Okinawa and Kuril Islands.

What is the understanding of other countries concerning the end of the war? In North and South Korea, August 15 is Gwangbokjeol (“Restoration of Light Day”), in other words, a day to celebrate the liberation of Korea. In the early days of the People’s Republic of China, August 15 was established as the Victory Day of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, but the official date was later moved to September 3 to coincide with the former Soviet Union’s Victory over Japan Day (although many Chinese people still consider August 15 as the commemoration day). In America, France, and post-Soviet Russia, September 2 is V-J (Victory over Japan Day) Day (the same date is adopted in many other western countries). As for South East Asia, end-of-war day is September 3 in the Philippines, September 6 in Myanmar, September 12 in Singapore and Malaysia, September 13 in Thailand, and October 25 in Taiwan. In each case, the date commemorates the surrender or disarmament of the occupying Japanese forces in that country.

Having introduced to the students the discrepancy in Japan over the end-of-war day, and the multiple versions of end-of-war day that are celebrated overseas, I introduced them to what I believe to be the three types of history: official, private, and public history. I then posed the question: “Is there really a correct end-of-war day? If so, on what grounds can you say it is the correct one?”

The answers were as follows.

A: There is a correct date (19)

(Breakdown)

August 14 (2)

August 15 (4)

September 2 (1)

April 28, 1952 (1)

Each country has its own correct date (1)

A correct date needs to be established (6)

B: There is no correct date (116)

(Breakdown)

No correct date; nevertheless, a date for commemoration should be established (71)

-August 14 (2); August 15 (8); September 2 (4); depends on the country (19)

It is unnecessary/impossible to establish a correct date (35)

C: There is no need/no point to establish an end-of-war date anyway (3)

D: Reserve judgment (9)

Nearly 80% of the students answered that there is no correct end-of-war day. However, most of these students nevertheless believed that it is important to set a date to mark the end of the war.

(3) Fabricated memory: The *gyokuon-hōsō* and the *gyokuon*-photographs

Next, I provided an explanation about the August 15 *gyokuon-hōsō* and the written accounts/memories associated with it.

The *gyokuon-hōsō* is frequently depicted in movies and television dramas, such that it has become well known even among post-war generations. What actually happened though? First, the government issued two notices – one on the evening of August 14, and the other on the morning of August 15 –conveying that a very important announcement would be made on the afternoon of August 15 (the *gyokuon-hōsō*) and urging them to gather in front of a radio and listen to this announcement very carefully. When the time signal sounded, the announcer gave various commands (such as “stand up!”) and the national anthem *Kimigayo* was played. The 4:37 minute-long recording of Emperor Hirohito reading out the Imperial Rescript on the Termination of the War was then played. Following this, *Kimigayo* was played once again, and then the announcer read out the text of the Imperial Rescript, providing additional clarifications. He then provided further explanation on the circumstances surrounding Japan’s acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration. The broadcast lasted 37:30 minutes in its entirety.

My father is 83 and my mother is 82. They both remember listening to the *gyokuon-hōsō*. My father was a first year middle school student at the time. He listened to the broadcast in his place of evacuation in the outskirts of Tokushima City, Tokushima Prefecture. My mother was a fifth year elementary school student. She listened to the broadcast in her family home in Anan City, Tokushima Prefecture. My father recalls: “the audio quality was so poor, I couldn’t understand a word of what was being said.” He also remembers that shortly after the broadcast finished, adults in the vicinity shouted out “Japan has lost,” at which point he finally realized that Japan had surrendered. My mother recounts that she could not understand the Imperial Rescript because of the difficult wording, but that she found out the truth of the situation from her father, who was working as deputy major in the local village office (she says her father probably knew beforehand about Japan’s surrender). Neither of my parents recalls the announcer’s clarifications following the recorded speech.

Various photographs of people kneeling in front of the palace can be found among the various photo collections and other materials on the end of the war. These photographs have been offered as a defining image of the shocking moment on August 15 (they were given the name *gyokuon-shashin*, or *gyokuon*-photographs). As such, they have given rise to and reinforced the popular conception of August 15 as the moment of Japan’s capitulation. However, it has come to light that these photographs were not taken on August 15, and that their linkage with August 15 was a fabrication of the mass media, which deemed it appropriate to make such a linkage.

(4) The switch from September 2 to August 15

In today’s Japan, August 15 is considered the end of war date, but this was not always the case.

The American occupation of Japan lasted from 1945 to 1951. During this time, Japan commemorated the end of the war on September 2. Inasmuch as Japan was under the command of GHQ (General Headquarters), it was only natural for the date to coincide with America’s V-J Day. The Japanese government and the mass media

went along with this by organizing annual events and special reports on this date.

However, the situation changed quickly after 1952, when America ended its military occupation and returned sovereignty to Japan in accordance with the Treaty of San Francisco, which had been signed in the previous year. There were no more commemorative events on September 2, and August 15 emerged in its place.

Why August 15? Suffice to say, August 15 holds special significance for the Japanese people, as it was the day of the *gyokuon-hōsō*. It just so happens that August 15 is also the day when people hold O-bon events. Moreover, in the early 1930's, NHK started broadcasting Uraban-e kuyō (Ancestry Remembrance Festival), but the nature of these broadcasts changed in tandem with the development of the 15 year-long war between Japan and China, such that by the end of the 1930's, they had morphed into services to honor Japanese soldiers who had died in battle.

Having provided this explanation, I asked the students to suggest the possible reason(s) why the date was switched from September 2, and to state their own view about the switch.

Neither of my parents recalls that September 2 was the official end-of-war day during the American occupation. One can conclude that August 15 was a much easier date for Japan (the government and the public) to accept than September 2. This was because the former was the day Japan formally announced its surrender to the outside world by signing the Instrument of Surrender and thus a day of humiliation, whereas the latter was the day in which the *gyokuon-hōsō* occurred alongside the O-bon festivities and thus a day of emotional outpouring. In 1955, there were special media reports providing a retrospective of the first ten years of the post-war period and an outlook for the future. These reports cited August 15 as the day the war ended, and this became a precedent that has been followed ever since. Against this backdrop, in 1963, the Japanese government formally established the August 15 National Memorial Service for War Dead (*Zenkoku Senbotsusha Tsuitōshiki*). It was decided in a Cabinet meeting in 1982 to designate August 15 as the "Day to Mourn the War Dead and Pray for Peace."

(5) On Prof. SATO's Proposal

In practice, it will probably not be a viable prospect to change the end-of-war day after all this time and in defiance of the will of the people. However, there is a danger that this commemoration becomes too inward facing and too unconcerned about others. What must we do to ensure that the end-of-war day is a day for mourning not only the 3 million Japanese who perished in the conflict (soldiers and civilians), but also the 20 million who died throughout Asia? Takumi Prof. SATO has proposed a solution to this problem, one that divides the end-of-war day into two. He suggests designating August 15 as the Day to Mourn the War Dead, and September 2 as the Day to Pray for Peace. The former shows consideration to Japanese sentiments in that it falls on the folk festival of O-bon. The latter marks the theoretical end-of-war as per the political memory of the international community.

I put Prof. SATO's proposal to the students, and their responses were as follows.

- A: I definitely agree (41)
- B: If I had to choose, I'd agree (31)
- C: I agree in principle, but is it viable? (17)
- D: I disagree (34)
- E: Reserve judgment (24)

In Questionnaire B (the results for Question 1 [the view of Prof. SATO] tallied with the results for Question 3), around half the students either reserved judgment (d) or accepted Prof. SATO's view (the view that decision on the end-of-war day is a matter of foreign relations, so the date should be based on international norms) while paradoxically clinging to the August 15 date (b). Most of these students probably either definitely agreed with Prof. SATO or would say they agree if they had to choose. On the other hand, they did not appear to be snapping up Prof. SATO's proposal as an easy way to solve the intractable problem of determining the end day of the Asia Pacific War. A certain number of students agreed with Prof. SATO's proposal in principle, but expressed doubt as to whether it could be implemented in practice. Moreover, around 40% of the students either disagreed with the proposal or reserved their judgment.

In any case, I would say that Prof. SATO's proposal had a considerable impact on the students; it seems to have broken up the cooped-up feeling among them.

4. Conclusion

I had set the following three goals for the end-of-war day lesson.

- A: Encourage students to consider the designation of the end-of-war day and the grounds for doing so.
- B: Give students an understanding of the "fabricated memory" surrounding the *gyokuon-hōsō*.
- C: Encourage students to consider the value of changing the end-of-war day.

The lesson was successful in driving a wedge into the customary notion of "end-of-war day = August 15" which the students had accepted unquestioningly so far. Reading through the students' feedback on the lesson as a whole, I can state that of the three goals, A and B in particular have been largely met. The key comments the students provided in their feedback are as follows.

(1) The more I found out about the end of the war, the more my opinion changed. Since Japan was one of the countries involved in the war, it is important that the Japanese people know the facts. Rather than trying to come up with a single answer, it is more important to think about the end-of-war day. It will deepen one's interest in the war. (2) I found out about all the different perspectives on the end of the war. I had no idea about the facts of the *gyokuon-hōsō* and the *gyokuon*-photos. I was shocked at first, but I'm glad I found out. It's important to know the facts. (3) I was skeptical about what kind of lesson it would be, and why it was necessary to go so far as to conduct a questionnaire, but I found it to be the most interesting lesson I've had. I appreciated

hearing about your parents' memories – I guess that's a great example of private history.

There are of course some things that can be improved upon. The content should really have been covered in two parts, but I condensed it into a single lesson. As a result, the students had to work very hard to cope with intense speed of the lesson. The students did not get enough time to consider their answers to the questions. Also, there was no time for group discussions among students. With particular regard to the Goal B, it is regrettable that I only introduced the students to one particular view (my own). There were also some students, albeit few in number, who were apathetic or even antipathetic toward the topic.

(4) I wish there had been more time to write down my thoughts. All four of my grandparents experienced the war. They have told me some of their experiences, but it is a rather sensitive topic; my grandparents lost their parents in the war. (5) Honestly, I didn't really care. The international community can decide the international end-of-war day, and different people can decide themselves on their own particular end-of-war day. (6) There were lots of things I found difficult. It was very tough.

On the whole though, the lesson was warmly received by the students.

(7) What I learned might not help me pass an exam, but it was nevertheless interesting and will prove valuable for the rest of my life in that it taught me about Japan and the world and helped me take a worldwide view. I used to take it for granted that August 15 is the end-of-war day, but the lesson prompted me to take a wider perspective and to give much more thought to the views and backgrounds of other countries, regions, and people. (8) I used to see special end-of-war programs on TV and say, "ah, today is end-of-war day" and then think no further than that. However, the lesson has prompted me to question what one means by the end of war. A war does not start with country fighting against country, but with people in these countries who are willing to fight. Therefore, the end-of-war day should be regarded as a day for mourning the war dead (not only in Japan) and reflecting on war. (9) The lesson brought home to me the fact that different people and different countries do not share the same view on the war, and that they therefore have different feelings about the war. This being the case, the end-of-war day should not be something superficial. Instead, each individual in each country should value the day as an opportunity to understand the horror and tragedy of war. (10) This lesson stood out among the lessons I've had thus far in that it was very content-heavy and intense (I was taken aback by the sheer amount of content). I was astonished at just how much data there was in this single topic, and how deep the topic goes. I found it really interesting that the lesson did not just present the facts, but encouraged us to consider how these facts are interpreted by others. I would like to take this kind of lesson again.

I would like to make necessary improvements to the end-of-war day lesson and provide more opportunities for dialogue with even larger numbers of students with respect to public history.