Helen Mears, Asia, and American Asianists

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HELEN MEARNS, ASIA, AND AMERICAN ASIANISTS

RICHARD H. MINEAR

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HELEN MEARS, ASIA, AND AMERICAN ASIANISTS

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INTERNATIONAL AREA STUDIES PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST
Richard H. Minear is professor of history at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He studied European history as an undergraduate (A.B., Yale, 1960) before doing his graduate work at Harvard (Ph.D., 1968) in Japanese history. Although Edwin O. Reischauer figures prominently in this essay and was in fact the only Japanist Minear could have named in 1960, Reischauer's term as American Ambassador to Japan coincided with Minear's graduate study, and Albert M. Craig, not Reischauer, supervised his Ph.D. Minear is the author of Japanese Tradition and Western Law (Harvard University Press, 1970; Japanese translation, 1971) and Victors' Justice: The Tokyo War Crimes Trial (Princeton University Press, 1971; Japanese translation, 1972); editor of Through Japanese Eyes (Praeger, 1974); and of many scholarly essays.

Professor Minear's first contact with Helen Mears' Mirror for Americans: Japan came in 1977 when he purchased a copy at a used book store. Thereafter he tracked down Helen Mears in New York City and has kept in touch with her since. This experience became a major stimulus for his recent series of essays on the history of Japanese studies (see, in addition to the essays listed in footnote 3, "Orientalism and the Study of Japan," Journal of Asian Studies 39.3 (May 1980), pp. 507 - 517, and "America, Japan, and Mirrors," a review essay comparing Mears' Mirror and Ezra Vogel's Japan as Number One in The Japan Interpreter, forthcoming).
American Asianists are like the historians described by Charles H. Haskins: we "...find it easy to be historically minded respecting everything save only history."\(^1\) We deal with Asia in its historical development, but about the historical development of our own fields we know next to nothing. We are adept at analyzing Chinese or Japanese or Korean or Vietnamese views of the outside world in relation to the international context of the time, but we resist the treatment of our own fields in the same way.\(^2\)

Being ahistorical about history is particularly shortsighted for those of us uncomfortable with the recent past and the current condition of our fields, for as dissident minorities we need all the roots we can find. One writer to whom the search for roots quickly leads is Helen Mears, author of three books on Japan and a great many articles on Asia. Her writings form the earliest and most inclusive postwar presentation of a revisionist approach to the recent history of the Pacific. Her rethinking of Japanese history began while the Pacific war was still on. Before that war was over she identified the colonial issue as the crucial postwar issue. Before the Geneva Conference of 1954 she developed a strong case against American policy in Indochina.

Yet Mears was too far ahead of her time. She was revisionist too early. Her message was an uncomfortable one, and most Americans -- including most American experts on Asia -- ignored her or patronized her work. But reading her ideas today, we are struck with the currency of her analysis and with the extent to which she identified the major issues of the postwar Asian world, issues which continue to be of critical importance in the 1980s. Her ideas are important ones, and we ignore them -- in 1948 or in 1980 -- at our own peril.
I. Helen Mears.

Helen Mears is an intensely private person. Throughout her career she has resisted interviewing, attempting always to focus attention on her ideas and away from herself. Even today she becomes uncomfortable when the conversation turns to the sources of her commitments. Her biography, she feels, belongs in a footnote, perhaps, but surely not in the text of an essay concerning her ideas. Still, the story of her life is an important part of the study of her ideas.3

Helen Mears was born in New York City in 1900. She graduated from Goucher College in 1922. From her teens on, she wrote poems and essays, and she aspired to write the great American novel. But it was not until 1925 that she made the acquaintance of Asia. That meeting came in 1925, virtually out of the blue.

One of her college friends was the daughter of American missionaries in China. En route back to China in 1925, this friend suggested that Mears go along. Mears did, leaving a job behind and setting off with no apparent means of support. Arrived in China, she stayed a year, earning her keep as executive secretary at Peking Union Medical College. She returned to America via the Trans-Siberian Railroad, travelling -- characteristically -- third class.

Her next trip to Asia came ten years later, in 1935, when she started off for India. She never got there. What was intended as a brief stay in Japan turned into an eight-month sojourn, and her experiences became the subject of her first book, Year of the Wild Boar (Lippincott, 1942). The title refers to the traditional Japanese calendar, according to which 1935 was the year of the wild boar.

In Wild Boar Mears sets out to consider "...how the Japanese actually live their day-by-day round." The book is "a personal record," an attempt
"to understand, in its own terms" a culture very different from her own.
Through extensive interviewing and travel, and particularly through the wide historical research and documentation which are one Mears hallmark, Mears gets well beneath the surface. To assist the reader she personalizes many of the issues, dealing with them as they affect her closest Japanese friends. Her lengthy analysis of Japanese society and culture leads to the conclusion that Japanese culture before Perry was "a brilliant solution for an economy of scarcity." The impact of the machine age as represented by Perry forced Japan into the cross-currents of Great Power pressures; and Mears devotes a full chapter late in the book to a presentation of a Japanese view of the 1930s.

Mears makes clear her own antipathy to Japanese acts in Manchuria and China and to the atmosphere of political repression in Japan. She also speaks out against the psychological repression which she sees as a major drawback of Japanese culture. Still, for the most part she offers a non-ethnocentric view. For example, in her conclusion she writes: "There was always the danger of judging Japanese reactions from an American point of view, of assuming that because an American found certain habits of living uncomfortable, the Japanese must also find them uncomfortable; of assuming that because an American found certain customs and restrictions intolerable, they were intolerable also to the Japanese. I had by now learned this lesson -- that the Japanese civilization was as satisfactory to the average Japanese as the American was satisfactory to the average American."

And the major thrust of her discussion of Japan's dilemma in the 20th century is not to blame Japan but to understand the total situation. She writes:

One thing was sure. Now that the machine age had made isolation impossible for any nation; now that the machine age made the
mildest of men as dangerous as the most aggressive; now that the machine age could turn self-sufficient agricultural people into dependent, exporting people; now that the machine age could create individual and national insecurity that could become passionate aggressive nationalism -- it was essential, if the world were not simply to be given over to chaos, that all people everywhere try to understand the problems of all people, try to work for an international order. An order in which national insecurity would be replaced by international co-operation; an order in which all people were equal, regardless of race, color, or previous condition of dependence; an order which would destroy the Japanese racial propaganda, by destroying the conditions on which it was based.7

This passage in Wild Boar clearly foreshadows the concerns of most of Mears' later work. Written in 1942, it remains relevant today to the issues which have dominated the history of the Pacific since that time.

George B. Sansom, already the senior statesman among Western Japanists, was among the many reviewers who reacted with high praise. He wrote: "It is very competently done. I do not know of any book in English which, within its range, is more penetrating... She writes sensitively. I do not think I have ever seen a better piece of description, anything better felt and seen, than the chapter... in which she pictures the countryside near Kamakura and endeavors to learn what Shinto means to simple people. It is charmingly done, truthful and penetrating..."8

Together with a series of essays in The New Yorker (Mears was the first to write of foreign affairs under the byline "Our Far-Flung Correspondents")9, Wild Boar established her credentials as a writer on Japan. It gave her entree into academic and official circles. During the war Mears gave lectures
on Japan to university and general audiences, and she attended various
conferences and symposia sponsored by the Institute for Pacific Relations and
other organizations. The Army set up Civil Affairs Training Schools (CATS) as cram courses for people who would serve in the postwar occupations, and
Helen Mears was one of the lecturers. Indeed, she had agreed to take charge of Japan studies at the CATS operation at the University of Chicago; but the dropping of the atomic bombs brought an end to that enterprise. Her role in the CATS program was the closest Mears came to a conventional academic career in Asian studies.

Shortly after the war, in February of 1946, Mears returned to Japan, this
time in an official capacity, as member of an eleven-person labor advisory
committee. This second stay in Japan, together with a Houghton-Mifflin
Literary Fellowship after her return, led to her second book on Japan, _Mirror
for Americans: Japan_ (1948). This title makes explicit the change in emphasis from _Wild Boar_. _Wild Boar_ was a report on how Japan in 1935 appeared to an interested American observer. _Mirror_ is a didactic book, a polemic, an attempt to draw from Japan's experience lessons for Americans, a book about American images of Japan and Asia. A survey of Western relations with Asia, it is an attack on American policy toward Asia.

The publication of _Mirror_ in 1948 marks the emergence of Mears as a full-
scale critic of American policy in Asia. Her focus in _Mirror_ is on the back-
ground of the Pacific War; and the lessons she draws from that analysis are
decisive for virtually all of her later writing. As she recalled in early 1978: "Everything I've done has come out of my studies which resulted in
_Mirror_. The _patterns_ were perfectly clear then... Of course, events moved so
fast. One war after another. I didn't think they'd come _that_ fast."
Mirror received a mixed reception, with the academic reviewers somewhat
more hostile than the general reviewers. Nathaniel Peffer contrasted Mirror
unfavorably with Wild Boar and commented: "Here she is only proving that a
little historical learning is a peculiarly dangerous thing." Howard P.
Linton wrote caustically: "Near-fanaticism and want of realism lessen the
value of the book." John M. Maki called Mirror "...a bold and sincere
statement of one woman's sentiments on the problems of international relations
in the modern world and on the occupation of Japan. To regard it as a serious
analysis of those problems would be to place it in a category for which, it
is to be hoped, it was not intended..." Among the specialist reviewers, only
John Fee Embree was enthusiastic. In a formal review Embree compared Mears
with an illustrious predecessor: Mirror was "...a treatment after the manner
of Thucydides -- with due attention to the distinction between acts and pious
words in relations between states." Two years later, as part of a biting
attack on ethnocentrism among American anthropologists, Embree would add:
"Helen Mears, a journalist with no anthropological training, has written an
account of Japanese-American relations which tells more about why the two
countries went to war than all the anthropologists put together."

Houghton Mifflin, Mirror's publisher, sought permission from the
Occupation authorities for a Japanese translation, but permission was denied.
"Because of my abhorrence of any form of censorship or the restriction of the
freedom of expression," wrote Douglas MacArthur, "I undertook, personally, to
review the book..." He considered the book propaganda and a threat to the
public safety: "...there appears no justification whatsoever for its publi-
cation in occupied Japan." MacArthur objected both to Mirror's history --
"Indeed, in the technique of slanting, misrepresentation and perversion of
the historical record, not even the propaganda emanating from Soviet sources
is that of the non-organization man [Mears was an admirer of C. Wright Mills].

The independent, rugged-individualist, the man from Missouri... who at one time
was assumed to be the normal American but who is a vanishing breed."

Not surprisingly, these activities stood in the way of her book-length projects. In a letter of March 1962, she writes: "Of course, I should keep to my long-term work and get a book done, and stop bothering about current affairs. But at the rate events are shaping up, by the time my Great Works are in publishable form, there won't be any point in publishing them, or any others...or even any means to..."

Mears did not travel again to Japan or to Asia, but she did not need to. Based in New York City, with government documents and the major English-language newspapers as her source material, she carved out for herself a career as critic, as conscience. Her modus operandi and much of her message are reminiscent of I. F. Stone. Mears agrees that the parallel is valid. Early in 1978 she commented wryly: "The major difference between I. F. Stone and me is that he knew how to put together a newsletter and get it circulated."

Indeed, herein lies one of the lessons to be learned from the case of Helen Mears: that it was possible in the 1940s and 1950s, working solely from published sources in Western languages, to develop a compelling critique of American policy in Asia, to see what was going to happen.

II. Japan.

In the opening chapter of Mirror, Mears establishes an extended metaphor for the whole book and, indeed, for all her writing about Asia. Her trip across the Pacific by plane becomes an embodiment not simply of the machine age but also of the sudden expansion of American power into the Pacific. She writes (pp. 1-7):

The Army Plane on the last lap of a San Francisco-Atsugi run had left Guam at ten-fifteen in the morning and was streaking for
Japan. With no sensation of motion it appeared to hang balanced between sky and sea so that, unless I looked out of the porthole, it was hard to remember that we were rushing through the air at the rate of over two hundred and fifty miles an hour. Even looking out, unless there were clouds below or around us, the effect was merely like sitting on a high hill looking down over a spreading seascape. This lack of sensation was almost frightening. To be using power which you did not understand and of which you could be unaware was a privilege that carried terrible dangers. Your life depended on the quality of leadership in the men who planned the routes, who serviced the planes, who performed the job of keeping on the true course, of controlling the motors. The passengers, once in the plane, were powerless to alter course, powerless to help themselves. It was necessary to surrender completely to the pilots and crew and to the men who had chosen the goal and plotted the route. If they failed, we all crashed with them.

En route to her assignment with the Occupation, Mears considers herself "helplessly involved in an undertaking as potentially dangerous to all Americans" as a plane flight. "The Occupation," she writes,... was the climax of an American demonstration of controlled power on such a vast unprecedented scale, and with such possibility for future disaster" that inspired leadership was crucial. Things seemed to be going well; but planes often crashed without warning: "A momentary appearance of order was no guarantee of safety to those who worked with overwhelming power. Power was too complex ever to be taken for granted. The more power you had, the greater the possibility for violent and overwhelming disaster."

According to Mears, the fundamental problem was "this power age," the modern era "that had its roots back in the fifteenth century with the
invention of the compass and the gun; that had thrust up its solid trunk along with steam and electric power; that had branched out and flowered with the thousand mechanical contrivances to conquer nature and men, to bring convenience, comforts, and destruction; and finally, to produce in darkness the dubious fruit that had exploded terror over Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

This power age was marked by crisis: "an amalgam of unsolved economic, social, and psychological problems that developed along with the industrial revolution and the machine-power age." This power age had "...created a state of nationalistic hysteria that had affected certain nations sooner than others, and some nations to a greater degree than others, but progressively, during the twentieth century, had infected the entire world." In Japan in 1935, she had seen that hysteria take its toll: "I was alarmed then by the unanimity of opinion among all I talked to. It was almost as though, instead of having a brain, each one had a victrola in his head that played over and over the identical record."

But during the war years in America she saw Americans, too, succumb to the same disease: "...I was appalled to discover that Americans seemed to have, instead of a brain, the same sort of victrola as the Japanese..." This discovery cast new light on the origins of the Pacific War: "...what had been wrong in Japan was not a naturally aggressive leadership and a uniquely acquiescent people, but instead an international and domestic situation that made the idea of crisis and war easily believed. It was the 'state of crisis' that was the villain of the piece both in Japan and in America. If World War II were not to be merely the middle act of a three-act tragedy, it was the crisis that must be examined."

The "most crucial" problem posed by this crisis was that "of directing and controlling political power in a world in which the people's welfare is increasingly dependent on government, and in which international relations are
concurrently interdependent and antagonistic." In hindsight, the Japanese -- people and leaders -- were helpless; they "could no more have controlled the forces that were thrusting them into the slipstream of dangerous and dynamic power than could a passenger control an airplane in the midst of a power dive." In this light Japan's experience becomes an object lesson: "To study Japan objectively is to clarify the problems and contradictions of our turbulent age, and to plot a trend that can be extended, with considerable assurance, into the future." Indeed: "...the story of Japan's abrupt rise from peaceful isolationism to militaristic expansionism in its brief modern period is, in capsule form, the history of the Western World for the past four centuries."

Japan has already crashed; and so Mears' real concern is with America. She writes: "Our crisis started building with the First World War and has accelerated, during the Second, to an exhilarating and dangerous power dive. Unlike the Japanese, we have swung into it with apparently everything in our favor. With power, however, too much can be as dangerous as too little. With our velocity, only a miracle of intelligent planning, disciplined control, and luck will bring us out of it without a crash."

In this stunning opening passage Mears establishes her context: not Japan and the United States in the ten years before Pearl Harbor, not Japan and the United States since Perry, but the international relations of Asia since the arrival of the West. Her concern is less with individuals and more with long-term geo-political forces. Most important, she places Japan and America on an absolutely equal footing. Japan lost the Pacific War, and the United States won it; but the Pacific War is symptom, not disease, and Japan and the United States both suffer from the disease. Victory does not confirm the moral superiority of the victor. It confirms the victor's superiority of power, yes; but no more. She writes (p. 48): "If Americans
are to fulfill the promise implicit in our political ideals and material power, we will have to start from scratch and re-evaluate our role in the war and our proposals for peace. For such a study Japan is a primer and source-book. To review, objectively, our relations with Japan may serve as a mirror to help us reassess our present policies in international relations."

The Pacific War

Mears lays most of the blame for the Pacific War on "the crisis." But she does not suggest that the Japanese are free of all responsibility (p.161): "That modern post-Perry Japan has been aggressive and expansionist is clear."

Still, she notes that the same expansionism is not true of Japan before Perry. Hence, Mears sees in the international conditions of the late 19th century the key to the change (p.175): "The modern Japanese developed a highly centralized regime because they were introduced into world society under conditions that made centralized control of both government and economy essential to survival. They became 'violent and greedy' because they were introduced into a world society in which violence and greed were standard and correct behavior..."

Japan's drive for empire, Mears suggests (p.296), is nothing new in Asia: "For centuries Asia and the Pacific Islands have been a Co-Prosperity Sphere for Europe and, to a minor degree, the United States." In that context of Western colonialism and imperialism, Mears writes (p.264), Japan became "despite herself...the spearhead of Asiatic nationalistic revolution." Later, writing of Japan's expulsion of the Western rulers from their colonies in Asia, Mears comments (p. 273) that the Japanese "...emerged -- even if dishonestly -- as the leaders of 'Asiatic liberation.'" After the outbreak of the China Incident, Mears notes (p. 273), the Japanese "proceeded with ruthless brutality." So Mears holds no brief for the Japanese, as some reviewers charged at the time.
Second, Mears traces the history of Western relations with China, sketching out the prewar history essential to an understanding of postwar events. For example, she notes (p.219) that the Open Door policy, far from protecting China's sovereignty, "was, in practice, a denial of it. ...the issue was only, Can the Western Powers (including Japan) agree among themselves not to go so far in turning China into a colony that they exclude each other from trade and investments?" It is for this reason that Mears speaks (p.264) of "the failure of the democracies" on "the moral side" in dealing with the Manchurian Incident. They sought not to abolish the unequal treaties but to re-establish the status quo.

Similarly, Americans "...must face the fact that there is remarkably little correlation between moral principles and international law." To Mears, power politics is the real issue, and the Manchurian Incident one not atypical case study. She writes (p.207): "From the Asiatic point of view [which Mears contrasts with public opinion in the United States], the Incident was a highly elaborate example of traditional power politics in which Japan and the other Western powers traded legal fictions with each other." And Mears does not hesitate to add a third point of view -- the Chinese -- which saw all parties as having a common objective: "that of 'maintaining or extending the 'interests' of the Western Powers in the Far East."

Mears quotes (p.270) Joseph Grew to the effect that Japan was out "to supersede British interests in China," and she cites President Roosevelt's statement on the importance of keeping the Japanese "within bounds" insofar as territorial changes were concerned. She reports that the Japanese government interpreted British opposition to Japanese policy in the 1930s as imperial in nature, and American opposition as based on "racial, commercial, and strategic objections." She writes (p.271): "The major antagonists in the China Incident were not China and Japan. They were still Japan and the other..."
Western Powers, largely Britain and the United States. There were Chinese generals and politicians on both the Anglo-American and Japanese sides of the argument. The Chinese people, as usual, were the victims of everybody, and had no role except to be starved and killed."

For Mears, World War II began before Pearl Harbor, and the United States had already taken sides. She writes (p. 274): "The United States Government took part in the China Incident (which, in practical terms, merged with the World War in 1939), not only by lending large sums to Chiang Kai-shek, but also by threatening to impose stringent economic sanctions against Japan."

Between 1939 and Pearl Harbor, American policy was devious (pp.274-275): "In practical terms our policy was designed to keep the Sino-Japanese War going until the European War was under control and until our 'defense' program was further advanced. The Japanese were kept busy in China, and Chiang Kai-shek was given help enough so that he would continue fighting and not yield to the Japanese. We interpreted this policy as being to the best interests, not only of Britain, but also of the American and Chinese people."

Not surprisingly, Mears lays great emphasis on the American oil embargo of July 1941 (p.277): "... the Japanese knew that the ultimatum they had been dreading since the Manchurian Incident had come at last. Without supplies from these Powers, the Japanese would have to get out of China and Manchuria on American, British and Dutch terms. They had to be prepared to fight or submit to terms that would reduce them to a minor Power."

Much of what Mears writes about the Pacific War seems unremarkable today. This impression tells us a good deal about today, but little about 1948. In 1948 American public opinion was not ready for Mirror; and neither, by and large, were American Japanists. To many Americans studying and writing about Japan, the Pacific War had been anything but a conventional struggle for empire. Japan in the 1930s, they felt, offered a mortal threat not to assumed
American strategic interests or to the American economy, but to the American way of life, to "democracy." For them, the war was less a power struggle than a crusade.

For example, Edwin O. Reischauer, America's leading Japanist of the post-war years, had spoken out in June of 1942 in a radio series on "The Fight for a Free World." This is how he began: "In Japan we do not face merely a military enemy or a rival in a game of power politics. Japan represents a political, economic, and social system which is a direct challenge to our own ways of life and thought. Japan is not simply an enemy nation. It represents an enemy ideology which is threatening to drive the ideas of democracy, equality, and individual freedom from the Far East and which is attempting to win the uncounted millions of Asia to a system characterized by the mass slavery of totalitarianism, the bitter hatreds of ultranationalism, and the cruelty and oppression of militarism." Many of these themes he would develop in The United States and Japan (1950), although by then Reischauer found it necessary to split the role of anti-Christ: for the prewar years it still belonged to Japan, but for the postwar years it now became the Soviet Union's.

A second example is John M. Maki, a political scientist soon to be in the forefront of America's Japan scholars. He began his Japanese Militarism: Its Cause and Cure (1945) by talking of two wars: one against people, the second against ideas. He wrote (p.2): "If we could carry the war against people to its logical conclusion and kill seventy-two million Japanese, we should not have to worry about the winning of the war of ideas. Modern weapons have not yet reached the point where they can annihilate a nation; we must accept the fact that there will be a good many million Japanese still living when this war comes to an end. The war of ideas involves these people."
Some Japanists attacked Mears; more ignored her. Few reading lists of the 1950s included *Mirror*; and it is not to be found in most bibliographies of the period. But thirty years later, it is clear that Mears anticipated much of the revisionist history of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Noam Chomsky deserves great credit for his essay of 1967 examining the roots of the Pacific War; but most of his themes are present already in *Mirror*. Had they not ignored Helen Mears, American Japanists would have had less need of Noam Chomsky twenty years later.

**America and Japan, 1945-1952**

The American Occupation of Japan rested firmly and comfortably on the American wartime propaganda which "...relieved Americans of any responsibility whatsoever, and indicted a people, never popular, as the sole, deliberate, and unprovoked offender." ([Mirror](#) p.13). That connection made it inevitable that Mears extend her critique of prewar American policy to postwar policy, too. Mears intended to follow up *Mirror* with a book on the Occupation, but "the rapidity with which my insights turned into events in the postwar period -- the developing Cold War with the U. S. S. R., the war in Korea, the fanatic anti-Communism (which echoed the Axis anti-Comintern pact), the issue of 'Red China' and the U. N., the devastating war in Indochina -- made the current policies (which so painfully reproduced the past) seem a more urgent topic." [23]

Why should there be an American Occupation of Japan at all? This is a simple question, perhaps; but to ask it in 1948 one had to be immune to the bacillus of American wartime propaganda. Hence, it is not normally asked in American writings on Japan. But for Helen Mears it is an obvious question, and she seeks to answer it. For her, the Occupation is "part of our postwar plans for the future, rather than of our war efforts. We did not occupy Japan as a necessary step to winning the war; we insisted on the Occupation as a
condition of allowing the Japanese to surrender." She continues (Mirror pp.49-50): "The Occupation of Japan...was an objective of our war. But what was the objective of our Occupation? The answer seems too easy, and could probably be summed up with the simple declarative statement [official policy, as widely reported in the wartime press]: 'Put them down and keep them down.' If further pressed, most Americans would probably go on to say that we are trying to 'democratize the Japanese so that they won't eternally be waging war.'" Hence (pp.52-53) the Occupation is "very far indeed from being a philanthropic gesture... Expressed in its most obvious terms, the Occupation is a demonstration of cops-and-robbers on an international scale."

But Mears does discuss an additional objective of American policy in 1945 and after: the containment of the Soviet Union. She discusses (pp.108-109) the rush to end the war by force despite the fact "that for at least three months [the Japanese] had been trying to discuss surrender." Her conclusion is a stark one: "...we were perfectly willing to massacre over a hundred thousand Japanese civilians in an attempt to bring a quick decision. And we were quite ready, if this failed, to go ahead with the planned invasion at the possible sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of American lives. And the atom bombs which we used against the Japanese were used, not in a war against Japan, for Japan had already been overwhelmingly defeated, but in a political war against Russia. And our Occupation is a device for carrying out certain political and economic objectives which are connected with the Japanese only in the sense that they...happen to inhabit some strategically placed islands."

Helen Mears was not the first to suggest that the American motivation in dropping the atomic bombs was to impress the Soviet Union, but she may well have been the first expert on Asia to confront the issue. Edwin O. Reischauer, for example, ignores the issue in The United States and Japan; in fact, in none of his writings does Reischauer go beyond the statement that "...the
Americans, without stopping to think fully about what they were doing, proceeded...to drop" the atomic bombs. For Reischauer the controversy surrounding atomic diplomacy is simply not a topic of concern or interest.

For many people today the dropping of the atomic bombs is one of the great war crimes of the Pacific War; but at the major Pacific war crimes trial at Tokyo, only Japanese acts were under judgment, and the emphasis was less on conventional war crimes than on the crime of aggression. While in Tokyo, Mears attended one session of the Tokyo trial. Mirror appeared before the trial drew to a close; but between 1949 and 1954 Mears studied the records of both Nuremberg and Tokyo and prepared a prospectus for a book on the trial. However, she found no publisher, and the project died. What remains is a portion of a manuscript and an entry, "war crimes trials," in the Collier's Encyclopedia (1954; the entry is still running in the 1977 edition). Once again, Mears is far ahead of her time, for the first critical monograph on the trial in any Western language appeared in 1971.

Mears is attracted by the ideals behind the trial. A firm believer in the principle that international law should supersede power politics and war, as the charter and judgment of the Tokyo trial assert, Mears writes: "The importance of these new principles of international law cannot be overstated." But as always she insists on comparing ideal and real, for "the danger...of asserting such idealistic principles only to illustrate their unreality in practice is that the whole concept of International Law is weakened if not wholly discredited." Later in the essay she writes that "...the appointment of the American defense attorneys, which was the most obvious demonstration of American high concepts of legal justice, had, in the end, the paradoxical result of illustrating how far Americans' conception of international justice is removed from American domestic standards."25
The essay comes to no conclusions; and the prose of the encyclopedia entry, not surprisingly, is fairly matter-of-fact. Still, she writes there that Nuremberg and Tokyo "introduced into international society some revolutionary definitions, principles, and procedures of international law." Of eleven paragraphs on Tokyo, two are about the many separate judicial opinions, with the emphasis on fundamental problems of legal principle and procedure. She reports the action of the U. S. Supreme Court in denying that it had jurisdiction, quotes Associate Justice William O. Douglas, who wrote that the trial was "solely an instrument of political power," and leaves the reader with no doubt that the issues are still open: "The importance of the War Crimes Trials has yet to be assessed. Those who wrote the charters, and those who judged the defendants as guilty, asserted the existence of a body of international criminal law, which superseded national law and by which governments and people are bound. Others have questioned the existence of such international law and have charged that the trials represented only a victor's vengeance or a demonstration of power politics." For an encyclopedia entry of 1954, and especially for an entry which covers both Tokyo and Nuremberg, these are startling words.

In her writings about the war and the Occupation, and indeed in her writings about American policy in general, Mears consistently inveighs against the naive and easy self-assurance with which Americans have addressed themselves to issues of enormous complexity and deep historical roots. In Mirror she questions the competence of Americans to "reform" Japanese institutions, to make Japan "peace-loving," the declared objective of the Occupation. The plane which took her to Japan in 1946 also carried some of the other members of the labor advisory committee, and they illustrated the problem. With indignation she writes of them (p.38): "They were, personally, serious and civilized -- competent in their own fields in America. Few of the
Americans, however, had so much as read a book about Japan. They had not followed the events of the Occupation in the newspapers. Most of them had never heard of the 'Pauley Report,' although this was, at that time, the basic document defining Japan's economic future and so the future of the Japanese worker whose problems we were supposed to advise about. Moreover, their lack of Japanese background did not in the least bother them. Their attitude was that (a) there were certain basic economic principles which were universally true...and (b) we were, in any event, not interested in what Japan had been, since our job was to turn Japan into what we wanted it to be. One of the members carried with him slim volumes of Aristotle and Machiavelli, which -- during the flight out -- he had browsed in from time to time getting a firm grasp on basic principles."

This combination of self-confidence and yet basic ignorance struck Mears as typical of the whole Occupation. Her reaction was sharp (p.37): "Americans had, in fact, and no nonsense about it, taken on the role of Roman conqueror and reformer with fewer qualms and less self-questioning than they would, at home, advise their wives about the purchase of a new hat. The extreme self-discipline and co-operativeness of the Japanese served to give an illusion of stability that reinforced the dangerous self-assurance of the reformers."

The Occupation of Japan came to an end formally in 1951-1952 when the United States and Japan negotiated a multi-lateral peace treaty and signed a bi-lateral security treaty. The security treaty extended the American military presence in Japan past the end of the Occupation. Helen Mears is one of the first American writers to express serious doubts about these events.

In an essay of 1950, accepted for publication in The Nation but never published, Mears notes the appointment of John Foster Dulles as chief negotiator, the likelihood that neither Russia nor China will be party to
the treaty, and the prospect that the United States will insist on long-term military rights and bases. Such a peace, she suggests, will seem provocative to both China and Russia. Is the root cause of the separate treaty Russian intransigeance? No: "The record...suggests that intransigeance is an occupational disease of all Great Powers." Japan, she contends, is militarily indefensible and should choose neutrality, but the United States will not accept such a course: "We have taught the Japanese to prefer neutrality. We should stop our projects for making that neutrality impossible."27

The administrative agreement setting forth the terms of the security arrangement was concluded on February 28, 1952, and within a month Mears takes her stand. Her essay, entitled "The Japanese 'Insecurity' Treaty," appeared in the March 22 issue of The Nation. Mears makes several fundamental points about the security arrangement. First, the treaty is not voluntary on the part of Japan. She writes: "To claim that the security treaty is a 'voluntary agreement between free peoples' (as Secretary of State Dean Acheson expressed it) when one of the signers is an occupied nation and the other the occupier is to put a peculiar interpretation upon 'voluntary' and 'free'. As a matter of fact, the Japanese were told from the first that they would get no peace treaty unless and until they ratified the security treaty. ... In short, we made no bones about it -- no bases, no peace treaty." Further, the treaty reestablishes extraterritoriality; it has evoked significant opposition in Japan; and it permits the use of American troops to put down domestic insurrection in Japan. Most important, Mears argues that as far as Japan is concerned the treaty "...offers the reverse of security." Not only is the American pledge to defend Japan vague and non-committal, but Japan will become involved in any American action: "...Japan's participation in any military adventure involving the United States or the United Nations becomes automatic.
We may contemplate this situation with great satisfaction, but the war-weary
Japanese can hardly be expected to do so."28

Almost twenty years were to pass before the issues Mears raises in this
article of 1952 received the serious attention of academic Japanists. For
them, an article in the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars in late 1969
represented the first attempt to "bring the war home," to explore in the
realm of relations between America and Japan some of the questions raised
by the American involvement in Indochina. In that essay of late 1969 John W.
Dower analyzes at length the security arrangement in terms not of American
magnanimity but of American self-interest. He argues that the treaty was
"an unequal treaty in the fullest sense" of the term; that the treaty gave
"rise to legitimate resentment and fear among many Japanese;" and that "by
being forced into a rigid anti-communist role, Japan may have increased
rather than decreased its vulnerability."29

As we have seen, Helen Mears gave voice to all these issues in 1952. A
non-academic Japanist, she enjoys clear priority of place. Yet it is
indicative of the state of affairs that her essay does not appear in the notes
to Dower's article. The point here is not to denigrate Dower's contribution,
for his essay was important in stimulating rethinking within the field, but
to underline the costs that academic Japanists have paid for their failure to
listen to Helen Mears.

III. Vietnam

The study of the international relations of the Pacific in the years
before 1941 led naturally to a concern with postwar reality, with American
policy not simply toward Japan but toward all of Asia. In the 1950s Helen
Mears publishes articles on Okinawa, on China, on Korea, and on Vietnam.30
Apart from Japan, Vietnam is the major focus of her efforts, and it is these
articles in particular which testify to her foresight. The colonial issue forms a natural bridge between the Pacific War and postwar Vietnam, but Mears is perhaps the first to walk across it. Even before the Pacific War comes to a close, she publishes (June 1944) an article entitled "Japan is winning the political war." By this she means the political war in Asia. She begins: "The conflict in the Far East involves a great deal more than the defeat of the Japanese. It involves our relations with all the Asiatic and South Sea Island peoples." Japan had appealed to these peoples and had won wide acceptance as "the spearhead of an Asiatic nationalist revolution." Hence, she writes: "...we cannot 'liberate' these regions from the Japanese without making definite and concrete arrangements for their early independence."

Real political and economic issues underlay the Japanese attack on the United States. In the same way: "...behind Japan's expansion and the revolutionary upsurge in Asia there are genuine economic and social problems. If they are not solved, even the total demolition of Japan and the Japanese will not be enough to gain us peace in the Pacific." Mears offers her own prescription: "We are obliged to choose now whether we want to run the world by co-operation or spend the rest of the century in war. We can make a start by an unequivocal statement that we consider the rights of the native peoples in Asia and the Pacific paramount in these regions and that when such rights seem at variance with our assumed interests, our interests must give way and native rights take precedence." The nationalist revolutions Mears foresees in 1944 come with startling rapidity after 1945.

Mears' first article on Vietnam appears in April 1953 -- before the French debacle at Dienbienphu, before the Geneva Conference. The title itself is prophetic: "Our newest war: the mess in Indochina." The immediate occasion for the article is the visit to Washington of French Premier René
Mayer (March 1953), in search of American aid for the French in Indochina. The joint communiqué issued at the close of the visit is what worries Mears, and she writes: "The new 'positive' American policy in Indochina...puts the United States into the war in Indochina..." Further, she ties the war in Indochina to the issue of nationalism and surveys recent Vietnamese history: "The French, of course, have charged -- and of late the United States has echoed the charge -- that the original Vietnam Republic of Ho and his Vietminh is dominated by Communists working in the interest of the Kremlin. But the facts as reported by American newspaper correspondents strongly suggest that, whatever the extent of Communist influence, the major operative factor has been and is nationalism. Ho Chi-minh was a nationalist, anti-monarchist revolutionary before the Russian Revolution..."^32

In an unpublished essay dated April 1954 -- during the siege of Dienbienphu but before the Geneva Conference, Mears explores another aspect of the American involvement in Indochina: its legality. Entitled "Indochina: Illegal War," this essay analyzes the situation in terms of the Charter of the United Nations and the verdict of the Tokyo trial (of which she comments bitingly, "The general indifference to these records does not expunge them from the pages of history"). Here is her conclusion:

"It seems clear that under existing commitments, no nation, or alliance of nations, can legally use force unless specifically authorized to do so by the correct procedures as defined in the U. N. Charter. No nation, or group of nations, can constitute themselves a U. N. police force without formal authorization. The Governments of the Great Powers can of course take the law into their own hands. If they do so, however, they are not helping to establish a world under law, but are themselves law-
breakers, leading the world backward toward international anarchy. They also risk being charged as War Criminals, guilty of the 'crime against peace' which has been declared to be 'the supreme international crime.'"  

It would be the end of the 1960s, a decade and more later, before the criminality of the Vietnam war became a topic of serious discussion. But Mears had sketched out the basic outlines of an argument in 1954, before the Geneva Conference.

Seven years later, in November 1961, she wrote to President John F. Kennedy protesting reports of arms-shipments and stepped-up action in Vietnam: "If this isn't waging an undeclared war against the Vietnamese people -- what is it? Even if the rebels are Communist-led, the rebels and their leaders are Vietnamese -- natives of this area, fighting in their own country. It is the Americans who are the foreign intruders." In this letter too she raises the issue of legality: "Suppose the U. S. Government were called on to defend it successfully in view of the Geneva agreements and the U. S. obligations under the U. N. Charter?"  

In 1962 Mears wrote of "The Big Risks of Little Wars." Her text was a report on Pentagon strategy which had appeared in the Wall Street Journal. In typical fashion Mears draws from the report the implications which other readers did not see:

"What does this report reveal, in essence, about U. S. planning? It says that to put into power in South Vietnam a regime which does not have 'solid support' from the people, the United States is waging war against native rebels and is prepared to carry out guerilla warfare against North Vietnam; the report adds that if the United States cannot subdue the native rebels within a few years by using these methods, it will bomb North Vietnam."
If the Chinese intervene -- either before the open attack against North Vietnam or after -- the United States is prepared to carry the war to China. It is hoped that the U. S. S. R. will stay out of it. However, this is a risk that must be accepted.

"When such policy planning is stated bluntly -- without the customary circumlocutions of our anti-communist ideology -- it sounds preposterous. Yet for over a year our press has been full of grimly realistic descriptions of the situation in South Vietnam -- and the frustrations of American planners who have determined that Vietnam is a 'piece of strategic real estate' which the United States must not 'yield to the Reds.'"

"Admittedly, the problem of gaining 'victory' lies in the widely publicized fact that the people of Vietnam prefer the 'Reds' to 'our man Diem.' This situation has little, if anything, to do with Communist ideology. The important point is that many rebels called 'Communists' are not Communists; and even the Communists, both South and North, are native Vietnamese. When the U. S. government, in effect, tells the Vietnamese 'Reds' to go back where they came from or be killed, it puts both the 'Reds' and the American people in a difficult position. For these Vietnamese 'Reds' are already where they came from. It is the Americans who are a long way from home."35

Thus, between 1944 and 1962 Helen Mears develops a critique of the American involvement in Vietnam which stands up very well today. Needless to say, most Americans took much longer to see the truth in her argument, and so did most American Asian scholars. At the time she wrote, Mears was clearly out of step with her time.
IV. Helen Mears and American Asianists.

For more than thirty years Helen Mears has provided a highly intelligent and informed criticism of American policy in Asia. She has done so under conditions far from ideal: her highest degree is a B.A.; she is not competent in any Asian language; she has not been to Asia since 1946. An outsider to the academy, she has not enjoyed the advantages of the insiders: tenure, Fulbright grants, university-press publications.

Academic Asian scholars had all these advantages during the same time but produced little fundamental criticism. Language study, area travel and research grants, university presses anxious to publish monographs -- these became almost routine in the life of academic Asian scholars. However, in retrospect it seems clear that the best and the brightest of the Asian academy, like their political counterparts in Washington, were not up to the real challenge. They did not examine the roots of American policy in Asia; they did not see the connections between American policy toward Japan and American policy toward Vietnam. They did not speak out and take unpopular stands. Their absorption in Asia left them blind to reality at home.

Helen Mears was not so buried in research that she paid little attention to contemporary issues. She was not so intent on being a Japanist that she ignored developments in China, Korea, or Vietnam. She was not so absorbed in Asia that she ignored developments in her own country. Only shortly out of college when she first went to China, she learned about the complexities of international relations from experience and study, trying always to understand Asian points of view. Her study of Asia led her back to the United States and enabled her to see her own country in a new light. As a result, she began to see her government's foreign policies in a global
context and to examine them in relation to the ideals and goals professed by the makers of American policy.

This contrast between her feasance and the malfeasance of America's Asian scholars calls for some explanation. To Mears, looking back in 1978, the crux of the matter is independence: she was independent; most Asian scholars were not. They thought of themselves, she suggests, as colleagues of the policy-makers rather than as watchdogs. They considered their role to be helping to implement policy rather than trying to insure that the policy lived up to the professed principles and goals. Says Mears today: "Independence is the word. I've been an independent person."

Mears takes seriously the principles that many American policy-makers have used as window-dressing. She considers herself a "genuine internationalist." Today she still refers with deep feeling to the passage from John Quincy Adams which she used as an epigraph for Mirror. Adams wrote of America: "Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." Mears adds: "Now that's the way I think America should be."

For all the fire of her polemic and the consistency of her thinking, Mears is not ideological. One of her most characteristic essays appeared in 1959 under the title "Militarism is impractical." There she writes: "...political decisions which ignore the 'morally right' seldom turn out to be 'politically sound,' for foreign-policy decisions based on military judgments seldom prove to be wise, even in terms of military and strategic advantage." She continues: "...those who rely on military power as the major element in their policy-making do not try to relax international tensions; they do not try to solve international problems. Instead, they
try to impose stability, even on situations which are artificial, unjust and unworkable from the point of view of the people who live in the strategic regions." 36 Solid common sense is a major element in the Mears formula.

Mears is extremely reluctant to talk of her own religious beliefs. She feels that the issue is a personal one, not for public display. Organized Christianity has given Christianity a bad name, and so have John Foster Dulles, Billy Graham, and Jimmy Carter. The issue, she feels, is not her religion but the way policy-makers have invoked Christianity to justify thoroughly un-Christian policies. But in the 1950s Mears wrote a number of articles for the Episcopal journal Witness, and these articles reveal that she is as comfortable expressing her message in the terms of the Church as in the more secular language she uses for her other articles. In one of these articles, published in 1951, she expresses her own conviction that "As a basis for a world united under law the principles of Christianity seem mankind's best hope."

In many hands such a statement could be ethnocentric to the core. But not so in the case of Helen Mears. The passage continues: "This hope, however, will be frustrated until Americans, and Christians, become more attentive to our own shortcomings. At this moment when our military power is the most obvious fact of international relations we are in the gravest danger of forgetting that might is not always identical with right. Surely the Christian method for solving international tensions would be by mediation, conciliation, and a sincere effort to solve the problems which give rise to international tension, rather than by force of arms." 37

Indeed, here is the source of the fire of her writings: hers is a message not to the heathen but to the Greek, not to the Asian but to the American. As early as 1948, Mears' prime concern is not Asia but the
Consider the title of her book — *Mirror for Americans: Japan*. Consider the fact that the metaphor of the airplane flight applies primarily to the United States. Mears concludes the first chapter of *Mirror* (p.48): "We are in mid-flight. It is about time the passengers on this power dive begin to check up a little on the goal we are heading for and the quality of the leadership that set the course and is directing the run." *Mirror* concludes with Mears' own appraisal of that leadership (p.324): "Our current foreign-policy leaders...lost in their dream of power and glory... have become as blind to reality as the Japanese militarists before them. The question for Americans to answer, and answer at once, is whether we have allowed our Power machine to get out of control or whether we can still take over and reverse our direction." When most American intellectuals -- Asian specialists included -- occupied themselves first and foremost with the sins of our enemies -- the Japanese, the Russians, the Chinese, the Koreans, the Vietnamese, Helen Mears focused attention on ourselves, on "the extreme divergence of U. S. practice from U. S. ideology," on the "moral schizophrenia of our society," on the "moral callousness" of America. 38

Finally, crucial to Mears' faith is her basic humanity and her opposition to oppression. Particularly poignant is an article Mears wrote for the Christian Science Monitor Magazine of May 27, 1939. The title is "Culinary Art of Japan," and the essay tells of a dinner in a fine Tokyo restaurant. Hundreds of writers have written hundreds of similar articles; but Mears' ending sets her apart. She writes:

"Dinner over, fresh tea provides excuse to linger for a chat. In no time the proprietor and his family discover that your country is America, and will wish to know what America thinks of Japan... what you yourself think of their country. You will exchange courtesies. They will admire Henry Ford, of whom every Japanese
seems to have heard favorably; you will praise the food or the
theater or the beauty of the country. Your host will answer to
the best of his ability your many questions. It is only if you
speak of militarism in China that you break the spell. Then he
will pause, his friendly garrulity will become formal courtesy,
and he will be sorry, but that is a subject about which he has
no opinion. Self-conscious as though you had committed a breach
of good manners, you will slip on your shoes. The family formally
bows, and as you go out to the cacophony of Tokyo, you think
regretfully how difficult it is today for individuals to meet
as human beings rather than as members of some system."

In Japan in 1935 Mears is not afraid to speak of Japanese militarism; but
her final thought is of common humanity despite racial or ideological
barriers.

Mears incurred the wrath of most Japanists of the 1940s, when her two
books appeared. Few reading lists of the 1950s included Mirror, and it is
not listed in the bibliographies of Reischauer (any book, any edition),
of Borton, of Kawai. As a result, most academic Japanists today have not
read her books and do not know her name.

Yet the conventional wisdom of 1948 seems highly parochial today; and
viewed in hindsight, Mears towers over those academic Japanists who could
not distance themselves from their time. She is not racist; she does not
condescend to Asia. She goes to Asia in search not of monsters to destroy
but of a mirror in which to "reassess our present policies in international
relations."

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Clearly the field has paid a price for its cold shoulder to Mears. The spectrum of debate was narrowed artificially, and parochial patriotic views soon achieved dominance. Writing of A. J. Muste's revolutionary pacifism as it appeared in contrast to the policies America actually pursued in the 1930s, Noam Chomsky found "great tragedy" in the fact that Muste's position was so remote from "the American consciousness." It is surely no exaggeration to say the same of the position represented so eloquently by Helen Mears.
NOTES

1. Charles H. Haskins, "European History and American Scholarship," American Historical Review 28.2:225 (January 1923); I am indebted to Lewis Hanke for this citation.


5. Wild Boar, p. 244.


16. Douglas MacArthur to Lovell Thompson, 6 August 1949; quoted here courtesy of the MacArthur Archives (Norfolk, Va.). I am indebted to Ray A. Moore of Amherst College for bringing this letter to my attention.

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17. First Book of Japan (New York: Franklin Watts, 1953). On the Pacific War (p. 37): "So there grew up a new Japan, a modern nation, with a modern capital in Tokyo. In fifty years, the number of people living in Japan doubled. There were neither land nor resources enough to feed them or give them jobs. This modern Japan supported its people by trading with foreign countries. Like the Western nations before it, Japan began to spread out -- into other Pacific islands, and into Korea, China, and Manchuria, in northern China. During its early years of spreading out, the Western nations sided with Japan. After 1931, however, when the Japanese began to control Manchuria, the Western nations were against Japan. This disagreement led to others. Finally it led to war between some of the Western powers and Japan -- a part of World War II."

18. Mears papers.

19. Mears papers.

20. Mears to Carey McWilliams, March 1, 1962 (Mears papers).


25. Untitled essay, Mears papers.


34. Mears to President John F. Kennedy, Nov. 14, 1961, (Mears papers).


