

US historians criticize Tokyo's efforts to whitewash war crimes

By Ben McGrath
16 February 2015

A group of 19 American historians have condemned efforts by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to whitewash the historical record following his recent attempts to pressure a McGraw-Hill, a US publishing company, to change textbook passages concerning the Japanese military's terrible abuse of "comfort women" during the 1930s and 1940s.

In a February 5 statement entitled "Standing with Historians of Japan," the American academics not only criticized the Japanese government's attempts to whitewash history but opposed any attempt by other governments to censor the past. As the title also makes clear, the historians lent support to their Japanese colleagues who have worked to investigate the truth regarding "comfort women," or women who were coerced into "comfort stations" as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers.

Among those who signed the statement were Patrick Manning, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh who is being considered for the chair of the American Historical Association, and Hebert Ziegler, of Hawaii University and one of the authors of McGraw-Hill's textbook that Abe criticized.

At the end of last year, the Japanese Consulate General in New York met with representatives of McGraw-Hill, to call for its textbook to be amended. The company refused. At the end of January, Abe declared that he was "shocked" by what he had read in the books and called for greater efforts to "correct" such accounts.

The statement by the American academics reads, "As historians, we express our dismay at recent attempts by the Japanese government to suppress statements in history textbooks both in Japan and elsewhere about the euphemistically named 'comfort women,' who suffered under a brutal system of sexual exploitation in

the service of the Japanese imperial army during World War II. We therefore oppose the efforts of states or special interests to pressure publishers or historians to alter the results of their research for political purposes."

The historians' statement also expressed support for Japanese historians like Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a professor at Chuo University in Japan. It continued, "The careful research of historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki in Japanese government archives and the testimonial of survivors throughout Asia have rendered beyond dispute the essential features of a system that amounted to state-sponsored sexual slavery."

Yoshiaki is a professor of modern history and author of the book, "Comfort Women," first published in Japanese in 1995 and then in English in 2002. Yoshiaki began researching the sexual enslavement of comfort women in 1992 when victims were first beginning to come forward. He made extensive use of documents from the 1930s, found in the Ministry of Defense's library (then known as the Defense Agency). This type of information is invaluable as many papers were destroyed in Japan during the closing days of World War II, including many that were evidence of war crimes.

While Yoshiaki made use of these documents to show the military's role in setting up the brothels, he also stated in 2007 in the *New York Times*, "There are things that are never written in official documents. That they [comfort women] were forcibly recruited—that's the kind of thing that would have never been written in the first place."

The number of women forced into military-run "comfort stations" is estimated to have been approximately 200,000, with many of them coming from Korea, China, the Philippines, and other Asian countries occupied by Japan. Girls, often in their teens,

endured horrendous conditions in the Japanese military brothels. Many committed suicide.

While some women were directly forced into sexual slavery, others were duped and then held against their will. In Korea, for example, the Japanese military relied on Korean middlemen to round up girls, often with phony promises of good jobs in factories or other work. These girls often came from poor families.

Right-wing Japanese nationalists often claim that the “comfort women” were already prostitutes and willingly worked at the comfort stations. While there is some evidence that this might be true in the early stages, as Japan’s imperialist war drive expanded, the practices of coercing and intimidating young women into becoming “comfort women” increased.

“The Japanese military itself newly built this system, took the initiative to create this system, maintained it and expanded it, and violated human rights as a result,” Yoshiaki said in 2007 comments to the *New York Times*. “That’s a critical difference [from prostitution].”

Abe’s attempt to revise the historical record on “comfort women” is just one aspect of a broader agenda. The government has also set aside more than a half billion dollars for a diplomatic and propaganda offensive to “restore Japan’s honor.” It recently announced the establishment of “Japan Houses” around the world to promote the country’s image and to whitewash past war crimes.

The first “Japan Houses” will be set up in London, Los Angeles, and Sao Paulo by the end of 2016, but the plan does not end there. “We are half-satisfied. By mobilizing all means, we must strengthen Japan’s information strategy...so that in a real sense, we can have (others) properly understand what is good about Japan,” said Yoshiaki Harada, a lawmaker with Abe’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Japan also recently provided \$5 million to Columbia University for a Japan studies position. It was the first time Tokyo has made such a grant in more than four decades. “There is a fear that Japan is losing out in an information war with South Korea and China and that we must catch up,” said Kan Kimura of Kobe University.

This concerted ideological campaign is part of the Abe government’s remilitarization of Japan and preparation for war. It is aimed at whipping up patriotic

sentiment at home to dragoon a new generation of youth to go off to war, while blunting criticism abroad not only of past crimes, but the Japanese government’s current military build-up.

All of this has been encouraged by the United States as part of its “pivot to Asia,” designed to undermine China economically and militarily encircle it. While it is fully supportive of the “pivot,” the Abe government is also seeking to remilitarize to prosecute the economic and strategic interests of Japanese imperialism, even if they conflict with those of the US.

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