

'Comfort women' and history



By [DAN STEINBOCK](#) on January 15, 2018



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Recently, a Manila statue commemorating Filipino “comfort women” has been overwhelmed by a debate. Yet, Philippine-Japanese relations are strong enough to endure the weight of history, especially in the year 2018 which is internationally being promoted as the “Year of the Woman.”

IN early December, a memorial was erected along Roxas Boulevard facing Manila Bay. It commemorates the Filipino “comfort women” who were forced to work as sexual slave labor in Japanese military brothels during World War 2.

Soon thereafter, a spokeswoman from Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it was “extremely regrettable” that comfort women statues, including the one in the Philippines, had been erected.

In reality, both historical facts and good diplomacy should be respected.

Japan's sexual slavery in the 1930s and 1940s

Until recently, the extent of Japan's wartime sexual slavery has been downplayed. According to conservative historian Ikuhiko Hata, there were barely 20,000 "comfort women" in the 1930s and 1940s and they were largely willing prostitutes, with no or minimal direct involvement by Japanese military.

However, the very notion of the "comfort women" is a euphemism for sex slaves and historical revisionism. In fact, even Hata's initial estimate was 90,000 but he revised the number downward following his political alignment with Japanese conservatives in the late 1990s.

In reality, the number of Japan's wartime sex slaves is estimated at some 200,000 women. According to Chinese scholars in Shanghai, in which a "comfort station" was established in the Japanese concession already in 1932, the real number of "comfort women" may have been as high as 360,000 to 400,000.

Unlike what Hata and other Japanese historians would like to believe, these women were not prostitutes and Japanese military was involved.

Most women were from areas occupied by Imperial Japan, particularly China and Korea, but also the Philippines. There were also "comfort stations" in Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Singapore, East Timor and other Japanese-occupied territories. Additionally, hundreds of women in the region were involved from the Netherlands and Australia.

International debate

The Philippine protest is part of a broader regional debate. In December 2015, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye reached an agreement to settle the "comfort women" dispute. Tokyo agreed to pay \$8.3 million to a fund supporting surviving victims. South Korea would refrain from criticizing Japan regarding the issue and to work to remove a memorial statue for the victims. The strange pact was criticized by South Korea's current president but signed by its conservative then-president Park who was later impeached for corruption.

Recently, Seoul has demanded more recognition for its victims. As the UN Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women said in 2016: "An unequivocal official apology recognizing the full responsibility of the then-Japanese government and military, as well as adequate reparations would protect and uphold the victims' right to truth, justice and reparation."

Yet, last fall, a Unesco committee deferred its decision on the listing of the "comfort women" archives on its Memory of the World Register, which preserves documentary heritages – after Japan resisted paying its Unesco dues.

Thereafter, the UN human rights agency (OHCHR) called on Japan to acknowledge its violation of the human rights of "comfort women," to take legal responsibility and to punish responsible individuals for the issue. The OHCHR also expressed concerns regarding the Japanese government's revisions of history textbooks.

As these debates continue, the remaining "comfort women" are passing away, amid a painful struggle for recognition.

So why would Japan and some of its allies like to have the issue go away? The simple answer is that the matter is intimate to Tokyo – and Washington.

Weight of history

Unlike his predecessors as prime minister and the head of the Liberal Democratic Party, Abe has far-right views about history. He would like to restore the "honor" of his beloved grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, and the romanticized wartime generation.

That's why in the late 1990s, Abe led the Japanese history textbook reform, which downplays Japanese war crimes. That's also why he has publicly questioned the "comfort women" history and stated that Class A war criminals are not criminals under Japan's domestic law. To him, the two issues are intertwined.

In Japan, Abe comes from a political family dynasty. His grandfather Kan Abe and father Shintaro Abe were prominent politicians. His mother is the daughter of Nobusuke Kishi, Japan's Prime Minister and America's key ally in the late 1950s.

However, starting in 1933, Kishi attacked democracies and praised Nazi Germany as Japan's model. As he spent time in the Japanese puppet state Manchukuo, he built ties with Japanese "total war" militarists, statist "reform bureaucrats," business leaders and was involved in the opium trade with Yakuza which was used to keep Chinese labor "in line."

In 1937, Kishi signed a decree calling for the use of slave labor in Manchukuo and northern China. The enslavement of men paved the way for the exploitation of Chinese and Korean women as sex slaves and the expansion of sexual slavery into Japan's occupied colonies in Asia. As a believer in the Yamato race theory, Kishi thought that the racially superior Japan was destined to rule Asia "eternally."

Due to Kishi's brutal rule in the Manchukuo and his participation in the Tojo War Cabinet during World War 2, he was imprisoned for over three years as a Class A war crime suspect – until Washington's Cold War architects intervened.

In the postwar era, prominent Nazis were prosecuted in the Nuremberg trials in the mid-1940s. In the 1950s, America was in the midst of the Cold War. So, in Japan, many war leaders were enlisted by the US to suppress Japanese communists and socialists. That's how Kishi was released from the Sugamo Prison and became known as "America's Favorite War Criminal." He played a key role in the creation of the "1955 System," which made the Liberal Democratic Party the dominant political force in Japan and America's key ally – until today.

That's the history Abe would prefer to revise.

Need to remember

Wartime sex slaves are not "just history." In Japan, the lingering imperial fantasies contribute to economic decline. Abe's economic reforms, though controversial, are undermined by his politics, which promotes divisive remilitarization and US-style state secrecy laws that many Japanese oppose.

Regionally, revisionist views continue to alienate Japan from its regional neighbors.

Economically, Japan is one of the world's 10 most competitive countries, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF). Yet, its ranking in the WEF Global Gender Gap Report is deplorable. In gender equality, Japan is not among the top 10, not even among the top 100 but 114th (!); well behind Myanmar, India and Nepal, and barely ahead of Ethiopia and Nigeria.

Forced silence about wartime sexual slavery is part of a broader legacy of sexual discrimination that casts a long shadow over the position of women, their human development and economic potential in Japan.

So, if one simple statue in Manila can remind us about Japan's wartime sexual slavery and that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," that will ultimately unite us all against what's wrong – everywhere.

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