

Japanese history textbook provokes sharp controversy

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The new Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is provoking a diplomatic rift with South Korea and China over a school history textbook that sanitises and justifies the role of Japanese militarism in Asia in the first half of the 20th century. The disputed text has been approved for use in high schools next year and went on sale this week in Japanese bookstores. It was authored by a rightwing academic grouping, the History Textbook Reform Society.

South Korean historians have cited 25 passages or omissions in the textbook that distort the history of Japan's occupation of Korea from 1905 to 1945. Academics in China have highlighted eight passages or omissions that distort the Japanese seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and the invasion of China from 1937 to 1945. The depth of feeling in these countries, extending to broad sections of the population, stems from the fact that both were victims of Japanese colonial rule.

The original content of the textbook was far more blatant in its historical falsifications. When it was submitted for approval to the Japanese Education Ministry, screeners insisted upon 137 factual revisions or supplements. Despite reported differences within the ministry, the final version was authorised for use in April.

The South Korean and Chinese governments have made official diplomatic requests that the text be revised further before it is allowed into school classrooms. Seoul has given the Koizumi administration until August to act or it will consider reprisals. It has already threatened to restore the total ban on the import into South Korea of Japanese culture—such as popular music and film—that was only lifted in 1998.

Koizumi, however, has bluntly dismissed the South Korean and Chinese requests. On May 8, 12 days after being sworn in, he told media it was “unthinkable” that his government would interfere in textbook selection. On May 17, he reinforced this position, telling a press conference: “I know there are various opinions, but we cannot revise it”.

The administration, while declaring that the views of the Reform Society are not shared by the government, is allowing the book to be used in Japan's state-funded, secular schools on the grounds it has passed through the necessary screening process. An Education Ministry official, Toru Funahashi, stated on May 17: “Since we have strict screening, the approved textbooks do not contain mistakes”.

By taking this stance, Koizumi has aligned his government with an organisation that openly defends the brutal rule of the Japanese

capitalist class at home and in the region in the first half of the 20th century.

The Textbook Reform Society was formed in January 1997 and claims to have 10,000 members, including several hundred politicians and leading business figures. Its main criticism of existing textbooks is that even their limited and grudging references to some of the atrocities committed by Japanese militarism are “a perverse, masochistic view”.

The Society's website declares: “After its defeat in World War II Japan was occupied by US troops. To render it incapable of attacking them a second time, the Americans forced Japan to reorganise all of its institutions, even its constitution. Not content to stop there, they attempted to alter the Japanese perception of history. They expunged Japan's history, injecting in its place a history fabricated by the victors. Japan became the source of all evils in accounts of wars subsequent to the Manchurian Incident (1931).”

Running throughout the Society's version of history is a reassertion of the Japanese militarist claim that its actions in the 1930s and 1940s were acts of self-defence against the Western powers and wars of liberation that benefited the Asian people. The rightwing in Japan is able to point to the undeniable role of European and US colonialism in exploiting the Asian masses, and of the US, in particular, in helping to provoke the Pacific War.

The European powers subjected Asia to colonial rule and economic plunder for centuries. At the end of the 19th century the Indian subcontinent, Burma, Singapore and the Malay Peninsula were held by Britain. The Dutch had ruled Indonesia (the Dutch East Indies) for over 300 years. France exerted colonial rule over Indochina. Spain held the Philippines. Throughout the 19th century China was forced by interventions and wars to grant the colonial powers a series of humiliating economic and territorial concessions.

Having barely avoided colonisation itself, Japan was hemmed in by the preceding division of the region. Like the US, which seized Cuba and the Philippines from Spain in 1900, Japan sought to overcome this by an aggressive militarist policy of its own. From 1894 it conducted a succession of annexations, interventions and wars, firstly against China and then Russia. In the 1920s and 1930s, it came into conflict with a far more powerful contender for hegemony, the United States.

Stripped of its ideological masks, the Pacific War between the US and Japan was a struggle between two predatory states seeking

to replace the previously dominant European powers in the region and in China in particular. Being the weaker power, Japan was compelled to resort to adventurist methods—the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, then China as a whole in 1937. For its part, the US, while claiming to stand for democracy, had no qualms about firebombing Japanese cities and dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to ensure the complete submission of its rival.

The objective of the Textbook Reform Society, however, is not to expose the role of imperialism in Asia but to replace one set of historical distortions with another. Like all nationalist apologists, the group seeks to justify the crimes of one imperialist power—in this case Japan—by pointing the finger at those of its rivals—Europe and the US.

The Society's book, for instance, declares that the 1904-1905 Russian-Japanese War, fought for control of the Korean peninsula and China's Manchurian region “[w]as a momentous war that brought victory to a non-white race of people... The victory inspired tremendous hopes of independence among the oppressed nations around the world”.

The text also lauds the economic development of Korea and Manchuria under Japanese rule. It asserts that the World War II conquest of much of South East Asia by Japanese troops “helped the Asian peoples to cultivate the ideal and dream of independence”.

What it fails to mention, however, is that for Korea, Formosa (Taiwan) and Manchuria, Japanese rule meant decades of brutal suppression. Under an “assimilation” policy, the Korean and Chinese languages and names were proscribed and the population compelled to swear loyalty to the Emperor and worship in Shinto shrines. During World War II, hundreds of thousands of Korean and Chinese men were conscripted for forced military service or to work as semi-slaves in Japanese industry. As many as 100,000 Korean women, as well as tens of thousands of Chinese women, were transported to military brothels to function as sex slaves or “comfort women”.

The Japanese invasion of China from 1937 was marked by particular barbarity. At least 10 million Chinese civilians and 1.3 million soldiers were killed from 1937 to 1945. The textbook initially omitted any reference at all to the notorious Nanjing massacre in 1937 when, in an attempt to intimidate the Chinese people, Japanese troops were ordered to murder the city's population. Over 200,000 surrendered Chinese soldiers and civilians were butchered.

The denial or understatement of what took place in Nanjing is a trademark of the extreme rightwing in Japan much like the denial of the Holocaust is for fascistic sympathisers of the Nazi regime in Germany. The Reform Society only reluctantly included a reference to Nanjing in the final version of the textbook on the orders of the Japanese Education Ministry, but qualified it by saying it was “the subject of debate”.

The positions of the Textbook Reform Society reflect the long-held views of significant sections of the Japanese ruling elite and especially in the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which held power for most of the postwar period. While forced to curb any open defence of Japan's wartime regime, Japan's political

leaders only ever made the most begrudging admissions of the prewar and wartime crimes. Koreans only received a token verbal apology from the Japanese government in 1995.

The open defence of Japan's militarist past is connected to the dilemmas confronting the Japanese ruling class—the necessity of radically restructuring its stagnant economy, of dealing with the opposition such policies will inevitably engender, and of adopting a far more assertive foreign policy, including reviving Japan as a military power.

Under these conditions, figures like Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara have consciously sought to whip up sentiment that blames Japan's present misfortunes on its treatment by the US following the war and its lack of a strong military. In doing so, Ishihara has received high-level media and business support.

The inculcation of patriotism in the schools is being pushed aggressively by the media. Since 1997 the Fuji-Sankei Communications empire, the owner of Japan's largest television and radio stations and fifth largest newspaper, *Sankei Shimbun*, has provided editorial space and support for the Textbook Reform Society. The textbook was printed and is being distributed by Fuso, a major publishing house owned by Fuji-Sankei.

The LDP responded to the campaign in 1999 by making the singing of the national anthem and raising the Rising Sun flag—symbols of wartime militarism—compulsory in schools. Other textbooks are also being modified. This year, four out of the seven other history texts in Japan cut out their previous references to the fate of “comfort women” during World War II.

This campaign has now been given an extra boost by the new Koizumi administration, which is seeking to establish a social base for its economic policies by nationalist appeals.

Koizumi is calling for the revision of the postwar pacifist constitution to remove Article 9, a clause inserted by the US prohibiting Japan from maintaining armed forces and deploying them overseas. Constitutional change is being justified on the grounds that Japan, as the second largest economy in the world, must be able to assist the US and other major powers militarily in “maintaining regional stability”.

Koizumi has also provoked controversy by announcing his intention to worship at the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead in an official capacity on August 15—the anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II. Wartime leader and convicted war criminal Hideki Tojo, as well as five other hanged war criminals, are buried in the shrine. Japanese politicians have shunned official worship due to the perception in both Japan and Asia that it amounts to commemorating the wartime regime.

A definite logic is contained in the various efforts to legitimise and resurrect the history and symbols of Japanese militarism. It amounts to clearing the ideological decks for an aggressive reassertion of the interests of Japanese imperialism in Asia and elsewhere against those of its rivals.



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