

Japanese government pushes to revise US history text

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6 February 2015

The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has extended its campaign to whitewash the crimes of the Japanese military in the 1930s and 1940s to the international level. Last week, Abe took issue with an American history textbook and its treatment of so-called “comfort women.”

“Comfort women” is a euphemism coined by the Japanese military for its practice of forcing women to act as sex slaves for soldiers prior to and during World War II. Approximately 200,000 women in Asian countries occupied by Japan were herded into “comfort stations” where the brutal conditions led many to commit suicide. Women were often lured with phony promises of work in factories.

Abe criticized history textbooks printed by McGraw-Hill Education dealing with the issue. “I just looked at a document, McGraw-Hill’s textbook, and I was shocked,” the prime minister said. “This kind of textbook is being used in the United States, as we did not protest the things we should have, or we failed to correct the things we should have.”

The Japanese government has demanded that McGraw Hill revise the books. Officials from Japan’s Consulate General in New York met with the publishing company in December to voice their complaints. The company rejected Tokyo’s objections saying, “Scholars are aligned behind the historical fact of ‘comfort women’ and we unequivocally stand behind the writing, research and presentation of our authors.”

A large number of the women forced to serve as sex slaves came from Korea, but others were from China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other countries. Many were too ashamed to speak about their horrific experiences and only began coming forward in the early 1990s. In 1993, Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary

Yohei Kono issued a formal but limited apology—known as the Kono Statement—to the victims.

Abe, who came to office in 2012, has been pressing for a revision of the Kono Statement. His government established a panel of so-called experts to examine the testimonies of former comfort women that formed the basis of the Kono Statement. Last June, the panel claimed that there was a lack of evidence that the women had been “forced” to serve as sex slaves. While not formally calling for the repeal of the Kono Statement, the purpose was clearly to cast doubt on the crimes of imperial Japan.

Right-wing apologists for the Japanese military have long claimed that the comfort women were not sex slaves, but were prostitutes. As a result, they conclude, the Japanese army was no different from other armed forces. In reality, the Japanese military organised and ran the “comfort stations.” Whether or not women were tricked or coerced into these hell-holes, they were not free to leave or to refuse to have sex with the soldiers.

Within Japan, extreme nationalists have targeted the liberal *Asahi Shimbun* over the issue. The newspaper last year retracted 18 articles published in the 1980s and 1990s dealing with comfort women. The articles were based on the testimony of Seiji Yoshida, a soldier who claimed to have rounded up women on Jeju Island in South Korea for the military brothels. Before his death in 2000, Yoshida admitted to changing certain aspects of his story.

The Abe government and its right-wing ideological allies have seized on the *Asahi Shimbun*’s retractions to claim all evidence of the crimes against comfort women is false. Led by Shoichi Watanabe, a professor at Sofia University, more than 10,000 have joined a lawsuit against the paper. Watanabe not only denies that women were forced into sexual slavery but also that the

1937 Rape of Nanking occurred, during which 300,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians were massacred by the Japanese army.

These attempts to justify the past crimes of Japanese imperialism are in order to prepare for future wars. Last summer, Abe's cabinet approved the "reinterpretation" of the constitution to allow for "collective self-defense." This would enable Japan to take part in US wars of aggression particularly aimed against China. The United States is pushing Japan to play a larger role in Asia as part of the US "pivot to Asia" which is aimed at subordinating China to Washington's economic and strategic interests.

Abe's cabinet is stacked with ultra-right wing officials with connections to Nippon Kaigi, or Japan Conference, which promotes the lie that Japan went to war in the 1930s to liberate Asia from Western imperialism. It intends to revise textbooks in Japan to promote "patriotic values," opposes gender equality, and erase war crimes such as the Rape of Nanking.

To serve this agenda, Abe also stated last week that a new, litigation bureau in the Justice Ministry would be created to handle lawsuits against Japan, claiming that they "seriously affected the nation's honor." While former comfort women have filed lawsuits against Japan, people forced to work as unpaid laborers in factories have also filed suits against Japanese companies. In May 2013, the South Korean Supreme Court ruled that a 1965 treaty between Seoul and Tokyo did not bar individuals from filing compensation claims.

A study released in January by the South Korean government found that 7.82 million Koreans were forced to work in Japanese factories between 1931 and 1945 at companies like Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Toyota, Nikon, and Nissan. In November 2013, the Gwangju Local Court in South Korea ruled against Mitsubishi Heavy Industries after several women filed compensation claims. Nippon Steel Corporation lost a similar case that year in Seoul and Busan high courts. Both companies have appealed.

South Korean governments regularly exploit Japanese war crimes to engage in its own historical revisionism to cover up the role of Korean leaders in collaborating with Imperial Japan. Many within the South Korean elite enjoy their positions today thanks to their families' willingness to serve Japanese colonial rule,

which lasted from 1910–1945. This includes President Park Geun-hye whose father, the military dictator Park Chung-hee, was an officer in Japan's Kwantung Army.

South Korean politicians often attempt to paint their anti-Japanese denunciations in progressive terms, by claiming to be seeking justice for victims. In reality, there is nothing progressive about this campaign. Its purpose is to whip up anti-Japanese chauvinism to distract from declining economic conditions like growing unemployment, particularly amongst youth. It drives a wedge between Korean and Japanese workers who suffered and continue to suffer from the same assaults on their rights and working conditions.



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