

# Historians condemn Japan's whitewashing of war crimes

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Last Tuesday, 187 prominent historians from universities in the United States, Canada, Australia and other countries published an open letter criticizing the Japanese government of Shinzo Abe for continuing to whitewash past war crimes.

The statement entitled, “Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan,” takes aim at the Abe government’s stance on “comfort women,”—a euphemism for women coerced into becoming sex slaves for the Japanese army during the 1930s and 1940s. It calls for the defense of the “freedom of historical inquiry” in Japan and all countries against nationalistic distortions.

Among the signatories were notable historians such as Herbert Bix, professor emeritus at Binghamton University/State University of New York (SUNY), Ezra Vogel, professor emeritus at Harvard University, and Bruce Cumings from the University of Chicago. An earlier letter, released by 19 American historians in February, criticized Abe’s efforts to have references on comfort women altered in American university text books.

The comfort women system was established in the early 1930s. While the first women to be involved were Japanese, as the war spread throughout the Pacific, the military turned to its colonies, coercing poor women with phony promises of good jobs in factories. An estimated 200,000 women from Korea, China, the Philippines, and other Asian nations were then taken to brothels and prevented from leaving. Many committed suicide to escape their barbaric treatment.

The open letter stated: “The undersigned scholars of Japanese studies express our unity with the many courageous historians in Japan seeking an accurate and just history of World War II in Asia.” Historians, as well as journalists in Japan, who have published

information on war crimes, have been criticized and in some cases threatened with violence by right-wing nationalists, who claim that comfort women were willing prostitutes and that stating otherwise is an affront to Japanese honor.

Yoshiaki Yoshimi, a leading Japanese historian on comfort women, received phone calls and letters threatening his life after he began publishing his research on comfort women in the 1990s. One such note read, “You must die.” In 1992, Yoshimi discovered extensive documents from the 1930s in the Japanese Ministry of Defense’s library (then called the Defense Agency), showing the military’s role in establishing “comfort stations” (military brothels) throughout Asia.

In January of this year, former *Asahi Shimbun* journalist Takashi Uemura filed a defamation lawsuit against Bungei Shunju, a publisher, and Tsutomu Nishioka, a right-wing professor at Tokyo Christian University and denier of the crimes against comfort women. Nishioka has accused Uemura of faking the information in his articles.

Uemura stated when he filed his lawsuit: “There is a movement in Japan to stop people who want to shine a light on the dark side of history, on the parts of the war that people don’t want to mention.”

Uemura first became the target of Japanese nationalists in 1991, following two articles he wrote on Kim Hak-sun, who is considered to be the first comfort woman to come forward. Uemura was accused of faking his stories and was attacked as the journalist who “fabricated the comfort woman issue.”

Condemnation of Uemura increased last August, following the *Asahi Shimbun*’s retraction of a series of articles on comfort women published in the 1980s and 1990s that referenced the accounts of Seiji Yoshida, a

former soldier who claimed he had rounded up women during World War II in Korea. Historians had dismissed Yoshida's story by the early 1990s, while emphasizing the clear evidence of the military's role in establishing comfort stations.

Neither of Uemura's articles relied on Yoshida's story, but the retractions further opened the door for attacks on journalists and academics by right-wing nationalists like Nishioka. Not only was Uemura's life threatened, but Hokusei University, where he is now employed, received bomb threats. Photos of Uemura's teenage daughter also appeared online with calls to force the girl to commit suicide.

The Abe government strengthened the nationalists' claims by calling into doubt the 1993 Kono Statement, a formal yet limited apology for the abuse of comfort women during the war in the Pacific, released by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono. In June 2014, Abe's government released a report by five "experts" questioning whether women and young girls were coerced or forced into the military brothels.

Tuesday's letter goes on to say, "[...] historians have unearthed numerous documents demonstrating the military's involvement in the transfer of women and oversight of brothels. Important evidence also comes from the testimony of victims. Although their stories are diverse and affected by the inconsistencies of memory, the aggregate record they offer is compelling and supported by the official documents as well as by the accounts of soldiers and others."

The letter also makes clear the fundamental difference between the comfort women system and justifications by Japanese nationalists that prostitution was common in other theaters of war: "Among the many instances of wartime sexual violence and military prostitution in the twentieth century, the 'comfort women' system was distinguished by its *large scale and systematic management under the military*, and by its exploitation of young, poor, and vulnerable women in areas colonized or occupied by Japan." [emphasis added]

The open letter comes less than a week after Abe, the most right-wing Japanese prime minister in the postwar period, was warmly welcomed by Obama on a trip to the United States where the prime minister also made a speech to a joint session of Congress, the first Japanese premier to do so. The two sides agreed to new security

guidelines to allow Japan to take part in the United States' imperialist wars.

All of this is bound up with the United States' "pivot to Asia," designed to economically subordinate and militarily surround China. Japan has been encouraged by Washington to remilitarize and discard its postwar pacifist constitution, as well as to enflame territorial conflicts in the region. During Abe's recent trip to the US, Obama once again promised to back Japan in a war with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

While the historians' letter fails to directly tie historical revisionism to preparations for war, that is the purpose of Abe's campaign: to whip up Japanese nationalism to condition public opinion, particularly young people, for future conflicts.



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