

A Confrontation with the Past

The Japanese Textbook Dispute

By Burton Bollag

This past summer an unusual battle was fought out at school districts across Japan. At issue was whether to adopt a new history textbook for junior high school, which was written by nationalist historians. The text, its supporters say, is intended to promote self-pride and reverse the “masochist” approach to history education, which teaches Japanese schoolchildren their country was an evil aggressor during its recent history.

Nobukatsu Fujioka, a professor of education at the University of Tokyo, is the founder of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which is promoting the new textbook. An amiable, even charming, former Communist and later pacifist, he was reborn 10 years ago as a nationalist.

“Japanese children are only taught that their country has done bad things,” he explained to me recently at the university’s graduate school of education where he works. “They are not taught anything they can be proud of. The current textbooks only teach them how to apologize.”

The controversial book, entitled *New History Textbook*, was published by the small, recently founded Fuso publishing company. It presents Japan’s military occupation of other Asian countries in the years before and during World War II in a more positive light than do other texts. The book justifies the colonization of Korea, from 1910 to 1945, as necessary to protect Japan’s security and economic interests. It suggests that Japan’s subjugation of other Asian peoples was at least in part positive because it helped hasten their liberation from Western colonial rule; and it ignores the sexual slavery forced on tens of thousands of young women, the germ warfare experiments on prisoners, and other atrocities

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committed by Japan’s Imperial Army.

Japan’s neighbors reacted angrily, especially to the fact that Japan’s education ministry approved the Fuso textbook for use in public schools. The issue provoked strong diplomatic protests from South Korea and China. In a compromise gesture in October 2001, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi agreed, during a summit meeting with his South Korean counterpart, to establish a joint committee to propose revisions to the controversial textbook.

The issue illustrates how painful and difficult it can be to confront the more shameful parts of a country’s past, even in a nation where the rules of good behavior require the utterance of the phrase “I am sorry” many times a day.

An Uproar in Tochigi

During the summer, Japan’s 543 central textbook boards, each comprising on average six school districts, chose the textbooks they will use for the next four years. Normally, this is a rather routine affair. Each board examines texts from a list of titles approved by the education ministry. The boards make their choices according to the style and educational approach they consider best suited to their communities.

But this year was different, observes Kazuo Fujimura, executive director of the Japan Textbook Research Center, which represents the interests of many of the country’s textbook publishers. “This time, political groups have been trying to influence the choice,” Fujimura says, “They say we should rather use textbooks which give us more self-pride.”

Well before the summer, support for Fuso’s *New History Textbook* became a rallying cry of Japan’s resurgent nationalist right wing. School boards across the country were lobbied by the right wing of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Nationalist groups joined the campaign, as did the

conservative Sankei media group, which includes a major national newspaper and several television stations.

Tochigi prefecture, a quiet, hilly agricultural area about 70 miles north of Tokyo, made news this summer when one of its central textbook boards first chose the controversial Fuso book, then reversed itself after a storm of local protest. The board, which chooses the textbooks for the public schools of the prefecture's 10 towns, divides the task according to subjects. The five members of the 23-member board who had the job of recommending social studies texts proposed one of the uncontroversial history books. But at a stormy meeting July 11, a majority of the entire board voted to overturn the recommendation and pick the Fuso text instead. One member, a superintendent of education from one of the towns, who asked not to be identified, says the board was swayed both by the right-wing campaign in favor of the nationalist text and by several conservative senior board members.

The next day, all hell broke loose. Parents, representatives of the teachers' union, journalists, and other local people began besieging the public education offices of the 10 towns, protesting the decision. They called, sent faxes, and showed up personally to complain. The superintendent, who requested anonymity, showed me several knee-high stacks of manila envelopes, piled up on the floor next to his desk, containing 1,800 faxes that had arrived at his office alone. Outraged residents staged a protest demonstration in the district's biggest town. Then the municipal school boards of each of the 10 towns voted individually to reject the Fuso book.

Clearly the 23-member board had not anticipated this groundswell of opposition. Two weeks after its original decision, the board met and voted to reverse itself, choosing one

(Above) Demonstrators at the city hall of Sugunami, a ward in the city of Tokyo, protesting the adoption of a controversial nationalist history book. (Right) Professor Saburo Ienaga, the Japanese teacher and historian who repeatedly sued the Japanese government to protest its censorship of his history textbooks.

of the uncontroversial texts instead. "It was really confusing for two weeks," remarked the superintendent. "But in the end we got it right."

There were many small demonstrations across Japan, in which people demanded that their local authorities not choose the Fuso book. In Sugunami, a ward of Tokyo, several hundred people staged a noisy demonstration at the local town hall, beating drums and cymbals and forming a human chain around the square, gray, seven-story building.

Naoko Tomita, who cares for residents of a state institution for mentally handicapped people, was one of the protesters. She says that when her two college-age children were in public school, "they learned only part of the truth" about Japan's role before and during World War II. Japan's invasions of its neighbors were coyly referred to as "advances," and her children hadn't learned about the "comfort women," the name Japanese authorities at the time gave to the tens of thousands of young women from Korea and other occupied countries who were forced into military-run brothels, where they had to provide sex to large numbers of Japanese soldiers daily.

"The Japanese government wants to hide the truth about the comfort women," she said. "They may want another war."

Despite all the public anxiety, almost no one chose the Fuso text. When the deadline for choosing textbooks passed at the end of August, only three of the 543 central textbook

Fuso text as a backlash against gradual moves over the last two decades to make history textbooks—and the official government position—more open about the past.

Talking About the Past

In the first years after Japan's defeat in World War II, the education authorities, then under the supervision of the American occupation forces, produced a new history curriculum. It was very different from the prewar lessons, which had taught that Japan had an almost divine right to rule over its neighbors.

The Japanese were exhausted and sick of war, which had brought them not the glory they were promised, but destruction, defeat, and humiliation. The country's new history curriculum branded Japan the aggressor during the just-ended war. But the curriculum was, above all, pacifist: It stressed the horrors of war in general and how much the Japanese people had suffered because of it.

By the mid-1950s, however, the approach to curriculum began to change. Japan had become a key Cold-War ally of the United States; it was an important rear base for American forces during the Korean War; and in 1954 the two countries signed a mutual defense-assistance pact. History lessons that inculcated in young people too much of a sense of pacifism were no longer deemed appropriate. Often against the objections of teachers, who tended, then as now, to be left-leaning, the education ministry began screening textbooks, requiring them to tone down their criticisms of Japan's role during the war, and insisting they promote students' patriotic feelings.

A few textbook authors tried to include specific references to atrocities Japan had committed during World War II. The education ministry invariably sent the texts back demanding that the references be deleted. Many writers censored themselves to avoid long negotiations with ministry officials or possible rejection of their books. It was not until the early 1980s that the policy changed again and the authorities gradually began allowing textbooks to address the unsavory aspects of Japan's foreign policy in the 1930s and 1940s.

The turning point came in 1982, when the ministry issued guidelines for textbook publishers, saying texts now had to show "concern for neighboring countries." Those countries—for example, South Korea, China, and the Philippines—were growing stronger and becoming increasingly important export markets for Japanese goods. "The Japanese government couldn't help paying more attention to their interests," says Yutaka Yoshida, a professor of history at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo and co-author of a junior high school history textbook that probably goes the furthest in speaking openly about Japan's war crimes.

This period was also marked by the start of a slow dance in which successive Japanese leaders circled painfully round and round, moving ever closer to apologizing—though never quite managing to do so—for Japan's invasions and brutal occupations of its neighbors. In 1986, then-Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone publicly admitted for the first time to "invasive aspects" in Japan's actions during World War II. Finally, in August 1995, with the whole world

boards had chosen it, and then only for their schools for disabled children. Several private schools also picked the text. In the end, it appears that only about 10 out of more than 10,000 junior high schools in Japan plan to use it.

The result was a setback for the nationalists. But their movement to transform history education continues, and even received a boost, when Prime Minister Koizumi made a controversial decision to end a taboo and visit Tokyo's Yasukuni shrine in August. It is the most important Shinto shrine honoring Japan's war dead, including the soldiers and commanders of the Imperial Army. So what is behind this current resurgence of nationalist feelings?

In part, it appears to be a response to a loss of confidence due to almost a decade of economic malaise, including record unemployment, bank failures, and a stubborn recession. If the Japanese economic miracle is coming undone, some people feel, this is a time for history lessons to teach children to be proud of their country, not guilty about its past.

At the same time, many observers see support for the

watching what Japan would say on the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama went further. He expressed deep regret—but still could not quite bring himself to apologize—for the “great damage and suffering” Japan had caused other Asian peoples through its “invasion” of their countries.

Ienaga's Battle

While political leaders were grudgingly making it more permissible to talk about the past, developments on several other fronts forced the authorities to allow more of the truth into school textbooks. One factor was several lawsuits claiming it was unconstitutional for the education ministry to censor references to atrocities committed by the Imperial Army. The most famous court action was by Saburo Ienaga, a historian. He first filed suit in 1965 after the ministry ordered him to delete or rewrite passages about wartime atrocities in a textbook he had written.

His court battle continued for 32 years. Finally, in 1997, Ienaga won a major victory when Japan's Supreme Court ruled in his favor. While dozens of his supporters in the packed courtroom rose and applauded, Ienaga, then 83, smiled and bowed deeply. The court decided that the ministry had acted illegally when, in 1980 and 1983, it had removed from a textbook Ienaga was writing a description of biological experiments Japan carried out on 3,000 soldiers and civilians taken prisoner in northern China during World War II. In the experiments, conducted by the army's

infamous Unit 731, victims were allowed to die without treatment after being injected with diseases like typhoid, or dissected without anesthesia. However the victory was only partial. The court rejected Ienaga's claims that the ministry had illegally censored seven other portions of his textbook. During his long legal fight, Ienaga had at times required police protection from right-wing thugs who felt he had disgraced Japan and its old Imperial Army.

Another factor was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. With many former Communist countries coming clean about their past misdeeds, it seemed increasingly incongruous for Japan to refuse to do the same. Even more so since, in the last few years, a number of old Japanese soldiers have come forward publicly and admitted to having taken part in massacres, rapes, and other crimes. Furthermore, some of the elderly surviving “comfort women” ended nearly a half century of silence and began speaking out about their painful ordeals as sexual slaves and the physical and emotional scars they carried for the rest of their lives. The first to speak publicly was a South Korean woman, Kim Hak-Son, in 1991. Others followed, from all over Asia and as far away as Holland. Tokyo long denied that the Imperial Army was responsible, claiming that prostitution was a private business. Then, a researcher in Japan unearthed documents proving the army's responsibility. In 1993, the prime minister's office admitted as much and apologized. But the government has refused to accept legal responsibility or pay compensation to survivors.

Taking Responsibility: Japan vs. Germany

Japan's efforts to deny or minimize war time atrocities contrast sharply with Germany's postwar behavior. Why did it take so long—a half century—for Japan to acknowledge its guilt? Part of the answer lies in the fact that Japan, which carried out such harsh subjugation of its neighbors, had nonetheless become a solid democracy after the war. As Manabu Sato, a professor in the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Education, points out, until about a decade ago Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other Asian countries were dictatorships that jailed people for publishing information unfavorable to their governments. This weakened the moral force of their demands that Japan come clean about its wartime conduct.

A defeated Germany, on the other hand—at least its western half—had as its neighbors the community of democratic Western European nations. There were several other signifi-

cant differences in the fate of Japan and Germany after the war. These differences help explain why, while Japan still resists taking responsibility for its war crimes, and quibbles over what took place, Germany has long since acknowledged the full horrors committed by the Nazi regime, and made that information part of its standard school curriculum.

At the end of the war, the victorious allies set about to destroy Germany's ruling Nazi apparatus, which had been responsible for the war. The rest of society could then begin rebuilding a democratic system. But unlike Germany, prewar Japan had not been usurped by a Fascist party. On the contrary, the war had been prosecuted by the country's long-standing power structure: the emperor, the imperial government, and the army. The United States forces occupying a defeated Japan decided, in the name of a peaceful transition, to leave the emperor on his throne—at least as a fig-

urehead—and concentrated on prosecuting a small number of army leaders. The result was that Japan did not make—indeed could not have made—as clean a break with its wartime past as did Germany.

Ian Buruma, author of a 1994 book, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*, points to another factor. Germany was occupied by the United States, Britain, and France (with the Soviet Union occupying the eastern part of the country) and quickly began to find its place among the Western European democracies. But Japan was occupied by the United States alone. “The trouble was that virtually all the changes were made on American orders,” writes Buruma. “This was, of course, the victor's prerogative, and many of the changes were beneficial. But the systematic subservience of Japan meant that the country never really grew up.” And never took full responsibility for confronting its past.

"The survivors feel insulted a second time," said Yayori Matsui, when I met her in her small downtown office where one takes off one's shoes before entering. Matsui is a determined former journalist and author who now heads a group fighting against the rape and abuse of women during war. "The most important thing for them is to establish that this was a war crime against women."

These various pressures culminated in 1996 to produce a crop of seven approved junior high school history textbooks that, for the first—and perhaps the last—time, all included information the nationalists had tried to keep out: the basic facts about Japan's actions toward its neighbors during the 1930s and 1940s, as understood by most historians around the world. All the books said, without equivocating, that Japan had been the aggressor. They all made note, for example, of the "comfort women," the cruel biological experiments, and the Nanking massacre. The latter refers to the slaughter of up to 300,000 people by the Imperial Army in that southern Chinese city in the winter of 1937-38.

The Unsettled Story

Even with the rejection of the Fuso book, the right-wing campaign has had a definite impact on what children are taught. All textbooks used in public and private schools must be screened and approved by the education ministry every four years. (This year's screening process came five years after the last one in order to coincide with the introduction of curriculum changes.) All of the seven junior high school history texts approved by the ministry in 1996 mentioned Japan's major war crimes. But this year, publishers "have tried to tone down" those references in response to the pressure for the Fuso book, says Fujimura, of the textbook research center. For example, each of the seven books mentioned the "comfort women" in 1996; this year only three do.

This backsliding was made possible by a lack of commitment on the part of the government to face up to the past, says Professor Yoshida, the historian and textbook author from Mitsubishi University in Tokyo. With their gradual and grudging acknowledgments of past war crimes, the Japanese authorities have often appeared to be giving in to pressure, rather than leading the nation with a principled stance, he says. "The Japanese government started expressing regret to Korea and China in the 1980s before getting consensus among the Japanese people. So people are confused."

The Fuso text, as nationalistic as it is, was even more so in the version submitted to the ministry for screening. For example, the text claimed the invasion and annexation of Korea "proceeded legally according to the basic rules of international relations of the days when it was carried out." The text raised serious doubts about whether the Nanking massacre took place: "...there could have been some killings, but the incident was nothing like the Holocaust."

Ministry officials demanded changes to these and 135 other passages before approving the text. The other seven textbooks each required between 13 and 41 changes. Keita Sasata, the education ministry official in charge of screening social sciences textbooks, says Fuso's text focused too much

on the suffering of the Japanese people. He says he told Fuso: "You should try to understand; we were not the only victims."

I asked Professor Fujioka, head of the society promoting the Fuso book, for his reaction. "The U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki," he said. "Do American textbooks say the United States was evil for doing this? No. Yet the atomic bombings were the worst crime of World War II. All we are trying to do," argues Fujioka, "is to write a textbook with an interpretation of history that is similar to the way the United States, Great Britain, and other countries approach their own histories."

What about the fact that the Fuso book plays down or excludes mention of most of the war crimes widely accepted to have been committed by Japan? That is the "Tokyo trials perception of history," he told me. In other words, the version based on testimony at the trials of high-ranking Japanese military leaders during the American occupation, which he feels distorted history to suit the American victors.

Fujioka and his co-thinkers brush off Japan's responsibility by clinging to shreds of doubt. The Nanking massacre? There was heavy fighting, but there is no convincing proof that a massacre took place. Survivors were encouraged, even paid, to give false evidence against the Japanese. The testimony of scores of former "comfort women"? Their words are not backed up by documentary proof. The horrible biological experiments? There may be some truth to it, but nothing has been definitively proven yet.

One of the groups in the forefront of the fight to teach students more about Japan's war crimes is the Japan Teachers' Union. With 400,000 members, it is the main association of teachers in the country. Its national headquarters in Tokyo occupies a large crowded floor with scores of people working in small cubicles. There, Hiroshi Higuchi, the union's vice president, told me the Fuso textbook "should never be put in the hands of children."

A survey of more than 2,000 adults carried out last year by Japan's large state television broadcasting company, NHK, found that 51 percent agreed with the statement that during World War II, Japan had carried on a "war of aggression." That was exactly the same proportion who agreed in a similar survey in 1982. However, the polls found that young adults are increasingly unsure. In 1982, 11 percent of people in their 20s said they didn't know or gave no response; last year, 37 percent said they didn't know.

Higuchi says that as old people with firsthand experience of the horrors of the last war die out, public education must ensure that younger generations don't forget what happened. "As Japanese, we don't even know the facts. How can people who don't know the past cooperate with the victims?"

During the decades of conquest and war that culminated in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan's school teachers played a central role in preparing young people to follow the orders to fight. In 1951, still living in the ruins of their bombed-out cities, and under American occupation, the teachers' union adopted a slogan that Higuchi says is still a guiding principle for the group today: "Never again send our children to the battlefield." □