

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Laura Hein, Mark Selden, eds.** *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000. 287 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0447-7.

**Reviewed by** Paul Barclay (Department of History, Lafayette College)

**Published on** H-World (May, 2001)

This important and timely collection puts connections between cultural politics, foreign relations and Cold War history into focus by “examining and comparing controversies over textbook depictions of recent wars in Japan, Germany, and the United States(3).” Each chapter can be read on its own with great profit, for as one historian of modern Japan puts it, “One of the swiftest entrees to understanding any modern society is through listening to political discourse about education. Power struggles and ideological controversies about how to socialize and enculturate youth are at the heart of the processes by which a society is continually recreated....”[1] This book is indeed a treasure trove of detailed analyses of three historically related national discussions on history and memory. In addition to Hein’s and Selden’s substantive introduction, which deftly integrates and situates the subsequent essays, *Censoring History* contains four chapters on Japan, two on Germany, two on the United States, and a chapter about Japan and the United States. The editors and authors are to be commended for putting together a cohesive and well written monograph.

To paint in very broad strokes, the volume’s chief comparative insight is that German educators, politicians, and intellectuals have been more forthcoming about the atrocities of World War II than their Japanese or American counterparts have been regarding aggression in the Pacific War and Vietnam. The systemic roots of these disparities can be traced to the post-World War II settlement. One major difference between the occupation periods in Japan and in Germany was the survival of the Japanese bureaucracy, and even many political leaders, from the prewar era. Douglas MacArthur’s U.S. occupation forces exonerated, and some would say rescued, the Japanese emperor Hirohito and his court, and governed by relying on Japan’s prewar bureaucrats. On the other hand, German political leaders and institutions were more thoroughly destroyed after the war. Therefore,

much of the prewar flavor of today’s Japanese Liberal Democratic Party nationalist rhetoric can be attributed to institutional continuity. The impact of each nation’s place in the Cold War political economy, sometimes known as the Bretton Woods system, is a more complex issue.

Germany’s future was hitched to integration with Europe during post-war reconstruction; from the 1960s especially, monetary compensation to Nazi victims and a high-school history curriculum denouncing German atrocities and racism were in part policies of enlightened self interest. Added to these diplomatic concerns, West German demand for immigrant labor dovetailed with a public policy committed to a multicultural vision of the nation. Japan fit into the Bretton Woods system much like Germany—as a regional bastion of global capitalism and anti-communism dependent upon U.S. protected petroleum supplies. Japanese and American planners alike saw a need to re-integrate the Japanese economy into the global one.[2] Unlike West Germany’s anti-communist European allies, however, Japan’s Asian Cold War allies were former colonies. Since much of the organized anti-imperialist movement in China, Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines was socialist or communist, the anti-communist regimes supported by the United States ended up being run by “anti-anti-imperialist” strongmen. Calls for Japanese accountability for war atrocities by men like Magsaysay, Marcos, Diem, Jiang, Rhee or Park would only have opened their own regimes up to charges of imperialist collaboration, collusion, and human rights violations.

Particularly galling to South Korean and Chinese “memory activists” [3] are Japanese denials of the wartime state-run system of military brothels staffed by coerced Asian female labor, coupled with public statements by Japanese politicians and authors denying the extraordinary brutality, or even existence of,

the “Rape of Nanjing” in December of 1937. In 1982, right-wing Japanese politicians, working through the Ministry of Education’s textbook screening process, pressured authors to change the word “invade” to “advance” in their discussions of Japan’s 1930s China policy. This crude intervention drew heated criticism from South Korean and Chinese officials and citizens. In the early 1990s, South Korean, Filipina and other former sex slaves in Japan’s state-run military brothels began to testify publicly. As Japanese historians and journalists followed their lead, mention of the so-called “comfort women” began to appear in Japanese middle-school textbooks in 1996. Then Iris Chang’s best-seller *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* hit U.S. bookstores in 1997. Chang’s vivid and impassioned journalistic account compared the Nanjing massacre to the Holocaust, at times arguing for the formers greater barbarity and intensity.[4]

Reacting to these perceived slights to Japan’s national dignity and the memory of its veterans, a somewhat strange alliance of high-profile Japanese mass-media figures and scholars went on the offensive. In April of 2001, the Japanese Ministry of Education approved for adoption a middle-school textbook written by the “Society for the Creation of New Textbooks,” founded in 1997 to fight references to “comfort women” in Japanese school curricula. The new text reportedly makes no mention of the military brothel system and is sympathetic to the aims of militarists in 1930s Japan. As a response, South Korea withdrew its ambassador from Japan (he has since been returned).[5]

In Germany there have been rumblings on the right not dissimilar to recent Japanese movements. The “generation of 1989” has expressed resentment at the “defeatist” outlook of the previous generation and has called for the assertion of German history’s positive aspects and a downplaying of regret and apology. In 1993 the Neue Wache museum was opened to commemorate the suffering of all victims of war in Germany—some have considered this approach to national memory as an attempt to recast the German people as victims instead of aggressors. But in comparison to the Japanese case, German mainstream politics and civic discourse has been defined by a repudiation of its nation’s activities in the 1930s and 1940s.

If we stay with the systemic analysis proposed by the editors in their introduction, we might attribute

much of this difference to the fact that West Germany was being reintegrated into a multi-state system, one where its former victims were represented after the war by governments whose legitimacy in part rested upon their anti-fascist, or at least anti-Nazi, credentials. For American planners, who had much to say about the nature of Japanese reconstruction, the goal was to reintegrate Japan with its former colonies, whilst making Japanese economic growth a priority over war reparations. Following this same logic, the proliferation of Asian demands for reparations and apologies can be explained as the post-Cold War release of popular anti-Japanese sentiments long muffled by right-wing dictators who defined national interest in terms of what was good for the U.S. led Cold War alliance.

The timing of Asian calls for Japanese textbook revision, beginning with Chinese and Korean governmental protests in 1982, suggests some connection to the lessening of Cold War tensions. Deng Xiaoping announced the “four modernizations” in 1978, Marcos fell in 1986, Taiwan held democratic elections in 1987, and South Koreans elected a civilian government in 1993. As Hein and Selden note, the prosperous and multipolar Asian economy of the 1980s and 1990s has increased the leverage of smaller Asian states in their dealings with Japan, and the necessity for more bilateral agreements in the region has provided opportunities for the cynical use of Japan’s imperialist past at negotiating tables.

The editors go on to argue that at present, the Japanese-U.S. alliance competes with “regional Asian federation” as an option for post-Cold War Japanese geopolitical strategy, with the clear implication that the latter choice would tip the scales towards a German, internationalist approach to war remembrance and diplomacy. They add that the “presence of a network of U.S. military bases more than half a century after Japan’s wartime defeat is particularly unpopular (18).” This view, in my opinion, greatly overestimates Japanese dissatisfaction with the U.S. alliance and the number of options available to Japanese policy makers. While many of the parallels and connections between the Cold War’s demise in Eastern Europe and its thaw in East Asia are productive, it should be remembered that the Chinese government did not make glasnost their blueprint for state capitalist development, but rather used it as a cautionary tale about the dangers of political liberalization. The “fifth modernization” is a long way off in the PRC and the Cold War in Asia has not ended. Japanese nation-

alist revisionists like Fujioka Nobusuke have pointed out the absurdity of PRC calls for greater Japanese disclosure in historical writing, asking how Japanese can have a real dialogue with citizens and officials whose states have no respect for independent scholarly inquiry or legitimate dissent. And as Kimijimi Kazuhiko points out in his chapter on the “Japan-South Korea Joint Study Group on History Textbooks,” South Korea still has a system of government authored textbooks. In effect, Japanese textbook authors are being urged by Asian governments to accept input from abroad not to create more independent minded and democratic citizenries but rather to fuel anti-Japanese nationalism to help these repressive regimes maintain public support.

American textbook accounts of World War II have shown one important parallel with German textbooks: they have become more multicultural and critical of past racism. The emergence of racial segregation in the U.S. military, contributions of women on the home front, and the internment of Japanese-Americans into concentration camps as topics for discussion in some school curricula shows a family resemblance to the German notion that a full accounting of Nazi atrocities is necessary for building a multi-ethnic German future. But as the Enola Gay controversy of 1995 shows, Americans have been less flexible in their views of foreigners: multiculturalism does not necessarily lead to internationalism. U.S. public discourse about the Vietnam War is closer to Japanese official memory of the Pacific War. American textbooks lack serious engagement with the causes of the war, U.S. atrocities against civilians, the causes of domestic division over the war, and attention to Vietnamese social and cultural history. Like Japanese, Americans have access to a number of scholarly and journalistic resources which could be used to correct these deficiencies, but alas the problem is not a lack of information or available research. Also like the Japanese, Americans tend to focus on the suffering of their own fellow nationals, portraying themselves as victims instead of invaders. Finally, it is interesting to note that if Vietnamese citizens today want apologies and compensation from the Americans, they will have to succeed without the help of their government. As Bill Clinton’s recent trip to Vietnam made clear, American investment, aid, and sponsorship in international organizations are far more important to these erstwhile anti-imperialists than official acknowledgment of war atrocities or past aggression.

As an economic system premised on ever increas-

ing efficiency and endless technological progress, capitalism’s only teleology, its eschaton, was the eventual defeat of communism, and by extension, the triumph of freedom. The freedom of access to markets and cheap products made possible by global capitalism has been insufficient to fire the imaginations of American, German, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese nationalists who still demand histories which edify their own citizens and strengthen the state at the expense of others. Though global capitalism, in principle, abhors national boundaries, popular and official histories in capitalist nations often remain premised on the existence of these boundaries[6]. As this volume so eloquently illustrates, many of these neo-nationalisms are intolerant, intellectually muddle-headed, and downright mean spirited. Presented with a future dominated by the global marketplace, one wonders where, if not in the nation-state, citizens can seek refuge from the excesses of an economic system which by definition can and should ignore locally defined aspirations and concerns.

#### NOTES

[1]. Bryon K. Marshall, *Learning to be Modern: Japanese Political Discourse on Education*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994, p. 1.

[2]. Bruce Cumings, “Japan’s Position in the World System.” In Andrew Gordon, ed., *Postwar Japan as History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 34-63.

[3]. To the best of my knowledge this term was coined by Carol Gluck.

[4]. See Joshua A. Fogel, ed., *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 for a very good companion to the volume under review.

[5]. For details on recent developments, see “Special Report: Japanese History Textbook Raises Concerns,” *Asia Source* April 09, 2001 <http://www.asiasource.org/news/atmp02.cfm?newsid=48253> and Tawara Yoshifumi, “Junior High School History Textbooks: Whither ‘Comfort Women’ and the ‘Nanking Massacre’?,” *SEKAI* vol. 681 (November 2000), <http://www.iwanami.co.jp/jpworld/text/textbook01.html>.

[6]. This tension is explained with great power and finesse in David W. Noble, *The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writ-*

*ing, 1880-1980*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full

and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Paul Barclay. Review of Hein, Laura; Selden, Mark, eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. May, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5136>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).