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The "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan": A Critique A japanese translation is available.

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Summary:

Some Japanese studies scholars recently published an "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan," to counter the revisionist atmosphere surrounding the "comfort women" issue in Japan. While the author agrees that historical revisionism should be criticized, he takes issue with some elements in the Letter. First, it distorts the history of post-1945 Japan by listing factually incorrect "achievements." Second, its treatment of nationalism in Japan and other countries is problematic. The Letter seems to be the result of a compromise among people with divergent views, and the author argues that what should not be compromised has been compromised.

Dear Signatories of the "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan,"

Revisionists of history are alive and well in Japan, denying the established facts of the atrocities committed during the period of its wars of aggression and colonial rule in the Asia-Pacific region. While it is important for those of us in Japan to fight against such forces, international pressures can be helpful. Your recently published "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan,"[1] however, came as a disappointment. You try to glorify Japan's post-defeat history by distorting facts, and I take issue with your formulation of critical remarks on Korea and China.

Let us start by quoting the second paragraph in your Letter:

> In this important commemorative year, we also write to celebrate seventy years of peace between Japan and its neighbors. Postwar Japan's history of democracy, civilian control of the military, police restraint, and political tolerance, together with contributions to science and generous aid to other countries, are all things to celebrate as well.

Perhaps it is nice, when one comments on something that may taste bitter to some, to say something positive about it first. The problem is, most of the things stated above are simply untrue. Since 1945, Japan has not been a peaceful nation. It quickly rebuilt its military under the occupation of, and later in alliance with, the United States. Not even Prime Minister Abe Shinzo denies its role in support of the US in the Korean War, the Vietnam War and throughout the Cold War and its aftermath. If this did not take the form of engaging in combat, Japan's economic, technological, diplomatic and financial support were substantial and critical. Okinawa was under American occupation for decades and the American bases remain disproportionately concentrated there today, seventy years after Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific War. Japan

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possesses a powerful navy, army, and air force, which in alliance with the US, constitute a threat to neighboring countries. Japan is extremely hostile to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, imposing economic sanctions on the country and discriminating against elements of the *zainichi* Korean community affiliated with it. Had Japan's democracy been something commendable, it would have upheld the Constitution, and we would not be talking about civilian control, as there would not be any military force in the first place. Viewed from the perspective of the history of the repression of the social movements against these militaristic policies, it is hard to describe the police as restrained. Japan has, moreover, used its "aid" to Asian countries as a means to evade the responsibility for reparations for its past wars and colonial rule and to advance its own economic ambitions.

It is important to get these facts right in order to understand the context for historical revisionism rampant in Japan today. In their interview with Peter Ennis, both Jordan Sand and Alexis Dudden, Co-coordinators of the Letter, suggest there has been a significant change in recent years, noting particularly the narrowing of limits of permissible speech.[2] But Abe and his allies are not some aberrations. Their predominance is rather a product of Japan's post-defeat history.Despite its military defeat, dismantling of the empire and US occupation, 1945 was far from marking a decisive break in the character of the nation.

Hirohito not only was never tried but, if his power was curbed, his reign continued until his death several decades later. Hirohito's son, Akihito, is the present Emperor. It is particularly striking that the Japanese people and government far from putting anyone on trial after the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, released many who were leading militarists who were imprisoned under the occupation.

In his address to the American Congress, Abe alluded positively to his grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke,[3] who was a key planner in the Manchukuo regime and later a minister in Tojo's Cabinet, returned from prison to become a prime minister in the 1950s. It is no accident that the Japanese government had never conducted significant research into its wartime system of sexual slavery until some of the victims started to come forward in the 1990s. Thus, it is mistaken to see, as Sand does, a "turn" in recent years; rather, the unfinished business of 1945 has left Japan without any major transformation despite its defeat. Today's revisionists are not an anomaly but a natural extension of what has been going on and what has not been going on in the last seventy years. If the goal is to prevent denial or distortion of the historical facts of atrocities, then painting its "*sengo*" as something to celebrate and making the Japanese feel good is not helpful. Post-1945 Japan, in cooperation with the United States, has continued along many paths charted in its pre-defeat era. Fundamental change is needed if it is to fully recognize its wrongdoings and make amends. If you respect the Japanese as beings with moral capacity to admit their historical crimes and injustices, you can criticize their revisionism straightforwardly without sugarcoating it by listing its "achievements."

Additionally, included in your letter are some criticisms of nationalism. You state that "nationalist invective in Japan as well as in Korea and China"[4] has distorted the "comfort women" issue and that:

> Exploitation of the suffering of former "comfort women" for

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> nationalist ends in the countries of the victims makes an international resolution more difficult and further insults the dignity of the women themselves.

This is followed by the core message of the Letter that "denying or trivializing what happened to them is equally unacceptable." I would wholeheartedly agree with the last sentence if we took away the word "equally," but even after reading the passage several times, it seems to me that you are treating Japanese nationalism and nationalism in the countries of the victims as things that are essentially equivalent, effectively relativizing the Japanese stance on history.

While nationalism can have oppressive aspects, it would surely be difficult for the people and governments of the countries of the victims to raise awareness of the issues without recourse to at least some level of nationalism. The "comfort women" system did not exist in a vacuum; while Japanese women were also victimized in it, the "comfort women" system was operated under the rule of an empire and a military that had conquered a large part of the Asia-Pacific region. And nationalism is an ideology that has historically not been used exclusively for imperialistic and colonialist ends but has also served resistance struggles. Perhaps the intent is not to dismiss nationalism as such but to warn us against it distorting the issue. Your Letter fails to provide any evidence or example, however. What specific statement by which group or person in Korea and China could be described as "invective"? How does it distort the issue? Who in the victims' countries is exploiting the issue to make a resolution more difficult and how? In the interview I referred to earlier, Sand does concede that "To paint the nationalism we've seen in China, Korea, and Japan regarding comfort women with a single brush might appear to be very facile."[5] Why then, one is tempted to ask, paint nationalism in the three countries with a single brush without clearly differentiating them in the Letter?

Criticizing your Letter, perhaps I am preaching to the converted. There were initially 187 signatories, and the number has expanded to 456 as I write.[6] I imagine many of you would not describe the relationship between Japan and its neighbors in the last seventy years as peaceful; many would not treat nationalism in different countries in such a simplistic manner if they were writing themselves. Koyama Emi, a signatory who had been involved with the Letter as early as March, says compromises were necessary to gain broad support.[7] Some scholars have ties with Japanese politicians, bureaucrats, and business people, and would not like to be seen as "anti-Japan." According to Koyama, the Letter had to be so written as to get those people to join, too. Consequently, as Sand says:

> There are people involved in this who have never had their names printed on the same page, anywhere. Some of them may not be willing to appear in the same room with each other. But we all shared the statement.[8]

The Letter was thus a result of compromise, which was successful in that it managed to gain the support of so many scholars with a diverse range of positions.

A shared enemy or problem can get otherwise antagonistic people to work together. As Slavoj Zizek said apropos the rise of the far right in Europe:

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> Plain to see, in fact, is the structural role of the populist Right in the legitimation of current liberal-democratic hegemony. For what this Right—Buchanan, Le Pen, Haider—supplies is the negative common denominator of the entire established political spectrum. These are the excluded ones who, by this very exclusion (their 'unacceptability' for governmental office), furnish the proof of the benevolence of the official system. Their existence displaces the focus of political struggle—whose true object is the stifling of any radical alternative from the Left—to the 'solidarity' of the entire 'democratic' bloc against the Rightist danger.[9]

Likewise, Japanese revisionists function as "the negative common denominator" to suspend differences among people who otherwise "may not be willing to appear in the same room with each other." Given the urgency of the situation (time is scarce for the few remaining "comfort women" survivors, while journalists who have reported on the issue receive violent threats), I understand the need for compromise. The now 456 signatories may each have parts they do not like in the Letter, but they were able to unite. My point is not that it is wrong to compromise; rather, I want to ask, what kind of compromise is appropriate, and what is given up by doing so? Sand says "The Letter was issued by a group of people who were persuaded that 'this much we can all agree on, this much we believe is common sense.'"[10] In my humble opinion, the Letter contains things that should not pass as "common sense" for the reasons stated above.

According to Koyama, for some signatories, to be labeled "anti-Japan" can be detrimental to future research. Dudden denies being "anti-Japan" in the interview. But being anti-Japan, in the sense of profoundly critical of state policies, is precisely what is needed. This of course does not mean we should call for the physical annihilation of the Japanese people, just as anti-Nazis people do not demand that for the Germans. It simply means we should oppose the imperialist, colonialist project that is called Japan, which started in 1868 and which, in significant ways, continues in a new era. It survived its defeat in 1945 and is thriving today, providing a solid base for historical revisionists. To be anti-Japan means to say no to that project. And if I may repeat myself, if you respect the Japanese as moral beings, you should be able to say that to them (us).

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About the author:

Tsuneno Yujiro is currently unemployed and receives a disability pension. He contributed a chapterto□不登校、選んだわけじゃないんだぜ！』(*Futoko: It was not My Choice)*, Kido Rie and Tsuneno Yujiro, Tokyo, Rironsha, 2005, (republished, Tokyo, East Press, 2012), writing on his experience as a deserter from compulsory education. He blogs in Japanese at http://d.hatena.ne.jp/toled/. His Twitter account is @yujirotsu. His e-mail address is yt5486yt at gmail.com.

Notes

[1] "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan," *H-Asia*, May 5, 2015. The full list of signatories is available here.

[2] Peter Ennis, Jordan Sand, and Alexis Dudden, "Anatomy of an Open Letter: How 187 Japan scholars came together to push Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on history issues," *Dispatch Japan*,

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May 16, 2015, retrieved May 21, 2015.

[3] Abe Shinzo, "Toward an Alliance of Hope," April 29, 2015, retrieved May 21, 2015.

[4] ""Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan," ibid.

[5] Peter Ennis, Jordan Sand, and Alexis Dudden, ibid.

[6] Chang Jae-soon and Roh Hyo-dong, "Hundreds more scholars sign joint statement urging Japan to acknowledge sex slavery," *Yonhap News Agency*, May 19, 2015.

[7] Koyama Emi, "Sekai no Nihon kenkyushara 187 mei niyoru 'Nihon no Rekishika wo Shiji suru Seimei' no Haikei to Nerai," ("'Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan' by 187 Japan scholars of the World: its Background and Aims"), *Synodos*, May 5, 2015, retrieved May 21, 2015.

[8] Peter Ennis, Jordan Sand, and Alexis Dudden, ibid.

[9] Slavoj Zizek, "Why We All Love to Hate Haider," *New Left Review*, March-April 2000, retrieved May 21, 2015.

[10] Peter Eniss, Jordan Sand, and Alexis Dudden, ibid.

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