

FEATURE

Standing with Historians on Disputed Japanese History

Letters to the Editor, in the March 2015 issue of the American Historical Association's news magazine *Perspectives on History*:

Standing with the historians of Japan

On November 7, 2014, Japan's Foreign Ministry instructed its New York Consulate General to ask McGrawHill publishers to correct the depiction of the comfort women in its world history textbook *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*, coauthored by historians Herbert Ziegler and Jerry Bentley.

To the Editor:

As historians, we express our dismay at recent attempts by the Japanese government to suppress statements in history textbooks both in Japan and elsewhere about the euphemistically named "comfort women" who suffered under a brutal system of sexual exploitation in the service of the Japanese imperial army during World War II.

Historians continue to debate whether the numbers of women exploited were in the tens of thousands or the hundreds of thousands and what precise role the military played in their procurement. Yet the careful research of historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki in Japanese government archives and the testimonials of survivors throughout Asia have rendered beyond dispute the essential features of a system that amounted to state-sponsored sexual slavery. Many of the women were conscripted against their will and



taken to stations at the front where they had no freedom of movement. Survivors have described being raped by officers and beaten for attempting to escape.

As part of its effort to promote patriotic education, the present administration of Prime Minister Shinzô Abe is vocally questioning the established history of the comfort women and seeking to eliminate references to them in school textbooks. Some conservative Japanese politicians have deployed legalistic arguments in order to deny state responsibility, while others have slandered the survivors. Right-wing extremists threaten and intimidate journalists and scholars involved in documenting the system and the stories of its victims.

We recognize that the Japanese government is not alone in seeking to narrate history in its own interest. In the United States, state and local boards of education have sought to rewrite school textbooks to obscure accounts of African American slavery or to eliminate "unpatriotic" references to the Vietnam War, for example. In 2014, Russia passed a law criminalizing dissemination of what the government deems false information about Soviet activities during World War II. This year, on the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, a Turkish citizen can be sent to jail for asserting that the government bears responsibility. The Japanese government,

however, is now directly targeting the work of historians both at home and abroad.

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On January 15, 2015, the Wall Street Journal reported a meeting that took place last December between Japanese diplomats and McGraw-Hill representatives. The publisher refused the Japanese government's request for erasure of two paragraphs, stating that scholars had established the historical facts about the comfort women.

On January 29, 2015, the New York Times further reported that Prime Minister Abe directly targeted the textbook during a parliamentary session, stating that he "was shocked" to learn that his government had "failed to correct the things [it] should have."

We support the publisher and agree with author Herbert Ziegler that no government should have the right to censor history. We stand with the many historians in Japan and elsewhere who have worked to bring to light the facts about this and other atrocities of World War II.

We practice and produce history to learn from the past. We therefore oppose the efforts of states or special interests to pressure publishers or historians to alter the results of their research for political purposes.

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