

World View

The Use and Abuse of the Past

By HIDEKI KASE

History is a hot topic in Japan these days, with the country's wartime behavior returning to haunt its citizens. Many Japanese are dismayed by the possibility that the U.S. House of Representatives will soon demand a formal apology from Tokyo for the imperial military's alleged use of "comfort women," or sex slaves, during World War II. This talk has taken Japanese government by surprise, especially given its unprecedented support for Washington in Iraq and the war on terrorism.

The world cannot comprehend why Japan is reluctant to say sorry once more. But most Japanese can't understand why issues like the comfort women or the Nanking Massacre have resurfaced at all. Since World War II, the country has abided by the pacifism forced on it by the U.S. occupation. To promote such peacefulness, the Japanese media and intellectuals created an image of Japan as a warlike place that had to be prevented from rearming at all costs. To heighten the danger, the media also exaggerated or even invented wretched acts supposedly committed by Japan's imperial forces.

In the first years after the nation's surrender in 1945, many of its citizens found this imposed meekness hard to take. In 1952, for example, the Diet unanimously called for the men convicted by the Allied war-criminal trials to be treated the same as those honorably killed or injured on the battlefield. Half of Japan's then population signed petitions calling for the immediate release of incarcerated war criminals, and the major political parties of the day refused to accept any war guilt.

By the 1970s, however, this resistance began to diminish as memories of the war faded and economy began to boom. Intoxicated by its unprecedented affluence, Japan was willing to ask forgiveness of its neighbors if this proved good for business. In 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono apologized for Japan's having coerced women into prostitution during the war. Three years later, on the 50th anniversary of Japan's surrender, the Socialist Prime Minister Tomoichi Murayama acknowledged that Japanese aggression during the war had caused "tremendous damage and suffering" to many Asian countries.

In recent years, however, long-dormant nationalism has begun to rise again due to several factors. First, during the economic slump that extended into the early part of this decade, the benefits of apologizing became less clear. Second, the conservative prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is 53, and the bulk of his cabinet and aids

are in their 40s and 50s. Most don't understand why they should do penance for events that occurred before they were born.

Japanese nationalism has also been revived by China's alarming military buildup and North Korea's nascent nuclear threat. And it has spiked in response to the way Japan's neighbors seem to be exploiting bad history for present again. Seoul did not even raise the comfort women issue, for example, when it normalized relations with Tokyo in 1965; it was Japanese leftists who finally broached the topic in the 1980s.

The fact is that the brothels were commercial establishments. U.S. Army records explicitly declare that comfort women were prostitutes, and found no instances of "kidnapping" by the Japanese authorities. It's also worth noting that some 40% of those women were of Japanese origin.

Many Japanese politicians have also come to believe that Nanking Massacre was a fabrication of the Chinese, who are using it to pressure Japan into granting concessions in other areas. More than 60 Diet members conducted several study sessions in February and March. Much evidence disproving the massacre was presented; for example, although the Chinese Nationalist Ministry of Information conducted more than 300 press conferences over 11 months after the fall of Nanking, it never breached a word about any massacre. Nor did Chiang Kai-shek or Mao Zedong refer to it in statements on the first anniversary of the war.

Diet members are now forming a new caucus to study the facts. Whatever they find, further apologies are unlikely. The country's attitude has changed dramatically since the 1970s. In recent decades, for example, many Japanese history textbooks blamed Japanese forces for massacring 200,000 to 300,000 Chinese civilians in Nanking. Only one textbook mentions such events today. Saluting the rising-sun flag and singing the national anthem (the title of which translates as "Your Noble Reign") have become mandatory in public schools. These are small but telling signs of how Japan's sentiments have changed. The country is eager to resume its place in the world as a normal nation, with a normal defense and foreign policy. The harder its neighbors or United States push it for apologies, the harder Japan may start pushing back.

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