

Why Japanese Wartime Apologies Fail

Karasaki Taro

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By Karasaki Taro

With Japan and its neighbors still at odds over history, German freelance journalist Gebhard Hielscher says Tokyo should take bold measures to clarify that it has atoned for its wartime aggression.

The former Far East correspondent for the daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung proposes that Japan follow Germany's lead and come up with legislation that offers compensation to individuals that suffered under its wartime policies, even if only a token sum. Hielscher says Japan must also conduct joint historical research with its neighbors, as Germany did, so that all sides can at least learn to accept one another's different perceptions.

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Q: What was your reaction to the recent outrage against Japan in China and South Korea?

A: My impression is that all along, Japan has been deliberately not trying to face the past, and hoping that these issues would go away. Japan has been more concerned about its relationship with the United States.

Running away from the issue of compensation to the two countries that were the main victims of Japan's aggression, the Japanese have had it (protest) coming for all these years.

Our (Germany's) main victims, aside from the Holocaust, were the Soviet Union and Poland,

and we have done a lot for them. I always leave out the Israel issue because it is not part of the comparison: Japan did not commit a Holocaust. But what we did in Poland, which is colonize it, can be compared to what Japan did in the Korean Peninsula.

Germany didn't pay direct reparations to Poland, or the Soviet Union, but the Allied Forces took a lot of industrial property out of Germany as a form of reparation. Also, Germany gave up 24 percent of its traditional territory to these two countries, the two biggest victims. We saw that as one way to pay our moral debt.

Q: What do you see as the biggest difference between Japan and Germany in coming to terms with history?

A: The biggest point is that after the Tokyo war tribunal and after Japan regained sovereignty, there were no further investigations or indictments of war criminals. It's interesting that in 1958, the last remaining war criminals were released from Sugamo Prison. So for Japan, the story was finished.

Quite the opposite happened in Germany. In 1958, we set up a central systematic investigation office in Ludwigburg to investigate Nazi crimes. They are still operating and to this day, have charged about 100,000 people of whom about 6,500 were actually found guilty.

In Germany there was a political movement to settle the past, and while there were people who resisted, it was much more widespread and basic than anything Japan has ever

undertaken.

Q: Is this reflected in the way history is taught?

A: I came to Japan in 1967 and became correspondent in 1969. When Emperor Showa went to Europe in 1971, I looked at what was written about the war in Japanese textbooks and I was really surprised.

There was nothing in there of any self-critical nature. There were mentions of ``incidents' here and there, but it was not meant to teach students anything about the past. For example, in none of the textbooks I purchased was the Nanking Massacre even mentioned in the main text.

Then in the 1980s, when the textbook issue arose, the government took an unusual move and improvements were made. While not sufficient, at least out of 19 textbooks examined (in the 1990s), 12 made mention of the Nanking Massacre.

What is happening right now, or has been happening since 2001, is that the government is falling back into the old line, trying to cut out some of the things they had put in-for example, the mention of ``comfort women.'

They (the government) should stop the current history textbook review process of telling schools what books are acceptable for use, while the rest are not.

For instance, this reference to Tokdo (Takeshima) being ``illegally occupied' by South Korea was prescribed this year by the education ministry.

The rocks were formally integrated into Japanese territory only in the process of Japan's expansionism and thus cannot be called a traditional territory. I think this time, it is very clear that the ministry has directly interfered.

Q: Tokyo and Beijing have basically reached agreement on conducting joint research on history. What was Germany's experience?

A: On deciding our textbooks we had negotiations with France, Holland and Poland, most of the neighboring countries that we invaded. A public institute for international textbook studies was set up nearly 25 years ago and has been operating these bilateral negotiations.

After World War II, the French and the Germans got together in 1950 with groups of historians and teachers, and the two sides agreed on how to deal with the war. They agreed to make sure these things go into history books so that they would not happen again.

In the East, in the 1970s, West Germany took the initiative in setting up joint research with Poland. It was a very difficult process, but after a couple of years, they settled on the basic issues and brought out joint recommendations published both in German and Polish, providing guidelines on interpretation of history.

The parties do not have to agree on each detail-they can agree to disagree. But when they disagree, the recommendation would say there is no agreement on that particular point and would include each view. So when you compare the history textbooks between Japan and Germany, the difference is like day and night.

Q: What should Japan do?

A: If Japan is seriously considering gaining a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, I think it will have to confront the issue of history and negotiate with China.

As to what should be done, there should be a reasonable approach to the issue of textbooks and individual compensation.

Also, a prime minister, or anybody of significance in relationships with foreign countries, should not visit Yasukuni Shrine while in office.

Regarding compensation, it doesn't have to be full reparation. It can be just partial compensation, a token.

In my view, China and Korea were given a raw deal as they were given nothing.

In 1965 when Park Chung Hee took power, he agreed to settle for economic cooperation. And, being a military dictator, Park did not consider the people's desire.

In the case of China, first the Nationalists (in Taiwan) agreed to give up all claims against Japan to draw Tokyo on their side. This remained valid even after Japan switched diplomatic relations to the People's Republic. China, which was a dictatorship of a different

kind, was not interested in individual claims against Japan.

If you feel an obligation, you can make a new law and give those people a claim. That is what Germany did as late as 2000. The German parliament almost unanimously passed a law in which the government and companies equally shared the cost of compensating forced laborers.

This has very little to do with the Holocaust because 80 percent of the forced laborers were from the Soviet Union and East European countries. The reason it came so late was because of the Cold War.

That is a typical case-if you have the political will, there is always a way.

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