

Disputes between Japan, South Korea, and the People's Republic of China Regarding World War Two History: Finding a Resolution

Juanru Zhang

Abstract—This article addresses the disputes between Japan, South Korea, and China regarding memorializing WWII history, and goes onto analyzing possible resolutions for the disputes at hand. This article begins by introducing current conflicts at hand and exploring underlying historical factors which may have instigated or otherwise influenced these conflicts. This article is primarily focused on addressing a selected number of conflicts in detail. Then, the article analyzes the differences between how the nations of Japan and Germany address and memorialize WWII history, which is followed by a description of possible historical factors which have contributed to these differences. Lastly, this article proposes possible solutions to the beforehand mentioned conflicts by and analyzes the eligibility of these conflicts. The proposed solutions draw their characteristics from how the nation of Germany address and memorialize WWII history. In addition, this article also addresses potential limitations and other flaws of proposed solutions.

Index Terms—Conflict resolution, history, memorialization.

I. INTRODUCTION

A small statue of a teenage girl sat outside a Japanese consulate in South Korea. She was the cause of a large-scale dispute between Japan and South Korea, leading to suspensions of economic talks, public demonstrations, and the removal of the Japanese diplomat from South Korea by the Japanese government [1]. The cause of the conflict lies with the identity of the girl, which ties into the war with the highest death toll in history - World War II (WWII).

Comfort women - women captured and utilized as sex slaves by the Japanese government during WWII - are a matter of controversy between Japan and South Korea. The statue of the teenage girl, meant to represent one of the many comfort women, is not the only case in which Japan came into conflict with other East Asian countries over the portrayal of Japan's involvement in WWII.

This essay will address the conflict between Japan, South Korea and the People's Republic of China on the memorialization of Japan's involvement in WWII, notably Japan's portrayal of its history. First, the parties involved in the conflict, and their different perspectives, will be introduced. The causation and circumstances surrounding the conflict are described, focusing on several notable instances of disputes. Next, the importance of the topic will be explained. The essay will compare Japan with Germany for how they came to terms with their WWII history, as well as

analyze the causation for their differences in addressing their individual WWII histories to determine whether Japan should follow Germany as a model on how to address WWII history.

II. PART ONE: PARTIES AND PERSPECTIVES

A clarification should be made that distinguishes the various aspects of Japan that will be mentioned in this essay. Firstly, there is Japan, the nation itself. Then, there is the Japanese government, which is responsible for Japan's foreign relations. There were many different groups of Japanese citizens during WWII, ranging from ordinary civilians to officers who led their soldiers to commit mass atrocities. Moreover, different groups of modern Japanese citizens can have polarizing opinions regarding Japan's involvement in WWII. Overall, Japan does not have a single united stance on portraying Japanese involvement in WWII as the spectrum of opinions ranges from extreme nationalist to extreme liberal. This essay will primarily focus on the stance taken by the Japanese government. However, perspectives taken by other groups will also be analyzed.

The nations collectively known as 'East Asian' nations are China, and to a lesser extent, South Korea. Due to the great degree of homogeneity of opinions regarding Japan's involvement in WWII in these nations within both the governments and the civilian bodies, the essay will not address the nuances of different perspectives for these nations. Other parties involved or influenced by the conflict could play supporting roles in understanding and resolving the conflict at hand.

A. Japanese Parties

From academics to trade unions, different aspects of Japanese society have different perspectives in regards to Japanese wartime atrocities. Currently, there is no clear division of these perspectives by social status, careers, gender, or other significant factors. The progressive wing of Japanese politics played an essential role in the last few decades in promoting the recognition of Japanese war crimes, whether through education, book publications, organized campaigning, or other tactics [2]. Many textbook disputes were spearheaded by progressive Japanese citizens and teachers who were unsatisfied with the censorship of Japanese history. Both progressive and conservative authors have gained popularity through their different portrayals of Japanese history [3].

III. PART TWO: CONFLICT

There were several significant incidents in which tensions worsened between Japan and other East Asian nations due to

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Juanru Zhang is with the National Institute of Standards and Technology, Boulder, USA (e-mail: author@boulder.nist.gov).

the Japanese government's portrayal of or opinions regarding WWII history. Three significant incidents are described in detail to illustrate the nature of these disputes between Japan and other East Asian nations.

B. Contention Point: Comfort Women

Comfort Women describes women who were exploited by the Japanese army as sex slaves during WWII. The topic of Comfort Women is perhaps the most contentious argument between Japan and South Korea regarding WWII. Japan is criticized by many East Asian nations for its lack of recognition of the atrocities committed by the Japanese army, as well as its inadequate response to survivors of these atrocities. Some Japanese officials went as far as to deny outright the Japanese army's involvement with Comfort Women[4]. In several instances in the past few decades, the Japanese textbook's erasure or heavy censorship of Comfort Women has led to outrage in South Korea, sometimes even severe political backlash from the South Korean government and progressive Japanese organizations [5].

C. Contention Point: The Nanjing Massacre

In 1937 the Japanese army occupied the city of Nanjing in China, then subsequently committed one of the most infamous atrocities of the second Sino-Japanese war. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were massacred, tens of thousands of women were sexually assaulted, and large sections of the city were destroyed [6]. The Nanjing Massacre is well known throughout China due to the scale of its brutality and due to government efforts to raise awareness about Japanese war crimes.

The Nanjing Massacre is not taught in Japan like how Nazi war crimes are taught in Germany. Nazi atrocities are taught as a core part of the school curriculum in Germany, and the general population has a greatly heightened awareness of Nazi war crimes compared to the Japanese population's awareness of the WWII Japanese government's war crimes. Like the topic of Comfort Women, how the Nanjing Massacre has been addressed in Japanese textbooks has also roused tension between the Japanese government, its neighbors, and progressive Japanese organizations. There also exists a number of Japanese written works that are focused on denying or downplaying the Nanjing Massacre, some of which the Japanese government allowed to be put on sale at historical sites or museums. For instance, the Alleged Nanking Massacre, sold at the Yushukan Museum of the Yasukuni Shrine, describes the Nanjing Massacre as 'one-sided speculation developed by the CCP'[7].

D. Contention Point: The Yasukuni Shrine

The Yasukuni Shrine, located in Tokyo, the capital of Japan, likely would have been uncontroversial if not for a few details. This shrine commemorates not only fallen WWII Japanese soldiers but also 14 class-A WWII criminals such as Shiro Ishii, commander of Unit 731, who led the conduction of human experimentation on Chinese soldiers and civilians. The shrine also operates a WWII history museum called the Yushukan Museum, where large portions of WWII history are obscured or falsified. However, what especially raises the ire of many East Asian nations are the trips made to the Yasukuni Shrine every year by notable Japanese political figures, such as the previous Japanese

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [8]. The visits are heavily broadcasted and criticized by popular East Asian media, while Japanese media has a spectrum of opinions regarding the visits.

IV. PART THREE: CONSEQUENCES

Considering the three examples listed above, the major consequences regarding Japan's portrayal of its WWII history can be summarized here.

Firstly, when Japanese WWII history is acknowledged in Japan, there are areas or instances where it is portrayed inaccurately or in a heavily biased manner. This can include omitting facts, such as purposefully leaving out Japanese wartime atrocities, or this can include the falsification of facts, such as the Yushukan Museum's denial of the Nanjing Massacre. This behavior impairs Japanese citizens' awareness of history and contorts their understanding of their unique identities by leaving them unaware of critical historical events that have shaped modern Japan.

Secondly, when the Japanese government responds to criticisms of its portrayal of Japanese WWII history, it often incites conflict between itself and the opposing parties. These conflicts can damage Japan's international reputation and worsen its relationships with other nations.

V. PART FOUR: RESOLUTION

A. Japan and Germany: Similar Pasts, Different Responses

Germany and Japan, two nations with similar WWII era histories but polarizing attitudes towards addressing said history. While one nation erected famous monuments and memorials in its capital exhibiting wrongdoings of its WWII-era government, the other has top government officials frequent a shrine that honors war criminals. There are a number of historical factors for how this difference in behavior came about in these nations. It is essential to understand the historical context of modern conflicts because the past is a powerful driving force that shapes contemporary opinions. Governments' opinions on subjects could change depending on current circumstances, but history cannot be altered. By analyzing the roots of current opinions, the fundamental basis of how these opinions came about becomes apparent.

B. The impact of WWII on German and Japanese Citizens

While both German and Japanese citizens were heavily affected by WWII, the way and degree to which they were impacted by it differ greatly. Nazi Germany's actions impacted the lives of its citizens to a much greater and more devastating degree than the Japanese government during WWII. Concentration camps were erected across Germany just as they were erected in conquered nations, and ghettos imprisoning Jewish or other citizens deemed undesirable existed in both Germany and its conquered territory. The purging of political dissidents and other people deemed undesirable, such as homosexuals and the mentally ill, was also prominent within Nazi Germany itself. Therefore, many German citizens had experienced or witnessed firsthand the

cruelty of the Nazi government. On the other hand, the WWII-era Japanese government committed most of its war crimes outside of Japanese borders. Some of the most well-known Japanese war crimes, such as the Nanjing massacre and the Unit 731 experiments, all occurred outside of Japan. The direct impact of Nazi Germany's war crimes on German citizens led to greater awareness and abhorrence of Nazi Germany's immorality in Germany today. Japanese citizens, on the other hand, were not impacted to such a large degree, and therefore there is a lack of modern Japanese national scorn towards the WWII Japanese government's actions.

C. American Interference in Japan after WWII

The cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union caused the American government to harbor an extreme fear of the spread of communism. Shortly after Japan's defeat in WWII, in order to prevent communism from gaining popularity in Japan, the American government began to interfere with Japanese politics to root out suspected communists or communist sympathizers. In the process, many left-wing politicians - who had more inclination to acknowledge and make amends for Japanese war crimes - were compromised, therefore allowing conservative and nationalist ideology to strengthen[9]. Some government officials previously associated with the old Japanese government remained in power since the American government was more focused on purging communists. In a sense, the American government saw its political decision in Japan as a choice between two evils. One choice is the old remnants of the militaristic Japanese government that had committed mass atrocities, and the other is - as the American government believed back then - the emerging evil of communism that could threaten American interests.

D. Post War Conditions

After WWII, a large number of nations involved in the war were left in devastation. However, the US emerged more powerful and prosperous, though wounded by the war regardless. The US was highly concerned with taking control of the situation in Europe and holding the Nazi government accountable for its crimes. As major western powers began to recover from the war, they too were primarily focused on controlling the situation in Europe.

The situation in Asia recovered at a much slower rate as many nations devastated by war were not politically powerful or economically prosperous before the war, unlike many European nations. China, which was a primary target of Japanese aggression, was devastated by a high death toll and a civil war that raged on even after WWII. South Korea became embroiled in a war with North Korea; various other East Asian colonies were embroiled in conflicts to gain independence. East Asia suffered a series of large-scale conflicts throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Under such circumstances, many East Asian nations were more concerned with their immediate welfare rather than past suffering inflicted by the Japanese government.

E. Resolution Requirements

The three points outlined above describe several possible factors for the divergence of attitudes between contemporary Japanese and German governments: Impact of war crimes on civilians, interference by third parties, and post-war

conditions.

Now that the historical causes of the difference in Japan and Germany's modern opinions and actions are apparent, it could be viable to outline a series of actions that can be undertaken in order for Japan to alter its attitude towards its WWII history to become more similar to the attitude of Germany. However, it is also essential to consider whether it is necessary for Japan to follow the model of Germany. If the Japanese government were to adopt a similar approach to WWII history as Germany, the feasibility and moral aspects of the resolution must be taken into consideration.

F. The Resolution: Feasibility

The resolution would have to be physically feasible and practical. Entities involved with the problem at hand have a limited amount of time and resources they could potentially dedicate to it.

There are many practical problems that could surface if the Japanese government were to alter its attitude towards WWII history. One would have to take into consideration the social and cultural impact of the changes as a change in the approach to addressing an important part of history could cause a considerable change in public opinion and behavior. Monetary requirements are also important factors, such as if the Japanese government were to build or demolish buildings pertaining to WWII history.

Reshaping a nation's attitude to history can be a lengthy and costly process. People's attitudes must be gradually influenced in various aspects of life, from education to media consumption. However, while Japan would need to put considerable effort into changing public opinion and reshaping the official stance on the topic at hand, it is still possible. Similar to Germany, Japan has high social and economic performance and a transparent and democratic government. These traits are indicative of a developed nation, and therefore one that is capable of spending more time and resources on problems that go beyond survival necessities. Therefore, the Japanese government should be able to commit to changing its approach to addressing WWII history.

The resolution does not expect Japan to change its stance overnight but expects a long, tedious process during which the Japanese government will take necessary steps to reshape its attitude towards WWII history. Therefore, at least on a physical level, Japan is capable of following the model of Germany to change its attitude towards its WWII history.

G. The Resolution: Morality

The resolution should commit to certain moral standards. Morality is complex and intangible, but some brief outlines could still be formed based on the nature of the topic at hand. Considering that a pressing problem regarding Japan's portrayal of WWII history is historical inaccuracy, the resolution should at the very least not commit to falsifying history to a degree greater than the extent to which history is inaccurately portrayed by the Japanese government today.

Germany's actions and perspectives towards its WWII history appeals to the moral aspect of understanding history. The German government upholds an open-minded attitude towards acknowledging its historical wrongdoings. Nazi war crimes are essential topics covered in the German educational curriculum. Memorials for victims of Nazi atrocities are famous and visible in German cities, such as the Memorial to

the Murdered Jews of Europe and the Empty Library [10]. Political groups and figures expressing denial of Nazi war crimes or agreement with Nazi ideology are usually considered extremists by the public and the German government [11]. This acceptance and acknowledgment of history can be considered the leading reason why Japan should consider imitating Germany's approach towards addressing WWII history.

The German government often openly apologizes for the actions of Nazi Germany. Therefore, the question of whether the current Japanese government should follow suit comes into play here. The resolution to the problem at hand is not simply a matter of the current Japanese government asking for forgiveness for the pain and suffering that Japan had inflicted upon many nations during WWII. The current government of Japan is made up of the modern Japanese people and serves the modern Japanese citizens, and it would not be sensible for a generation of people to take up the burden of the crimes of their ancestors. However, the current government of Japan should openly acknowledge the crimes that the Japanese government had committed during WWII and educate its citizens about its history transparently and factually. While the current Japanese government is not responsible for the actions of its predecessors, the way that these actions are remembered is a responsibility that falls upon it.

H. The Resolution: Fallbacks

Germany's approach towards addressing WWII history may not perfectly apply to Japan, given its current political environment. If Japan were to adopt an attitude towards WWII history similar to Germany's, it could face a massive backlash from its more nationalist and militaristic sectors of society. On the other hand, Japan also contains vocal progressive groups which would support the government's role in reshaping the portrayal of Japanese WWII history. The conflict between influential and polarizing political parties could cause political instability in Japan. In contrast to Germany's direct acknowledgment of WWII Nazi crimes, the Japanese government may feel pressured to work towards a more subtle approach that could minimize any potential political conflict. It was also established that different historical circumstances shaped Japan and Germany's divergence in opinions regarding WWII. Therefore, it is worth noting that the same approach to addressing history might not be suitable for two nations with different historical circumstances. Therefore, while there are many desirable aspects of Germany's approach to addressing WWII history, some aspects potentially could not be imitated by Japan.

VI. CONCLUSION

The resolution should be that Japan should take important values from Germany's way of portraying WWII history. Japan should commit to correcting historical inaccuracies in its portrayal of WWII history, always openly acknowledge

war crimes, and strive to educate the Japanese public on Japanese war crimes. However, given the differences between Japan and Germany's historical circumstances, as well as their current different political environments, Japan could take some steps to come to terms with its history that may be different from the ones taken by Germany. These nations have unique histories, and therefore an identical method of addressing their histories may not be best suited. However, what Japan definitely should learn from Germany is the values it upholds when addressing history. By taking actions to reshape Japan's attitude towards its WWII history by studying the actions of Germany, the Japanese government could improve the historical awareness of its citizens and form better relationships with its neighbors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Juanru Zhang is responsible for the creation and completion of this paper.

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Juanru Zhang was born in Qingdao, China. She currently studies at Singapore American School in Singapore, where she is a senior year student. She will be receiving her high school diploma in June 2022.