

A Nation Blind to the Past

Yoshitaka Saeki
Waseda Univ. ESA

This March, the Tokyo District Court handed down its decision in the case between Professor Saburo Ienaga of Kyoto University and the Ministry of Education over the screening and approval of school textbooks. About 20 years ago, Prof. Ienaga was ordered by the Ministry to change more than 200 parts in the draft of his textbook on Japanese history. His reaction was to sue the Education Ministry claiming that the screening process is unconstitutional and infringes upon freedom of education and expression. But the court decision in March went completely against him.

The most controversial issue in the textbook was the description of World War Two. Here is his original wording: "Since the reckless war was justified as sacred and the people were kept blind to the brutalities of the Japanese army, they had no choice but to cooperate." The Ministry complained, "Brutality is in the nature of war. If we think about the complex elements behind the scenes, we should not call the war just reckless." Well, what is your judgment? It sounds to me as if the government was trying to justify the brutality by calling it inevitable.

However some of Japan's brutalities were, in fact, far from inevitable. I learned it when I was an exchange student in the United States several years ago. In a history class, I saw a film about Japan's aggression during the war. The scene on the screen was beyond my imagination. Japanese soldiers shot a defenseless Chinese woman right before the eyes of her crying child. And then they shot the child, too. Gazing at the screen, I felt ashamed of being Japanese and wanted to run from the classroom. Because I had this shocking experience, I was upset by the recent defeat of Prof. Ienaga. Even if it is true that some brutality is in the nature of war, there is no way that such extreme brutality is justifiable.

But through the screening of textbooks, the government keeps us blind to the facts of Japan's war-time aggression. For example, in the history textbook I used in high school, the word "invasion" is used for Germany but never for Japan. I'm sure you can find similar things in your textbooks. In this way, the Government treats Japan's aggression as if it were something we can forget about. But the world will never forget it.

For instance, last September there was a big demonstration in China protesting Prime Minister Nakasone's official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine where war criminals are enshrined. To make the matter worse, very few Japanese people expressed opposition to his visit. We are indifferent to the feelings of the Chinese people and thus do not understand what his visit means to them. From their point of view, his visit justifies Japan's war-time aggression. One Chinese student explains, "The memory of the China-Japan war remains in the heart of every Chinese person. Nakasone's visit proves the obliviousness of the

Japanese to their past crime." The Chinese student demonstration is reminder to us, not only of the arrogance of our government but also of our indifference to the past.

On the other hand, the German people had a different reaction to a similar incident. Last year when Chancellor Kohl was planning to visit the cemetery at Bitburg with President Reagan, the German people strongly called for the cancellation of the visit, because the cemetery is a place where members of the SS, an elite Nazi unit, are buried together with other German soldiers. The contrast with Japan is even clearer with respect to the day commemorating the end of the war. In Germany a primary purpose of the day is to express condolences to the victims of the Nazis. But in Japan we never pray for the millions of war victims in our neighbor nations but only for the Japanese victims.

So what is the reason for this contrast? I think it's a difference in terms of how we deal with the past. For us, the Japanese, the past must be forgotten in order to make a new start. In this sense, ambiguous descriptions in screened textbooks serve well to erase the memory of the past. And we eventually become blind to our past aggression and arrogant toward our neighbors. But for the German people, the past must be learned for the sake of the future. So their textbooks describe precisely what the Nazis did during the war. The following comment by a German journalist expresses the essence of the German attitude. "We have the responsibility to teach the truth about our past to the next generation so that they will never repeat the same mistakes in the name of Germany."

In the 40 years since the war, both Japan and Germany have made miraculous recoveries from their defeats. But former Chancellor Schmidt points out one difference: "After the war Germany made friends with its former victims but Japan didn't." Now it is time for us, too, to listen to the voices of our neighbors. We can't stay blind. We must open our eyes to the truth about our past so that we never repeat the same mistakes. If we do this, we'll be able to construct a bright future. But if we remain a nation blind to the past, we will be blind to the future as well.

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