

Case #6: Revisionist History—Deleting Bad Acts

They say that history is written by the winners, but others are finding that they have a say in what future generations learn about a country's past. Recently Japan's Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, has tested how far that "say" can go.

In March 2007, the Japanese Ministry of Education ordered that publishers delete passages from history textbooks that claimed Imperial Army officers ordered citizens to commit mass suicide when Okinawa was about to fall to American forces near the end of the war. Responses to the ministry's order have taken the form of changing active verbs to passive ones in order to describe mass suicides. Instead of saying, "There were some people who were forced to commit suicide by the Japanese Army," one textbook now reads, "There were some people who were driven to mass suicide." Opposing the new official stance on the suicides are eye-witness accounts of Okinawans (now Japanese citizens) who claim Japanese soldiers gave them grenades with orders to use the grenades to take their own lives should the Americans win.

This is not the first time modern Japan has been accused of "whitewashing" history. Abe was recently in the international spotlight for claiming that the Japanese military had not forced women, many Korean, into sexual slavery during World War II despite testimonials from witnesses and victims alike. The remarks drew strong condemnation from South Korean foreign minister Song Min-soon, who said that, "...problems over perceptions of history are making it difficult to move South Korean-Japanese relations forward."

Other Asian leaders have expressed similar concerns about Japan's version of events especially in China where hostility towards the Japanese has lingered long after Japanese involvement in China during World War II. Japanese and Chinese historians are famously at odds over the number of civilians killed in the Nanking Massacre with estimates ranging from several hundred to 100,000 to 300,000.

Overall, the worries of other Asian nations could be summed up as a concern that the truth about Japan's actions in World War II will not be learned by future generations of Japanese students, thus eliminating barriers to a resurgent Japanese nationalism. Those who do not learn the mistakes of the past have no chance to learn *from* the mistakes of the past and stand a greater chance of repeating them. In the background of these arguments are other echoes of Japanese nationalism, such as new nationalist "manga" comic books and Abe's move to bolster the Defense Agency, reigniting fears that Japan may change its Constitution to create an army for purposes other than defense.

The revisionists argue that Japan need not paint such a "masochistic" view of its own history, and that constant reminders of Japanese militarism and atrocities only serve to keep a national attitude of guilt for events that current generations are no more responsible for than current generations of Germans are responsible for Nazi atrocities in Europe. A more positive, less guilt-ridden view of history has been sought by most if not all nations at one time or another. Whether there is an ethical duty to maintain an accurate

historical account, or whether history is just one of many tools leaders can use to lead their people is not merely an issue faced by contemporary Japan. Chinese textbooks have also been changed recently to de-emphasize communism, relegating Chairman Mao Zedong (a former focal point of recent Chinese history) to a section on etiquette. United States textbooks also face strong criticism from historians and Native Americans for their depiction of Christopher Columbus and the other “discoverers” of North America. Japan claims its current interests lie in leading its citizens towards the future in a positive way, rather than dwelling incessantly on every detail of a troubled past.