



War Responsibility in a Japanese College Classroom

By William Underwood

"August 6, 1945: Hiroshima. August 9, 1945: Nagasaki." I wrote the words on the classroom whiteboard in large letters. Then I crossed out both dates and places with a big red X. "Not true," I declared. "The atomic bombings never happened. A total fabrication."

My university students were dumbstruck. We stared at each other in silence for a long moment. All right, I conceded, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed by American warplanes 60 years ago. But only conventional bombs were used and only a few hundred people were killed. Another uncomfortable silence.

Then I admitted it was a ruse. The students seemed to collectively exhale in relief. The tragic reality, of course, is that hundreds of thousands of Japanese died as the result of the two atomic bombings.

The brief classroom exercise helped students imagine how citizens of Asian countries victimized by Japanese colonialism, invasion and atrocities during World War II feel when the Nanjing Massacre is labeled a fabrication, military sex slaves are portrayed as willing prostitutes, and forced laborers are claimed to have voluntarily toiled for Japan's former empire.

It also gave students additional insight into why Chinese and Koreans, in particular, continue to react so indignantly to revisionist Japanese history textbooks and prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine, where convicted war criminals are among the Japanese war dead worshipped.

"Japan and America" is the name of the course. We began with the arrival of Commodore Perry's black ships in 1853, ending Japan's two centuries of national isolation and leading to the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Despite the burden of "unequal treaties" imposed by Western nations, Japan modernized rapidly and avoided the fate of foreign domination or outright colonization that befell most of Asia. Enriching the country and strengthening the army (*fukoku kyohei*) became the overriding national goal.

Our class explored how Japanese immigrated first to Hawaii and then to the American West Coast in the late 1800s and early 1900s, seeking better lives and gradually forging new identities as Japanese Americans. The United States cemented its control over Hawaii during this period and, following victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898, took possession of the Philippines and harshly suppressed local movements for self-determination.

NEWEST CLUB MEMBERS

In the face of pressures from the European powers and the United States, in the late nineteenth century Japan embarked on its own expansionist policy. Having seized Okinawa in 1879, Japan prevailed in its first war with China in 1894-95, obtaining Taiwan and imposing heavy reparations on China. Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905 strengthened its position in Korea and Manchuria. The secret Taft-Katsura Agreement between the United States and Japan that year recognized each nation's respective suzerainty over the Philippines and the Korean Peninsula.

Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910, but its imperial ambitions were just beginning. Japan and America, two rising colonial powers, were on a collision course in Asia. Conflicting geopolitical objectives, beginning in the 1930s with Japan's seizure of Manchuria and creation of Manchukuo, eventually led to an American embargo on the oil and iron that were indispensable to Japan's military plans for the continent. Pearl Harbor was the end result.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's well-known "Day of Infamy" speech before the U.S. Congress, stressing that America was "suddenly and deliberately attacked" by a treacherous Japan still seated at the negotiating table, was played in class. This portrayal of immediate events was not untrue, but the president elided, as many Americans still do, the nearly century-old origins of this clash in the Pacific. "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory," FDR intoned. "So help us God."

I also presented audio excerpts from a wartime speech by the Japanese leader, General Hideki Tojo, invoking Japan's divine mission and vowing inevitable victory in a rhetorical style very much like Roosevelt's. Japan depicted its role in the Greater East Asian War as that of elder brother leading fellow Asians to liberation from Western colonialism. This message of "Asia for the Asians" had some initial appeal, but it soon became clear that equality and self-government would not be part of Japan's new order. Nearly all of the students were in their early 20s, so listening to a Japanese military marching song (*gunka*) was a first, although an elderly auditor recalled the song from her childhood.

REDRESSING INTERNMENT

More than 110,000 ethnic Japanese, about two-thirds of them native-born U.S. citizens, were relocated from the American West Coast and interned in ten barren, military-run internment camps between 1942 and 1945. Military necessity was the reason given for the policy authorized by FDR's executive order and ruled constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, but the policy was driven by anti-Asian racism.



1. Beginning in 1942, more than 110,000 ethnic Japanese were uprooted from their homes and interned in desolate camps like this one at Manzanar.

Fanned by fear of a “yellow peril,” institutionalized discrimination against Japanese in America had been one factor behind deteriorating Japan-U.S. relations in the decades before World War II. Federal laws barred Japanese immigrants from owning land and becoming citizens, and in 1924 banned immigration from Japan altogether.

Japanese racism, in common with much colonial racism, was extreme but at the same time more complex. Japanese views of fellow Asians as backward and inferior were used to justify Tokyo’s policies of colonization and military aggression. Chinese became especially dehumanized and bore the brunt of some of Japan’s worst war atrocities. Japanese racism toward “white” nations, whose technology and imperial accomplishments Japan had been emulating, became more pronounced after 1941 and led to brutal mistreatment of Allied soldiers and civilians.

Several class sessions were devoted to the injustice of the Japanese American internment, focusing on the experiences of victims from my home state of California. Then we examined the landmark Japanese American redress movement, one of the most effective civil rights movements in American history. The Civil Liberties Act, congressional legislation signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1988, produced a national apology, individual compensation of \$20,000, and an education fund.

Former internees were entitled to redress if they had spent even one day in the camps. (Many second-generation Japanese Americans left the camps to work and some were aided by church and civic organizations in attending college, although none were allowed to reenter the evacuation zone while the war continued.) The American government made efforts to locate eligible recipients including those living overseas, but the families of internees who died before 1988 were not compensated. The Supreme Court reversed its wartime ruling on the internment’s legality. Presidential pardons were granted, federal pensions restored, and high school diplomas belatedly issued.

I showed students copies of the formal apology letter and a photo of the U.S. attorney general bending down to present a reparations check to a 100-year-old Japanese American in a wheelchair. Students, some of whom plan to become teachers themselves, were also introduced to classroom activities from an internment and redress curriculum guide used in U.S. public schools today.[1] In 1988, the Canadian Parliament passed a nearly identical redress law compensating Japanese Canadian victims of wartime internment. In Canada and the United States, textbooks both before and since the redress have introduced critical discussion of the internment and respectful treatment of the internees.

TOKYO’S LEGALISTIC APPROACH

Japanese war responsibility was considered toward the end of the 15-week course. Although numerous Americans have sought compensation from Japan for a variety of WWII-era grievances, we focused on the current redress movement for Chinese forced labor (CFL). This was because Fukuoka Prefecture was a major CFL center, with nearly 7,000 workers at 16 sites, and redress lawsuits remain pending in regional courts.[2]

A total of 38,935 Chinese males between the ages of 11 and 78 were forcibly brought to Japan and made to perform harsh physical labor at mines, construction sites and docks from Kyushu to Hokkaido beginning in April 1943. While the overall death rate was 17.5 percent, at some of the 135 sites nearly half of all workers perished. Brutality was standard practice and there was little or no pretense of payment of wages. Food, clothing and shelter were provided at or below survival threshold levels.



2. Bound for forced labor in Japan, Chinese captives set out from a North China prison that had been renamed Ishimon Industrial Labor Training Center in 1942.

There were other major forced labor programs. A separate program for Allied POWs in Japan involved a slightly smaller number of victims. Forced labor in Japan by Koreans, currently being researched by the Japanese and South Korean governments for the first time, involved hundreds of thousands of victims. Outside of Japan, millions of Asians are believed to have performed forced labor throughout the far-flung wartime empire. Relatively few records exist for these *romusha*, as they were called in some regions, making their actual numbers unknowable.

Last semester the class watched "The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report," NHK television's hard-hitting 1993 expose of the Japanese government's postwar campaign to evade accountability for Chinese forced labor by suppressing evidence and deceiving the Diet. Students, including a few from China, commented on the insincerity displayed by Japan's government and corporations toward this ongoing war legacy issue. Twenty of the 35 Japanese corporations that profited from Chinese forced labor are still in operation today, including several such as Mitsui and Mitsubishi that are among the world's largest.

A retired high school teacher visited our class as guest lecturer in 2003. He described his research involving a former Mitsubishi coal mine in nearby Umi-machi, where 87 out of 352 Chinese laborers (25 percent) died. "I was shocked to hear about Chinese forced labor in Umi-machi," one student later wrote. "I live there and didn't know anything about it."

The teacher did not endear himself to some high school administrators by engaging in vital CFL reconciliation work with his own students before his retirement. They exchanged letters in the late 1990s with the Chinese family of a worker who had died at the mine in June 1945, informing them for the first time about the fate of their disappeared relative. This conscientious teacher subsequently left Fukuoka to teach Japanese in China, where he is undoubtedly researching forced labor and improving grassroots ties.

My students looked at a recent Diet statement in which the Koizumi administration expressed regret that "amid abnormal wartime conditions many Chinese people came to Japan in a half-forcible manner and endured many hardships due to severe work." Discussion of the statement suggested that this description of "half-forced" labor is about as plausible as being half pregnant. Although numerous court cases are under review, the statement asserted that all legal claims to compensation were extinguished in 1972 by the Japan-China Joint Declaration.[3]

Japanese moral responsibility for Chinese forced labor remains a contentious issue, one of many that continue to poison China-Japan relations. At the same time, many Japanese believe that the United States continues to bear heavy responsibility for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as for the saturation firebombing of virtually every other major population center.

JAPANESE VICTIMHOOD

Following the guest lecture by the CFL activist, one student's classroom comment seemed to confirm the stereotype of "historical amnesia" regarding Japan's war conduct. "But Japan was a victim," the student protested, in response to the new information about Chinese forced labor. After class, I was able to better grasp her meaning. She told me and the guest teacher that her family was from Nagasaki, and that she had relatives who were *hibakusha*.

Ordinary Japanese people were indeed tragic victims of the Asia-Pacific War, and very often the instrument of their suffering was the U.S. Army Air Force. American warplanes, flying at low altitudes and mostly unopposed, indiscriminately firebombed 64 Japanese cities late in the war. Reasonable estimates of the death toll start around a quarter million, although two or three times that number may have been killed. The massive firestorms that claimed 100,000 civilian lives in the area bombing of the Japanese capital in a single raid were by design. Use of delayed-fuse bombs and anti-personnel bombs were intended to prevent firefighters from putting out the blazes.

"On 9 March 1945, a basic revision in the method of B-29 attack was instituted," according to Washington's official 1946 report on the bombing campaign. "Incendiaries were used instead of high-explosive bombs and the lower altitude permitted a substantial increase in bomb load per plane. One thousand six hundred and sixty-seven tons of bombs were dropped on Tokyo in the first attack. The chosen areas were saturated. Fifteen square miles of Tokyo's most densely populated area were burned to the ground. The weight and intensity of this attack caught the Japanese by surprise." [4]

It is true that such indiscriminate bombing of civilian centers, essentially aerial terrorism, was a tactical bridge that had been crossed earlier by Japan, Germany, Britain and, in 1944, the United States.[5] It is also true that if Japan had surrendered after its military position became untenable in 1944 or early 1945, massive loss of civilian and military Japanese lives in the home islands, Okinawa and Manchuria could have been avoided. Both arguments are valid, but neither bears directly on the morality of the American conduct itself. Nonetheless, controversial commemorations involving the *Enola Gay* in 1995 and 2005 make clear that many Americans believe the atomic bomb, and by extension the lesser-known firebombing campaign, saved Allied and Japanese lives by forcing Japan's surrender prior to an invasion, and were therefore justified.

In the end, we did not delve as deeply as I would have wished into American war responsibility. Faced with the dilemma of too much course content and not enough class sessions, I tried instead to fill in gaps and clear up misconceptions about Japanese war responsibility. Without that knowledge base, I reasoned, there is little likelihood of my students ever progressing to a more balanced, nuanced perspective.[6]

JAPAN AS VICTIMIZER

"We know that Japan did bad things during the war, but every country did bad things. We want peace." This composite quotation perhaps sums up the prevailing view of World War II among my students and perhaps young Japanese at large. I attempted to encourage further reflection by preparing two handouts.

The first handout posed the question: Was Japan a victim or victimizer during the Asia-Pacific War? The answer is certainly both. I conceded that *kenka ryosei bai*, a well-known expression meaning "both sides are at fault in a quarrel," is at some level true enough. But the handout noted that approximately three million Japanese died as a result of the war and the majority of them were military personnel. About 20 million non-Japanese Asians died and most of them were civilians. At this starkest level, the victimizer-to-victim ratio was thus around seven to one.

The second handout consisted of a chart with three vertical columns. Entries in the left column included aggressive war, medical experiments, poisonous gas, germ warfare, massacre of civilians, sexual slavery, forced labor, and systematic torture. There were check marks in the center column, under "Japan," for all these types of war conduct but nothing under the right column, headed "U.S./Allies." Both Japan and the U.S. received check marks for indiscriminate aerial bombing, while America alone committed atomic bombings.

This approach challenged the commonly held, passively acquired assumptions that all nations suffered in equal measure and all combatants behaved in similar ways. For most students this was clearly new information; not all seemed immediately inclined to accept it. Far from being deniers or revisionists, they had simply never encountered these historical facts in any coherent fashion. Fuller Japanese knowledge of the nature and degree of suffering inflicted upon Asian neighbors, the prime precondition for authentic reconciliation, would greatly enhance peace-building and nuclear disarmament efforts throughout the region.[7]

Some sense of urgency should accompany this educational task. Acrimonious events throughout 2005 involving Japan, China and the Koreans confirm that the history problem is becoming more, not less, pressing with the passage of time and rising nationalism. While reconciliation with South Korea has achieved a measure of success, in late August Seoul declared that its 1965 treaty with Japan does not erase Tokyo's legal responsibility for military sexual slavery and forced labor. In conjunction with its historical truth commission, the South Korean government is supporting victims' redress efforts, although it will not pursue official state claims against Japan on their behalf. As influential voices in Japan more loudly minimize and excuse Japan's prewar and wartime actions, the region's history gap is widening.

AMERICA'S UNSETTLED ACCOUNTS

Two recent personal experiences have led me to rethink my classroom approach to war responsibility. One was the review conference for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) held at the United Nations in May 2005. In April I was asked to revise the English translation of a Nagasaki hibakusha's firsthand account of that August 9 morning. Kamikawa Hitoshi attended the NPT conference and distributed the English account there and during visits to New York City schools.

The ten-year-old Kamikawa was taking his five-year-old sister to the air raid shelter when the bomb detonated. "The fireball must have been ten or twenty times as bright as the sun. Being blown by the bomb blast, I hurried back to my house. 'Where is Nobuko?' my mother cried as soon as I returned without my little sister. My mother's words made me notice that Nobuko's little hand had separated from mine when we were hit by the flash. Mother and I ran out of the house. We found the small heap covered with some fence boards, bricks, wall soil, and roof tiles. 'Maybe this is it!' I cried. Mother cleared away the debris with all her might. She rescued my little sister Nobuko at last. Nobuko was lying on her face on the stone pavement, with blood oozing from her forehead."

Kamikawa's sister survived, but on August 12 he and an uncle went searching on foot for relatives living 800 meters from ground zero. "The nearer we approached to the hypocenter, although we did not yet know what the bomb was or where the hypocenter was, the more tragic the damage became. It was far beyond my comprehension. There were lots of dead bodies in and along the river; their strength must have drained away there while looking for water. There were also some carbonized dead bodies still sitting on the seats in the tramcar, which had been all burned except for half-melted iron. While passing through the city, I saw many half-burned dead bodies and corpses crushed by debris being cremated here and there using old wood." Kamikawa's relatives were never found.[8]



3. The aftermath at the hypocenter: surveying Nagasaki's devastated Matsuyama district.

The second personal experience involved an elderly woman from church, a friend with whom I had previously discussed the war in general terms. On June 19, 1945, about 200 American B-29s bombed Fukuoka, leveling the city and killing some 2,000 people. My friend's family lost their home and she suffered badly for many years. Last June, after watching a television documentary commemorating the Fukuoka firebombing, she wrote me a lengthy email detailing her memories. I apologized to my friend "as an American."

The choice of yardsticks employed for measuring war responsibility depends on whether the object of examination is one's own nation or someone else's, as well as on whether one was directly or indirectly involved in the events. As the American journalist Charles Burress recently asked, "Wouldn't the case for greater Japanese contrition be stronger if others were willing to take the German medicine they prescribe for Japan?"[9]

Moral responsibility for inhumane war conduct cannot lie solely with defeated peoples, even when victors manage to frame complex conflicts in nationalistic terms of good versus evil. War crimes tribunals at Tokyo and Nuremberg scrutinized some of the most egregious transgressions of Japan and Germany, but

perpetrators of war atrocities were not confined to the Axis side. The firebombing and atomic bombing of Japanese cities, along with the mistreatment of Japanese Americans, confirm that the United States was far from blameless. Self-examination may be most necessary, and most difficult, when victorious nations assume control of historical narratives that omit their own culpability, often for purposes of legitimizing state power.

An American hard look in the mirror would facilitate the process of reconciliation in Northeast Asia, where transgenerational responsibility for Japanese war conduct will continue to shape the political landscape in the early twenty-first century. Even as elderly men and women with firsthand experience as victims pass from the scene, historical claims for recognition and restitution will continue to be advanced by their children and grandchildren, quite possibly with increased determination.[10] These claims will be either engaged or rebuffed by the descendants of Japan's wartime generation, by Japanese like the students in my class.

The basic lesson: war responsibility starts at home. Perry and his black ships will be dropped from the "Japan and America" syllabus next semester. My students and I will spend more time negotiating questions, still unresolved after sixty years, about who ought to make amends for what.

ENDNOTES

- [1] See Mark Selden, "Remembering 'The Good War': The Atomic Bombing and the Internment of Japanese-Americans in U.S. History Textbooks." Available at [Japan Focus](#), 8 May 2005.
- [2] See William Underwood, "Chinese Forced Labor, the Japanese Government and the Prospects for Redress." Available at [Japan Focus](#), 8 July 2005.
- [3] The August 28, 2003, statement is available at the Japan House of Representatives [homepage](#). The United States, even in cases involving American former POWs, strongly supports Japan's position that all individual legal claims have been settled by postwar treaties and other state-to-state agreements. Inconsistently, the American government played a key role in the establishment by the German government and corporations in 2000 of a major compensation fund for forced labor.
- [4] United States Strategic Bombing Survey Summary Report (Pacific War). Washington, D.C., 1 July 1946. [Available](#)
- [5] Evolution of the practice is described in Tanaka Yuki, "Firebombing and Atom Bombing: A Historical Perspective on Indiscriminate Bombing." Japan Focus, 16 May 2005. [Available](#).
- [6] For a thoughtful discussion of striking a balance in this area, see Takahashi Tetsuya, "Why Must Japan Apologize for War while the United States Has Not Apologized for the Atomic Bombing? Reply to a Young Japanese." Sekai, April 2001. English translation [available](#).
- [7] One domestic consequence of thin historical consciousness among Japanese young people is that their awareness even of atomic bomb victimization is waning, with worrisome implications for the future of Japan's peace and anti-nuclear movements. See Lawrence S. Wittner, "Reflections on Hiroshima and the Anti-Nuclear Movement." Japan Focus, 16 July 2005. [available](#). See also Tanaka Yuki, "The Hibakusha Voice and the Future of the Anti-Nuclear Movement." Japan Focus, date not given. [Available](#).
- [8] Kamikawa's one-page English account is available from the author.
- [9] Charles Burrell, "Japan and the German Sackcloth: Other Countries Should Atone for War Crimes." San Francisco Chronicle, 17 July 2005.
- [10] Implications of this generational transition are discussed in Laura Hein, "Remembrance of World War II and the Postwar in the United States and Japan." Japan Focus, 31 May 2005. [Available](#).

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