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Addressing Japan's 'Comfort Women' Issue From an Academic Standpoint 日本の「慰安婦」問題に学術的観点から対処するとは

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Contesting the Kōno Statement

On 4 August 1993, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei issued an official declaration on the issue of the so-called 'comfort women' - women recruited to work in a large network of brothels operated by the Japanese military during the Asia-Pacific War, where many suffered terrible sexual and other physical and mental abuse, and many died. The declaration, based on a study conducted by the Japanese government, read in part as follows:

> Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day... The Government study has revealed that in many cases [the comfort women] were recruited against their own will, through coaxing coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere.

The Kōno Declaration went on to express the government's 'sincere apologies and remorse' to the women concerned, and to say:

> We shall face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterated our firm determination never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history.

Kōno's statement resulted not only from demands for an apology from countries like Korea, where many 'comfort women' had been recruited, but also from the work of many grassroots groups within Japan, who had worked tirelessly to seek recompense for the victims. The study carried out by the Japanese government involved the collection of official documents showing army involvement in the control and running of the 'comfort station' system. Testimony was also collected from sixteen former 'comfort women' in Korea, but not from victims of the system in more than a dozen other Asian countries.

Korean comfort women and Jan Ruff-O'Herne visiting Japan around 1993

Ever since 1993, the Kōno Declaration has been a target of the Japanese political right, who insist that it dishonored Japan's dignity. In 2007, during the first Abe administration, the cabinet issued a 'decision' (kakugi kettei) which partially retracted the Kōno Declaration, denying that Japanese military or government officials had been personally involved in forcible recruitment of 'comfort women'.

On 20 February this year, Restoration Party politician Yamada Hiroshi launched a fierce and emotional attack on the Kōno Declaration in the Japanese Diet. Yamada's ammunition for this attack included a statement by Ishihara Nobuo, who had been Deputy Cabinet Secretary at the time when the Kōno Declaration was issued. Ishihara (as he has done several times in public) argued that Japan had bowed to pressure from South Korea in devising the wording of the Declaration and in its use of the testimony of the sixteen comfort women. By agreement with the women, the content of their testimony has never been made public. Ishihara and Yamada imply that the women's testimony of forced recruitment was false, and demand that this testimony should be made public and 're-investigated' by the government.

Suga Yoshihide, Chief Cabinet Secretary in the present Abe government, responded by announcing that the government now intends to re-examine the testimony and evidence gathered in 1993. According to Japanese newspaper reports, Prime Minister Abe went on to applaud Yamada for his intervention, stating that 'thanks to your questions, public support for a possible reexamination of the comfort women statements is high'.

The official stance of the Japanese government on the issue is that during the first Abe government, a cabinet decision was made regarding this issue. Based on this, the Abe government believes it is ideal for more discussions to be had in the future in regard to this issue from an academic stand point as historians and intellectuals are currently conducting research on various issues surrounding comfort women.

History and Responsibility

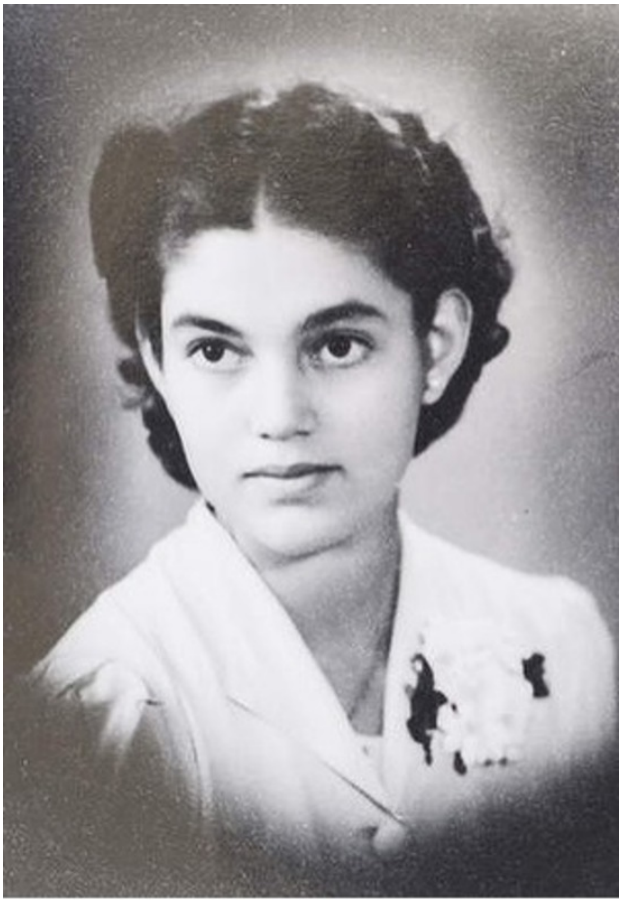
There are, of course, many aspects of the 'comfort women's' history that need more academic research. Surprisingly little is known, for example, about the stories of the many Japanese women recruited to work in the military's sexual empire. A serious plan by the Japanese government to promote research on the history of the 'comfort women' issue, and to communicate that history to the public (as promised by the Kōno Declaration), would be welcomed.

Genuine historical research should begin with a careful, responsible and open-minded review of the existing academic literature and other relevant documentation such as memoirs by Japanese officials and soldiers, and accounts by 'comfort women'. It would involve a willingness to look at the evidence as a whole, and draw balanced conclusions from that evidence, even if those conclusions turn out to be politically inconvenient. This is not a simple process. Many military and government documents were

deliberately destroyed at the end of the war. Much evidence on the 'comfort women' issue is oral testimony, which does need to be used with care, as human memories are fallible and stories may sometimes be altered in the telling (for a good discussion of this issue, see Soh 2008). Official documents too need to be read with care, since they may be designed to conceal as much as to reveal the truth.

In spite of these difficulties, a very large amount of information on the 'comfort women' has already been collected by Japanese and international academic researchers, UN enquiries, the Japanese government, NGO groups, including evidence collected for a number of court cases (see references below). This information unequivocally documents the existence of a vast network of 'comfort stations' throughout the empire and including the front lines of battle. The system was a complex one. Some 'comfort stations' were operated directly by the military; others by civilians for military use. Some were temporary and local, created by troops on the ground rather than by command from on high. Many thousands of women were recruited in various ways, sometimes by members of the military but often by brokers, who commonly used deceptive promises of work in factories or restaurants to lure women into 'comfort stations'. Once there, some women were physically imprisoned, but even those who were allowed out could rarely escape, as most had been transported to places hundreds or thousands of miles from their homes, frequently on Japanese navy ships, and had no means of return.

The attack on the Kōno Declaration focuses on the claim that there are no official documents showing the direct engagement of the Japanese military in the forcible drafting and transportation of 'comfort women'. This is sometimes expanded into a claim that there is no evidence of forcible recruitment at all. But in fact there is very credible testimony from numerous women that they were directly and violently abducted by Japanese soldiers. Among them is Jan Ruff-O'Herne, a Dutch citizen, who was forcibly taken by the military to a 'comfort station' in Indonesia, and who, at age 91, courageously continues to speak out on behalf of the former 'former comfort women'. Responding to the latest Japanese government statement, Mrs. Ruff-O'Herne says, 'it's just hideous to not acknowledge it, there are so many witnesses who have spoken out about this' (The Age newspaper, 25 February 2014).



Jan Ruff at approximately age seventeen before being captured by the Japanese

Testimony of direct forcible abduction by Japanese military or police has also come from victims and other witnesses in many countries including China (see, for example, the Hainan Net website, listed below), the Philippines and Taiwan (see here), Vietnam and Indonesia (see 'Reference Materials of the Press Conference on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, on the web site of the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility, listed below).

There is also abundant credible testimony of recruitment by brokers who worked closely with Japanese military or police using deception to lure women to 'comfort stations'; and even where women were recruited by third parties, this in no way diminishes the responsibility of the Japanese military on whose behalf the brokers were working. Japanese military records, soldiers' diaries and recorded recollections by veterans unmistakably record the close involvement of the military in the recruitment, transport and organization of women. Just one of numerous examples of such evidence is an Imperial Japanese Navy document recording the 'collection of native women' for a 'comfort station' in Balikpapan, Indonesia, carried out under the 'management' of the chief accounts officer of a local Japanese naval unit. The chief accounts officer in question (the document notes) was Nakasone Yasuhiro, who went on to serve as prime minister of Japan from 1982 to 1987, and is now a Liberal Democratic Party elder statesman. This document was presented and discussed in the Japanese Diet by an opposition parliamentarian in May 2013, but has been ignored in the recent debate.

Will the Japanese government's planned study examine all this evidence and produce a balanced conclusion? Or has the conclusion already been determined before the research is even begun? Will the 'discussions from an academic view point' follow genuinely scholarly practices, or will they be an exercise in that pseudo-scholarship which (as Hannah Arendt put it) 'destroys its object'? Will they aim to create memory and understanding of this history, or to un-make memory by selecting and sewing together a few disconnected fragments into a veil that distorts and conceals the past?

The Road Forward

A second prong in the attack on the Kōno Declaration is the claim that all countries have had equivalents of the 'comfort women' system in wartime: an argument made, for example, by the new Director General of NHK Momii Katsuto who, specifically citing France and Germany, stated that similar systems 'existed everywhere in Europe' during the war.

Of course Japan is far from being the only country whose military has been guilty of sexual violence in war. Momii is incorrect to suggest that military-run networks of brothels existed throughout wartime Europe; but they have existed in places outside the Japanese empire. In colonial India, for example, British rulers authorized a system of brothels in military cantonments between the 1850s and the 1880s. Troops from many counties have been responsible for sexual violence against women in occupied territories - including in occupied Japan itself, where a short-lived system of government-authorized brothels specifically for the use of the allied occupying forces existed between 1945 and 1946, and where events like the Kokura riot of July 1950 resulted in the reported rape of dozens of women by US troops. The system of military 'comfort stations' created in the Japanese empire was not unprecedented in nature; but it was unprecedented in scale, and the misery it caused continues to afflict its victims and their families to this day.

The Japanese government must confront its nation's past with honesty if it is to regain the trust of invaded and colonized nations such as China and Korea who now number among its major trade partners. And if it is to stand among those nations seeking to prevent sexual violence in the contemporary world. Other countries like Britain and the US can help this process by facing up to their own dark histories, while committing themselves to new ways to prevent sexual violence in contemporary war zones and within their military forces. We should also remember, celebrate and seek to empower the work of Japanese citizens groups like the Violence Against Women in War Network (VAWW-NET Japan) which have worked for so long to seek justice for the 'comfort women'. The

history of the 'comfort women' is not (as some commentators in both countries wish to portray it) an issue of 'Japanese-versus-Koreans'. It is an issue of human rights and human dignity whose implications extend throughout East Asia and beyond.

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- ARCHIVAL SOURCES ON THE COMFORT WOMEN ISSUE INCLUDE the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, Radhika - Coomaraswamy, 1996

- the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Gay J. McDougall, 1998

- Digital Museum – The Comfort Women Issue and the Asian Women's Fund (containing many key documents on the issue)

- The Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility

- Women's Active Museum on War and Peace

- Hainan Net

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