

# JAPAN

↓ Annika Brockschmidt (Podcast host)

↓ Fumiko Ishioka (Guest)

Welcome to the second episode of histoPOD. histoPOD is one part of histoCON:LINE which is the first digital edition of the event series histoCON organized by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. histoCON:LINE aims to commemorate the end of World War II from multiple and international perspectives. My name is Annika Brockschmidt. Today we are going to take a look at how the Holocaust is taught and remembered in Japan. Our expert today will be able to tell us all about how Japan deals with the memory of the Holocaust, how it deals with its own past as Nazi Germany's ally, and why she thinks it is so important for Japanese children to learn about the Holocaust today.

**My name is Fumiko Ishioka. I am the director of the Tokyo Holocaust Education Resource Center. It is a non-governmental organization, using the history of the Holocaust as an educational tool. To teach, to educate kids in Japan about human rights and the values such as tolerance and respect for each other.**

One way of teaching the Holocaust is to speak with survivors, which is exactly what Fumiko has been doing.

**There are actually-, there were two survivors of the Holocaust living in Japan, one of them passed away. He was originally from Poland and was hiding in the ghetto. We visited schools with him, but the other Holocaust survivor is originally from Hungary, and he never shared experience before. But three years ago, he started to join our activities and we sometimes visit schools together.**

Without the institutes work though, there are not many instances where the average Japanese citizen comes into contact with information about The Holocaust, unless, of course, they are already interested in this part of history.

**There are also lots of books and films and documentaries, translated in Japanese and shown here if you are interested in learning the history, but people do not see the direct connection to the Japanese history. So, the amount of available resources does not match the level of understanding among the Japanese. Each year, we have new Holocaust movies imported from the US or nowadays we have a lot of movies made in Germany. The opportunity for learning about the Holocaust is increasing these days in Japan, I would say.**

But what does that mean for the schools? Is the Holocaust even on the curriculum? Is it taught in history class or do students normally not hear about it in school at all?

**It is in the school textbooks. But I would not say it is in the curriculum. So, it really depends on the teachers. If they are interested in teaching the Holocaust, they will introduce it. But it is not just about the history of the Holocaust. But we have a challenge with history education. Students are still encouraged to memorize dates and facts and what happened when and they are not encouraged to have a deep discussion or not encouraged enough to ask questions. It is really difficult to give you a general idea of how it is taught at formal school systems.**

Another challenge when it comes to teaching the Holocaust in Japan is this.

**Many Japanese people do not see the direct connection. For most of the Japanese, it is something that happened in Europe.**

Which is particularly important for Fumiko when she teaches about the Holocaust is to make clear that Jews were not just killed during the war, but that they were targeted because they were Jews. That they were the victims of relentless persecution.

**We wanted to stress the fact that Anne Frank was not killed in the bomb and she was the target of persecution. With that understanding we-. So, the kids in Japan can also look back on their own society and think about the discrimination and prejudice that still exist in our society. I visited about 1200 schools all over Japan in the past two years, and we have reached approximately 200,000 kids. We have been trying to introduce this Holocaust education in Japan.**

But not only are institutes like Fumiko's is trying to bring Holocaust education to the schools. Something else has changed. Japanese people have been able to see the sides where the mass murder of the Jewish people happened.

**Many Japanese people traveled to Auschwitz and not just Auschwitz, but they also go to Germany. And they visit the concentration campsites.**

And yet, even though progress has been made, there is one area that is still tough to talk about in Japanese society today. And we will get to the why in a second. The Japanese involvement with Nazi Germany.

**When Japanese people talk about the Holocaust, they-, when they go see a film about the Holocaust, I do not believe that there is much talk about this alliance between Japan and Germany.**

Let us stay with the history for a moment. Japan and Nazi Germany were allies. In Germany, Jews were facing persecution even before the war. But what was the situation for Jews in Japan?

**There was a small Jewish community in the port cities of Yokohama, Kobe, and they were Jewish merchants. And the number increased when they received Jewish refugees escaping from the Russian Revolution.**

When the war broke out, refugees arrived in Japan. Jewish refugees.

**They were escaping from the Nazi Soviet-occupied Poland through Lithuania because they had the transit visas. And so, they stayed mainly in the city called Kobe. It is the port city. And it was the Japanese government's policy at that time to treat Jews like other foreigners in matters of immigration, and ordinary people also saw them treat them just like they treat other foreigners. There was anti-Semitism imported in Japan. There was this Japanese translation of anti-Semitic publications such as the protocols of the Elders of Zion. It was circulated in Japan. But the general public, I do not believe they could see the difference in-, Kobe was the city, as I said, it is an international port city. So, a lot of foreigners there. So, they were trading just like other foreigners.**

This cannot have been to the liking of the Nazis that their ally was taking in Jewish refugees. But what the exact pressures were that the Germans put on Japan, and what that looked like is still the subject of research today. Unfortunately, this year, the pandemic made everything more chaotic.

**These groups of Japanese scholars were going to organize this symposium this year, actually just last month, but it was postponed till next year. The scholars are still trying to examine what the relationship was, what kind of pressures the Japanese government had from Germany. And but as I said, the official Japanese policy was to treat Jewish like just like other foreigners. So, there was this Nazi called Josef Meisinger who had been a horrible murderer in Poland. And he came to Japan, and-, or some publications that he really pressured the Japanese government and they planned the killing of Jewish people in Shanghai. But I just recently read the report by a different scholar saying that that is not the case. And so, it is-, I think it is still in the process of examination.**

And so, while Japan did not actively take part in the Holocaust, they have their own pasts to reckon with, namely the war crimes that Japanese Soldiers committed in Asia. We will take a look at some of the most important ones. Content warning: There will be mentioning of sexual violence and violence in general. If you do not wish to hear this, hit the skip button

a few times. The first big topic to approach here is that of the so-called Korean comfort women. Who were they?

A comfort woman is a euphemism that referred to women, mostly Koreans, but also Chinese, Southeast Asians, and Dutch, and a small number of Japanese who were forced to work in frontline brothels to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers during World War II. In the early 90s, one of the victims, former Korean comfort woman spoke out for the first time and other women followed and came forward following the official apology from the then Japanese Prime Minister. Japanese Government set up the Asian women's fund and called for Private donations to pay compensation to former comfort women. We have been caught up in such debate over whether the brothels were officially run by the Japanese military or it was acts of individual soldiers, or whether these women were brought in by Korean recruiters, et cetera. But when these former comfort women speak out, the nationalists tend to dismiss their whole experience as lies. There is this NGO that runs a museum in Tokyo that shows the history of comfort women. They have received a bomb threat demanding they remove displace.

And I also wanted to give you two more examples of why some people shy away from talking about it or remain silent. One example is history texts books. The majority of the history textbooks in Japan have long omitted the description of comfort women. But several years ago, a group of teachers published a textbook, which mentioned comfort women and it passed the government screening. So, there were Junior High Schools, which started using that textbook. But these schools then received hundreds of phone calls and postcards objecting to their use of such history textbook, saying that it is anti-Japanese, or it is masochistic.

And the other example is this art festival in the city of Nagoya last year. A section of the exhibition was shut down to do an enormous amount of angry phone calls and threats on social media by online nationalists, one of the exhibits was a statue of a girl, a work by South Korean artists that represents comfort women. The exhibit later was opened again. But the world politicians and the mayor who were against reopening the exhibit, saying that it is anti-Japanese. So, there is this huge debate over freedom of expression and political pressure still continues as the voice of nationalists gets louder like this. There is a chilling atmosphere that encourages society to stay away from any discussion that is related to wartime history.

Another subject that is not often talked about when it comes to Japanese war crimes in Asia in Japan itself is the unit 731.

Unit 731 is a biological warfare unit of the Japanese military in northeastern China. They conducted experiments on Chinese civilians during the war, as they were developing chemical and biological weapons. According to the testimonies of the former members of the Union, these Chinese victims were infected with typhus and some were subjected to vivisection, etcetera.

These former members were not held accountable after the war because of the deal with the US who wanted access to their research. I remember at one of the first events my center organized among the participants, there was a doctor who stood up and started talking about the experiments he conducted as a member of the unit during the war.

There were times, however, where it looked like Japan was starting to reckon with its own violent past, at least a little bit.

They were times when it was not a taboo. In the 80s, there was a-, was like a social movement where teachers and mothers and the civil society come together and organize exhibitions on their own local wartime history. And it was really like a phenomenon that spread across the country. And it is called "Exhibition of wars for peace". And local government, and local board of education at the time showed support if only on paper. And it was organized every year in summer around the War Memorial Day in August. And still today, but the exhibition showed not just the suffering of the Japanese people but also Japanese aggression in Asia. And I remember it showed Nanjing Massacre it showed pictures related to the unit 731 which was biological warfare unit in northern

China and the exhibition often had the title or a caption with the term 15 Years War, which means that the war started with the Japanese invasion in China in 1931 and ended in 1945. And I also remember, at the exhibition venues, former soldiers or former member of the unit 731 would talk about their experience, they make confessions.

So, in the 80s, the reconciliation was an agenda. And many people will recognize the importance of facing the past and that led to the openings of many, many peace-, so-called peace museums, again across Japan in the 90s. One researcher was looking at these numbers - one researcher listed about 200 so-called peace museums in the world and one third was in Japan.

In the 80s and 90s, when I was growing up when we also saw democratization in South Korea and Taiwan, and there was also this first Korean comfort woman who came out and to talk about our experience that was in 1991. And there was a series of official apologies by the Japanese prime ministers in the early 90s.

But then things changed. And the number of factors helped people to power who wanted to change the narrative of the war. And two were not interested in coming to terms with Japanese war crimes at all. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Japan's drive for peace and reconciliation in the 80s, 90s suffered serious setbacks. It was also the time when the bubble economy collapsed, which was followed by these long years of economic slump. There is not a single wartime narrative in Japan. They have been nationalist who want to glorify the war dead and erase the stigma of defeat and this economic downturn, and anxieties for future globalization kind of fueled a new wave of nationalism and they would call the act of facing the past masochistic or the act of critically looking at the past history, anti-Japanese.

This development has also meant a change for some of the peace museums that Fumiko mentioned earlier. But it is not the same for every peace museum. Fumiko explains why.

Some peace museums are run by non-NGO-, non-governmental organization and some publicly funded and one example is that there is this peace Museum in Osaka city, the second biggest city in Japan and it is public-funded. And they use, they went through renewal in 2015. And in the new exhibit, I actually have not been there to see, actually see the new exhibits, but discussion of Japanese aggression and atrocity has been totally, completely removed. I read in the paper that the process of this change started with the nationalist campaigns to revise and undermine the exhibits, started in the 90s. And Osaka has a conservative local government. So, they are also pressured. And unfortunately, they went through this major change. And it is one example of this political pressure.

When something in today's politics comes up that touches on Japanese identity or the military, which in Japan is called the Self-Defense Force. The memory of the war is never far behind. Like in 2004.

In 2004, our Self-Defense force was sent to Iraq and there was a huge debate over Japan being remilitarized, Japan going back to the wartime aggression and these pacifists were outrageous with this government's action of sending the Self-Defense Force in Iraq. So, when we have such political issues come up, it always touches the wartime memory, but more so, with the current administration, second Abe administration in 2012, that we hear the word masochistic more often.

But what narrative would far right nationalists like to establish about Japan's role during the Second World War?

First of all, they were forced into the war by western colonial powers. What the administration itself does not say that explicitly. But when the Abe went through the cabinet reform in 2012, I believe the majority of the cabinet members belong to this organization called Japan conference in-, that is a group of people the ultra-right-wing nationalist group, which is insistent that Japan was forced into war by the western colonial powers in that Japan was, in fact, liberating Asian countries from the western colonial powers.

The revisionist version of Japanese history fabricated by nationalists has gained more traction in the past years. For them, it is not just about denying the past but shaping a certain image of Japan in the present.

For one thing, it is the nationalist government that does not want a discussion on Japanese aggression. But secondly, how these people see their history is deeply intertwined with their political agenda. So, nationalists want to envision a strong Japan and they desire to enhance Japan's power, wealth, and prestige. The Nationalists support the current administrations move toward re-militarization. And their voice is getting louder and louder.

In the light of the change of course by the Japanese government. A debate started about a certain article in the Japanese constitution, namely article nine. And again, history and how each side sees it plays a complex role in the discussion. This is quite a complicated issue. But Fumiko shed light on the issue for us, and why the article nine is so crucial for the culture of remembrance in Japan.

**Article nine is a war-renouncing clause of the Japanese constitution**, not only it renounces the use of military force as a means of settling international disputes. **It also prohibits the establishment of a military. The reality is; however, Japan has a military named Self-Defense Force.** The government has interpreted the Constitution the way the Self-Defense Force would not be unconstitutional, saying that they are not war potential, but only for Japans self-defense. But then what about the presence of US troops in Japan does it violate the Constitution's prohibition of war potential?

**The meaning and intent of Article nine has been much debated since the 1950s.** After the Cold War ended, the role of the Japanese Self-Defense Force expanded to participate, and the UN peacekeeping mission started in Cambodia. Japan also joined the US-led coalition in Iraq following the 9/11 terror attack on the US. There was again much debate as to what kind of personell can be sent to such a coalition. Under what kind of threat are they allowed to use weapons for the purpose of self-defense?

More recently, the government went through another reinterpretation of the constitution, which allowed this time collective self-defense. Meaning the use of force is allowed if it defends allies like the US under attack. It was beyond interpretation. **Tens of thousands of people including many young students, young people took to the streets to protest the government's move, saying it would allow Japanese troops to fight abroad.** In order to end all these debates, the current administration wants to clearly state the existence of Japan's self-defense force as a military in the constitution. Some who support the amendment say that the constitution was imposed by the US during the post-war occupation, and for nationalists, it is a humiliating symbol of defeat. They insist Japan should be able to protect the Japanese homeland by itself and cope with the growing military power of neighboring countries by changing the constitution. Those who oppose revisions say the article nine has significantly contributed to the peace after the end of World War II, and we must hold high our constitutions pacifist ideals. It is a positive contribution to global efforts to sustain peace.

So, I believe article nine represents the Japanese culture of memory. It sets an example of a reflection on Japan's past behavior in World War II. The debate over article nine has given people of Japan an opportunity to think about how Japan should face challenges in the 21st century. It also has a lot to do with the debate on how constitutions should define the balance of power between the individual and the state, what individual rights and freedoms should be asserted, or altered.

While it is progress that the history of the Holocaust is started to being taught in Japan, it is also tricky, because according to Fumiko, it offers a nationalist Japanese perspective and option to gloss over Japan's own violent past.

As long as we are discussing the history of the Holocaust we do not touch upon Japanese aggression. So, that is what I have been struggling to challenge.

And this is where Fumiko's Institute comes in, and Germany's history.

So, for example, this story of the Jewish refugees escaping from Europe to Japan because the Japanese diplomat issued transit visas. It is a very feel-good story. So, he is now all-over school textbooks. And there are new memorials in the city of Kobe where refugees arrived, and those people who are interested in this story of Japanese diplomats and Jewish refugees, they do not follow the whole journey of the refugees. They do not really know that some of the refugees were sent to Shanghai which was under Japanese military occupation.

The general approach to education in Japan is making it harder for Institutes like Fumiko's to achieve their goal.

What my organization has been trying to do is to really connect these dots in history. Not necessarily comparing this Japan and Germany's experience but really connect the histories and-, so that the kids in Japan can have a wider perspective. And also, the other things that have been really effective recently is that we have been introducing this culture of remembrance in Germany. And one thing that my organization does is this, **organizing the study tours to Berlin and I take them to the Nazi-related sites. And students are just really shocked to see these-, so many memorials and museums. And it naturally sparks conversation among them about Japanese history of the time. I see them talk about, why is it so different? Why can we not talk about the-, Why are we not educated about the Japanese aggression during the war? It is been quite effective.**

But confronting that problem opens up thought processes to students that might not have been encouraged before, to think about history on a more abstract level.

The reason why I use the history of the Holocaust is because it really encourages students to ask questions. That is not what students, in general, are encouraged to do, still, in today is Japan. So, on the one hand, I feel hopeful that because just ten days trip to Europe really changed them, I can see them. But at the same time, in Japan, these young people, the majority are remaining silent. They feel really pressured, if they speak because with this social media culture, that if you say something wrong, then people really attack you harshly. And so, there is an atmosphere of not being able to easily speak out or talk about sensitive subjects like Japanese aggression during the war.

So, what my organization is trying to do is to, first of all, encourage students to ask questions, but second of all, really to create a place where students can freely talk and share and have this open dialogue. And that is really possible when they are outside Japan, when they are traveling together. So, **we are introducing the history of the Holocaust, but we are encouraging students to think about what it means to us.** We would like to create an opportunity where students realize that how we see our past, and how we try to learn from the past, really shaped us today and our future, so twice a year, three times a year actually, we organize study tours to Europe twice for students and one for teachers.

I asked Fumiko about her own first encounter with the German culture of remembrance of the Holocaust. What it sparked in her?

When I, for the first time went to Germany and asked some people why do you remember the Nazi past? The answers that I received were that it is for human rights and democracy. And those keywords never really come up in Japanese society. When you think about-, when you educate young people about wartime history, you only encourage them to think about peace. It is a really vague concept. And you encourage kids to think about what they can do to contribute to world peace, but actually, students are-, do not know where to start, what to do. But the cultural remembrance in Germany, gives us a chance to think about-, **the cultural remembrance in Germany really gave us a more concrete idea of human rights and democracy and an opportunity to reflect on ourselves and the challenges that our society has.**

That was it from us this month. You can find more information about the histoPOD as well as various other offers on [www.histocon.de](http://www.histocon.de). To stay updated, please feel free to check the website on a regular basis as the histoCON:LINE team plans to successively expand the offers throughout the year. If you have further questions, reach out to the team via [histocon2020@bpb.de](mailto:histocon2020@bpb.de). The music we used is sincerely by Kevin MacLeod. Take care and stay healthy. Until next time.