

# Establishing a Comfort Women Memorial in the US or Europe

Written by Thomas J. Ward and William D. Lay

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THOMAS J. WARD AND WILLIAM D. LAY, JAN 30 2019

**This is an excerpt from *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States*.  
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The United States chose not to prosecute the officials responsible for the comfort women system. For the United States occupation forces in Japan after WWII, the priority for prosecution and punishment were Class A War Criminals, guilty of so-called "Crimes against the Peace," referring to those Japanese leaders who had planned and attacked the United States and its allies at the start of the war. The United States under the leadership of Supreme Commander Douglas MacArthur made the decision *not* to investigate or prosecute the perpetrators of the comfort women system, despite having testimonies and physical evidence available to them that established beyond a reasonable doubt that the system had existed and was operated by the Japanese military with the support of other branches of government, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The end of WWII marked the start of the Cold War. Soviet protégés quickly seized power across Central and Eastern Europe. In East Asia, Kim Il Sung, with Soviet support, soon rose to power in North Korea, based on a hasty agreement between the United States and the USSR that ceded Korea north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel to Soviet influence in return for Soviet entry into WWII three months after the end of the war on the European front, just one week prior to Japan's surrender. In 1949 Mao Tse Tung and his supporters also emerged as the victors in China.

In the case of the European front, both the United States and the Soviet Union arranged clemency and safe passage for some key German actors in the war, especially scientists and spies. These individuals received their freedom or reduced sentences in exchange for valuable information related to Germany's advanced missile and nuclear weaponry development and other strategic intelligence. In the case of Japan, the United States, witnessing the new threat posed by the Soviet Union and its rising Asian allies, offered clemency in exchange for information to Japanese researchers who were responsible for horrible atrocities against Chinese civilians in the infamous Unit 731 where Japan tested biological and chemical weapons on Chinese citizens.

The United States also rehabilitated some Japanese political leaders soon after the war including Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, who had served as Minister of Commerce and Industry in the Cabinet of War, and Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, who had ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Kishi was arrested at the end of the war and spent three years in prison where he awaited trial as an alleged Class A War Criminal. The United States identified him as someone who could play a productive role in the future of Japan and in defending the Pacific from the threat of the Soviet Union and its emerging Asian allies.[1] He was released and would eventually become Prime Minister. Prime Minister Kishi was but one among numerous individuals who had served in the Tojo cabinet and the Japanese military yet eventually joined the U.S.-Japan partnership. What do officials in the United States need to be aware of as they contemplate whether or not to establish a memorial for the comfort women?

Municipal, state, and federal officials in today's America have given their approval to the monuments in their jurisdictions. These memorials recall the tribulation endured by thousands of victims of the Japanese military's comfort women system during and prior to WWII. The memorials single out Japan for creating and implementing the

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system that trafficked these women and girls against their will and forever tarnished their integrity and quality of life.

Charges against Japan for its role in creating and presiding over the dehumanizing conditions of the comfort women system are justified. Nevertheless, the anti-Japan rather than the pro-comfort women narrative advanced by CSOs in the United States, such as the KAFC and the Chinese-American Comfort Women Justice Coalition, do not further reconciliation and healing. For its part, the narrative advanced by the Global Alliance for Historical Truth (GAHT), which supports Japanese ultranationalist views on the comfort women conveniently rejects the manifest evidence of Japan's central role in creating the comfort women system.

This bitter battle of narratives jeopardizes efforts by the United States and the democracies of Japan and Korea to promote rule of law and democratic values in East Asia at a time when China remains ambivalent about the value of the rule of law versus the dictates of the Communist Party.

Americans who hold office in the local, state, or federal government need not choose between the politicized, carefully crafted narratives of the supporters and detractors of the comfort women statues. Indeed, American local government officials asked to choose between these two narratives should be aware that the United States, not Japan, decided against prosecuting those responsible for the creation and implementation of the comfort women system. Those Japanese responsible for the coercive recruitment and assignment of Dutch women to comfort stations were tried after the war and the leader in this, Japanese Army Major Keiji Okada, was executed for his role.[2] It was an American choice not to show the same judicial vigilance towards those responsible for crimes against Asian women.

The United States has been an active actor in the comfort women issue. U.S. military leadership allowed American military forces to use the comfort women system between August 1945 and March 1946. The U.S. Supreme Command censored the press in Japan and Korea for decades after the war, prohibiting newspapers from reporting on the thousands of cases of sexual assault and rape allegedly committed by U.S. military forces during the occupation of Japan. For 72 years, ten times longer than the existence of Japan's comfort station system, the U.S. military has enabled and patronized a massive prostitution ring in East Asia, which has compromised the integrity of young women from Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. Many of these women have also been deceived and trafficked against their will under circumstances similar to those faced by the comfort women during World War. Commenting on this, Dr. Yuki Tanaka, one of the pioneers in exposing Japan's comfort women system, has undertaken a critical study of both Japan's WWII comfort women system and what followed under the American occupation. Tanaka critically assesses the status and social conditions of Asia's women since the U.S. occupation and argues that "far from implementing 'democratization policies,'" for women, the U.S. occupation "actively participated in their subjugation." [3]

Should monuments in the United States ignore the camp town brothels that have surrounded U.S. military camps in Korea for more than 70 years? Should memorials in the United States conceal that many of the women suffering this abuse today are young Filipina women, typically deceived by Korean and Japanese *entremetteurs* into coming to Korea and Japan? [4] Like the original Korean and Taiwanese comfort women, young Filipinas are being promised positions as servers and entertainers, only to find themselves forced to serve as indentured sex workers. [5] If the United States' role in this terrible chapter of history was revealed, the monuments would do far more good than they do presently by engaging solely in Japan bashing.

In the case of the comfort women, the United States was not only neglectful in failing to undertake sufficient investigation and to seek justice for the victims but it also patronized the system in the first six months of the U.S. occupation of Japan. The United States numbers among the culpable actors in this tragic chapter of history not only because of its use of the comfort women system after the war but because of U.S. forces' continued patronage of a vast prostitution network across Korea and Japan since then. Omitting reference to American participation in the comfort women tragedy is akin to an American city erecting a monument that denounces the treatment of African slaves by the Dutch or Portuguese during their transport to the United States while ignoring the horrors that they faced once they arrived here.

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## Notes

[1] Clyde Haberman, "Nobusuke Kishi, Ex-Tokyo Leader," *New York Times*, August 8, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/08/obituaries/nobusuke-kishi-ex-tokyo-leader.html>.

[2] "Women Made to Become Comfort Women—Netherlands," Asian Women's Fund, <http://www.awf.or.jp/e1/netherlands.html>.

[3] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*, 165.

[4] "Court Rules in Favor," *Korea JoongAng Daily*.

[5] "Court Rules in Favor," *Korea JoongAng Daily*.

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## About the author:

**Thomas J. Ward** serves as Dean of the University of Bridgeport's College of Public and International Affairs. An honors graduate of the Sorbonne and a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Notre Dame, he did his doctoral studies in Political Economy and International Education at the Catholic Institute of Paris and De La Salle University in the Philippines. He teaches graduate courses in International Conflict and Negotiation and Political and Economic Integration. A former Fulbright scholar, he has lectured at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and has been a Visiting Research Fellow at Academic Sinica in Taipei. His research on the comfort women issue has been published in *East Asia* and *Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*.

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