The Comfort Women Controversy in the American Public Square

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This is an excerpt from *Park Statue Politics: World War II Comfort Women Memorials in the United States*. Get your free copy here.

The "Statue of Peace" approved by the Glendale, California City Council is a replica of the statue located in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The first line reads, "I was a sex slave of Japanese Military."[1] During WWII, the U.S. government interned between 110,000 and 120,000 Japanese-Americans under the authority of President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, issued February 19, 1942. Glendale is located 35 minutes by car from Pomona, California where more than 5,000 Japanese-Americans were held in a detention camp between April and September 1942. Some of the young men were later released and joined the U.S. war effort. They number among the most decorated American soldiers in WWII. The 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regional Combat Team, where such soldiers often served while family members continued to intern in the camps, "earned more than 4,000 Purple Hearts, 560 Silver Stars, seven Presidential Unit Citations and 21 Medals of Honor."[2] The descendants of those herded into the internment camps have been in the United States for at least four generations, unlike the first generation Korean-Americans who successfully lobbied for the Glendale statue. There is no evidence that the Glendale Council considered the impact that the quote "I was a sex slave of Japanese Military" might have on the feelings of those Americans of Japanese descent whose parents and grandparents had interned in the camps while their sons risked their lives for their country, the country that had unfairly sequestered and marginalized them. Nowhere in California is there a statue of a young Japanese-American girl that reads, "I was the prisoner of a racist war-time America."

A Narrative in Denial of the U.S. Military's Mistreatment of Japanese Civilians

In 1980 under mounting pressure from the Japanese American Citizens League and other organizations seeking redress, President Jimmy Carter appointed the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians to investigate the camps. The Commission's report found little evidence of Japanese-American disloyalty at the time of the war. In 1988 Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which apologized for the internment on behalf of the U.S. government and authorized a modest payment to each survivor. However, the apology and reparations did not include the thousands of people of Japanese descent who were abducted from Latin American countries by the U.S. military during WWII. The U.S. government, in fact, targeted over 6,000 men, women, and children of Japanese, German, Italian, and Jewish ancestry in 18 Latin American countries as potentially "dangerous enemy aliens." They were "seized from their homes and communities in those countries by the United States, forcibly deported, stripped of their passports and identity papers, transported over international borders, and imprisoned in concentration camps in the United States."[3] A review of records reveals that there was no specific evidence of subversive activities. Rather, they were to be used in hostage exchanges.[4] Details of their mistreatment were presented to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, D.C. on March 21, 2017. Several lawsuits involving such persons have been dismissed on technical grounds.[5]

The U.S. Military's Untold Use of the Comfort Women System in Japan

In the United States, the inscriptions on the comfort women statues make no reference to the use of comfort women by the U.S. military in the six months immediately after the war. They also fail to mention the vast complex of camp town brothels set up for American soldiers in Japan and Korea following WWII and the Korean conflict.

Prince Konoe Fumimaro, who served as Japan's Prime Minister during the Pacific War as well as its Deputy Prime Minister at the war's end, insisted that "comfort stations" be made available to arriving troops of the U.S. occupation of Japan following WWII. Japan's provisional leaders during the surrender feared that, with the arrival of the U.S. troops, Japan's young women might be subjected to "mass rape" and thus the need existed to set up a "comfort women system to protect Japanese women and girls."[6] Appealing to Japanese women's sense of patriotism, ads appeared in Japanese newspapers seeking prostitutes to provide sexual services to the arriving U.S. troops:

We are looking for women of the New Japan who will do their part in rebuilding our nation by doing the important deed of providing comforts for the American forces stationed in Japan. From ages 18 to 25. Shelter, food, and clothing provided.[7]

Because Japanese women were reticent to have contact with foreigners, the government needed to "sweeten the pot" for the women who were to be offered as "gifts from the vanquished."[8] These comfort women received "free of charge – sufficient daily food provisions, such as rice, beef, sugar and cooking oil," which, Yuki Tanaka points out, represented "an extraordinarily attractive offer at a time when the entire population of Japan was suffering from acute food shortages and malnutrition and starvation were widespread."[9] The goal of recruiting these women was to provide a wall of protection for Japan's "respectable women." [10] Besides those recruited directly through these methods, Tanaka points to warnings put in place for recruiters two months after the system's implementation indicating that, just as in the case of the Japanese military comfort women, some of the women who first joined the comfort stations set up for U.S. military "may have been deceived or trapped" into serving as prostitutes.[11] Because of their poverty and the poverty of their families[12], they also found themselves trapped and "enslaved by loan arrangements"[13] that they accepted for themselves or their families. Tanaka points out that although "little information is available about the cases of high-school students who were deceived or forced to become comfort women," there is, nonetheless, significant circumstantial evidence that Japanese gangster-related organizations played an important role in the post-war effort to "hunt and procure comfort women,"[14] which did reach into the high school girl population that had been working in munitions factories during the war.[15]

Between August 1945 and March 1946, U.S. occupation forces utilized the state-approved brothels the Japanese government had arranged for them. These brothels were assented to by the U.S. military, Tanaka cites a specific case of a U.S. Army General requesting comfort women services for specific dates for his troops and Tanaka maintains that there were other cases of requests by high ranking U.S. military.[16] The comfort stations bore "Shangri-La" style names such as "The International Palace" and "Dream Land." Even some high-ranking U.S. officials who traveled to Japan immediately after the war paid visits to these comfort stations. Under the new American occupation, the name "Special Comfort Facilities Association" was replaced by "Recreation and Amusement Associations (RAAs)."[17]

Anthropologist and comfort women research scholar C. Sarah Soh points to the need to expand accountability beyond Japan for the misogynous acts committed against women in WWII:

…the international community, including the United States and other nations of the Allied forces, must acknowledge their complicity in allowing their troops to engage in similar acts and crimes against women in vanquished Japan and postliberation Korea.[18]

By 1945 the war had ended. The day-to-day conditions that put the comfort women located on the war front in life-threatening circumstances no longer existed. Nevertheless, the physical hardship and working conditions that the comfort women faced during the U.S. occupation paralleled those of the WWII comfort stations. Tanaka believes that the major difference was that comfort women mobilized for U.S. troops were properly paid in most cases, whereas the comfort women mobilized for Japan's military were not.[19] Tanaka points out that at least some of the comfort women used by the U.S. military were Koreans. He references one dinner at a comfort station that allegedly involved

U.S. officers and Korean women that carried on until 2 or 3 AM.[20]

More than 10,000 Japanese comfort women were mobilized to service U.S. troops during the period between August 1945 and the end of March 1946. Comfort stations were deployed in all locations in Japan which had large concentrations of U.S. troops, including Tokyo, Osaka, Hiroshima, Okinawa, and Yokohama. In Tokyo alone, "the total number of comfort women and prostitutes gathered to serve the occupation troops at the end of 1945 was 10,000."[21] By October 1945, Hiroshima, at not even one-twentieth the size of Tokyo, had in place some 500 women to staff the comfort stations set up for the U.S. troops and "as expected, 'as soon as they were opened, all comfort stations were crowded with clients.'"[22]

The March 1946 Closure of Comfort Women Stations

On March 25, 1946, the General Headquarters of the Supreme Command designated all brothels, comfort stations, and houses of private prostitution "off-limits" for U.S. military personnel.[23] The unexpected prohibition of patronage by U.S. troops put more than 150,000 Japanese women out of work.[24] The reason for the change in policy was, on the one hand, a concern about the moral degradation of the American military that was outlined in a letter by U.S. military chaplains to General Douglas MacArthur. Furthermore, there was a preponderance of sexually transmitted disease (STDs), including venereal disease (VD) in the comfort women population and in the GIs:

As many as 200,000 VD cases mainly women in the sex industry were recorded in Japan in 1946. The majority of these women's clients were occupation troops. The brothels that the troops patronized were sanctioned both by the Japanese and Allied occupation authorities…[25]

Tanaka writes that "in March, 1946, the average VD rate for the entire U.S. occupation troops was 274 per 1,000; in other words, more than one in every four GIs was suffering from some form of VD."[26]

The U.S. Failure to Provide Justice for Comfort Women

The vast majority of the WWII comfort women were of Asian rather than European heritage, which has led to allegations that, unlike the case involving European women as comfort women where the tried and convicted Japanese military officer responsible was executed, the cases against Japan for use of Asian women were dismissed, presumably because Asian women were viewed as less important.[27] A prevalent mindset existed among both the Japanese and American military alike that women were expected to provide sexual services to the soldiers:

A common refrain is the idea that women are morally obliged to offer amenities to soldiers who are fighting at the risk of their lives, to defend their people and the nation. This kind of androcentric ideology has been, and still is, deeply rooted in most military forces and the societies that support them.[28]

This misogynist mindset also found itself reflected in the ways in which American soldiers treated the Japanese women doing clerical or translation work for the occupation forces. Tanaka cites numerous examples but this example confirms one's worst speculation:

In the case of one military site, the troops had assembled photos of the Japanese women working there. Those with a cross above the photo were women who had been "seduced" by one or more members of the U.S. military. Out of 200 photos posted there, according to one of the interpreters, only ten did not have the cross mark and these were "all newly employed women." [29]

Tanaka cites scores of examples of Japanese women workers who were sexually assaulted by GIs.[30]

The American Leadership's Attitudes on Sex and the U.S. Soldier

In 1945 a Catholic priest contacted New York Senator Robert Wagner and New York Congressman Hamilton Fish to

report an attitude prevalent among U.S. military that "it's necessary for a man to satisfy his desires, especially a married man."[31] As with the Japanese military in WWII, a popular view existed in the American military that, through controlled prostitution, it would be possible to reduce the spread of venereal disease. The American brass also felt that prostitution served as a "means to improve troop morale with relative safety." [32] Tanaka cites many cases of alleged rapes of Japanese women by members of the U.S. military. In Yokohama, a large city southeast of Tokyo, the city police reported 119 cases of rape of Japanese women by U.S. military between September and October 1945. Tanaka speculates that this represents less rather than the real number of cases; Japanese had reservations about reporting cases of rape of Japanese women to the U.S. military. They feared that it would cause more trouble for informants rather than improve the conditions that Japanese women faced.

Sharp censorship of any report of alleged malfeasance by United States troops was observed, based on guidelines released by the U.S. military leadership on September 19, 1945, which read that "there shall be no destructive criticism of the Allied Forces Occupation and nothing which might invite mistrust or resentment of the troops." [33] Comfort women researcher C. Sarah Soh observes that "the atrocities of Japan's imperial army against women have been amply aired in recent years, but few people in the United States are aware of heinous sexual crimes committed by American military men, most of which went unpublished due to the unequal Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the superpower United States and Korea." [34]

Voluntary or Forced Conscription into Sexual Service for the U.S. Military

One of many cases cited by Tanaka illustrates this tragic reality. This case involved a dozen young women conscripted into the system who had lost their parents and families in the Hiroshima bombing. Tanaka describes the incident:

A dozen high-school students, who were members of the Women's Volunteer Corps, were staying in a dormitory of one of the arsenals in Kure, a major naval port in Hiroshima prefecture. They had become war orphans when, on August 6, 1945, their families had perished and their homes had been destroyed by the atomic bomb. (Shortly after the bombing of Hiroshima, the younger sister of one of the dormitory students, Momoyama Chikako, had made the trip from Hiroshima to Kure on foot, only to fall dead in front of the factory gate on arrival due to radiation exposure.) As the students had nowhere to return to, they stayed at the dormitory, doing domestic work for the factory manager's family. One day, the above mentioned Yoneyama appeared at the factory, and gave the factory manager several tons of sugar and some packets of foreign-made cigarettes. Then the factory manager took Yoneyama to the dormitory. Yoneyama told the students about a 'task' – the same 'task' about which he had told the students in Kawasaki. They were put into a truck and taken away. First they were taken into a house in an unknown place where they were gang-raped by a number of GIs, and then were taken by the same truck to a building in another place they were again gang-raped by a different group of GIs. Eventually they were taken to a comfort station and attended to by a medic of the occupation troops. A few days later all were found to be infected with VD. [35]

A survey of prostitutes conducted by Tokyo Police Headquarters in 1948 revealed that 13% of those interviewed had lost both their parents during WWII or in the period immediately following the war.[36]

Notes

[1] Alex More, "Japan Upset about Memorial Honoring WWII Sex Slaves," Death and Taxes, February 27, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20171116224003/https://www.deathandtaxesmag.com/215970/japan-upset-about-memorial-honoring-wwii-sex-slaves/.

[2] "American Heroes: Japanese American World War II Nisei Soldiers and the Congressional Gold Medal," Holocaust Museum Houston,https://www.hmh.org/ViewExhibits.aspx?ID=93&ExhibitType=Past.

[3] *Campaign for Justice: Redress NOW for Japanese Latin Americans* (El Cerrito, CA: National Japanese Historical Society, 2017).

[4] *Preserve and Protect Our Freedoms, 75th Anniversary of Executive Order 9066* (El Cerrito, CA: National Japanese Historical Society, 2017), excerpting *Rafu Shimpo* and *Nichi Bei* newspapers.

[5] *Preserve and Protect Our Freedoms.*

[6] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 132.

[7] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 208.

[8] Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 208.

[9] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 136.

[10] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 141.

[11] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 147.

[12] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 155.

[13] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 161.

[14] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 140.

[15] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 138.

[16] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 151.

[17] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 142.

[18] Soh, *The Comfort Women,* 235.

[19] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 147.

[20] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 86–87.

[21] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 154.

[22] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 136–137.

[23] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 162.

[24] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 162.

[25] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 160.

[26] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 161–162.

[27] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 87.

[28] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 87.

[29] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 130.

[30] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 111–166.

[31] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 106.

[32] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 109.

[33] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*, 124–125.

[34] Soh, *The Comfort Women,* 214.

[35] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 139–140.

[36] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women,* 155.

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