

# Mutual Complicity: Denial of War Responsibilities in Japan & the US

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**Abstract:** *In France and Germany, it would have been unthinkable for a cabinet member of the Vichy government or the Nazi regime to become a national leader after the war. This was not the case in Japan with Kishi Nobusuke, who served as Minister of Trade and Industry in the wartime Tōjō cabinet. Astonishingly, Kishi became Prime Minister in February 1957. Similarly, Emperor Hirohito's war guilt and responsibility were never questioned at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, despite the abundance of crystal-clear evidence. In this article, I discuss how closely the U.S. and Japanese governments have been collaborating for the last 78 years since the end of the Asia-Pacific War in August 1945, supporting one another to whitewash each other's war crimes and responsibility in every possible way.*

**Keywords:** *War Crimes, War responsibility, Denial of responsibility, Whitewash of crimes, US-Japan mutual support*

*The worst form of injustice is pretended justice.*

Plato

On 31 January 2018 in Germany, four days after International Holocaust Memorial Day, ninety-two-year-old Anita Lasker-Wallfisch addressed German lawmakers gathered in the lower house of parliament known as the Bundestag. The occasion was the Ceremony of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism (Remembering the victims of National Socialism with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, 31 January 2018). Anita is a Holocaust survivor. In 1943 she was sent to Auschwitz, but fortuitously selected as a member of the Auschwitz women's orchestra because she played the cello. This position as a musician saved her life. Every day, the orchestra played marches at the camp gate as the prisoners went to and from work. The orchestra also gave concerts for the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, the Nazi elite corps who controlled the German police force and the concentration camp system). Her sister, Renate, was also sent to Auschwitz and remarkably survived, although she was not an orchestra member. Toward the end of 1944, as Auschwitz began being evacuated, together with 3,000 prisoners, Anita and her sister were transferred to the camp at Bergen-Belsen and survived there for six more months with almost nothing to eat. Anita was nineteen years old when she and her sister were finally liberated in April 1945 by the British army (Lasker-Wallfisch, 1996).

After the war, Anita migrated to England and, in 1951, married Peter Wallfish (1924–1993), a concert pianist and coincidentally also a Holocaust survivor of Bergen-Belsen. Anita co-

founded the English Chamber Orchestra (ECO) and performed as a member of this orchestra as well as a solo artist. Peter was professor of piano at the Royal College of Music from 1973 until 1991 (Interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch). Their son, Raphael Wallfisch, is also a well-known cellist. At the Ceremony of Remembrance in the Bundestag, with John York’s piano accompaniment, Raphael played a piece of music entitled “Prayer” from “Jewish Life” composed by Ernest Bloch. This performance was presented between the two main speeches—one by the then President of the Bundestag, Dr Wolfgang Schäuble, and the other by Anita.

In his speech, President Schäuble clearly acknowledged German responsibility for the war crimes committed by the National Socialist regime, stating that “we are not remembering because we bear personal guilt. But the guilt that Germans incurred in the twelve years of National Socialist dictatorship has imposed a particular responsibility on us, as succeeding generations” (Schäuble, 2018). At the same time, he also emphasized the relationship between national responsibility and the ideas of democracy:

This free, democratic, constitutional and peaceful Germany in which we have the good fortune to live today has been built on historical experiences of immeasurable violence. The authors of our Constitution drew conclusions from that history. ...

The Basic Law guarantees rights, but it cannot guarantee values such as consideration, decency and respect; respect for the fact that all people are entitled to live their lives as they wish, to express their opinion, to live out their faith, to be free—as long as they do not thereby impinge on the freedom of others, and as long as they do not infringe the law or endanger public order. ...

How brittle freedom is, how fragile civil society is—that is the lesson of our history. Human dignity is vulnerable. That is why Article 1 of our Basic Law postulates that “Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority.” That is the standard by which we must measure ourselves—in our country and as a responsible partner in Europe and in the global community. (Schäuble, 2018)

The Ceremony of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism has been an annual event conducted in the Bundestag since 1996. A Holocaust survivor is invited to speak every year.

It is inconceivable that the Japanese National Parliament, the Diet, would do something similar. That it would invite a survivor of atrocities committed by Japanese imperial forces during the Asia-Pacific war—for example, a victim of military sex slavery—as the main speaker, or that Japan’s emperor would address the nation, emphasizing the importance of collective responsibility to protect democracy. It is equally unimaginable that the U.S. Congress would request a survivor of the atomic bombing to address American lawmakers, and that, in response, the U.S. President would deliver a speech asking citizens to seriously think of American responsibility for the indiscriminate and genocidal massacre of the Japanese with two atomic bombs, and to explore the way to abolish nuclear weapons.

Why does it seem so impossible for the Japanese and Americans to instill and cultivate “human dignity,” which would enable them to acknowledge their own wartime wrongdoings respectively? This query is the starting point of the discussion presented here, which searches for answers from a number of different perspectives.

## Japan's "War Apologies" vis-à-vis the "Acceptance of Apologies" by the U.S.

On 28 December 2016, then Prime Minister of Japan Abe Shinzō visited the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii, at the invitation of then U.S. President, Barack Obama. This memorial ceremony at Pearl Harbor, where more than 2,400 Americans (mostly military servicemen) were killed by the Japanese surprise attack seventy-five years before, was conducted as a "return salute" in response to Obama's visit to Hiroshima Peace Park in May of the same year. In his speech at the ceremony, with Obama quietly standing beside him, Abe stated:

Rest in peace, precious souls of the fallen. With that overwhelming sentiment, I cast flowers on behalf of Japanese people, upon the waters where those sailors and marines sleep ... As the prime minister of Japan, I offer my sincere and everlasting condolences to the souls of those who lost their lives here, as well as to the spirits of all the brave men and women whose lives were taken by a war that commenced in this very place, and also to the souls of the countless innocent people who became victims of the war. (Abe, 2016)

By filling his speech with flowery language, Abe artfully avoided using words such as "apology" or "Japan's war responsibility." In this way, he clearly made use of the official clichés used by many of his predecessors, referring to something "unfortunate or regrettable in the past between the two nations."<sup>1</sup> Abe's speech was simply a more glamorous form of the official statement that bureaucrats had likely conceived to circumvent any transparent manifestations of sincere apology for Japan's

wartime and colonial atrocities. Indeed, Abe's speech at Pearl Harbor fully corresponded to Obama's speech at Hiroshima Peace Park, seven months earlier. As I demonstrate in detail in Chapter 7 of my book, *Entwined Atrocities*, (Tanaka, *Entwined Atrocities*) at the ground zero ceremony, Obama also failed to openly acknowledge U.S. national responsibility for the instantaneous and indiscriminate massacre of hundreds of thousands of Japanese and Koreans civilians with the newly invented atomic bomb.

It is clear from the following words in Abe's speech at Pearl Harbor that the hidden significance of this ostensibly solemn memorial ceremony was to reconsolidate the U.S.-Japan military alliance.

We are allies that will tackle together, to an even greater degree than ever before, the many challenges covering the globe. Ours is an "alliance of hope" that will lead us to the future. What has bonded us together is the power of reconciliation, made possible through the spirit of tolerance. ... The world needs the spirit of tolerance and the power of reconciliation now, and especially now. (Abe, 2016)

It is politically deceptive to mourn war victims without admitting the crimes and responsibility of one's own nation, and then to insist you value peace above all. This is nothing but a sham to conceal those very crimes and responsibility. True reconciliation and peace can only be achieved when victims accept sincere apologies offered by perpetrators for the crimes which they fully acknowledge having committed. Yet both Obama and Abe, as national leaders, failed to fulfill this obligation.

We therefore need to carefully reconsider the fact that a hidden aim of Obama's visit to

Hiroshima—and of Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor—was to celebrate their mutually accepted denial of respective war responsibilities, this mutual acceptance being the crucial foundation of the U.S.-Japan military alliance.

Abe’s deceit in grieving for war victims is exposed when one examines his political record since 1993, when he was first elected as a member of the Lower House in the Diet. He was one of the most vocal deniers of Japan’s responsibility for the so-called “comfort women,” a euphemism for those victims of a sex-slave system operated by Japanese imperial forces in many parts of the Asia-Pacific during the fifteen-year Asia-Pacific War between 1931 and 1945. Moreover, Abe has been associated with extreme nationalist groups such as the Association for A Liberalist View of History, the Association for Producing New Textbooks (APNT), and the Association of Young Parliamentarians for Japan’s Future and Historical Education, all of which have been at the forefront of the movement denying the existence of the Japanese military sex-slave system. In 1996, they forcefully demanded that references to the comfort women issue be removed from school textbooks. These nationalist associations have also been the core groups attempting to sanitize many other Japanese war crimes. For example, they claimed that Japanese war atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre were a Chinese fabrication, and that the Japanese never committed such war crimes (Tawara ‘Kyōkasho Mondai’ 2013, 162-168).

Abe was Deputy Executive Director of the Diet Members’ League for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of War. This league was established at the end of 1994 in order to counter parliamentary efforts to pass a resolution to critically reflect upon Japan’s aggressive war in the Asia-Pacific between 1939 and 1945. Its founding statement asserts that Japan’s more than two million war-dead gave their lives for

“Japan’s self-existence and self-defense, and peace of Asia.” The league’s campaign policy statement of 13 April 1995 rejected offering any apology or issuing the no-war pledge included in the parliamentary resolution to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of war. The league’s public statement of 8 June 1995 declared that the majority party’s resolution draft was unacceptable because it admitted Japan’s “behaviors of aggression” and “colonial rule” (Tawara, ‘Abe Shushō’ 2013).

On 26 September 2006, Abe was elected as Prime Minister of Japan. On 5 October, he stated in a Diet committee that there was no evidence to prove that comfort women were forcibly taken into comfort stations, so the issue must not be taught in junior high schools. Abe used the term “coercion in the narrow sense” to indicate “abduction” or “kidnapping.” With this limited definition, he ignored the fact that many women had been deceived and conned into becoming sex slaves, or sold to comfort stations because of poverty (Yamamoto, 2013). He took no notice of cases such as that of Jan Ruff-O’Herne and other Dutch women who had been forcibly taken from internment camps and put into comfort stations, as was verified at the Dutch military war crimes tribunal in 1948 (Kajimura 2008 and Tanaka, 2002). At the same time, he declared that the Class-A war criminals tried at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (usually known as the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal) were not criminals according to Japan’s domestic law. He went on to claim that Japan had no option but to accept the judgment of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal because of the political situation at the time (Yamamoto, 2013). Undoubtedly Abe adopted the concept of “coercion in the narrow sense” from the way in which members of APNT such as Fujioka Nobukatsu, former Professor in Education at Tokyo University, interpreted the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal.

In January 2007, Mike Honda, a member of the

U.S. House of Representatives, proposed a resolution to the House, requesting that Japan “formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces’ coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as comfort women, during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II” (Tokudome Kinue with Michael Honda, 2007).

On 16 March 2007, Abe stated that he would respect the Kōno Statement (issued by the then Chief Cabinet Secretary, Kōno Yōhei, on 4 August 1993) with which the Japanese government under Prime Minister Miyazawa Ki’ichi fully admitted Japan’s responsibility for abusing a large number of women as military sex slaves during the Asia-Pacific War. Abe added, however, that it had been confirmed at a cabinet meeting that there was no evidence in the documents found by the Japanese government to prove that women were forcibly taken away by Japanese military forces or police. He therefore blatantly ignored the fact that the Kōno Statement had been issued based on careful examination of many relevant Japanese official documents. This documentation included reports prepared by the Allied (in particular the U.S.) forces during the war, the proceedings of the Dutch military war crimes tribunal conducted in Batavia in 1948 on the so-called Semarang Incident, and records of interviews with sixteen Korean former comfort women conducted by the Japanese government in 1992 and 93.<sup>2</sup>

On 24 March 2007, *The Washington Post* severely criticized Abe’s attitude toward the comfort women issue, referring to it as “double talk.” The article read:

What’s odd—and offensive—is ... to roll back Japan’s acceptance of responsibility for the abduction, rape and sexual

enslavement of tens of thousands of women during World War II. Responding to a pending resolution in the U.S. Congress calling for an official apology, Mr. Abe has twice this month issued statements claiming there is no documentation proving that the Japanese military participated in abducting the women. ... he should straightforwardly accept responsibility for Japan’s own crimes—and apologize to the victims he has slandered (‘Shinzō Abe’s Double Talk’ 2007).

*The New York Times* and many other newspapers in Korea, China, Taiwan, and the Philippines also ran similar articles criticizing Abe’s dishonest approach to this issue.

On 27 March 2007, Abe met U.S. President George Bush at Camp David (President Bush and Prime Minister Abe, 2007). At the press conference after this meeting, Abe said:

Well, in my meeting with the congressional representatives yesterday, I explained my thoughts, and that is I do have deep-felt sympathy that my (sic) people had to serve as comfort women, were placed in extreme hardships, and had to suffer that sacrifice; and that I, as Prime Minister of Japan, expressed my apologies, and also expressed my apologies for the fact that they were placed in that sort of circumstance. The 20th century was a century when human rights were violated in many parts of the world. So we have to make the 21st century a century—a wonderful century, in which no human rights are violated. And I, myself, and Japan wish to make significant contributions to that end. And so I explained these thoughts to the President.

Bush responded to this with the following statements:

The comfort women issue is a regrettable chapter in the history of the world, and I accept the Prime Minister's apology. I thought it was very—I thought his statements—Kōno's statement, as well as statements here in the United States were very straightforward and from his heart. And I'm looking forward to working with this man to lead our nations forward. And that's what we spent time discussing today. We had a personal visit on the issue. He gave his—he told me what was on his heart about the issue, and I appreciated his candor. And our jobs are to, obviously, learn lessons from the past. All of us need to learn lessons from the past and lead our nations forward. That's what the Prime Minister is doing in a very capable way.

It is extraordinary that Japan's prime minister expressed apologies for the comfort women issue in the U.S., and that the U.S. president accepted his apology, while both completely ignored the actual victims of the Japanese military sex enslavement. Furthermore, despite his pronouncement that "all of us need to learn lessons from the past," it did not seem to occur to Bush that he, as the U.S. president, should apologize to Japanese victims for the indiscriminate fire bombings and atomic bombings that U.S. forces conducted in the final year of the Asia-Pacific war.

Abe never expressed his apologies directly to any former comfort woman prior to or even after this meeting with Bush at Camp David in March 2007. When the House of Representatives passed Honda's resolution on 30 July 2007 (Text, 2007). Abe simply said "it was disappointing." Abe continued his bitter campaign against the victims of Japan's

military sex slavery, adopting many different acrimonious political tactics, until he resigned from his second term as prime minister in August 2020.

It should be noted, however, that Abe's hostile stance toward Asian victims and kin of Asian victims of atrocities committed by the Japanese imperial forces is not a trend peculiar to Abe personally. A similarly arrogant attitude is widely shared by many conservative Japanese politicians with strong nationalistic sentiments, in particular those of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Often, their resentment is focused on the Korean government and Korean political leaders, who have always demonstrated strong moral and financial support for their own victims of Japanese wartime and colonial atrocities such as forced labor and sexual enslavement.

Successive postwar cabinets of the Japanese government both preceding and following the Abe administration have adopted the same policy of openly denying Japan's legal and moral responsibilities for their wartime and colonial atrocities. Furthermore, the Japanese government has been repeatedly ignoring recommendations made by the UN human rights mechanisms such as the UN Committee Against Torture and Human Rights Committee, concerning the treatment of the victims of Japanese wartime and colonial atrocities.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, ultranationalist non-governmental organizations and lobby groups such as Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), which currently has about 40,000 members throughout Japan, are providing vital moral support to the Japanese government and LDP politicians. Membership of Nippon Kaigi includes grassroots far-right activists, national and local politicians—with Abe serving as a special advisor to its parliamentary league until his assassination on July 8, 2022. More than 200 of the 707 Diet members—mostly LDP members—are now associated with this parliamentary league, whose aims include

“changing the postwar national consciousness based on the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal’s view of history as a fundamental problem,” and promoting patriotic education and a nationalist interpretation of State Shintoism (Tawara, 2017).

Behind Japan’s conservative political spectrum, one should not forget the current situation of Japanese society, which entirely lacks the essential knowledge and sense of collective responsibility for the wartime and colonial atrocities committed in the past. The lack of such basic historical knowledge and moral awareness leaves many Japanese susceptible to nationalistic politicians such as Abe and ultranationalist organizations such as Nippon Kaigi. The Japanese people ought to know how Japan’s current social conditions have been molded. This is not simply a historical matter; it also deeply relates to the quality of Japan’s contemporary democracy.

In this regard, it should be recalled that Abe was not the first postwar Japanese prime minister to visit Pearl Harbor and pay his respects to the American victims. Three of his predecessors also went, but always in connection with the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. In 1951, Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru visited Pearl Harbor on the way back from San Francisco after he signed the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, by which the U.S. was entitled to maintain its military bases on Japanese soil indefinitely. Five hours after signing the Peace Treaty with former enemy nations, Yoshida was taken to the sixth U.S. army headquarters at Presidio, just north of San Francisco. There, he authorized a new agreement with the U.S. government to continue the U.S. military presence in Japan and allow the U.S. to continue to directly control Okinawa. Five years later, the aim of Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichiro’s visit in 1956 was to demonstrate Japan’s continuing commitment to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the country’s loyalty to the U.S. This took place in

spite of his visit to Moscow ten days earlier, to conclude the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration on the restoration of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. A year later, in 1957, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke—Abe’s grandfather—visited Pearl Harbor on the way back from Washington D.C. after a meeting with President Eisenhower where the possibility of amending the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty was discussed (“Shinjuwan”). In this way, visits by Japanese prime ministers to Pearl Harbor were always highly political gestures designed to confirm and reaffirm the U.S.-Japan alliance. The succession of visits by Japanese prime ministers to Pearl Harbor is a typical example of the political exploitation of war victims.

Similarly, the aim of Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor was to boost his popularity both in Japan and the U.S. by conducting a ceremony for ostensible “peace and reconciliation” whilst simultaneously reinforcing the military alliance with the U.S. His purpose was to strengthen his campaign to abolish the war-renouncing Article 9 of Japan’s Constitution by seeking to allow Japanese military forces (still called “self-defense forces”) to conduct military operations alongside U.S. forces anywhere in the world. It can be said that the Obama administration supported Abe’s political intentions by accepting his proposal to visit Pearl Harbor.

In view of these facts, mere criticism of Abe’s flawed view of history does not adequately account for the significance of a political ceremony in which Japan and the U.S. collaborated together to exploit war victims. One of the important questions needing to be asked is why not a single serving postwar Japanese prime minister—including Yoshida, Ishibashi, Kishi and Abe—ever visited Asian and Pacific nations to mourn victims of the war that Japan conducted, or to sincerely apologize. While four former Japanese prime ministers—Murayama Tomi’ichi, Kaifu Toshiki, Hatoyama Yukio, and Fukuda Yasuo—have so

far visited the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders and expressed their condolences to the victims, they all visited the Memorial Hall only after they retired from politics. Moreover, Japanese media scarcely reported anything about their trips to China.

### **Japan's War Crimes and the Treatment of War Criminal Suspects by the U.S.**

To understand Japan's present situation, it is particularly important to know how A-class war crime suspect, Kishi, was acquitted on 24 December 1948, just a day after seven A-class war criminals, including former prime minister Tōjō Hideki, were executed. Furthermore, how did Kishi become prime minister in February 1957, less than nine years after being released from prison?

Kishi was a product of the U.S.-Japan postwar collaboration, but before that he was central to Japan's imperial and war efforts. In October 1936, he took up the position of head of the Department of Industry of the State Council of Manchukuo—Japan's puppet state. In March 1939, as the deputy director of the Office of General Affairs he effectively seized the power to control the entire economy and industry of Manchukuo. While working in Manchukuo, Kishi closely cooperated with the leaders of the Kwantung army, in particular the staff officers, and contributed to the formulation of the five-year industrial development plan. This aided preparations for war in China. By developing the ability to manufacture weapons in Manchukuo, Kishi planned to make it a vital strategic base for the Japanese imperial army. This role in preparing Japan for a war of aggression is of the reasons Kishi was arrested and charged as an A-class war criminal suspect after the war. Kishi raised a huge sum by utilizing his power in Manchukuo, and furtively gave financial support to many powerful militarists and politicians, including General

Tōjō Hideki. In October 1941, he was appointed Minister for Commerce and Industry of the newly sworn Tōjō Cabinet. In November 1943, when Prime Minister Tōjō established the Ministry for War Industry—and concurrently served as its minister—Kishi continued to work for Tōjō both as deputy minister and as a minister of state. In the Tōjō cabinet, he was the person responsible for the rapid restructuring of Japan's economy and industry that enabled Japan's massive war effort (Ōta, 2015).

Kishi's arrest after the war was therefore hardly surprising. Yet, at the end of 1948, the U.S. adopted a new policy making Japan the vanguard in northeast Asia against the rapidly expanding communist bloc. Kishi, together with many other prominent war crime suspects, was acquitted and discharged. Furthermore, when he officially returned to politics in 1952 and became Japan's prime minister in 1957, he received strong support from the U.S. government (Togawa, 1965). His younger brother Satō Eisaku, who served as his government's Minister of Finance, secretly asked the U.S. government for "financial support to fight against communists," and the U.S. government responded to this request by providing support from the CIA's fund for covert operations (CIA Spent Millions, 1994, Johnson, Schlei, Schaller, 2000, 79-103). Later, in 1964, Satō also became prime minister and held that position until 1972. In their capacities as prime ministers, both Kishi and Satō made secret agreements with the U.S. government to allow U.S. forces to bring nuclear weapons to Japan without informing Japanese authorities (Ishii 2010, 26-35). This is especially ironic in light of Satō's Nobel Peace Prize, which he was awarded in 1974 for the strength of his anti-nuclear policy, called the "Three Non-nuclear Principles." These prohibited production and possession of nuclear weapons in Japanese territory as well as their entry into Japan, but it was later revealed that he had made a secret agreement with the Nixon administration to



allow U.S. forces to bring nuclear weapons into Okinawa (Ishii, 2010, 100-124 and Trent, 2019).

More importantly, it should be pointed out that from the very beginning of the Allied occupation of Japan, the culpability of Emperor Hirohito, who was commander in chief of the Japanese imperial forces, was artfully concealed in collaboration between the U.S. and Japan. From various records of Japanese military conduct during the war, it is clear that between September 1931 and August 1945, the Japanese imperial army and navy forces under Emperor Hirohito conducted extremely destructive battles against the Chinese and Allied forces in many parts of China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. In this regard, it is undeniable that Hirohito committed grave crimes and was therefore responsible for causing tragedy and suffering in many people's lives.

In particular, the Japanese military in China waged a war of consistent aggression from the outset that caused enormous civilian as well as military suffering. China estimates that about twenty million Chinese people died in the war. In his 1941 reportage entitled "Scorched Earth," renowned American journalist Edgar Snow, described the Japanese atrocities as "an orgy of rape, murder, looting and general debauchery which has nowhere been equaled in modern times" (Snow). In addition to the appalling number of Chinese victims, an estimated 1.5 million people died in India, two million in Vietnam, 100,000 in Malaya and Singapore, 1.11 million in the Philippines, and four million in Indonesia. If the losses of Pacific Islanders are added, it can be speculated that about thirty million people died as a result of the war that Japan conducted (Otabe, 1997, 220).

The Holocaust claimed between 5.8 and 6 million victims. Of course, the victims of well-planned genocide committed by the Nazis over

five years cannot be easily compared with thirty million direct and indirect victims of the Japanese military activities in the Asia-Pacific over fifteen years. Unlike the Nazi regime, the Japanese military government did not establish a clear policy of genocide. Yet, considering the massive number of victims, it can be said that the Japanese treatment of the Asians and Pacific Islanders during the Asia-Pacific war was genocidal.

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, which was carried out in Tokyo between 1946 and 1948, also established that of the 350,000 prisoners of war (POWs), 132,134 came from Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand; 35,756 died while detained: a death rate of about twenty-seven percent. In contrast, deaths among the 235,473 Allied POWs interned by Germans and Italians only reached 9,348, a rate of four percent. In other words, the death rate for POWs under the Japanese was seven times that of POWs under the Germans and Italians (Kosuke, 1994, 20; Horyo, 1968, 766, Clarke, 1988, 153). In addition to POWs, over 130,000 civilians of the Allied nations—including Dutch civilians who had been residing in the Dutch East Indies (presently Indonesia) and British citizens in Singapore and Hong Kong—were detained in many detention camps and forced to live under terrible conditions for four and a half years. As a result, about fifteen thousand reportedly died from starvation and illness (Waterford, 2004, 5).

Attention to Hirohito's war responsibility does not mean that we should ignore the acts of everyone else. It should not be forgotten that 2.3 million Japanese soldiers and civilian employees (including about fifty thousand Koreans and Formosan Chinese) died in this war, sixty percent of whom were casualties of starvation and illness. The total Japanese death toll was about 3.1 million, if civilian victims of fire and atomic bombings conducted by U.S. forces, and civilians who died in Okinawa and

Manchuria in the last stages of the war, are included (Ienaga, 2002, 199-201). Undeniably the U.S. also committed war crimes and crimes against humanity by conducting indiscriminate fire bombings and the two atomic bombings in Japan. The number of casualties (that is, both people wounded and killed) due to the U.S. aerial bombings (including the atomic bombings) was approximately one million, including more than 560,000 deaths. (Tanaka 2008, 237).

After the war, Hirohito evaded responsibility, claiming that military leaders acted against his will. Yet, war records compiled by the Defense Studies Military History Section of the Defense Agency National Institute show that Hirohito was deeply involved in drafting various war policies and making strategies through his preferences expressed as “questioning of reports to the throne” and “advice to military leaders” (Yamada, 2017). From the records of a wartime diary written by Marquis Kido Kōichi, it can be seen that Hirohito indisputably played the decisive role in making the final decision to enter the war against the Allied nations in December 1941 (Kido, 1966, 926-928; Sanbō Hombu, 1967, 554; Mori, 1997, 175).

At the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal conducted after the war, under political pressure from the U.S. occupation forces and the Japanese government, former prime minister Tōjō Hideki falsely testified that Emperor Hirohito “reluctantly” decided to enter the war on the advice of Tōjō and other officers in charge of war strategies (Dower 1999, 468; Toyoshita, 2015, 57). Yet, more importantly, regardless of his emotions at the time, it cannot be denied that Hirohito signed the declaration of war. It is a historic fact that he did sign as supreme commander of the imperial army and navy. Thus, it is indisputable that the position of ultimate responsibility was his. Ultimately, twenty-eight former military and political leaders were prosecuted as A-class war criminals on 29 April 1946. Seven were

executed on 23 December 1948. In this way, the issue of war responsibility was deemed resolved simply by blaming a handful of militarists and politicians who had served Hirohito.

It is also a fact that the war began and ended as a result of Hirohito’s orders. Consequently, the lives of tens of millions of Asians and Pacific Islanders and 3.1 million Japanese people depended on Hirohito’s decision more than anything else. The grief of each victim should be respected—not only the dead, but also the survivors of Japanese exploitation such as forced laborers, sex slaves, POWs, survivors of the fire and atomic bombings, survivors of the military violence in Okinawa and Manchuria, and the like. It is easy to forget the horrific suffering these people experienced if one deals with the issue of war victims simply in terms of abstract numbers.

A Japanese man by the name of Watanabe Kiyoshi (1925-1981) wrote an open letter addressed to Hirohito in 1961. Watanabe had been a sailor on board the battleship *Musashi*, one of the largest battleships in the world, which was sunk by U.S. forces in the Battle of Leyte Gulf on 24 October 1944, killing more than a thousand sailors. In his letter to Hirohito, Watanabe writes:

If you are an ordinary person and just think of the fact that so many people died as the result of the orders you issued, I imagine you would be extremely distressed and in deep agony. I believe that is how an ordinary person would naturally feel as a human being. Therefore, if someone does not have such natural feelings, I think that person is a heartless human being. I think that person is a human being, yet simultaneously is not really a human being, or is some strange creature disguising himself with the name of “human being.” I cannot think of you in

any other way ...

On 1 January 1946, you issued an imperial rescript ... and in it you denied that you were god in human form ... Despite the fact that you had driven so many people to their deaths during the war, (in this rescript) you emphasized “mutual trust and affection” between you and the people of the nation. Although I do not know how other people took those words of yours, I no longer believe such a barefaced lie. You could not deceive me anymore. This New Year’s rescript of 1946 did not show even a glimpse of a sense of your responsibility.

The same can be said about the imperial rescript that you issued on the defeat and end of the war. In that rescript, you did not apologize at all and did not say even simple words such as, “I am sorry. I was responsible for the war.” You apologized neither to the people of your own nation nor to the people of China and Southeast Asia on whom you inflicted tremendous damage and heavy casualties. Indeed, you have not touched the issue of war responsibility in any of rescripts that you have so far issued since the end of the war. (Watanabe, 1981, 21-72)

It is not known whether Hirohito read this letter.

Despite numerous crystal-clear pieces of evidence, Hirohito’s war guilt and responsibility were never questioned at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. On the contrary, Hirohito’s majestic status as emperor was maintained and even elevated as “the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People” in the new postwar constitution, although he was stripped of his political and military prerogative. Furthermore, the U.S. occupation forces, together with the Japanese government, presented him as a pacifist manipulated by a

group of warmongers during those fifteen years of war. Unlike Watanabe, the majority of the Japanese people sincerely believed that their emperor was a peace-lover, whose power had been seriously abused by military leaders like General Tōjō. In other words, immediately after the war, he metamorphosed from the supreme commander of aggressive imperial forces into a victim of war.

How democratic is Japan’s postwar “democracy,” considering it is based on this treatment of the emperor, the person most responsible for the war tragedy? It is instructive to ponder not just how on earth such an astonishing transformation could happen and the beneficiaries of this extraordinary political inversion. In addition, how did such a reprehensible injustice affect the collective sense of war responsibility of the Japanese nation?

One clear manifestation of this injustice is the postwar ruling class. As I discuss in *Entwined Atrocities*, many Japanese people, in particular high-class militarists, politicians, and bureaucrats, who psychologically subjugated themselves almost like slaves to the emperor system before and during the war, quickly submitted to the rule of the U.S., which brought them “freedom and democracy.” They did so without questioning the real nature of “freedom and democracy,” underpinned as it was by the great destructive power of nuclear and other lethal weapons. They happily acquiesced to the “new society” that the U.S. provided—democracy based upon constitutional monarchy. The preconditions for acceptance of this new society were an acceptance in turn of the American justification of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as Hirohito’s immunity from responsibility for the war. As mentioned above, one prominent postwar politician who acceded to this scheme of delusion was Kishi.

As is well known, wartime resistance groups

did not exist in Japan. In comparison with Germany, France and Italy, the continuity of Japan's state power before and after surrender in 1945 was far more solid. This is evident, as we have seen above, from the fact that one of the ministers of the Tōjō cabinet became prime minister 12 years after the war ended. In France and Germany, it would have been unimaginable for a cabinet member of the Vichy government or the Nazi regime to become the national leader after the war. The firmer the link between the ruthless and violent wartime regime and the postwar government, the heavier the responsibility of that postwar government for the war. Yet this principle doesn't seem to have been applied in Japan.

Japan's lack of collective war responsibility and continuous denial of such responsibility are not simply a product of amnesia or repression, however—it is also the result of Japan's relationship with the U.S., the nation that avoids truly facing its own responsibility by justifying the annihilation of tens of thousands of Japanese civilians with fire and atomic bombs. Indeed, such respective evasions were comprehensively manufactured through close collaboration between the two nations. This complicity has been incessantly exercised for almost eighty years and is still being practiced.

## Conclusion

Through this study of Japan's failure to cultivate and enhance the collective national sense of war responsibility, we can learn that "to master the past"—what Theodor Adorno called *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (literally "working through the past")—does not mean simply to comprehend events of the past intellectually (Adorno, 2005, 89-103). We can learn that working through the past also necessitates exercising *moral imagination*. Moral imagination requires us to take responsibility for the past wrongdoings and, at the same time, stimulates us to project our

thoughts toward a more humane future through the creative examination of our past. Yet, moral imagination cannot be generated and firmly built in the nation simply through learning national history or the basic law. As the former President of Bundestag, Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble, rightly said: education of history and law "cannot guarantee values such as consideration, decency and respect" (Schäuble, 2018). In other words, the old and conventional culture that tolerated various forms of injustice and inhumane conduct over many decades must be transformed into a new culture with humane and dignified values. Japan requires such radical cultural reform, and the same can be said for the existing culture of the United States.

*This article is a shorter version of the Prologue of the author's newly published book, Entwined Atrocities: New Insights into the U.S.-Japan Alliance with a Foreword by John Dower (Peter Lang, 2023). See [https://storage.googleapis.com/flyers.peterlang.com/March\\_2023/978-1-4331-9953-0\\_normal\\_English.pdf](https://storage.googleapis.com/flyers.peterlang.com/March_2023/978-1-4331-9953-0_normal_English.pdf).*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eleven out of thirty-six postwar prime ministers have so far issued official statements regarding Japan's war responsibility and clearly acknowledged that the Asia-Pacific War that Japan conducted made "many Asian people suffer." Eight of those eleven used the word "apologies" in their statements, but only two—Hosokawa Morihiro and Murayama Tomi'ichi—admitted that Japan conducted a war of aggression. Neither Hosokawa nor Murayama was a member of a long-dominant and conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP); Hosokawa belonged to Japan New Party and Murayama was a member of Japan's Socialist Party. However, none of those eleven tried to pay war compensation to any victims. In other words, they admitted moral responsibility to some extent but not legal responsibility for various atrocities and war crimes that the Japanese imperial forces committed in various

parts of the Asia-Pacific.

<sup>2</sup> Lists of the relevant documents examined by the Japanese government to prepare the Kōno Statement are available at the following

site: [https://wam-peace.org/ianfu-koubunsho/file/file\\_3.pdf](https://wam-peace.org/ianfu-koubunsho/file/file_3.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, a series of UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding Observations on the Third Periodic Report of Japan*; UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Japan*; and UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *Concluding observations on the 3rd periodic report of Japan*.