Politics, Memory and Public Opinion: The History Textbook Controversy and Japanese Society. By Sven Saaler. Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2005. 197 pages. Hardcover €28.00.

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This is a timely and informative book on issues of crucial importance to current Japanese society, education, and politics. Begun at a 1997 workshop sponsored by the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo, Sven Saaler's work comprises three chapters about "neonationalist historical revisionism" in the Society to Create a New History Textbook (a.k.a. Tsukuru Kai), in the politics of public memory related to Yasukuni shrine issues, and in public memory fostered by the mass media, literature, films, monuments, and museums. Saaler's sympathies lie with the Japanese left, but unlike many leftists, he fears no major imminent threat from the right-wing nationalists he studied. His thesis is that, contrary to incessant claims made by Asian neighbors and mainstream Western media, most Japanese today do not foster historical amnesia or wallow in war-victim self-pity. Instead, most affirm that Japan waged a terrible war of aggression in the 1930s and 1940s, feel remorse for this recent history of imperialism and colonialism, and wish to make amends for it. This popular historical consciousness forms the bedrock of what Saaler calls "extraparliamentary opposition" to two groups. One is high-profile and seemingly dangerous, but largely ineffective, right-wing revisionists such as Kobayashi Yoshinori, Nishio Kanji, and Fujioka Nobukatsu. Such figures strive to dominate public discourse and education, glorify the Japanese past, and rekindle patriotism together with the second group: conservative lawmakers and bureaucrats. Both groups are bent on revising Article 9 of the current constitution, which renounces war as a sovereign power of the state, so as to strengthen Japanese military power and employ it freely, either through a stronger U.S.–Japan alliance or under the guise of U.N. peacekeeping efforts.

Saaler is required reading to correct the egregious misconceptions—prevalent in China, South Korea, and the West—about how contemporary Japanese teach, study,

and reflect on their war crimes. We should appreciate and applaud his culling of English, German, and leftwing Japanese scholarship, plus his independent surveys that yield a wealth of information on key topics little known outside of Japan; e.g., the limited role of the government in textbook screening and selection, links between revisionist educators and conservative politicians, issues that divide the backers and detractors of Yasukuni shrine, museums and monuments that commemorate Japan's military and (to a lesser extent, civilian) war dead, portrayals of history in Shiba Ryōtarō's hugely popular novels, their permutations on television, and public opinion polls that gauge historical consciousness among ordinary Japanese. Yet precisely because this is a must-read book for so many people, Saaler should have lightened their burden through drastic reorganization and aggressive editing, for there is far too much repetition, signposting, and cross-referencing. He also has an irritating habit of embedding exclamation marks within brackets in his text to express disgust or exasperation. Surely these sentiments could be conveyed more subtly. Most readers will come to the subject with a fierce skepticism that Saaler must break down. Unfortunately, his writing compounds the problem; even a sympathetic left-wing reader such as myself found this book to be taxing.

Saaler's optimistic contention—that "neonationalist historical revisionists" may seem to be gaining the upper hand but actually are not—fails to fully convince. My admittedly impressionistic view from Canada is that postwar generations in Japan, faced with huge fiscal woes, are slowly moving toward the right on war guilt issues, especially after mass anti-Japanese rioting in China these last two years. Some questionable judgments and errors of fact on Saaler's part, though few in number and not fatal to his thesis, do nothing to alter my view. For example, he cites opinion polls showing that Japanese today feel they bear "ongoing responsibility for the war" (pp. 137–43). But the key follow-up query never got asked: "Do you believe Tokyo should raise your taxes to discharge this responsibility through compensation to individual victims?" It is one thing to admit responsibility as a vague matter of principle; it is another to foot the bill when faced with the threat of restructuring. Or, arguing that numbers of Diet seats understate "the strength of this unofficial [extraparliamentary] opposition," Saaler cites circulation figures for four daily national newspapers that better reflect it (p. 166). But these show the conservative *Yomiuri* (10 million) and right-wing *Sankei* (2 million) as roughly equal to the liberal *Asahi* (8.3 million) and *Mainichi* (4 million). Had he added figures for the *Nihon keizai*, conservative papers would have come out on top. On the other hand, he cites *Asahi* circulation at 9 million elsewhere (p. 59). Do these numbers suggest that right- and left-wing sentiments are about equally strong in Japan?

As for factual errors, Saaler presumes that wartime comfort women were "forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military" (p. 20). But conservative revisionists show that evidence for this claim to date is at most indirect and inconclusive (See Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Comfort Women: Beyond Litigious Feminism," MN 58:2, pp. 231–36). Saaler says that the Tsukuru Kai textbook omits mentioning the Nanking Incident except negatively "in relation to the IMTFE [i.e., Tokyo war crimes trials] rather than the war" and does not deal with the incident itself as an atrocity (p. 55). But in fact two passages in the 2001 edition do mention Nanking as part of the war, and both state, "a huge amount of death and injury resulted to common people owing to the Japanese army" (Nishio Kanji et al., eds., *Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho*; Fusōsha,

2001, pp. 270 and 295). Saaler comments, "Nishio [Kanji] never passes up the opportunity to slap China and Korea in the face," as in the line, "Contemplating Japanese-Korean relations has never been a pleasant task. Most Japanese probably feel this way." Then he contrasts Nishio's "claim to speak for all Japanese" with the Korea boom now sweeping Japan (pp. 45–46). But Saaler quotes out of context. Nishio wrote: "Most Japanese probably feel this way, and it may be true for Koreans [the polite term, *Kankoku no kata*] as well. Like many Japanese, I have gone back and forth between feelings of self-defensiveness and self-assertiveness [as to Korean grievances about Japanese colonialism], but now realize that was a mistake" (Nishio Kanji, *Kokumin no rekishi*, Sankei Shinbunsha, 1999, p. 705). Saaler berates Nishio for portraying an "unidentified medieval Chinese [!] ship . . . as an example of *Japan's* superiority over the West" (p. 45). But the ship is identified as Cheng Ho's of the Ming dynasty. This chapter of Nishio's *Kokumin no rekishi* argues that East Asia, not Japan, was superior to the West until the Opium War and that the age of imperialism would not have developed had Chinese dynasties remained stable and powerful because East Asian peoples under the *ka-i* world order showed little desire for major overseas conquests (Nishio 1999, pp. 421–26). Nishio should be faulted on many points, but not these, and not in this way.

Again, Saaler's shortcomings are few and not fatal, but, as the above indicates, they do point in one direction: a refusal to give right-wing revisionism its due after a fair and careful reading. He insists that this revisionism "is not a re-interpretation following new developments in historiography or historical research, or even the discovery of new historical documents" (p. 25). That is untrue, at least for the Nanking and comfort women issues. In sum, Saaler is too sweepingly dismissive of these revisionists, their intellect, and their power to change Japanese society. Whether we like them or not, they and their version of history deserve to be taken more in earnest.