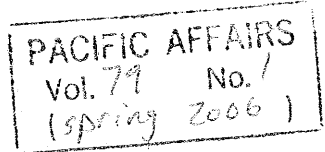


POLITICS, MEMORY, AND PUBLIC OPINION: The History Textbook Controversy and Japanese Society. By *Sven Saaler*. Muenchen (Germany): *Judicium Verlag* (German Institute for Japanese Studies Monograph Series). 2005. 202 pp. (B&W photos, charts.) Euro 28.00, cloth. ISBN 3-89129-849-8.

In the midst of the overheated rhetoric that often dominates discussions of “the textbook controversy” in Japan, this book serves as a welcome breeze of calm, cool air. Placing the recent controversy over the approval of a nationalistic history textbook for Japanese junior high schools in a larger political and intellectual context, Saaler does a workmanlike job of illustrating the problems with certain nationalistic interpretations of history, while showing that these versions do not form the dominant view of history in Japan.

The approval for use in junior high schools of a controversial textbook produced by the Society for Textbook Reform (Society) in 2000 set off a storm of debate and even protests in Japan and abroad. Saaler “aims to provide insights into the current history textbook controversy by unveiling its background in politics and society, and by identifying the major actors and their motives and objectives,” and to offer a “guide to understanding future developments in the Japanese debates over history, in particular the political utilization of history and history textbooks” (p. 9). Saaler completes both tasks, producing an excellent introduction to the broader context of the Japanese debates over its imperial history.

Saaler argues that “the ‘history textbook controversy’ is a barometer of social and political debate in contemporary Japan,” (p. 165) giving the topic significance even as he successfully illustrates that the version of history in



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the controversial textbook under consideration has relatively little influence on dominant views of history, popular or academic, within Japan. In line with the broader goals of the book, chapter 1, ostensibly about the textbook reform society, briefly surveys the problems with the new textbook, then analyzes the political and historical context in which the society writes.

In a similar fashion, the second chapter chooses a small sample of public memorials to the war, and uses them to analyze the political implications of the debate about historical memory. Thankfully, Saaler has chosen his subjects well and written about them, usually, in an evenhanded manner. His excellent choice of topics in chapter 2, in particular his analysis of the use of Yasukuni (pp. 94-101) and the debate over the creation of a new national war memorial to commemorate the dead (pp. 116-120), provides the reader with a quick overview of the nature of this complex debate.

In chapter 3, attempting to provide an overview and analysis of “history and public opinion” (p. 124) in about forty pages, the book starts to wander a bit from topic to topic. Nonetheless, even this chapter, especially with its use of public opinion data, helps illustrate the relationship between academic histories, popular histories, and the almost impossible to gauge public perceptions of history.

While the book provides an excellent introduction to this topic, it is weakened by occasional inaccuracies and assertions of unexplained opinions sprinkled throughout the monograph. To give one example, Saaler claims that “only two [out of seven] of the 2001 editions [of junior high school history textbooks] retain short references to the [Nanjing] massacre” (p. 66). In fact, all seven editions mention the massacre. The insertion of exclamation points within quotations he disagrees with, which appear as an attempt to mock the people he is quoting, detract from the general tone of the book, in which logic, rather than assertions of “political correctness,” is used to prove his points. In most cases, correcting the errors would have actually strengthened his arguments.

Despite some errors and inaccuracies, Saaler has written an excellent analysis of the relationship between historical memory and contemporary politics in early twenty-first century Japan.