

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

*Reviewed by*

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Sven Saaler began this book while serving as the head of the humanities section at the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo. More specifically, he conceived the idea for this project while helping to organize “Making History: The Quest for National Identity through History Education,” a workshop hosted by the institute in September 2001. This workshop was, in turn, one of the many gatherings hosted by the institute in support of its research initiative on Japan in Asia, commenced in 1997 (pp. 7–8). Saaler is now an associate professor at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of the University of Tokyo. In his current monograph, he aims to provide insights into the ongoing controversy over history textbooks in Japan “by unveiling its backgrounds in politics and society, and by identifying the major actors and their respective motives and objectives” (p. 9).

Saaler has divided his book into three chapters. In the first chapter, he analyzes “the re-emergence of nationalist historical revisionism . . . since the 1990s, its role in the textbook debate in 2000/2001, and its significance in contemporary Japanese politics and society” (p. 11). His second chapter examines “official and other politically sanctioned interpretations of Japan’s recent history in museums and monuments” (p. 12). In chapter three, which is largely based on public opinion surveys, he argues that “the views promoted by historical revisionists are by no means broadly accepted in Japanese society” (p. 127).

Readers will probably find chapter one most enlightening, as it presents a competent overview of the history and politics of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (*Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru-kai*). Established in late 1996, the society has challenged existing junior high school textbooks that, in the society’s view, have painted an overly negative picture of Japan’s conduct of the Asia-Pacific War and have “neglected the culture and traditions that Japanese are duty bound to pass on to following generations” (p. 40). Saaler examines the politics of key individuals in the organization, such as Nishio Kanji, a professor of German studies at the University of Electro-Communications, and Kobayashi Yoshinori, a popular cartoonist. He also details how the society struggled to win government approval for its junior high school history and civic textbooks, which are much less critical of Japan’s wartime actions. Whereas the government required an average of only 25 revisions when it reviewed junior high school history textbooks submitted by the seven existing textbook companies, it required the society to revise 137 items. The society’s civics textbook also encountered rigorous scrutiny; 99 revisions of this text were requested, while other publishers were asked to make significantly fewer changes (p. 60).

Even after its textbooks were approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in April 2001, the society encountered a series of harsh protests across the country. Lobbying organizations such as the Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21 (*Kodomo to Kyōkasho Zenkoku Netto 21*), founded in June 1998 by the activists who had supported Ienaga Saburō’s lawsuits against the government, organized

an effective citizens' movement to discourage regional district boards from adopting the society's textbooks (pp. 64–67). As a result, only a trifling 0.039 per cent of Japanese junior high schools used the society's history textbook (p. 66).

Although the society's history textbook was thus resoundingly rejected by educational authorities, the author also discusses the volume's spillover effect on subsequent editions of other junior high school history textbooks. Evidently as a concession to the society's conservative position, its competitors toned down their commentary on Japanese atrocities during the Asia-Pacific War. For instance, textbooks were more likely to omit controversial topics such as the military sex slavery and the numerical estimate of the death toll during the Nanjing Massacre. Saaler refers to Tawara Yoshifumi, the head of Network 21, who lamented that the coverage of the textbooks had reverted to that of 20 years ago (p. 66). Throughout the chapter, the author enables us to hear the voices of activists and scholars in Japan who confronted the society. It is also apparent that Saaler has examined a vast amount of literature, not only in English and German, but also the work of leading Japanese scholars such as Arai Shin'ichi, Kimijima Kazuhiko, Oguma Eiji, and Yoshida Yutaka.

Another strength of this book is its presentation of a number of useful tables, charts, and images. These include a diagram of the selection process for textbooks in Japanese junior high schools (p. 62); a table of market share of the eight publishers of history textbooks for Japanese junior high schools from 2002 to 2006 (p. 66); photographs of various monuments such as the Cornerstone of Peace in Okinawa (p. 115); and bar graphs of opinion surveys conducted by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) in 2000 regarding Japan's responsibility for the war (pp. 139–40). College students of Japanese studies are likely to appreciate these easy-to-grasp visual sources.

Regardless of the strengths of the study discussed above, the book contains some troubling weaknesses. The volume does not include an index, and those who are not familiar with the topic may have a hard time locating particular names and events. In addition, the second chapter, which examines museums and monuments, is inaccurate in some important respects and would benefit from a reconsideration. In this chapter, the author analyzes the Yasukuni Shrine's Yūshūkan war museum; the Chidorigafuchi Cemetery for the War Dead; the Shōwa Hall; the Exhibition Center and Reference Library for Peace and Consolation (Heiwa Kinen Tenji Shiryōkan), a temple in Atami dedicated to the seven war criminals (Kō-A Kannon); the Great Monument to the Holy War in Greater East Asia (Daitō-A Seisen no Taihi) at the Gokoku Shrine, which is dedicated to the war dead in Ishikawa; and the Cornerstone of Peace in Okinawa.

Taken individually, the author's discussions of the museums and memorials are deserving of praise. However, it is difficult to agree with his

conclusion that “it is an affirmative view of the war that dominates public memory in Japan” (p. 121). One should also pause before accepting the argument that “in memorials and museums run or sanctioned by the state—and apart from some prefectural museums, Japanese responsibility for war is not raised in them, and the victims of Japanese aggression are nowhere memorialized or even considered” (p. 121). In the eyes of the author, the Yasukuni Shrine is sanctioned by the state, and its war museum Yūshūkan represents the “semi-official reading of history” (p. 100). In fact, it may be more accurate to regard Yasukuni Shrine as a private religious institution and to recognize that Yūshūkan’s narrative exemplifies the viewpoint, not of the Japanese government or people, but merely that of the Japan Bereaved Families Association (Nihon Izoku-kai) and its supporters, including Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō and lawmakers affiliated with the Group of Diet Members Who Visit Yasukuni Shrine Together (Minna de Yasukuni Jinja ni Sanpai Suru Kokkaigiin no Kai). As the author himself acknowledges, Koizumi’s visit to the shrine was controversial, and it seems misleading to equate the fact that a number of Diet members have visited the shrine with the much broader idea of state sanction.

Similarly, it does not seem accurate to identify Kō-A Kannon in Atami, originally founded in 1940 by Matsui Iwane, commander-in-chief during the Battle of Nanjing who later received the death sentence at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946–48), as a monument sanctioned by the Japanese state. Again, Saaler’s analysis may overstate the importance of the events on which it relies. For example, while it is true that Yoshida Shigeru, who served as prime minister five times between 1946 and 1956, contributed to the inscription of the Cenotaph of the Seven (Shichishi no Hi), he did so only in 1959, well after he had retired from office.

It seems that the author is able to maintain his hawkish characterization of Japanese war museums only by choosing not to discuss in this chapter the large number of peace museums that exist across Japan. According to *Heiwa hakubutsukan sensō shiryōkan gaido bukku* (Guidebook of peace and war museums, Aoki Shoten, 2000), Japan today has more than 85 public and private museums that specialize in artifacts related to war. Of these museums, at least 30 contain candid exhibits addressing the wartime suffering of non-Japanese, while many others try to avoid provoking controversy. They include public museums such as the Ōkuno Island Poison Gas Museum (Ōkunoshima Dokugasu Shiryōkan, opened in 1988), the Kawasaki Peace Museum (Kawasaki-shi Heiwakan, 1992), the Peace Museum of Saitama (Saitama-ken Heiwa Shiryōkan, 1993), and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (Hiroshima Heiwa Kinen Shiryōkan, renovation completed in 1994). Private museums such as the Kyoto Museum for World Peace at Ritsumeikan University (Ritsumeikan Daigaku Tokusai Heiwa Myūjiamu, 1992) and the Oka Masaharu Memorial Nagasaki Peace Museum (Oka

Masaharu Kinen Nagasaki Heiwa Shiryōkan, 1995) openly acknowledge Japan's wartime atrocities in Asia. Indeed, the latter is solely dedicated to Chinese and Korean victims of Japanese imperialism and aggression, and visitors are invited to consider a question posted on the wall: "Why does Japan continue to be irresponsible?" (*Naze Nihon wa musekinin de aritsuzukeru no ka*). Of course, the existence of these museums does not suggest that such self-critical views have dissuaded all Japanese from taking an affirmative view of the war. Nevertheless, it is curious that Saaler's study gives the peace museums such short shrift. Indeed, one might argue that a more extensive treatment of the peace museums would bolster the author's overarching thesis that "the majority of Japanese . . . remain quite self-critical on . . . the Asia-Pacific War" (p. 168).

Section three of chapter three (pp. 147–70) of the book also seems rather confusing and inaccurate. Whereas he argues that "most Japanese also consider that their own country still owes apologies for its wartime actions" (p. 150), the author later stresses that many popular historical novels and television dramas avoid enlightening Japanese regarding the nation's war responsibility or the aggressive character of the war. These two observations would seem to point to a contradiction the book leaves unresolved. The author also assumes that "historical museums in Japan do not play a large role in shaping Japanese views of the past" (p. 159), and he creates the impression that museums such as the Kyoto Museum for World Peace and the Kawasaki Peace Museum seldom directly confront the question of Japanese wartime responsibility (p. 160). This interpretation is somewhat more subject to dispute than Saaler's discussion acknowledges.

Perhaps this book is too ambitious, seeking as it does to identify the "historical consciousness of the majority of the Japanese" (p. 168). As Saaler certainly recognizes, Japanese society has diverse viewpoints respecting the interpretation of the Asia-Pacific War. While it seems undeniable that the cultural forces that currently oppose revisionism in Japan will remain strong, the revisionist impulse is powerfully entrenched in some circles, and neither historiographical faction has ever shown much inclination to compromise. Just like the latest textbook controversy on which Saaler so extensively comments, similar controversies over historical interpretation of the war will continue to be seen in museums, novels, films, and comic books in Japan. Any study that strives to identify any single position that summarizes Japanese thoughts and feelings about the war takes upon itself a Herculean, perhaps impossible task. Too strenuous an attempt to extract order from these fervid and often messy debates may be admirable in its intentions, but it is likely to be victimized by its own eagerness.