Refighting the Battle of Okinawa: The Controversy over History Textbook Revisions of 2007

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For history is the raw material for nationalist or other fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented.¹

On March 30th, 2007, the Japanese ministry in charge of education (文部 科学省 hereafter the Monkasho) issued a textbook revision for history textbooks. The changes were small, but concerned the descriptions the mass suicides that occurred during the Battle of Okinawa. Though apparently minor changes, the shift they caused in the interpretation of those events would reverberate for the remainder of the year, leading ultimately to some further revisions to the texts.

A great deal has been written on this subject already,² and the actual content of the textbooks is at the center of the debate. More importantly however, the debate over history or what is called the "historical consciousness problem" (歷史認識問題) reflects different but often times overlapping aspects of the need or desire of different players to come to terms satisfactorily with the "past" and how it is remembered. From the Japanese Government's perspective "at stake is the legitimacy of regulating

national history to cultivate 'desirable' national identity and solidarity...." Taken from a larger perspective, the debate is not "only about war responsibility but also about national belonging, the relation between the individual and the state, and relations between the living and the dead." ⁴

Thus, as mentioned above, the specific changes that were made need to be examined, but of more importance is the way they were made, in particular the reason (or lack there of) given for making them, and the reaction this drew from, but not limited to, the people of Okinawa.

The issue of Japanese junior high and high school textbooks have arisen many times in the past and has often received a lot of coverage in the foreign press because in the past the issues involved were often related to the "comfort women" (慰安婦), the Nanking massacre or other related issues that had international diplomatic repercussions, particularly Japan's relations with China and South Korea. This instance is unusual in that it represents what could be seen as largely domestic history (not ignoring of course that many foreigners, mainly from the Korean peninsula, also perished in the battle). Though different in that respect, this case also received a fair amount of attention, if only because of past cases which have created the impression (unfairly I think—but, as in this case, seems partly the result of conservative attempts to rewrite or delete history) in foreign media that Japan still refuses to deal with its past.

To better put this into perspective, the first section will offer a brief review of the Battle of Okinawa, in particular the mass suicides; this will include testimony from survivors and that taken from survivors as well as academic conclusions that have been drawn. The events that unfolded did so in what is seen as the most ferocious battle in the Pacific theatre of World War II—which is not to say that conclusions cannot be drawn, only that evidence must be weighed carefully. This is presented not as a definitive statement or conclusion of what happened. But it is important for

understanding how Okinawans understand and remember the past.

A second section discusses the revisions, the announcement of the revisions, and most importantly the reasons (excuses?) given for the revisions. Because the process of reviewing textbooks is closed and no records are made available to the public this will necessarily be brief.

A final section deals with the reaction to the revisions, centering primarily on Okinawans, but drawing on other sources as well, as they illustrate this issue is not just an Okinawan issue.

The Battle of Okinawa⁵

General Gerald Astor considered Okinawa to "the equivalent of England for the Normandy invasion." The fighting started on March 26th 1945 with the attack on the Kerama island chain (Kerama, Tokashiki, and Zamami). The battle would reach the main islands on April 1st and continue until June 23rd. It is considered the bloodiest battle of the Pacific War with estimates of casualties being about 110,000 Japanese combat deaths and an additional 150,000 civilian deaths. (Estimates for civilian deaths are more varied, the number here is from Hanson's. But an easier way so grasp is to understand it was about 1/4 of the civilian population.) Most of these civilian deaths happened in the last few weeks of the battle. They were not the result of mass suicides but of getting caught in the crossfire, hit by artillery, starvation, and disease. Most of the mass suicides that have been documented occurred on the Kerama Island chain. The following is a description of what Captain Frank Barron saw on his second day on Zamami:

[Our] advancing company came upon a group of civilians huddled at the edge of a step precipice. One woman had a baby in her arms and another had a two- or three-year-old clinging to her side. "They were about thirty to forty feet from me," Barron recalled, "all staring at us like little frightened animals." Seconds later, the entire group disappeared over the cliff. Barron and his men rushed forward in time to see bodies bouncing off the wall of the precipice as they plunged to their deaths.

What Barron and his comrades couldn't have known at the time was that all the natives of Zawami had been ordered by the Japanese to kill themselves when the U.S. forces landed on the island.⁷

The exact numbers of those who committed mass suicide is still uncertain, but records from various municipalities dating from 1945 puts it somewhere between six and seven hundred.⁸ In areas where the main fighting took place undoubtedly it would have been difficult to ascertain in many cases.

Sloan records the testimony of other soldiers who came upon families who had committed suicide by slitting their throats or blowing themselves up, and Japanese survivors also testify about their own experiences. A man named Yoshikawa Yoshikatsu, who was seven years old at the time, testified to his experiences on Takashiki Island on March 28 1945. He and his family had evacuated from a cave (壕) during the night of the 27th to escape the upcoming attack. They headed to the northern part of the island to an area called Nishiyama (北山) The families had formed circles and were huddling together. He recalls hearing the village head shout "Tenno Heika Banzai" and then hearing grenades exploding all around him. His elder brother had also thrown one into their group, but it didn't explode. His father then told them "Thrown it in the fire!" At that moment, his mother said "Throw it away! You can die any time. You should live while you can." Upon which the family ran away.

The elder brother in the story above was working at the town hall at the time, and people who worked for municipalities were responsible for making sure military instructions were followed. Stories of being given grenades and asked to blow themselves up are quite common. Oshiro Mitsuko recalls being

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given a grenade for such a purpose, but recalls "I wanted to die, but I couldn't do it. We fled into the hills when the Americans invaded, but they didn't harm us—they just let us go." ¹⁰ Another survivor, Toyama Majun, who was chief of military affairs in the village of Takashiki, testified "On March 28 at Fijiga...in the upper reaches of the On'na river, the collective death (集団死) incident of residents occurred. At that time, defense unit members brought hand grenades and urged members to commit suicide." ¹¹ He goes on to explain that when they received orders from the military they were considered orders from the Emperor himself.

These few examples are not intended to tell the whole story nor to offer definitive proof of exactly what happened. But they do point to some of the dynamics involved as events unfolded. There were of course orders/ instructions given through local governments and passed on to villagers. But another important dynamic was the propaganda the army had used to convince the local population that should they be captured by the Americans they would see their wives and daughters brutally raped and killed in front of them before they too were brutally killed. The fear on the faces of the victims Captain Barron saw attests to this as does the testimony countless others. "We all wanted to kill ourselves because we believed the imperial army." 12 Corporal Dan Lawler's experience on meeting some young children who had come out of a cave tells a similar story. When he offered them candy they refused, thinking it poisoned. They only relented after he ate some himself, but he had to continue to do so for each and every child in the group of eight.¹³ As Dower has noted, "It can be plausibly argued that no nation in World War II launched a more sophisticated propaganda blitz domestically than the Japanese." 14

From all this, and, most importantly for understanding the events of 2007, it is clear the imperial army was deeply involved in the events of those spring and summer months of 1945. As further evidence of this, the mass

suicides only occurred where Japanese soldiers were present. Perhaps only circumstantial, but, as noted earlier, several dynamics were at work. Hayashi sums this up: "There is abundant testimony that the Japanese military gave strict orders (厳令) 'Never allow yourself to be captured,' and also that they passed out grenades saying, 'If you have no choice, commit suicide.' It matters little if on the day the military commander gave the order to commit suicide or not. If we look at the overall picture, there is no question that the mass suicides were coerced (強制) by the military, and there is not a shred of research to refute this." ¹⁵

While this research focuses on the mass suicide issue, it is worth recalling that one fourth of the civilian population lost their lives during those 85 days. So it is not surprising that polls show Okinawans consider the Battle of Okinawa to be the most significant event in contemporary Okinawan history. ¹⁶ The Battle of Okinawa "not only physically destroyed Okinawa, but also left deep scars in the minds of its people." ¹⁷ It is small wonder then, that the Monkasho announcement in the spring of 2007 would spark the reaction that it did.

Textbook Revision

On the evening of March 30, the Monkasho announced revision to the high school history textbooks to be used from the following year. The changes in wording were subtle, but had the effect of eliminating military responsibility or any role in the mass suicides during the Battle of Okinawa. The small changes made big news. The headlines were quite similar: The *Tokyo Shinbun* "Mass Suicide 'Military Coercion' erased"; *Okinawa Times*: "Mass suicides' Military connection denied"; *Ryukyu Shinbun*: ""Mass Suicide Coercion' erased" and the previously cited *Asahi Shinbun*: "Ignoring the truth." ¹⁹ The foreign media also picked up the story, the *New York Times*: "Japan's Textbooks Reflect Revised History." ²⁰

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Before looking at the justification for the changes here are two examples:

Yamakawa Publishing: Japanese History A Text

Pre-revision: "The Japanese Army forced people out of the caves (壕) and some were cornered into committing mass suicide."

Revised: "Among them the Japanese army forced some out of the caves, some committed mass suicide."

Tokyo Shoseki Publishing Japanese History A Text

Pre-revised: "Among them, the Japanese army massacred some members of the general public as spies and others were forced to commit mass suicide."

Revised: Among them, some were cornered into committing mass suicide, the Japanese army massacred some members of the public as spies." ²¹

In both revised and pre-revised the passive voice is used but in the revised versions it in not clear who or what is the cause of cornering people into committing mass suicides. The way they are written in the revised version the people could be making the decision of their own volition.

So what was the reason for the revisions? Very little was explained in depth, but the comment from the review board (検定委員会) said of the former passages "these passages could generate misunderstanding that all these actions were carried out under orders from the military." As means of further explanation, the Monkasho explained that 1) there are no documents proving there were orders; 2) the two commanders (one by his descendants) on Kerama Island who were said to have given the orders are in the middle of suing for defamation of character; 3) Research in recent years has focused less on whether or not there were orders and more on the mental states of the people at the time. Number 2 refers to the law suit that was brought against Oe Kenzaburo and Iwanami Shoten (publishing) for *Okinawa no-to*, a book in which he records the testimony and experiences of the people on the islands. He won the case in 2008, with Judge Fukami Tochimasa concluding:

"The military was deeply involved in the mass suicides.²⁴ In either case, at the time the revisions were announced, the case, still being agued hardly seems a justification for anything. Yet, when the Monkasho Textbook Division was queried as to whether or not they took that into consideration they responded: "Even though at the moment the case is not settled, the plaintiffs have publicly testified [that there were no orders] so we can't just completely ignore it." ²⁵ The reasons thus given do not develop a coherent argument. As the headlines introduced earlier suggested, the response would be fast and vocal.

The View from Okinawa

As might be expected, many people in Okinawa were quite upset. Politicians and other activists soon started organizing, meetings were held and the issue would carry through the summer climaxing in a large demonstration on the 29th of September. The demonstration was clearly the climax in the campaign to get the revisions reversed. However, the discourses that arose in the interim also provide insight into how the issue was and is viewed by people in Okinawa.

Many articles were written, people interviewed and a lot of people wrote letters to newspapers. A sample will give an idea of the tone. In an interview, Ryukyu University Professor Hiyane Teruo stated: "For the people here the Battle of Okinawa is a problem directly tied to our dignity of life; even now with the memories of this battle are still fresh, there is no room for inserting politics or political ideology into it." It is clear here that 1) this should not be a political issue and Tokyo appears to be making it one, and 2) for Okinawans this is a very personal issue. A letter writer comments: "As someone who escaped death numerous times during the rampage of war, to see this distortion makes me apprehensive." Another letter writer, Uchihori Takshi, noted, "The Granpas and Gramas (おじい・おばあ) must be lamenting 'we've

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been duped by Yamato again." ²⁸ In the case of the apprehensive writer he explains in his letter that his mother had been given cyanide with which to kill herself and her family, but they kept wandering until they finally made to safety. Such a childhood experience would no doubt stay with one for one's whole life, with fear at the thought of anyone being put in that situation again. The second comment somewhat wryly alludes to the fact that many Okinawa people do not identify with Tokyo (i.e. the central government) and see themselves as set apart, and at the same time, feel that what happened in the past was deceptive.

Somewhat broader perspectives were offered from both at home and abroad. Urashima Etsuko, an author and reporter, noted "To the people here, the textbook revisions are a flat denial of what Okinawans elders went through and what they have been telling younger generations. Young people are retorting, 'Is the government saying our grandparents are lying'?" ²⁹ Of course, young people are going to believe their grandparents over the government in Tokyo, so one wonders how this might affect them in their thinking about the central government. This sort of negative backlash was noted elsewhere as well. Denial of military responsibility is likely to "deepen suspicions...that Tokyo is trying to whitewash its militaristic past even as it tries to raise the profile of its current forces." Considering the seemingly more important issues concerning the US bases and forces based in Okinawa, the government's moves to revises the textbooks was not timed particularly well.

A writer from Aichiken, Utsunomiya Takufumi, ties the issue to broader issues of education. "If you can't accept the truth as truth you cannot call it education. And likewise, with moral education you can only start from the truth." ³¹ This comment points to one of the major issues in education that is one of the primary sources of textbook controversies: what is the purpose of education. *Asashi Shinbun* raises the same issue in an editorial: "Eliminating

the military's involvement also eliminates the extreme militarism that would not even brook civilians becoming prisoners of war. This is a distortion of history." ³²

Clearly, with respect to the history of the Battle of Okinawa, the people of Okinawa want their children and the rest of the world to understand what happened. A visit to the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum will leave anyone with the impression that passing on the experiences of the past is highly valued in Okinawa, no doubt in part because of the intensity of those experiences. And, as the comments above suggest, a lot of other Japanese agree with them. As a writer quoted earlier ended his letter: "By denying military coercion in the mass suicides, you are in effect killing them again." ³³

As noted above, people in Okinawa began organizing immediately. Doing petition drives, politicians putting together resolutions, and people organizing demonstrations. On June 9th 63 various organizations held a Okinawan Prefectural Citizens Meeting (県民大会) attended by about 3500 people. This meeting and the ones that would follow were focused on getting the revisions reversed, something which rarely happens. Takashima Nobuyoshi, Professor at Ryukyu University, however was passionate in his determination and optimism that they could: "A corruption (改悪) [referring to the revision] which has distorted the historical truth:' it is still possible to make them take it back; in this energy filled context I want to take courage and band together." While this meeting was not as large as the one that would follow, the lack of any sign of compromise from Tokyo, seems to have fed the flames.

On June 22nd, the Prefectural Assembly passed a unanimous statement (意見書) "voicing our anger and demanding a retraction of the revisions." ³⁶ The same report also note that by the 28th all 41 municipalities in Okinawa had passed similar resolutions, and, further, that several civic groups had also implored the Ministry to reverse its decision. The report also notes that survivors have also come forward to personally relate their experiences

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which testify to the military involvement in the mass suicides. To this out pouring of anger, the Monkasho has merely replied "This was a matter decided by the review council." In essence they are saying that as this is a matter for the review council (審議会) and so it is out of our hands. The question arises however, if, as was noted above, nothing had changed substantially in the scholarship relating to the events, what over the course of two years had changed. There is no definitive answer as the review process is closed and only the results are made public. 38

Without any satisfactory response from the Monkasho another demonstration was planned for September 29th. The lack of any substantive response from Tokyo perhaps served to galvanize the people of Okinawa. This next demonstration at Ginowan would turn out to be the largest since the islands reverted to Japanese control in 1972.³⁹ While they were hoping to gather about 50 thousand they ended up with around 110,000 people attending. The main purpose of the rally was to make two demands: 1) that the Monkasho retract the examination opinion (検定意見) and 2) that they put the original wording back in. Other events during the day included a special dance performance for peace, a song for memorializing the victims, and a 34 kilometer peace torch relay. If the numbers of attendees are accurate, this would be equivalent to about 8% of the Okinawa population. (There may have been people in from the mainland as well, but there were also rallies held the Kerama Islands which also had a few thousand participants.)

It had been almost exactly six months since the announcement of the revisions, and the opposition was clearly getting stronger, not weaker, and difficult to ignore. Yet, at noted above, in this case, as in previous cases (usually complaints from South Korea or China) the general reply is that the Monkasho cannot interfere. To do so this time would set a precedent. In the end, they announced that if the publishers wished to apply for permission to

amend their texts, those applications would be considered. This was, according to the Heiwa Forum, "an unforgivable shirking of responsibility." 42

Ultimately, some changes were made. The Heiwa Form and others had called for a clear expression of what had taken place. "But the ministry rejected this clear description of the military's role, effectively opting for the softer and vaguer reference to the military's 'involvement'." ⁴³ For those who would seek to completely exonerate the Japanese military this was a disappointing result. And for Okinawans "textbooks should belong to the people. The essence of the problem here is how do we understand what the Japanese military did during the battle of Okinawa, and how do we pass that on to our children?" ⁴⁴ It seems from this case that not only do we see two (or more) ways of viewing and understanding the past, but two very different visions for the future.

Different Ways of Remembering

In the case of the mass suicides and the textbooks, the struggle over slight changes in wording (albeit with significant impact on meaning) offers a glimpse at the larger on-going struggle over history and memory that on been going since the end of the war. This struggle became more pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing especially on textbook issues. ⁴⁵ Ienaga Saburo's 32 year court battle to allow a more straight-forward treatment of the war also helped keep the issue in the public realm. ⁴⁶ Since the turn of the century, however, those opposed to such treatment have been fighting back, and the mass suicide textual revisions were another site of that struggle.

Superficially at least, as the above analysis indicated, the arguments seem to be about what happened, who did what and the like. At a deeper level however, it is about not just what happened (or what we choose to remember as happening), but about who we are and who we want to be.

The struggle for control over memory is rooted in the conflict and

interplay between social, political, and cultural interests and values in particular present conditions. Memories of wars, massacres, atrocities, invasions and other instances of mass violence and death become significant referents for subsequent collective life when people choose to make them especially relevant to who they are and what it means to be a member of that society.⁴⁷

Thinking about the mass suicides (and of course the mass suicides were part of the larger tragedy that was the Battle of Okinawa) in this light, it isn't really an argument about whether or not it happened. From the Okinawan perspective, it is a question about who we are. Further, in terms of continuity, and passing on the knowledge of the experiences to future generations, who we will be in the future.

Hashimoto identifies three conflicting narratives that help give perspective to the differing ways in which the past is thought about in Japan. 48 These are not wholly exclusive, and can and do overlap, as can be seen in the case of Okinawa. The first narrative emphasizes the stories of fallen national heroes, "which justifies the war and national sacrifices in hindsight by claiming that the peace and prosperity of today are built on the sacrifices of the past." Such narratives aim to cultivate pride in national belonging.

A second narrative focuses on victims and on empathy. The vision is of war as a catastrophe or terrible tragedy. These types of narrative will focus on suffering, anti-militarism, and pacifism. The narratives in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are good examples of this type of narrative. The third type of narrative presents Japan as perpetrator, emphasizing imperialism and exploitation—a narrative of a "dark descent into hell." 49

In the case of the mass suicides the emphasis tends toward both the second—victim focus and the third, Japan as perpetrator. With the mass suicides clearly the emphasis is on being victimized. But at the same time,

that victimhood would be inauthentic without the Japanese military there as perpetrator. The Monkasho and the government of Abe Shinzo at the time clearly favored something along the lines of the fallen heroes type narrative. His oft spoken desire to visit Yasukuni and his wish to see Japanese people filled with pride are clear indications of this. Thus, ultimately this dispute was not about history, but about the kind of narrative, the kind of identity (maybe not consciously) one creates for oneself and constructs together in society as a whole.

This is not likely to be easily resolved. One underlying reason is the intensity of the experience of the war. Such intense experiences can cause what Alexander calls "cultural trauma." Cultural trauma occurs "when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. ⁵⁰ Though 70 years has passed since the end of the war, this 'trauma' helps to understand the passionate out-pouring of opposition to the revisions that came from Okinawa.

Conclusion

The focus has been on the dispute between Tokyo and Okinawa due to the textbook revisions made by the Monkasho. The emphasis has intentionally been on the discourse emanating from Okinawa, to better understand their view of the past. Having written on this topic before, it might also be worth thinking about this issue from a larger historiographical perspective. History writing always involves choice. "Remembering or reconstructing the past, as we would say these days—inevitably involves neglecting and forgetting." ⁵¹ When studying or thinking about history, sometimes it's worth thinking about what is missing.

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¹ Hobswam 5.

- ² See for example Hashimoto: Iwasaki et.al: Nozaki and Seldon: and Seaton.
- ³ Hashimoto 89
- ⁴ Hashimoto 25
- Except where otherwise quoted this review is drawn from Sloan's *The Ultimate Battle* and Maj Hanson's "The Battle of Okinawa."
- ⁶ Hanson 47
- 7 297-8
- ⁸ Data reproduced in 「実態無視」.
- ⁹ Retold in 「撤回求める著名」. His recorded testimony can also be seen on you tube at 吉川嘉勝。
- 10 "Okinawa war time wounds reopened."
- 11 Aniva
- ¹² Nakamura Takejiro, quoted in "Okinawa war time wounds reopened."
- ¹³ Sloan 304-305.
- 14 Ways 65.
- 15 2
- ¹⁶ Nakazato 95. Also "Okinawans Protest" 16.
- 17 Nakazato 95
- ¹⁸ These are listed in Havashi 1.
- 19「事実無視」。
- ²⁰ Onishi
- 21「事実無視」
- 22 "Mass Suicides."
- 23「集団自決『軍強制』| 1.
- ²⁴ Onishi, "Japanese Court Rejects," 30.
- 25 大江,健三郎 20.
- 26「沖縄県議会」.
- ²⁷ 堀江祐一郎.「集団自決、青酸カリ携え、死線くぐった」. 声. 朝死新聞. 4 May 2007, 13
- 28 「歴史の汚染をまた隠すか」
- ²⁹ Kambayashi.
- 30 Onishi, "Japan's Textbooks."
- 31「沖縄の人々」
- 32「集団自決」
- 33 字都宮.
- ³⁴ 平和フォーラム.「文部科学省」.「歴史歪曲・沖縄『ノー』」県民大会に人の波.」朝日 新聞(西日本版). 10 June 2007, 38. Web. 2 Mar 2015.
- 35「歴史歪曲」.

- 36「文部科学省」
- 37「文部科学省」.
- ³⁸ "A Political Decision." This is also discussed in depth in Nozaki and Seldon.
- 39 Aniva.
- 40「文部科学省」.
- ⁴¹ Onishi "Japan Court Rejects," 6; "Okinawa Protests," 15.
- 42 福山.
- 43 Onishi "Japan Amends."
- 44 福山.
- 45 Seaton; Nozaki and Seldon.
- ⁴⁶ Hashimoto 13-14.
- ⁴⁷ Hashimoto 2.
- ⁴⁸ Hashimoto 8-14.
- ⁴⁹ Hashimoto 8.
- ⁵⁰ 1.
- ⁵¹ Dower 3.

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