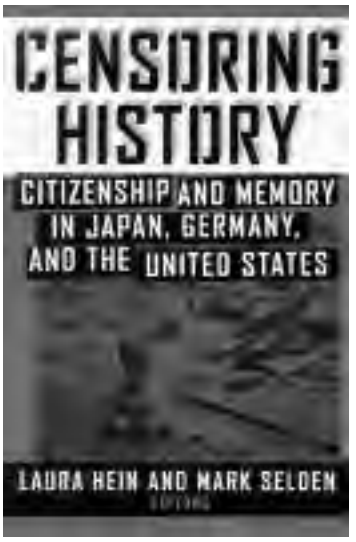

Censoring History

Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States

LAURA HEIN AND MARK SELDEN, EDITORS
ARMONK, NEW YORK: M. E. SHARPE, 2000
IX + 301 PAGES. PAPERBACK
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Anyone who teaches Asian History and/or America's relations with Asia should welcome this provocative if somewhat loosely organized set of essays. As the book's subtitle suggests, eleven individuals from Australia, England, Japan, New Zealand and the United States have contributed ten essays detailing how three countries have debated the way young people should be taught about their past. While the book places six of the nine essays in a section called "Textbooks and Historical Memory" and three in "Politics of the Classroom," it is probably more useful to note that five essays discuss Japan's treatment of World War Two, two look at Germany's treatment of the Nazis, and two examine American treatment of our war in Vietnam. For reasons that the authors' fifty-page introduction seeks to explain, the consensus seems to be that neither Japan nor the United States does as well as Germany in dealing with dark moments in their pasts. This in turn is related to Japanese feelings that they must encourage patriotism if they are going to survive in a globalized world, contrary to German conclusions that a united Europe requires their schools to stress multicultural understanding, and a less stated but rather clear American vision that the textbooks of the world's greatest superpower should avoid dealing with any painful Vietnam controversies.

The key issue of the book, indeed, is the tension between the rather conservative desire to create a "master narrative" that will encourage young people to love and honor their country, and a more liberal notion that the culture of a country cannot improve unless this narrative helps us learn from our past mistakes. In Japan, for example, the long struggle between the historian Ienaga Saburō and the Ministry of Education's textbook department has led to multiple lawsuits that are nicely explained by Nozaki Yoshiko and Inokuchi Hiromitsu. Ienaga did not fare well in the courts, the authors note, and yet the publicity generated made the public aware of what was going on and hence undoubtedly helped the liberal cause. Despite this, Gavan McCormack explains, a popular movement by Tokyo University's Fujioka Nobukatsu—cleverly calling itself "liberal" because it wished to get away from allegedly old stereotypes—opposed negative treatment of such sensitive issues as the Japanese military's abuse of the so-called "Comfort Women." Trying hard, if not always completely successfully, to limit post-modern terminology, Aaron Gerow links this movement to "the flow of floating signifiers that constitutes consumer culture,"[1] while Kimijima Kazuhiko rather sadly relates how dialogues attempted by Korean and Japanese historians still become bitter. Topping the Japan essays off is a very helpful piece by Kathleen Woods Masalski discussing how she gets Japanese and American educators to evaluate a textbook and generally look more closely at all their teaching materials. Her very specific advice and assessment of what does and does not work should be required reading for all of us who teach teachers.

This is not to say that the book is without problems. Essays on Vietnam by James Loewen and David Hunt are useful, to be sure, but essays that the editors (among others) have sponsored on the politics surrounding the Smithsonian's 1995 plan for an atom bomb exhibition would have been far more useful both because they discuss the same World War Two time period, and because they raise the same issues of political control over the retelling of another event that some have also called a "holocaust." Loewen might also have discussed the

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fact that at least two of the famous pictures on Vietnam that he feels should have made it into American texts (the napalmed girl and the execution of an NLF fighter) have, as I recall, been altered in ways that increase their anti-war impact, while the equally famous picture of the injured Chinese baby that highlights the book's cover was also posed (the baby was placed on the train tracks) for maximum effect. It is not just the right that tinkers with "the truth."

Similarly, Fujioka's revisionism is worrisome, to be sure, but what we also need is an analysis of exactly how much officially sanctioned textbooks have in fact changed. As the authors suggest, conservatives who would rewrite the "master narrative" face plenty of pressure both from other nations in Asia and from their fellow citizens to own up to the darkest horrors of the past. Who, after all the smoke has cleared, is actually winning? Hopefully the book will inspire others to dig into the ongoing question of just what students are being taught in all three of these countries.

When you open a book edited by Selden and Hein, copyrighted by the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* and endorsed by John Dower and Howard Zinn, in sum, you know that you are in the company of what, for quite different folks, the police chief in the old *Casablanca* film once called "the usual suspects." "Revisionists" of this sort will inevitably be alarmed by the alleged power of the state to push a kind of "hegemonic nationalist narrative"[2] that glosses over the terrible suffering that Japan and the United States inflicted on Asia and thus helps our three countries strengthen their military alliances. All this is a bit gloomy for my tastes, and yet raises issues to which any who object must respond. Put another way, these propositions may be contentious, yet they are bolstered by excellent scholarship, clear writing and eye-opening methodology. This book has a powerful message to convey. I learned a lot, and am happy to recommend it to others. ■

NOTES

1. Laura Hein and Mark Selden, Editors, *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States (*Armonk, N.Y., M. E. Sharpe, 2000), p. 87.
2. *Ibid*, 5

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