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Japan's Textbooks Reflect Revised History

By [NORIMITSU ONISHI](#)

TOKYO, March 31 — In another sign that [Japan](#) is pressing ahead in revising its history of World War II, new high school textbooks will no longer acknowledge that the Imperial Army was responsible for a major atrocity in Okinawa, the government announced late Friday.

The Ministry of Education ordered publishers to delete passages stating that the Imperial Army ordered civilians to commit mass suicide during the Battle of Okinawa, as the island was about to fall to American troops in the final months of the war.

The decision was announced as part of the ministry's annual screening of textbooks used in all public schools. The ministry also ordered changes to other delicate issues to dovetail with government assertions, though the screening is supposed to be free of political interference.

"I believe the screening system has been followed appropriately," said Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#), who has long campaigned to soften the treatment in textbooks of Japan's wartime conduct.

The decision on the Battle of Okinawa, which came as a surprise because the ministry had never objected to the description in the past, followed recent denials by Mr. Abe that the military had coerced women into sexual slavery during the war.

The results of the annual textbook screening are closely watched in China, South Korea and other Asian countries. So the fresh denial of the military's responsibility in the Battle of Okinawa and in sexual slavery — long accepted as historical facts — is likely to deepen suspicions in Asia that Tokyo is trying to whitewash its militarist past even as it tries to raise the profile of its current forces.

Shortly after assuming office last fall, Mr. Abe transformed the Defense Agency into a full ministry. He has said that his most important goal is to revise the American-imposed, pacifist Constitution that forbids Japan from having a full-fledged military with offensive abilities.

Some 200,000 Americans and Japanese died during the Battle of Okinawa, one of the most brutal clashes of the war. It was the only battle on Japanese soil involving civilians, but Okinawa was not just any part of Japan.

It was only in the late 19th century that Japan officially annexed Okinawa, a kingdom that, to this day, has retained some of its own culture. During World War II, when many Okinawans still spoke a different dialect, Japanese troops treated the locals brutally. In its history of the war, the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum presents Okinawa as being caught in the fighting between America and Japan — a starkly different view from the Yasukuni Shrine war museum, which presents Japan as a liberator of Asia from Western powers.

During the 1945 battle, during which one quarter of the civilian population was killed, the Japanese Army showed indifference to Okinawa's defense and safety. Japanese soldiers used civilians as shields against the Americans, and persuaded locals that victorious American soldiers would go on a rampage of killing and raping. With the impending victory of American troops, civilians committed mass suicide, urged on by fanatical Japanese soldiers.

“There were some people who were forced to commit suicide by the Japanese Army,” one old textbook explained. But in the revision ordered by the ministry, it now reads, “There were some people who were driven to mass suicide.”

Other changes are similar — the change to a passive verb, the disappearance of a subject — and combine to erase the responsibility of the Japanese military. In explaining its policy change, the ministry said that it “is not clear that the Japanese Army coerced or ordered the mass suicides.”

As with Mr. Abe’s denial regarding sexual slavery, the ministry’s new position appeared to discount overwhelming evidence of coercion, particularly the testimony of victims and survivors themselves.

“There are many Okinawans who have testified that the Japanese Army directed them to commit suicide,” Ryukyu Shimpo, one of the two major Okinawan newspapers, said in an angry editorial. “There are also people who have testified that they were handed grenades by Japanese soldiers” to blow themselves up.

The editorial described the change as a politically influenced decision that “went along with the government view.”

Mr. Abe, after helping to found the Group of Young Parliamentarians Concerned About Japan’s Future and History Education in 1997, long led a campaign to reject what nationalists call a masochistic view of history that has robbed postwar Japanese of their pride.

Yasuhiro Nakasone, a former prime minister who is a staunch ally of Mr. Abe, recently denied what he wrote in 1978. In a memoir about his Imperial Navy experiences in Indonesia, titled “Commander of 3,000 Men at Age 23,” he wrote that some of his men “started attacking local women or became addicted to gambling.

“For them, I went to great pains, and had a comfort station built,” Mr. Nakasone wrote, using the euphemism for a military brothel.

But in a meeting with foreign journalists a week ago, Mr. Nakasone, now 88, issued a flat denial. He said he had actually set up a “recreation center,” where his men played Japanese board games like go and shogi.

In a meeting on Saturday with Foreign Minister Taro Aso of Japan, South Korea’s foreign minister, Song Min-soon, criticized Mr. Abe’s recent comments on sexual slaves.

“The problems over perceptions of history are making it difficult to move South Korean-Japanese relations forward,” Mr. Song said.

Mr. Aso said Japan stuck by a 1993 statement acknowledging responsibility for past sexual slavery, but said nothing about Mr. Abe’s denial that the military had coerced women, many of them Korean, into sexual slavery.

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