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Corporate Japan's War Stories

By William Underwood and Mindy Kotler

Since the end of World War II, businesses in Japan have seemed intent on fighting a rear-guard action to rewrite the wartime history of their country. This recurring tendency has a pernicious effect on Japan's postwar relationships and undermines its corporate citizenship efforts.



AFP Photo / Alfredo Estrella

Japan's Prime Minister Taro Aso greets the press upon arrival for the APEC summit in Lima, Peru, Nov. 23.

The latest example of rewriting is the "True Modern Japan" essay contest, sponsored by the hotel and condominium developer APA Group. Gen. Toshio Tamogami, Japan's air force chief of staff, won the contest with a paper asserting that Imperial Japan fought a just war that was forced upon it by a Soviet-manipulated American president.

Although Gen. Tamogami was promptly dismissed, his public writing is not an isolated incident. Many Japanese companies, including the successor to Prime Minister Taro Aso's family firm, have promoted their own idealized versions of the Asia Pacific War.

In 1975, to mark the centennial of the family business empire, Taro Aso as president and CEO of Aso Cement Company oversaw the publication of its history. The resulting 1,500-page book glorifies Aso Mining's role in the Japanese war effort and suggests, like the winning APA Group essay, that Japan was tricked into attacking the United States.

The "Aso Fights" section of the book states that top U.S. leaders had detailed knowledge of Japanese military plans prior to Dec. 7, 1941. Japan was purposely allowed to strike the first blow, in this telling, so that "Remember Pearl Harbor" could become a rallying cry for Americans. Like Gen. Tamogami, the Aso historians conclude that "this cleverly united American opinion for war against Japan."

Aso Mining then became a "kamikaze special attack production unit," according to the book. "People like Korean laborers and Chinese prisoners of war filled the void" in Kyushu's coalfields as Japanese miners left for military service.

The history, however, omits all mention of the 300 Allied prisoners of war (197 Australians, 101 British, and two Dutch) who were also forced to dig coal without pay for Aso Mining. This fact became widely reported in 2006, but Japan's Foreign Ministry disputed the media accounts and insisted that "our government has not received any information the company has used forced laborers." Mr. Aso was foreign minister at the time.

Yet, in early 1946, the Japanese government presented Allied war crimes investigators with the Aso Company Report, detailing living and working conditions for the 300 prisoners. Written on Aso Mining stationery and bearing company seals, the report can be found in the U.S. National Archives. It is not too different from the reports submitted to Occupation authorities by over 50 Japanese companies who profited from POW labor.

An opposition party lawmaker, using a blow-up of the Aso Company Report as a prop, directly questioned the prime minister about his family's use of forced labor in parliament earlier this month. Prime Minister Aso noted he was only five years old when the war ended and defiantly insisted that "no facts have been confirmed."

The problem with these airbrushed histories is that they have allowed corporate Japan to avoid taking steps toward reconciliation with its Allied POW, Korean or Chinese victims of forced labor. This resistance to confronting past conduct is no longer due to fear of legal responsibility, since courts in Japan and elsewhere have consistently ruled that postwar treaties waived the right to file private lawsuits against the Japanese state and industry. Only moral responsibility remains.

The British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, Dutch and Norwegian governments have responded to Japan's failure to act by compensating their own surviving POWs. They consider it a debt of honor. South Korea's government also has begun national payments to its victims of Japanese labor conscription.

Although all suits in Japanese courts by Asian and Western forced laborers have been rejected, the courts have acknowledged their suffering and the lack of compensation. Some Japanese judges have recommended that either the government or the Japanese firms involved voluntarily provide redress.

Sadly, corporate Japan fends off these solutions, relying on the same faulty history as Gen. Tamogami and Mr. Aso. In a 2005 defense strategy, lawyers for Mitsubishi Materials Corporation lambasted the “victor’s justice” of the Tokyo Trials and questioned whether Japan ever “invaded” China at all. They warned the Fukuoka judges that compensating the elderly Chinese forced labor survivors would saddle Japan with a “mistaken burden of the soul.”

“Was Japan an Aggressor Nation?”, the title of Gen. Tamogami’s polemic, was neither an aberration nor original. The essay and Japanese industry’s evasion of its wartime past form a pattern that continues to damage Japan’s international credibility as a responsible partner.

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