Little Comfort for Comfort Women
Asia Rising Podcast

Professor Nick Bisley
Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we discuss the news, events and general happenings of Asian states and societies. I'm your host Nick Bisley, the Executive Director of La Trobe Asia.

On 28th December 2015, Japan and South Korea reached what they hope will be an agreement that will settle an issue that has long divided the two neighbours, that of the comfort women. Japan paid one billion yen to Korea, the amount that had been requested and in the text of the agreement, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and I'm quoting here, "Expresses anew his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women to underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and physiological wounds as comfort women."

Japan and Korea – two large prosperous democracies and allies of the United States have had remarkably poor relations since the end of World War 2. At the heart of these difficulties have been the experiences of so called 'comfort women'. The agreement reached at the end of 2015 reflects efforts by both sides to cauterise the issue, but the agreement has its critics with right wind denialists including senior figures in the LDP and business figures with close ties to the Japanese Prime Minister continuing to fulminate, while supporters groups in Korea feel the agreement doesn't go far enough to address the deep seated wrongs that the comfort women have experienced.

But just who are, or were the comfort women? And why is the issue so controversial seventy years after the second world war? And what steps can be taken to provide a sense of justice to the victims of these kinds of acts?

Joining us in today's podcast to discuss these issues is Dr Nicola Henry, a senior lecturer in Crime Justice and Legal Studies here at La Trobe and a recipient of a La Trobe Asia grant to research this field. Welcome to the podcast Nicola.

Doctor Nicola Henry
Thank you Nick.

Nick Bisley
Why don't we start with some background? Who are comfort women and why has this euphemism been used to describe this group of people?

Nicola Henry
The comfort women refers to between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand women who were coerced, forced, kidnapped and otherwise recruited into a military sexual enslavement or what's also known as enforced prostitution, that occurred during the Asia Pacific war between 1931 and 1935. The comfort stations were run by private operators and also supervised and maintained and also run by the Japanese military.

Nick Bisley
And I think at places like Australia and elsewhere we tend to think of World War 2 in the Pacific as '41 to '45, a four or five year period, or maybe even '39. But actually this goes back right to the start of the '30's.

Nicola Henry
That's right and one of the first comfort stations was set up in Shanghai in 1932 and part of the rationale for setting up the comfort stations was in order to prevent the mass rapes that had previously occurred during the invasion of Nanjing in 1937. To try and boost soldier or military morale and also to placate the locale population, so that was part of the rationale, and I guess the euphemism then kind of stems from that. The way to present these stations as being somewhere for comfort and pleasure for military men.

Nick Bisley
An active concession I guess, on behalf of the Imperial Japanese Military to say; 'these guys are going to misbehave, lets focus where they misbehave in a particular area', but then to do that you've got to have these people.

Nicola Henry
Absolutely, it's an extremely chilling example of an attempt to turn something that's horrific for the victims involved into something that's acceptable to local populations. That's couched as 'it's a comfort station', the victims are represented as prostitutes or sex workers. The language that's used; the euphemism of *comfort women,* helps to make this into something that's accepted by local populations and also by military men.

So it's extremely chilling and, I think just as an added layer to that is, most of the victims of sexual enslavement in the comfort stations were from countries that Japan regarded as lesser countries. So for instance, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, you know there's definitely a hierarchy there, there's an intersection between class, between national identity and also gender and race.

Nick Bisley
When the Japanese decided to model themselves on European politics and society in the late 19th Century, they adopted a whole range of pretty unpleasant aspects, one is this notion of racial hierarchy. And that there are people at the top of the pyramid, Europeans tended to think we were at the top of one pyramid and they saw themselves as similarly positioned at the apex, and all these lesser people were lesser in a whole range of ways. One of which is, you could just take these people and treat them in a way that you wouldn't treat your own population.

When the Second World War came to an end, there were a range of efforts across the board to try to right the wrongs of the war. Certainly from the victors point of view at any rate. So what occurred originally to try to redress the experiences of these women?

Nicola Henry
Ok, so in October 1945 there was a United Nations War Crimes Commission that conducted investigations in Asia Pacific in order to identify war criminals, to gather evidence regarding war crimes in the region. Interestingly, the Commission had a hierarchy of crimes, so listed at Number 5 was rape, and listed at Number 6 was the enforced prostitution or kidnapping of local populations into forced prostitution. So the Commission did, at the time, rank very highly both rape and enforced prostitution as harmful and egregious, there was a lot of evidence that was gathered by allied investigators.

However, with the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, unfortunately against the comfort women was all but ignored. The fixation was heavily on the crimes against the Peace Charge, so that's waging an aggressive war. So what that meant was that the prosecutors were less concerned about some of the crimes that had occurred against civilian populations. And that was particularly in regards to civilian populations of countries that weren't represented at the Tokyo War Crimes Trial.

So there were mentions, throughout the proceedings of the mass rapes against the Chinese population in Nanjing in 1937, and in fact rape was included in the indictment of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial and a couple of people were prosecuted for rape crimes along with the crimes against the peace charge. So that kind of stands in contrast to the failure of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial to prosecute sexual enslavement or enforced prostitution. Really we're getting back to this hierarchy; this racial hierarchy, where victims of these particular harms weren't recognised, they certainly didn't appear as witnesses.

There were a couple of affidavits that were given by victims and one in particular was a Dutch woman who spoke about the involvement of the Japanese military and the comfort stations. But as I said, there was no indictment for those crimes and there was no prosecution of any individuals for those crimes.

Nick Bisley
So we go forward into the 1960's there was an agreement struck between Japan and Korea, kind of about the war in total. A significant amount of reparation is paid and a general statement about remorse and guilt in general and that had subsumed within it the comfort women issue. Was that the sort of, end of it?

Nicola Henry
I think that the 1965 Treaty of Peace at San Francisco is an interesting example of the historical contestation of the comfort women issue, but also how it's expressed in contemporary context. That treaty was kind of a closure treaty, Korea made promises that they wouldn't pursue compensation after that treaty was signed. So it does mark the turning point.

But also in 1951, Japan agreed to accept the Tokyo Tribunal, which is really interesting because later critics have argued that the Tokyo Trial was a form of victor's justice: that it was unfair, that it was racist, that it was biased. So you've got all these interesting, historical moments that influence the way in which the comfort women debate is rolled out in contemporary context, and certainly the 1965 Treaty is an interesting example but also the 1951 promise to accept the terms of the Tokyo Trial.

So what you're find there, because the Tokyo Tribunal didn't prosecute individuals for the crimes against the comfort women, that it's been used as a way of saying, 'well, we've accepted the terms of the Tokyo Trial, the Tokyo Trial didn't prosecute the crimes against the comfort women – this issue's been dealt with.'

Nick Bisley
That's essentially it, isn't it? In terms of the formal attempts to provide redress or some sort of sense of justice towards the victims of this, really up until the end of last year?

Nicola Henry
That's right, and I think the other factor to consider is the denial of Japanese war responsibility stems from post Second World War; as I mentioned the victor's justice charge, but also General MacArthur's attempt to gain Japanese stabilisation, stabilisation of post war Japan, and also to fight against communism.

So you've got those historical factors that are playing out in that context too, where you've got a period of time until the 1980's, 1990's where, generally speaking, Japan was very much in denial in relation to war responsibility, and also representing itself as a victim of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial, but also of the fire bombings of Tokyo, also the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

So you've got all those factors that are playing out here, and I think it really points to the contested and controversial and complicated situation of the comfort women throughout history.

Nick Bisley
Yeah, and you had that sense I think, not only did the geopolitics come in and say, 'we've got this bigger gain going on, we've got to get on with the Japanese because they're our allies against the communists who have just invaded half of the Korean Peninsula, and they've just taken China', and as the cold war comes to East Asia, the notion of the allies just say, 'these things are difficult, but we've just got to get on with it'.

The other thing, we've talked about this in a previous podcast, about Japan also with this sense of denialism of responsibility. And there's a narrative in Japan that is not only 'we were victims of attacks and the atomic bombing being the most obvious', but also the Japanese were a victim of this military clique. You know, 'we were duped into this thing, we were sucked along, we had no real culpability in this and we were gulled by a small group of thugs', essentially.

Not only do you get this playing out, but making difficult relationships with China, with Korea, but this group of people who suffered horrifically, just get completely shunted out of the picture.

Let's move to the agreement of 28th December, so Japan and Korea, and again it's the geopolitics for a lot of people, there's an agreement which is principally being reached because of China. If China was not behaving the way it was, the Korean and President and Japanese Prime Minister who basically do not get along for a lot of reasons, would not have reached this accord.

So what's your sense of the agreement? Do you feel that the geopolitical sentiment that seems to be driving it colours it? The governments both sides have tried to say, I think the official word is this is going to *irreversibly resolve the issue.* Do you buy that?

Nicola Henry
Again, it's so complicated. The demands that have been placed on Japan by survivor activists and their advocates has been very much around getting a proper apology that acknowledges the involvement of the Japanese military and political leaders. So that's one aspect and I guess you can frame that as a recognition of, not just the harms that occurred against the comfort women, but also the role of the state.

But then on the other hand, there's been calls for a very long time for compensation. And so now you've got the situation where Japan's offering a billion yen I believe and a deeper apology, a less ambiguous apology. I haven't seen a mention of, to what extend will they refer to the involvement of the Japanese military or the Japanese state, but I imaging that that's going to be a source of contention.

There's also been promises on behalf of South Korea, to look into possibly removing the statue outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, that's been there since 2011, that is a memorial to comfort women and also the promise to say, 'we're done and dusted here, this is the end of it, we'll settle this once and for all'. And I think what's problematic about that is, where is the voice of the victim survivor? There's forty-six surviving comfort women in South Korea at the moment. It's not very many, they weren't brought to the table, they haven't been included as part of the negotiations and that's been heavily criticised by Amnesty International for instance, and the Korean council that's working on behalf of the surviving comfort women.

So that question is a really important one. I mean it is for diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea, but is misguided to a certain extent because, really it should be looking at what do

these surviving comfort women actually want?

Nick Bisley
Yes, and it seems fundamentally a diplomatic deal. It's about, 'we've got this road-block in our relationship between Japan and South Korea, and it is called the comfort women. How do we deal with it? Our diplomats talk to your diplomats, we reach a deal. The PM and the President get together and agree and off we go'. The deeper sense of justice and the sense of engaging with the victims and responding to those needs is just not part of the equation, it was about a diplomatic deal to them.

But there's other challenges that you've got I think, not only very rightly pointing out absence of the victim's voices and participation, but you've also got this ongoing denialism in Japan. They weren't slaves, they consented to this and that's likely to continue. Do you see any ways in which that point can be responded to?

Nicola Henry
It must add salt to the wounds of the comfort women to have their stories and their experiences denied in the way that they have been. I think it points to the power of language, we spoke earlier about the euphemism of *comfort women*, which is highly insulting to many surviving comfort women: although they continue to use that term because it's the term that has been catchy, that it's understandable to media and academics and the population at large.

The euphemism is really at the heart of the controversy and denialism because, as you say, denialists argue that there's no evidence to prove that these women were coerced or forced and kidnapped into sexual slavery, and that they were willing sex workers basically. And then you have on the other hand the human rights activists who argue that, these women were uniformly victims of sexual enslavement.

And then you have some people in the middle, for instance there's a post-colonial scholar from the US who argues that, 'the extreme narratives between comfort women as sex slaves compared to comfort women as sex workers, that there was a lot of in-between'. There were women who; from very poor families from South Korea who knew they were going to work in this particular field, and she has argued those polarising narratives do something terrible to women whose experiences were somewhere in-between. She also argues that there does need to be more attention placed on the intersection of patriarchy, colonialism and racism that was prevalent in Korea at the time. That these women were kidnapped or recruited or whatever ways they were somehow found themselves in these particular brothels.

Yeah, I just think it's not likely to go away, even though there's plenty of evidence from women who've told their stories about what happened to them, that there does continue to be this denialism and I think that must be a really horrible thing that they have to go through and they have to go to their graves with.

Nick Bisley
And no amount of moving of little statues around embassy's or I mean a billion yen sounds like a lot of money but in the scheme of national coffers, it's a drop in the bucket. This issue I think, only continues to bedevil both the personal lives of the survivors, but also I think the relationship between the two, particularly when you've got people very close to the current Japanese Prime Minister openly saying, "this didn't happen the way they said it did."

Well I'm afraid that's all the time we've got, thank you Nicola for being part of the programme. You can follow Nicola Henry @n_henry or me @nickbisley.

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