



# Limits of Reflective Memory Culture: *The German Media's Understanding of the Japanese Military Comfort Women Issue, 1990–2019*

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## Abstract

*This study investigates how the German-speaking media published in Central Europe have dealt with the Japanese Military comfort women issue. Germany is regarded by the East Asians to have better reflected on their atrocities during the Wars than Japan. The forced prostitution in Nazi Germany, however, has been silenced for decades just as that in Japan. In this comparison, my purpose in this study is to investigate how the German public understands the comfort women through media coverage. The findings are as follows. First, the German media understand the issue primarily as part of East Asian international relations. On the basis of consciousness of responsibility through their own historical experiences, they recommend the German model of historical reconciliation for East-Asian peacebuilding. Second, Germany's memory culture on its tragic past is limited to Nazi genocide, but remains largely unaware of the historical atrocities of the German Empire. They are also oblivious to past sexual crimes of the Nazi regime. Finally, the memory of comfort women through the installation of the Statue of Peace in Germany is not connected with, nor does it promote, reflections on their own past, at least not to the German public. On the other hand, the installation of this statue outside South Korean territory is a test for the (im)possibility of global solidarity through victim memories.*

**Keywords:** comfort women, German-speaking media, historical reconciliation, forced prostitution, Statue of Peace, solidarity of memory

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## German Model of Reconciliation?

South Koreans are interested in what the foreign media say about them and their issues. It is important particularly to the South Korean civic movement for the rehabilitation of victims of Japanese military sexual slavery that others understand the content and context of the issue of sexual slavery. The strategy of solidarity with those outside Japan to pressure the Japanese government began in the early 1990s, and brought about results, such as the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Slavery in 2000, the United States House of Representatives House Resolution 121 on Comfort Women in 2007, and the description of the Japanese military *comfort women* in the history textbooks of many countries.<sup>1</sup> However, does the *world* understand this issue in the same way Koreans do? What exists in the background of their understanding of this issue? In this study, I focus particularly on German-speaking societies in Central Europe to consider these questions.

In East Asia, Germany and Japan are considered opposite models of historical reconciliation (Buruma [1994] 2015). However, it took a long time for Germany to recognize its responsibility for World War II and to overcome internal resistance against such recognition. Japan also has officially recognized its responsibility for the damages of that war and has apologized for this repeatedly; the Murayama Statement of 1995 apologized for the damage inflicted by imperial Japan. However, the difference between the two societies in dealing with the past lies in social consensus. The Japanese government's apology was not accepted by neighboring countries, but was exploited to strengthen nationalism and historical revisionism by Japanese right-wingers. Meanwhile, in Germany, a succession of apologies by the country's political leaders reveal Germans' recognition of their unconditional responsibility and search for forgiveness. The image of Germany as the champion of historical reconciliation was completed by the compensation, between 2000 and 2007, of the victims of forced labor by the

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1. For the development and results of research on the Japanese military comfort women, refer to the report of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Jung, et al. 2017).

Nazis through the Foundation for Remembrance, Responsibility, and the Future. Yet, there are still victims excluded from this delayed justice. Those forced into prostitution by the Nazis during World War II have been totally ignored (Paul 1994), and official recognition and compensation for these damages have yet to be properly realized (Sommer 2014).

Examining the reappraisal of the past, my purpose in this study is to analyze the understanding(s) of the Japanese military *comfort* women issue in German-speaking society as reflected in that country's journalism. To that end, in the first part of this article, I briefly summarize the German-language press landscape, and in the following three sections, I analyze the reports and comments on the issue in three aspects: (1) conflicts over the past from the postcolonial context; (2) violence against women; and (3) memory politics.

### **Media Landscape: Diversity in Liberalism**

My study analyzes reports and comments in German-language daily newspapers and weekly magazines (including regional newspapers and in some cases, broadcasts) published in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland that mention "*Trostfrauen*" (comfort women) between January 1992 and March 2020. I retrieved articles using the database GENIOS, a private company that provides digital information on media, business, and economy, and, for major newspapers, used original articles in their own online archives. I retrieved approximately 1,050 articles, from newspapers with national, regional, and local circulation. Among them, I selected and reviewed articles containing meaningful analysis and comments, mainly biased towards qualitative analysis rather than a quantitative method in media analysis.

The characteristics of the German media market can be summarized in terms of the importance of print newspapers and the diversity of opinions. In the German-speaking world, broadcast journalism is not keeping up with newspaper journalism as an opinion leader. In this environment, newspapers deal with political and social agendas in a variety of ways. For this study, I reviewed major media with varying political orientations and

publishing formats; these included national daily newspapers, representative regional newspapers, major current-affairs magazines, and one broadcaster (see Table 1). In addition, other articles that seem to provide meaningful contributions on the comfort women issue were also included for analysis.

**Table 1.** German-speaking Media Topography

Name of media	Characteristics	Place of publication	Circulation (as of 2018)	Number of articles on comfort women
<b>Daily newspapers and Broadcasters</b>				
<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) / FAZ NET / FAZ sonntags</i>	Conservative liberal.	Frankfurt am Main	240.000	115
<i>Der Standard</i>	Austria's representative daily newspaper. Social liberal. Highly educated readership.	Vienna	60.000	55
<i>Neue Züricher Zeitung (NZZ)</i>	Switzerland's representative daily newspaper. Conservative liberal.	Zurich	104.000	54
<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)</i>	Politically left liberal, business friendly.	Munich	353.000	50
<i>Die Tageszeitung (TAZ)</i>	Alternative and critical.	Berlin	50.000	45
<i>Die Welt / Welt am Sonntag / Welt Kompakt</i>	Conservative. Older readership.	Berlin	164.000	40
<i>Deutsche Welle</i>	German state-owned international broadcaster	Bonn	-	36
<i>Frankfurter Rundschau (FR)</i>	Left liberal. Sister newspaper of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD).	Frankfurt am Main	43.000	32
<i>Der Tagesspiegel</i>	Regional newspaper. Liberal.	Berlin	116.000	28
<i>Neues Deutschland (ND)</i>	Former East German regional newspaper. Left socialist. Before 1990, the official organ of the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, i.e., the East German Communist Party).	Berlin	25.000	25
<b>Weekly magazines</b>				
<i>Der Spiegel/Spiegel Online</i>	Left liberal.	Hamburg	715.000	17
<i>Die Zeit / Zeit Online</i>	Classic liberal.	Hamburg	495.000	14

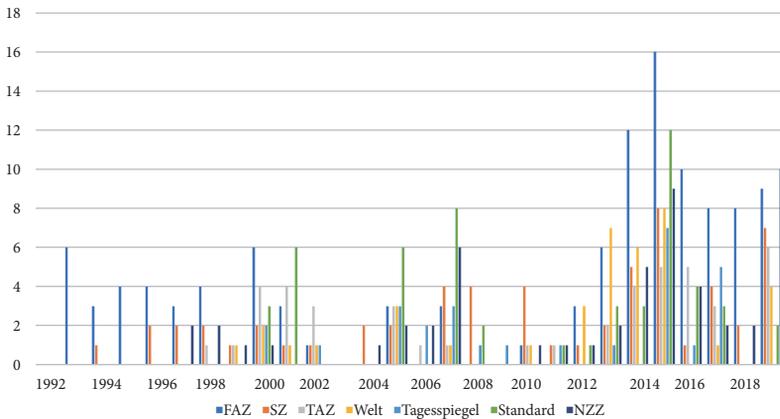
Table 1 shows that *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) overwhelms other media, with 115 reports and comments touching on the comfort women. With a reputation for its responsible articles and serious criticism, FAZ has served as a central forum for the social and political debates that have influenced German policy and public opinion. In the mid-1980s, the *Historikerstreit* (historians' dispute) over the revisionist interpretations of the Holocaust, joined by conservative intellectual Ernst Nolte and left-of-center academics, was featured in the FAZ weekend edition. In 2006, after he published his memoir *Beim Häutender Zwiebel* (Peeling the Onion), Günter Grass revealed his own hidden past of service in the Waffen-SS during an interview with FAZ. In spite of its reputation as a conservative newspaper, FAZ has a wide political spectrum of interviewees and debaters, and experts from various fields contribute to its columns.

The most widely read newspaper in Germany is the tabloid *Bild*, which boasts an overwhelming circulation of 3.3 million, and is published by Springer Publishing Company, which also publishes the conservative daily *Die Welt*. However, *Bild* reported on the comfort women only once, when German Prime Minister Merkel visited Japan in March 2015, which indicates that the comfort women issue is not tabloidized in German journalism. This topic has instead been covered in the cultural criticism sections of various papers: reviews of Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Women* translated into German (*SZ*, September 24, 1997; *NZZ*, February 7, 1998); the performance of the traditional Korean opera *The Trojan Women*<sup>2</sup> in Vienna (*Der Standard*, May 7, 2007; *FAZ*, May 18, 2007; *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 24, 2007); reviews of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (*FAZ*, August 20, 2016), and Lee Min-jin's *Pachinko* (*FAZ*, December 11, 2018).

*Die Tageszeitung* (TAZ), a critical alternative paper, has dealt with the comfort women issue from its beginning and from a feminist perspective, producing quite a few articles. The socialist daily *Neues Deutschland* (ND)

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2. The traditionally styled Korean opera, *The Trojan Women: An Asian Story*, was adopted from a play by Euripides dealing with sexual violence. It is the creation of an international collaboration between a Bosnian-born director and a Korean choreographer, a Korean composer, and a Korean theatre company. It was first performed at the Vienna Festival in 2007 and then toured the United States and South Korea.

and the liberal regional daily *Der Tagesspiegel* also have proportionally many more articles than do the larger media companies. What these three papers have in common is that they are published in Berlin, home to Germany's largest Korean community, which was formed during the 1960s and the 1970s. In these decades, about 20,000 Korean nurses and miners arrived as labor migrants, and from the 1980s became actively involved in the political and social issues of their homeland. In cooperation with these Korean Germans, *TAZ* has participated in promoting the comfort women issue to the German public.



**Figure 1.** Number of articles on comfort women in major German-speaking media (1992– 2019)

The quantitative trend of the articles on the comfort women issue as seen in Figure 1 shows that the German media's interest in this issue primarily arose from the need to understand East Asian international relations. Only a few major newspapers, such as *FAZ*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)*, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)*, reported on the comfort women in the 1990s, when major issues concerning this, such as the Kono Statement and the Asian Women's Fund, were arising. The launch in 2000 of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Slavery (hereafter, sometimes Women's

Tribunal) interested more media in this matter. This interest contrasts with the rather sparse media coverage in South Korea and Japan at that time. The Japanese government even discouraged reports on the Women's Tribunal.

The history-textbook disputes between South Korea and Japan in 2005 and the United States House of Representatives House Resolution 121 on Comfort Women in 2007 refocused German-speaking media on this issue. These controversies intensified with the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women of December 28, 2015. It should be noted that the increase in articles came about partly because of both Abe's foreign-media diplomacy, which the Japanese government actively conducted to inform the world about its position immediately after the agreement, and Obama's positive assessment of the agreement on January 6, 2016. The main theme of articles about comfort women in 2017 was conflicts over the installation of the Statue of Peace in Germany. In 2019, the comfort women issue took on new significance in relation to trade disputes between South Korea and Japan aroused by the legal judgment in a Korean court of October 30, 2018 regarding compensation for forced labor.

### **Japanese Responsibly and Conflicting Nationalisms**

The German expression *Trostfrauen* for *comfort women* was first mentioned in a brief report from Seoul by a German daily reporting on Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa's January 1992 visit to South Korea (*Nürnberg Nachrichten*, January 17, 1992). Just previous to that visit, on January 8, the first Wednesday Demonstration was held in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul.

Uwe Schmitt, who worked as the *FAZ* Tokyo correspondent from 1990 to 1997, when the comfort women issue was first publicized and expected to be positively resolved by the reformist government in Japan, faithfully reported the statement released by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei on August 4, 1993 as well as the apology by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi on August 15, 1995, and the activities of the Asian Women's Fund (see for example, *FAZ*, August 24, 1993; July 28, 1995; January 17, 1997).

According to Schmitt, the Japanese military's involvement in operating the so-called comfort stations and the mobilization of women had been sufficiently demonstrated, and the silence on this issue to date was a result of a conspiracy between the traditional Confucian patriarchy in Korea and the avoidance of historical responsibility by Japan (*FAZ*, September 11, 1993). The official position of the Japanese government was that the right for victims of military sexual slavery to claim personal compensation had been nullified by the Korea-Japan talks of 1965. As Schmitt wrote:

It is not a generous, politically wise attitude if [Japan's foreign minister] Hosokawa is serious about a reconciliation with the Asian peoples. It is fatally reminiscent of the ignorant shopkeeper mentalities of all liberal-democratic heads of government in the past.<sup>3</sup>

The liberal *SZ* shed light on the absence of a reflective memory culture in Japan, which prevented it from really following the example of Germany and reconciling with its East Asian neighbors (*SZ*, July 12, 1999). The Swiss daily conservative *NZZ* focused on Japanese nationalism and historical consciousness and on history education in Japan that was censored by the government (*NZZ*, March 3, 1997). From this perspective, the decision by Korea and Japan to co-host the 2002 FIFA World Cup was evaluated as a "forced marriage" between two countries bound together by a common economic destiny (*Der Spiegel*, October 28, 1996; *FAZ*, October 18, 1998).

At the end of the 1990s, when Japanese politics shifted to the right, Anne Schneppen, Schmitt's successor, began to report on Korea-Japan conflicts, such as territorial disputes over Dokdo (or as the Japanese tend to call the island, Takeshima), Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's regular visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and the revisionism of history textbooks published by the Japanese Society for History Reform (aka Tsukuru-Kai). Schneppen explored the reasons for the retrospective historical consciousness of the neoconservative circle in Japan and their unconditional faith in the United

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3. Uwe Schmitt, "Als Minister ist ein Sozialist sogar in Seoul willkommen" (A Socialist is Welcome as a Minister, even in Seoul), *FAZ*, September 7, 1993.

States-Japan alliance, especially during the second Bush administration, which the reporter posited was a dangerous strategy leading to Japan's isolation in East Asia (*FAZ*, April 6, 2005). In this regard, Schnepfen noted the democratization of South Korea and its decreasing economic dependence on the United States as new factors affecting international relations in East Asia, especially South Korea-Japan relations (*FAZ*, April 22, 2005).

With the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011, the Japanese government began to tighten its control over the press. *FAZ* correspondent Carsten Gremis criticized the Abe administration for taming the press and for its subsequent denial of history (see for example, *FAZ*, March 6, 2014; March 7, 2014). Gremis claimed that as a consequence, he suffered the slanders of the Abe administration simply for "doing my [his] job." Jeff Kingston exposed the crackdown on the German journalist by Abe government as the "Gremis affair" (Kingston 2017, 298). Kingston did not limit his criticism to the Japanese government; he disclosed that aggressively cracking down on the foreign media with threats of prosecution was common in other Asian countries, including South Korea (Kingston, *The Japan Times*, May 2, 2015).

German Prime Minister Merkel, who visited Japan in March 2015 and politely urged Japan to reflect on its past, was highly appreciated in Germany (*SZ*, March 9, 2015; *Spiegel Online*, March 9, 2015). Although she was courteous to her host by not mentioning comfort women directly, she did make reference to a speech by Richard Weizsäcker, who had said that Germany's defeat had liberated it from the Nazi barbarism, implying that "reconciliation requires both [sides]"—referring to the relationship between Germany and France.<sup>4</sup> "Both" in this case might also be understood as Japan and China. This was a sensitive diplomatic issue because of China's strategic and selective approaches to the past. Not surprisingly, Abe did not heed Merkel's elegant criticism, and around seventy years after the end of the World War II, German papers headlined Japan's regressive and selective perception of its history (for example, *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 14, 2013;

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4. Thomas Kröter, "Merkel wirbt in Tokio für Aufarbeitung der Kriegszeit" (Merkel Campaigns in Tokyo to Come to Terms with the War Experiences), *FR*, March 10, 2015.

August 15, 2015). *DW*, referencing Ian Buruma, noted how “hazi [shame] instead of guilt” and “reversed victimhood” were characteristics of the Japanese memory culture.<sup>5</sup>

Two features characterize the approaches of German journalists to the East Asian conflict over historical issues from the 1990s to recent years. First, they have tried to comprehend it in connection with the German historical experience. Hermann Lübke, a philosopher and political theorist, in response to Schneppen's report on Korean victims and civil society's rejection of the Asian Women's Fund (*FAZ*, Oct, 8, 1998), asserted that although the statements by Kono and Murayama did not meet German standards, they were reasonable and clear enough, and that further demands for an apology were demands for *ritual* apology (Lübke 2001). In response, the *FAZ* upheld the norm of historical responsibility, while separating the recognition of damages from compensation: “Just recognizing injustice reduces the pain, with or without material compensation.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, in the German media's understanding of the East Asia international order, Japan is regarded as the primary pillar, with China added following that country's rise. Information about Korea, on the other hand, has long been limited and cross-sectional, due to the relatively limited history of political, social, and economic exchanges and entanglements between Germany and Korea. The German media's perception of the comfort women issue normally arises from an interest in Japan and as a means of deepening the understanding of Japan, partly because most of the articles treating of the issue were written by correspondents in Tokyo who served as experts on Japan. Recently, however, freelance journalists based in Seoul have authored articles in several newspapers that have deepened the German audience's understanding of Korean society and offered criticism as well.

Germany's public international broadcaster *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, for example, went beyond Japan to focus on the nature of aggressive

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5. “Die ‘unbehagliche’ Beziehung” (The ‘Uncomfortable’ Relationship), *DW*, September 28, 2012.

6. Franziska Augustein, “Büßerhemden, maßgefertigt” (Penitent Shirts, Custom Made), *FAZ*, March 20, 2001.

nationalist clashes between China, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan (DW, August 18, 2015). According to its report, the political leaders in each country commonly instrumentalized nationalistic sentiments to appeal to their supporters, a situation that differed from that of postwar Europe, which was forced to pursue a peaceful international order for coexistence and prosperity. In the phase of diplomatic and economic conflict between South Korea and Japan after the 2015 Agreement on Comfort Women, South Korea's *selective nationalism* and *biased consciousness on human rights* were an increasing target of criticism in the German media. For example, Christian Neidhart, a correspondent for the liberal daily SZ, asked if Japan's neighboring nations had the courage to face an unpleasant past, arguing that not only Japanese political leaders but also their colleagues in China and Korea had abused history for politics. In this regard, he assessed Japan's attitude towards the Agreement on Comfort Women as an evolution:

Japan has never really faced the darker side of its history. ... Japan is only gradually realizing that, as Germany's example shows, it is even economically worthwhile to come to terms with its own past.<sup>7</sup>

However, one should consider the possibility that Abe's foreign-media diplomacy immediately after the agreement may have influenced this positive statement.

Fabian Kretchmer at the *TAZ* also criticized the political instrumentalization of the comfort women issue in South Korea. According to him, in the "deeply split society," where generations and political groups conflict with each other over almost all political and social issues, such as historical interpretations, the North Korean nuclear issue, and social welfare, the comfort women issue has power to unite Koreans. To a Berliner born in 1986, whose interest in Korea was sparked by the issue of North Korean defectors, it was amazing that the young South Korean students guarding the bronze Statue of Peace around the clock were ignorant about the inmates of North Korean concentration camps only a few hundred kilometers away.

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7. Christoph Neidhart, "Dichtung und Wahrheit" (Poetry and Truth), SZ, December 29, 2015.

He added:

One would have hoped that the debate about comfort women would be more honest. The historical revisionism of the Japanese right is undoubtedly unacceptable. At the same time, the South Korean side lacks a reflective discourse on the extent to which the comfort women's suffering is being instrumentalized for their own nationalist purposes. Leftist civil society in particular is resisting with its absolutely black and white thinking.<sup>8</sup>

The German media's interpretation of South Korea-Japan relations, which were harshly affected by the Korean court verdict for the compensation for forced labor on October 30, 2018, can be summarized as a confrontation between pragmatism and idealism. As an economist, the Tokyo correspondent for *FAZ* characterized the South Korea-Japan trade conflict brought about by conflicts over how to deal with the past as a "diplomatic catastrophe," writing that "moral motivation" should not overwhelm "political pragmatism," and South Korea's constant demand for an apology makes Japanese people weary.<sup>9</sup> Hannes B. Mosler, a Korean studies researcher in Berlin, refuted this as pragmatism without historical context. In his opinion, Germany faced up to the moral issue by recognizing its historical responsibility to France and Poland, whereas Japan had repeatedly turned insufficient apologies into denials, which also exhausts Koreans (*FAZ*, September 23, 2019). In addition, Christian Taaks, director of the Korean office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, affiliated with the Free Democratic Party of Germany (FDP), pointed to the potential explosiveness of the compensation issue: "When you see the dispute over the Polish reparation claims, you notice how quickly such feelings can be revitalized in Europe too."<sup>10</sup>

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8. Fabian Kretschmer, "Zum Nutzen der Nation" (For the Benefit of the Nation), *TAZ*, September 18, 2017.

9. Patrick Welter, "Neue Fronten in Ostasien" (New Fronts in East Asia), *FAZ*, September 9, 2019.

10. Klaus Geiger, "Ostasien verständlich" (East Asia Understandable), *Die Welt*, August 15, 2019.

However, it should be noted that Germany's recognition of responsibility, and its apologies and compensation for historical injustice, are limited to Nazi genocide and do not encompass the historical consequences of Germany's past colonial rule. In 2004, the Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation, Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul, offered an expression of apology for the massacre committed by the German Empire against the Herero and Nama in Germany's African colonies between 1904 and 1908, and in 2015, Congressman Robert Lammert characterized these massacres as "Völkermord" (genocide). But to date this is all that has been done to address the issue of colonial responsibility, and even this is the result of a struggle by civil society elements in Namibia and some of their German supporters in a thus far futile search for compensation.

### **Western-Centrism and Double Standards**

The Korean activists who are dedicated to rehabilitation of and compensation for the victims of Japanese military sex slavery feel that their appeals to international solidarity place the issue on the global agenda of women's rights (Lee 2018). Kim Hak-sun's disclosure in 1991 of her suffering in Japanese military comfort stations was little known to the German public. Other efforts, such as the 1993 International Criminal Tribunal to deal with the mass rapes during the civil war in Yugoslavia, a report of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1995 on the organized and racially motivated rapes by members of the German military during World War II, and a war-crimes trial in Tanzania in 1996 for the genocide during the Rwandan civil war, also failed to arouse much public interest in Germany. In organizing a chronology of dates concerning the silencing of violence against women in 20th-century conflicts, *TAZ* mistakenly conflated Kim Hak-sun's lawsuit in the Tokyo District Court (December 6, 1991)<sup>11</sup> and other victims' lawsuit in the Yamaguchi District Court (December 25,

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11. Litigation seeking compensation for Korean victims of the Asia-Pacific War by Kim Hak-sun and nine other victims (military personnel and civilian employees).

1992)<sup>12</sup> (for example, *TAZ*, May 5, 1999).

In Germany, the main activists on behalf of the comfort women issue have been Korean migrant women. In particular, the Korean Women's Group in Berlin, which jumped into the comfort women movement in the wake of Kim Hak-sun's testimony, embraced solidarity with the Japanese Women's Initiative in Berlin, cooperated with the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council), and received support from the Green Party of Germany (Han 2014). In the review of the book *In die Prostitution gezwungen: Koreanische Frauen erinnern sich; Zeugenaussagen aus dem japanischen Asien-Pazifik-Krieg* (Forced to Prostitute: Korean Women Remember: Testimony from Japan's Asia-Pacific War; Koreanische Frauengruppe, 1996), which was translated by Korean women in Berlin, Schmitt criticized both the Japanese government and mainstream Japanese society for ignoring the historical facts and the victims' sufferings, as well as the Korean patriarchal society for so long silencing the victims (*FAZ*, January 27, 1997).

It was not until the late 1990s that leftist press organs such as *TAZ* and *ND* dealt in a meaningful way with the comfort women issue (see for example, *ND*, November 28, 1997; *TAZ*, April 28, 1998). But these media reports differed by focusing on the exploitation of women's bodies as a weapon in war and actively using the term "sex slave" in the headlines of many of their articles, when other media were using the term "comfort women." *TAZ* even sent observers, including its reporter Sven Hansen and other experts, to Tokyo to cover the Women's Tribunal. These included Christa Paul, who had uncovered forced prostitution by the Nazis, and Beate Ziegler of *Medica Mondiale* (Han 2014, 357). As a medical NGO established in the wake of reports of rape and torture in the Yugoslavia civil war, *Medica Mondiale* had been operating a medical support center for rape victims in Zinica, Bosnia, since 1993, and cooperated with the Korea *Verband*, a Korean civic group in Germany, for the rehabilitation and memory of victims of Japanese military sexual violence.

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12. Litigation seeking an official Japanese apology for three victims of sexual slavery, including Ha Soon-nyeo, and seven other female victims (forced laborers).

The Women's Tribunal in Tokyo in 2000 succeeded in arousing the interest of various media outlets in Germany, such as *Der Standard*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR), and SZ, in the comfort women issue. Predictably, however, the mock court's verdict, in its evocation of the victims' dignity, was nothing more than symbolic (FAZ, December 13, 2000). In the opinion of the German media, the more significant legal struggle for the victims was instead the class-action lawsuit against the Japanese government for claims of forced labor that were filed in California, the United States, Japan's most important ally and trading partner (FAZ, September 14, 2000; NZZ, September 20, 2000). In that respect, the significance of the Women's Tribunal in Tokyo was that it placed the comfort women issue on the feminist agenda in the international community.

The German media's critical reporting on the comfort women issue met backlash in Japan. Germany was also not free from blame for ingoring its own history of forced prostitution by the Nazis, something officially revealed only in the early 1990s (Paul 1994). In the preface to the Japanese translation of her book, *Zwangsprostitution: Staatlich errichtete Bordelle im Nazionalsozialismus* (Forced Prostitution: State-built Brothels under National Socialism), Christa Paul expressed admiration for the dedication of Japanese activists: "Germany has not reached the point of dealing with the sexual violence committed during the Nazi era as an issue that is as important as it is for Japan" (Paul 1996, 9). However, the Japanese right-wingers used this as a basis for relativizing the suffering of victims and rejecting the claims for compensation, on the grounds that it was unprecedented. It is true that the existence of military and concentration-camp brothels during World War II was kept secret for half a century and compensation has yet to be made. Reasons for this can be found in the social marginality of the victims, the overwhelming grand narrative of the Holocaust, and the absence of effective social movements for the issue. Research has been conducted steadily since then.<sup>13</sup> At least in Germany,

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13. Paul's disclosure led to the making of the documentary *Große Schweigen: Bordelle in Konzentrationslager* (The Great Silence: Brothels in Concentration Camps), produced by

these facts have never been denied or relativized, rather Germans have made it clear that there is no end to the reappraisal of the past.

Nevertheless, the fact that the federal parliament of Germany rejected proposals to join the “United States House of Representatives House Resolution 121 on Comfort Women of 2007” demonstrated the detachment from and internal disagreements over the issue of comfort women and wartime sexual slavery in German society. In February 2012, Angelika Graf and ten other members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), along with *Die Linke* (The Left) and *Die Grünen* (Green Party), submitted a resolution to the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid to urge recognition of and reparation for the forced prostitution by the Japanese empire.<sup>14</sup> The adoption was rejected by members of the union parties (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) for two reasons: the first was the timing of the resolution—it came as Japan was still struggling with the fallout of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster; and second, they were concerned about stigmatizing Japan. Because, in the opinion of Germany’s conservative politicians, “the Japanese are also in the process of settling the problem, one has enough confidence in Japanese democracy that it will find a settlement.”<sup>15</sup> The Green Party argued that the proposal was not aimed at Japan but the demands of the victims. Members of the Union parties, however, remarked that sexual violence in war was not a problem limited to

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Ostdeutscher Rundfunk-Brandenburg TV (ORB) in 1995. A study on the military brothels set up in the occupied territories by Nazi Germany on the grounds of racial-hygiene policies has also been done (Meinen 2002) and the related documentary *Frauen als Beute: Wehrmacht und Prostitution* (Women as Prey: The Wehrmacht and Prostitution) was broadcast on the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD) network on May 8, 2005. The concentration camp brothels used for economic purposes by the Waffen-SS, the military branch of the Nazi Party’s SS organization, have also been analyzed in a doctoral thesis, later published as a book (Sommer 2009), and there have also been studies on various types of sexual violence by German soldiers in Russia (Mühlhäuser 2010) and in Poland (Röger 2015), and by the Allied forces in “emancipated” Germany (Gebhardt 2015).

14. “Antrag: Anerkennung und Wiedergutmachung des Leids der “Trostrfrauen” (Petition: Recognition and Reparation for the Suffering of the “Comfort Women”), Deutscher Bundestag (German Federal Parliament), Drucksache 17/8789, February 29, 2012.
15. Ok-Hee Jeong, “Japans ungesühntes Kriegsverbrechen” (Unpunished War Crimes of Japan), *Die Zeit*, September 10, 2013.

Japan. The FDP also commented that, although the suffering of the victims was beyond debate, it was inappropriate for Germany, which was not a party to the issue, to get involved in such discussions.<sup>16</sup>

For Germany's conservative political parties, maintaining a political distance from the issue and considering the face of the Japanese government proved to be profitable considering the strong reaction to President Obama's comments on "Japan's sex-slave system" when the American president visited Seoul in 2014.<sup>17</sup> The United States, which needed to restore relations between South Korea and Japan for its own national security interests, was interested in resolving the historical issues politically and diplomatically, but Germany was not. The US Army was also not free of responsibility for its own sexual crimes. German media maintained that the scandal at Abu Ghraib Prison in 2004 contaminated the international community's efforts to control sexual violence being used as an instrument of war (SZ, May 7, 2004). That is why *FR*, sister press of the SPD, which consistently supported the rehabilitation of victims of Japanese military sexual violence, cast blame on Obama, reminding him that the United States had over the past ten years also stifled the debate over the Abu Ghraib scandal, rather than apologizing to its victims (*FR*, April 30, 2014).

It is paradoxical that both the United States and Germany demonstrate solidarity with the comfort women issue while maintaining silence on their own past deeds. In East Asia, the military brothels established by the Japanese imperial government continued even after 1945, not only in Japan, but also in its former colonies and occupied territories. It is not surprising that Uwe Schmitt, who had eagerly covered the comfort women issue in the 1990s, extended his research to the American military's comfort women in Okinawa in the 1960s (for example, *Die Welt*, May 30, 2013). The South Korean government also has maintained a silence about the management of the Korean comfort women used for their own soldiers as well as those of the US Army. Academic discussions on this topic are just beginning to

16. "Antrag zu japanischen 'Trostfrauen' abgelehnt" (Petition for Japanese 'Comfort Women' Rejected), Deutscher Bundestag (German Federal Parliament), April 2012.

17. "Japan weist Obamas Kritik an Zwangsprostitution" (Japan Rejects Obama's Criticism on Forced Prostitution), *Spiegel Online*, April 26, 2014.

appear in Korea (e.g., Kim 2019). The South Korean Army is also not free from responsibility for its own deeds in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, something a left-liberal criticized as the “double standards of Koreans.”<sup>18</sup>

Aida Karic, the director of *The Trojan Women* and herself a female refugee of the Yugoslav wars, felt that the stories of the twenty comfort women victims she had met in Korea sounded almost identical and revealed no individual personalities (*Der Standard*, May 10, 2007). This was obviously a result of the victims adapting to the selective listening of the Korean public. In the lives of survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery (women who were mostly subaltern women from Japanese colonies or occupied territories) different kinds of narratives—personal, gender, and ethnic—intertwine and collide. The dual mission of decolonialization on the one hand and the pursuit of universal women's rights on the other, caused continuous tension among the South Korean activists devoted to the issue (Chung 2003; Ahn 2015). Such a collision is exposed in the complex desires and ambitions projected onto the Statue of Peace established as a site to remember the victims.

### **The Statue of Peace and Memory Politics**

The Statue of Peace, which was first installed in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul on December 14, 2011 to mark the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration, was an expression of South Koreans' protests and accusations against a Japanese government that had never reflected on its historical responsibility (SZ, July 2, 2012). After the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women in 2015, the installation of the statue emerged as a symbol of support and sympathy for the comfort women civic movement among South Koreans. Also, the Korean communities outside of Korea launched sustained campaigns to install the same statue in their cities.<sup>19</sup>

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18. Fabian Kretschmer, “Zwangsprostitution und Krieg: Südkoreanische Doppelmoral” (Forced Prostitution and War: South Korean Double Standards), *Der Standard*, March 24, 2016.

19. For an interpretation of their activities and dedication for the comfort women issue as a part of the identity politics of the Korean diaspora, see Lee (2020).

The diplomatic dispute between Korean supporters and the Japanese government over the installation of the statue also has spread beyond South Korea to the rest of the world. The official name of the sculpture is the Statue of Peace, given to it by the Korean Council. However, the right-wingers in Japan persistently call it a “comfort women statue,” and is popularly known among the Korean public simply as the “statue of a girl,” which reveals the different messages each side tries to impart by it. German journalists use interchangeably both the official name (Statue of Peace) and “the so-called comfort women statue,” which exposes their plural interpretation of the image.

In early 2016, Germany became a battlefield over the installation of this monument. When Freiburg, known as an ecological city in southwestern Germany, signed a sister-city agreement with Suwon City of South Korea in November 2015, the mayor of Suwon, Yeom Tae-young, proposed a Statue of Peace as a present. Mayor Dieter Salomon accepted it with a light heart as simply a good idea to set an example against sexual violence and mass rape in war. However, when it became known that the statue would be installed in a city park in commemoration of International Human Rights Day on December 10, 2016, Japanese diplomacy was in an uproar. The consul general of Japan in Germany came to Freiburg and warned the Deputy Mayor, Otto Neideck (CDU), of the impact it would have on diplomatic relations between Germany and Japan. The Japanese sister-city Matsuyama threatened to break its thirty-year-old sisterhood with Freiburg. Mayor Salomon was faced with a dilemma, which he barely escaped when the proposal was withdrawn by Suwon.

Ironically, the local German press criticized “tricky” Yeom rather than “naive” Salomon, because they suspected that Yeom had a hidden political agenda behind his suggestion of gifting the statue.<sup>20</sup> When he had proposed the gift, anti-Japanese sentiment among South Koreans was on the rise, because it was known that the Japanese government had demanded the

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20. Heinz Siebold, “Freiburger Partnerschaften: OB opfert Trostfrau für Japan” (Freiburg’s partnerships: Mayor sacrifices comfort women for Japan). *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*. October 3, 2016.

removal of the Statue of Peace in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul as a condition for the Korea-Japan Agreement on Comfort Women. According to the local press, there was speculation that Yeom's political calculations were aimed at gaining popularity in South Korea by pressuring Japan internationally by means of a statue installation abroad, since the statue installed in Freiburg's city park would have been Europe's first Statue of Peace installed in a public space.

This suspicion was not fundamentally wrong, because the first Statue of Peace in Germany, "SuNI," as a revival of the failed Freiburg project, installed in commemoration of the International Women's Day on March 8, 2017, in Wiesent, a small village in Bavaria, was granted that very significance by South Koreans. *The Korea Times* welcomed the "first comfort women statue in Europe" as a way of promoting global recognition of the comfort women issue:

Despite opposition from Japan, around sixty statues have either been set up or are in the making here and overseas, in protest of the deal reached between Seoul and Tokyo on the issue in December 2015.<sup>21</sup>

Regretfully, SuNI in the Nepal-Himalaya Pavilion, a private park in Wiesent, with 2500 inhabitants, remained merely a local issue (see for example, *Mittelbayerischer Verlag*, March 12, 2017), whereas the failure to install the statue in Freiburg was reported in newspapers nation-wide (for example, *FAZ*, September 23, 2016; *TAZ*, October 5, 2016).

In the experience of the Korean-American activist Phyllis Kim, the installation of monuments that had not been discussed and approved by the residents and community would lack support by that community (*Kyunghyang sinmun*, January 6, 2020). This is why such monuments should be located on public sites. Lim Ji-hyun as a memory activist explains why the first Statue of Peace outside of Korea was installed in Glendale, which has no special connection with Korea, in the "global solidarity of memories and

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21. Bo-eun Kim, "Europe's First Comfort Women Statue Set up in Germany," *The Korea Times*, March 9, 2017.

victimhood” (Lim 2019, 162). According to Lim, Glendale has the largest Armenian community outside of Turkey, and the Armenians preserve their memory of genocide by the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; so their community in Glendale responded to the suffering of comfort women victims.

In the wake of the controversy in Freiburg and Wiesent, the Statue of Peace has emerged as an example of memory politics. It has been argued that local politicians with little understanding of East Asian contemporary history *took sides* by rashly acting without properly contemplating the comfort women issue, which exists in highly complicated historical and political contexts in the East Asian international community (Ward and Lay 2019, xi). Though, Mayor Salomon, a Green Party politician born in 1960, was not ignorant of the difficulties of dealing with the past, he accepted this proposal because he adhered to the norms of the memory culture established through German experience. What he was not aware of was the complicated historical politics of East Asia surrounding the comfort women issue. Japanologist Reinhard Zöllner in Bonn emphasized this:

Because it is an issue that has not been resolved for the people of either country, this point was completely misunderstood by Freiburg. The agreement between the two governments on diplomatic solutions does not mean that tensions between the two populations have been resolved.<sup>22</sup>

Zöllner asks if the statue could contribute to reconciliation and further the peace-building process, citing a case in which Strathfield in Austria rejected the installation of the Statue of Peace in a public hearing, on the grounds that it could be understood as a “moral judgment” and “ethnic disparagement” against Japan. This is a question concerning the political context of the installation of the statue. Unfortunately, his interview was interpreted by the Japanese right-wing to its own advantage. “Germany has not yet responded to the compensation for wartime sexual violence....The government, the

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22. Quoted in Esther Felden, “Freiburg und die Trostfrauen” (Freiburg and Comfort Women), *DW*, September 21, 2016.

media, and society have all closed their eyes,” said one right-wing journalist, adding some advice: “Japan has accumulated various research results and strategies for political solutions that Germany should consult.”<sup>23</sup>

The uproar over the exhibition of the Statue of Peace at the Aichi Triennale in Nagoya, Japan, in August 2019 confirms the power of the Japanese right wing (*SZ*, September 3, 2019). In April 2017, the Ravensbrück Memorial in Germany suffered the Japanese embassy's repeated requests to get rid of a small comfort woman figure in its exhibition hall (*SZ*, August 14, 2019). This exhibition was held at the request of a local Korean group and did not develop into a major uproar because it was not a permanent exhibit. This pattern was repeated at the Dorothee-Sölle-Haus in Hamburg, at the Women's Museum in Bonn in 2018, and at the Zeche Zollern Industrial Museum in Dortmund in June 2019. The problem is that the true teaching moment for this issue is lost in the competitive lobbying between Korean supporters and the Japanese government. The monument, supposed to preserve and mediate memories on comfort women victims, is relegated to the battlefield of memory politics.

From the gender perspective, the comfort women issue can be understood better in terms of the “crimes of misogyny” that cross all traditional East Asian societies (Ward and Lay 2019, 255). A better understanding of the issue requires research into the Japanese military and the state, and on the collaboration of colonial Korea, Taiwan, and China, beyond specific ethnic victims. In doing so, the critical mind can and should extend itself to the sexual exploitation and violence sustained on US military bases in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines even after World War II, and finally to the human rights of North Korean defector women.

Considering this, I argue that the comfort women memorial should be approached from the aspect of public history lest it falls into the chasm

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23. Shuhei Fujiwara, “Kokusaizyohou doitsuno nikkanshikengyuusyaga ianfuzono kaigaikenzouni hantaisuru riyu” (International Information: Reasons why a German researcher on the History of Japanese-Korean Relations Objects to the Erection of the Comfort Women Statue Overseas), *Nyusu posuto sebun* (News-postseven), last modified March 29, 2017, [https://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20170329\\_500792.html?DETAIL](https://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20170329_500792.html?DETAIL).

of an inter-ethnic war of memory. The installation of the memorial should not be positioned in the center of conflict but should stimulate and promote reflections on the past of the place where it is installed, e.g., Germany. If a Statue of Peace were to be installed somewhere in Germany, it should be connected to the silenced memory of forced prostitution in the Nazi era. The German public should discuss and reach a consensus on the location, form, and meaning of the memorial. This may require an alternative monument with a different design and intention, perhaps something to represent violence against women in general. Such attempts have been made by a German artist after the dispute over the installation of the Statue of Peace in the courtyard of the Women's Museum in Bonn (*Münchener Merkur*, March 6, 2020). If what is sought with the installation of the statue is a global solidarity of memory, beyond merely ethnic accusations against Japan, the most important thing should be the process of reaching a consensus in the societies where such monuments are installed, rather than the installation itself.

### **Toward Solidarity through Memories**

German journalists believe that historical reconciliation is necessary for a peaceful international order in East Asia, something for which the so-called German model can serve as reference. As the argument goes, because Germany has resolved the so-called *German Question* through the recognition of and apology for the Holocaust and other Nazi war crimes, it now enjoys a position as *de facto* leader of the EU, and therefore Japan would contribute to peace and order in East Asia and enjoy economic benefits by taking the initiative in historical reconciliation with her victim nations. The demonstration of *comfort women* as historical fact is no longer of interest, but what is of interest is Japan's recognition of responsibility and appropriate follow-up measures. In this regard, the views of the German media regarding Japanese military sex slavery are generally liberal, regardless of their political positions on domestic issues, and are faithful to the memory culture established in postwar West Germany. Regarding the

comfort women issue, the more left-leaning German media tend to take a more feminist perspective, highlighting aspects of wartime sexual violence and women's rights.

The liberal or critical alternative media demand that the Japanese government take responsibility in terms of solidarity for human rights, and even participate in actions toward that end. This awakening, however, is mainly linked to wartime sexual-violence cases in the Third World, which makes it difficult to find connections with Germany's own past. The efforts of Korean activists in Germany for the rehabilitation of the comfort women victims failed to promote the memory of forced prostitution in Germany and Europe in World War II, at least publicly. The contemporary tragedies in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, which are geographically and historically closer, awakened Germans to the problem of wartime sexual violence.

The civic movements in Japan and South Korea for resolving the comfort women issue have pioneered their own ways with no reference or precedent. South Korean activists have tried to expand their impact through a global solidarity for women's rights, striving to balance the demands for nationalization and a future-oriented denationalization; nonetheless, they have been unable to avoid the charge of being closed nationalists, for South Koreans have responded to the comfort women issue when framed in the context of nationalism. The Statue of Peace reveals this collision. In this regard, the controversy over the installation of the statue leads us to ask how we should remember the comfort women. In era of globalization, memories cross borders and are newly (re)created by acquiring various meanings in each context, depending on with whom, where, and how they are connected. In this sense, the phenomenon of installing the Statue of Peace outside South Korean territory is a test of the (im)possibility of global solidarity.

Postwar European reconciliation is historically an exceptional phenomenon. The international order of the Cold War led to different postwar constellations in Europe and East Asia. The Allies succeeded in transforming West Germany into a democracy and a strong economic power, and denazification was a precondition for that. By contrast, Japan's war criminals, including the Emperor, were exempted by the United States,

which allowed Japan, through rapid, American-backed postwar economic recovery that allowed it to become an Asian economic powerhouse, to avoid responsibility for its past deeds. The neighboring victim nations have demanded Japan take responsibility like Germany.

In terms of memory politics and memory culture, Germany is opposite to Japan as a model. Whereas textbook conflicts over how to teach the past persist in East Asia, the Nazi past is an important topic in German classrooms. The postwar memory culture in Germany is based upon reflection on the Holocaust and is firmly supported by civil society. This reflective memory culture has become an essential part of postwar German identity. This has not been the case in Japan, where right-wing politicians have instead pushed postwar Japanese identity in the opposite direction. Reflective memory culture is the key to why *historical sinners* can now participate with confidence in the European international community. Yet, such a reflective memory culture remains limited to Europe and does not include the colonial past. The German government keeps silent about the Herero War, which is discussed as a precedent for Nazi genocide. Similarly, one can say that civil societies in East Asia, which contend with the legacy of colonial rule, including the comfort women issue, are pioneering their own path in dealing with the past.

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