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War Museum Resists Japan's Historical Amnesia

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Tokyo

The photographs are sickening, a gallery of horrors from a war in which the casualties were counted in the millions: decapitated and disemboweled bodies, dead babies discarded in ditches, skulls staring from a pile of human bones.

After five minutes, the mind starts to numb; 10 minutes and the air in this converted warehouse in a northern suburb feels still and heavy, the weight of history seeping through the doors.

In the newly opened Chukiren Peace Museum, the 80-year old curator, Fumiko Niki, is among a small group of activists and academics who have spent years compiling a depository of records that they say proves the enormity of the imperial army's war crimes before and during World War II. The effort to remember that history is being lost in a growing revisionist tide, she fears.

"We are in a very dangerous period," says Ms. Niki. "Awareness of Japan's role in wartime is fading."

The main purpose of the museum, she says, is to provide "facts and evidence to history scholars" who want to learn the truth of Japan's war in China from the early 1930s to 1945. "It is a unique collection," says the curator. "The repatriated survivors used to be rank-and-file soldiers, which means they were in the front line of the most murderous activities."

Some other Japanese museums discuss the Nanjing massacre and other war crimes, but typically in a way that minimizes or whitewashes the brutalities committed. The most famous example is the museum attached to Yasukuni Shrine, in Tokyo, which is dedicated to the spirits of soldiers who died in combat, including some convicted of war crimes. That museum essentially argues that Japan was forced into the Pacific war by Western colonialism.

'Lid on a Stinking Pot'

The core of the Chukiren museum's collection is the testimony of 300 Japanese army veterans who, while in custody in China in the 1940s and 50s, confessed to atrocities there, including rape, torture, and infanticide. Photographic evidence is held in the archives. Ultranationalists have threatened to burn down the museum, prompting the elderly staff members to look into the unfamiliar world of high-tech security.

The firsthand accounts and more than 20,000 books were donated by Chukiren, an association founded in 1957 by 1,100 veterans who had been held prisoner in China after the war. Many of them had believed that they would be executed as a result of war-crimes trials in China in 1956. But only 45 were indicted, and all of the veterans were repatriated by 1964.

Some became academics and teachers and spent the rest of their lives writing and speaking about what they had done as soldiers. Their testimony was fueled by atonement, compassion, and the need to fight what they saw as Japan's historical amnesia. When they were not being ignored, however, they were objects of scorn, vitriol, and mistrust. Many critics said the returned veterans had been brainwashed by Chinese Communist propaganda.

"You won't find these things in school textbooks," says one of the veterans, Tsuyoshi Ebato, who helped compile the archive.

The accounts include that of a sergeant major who had raped and killed a Chinese woman, and then actually joined other members of his unit in eating her flesh. Mr. Ebato says he himself trained recruits to use captured Chinese for bayonet practice.

"Terrible things like this happened all the time," he says. "Now people are saying that they never happened. Japan wants to keep a lid on a stinking pot."

The opening of the Chukiren museum has been hailed by progressive scholars.

"As a historian of that war, I find the testimony consistent with both the documentary record and my own interviews with Chinese villagers," says Mark Selden, a senior fellow in the East Asia program at Cornell University, in an e-mail message. "Like their American counterparts who returned home to tell of their own destructive acts in Vietnam, the Chukiren soldiers have braved opprobrium from super patriots to tell the truth about the war and their own part in it."

The collection also includes almost all of the writings of Masami Yamazumi, a former president of Tokyo Metropolitan University and a well-known critic of Japanese education.

Mr. Yamazumi linked his own efforts to preserve evidence of war crimes with his political activism. He fought a long battle to keep official displays of the controversial *hinomaru* (rising sun) flag out of official school ceremonies. Today, four years after his death, the flag flutters in schools across the country.

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