



Robert Fisk

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Robert Fisk: Sinister efforts to minimise Japanese war crimes and portray the empire as a victim must be exposed

The man known as Abe's 'brain' says Japan has become 'a hopelessly pacifist nation'

I had to go to California to learn that Michiko Shiota Gingery, who lives in the Central Park area of Glendale City, suffers “feelings of exclusion, discomfort and anger” because her local authority unveiled a memorial to the innocent Asian women turned into sex slaves by the Japanese Imperial Army.

These “comfort women”, the Japanese military’s repulsive euphemism for the victims they turned upon with such sexual sadism, were gang-raped, used as prostitutes and often butchered by Japanese soldiers during their occupation of Korea and China in the late 1930s, in the early years of what was for them – but not for us – the Second World War. These women – the few ageing survivors and the many dead – are a symbol of Japan’s wartime disgrace.

Now you would have thought, wouldn’t you, that these poor women (forced into mass prostitution by the Japanese army and government over many years) had themselves suffered “feelings of exclusion, discomfort and anger”? But no, it’s poor Michiko Shiota Gingery, presumably of Japanese origin, who’s all upset at the Glendale monument to this most appalling of Japanese war crimes. Furthermore (a gritting of teeth is necessary here), a joint lawsuit claims that Glendale City – a peaceful and intensely boring suburb of greater Los Angeles – has exceeded its power by infringing on the US government’s right to conduct America’s foreign policy; thus “the monument threatens to negatively affect US relations with Japan, one of this nation’s most important allies...”

Since we are a family paper, I will merely say that statements of this kind are identical to the material that comes out of the rear end of a bull. But it’s all of a kind. Turkish Americans bleat that Armenian-American monuments to the 1915 Armenian genocide – the world’s first holocaust – upset good “relations” between the US and Turkey. Which is why the spineless Obama still, despite his pre-election promises, will not acknowledge that the Turks deliberately killed one and a half million Christian citizens of the Ottoman empire.

If the Germans started to deny the truth of the Jewish Holocaust, I suppose it would only be a matter of time before the anti-Semites of Europe lined up to express their “feelings of exclusion” every time they saw a memorial to Hitler’s war crimes.

But when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shames himself and his country by wandering through the Tokyo Yasukuni shrine, what else can we expect? I've been to Yasukuni myself, a place of cherry trees and blossoms and a museum to honour the memory of the 2.5 million Japanese soldiers, kamikaze pilots, rapists and war criminals who died in the Second World War. I had a cousin who died building the Burma railway and so I was greatly interested in the real steam loco shunted into Yasukuni, the very first engine to use that infamous track. It carried home the ashes of the first Japanese soldiers to die in Burma. No doubt Abe enjoyed his little trip to honour the murderers of Imperial Japan.

Sure, Japan has apologised for the little matter of the "comfort women". But why, according to the Chinese, has Yasukuni received 60 visits from Japanese prime ministers between 1945 and 1985, including six visits made on 15 August, to mark the date of Japan's surrender? The 1937 rape of Nanking – in which tens of thousands of Chinese women were raped and at least 100,000 killed – is being turned into part of "a self-defensive holy war"; school textbooks now try to depict Japanese aggression in the 1930s as the "liberation of backward nations". The Japanese Education Minister is proposing to reject textbooks that do not adopt a "patriotic tone". When the US hears that Palestinian textbooks include Israel as part of "Palestine", American officials roar like bears. But when the Japanese do far worse, the Americans turn into mice.

Yasukuni's purpose is to minimise Japanese war crimes and portray the expansionist Japanese empire as a victim. That's what Abe wants to do. He's spending more on his country's military. The man referred to as Abe's "brain", the former diplomat Hisahiko Okazaki, says that Japan has become "a hopelessly pacifist nation". Now that China is a newly emergent military power – and challenging Japanese ownership of the Senkaku Islands – Abe's rewriting of his country's outrageous occupation of China takes on a far more sinister quality.

One of the best British political scientists on Japan, James Stockwin, has expressed grave concern at Abe's visit to Yasukuni. A retired Oxford academic, Stockwin is no Japan-hater; just a decade ago, the Emperor of Japan awarded him the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays (with neck ribbon), no less. But he speaks frankly of Japan's atrocities in the Second World War and finds it "quite extraordinary ... that Abe should use this juncture to visit the Yasukuni shrine, a gesture he must know would be regarded as highly provocative by China".

In an iconoclastic moment, Stockwin suggested that China and Japan should jointly bulldoze into the sea "these useless pieces of real estate".

But there is a far darker side. Last year, the Japanese passed the Designated Secrets Act, which applies a prison sentence of 10 years to journalists and whistleblowers who give publicity to "state secrets" – and five years for those who ask questions about secrets! This document, as Stockwin says, "runs counter to some of the most basic principles of democracy". There have been protests against it. And how did the secretary general of the governing party characterise the protesters? They were "terrorists", of course.

Emperor Hirohito himself – along with Admiral Yamamoto and all the old war-mongers – would have approved. Long live the Greater South-east Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Speak not of Nanking. Set course for Pearl Harbour. That should put paid to all that exclusion, discomfort and anger in Glendale City.

A reminder that Russia was once the good guy

Staying with World War Two, "Stalingrad the movie" has an American version (Enemy at the Gates), a German version (Stalingrad) and now Fyodor Bondarchuk's Russian version (Stalingrad again).

Jude Law's portrayal of sniper Zaitsev and his love affair with a Soviet radio translator got howled down in the Russian Duma. The German film showed the Nazis at their worst but had the Wehrmacht leave Italy for Russia on a modern electric train.

Bondarchuk's fearful 130-minute epic, which I watched in Canada last week, beats them both. Partly based on the diaries of Vasily Grossman – by far the finest Soviet writer of the Second World War, way ahead of anything by Solzhenitsyn – it follows the last days of a platoon of Red Army soldiers and seamen confronting Friedrich von Paulus's Sixth Army in the wrecked home of a lone Russian girl.

Her family have all died but she refuses to leave her bombed house; Mariya Smolnikova's portrayal of 19-year-old Katya is breathtaking.

In a war movie of immense violence, she is as close to perfect as a refugee whose soul is both mutilated by war and ennobled by struggle – because she underplays every moment.

At a time when we all hate Russians again – Ukraine, the Crimea – it's worth being reminded of a time when they were the good guys and when Hitler thought he represented "Western civilisation".

Not a bad film then, especially – as someone said – if you want to know what it's like to be shot in the throat.