

# Comfort Women and the David Irving Problem



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At the centre of on-going hostilities between Korea and Japan is the issue of the Korean comfort women, and the lingering feeling that justice hasn't yet arrived – but that it is achievable, if history can only be sheltered from distortion and doubt. The real risk here comes from a much more subtle, and much more pernicious, place. In fact, it is only by protecting the memory of the comfort women, that they are being harmed at all.

At the end of the Second World War there was a contagious – and well-deserved – feeling of guilt running through Europe and the world. The full extent of German war crimes was quickly coming to light, and though the allied forces had fought on the right side of things, and of course hadn't perpetrated the Holocaust themselves, they also hadn't acted as swiftly as they could have to stop it.

Trying to make up some of this ground, the prospect of a Neo-Nazi rebirth was taken incredibly seriously. Soon there was a movement to protect the memories of the dead, and a standardised history was being written into both culture and law. Anyone daring to challenge this was soon facing a court summons, or being successfully ostracised as a dangerous bigot. A tripwire was laid across peoples' minds.

And it largely worked! Those people still willing to push up against this barricade tended to all look (shaved heads, tattooed faces, and hand-me-down military fatigues) and sound (Aryan nationalists, racial supremacists, and conspiracy theorists), the same. The enemies were obvious, unsophisticated, easily ignored, and not a threat to anyone beyond the reach of a right hook or a steel capped boot...until David Irving came along.

A British historian of once-considerable reputation, David Irving had built a long career around doing the type of things that very few people could, or cared to: searching for lost archives, chasing down old reference points, comparing witness testimonies, translating and retranslating primary sources, and checking the work of his colleagues.

The presentation and discussion of history can be glamorous, but the work of historians – what it takes to build that story up – never is. Not too dissimilar to the work of a cold case detective shaking around for new leads, it involves years of tedium, painstaking effort, and countless dead ends – scouring the world for snippets of information, that may, or may not, exist at all.

What Irving did for our understanding of the Second World War and the Nazi period is immense; worthy of admiration and respect. He made everyone a little smarter and better informed, he brought truth into our lives – but he also did something else. At some point along the way this great historian of fascism also became a fascist historian.

And it's here, in this so unlikely of places, where all the danger lies.

Irving had been hugely influential in proving that the 'Hitler Diaries' were a fake, in explaining – through lengthy biographies – the roles of key Nazi figures such as Heinrich Himmler, Hermann Goring, and Joseph Goebbels, and had exposed the documents linking Benito Mussolini and Winston Churchill to be fraudulent.

While doing this type of investigative history, Irving – in a few, now infamous, cases – asked his colleagues for the underlying proof and sources of their information. He would often be referred on to the work of another colleague, only to have that colleague then refer him on to another. And, when finally at the bottom of this attribution ladder, the last historian in line would refer him back to the first – a complete, and self-perpetuating, circle of misinformation.

So having spent his career fighting in the trenches of truth and academic rigor, when David Irving turned double-agent he intimately knew the weak spots in the line; where his former allies were most poorly defended.

Over the years, Irving had also managed to have the plaque outside the gates of Auschwitz changed, revising the total number of people killed there down from four million to one million (Irving continues to argue that it should be lowered further to 300,000 to match the 1947 ruling of the Kraków court that convicted and hanged the twenty Nazi's deemed most responsible).

And it was here, challenging this figure, that Irving was first called a Holocaust denier from both those in, and outside of, his profession. Auschwitz had become sacred ground, and the symbolic heart of the larger Nazi plan to exterminate European Jewry. So, as the logic went, what kind of person would spend their time picking across the details of what happened there, and then try to minimise the extent of the crimes? What kind of person other than a Holocaust denier that is?

The answer should have come loudly, decisively, and from all corners, back at those people daring to make this claim: 'any historian worthy of the name!' Or *anyone* interested in the truth for that matter.

The horrors of Auschwitz are still horrors whether the official number is one million or four. Still it felt to many as an assault on the memory of those who died and suffered there. And so without recognising the wolves that were being welcomed through the doorway, these forbidden questions, and the policing of history, was allowed to continue. Once unfairly labelled (as a Holocaust denier) in this way, secondary charges don't tend to stick quite as well, and so Irving had cover to match his expertise – as well as a fragile target.

By treating Auschwitz with kid gloves for so many years, by not running an exhaustive documentation, by not critically examining the witness statements, the people trying to protect its memory had inadvertently made it weak and vulnerable.

Soon Irving was asking technical questions about gas delivery mechanisms, the size of incinerators, the locks on doors, the architecture of ceilings and walkways, the chemical compounds of the gases used, the staining of walls, the thickness of glass windows, inconsistencies in witness statements; and claiming that Auschwitz didn't have any gas chambers at all, that it wasn't an extermination

camp, that “*more women died on the backseat of Senator Kennedy’s car in Chappaquiddick than ever died in that building*”.

David Irving had *become* the Holocaust denier that people had previously misattributed to him. He was picking into the tiny minutia, selectively mistranslating documents, twisting certain facts, and simply choosing not to apply the same level of intellectual rigor to information casting doubt over the Holocaust as he did for information supporting it. He was trying to rehabilitate the image of Adolf Hitler by tearing down what we know of his crimes.

Very few people in the academic world could see what he was doing, because very few people had ever approached the issue in the same critical way. Irving had an almost free run of things, publishing countless books, lecturing across the world, and making easy work of anyone willing to publicly debate him.

At a similar time, Michael Shermer, founder of The Skeptics Society, and editor-in-chief of Skeptic magazine, decided to look into the Holocaust denier community. Trying to treat “*history as a science*”, Shermer first approached the community itself and asked for a charge sheet – a list of their evidence and their arguments. He then shopped this list around a number of reputable historians and found to his horror that they had no response to, and couldn’t explain why, the majority of the charges were false.

Shermer had to build the defence himself, from the ground up – and in a similar way, things slowly caught up with David Irving (now widely discredited). But it took time, and before a defence of the Holocaust could be properly constructed, conspiracy theorists and racists had their moment in the sun, and everyday people with even less understanding of this history than those flat footed academics, were forced to doubt everything that they once believed to be true.

What Irving did – a reputable researcher deciding to subtly shade information just enough to cast doubt over an entire field of scholarship – might appear as something incredibly hard to ever fight against. But the gates were held wide-open for him, and inside he found people (his former-colleagues) already belly-up, and unable to defend themselves.

The parallels with South Korea today, and the question of wartime comfort women, is unmistakable; all the way down to the openly drawn equivalences to Nazi war crimes, and between the symbolisms of Japan’s ‘Rising Sun’ flag and the swastika.

From documentary evidence and witness testimony, we know that a large number of South Korean women and girls were abducted from their homes by the Japanese imperial army, and – in a pattern repeated across occupied countries – forced into sexual slavery. In some cases they were lured with the promises of work or education, in others they were simply kidnapped.

The same aura and culture of untouchability is there too. This painful history has been spun into modern Korean nationalism, bilateral relationships are collapsing under its weight (as can be seen with the current trade war with Japan), and academia is being suffocated – always around eerily familiar questions: the numbers of victims and the nature of the crimes.

A few lucky historians have stepped into this space, dared to dispute the narrative, and have managed to walk away with their careers intact. But they have all tended to be foreign-based. Sarah Soh, of San Francisco State University, in her outstanding work ‘The Comfort Women’ – with access to newly opened Japanese archives – showed that the “*Korean patriarchy*” were equal and willing collaborators in this forced prostitution. And that the label of ‘war crimes’ is only applied today because “*that makes it easy to pin the blame on the policies of imperial Japan*”.

Based in America, Soh's book was rightly praised, and she was elevated to the heights of her historical field. But inside South Korea, things work a little differently.

In 2013, Park Yu-na of Sejong University, published her own deeply researched book on the topic, 'Comfort Women of the Empire', which challenged the testimonies of some of the victims, and showed beyond the obvious crimes of sexual slavery, that there was also a "*comrade-like relationship*". Moments of compassion, loyalty, and even love. Without anyone seriously questioning the veracity of her claims, Yu-na was criminally charged, convicted, and had her book removed from circulation, for inflicting "*mental stress on the victims [comfort women and their families]*".

Suncheon National University fired one of its professors in 2017 – and he was later sentenced to six months in prison – for daring to say that *some* of the comfort women were actually willing prostitutes. Something that Lee Young-hoon of Seoul National University has staunchly supported, while also claiming that the total number of victims is dramatically over estimated – it should be 5000 rather than 200,000. His new book, 'Anti-Japan Tribalism', is currently doing the rounds, and the war machine of those people trying to both muzzle, and prosecute him, are at his door as we speak.

There is something noble in trying to protect the memory of the victims of such unspeakable crimes – especially as less-and-less of them are around to tell their stories. But the difference between 5000 and 200,000 is not insignificant, and just like at Auschwitz the question of what happened to the Korean comfort women should bear out through the historical record. It is for historians to argue and debate, not for politicians to make laws about.

Erecting statues and memorials in front of Japanese embassies and consulates, as the Korean government has done in Seoul and Busan – in violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations – is no substitute.

In 2005, David Irving was imprisoned in Austria under a three year sentence (he only served one) for 'trivialising the Holocaust'. He came out of this looking like a martyr for freedom of speech, while his accusers – in fearing what he had to say so much that they locked him up – looked like they had something to hide. Years earlier, Irving dragged Penguin Books, and the author Deborah Lipstadt, into court claiming that he had been libelled by Lipstadt calling him a holocaust denier. In this case it was not the plaintiff nor the defendant that was on trial, but history. All of Irving's slights of hand were slowly picked apart by expert witnesses (other historians), and Irving was exposed before a global audience.

Those people challenging the history of the Korean comfort women might all be wrong, but by silencing them rather than disproving them, it makes it appear like they are all on to something. It makes it seem like there is a conspiracy theory at play, a reason why they are not being debated on the merits of their arguments.

By censoring people and research in this way, it also has the unhappy effect of blurring the distinction between those witness statements that are authentic and those that are not. There is real abuse and suffering in this history, and the testimonials of victims are the most important insight into this, but by not rigorously analysing these personal narratives and then dismissing the ones that don't stand-up to questioning, it clouds the accuracy of them all. Disprove one, and suddenly there is an excuse to reject them all.

What is missed in all of this, is that truth has a rare quality which distinguishes it from falsehood – it is never weakened by criticism, only ever strengthened. The more it is challenged and attacked, the

clearer it becomes. It is only when people – through misguided prohibitions – try to shield it away into darkness, that it grows into something fragile.

Honest people can have honest debates. They can be wrong. And they can change their minds. When this isn't permitted, the academic field – and everyone in it – becomes weaker, more vulnerable, and ripe for exploitation. After decades of suppression and a lack of critical attention, a space was opened-up inside the history of the Holocaust, a space that David Irving could emerge from and still appear credible, honest and diligent. All the memory laws in the world couldn't stop this from happening.

The enemies of truth and civilization are not always as clumsy and easy to spot as we might hope. Occasionally they are sophisticated – credentialed even – with long-term, war-like strategies for smearing everything that we care about. If the comfort women issue continues to be protected as sacred ground, as something that cannot be touched, something impervious to new or contradictory evidence, then soon-or-later a David Irving-type figure is going to walk onto this manicured stage, and then burn everything to the ground; with truth becoming indistinguishable from falsehood.

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