

Saburō Ienaga (1913-2002) was Japan's most famous 20th century historian. Besides being a prolific author in the field of Japanese intellectual history, he took action against the Japanese government in three lawsuits that lasted from 1965 to 1997. The lawsuits were Ienaga's way of going on the offensive against the Ministry of Education and its practice of censoring elementary and secondary school textbooks. In the end, the government withstood Ienaga's constitutional challenge to textbook "certification" when the Japanese Supreme Court chose to avoid the issue. The Supreme Court did side with Ienaga, however, on one paramount concern, namely that school textbooks ought to include descriptions of the suffering that Japan's World War II aggression had caused its neighbors.

Perhaps the best explanation for why the Ministry of Education was allowed to supervise educational content in post-World War II Japan is because it had possessed even greater control over education in the prewar period; for almost the entire history of compulsory education in prewar Japan, the central government closely regulated the schools. The goal of this oversight had been to produce loyal and devoted subjects of the emperor. In the excerpt that follows, Ienaga argues that this "conformist education" was so effective that it removed an important obstacle on Japan's road to war—the Japanese people. The people, because of the type of schooling they received (along with tight restrictions on freedom of thought and expression), lacked the independence of mind and the understanding of the world to resist the militarism that resulted in the Pacific War.

Saburō Ienaga on Education for National Conformity

(The Pacific War, 1931-1945: A Critical Perspective on Japan's Role in World War II, by Saburō Ienaga, Pantheon Books, 1978, pages 19-24, 28, 31-32; first published in Japanese in 1968.)

The new Meiji government's zealous imposition of controls on freedom of expression was partly an extension of the feudal practice of keeping the people ignorant. The Meiji leaders inherited the Tokugawa government's controls on publication, political activity, and Catholicism. That the government should control education and thereby indoctrinate the population had not yet occurred to the authorities; the notion was conceived only later as an absolutist emperor-centered state was established.

In the beginning, the Meiji government recognized the need to build a modern school system. For many years afterward, during the "enlightenment period" when Japan was absorbing so much from the West, the government wanted the people to have a sense of intellectual openness and inquisitiveness about Western technology and culture. Far from rigidly restricting educational content, government policy allowed the schools to use as textbooks publications full of the political and legal doctrines that underlie Western social concepts, Christian ethics, and modern democracy. Books issued by commercial publishers could be used in the schools without government approval.

But when the People's Rights movement reached a high point in the late 1870s, the policy changed. In 1880 the government compiled a list of books favorable to democracy, including Fukuzawa Yukichi's writings, and prohibited their use as textbooks. It was the first move toward official intervention in the content of education. The government

abandoned the policy of encouraging intellectual curiosity and cultural enlightenment, began a revival of Confucian feudal virtues, and started to compile textbooks to inculcate these values.

The government moved step by step—but at a quick pace, one might add—to rein in the educational dragon before it got out of hand. At first a reporting system was set up for textbooks. The schools selected the books and notified the authorities of what texts they were using. Then the government required the schools to obtain approval *before* adopting books. In 1886 a certification system was implemented. Books could not be adopted as texts unless the Ministry of Education certified them. The state had acquired the power to control textbooks, a power that increased steadily.

After 1904, elementary-school texts were compiled by the national government; all Japanese children were taught from books produced by the Ministry of Education. In a pre-modern society, regardless of how powerful the rulers are and how weak vis à vis authority the people may be, it is virtually impossible for the ruling class to indoctrinate the entire populace. The requisite means of communication do not exist. A ruling elite needs a modern school system to get its message across. Modern Japan accomplished a vast quantitative increase in the citizenry's intellectual level by rapidly establishing compulsory education, increasing the compulsory period from three to six years, and attaining an enrollment rate of more than 90 percent by shortly after 1900. Nearly every child received a basic education. However, the standardized educational content stamped a uniform outlook on most Japanese minds. The diversity of ignorance was replaced by the conformity of state-approved knowledge. An impressionistic young child often retains his early education through adulthood despite later experiences. And in prewar Japan, for most people formal education ended with elementary school.

The middle schools were allowed to use certified textbooks until 1943, permitting a modicum of variety. Given the very detailed Ministry of Education curriculum, however, the use of commercially published books made little difference. Furthermore, not many students went on to middle school; the national conformity created by the state textbooks in the early grades was not alleviated at this level. Government control of educational content was notably weak (but not nonexistent) at the higher school, technical college, and university levels. Still fewer students went on to this advanced training, however. Those who did formed a special stratum of intelligentsia. The gap between the intellectuals and the popular consciousness was itself a barrier to ameliorating mass conformity.

What were all Japanese being taught to believe and honor? The policy of standardizing education was a response to the People's Rights movement and naturally accelerated the propagation of antidemocratic, statist values. Instead of the democratic political system and a constitution with guaranteed human rights demanded by the People's Rights movement, an emperor-centered absolutist constitution was imposed from above. No mere head of state, the emperor became a monarch with sacred authority based on the myths of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* [the two Shinto holy books], an object of worship. In 1890, the year after the constitution was announced, the Imperial Rescript on Education was issued in a bid to inculcate total submissiveness to the political authority presided over

by the emperor. The practice of emperor-centered patriotic ceremonies on the opening day of school each year began about the same time. Children were required to venerate the imperial photograph, and there was a solemn ceremonial reading of the education rescript. These rituals were used to instill an awed obedience to the emperor and the state.

The Imperial Rescript on Education's most direct function was as a sacred object in these ritual observances. It also had a noteworthy practical role as the ultimate normative statement on public education until 1945. The contents of ethics textbooks, for example, were based on the values and injunctions of the rescript. The document is a complex ideological blend that reflects the objectives of the men who worked on it. Motoda Nagazane, the Confucian teacher of the Meiji Emperor, wanted to impose Confucianism on the people as a state religion. Ito Hirobumi, one of the leaders of the Restoration and of the new government, and Inoue Kowashi, his intellectual advisor, wanted a political system that, although allowing a degree of constitutionalism, was state-oriented. The sovereign's authority should be paramount. Yamagata Aritomo, another Restoration leader and one of the founders of the modern Japanese military, was a forceful advocate of the rescript. Seven months before it was issued, Yamagata wrote in a "Memorandum on Military Armaments" that "Korea is the vital point within Japan's sphere of national interests" and "the indispensable elements of a foreign policy to protect those interests are first, troops and armaments, and second, education. Education should foster and preserve patriotism." The militaristic command in the rescript shows Yamagata's influence: "Should emergency arise, guard and maintain the prosperity of the Imperial throne." There is also the phrase "always respect the Constitution and observe the laws." While nominally acknowledging the constitution as the basis for parliamentary politics, the rescript subverted the basic purpose of modern constitutions: to limit state authority and guarantee human rights. The rescript mentions the constitution only in the context of the people's obligation to obey the law; there is no reference to limits on state power. A spirit of respect for human rights was totally lacking. Naturally enough, and again quite contrary to modern constitutional thought, the public education based on the rescript was slanted toward unconditional obedience to state authority.

Passive acquiescence to the state was not enough. The Meiji authorities wanted education to turn out citizens who spontaneously and enthusiastically supported national policies. A willingness to die for the country in time of war was stressed as "loyalty to the emperor and love of country." The inculcation of feelings of contempt toward China in the elementary schools during the Sino-Japanese War...seems to have occurred across the country...

Militarism was systematically inculcated during the Russo-Japanese War... The objective was to militarize the entire curriculum. The impact on the children was soon apparent. Consider a third-grade student's composition: "I will become a soldier and kill Russians and take them prisoner. I will kill more Russians, cut off their heads and bring them back to the Emperor. I will charge into battle again, cut off more Russian heads, kill them all. I will be a great man."

This might be discounted as a transient wartime excess except that there was a war every ten years and the curriculum was called to the colors each time. The national consciousness was markedly affected by these jingoistic booster shots every decade. Furthermore, they left a permanent militaristic tint to the standard curriculum taught during the interwar years...

Starting in 1925, active duty military officers were assigned to every school from the middle school level up (except girls' schools), and military training became part of the regular curriculum. The next year youth training centers were established in every city, town, and village as part of a four-year program of four hundred hours of military instruction for males whose formal education ended at elementary school. The military threw its training net wide to catch everyone: the sons of the middle and upper classes who continued on to higher education and the boys from proletarian families who went out to work after finishing elementary school.

The state had arrayed powerful weapons against the individual. A militaristic education implanted jingoistic ideas in the populace and overwhelmed a critical consciousness toward war. All education was standardized under the centralized control of the Ministry of Education. Neither teacher nor parent could make any educational choices for the children. Academic freedom for teachers in the classroom was not recognized. From nursery school through high school, students were told what they would learn and what they would think. Under these conditions it was all but impossible to train students to think rationally about society, especially to have a critical attitude toward authority.

...I speak from personal experience. I was in elementary school during the most liberal years of the prewar period. Yet through middle school I soaked up jingoistic ideas and never questioned them. When the Manchurian Incident [an event staged by Japanese military personnel in 1931 as a pretext for invading northeastern China] occurred shortly after I entered high school, I was incapable of understanding its real nature. I was shocked to discover classmates who rejected the orthodox values and ideology I had accepted as gospel truth. They had different views and they acted upon them. The latter part of 1932 was the turning point in my own intellectual and spiritual growth. To escape the snares of my "education," I rejected most of what I had been taught in the public schools. It still took another twenty years to overcome the handicap of that early indoctrination and be able to grapple with fundamental questions.

The prewar state kept the populace in a powerful vise: on one side were the internal security laws with their restrictions on freedom of speech and thought; on the other side was the conformist education that blocked the growth of a free consciousness and purposive activity for political ends. The vise was tightened whenever any individual or popular resistance challenged reckless military action. These laws and public education, used as instruments of coercion and manipulation, were the decisive factors that made it impossible for the Japanese people to stop their country from launching the Pacific War.