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Abe's unconvincing attempt to whitewash Japan's history

BY HUGH CORTAZZI

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LONDON – The more I study the statement issued in the name of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Cabinet on Aug. 14, the more it disappoints me. The statement marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II glosses over unpalatable facts and attempts to interpret them in a favorable way for Japan.

Most Japanese today cannot be held responsible for the crimes committed by their leaders before they were born any more than we can be held responsible for the iniquities of the slave trade or other crimes committed by our ancestors. The Russians today are not responsible for Stalin's crimes. Nor are today's Chinese culpable for the massacres and misery caused by that monster Mao Zedong. But we all need to know the basic facts if only to try to ensure that we do not repeat the errors. Cruelty and greed are characteristics sadly found everywhere.

Since the Meiji Restoration, Japanese achievements in industry and commerce have been paralleled in art and culture, but in the first half of the 20th century Japan was led by misguided leaders to “become a challenger to the international order,” to use the euphemism of the Abe statement. Unfortunately the first part of the statement is so full of such euphemisms and vague phraseology that it reads to anyone who knows the facts as a totally unconvincing attempt to whitewash recent Japanese history and suggests that Japan was forced to go to war by the attitude and actions of the rest of the world.

The Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 had nothing to do with anti-colonialism, but was the precursor of the annexation of Korea and set Japanese sights on Manchuria. Japan took advantage of World War I to make the infamous 21 demands on China and to promote its economic interests in China.

The whole world suffered in the Great Depression. Japan's situation was no worse than in Britain or the United States, but in Abe's statement it was made an excuse for the demise of Taisho democracy.

The rising power of the Japanese military was boosted by the cult of the Emperor and the mythology of State Shinto. Japan's military leaders succeeded in misusing Japanese patriotism to promote their power.

The Manchurian incident was manufactured by the military, as was Japanese aggression in China. It was Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations that forced its failure.

Even though there can never be a final count of the numbers killed in the Nanjing massacre it surely should have been mentioned. It should also have been acknowledged that Japan began in China the horrors of aerial bombardment of unprotected civilian targets and open cities.

No mention was made of the tripartite pact with Germany and Italy that bound Japan to the evil forces of Nazism and Fascism. While Japan did not participate in the Holocaust and some Japanese did their best to help persecuted Jewish people, Japan backed Nazi Germany's attempts to dominate and oppress Europe and defeat the Allies, which had joined together to defeat what can only be described as the forces of evil.

Was it out of a sense of shame for Japanese treachery that no mention was made in Abe's statement of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor before a declaration of war was made? There was also no admission that the Japanese Co-Prosperity Sphere was a disguise for Japanese aims to bring Asia under Japanese domination.

Why was nothing said about the criminal behavior of Japanese leaders in 1945 in refusing to admit that Japan was doomed to be defeated? They should have been condemned not merely for their blindness to facts but also for their cowardice in refusing to admit that they had failed. They must share responsibility for the cruel sufferings inflicted on Japanese cities in those terrible months 70 years ago before the Emperor admitted the truth.

The absence of a historically accurate narrative detracts from the value of some very welcome phrases in the statement. While there was no new apology, the words in the Murayama statement still stand. The phrases about the role and sacrifices of Asian women were welcome, although the welcome would be warmer if the Kono statement about the "comfort women" had been repeated.

I am glad that the statement finally acknowledges the suffering of allied prisoners of war at the hands of the Japanese military. So often Japanese governments have seemed to do all they could not to admit responsibility for fear that admission might cost money.

I welcome the commitments in the final paragraphs to an open economic system, to the maintenance of peace and the settlement of disputes by peaceful means. I attach great importance to the upholding of human rights and the rule of law.

If Abe and his government want to win the trust of Japan's friends and allies they will need to show through their actions that these are not just pious cliches but real and firm commitments.

Hugh Cortazzi served as Britain's ambassador to Japan from 1980-1984.

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