



The Debate over Japan's Rising Sun Flag

NIDS コメンタリー

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Introduction

In October 2018, South Korea hosted an international fleet review off the coast of Jeju Island. Their navy requested that the vessels of participating countries only fly their national flag and the South Korean flag at the event. This request was chiefly targeted at Japan because South Korea wanted Japanese vessels to refrain from flying the *Kyokujitsuki*, or “Rising Sun Flag,” which is the naval ensign of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).

Japan refused to comply with the request. The Minister of Defense, Itsunori Onodera, replied, “Our naval vessels must display the ensign under domestic laws, according to the Self-Defense Forces Act. Moreover, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea mandates that warships must bear an external mark distinguishing the ship’s nationality, and that’s exactly what the flag in question is.” Since South Korea was unconvinced by this argument, the succeeding Minister of Defense in Japan, Takeshi Iwaya, decided against sending a destroyer to Jeju Island. The minister defended the *Kyokujitsuki*: “Flown for over half a century, the JMSDF ensign is accepted internationally.”

In South Korea, the *Kyokujitsuki* is regarded as a symbol of Japanese militarism and imperialism, and the country’s request to remove the flag reflected the domestic climate. In the years leading up to the event, South Korean politicians, intellectuals, and activists campaigned against the *Kyokujitsuki*, dubbing it a “war crime flag,” and this fomented broad public disapproval of the flag. More recently, South Korean legislators in the ruling party proposed to outlaw the *Kyokujitsuki* in South

Korea, just as Germany proscribed the Nazi’s predominant symbol, the swastika (known in German as the *Hakenkreuz*, or “hooked cross”).

In this article, I set aside the Japanese Government’s legal justifications for displaying the *Kyokujitsuki*. Instead, I analyze a key narrative behind the controversy, which equates the symbol to the Nazi swastika and identifies it as a “war crime flag.”

1 The Nazi Swastika: Symbolizing a Regime and its Ideology

The swastika is an ancient Sanskrit symbol that can be traced back millennia. It has been prominently featured in religions that originated in India, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the swastika became entwined with nationalist movements, especially in Germany, where it symbolized the Aryan “master race.”¹ In the 1920s, the Nazi Party adopted the swastika as its official flag. In the hands of the Nazis, the swastika became a clear symbol of Aryan racial supremacy and anti-Semitism. As Adolf Hitler stated in *Mein Kampf*, “In red we see the social idea of the movement, in white the nationalistic idea, in the swastika the mission of the struggle for victory of the Aryan man, and, by the same token, the victory of the idea of creative work, which has always been and always will be anti-Semitic.”² After seizing power in 1933, the Nazi Party enacted a law in March of that year to establish two national flags: the black-white-red tricolor flag (of the German Empire before 1918) and the *Hakenkreuzfahne* (“swastika flag”). In September of

1935, however, the Nazis issued another ruling that made the Nazi swastika flag the only national flag. This symbol was also incorporated into the *Reichskriegsflagge*, or “Imperial War Flag”, which was the war flag and naval ensign of the Wehrmacht (the unified German armed forces).

After Germany was defeated in World War II, the Nuremberg trials were held, accusing six Nazi organizations of being “criminal organizations”: the Leadership Corps of the Nazi Party, the Schutzstaffel (SS), the Gestapo, and Sicherheitsdienst (SD), the Sturmabteilung (SA), the Reich Cabinet, and the General Staff and High Command (OKW). The first three organizations were found guilty and declared “criminal organizations.”³ As a measure to ensure justice for Holocaust victims, the Allies had given the court jurisdiction to try individuals for *crimes against humanity*. The court declared the Nazi Party organizations as “criminal” because of the crimes they planned and executed.

Given that the Leadership Corps of the Nazi Party had been legally declared a “criminal organization” that committed crimes against humanity, it followed that the Nazi swastika, which symbolized their anti-Semitic ideology culminating in the Holocaust, could reasonably be deemed a “criminal flag.” Accordingly, the symbol has been outlawed in Germany under the country’s Criminal Code (*Strafgesetzbuch*). The relevant provision can be found in section 86 (Dissemination of Means of Propaganda of Unconstitutional Organizations), which states that whoever disseminates or makes publicly accessible the propaganda (e.g., flags, insignia, uniforms, slogans, and forms of greeting) of “a party which has been declared to be unconstitutional by the Federal Constitutional Court” or “a former National Socialist [Nazi] organization” shall be punished with a fine or imprisonment for up to three years. Thus, although the Nazi swastika served as Germany’s national flag for part of its history, it always represented a particular party and

regime. Since the Nazis were legally condemned for perpetrating the Holocaust and their organizations were found to be unconstitutional, the symbol’s use was also prohibited.

2 The *Kyokujitsuki*: A Traditional Naval Ensign

The *Kyokujitsuki* features a sunburst motif of red rays that radiate from a central disk. (While there have been multiple versions of the design with unique compositions and dimensions, I use *Kyokujitsuki* as a blanket term for all of the variants). The *Kyokujitsuki* is widely recognized as Japan’s naval ensign, as it was used by the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) and the modern JMSDF. In fact, it originated as the flag of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA).

On April 17, 1870, Emperor Meiji reviewed a military drill at the Komaba field in Tokyo, which involved the forces of the principal clans of that time (Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen). The Ministry of War decided that the event should use a military symbol to stir the troops’ morale and instill solidarity, which resulted in Japan’s first national war flag. The flag was called, the *rentaiki*, or “regimental standard,” and it featured a central disk with sixteen sunrays, which later became the classic *Kyokujitsuki* design.

One of the individuals in the Ministry of War who worked on the flag design as a junior officer was Soga Sukenori. He later became a lieutenant general and then Vice Chief of the General Staff. According to Soga, the original draft featured tapered rays, but the government ultimately adopted a design where the ends of the rays were widened. He said, “The first design that we submitted to the Imperial Diet featured shortened rays. The Diet members laughed scornfully, saying that it resembled *konpeito* [Japanese candy in the shape of a ball surrounded by short knobs]. We then submitted a new design with non-tapered rays, and they said it was

outstanding. The design became today's war flag."⁴ Incidentally, Kodama Gentaro (who was later promoted to General) was in his second year at the Osaka military academy during this time (Heigakuryō). Kodama designed a flag for the academy and described it as a "rising sun," or a *kyokujitsuki*.⁵

The *Kyokujitsuki* was not the first flag in Japan to feature a sunburst motif. The motif had appeared in several family crests under the name, *hiashi*, which means, "sun legs." During the Sengoku period (1467–1600), some clans in Kitakyushu, such as the Ryuzoji of Hizen Province and the Kusano of Chikuzen Province, used the *hiashi* as their crest. (Soga himself was from the Yanagawa clan). The *hiashi* motif (i.e., a solar disk with sunrays radiating outward) was semantically derived from sun worship, that is, the veneration of the solar deity. There was some design variation among the different *hiashi* crests, like the number of rays, for example. They ranged from four to six, and the rays themselves were varied too, as some were pointed, straight, and others fanned outward.⁶ In April of 1875, the Great Council of State established the Order of the Rising Sun (*Kyokujitsu-shō*), Japan's first national decoration. The sunburst motif in this design was meant to convey "the vigor of the sun rising in the eastern sky".

Although the *rentaiki* was originally intended to only be used on the day of the military drill, the Great Council of State established it as the formal flag of the Imperial Army later that year on May 15, 1870. On December 2, 1874, the Great Council of State established it as the war flag of the IJA. On January 23 of the same year, Emperor Meiji had presented this standard to the 1st and 2nd Imperial Guards Infantry Brigade. The IJA would subsequently fight under this flag in all military engagements through the end of World War II.

As for the navy, IJN vessels initially flew the *nisshōki*, Japan's national flag, which includes a red disk on a white background. However, on October 7, 1899, the Cabinet (the Great Council of State having been replaced

by a cabinet government system in 1885) ruled that the naval ensign should be consistent with the war flag. Therefore, the IJN adopted the *Kyokujitsuki* as its ensign with the war flag's same design, including the sixteen rays but with an off-center circle in the middle.

Over time, the perceived meaning of the *Kyokujitsuki* changed. In the early twentieth century, a jingoistic interpretation emerged. For example, a 1902 publication said the flag represents "Japan as a nation that seeks peace, yet remains steadfastly determined to defend her honor against any incursion or insult by a foreign power and to exert her prestige in the world."⁷ Amidst the turbulent conditions of the 1930s, the Ministry of the Navy described the ensign in similarly striking terms: "The rays represent His Imperial Majesties' August glories shining forth over the four seas."⁸ Undeniably, this ideological meaning has been ascribed to the *Kyokujitsuki*, reflecting the hostilities and circumstances of the period. Despite this ephemeral interpretation, the war flag and naval ensign continue to represent the sun in modern times, just as the design originally intended.

At the end of World War II, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal was held. Whereas the Nuremberg trials prosecuted for crimes against humanity to impose justice following the Holocaust, no equivalent treatment was meted out to any Japanese organization. Moreover, the court did not even have jurisdiction to declare any organization to be "criminal." Consequently, the IJA, IJN, and other Japanese organizations and institutions were never indicted as the Nazi organizations were. There were only individuals that were held criminally responsible.⁹

Free from association with a "criminal organization," the *Kyokujitsuki* has continued to represent Japan's armed services. Different flags were adopted by the National Police Reserve (1950–1954), the National Safety Force, and the Japan Coast Guard. However, in conjunction with the inauguration of the Ministry of Defense and the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in

1954, the Cabinet issued an ordinance (Order for the Enforcement of the Self-Defense Forces Act) establishing the *Kyokujitsu* as the flag of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) and the ensign of the JMSDF. The JGSDF flag is a slight modification of the IJA war flag, as it features just eight rays and golden edges, while the JMSDF ensign retains the classic design of the IJN ensign with sixteen sunrays and an off-center middle.

The JMSDF ensign was chosen judiciously. The authorities consulted external experts and considered the historical background as well as public sentiment.¹⁰ Among those consulted were academics at the Tokyo University of the Arts, who advised that the old IJN ensign would be the best choice. Another advocate for this design was Suiho Yonai, a celebrated painter and relative of Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai. Yonai praised the flag's aesthetic value and said, "Whether static or fluttering, the flag has a resolute beauty. The colors work perfectly against a blue sea and white clouds. It is the most sublime of designs, and I can think of none to surpass it." In light of this advice, the *Kyokujitsu* was ultimately adopted as the JMSDF ensign. Agreeing with this decision, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida said, "There is no country in the world that does not know of this flag. Wherever our ships sail, this ensign will offer a clear indication that the vessels belong to Japan. I trust that the JMSDF will carry forward the cherished traditions of the old navy and safeguard Japan's status as a maritime nation."

3 The "Learn from Germany" Narrative

Given that the *Kyokujitsuki* differs substantially from the Nazi swastika or any other "criminal flag," why do so many Koreans equate the two? This idea is driven by the narrative that Japan should learn from Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—the country's effort to

"work through the problematic past."¹¹

This narrative originated from a speech that Richard von Weizsäcker, the president of West Germany at the time, delivered in May of 1985 during an event commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of War in Europe and of National-Socialist Tyranny. His speech was widely reported in Japan, sparking a public debate where a flurry of commentators argued that Japan's way of dealing with the past unfavorably compared to Germany's model. Eventually, the discourse in Japan petered out as there was a growing recognition that the comparison was problematic. However, in 1995, during the 50th anniversary of the war's end, a similar discourse emerged in East Asia, and it continues today. In South Korea, successive presidents (Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye) have invoked the "learn from Germany" narrative, and daily newspapers, such as the *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*, refer to it regularly.

This narrative fails to account for critical differences in the circumstances between Japan and Germany. One major difference concerns the role of the Holocaust, for example. When Germany is dealing with the past, it is primarily focused on the Holocaust. Relating the Holocaust to other atrocities is problematic because it was unique in being a premeditated, organized attempt to annihilate an ethnic group. As Weizsäcker stated, the Final Solution to the Jewish Question is "unparalleled in history, defying all attempts at relativization."¹² So grievous were the crimes that they led to the new criminal category of "crimes against humanity" at Nuremberg.

Those who argue that Japan should do more to atone for the "comfort women" system, often cite the famous image of the West German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, kneeling before a monument of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and they argue that Japanese leaders should emulate his example. However, this comparison fails. In a historic gesture, Brandt expressed remorse for the Nazi

oppression, including forcing Jews into the Warsaw Ghetto and subjecting them to harsh labor and starvation.

Another salient difference between Japan and Germany concerns the identification of the perpetrators. The masterminds behind the Holocaust were Hitler and other Nazi leaders, who had organizations that were condemned as “criminal” at Nuremberg. There were, however, no equivalent Japanese organizations.

The differences between the circumstances of Japan and Germany did not escape Weizsäcker. During a speech he delivered in Japan, the former president mentioned some similarities, but he also underscored some differences. He said, “The situations of the two countries are very hard to compare. We must resist the temptation to lay the two countries side by side.”¹³

On the other hand, when considering Japan’s relationship with Korea, France’s relationship with Algeria may offer a better comparison than Germany’s relationship with the victims of Nazi rule. Arnaud Nanta, a professor at the Institut d’Asie Orientale, said, “When it comes to the Second World War, there are abundant historical parallels between Japan and Germany. However, when it comes to the history of colonial rule, better comparisons are found in France, the USA, and the Netherlands.”¹⁴ First colonized by France in 1830, Algeria finally won its independence in 1962 after a bitterly fought armed struggle. By comparison, Japanese colonial rule in Korea was much shorter, lasting only 36 years (compared to 132 years), and Koreans gained independence as a result of Allied victory rather than by fighting off the oppressors alone. Notwithstanding these differences, the two systems of colonial rule were similar in terms of the geographic proximity between the colonizer and colony and in terms of the respective ties between the two that arose from such proximity. Nanta said, “Relations between France and Algeria remain as fraught as ever. Neither country has properly reconciled over the colonial past.”¹⁵ Throughout the world, competing historical perspectives about colonialism

continue to create complex, intractable hurdles on the pathway toward reconciliation.

On the matter of reconciliation, I would venture to add that Japan is one of the few countries that apologized and paid compensation for its colonial abuses. Germany’s *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, for all its virtues, notably omits the colonial abuses in German’s Southwest Africa (now the Republic of Namibia). Despite Namibia’s requests, Germany has yet to offer a clear formal apology, let alone compensation. For this reason, some have criticized *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* for its Eurocentrism.¹⁶

Final thoughts

Regardless of how we appraise Japan’s efforts in handling the past, the fact remains that the *Kyokujitsuki* is a legitimate symbol of the nation’s armed forces, just like the military flags of other countries. Although it was admittedly associated with militarism for a period, it also boasts a long history that transcends any single regime. As such, one should not lightly compare it with the Nazi swastika. The latter is substantially different because it was associated with a particular party and regime. It also symbolized an inhumane ideology that culminated in the Holocaust. Far from being a “war crime flag,” as South Korean critics claim, the *Kyokujitsuki* has enjoyed broad international acceptance since 1945. South Korea even allowed JMSDF ships to fly the ensign without controversy during the international fleet reviews it hosted in 1998 and 2008.¹⁷

The JMSDF ensign has flown since 1954. It is now sixty-five years old, which means that it has lasted longer than the IJN ensign, which endured for fifty-six years. Over the years, the flag has flown for countless cooperative support and humanitarian aid operations, underscoring just how well-accepted it is by nations worldwide.

- ¹ William L. Shirer, *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, translated into Japanese by Isamu Inoue (Tokyo Sogensha, 1961), pp. 77–79.
Hans Biedermann, *Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole [Dictionary of Symbolism]*, translated into Japanese by Koichi Fujishiro and others (Yasaka Shobo, 2000), pp. 406–407.
- ² Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, translated into Japanese by Tatsuo Akabane and others (Kawade Shobo Shinsha), pp. 168–169, 516.
- ³ Kensuke Shiba, *Nyūrunberuku Saiban [The Nuremberg Trials]* (Iwanami Shoten, 2015), pp. 132–133.
- ⁴ Soga Sukenori, *Soga Sukenori Ō Jijoden [Biography of Soga Sukenori]*, ed. by Jiro Sakaguchi (Soga Sukenori Biography Publishing Committee, 1930), p. 200.
- ⁵ Tadayoshi Sakurai, ed. *Kokubō Daijiten [Dictionary of National Defense]* (Chugai Industries Research Committee, 1932), p. 434.
- ⁶ Shigeru Chikano, *Nihon Kamon Sōkan [Inspector-General of Japan's Family Crests]* (Kadokawa, 1993), pp. 795–797.
- ⁷ Sadakichi Okuda, *Teikoku Kokki oyobi Gunkanki [Imperial Flags and Naval Ensigns]* (Shunyodo, 1902), pp. 12–13.
- ⁸ Military Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of the Navy, “Gunkanki [Naval Ensigns],” *Shūhō [Weekly Reports]*, 55 (November 3, 1937), p. 9.
- ⁹ Seigi Shimizu, *Sensō Sekinin to wa Nani ka [What is War Liability?]* (Kamogawa, 2008), pp. 46–48, 69–72.
- ¹⁰ For more on the flag selection process, see the following: Sobe Suzuki, *Kikigaki - Kaijō Jieitai Shiwa [Oral Record – History of the Maritime Self-Defense Force]* (Suikokai, 1989), pp. 160–165.
- ¹¹ For a general analysis of the differences between

Germany and Japan, see the following: Junichiro Shoji, “‘Kako’ o Meguru Nichidoku Hikaku no Muzukashisa: Motomerareru Shinchōsa [The Problematic Nature of Comparing how Japan and Germany Deal with the Past: The Degrees of Sincerity Demanded],” *Column Article of the Japan Institute of International Affairs* (May 29, 2014)

<https://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/column/140529_shoji.pdf>

¹² The Asahi Shimbun Company, ed. *Nihon to Doitsu: Fukaki Fuchi yori [Japan and Germany: From the Depths]* (The Asahi Shimbun Company, 1995), p. 82.

¹³ Chunichi Shimbun, ed. *Vaitsuzekkā Nihon Kōen Roku: Rekishi ni Me o Tozasuna [Weizsäcker's Speech in Japan: Don't Close Your Eyes to History]* (Iwanami Shoten, 1996), pp. 47–48.

¹⁴ Arnaud Nanta, “Furansu Arujeria Kankei to Nikkan Kankei no Ruisei [The Similarities Between French-Algerian Relations and Japan-Korea Relations],” *Mainichi Shimbun*, August 20, 2012.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Yoko Nagahara, “Doitsu to Minamiafurika / Namibia: Shokuminchi o meguru ‘Kako no Kokuhō [Germany and German South West Africa / Namibia: Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Regard to the Former Colony],” *Journal of the Japanese Society for German Studies*, 41 (2007). For more on comparisons between Japan and Germany in respect of responsibility for colonial abuses, see the following: Hisashi Yano, “Sensō Sekinin Ron kara Shokuminchi Sekinin Ron e [From Liability for War to Liability for Colonialism],” *Mita Journal of Economics*, 102.3 (October 2009).

¹⁷ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 6, 2018. For more on the 1998 inspection, see the following: Ryota Watanabe, “Pusanhan no Jiekan Ki [MSDF Vessels in Busan Bay],” *Securitarian* (January 1999), pp. 52 – 53.

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