Late in 2011, in the capital of the Republic of Korea (ROK), Seoul, a sculpture of a teenage girl was displayed right opposite the entrance to the Embassy of Japan. The sculpture’s face does not bear any feelings. It expresses neither sadness nor anger, neither joy nor curiosity. She just sits in a chair and looks in the windows of the building of strict, “formal” architecture.

However, the display of this sculpture was viewed in Japan as an act that provoked further deterioration of the already difficult bilateral relations. The point is that the bronze girl reminds of a problem, the mere existence of which is put in doubt by Tokyo.

We are talking about the issue of “comfort women” in the so-called “comfort stations”, which were established from the early 30s to 1945 by the Japanese Army on the occupied territories from the Korean Peninsula to Philippines, Singapore and islands of today’s Indonesia.

In 1932, after cases of rape of Korean women by Japanese soldiers got more frequent (which contributed to the development of anti-Japanese sentiment among the population of the occupied Korea, as well as to a drop in discipline in the army) and the number of venereal disease cases among the population grew, the occupation forces command decided to regulate military men satisfying their basic instinct by using special “stations”.

Those who were responsible for establishment and functioning of the stations, initially hired on a voluntary basis only Japanese women who, as a rule, had had experience in that field in Japan, were physically fit and older than 21. The latter condition was consistent with the requirements of international agreements of the time, which were signed by Japan. Most of those Japanese women viewed their “service” as their patriotic duty.

The situation became more difficult because of the expansion of the occupied territory and the growth of the occupation forces. The number of “comfort stations” rose to 400, and they began to recruit local women, especially Koreans. Girls younger that 21, under-age girls might have formed a large part of them.

Today’s estimate of the total number of “comfort women” who worked at “comfort stations” directly depends on the nationality of a person making estimate. For the Japanese, the total number is several dozens of thousands, for the Koreans and Chinese - several hundreds of thousands.

The conditions in which the girls lived were probably also very different. There is some evidence that the "comfort women" were absolutely free as far as providing services to a particular client was concerned. Some of them allegedly were able to provide for their families, since they earned a hundred times more than a junior officer of the Japanese army.

However, most of the evidence indicates that the situation was absolutely horrible, some women tried to dissuade others from suicide attempts. According to some estimates, only 20% of them lived to see the victory of 1945.

Anyway, one of the key historical problems of modern Japan’s relations with its neighbors is reduced to the question
of voluntariness. If Korean (Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Dutch...) women were recruited to work as “comfort women” by deception and against their will, than such political problem does exist in modern Japan-Korea relations. It can be resolved if Japanese authorities apologize and pay compensation to victims of violence.

If there is no such information, appropriately recorded (not as texts on the Internet) and women worked at “comfort stations” on their own accord, doing all they could to survive during war, famine and devastation, then there is no such problem in modern Japan-Korea relations.

In the second case various activities (including sculpture and art) of individual groups of Koreans is counterproductive, and unfair politician can use it to their own advantage. For example, Lee Myung-bak, penultimate South Korean President, often exploited the topic of "comfort women". Because of that, Japanese-Korean relations were on the edge of breaking.

His successor, Park Geun-hye, had to deal with the situation. She tried at least to “slow down” the activity of concerned "groups of citizens".

However, one cannot understand the burning issue of the “comfort women”, if it is not regarded in the context of modern relations between ROK and Japan. ROK views the inevitable ending of a cultural and political post-war syndrome in Japan and its gradual "normalization" as a threat to Korean national interests and security.

In these circumstances, various historical problems, including the issue of “comfort women”, occupy today almost central position in South Korea. They fit the general policy of suspicion towards Japan.

A fundamental difference in the current estimates of the period of Japanese colonization in South Korea and Taiwan seems interesting, since real impacts on both colonies are more or less similar. In Taiwan this period is assessed as quite positive, the process of “normalization” of Japan is welcomed, and the relations with it (though there is no official, or, to be more precisely, diplomatic format) are developing comprehensively and successfully. But with South Korea it is completely opposite, with an exception of trade with Japan.

Today Seoul assesses the colonial period only negatively, and Lee Myung-bak even demanded that Tokyo officially condemned that period and presented apologies. The nature of the colonial period, however, was ambiguous, and there is various evidence of that fact. For example, on the Internet there is a photo of a squadron of Korean kamikaze pilots who fought for the Japanese army during the Pacific War.

And as for the present state of political relations between South Korea and Japan, there is a diplomatic component but despite that they have been in a deadlock for quite a long time, and so far there is not way to break it. Although there have recently been made some attempts to move out of that deadlock on the part the leaders of both counters, that is, Shinzo Abe and Park Geun-hye, who are being persistently persuaded by Washington to make these steps.

The explanation of the above mentioned divergence is related to a difference in the assessment of the formation of China as a global superpower No. 2, as well as the place of Japan in the political game in the region. Taiwan considers China to be more of a potential threat to the present status of the island as a de facto independent state, and Japan is seen as an important counterbalancing element to “the mainland”. South Korea, however, assesses both leading players in a different way.

Until the middle of the last decade the official Japanese assessment of various aspects of its own historical period of the 30-40s was based on the statements of two politicians who were in charge in the first half of the 90s. These are the “statements of Yohei Kono” in 1993 (who was then the Chief Cabinet Secretary) in which he, first, admitted the use of coercion to make local women work in “the comfort stations”, and, second, formally apologized for that fact. Since that time Kono has not changed his opinion on the question, which he confirmed in a statement made in the summer of 2014.

“The statement of Tomiichi Murayama” in 1995 (then Prime Minister) was a second statement of that kind, in it he admitted that the Imperial Japanese Army inflicted “tremendous damage and suffering” on the peoples of the countries it had occupied. In 2013 T. Murayama also confirmed his commitment to that opinion.

These confirmations of the statements issued 20 years ago made by both former eminent Japanese politicians were not ad hoc. They were the reaction to a tendency, which appeared in the second half of the last decade, towards the Tokyo’s revision of the role of Japan in the events which took place in the 30-40s of the last century. Already during his first tenure (2006-2007), S. Abe questioned the coercive nature of recruitment of women from the countries...
occupied by Japan in “the comfort stations”.

His position was based on the belief that one cannot rely on the testimonies given today by the eyewitnesses of the events which took place 70 years ago. Moreover, the motives behind these testimonies can be mercenary. As for the mentioned above statements of Japanese officials who were in charge in the 90s, their critics now think that they were issued without any reliance on the documents relevant in law and under the pressure of “the political expediency” of that time.

But such a position caused condemnation from the parliaments of the USA, Canada and the EU, and in March 2007 S. Abe had to “express regret” about the violation of human rights at “the comfort stations”. After S. Abe in 2012 became Prime Minister for the second time, the “revisionist” implication of his statements about the recent history had been becoming increasingly definite, and this deserves a reasonable discussion (that is, without any elements of primitive propaganda).

It was clear that Japan had become bored of being “guilty of everything” in the reference to the origin and nature of the Pacific War. Japanese army is by no means a pioneer and exception in the treatment of women as a kind of plunder in the conquered country, similar to its material wealth. Women had been treated that way throughout the course of human history on all continents.

Only the number of recorded acts of rape of Japanese women by American soldiers in one year after the surrender of Japan during the Second World War is estimated in thousands. Back in the 70s, soldiers of the American corps stationed in South Korea itself enjoyed the services of institutions which resembled Japanese “comfort stations”.

Amid the recent scandal with the second biggest national newspaper Asahi Shimbun, it has become obvious that it is necessary to take the “dark” pages of history away from participants of propaganda wars and give them to historians. In the 80s and 90s the Asahi Shimbun published faked articles of a “witness and recruiter” who, allegedly, forced women into working at “comfort stations” during the Pacific War.

Only manifestation of truth and its adoption “by the interested parties” are able to heal historical wounds and restore the confidence between nations. For, as we all know, along with children, women, and elderly people, i. e. most vulnerable layers of population, truth is the first and the main victim of war, as well as of political peacetime games.

As for a simple, but expressive sculpture “of a girl sitting in a chair”, it seems that the most suitable place for it is opposite the UN headquarters in New York. It will very useful for representatives of “world politics”, who use the Organization, to look a potential victim of their speeches in the eye.

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