



all > International

In former Gestapo HQ in Germany, history of 'comfort women' expands the narrative on WWII's horrors

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Victims of Japan's systematic sexual abuse are highlighted in a new exhibit titled "The Third World in World War II" in Cologne, Germany



Portraits of Indonesian women who were victims of Japan's wartime military sexual slavery system are on display at the NS-Documentation Center in the German city of Cologne as part of its exhibit "The Third World in World War II," ongoing from March 7, 2025. The portraits, by the Dutch photographer Jan Banning, are being displayed in Germany for the first time. (Jang Ye-ji/Hankyoreh)

Kim Soon-ok, Park Du-ri, Moon Pil-gi, Gil Won-ok, Kang Duk-kyung, Lee Yong-soo, Lee Ok-seon, Kim Soon-duk, Kim Kun-ja, Shim Dal-yeon, Park Ok-ryeon, Song Shin-do, Kim Yong-suk (North Korea), Kwak Kum-nyo (North Korea), Lee Sang-ok (North Korea), Pak Yong-sim (North Korea).

These are the names of the Koreans included on a list of 44 victims of the Japanese military sexual slavery system as presented at "The Third World in World War II," a special exhibition that opened at the NS-Documentation Center in the German city of Cologne on Friday.

Visitors to the exhibition are greeted by photographs of "comfort women" victims from various regions in Asia, including the Korean Peninsula, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

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The entrance to the NS-Documentation Center in the German city of Cologne where the exhibit is being held. (Jang Ye-ji/Hankyoreh)

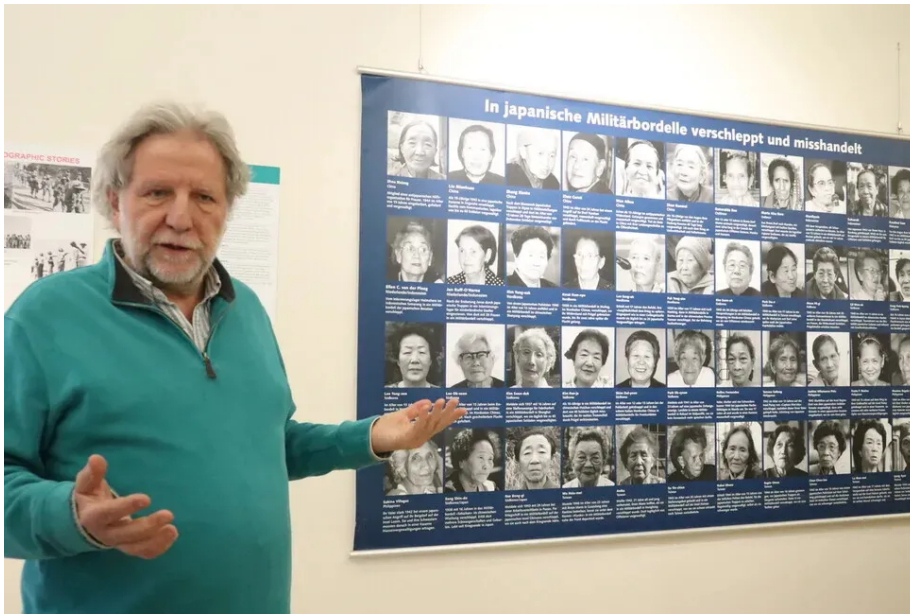
This exhibition, which opened to the public on March 7 and will run through June 1, coincides with the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. To break the historical concept that World War II was solely a "European war," the exhibition shows the horror of what happened in Asia, Africa and Oceania. More troops from the so-called "Third World" served in the war than Western European soldiers did, but the scale of memory tips toward the West.

The exhibition devotes particular attention to the issues surrounding the imperial Japanese military's "comfort women" system of sexual exploitation. On March 8, International Women's Day, a Statue of Peace was erected in front of the NS-Documentation Center. The building was once the headquarters of the Gestapo. Now, it's a history museum that receives around 90,000 visitors a year.

On Thursday, the day before the exhibition opened to the public, exhibition curator Karl Rössel spoke with the Hankyoreh at the museum.

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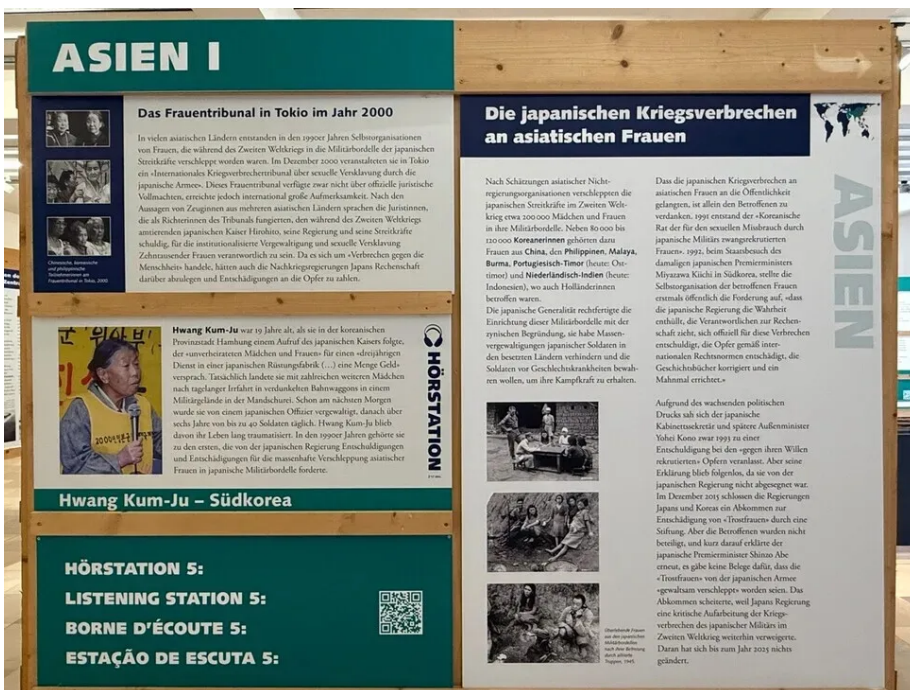


Karl Rössel, one of the curators of the exhibition, speaks to the Hankyoreh at the NS-Documentation Center in Cologne. Behind him are portraits of 44 women from across the world who were abused in the Japanese imperial military's "comfort women" system. (Jang Ye-ji/Hankyoreh)

"The Statue of Peace tells a story that goes beyond the women in the Pacific who were abducted. It also has the effect of making us talk about the women who were hurt by violence from a war that began in Europe, and allows us to talk about war today," he said.

A journalist and historian, Rössel has studied WWII from the perspective of colonized nations at an independent German research institute for over 40 years. He has traveled to hear stories from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, gathering interviews from victims and their loved ones.

"My interview with a Korean victim sticks out the most in my memory," he said. "She said she didn't want compensation or money. She only wanted Japan to recognize its war crimes."



he exhibit features an audio recording of Hwang Kum-ju, a South Korean "comfort woman" survivor, next to an explanation of the 2015 "comfort women" deal between South Korea and Japan. (Jang Ye-ji/Hankyoreh)

The person Rössel recalled was Hwang Kum-ju, who passed away in January 2013 at the age of 91. Visitors to the exhibition can hear her voice tell her story, dubbed over in German, English, French and Portuguese. The recording begins with the statement "My name is Hwang Kum-ju." This is the beginning of her testimony in 2000 at the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery. Told she could get a job at a Japanese munitions factory, Hwang was tricked into traveling to Japan at age 19, when her suffering as a "comfort woman" began. In the exhibition's biographical sketch, Hwang is described as "among the first victims [in the 1990s] to demand an apology and compensation by the Japanese government for the mass abduction of Asian women to be abused in Japanese military brothels."

Titled "The Japanese War Crimes Committed Against Asian Women," this section of the exhibition clearly calls for Japan to take accountability. The exhibition notes the activities of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, founded in 1990, and the Tokyo Women's Tribunal of 2000, where "Japan's post-war governments were to be held accountable and were responsible for compensating the victims."

The Japanese government claims that the issue was resolved by an agreement signed with the South Korean government in 2015. The exhibition clarifies, however, that "the victims were not involved, and shortly afterwards Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe again declared that there was no evidence that the 'comfort women' had been 'forcibly abducted' by the Japanese army."

"The agreement failed because Japan's government continued to refuse to critically analyze the war crimes committed by the Japanese military during the Second World War. Nothing changed until 2025," the exhibition notes.



Over 200 people took part in a workshop on the "The Third World in World War II" exhibit at the NS-Documentation Center in the German city of Cologne on March 7, 2025. As part of the workshop, Nataly Jung-hwa Han, the director of Korea Verband, a group that has helped bring Statues of Peace to Germany, gave a presentation on the meaning of the memorials and the pressures from the Japanese government regarding their installation. (Jang Ye-ji/Hankyoreh)

The exhibition also tells the story of Koreans being drafted to work for the Japanese military and the fate of Korean forced laborers who were victims of the atomic bomb droppings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

"155,000 Korean boys aged 13 or 14 had to carry weapons and armaments for the Japanese military and load their ships and trains," the exhibition description reads. "10,000 Korean child soldiers were sent to the front lines."

ASIEN I

Koreas Bedeutung für die japanische Kriegsführung

Korea war seit 1910 eine japanische Kolonie und erlangte im Zweiten Weltkrieg als Aufmarsch-, Rückzugs- und Nachschubbasis der japanischen Streitkräfte herausragende strategische Bedeutung.

Mit Beginn des Kriegs im Jahre 1937 verschärfte Japan sein Besatzungsregime. 1938 strich es die koreanische Sprache und Geschichte aus den Lehrplänen der Schulen. Alle Koreaner und Koreanerinnen mussten sich japanische Namen zulegen. Im April 1938 verkündete die japanische Regierung das «Gesetz zur Allgemeinen Mobilmachung des Volkes für den vaterländischen Arbeitsdienst». Bis 1945 mussten danach 4,5 Millionen Koreanerinnen und Koreaner Kriegsdienste aller Art verrichten.



Das Mahnmal für die 35.000 koreanischen Opfer des Atombombenabwurfs in Hiroshima zeigt eine Schildkröte. Auf ihrem Panzer erhebt sich eine Säule mit einem Relief von zwei koreanischen Drachen. Die Inschrift darunter lautet: «Die Seelen der Toten ruhen in den Himmel – auf dem Rücken der Schildkröte.»



Chung Ki-Young war Student an der koreanischen National-Universität in Seoul, als ihn die japanischen Kolonialbehörden am 20. Januar 1944 zum Militär einzwangen.

Nachdem die japanischen Behörden die meisten Erwachsenen in Korea zwangsrekrutiert hatten, zogen sie 1944 auch Schüler und Studenten ein. 155.000 koreanische Jungen im Alter von 13 oder 14 Jahren mussten für die japanischen Militärs Waffen und Ausrüstung schleppen, Schiffe und Züge beladen. 10.000 koreanische Kindersoldaten wurden an die Front geschickt.

1,5 Millionen Koreaner und Koreanerinnen wurden nach Japan deportiert, um dort in Bergwerken, Kohlegruben, Häfen und Rüstungsbetrieben zu arbeiten. Beim Abwurf der ersten Atombombe am 6. August 1945 in Hiroshima kamen deshalb auch 35.000 koreanische Zwangsarbeiter ums Leben. Drei Tage später starben in Nagasaki weitere 15.000 Koreaner. Die meisten von ihnen hatten in Fabriken des Mitsubishi-Konzerns Kriegsschiffe für die kaiserliche Marine bauen müssen.

Erst nach langjährigen Auseinandersetzungen mit den japanischen Behörden konnte 1999 im Friedenspark von Hiroshima auch ein Mahnmal zur Erinnerung an die koreanischen Atombombenopfer errichtet werden.

The exhibit features information on the important role of the Korean Peninsula in Japan's wars in Asia. It features a photo of a memorial in Hiroshima, Japan, dedicated to Koreans killed in America's dropping of an atomic bomb on the city. (Jang Ye-ji/Hankyoreh)

The exhibition shows a photo of the Hiroshima memorial for Korean victims of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The bombings killed 50,000 laborers who had been forcibly mobilized. The exhibition goes beyond the Korean Peninsula to cover the Second Sino-Japanese War 1930s and '40s, the Nanjing Massacre, and the Japanese invasion of Indonesia.

Rössel also said that he's aware of how the Japanese government has reacted to the Statue of Peace and the comfort women issue. The process of erecting the statue in front of the museum, where it will stay throughout the period of the exhibition, encountered opposition from the Japanese government. The same goes for the statue's presence in Berlin and other regions throughout Germany. Earlier this year, Cologne Mayor Henriette Reker suggested erecting the statue on private property rather than in front of the museum, which is public property.

"We'd been planning for the exhibition for two years at that point. But after Mayor Reker came back from her trip to Kyoto last December, the city government called for the statue's erection on public property to be reviewed by the city's subcommittee and political committee, as the city government couldn't legally make a unilateral decision regarding the statue's removal," Rössel said.



An article from a local newspaper dated Jan. 14, 2025, on the Cologne mayor's ban on the display of the Statue of Peace. (Jang Ye-jj/Hankyoreh)

Regarding resistance by the Cologne city government, Rössel and other exhibition planners said, "We had to fight." They allied with civic groups to send open letters to the

mayor, the city council, and politicians to get media attention. They also directly protested Reker's decision. As a result, the city's political committee unilaterally approved the statue's installation in front of the museum. Rössel said Reker had no choice but to capitulate.

"City authorities will not publicly acknowledge that the Japanese government exerted pressure. But when the Japanese consul general in Dusseldorf met with Cologne city authorities last year, I've been told that the consul general said that he did not like the idea of anyone in Cologne or North Rhine-Westphalia erecting a Statue of Peace," Rössel said.

"We heard this from several sources," he added.

After their battle with the Cologne city government, Rössel finally attained approval to erect the statue in front of the museum. A corner of the exhibition deals exclusively with press reports about the dispute.



Portraits of 44 women from multiple nations, including Korea, who were abused by Japan in its "comfort women" system of sexual exploitation. (Jang Ye-ji/Hankyoreh)

By Jang Ye-ji, staff reporter

Please direct questions or comments to [\[english@hani.co.kr\]](mailto:english@hani.co.kr)

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