

Abe's Nationalism Is His Most Toxic Legacy

U.S. elites were happy to overlook the late Japanese prime minister's historical revisionism.

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Suppose the Nazi leader Hermann Göring had a grandson who was “emotionally attached to ‘conservatism’” because people around him “used to point to [his] grandfather as a ... ‘war criminal’” and he “felt strong repulsion.” The younger Göring entered politics and promptly joined a group of lawmakers who issued a report finding that in World War II, Nazi Germany did not wage a war of aggression; that the Wehrmacht was protecting Europe from communism; that Nazi Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia shouldn’t be called an “invasion” because the Sudetenland was historically German; and that the viewpoint to the contrary is a “masochistic” view of history that made it impossible for Germans to feel proud of their country.

Imagine the younger Göring went on to become the chancellor of Germany, pass laws that grant the government with sweeping surveillance power, and hound critical journalists, making the country fall 56 places in the World Press Freedom Index in less than a decade. He would send flowers to Waffen SS memorials each year and claim the Holocaust was greatly exaggerated, arguing the Jewish people volunteered to work in the labor camps: “The fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion.”

In a retrospective about Göring’s politician grandson, would anyone consider him a defender of freedom and democracy? Yet in the wake of Shinzo Abe’s death last week, that was the general assessment of the former prime minister of Japan, particularly in U.S. foreign-policy circles. Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, praised Abe as “a champion of democracy” and promoter of women’s rights. Even when his historical revisionism has been mentioned, it’s been relegated to a secondary issue—or even lauded.

Undoubtedly, Abe was a globally important, history-making figure. He was Japan’s longest-serving prime minister and gave a new direction to a country that had been economically adrift since the mid-1990s. The shocking manner of his death—assassinated by a former Japanese sailor wielding a homemade shotgun—also invited kind words.

Yet even before Abe died, his rank historical revisionism was routinely glossed over or treated in a way quite differently from blood-and-soil nationalism elsewhere. Hungary’s Viktor Orban and Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan are constantly referred to as examples of democratic backsliding. Even a near-miss like the French presidential candidate Éric Zemmour generates negative global headlines. The greatest international crisis now is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which was motivated in large part by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s imperial fantasies of restoring his country to its past glory.

Japan is a greater international presence than Hungary or Turkey. Unlike Zemmour, Abe repeatedly won elections. And while Abe did not directly assault Japanese democracy and does not deserve to be placed in the same league as Putin (or Orban or Erdogan or Zemmour, for that matter) his nationalist historical revisionism was hardly a secret.

Abe was a grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, a key architect of Imperial Japan's puppet state in Manchuria and a Class A war criminal suspect (and, later, one of the most important postwar prime ministers of Japan). Abe recalled being "emotionally attached" to conservatism because he felt that his grandfather did not deserve to be considered a criminal. As a junior lawmaker, he made his name by attacking Japan's history textbooks that he deemed "defeatist." As a prime minister, he engaged in soft authoritarianism while drawing international condemnation for visiting (and later sending offerings to) the controversial Yasukuni Shrine—which honors Japanese war dead, including convicted war criminals—and denying such Imperial Japanese atrocities as the sexual enslavement of women in occupied countries and the Nanjing Massacre.

Yet in the Anglophonic retrospectives of Abe's life, these facts are marginalized. If they are discussed at all, they are treated as a momentary lapse of judgment in an otherwise commendable career, marked by a solid economic policy and greater inclusion of women in the labor force. Alternatively, the toxicity of Abe's historical revisionism is watered down, either rebranded as a generalized desire for a stronger Japan or a response to the rise of illiberal China.

But Abe's words and deeds resist such attempts to explain away the centrality of his desire to return Japan to (in his view) the halcyon days before 1945, before the humiliating loss in World War II, and before Japan was stripped of the ability to enslave and colonize like other world powers through the Peace Constitution. The most rigorous accounts of Abe's life make it plain that his political *raison d'être* was the restoration of Japan to its former glory; all else was but a means to this end.