

# Internal pressure—Japan War-Bereaved Families Association and Its Influence on Japanese Politics of Memory

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## Abstract

The memory of World War II still affects international relations in East Asia. Japan has been criticised for its politics of memory, especially regarding Yasukuni shrine issue. This paper argues that the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association has primarily influenced the Japanese politics of memory due to its strong ties with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party of Japan.

The Japan War-Bereaved Families Association rose to prominence during the 1950s and 1960s. Since its very beginning, the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association started to push for more state support for the Yasukuni shrine.

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association has been struggling with a declining number of members. However, it still tries to keep close relations with Japanese politicians. While the associations' agenda remains mostly unchanged, it lacks the power to influence the Japanese politics of memory as it did for almost six decades

**Keywords:** Izokukai, nationalism, Yasukuni shrine, Pacific War, politics of memory, Liberal Democratic Party of Japan

## Introduction

Though 70 years have passed since the end of World War II in East Asia, historical controversies continue to affect relations between the most significant powers in the region. Ever since Prime Minister Abe Shinzō returned to power in 2012, Japanese memory politics have been mostly against the expectations of both Beijing and Seoul—especially regarding the Yasukuni Shrine. It remained a controversial topic in the region even after Prime Minister Abe stopped visiting it and decided merely to send offerings during the spring and autumn festivals. Despite this development, it must be stressed that significant changes have occurred over the past several decades regarding the state's position on Japanese war crimes. Furthermore, the contemporary educational system includes references to comfort-women stations and such events as the Nanking massacre, and it does not altogether avoid the question of Japanese war crimes committed during the war (Bernard 2001: 522-524).

The changes mentioned above, among others, are significant without a doubt and should not be ignored when discussing contemporary Japanese politics of memory. However, one can argue that these changes were initiated not by the state but either internally by interest groups or externally due to pressure from foreign governments. The best-known examples of Japan reactively adjusting its politics of memory to

external pressure are the history-textbook controversy of 1982 (Yamamoto 2000: 238-239), Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on August 15 of 1985 (Hardacre 1991:151) and numerous visits by Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō that took place between 2001 and 2006 (Hasegawa et al. 2008: 135-137). In all of these cases, official protests by China and South Korea forced Japan significantly to change its course of action regarding both historical education and visits to the infamous shrine.

This paper, however, argues that the Japanese politics of memory has been largely influenced by one internal actor: the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association (*Nippon Izokukai*, hereafter *Izokukai*). Through its strong ties with politicians of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (*Jimintō*, hereafter *LDP*), the association was able to exert its influence over the politics of memory. *Izokukai*'s influence has recently been diminishing somewhat, mostly due to the generational change within the association. Nevertheless, it is impossible fully to understand issues such as the controversies surrounding the Yasukuni Shrine without taking a closer look at *Izokukai*'s relations with the Japanese political elite.

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first introduces the relation between interest groups and the Japanese political system. The next section focuses on *Izokukai* as an example of an internal pressure group with an agenda related to both war-bereaved families and the commemoration of fallen soldiers. Thirdly, it analyses *Izokukai*'s influence in relation to the Yasukuni Shrine's significance in contemporary Japan's politics of memory. The last section examines how *Izokukai*'s influence has been diminishing since the 1990s and considers whether it can remain a significant pressure group in the ever-changing landscape of Japanese politics.

Before proceeding, the term *politics of memory* (or *memory politics*, as the two terms are often used interchangeably) must be defined. Memory politics can be described as an act of utilising or strengthening the collective memory regarding a certain historical event to establish or enforce political identity (Dujisin 2020: 27). Collective memory itself should be understood as an idealised depiction of a group's past that is embedded in the social fabric (Foucault 1980: 144). How a group remembers its past differs radically from how individuals remember it, and how a group remembers cannot be treated as a mere sum of individual memories (Olick 1999: 336-338). Collective memory, as constructed through the politics of memory, can be regarded as an example of an invented tradition, which means that traditions are artificially created by borrowing certain historical elements and giving them new meanings which are significant from the symbolic perspective of a given group. Over time, the new traditions can acquire the characteristics of an unchanging heritage, and they can then become key elements of the collective identity of the group (Hobsbawm 2000: 6-14). In the same way, collective memory is based on historical events, but it can be shaped into a narrative that stresses only those elements which can be useful from the perspective of strengthening national identity while ignoring those which might not be utilised for such purposes.

The main goal of memory politics is to propagate a discourse regarding the collective past that will strengthen the current political power relation. The politics of memory is most successful when state institutions—such as schools, museums and official commemorations—collectively strengthen the same narrative regarding the past as do popular culture, mass media, and non-government organisations (Foucault 2011: 254-256). Memory can be an important tool for domination; therefore, it is important that political actors have control over narratives related to a nation's past (Foucault 2011: 252-253). The politics of memory stresses past events that underline the uniqueness of a group and therefore strengthens its collective identity. Commemorations are in fact aimed at reproducing a certain narrative about the past. Furthermore, the more a certain historical event is made present in the public space, the more significant it can become (Zerubavel 2011: 237-238). To sum up, politics of memory is concerned with making the past serve present-day purposes including shaping the identity of a group. The nation-state remains a central point in shaping memory politics, but other actors can partake in this process so long as their actions are motivated not to preserve the history but to achieve a goal rooted in contemporary conditions (Fuchs, Otto 2013: 1).

## Interest groups and the Japanese political system

The origins of the modern political interest groups in Japan can be traced to the first years of the postwar US occupation of Japan (1945-1952). The agricultural cooperative Nōkyo was formed in 1947 and later turned into one of the most powerful representatives of the interests of farmers (Mulgan 2000: 39). Initially, two terms were used to describe organisations formed by citizens to protect their particular interest: *interest group* (*riekidantai*) and *pressure group* (*atsuryokudantai*). The main difference between the two is that the second was used mainly to describe organisations which used tactics such as demonstration or mass lobbying to achieve their interests. Interest groups mostly provide political support or donations to promote their interests in parliament (Barbasiewicz 2017: 180-181).

Because interest groups are typically oriented towards the ruling party, after the establishment of the 1955 system, the ties between Japanese interest groups and the LDP grew stronger (Kawamura 2011: 33). This relation continued to strengthen for the next few decades. Since Japanese parties, including the LDP, typically have a limited number of party members, they have to rely on interest groups to provide votes. Furthermore, since the absence of memberships results in difficulties with obtaining financing, political parties have also relied on interest groups to provide additional financing. Such relationships created a situation such that, in 1970, members of Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) were able to demand a reduction in the percentage of corporate tax and have their wish granted by the LDP (Ishida 1974: 4-5). The LDP's reliance on interest groups until the political changes of the 1990s was twofold. On the one hand, interest groups such as trade unions and agricultural cooperatives provided votes needed to secure the continuity of the 1955 system. Other groups with fewer members but more capital, such as Keidanren, provided necessary financial support for the party.

After the 1980 election, 144 politicians in the lower house had either held or were holding official leadership positions in interest groups. In the upper house, 102 members were affiliated with some interest group. Trade unions—such as those of postmasters and agricultural groups—were the most prominent, but groups representing industry also played a significant role. Not all groups relied on direct representation. Some were satisfied to secure a seat for a politician who sympathised with their cause (George 1988: 109-110.). Throughout the 1980s, interest groups and the LDP maintained a very tight symbiotic relationship. However, such relations, while mostly beneficial, also posed a threat to the ruling party. Both agricultural groups and postmasters threatened to stay home during elections if the LDP did not refrain from implementing reforms they disagreed with (Maclachlan 2014: 440).

The 1990s brought a significant change to the relations between interest groups and the LDP. Reforms in the electoral system created conditions in which the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) could be considered a serious political contender, and a change of government became a possibility. Some interest groups began to approach the DPJ even before the elections (Kawamura 2011: 33). The LDP's temporary loss of power between 1993 and 1995 significantly affected relations between the party and the interest groups that had traditionally supported it. The necessity of fiscal reforms implemented from 1996 and 2000 meant that the government could no longer adjust its politics to the wishes of interest groups. During the 2001 election, the LDP could not rely on the support of voters affiliated with interest groups to the same extent that they did in the 1980s (Inoguchi 2002: 47-48).

Koizumi Jun'ichirō's term as prime minister (2001-2006) marked the first significant breakdown of relations between the LDP and interest groups. Postal reform, which is addressed later in this paper, helped these groups to establish even closer ties with the DPJ, as the LDP was no longer able to guarantee the protection of their interests. After Koizumi, the LDP attempted to win back the support of its traditional electoral base, but the interest groups became suspicious of the party and its agenda. In 2007, the DPJ won the election and formed the government, mainly due to support from agricultural groups and postmasters who were disillusioned with the promises made by the LDP. However, before 2012, these groups had a change of heart and believed that backing the LDP again would be in their best interests (Maclachlan 2014: 444-450).

While interest groups are still oriented towards the ruling party, they no longer ignore the opposition. Instead, they are willing to support the party which will represent their interests the best. On the other hand, they are not as powerful as they were in the past. Even the LDP cannot win thanks only to support from interest groups like that of the postmasters. The relation between the LDP and interest groups is still strong, but it is no longer a guarantee of the continuous rule of a single party; nor is it a guarantee that the government will not push reforms that might affect its core electoral base.

## Izokukai as an internal interest group

The Japan War-Bereaved Families Association was formed in 1947 as the Japan Bereaved Family-Welfare Federation (*Nihon izoku kōsei renmei*). The name was changed after a few years, in 1953, to the one that is used today. From the very beginning, it was composed of those who had lost family members during the war. It included 1.5 million Japanese and was the largest association in Japan after the war. Its main goals from the beginning were as follows: to ensure the honour and memory of those who had died serving the country and to improve the care and social welfare of the families left behind. Izokukai became a nationwide umbrella organisation after the end of the U.S. occupation, in 1952, as it had local chapters in each of Japan's prefectures (Smith 2014: 68-69).

According to Izokukai's official Website (Nippon Izokukai), the primary purpose of the association is to increase the welfare of bereaved families and to recognise the spirits of the dead who became the cornerstone of the country. Furthermore, it aims to establish world peace through the cultivation of morality and good character and by offering support and sympathy to families which lost relatives during the war. The Website only vaguely discloses the special significance the Yasukuni Shrine has for the association. In a section entitled "Families of those who died during the war" (Shūsengo no senbotsusha izoku), it states the following:

On August 15, 1945, the four-year Great East Asia War ended. As a defeated nation, Japan has begun a new era under the control of the occupation forces of the Allies. Among the orders issued in rapid succession, the Shintō Order was a major blow to the bereaved families. The Yasukuni Shrine has lost its connection with the country. In addition, municipal memorial services and memorial services were banned and benefits were suspended. Also, families were met with a rather severe reaction from society. Until yesterday, the bereaved families, which were respected as "Honour Houses" (*homare no ie*), felt ashamed. In particular, war widows—who had lost their family pillars and had to ask their parents for help and raise orphans—were suffering psychical and spiritual pain.

However, fully to understand Izokukai's influence on contemporary Japanese politics, it is necessary to take a close look at its history. The beginnings of the Nippon Izokukai can be traced back to the 1920s. During the interwar period, Japan introduced a social-welfare system which included pensions to the families of those who had died in battle. To qualify as war-bereaved, one had to be a spouse, child, parent or grandparent of a soldier who had died during duty. After the escalation of the war in China, the Military Aid Law was passed in March of 1937. The law treated the families of both the war injured and dead as eligible for the pension. The pay categories differed significantly depending on the soldier's rank and whether he was injured or dead (Seraphim 2006: 63-64).

Izokukai first rose to prominence soon after the "reverse course" that began around 1947. In 1948, the League for the Welfare of the War Bereaved petitioned the Diet and Welfare Ministry to consider reviving pension payments to families which had lost relatives on the battlefield. Though both lower and upper houses passed the Resolution Relating to the Support of War-bereaved Families in 1949, it was not until January of 1952 that this resolution was formally taken up by the government. Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru had to be pressured by protests in front of his house to pass the War-injured and War-bereaved Families Support Act, which went into effect in April of 1952. The next year, in August of 1953, the

government introduced the Military Pension Law, which was, in fact, a revival of a war-time legislation that had guaranteed pensions to the families of injured or dead soldiers (Seraphim, 2006: 78-79). Yoshida's decision was without a doubt also influenced by Izokukai's first significant political success during the 1950 House of Councillors election. Nagashima Ginzo, who was the president of the association at that time, managed to receive 180,000 votes (Oku 2006: 229). It proved to the LDP that Izokukai could become one of its crucial electoral bases so long as the party was willing to support at least some of its main goals.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Japanese government revised the law and created a new pension for the families of those who had died or were wounded during the war. As the Japanese economy was growing, the government decided to create an additional pension for the wives of those who had died during the war, to support their emotional suffering (Smith 2014: 69). One of these revisions is particularly significant. Under the 1955 revision of the Military Pension Law, the families of convicted war criminals were eligible to receive a pension, and executions of war criminals were officially treated as deaths in the line of public duty (Seraphim 2006: 78-79). This revision opened the door for the enshrinement of Class A, B, and C war criminals at the Yasukuni Shrine. It is worth remembering that not all soldiers who died during the war are enshrined in the Yasukuni Shrine. Deserters and those who died dishonourable deaths are not eligible (Utsumi 2006: 3). Therefore, due to the 1955 revision, executed war criminals could be considered for inclusion, as their deaths were no longer considered dishonourable.

During the first few decades after the end of the occupation, the Japanese politics of memory began to take shape. It was based on two main pillars: re-evaluation and re-appreciation of the sacrifices made by Japanese soldiers during the war and the suffering of the civilian population represented by the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The abolition of censorship, which took place at the end of the American occupation, made it possible freely to discuss the events of the war. It quickly resulted in the publication of numerous memoirs and veterans' diaries. At the same time, former Japanese soldiers met with increasing social acceptance. Issues related to the wartime experience began to appear more and more often in the public sphere and thus gradually stopped being taboo subjects. Veterans were no longer seen merely as living proof of the horrors of war but began to be seen as examples of sacrifice to the state and boundless patriotism (Trefalt 2002: 130). The Tokyo Trials also began to be criticised publicly. In 1953, 15 million people signed a petition demanding the release of all convicted Japanese soldiers, arguing that the sentences were nothing more than a form of revenge from the victors. It was further emphasised that these convicts felt that they had not committed any crimes but had behaved as loyal soldiers who were fully committed to the homeland and the emperor (Buruma 1995: 169). Izokukai's activities during the 1950s were complementary both to actions taken by the state and the sentiments of the general population. While more public attention was being brought to the sacrifices of fallen soldiers and the struggles of their families, the association became the most influential advocate of their interests, drawing the attention of the general public to their hardships. Furthermore, their actions to revise the pension law to include war criminals also fit the politics of memory of that time.

Regarding the atomic bombings, in 1952, right after the end of occupation, the newspaper *Asahi Guraifu* published a special edition that included photos taken right after the destruction of both cities. For most Japanese, it was the first time they could see the magnitude of pain and suffering inflicted by the atomic bombs. In August of 1955, the first World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs took place at the newly opened Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. It allowed people not only to learn about the tragedies but also to listen to experiences of the survivors of the atomic bombs (*hibakusha*) (Tachibana 1996: 174-176). The opening of one museum in Hiroshima and a similar one in Nagasaki, combined with official commemorations held on the anniversary of the dropping of the first bomb, helped to strengthen the second pillar of the early post-war politics of memory: the experiences of the victims.

Almost from the very beginning, Izokukai was also directly involved in activities related to pilgrimages to battle-sites and recovering the remains of the fallen soldiers. From the early 1960s, it began organising pilgrimages to Okinawa for bereaved children. These pilgrimages provided a way to revitalise the activities of the association (Masutani 2010: 192). Starting in 1972, when Okinawa was returned to Japan, Izokukai

was one of numerous organisations involved in collecting the remains of those who had died during the Battle of Okinawa. The remains of those who were identified were then returned to their families with the involvement of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Most of the remains were placed in the central cemetery in Naha. Regional branches of Izokukai, mostly from Okinawa but also from Hokkaido, were instrumental in recovering the remains of almost 200,000 fallen soldiers (Awazu 2010: 11-14). These efforts showcase Izokukai's involvement in more grass-root activities, which build broad public support for the association and the causes it represented. Consequently, it enabled Izokukai to gather even more votes during the elections and to put more pressure on the LDP politicians.

One of the crucial elements of the post-war politics of memory in Japan is a network of history museums related to the war-time experience, not least because of their frequent use in the educational process. Museums comprise a tool which can be used to mediate the past, and though the messages they construct are always only interpretations, they can influence the shaping of attitudes towards historical events (Joly 2000: 33). Often, the content of museums, and the way in which it is presented, is constructed so as to influence both the perception of a nation's historical past and to strengthen positive identification with the state. It can be said that the role of modern museums is to strengthen identity in a way that would lead to the creation and strengthening of the sense of belonging to imaginary communities, especially to the nation (Kaiser, Krankenhagen, Poehls 2014: 16). Acknowledging the significance of museums for influencing the trans-generational politics of memory, Izokukai wanted to establish a museum of its own which would help to make sure that its message would remain vital among younger generations.

Starting from 1979, Izokukai began to lobby the Welfare Ministry to build a museum to commemorate the suffering of the families of Japan's war dead. Hashimoto Ryūtarō, while president of Izokukai, was personally involved in this project (Hein et al. 2007: 8). A museum known as the Shōwakan opened finally in 1999 and has been managed by Izokukai ever since, though the museum itself is careful not to disclose this fact. Its content focuses on the everyday lives of the Japanese from 1935 until 1955. The museum receives financial support from the Health and Welfare Ministry, and its opening ceremony was another display of close ties between Izokukai and the LDP. Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō, Welfare Minister Miyashita Sohei, Izokukai President Nakai Sumiko, and former prime minister and former Izokukai president Hashimoto Ryūtarō all gave speeches, each about 30 minutes long. Hashimoto, during his speech, explicitly stated that the project originated with the desire of the Izokukai to have a memorial site which would function as an additional support measure for war-bereaved families (Seraphim 2007: 37-39).

The Shōwakan museum itself focuses on the hardship of people's daily lives during and after the war. It focuses almost solely on the lives of civilians, mostly women and children. Men, regardless of whether they were soldiers or not, are only briefly mentioned. Since the Izokukai manages the museum, it should come as no surprise that it focuses primarily on the experience of war-bereaved families and aims to convey the significance of their suffering to future generations (Low 2013: 116-118).

Within a few decades of its establishment, Izokukai developed a close relationship with the LDP. However, Izokukai was initially in a constant struggle with the Japanese government regarding support for war-bereaved families. It was only after the LDP got involved in memory politics that it stressed the soldiers' sacrifices and their dedication to the Emperor. After public support for Izokukai became apparent, the LDP strove to keep relations with the association close, mainly because the association represented a significant number of its potential political supporters. To keep the relation close, the LDP made sure to establish one additional pension for the parents and grandparents of those who died. The last pension created during the mid to late 1960s was a special fund for the children and siblings of deceased veterans who did not qualify for any other form of government support. Furthermore, all but one of the chairmen of the Izokukai were politicians with strong connections to the LDP. The most significant was probably Hashimoto Ryūtarō. By the early 1970s, Izokukai had become one of the three most significant supporters of the LDP, thereby ensuring its constant rule (Smith 2014: 69-71). Thanks to this, Izokukai also became a very influential pressure group and was able to gather enough political support for the Shōwakan.

## Izokukai and the Yasukuni Shrine

Even before the establishment of Izokukai, war-bereaved families had a close relation with the Yasukuni Shrine. From 1938, public ceremonies for the war dead began at the shrine. These ceremonies played two roles: First, to help raise the profile of the shrine as a symbol unifying the nation during the war; and second, to confirm those who qualified as war-bereaved, as only the families of those who were enshrined could be considered as such. The end of the war and the beginning of occupation both brought an end to public ceremonies at Yasukuni and led to the termination of pensions for war-bereaved families (Seraphim 2006: 65-66).

The commemoration of fallen soldiers by the state became a public issue after the end of the occupation. The Japanese constitution prevents representatives of the state from participating in religious activities—at least in an official capacity. Therefore, no public ceremonies could take place at Yasukuni Shrine. Though the shrine was not on the association's agenda during the first few years after the end of the war, Izokukai started to collect signatures for restoring state support for the Yasukuni Shrine after it had secured the pension for war-bereaved families in 1956. At the same time, the association was actively lobbying LDP members to support the bill. By 1959, Izokukai had collected 2,950,000 signatures, including those of many politicians who were themselves members of the association (Hardacre 2017: 461-462). The same year, a new memorial was erected dedicated to soldiers who had died during the war. Chidorigafuchi, as it came to be known, was proposed for the first time in 1953. The state understood that, as part of its memory politics, it needed a place to commemorate fallen soldiers. However, constitutional constraints prevented it from using Yasukuni Shrine for such a purpose. The new memorial was meant to solve this issue.

Despite close consultations between the government and Izokukai, Chidorigafuchi failed to meet the association's expectations. Though it allowed politicians to commemorate fallen soldiers without breaking the constitution, Chidorigafuchi is much less personal than Yasukuni Shrine, as it is modelled on the western-style tombs of unknown soldiers (Trefalt, 2002: 123). Izokukai rejected the new site and continued to lobby for restoring state support for the Yasukuni Shrine and for putting pressure on LDP politicians to participate in the annual festival commemorating the end of the war on August 15.

A few years later, in 1962, Kaya Okinori became a leader of the association in a position he held for 15 years. Kaya was a finance minister during the war, and he spent 10 years in prison as part of the life sentence imposed by the Tokyo Tribunal. After his release, he became a justice minister (Selden 2008: 10). During his term, the relationship between the association and Yasukuni-shrine authorities grew so strong that they began to hold joint meetings toward the passage of legislation, hoping that the bill to support the shrine would be passed in 1969, on the shrine's 100th anniversary. The Diet attempted to pass the bill four times between 1969 and 1974, but it failed each time. The debate in the parliament focused on the issue that the bill was potentially unconstitutional, as its passing would mean supporting the shrine with public funds (Hardacre 2017: 461-462). In 1974, the LDP was defeated in the House of Councillors elections, and it decided to shelve the bill, as it would not be accepted by both houses anyway (Oku 2010: 72).

Though Izokukai was not able to gain enough support to pass the Yasukuni bill, it still managed to establish a separate agreement with the LDP. From 1975, it became customary for prime ministers to visit the shrine on August 15: the anniversary of the end of the war. Miki Takeo was the first prime minister in the office to visit the shrine on that date. However, he would not say whether he visited in an official or private capacity (Tanaka 2008: 124). This ambiguity was understood as a solution to the constitutional issue mentioned previously. From 1978, new rules regarding visits were laid out. Prime ministers were free to visit the shrine as private citizens, but they were also allowed, for example, to use government vehicles and have other cabinet ministers accompany them. Following these new rules, almost all prime ministers between 1978 and 1985 visited Yasukuni on August 15 (Seraphim 2006: 244).

In 1978, the enshrinement of 14 Class A war criminals in Yasukuni was officially announced. This event created a rift even within Izokukai, despite the fact that the association had lobbied for a pension-law

revision in 1955 that essentially created the legal possibility for such enshrinements. Within several years, some local chapters cut ties with the headquarters and established separate war-bereaved associations (Seaton 2007b: 22). Furthermore, in 1975, Yasukuni and Izokukai lost their most significant supporter, at least from a symbolic standpoint: Emperor Shōwa decided to stop visiting the shrine after that year, due to increasing controversies surrounding his visits and the shrine itself, controversies which only grew stronger after 1978. He considered commemorating the 40th anniversary of the end of the war in 1985, but the visit was deemed undiplomatic at that time, and in the end the Emperor never returned to Yasukuni (Breen 2005: 2).

Nevertheless, establishing a customary visit to Yasukuni by prime ministers was a great victory for Izokukai. As one of the most significant support groups for the LDP, the Izokukai was able once more to exercise its influence over the internal politics of memory. However, Izokukai's leadership was not content with the "private" character of visits and began lobbying the LDP to start making visits in an official capacity, as this would mean that the state fully recognised the shrine as an official site of commemoration for all fallen soldiers. In 1984, an investigation body called The Yasukuni Discussion Group was created. It was attached to Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujinami Takao, and its main task was to consider the constitutionality of official visits to the shrine (Umehara 2004: 1). Despite opinions suggesting that such visits would comprise a violation of the Japanese constitution, efforts by Izokukai to have politicians visit the shrine in an official capacity seemingly paid off in 1985 when Nakasone Yasuhiro became the first prime minister to declare his visit as official. This was, however, a very short-lived victory. Criticism from China and the threat of further deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations prevented Nakasone from visiting the shrine until the end of his term. On August 15, 1986, Izokukai issued a protest, criticising Nakasone of submitting to Chinese pressure. Hasegawa Takashi, the association's leader at that time, threatened to remove 160,000 Izokukai members from the LDP. However, he did not follow through with this threat (Smith 2014: 80). Nakasone was criticised not only by the association, but also by a member of his own cabinet. Masayaki Fujio, Minister of Education, who verbally attacked the Prime Minister for succumbing to foreign pressure. However, he was dismissed by Nakasone after South Korea issued a protest against Masayaki's statement that the 1910 annexation of Korea was voluntarily agreed to by both parties (Cha 1999: 195).

Nakasone's case showcased the limits of Izokukai's influence. While the association remained a crucial supporter of the LDP, rapid changes in East Asia, including the rise of China, meant that the party's leadership was now forced to take international public opinion into account before bowing down to the association's pressure. However, Izokukai did not drop Yasukuni visits from its agenda. Every prime minister since Nakasone was scrutinised for not visiting the shrine and for not showing respect to the fallen soldiers. It was not before 1992 that another prime minister of Japan visited the shrine while in office. Miyazawa Kiichi wanted Izokukai's support before the LDP's presidential election in October of 1992. In exchange for the association's backing, he promised to visit the shrine. However, being fully aware of potential repercussions from China and South Korea, he made his visit in secret, and it was not revealed to the public until 1996 (Mochizuki 2010: 43). It was a testament to Izokukai's influence that it was able to convince a relatively liberal politician to visit the shrine. However, the first sign of its diminishing power was the fact that the visit had to be made in secret.

As mentioned previously, before becoming prime minister, Hashimoto Ryūtarō was a president of Izokukai. It should come as no surprise that he wanted to express his gratitude for continuous support from the association and decided to visit Yasukuni after taking office in 1996. He chose the date of his birthday, July 29, to visit the shrine, and he claimed that it was a wholly private visit, as his cousin had died on the battlefield during World War II. China still issued an official protest and forced Hashimoto to refrain for further visits during his term (Mochizuki 2010: 44). Hashimoto also had to consider the displeasure he had caused among Izokukai's members by acknowledging Murayama's apology for Japanese war crimes from 1995 (Seaton 2007a: 51). Hashimoto's visit could be seen as another example of Izokukai's influence. His long history with the association, and the constant support he received, meant that he felt obliged to visit the shrine. Hashimoto also understood that Murayama's apology was somewhat controversial among the association's leadership. However, given that he explicitly stressed that his visit



was motivated solely by personal reasons, it was an attempt to reframe the visit as unrelated both to his current position as a prime minister and to his previous position as a leader of the association.

Another significant example of Izokukai's influence on Japanese memory politics is the visits to the Yasukuni Shrine made by Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō. During the election, he promised Izokukai that, in exchange for its support, he would visit Yasukuni on the anniversary of the end of the war. Despite not visiting the shrine in the past, this declaration was Koizumi's way of securing some of the Izokukai members' votes that would otherwise go to Hashimoto, who was his direct rival for the LDP's presidency (Matsura 2012: 16). Koizumi's first visit, however, was not made on August 15, but on August 13. Moreover, in a relatively unsuccessful attempt to ease China and South Korea, he offered his condolences for suffering inflicted by the Japanese colonial rule and military aggression (Shōji 2012: 129). Koizumi's action shows that, though he had to take into consideration promises made to Izokukai during the election, he could not ignore Japan's most important partners in East Asia.

Though Koizumi visited the shrine five times between 2001 and 2005, he refrained from visiting on August 15, despite the promises he made to Izokukai leadership. He finally decided to visit on August 15 in 2006, when it was well known that he would resign from his post as a prime minister in September of the same year (Smith 2014: 93). However, though Koizumi waited with his promised August 15th visit until his last year in office and remained ambiguous whether his visits were private or official, he did not act without Izokukai's permission. In 2002, Koga Makoto, Izokukai's president and an influential LDP politician from Hashimoto Ryūtarō's faction within the party, expressed that he would also be pleased if prime ministers' visits to Yasukuni took place on a date different than August 15. Thanks to his continuous prayers at the shrine, Koizumi was able to gain enough goodwill with Izokukai, and with Koga in particular, to create the support needed within the LDP to push his postal reform in 2005 (Cheung 2010: 538). This reform, made against wishes of the postmasters' interest group, affected LDP relations with other similar organisations which could no longer be sure that the ruling party would prevent reforms that would affect their core interests (Maclachlan 2014: 443).

Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni could be understood as an attempt to resist external pressure and take a more active stance regarding the politics of memory. They were also a testament to the importance that Izokukai played regarding internal struggles within the LDP and to the influence that the association still had regarding memory politics. Furthermore, in a 2006 opinion poll, 52.6% of respondents supported visiting the shrine on the anniversary of the end of the war. Moreover, 25.3% declared that visits should not be cancelled as a result of external pressure (Shōji 2012: 130). Such polls show that protests by China and South Korea were in fact generating more support for official visits to the shrine and were therefore strengthening Izokukai's position as the most vocal advocate of such visits.

Interestingly, in 2003, the international repercussion brought by Koizumi's visits to the shrine resulted in a new debate regarding the establishment of a new site dedicated to Japanese war dead. A report prepared by Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo suggested such a solution, but it has been criticised both by some factions of the LDP and by Izokukai, which claimed that a new site would diminish the significance of Yasukuni Shrine. After another visit by the prime minister in 2004 and another wave of protests from China and South Korea, some LDP politicians, the coalition party Kōmeitō, and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) became vocal about the need to build a new memorial site. However, Koizumi stated that, if such a site were built, he would continue to visit Yasukuni Shrine. Fukuda, who had been a strong advocate of a new site since the beginning, officially declared at a press conference that the government would no longer pursue the establishment of a new site (Smith 2014: 88-89).

The Japanese press widely reported Koizumi's visits at Yasukuni Shrine. His first visit drew much attention from newspapers such as *Asahi Shimbun* and *Sankei Shimbun*. However, it is worth noting that attention to the shrine was mostly temporary. Requests made by Izokukai urging the prime minister to visit the shrine were widely reported, but most of the media attention focused on the international repercussion of Koizumi's visits (Zhang 2019: 5-6). The press in East and Southeast Asia also gave attention to the Yasukuni Shrine controversy, starting with Nakasone's visit in 1985 (Hayase 2018: 10).

While Izokukai was able to draw attention to its long-running dedication to establish state support for Yasukuni Shrine, media and popular opinion was much more concerned with China and South Korea protests regarding Koizumi's support for the shrine.

Crisis with China and South Korea over Yasukuni Shrine visits show how the politics of memory, as an example of symbolic politics, can have a significant influence on international relations. Symbolic politics, understood as a political activity focused on emotions instead of rational interests, can utilise historical narratives as symbols of national unity. When those narratives are contradictory, conflicts can arise (Kim 2014: 33-34). Koizumi's case showcases how memory politics, focused around the nation-bonding experience of a soldier's sacrifice, can have an opposite, although equally axiologically significant, meaning to other nations, such that it can therefore generate conflict despite strong rational arguments which would suggest that cooperation is mutually beneficial. It also shows how Izokukai's influence, while necessary for generating support for difficult political reforms, resulted in deepening the rift between Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul.

Izokukai's long-term support for Yasukuni and its expectations that the LDP would continue to support the shrine and pay respect to the war-dead do not mean that the association's position regarding the shrine has not evolved. Change has been especially noticeable regarding Yasukuni's stance on the possibility of reversing the inclusion of 14 A-class war criminals. While the shrine itself is firm in its position that such reversion is not possible, Izokukai has expressed doubts about whether the sentiment expressed by Yasukuni authorities should not be more flexible. Eventually, in 2006, there was a break between Yasukuni and the association over Izokukai leader Koga Makoto's support for the families which were dissatisfied by the shrine's inclusion procedures (Smith 2014: 89-90). Nevertheless, Izokukai remains the most vocal supporter of official visits to the shrine. However, ever since Prime Minister Nakasone's visit and the surrounding controversies, politicians have had to consider factors other than just Izokukai's support when deciding to visit the shrine.

After the end of Koizumi's term, it was not until 2012 that a prime minister of Japan again decided to visit Yasukuni while in office. However, by the time Abe Shinzō began his second term, the LDP did not have to rely on Izokukai's support to win an election, nor did he personally need the association's support to ensure his leadership position within the party. Abe's last visit took place on December 26, 2013, and it was met with protests from China and Korea, while the United States expressed disappointment regarding the visit (Asahi Shimbun, 26 December of 2013). On the same day, Abe issued a statement describing his reasoning behind the visit. He both addressed concerns expressed by Chinese and Korean people and stressed that Japan must never wage war. At the same time, he acknowledged that the peace and prosperity that Japan enjoys would not be possible without the sacrifices of those who fell on battlefields (Statement by Prime Minister Abe: 'Pledge for everlasting peace' 2013). It was the last visit by the prime minister of Japan to Yasukuni Shrine so far, and the last for Abe, who did not return to the shrine before stepping down. However, just three days after resigning, on September 19, 2020, Abe visited the shrine again, but this time fully as a private citizen. *Asahi Shimbun* reported that Abe declared that he wanted to report to the spirits that he had stepped down as prime minister (Asahi Shimbun 19 September 2020).

## **Izokukai's diminishing influence—conclusions**

Thanks to its large number of members and close connections to the LDP, Izokukai was able to have an undeniable influence on the Japanese politics of memory for over six decades. The LDP's inability (or unwillingness) to take an assertive stance regarding some of Izokukai's expectations can be seen as an example of reactivity to internal pressure by the Japanese state. Furthermore, to gain broader support within a party, politicians have had to act in accord with the association's wishes—at least to a certain degree.

From 1955 until 1980, Izokukai's political influence was steadily increasing and, as was mentioned earlier, by the 1970s it had become a crucial supporter of the LDP. After the establishment of the 1955 system, several members starting from LDP lists were elected to the Japanese parliament. In addition, they were on average able to secure significantly more votes than were needed to be elected. Though the number of candidates decreased over time (starting with 150 in 1955, ending with 93 in 1980), the number of votes they were able to secure increased (Oku 2010: 67). During the elections in 1980, 920,00 members of Izokukai voted for the LDP. However, in 2001, only 260,000 members voted; 110,000 of them were LDP party members as well (Inoguchi, 2002: 48). Despite this significant drop in numbers, Izokukai remains the LDP's third-largest supporting group, and its members constitute 4.5% of the members of LDP (Sasada 2010: 11-12). However, after Izokukai accomplished securing pensions for the bereaved families and shifted its focus on the Yasukuni Shrine issue, political mobilisation of its members began to decline (Oku 2010: 72) slowly.

Though ties between Izokukai and the LDP remain strong, their significance to the party's decision-making has been diminishing. The best example of the weakening of Izokukai's ability to put serious internal pressure on politicians can be seen in its call for another visit by Prime Minister Abe to the Yasukuni Shrine. On December 14 of 2018, an annual national meeting of all of the association's members took place in the LDP headquarters. During this meeting, Izokukai adopted a resolution calling for Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and his ministers to visit the Yasukuni Shrine. Furthermore, the chairman of the Izokukai, Mizuochi Toshiei, declared that, since over 80% of Japanese society comprises the post-war generation, it is the survivors' duty to convey the misery of war and the preciousness of peace (Sankei Shimbun 14 December 2018). Izokukai's national meeting repeated its call for Prime Minister Abe on December 9, 2019, mentioning that he had not visited Yasukuni Shrine since December of 2013. Izokukai expressed hope that he would continue to pay respect to fallen soldiers without succumbing to any domestic or foreign pressures (Sankei Shimbun 9 December 2019).

Before the July, 2019, elections to the House of Councillors, Izokukai decided to support five candidates whom they believed had a good understanding of the values of the association. In his editorial for *Sankei Shimbun*, Mizuochi Toshiei wondered if candidates who were also members of the association would be able to gain 100,000 votes. At the same time, he reminisced that, in 1980, members of the association gained 930,000 votes during the elections for the House of Representatives. Mizouchi also reflected on how Izokukai supported the LDP even when they were in opposition, and he mentioned that, so far, Izokukai and the government were cooperating to improve the conditions of beavered families. He also expressed concern that members of the association were ageing and that his generation would not be able to lead Izokukai for more than another five or six years. However, he also showed a strong belief that the association's future rested in youth clubs, which are being joined by the grandchildren and great-grandchildren - of those who had died during the war (Sankei Shimbun 22 April 2019).

Mizouchi has every right to be concerned. Izokukai is nowhere near as powerful as it was right after the end of the war through the early 1990s. The number of members in 2008 was around 870,000 compared to 1,255,000 in 1967. Despite the lack of official numbers, it is safe to assume that membership has dropped even more since 2008. As of 2018, according to chairman Mizouchi, about 25,000 widows of soldiers who died during the war were still alive. The average age of survivors was between 97 and 98 years old. The average age of orphans was between 77 and 78 years old. It should come as no surprise that Izokukai is putting much effort into establishing youth clubs. As the chairman of the Hiroshima Prefectural Survivors' Association stated during his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in 2018, he was no longer able, at age 75, to continue his activities unless a younger person were to work as a coordinator (Sankei Shimbun 16 August 2018).

In some respects, Shōwakan represents the last significant victory for Izokukai. After two decades of lobbying, the association has managed to build a museum dedicated solely to its cause. Besides, Izokukai was able to gather significant political support for what is essentially a private endeavour. Despite some other successes—made especially during Koizumi's term—Izokukai has not been able to have the same influence on the Japanese politics of memory that it had at the height of its powers. This does not mean

that the association is no longer a core supporter of the LDP. However, the party itself no longer has to rely heavily on the association's support. It can ignore pressure regarding some of the issues if its members feel that the potential gain is not worth alienating other constituencies or straining international relations with China or South Korea.

Izokukai's influence on the contemporary politics of memory cannot be overstated. As its significance grew, it was able to encourage Japanese politicians to show respect to fallen soldiers at the Yasukuni Shrine more openly. Though Izokukai was not able to secure state support for the shrine, it played a crucial role in reframing the Japanese politics of memory in a way that openly commemorated the sacrifice of soldiers who lost their lives during the war. However, while both Izokukai and the politicians who support it share a belief that it is possible to separate the individual sacrifices made by soldiers from Japanese war-crimes, such sentiment is controversial at the very least. Moreover, since Prime Minister Nakasone's 1985 visit to Yasukuni Shrine, it has become apparent that such belief is not shared by the nations which suffered from Japanese aggression. The fact that Izokukai was able, even after significant crises in international relations, to encourage four prime ministers of Japan to visit the shrine, is a testament both to its influence and to its relative disregard for the concerns of neighbouring countries.

Nevertheless, Izokukai's role in contemporary Japanese politics should not be seen solely in a negative light. Without the association's lobbying and perseverance, war-bereaved families might not receive the support that in many cases has been necessary for their survival—especially right after the war. Furthermore, for many members, Izokukai became a valuable form of a social networking for people with similar experiences (Seaton 2007b: 22). Nonetheless, Izokukai's future remains uncertain, and the association's leadership is well aware of the challenges to its survival. Will it be able to transmit its narrative regarding the suffering of Japanese soldiers and their families to future generations? Will it be able to do so particularly for people who not only express pacifistic attitudes but who also might not have any personal, family-transmitted memory of the war-time events? To survive and maintain even a fragment of its significance, Izokukai will have to transform its narrative into a trans-generational memory, a task that so far cannot be considered successful.

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