

Hashima Island: Source Pack for GCSE

Who Gets to Tell the Story? — Hashima Island and Contested Heritage | Sources A, E, F, G, K, N

This pack contains key excerpts from six digital sources about Hashima Island. These sources trace how a contested heritage site became the subject of an ongoing diplomatic dispute between Japan, South Korea, and UNESCO. Each source includes the specific passages you need for source analysis. For the full sources, visit: simulating-silence.org/teach/secondary/sources/

A note on language: These sources use different terms for the same historical events. Some describe workers “brought against their will and forced to work” (UNESCO’s language). Others refer to “requisitioned” labour, “forced labourers,” or do not mention the workforce at all. These differences are not accidental — they are part of what you are analysing.

A

OFFICIAL HERITAGE

Hashima Coal Mine — Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution

Published on the official heritage website managed by the World Heritage Council for the Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution. Site footer reads: “Directed by Koko Kato.”

KEY EXCERPT

“Hashima coal mining island is an artificial reclaimed island and the site of Japan’s first major undersea coal exploitation (1890) pioneered by Mitsubishi — and host to one of the world’s most extraordinary former mining communities.” The page describes the island’s history from 1890 to 1974 as a story of technological innovation, community life, and industrial achievement. It does not mention forced labour, wartime workers, Korean or Chinese labourers, or the UNESCO controversy at any point in the text. **The workforce that operated the mine is entirely absent from the narrative.**

GUIDING QUESTION

Read the excerpt carefully. What aspects of Hashima’s history does this source describe? What aspects does it not mention?

<https://www.japansmeijiindustrialrevolution.com/>

E

UNESCO INSCRIPTION DECISION (2015)

Decision 39 COM 8B.14 — UNESCO World Heritage Committee

Official UNESCO decision inscribing the Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution on the World Heritage List, July 2015. Formal international diplomatic document.

KEY EXCERPT

The decision describes Japan’s rapid industrialisation as “the first non-Western country to successfully industrialize” and recognises the sites’ “Outstanding Universal Value.” Critically, the decision includes a requirement that Japan develop “an interpretive strategy for the presentation of the property” that “allows an understanding of the full history of each site.” Japan’s representative stated at the session that the country was “**prepared to take measures to allow an understanding that there were a large number of Koreans and others who were brought against their will and forced to work under harsh conditions.**”

GUIDING QUESTION

What does this decision celebrate about the Meiji industrial sites? What does the phrase “full history of each site” imply might be missing? What specific commitment did Japan make?

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/6364/>

F

UNESCO REVIEW DECISION (2021)

State of Conservation Report and Decision 44 COM 7B.30 – UNESCO World Heritage Committee

Official UNESCO decision reviewing Japan's compliance with the 2015 commitments. Published after a UNESCO inspection mission visited the Industrial Heritage Information Centre (IHIC) in Tokyo, which Japan opened in June 2020.

KEY EXCERPT

Six years after Source E, UNESCO sent a mission to inspect the IHIC. The mission concluded that the Centre's interpretation was **"currently insufficient"** in allowing understanding of those "brought against their will and forced to work." It noted that the testimonies displayed at the Centre "convey the message that there were no instances of [Koreans and others] being brought against their will or forced to work." The committee "strongly requests" Japan to revise the displays.

GUIDING QUESTION

This decision was issued six years after Source E. What did UNESCO find when it inspected the IHIC? What does the phrase "currently insufficient" suggest about Japan's response to the 2015 commitment?

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/7901/>

G

KOREAN GOVERNMENT

Japan's "Island of Hell" whitewash mars UNESCO Heritage site – Korea.net (2020)

Published by Korea.net, the official English-language website of the Republic of Korea (South Korea). Government news article aimed at an international audience.

KEY EXCERPT

This article describes the IHIC's displays as "disinformation" and calls Hashima an **"island of hell,"** reporting that Korean survivors described a neighbouring island as "the crematory." The article states that between 500 and 800 Koreans worked as forced labourers at Hashima during the Pacific War, and that 122 Koreans are confirmed to have died there. It accuses Japan of breaking its 2015 UNESCO commitment.

GUIDING QUESTION

This source uses very different language from Source A. What words and phrases reveal its perspective? Is it possible for this source and Source A to both be accurate? What would a historian need to do to evaluate the claims made here?

<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=186700>

K

COUNTER-NARRATIVE CAMPAIGN

The Truth of Gunkanjima – National Congress of Industrial Heritage (NCIH)

Published in 2017 by the National Congress of Industrial Heritage (NCIH), the same organisation that manages the official heritage website (Source A) and the IHIC reviewed in Source F. Its Managing Director is Kato Koko.

KEY EXCERPT

The site states that **“misinformation is currently being spread across the world that Hashima was an ‘island of hell’”** and presents video testimonies from former Japanese residents who recall their childhoods there. The site’s menu includes sections titled “Witnesses,” “Rebuttals to Allegations,” and “Protest Letter.” Its footer links to the NCIH. A disclaimer states: “Please note that the oral evidence that we transmit on this website is based on the memories of the interviewees. It includes facts and memories that may differ from the interpretations of others.”

GUIDING QUESTION

Compare the language of this source with Source G. Both respond to the same debate, but from opposing sides. What techniques does each source use to persuade the reader? Who is the intended audience for this site?

<https://www.gunkanjima-truth.com/en/>

N

PEER-REVIEWED ACADEMIC ARTICLE**Katō Kōko’s Meiji Industrial Revolution — Nikolai Johnsen, Asia-Pacific Journal (2021)**

Peer-reviewed academic article published in two parts in the Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, an open-access scholarly journal. The author examines the role of Katō Kōko in shaping heritage narratives around the Meiji Industrial Sites.

KEY EXCERPT

Johnsen argues that Katō “has created celebratory narratives of Japan that actively deny the history of its forced laborers” and that, “with the backing of powerful Japanese politicians,” she “has put on a false performance of cooperation for UNESCO.” The article traces the connections between Katō’s organisation (the NCIH), the official heritage website (Source A), the Industrial Heritage Information Centre reviewed by UNESCO (Source F), and the “Truth of Gunkanjima” website (Source K). **All are managed by the same person and organisation.**

GUIDING QUESTION

This source connects Sources A, K, and F by identifying the same person and organisation behind all three. How does knowing this connection change the way you read those sources? What is the difference between reading a website on its own terms and understanding the institutional network behind it?

<https://apjif.org/2021/23/johnsen> — Full citation: Johnsen, Nikolai. “Katō Kōko’s Meiji Industrial Revolution: Forgetting Forced Labor to Celebrate Japan’s World Heritage Sites.” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 19:23:5 (2021). A classroom-ready extract from this article is available as a separate downloadable handout.