

# Teaching Hashima in Your Classroom

A guidance document for secondary history teachers

*Simulating Silence — Secondary Teacher Resources*

---

You do not need to be a Japan specialist to teach this material effectively. This guide provides the background knowledge, classroom strategies, and curriculum connections you need to use Hashima Island as a case study in contested heritage with your KS3 or GCSE history students.

**Time to read:** 8–10 minutes.

---

## 1. What Is the Hashima Case About?

**Hashima Island** (also called **Gunkanjima**, meaning "Battleship Island") is a small island off the coast of Nagasaki, Japan. For nearly a century it was a coal mine and company town operated by Mitsubishi. At its peak in 1959, over 5,000 people lived on just 6.3 hectares of concrete — the highest population density ever recorded anywhere on Earth. The mine operated from 1890 to 1974. Mitsubishi owned every building on the island: the apartments, the school, the hospital, the shops, even the cinema. Workers and their families depended entirely on the company.

During the Second World War, the Japanese government passed laws directing workers to strategic industries. Between 1939 and 1945, Korean and Chinese workers were brought to Hashima under coercive conditions to mine coal for Japan's war effort. They were **forced labourers** — people made to work against their will. Conditions underground were dangerous, and some workers died. After the war ended in 1945, the surviving forced labourers left. How many worked there, and exactly what happened to them, remains debated — partly because the evidence itself has become politically contested.

In 2015, the island was inscribed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** as part of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution. At the time of inscription, Japan's representative at UNESCO acknowledged that workers had been "brought against their will and forced to work under harsh conditions," and Japan committed to telling the "full history" of the site. By 2021, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee concluded that Japan had not fulfilled this commitment. The Committee expressed "strong regret" — in diplomatic language, a serious criticism — that the official interpretation centre in Tokyo did not properly acknowledge the forced labour history.

For your classroom, the case is best understood as a study in **how industrial heritage gets commemorated and who gets left out of the story**. The debates about statues, memorials, and museum interpretation happening in the UK today — from the Colston statue in Bristol to the reinterpretation of country house histories — involve exactly the same dynamics.

## 2. How It Connects to Topics Students Already Know

You already teach the analytical skills this material requires. The Hashima case does not ask you to become an expert in Japanese history. It asks you to apply a comparative framework you already possess — one built from teaching about empire, industrialisation, and contested commemoration in British and European contexts — to a non-British case study.

**Forced labour** is not unique to Japan's wartime empire. British students studying the Atlantic slave trade, indentured labour in the British Empire, or the use of convict labour in colonial Australia are already developing frameworks for understanding how imperial powers extracted labour under coercive conditions. The Hashima case adds a parallel from a different imperial context.

The curriculum connections are specific and examinable:

- **AQA GCSE "Britain: Migration, Empires and the People" (Paper 2A/C):** Connects to industrialisation, the experience of empire, and attitudes to empire — viewed from the perspective of those subjected to imperial labour systems.
- **Edexcel KS3 "Interpreting the British Empire: how has it been commemorated and contested?":** A non-British parallel case for analysing contested heritage interpretation.
- **All exam boards — second-order concepts:** Significance, interpretation, causation, evidence — exactly the skills students develop through working with the Hashima sources.

Using a Japanese case study has a specific pedagogical advantage: **it gives students analytical distance**. They can practise evaluating competing institutional narratives without navigating the personal and family connections that can make British Empire topics emotionally fraught for some students.

## 3. Classroom Management Advice

**Setting up discussion norms.** Before engaging with material about coerced labour, establish clearly that the lesson is about analysing institutional behaviour, not judging a national culture. Frame the analysis around institutions, decisions, and documented evidence. When students make claims, ask them to point to specific sources.

**Handling the Japan–Korea political dimension.** The material involves a live diplomatic dispute between Japan and South Korea. Students do not need to take sides. Frame it clearly: two governments disagree about how a historical site should be interpreted. The question for historians is not "who is right?" but "what does each side's position reveal, and what evidence supports or undermines their claims?"

**Working with difficult content.** The forced labour content is serious but not graphic. The primary challenge is conceptual, not emotional: understanding how institutions can suppress historical evidence through procedural means rather than overt censorship. Frame the lesson around institutional analysis rather than individual suffering.

**Language sensitivity.** The sources use different terms for the same events: "forced labour," "requisitioned labour," "workers brought against their will." These differences are not a source of confusion — they are part of what students are analysing. Make this explicit at the start of the lesson.

## 4. What This Resource Does and Doesn't Cover

This resource was created by a historian at SOAS University of London who worked on the HashimaXR virtual reality project — a project that was itself subject to the institutional constraints it describes. The resource does not claim neutrality. It models the kind of positional transparency it asks students to develop.

The resource does not provide a comprehensive history of Japanese colonial labour policy. It does not settle the historiographical disputes it describes. What it provides is a framework for thinking about how contested histories are governed — and documented evidence that makes those dynamics visible to students working at KS3 and GCSE level.

The **source sheet** (14 digital sources, A–N) forms the foundation of all classroom activities. Teachers should review the full source sheet and teacher notes before using the lesson plans.

---

*Simulating Silence: A Learning Resource from the Hashima XR Project SOAS University of London · simulating-silence.org © 2023–2026 Christopher Gerteis. All Rights Reserved.*