

## Japan has a flag problem, too

By [Adam Taylor](#) June 27, 2015

As the debate about the use of the Confederate flag raged in the United States this week, many looked abroad for other symbol-based controversies. Germany, which had [banned the swastika and other Nazi iconography after World War II](#), became an especially common reference: If the Germans had banned Nazi symbols, the logic went, why couldn't the United States ban symbols of the Confederacy?

The German example is illuminating, if imperfect, but the swastika is not the only controversial symbol of World War II worth considering. The most infamous emblem of the horrors of wartime Japan, the Rising Sun flag, was never banned, and it still flies today.

Much like the Confederate battle flag, which was used by several Confederate army units, the Rising Sun flag was a flag of war. It was first used by warlords back in the Edo period between the 17th and 19th centuries and was officially made the war flag of the Imperial Japanese Navy in 1870.

Despite its history, the Rising Sun flag remains in use. It is flown by the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, which was formed following the dissolution of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force uses a modified version, too, and you can spot the flag on cans of Asahi beer or in the flag of the Asahi Shimbun newspaper company. (Japan's official national flag since 1999, which shows a sun disk and is known as the Hinomaru, also has links to Imperial Japan but is generally considered less provocative than the Rising Sun flag.)

The continued use of the flag causes significant problems with Japan's neighbors, many of which link the Rising Sun symbol to imperial aggression and war crimes that they think Japan hasn't fully atoned for, even 70 years later.

"Unquestionably, in China and Korea, the use of those flags remains very controversial, as they are associated with Japanese imperialism and specifically with the invasion of China and colonial rule in Korea," Dan Sneider, associate director at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, explains in an e-mail. "Japanese were warned not to use the flag during the Olympics in Beijing, for example. I recall being told that one of the obstacles (though not the only one) to Japanese naval vessels making port calls in Korea is the flying of the Rising Sun flag."

In the United States or Europe, the controversy surrounding the Rising Sun flag is little known. Sometimes, the flag is even co-opted by Westerners as a kitsch symbol of Japan: In [one recent example](#),

British rock band Muse prominently used the flag during a rock video shot in Japan. Internet users in Asia were incensed.

"To the people who can't understand why some are mad, I guess you can compare the Rising Sun flag with the Confederate flag," one commentator on YouTube explained. "Some people can go on and on about how the Confederate flag is a symbol of Southern heritage, but come on now, you know that's not what people associate it with. Same with the Rising Sun flag. Both are rife with controversy and history."

Sneider says that although the comparison with the Confederate flag or Nazi symbols might seem fair, its Japanese fans don't see it that way — the flag's origins, like other symbols of Japan's imperial history, goes back long before World War II and its associated horrors. It's not quite as simple as Germany ignoring the years of 1933 to 1945, or Southerners ignoring the period between 1861 to 1865 when the Confederate flags were used.

Akiko Hashimoto, a sociologist who [has studied Japanese attitudes about World War II](#), says that the flag's popularity seems to be far lower than that of the Confederate flag in the United States. But, she says, she sees a similar message from those who fly both flags, which she describes as "the aspiration to destigmatize themselves from a tarnished past and the desire to feel better about themselves despite the perceived characterization of them as primitive, backward, uncivilized people who wronged others in the past."

For Japan, this aspiration and the corresponding response from countries such as China and Korea may prove to become a problem. Unlike Germany, Japan has struggled to find good relations with its neighbors, and [territorial disputes have threatened to spark](#) new conflicts. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, like other Japanese leaders before him, has visited the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo despite the criticism of those who say it honors war criminals. Under Abe, [some analysts say](#) that the country has veered toward a murky return to nationalism.

It's unlikely that a post-World War II banning of the Rising Sun flag or limiting its official use would have solved this problem completely, of course. But the continuing controversy over the flag and other symbols of Imperial Japan are a reminder of how fresh the horrors of the 20th century are in Asia.

"I think there will always be traditional nationalists who are attached to symbols of a heroic past to give them a sense of positive identity and belonging, especially when feeling discounted and devalued," Hashimoto says. "Dealing with these potent resentments is politically important in any era."