

Cover note points for interpretation strategy update

– Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution.

The following is a summary note of the advice provided by international experts present at the 13th Meeting of the Expert Committee on the Industrial Heritage including Operational Sites, held in Tokyo September 14, 2022, on the topic of conscripted labour in the context of interpretation of the Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution.

Signed November 25, 2022

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1. Consistent with previous advice provided by the State Party, the “full history” of the component sites must concern the relevant period before, and after, that which defines the principal contribution to OUV – c1850 to 1910.

This key period is not artificially constructed as it relates directly to OUV – from the time when Japan was emerging from its 220-year seclusion era (“Sakoku”, or “locked country”, when Western technology was severely limited and under close control by the Shogunate), to the year which best defines the recognition of Japan as an industrial nation by the global powers of the time which had assisted Japan to become so (Britain, Germany, US, France, Netherlands).

The Japan-British Exhibition of 14 May to 29 October 1910 in London, the largest international exposition that Japan had ever participated in, best signifies that widely reported recognition.

The interpretation strategy – revealing the significance of the WHS to the diverse range of audiences concerned – addresses all most relevant periods, both in the new Industrial Heritage Information Centre in Tokyo (specially created at the recommendation of the World Heritage Committee) and at many of the sites. The Strategy acknowledges that the period before 1850-1910 is most relevant to some components (e.g. those in Kagoshima, Hagi, Kamaishi, Nirayama, Saga), and the period after to other components (e.g. Yawata, Miike, and some in Nagasaki). There is of course overlap, continuity, and discontinuity.

There are many contributions to the “full history” of the property, not just the military programme of World War II, but this note addresses some of the issues concerning that period which have been asserted against the State Party in its considerable efforts made in good faith and in response to recommendations made by the World Heritage Committee.

2. Lack of narratives “contrary” to the oral testimonies which provided little evidence of severe working conditions for people being “forced to work”- The lack of evidence for alternative narratives is perhaps telling – the research including direct testimonies obtained in a dedicated oral history project has so far not produced any reliable evidence to the contrary, despite a wide scoping. However, it is recognised that there were harsh conditions in mines generally in Japan for all workers, including Japanese, even if the Hashima mine was more modern than others. But all evidence so far suggests that all miners on Hashima were treated much the same, rather than more severe conditions being provided for conscripted miners. Hashima was probably singled out in claims against Japan due its iconic form and sensational location inviting media potential. It was a modern and well-run mine, with a diverse labour force, regardless of their origin, working side-by-side in conditions that were better than most mines elsewhere in the world at the time. Nonetheless, all workers in mines, including Hashima, endured difficult conditions.

3. It was recommended to Japan to look at examples from other industrial heritage sites with similar histories. The mines or factories of Nazi Germany, where slave labour and inhumanely working to the death was policy, are absolutely incomparable. This parallel repeatedly being drawn between the experience of Korean 'requisitioned workers' (conscripted labour) under Japanese law and 'forced labour' under the extreme regime in Germany during World War II is a false assertion. One example with similar histories to that of Japan may be the coal mines of the UK where many escaped conscription in the armed forces but were conscripted to work in the mines (see separate note – Bevin Boys *1).

*1 - In 1942, four years into the Second World War, the British Government had to counter the damaging loss of 36,000 miners who had been conscripted into the armed forces. Coal supplies had dwindled (it was estimated they might not last beyond three weeks) and was vital to fuel the war effort at home and at sea. The public had failed to respond to a call from Ernest Bevin, the then Minister for Labour and National Service, for volunteers to sign up at the coalface (and a few metal mines). So compulsory conscription began.

Each month Bevin's secretary drew a series of numbers from his hat. If they matched the last digit of a man's national service number, he was destined for the mines. By 1948, 48,000 young men had been sent to serve in British coalmines: 28,000 comprised 'optants' who chose the mines as an alternative to being conscripted into the armed forces and 'volunteers' who were former miners working in the army at home, while 20,000 were balloted or 'called-up' (conscripted). The latter was compulsory recruitment. Mining was not a popular choice, and four out of every ten men appealed against their fate. Some were sent to prison and 41 conscientious objectors to the war were also conscripted to work in the mines. 'Bevin Boys' were not demobilised until 1948 due to the continuing coal shortage.

There have been several temporary exhibitions about the 'Bevin Boys' at heritage coal mines in the UK but we are unsure if any permanent exhibitions exist (other than perhaps an interpretive panel) because conscription was normal policy for many countries during such extreme national security emergencies - 1.5 million were conscripted into the armed services in the UK. This was in the early years of the war – see <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/overview/conscriptionww2/> However, it has more recently been acknowledged that the contribution of the Bevin Boys to the war effort should be better acknowledged.

East Pool Mine in the Cornish Mining World Heritage Site (UK) hosted several Bevin Boys working underground during World War II, alongside some Italian prisoners of war. Six survivors were interviewed in an oral history project in the mid-1990s. Several of the miners, and Italian POWs, married local girls and stayed in the area. They were well liked.