FACT FILE: Yasukuni Shrine
Source: THE ASAHI SHIMBUN, December 27, 2013

Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine was built in 1869 so the newly established Meiji Era (1868-1912) government could honor the soldiers who died in the Boshin War, a civil war fought from 1868 to 1869 between forces loyal to the new government and the emperor and those loyal to the toppled Tokugawa government.

At that time, it was named Tokyo Shokonsha. Shokonsha literally means a "shrine to invite souls." However, in 1879, the name was changed to Yasukuni.

Later, soldiers and others who died in other conflicts such as the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) were also enshrined there.

The soldiers and those who gave their lives up for the nation were praised as "eirei" (heroic souls). At present, the names of nearly 2.5 million war dead and others are enshrined at Yasukuni.

However, civilians who died in the U.S. atomic bombings and air raids during World War II, soldiers who fought on the losing side during the Boshin War, and Takamori Saigo (1828-1877), an influential general and a key leader in bringing the Meiji government to power, only to rebel against it later, are not honored in Yasukuni.

After independence was returned to Japan in 1952, successive prime ministers, including Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida (1878-1967), have visited Yasukuni Shrine almost annually since.

In 1975, Prime Minister Takeo Miki visited the shrine on Aug. 15, the day that World War II ended in 1945. It marked the first visit of a prime minister to the shrine on that anniversary.

At that time, a controversy erupted on whether the visit was made as a public or a private person. It was controversial because it raised questions concerning the separation of state and religion, which is noted in Article 20 of the Constitution.

In 1985, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone also visited the shrine as a public figure on Aug. 15. China and South Korea criticized the visit for the first time, accusing Japan of justifying its past militarism. The criticism was based on the fact that 14 Class-A war criminals, including wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo (1884-1948), were enshrined at Yasukuni in 1978.

Nakasone's visit as a public figure also caused a controversy in Japan. Lawsuits were filed against the visit on the grounds that it violated the Constitution.

In 1992, the Osaka High Court ruled that it suspects the visits are unconstitutional.

Though Nakasone visited the shrine in 1985, he did not do so in subsequent years.

Meanwhile, Junichiro Koizumi, who assumed the post as prime minister in 2001, visited the shrine every year until 2006.

In 2004, the Fukuoka District Court ruled Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine were part of his official duties and therefore unconstitutional. In 2005, the Osaka High Court made a similar ruling. Both of the rulings were later finalized.

After the end of World War II, Emperor Hirohito, posthumously known as Emperor Showa, repeatedly visited Yasukuni Shrine. In 1975, he made his eighth and last visit.

After the Class-A war criminals were enshrined there in 1978, he no longer visited the shrine.

Hirohito allegedly said in 1988, "At one point in time, Class-A (war criminals) were enshrined … That's why I have not made the visit since then. That is my heart."

The remark was described in a memo written by Tomohiko Tomita, the then grand steward of the Imperial Household Agency.

Emperor Akihito has not visited Yasukuni Shrine since he was enthroned in 1989.

After the end of World War II, Yasukuni Shrine became a religious organization. Because of that, the state could no longer involve itself in matters concerning the shrine due to separation of state and religion.

In 1959, the government set up the non-religious Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery in Tokyo. It currently accommodates the ashes of about 360,000 soldiers and others who died overseas during World War II but have not been taken in.