

# Controversies over Historical Revisionism in Wikipedia

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## Abstract

This study investigates the development of historical revisionism on Wikipedia. The edit history of Wikipedia pages allows us to trace the dynamics of individuals and coordinated groups surrounding controversial topics. This project focuses on Japan, where there has been a recent increase in right-wing discourse and dissemination of different interpretations of historical events.

**Keywords:** Edit wars, historical revisionism, Japanese Wikipedia, right-wing populism, disinformation

## Introduction

Historical revisionism refers to the reinterpretation or rewriting of historical events, often with the goal of promoting a particular political or ideological agenda. In particular, right-wing populism often employs historical revisionism to promote national identity and patriotic pride to mobilize support and achieve their political agenda (Faber, 2023). In recent years, as right-wing populism has gained momentum (Hann, 2019), historical revisionism driven by right-wing populism has become increasingly visible in many countries (Berkofsky, 2022; Laczó, 2022). As a result, the rise of right-wing populism can impact the social acceptance of certain historical perspectives and make it easier for individuals or groups who believe in those perspectives to spread their reinterpreted versions of history. However, our understanding of these phenomena is still limited.

This study aims to investigate the recent development concerning historical revisionism using Wikipedia data. Wikipedia is an ideal platform to capture the development of interest since anyone can edit almost any Wikipedia article. Although content on Wikipedia must be written from a neutral point of view (NPOV), edits can be driven by the editor's ideological alignment – reflecting ideas of society members – especially if a topic is ideologically controversial (Leshnick, 2022; Greenstein et al., 2021). Moreover, given the high number of readers of Wikipedia and its central role in the online information ecosystem (Vincent et al., 2018), it is reasonable to assume that some individuals and groups might be

interested in disseminating their version of “facts” on Wikipedia articles. As all edits are recorded, we can trace the dynamics of individuals and coordinated groups surrounding controversial topics. This exploratory study aims to address the following questions:

1. What types of historical topics are most susceptible to historical revisionism?
2. What are the common factors for the historical topics that are subject to revisionism?
3. Are there groups of editors who are seeking to disseminate revisionist narratives?

This project focuses specifically on Japan, where politics has taken a rightward turn in recent decades, accompanied by the rise of radical right-wingers (Higuchi, 2018). Previous studies pointed out that right-wingers in Japan have disseminated revisionists claim, and some historical pages on the Japanese Wikipedia were edited in a way that reflects radical right-wing ideas (Sato, 2021). Revisionist claims often center events that occurred World War II, with a particular focus on war crimes and related topics (Yamaguchi, 2022; Berkofsky, 2022). Therefore, in our analysis, we focus on articles related to Japanese war crimes and events surrounding World War II.

## Methods

**Data collection** We collected a total of 74,010 articles on Japanese history from four Wikipedia categories and one portal page (Table 1). The portal page introduced a wide range of articles related to WWII and Japanese perceptions toward the events. Given that these articles are curated by a group of editors who have knowledge in the topic, it is likely that they are at the center of the topic and thus potentially contentious.

To find the historical topics which are susceptible to revisionism, we focus on the level of controversy of historical articles. It is likely that when revisionism is introduced, particularly when it is motivated by political or ideological agendas, it leads to “edit wars”. Based on this premise, we expect that articles with a higher level of controversy are more likely to be subjected to revisionism. To determine which article categories are potentially

Source	#articles
Category:History of Japan †	70,886
Category:Japanese war crimes *	1,942
Category:Japan's postwar settlement *	1,890
Category:Pacific war *	4,519
Portal:Historical perceptions and postwar settlement	225
Total number (after deduplication)	74,010

Table 1: Collected article titles by source category. \*: All articles including its sub-categories are collected. †: All articles under the main category and three further levels of sub-categories are collected.

more susceptible to revisionism, we compare the levels of controversy across different category of articles. As for controversiality, we rely on the  $M$  measurement that focuses on editor's mutual reverts as an indicator of controversy (Sumi et al., 2011).

After measuring the level of controversy of the articles, we select highly controversial articles for further investigation (*the target articles*). To address the second question, we first examine the common factors that contribute to high levels of controversy. To achieve this, we analyze the talk pages and the most contentious texts of the target articles. We also explore the relationship between these controversial factors and revisionist arguments made by radical-right wingers. Additionally, we track the target articles' development in terms of controversy level and editor contributions.

To address the third question, we analyze the contribution patterns of editors to the target articles. Our assumption is that editors who are seeking to disseminate revisionist ideas will contribute to a wide range of controversial topics, regardless of dissimilarity of the articles' topics, and are more likely to be involved in "edit wars" than other editors. Based on this assumption, we compare the average number of articles contributed by editors who have been involved in edit wars, specifically those who were mutually reverted in any articles from our data collection, with other editors for the target articles. Our expectation is that if there are groups of editors interested in disseminating revisionist ideas, these mutually reverted editors will show a significantly higher level of participation in the target articles.

## Findings

Articles related to WWII exhibited significantly greater controversy than general historical articles (Figure 1). Among the top 20 most controversial articles, eleven were largely related to Japanese war crimes and right-wing ideology (Table 2). Over time, the number of contributing editors and the level of controversy increased (Figure 2). Furthermore, editors involved in edit wars were more likely to contribute to a higher number of controversial

articles (Table 3), particularly those related to right-wing ideology (Figure 3). These findings suggest the possible presence of groups of editors seeking to disseminate revisionist narratives.

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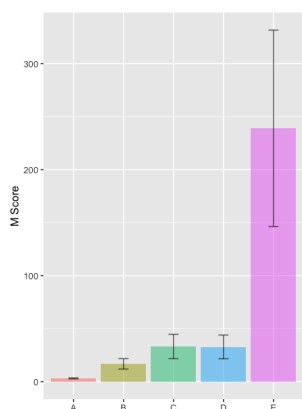


Figure 1: The average M score by category. Vertical lines indicate 95%-confidence interval. A: Historical articles; B: Pacific war; C: Japan’s postwar settlement; D: Japanese war crimes; E: Historical recognition and postwar settlement (Portal)

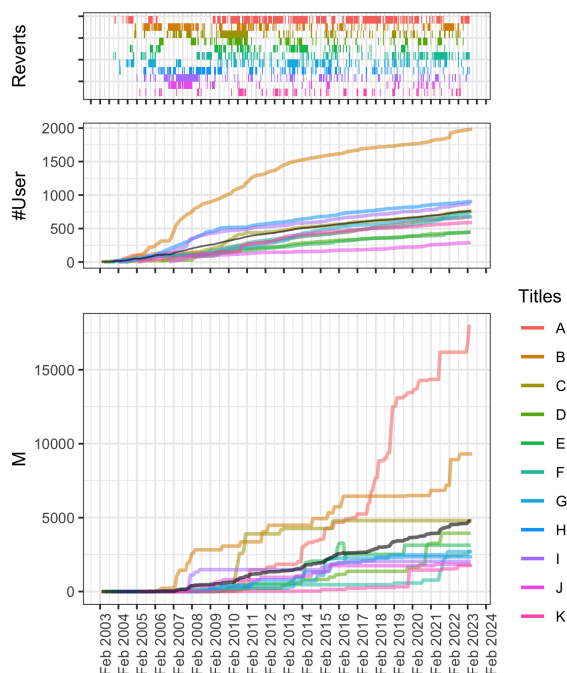


Figure 2: Development of the target Articles. For article titles, see Table 2. M: M scores; #User: number of contributed editors; Reverts: a line indicates the presence of reverts in the corresponding months, with line width representing the number of reverts.

M score	Title in English
17941	A. Nanjing Massacre *†
9308	B. Shintaro Ishihara
4796	C. Mizuho Fukushima
3944	D. Special Privileges of the Zainichi †
3136	E. Nanjing Massacre denial *†
2730	F. Second Sino-Japanese War *†
2700	G. Comfort women *†
2349	H. Mitsubishi A6M Zero
2040	I. Battle of Okinawa *†
1846	J. War Guilt Information Program †
1760	K. Senkaku Islands †

Table 2: The most controversial articles related to Japan’s historical recognition and postwar settlement. \* and † indicate articles related to war crimes and right-wing ideology, respectively.

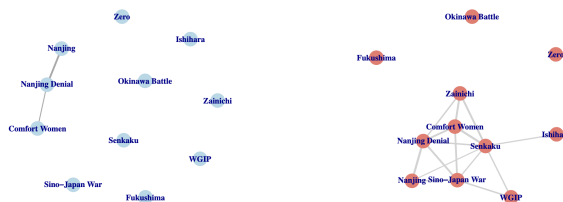


Figure 3: Similarity network of the target articles based on the overlap of editors who have contributed to them. Nodes indicate articles, and edges indicate similarity (Yule’s Q > 0.3). The left graph shows the network considering all editors, while the right graph only considers mutually reverted editors. All edges are significant at the 5% level based on chi-squared test. Thicker lines indicate higher Yule’s Q values.

	N	mean	t-value
Mutually reverted users	368	1.64	6.056
Others	6665	1.17	–

Table 3: T-test result: Comparing the number of contributed articles for the target articles between mutually reverted editors and others.