

## **"Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II"**

**By Peter Williams and David Wallace, 1989, 303 pages, The Free Press**

**Review by Norman M. Goldfarb**

"Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II" is the first of several books that have been published on Japan's World War II biological warfare program in China. Like Nazi biomedical experimentation, the program included human experimentation that seldom rose to the level of "scientific." What we consider unethical today doesn't remotely approach the barbarism of this work. While the Nazi experiments were largely conducted on concentration camp inmates with the intention of supporting the war effort (e.g., pilot survival), Unit 731's experiments were largely conducted on civilians and prisoners of war, with the intention of perfecting biological warfare weapons. Further, Unit 731 took the next step of actually conducting biological warfare.

The book's introduction includes the following passage:

It is forty years and more since the events that make up this chronicle. Many of the principal actors in the drama are now dead; but many are not — otherwise it would have been impossible to have reassembled the jigsaw. For some, little has changed in their circumstances during these turbulent years; the Emperor of Japan, Hirohito, is still, as we write, the Emperor of Japan. For others, the affairs of Unit 731 and the repercussions of their actions have remained both tragedy and mystery, matters privately to be assessed and reassessed in the intervening years. For too many, Chinese, Manchurian, American, British and Australian, the deeds of those Japanese scientists cost them their health, even life itself.

After the war, most of the scientists of Unit 731 prospered. Protected by the deal struck between General MacArthur and their leaders, they resumed their places in a reconstructed Japanese society and were, and are, numbered among the most senior and respected names in the Japanese scientific community.

The success that these senior members achieved may seem surprising today when considering the extraordinary efforts that have gone into tracking down Nazi war criminals, such as Mengele, Barbie and Bormann. Much is explained by the clear complicity on the part of United States' authorities in the war crimes of Unit 731. There is no question that the American government corrupted the workings of the Tokyo trial by offering its immunity deal in exchange for the scientific data acquired by Unit 731. But, on a wider perspective, after the conclusion of the proceedings of the IMTFE, no judicial system for prosecuting war criminals has ever been established in Japanese law. At Nuremberg, by contrast, the criminal nature of specific groups, such as the Nazi Party, the SS, the German Secret Police, and the German High Command, was clearly recognized, and the German court established the bounds for further prosecutions beyond the indictments issued by the tribunal itself. As a result, the prosecution of German war criminals continued after East and West German independence. Both countries established legislation, without statutes of limitation, for the prosecution of Nazi war criminals by the German peoples themselves. Not so in Japan. As British prosecutor Comyns Carr had pointed out while preparing the IMTFE's indictment: "The whole Japanese situation is infinitely more complicated than the German for the purposes of prosecution, as all the politicians, soldiers and sailors were all squabbling and double-crossing one another all the time, and it is by no means easy to pick the right defendants." In Japan, there

was no clearly identifiable specific group or groups who had perpetrated a conspiracy to wage aggressive war.

In a sense, there is a supreme irony in this. Unit 731 committed atrocities that could truly be described as "crimes against humanity," as much and perhaps more than anything else heard before the tribunal. Yet the principal culprits were at the same time, by virtue of their acts, the most immune from prosecution. They returned to untroubled civilian life, their past, if anything, aiding their future careers.

The book includes 17 chapters:

- A Discovery
- Higher Forms of Killing
- Experiments in Manchuria
- The Secret of Secrets
- Prisoners in Mukden
- Waging Germ Warfare
- The End of Pingfan
- What Allied Intelligence Knew
- MacArthur: Freedom, Tolerance and Justice...
- Murray Sanders
- Ishii Investigated
- Evidence and Trials
- Soviet Interrogations and Information
- Further Interrogations
- US Secret Knowledge
- Six Days at Khabarovsk
- Forty Years On

### **Reviewer**

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Unit 731 was set up in 1938 in Japanese-occupied China with the aim of developing biological weapons. It also operated a secret research and experimental school in Shinjuku, central Tokyo. Its head was Lieutenant Shiro Ishii. The unit was supported by Japanese universities and medical schools which supplied doctors and research staff. In Japan, not one was brought to justice. In a secret deal, the post-war American administration gave them immunity for prosecution in return for details of their experiments. Some of the worst criminals, including Hisato Yoshimura, who was in charge of the frostbite experiments, went on to occupy key medical and other posts in public and private sectors.