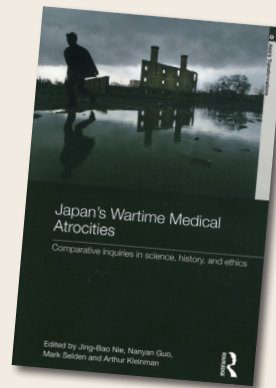


## BOOK REVIEWS

*Japan's Wartime Medical Atrocities:  
Comparative Inquiries in Science,  
History, and Ethics*

Jing-Bao Nie, Nanyan Guo,  
Mark Selden and Arthur Kleinman, eds.

Routledge, 2010  
254 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-68228-2



While lagging significantly behind research on Nazi human experimentation, over the last twenty years, no less than four full-length monographs in English have appeared in print on Japanese experimentation on human subjects during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> As evident from the extensive bibliography in *Japan's Wartime Medical Atrocities*, this is only the tip of the iceberg of related publications since the 1950s, mostly in Japanese, with some notable contributions from China. Given the dramatic decline in Japan's global status and the steady slide of World War II into distant memory, however, one might ask: why a new edited volume in English on one of the most sordid chapters of Japan's wartime past?

The turbulent legacy of the Vietnam War spurred the initial wave of scholarship on Japanese human experimentation and biological warfare in the early 1980s, followed quickly by a flood of testimonials by former Japanese participants. In the 1990s, the story of Unit 731 and its notorious director, General Ishii Shirō, gained wide currency in Japan through a two-part NHK documentary (1992), an exhibit that toured 64 Japanese cities for eighteen months (1993–1994), a Sino-Japanese symposium in Harbin (1995) and new evidence from the grounds of the former Japanese Army Medical College in Tokyo (1989) and military records in the Japanese National Archives and National Defense Agency Library (1993).<sup>2</sup> Since 1993, lawsuits against the Japanese government by former Chinese victims have kept interest in the history of Japanese biological warfare alive in Japan and spurred a steady stream of new evidence and testimonials from China.

Aside from the notable exception of Tsuneishi Keiichi, none of the remaining ten contributors to this volume has played a role in this critical thirty year effort to unearth evidence of Japan's wartime medical atrocities. Nor do these essays reveal much that has not already been reported in the extant English language scholarship. The self-proclaimed central theme of the volume to explore the ethics of Japanese experimentation and implica-

1 Daniel Barenblatt. *A Plague upon Humanity: The Hidden History of Japan's Biological Warfare Program*. Harper Collins, 2004; Hal Gold. *Unit 731: Testimony*. Charles E. Tuttle, 1996; Sheldon H. Harris. *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932–45 and the American Cover-up*. Routledge, 1994; Peter Williams and David Wallace. *Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II*. Free Press, 1989.

2 For an analysis of these revelations, see Frederick R. Dickinson. "Biohazard: Wartime Biomedical Experimentation in the Politics of Postwar Japan." In *Dark Medicine: Rationalizing Unethical Medical Research*, eds. William R. LaFleur, Gernot Böhme, and Susumu Shimazono. Indiana University Press, 2007.

tions for “the contemporary moral experience of physicians, researchers, and patients” (p. 3) also has a formidable antecedent in the celebrated 2007 comparative study of Japanese, American and Nazi experimentation by LaFleur, Bohme and Shimazono.<sup>3</sup>

There are, however, three reasons to take note of this new focus on Japan's dark medical past. First is the convenience of chapter-length surveys of specific components of the story. Tsuneishi offers a succinct summary of the wartime activities of the principal locus of Japanese human experimentation in Harbin, Unit 731; Suzy Wang chronicles the history of postwar revelations through coverage of court battles from 1946; Boris Yudin introduces the 1950 Russian trial of Japanese war criminals in Khabarovsk; Till Barnighausen assesses data generated by Japanese experimentation; Nanyan Guo probes the conscience of Japanese participants; Jing-Bao Nie analyzes the state's role in human experimentation and the postwar cover-up; Ole Doring identifies former German concentration camp, Ravensbruck, as a model effort to learn from a dark past; Peter Degen tells an absorbing tale of German racial hygienist Otmar von Verschuer; David MacDonald analyzes the U.S. record of owning up to its own past bad practices; and Mark Selden details Japan's Nanjing Massacre and wartime civilian bombing by the U.S.

Perhaps even more immediately useful for researchers and undergraduates alike will be the informative tables that accompany these handy snapshots. These include a list of Japanese biological warfare attacks in China between 1939 and 1944, charts of human experimentation conducted by the Nazis from 1939 to 1945, Imperial Japan between 1932 and 1945 and in U.S. prisons from 1906 to 1973, and a short table on postwar use of Nazi and Japanese data. Most valuable is the extensive annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources on Japanese experimentation currently available in Japanese, Chinese and English.

*Japan's Wartime Medical Atrocities* does also make a significant conceptual contribution to our understanding of Japanese experimentation. LaFleur, Bohme and Shimazono made the first important departure from an exceptionalist narrative of Japanese evil by incorporating Japan in a nuanced discussion of comparative bioethics. This volume challenges the image of a deviant Japan even further through a more explicitly historical discussion of comparative complicity and humanity. In terms of complicity, Tsuneishi, Wang and Nie indict American authorities for protecting Japanese perpetrators in return for their data; Yudin locates as damning a Faustian bargain in Khabarovsk, where Russian authorities granted light sentences to Japanese criminals in return for test results; Barnighausen highlights bad science in both Germany and Japan; Nie faults both Nationalist and Communist China for not aggressively pursuing Japanese perpetrators; Doring and MacDonald condemn the U.S. for particular difficulties in dealing with its own dark past; Degen locates unpunished criminality in Germany mirroring that in Japan; and Selden finds equivalent “state terrorism” in American civilian bombing and the Nanjing Massacre. In terms of humanity, Wang highlights efforts by postwar Japanese lawyers to promote Chinese victims' rights; Guo locates pangs of guilt among Japanese perpetrators; and Selden credits Japan with a vibrant postwar debate, both internal and external (principally with China and Korea), over Japan's dark wartime past.

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3 William LaFleur, Gernot Bohme and Susumu Shimazono, eds. *Dark Medicine: Rationalizing Unethical Medical Research*. Indiana University Press, 2007.

Readers may not find all of these efforts to contextualize Japanese sins compelling. But Nie et al. have done a valuable service in making the story of Japanese human experimentation widely accessible and ensuring that English speakers do not easily dismiss it as an aberrant history. *Japan's Wartime Medical Atrocities* demonstrates with painful clarity that, much more than merely someone else's problem, Japan's wartime medical history must serve as a lesson in past crimes, historical truth and justice for all.

**Reviewed by Frederick R. Dickinson**