

The Deepest Circle of Hell:
Sex Crimes Propagated at Unit 731 During the Pacific War (1931-1945)
March 7, 2016
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In a previous paper on the subject of Unit 731, I argued that Japan, before and throughout the Pacific War (1931-1945), attempted to systemically bolster its imperial credentials as a colonizer by developing its scientific establishment, in an attempt to display that it had surpassed Western nations. The experiments conducted at Unit 731 contributed to this goal. Japanese medical professionals used Unit 731 as an opportunity to conduct experiments on humans, which social stigma and global scientific ethical standards had previously prevented. The results of the Unit's experiments were disseminated worldwide in order to prove Japan's capacity to contribute to global scientific establishments.¹ Additionally, a broad range of sex experiments were also conducted using (mostly) female and child prisoners. When reviewing primary source material that relates to sexual experiments conducted at the facility, it seems that though the scientific or rational motivations underpinned some experiments, other sex crimes cannot be justified as anything other than gross excesses of senseless violence.² While non sexual experiments could be justified as attempts to solve disease, display Japanese modernity, or collected research for the development of advanced biological weaponry, the obscenity of some sex acts committed cannot be justified by these motivations. Why were sex experiments unique? Why were women, whose limbs were black with disease, raped by multiple guards at once? Why were prisoners abused and defiled, as their children, who were the result of forced impregnation, watched? In terms of the abuses that occurred at Unit 731, it is easy to homogenize 'sex experiments' and 'sex crimes' as the same thing. However, when analyzing these grotesque incidents, it becomes clear that the guards of the facility were motivated by different factors during experiments, which I will contrast with sexual violence propagated against the inmate population. The distinction I will argue in this paper is that it was the guards, staff, and independent medical practitioners who

¹ Publications released globally were carefully worded to conceal that test subjects were humans.

² C. Hudson, "Doctors of Depravity," *Daily Mail*, Associated Newspapers Ltd. March 2, 2007.

perpetuated crimes against humanity (expressed in sexual form). In regard to this violent, they acted as individuals, independent from the military-scientific establishment that operated and conceived of the Unit and the clinical sex experiments.

Sex Crimes: Definitional Clarity

Perceptually, it seems easy to accept that sexual experimentation and sexual crimes perpetrated at the facility are not the same thing. However, consideration of what constitutes sexual abuse is culturally and historically specific. Furthermore, a global definition of what international courts consider sex crimes has not been established.³ Despite this, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court establishes a framework with which we can analyze “sexual crimes against humanity.”⁴ Unfortunately, this definition groups specific acts as sexual crimes but does not establish a framework by which crimes can be judged as sexual offenses. For example, whereas we can determine a crime is theft because it has violated someone else’s ownership rights, it is difficult to distinguish if an assailant tearing a woman’s blouse is assault or a sexual crime. However, the Rome Statute provides some clarity, stating that “rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” are definitively sex crimes against humanity.⁵ At Unit 731, where so many crimes against humanity existed, aggregating sex crimes and sex experiments risks mistaking subtle influences of masculinity and domination as crazed perversion. While all crimes committed at the facility, both human sexual experimentation and individual sexual violence experienced by prisoners at the hands of guards, were sex crimes

³ Caryn E. Neumann, *Sexual Crime: A Reference Handbook*. Contemporary World Issues, Santa Barbara, California.: ABC-CLIO, 2010.

⁴ "Policy Paper on Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes: International Criminal Court, Office of the Prosecutor," *Reproductive Health Matters* 22, no. 44 (2014): 99-101.

⁵ "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court," *Social Justice* 26, no. 4 (78) (1999): 125-43.

against humanity, for the purpose of this paper, I will delineate the two as either ‘sex experiments’ and ‘sex crimes.’ Sex experimentation will be defined as experiments that were sexual in nature that had a clear aim to produce a medically relevant result. Conversely, sex crimes will be defined as instances in which prisoner’s sexuality was used as a way to hurt, emotionally maim, or degrade prisoners. While natural impulses may entice us to think of every sexual violation of the prisoners of Unit 731 as disgusting crimes against humanity (which they were), we must resist prescribing any one motivation to individual acts, instead viewing each offense as a discrete crime.

Background- The Unit

The story of the establishment of Unit 731 is impossible to tell without continuous reference to the facility’s head practitioner, Shiro Ishii, who is often dubbed as the “madman architect of the unit.”⁶ Ishii, a microbiologist turned medical officer, was described as an egotistical maniac with a destructive lust for power.⁷ Ishii eventually amassed the political capital and relationships to turn the 1931 invasion of China into opportunity for his medical work.⁸ By 1935, construction on Unit 731 in Pingfang began, after a previous complex proved too weak to contain prisoners.⁹ Emperor Hirohito himself announced that ‘the Togo Unit’ was an “official unit of the Japanese army.”¹⁰ By 1938, the laboratory-prison consisted of a six-square-kilometer area, housing five buildings, surrounded by trenches, electrical gates, and barbed wire

⁶ Hal Gold, *Unit 731: Testimony*, North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2004, 24.

⁷ Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-1945, and the American Cover-up*, Rev. ed. New York: Routledge, 2002, 24.

⁸ Daniel Barenblatt, *A Plague Upon Humanity: The Secret Genocide of Axis Japan's Germ Warfare Operation*, 1st ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2004, 1-3.

⁹ Barenblatt, 26.

¹⁰ Thomas A. Faunce, "The Oxford Textbook of Clinical Research Ethics," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 300, no.12 (2008): 1466.

fences.¹¹ By 1939, Ishii had been given power to run Unit 731 operations in near secrecy.¹² At its height, “the Japanese program consisted of more than 150 buildings in Pingfan, 5 satellite camps, and a staff of more than 3000 scientists.”¹³

“Aim” of Sex Experiments

The activities and experiments analyzed in this paper are neither extensive nor complete. In a previous paper I analyzed a broad range of experiments and the motivation for performing them. I substantiated the assertion that the creation of Unit 731 was not due to racist desires to subjugate and defile Chinese people, but as a goal oriented mission to advance the offensive capabilities of the Japanese Imperial Army and provide solutions to internal problems that weakened the formidability of the Japanese forces. With regard to acts of sexual violence, sex experimentation seemed to be performed in accordance with the same goal. That is, they were conceptualized to solve sexual disease.

“Research at Unit 731 took as its starting point a simple and correct observation: more soldiers die in wartime from disease than in battle.”¹⁴ Accordingly, sex experiments were conceived to combat the rising prevalence of venereal disease within the ranks of the Japanese Army. The prevalence of sexually transmitted disease is evident in its euphemistic moniker as “the scourge of armies.”¹⁵ In addition to creating treatments for venereal diseases, doctors at Unit 731 also used experiments to further educate themselves about the female body. Mr. Makino, a former medical assistant now living in Osaka, provided testimony of the operations he assisted

¹¹ Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876-1945*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011.

¹² Gregory Dean Byrd, “General Ishii Shiro: His Legacy is That of Genius and Madman” Master’s Dissertation, East Tennessee State University, 2005, 11.

¹³ Stefan Riedel, “Biological Warfare and Bioterrorism: A Historical Review.” *Proceedings (Baylor University Medical Center)* 17, no. 4 (2004): 415.

¹⁴ Tia Powell, “Cultural Context in Medical Ethics: Lessons from Japan,” *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, Vol 1, Iss 1, P4 (2006): 4.

¹⁵ Powell, 8.

while stationed at Pingfang: “These barbaric acts were, he said this week, ‘educational,’ to improve his knowledge of anatomy. ‘We removed some of the organs and amputated legs and arms. Two of the victims were young women, 18 or 19 years old. I hesitate to say it but we opened up their wombs to show the younger soldiers. They knew very little about women - it was sex education.’”¹⁶ Like wise, Japanese surgeons used experiments as an opportunity to practice procedures that would be needed in battle. Common procedures included amputations, removing bullets, suturing, and performing transplants and transfusions.

Perhaps ironically, the necessity of venereal disease human experimentation, one crime against humanity, was created by another crime against humanity propagated by the Japanese Army, the comfort system in which women were confined to “comfort stations” and expected to service the masculine needs of Japanese forces.¹⁷

While these experiments served a medical and rational goal, informal, sexual violence was also occurred, which was carried out outside the orders of the Japanese medical military complex. While the guards and staff that carried out these crimes were part of this establishment, they acted as individuals when directing violence against the prisoners. This represents a fairly common wartime phenomenon that while “perpetrators of systematic sexual atrocities in war target individuals who belong to a particular ethnic group, religious community, or political affiliation. Moreover, reports indicate that the usual victims of sexual crimes are those most vulnerable during armed conflicts: the unarmed, particularly women, as well as children and individuals in captivity.”¹⁸ For the purpose of Unit 731 this is significant: guards and medical

¹⁶ Hudson, 1.

¹⁷ Chunghee Sarah Soh, "From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'Comfort Women'," *Social Science Japan Journal* 3, no. 1 (2000): 59.

¹⁸ Kristen Boon, “Rape and Forced Pregnancy Under the ICC Statute: Human Dignity, Autonomy and Consent,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 32 (2001): 625.

staff carried out both these sexual experiments and sex crimes, however the identity with which they justified each category was unique.¹⁹

Victims

Subjects used for sex experiments were diverse and varied. As demonstrated in my previous paper, organizers of the Unit took great pain to ensure ethnic diversity in the prison population in order to ensure testing was universally applicable.²⁰ A continuous supply of subjects was furnished by Military Police, army officials, and through special transfer, with an average of 400 to 600 of subjects being received by the facility annually.²¹ Some inmates “were simply rounded up off the streets of Harbin to meet quotas set by Unit 731 officers.”²² In special relation to sexual experiments, some women from comfort stations throughout China and Korea were relocated to Unit 731. Of the more than 10,000 prisoners suspected to have been killed at Unit 731, “at least 3000 of these victims were prisoners of war,” which included “Korean, Chinese, Mongolian, Soviet, American, British, and Australian soldiers.”²³ Female prisoners were especially diverse, with study findings revealing that white Russian women, “mothers of Chinese spies,” and even Indonesian female prisoners were used.²⁴

In my research I have found little to substantiate the idea that children were a prominent portion of the inmate population. This is not to say that children were immune from testing, just that they were not subject to imprisoned testing in the same proportion of adult men and women.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gerhard Baader, Susan E. Lederer, Morris Low, Florian Schmaltz, and Alexander V. Schwerin, “Pathways to Human Experimentation, 1933-1945: Germany, Japan, and the United States,” *Osiris* 20 (2005): 221.

²¹ Takashi Tsuchiya, "The Imperial Japanese Medical Atrocities and Its Enduring Legacy in Japanese Research Ethics," Paper presented at the 8th World Congress of Bioethics Beijing, China, August 8, 2006, 4.

²² Clay Farris Naff, *Biological Weapons*, Contemporary Issues Companion, Detroit, MI: Greenhaven Press/Thomson Gale, 2006,

²³ Riedel, 2.

²⁴ Ibid, 4.

The biological weapons and pathogens were tested on children in towns surrounding the Unit. Children used in experiments conducted inside of the Unit were the result of female prisoner's pregnancies while incarcerated. In some cases, males were also used in sex experiments. Usually, in cases that sexually transmitted diseases needed to be spread to other prisoners, forced copulation between men and women occurred. These groups—children and men—while subject to sexual experimentation did not endure the abusive sex crimes that was exercised by guards and staff upon women.

Testing- General

Experimentation on humans that took place at Unit 731 can be categorized by two different approaches. The first consists of bacteriological studies, those in which subjects were deliberately infected with disease in order to view the progression of the disease and search for cures to it. The second approach consists of physiological studies, which involved viewing how a subject reacts to stimulus. Both were performed at Unit 731 and featured in scientific publications written by the scientists and doctors in charge at the facility.²⁵ Sex experiments authorized by the organizers of Unit 731 were primarily bacteriological in nature; the majority of 731 sex experiments tested transmission and treatment of venereal disease. Conversely, sex crimes were neither bacteriological or physiological because they were not experiments, were unauthorized, and perpetrated by individuals acting as individuals instead of members of the scientific establishment of the Unit.

In the previous section I outlined that surgical practice, disease investigation, and female education were the motivation for sexual experimentation, the facility also came to represent an opportunity for Japanese doctors. The growing trend throughout Japan to apply scientific method to everything, especially sexuality, made it permissible to ignore the inherently militaristic and

²⁵ Baader, 221.

grotesque nature of the crimes doctors were actually committing. Morally atrocious human testing became possible, if the neutral scope of ‘science’ could assuage practitioners guilt.²⁶

Syphilis

Of the venereal diseases investigated, none was more important than syphilis. Developing a cure for syphilis was crucial to treating and rehabilitating infected soldiers, “among whom the prevalence of syphilis was high due to the systematic rape of women and the widespread use of sex slaves.”²⁷ However, while serums were easily produced to infect patients with tuberculosis, smallpox, and other virulent pathogens, infection of syphilis could not be easily facilitated by injection. Accordingly, doctors orchestrated forced sex acts between infected and non infected prisoners to transmit the disease. Consider the testimony of a prison guard on the subject of devising a method for transmission of syphilis between patients:

"Infection of venereal disease by injection was abandoned, and the researchers started forcing the prisoners into sexual acts with each other. Four or five unit members, dressed in white laboratory clothing completely cover the body with only eyes and mouth visible, handled the tests. A male and female, on infected with syphilis, would be brought together in a cell and forced into sex with each others. It was made clear that anyone resisting would be shot.²⁸

An important distinction is revealed by the above testimony. The individuals orchestrating the forced sex acts are described almost as accessories to the overall framework of the experiment. Dressed in white, with only eyes and mouth visible, their individual dominance was not expressed, instead they served as panoptic extensions, and as a reminder that copulation was required and consequences could be forced if the prisoners resisted. This tangential association is very different from the direct violence noted in other testimony, which I will

²⁶ Miriam Kingsberg, "Legitimizing Empire, Legitimizing Nation: The Scientific Study of Opium Addiction in Japanese Manchuria," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 350.

²⁷ E. Cuerda-Galindo, X. Sierra-Valentí, E. González-López, and F. López-Muñoz, "Syphilis and Human Experimentation From the First Appearance of the Disease to World War II: A Historical Perspective and Reflections on Ethics," *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas (English Edition)* 105, no. 8 (2014): 765-67.

²⁸ Gold, 165.

analyze in a later section. This event was part of a sex experiment, but was not marked by the direct abuse of sex crimes.

After victims were infected, they were vivisected at different stages of infection, so that internal and external organs could be observed as the disease progressed. Confusingly, testimony from multiple guards rhetorically blames the female victims as being hosts of the diseases, even as they were forcibly infected. Genitals of female prisoners that were infected with syphilis were called “jam filled buns” by guards.²⁹ This colloquial degradation of the prisoners sharply contrasts with the clinical numbers by which the staff refer to patients for the purpose of official experimentation.

Beyond the affects of syphilis infection in adults, Unit 731 doctors also wanted to understand how children were affected by various pathogens. A Youth Corps member deployed to train at Unit 731 recalled viewing a batch of subjects that would undergo syphilis testing: “one was a Chinese woman holding an infant, one was a White Russian woman with a daughter of four or five years of age, and the last was a White Russian woman with a boy of about six or seven.”³⁰ The children of these women were tested in ways similar to their parents, with specific emphasis on determining how longer infection periods affected the effectiveness of treatments. In short, some children grew up inside the walls of Unit 731, infected with syphilis.

Rape and Forced Pregnancy

Women prisoners were forced to become pregnant for use in in experiments. Specifically, the plausibility of vertical transmission (from mother to fetus or child) of diseases was test. This was especially true in the case of syphilis, which was suspected to affect fertility. Whether or not a fetus survived and if its mother’s reproductive organs were compromised, was of great interest

²⁹ Ibid, 55.

³⁰ Ibid, 172.

to practitioners at 731. Though “a large number of babies were born in captivity” of Unit 731, there has been no account of any survivors of the facility, children included.³¹ It is suspected that the children of female prisoners were killed or the pregnancies terminated.

While male prisoners were often used in single studies, so that the results of the experimentation on them would not be clouded by other variables, women were sometimes used in bacteriological or physiological experiments, sex experiments, and the victims of sex crimes.

The testimony of a unit member that served as guard graphically demonstrates this reality:

One of the former researchers I located told me that one day he had a human experiment scheduled, but there was still time to kill. So he and another unit member took the keys to the cells and opened one that housed a Chinese woman. One of the unit members raped her; the other member took the keys and opened another cell. There was a Chinese woman in there who had been used in a frostbite experiment. She had several fingers missing and her bones were black, with gangrene set in. He was about to rape her anyway, then he saw that her sex organ was festering, with pus oozing to the surface. He gave up the idea, left, and locked the door, then later went on to his experimental work.³²

This testimony demonstrates the divide of motivations for different sexual abuses endured by prisoners. The individual staff member’s volition is what drove the two men above to commit the above abuses against the two female prisoners, which is contrasted by the ‘orders’ they received as a part of regular duty. Whereas the rhetoric of the guards towards facilitating their given order is spoken with obligation, responsibility, and respect, their attitudes towards sexual degradation of the prisoners is casual.³³

Children

As previously noted, children were used in experiments, though not in mass. For sexual experiments the impetus for their inclusion served the practical purpose to ensure variable consistency and applicability of their results. A former doctor, now farmer, with reputation for

³¹ Gold, 45.

³² Ibid, 166.

³³ At what point does your soul degrade into such a pitiful blob of mush that you can casually ask, “Hey, are you down for raping some people right now, I was going to work out but....”

being one of the cruelest of Unit 731 on the subject of children: “When the topic of children came up, the farmer offered another justification: ‘Of course there were experiments on children. But probably their fathers were spies.’”³⁴

Yoshimura Hisato, who ran frostbite experiments at the facility, recounted an experiment he ran with a three-month-old baby. “A temperature-sensing needle was injected in the baby's hand and the infant was immersed in ice water, then temperature changes were carefully recorded. After the war he issued a paper on this experiment and the results. Since it would have been impossible to conduct an experiment like this in postwar years.”³⁵ This confession gives the reader interesting insights to how victimizers conceptualized their work medically—as an opportunity, a gray area of morality, and eagerly approach the task. Here, Hisato emphasizes the academic possibilities and the scientific procedures he took to secure his results. He does not reflect on the pain of the child, the cruelty of forcibly insert glass into an infant’s hand, or watching a wholly innocent being frozen to death in front of him. Other hallmarks of sex crimes involving children are not present: there is no sexual subjugation, consideration of the patient in relation to his own social position, and vulgar expressions of anger are not voiced. Instead, Hisato considers his actions strictly scientific, as if he is not morally or individually responsible for the death of the child.³⁶

Mother-Child Experiments

³⁴ Kristof, Nicholas. “Japan Confronting Gruesome War Atrocity” *The New York Times*, March 17, 1995.

³⁵ Gold, 165.

³⁶ Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-1945, and the American Cover-up*, Rev. ed. New York: Routledge, 2002, 99. Furthermore, outside of the unit, in the surrounding town of Harbin, children were targeted to test the effectiveness of biological agents developed in the facility. The Japanese officers offered children pastries and chocolates filled with pathogenic serum. On warm days in the summer, their approach changed to offer children lemonade laced with anthrax or malaria. This distribution was critical to understand what methods to disseminate biological weapons was most effective.

Another class of experiments seemed intended test the bonds between mother and child. Death was slowly inflicted upon a mother and her children. Japanese doctors and technicians would view desperate attempts of women to protect themselves and their children: “A Russian mother and daughter left in a gas chamber, for example, as doctors peered through thick glass and timed their convulsions, watching as the woman sprawled over her child in a futile effort to save her from the gas.”³⁷ Japanese doctors gauged these relationships in scientific terms; they wanted to see the physical manifestations of maternal instinct in contrast with the new weapons produced at the facility. For this reason, the woman’s attempts to protect her child are of great interest to the observer. While eliciting emotional pain and the intentional use of violence against a child to cause anguish qualifies this experiment as a sex crime, the goal of the project was to understand how this trauma would provoke biological response. This example perfectly demonstrates why it is difficult to assert that sex experiments and sex crimes were the same; substantial overlap exists between them. However, this experiment is marked by a demonstrative desire to produce results, rational findings, and apply knowledge collected, rather than interpersonal expressions of dominance that characterize sex crimes.

Male Sex Crime Victims

While this paper has focused mostly on crimes propagated against women and children, males were also subject to sexual experimentation. As mentioned previously, sex acts between male and female partners was forced, especially in the case of venereal disease study. Male prisoners were subject to a wide and bizarre spectrum of testing, including forced male-male sex acts and genital mutilation.³⁸ For example, it is hard to image what type of information Japanese

³⁷ Krisof, 2.

³⁸ Stefan Vetter, "Understanding Human Behavior in Times of War," *Military Medicine* 172, no. 2 (2007): 7-10.

doctors sought when they “[inserted] glass rods to their rectum.”³⁹ It is in this class of experimentation that I find it most difficult to parse sex experiments from sex crimes. However, it seems likely that because the male prisoners of the Unit were, definitionally, enemy combatants, sexual violence propagated towards them could have been the result of wartime aggression.

Cures/Treatments Developed

The unit was overwhelmingly successful in terms of medical innovation, including “development of therapies, vaccines, surgical techniques both in hospital and on the battlefield, hemostasis, and transfusion of blood.”⁴⁰ The current method to treat frostbite, which involves submerging limbs in warm water instead of applying direct heat, was developed as the result of experiments conducted at Unit 731. The Unit’s contributions to global health, frostbite, new ways to purify water, treat dysentery, perform surgery, and much more, cannot be ignored. Innovations developed at the facility are credit to have reduced wartime death by eight percent overall.⁴¹ The cost of these advances was an estimated 3,000 lives inside the facility and many thousands more that were the victims of field testing.⁴²

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to identify the extraordinary suffering of the women and children that were sexually abused outside of the context of the scientific and medical mission of the Unit. While tremendous suffering was endured by all prisoners at the Unit, the additional

³⁹ Joshua A. Perper and Stephen J. Cina, *When Doctors Kill*, New York, NY: Springer New York, 2010, 82.

⁴⁰ Takashi Tsuchiya, “The Imperial Japanese Experiments in China” In *The Oxford Textbook of Clinical Research Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 8.

⁴¹ Louis Livingston Seaman, *The Real Triumph of Japan, the Conquest of the Silent Foe*, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1906, 238.

⁴² Steven Kuhr, and Jerome M. Hauer, "The Threat of Biological Terrorism in the New Millennium," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no. 6 (2001): 1032.

burden of sex crimes, the independent actions of guards and staff, has not been acknowledged or analyzed as two separate forms of violence. Those who committed these crimes against humanity upon already traumatized victims should be recognized as especially heinous individuals, who cannot hide behind the comforting thought that the Unit produced scientifically beneficial research.⁴³ More importantly, the victims of these crimes should be acknowledged and remembered. It is these men, women, and children that should be credited for the thousands of lives the success of the Unit made possible.

⁴³ After the war an agreement between Ishii and General McCarthy was formulated to exchange immunity for the results of the testing conducted. For more information see: Nie Jing-Bao, "The United States Cover-up of Japanese Wartime Medical Atrocities: Complicity Committed in the National Interest and Two Proposals for Contemporary Action," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 6, no. 3 (2006): 21-33.

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