



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

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## BOOK REVIEW

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

Edited by Nie Jing-Bao, Guo Nanyan, Mark Selden and Arthur Kleinman

Routledge, Oxford, UK, 2010

249 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-68228-2 (pbk)

This is not an easy book to read, since it reveals in painful detail the callous brutality of which human beings are capable, especially in times of war, but it is essential reading for those interested not only in the ethics of human experimentation but also in the ways in which basic humanitarian values become compromised by nationalism and double standards of morality. It is now well known (though it was concealed or denied for decades) that the appalling experiments conducted by Nazi doctors in the Second World War were matched by equally inhumane and lethal experiments carried out mainly on Chinese prisoners by Japanese doctors in several locations, including a special facility (Unit 731) designed to research into biological weapons. The essential difference, however, is that, unlike their German counterparts, who were tried at Nuremberg, the Japanese doctors were never brought to justice, and some went on to have successful medical careers in postwar Japan, often at a senior level. The reason for this was that the American government made a deal with the Japanese, whereby the individuals involved were granted immunity from prosecution in return for the handing over of all the data from the experiments (most of which, incidentally, were scientifically worthless).

There has already been a number of publications describing these events, but this volume makes a major new contribution to the literature in a number of ways. First, the Introduction, written by Nie Jing-Bao and his fellow editors, provides an admirable summary of these dreadful events, and I would strongly recommend this as a key reading for any courses in the ethics of human experimentation, to set alongside the usual references in such courses to the Nazi atrocities and the Nuremberg Trials. Second, the range of scholarship

represented in this volume — 11 authors drawn from several different disciplines — provides great depth to the discussion and also broadens the scope of the analysis to consider the wider implications internationally of what was done and subsequently concealed. In other words, this is far more than a criticism simply of the Japanese role in these atrocities. Third, the book contains a rich source of data about these and other crimes against humanity carried out in the name of medical science. Such data are hard to come by, and are inevitably incomplete, but they are sufficient to let us see how widespread such practices have been and to raise fears that we have not seen an end to this kind of atrocity. Last, there is a large annotated bibliography of both primary and secondary sources in Japanese, Chinese and English. This will be of great value to scholars in the field.

Since all the chapters in this book are of a high quality, it would be invidious to pick out any of them for detailed attention, but some do deal with issues, which might have been overlooked in a work focusing on the Japanese atrocities. The most obvious area of concern is the collusion of the American military and American government in covering up this part of history, a decision which stands in stark contrast to their pursuit of the Nazi doctors in the postwar trials. This issue is explored in three chapters of the book by Nie Jing-Bao (who also considers the parts played by the Russian and the Chinese governments after the war); by David B. MacDonald (reflecting on the “chosen amnesia” of the USA); and by Mark Selden (who writes a crushing account of his own nation’s part in wartime atrocities in the Second World War and up to the present day). These authors make it abundantly clear that simply stigmatising the Japanese for what happened is a wholly inadequate moral assessment of the corrupting effects of nationalism and war in all nations. A further enrichment of the volume’s moral assessments comes from reflections on the German experience by Ole Doering and by Peter Degen. (Degen’s description of how a racial hygienist escaped any consequences postwar, gaining respectability from association with the Confessing Church, is particularly disturbing and ironic.) Other contributions (by Keiichi and by Wang) add vivid detail to the summary account in the introduction about the set up in Unit 731 and its relationship to a wider programme of biological warfare. Boris Yudin provides another historical dimension in a description of the Russian trial of 12 Japanese military personnel involved in the experiments, and asks the question we must all ask — how could such things be done to one’s fellow humans? The answers he gives have much wider application and must make us all think about our own history. Guo Nanyan, working with a range of historical and literary material, looks for “traces of humanity” in the

midst of all this barbarity in a detailed and sensitive account of the thoughts of those who rejected the atrocities and showed some remorse.

I said at the beginning of this review that this book is not an easy read. Indeed, I have found it very hard to keep reading, and have been able to do so only by doing a little at a time. But although not at all easy, this is *essential* reading for all of us in bioethics, and of especial interest and concern for those of us working in Asia, where memories of such dreadful times linger on. I can best sum up the merit of this book by quoting its dedication page: "To all victims of medical atrocities for whom justice has never been fully served". Beyond doubt, this volume does much to honour this dedication through its meticulous scholarship and its unwavering assertion of the inalienable worth of every human being.

**Alastair V. Campbell**