Japanese WW II experiments

Veronika Valdova, MVD.

Non-consensual medical or any other scientific experiment fulfils the definition of torture\(^1\) as per Article 7 of the ICCPR: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In particular, no one shall be subjected without his free consent to medical or scientific experimentation”. What is less widely understood is the fact that any biological and chemical warfare has got to be tested on humans in a very similar manner. The purpose is the same – to ascertain effective dose and determine mode of action and effects on humans in real life conditions. Experiments on human subjects during WWII led to worldwide adoption of standards in medical research.

BW and CW research

The Japanese Biological and Chemical Warfare research was mainly conducted by the Kwantung Army in Northeast China. Most research subjects were Chinese, Russian, and Mongolian nationals, communist partisans, ordinary criminals, political dissidents, mentally disabled peasants, and eventually, when these groups run out, local population of the poor and homeless. Medical officer Colonel Shiro Ishii, who was in charge of the Unit 731 in Harbin, Manchuria, since 1935, was the main mastermind of the Japanese Biological Warfare research. At least 3,000 were killed in experiments at the Unit 731 biological weapons facility, reportedly including gunned down Allied airmen.

Experiments conducted at Unit 731 included vivisections, freezing and amputations of limbs to study spread of gangrene and blood loss, removal of organs such as parts of brain, lungs, and liver to study disease, and tests of explosives on human body. Ishii himself patented over 200 discoveries. Unit 731 was not the only unit where the Japanese tested biological and chemical warfare; there were also units 1855 in Beijing, 1644 in Nanjing (Tama Unit), and 1688 in Canton.

Unit 100, commanded by Jiro Wakamatsu, focused on different type of biological warfare – extermination of animals and crops by disease and inducing famine by artificial creation of shortage of food. The main diseases used were cholera, typhoid, anthrax, and bubonic plague; and the main vector used to spread the disease were fleas.

After the surrender of Japan, General Ishii Shiro ordered to kill all the experimental subjects by potassium cyanide in their food, or gas them to death with mustard gas or phosgene. Ishii Shiro ordered his staff and family to commit suicide and even issued poison for them all. Hardly any of these people followed the order; and approximately 2,000 of them including Ishii fled the camp instead. On departure, they released thousands of bubonic plague-infected rats, what directly led to the death of another 20,000 to 30,000 Chinese.

**Capability and intent**

General MacArthur obtained intelligence about Japanese biological and chemical warfare research in Manchuria already in mid 1944 from the Allied Translator and Interpreter Section (ATIS) including information on the so-called “bacillus bomb” and research report on medical war crimes, including the incident at Kyushu Imperial University where American pilots were dissected out of “curiosity”.

Whether the Japanese intended to use biological warfare against the USA or not will never be known for certain, although the development of air balloons which were sent to over the U.S. mainland using meteorological phenomenon jet-stream, and the fact that these weapons were tested in China, suggests that this was more than only a theoretical possibility.

**Post-war attempts for justice**

At the war end, there was substantial problem with evidence regarding Japanese war crimes in occupied territories. It has to be remembered that in Europe the presence of the U.S. military was much stronger than in the Pacific and therefore securing of the evidence was much more realistic despite Nazi efforts to burn the documents. Moreover, the concerned Unit 731 was located in Manchuria, which was by then occupied by the Soviets and some of the research on biological and chemical warfare was seized by them. The main focus of the U.S. authorities was on individuals responsible for Pearl Harbor, mistreatment of U.S. POWs, and war crimes against Caucasian women, especial their exploitation as so-called comfort women for Japanese Army. Irrefutable evidence that Allied POWs were used as subjects for medical experiments or for biological and chemical warfare research is hard to come by.

Some of the Unit 731 scientists involved were later tried in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and the Khabarovsk War Crime Trial; most escaped to the West and succeeded in business, academia, politics, and medicine. According to the Unit 731 Testimony, General Douglass Mac Arthur secretly granted immunity to the physicians of Unit 731 in exchange for providing America with their research on chemical and biological warfare.

After the war, U.S. representatives refused to deal with the atrocities and force the Japanese to face trial. Opposite is true; they were granted impunity in exchange for data and cooperation. Of 200 surviving POWs, only one was allowed to testify in Congress in 1982.² Many doctors who participated in Japanese Biological Warfare Research during the war ended up in leading positions in medicine and pharmaceutical industry (e.g. The Green Cross Company headed by Naito Ryoichi), and dominated medical science in Japan for the rest of their lives.³ The Japanese Emperor Hirohito did not stand trial for

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² Guyatt D: Deep Black Lies. Unit 731. [http://www.deepblacklies.co.uk/unit731-part1.htm](http://www.deepblacklies.co.uk/unit731-part1.htm) (accessed December 10, 2011)

³ Harris SH: Japanese medical atrocities in World War II: Unit 731 was not an isolated aberration. A paper read at the International citizens forum war crimes and redress, Tokyo, Japan, December 11, 1999. [http://www.vcn.bc.ca/alpha/speech/Harris.htm](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/alpha/speech/Harris.htm) (accessed December 10, 2011)
war crimes committed by Imperial Japanese Army, but many of the high officials and Army Generals, including Gen. Hideki Tojo who was one of those executed for war crimes⁴.

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal began in May 1946 and ended in November 1948. Of 25 defendants, 7 were sentenced to death by hanging and executed, 16 were sentenced to life imprisonment, and 2 received lesser terms. Of those sentenced to life only 4 died in prison, others were granted clemency.⁵ The charges against the doctors included vivisection, wrongful removal of bodily parts, and cannibalism. 23 doctors were found guilty on various charges. In 1948, 30 people were charged with vivisection, wrongful removal of bodily parts, and cannibalism; 23 were convicted.⁶

The Soviet led Khabarovsk trial brought to trial 5,379 of them and convicted 4,300, but the trial was dismissed by most people in the West as yet another Soviet style kangaroo court and its results were never examined in detail by Western historians.

When confronted by advocacy and human rights groups, the Japanese government insisted these issues had been settled by stipulations of the peace treaty signed in San Francisco in September 1951. The reasons for this stubborn denial of history in Japan were mainly driven by conservative ruling party; and the general consensus was that the role of Emperor Hirohito in the WW2 is a taboo subject in Japan.⁷

The most notorious suspected WW2 criminals who were never punished for their actions were Ishii Shiro of Unit 731, Hatoyama Ichirō (Prime Minister 1954–1956), Ikeda Hayato (Prime Minister 1960–1964), and Kishi Nobusuke (Prime Minister 1957). A convicted Class A war criminal, Shigemitsu Mamoru, a senior diplomat and foreign minister during the war years, regained the foreign minister portfolio in 1954. Transfer of both suspected and convicted war criminals back in positions of power after the war was smooth and undisturbed.⁸

In 2000, U.S. Congress passed the Japanese Imperial Government Disclosure Act, and the Interagency Working Group was created. In 1993, U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry finally promised to declassify records of WW2 experiments. The result of this effort is an impressive study “Japanese War Crimes Records Introductory Essays” which was published in 2006⁹.

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⁴ McNaughton, James C: Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence service during World War II. Department of the Army, Washington D.C. 2006; Map 15, p 438.


⁶ Ibid; pp 79-110.

⁷ Ibid, p 5.


⁹ Ibid.
All forgotten

According to the 2002 International Symposium on the Crimes of Bacteriological Warfare, the number of people killed by the Imperial Japanese Army germ warfare and human experiments is about 580,000, most of it Chinese civilians killed by cholera, typhoid, anthrax, bubonic plague, and tularemia. Japanese law does not define those convicted in the post-1945 trials as criminals, despite the fact that Japan's governments have accepted the judgments made in the trials, and in the Treaty of San Francisco (1952).

As per the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, Japan does not currently posses any Weapons of Mass Destruction including Biological and Chemical Warfare. This claim disregards Japanese testing of biological and chemical warfare on Allied POWs during the World War Two. Japan only signed the Biological Weapons Convention in 1982 and the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997, after the sarin attacks in Tokyo.¹⁰