

# **Weapons of Mass Destruction: Remembering and Forgetting**

**by John Price**

The world is increasingly focused on the horrors of biological warfare as the Bush administration demands the world wage war on Iraq because Saddam Hussein might possess biological weapons. U.S. officials also suggest that the U.S. Occupation of Japan after World War II might be a model for the occupation of a post-Saddam Iraq.

Events unfolding in far-off courtrooms in Japan suggest we be skeptical of such proposals.

On a sweltering summer day in August 1997, Japanese lawyers handed officials of the Tokyo District Court a compensation claim on behalf of 180 Chinese citizens. The brief claimed that the 180 plaintiffs were victims of Japanese biological warfare in China during World War II.

Five years and many courtroom hours later, the plaintiffs with their Japanese supporters gathered in a crowded courtroom to hear the verdict. On August 27, 2002, a panel of Japanese judges (Koji Iwata presiding) concluded that Unit 731 of the Japanese imperial army had indeed conducted war using biological weapons in various regions of China

Under the direction of Shiro Ishii, Unit 731 of the Japanese imperial army conducted extensive experiments that included injecting captured Chinese prisoners with infected blood, monitoring them and then dissecting them while they were still alive. Women prisoners were infected with syphilis in the name of preventing the disease.

Biological bombs were dropped on Chinese villages, infecting thousands with anthrax, glanders and other diseases. The court concluded that victims' suffering "was truly immense and the former Japanese military's wartime actions were clearly inhumane".

At Nuremburg in 1948, physicians who conducted similar medical experiments for the Nazis were sentenced to death for their actions. Yet Shiro Ishii and others of Unit 731, whose actions included not only medical experiments but wide-scale deployment of biological weapons, did not face trial—in fact many went on to successful careers within Japan's biomedical establishment.

How could this have happened? Scholars such as Tsuneishi Keiichi in Japan and the late Sheldon Harris in the U.S. have proven beyond doubt that U.S. Occupation officials, under orders from Washington in 1947, provided immunity to officers of Unit 731 in exchange for the information that Ishii and others provided about biological warfare. This information was integrated into, and used to promote the U.S. government's own program of biological weapons development centred at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

For sixty years a shroud of silence descended over these crimes. The U.S. government had little interest in revealing any information that might expose its own weapons

program, or that would have opened up discussion about its own first-use of weapons of mass destruction—the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Chinese victims of biological warfare have been caught in this web of deceit. Even now the Japanese court, while admitting the facts of Unit 731's crimes, refused to grant restitution to the plaintiffs. The survivors have appealed that aspect of the verdict and as their quest for justice becomes better known, word is spreading around the world about the travesty committed during the U.S. Occupation of Japan.

While it would be convenient to lay the blame solely at the feet of the U.S. government, others, including the Canadian government had a role in constructing the shroud of silence.

During World War II, the Canadian, British and U.S. governments engaged in a coordinated program of both defensive and offensive biological weapons development, even though the use of such weapons was technically prohibited by the 1925 Geneva Convention.

This wartime program was initially justified because of the suspicion that Axis powers were developing biological warfare. But the Allied victory did not bring an end to the programs. Instead, the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain cranked up their tri-national co-operation, developing offensive weapons. Canadian scientists helped produce large amounts of botulinum and anthrax spores and conducted field trials at the Suffield experimental station in Alberta. Bombs and insects were tested as means of dispersal.

The full story of this tri-national collaboration has yet to be fully revealed but it seems likely that Canadian scientists were aware of the activities of Unit 731.

Guilford B. Reed and H.M. Barrett, professors at Queens and the University of Toronto respectively, also worked for Canada's Defence Research Board that oversaw Canadian biological weapons development. In December 1947, they completed a secret report summarizing the state of knowledge related to biological warfare. It began: "With the exception of some isolated incidents in China, bacteriological warfare has not been used as weapon of war." In later versions of similar reports, references to China disappear.

Otto Maass, head of the chemistry department of McGill and a key player in Canada's biological warfare program, sat as a permanent Canadian representative on the U.S. biological war committee. Maass developed a close working relationship with Maj. Gen Alden Waitt, chief of the chemical corps at Fort Detrick. As it turns out, Waitt was the key figure at Fort Detrick who arranged immunity for Unit 731 officers.

By early 1950, Canadian officials possessed full details of the scope of biological warfare employed in China from reports they received after Soviet trials of Unit 731 officers captured in Manchuria. The reports, which we now find were quite accurate, were dismissed at the time as Soviet propaganda. Soviet claims that biological weapons

testing at Suffield had led to an outbreak of plague among First Nations were also dismissed out of hand. Will this claim prove to be accurate?

For fifty years the Canadian government has sat on what it knew about Unit 731. This was not only ethically irresponsible, it betrayed solemn obligations that the government had undertaken in the postwar settlement of World War II in Asia.

We appointed a judge and an associate prosecutor to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, the Tokyo version of the Nuremberg war crimes trials. We also held a seat on the Far Eastern Commission, created to supervise the U.S. Occupation of Japan. And Canada was a signatory to the San Francisco Peace Treaty that ended the occupation of Japan. But instead of facilitating reconciliation in Asia, we worked to rehabilitate Japan as an ally in the cold war.

The victims of Japan's imperial adventures were thus shunted aside and forgotten on this side of the Pacific. Forgetting them was not so hard. Racism towards Asian peoples was rampant in Canada after the war. Asian lives sacrificed in the Pacific theatre were of little concern as the Canadian government focused its attention on Europe.

The legacy of the Occupation of Japan has been a disaster. Because there has been no restitution and no full accounting of Japanese crimes against humanity, many Asian peoples continue to harbour deep resentment towards Japan and reconciliation remains elusive. In Japan, because of the atomic bombs and the shroud of silence surrounding Japanese war crimes, many people perceive Japan as itself a victim. Consider: German courts have prosecuted over 91,000 suspected German war criminals between the end of the war and 1988. The Japanese government has not prosecuted a single suspect. This is a dangerous divide in a dangerous world.

So, today, when the Bush administration seeks to rally the world to bludgeon Iraq in the name of defending civilization from biological weapons let us remember: The United States government engaged in a first-strike using weapons of mass destruction at Nagasaki and Hiroshima; it covered up war crimes committed by Unit 731; and in the 1980s it supplied Saddam Hussein with 11 types of germs including anthrax strain 11966, developed in 1951 at Fort Detrick.

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