

The trial of Unit 731

By **RUSSELL WORKING**
Special to *The Japan Times*

KHABAROVSK, Russia -- Late in December 1949, Soviet Communist Party leaders began distributing tickets in factories and institutes for an upcoming trial. Twelve Japanese physicians and military officers -- former researchers at a secret facility near Harbin, China known as Unit 731 -- stood accused of manufacturing biological and chemical weapons following experiments on human guinea pigs. And somewhere it was decided that the masses should hear firsthand what had gone on at the sprawling complex, which had been dynamited by the Japanese as Soviet troops advanced at the end of World War II.



Georgy Permyakov, now 83, was the chief translator at the trial.

The proceedings began in an orderly fashion, with the audience sitting quietly in the hall and balconies of the colonnaded Soviet Army Officers' House where the trial was held. But revelations about the alleged crimes soon shocked listeners. Graduates of Japan's leading medical universities, prosecutors said, had infected their victims with typhus, anthrax, cholera and bubonic plague -- and later loosed the diseases in Chinese villages. A three-day-old baby was said to have been jabbed with needles and submerged in icy water and live victims dissected without anesthesia. Circles of doctors would cut open screaming women to examine their reproductive organs.

"The first day, everything was quiet in town," said Georgy Permyakov, an 83-year-old language instructor who was the chief translator for the trial. "But there were two trial times a day, morning and evening, and when the spectators left the first morning session, they started calling and talking to each other. And after the evening session the entire city starting talking about it."

By the second day, angry crowds thronged the court. Party leaders, eager to discredit "Japanese militarists," set up loudspeakers outside. The crowds heard about doctors who subjected their victims -- termed "logs" -- to all kinds of experiments: injection with animals' blood, exposure to syphilis, hanging upside down until death, surgical removal of their stomachs with the esophagus then attached to the intestines, amputation of arms and reattachment on the opposite side. Some 10,000 people were reported to have died in Japan's 26 known killing laboratories in China, Japan and other occupied countries. Field tests by Unit 731 and other germ and chemical-warfare laboratories in China are estimated to have killed 250,000 people.

The trial, rammed through Stalinist courts in five days, is the forgotten war-crimes prosecution of the 20th century. It followed the 10-month-long Nuremberg trials and the two-year-long Far Eastern War Crimes Tribunal in Tokyo. But the Khabarovsk trial casts light on a wound that still festers in Asian international relations. Anger at Japan runs deep in both Korea, China, the Philippines and other nations occupied in World War II to whom Japan has never paid reparations or issued a satisfactory apology. And even as war-crimes victims and their descendants are suing the Japanese government for compensation, the nation's Education Ministry approved a textbook this past April glossing over the Imperial Japanese Army's wartime culpability.



The Soviet army officers' house in Khabarovsk, Soviet Union

"One can't overestimate the importance of the Khabarovsk trial, since it was the third after Nuremberg and Tokyo, and it was dedicated to crimes against humanity," said Vladislav Bogach, the director of Khabarovsk Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology and the author of a book about the trial, "Outlaw Weapon." "Khabarovsk doctors proved that the secret units of the Japanese Army . . . prepared extremely dangerous weapons intended for the mass murder of people."

Japan launched its biological-warfare program in the 1930s after Ishii Shiro, a military physician, returned from a European information-gathering tour. The Showa Emperor signed a decree establishing Unit 731 in occupied Manchuria, behind multiple barbed-wire fences 20 km south of Harbin in the village of Pingfan. The Emperor's younger brother, Prince Mikasa, toured the headquarters and later wrote that he was shown films on how Chinese prisoners were "made to march on the plains of Manchuria for poison-gas experiments on humans."

The base was publicly known as the Epidemic Prevention and Water Supply Unit, and its true mission was top secret. But the Soviet Consulate in Harbin quickly realized that something strange was going on, said Permyakov, who worked in the consulate during the war. Suddenly work crews built and paved a road to Pingfan, and it was crowded with the cars of officers. Black prison vans known as "voronki," or ravens, began racing through Harbin. As they headed out of town, pedestrians could hear prisoners pounding and shouting for help. Unknown to the Japanese, the consulate lofted a small, clear-plastic hydrogen balloon carrying a tiny camera that secretly photographed the entire complex, Permyakov said.



One of the few remaining structures of Unit 731's secret facility in Harbin, China: the concrete wall of a boiler house

Like many places connected with the mid-20th century's mass-murder sites, Harbin today offers little hint of the horrors that occurred nearby. It is a city of 2.5 million, with remnants of Russian architecture and onion-domed cathedrals mixed with Chinese high-rises. The former Unit 731 facility sits in what is now an industrial park in a suburb south of town. The wartime-era buildings are gone, replaced by row upon row of factories and businesses covered in white swimming-pool tiles. The Chinese government has built a small museum, where dummies of doctors in smocks smeared with pink dye cut open a mannequin. Its mouth is open in a scream. Elsewhere, mannequins stripped to their underwear are tied to poles. Dummy Japanese soldiers douse them with water. A soldier with a club knocks off the hand of one prisoner.

It is not a fictitious scenario. Unit 731's physicians, preparing to fight in the Soviet Union or Alaska, would experiment on victims in the bitter Harbin weather, where winter temperatures can fall into the minus 40s Celsius. Guards would strip a victim, tie him to a post outdoors and freeze his arm to the elbow by dousing him with water, researchers say. Once the lower limb was frozen solid, doctors would test their frostbite treatment, then amputate the damaged part of the arm. Then the guards would repeat the process on the victim's upper arm to the shoulder. Another test, another amputation. After the victim's arms were gone, the doctors moved on to the legs.

When the prisoner was reduced to a head and a torso, orderlies would lug him elsewhere in the compound and use him for experiments involving bubonic plague or other pathogens. Virtually no one survived. Unit 731 found a ready supply of human guinea pigs: members of resistance movements, children who strayed too close to the outer perimeter, a teenage girl found carrying a pistol, Mongolians, Koreans, Russians. Any non-Japanese, really, was a potential victim.

The work of Unit 731, while heinous, was not irrational. The Imperial Japanese Army was attempting to produce biological weapons that could be transported by balloon to the United States. (The Khabarovsk trials also revealed plans to use germ warfare in Russia, but the Soviet Union did not join the Pacific War until after the atomic bomb was dropped in August 1945.) Japan succeeded in lofting hundreds of incendiary balloons, swept eastward by the jet stream to the U.S. West Coast. These killed seven people, ignited forest fires and crashed in Medford, Oregon, and Billings, Montana. But the logistics of sending infected rats or fleas across the Pacific apparently proved overwhelming. Late in the war, the Japanese devised Operation Cherry Blossoms at Night, a plan to send kamikaze pilots to bomb San Diego with plague-infected fleas. But with the U.S.' atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the plan was never carried out.

Around the corner from the Harbin museum stands one of the few remaining structures of the camp: the concrete wall of a boiler house. Zhao Daobin is an unemployed factory worker who lives in its shadow. Stretched out on a platform bed in his home, he was recently recovering from an eye injury following an accident with his electric saw.

"People still find pieces of old Japanese ceramics and bring them to the museum," he said. "I found this container in the ground and I wanted to dig it up. But people said, 'Don't touch it! There might be plague on it.' We are very frightened of the plague. Last year, they sent people out to spread some sort of medication on the ground to kill the germs."

Zhao's uncle, Zhang Guanghui, 76, typifies the attitudes of the older generation toward the Japanese. He lives on a narrow, muddy alleyway in Harbin and walks with difficulty nowadays. But he clearly recalls being drafted as a forced laborer for the Japanese. Every day as he left the house, he warned his family that he might not return.



Zhang Guanghui

"They would catch people surreptitiously and bring them to their laboratory," he said. "Local residents were afraid every day that they might be kidnapped by the Japanese. Before going outside, I had to stop and think: Are there Japanese around? I know people who lived across from my house, and the Japanese caught them, and they never came back. And nobody could ever learn anything about

it."

Trembling with anger, he said, "If I saw a Japanese on the street today and I were young again, I would kill him."

When the war ended, the Soviet Army overran Manchuria and brought back 500,000 Japanese prisoners of war, including some who had worked at Unit 731. While Soviet officials deliberated on what to do with them, U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur secretly granted immunity to the physicians of Unit 731 in exchange for providing America with their research on biological weapons. Presented with evidence that downed U.S. airmen had been victims of grotesque experiments, MacArthur suppressed the information.

Russians aware of the atrocities in Harbin were outraged. Josef Stalin responded by ordering trials of his own. On Dec. 25, 1949, the trial of Unit 731's doctors began, with orders to finish by the end of the year, before implementation of a decree reinstating the death penalty in the Soviet Union. Stalin apparently feared that Japan might execute Soviet prisoners of war if the physicians were hanged in Khabarovsk, Permyakov said.

Nevertheless, the proceedings "were not a show trial on the Stalinist model," said Sheldon Harris, the American author of "Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932-45."

"It was a strange affair, having the trial take place in Khabarovsk rather than in Moscow or Leningrad," Harris said. "However, the evidence presented at the trial was reasonably faithful to the facts. It was discredited in the U.S. and elsewhere because of the notoriety of earlier show trials in the U.S.S.R. Nevertheless, the [U.S.] State Department and MacArthur's people were in a panic that some evidence would come out at the trial that there were American POWs who were [victims of] human experiments."

In Japan, some have alleged that the suspects were railroaded in a Stalinist show trial. But Bogach, the author of "Outlaw Weapon," said the Khabarovsk court paid a surprising amount of attention to medical evidence. He became interested in the trial when he studied under a professor who had been one of the expert witnesses. He writes, "The former employees of Unit 731 insisted that they were making vaccines and other medicine. However, [Soviet] experts proved that in one cycle, up to 300 kg of plague bacteria, 800-900 kg of typhoid and about a ton of cholera were produced. Experts proved that in one of the unit's branches in the town of Hailar in the summer of 1945, there were 13,000 rats. In Unit 731 there were hatcheries for fleas (they raised them on the bodies of rats infected with plague). The output of such incubators was 45 kg of infected fleas during three to four months."

Soviet inquisitors were angered by the testimony of the Japanese. Permyakov still remembers some of the questions and answers from the courtroom interrogation.

Question: Why did you help to cut out his eyes?

Answer: I received an order.

Question: Are you a puppet? Don't you understand that was sadistic?

Answer: It was an order.

Several Western and Japanese papers, among them The New York Times and the Asahi Shimbun, sought permission to send reporters to Khabarovsk, Permyakov said. But Stalin, perhaps still stung by coverage of the 1938 show trials, refused. It is a pity. Soviet newspapers, fueled by Stalinist xenophobia and communist contempt for the people, dehumanized the defendants and condescended to their readers. Reporters in a totalitarian state were ill-suited to consider the moral riddle of what impels men in uniform to commit mass murder and then return home to their families believing their work was good and necessary. Nevertheless, Khabarovsk's newspapers captured some of the anger felt by the audience and the crowds standing outside in the winter dark, stamping their feet to stay warm as the loudspeakers blared.

Tikhookeanskaya zvezda reported Dec. 27 that "sitting behind the bar, the suspects looked askance at the overcrowded halls and then, with cowardice, moved their eyes away, hunching their shoulders as if from a chill. The renowned samurai self-control doesn't last long -- only through the first section of the charges."

The paper heaped scorn on expressions of repentance: "The accused Karasawa Tonigo now babbles that he thinks his activities were a bad thing (because they will obviously end in a bad way for him). Yamada Otozoo wants it to be understood that he has repented of his crimes. . . . No doubt the haughty samurai Sato Syundzi, who looks from side to side like a malicious polecat, wants to tell about his love for mankind. But this will fool nobody."

Amid the bombast, the papers provided glimpses of drowned souls as they sank into Unit 731. "Witness Hotta told about a riot of the inmates in the Unit 731 jail who couldn't stand the fanatically cruel tortures any longer, and tried to escape, but all were killed. . . . Witness Hataki . . . said: 'I saw that the guard Mizuno shot and killed one Russian guinea pig after he was driven to complete exhaustion by the experiments.' "

Question: Are you a Shinto believer?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Your belief is gentle and kind; how can you use people in experiments, instead of rabbits?

Answer: The interests of our mission required this.

As the trial ended, the daily Suvorovsky natisk expressed its anger. Alas, the Soviet rhetoric of indignation had been deflated by overuse in the previous three decades of assaults on "enemies of the people." The paper could just as well have been describing Leon Trotsky or Nikolai Bukharin when it stated, "With feelings of outrage, disgust and repugnance, those present in the courthouse look at the accused. Honest people can have no other feeling. These are not humans the military court is trying; they are monsters and villains, and there is no proper word in human language to characterize them. . . ."

Permyakov likewise could not conceive of what motivated medical doctors to inflict such suffering. "They treated the Chinese like cattle," he said. "They had no sympathy. . . . The Japanese were robots."

For their part, some of Unit 731's staff had little time for the Russians' ethics. "There was a Lt. General Takahasi," Permyakov said. "He smoked all the time, and he was

very nervous. And he said, 'Didn't you make biological weapons, too? How can a big country exist without biological weapons. You did it, and we also did it.' "

Unlike the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, in which high-ranking German and Japanese officials were hanged or sentenced to life in prison, the Khabarovsk trials ended on a less definitive note. One Unit 731 convict received a sentence of two years imprisonment, a second got three years, and most received terms of 20 to 25 years. Several years later, one of the prisoners committed suicide behind bars. The rest were quietly slipped back to Japan and freed in 1956.

Most of the Unit 731 war criminals went on to respectable careers in Japan. Lt.-Col. Ryoichi Naito, a military physician, became the founder of the Japan Blood Bank, the predecessor of Green Cross. Gen. Ishii Shiro (who had escaped the Soviet forces and was never tried) lived in peace until his death from throat cancer in 1959.

The trial's legacy has been mixed. Many Western historians have criticized the Soviet Union for handing down such light sentences. Why take the trouble to conduct such a trial if you are not prepared to set commensurate punishment? Harris believes that the Soviet Union may have cut a deal with the criminals.

"My guess is that the Soviets made a deal with the Japanese similar to the one completed by the Americans: Information [in exchange] for . . . extremely light sentences," he said.

"The Soviets and their successors never released the interrogation reports of the Japanese, some 18 volumes. This leads me to believe that the Japanese did arrange a deal, did yield some information, and the Soviets settled for the best goodies they could get."


Yet the effort of the Khabarovsk trial was not completely wasted. The evidence gathered has proven useful to war-crimes victims and their descendants who are suing the Japanese government for compensation, said Katsuhiko Yamado, executive secretary of the Tokyo-based Society to Support the Demands of Chinese War Victims.

"We, as Japanese citizens, support those who suffer from what Japan did in the war, just as we sincerely accept the fact that the Japanese Army in the past invaded China," Katsuhiko said. "By supporting the victims, I hope we understand the importance of peace. . . . Japan must recognize our act of aggression against Asian countries and assume the responsibility of paying compensation to the victims."

However, in the face of a rightwing minority and an often indifferent majority, the group admits it has a long road ahead in trying to change Japanese opinion about the war.

Sometimes it seems that many in China have forgotten as well. On a cold day in Harbin recently, there was little to see at the remnants of the boiler house. It sits in a muddy, walled enclosure freely used by dogs as a squatting ground. A stone marker and plaque memorialize those who were murdered here. There is a sense that if the right offer were made, this corner of Unit 731, too, would be replaced by a furniture factory covered in white swimming-pool tiles.

Yet a few still remember. Zhang Bo, a 40-year-old driver, says he sometimes brings a surprising kind of visitor down from central Harbin. "Japanese tourists often come



here. The old people fall down on their knees and pray. The young people -- judging by their faces afterward, they think it's funny."

Nonna Chernyakova contributed to this story. She and Russell Working are freelance journalists based in Vladivostok, Russia.

The Japan Times: June 5, 2001

(C) All rights reserved

The Japan Times