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Linda Goetz Holmes. *Unjust Enrichment: How Japan's Companies Built Postwar Fortunes Using American POWs.* Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2001. 202 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-1844-8.

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Rare is a book whose subtitle does as much disservice to itself as Linda Goetz Holmes's *Unjust Enrichment: How Japan's Companies Built Postwar Fortunes Using American POWs*. This laboriously crafted book does a lot of things, not the least of which is to shed important new light on the oft-discussed Japanese mistreatment of Allied POWs during World War II. But, alas, one thing the book does not do is to show what the subtitle says: that Japanese companies built postwar fortunes with labor forced out of American POWs. This claim adds a gratuitously sensationalist tone that undermines the book's contribution to the campaign, which has been cresting since the early 1990s, to seek recompense for victims of Japan's wartime acts of inhumanity and labor exploitation.

Holmes, the author of a 1994 book about the Allied POWs who constructed the infamous Burma Railway [1], marshals an impressive array of newly declassified U.S. government documents, privately owned photographs, diaries and interviews of ex-POWs in support of her impassioned narrative. Among other appalling revelations, the reader is informed that approximately 15,000 Americans were forced to work at Japanese factories, shipyards, and mines under the most brutal and inhumane conditions during World War II. Many of the companies that availed themselves of this captive labor bear familiar corporate names like Mitsui and Mitsubishi. The government in Tokyo and its agents elsewhere in Japan's wartime empire did not stop at brutalizing POWs and captured civilians in violation of international law. They refused to provide the most basic needs of the enslaved workers and did everything they could, argues Holmes, to thwart the Allied attempts to deliver relief goods through such legitimate international channels as the Red Cross. Even more disturbing is her suggestion that Allied prisoners at the Mukden POW camp were subjected to medical experiments similar to those conducted by Unit 731.

These compelling stories, unfortunately, are offset by the book's several flaws. Some of Holmes's most damning arguments are not accompanied by proper citations, a fact that will be frustrating to historians seeking to build on her pioneer work. There are a fair number of errors in transliteration and confusion about Japanese names. Finally, the book gives little insight, beyond denunciatory characterization, into the workings of Japan's war mobilization system that was built on this shameful public-private sector collaboration. Yet the story Holmes tells will fill many readers with moral outrage and leave them wondering how and why such horrendous facts remained buried until recently. Those familiar with the political considerations that constricted the prosecutorial parameters of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East will recognize the systematic downplaying of material and testimonial evidence of Japanese wartime malfeasance. Such collusive silence was hardly unique to this case. The voices of many victims of Japanese atrocities, including those of "comfort women"—forced into Japan's military system of sex slavery—were also suppressed at the Tokyo tribunal, and their unspeakable suffering was thus denied its rightful place in our collective memory for nearly half a century.

Nevertheless, it boggles one's mind to learn how little these American ex-POWs received after the war beyond generic laudation in the celebratory mainstream historiography of America's "Good War" or "the Greatest Generation." When their government renounced claims to reparations in the San Francisco Peace Treaty, these American citizens were rendered ineligible to seek redress from the Japanese government or demand compensation for their forced labor from the Japanese companies. The U.S. government did use Japanese assets frozen during WW II to pay them under the U.S. War Claims Acts of 1948 and 1952. But as one of Holmes's interviewees poignantly

says, “\$1 for a day for missed meals’ hardly made up for the life long effects of malnutrition.” Neither could \$1.50 paid “for each day they were forced to perform labor and/or were subjected to inhumane treatments” even begin to reflect the pain and indignities they were forced to endure at the Japanese hands [p. 138]. Indeed, the wall of legal strictures stretching across the Pacific has been little recognized. Those American men seeking postwar redress share the frustration of Korean women speaking up against forced military prostitution and former Japanese colonial subjects demanding compensation for their services during the war. The diplomatic “settlements” that their governments reached with Japan regarding inter-state reparations claims became firewalls blocking avenues of individual relief and redress.

In the case of the American ex-POWs, their campaign for compensation received a boost in early 1999 when a California Superior Court ruled that a foreign corporation operating in the state of California could be sued there, even if the basis for that claim dated back to WWII. This decision prompted state lawmakers headed by Tom Hayden to establish a legislative framework to permit WWII-era forced labor victims, military and civilian, in their state to deal directly with the companies that profited from the work they performed in captivity. Holmes’s research informed a landmark class action suit in New Mexico against five Japanese companies filed in September 1999 on behalf of 500 former POWs. By showing

the Japanese government’s direct role in doling out POW labor to private companies, this book discredits the pretext that the Japanese government used to turn away ex-Korean comfort women’s grievances and demands—that those abuses were acts of private businesses without formal government involvement. Some of the documents provided in the appendix clearly point to the conflation of government mobilization policy and private-sector business practices in wartime Japan. Therein lies the book’s fundamental limitation and unfulfilled potential. Throughout, Holmes uses a rigid “America vs. Japan” narrative strategy in the tradition of WWII military tales. This narrow formulation obscures, unwittingly to be sure, an important fact: that her heroes—American ex-POWs seeking postwar redress—are a part of a transnational chain of victims and their supporters, including Japanese citizens, who are urging the government in Tokyo to acknowledge more frontally the nation’s grievous colonial past and accept the responsibilities, both moral and material, that its history has accrued. It is in this transnational narrative of activist citizenry in search of a more just peace that the story of these valiant American ex-POWs, too, deserves to be told.

Note

[1]. Linda Goetz Holmes and J. M. Williams, *Four Thousand Bowls of Rice: A Prisoner of War Comes Home* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1993).

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