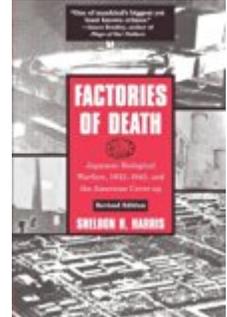


**Sheldon H. Harris.** *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-1945, and the American Cover-up.* New York and London: Routledge, 2002. x + 385 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-93214-1.



**Reviewed by** Lawrence Fouraker

**Published on** H-Japan (February, 2004)

Revisiting the Horrors of Japan's Biological Weapons Program

At Ping Fan, near Harbin, Manchuria, some of the most shocking crimes against humanity of the horrific twentieth century took place. In underground rooms beneath a huge isolated concrete building, scientists and doctors of Unit 731 of the Japanese army conducted biological weapons (BW) experiments on thousands of human subjects, referred to (and dehumanized) as "logs" (*maruta*). Unit 731 doctors intentionally infected their victims with plague, anthrax, cholera, and other diseases, and often cut them open while still alive with no anesthesia in order to examine, in isolation, the effect of the diseases on internal organs. Other "research" involved freezing and thawing the limbs of subjects, including children, or tying them to stakes and exposing them to explosions or various noxious substances and diseases. All of the research subjects died during these experiments or were "sacrificed" afterwards. An unknown number more died when plague and other diseases were disseminated in the Chinese countryside by Japanese researchers.

No American has done more research on Japan's infamous Unit 731 and other wartime BW programs than Sheldon Harris, professor emeritus at California State University, Northridge. Some vindication of the years of work Harris devoted to BW in Japan came not long after this revised edition went to the presses. Four days before Dr. Harris passed away at the age of seventy-four, a Japanese court ruled that the Japanese military had not only experimented with biological weapons but also had used them against Chinese citizens (though it deemed that victims of these weapons could not be compensated).[1]

This revised edition of Harris's book, more than a hundred pages longer than the 1994 original, certainly serves to confirm Japanese BW as the "life work" of this tireless scholar. And yet, while in his preface Harris wrote that "with the passage of time, my understanding of the human tragedy that unfolded in China from 1931 to 1945 because of BW and CW was greatly enhanced," little of this "enhanced" understanding is apparent in this new edition (p. xvii). Harris scrupulously examines an even more voluminous compilation

of sources than in the previous edition, and makes mention of some recent secondary scholarship, notably Herbert Bix's study of Emperor Hirohito's wartime role.[2] Harris has also added some material to his conclusion on chemical warfare. But, as he admits readily, the additional material in this volume does not alter the basic story about BW research found in the first edition (p. xvii). Furthermore, the new material adds to, but does not, in this reader's view, confirm the largely circumstantial evidence for the U.S. "cover-up" Harris claims took place after World War II. The agglomeration of evidence here makes a strong circumstantial case for an American "cover-up." But that case was arguably as strong in the first edition. Either version of *Factories of Death* makes for chilling reading, and is an important contribution to BW scholarship, but this revision does not seem to significantly alter the message or expand on the scholarship of the original.

Early on (in chapter 2) we are introduced to the mastermind of Japan's BW program, a medical doctor and eventually Army Major, Ishii Shiro. We learn that Ishii saw the potential for biological warfare in the late 1920s, and his nihilistic logic is apparent by the early 1930s when he apparently argued that BW was worth pursuing or else the League of Nations would not have banned it (p. 21).

Harris has interviewed Chinese and Japanese who lived through the events described, and has spent tedious hours mining U.S. government and other documentary archives. The detailed information stemming from the extensive research Harris conducted is surely one of the chief strengths of this volume.

On the other hand, Harris is not a scholar of Asian history, and refers to sources in the original languages only in translation (sometimes unofficial and unattributed translations). When it comes to Japanese history, I would argue that Harris relies too heavily upon some secondary sources that are, at best, controversial. For instance, referring

to its author as a "close student" of the Rape of Nanking, Harris relies on David Bergamini's journalistic and unscholarly book as his source for casualty figures (p. 136).[3] Harris also makes use of two rather suspect works on Emperor Hirohito and the imperial family.[4] Probably influenced by this sort of sensationalist source, Harris sometimes descends into a sort of history with adjectives in the place of convincing prose, referring, for example, to "fanatical Japanese racist militarists" (p. 59), the "wily Showa emperor" (p. 349), and the "clever and capricious Prince Konoye Fumimaro" (p. 189).

In general, Harris tends to consider quantity a substitute for quality, as if the sheer volume of footnoted material can compensate for vagueness or even internal contradictions of those sources. This tendency is especially pronounced in the evidence for the "American cover-up" discussed below.

In another source-related issue, Harris relies repeatedly on a translated record of a Soviet trial of accused Japanese war criminals. Towards the end of the book, Harris noted that this "Khabarovsk Trial" was, at least in part, a politicized show trial staged for propaganda reasons, producing a record that he characterizes as a "combination of fact and programmed statements" (p. 318).

This suspect source is the basis for a great many of the details of Harris's narrative. Consider a doubly problematic example: Harris recounts how, on a jaunt to Nanking in 1942, Ishii "prepared an unusual delicacy for local youngsters--chocolates filled with anthrax" (p. 99). Yet then Harris remarks in his footnote that anthrax cannot actually be delivered in this way, and that the witness at Khabarovsk must have had faulty memory. If so, why cite this as a source? In light of the problems with this source about anthrax chocolates, one can only wonder how credible is the reported outcome that Harris also cites: "epidemics broke out in the region shortly afterwards,

much to the delight of the researchers" (p. 99). Without secondary substantiation, I would tend to put all of the Khabarovsk trial information in the questionable category.

The second half of the book, retitled "American Cover-Up" instead of simply "Cover-Up," is where much of the new material in this book resides. Despite his earnest efforts, in my view Harris fails here to deliver a "smoking gun," or proof of a *quid pro quo* deal worked out between American scientists, Occupation officials, and the Japanese who operated Japan's BW program. Without a doubt, some credible evidence suggests that the Japanese who participated in BW research were told by American researchers that they were not interested in charging the Japanese scientists with war crimes. But Harris claims that there was an actual promise of immunity from prosecution in return for secret testimony.

American scientists (who had only in 1943 begun their own BW program at Fort Detrick, Maryland), were certainly interested in the results of the experiments carried out by Ishii and other Japanese BW scientists. Lt. Col. Murray Sanders traveled from Fort Detrick to Japan shortly after the surrender as part of the initial U.S. research into Japan's BW program. Harris calls Sanders "ambitious but naive," which led him to miss the trail leading to Ishii and others (p. 180). Japanese researchers, Harris claims, also took an active role in deceiving Sanders, particularly Lt. Col. Naito Ryoichi (who went on to found the Green Cross drug company) (p. 182). Yet Harris himself is inconsistent and confusing about Sanders, writing initially that Sanders's November 1945 report was "full of contradictions," asserting both that Japan "fostered offensive BW, probably on a large scale," but also that it "constituted an unimportant minor activity" (p. 183). Yet in a later chapter Harris writes that Sander's report "indicated conclusively that Japan was a major BW power" (p. 264).

Harris portrays another investigative mission dispatched by Fort Detrick, under Lt. Col. Arvo T.

Thompson in the spring of 1946, as more hard-hitting, but also deceived by the Japanese (p. 183). It is only in 1947 that the American BW researchers seem to have begun an intensive investigation, led by Detrick's Dr. Norbert H. Fell. (Does not the relatively long delay before the Fell mission itself call into question how important the Japanese BW evidence was to American researchers?) Harris associates Fell directly with the "cover-up," because when Fell was interviewing some Japanese researchers, he apparently told them that "war crimes were not involved" (p. 270). But does that mean that Fell was actually guaranteeing immunity from prosecution, or that he simply wanted to acquire information about BW? The latter seems far more likely. But Harris immediately begins to refer to "Fell's immunity promise" (p. 270).

Although Harris is convinced that a deal was already in place, Ishii and others still wanted written guarantees of immunity before they would speak freely (pp. 274-275). And this they would not receive (or at least Harris provides no indication that they did). Even so, and without any further evidence, Harris claims the deal for immunity was the price of the information Fell acquired in interviews covering two months. "During every one of the meetings between Fell and the experts, he promised them immunity for their deeds" (p. 277). Given the tendency of Harris to overwhelm the reader with detailed source materials, why is not a single example of such a promise of immunity documented here?

Harris notes a further complication: Fell lacked the authority to make an immunity deal with the Japanese scientists. Nor did his direct superior at Fort Detrick, Maj. Gen. Alden Waitt, have such power, which technically rested with President Truman and his secretaries of state and defense. Arguing that cases including a disagreement about the war in Iraq between President Bush and General Scharzkoph "offer sufficient testimony to the fact that in a struggle between military and civilian leaders, the latter prevail," Har-

ris concludes that the immunity decision must have come out of Truman's office, not Fort Detrick (pp. 279-280).

It is not that Harris generally makes statements that transcend the evidence presented; quite the contrary. For the most part, he is a careful scholar not willing to jump to conclusions. Consider, for instance, how he writes, that "it is uncertain today whether [Chief war crimes prosecutor Joseph B.] Keenan's indifference to prosecuting alleged BW criminals was a decision he took independently, or whether it was made due to instructions from higher authorities" (p. 250). Clearly, Harris tends towards believing the latter, continuing that "it is not unreasonable to speculate Keenan may also have been told to drop the issue by either MacArthur or War Department officials in Washington" (p. 250). Although this passage speaks to fairly high standards of scholarship, when it comes to evidence of a "cover-up," it is quite thin gruel indeed.

Another significant problem calling into question the U.S. "cover-up" is that the War Crimes Trial, more than any other part of the "Allied" Occupation of Japan, was truly multinational. How could there be an "American cover-up" that involved the active complicity of the various nations involved in running the trials, including the Chinese and the Soviets? Here, Harris's case is at its weakest. In his conclusion he admits that this is one of the "nagging questions" that remain after so many reports and studies (p. 314).

As a plausible explanation for silence on Unit 731 by both Chinese Communists and Nationalists, Harris comes close to rank speculation, suggesting that their Soviet and American allies may have urged them to be quiet. "Perhaps a better and more plausible explanation overlooked by Chinese scholars is one that suggests that the allies of the Kuomintang-communist warring factions, the United States and the Soviet Union, advised their friends not to raise the issue" (pp. 316-317).

Harris does not devote many pages to the Cold War context that could illuminate some of the complex interactions between the countries involved. Is it not likely that, given the tenseness of the early Cold War climate, especially in Asia, secrecy was a primary reason to not pursue war crime prosecution of Japanese BW research? After all, a public airing of this information could provide dangerous material to the Soviets. Though his emphasis is different, Harris documents the American stress on secrecy (p. 298).

Harris's work confirms that there was a lot of confusion in Occupied Japan. Various U.S. governmental agencies worked at cross purposes. Some expressed surprise that Ishii and others made no condition of immunity when speaking about their human experiments (p. 286). For Harris, this would have been redundant, since he believes that these promises had already been made. But surely it is likely that there were many who were simply not informed, or did not share the interest of American BW researchers.

And Harris describes other U.S. officials who continued to pursue leads that might have brought Ishii and his cohorts to trial for war crimes. Among those investigating Ishii and others were American BW researchers at Ft. Detrick, U.S. military intelligence agents (G2), and investigators from the occupation officials in Tokyo, seeking evidence to prosecute war crimes (p. 288). If this was a conspiracy or a cover-up, it was a very loosely coordinated one. Harris cites considerable material that does not support the case for a cover-up, as when a State Department representative opposed making any promises to Ishii (p. 302).

Yet sometimes Harris simply assumes explanations and motives that are open to question. "In order to prevent Ishii from being subjected to the humiliation of a war crimes accusation, it was determined that day by a Colonel Bethune that 'no information is to be released to any agency as data on subject is classified *top secret*'" (italics in

original, p. 288). Well, the quotation (and many others like it) confirm that the American authorities were concerned with secrecy. It does not seem to me sufficient to demonstrate the motive of preventing Ishii "humiliation" or being charged as a war criminal.

Representatives of the United States probably offered immunity from war crimes prosecution to Japanese BW researchers in return for access to the secret experimental results from Japan's BW program. But does Harris prove that a promise of immunity was made? After repeated trips through the pertinent pages, I do not think so.

Then the War Crimes Trial was over and any need for a cover-up ended with it. Harris argues that there did not seem to have been a big payoff in terms of the quality of information acquired with all of those immunity deals. After all, the Japanese BW data was not very useful: "by this time, Ishii and the others had so hoodwinked American investigators that, despite known evidence to the contrary, the investigators truly believed the Japanese data was of great worth to American security needs" (pp. 301-302). Harris also does not explore how the U.S. BW program evolved in the postwar years, even though at least one recent book argues that the United States employed biological warfare during the Korean War. [5]

Instead of a nine-page epilogue, this revised edition offers an expanded forty-two-page conclusion. Yet apart from some brief remarks about chemical weapons, the new material in this chapter consists of a criticism of the callousness of Americans in the wake of Hiroshima's atomic bombing, and long lists of violations of medical ethics in Japan and the United States. What are readers to make of the juxtaposition of these lists of questionable or unethical medical practices in the United States and Japan? Are we to assume that the two countries are equally culpable for these infringements of their citizen's human rights? By extension, are we supposed to make

some connection with the BW and CW programs of wartime Japan and the "cover-up"? Presumably, but Harris leaves us hanging. Most of the text in the previous epilogue regarding BW matters is reprinted here unchanged.

There are some changes worth noting in the revised edition. For instance, the select bibliography includes some recent material, including television documentaries and videos. Certainly it is apparent that there are a large and increasing number of works of varying quality in print and on the Internet which provide information about Unit 731 and other biological warfare activities of wartime Japan. So far, none of these works deal as exhaustively with the subject of Unit 731 nor make as extensive use of the American archival sources as *Factories of Death*. Some forthcoming studies are promising, notably a translation of Tsuneishi Kei-ichi's 1995 work on Unit 731, soon to be published in Rowman & Littlefield's War and Peace Library series (Mark Selden, editor). Researchers are beginning to obtain access to sources denied to Sheldon Harris, which may bring some even more thoroughly grounded studies than *Factories of Death* in the years to come. This volume is likely to remain an important work on the subject for the foreseeable future. Even if you cannot concur with some of the assumptions and conclusions of Harris, his work is the product of years of careful work and cannot be ignored by any student of the subject of BW in Japan.

#### Notes

- [1]. Paul Lewis, "Sheldon Harris, 74, World War II Historian, Is Dead," *New York Times* (September 4, 2002).
- [2]. Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).
- [3]. David Bergamini, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1971).

[4]. Edward Behr, *Hirohito: Behind the Myth* (New York: Villard Books, 1989); and Sterling Seagrave and Peggy Seagrave, *Yamato Dynasty: The Secret History of Japan's Imperial Family* (New York: Broadway Books 1999).

[5]. Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman, *The United States and Biological Warfare: Secrets from the Early Cold War and Korea* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

**Citation:** Lawrence Fouraker. Review of Harris, Sheldon H. *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-1945, and the American Cover-up*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. February, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8907>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.