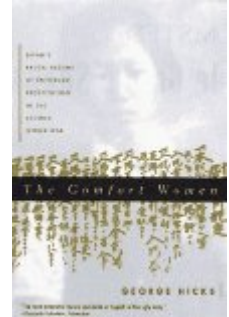


George Hicks. *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995. 303 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-03807-1.



Reviewed by Jeff Roberts

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Imperial Japan was not the first nation to procure women to provide sexual services for its soldiers. As George Hicks notes, "More or less institutionalized means have always been found for catering to this primitive sexual need." Hicks, however, convincingly argues that the Japanese case represents a most ghastly instance of abuse, involving "the legalized military rape of subject women on a scale ... previously unknown in history."

Hicks notes several reasons why this long-dormant issue surfaced only recently. In Asian societies, wherein chastity is esteemed, the comfort women "had everything to gain by keeping silent and everything to lose by making accusations." With prospects for marriage ruined by speaking out, most preferred to keep their ordeal secret rather than push for compensation and justice.

Furthermore, "[t]he task of uncovering the history of the comfort women has thus far been delayed by such factors as the destruction of evidence by the Japanese Armed Forces, the Japanese government's insincere attitude toward war responsibility and social prejudice against comfort

women." The Japanese were all too happy to avoid the issue. Government officials have attempted to deny or shift responsibility in a number of ways—for example, by claiming that the comfort women were volunteers, working for private operators, over whom the military maintained only limited supervision.

Hicks also notes that, with one exception, the victorious Allies did not press the issue. While other atrocities such as the abuse of prisoners of war and the massacre of civilians were dealt with by the Tokyo war crimes trials, all such trials ceased with the outbreak of the Cold War. Only the Dutch took action, on behalf of Dutch women. This lone exception, oddly and improperly conducted in the midst of Indonesia's war for independence, was routinely dismissed by the Japanese as an anomaly, if not an injustice.

Perhaps most important, South Korea, whose women were the primary victims, was both distracted by war and threats thereof and ruled by men who did not countenance demonstrations or protests. In addition Korea's leaders remained un-

willing to challenge Tokyo, at least in part owing to economic dependence.

Comfort women thus began demanding redress in earnest only in the late 1980s and 1990s. By this time, some individuals no longer had any family upon whom they might "cast shame." Furthermore, by then, Asian attitudes toward women's rights had begun to change. Groups and individuals began to link the issue with the problem of sexual oppression of women as a whole. "Simultaneously shocking from the standpoints of morality, feminism and patriotism," the issue could be used to arouse feelings against current practices, including the ongoing sex trade in Asia.

Beginning in the late 1980s, advocates for South Korean comfort women have demanded:

1. That the Japanese government admit the forced draft of Korean women as comfort women.
2. That a public apology be made for this.
3. That all barbarities be fully disclosed.
4. That a memorial be raised for the victims.
5. That the survivors or their bereaved families be compensated.
6. That these facts be continuously related in historical education so that such misdeeds are not repeated.

The Japanese government initially replied by claiming that there was no evidence of a forced draft, and hence no need for apologies, memorials, disclosures or compensation.

Anger at that response prompted many women to come forward and, in some cases, to file suit. Comfort women from other nations joined the South Koreans in protest. All the while, scholars gradually uncovered irrefutable evidence that the Japanese military was behind the running of the comfort stations.

Following more Japanese stalling, the South Korean government added its weight to the struggle in 1992. Several other nations followed suit. In August 1993, the Japanese finally admitted to the use of deception, coercion and official involvement in the recruitment of comfort women. The

apology they gave "was along the lines that the government ... offer[s] its deepest apology and sense of self-reproach to all the women for their irreparable mental and physical suffering and injuries, promising that means of compensation would be studied, and the lessons of history squarely faced."

The most powerful sections of the book are the personal accounts of the comfort women. Intermittently throughout the work, women tell of being violently "deflowered" and then forced to service dozens of men per day in a melange of dehumanizing ways.

One is left aghast at the physical pain the women endured. "I was continuously raw," writes one woman. "Sex was excruciating." Many emerged from their service with physical scars, nearly all of which were inflicted by Japanese officers. While a few managed to injure their tormentors in kind, "one forms the impression that many clients may have preferred this kind of sado-masochistic drama to tame submission."

Sadism is a recurring theme of the women's stories, along with the blatant abuse of force, as in the following example:

As I lay there naked on the bed ... he slowly ran the sword over my body ... He played with me like a cat plays with a helpless mouse ... He threw himself on top of me ... he was too strong.... To me, this brutal and inhuman rape was worse than dying.... The night was not over yet, there were more Japanese waiting ... this was only the beginning.

Beyond the damaged hips, the crippled legs, abdominal scars, broken bones, ruptured eardrums and missing teeth, came even more devastating psychological trauma. One woman speaks of her inability to "relinquish her fear of sex and hatred of men, which extends even to ... her grandson." "I just hate all men and I hate sex." Others have a different focus for their rage: "I was to be stripped of every shred of pride and dignity ... how I hate the Japanese!" "Cannot hate them enough" says another comfort woman, who was

seized from her family on the very eve of her wedding.

The anguish they have endured has been worsened by the fact that the victims could not find release in an open acknowledgement of the wrong done to them. A former Filipina comfort woman, now a grandmother of twelve, stressed the need for justice: "Our lives were wasted by the Japanese. We were treated like animals. Japan should at least say that it is sorry."

Curiously, many Japanese right-wing organizations have responded to even vague apologies with intense venom. They claim that Japan was not responsible for the war, that their actions were not lawless by the standards of the day, and that human rights were denied to all under wartime conditions. The present stir, many have claimed, is economically motivated to put pressure on Japan.

Such responses alert one to another reason why this issue must be pursued, beyond the fact that this is a war crime gone unpunished. Japan has too often attempted to cover up, or has failed to inform and educate young Japanese, on the less heroic aspects of the war. Overall there is a pervasive taboo on discussion of the war, giving one an appearance of "national amnesia." The comfort woman issue "raises afresh the question of Japanese reluctance to acknowledge wartime atrocities." What is needed is "not only apology and compensation, but proper understanding of history by all Japanese."

In one paragraph that may best sum up the reasons to pursue this issue, the Comfort Women Problem Resolution Council of South Korea concluded: "Even among the war crimes committed by Japan, the comfort women issue involved the most inhuman, atrocious national crimes, unparalleled in the world. We have consistently demanded that the concealed truth of the matter be brought to light and that apology and compensation be made to the victims. This is a move designed to restore the human rights denied the

comfort women. It also aims to correct the distortions in the history of Korean and Japanese relations and to sound an alarm bell to the world so that such war crimes are not repeated."

Hicks offers overwhelming evidence to support his criticisms of Japanese policies. He is more ambiguous, however, in discerning this example from other historical cases of military prostitution. Hicks is certainly correct to note that after the war, American soldiers claimed from some comfort women "the same sort of service their Japanese counterparts had." He also justifiably notes a "link between the sexual activities of the Japanese Armed Forces and that of the American Occupation Force as two sides of the same coin--the exploitation of women."

Hicks might do well, at times, clearly to note the differences as well. Consider the following: Scholars of the Holocaust, by way of comparison, distinguish that event from many other examples of genocide by noting the scope and scale of the deprivations, and the extent of involvement of modern bureaucracies in the business of torture and murder. It would seem that the Japanese case similarly extends well beyond other historical examples of military prostitution, and implicates both the Home Government and the Imperial Armed Forces in a variety of ways. Not only was the scale of deprivations extraordinary, but so too was the suffering.

The Imperial Japanese approached military prostitution with some unusual attitudes. Some felt that sexual deprivation made one accident prone, and that sex before battle provided charms against injury. Some even wore "lucky" amulets made with the pubic hair of comfort women.

The system was worsened far less by superstitions, however, than by an intensely hierarchial military that strayed considerably "beyond the rational requirements of discipline." Within the armed forces recruits endured daily abuse in a dehumanizing process designed to secure complete obedience. The comfort women, supposedly

supplied to "relieve tension," endured excessive mistreatment, especially from the officers. They who treated their own men as an inferior species showed even greater contempt for women whom they often regarded as not only sexually but racially inferior. As one officer put it, "They're less than cattle."

There is also no doubt of extensive bureaucratic involvement. Women were procured in one of three ways. Initially recruiters searched for volunteers, finding some among professional prostitutes. More commonly, they deceived young women with promises of cooking, laundry, nursing or waitressing jobs. Finally, women were seized in virtual slave raids.

While some (not all) of the "recruiting" was handled by private operators, the Japanese Armed Forces "controlled the comfort stations in such respects as laying down regulations for them and conducting examinations of venereal disease." There were no uniform standards, but posted regulations covered the hours of opening, the length of each visit, bathing procedures, the required use of condoms (which were washed for re-use in shortage-stricken areas), and the fee scale. The military bureaucracy treated the women as they would handle standard supplies. With the exception of a recurrent concern for decorum (amidst the satisfaction of rather brute "male needs"), they ran the comfort stations in a disturbingly banal, indifferent fashion.

There are minor problems with the work. Given that even educated readers often struggle with Pacific geography, the book could use at least one map. While a bit overgeneral on the background of the war, the last half of the work conversely drags in detail, as Hicks chronicles the increasing attacks of advocates and Japan's gradual admittance of guilt. Finally, on an admittedly trivial note, as a scholar of Afghanistan, I simply must dispute his claim that the Russo-Japanese war was "the first war in which an Asian power successfully took on a Western one."

I also question his rather virulent denunciation of the Allies for their failure to prosecute these war crimes earlier. Not only did the Allies have limited evidence, but, given prevailing attitudes, one must assume that they likely viewed the comfort women as not altogether unusual for a society known for its bathhouses, geishas, and the like. While the emergence of feminism has made these issues explicit today, one must at least wonder how clearly the Allies of the late 1940s could have seen the dividing line between prevailing cultural patterns and atrocity.

While the ongoing recovery of relevant information precludes anyone from calling Hicks' work definitive, he has provided much of value. He has also done well (the book's title aside) to supply a limited degree of balance amidst a subject that begs perjoratives and sensationalism. Hicks notes cases of Japanese soldiers who empathized with the comfort women, including one who objected to the whole process as "no different from relieving oneself in the lavatory." A 73 year-old veteran states: "I think it is appropriate that some kind of compensation should be made to the comfort women." One suspects that upon concluding this work, Hicks' readers will readily agree.

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