

Comfort Women

In 1932 the Japanese military began to institute “comfort stations,” places where women were kept to serve as sex slaves to men in the Japanese military. Lieutenant-General Okamura Yasuji, one of the military leaders who confessed that he helped arrange the creation of comfort stations, said that one of the reasons behind the creation of comfort stations was the high numbers of rapes that Japanese soldiers were committing in China. Building military-run comfort stations drastically decreased the number of reported rape of local women. The first comfort station under military control was in Shanghai, China. Comfort stations soon began being set-up through out the territories occupied by Japan. Tens of thousands of women were brought to the comfort stations from all across Asia. The majority was Korean, not only from the Korean peninsula, but from northern Kyushu as well. Chinese, Japanese, Dutch and Southeast Asian women were also recruited into the ranks of the comfort women. Japanese women brought to the front from mainland Japan most often came on a volunteer basis, many of them were professional prostitutes. The Japanese women who were professional prostitutes often times carried more STDs, however, Japanese women were more desirable to the Japanese men. Because of this the Japanese women were often reserved for officers and kept at safer military bases. Next on the ranks of favored women for sex were the Korean women, then Chinese and last came the Southeast Asian women because their skin tended to be darker. However, after all is said and done, women were in such a high demand that the only thing that mattered was that they had female bodies.

Women were “recruited” to comfort stations in many ways. Although a small portion came willingly, most women were tricked or kidnapped. They military recruited

young girls, from ages ranging to as young as thirteen, by promising them work, either in a factory or military hospital. Kang Duk-kyung, a former comfort woman was told that she was going to Japan for school.

One day my school teacher, who was Japanese, visited my home and asked me if I wanted to go to Japan to further my education and do something “good for the Emperor. I was flattered, but I was too shy to question his motives. So I said yes. When I showed up at the school ground for the appointment at least 50 other girls had gathered there.

After a few months of travel Kang Duk-kyung was taken to a camp and forced to work as a comfort woman, she was only thirteen years old. Most comfort stations were crudely built barracks. Each woman would be assigned a small room with one tatami mat and was forced to have sex with soldiers. Most comfort women received an average of 20-30 men a day. Some women, such as Kim Dae-il, were forced to receive up to 50 men a day. Girls were lucky if they caught the eye of an officer and were taken away from the common barracks. Some kind-hearted officers released comfort women and gave them the papers they would need to return home. Most women taken into the stations, however, were not so fortunate. Comfort women were abused terribly by the soldiers. Not only were they forced to have sex with the soldiers but they were also beaten. Women were kicked, punched, stabbed and even killed either for refusing sex, or for no reason at all. Kim Dae-il recalls a night when a man came to her drunk, “[he] continued drinking in my cubical. He then stabbed the lower part of my body and shouted, “Hey, this senjing (dirty Korean) is dying.” He then screamed “Kono Yaro!” (Damn you!) and stabbed a few more times in my lower abdomen. I became crippled for life from these wounds.” Women also contracted a wide variety of venereal diseases for which they were often

treated by being injected with “#606,” a substance containing arsenic, which had been originally created to treat syphilis. Comfort women were not fed well, and often found themselves on the brink of starvation. Hunger, disease and abuse made the lives of comfort women hell on earth. It broke their bodies and their spirits. Many women died as comfort women, those who have survived describe their lives as ones filled with constant pain and loneliness. Pak Kyung-soon, a former comfort women, now 67 years old said, “even today I cannot stop crying when I remember this past.” The lives of these poor women were destroyed by the Japanese military, but Japan has paid for its crimes?

Directly after the war the United States tried twenty-eight Japanese leaders, both military and political, on charges of crimes against peace and crimes against humanity at the Tokyo Trials of 1945. The accused were brought before a tribunal made of judges from Allied nations. In other places, including Yokohama, approximately 6,000 other Japanese were tried for lesser crimes, such as inhumane treatment of natives or POWs. The results of the Tokyo trials placed the blame on Military leaders. This placement of blame resulted in Japan's lost of rights to use military force against other nations. However, the placement of blame solely on the military was highly debated. The Emperor was taken out of power, but not punished for the actions of his country. Many people say that Japan got off easy, considering the horrible acts they committed during the war. For example, the doctors and scientists involved in medical experimentation were not punished. The United States granted experimenters, such as those in unit 731, immunity in exchange for the data they had collected through their experiments, particularly experiments with germ warfare. The men who actually performed the experiments were also not punished.

Gen. Shiro Ishii, the head of Unit 731, was allowed to live peacefully until his death from throat cancer in 1959. Those around him in Unit 731 saw their careers flourish in the postwar period, rising to positions that included Governor of Tokyo, president of the Japan Medical Association and head of the Japan Olympic Committee. Unfortunately for the victims, the human medical experimentation will not be re-evaluated in the foreseen future. The plights of the comfort women have been one aspect of Japan's war crimes that has been revisited again and again. In 1848 the Dutch government held trials for the war criminals who had enslaved approximately 100 Dutch women as comfort women. The trials were held in Dutch Indonesia and were not highly publicized outside of the Dutch community. Of the accused Japanese officers, two committed suicide, one was sentenced to death and eight were given sentences from seven to twenty years in prison. Two officers were acquitted and medical examiners that had examined the comfort women were given light sentences of up to two years. These trials were, however, only for officers connected with the sex slavery of Dutch women. It wasn't until many years later that Korean women began to come out and share their stories. The Korean government did not press any charges against the Japanese government for the wartime institutionalization of comfort women. In May of 1990, after a few publications telling the stories of former comfort women had caught the public's attention, several Women's Associations from Korea made a trip to Japan to issue a joint statement regarding the institution of comfort women. In May the issue was addressed by the Japanese Diet however no substantial progress was made. In November, 1990, people from multiple Korean women's associations formed the Korean Comfort Women Problem Resolution

Council, also known as the Council for the Matter of comfort Women. In December the council sent a letter to The Prime Minister of Japan stating their six demands:

1. That the Japanese government admit the forced draft of Korean 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.

In April of 1991 the council received a verbal reply from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul the Japanese replied that, “there was no evidence of the forced draft of Korean women. So no public apology, disclosures or memorial are forthcoming.”⁴ Although this is not a complete recount of accusations against Japan and Japan’s reactions to them, it is clear that since the end of the war Japan has been reluctant to accept responsibility for its actions.

Despite Japan’s published intentions to “liberate” East Asia, World War II was a time of suffering for the people Japan conquered. The Japanese treatment of natives, POWs and women were some of the worst crimes against humanity the world ever has seen. Many of their actions have been covered up, and should be uncovered. The truth about Japan’s actions during World War II must be told so that these atrocities will not happen again.