Comfort women: sexual slavery in the Japanese military during world war II

Yoshimi Yoshiaki; Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, ISBN 0-231-12032-X (Hbk), ISBN 0-231-12033-8 £16.50 (Pbk)

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Iwanami Shoten Publishers, Tokyo, 1995 (Original publication in Japanese; translated from the original by Suzanne O'Brien)

It has been 10 years since Yoshimi Yoshiaki's *Comfort Women* was published in both Japanese and English translation and the issue of sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II began to receive wide public attention internationally as well as in Japan. Since then, dozens of monographs and even more articles have been written on the issue, and the debate about the sexual slavery system, the Japanese military's conduct, and the Japanese government's responsibility then and now has continued in academic, political, and broader public circles to this day. Yoshiaki's book and the Center of Japan's War Responsibility in Tokyo, of which he is a founding member, continue to force the Japanese public as well as Asians formerly under Japanese colonial rule to reconsider their respective official accounts of 20th-century history.

In six chapters and a conclusion, the author lays out the course and conditions of the establishment of the military comfort station system (chapter 1), Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia and the Pacific (chapter 2), testimonies of comfort women and recollections of soldiers (chapter 3), a description of the lives comfort women were forced to live (chapter 4), the legal ramifications of the comfort women system according to international law and their absence from war crime trials (chapter 5), and the conditions after Japan's defeat (chapter 6). Overall the book traces the trajectory of Korean, Chinese, Thai, Indonesian, Japanese and other Asian girls and very young women who were forced into sexual slavery and suffered the after effects of diseases, injuries, trauma and social discrimination on account of having been made comfort women for the rest of their lives.

In contrast to the long-held Japanese government's stance according to which civilians were in charge of providing the military with *prostitutes*, Yoshiaki's findings effectively show that the military administration had full control of the rounding up and distribution of girls and women who were classified as 'military comfort women' in the Imperial Army and as 'special essential personnel' in the Imperial Navy. The Japanese military considered the establishment of military comfort stations essential to maintaining military discipline and to motivating soldiers to follow orders unconditionally.

Yoshiaki's account opens up the issue when he addresses the question of whether the Japanese comfort station system was in any way different from other military establishments' systems all over the world during World War II or different from the comfort station system that was established for the US occupation troops in postwar Japan. He suggests that it was different, but perhaps only in terms of degree of organization and brutality rather than in its nature. The British army in North Africa and India, the US army in China, and the German army throughout Eastern Europe established comfort stations for their respective troops. Yoshiaki, however, suggests we can draw a line between systems that have been established and promoted by the upper echelons of a military administration such as Japan's and others which have been installed locally without the knowledge of a central military command; he draws another line between systems that forced minors and other very young women into sex work for the military and others that relied on volunteers who had worked mostly as prostitutes before their recruitment into comfort stations.

Despite former comfort women's enormous suffering during and after World War II, it is not their plight *per se* that makes these questions remain powerful in present-day political discourse. In Japan, they touch upon the conduct of the Imperial military, Japan's war responsibility and war crimes and, perhaps most enduringly, the current Japanese government's inclination to compensate these women and their families – something the government refuses to this day despite frequently recurring protests in China and South Korea and the fact that the number of surviving comfort women is rapidly decreasing. Worldwide, these questions alert us to the continuing enormous victimization of women by military organizations at times of war or peace despite the increasing integration of women into the military. Hence Yoshiaki's book remains a must-read for students and scholars with an interest in questions of gender and violence, military-societal relations, and the militarization of sex and sexuality.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400266

Third-wave feminism: a critical exploration

Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford, editors; Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke/New York, 2004, ISBN 1-4039-1821-X £55.00 (Hbk)

In their succinct introduction, Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford emphasize their desire to offer a critical exploration of third wave feminism, considering its complexities, possibilities and limitations. Their project is vital,