

# ***Japan's Gestapo: Murder, Mayhem, and Torture in Wartime Asia,*** **by Mark Felton**

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*Japan's Gestapo: Murder, Mayhem, and Torture in Wartime Asia*, written by Dr. Mark Felton, first published by Pen and Sword Military in the UK and now available in the United States through Naval Institute Press, is a bleak and disturbing historical narrative describing an intelligence institution—and indeed, perhaps mankind—at its worst, tracing the activities of and particularly the atrocities committed by the Kempeitai, the military and secret police of the Japanese empire, in the buildup to and during World War II.

The book's structure is partly categorical and partly chronological. The first chapter lays out a brief description of the origins, structure, and eventual rise of the Kempeitai. It additionally sets the international and domestic historical context of Japanese militarism and the ascent to power of the Imperial Way Faction, the ultranationalist, fascist political doctrine he claims the Kempeitai and the rest of the Imperial Japanese army followed. The second chapter outlines a general description of the methods and types of torture used by the Kempeitai that appear throughout the book in myriad shades and versions. The rest of the book is generally organized into chapters centered on either specific categories of victims of the Kempeitai or on specific incidents; topics covered include, but are not limited to, treatment of Allied POWs in Japanese slave labor camps, the consequences of an Allied guerilla attack on the population under the control of the Japanese, comfort women, Unit 731 (a Japanese organization in Manchuria that used live test subjects to conduct horrific chemical and biological experiments), and various other victim groups. Later chapters deal with consequences of Japan's impending defeat on Allied POWs during the final days of the war. The final chapter describes the ways in which a large percentage of the Kempeitai managed to escape after the war without suffering consequences for their actions, and additionally addresses the Japanese government's historic unwillingness

to talk about the atrocities committed by their military—including the Kempeitai—before and during the war. The chapters are vaguely chronological in that the topics covered in the first several chapters take place in the first part of the war, while later chapters deal with problems that arose later in the war, but the overall layout is primarily categorical, and on several occasions the events described in one chapter reappear in or reflect the events of another.

In describing the behavior of the Japanese military and intelligence complex in World War II, this book deals with an issue that is desperately important and has unfortunately been covered up, ignored, and overlooked for a number of years. A thorough understanding of both the facts of the Kempeitai's behavior during the war and of the ways in which many of the guilty were allowed to escape without consequences is an important chapter in Japan's history that must, even if it is uncomfortable, be understood and dealt with by scholars of intelligence and security studies and by those who study Japan—and eventually by the Japanese themselves. On this front, *Japan's Gestapo* addresses a number of incredibly important issues, and Felton is a truly masterful writer; the book is beautifully written, and the prose is incredibly compelling in spite of the uncomfortable and at times disturbing subject matter with which it deals. Throughout the book Felton peppers his facts, figures, and historical descriptions with narrative-style prose, and the result is a very engaging read. If a reader is simply looking for a narrative detailing the depths of human cruelty or for a laundry list of war crimes committed by the Japanese during World War II, *Japan's Gestapo* certainly offers a plethora of horrifying anecdotes.

That being said, this book is not recommended to any reader who wishes to gain insight beyond a visceral sense of the historic wrongdoing of the Japanese. The book barely makes a claim of objectivity, and the vitriol that permeates the book—vitriol directed not only at the crimes committed by the Kempeitai during the war but also at the Japanese people as a whole—casts doubt on the entirety of his work. Although Felton occasionally attempts to explain the behavior of the Kempeitai, he very rarely offers concrete causal explanations for their behavior. For example, previous explanations offered for the behavior of the Japanese imperial army have discussed structural reasons for the forced sexual slavery of the comfort women, the differing cultural norms resulting in mistreatment of POWs, or the ways in which Japan's international experience in the years leading up to the war combined with the cultural legacy of the Meiji Resto-

ration to contribute to the buildup of the sense of Japanese superiority and purity. Felton, on the other hand, seems content to chalk the cruelty and inhumanity of the Kempeitai up to something wrong with the Japanese psyche. There is no “clash of cultures” within the narrative presented by this book; rather, cultures and their adherents are simply fundamentally good or evil.

There is no question of ambiguity—nearly every American or Englishman portrayed in the book is spoken about in glowing terms (“heroic” and “brave”), while the Japanese are described almost unilaterally as sadistic, cruel, and paranoid. The language Felton uses to describe the Japanese harkens back to the anti-Japanese propaganda put out by the Allies during World War II, most of which was blatantly untrue (John W. Dower examines the ways in which Allied wartime propaganda exaggerated or fabricated Japanese cultural and psychological traits—including so-called Japanese sadism and “military paranoia,” both of which Felton references more than once—in his book *War without Mercy*).<sup>1</sup> Throughout the entire book, the only two Japanese people Felton has even vaguely kind words regarding are described as being an Anglophile and a Christian, respectively. No one—not even the Japanese civilians on the home islands *today*—is portrayed as being both a good person and distinctly Japanese.

What may very easily be interpreted as Felton’s abhorrence of “the Japanese” as a group, rather than simply the military and secret police, vacillates from the strange (for example, his explanation that the comfort women were drafted into sexual slavery because prostitution was well organized and open in Japan)<sup>2</sup> to the bizarre (“It reveals a truly bizarre and sadistic streak rooted in the Japanese character—similar in many ways to the present delight in ritual humiliation and torture to be found in many modern Japanese game shows on television.”)<sup>3</sup> to the inhumane and insensitive (of particular note is his description of the annual memorial to the thousands of civilians who died as a result of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as a “nauseating ceremony”).<sup>4</sup> His language is likely to alienate any reader with any positive connection with Japan. Unfortunately, his argument is weakened by this open and vitriolic hatred—academics who study Japan, Japanese policymakers, and the Japanese people themselves truly *need* to understand, accept, and learn from the information he presents, but he is likely to alienate these readers with his clear bias.

In many ways, this book represents a missed opportunity. The Kempeitai were a military-security organization that was allowed

to go incredibly wrong, and the memory of the cruelty of the behavior of its members continues to have long-term and far-reaching consequences for the Japanese, particularly in Asia. An examination of the development and organization of the Kempeitai, as well as the reasons for its rise to power and for the cruelty of its methods, should be able to offer some insights into questions of ethics in intelligence gathering today. How far is it ethical for an interrogation to go before it is too far? In what ways can organization of institutions affect the intelligence-gathering methods considered acceptable by intelligence officers? Who determines accountability in situations of national crisis? How can the loss of central civilian control of military and intelligence forces be dealt with, and what are the possible consequences of this loss? How can a country deal with and take responsibility for historical and wartime acts of which it is not proud? All of these ethical questions are implicitly brought up at the beginning of the book. Felton does not address any of them, however; his section on the development of the organization is woefully short and amounts to an abbreviated version of the information that may be found on Japanese militarization in any introductory college-level Japanese history textbook. Felton instead opts to spend the majority of his time and energy spinning a long and grotesque narrative of Japanese wartime atrocities.

It cannot be stressed enough that the information Felton presents in *Japan's Gestapo* is incredibly important; people with an interest in Japan and in understanding how an intelligence-security organization can go so wrong *must* be willing and able to absorb, accept, and take lessons from Japan's wartime history. The story of the behavior of the Japanese military in World War II raises any number of questions about the Japanese (for example, how can a country capable of such atrocities have then gone on to uphold without amendment a "no-war" clause written into its constitution long after the end of the American occupation?) and about the ways in which organizations established to safeguard security and collect intelligence can go horribly wrong (e.g., what was it about the Kempeitai—or the Japanese government's control or lack of control of it—that allowed the atrocities committed to occur?). Felton's book, however, addresses none of these questions, ignoring Japan's recent half century of peace and not addressing any questions of the inevitable ethical dilemmas that arise when attempting to run intelligence-gathering operations in times of crisis. He opts instead to simply describe in detail the horrors committed during World War II by the Japanese. Instead

of offering possible pathways to understanding or improvement, he concludes that Japan has never apologized for its behavior in the war and never will. As a reference work and a cautionary tale of how horribly an organization can go astray, the book is invaluable. As an aid in understanding what happened and why—and how future horrors can be prevented—it is sadly inadequate.

## Notes

1. John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
2. Mark Felton, *Japan's Gestapo: Murder, Mayhem, and Torture in Wartime Asia* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), 100.
3. *Ibid.*, 148.
4. *Ibid.*, 208.

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