

Men to Devils, Devils to Men: Japanese War Crimes and Chinese Justice

By Barak KUSHNER

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Reviewed by Jonathan BULL

Hokkaido University, Japan

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The jacket photograph of Barak Kushner's book, taken from *Life* magazine, July 14, 1947, shows a truck laden with people emerging from the gate of Shanghai prison and crawling through a vast watching crowd. At first glance the details of what is happening are unclear. Also, the photograph used on the book cover has a reddish hue that does not exist in the magazine's original monochrome image. These two features of the photograph are suggestive of some of the larger themes that the author tackles in his important account of "what happened in China after the war and how a political equilibrium was attained in the face of a complete breakdown of the Japanese empire" (p. 3). By analysing BC war crimes trials conducted by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Kushner explores what the Chinese side was hoping to achieve by pursuing suspected Japanese war criminals (and in doing so he does much to clarify the 'what' and 'why' of the *Life* photo). For this reader, the photograph's colouring alluded to the author's forthright message that "imperial Japanese soldiers did commit grievous acts of random violence" and that "such behaviour needs to be concretely and forthrightly remembered when dealing with issues of BC class war crimes." (p. 63) Kushner's choice of extracts from the writings of Japanese veterans leaves the reader in little doubt about the empire's brutal and bloody history.

Using archives in Japan, Taiwan, China, the UK, the US, and France as well as a wide range of secondary literature in Japanese and Chinese, he argues that the KMT and CCP organised war crimes trials for domestic and international audiences. Within China the trials were useful for boosting each party's claim to political power. In particular, in Chapter 4, in a fascinating explanation of the KMT trials he shows some of the complicated manoeuvrings that the party undertook to try to ensure it received post-war Japanese support in its fight against the Communists. This example of how a messy politics of calculation and compromise linked actors across the imperial/post-imperial divide is one of the author's main reasons for arguing that previous historians have focused too much on postwar Japan as primarily an occupied nation under US control. In doing so, they have largely overlooked processes of "de-imperialization" such as the war crimes trials held by former colonies and occupied territories. These processes, Kushner argues, should be "at the very heart of a new transnational understanding of (...) regional history" (p. 321).

As well as making a significant contribution to the literature on the history of the East Asia in the 1940s and 1950s, this book also engages with work on historical memory. The author goes as far as to write that his book is an analysis of "how does an empire memorialize its defeat?" (p. 307). It is on this question that Kushner's analysis is weakest. Critiquing a letter written by the head of the Japanese Christian Association in 1952 who was trying to argue the case for releasing Japanese war criminals, Kushner states that it contains "a mystifying conviction that somehow military behaviour grew blindly from propaganda, rather than involving any individual's decision making" (p. 238). He seems to be arguing that the dominant discourse of wartime should not be allowed as an explanation for why individuals made the choices that they did. Fair enough. However, when Kushner offers his own interpretation of why so many Japanese have such a fuzzy understanding of how to grasp the deeper meanings of the war crimes trials, he bases his claims overwhelmingly on the popular appeal of one film: *I Want to Be a Shellfish* (*Watakushi wa kai ni naritai*). How far one film can be

invoked as an adequate explanation for how millions of Japanese across almost seven decades have come to understand the place of BC war crimes trials in postwar history seems to be questionable – unless, that is, one accepts claims about hegemonic narratives largely determining actions and ideas.

Nevertheless, these reservations about how the author approached the subject of postwar historical memory in Japan do not detract from what is a substantial addition to the work on how the aftermath of the Japanese empire shaped the Asia of today.