

Unit 731 and Biological Warfare during the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1931-1945

Steven Lin, History

Faculty Advisor: Professor W. Miles Fletcher, History



Project Background and Goals

The goal of this project is to understand the inner workings of Unit 731, a Japanese military medical team notorious for research on biological warfare during the 1930s and 1940s. I sought to illustrate the motivation of the Japanese for conducting the most comprehensive BW program ever to have existed. In a larger sense, Unit 731's story is also telling of the importance of ethics in science. By looking at how Unit 731 was conducted and ultimately failed, I analyzed how personalities, logistics, and unconceivable experiments (one of the best documented cases of human experimentation) played important roles in this government operation.

Primary declassified military documents obtained from the National Archives and the Library of Congress were critical for this SURF project, as much of the topic remains controversial to this day. Since Unit 731 was an organization shrouded in secrecy, this SURF also became a practice in interpreting how to work with conflicting and incomplete records.

Project Results

I examined two aspects of documents related to Unit 731. First, I conclude that the lack of a governing body in its scientific research led to poor quality control and hence its failure to produce effective biological weapons. In addition, an advisory body independent of the scientists was never established, allowing no possibility for the questioning the ethics behind Unit 731's research. Second, I demonstrate how dominating personalities in scientific research must be downplayed by explaining the various ways in which Unit research focus could have been shifted to accommodate more rational, immediate wartime goals. Finally, I integrate both aspects together briefly to discuss the continuing need for strict scientific review boards especially in the medical fields, despite all its inefficiencies.