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Pacific Terrorism: An Exchange on War and Terror

by Robert G. Kane and Mark Selden

Japan Focus does not as a rule post reviews. Because of the centrality of the issues of terrorism in the Asia-Pacific that it addresses, we are posting Robert G. Kane's review and a response. We hope to extend discussion of these themes in the future. GMc

By Robert G. Kane

With a response by Mark Selden

Mark Selden and Alvin Y. So, eds. War and State Terrorism: The United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century. War and Peace Library Series. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004. 304 pp. Notes, index. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-7425-2390-X; $29.95 (paper), ISBN 0-7425-2391-8.

The potentially powerful corrective offered in this provocative book to the contemporary U.S. political and media definition of "terrorism" calls to mind one of Mark Selden's editorial efforts from a comparable time. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Selden was among a group of young Asian studies specialists who pointedly challenged the then prevailing Cold War premises that were the basis of dominant American perceptions of and official policies toward Asia. Whereas McCarthyite censure had largely silenced criticism of the U.S. government by more senior scholars in the field (lest one appear to be "un-American"), this group argued against an
unexamined acceptance of American benevolence as being at the heart of American intervention across Asia since the end of World War II.

Their alternate analysis instead compellingly stressed the destructiveness of American military actions, first in Korea and, more pressingly given the period, the ongoing war in Vietnam. Here, a key intent was to dispel Cold War binaries in which the United States grudgingly projected its power overseas simply to defeat Chinese or North Vietnamese aggression. These Asianists also took aim at seemingly more benign American initiatives such as the Occupation of Japan or the study of China in high schools and universities in the United States. In both cases, the emphasis was squarely on the human costs of the exercise of American power and the hypocrisy of American perceptions of self and Asia. Despite its now obvious analytical flaws, the book was certainly a significant intellectual contribution to the study of Asia in the United States, at the very least due to its explosion of a distorted "us-versus-them" dichotomy.[1]

The volume under review attempts to aim a similarly bright spotlight at the highly destructive behavior of states, particularly the United States and Japan, in Asia from the late-nineteenth century to the present. While it necessarily retraces some familiar terrain in the process, the major value of the work is its thought-provoking theoretical framework. As the title suggests, the authors seek to clarify the
differences between acts of war, in which states use violence against other states with the focus on military targets, and state terrorism, and those in which states employ violent means against civilians, either at home or abroad, despite their official acceptance of treaties, edicts, or laws that specifically protect such populations. The distinction is essential, the book rightly argues, given the relentless erasure of the line dividing civilians and combatants that has characterized the conduct of war during the "long twentieth century," especially in Asia. Few studies so far have attempted to unravel and compare the two ideas, and the authors intend to bring the same scholarly rigor to this nexus as others have to the study of war, crime, genocide, and the much more widely known terrorist acts in opposition to states (pp. 4-6).

Like its iconoclastic predecessor, this collection of essays dissects the "heroic narratives of victors," contending that any state, including even democracies in wartime, might commit acts of terrorism, not just so-called rogue states or unscrupulous individuals (pp. 7, 3). Examples thus include not only Japanese atrocities in China in the 1930s and 1940s. They also categorize as state terrorism such U.S. actions as the massive bombing campaigns against Japan, Korea, and Vietnam during the Pacific, Korean, and Indochina wars of the mid-twentieth century, in addition to the actual or threatened use of nuclear weapons against those three countries as well as China at certain points in the Cold War (pp. 10-11). Further, the argument goes so far as to suggest that the United States might also have been complicit in acts of genocide through, for example, its diplomatic support of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and Indonesian
intervention in East Timor between 1975-79. Perhaps, they posit, the United States itself committed that ultimate evil against both Korea and Vietnam, just as Japan may have done so in China from 1931 to 1945 (pp.12). In short, the "record of Asian wars suggests that the range, scope, and frequency of U.S. state terrorist actions have had no rival since World War II" (p. 13).

The narrative of the American record begins with Imperial Japan in two interrelated ways. First, the editors argue that the first fifty years (1895-1945) of the brutal long twentieth century can be simply reduced to a time of "mounting conflict" between the Japanese and American empires, a claim which ignores both areas of real mutual interest in bilateral relations and the vicissitudes of the period, while giving an air of inevitability to the Pacific War (p. 1). Whatever its complex causes, that clash in its last stages experienced an escalation of acts of state terrorism in excess of all others to that point. American airpower obliterated Japanese imperial ambitions, but also what remained of the restraints against attacking non-combatant populations, particularly through its nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (p. 2).

Second, while Japan's acts of state terrorism ended in 1945, those of the United States continually expanded as it insinuated itself into power vacuums in postwar Asia. In this sense, the United States can be seen as the heir of the Japanese empire, at least initially in Korea and Southeast Asia. American ambitions, however, over time proved much More expansive. For the authors categorize the commencement of subsequent U.S. intervention in the Persian Gulf in 1991, Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003 as state terrorism in one form or another (pp. 7, 16). Two additional major concerns of this book are the official justifications for state terrorist acts and examples of groups that have achieved some degree of success in constraining state terrorism. In regard to the former, specific points include appeals to the greater good, such as to liberate peoples from communism in Southeast Asia; the use of religion to create the impression of the state waging a battle against a demonic enemy, as seen in George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech; dehumanization of another people, as exemplified in the acrimonious rhetoric of the Pacific War; and presenting

instances of state terrorism as legitimate acts of war (pp. 12-13).

Closely related to the latter two points are international law and the unique freedom of action hegemonic states in particular enjoy to define and enforce standards of global behavior. The United States, in other words, has been able to organize binding war crimes trials against Japan and Nazi Germany, while no such international tribunal with binding powers has been created to evaluate American actions in Korea or at My Lai, for example. In the post-Soviet world, the studies contend, even fewer restraints exist to hold back the United States, thereby making possible the recent war against Iraq (pp. 14-15). The volume closes with two essays about past social movements in Japan and the United States that arguably were involved in tempering the nuclear arms race, in the hope that their examples might also forestallfuture "adventurous wars that will bring to new heights the uses of state terrorism" (p. 17).

In post-September 11 American society, claims that the United States has itself engaged in terrorist acts, let alone is the worst offender in some regard, is certain to elicit fierce rebuttals from certain quarters or be dismissed out of hand. Yet, the authors have clearly delineated their definitions and offer a robust challenge to official interpretations of the Iraq War and its place in the larger context of the so-called War on Terrorism in much the same manner as the earlier volume did with Vietnam and the Cold War thirty-five years ago. The theory is promising in that regard, particularly as a means to educate American students in the legal and moral dimensions of international affairs.

Still, a close reading of the essays raises a major concern: how far might its parameters be pushed before the term "state terrorism" loses its meaning? How does one factor in intentionality, for example, or, put another way, what distinguishes state terrorism from a bad official decision with horrific repercussions? Moreover, in adding complexity to our understanding of terrorism in general it is essential that the United States itself not appear as a straw man. Analyses of its actions in this vein must, then, sufficiently incorporate the disparate motives, politics, ideological inclinations, and other variables associated with a multiplicity of American policymakers over time. In brief, how precisely do the authors define "the United States," ostensibly the leading purveyor of state terrorism since 1945? The international contexts in which the United States (and other great powers) have operated must also be considered in order to make the claims compelling. Unfortunately, in these areas and in the overall cohesiveness of the essays, this worthy preliminary attempt to extend the definition of terrorism falls a bit short.

The two essays that focus exclusively on Japan, the primary state terrorist in Asia in the first half of the long twentieth century, and Nationalist China, respectively, could easily stand alone. Utsumi Aiko provides a succinct account of the racism inherent in Japanese prisoner of war policies between 1931 and 1945. In particular, she adds an important dimension to the study of Japanese identities by pointing out official justifications for the preferential treatment received by "white" prisoners relative to their Asian counterparts. The essay as a whole would be a valuable supplementary reading for courses on modern Japan or the Asia-Pacific War. But apart from its links to the wartime abuses of international law, it offers no explicit explanation of what this example contributes to the study of state terrorism.

Diana Lary, on the other hand, reveals the extent to which the approach might reasonably be applied elsewhere. Her essay details a lesser known horror of the China-Japan War (1931-45) in which the Nationalist Chinese government deliberately breached the dikes of the Yellow River to stop further Japanese military advances, killing hundreds of thousands of its own civilians. Since the state in this case used "an integral aspect of civilian life, a river, as a weapon of war," Lary argues, an act akin to the use of airplanes by terrorists on September 11, then this event qualifies as state terrorism (p. 144). Yet, as the definition of the term makes clear, what in fact meets criteria is the systematic state violence directed against civilians of the Soviet gulags, for example (p. 4). Much more compelling, then, is Lary's subsequent assessment that the civilians who suffered the flood "were the victims of the inadvertent consequences of a Chinese military strategy, of a catastrophic reaction to a brutal invader" (p. 153). Indeed, there really can be no such thing as "inadvertent state terrorism" within the definition laid out in the introduction, which requires an intent to terrorize on the part of the state in question. What the essay clearly offers, rather, is further evidence of the criminal callousness of Nationalist rule in China.

The two essays that include comparative analysis of Japan and the United States by Brian Victoria and Mark Selden are more closely aligned with the stated objectives of the book. Victoria examines the role of religion in national expansion and modern wars, linking the contemporary lexicon of "holy war" to past Japanese and American examples. In part, he reprises his engaging previous book-length analysis of the ways in which Zen Buddhism was distorted to support Imperial Japan's "holy war" in eastern Asia during the 1930s and 1940s.[2] The essay also outlines how Christianity served as "the handmaiden of the state in providing moral and spiritual support and an ethical rationalization for U.S. wars" in the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (p. 114). At the very least, Victoria tries to show how religion was a "force multiplier" in these Asian conflicts in that it raised combatants' "commitment and self-sacrifice" (p. 115). Certainly there is something to this, particularly when considered in a finite case such as Imperial Japan in World War II. But since he covers a much longer era for the United States, he might also consider the differences over time in the public "Christianity" of, say, Jimmy Carter, on the left, as opposed to the Christian Right of Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush. This line of analysis will expose the politics of the pronouncements of faith, and can also be applied to such domestically contested words as "freedom" and "democracy," for which U.S. soldiers and society also have been willing to wage war.

Selden skillfully develops the ideas of the introduction, with a primary focus on the paradox that civilian populations in the long twentieth century "became targets of war on an unprecedented scale" despite extensive efforts to construct an international law regime designed to protect them (p. 19). Of equal concern here is situating contemporary affairs in a proper historical context. Selden, in other words, sees the "dominant discourse on terror in the post-9/11 world," i.e., groups like Al Qaeda attacking innocent people, as central to attempts by the George W. Bush administration to define "a new hegemonic world order subsequent to Soviet collapse" (p. 23). By understanding past Japanese or U.S. atrocities--such as the Nanjing Massacre, comfort women, and Unit 731 at the hands of the Japanese, or the American proclivity since World War II to obliterate the cities and civilian populations of its adversaries through air power, perhaps "a more equitable human rights regime" might develop, one that could also contain the United States, the world's "single ruthless superpower" (pp. 23, 36). Again, while generally convincing, this study also might benefit from a deeper examination of why disparate U.S. administrations have made and continue to make the decisions they have, and why U.S. societies over different decades have consistently supported such destructive behavior.

A related point can be made about the erudite, if at times scathing, article about U.S. air power and nuclear strategy in Asia since 1945 by Bruce Cumings. As he has done elsewhere, Cumings offers a powerful indictment of U.S. immorality in regards to nuclear weapons, in terms of their use against an already defeated Japan.[3] A more pressing concern, however, is the continuous nuclear coercion that successive American administrations have utilized against North Korea right up to the present. Here, his main intent is to refute the mass media and official depiction of the United States as an innocent victim of North Korean treachery. In fact, he argues, standing the conventional view on its head, since the end of the Korean War, the United States, through its aggressive air and nuclear strategies, has had a profound impact on North Korea's strategic choices (p. 64). And since 1950, "the main threat of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula has come from the United States, the only power to ever use nuclear weapons" (p. 82). It is certainly hard to disagree with that statement, but how might we move beyond an either/or dichotomy and restore greater North Korean agency to the analysis?

The above suggestions can be considered in light of points made in the essay by Richard Falk on humanitarian law. First, Falk

stresses the "pathological dualism" present in the minds of a majority of Americans, who simultaneously embrace the contradictory images of an innocent United States that acts solely out of self-defense or idealism, and one all-too-willing to pound its enemies into the ground (pp. 44-45). He, too, unequivocally sees the now familiar litany of American atrocities against Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Korea, and Vietnam as clear instances of state terrorism. Rather than presenting the United States as a totalized entity, however, Falk's account includes reference to specific people who did, at least, envision a more humane world, including leaders like Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy (though their actual policies often undermined it). He also recognizes that Americans, at times, have indeed defended the values of liberal democracy, both in contrast to European colonialism and "against the totalitarian assaults of fascism and Stalinist communism" (pp. 43-44). We also see the international context of different periods factored in to the equation when, for example, Falk notes the constraints placed upon the scope of potential U.S. actions against North Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, by China and the Soviet Union (pp. 55-56). This nuanced approach allows Falk to argue convincingly that the Bush administration's resort to preemptive war against Iraq in 2003 represents a dangerous shift in U.S. foreign policy, not simply bad business as usual.

While their links to state terrorism are not exactly clear, the essays by Peter Dale Scott and Ben Kiernan delve into significant areas usually found only on the fringes of the master narrative of U.S. intervention in Asia since 1941. Scott, in particular, presents a fascinating and richly detailed speculative essay on the nexus of oil, narcotics, and U.S. wars in Asia and Latin America. Sure to enhance reading lists for classes on Asia and the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy, or Asian history in general, the chapter brings to light a crucial example of "deep politics," or factors that definitively impact policy formation but remain unacknowledged, in this case the consistent U.S. utilization of drug proxies in fighting and funding conflicts that Congress and taxpayers would not pay for. The desire for oil and other natural resources has generally driven this unholy alliance, and Scott is able to tie together such seemingly disparate issues as the wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan; anti-drug trafficking in Colombia; and U.S. support of the Guomindang (GMD) in Taiwan (pp. 171-172). In brief, there is much of interest here, not the least of which is the potential this preliminary line of research has (as documents become available) to uncover the extent to which drug traffickers, for example, financed the activities of Al Qaeda or helped to induce "the anti-Soviet war" in Afghanistan (pp. 175, 179). A key precaution here will be to make sure that the central tension of the Cold War, the U.S.-Soviet strategic rivalry, is not simply subsumed into the concerns of today.

The Kiernan contribution also fleshes out the wages of U.S. intrigue in Asia, specifically its support of the excesses of Suharto in Indonesia and Pol Pot in Cambodia in the 1970s. The major value of the article is its precisely detailed descriptions of the genocide these regimes committed in East Timor and against the Cambodian people, respectively. In relation to the overarching theme of the book, meanwhile, Kiernan suggests more as an aside that American diplomatic support and arms sales make the United States complicit at least in these acts (pp. 212, 225).

Finally, a few words on the essays about the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements in the United States and Japan since 1945. Marilyn Young produces a thoughtful, well-argued retort to Adam Garfinkle and others who claim that the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States either prolonged the war or prevented an American victory (pp. 235-236). She provides a particularly powerful rebuttal to contentions that war protesters were somehow not part of American "public opinion," which she appropriately links to the more recent Bush administration attempts in 2003 (and after) "to read protest against its policies as outside the American political consensus" (p. 236). There is excellent analysis here, and the article is probably the best written of the volume. Still, situating it clearly within the framework of state terrorism would have been helpful, especially along the lines of the probing contribution by Lawrence Wittner.

The latter tackles the plausible extent of the theory right from the start, arguing that if the willful killing of civilians is an act of terror, then two of the "most effective antiterrorist organizations of the postwar era have been the Japanese and American antinuclear movements" (p.251). Besides, he states, the groups have "set limits on nuclear terror by helping to stigmatize nuclear weapons, curb the nuclear arms race, and prevent nuclear war" (p. 251). Still, the examples Wittner uses to support his argument might also be attributed to other factors. For example, Marc Trachtenberg shows that a basic goal of the Kennedy administration in negotiating a limited test ban treaty in 1963 was to stop West Germany and China from developing their own nuclear forces.[4] Might we also discover deeper strategic motives of the George H. W. Bush or Clinton administrations for a comprehensive ban once the documents ofthat time are fully declassified? Also, what role did domestic politics play here and at other times, and did the development of software that can better simulate nuclear explosions have a part in reducing the need for tests (pp. 265)? In short, strategic, political, and practical factors
cannot be easily dismissed, nor can it be proven that the anti-nuclear movements prevented nuclear war.

In closing, a concise conclusion would strengthen the book, especially one that ties together the strong undercurrent of criticism of the George W. Bush administration that flows through many of the essays. Mark Selden, who has well understood the necessity of holding a mirror up to the White House for three and a half decades, is perfectly qualified to do so. One wonders, as well, where the People's Republic of China fits into this story. Surely the excesses of Maoist China, for example, fall well within the parameters of state terrorism. Finally, how far have we come since the Vietnam War in our ability to explain the darkest depths of American actions in Asia? With further refinement of the distinction between atrocity and state terrorism, the theory offered in this engaging work should help us to more precisely compare past complex worlds to our own.

Notes

[1]. Edward Friedman and Mark Selden, eds., _America's Asia: Dissenting Essays on Asian-American Relations_ (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), pp.vii-xviii.
[2]. Brian Victoria, _Zen at War_ (New York: Weatherhill, 1997).
[3]. See Bruce Cumings, _Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations_ (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 35-67.
[4]. Marc Trachtenberg, _A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp.384.

Robert G. Kane, Department of History, Niagara University published this review at H-US-Japan on March 1, 2005. This is a slightly abridged version of the original.

Why State Terrorism?

Mark Selden responds

How are we to locate American and Japanese wars of the twentieth century in relationship to contemporary debates on war and state terror? Robert G. Kane's review raises important issues that illuminate not only U.S. and Japanese war making but contemporary issues of war, peace, power, justice, state terrorism, and international law.

The editors and authors of War and State Terrorism (W&ST) defined state terrorism in a simple and straightforward fashion drawing on a body of international and United States law that emerged with clarity in the wake of the most destructive war in human history,

World War II: "systematic state violence against civilians in violation of international norms, state edicts, and precedents established by international courts designed to protect the rights of civilians."

It is a definition that enables us to cast light on and assess the character of American and Japanese wars of the twentieth century, and to reflect in particular on the Cold War and post-Cold War epoch in which the "war on terror" has emerged as the centerpiece of American, and hence global agendas both international and domestic. It suggests an approach that closely interrogates contemporary U.S. claims that the 9/11 attack is sufficient justification to engage in any response it deems necessary to achieve its ends so long as it proclaims its intention to support the quest for freedom of enslaved peoples while ignoring the human costs imposed on the putative objects of liberation. It also raises questions about the origins and character of state terrorism and helps to refocus the terror question from exclusive preoccupation with shadowy, predominantly Muslim, groups operating at the margins to the workings of the international power system.

Such an approach leaves open a range of issues for assessing what many Americans regarded at the time and since as "the Good War" (World War II), but it draws particular attention to the necessity to carefully assess a range of crimes against humanity committed during that and subsequent wars, by Japan and Germany, to be sure, but also by the U.S. and its allies. These include crimes for which the Tokyo Tribunals convicted Japan, such as the Nanjing Massacre and the treatment of Allied POWs, as well those that the Tribunals ignored, such as the enslavement of the military comfort women and the slaughter of prisoners in tests conducted by biowarfare Unit 731. Most importantly, because most neglected and most pertinent in the new millennium, it places before the bar of justice American practices that the Tokyo Tribunals ruled beyond the pale of consideration: the firebombing of 64 Japanese cities and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, acts that would set the stage for all subsequent U.S. war making, most notably in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War. It provides, too, a lens for judgment concerning subsequent crimes against civilians and prisoners such as the largescale systematic atrocities including torture being committed by U.S. CIA and military forces against Iraqi, Afghan, and other prisoners in U.S. military detention centers and jails around the world. This approach leads us to inquire what eventually led the U.S. from a position as the most eloquent critic of strategic (or terror) bombing as employed by the Nazis and the Japanese, to adopt this as the centerpiece of its war making beginning in early 1945 and continuing with mounting ferocity across the subsequent six decades. Indeed, precisely at the moment that the U.S. led the way in defining war crimes as crimes committed against civilians and noncombatants, it entered on a course that would systematically violate those international norms in the name of a higher freedom.

Kane rightly notes that it was the intention of the authors to draw attention to "the relentless erasure of the line dividing civilians and combatants that has characterized the conduct of war during the 'long twentieth century', especially in Asia" as a means not only for assessing the major Japanese and American wars of the epoch, but also as a means to intervene in contemporary debates concerning terrorism and war. This research has led me to the conclusion that, without ignoring such high profile cases of atrocities as the Nanjing massacre or the Mylai massacre, the critical challenge for researchers interested in Asia and the Pacific lies in exposing the deep structures that define such wars of conquest as Japan's fifteen year China War (1931-45) and U.S. wars in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq. The corollary task is to differentiate the forms and consequences of such acts of state terrorism in relationship to the resources available to these and other nations.

Kane criticizes the editors of W&ST for arguing that "the first fifty years (1895-1945) of the brutal long twentieth century can be simply reduced to a time of 'mounting conflict' between the Japanese and American empires, a claim which ignores the areas of real mutual interest in bilateral relations." The editors are indeed interested in understanding the roots of the U.S.-Japan conflict, including the clash of two rising empires. But we nowhere suggest any such reduction in grasping the U.S.-Japan relationship. Rather, our interest in this book lay specifically in examining and assessing the ways of war of the two powers, in understanding the logic that produced in rather different ways and at different times, widespread violations of the rights of civilians, and in understanding the logic that resulted in a pattern of Japanese war-making throughout the epoch 1895-1945 (but not thereafter) and of American war making that crystallized in World War II but has then been extended in numerous wars and the militarization of American society down to the present. This suggests another important research agenda for the coming years: that is to explain the logic of the shift from a Japan that was perpetually at war throughout the first half of the twentieth century to six decades of peace since World War II while the U.S., for its part, has engaged in perpetual wars both large and small in the course of what has been misleadingly labeled the "Cold War" as well as in its aftermath. Are we entering a new and dangerous cycle now that Japan has sent its troops to support the U.S. war in Iraq and is expanding its military reach throughout the Asia-Pacific, as many of its neighbors fear?

A fair criticism of the book, and of the current state of research, might well be its failure to probe the structural character of the two nations that led them to embark on large numbers of wars with such deadly consequences not only for Asian peoples but for Americans and Japanese. It is a subject central to my present research. It is not the case, however, as Kane suggests, that I view the U.S. as "the heir of the Japanese empire." Rather, I seek to develop an analysis that recognizes the *differentia specifica* of the two approaches to power and hegemony in Asia, past and present. Kane's call for "a deeper examination of why disparate U.S. administrations have made and continue to make the decisions they have" strikes me as an important agenda that will surely challenge researchers in the decades ahead. Japan Focus hopes to continue exploring these questions.

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