

G. I. JOE MEETS GEISHA GIRLS: JAPAN'S POSTWAR POLICIES OF LEGALIZED PROSTITUTION FOR U. S. OCCUPATION FORCES

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The end of World War II left the Empire of the Rising Sun in total destruction, and the United States emerged out of the war ever more invincible. That the actual combat never took place on American shores marked a singularly stark difference from its foes and friends. With its resources and industries kept intact, America's first concern was to "return to normalcy." The end of the war saw 8.25 million men fighting for America, but within a year the number dropped to 1.5 million. The policymakers, therefore, had to strive against the current, as they faced the task of convincing the public of the need to send the occupation troops and to support their actions overseas.

Japan was under a completely different set of circumstances. The termination of the Japanese rule brought forth a bright daybreak to many; the oppressed in colonized areas were finally emancipated and no more acts of outrage were to be permitted, although what was once theirs was now in shattered ruins. On the islands of Japan, too, the end of the war meant no more military dictatorship. To those who endured the layers of bombings and survived the firing squads, however, the days of misery were hardly over. Rather, in the ashes of their homes and over the bodies of their loved ones, the people of the war-torn country continued to struggle for their lives.

The expression "unconditional surrender" made little sense to the Japanese population at large, and it was not until the arrival of the U. S. Occupation Forces that they finally came to face the grim reality—and the ultimate humiliation—of defeat. The Japanese grew indiscriminately distraught over the prospect of "beastly Westerners" coming to occupy the land. Rumors had it that Japanese men would be castrated and forced into labor and that Japanese women would be raped and made into prostitutes, once the American troops arrived. Many chose to flee the cities and crowded the stations in metropolitan areas. As the Japanese fearfully awaited the coming of the troops, their government was to commit itself to yet one more heinous crime against its people: legalized prostitution for U. S. soldiers.

Prostitution exclusively for U. S. soldiers remained in operation for a relatively short period of time of seven months. Of all the parties involved, the Japanese government is particularly responsible for its role in initiating and carrying out the operation. Though little known, this policy that determined the fate of many citizens made a lasting imprint on the postwar Japanese society. That the government was solely responsible for this peculiar institution reflects a particular notion with which Japanese politics has traditionally dealt with sex and gender. After all, it was the country that scouted prostitutes for foreign traders in times of isolation and that snagged women ravaging through towns and villages throughout Asia. Moreover, the enactment of such a policy has profoundly affected the American perspective of Japanese women and men—the former being subservient and sexually available, while the latter dictating and feudalistic. This paper examines the course of events surrounding

legalized prostitution after the war and explores the various implications that the particular policy has inflicted.

Confusion was everywhere in Japan following the imperial declaration of defeat, and the arena of politics was no exception.¹ The wartime administration under Kantaro Suzuki terminated as of August 17, 1945 with the acceptance of unconditional surrender, but its ideology remained as the backbone of the newly formed cabinet. The cabinet under Prime Minister Naruhiko Higashikuni held the maintenance of internal security and ideological standardization as pivotal in its administration. One was that the national polity headed by the emperor should be retained; and the other that the military must be kept under close surveillance so as to avoid any action against the state.

As the cabinet speculated about the reconstruction policies, no member knew exactly what to expect of the occupation forces. It was for that reason that Higashikuni sent a delegation of Navy and Foreign Affairs personnel to Manila, where they found out the more detailed version of the plan for U. S. occupation of Japan. But the news would not reach Tokyo for another week. In the meantime, when Vice Premier Fumimaro Konoe suggested that the sexual services provided for the Allied troops might work in favor of Japan, the remark quickly won the support of the cabinet. As early as August 18, a cable was dispatched from the Bureau of Police within the Ministry of Interior addressed to governors of prefectures across the country.

The cable, titled "Leisure Facilities on Occupied Grounds," marked the first step toward legalizing prostitution for the U. S. troops.² Each district police station was responsible for providing facilities for dining and entertainment, including those used for the sole purpose of prostitution. They were exclusively for GIs, and Japanese citizens were prohibited from entering. Originally, the plan suggested in the cable included various activities and facilities to accommodate GIs, such as a full-length golf course and a mega-theater, but it never materialized because of the lack of funds.

Nevertheless, the cable became a cornerstone in the establishment of RAA. Further, the cable stated the rationale for the operation, in that it emphasized that the facilities was supposed to protect the "Japanese womanhood" from "getting contaminated" by those foreign hands. Whether it worked or not for that specific purpose, one can only speculate. At any rate, rapes and sexual assaults by U. S. soldiers continued to mount. Many did buy into the logic, however, for the cable played on the class distinction within Japanese society and harped on the prospect of disorder and licentiousness that Americans would supposedly bring.

It should be also of interest to note that many Japanese women protested the establishment of prostitution facilities in their neighborhoods and expressed strong disgust at the sight of RAA women. Curiously and ironically, the party to blame was those women who worked for RAA and never RAA itself. How RAA women would be rowdy in the streets until early morning hours, how they would cling to Americans, how they would dress tacky, how they

¹ The events leading up to the occupation as well as those during the occupation are explored and examined in vast bibliography. Of particular help are: Michael Shaller, *The American Occupation of Japan* (New York: Oxford University, 1987); Warren I. Cohen, *New Frontiers in American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Columbia University, 1983); and Yoshikazu Sakamoto and R. E. Ward, eds., *Nihon Senryo no Kenkyu* [*Studies of the Occupation of Japan*] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1987). There is generally very little mention made about the issues discussed here.

² Kiyoshi Kanzaki, *Baishun:Ketteiban Kanzaki Report* [*Prostitution: The Ultimate Kanzaki Report*] (Tokyo: Gendaishi, 1976), p. 128-32.

would have terrible influence on their children; but never how RAA had put those women where they were in the first place. More often than not, the criticisms against RAA women would subside only when the police explained to them that RAA women were there to help.

Indeed, RAA was so afraid of criticisms that it took discreet measures to avoid reproach. That was part of the reason that the workforce at RAA was to be drawn mainly from the pool of former prostitutes, legal or illegal, from the prewar times. Those who were involved with RAA knew too well that it would help them avoid public opposition and to legitimize the institution somehow. After all, RAA was finding those women jobs to support themselves and often their families and helping them carry on. In a country where prostitution of various forms had been long permitted, such reasoning rendered more than acceptable.

RAA had even better reason to be acceptable. With the arrival of occupation troops, the number of rapes and assaults jumped steeply. Especially around the occupation camps, women of all ages lived in the constant fear of GIs breaking into their homes. Goto, in his typical overly dramatized manner, still does not overemphasize the monstrosity of such events when he tells numerous tales of horror throughout the country. One such was the infamous Nagoya Incident, where several dozen GIs ganged up, barged into a quiet residential area outside of Nagoya and cut off the power line, so that they could rape, steal, and commit other abominable crimes. The petrified middle-class population would applaud any attempt at eradicating their nightmares, as long as it did not involve their sacrifice.

Under these circumstances, the cable proved effective. Within a matter of hours, local organizations of artisans, restaurant owners, legal prostitutes and others that might partake in the operation were called upon to meet with the head of the district police respectively. The aim of those meetings was to form a consensus on the actual procedure by which the policy could be realized and to draw out the details to go about it. Further, the real objective lay in the urgency of the police to convince the organizations to campaign for prostitution for GIs and while camouflaging it as a civilian enterprise, not a state-run industry.

Central to this effort to promote prostitution were the "leisure" organizations in Tokyo as well as the Metropolitan Police of Tokyo, and they closely cooperated in the founding of RAA (Recreation and Amusement Association). The seven organizations that formed the core of RAA included the Tokyo Restaurant Association, Tokyo branch of the National Artisan Association, Tokyo Teahouse Association and Tokyo Waiting Services Union, among others. The Tokyo Restaurant Association was particularly vital in the operation of RAA, as Hamajiro Miyazawa of "Sagano," a renowned Japanese restaurant, became director of the board. Of some 12,000,000,000 yen spent by the government and the civilian sector during the first fiscal quarter of Japanese reconstruction, 1,000,000 yen went to RAA funds. One half of that amount came directly from the Ministry of Finance in the form of a loan, and the groups and individuals involved in RAA were responsible for raising the rest. With not so meager a budget, RAA was able to assume its duties on August 23, 1945. As the occupation troops were coming on August 26, RAA had only few days to prepare.

The task proved arduous, as Tokyo was practically all burned to ashes by American bombers and subsequent fires. Possible RAA locations counted some mere sixty-six, and that included what was left of teahouses and barracks. RAA was so desperate in the beginning that it shamelessly asked Mitsukoshi in Ginza, the Japanese equivalent of Macy's in New York City, to rent out for the very purpose, but only to face a cold rejection. Later, as reconstruction was underway, RAA grew more successful in obtaining the sites and more strategic at

choosing the locations with more women than the rest. For the successful operation of RAA facilities, the sites of occupation camps were crucial, as were the original establishments of prostitution so as to avoid public confusion and upheaval. As a consequence, RAA women in outskirts of cities substantially outnumbered those in metropolitan area, as camps were generally kept out of major cities. At the same time, RAA made clear attempts to drive GIs away from the middle-class Japanese residence as well as from the heart of the "Imperial Capital" of Tokyo. It should also be noted that African Americans and white Americans were "assigned" to different facilities. Racial segregation was prevalent even in prostitution overseas.

It was even harder to find possible candidates who would be willing to work for RAA. Many who had worked as prostitutes before the war had fled the bombings in cities and now lived in the safer countryside. RAA put up billboards and printed ads in newspapers, national and local, calling for them and others to join the venture. Consequently, of the 13,000 prostitutes who survived the war, 11,000 came to work for RAA.

However, it was clear to everyone in RAA that 11,000 women would hardly suffice the demand. With over 100,000 American GIs stationed around Tokyo, the demand would clearly surpass the supply by far. New blood was desperately needed, and RAA called on the "New Women of Japan" to offer their services for the reconstruction of their motherland. Here again, billboards and newspapers came to RAA's support. The infamous billboard in downtown Tokyo, for one, screamed: "New Women of Japan! Come and help rebuild the country." The conditions were attractive; not only would the women be paid generously and offered room and board, but also their transportation would also be paid in full in case they were not from neighboring areas. The allure is obvious when one thinks of the shortage of food and the abundance of ruins that tainted postwar Japan.

As RAA hoped and expected, women flooded at the gates of RAA for inquiry and possibly for enlistment. Unbeknownst to the majority of them, however, what RAA meant by "services" was precisely sexual. They would be told that there were no more positions open in the clerical section but only in sexual services, and even so, some opted to stay. It was hard to find any job to support oneself, not to mention a high-paying job. The women who signed up at RAA were, in many ways, acting realistically out of their needs. Subsequently, RAA succeeded in obtaining 1,400 more women for its operation.

Eventually, the demand was to surpass the supply. It was then that the means by which RAA found women to work grew more and more shady. The newly employed methods were such that billboard ads with outrageous lines began to seem tame. Many women were kidnapped from their homes or off the streets. Others were sold into bondage by gangsters, as organized crime is often connected to prostitution. Postwar Japanese cities were homes to hordes of war orphans, and they were an easy prey. A number of RAA women were thus very young, some in their early teens.

Sources tell very little of what those women were subjected to. Inoue cites that they would have to cope with at least 15 men and that they scarcely had any time off, though statistics vary. Many writers expound on the sexual innocence of RAA women, trading on their tragedy. There is little doubt that those women were exploited to the extent that Kathleen Barry categorizes as sexual slavery, but what ultimately matters is not the minute details of their activities and working conditions. The distinctions between the old and the young, the privileged and the not so privileged, and the experienced and the inexperienced should not

make any difference, because the institution itself is politically, socially and morally wrong. Here, one needs to remind herself/himself that the very circumstances were created by the government.³

Some point out the connection between the women employed in the prostitution business and the non-Japanese women in parts of Asia that were conquered and uprooted by the Japanese Army, yet to forge too close an association would bring about a dangerous generalization and illustrate utter naïveté. While both groups of women were subject to degradation and humiliation because of their sex, RAA women were paid for their labor, notwithstanding whether or not the salary would compensate for their loss, while, for the other group, it was out of the question. They also consisted of Japanese citizens, and wartime "comfort women" composed of the colonized and the conquered. This difference defined the eligibility for scanty pensions that the former received and the latter did not.

Similarly, RAA women consisted of enlistees who knew of the kind of labor in which they would be involved in, however limited the information, and therefore who were considered as having consented, however inadvertent. This was not at all the case with the wartime "comfort women," as they were deprived of all choices by invading troops of men. The background of the two groups of women also differs; a substantial portion of the postwar RAA women had worked as prostitutes previously, whereas the "comfort women" were hostages. Lastly, since the system to which RAA women were incorporated evolved not during the war but after the war, the tragedies that they suffered are separated from what one would consider war crimes in legal terms. However tragic, therefore, the assaults and offenses committed against RAA women cannot press charges against their offenders.⁴

Millions of women became incorporated in this peculiar business aimed specifically at American GIs. As many as 70,000 women were enlisted in its hay day. They were such an asset for Japan, for GIs would come to prefer to be stationed in Japan rather than elsewhere.⁵ GHQ, fully aware of the operation, referred to RAA women as "serving women" or "organized prostitutes," and the Japanese government as "honorable GI comfort women."

³ There have been a few works published concerning RAA and the women who worked there, although they tend to be more documentary than analytical. For factual accounts, the author depended mainly on the following material: Setsuko Inoue, *Senryogun-Ianjo [Comfort Facilities for Occupation Forces]* (Tokyo: Shinhyoron, 1995), Kiyoshi Kanzaki, *Baishun: Ketteiban Kanzaki Report [Prostitution: The Ultimate Kanzaki Report]* (Tokyo: Gendaishi, 1976); and Masayo Duus, *Haishano Okurimono: Kokusaku-Ianfu wo meguru Senryouka-Hishi [Present of the Losers: The Unknown History of State-Regulated Comfort Women]* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1979); Tsutomu Goto, *Kuroi Haru: Beigun, Pan-pan, Onnatachi-no-sengo [Black Spring: U. S. Forces, Pan-pan, and Women's Postwar Era]* (Tokyo: Togosha, 1985); Daijiro Kobayashi and Akira Murase, *Kokka Baishun Meirei Monogatari [The Saga of National Prostitution Order]* (Tokyo: Yuzankaku, n.d.); and Meiko Yamada, *Senryo-gun Ianfu [Comfort Women for Occupation Forces]* (Tokyo: Kojinsha, 1992). Also helpful were regional as well as municipal histories and prefectural police histories, especially of Tokyo and Yokohama, Kanagawa. Because RAA operated locally within the police department, those histories contain vital information concerning the locations of RAA facilities and the extent of their activities, among other items of interest.

⁴ For discussion of wartime "comfort women," see Chizuko Ueno, *Nashonarizumu-to-Jendai [Nationalism and Gender]* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 1998). The arguments concerning wartime "comfort women" are of vital interest, because there are many similarities to postwar RAA women as there are differences. For recent historical accounts concerning "comfort women," see Toshiyuki Tanaka, *Shirarezaru Senso-Hanzai [Hidden War Crimes]* (Tokyo: Otsuki, 1993); Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Jugun-Ianfu [Comfort Women]* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1995); and Seiji Takeda et al., *Seigi, Senso, Kokka Ron [Justice, War, and the Nation]* (Tokyo: Michi, 1997).

⁵ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 64.

Whatever the name might have been, those women symbolized the humiliating inequality that now existed between the United States and Japan. American conquerors were apt to take what they wanted by the means of their own choosing, while the ordinary Japanese could only watch the world go by.

There were objections raised against this state-run business of prostitution, but ironically from the other side of the Pacific. As American media arrived in Japan and covered such prominent RAA facilities as the Helm House in Yokohama and the Yasuura House in Yokosuka, various groups and individuals questioned the motive and condemned those establishments.⁶ Then came men and women with hopes and aspirations, who associated themselves with the reconstruction of the former militaristic nation. They were to endeavor within GHQ and without, and they became the ones to try to change the climate surrounding prostitution. Objections increased, but they were not to be heard until the following March.⁷

One may wonder how and why such a prosperous industry could cease to exist within a matter of months. RAA's demise started with VD (sexually transmitted disease) and ended with VD. It was simple as that. As opposed to the Japanese military forces that rated VD as a third-degree disease, the American counterpart rated it far more seriously as first-degree. This RAA did not know. Within a month into operation, on September 22, RAA found itself in trouble. GHQ filed a memorandum that alerted the prevalence of VD among Japanese prostitutes, and in another month, on October 16, ordered the Japanese government to conduct medical examinations on Japanese prostitutes. The Japanese government then demanded that RAA take care of the business quickly. RAA resolved that each facility should hold at least one or two checks every week, and that the carrier should be hospitalized right away. Regardless of the measures take by RAA, however, the tide was turning against the organization. GHQ would keep the GIs from going to certain facilities because of VD, causing those locations to close down. It now became possible for the armed forces to manipulate RAA by controlling the demand.

On January 21, 1946, GHQ filed another memorandum, "Concerning the Abolishment of Legal Prostitution in Japan." This was among the first major nationwide attempts on the part of GHQ to put an end to RAA. Even though GHQ had been filing occasional "Off Limit" orders to prohibit GIs from entering certain sites due to VD, this order was the most definitive. It was specifically targeted at RAA and there was no way out for RAA but to shut down. Although the memorandum is filled with democratic language, the message was clear: no prostitution, no VD. If democracy had been the key, RAA would not have remained so successful for so many months. The Japanese government, nevertheless, followed up by nullifying all laws that legalized prostitution within one month. Finally, on March 27, 1946, RAA was finally dissolved and all the facilities exclusively for GIs were shut down.

This was not the end of prostitution for the occupation forces, however. Houses of prostitution did disappear, but those who lost jobs had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. There were more than one instance where women who worked for RAA asked for support and understanding through anonymous letters to editors or via different means of reaching out to

⁶ Dusus describes how American media provided little coverage to Japan in comparison to Germany and focused its attention on the relationships between GIs and Japanese women, infuriating families of military men and Christian organizations. Dusus, *Haishano Okurimono*, p. 129-30.

⁷ The photographs of the establishment appeared in major U. S. newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Various women's groups protested, as did Christian organizations.

society, but no other but middle-class women, whom RAA women were to protect, would ignore, if not open fire. Their logic followed that, in the day and age of reconstruction, when there were opportunities as many as difficulties, one could always find something worthwhile to do to support herself/himself. It was an ironic turn of events considering that a number of RAA women worked in RAA for room and board, and that some came to be the “New Women of Japan” and then be left behind as Japan took a step forward.⁸

Following the final order, former RAA women had no choice but wander out in the street. Many pursued prostitution, though now with no backing of RAA. Their status only shifted from organized and legal to private and illegal. By then, it was clear that they were not going to enjoy the RAA level of material wealth for long. Catholic nuns stepped in to help as did U. S.-based Christian groups, but those women had been living a life in the fast lane for such a long time that it was difficult to change. In any case, women who “specialized” in GIs continued to exist through a good part of 1950s, until occupation troops were finally pulled out of the country.

Some have explored the unknown footage of those women and opened the public eye and caught the media attention to what the Japanese government demanded of its subjects and what long remained untouched and unquestioned, thus unresolved. However, the path that RAA women walked has remained largely unknown and unrecognized. Students of U. S.-Japan relations or women's history have generally heeded little attention. To them, RAA women have been either a non-issue or an eyesore. When one examines the procedure of diplomacy and the formulation of politics, they matter very little. When one illustrates the postwar “progress” in women's rights, they do not fit. Furthermore, as the turmoil and difficulty following the end of the war have gradually sunk into democratic oblivion of the postwar economic boom, it has come to seem pointless to look back to those hard times.

It is the same story with those who did in fact live through the same turbulent era. Those who survived the postwar chaos remember seeing Japanese women in flashy dresses and with bleached-out hair, walking hand in hand with American GIs—but only with a certain bitterness in their voices. To the majority of the Japanese, those women seemed so rich with all that they received from GIs, while the rest of the nation struggled with and suffered from poverty, malnutrition and disgrace. That those women ended up abandoned in the streets with little in their hands somehow served them right, just as in an Aesop tale of ants and a cricket. After all, they were having a ball when everyone else was fighting.

Whether or not RAA women helped keep U. S. soldiers away from middle-class Japanese women, it cannot be concluded. It has little relevance, if at all. To be sure, the number of rapes and assaults on Japanese women committed by American soldiers jumped up dramatically around March 1946, which coincides with the termination of RAA. Inoue writes that RAA women would not be appeased if their experiences did not fulfill the RAA objective, whereas Kanzaki refutes by stating that the objective was faulty to begin with and doomed to failure and that there were other means by which the Japanese government could have protected its citizens.⁹ The crux of the matter is that RAA women shall never be appeased, for all that they

⁸ The process in which GHQ dissolved RAA is depicted in depth by Kanzaki and Duus. See Kanzaki, *Baishun*, p. 155-61; and Duus, *Haishano Okurimono*, chap. 7.

⁹ Inoue, *Senryogun-Ianjo*, p. 224; Kanzaki, *Baishun*, p. 130.

went through and for all that they sacrificed.

As Japan strove to be an “industrialized” country, an economic giant, or whatever else one might prefer to call it, what was once used as RAA facility has continued to disappear one by one. The rundown RAA building in Yokohama was recently replaced by a mall. The old inns that once housed RAA women in Nagasaki were buried underneath brand-new apartment buildings. Before one assesses twentieth century, it may well be worthwhile to do some excavation before everything gets buried away.

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