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## Occupying power: Sex workers and servicemen in postwar Japan

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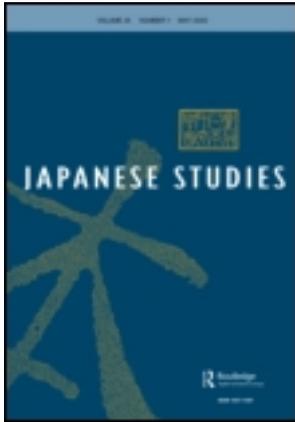


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## Occupying Power: Sex Workers and Servicemen in Postwar Japan

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chapter, it is clear that these contributors are far more familiar with research published in English than I, and I suspect many colleagues, are with the work of French scholars. *Japan's Postwar* will go some way to addressing that imbalance. However, some readers will no doubt wonder at certain omissions. This is not a work that deals directly with topics involving foreign policy, territorial disputes, war responsibility or historical revisionism. Yet for this reader it serves as a useful and illuminating collection precisely because it focuses on a wide range of other important themes and issues across a variety of disciplines. The authors represented here enrich our knowledge on a number of fronts by drawing links between the war and after, and thereby suggest different understandings and approaches of how to conceptualise and periodise postwar Japan.

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### **Occupying Power: Sex Workers and Servicemen in Postwar Japan.**

SARAH KOVNER

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

xi, 158 pp. + appendix, notes, bibliography, index; map, illustrations

ISBN 978-0-8047-7691-2 hb <http://www.sup.org/book.cgi?id=21270>

The caricature of the ‘pan-pan’, or amateur female prostitute, complete with western-style fashions and garish makeup, has become an iconic symbol of Japan’s defeat in the Asia-Pacific War and subsequent Allied Occupation. Portrayed in a mostly negative light, she simultaneously represents the ostensible sexual excesses of female liberation, the most visible rendering of Japanese emasculation, and the sexual exploitation of women by Allied servicemen. She has, as Sarah Kovner suggests in her new book, the signs of defeat and occupation inscribed onto her very body. Yet recent research on gender, sexuality and military occupations has begun to question the whore/ victim model of the ‘pan-pan’ and of occupation sexual interactions more generally. Rumi Sakamoto asserted in a recent issue of *Portal* that “‘pan-pan girls’ resist being reduced to pure signs of “victim” or “sacrifice,” given that they embody complex articulations of interracial desire, material ambition and opportunism, as well as victimhood’ (Sakamoto, 1). This complication of understandings of occupation sexualities continues in Kovner’s *Occupying Power*.

Kovner takes some interesting approaches in her study of sex under occupation. One is temporality – the period is placed within a longer chronology of selling sex, before and after occupation. This allows her to investigate changes in prostitution as both practice and target of social attitudes, as the framework changed from a regulatory prewar and wartime system to a deregulated occupation system, and eventually to its postwar criminalization – at a speed ‘unique in the annals of the “oldest profession”’ (3).

The second approach relates to notions of work itself. Kovner claims that an analysis of different types of occupation sex work – from geisha to professional to pan-pan, from beer-hall worker to *onni* (the ‘only one’, exclusive client relationships) – ‘can help us understand how selling sex is like, or unlike, other kinds of labor, and how it changes under different regulatory regimes’ (4). In other words, she removes the moral cloak that casts sex work as either whoredom or victimhood, and examines it as a legitimate form

of labour where agency operates – even under the inequality of power that defines military occupation. Relations between sex workers and the occupiers were not just about oppression and ‘unconditional surrender’, she says, but a negotiation of the terms of engagement.

In the first chapter, Kovner charts changes through 300 years of regulated prostitution in Japan, including both the forced prostitution/rape of the ‘comfort stations’ of Japan’s wartime empire and the paid ‘female kamikaze’ of the Recreational Amusement Association (RAA), before considering the deregulated system that took over later in the occupation period. Occupation concerns over sexually transmitted diseases and increased surveillance of sex workers form a significant part of the discussion. Kovner argues that deregulation and surveillance were not able to control prostitution, and instead markets developed ‘their own dynamic through the everyday interaction of sex workers and servicemen’ (48).

One aspect of the first chapter (indeed of the whole book) that particularly pleased me is that Kovner embraces the occupation as a multinational and multiracial event. She does not just focus on US servicemen, whether white, Nisei or African-American, but takes the whole Allied presence into consideration. Thus she is able to compare and contrast the treatment of sex workers and sexually transmitted diseases between the US area and that of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF). Kovner exposes the importance of race and whiteness in the enactment of occupation power, and the racial complexities of sexual and other forms of interaction between occupier and occupied.

‘Violence, Commerce, Marriage’, the second chapter, scrutinises rape, marketing strategies for sex work, and longer-term relations between occupier and occupied, including marriages. Kovner poignantly details the effect on those innocent products of such liaisons, the *ai no ko*, or love children. It is estimated that by 1952 the occupation had reared 200,000 bi-racial children, who were often rejected not just by the occupation but by Japanese society as well – a visible reminder of violation of ‘the boundaries upon which [occupation] authority rested’ (69).

The third chapter focuses on the sex trade in Tokyo and Sasebo, complicating the representation of pan-pan (for example, there were both *yōpan* and *wapan*, those who catered to either foreign or Japanese clientele). The next chapter discusses various moves towards a national anti-prostitution law. While these can be traced back to the nineteenth century, ‘for most Japanese, sex work had become objectionable only when the Allies occupying their country had deregulated it’, thereby removing the boundaries that had otherwise visibly delineated ‘legitimate’ sex work areas from the rest of society (118).

The fifth chapter follows the anti-prostitution debate with a particular focus on the postwar base-system. For Japanese society, prostitution discourse had moved from one of ‘necessary evil, or even [...] sign of family sacrifice’ to project a threat to public morals and a danger to children (124). The ‘inevitable’ Prostitution Prevention Bill was finally passed in May 1956, taking effect in April 1957. The path to criminalisation – though not eradication – was now complete. And this had occurred within just 10 years of the RAA. Rather than protecting women, though, the result has been less visibility than under a regulated system, and therefore an increase in exploitation.

In the final chapter, Kovner proposes that research on sex work needs to move beyond victimhood and moral panic to acknowledge the levels of agency that many sex workers, professional or amateur, had and have. She states that we need to ask how sex

workers themselves experience the regulatory regimes that govern their work – something I would have welcomed more of from her here too. Perhaps controversially, she states that sex work kick-started the postwar Japanese economy: ‘while the nation lay prostrate, they were uniquely empowered with control over their futures, their families, and their fates’ (157). While never denying the existence of sexual slavery, she observes that if *all* sex workers are seen as sexual slaves this can have ‘the unintended effect of supporting a nationalist agenda that depends on portraying Japan as a victim’ (157). It is a fair comment – but I wonder if Kovner’s argument can also be twisted to support a conservative agenda that defends the abuse of ‘comfort women’ and other forms of exploitation.

I like this book. It is well researched, thoughtful and courageous, and provides much material for scholarly and social debate. *Occupying Power* nicely complicates our understanding of the power dynamics of occupation, and of the place of sexual interactions within those dynamics. While it confines itself to female occupied/male occupier relations, I hope that Kovner’s research inspires further interrogations of sexual relations under military occupation, including same-sex relations, that acknowledge but move beyond the victim paradigm.

### **Text Mentioned**

Sakamoto, Rumi, ‘Pan-pan Girls: Humiliating Liberation in Postwar Japanese Literature’, *Portal: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 7:2 (2010): 1–15.

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### **Postwar History Education in Japan and the Germans: Guilty Lessons**

JULIAN DIERKES

London: Routledge, 2010

xv, 169 pp. + notes, bibliography, index; tables

ISBN 978-0-415-66723-4 pb

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415667234/>

In *Postwar History Education*, Julian Dierkes explores the differing paths of postwar history education curricula in Japan and the Germans following their defeat in World War II to the present day, including post-reunification Germany. Through looking at changes in curriculum and the textbooks used in middle schools, encompassing ‘the Japanese *Chūgakkō*, the East German *Mittelschule* (middle school) and *Oberschule* (high school), and the (West) German *Realschule*’ (17), Dierkes conducts a detailed study into how educational policy develops under occupation forces, how ideas of ‘nation’ are created within ‘defeated’ nations, and how the war crimes and atrocities of a nation are presented and discussed within domestic history textbooks. The similarities in these case studies are evident. All three had experienced defeat in World War II, all three spent several years under occupation rule and all were obliged to make significant changes to their textbooks and curricula – especially in the area of history. What differs between