

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Women on the Death Railway: A Microhistory of Victimization and Agency

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## Abstract

In total, 75,000 to 250,000 Asian civilians died building the Thailand-Burma Death Railway under Japanese military orders during the Second World War. Among these were women whose experiences remain overlooked or marginalized in histories about the Death Railway. This microhistory of the Kudo Butai war crimes trial draws on recent scholarship on the relational and structural aspects of victimization and agency to study the sexual abuse and broader experiences of women on the railway. It focuses on the experiences, strategic acts, and survival choices of the following women who appear in trial records: the nineteen-year-old orphan sexually tortured to death, “Siamese lady friends” of some defendants, and the Chinese dresser’s wife who helped POWs. By identifying the relational and structural conditions contributing to sexual violence on the railway, this study demonstrates that the overwhelming experience of women under Japanese military occupation was one of the widespread vulnerability to sexual violence.

Upon its completion, the Thailand-Burma Railway ran 415 kilometers through mountainous terrain from Ban Pong in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> This railway—also known as the Death Railway—was completed by civilians and Allied POWs under Japanese military orders and supervision. Evidence submitted in post-war Allied trials indicates that between 75,000 and 250,000 Asian civilians were forced to work on the railway alongside about 64,000 Allied POWs.<sup>2</sup> While Asian workers greatly outnumbered Allied POWs on the Death

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<sup>1</sup> For key facts and a collection of primary sources on the railway, see Paul H. Kratoska (ed.), *The Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942–1946: Documents and Selected Writings*, 6 vols. (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Yuma Totani, *Justice in Asia and the Pacific Region, 1945–1952: Allied War Crimes Prosecutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 78.

Railway, their experiences and suffering have received less attention.<sup>3</sup> Up to 100,000 Asian workers are estimated to have died, though the exact number is not known due to a lack of precise records on these workers.<sup>4</sup> The Asian work teams on these railways were “multiethnic,” comprising Indians, Malays, Burmese, Javanese, Chinese, Thai, and others from various locations under Japanese military occupation.<sup>5</sup> Based on estimates prepared by the Allies, the majority of workers came from Burma and Malaya, while other workers came from Java, Indochina and Thailand.<sup>6</sup> Apart from men, “substantial numbers” of women and children were also sent to the railway by those ordered by the Japanese military to meet required recruitment targets.<sup>7</sup> These women experienced inhumane living and work conditions as well as sexual violence. This microhistory studies the lives of these women, including their sexual victimization, by focusing on the relationships and structural factors shaping their choices and decisions.

Not much is known of these women’s lives on the railway, including the sexual violence committed against them by Japanese military personnel. Such sexual violence was prohibited by international law at the time of commission, but post-war trials organized by the Allied Powers generally focused on the abuse of Allied POWs when dealing with crimes on the Death Railway. Exceptionally, the Kudo Butai Trial organized by the British military in Singapore addressed war crimes committed by a Japanese military ambulance unit against Asian civilians.<sup>8</sup> The defendants in this trial were also accused of committing rape and other sexual crimes against women on the railway. This microhistory focuses on the experiences, strategic acts, and survival choices of the following women who appear in the Kudo Butai trial records: the nineteen-year-old orphan sexually tortured to death, “Siamese lady friends” of some defendants, and the Chinese dresser’s wife who helped POWs. Like other microhistories, it also tackles broader questions that are more “more far-reaching” than its object of study.<sup>9</sup> It aims to understand not just the sexual violence on the Death Railway but the “much bigger picture” of women’s lives under Japanese military occupation.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Lizzie Oliver, “‘Like Pebbles Stuck in a Sieve’: Reading Romushas in the Second-Generation Photography of Southeast Asian Captivity,” *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 10 (2017): 277.

<sup>4</sup> E. Bruce Reynolds, “History, Memory, Compensation and Reconciliation: The Abuse of Labor Along the Thailand-Burma Railway,” in *Asian Labor in the Wartime Japanese Empire: Unknown Histories*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska (New York: Routledge, 2015), 329.

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, “History, Memory,” 329.

<sup>6</sup> Michiko Nakahara, “Malayan Labor on the Thailand-Burma Railway,” in *Asian Labor*, ed. Kratoska (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe), 252.

<sup>7</sup> Nakahara, “Malayan Labor,” 255.

<sup>8</sup> The full citation information of this trial at the UK National Archives (TNA) is as follows: “WO 235/943: Defendant Kudo Hikosaku, Place of Trial Singapore”. This case will be referred to as the “Kudo Butai Trial”. I use the pagination system entered by the TNA staff as reference, placing ‘SP’ before the page number. Names appear as represented in the British records.

<sup>9</sup> István M. Szigjártó and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Filippo de Vivo, “Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale: A Response,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (2010): 391.

This study contributes to recent feminist and transitional justice scholarship contesting passive or binary ideas of victimhood and arguing for victim agency to be understood in situational and relational terms.<sup>11</sup> I adopt and build on Burkitt's broader definition of agents as "interactants or interdependants" and agency as "action that produces an effect on the world and on others" when exercised in "relational contexts".<sup>12</sup> Such a relational approach to agency expands this study's analysis of female victimization on the railway by spotlighting the broader relationships and structures contributing to such crimes. To distinguish between genuine and non-genuine cases of consent, this study emphasizes the need to situate the exercise of female sexual agency against prevailing social and gender relations as well as institutional practices. Further, it underscores the evolving and uneven distribution of victimization and agency among women on the railway. While the Japanese military was feared by all, female railway experiences depended on factors such as familial ties or the nature of work undertaken on the railway. By adopting this relational focus, this microhistory also addresses broader questions beyond the Death Railway setting.<sup>13</sup> Through its analysis of relationships and structural factors contributing to the victimization of women under Japanese military rule, such as discrimination within their own communities and pre-war colonial practices, this study demonstrates that the overwhelming experience of women under Japanese military occupation was one of widespread vulnerability to sexual violence.

### Microhistorical Methods: Reconstructing the Lives of Women on the Death Railway

It is particularly difficult to estimate the number of women who lived and worked on the Death Railway. Upon arriving at the railway in Thailand, each civilian laborer was given a registration number by the Japanese military. Women and children were often not registered.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, evidence shows that there were sufficient women and children on the railway to justify their differentiation of wages.<sup>15</sup> The Kudo Butai trial records provide rare insight into the lives of women on the railway due to its examination of abuse and sexual

<sup>11</sup> Anne-Kathrin Kreft and Philipp Schulz, "Political Agency, Victimhood, and Gender in Contexts of Armed Conflict: Moving beyond Dichotomies," *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (2022): sqac022; Erin Baines, "Forced Marriage as Political Project: Sexual Rules and Relations in the Lord's Resistance Army," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 3 (2014): 405–17; Helen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, "Navigating Vulnerabilities and Masculinities: How Gendered Contexts Shape the Agency of Male Sexual Violence Survivors," *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 3 (2021): 213–30; Mas Utas, "Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005): 403–30.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Burkitt, "Relational Agency: Relational Sociology, Agency and Interaction," *European Journal of Social Theory* 19, no. 3 (2016): 323.

<sup>13</sup> Szijártó and Magnússon, *What Is Microhistory?* 5.

<sup>14</sup> Nakahara, "Malayan Labor," 258.

<sup>15</sup> Nakahara makes this point with respect to children: Nakahara, "Malayan Labor," 255.

violence committed by the defendants against women.<sup>16</sup> This trial is one of many war crimes trials conducted by the British in Asia at the end of the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> Researchers have generally analyzed post-war Allied trials in Asia from a political or legal angle, focusing on the perspectives of politicians, trial organizers, judges, and other elites.<sup>18</sup> This study aims to contribute to building a legal history of post-war justice “from below” through its examination of the lives and experiences of female victims whose voices were not directly heard in the trial and who had their experiences represented at trial by male witnesses and counsel.

Not all microhistories focus on subaltern experiences, but microhistorical methods are particularly useful in the contextual analysis of sparse evidence in source documents.<sup>19</sup> Railway conditions, the criminal trial’s focus on the accused, and the systematic nature of these crimes mean that while many victims were referred to at trial, their names and personal details were not known. Trial records focused on the criminal events, on what was done to these women, and only to the extent deemed necessary by counsel and as provided by testifying witnesses. To overcome this challenge, this study employs micro-historical methods to analyze the lives and experiences of these women mentioned in the Kudo Butai trial records: a nineteen-year-old orphan brutally raped and murdered by Onodera, “Siamese lady friends” depicted by trial witnesses as sex workers, and the Chinese dresser’s wife who risked her safety and that of her family to help others on the railway. By keeping an eye out for clues, for “something that does not quite fit in with its immediate surroundings” or “something that seems odd or out of place”, this study identifies broader “connections” that illuminate the lives of these women beyond their victimization by the accused on the railway.<sup>20</sup> For example, a victim’s “orphan” status may hint at possible gender discrimination and abuse by others within her own community while the same-day acquisition of necessities for POWs by another woman on the railway reveals not only acts of helping but the existence of a supply network that enabled her timely response. By situating these clues in their thick context and referring to a range of primary and secondary material, this study seeks to overcome the silences and

<sup>16</sup> Totani refers to the sexual crimes committed against women in her discussion of the Kudo Butai trial, though her analysis of this trial and other post-war Allied trials focuses on these trials’ legal and political aspects.

<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive overview of trials conducted by various Allies, including the British, in Asia, see Sandra Wilson, Robert Cribb, Beatrice Trefalt, and Dean Aszkielowicz, *Japanese War Criminals: The Politics of Justice After the Second World War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Examples include, Wilson, Cribb, Trefalt, and Aszkielowicz, *Japanese War Criminals*; Totani, *Justice in Asia*; David Cohen and Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal: Law, History, and Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 133.

<sup>20</sup> Peltonen Matti, “Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro Macro Historical Research,” *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 40, no. 3 (2002): 357.

information gaps in the archival record on female lives on the Death Railway.<sup>21</sup> Following in the footsteps of microhistorians like Davies, I have also tried to be transparent about source limitations, recognizing that this microhistory is “in part my invention” even if it remains “held tightly in check by the voices of the past”.<sup>22</sup>

In studying their sexual victimization, this study avoids treating women on the railway as passive victims by underscoring their exercise of agency, such as the strategic decisions taken to survive. It also avoids a dichotomous understanding of agency that pigeonholes these women as either victim or agent, recognizing that both “frequently co-exist on a spectrum”.<sup>23</sup> Rather, by examining the relationships in which these women are situated, it aims to develop a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of the steps and choices taken by these women to survive coercive circumstances on the railway. It engages with recent feminist and transitional justice research on relational approaches to agency, treating agency as not located in the individual alone but in “manifold relations to others as well as to broader structures”.<sup>24</sup> For example, by focusing on relationships, this microhistory shows that women were made vulnerable and victimized by the Japanese military’s railway personnel as well as the men within their community and pre-war colonial practices. It also examines the co-constitutive nature of agency and victimization. In undertaking acts of helping and resistance, some women exposed themselves and their families to higher levels of risk of abuse and victimization. The roles taken on by women on the railway did not exist in binary form, as victim or resistor, but were fluid and overlapping. In doing so, this article aims to obtain a deeper, even if not fully complete, understanding of these women’s lives on the Death Railway.

This study of female victimization on the Death Railway answers broader questions beyond its immediate object of study. In moving from the micro to macro, it aims at not merely “simple reduction or aggregation” but the generation of new “knowledge” or understanding through the examination of broader connections and explanations.<sup>25</sup> For example, this microhistory identifies relational and structural factors contributing to sexual violence on the Death Railway, such as then-existing racial and gender stereotypes as well as institutional features of the Japanese military. These factors impacted not only women on the Death Railway but also women in other locations under Japanese military occupation, causing women to be particularly vulnerable to sexual crimes and abuse. Vulnerability was a matter of degree and Indian women faced similar threats to their personal safety on the rubber estates of Malaya from Japanese military personnel as well as Indian estate workers.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Valentina Vadi, “The Power of Scale: International Law and Its Microhistories,” *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 46, no. 4 (2018): 331–32.

<sup>22</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Kreft and Schulz, “Political Agency,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> Kreft and Schulz, “Political Agency,” 4.

<sup>25</sup> Peltonen, “Clues, Margins,” 357.

<sup>26</sup> Datta Arunima, “Social Memory and Indian Women from Malaya and Singapore in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 88, no. 309 (2015): 85–86.

Also, by highlighting the possibility of Thai women serving as ‘comfort women’ on the railway, this study shows that Thailand’s pragmatic decision to cooperate with the Japanese military did not always protect Thai female civilians from the excesses of the Japanese military.<sup>27</sup> The sexual atrocities experienced by women on the Death Railway were extreme examples of victimization, but the structural factors driving such victimization show that all women under Japanese military occupation were vulnerable to abuse and sexual crimes.

### **The Kudo Butai Trial: Sexual Violence on the Death Railway**

The accused prosecuted at the Kudo Butai Trial were members of the Kudo Butai or the 19th ambulance corps, an ambulance unit on the railway route headed by the first accused Kudo Hikosaku. All twelve defendants in this trial faced charges involving the “ill treatment” and “wilful killing” of Asian civilians on the railway.<sup>28</sup> This trial, like all war crimes trials organized by the British across Asia and Europe after the Second World War, was conducted pursuant to the 1945 Royal Warrant adopted on June 18, 1945.<sup>29</sup> British military courts established under the warrant were to try war crimes, defined as “a violation of the laws and usages of war committed during any war in which His Majesty has been or may be engaged at any time since 2 September 1939”.<sup>30</sup> Clearly included in this body of “laws and usages of war” was the 1907 Hague Convention, which Japan had ratified and which served as the basis of charges brought against the accused in the Kudo Butai Trial.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, the defendants were accused of violating Article 46 of the regulations annexed to the 1907 Hague Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, which requires occupying forces to respect “[f]amily honour and rights” and “the lives of persons”.<sup>32</sup> As argued by the prosecution, this obligation applied to Japan as a matter of a “conventional obligations” as well as “customary laws and usages of war”.<sup>33</sup> The

<sup>27</sup> Thai peoples did suffer relatively less compared to other populations in places occupied by the Japanese military. E. Bruce Reynolds, “Aftermath of Alliance: The Wartime Legacy in Thai-Japanese Relations,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21 (1990): 67.

<sup>28</sup> The names and ranks of the accused are Kudo Hikosaku (major); Takano Suteo (second lieutenant); Yaguchi Sanya (second lieutenant); Takino Shoichi (second lieutenant); Mukaeda Takeo (sergeant major); Onodera Shoji (lance corporal); Yasuda Kinichiro (lance corporal); Nishimura Katsumi (superior private); Nakamura Jiro (superior private); Tsukamoto Chuji (superior private); Fujita Hikoichi (superior private); and Kato Takeo (superior private). “Charge Sheet”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 30–31.

<sup>29</sup> Great Britain War Office, Regulations for the Trial of War Criminals, attached to 1945 Royal Warrant 0160/2498, June 18, 1945, promulgated by the War Office, Army Order 81 of 1945 (hereinafter ‘1945 Royal Warrant’ and ‘1945 Royal Warrant Regulations’ when referring to attached regulations).

<sup>30</sup> Regulation 1, 1945 Royal Warrant Regulations.

<sup>31</sup> Article 46, Convention (IV) respecting the Law and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land (hereinafter ‘1907 Hague Convention’), October 18, 1907.

<sup>32</sup> Article 46, regulations, annex to the 1907 Hague Convention.

<sup>33</sup> “Closing address for the prosecution”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 724.

prosecution also described the sexual atrocities committed by the accused as “among the very worst offences” that occupying forces may commit against civilians.<sup>34</sup> Rape was also prohibited by the Japanese military code, which treated it a serious offence attracting a punishment of seven years to death.<sup>35</sup>

The Kudo Butai Trial lasted 20 days and was held in Singapore’s grand Victoria Memorial Hall.<sup>36</sup> Three judges from the British military presided over this trial.<sup>37</sup> Two members from the British military served on the prosecution team, while the accused were defended by two Japanese defense counsel who were supported by one defense advisory counsel from the British military.<sup>38</sup> Ten out of thirteen of the prosecution’s witnesses were Asian civilians who had been recruited from Malaya, Burma, and Java to work on the railway as medical dressers and overseers.<sup>39</sup> Many witnesses referred to the rape and sexual abuse committed by accused persons in their court testimonies. While the Kudo Butai Trial was not as widely or closely reported as other war crimes trials, local newspapers reported the sexual crimes discussed in the trial in a sensational manner. On September 18, 1946, the *Morning Tribune* and the *Malay Tribune* carried reports on the Kudo Butai Trial entitled “Nip Major ‘A Sex Maniac’”.<sup>40</sup> These papers reported on trial witnesses testifying to Kudo’s “innumerable acts of bestiality and brutality on women and children especially while under the influence of liquor”.<sup>41</sup>

The British military kept meticulous records of these Royal Warrant trials. Nevertheless, analyzing these trial records can be challenging. The Royal Warrant took a flexible approach to evidence, and most courts substantially relied on affidavits and other written statements because it was difficult to identify and transport witnesses to places of trial.<sup>42</sup> In my analysis, I have prioritized the analyzing of court testimony as such evidence was subject to cross-examination at trial. Another analytical difficulty stems from the fact these 1945 Royal Warrant courts did not issue written judgments, so it is difficult to conclusively determine the basis on which these courts arrived at their findings of guilt or innocence. Trial proceedings were recorded verbatim,

<sup>34</sup> “Closing address for the prosecution”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 726.

<sup>35</sup> Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 120.

<sup>36</sup> “Military Court for the Trial of War Criminals”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 3.

<sup>37</sup> The names of judges were as follows: Lieutenant Colonel P. A. Forsythe (King’s Royal Rifle Corps), Major J. C. McMath (Royal Artillery), and Major A. A. Dumont (Ayrshire Yeomanry). See “Military Court for the Trial of War Criminals”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 3.

<sup>38</sup> The names of the prosecutors were Lieutenant Colonel E. L. St. J. Couch (RASC AJAG War Crimes Legal) and Major A. M. Prestt (SALFSEA). Defence counsel were Commander Tatsuzaki Ei (JAG Japanese Navy) and Lieutenant Commander Komori Takesuke (JAG Japanese Navy), assisted by Advisory Officer Captain H. Hughes (RASC). See “Proceedings of a Military Court”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 32.

<sup>39</sup> The names of these Asian witnesses were: Stephen A. Miranda, S. Nagalingan, Leow Koon Wah, Goh Soh Boon, Soehoed bin Karto, Tan Teik Seng, U. K. B. Menon, M. D. George, Sabar bin Noordin, and Mohamed Sali.

<sup>40</sup> “Nip Major ‘A Sex Maniac’”, *Morning Tribune*, September 18, 1946, 11.

<sup>41</sup> “Nip Major ‘A Sex Maniac’”.

<sup>42</sup> Regulation 8(i), 1945 Royal Warrant Regulations.



capturing the legal and factual arguments made by counsel as well as court interventions. In addition, findings of guilt were subject to confirmation while acquittals were final.<sup>43</sup> At the post-trial confirmation stage, accused could submit petitions to be considered by the confirming officer who would also benefit from a review and brief legal analysis of the case prepared by the deputy judge advocate general.<sup>44</sup> It is nevertheless possible to get an idea of the legal and factual arguments considered by the court based on the court's interventions as well as the review report at the confirmation stage.

When interpreting trial records, it was necessary to pay attention to the euphemistic language used by witnesses when describing sexual violence. Prosecution witness U. B. K. Menon, who worked as a conductor and overseer on the railway, stated that Kudo had engaged in the "molesting" of females.<sup>45</sup> Menon stated that he heard women "crying and shouting" in "neighbouring huts" late at night and was told the next morning that Kudo had gone to these huts and "troubled" the girls.<sup>46</sup> Stephen A. Miranda, who had been a medical dresser on the railway, described the same accused "disturbing the female patients in the wards" when drunk.<sup>47</sup> M. D. George, who had been the overseer of sick civilian workers, explained that Kudo had "used" female "labourers" in the "women's quarters" and female "patients" in the "patients ward" for "immoral purposes".<sup>48</sup> These witnesses possibly used euphemistic language to describe sexual violence to avoid embarrassment due to the taboo nature of sex. The shame and social stigma associated with such sexual assaults may explain why none of these women came forward after the war to speak about their experiences on the railway.

### **The Nineteen-Year-Old Orphan: Factors Contributing to the Victimization of Women on the Death Railway**

One of the many sexual crimes considered in this trial stands out not only for its cruelty but for what it reveals about the systematic nature of sexual atrocities and dynamics among Asian civilian workers. This crime by Onodera is described in the affidavit of Kenneth Glynn Prickett, a British POW who worked as a medical orderly to Asian laborers on the railway.<sup>49</sup> According to Prickett, in March 1944, he saw two Indian workers with syphilis.<sup>50</sup> Onodera was furious, given the debilitating and fast-spreading nature of this disease, and ordered the workers to tell him how they had contracted this.<sup>51</sup> These workers led Onodera to a nineteen-year-old Indian female "lying in the hut".<sup>52</sup> Onodera proceeded to

<sup>43</sup> Regulation 8(iv), 1945 Royal Warrant Regulations.

<sup>44</sup> Regulation 10, 1945 Royal Warrant Regulations.

<sup>45</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 112.

<sup>46</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 112.

<sup>47</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 41.

<sup>48</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 119.

<sup>49</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 457.

<sup>50</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 458.

<sup>51</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 589.

<sup>52</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 459.



beat and rape this nineteen-year-old female. He then forced twenty other Asian workers to rape his victim before thrusting “at least half a dozen lighted bamboos” into her vagina.<sup>53</sup> The victim died of her horrific injuries the same night.

Despite the atrocious nature of this incident, Onodera was not subject to any disciplinary action. Trial records link Onodera to other similar sexual atrocities.<sup>54</sup> Sexual crimes by railway personnel on the Death Railway were systemic and routine, committed and condoned by superiors and those in authority. Horace Claude Benson, another British POW on the railway, explained that “the younger coolie women” were always at risk of such sexual crimes and that it was “common knowledge” that certain accused were “in the habit of taking women into the Canteen despite their protestations”.<sup>55</sup> Kudo, the highest-ranking accused, was linked to many such sexual crimes. As the highest-ranking officer in charge of Kudo Butai, Kudo’s commission of such sexual atrocities would have sent a message to his subordinates that sexual violence against civilian women was acceptable and even encouraged. These sexual crimes included particularly humiliating and sadistic acts. Women and young girls were frequently forced to dance naked before Kudo and other Japanese personnel for their pleasure.<sup>56</sup>

The surrounding facts of Onodera’s torture and murder of his nineteen-year-old victim also reveal the particularly vulnerable position of women among civilian railway workers due to the highly gendered relations within the Indian community where women were treated as property or a “status marker”.<sup>57</sup> When Onodera questioned the Indian workers about from whom they had contracted syphilis, these workers did not hesitate to identify the nineteen-year-old victim. Given coercive conditions on the railway, these workers may have identified the victim out of fear and to avoid punishment. However, this could also reflect a lack of solidarity among civilian workers. Researchers have highlighted that, unlike POWs forced to work on the railway, Asian civilian workers on the railway were disorganized and fractious.<sup>58</sup> In fact, a close reading of this young victim’s history reveals an even more insidious story. Trial records show that this victim’s parents had earlier died of dysentery and cholera. Relations between men and women within the Indian community were highly gendered, and these relations were perpetuated by British estate owners through formal pre-war labor policies that paid women less than male workers and treated them as secondary wage earners.<sup>59</sup> The loss of her father must have left Onodera’s nineteen-year-old victim particularly vulnerable on the railway, trapped in an unfamiliar and threatening environment far away from home

<sup>53</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 459.

<sup>54</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 460.

<sup>55</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 512.

<sup>56</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 517.

<sup>57</sup> Arunima Datta, “‘Immorality’, Nationalism and the Colonial State in British Malaya: Indian ‘Coolie’ Women’s Intimate Lives as Ideological Battleground,” *Women’s History Review* 25, no. 4 (2016): 586.

<sup>58</sup> Nakahara, “Malayan Labor,” 260.

<sup>59</sup> Datta, “‘Immorality’, Nationalism,” 588.

without any support system. She may have decided to engage in sexual relations with other Indian male workers for survival reasons, in exchange for food or protection. The fact that the Indian workers identified her as the source of their venereal disease indicates that the victim had sex with numerous civilian male workers. Some may have coerced the victim into sex.

While they were not as vulnerable as female railway workers, male workers were also at risk of sexual crimes on the railway. Onodera's torture of the 19-year-old victim highlights this. Before killing her, Onodera forced other Asian workers to rape the victim as punishment before killing her. Apart from coercing these male workers into sex, Onodera exposed them to syphilis. This was not the only instance of male sexual abuse in the Kudo Butai trial records. Prosecution witnesses referred to an incident during which accused persons Nakamura and Kato had a worker who had tried to escape restrained before proceeding to tie up the "front portion of his private part".<sup>60</sup> Sexual crimes were systematically deployed by personnel working for the Japanese military against the weak and vulnerable, regardless of gender.

Railway personnel also did not limit their sexual assaults to civilians on the railway. Women passing through the railway, or its camps, also risked sexual assault. In his affidavit, Prickett referred to another sexual crime committed by Onodera. He explained that in April or May of 1944, a young Burmese woman had come to the railway camp he was stationed at to sell "tobacco, betel nuts and towgay beans".<sup>61</sup> Upon seeing her, Onodera "forced her to go into the jungle with him where he raped her".<sup>62</sup> The woman returned to the railway camp about two and a half hours later; due to Onodera's "brutality," she was unable to move and remained at the camp for three or four days.<sup>63</sup> In arguing against Onodera's petition for a more lenient sentence at the confirmation stage, the post-trial review report took note of Onodera's "most revolting cruelties" and referred to his involvement in the above-mentioned gang rape of the Indian girl as well as his rape of the Burmese girl.<sup>64</sup> These indiscriminate sexual attacks on civilian women and men demonstrate that sexual violence was an accepted practice within the Japanese military. Gendered attitudes, social taboos, and discriminatory treatment by members of their own community contributed to making the position of civilian women even more vulnerable and precarious.

### **"Siamese lady friends": A Critical Look at Sexual Relations on the Railway**

While the criminal nature of some sexual acts was obvious to witnesses in the Kudo Butai trial, other sexual acts were described by witnesses as consensual especially when unaccompanied by obvious force. A closer analysis of trial records casts doubts on the consensual nature of these sexual acts,

<sup>60</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 121.

<sup>61</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 460.

<sup>62</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 460.

<sup>63</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 460.

<sup>64</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, Review Report, SP 8.

demonstrating that sexual crimes may have been more widespread than observed by witnesses. An example would be witnesses' understanding of the relationship between railway personnel and their "Siamese lady friends". In his statement, Murphy observed that railway personnel often arranged for "Thai prostitutes" to be brought to the railway for parties.<sup>65</sup> Prosecution witness Goh testified that accused Nishimura gave away much needed bottles of quinine to "Siamese lady friends".<sup>66</sup> He described how these "lady friends" would visit the camp "whenever there was an opportunity late in the evening" to get quinine.<sup>67</sup> These witnesses were probably, understandably, resentful of these women given the severe shortage of medicines and other basic goods in camps along the railway. These women were depicted by these witnesses as sex workers who engaged in consensual sexual relations with railway personnel in exchange for necessities.

Given present-day knowledge of the Japanese military's 'comfort women' system of sexual enslavement, it is possible that some, if not all, of these "Siamese lady friends" were 'comfort women' who had been coerced or deceived into these activities without consent.<sup>68</sup> Just because these women were given quinine by railway personnel does not exclude this possibility. Women across Asia were recruited through deception and force by the Japanese military and private agents on behalf of the military into sexual slavery throughout the war. Due to social stigma and shame, these women remained silent about these crimes committed against them for years after the end of the war. It was only in 1991 that former 'comfort women' spoke up in Korea.<sup>69</sup> Hirofumi's research establishes the existence of Thai 'comfort women', though not much is known about their experiences.<sup>70</sup> The "Siamese lady friends" referred to in the Kudo Butai trial shows that there possibly were 'comfort women' from Thailand on the railway. While witnesses referred to these women as "Siamese," it is not clear whether all of them were from Thailand. If any of these "comfort women" were from Thailand, it demonstrates that the Thai government's collaboration with the Japanese did not prevent the sexual victimization of Thai women by Japanese military personnel.<sup>71</sup>

None of this is to say that consensual sexual and romantic relations were not possible or did not exist on the Death Railway. The consensual basis of such

<sup>65</sup> Sworn Statement of Patrick Francis Murphy, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 481.

<sup>66</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 67.

<sup>67</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 67.

<sup>68</sup> 200,000 women from the region were deceived, kidnapped, or forced into a system of forced prostitution and sexual servitude to serve Japanese servicemen. Kelly D. Askin, "Comfort Women: Shifting Shame and Stigma from Victims to Victimizer," *International Criminal Law Review* 1 (2001): 13.

<sup>69</sup> E. Tammy Kim, "Performing Social Reparation: 'Comfort Women' And The Path To Political Forgiveness," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16, no. 2 (2006): 227.

<sup>70</sup> Hayashi Hirofumi, "Japanese Comfort Women in Southeast Asia," *Japan Forum* 10, no. 2 (1998): 212–13.

<sup>71</sup> The Thai population did suffer less compared to other populations under Japanese military occupation.

Reynolds, "Aftermath of Alliance," 67.

relations between female workers and enemy personnel should not be assumed but should also not be excluded. When questioned about the accused Mukaeda Takeo, prosecution witness M. D. George stated that Mukaeda had “immoral actions with a woman with her consent”.<sup>72</sup> Without further details, it is hard to assess the nature of this relationship, and its consensual basis should not be assumed, given coercive circumstances on the railway. For example, there was evidence that if women refused Kudo’s sexual advances, he would order their husbands to be beaten.<sup>73</sup> However, as highlighted by feminist scholars, even under coercive conflict-related conditions, consensual sexual relations between the enemy and occupied population are possible.<sup>74</sup> Women may consent to sexual or romantic relations with enemy personnel for many reasons. An exclusive relationship with Mukaeda could have protected the woman from sexual attacks by other Japanese military personnel or provided her and her dependents with access to food or medicine.

There is also evidence that female and male civilian workers had consensual relationships with each other on the railway. These relationships were prohibited by the Japanese railway authorities and entailed much risk. Yoessoef Bin Rais, who worked as a dresser at Dai Ni hospital, explained that he had gone to visit his “girl-friend” at Dai Ichi hospital sometime in April 1944.<sup>75</sup> He was caught doing so and beaten and tied up for five days and night without food and water.<sup>76</sup> In his testimony before the court, when asked about crimes committed by the accused Yasuda Kinichiro, prosecution witness Goh Soh Boon referred to Yasuda’s beating of Yoessoef Bin Rais. Goh explained that Yoessoef had gone to visit his “lover,” a Malay woman, who worked in Dai Ichi hospital.<sup>77</sup> He confirmed that Yoessoef was caught and received a “thrashing” from Yasuda.<sup>78</sup> The trial record does not state whether Yasuda’s “lover” was caught and similarly punished.

### **The Chinese Dresser’s Wife: Acts of Aiding on the Railway**

While women were particularly vulnerable to sexual crimes on the Death Railway, this did not prevent some women from helping others through acts prohibited by the Japanese military. Stories of anti-Japanese resistance by women, such as Elizabeth Choy and Sybil Kathigasu, form part of officially

<sup>72</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 121.

<sup>73</sup> “Summary of examination of J. W. Karunakaran”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 526.

<sup>74</sup> In her insightful analysis of Marta Hiller’s memoir, *A Woman in Berlin*, Halley highlights the “tacit bargain” between Hiller and a Soviet officer in post-war Berlin according to which the latter provided Hiller with protection, necessities, and even luxuries while she provided him with sex, conversation, and “domesticity”. Janet Halley, “Rape in Berlin: Reconsidering the Criminalization of Rape in the International Law of Armed Conflict,” *Melbourne Journal of International Law* 9, no. 1 (2008): 116.

<sup>75</sup> “Summary of examination of Mohd Yoessoef Bin Rais”, Kudo Butai Trial, SP 490.

<sup>76</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 491.

<sup>77</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 66.

<sup>78</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 67.

sanctioned war memories in the region.<sup>79</sup> Their stories underscore that women were not only wartime victims but also individuals who defied the Japanese military authorities by helping others at great risk to themselves. Such stories of anti-Japanese resistance are similarly embedded in the Kudo Butai trial records. According to trial testimony, among those engaged in helping acts on the railway was the wife of a Chinese dresser who risked her life as well as that of her family to help POWs obtain necessities. Gender stereotypes of women as less threatening than men may have allowed women to move around, obtain medicine and daily necessities, as well as pass these on to POWs and other detainees. Other anti-Japanese female figures, like Choy and Kathigas, performed similar roles during the Japanese occupation.<sup>80</sup>

In his court testimony, prosecution witness Morris Fox stated that when he was hospitalized for dysentery on the railway, he had overheard a doctor saying that the tuberculosis patient next to Fox, an Australian POW, required milk which was unavailable.<sup>81</sup> When Fox felt better, he visited the hut of a Chinese dresser next to their POW hut though railway personnel prohibited such visits. This Chinese dresser and his wife were “friendly” with Fox and had told him that he could come to them if he ever needed “anything”.<sup>82</sup> They would “try their best” to get the necessities requested.<sup>83</sup> Civilians appointed as medical dressers on the railway benefited from better provisions and living conditions.<sup>84</sup> This was possibly one of the reasons why the Chinese dresser and his wife were able to obtain necessities for others. Fox asked them if they could obtain the milk required to treat his fellow patient. On the evening of the same day, Fox returned to the dresser’s hut to get the milk he had requested from the Chinese dresser’s wife.<sup>85</sup>

The facts surrounding the Chinese dresser’s wife helping of Fox show that this was possibly not the first time the former had engaged in helping acts. The fact that Fox had gone to the dresser to ask for help shows that the dresser had provided similar assistance to Fox or other POWs in the past. The dresser’s wife was able to secure the milk required by Fox in less than a day despite the shortage of necessities experienced in these camps. This demonstrates that the dresser’s wife was able to reach out to a network of reliable contacts to quickly obtain the milk. Many Asian civilians, like the dresser and his wife, played a crucial role in helping POWs detained in camps obtain the necessities needed for survival given the general shortage of such necessities in these camps. The movement of POWs and other detainees was highly restricted in these camps. European POWs were often unable to speak the local language or communicate with locals. POWs on the Death Railway faced additional challenges, transported to camps along the railway deep in jungles and far from urban areas. POWs in

<sup>79</sup> Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 76–79.

<sup>80</sup> Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 76–79.

<sup>81</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 143.

<sup>82</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 143.

<sup>83</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 143.

<sup>84</sup> Testimony of Sabar bin Noordin, SP 136–37.

<sup>85</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 143.

these camps were dependent on Asian workers or locals who could act as go-betweens and who had the information as well as contacts to obtain the medicines, food, and necessities so desperately needed in these POW camps.

Things did not turn out well for Fox, the Chinese dresser's wife, and her family. Kudo saw Fox exiting the dresser's hut after obtaining the milk. The next morning, Kudo entered Fox's hut with Yasuda to interrogate him about his visit to the Chinese dresser's hut. Kudo alleged that Fox had visited the dresser's hut to see the dresser's daughter. The daughter was someone whom Kudo "had eyes on".<sup>86</sup> Over her parents' protests, Kudo then went into the hut and "bashed the child," who was about fourteen years old. Kudo then beat up Fox and tied him up about twelve hours.<sup>87</sup> Acts of aiding and resistance by civilians, if detected by the Japanese military, could result in the punishment of not only the aider but also their family members. Yet, the Chinese dresser's wife was not the only woman on the railway engaged in such courageous acts. During his examination-in-chief regarding Kudo's crimes, prosecution witness Tan Teik Seng described another helping act by a "Chinese girl adopted by an Indian" who had obtained and given food to POWs on the railway.<sup>88</sup> Tan explained that the girl had managed to do so by passing food to a POW "through the fence".<sup>89</sup> While "outsiders" were not permitted to pass food to POWs, Tan explained that this girl was not an outsider and "belonged to the camp".<sup>90</sup> Tan explained that Kudo had subsequently punished this POW for receiving food, though he did not clarify whether the girl was similarly punished.

## Conclusion

All but one accused was found guilty of at least one charge by the court at the end of the Kudo Butai Trial.<sup>91</sup> Yaguchi Sanya, the third accused, was acquitted.<sup>92</sup> Others received sentences ranging from six months imprisonment to life imprisonment.<sup>93</sup> Kudo and Onodera, who had perpetrated particularly egregious sexual crimes, were sentenced to death.<sup>94</sup> At the confirmation stage, the deputy judge advocate general's review report made express reference to the rapes and sexual assaults committed by the defendants. It noted that the prosecution had "amply proved" the charges against the defendants and that the court's findings and sentences were "well balanced".<sup>95</sup> The confirming officer subsequently confirmed all sentences handed down by the Kudo Butai court, including Kudo and Onodera's death sentences.<sup>96</sup> At 9 a.m. on January 21,

<sup>86</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 143.

<sup>87</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 143.

<sup>88</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 93.

<sup>89</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 100.

<sup>90</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 101.

<sup>91</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 29.

<sup>92</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 29.

<sup>93</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 29.

<sup>94</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 29.

<sup>95</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, Review Report, SP 13.

<sup>96</sup> Kudo Butai Trial, SP 29.

1947, Kudo and Onodera were hanged alongside six other Japanese personnel convicted in another trial for crimes against POWs. The Singapore press reported that all eight had “fervently” shouted “Banzai” as they were dropped to their deaths.<sup>97</sup>

Without minimizing the blameworthiness of those convicted in the Kudo Butai trial, this microhistory examines the broader relationships and structural factors contributing to female victimization. Systemic abuse and sexual violence on the railway showed that the Japanese military did not implement effective supervision and disciplinary mechanisms ensuring proper treatment of POWs and civilians. Some defendants, including those in leadership positions like Kudo, were repeat predators who committed sexual atrocities without consequence. Indian women occupied particularly precarious positions on the railway. For these Indian women, gendered hierarchies within their own communities meant they were dependent on males who were considered primary wage-earners and heads of households.<sup>98</sup> Given such gender dynamics, the injury or death of male household heads left female household members without protection from other members of her own community. This is reflected in the case of the nineteen-year-old orphan who probably was sexually abused by Indian male workers prior to Onodera’s savage attack on her. A broader focus on relationships when assessing female victimization focuses not only on those directly responsible for the abuse but also the other relationships contributing to the vulnerability of women on the railway.

In studying sexual violence on the railway, this microhistory draws attention to the challenges of assessing the agency of women on the railway given coercive conditions and other abusive sexual practices, such as the Japanese military’s ‘comfort women’ system. In assessing sexual or romantic relationships, it recognizes the importance of allowing for the possibility of consent as well as the difficulties of assessing consent when coercion is not obvious. Though Thai women visiting the railway were depicted by trial witnesses as prostitutes or sex workers, given the scale and reach of the Japanese military’s “comfort women” system, it is possible that some of these women were “comfort women” rather than sex workers coerced or deceived into such activity and forced to live in inhumane conditions. If so, this study shows that the “comfort women” system clearly failed to achieve one of its apparent objectives of preventing rape, as demonstrated by the sexual crimes perpetrated by railway personnel against civilian males and females on the railway. However, care should be taken when assessing sexual or romantic relationships to not foreclose the possibility of consent, even in cases involving women with enemy personnel. As some feminist scholars argue, women may have chosen to enter such relationships for various tactical reasons, such as protection, social status, or to obtain materials that they would otherwise not be able to access under wartime conditions.

Not all women on the railway experienced victimization and agency in the same manner. Social positioning and access to resources shaped the agency

<sup>97</sup> “Eight Japs Are Hanged”, *The Straits Times*, January 22, 1947, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Datta, “Immorality”, Nationalism,” 586.



available to women on the railway. The Chinese dresser's wife clearly had more choices and resources available to her compared to the 19-year-old Indian orphan. As explained above, civilians appointed as dressers on the railway received more food and better treatment than laborers. Some, like the Chinese dresser's wife, took advantage of this to engage in acts of helping others on the railway. The dresser's wife's efforts were probably also facilitated by gender stereotypes of women as docile and less dangerous than men. Nevertheless, the agency possessed by these women remained precarious. If caught, these women risked subjecting themselves and their loved ones to severe punishment by the Japanese military. Women exercised varying degrees of agency on the railway, but all were vulnerable to abuse and sexual violence. Structural and relational factors underlying such violence include the Japanese military's condoning of, or at best indifference to, such sexual crimes as well as prevailing gender and racial biases. By identifying the broader relational and structural factors contributing to the vulnerability of women the railway, this microhistory of the Kudo Butai Trial demonstrates the pervasive risk of abuse and sexual violence experienced by women in all territories under Japanese military occupation.

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