
Exposing the Rape of Nanking

Exclusive excerpts from a Chinese-American author's unflinching re-examination of one of the most horrifying chapters of the second world war.

By Iris Chang

THE CHRONICLE OF humankind's cruelty is a long and sorry tale. But if it is true that even in such horror tales there are degrees of ruthlessness, then few atrocities can compare in intensity and scale to the rape of Nanking during World War II.

The broad details of the rape are, except among the Japanese, not in dispute. In November 1937, after their successful invasion of Shanghai, the Japanese launched a massive attack on the newly established capital of the Republic of China. When the city fell on December 13, 1937, Japanese soldiers began an orgy of cruelty seldom if ever matched in world history. Tens of thousands of young men were rounded up and herded to the outer areas of the city, where they were mowed down by machine guns, used for bayonet practice, or soaked with gasoline and burned alive. By the end of the massacre an estimated 260,000 to 350,000 Chinese had been killed. Between 20,000 and 80,000 Chinese women were raped—and many soldiers went beyond rape to disembowel women, slice off their breasts, nail them alive to walls. So brutal were the Japanese in Nanking that even the Nazis in the city were shocked. John Rabe, a German businessman who led the local Nazi party, joined other foreigners in working tirelessly to save the innocent from slaughter by creating a safety zone where some 250,000 civilians found shelter.

Yet the Rape of Nanking remains an obscure incident. Although the death toll exceeds the immediate number of deaths

from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (140,000 and 70,000 respectively, by the end of 1945) and even the total civilian casualties for several European countries during the entire war (Great Britain lost 61,000 civilians, France 108,000, Belgium 101,000, and the Netherlands 242,000), the horrors of the Nanking massacre remain virtually unknown to people outside Asia. The Rape of Nanking did not penetrate the world consciousness in the same manner as the Jewish Holocaust or Hiroshima because the victims themselves remained silent. The custodian of the curtain of silence was politics. The People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and even the United States all contributed to the historical neglect of this event for reasons deeply rooted in the cold war. After the 1949 Communist revolution in China, neither the People's Republic of China nor Taiwan demanded wartime reparations from Japan (as Israel had from Germany) because the two governments were competing for Japanese trade and political recognition. And even the United States, faced with the threat of communism in the Soviet Union and mainland China, sought to ensure the friendship and loyalty of its former enemy Japan. In this manner, cold-war tensions permitted Japan to escape much of the intense critical examination that its wartime ally was forced to undergo.

In trying to understand the actions of the Japanese, we must begin with a little history. To prepare for what it viewed as an inevitable war with China, Japan had

spent decades training its men. The molding of young men to serve in the Japanese military began early: In the 1930s, toy shops became virtual shrines to war, selling arsenals of toy soldiers, tanks, rifles, anti-aircraft guns, bugles, and howitzers. Japanese schools operated like miniature military units. Indeed, some of the teachers were military officers, who lectured students on their duty to help Japan fulfill its divine destiny of conquering Asia and being able to stand up to the world's nations as a people second to none. They taught young boys how to handle wooden models of guns, and older boys how to handle real ones. Textbooks became vehicles for military propaganda. Teachers also instilled in boys hatred and contempt for the Chinese people, preparing them psychologically for a future invasion of the Chinese mainland. One historian tells the story of a squeamish Japanese school-boy in the 1930s who burst into tears when told to dissect a frog. His teacher slammed his knuckles against the boy's head and yelled, "Why are you crying about one lousy frog? When you grow up you'll have to kill one hundred, two hundred chinks!"

In the summer of 1937 Japan finally seized the opportunity to provoke a full-scale war with China. One night in July several shots were fired at members of a Japanese regiment, garrisoned by treaty in the Chinese city of Tientsin, and a Japanese soldier failed to appear during roll call after the maneuvers. Japanese troops advanced upon the nearby Chinese fort of Wanping and demanded that its gates

be opened so that they could search for the soldier. When the Chinese commander refused, the Japanese shelled the fort. The confrontation escalated, and by August the Japanese had invaded Shanghai. Conquering China proved to be a more difficult task than the Japanese anticipated. In Shanghai alone Chinese forces outnumbered the Japanese marines ten to one, and Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Nationalist government, had reserved his best troops for the battle. For months the Chinese defended the metropolis with extraordinary valor. To the chagrin of the Japanese, the battle of Shanghai proceeded slowly, street by street, barricade by barricade.

LITTLE WAS SPARED ON THE PATH to Nanking. Japanese veterans remember raiding tiny farm communities, where they clubbed or bayoneted everyone in sight. Small villages were not the only casualties; entire cities were razed to the ground. Consider the example of Su-chow, a city on the east bank of the Tai Hu Lake. One of the oldest cities of China, it was prized for its delicate silk embroidery, palaces, and temples. Its canals and ancient bridges had earned the city its Western nickname as “the Venice of China.” On November 19, on a morning of pouring rain, a Japanese advance guard marched through the gates of Su-chow, wearing hoods that prevented Chinese sentries from recognizing them. Once inside, the Japanese murdered and plundered the city for days, burning ancient landmarks, and abducting thousands of Chinese women for sexual slavery. The invasion, according to the China Weekly Review, caused the population of the city to drop from 250,000 to less than 500. By the time Japanese troops entered Nanking, an order to eliminate all Chinese captives had been not only committed to paper but distributed to lower-echelon officers. On December 13, 1937, the Japanese 66th Battalion received the following command:

“All prisoners of war are to be executed. Method of execution: divide the prisoners into groups of a dozen. Shoot to kill separately. Our intentions are absolutely not to be detected by the prisoners.”

There was a ruthless logic to the order: the captives could not be fed, so they had to be destroyed. Killing them would not only eliminate the food problem but diminish the possibility of retaliation. Moreover, dead enemies could not form up into guerrilla forces.

‘It would be disastrous if they were to make any trouble’

But executing the order was another matter. When the Japanese troops smashed through Nanking’s walls in the early predawn hours of December 13, they entered a city in which they were vastly outnumbered. Historians later estimated that more than half a million civilians and ninety thousand Chinese troops were trapped in Nanking, compared with the fifty thousand Japanese soldiers who assaulted the city. General Kesago Nakajima knew that killing tens of thousands of Chinese captives was a formidable task: “To deal with crowds of a thousand, five thousand, or ten thousand, it is tremendously difficult even just to disarm them.... It would be disastrous if they were to make any trouble.”

Because of their limited manpower, the Japanese relied heavily on deception. The strategy for mass butchery involved several steps: promising the Chinese fair treatment in return for an end to resistance, coaxing them into surrendering themselves to their Japanese conquerors, dividing them into groups of one to two hundred men, and then luring them to different areas near Nanking to be killed. Nakajima hoped that faced with the impossibility of further resistance, most of the captives would lose heart and comply with whatever directions the Japanese gave them.

Even war correspondents recoiled at the violence

All this was easier to achieve than the Japanese had anticipated. Resistance was sporadic; indeed, it was practically nonexistent. Having thrown away their arms when attempting to flee the city as

the Japanese closed in, many Chinese soldiers simply turned themselves in, hoping for better treatment. Once the men surrendered and permitted their hands to be bound, the rest was easy.

After the soldiers surrendered en masse, there was virtually no one left to protect the citizens of the city. Knowing this, the Japanese poured into Nanking, occupying government buildings, banks, and warehouses, shooting people randomly in the streets, many of them in the back as they ran away. As victims toppled to the ground, moaning and screaming, the streets, alleys, and ditches of the fallen capital ran rivers of blood. During the last ten days of December, Japanese motorcycle brigades patrolled Nanking while Japanese soldiers shouldering loaded rifles guarded the entrances to all the streets, avenues, and alleys. Troops went from door to door, demanding that they be opened to welcome the victorious armies. The moment the shopkeepers complied, the Japanese opened fire on them. The imperial army massacred thousands of people in this manner and then systematically looted the stores and burned whatever they had no use for.

‘The killing went on nonstop, from morning until night’

These atrocities shocked many of the Japanese correspondents who had followed the troops to Nanking. Even seasoned war correspondents recoiled at the orgy of violence, and their exclamations found their way into print. From the Japanese military correspondent Yukio Omata, who saw Chinese prisoners brought to Hsiakwan and lined up along the river: “Those in the first row were beheaded, those in the second row were forced to dump the severed bodies into the river before they themselves were beheaded. The killing went on nonstop, from morning until night, but they were only able to kill 2,000 persons in this way. The next day, tired of killing in this fashion, they set up machine guns. Two of them raked a cross-fire at the lined-up prisoners. Rat-tat-tat-tat. Triggers were pulled. The prisoners fled into the water,

but no one was able to make it to the other shore.”

Next, the Japanese turned their attention to the women. The rape of Nanking is considered the worst mass rape of world history with the sole exception of the treatment of Bengali women by Pakistani soldiers in 1971. Kozo Takokoro, a former soldier in the 114th Division of the Japanese army in Nanking, recalled, “No matter how young or old, they all could not escape the fate of being raped. We sent out coal trucks from Hsiakwan to the city streets and villages to seize a lot of women. And then each of them was allocated to 15 to 20 soldiers for sexual intercourse and abuse.”

Surviving Japanese veterans claim that the army had officially outlawed the rape of enemy women. But rape remained so deeply embedded in Japanese military culture and superstition that no one took the rule seriously. Many believed that raping virgins would make them more powerful in battle. Soldiers were even known to wear amulets made from the pubic hair of such victims, believing that they possessed magical powers against injury.

THE MILITARY POLICY forbidding rape only encouraged soldiers to kill their victims afterwards. Kozo Takokoro was blunt about this. “After raping, we would also kill them,” he recalled. “Those women would start to flee once we let them go. Then we would bang! shoot them in the back to finish them up.” According to surviving veterans, many of the soldiers felt remarkably little guilt about this. “Perhaps when we were raping her, we looked at her as a woman,” Shiro Azuma, a former soldier in Nanking, wrote, “but when we killed her, we just thought of her as something like a pig.”

One of the most bizarre consequences of the wholesale rape that took place at Nanking was the response of the Japanese government. The Japanese high command made plans to create a giant underground system of military prostitution—one that would draw into its web

hundreds of thousands of women across Asia. The plan was straightforward. By luring, purchasing, or kidnapping between eighty thousand and two hundred thousand women—most of them from the Japanese colony of Korea but many also from China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia—the Japanese military hoped to reduce the incidence of random rape of local women (thereby diminishing the opportunity for international criticism), to contain sexually transmitted diseases through the use of condoms, and to reward soldiers for fighting on the battlefield for long stretches of time. Later, of course, when the world learned of this plan, the Japanese government refused to acknowledge responsibility, insisting for decades afterwards that private entrepreneurs, not the imperial government, ran the wartime military brothels. But in 1991 Yoshiaki Yoshimi unearthed from the Japanese Defense Agency’s archives a document entitled “Regarding the Recruitment of Women for Military Brothels.” The document bore the personal stamps of leaders from the Japanese high command and contained orders for the immediate construction of “facilities of sexual comfort” to stop troops from raping women in regions they controlled in China.

The first official comfort house opened near Nanking in 1938. To use the word *comfort* in regard to either the women or the “houses” in which they lived is ludicrous, for it conjures up spa images of beautiful geisha girls strumming lutes, washing men, and giving them shiatsu massages. In reality, the conditions of these brothels were sordid beyond the imagination of most civilized people. Untold numbers of these women (whom the Japanese called “public toilets”) took their own lives when they learned their destiny; others died from disease or murder. Those who survived suffered a lifetime of shame and isolation, sterility, or ruined health.

In interview after interview, Japanese veterans from the Nanking massacre reported honestly that they experienced a

complete lack of remorse or sense of wrongdoing, even when torturing helpless civilians. Hakudo Nagatomi spoke candidly about his emotions in the fallen capital: “I remember being driven in a truck along a path that had been cleared through piles of thousands and thousands of slaughtered bodies. Wild dogs were gnawing at the dead flesh as we stopped and pulled a group of Chinese prisoners out of the back. Then the Japanese officer proposed a test of my courage. He unsheathed his sword, spat on it, and with a sudden mighty swing he brought it down on the neck of a Chinese boy cowering before us. The head was cut clean off and tumbled away on the group as the body slumped forward, blood spurting in two great gushing fountains from the neck. The officer suggested I take the head home as a souvenir. I remember smiling proudly as I took his sword and began killing people.”

After almost sixty years of soul-searching, Nagatomi is a changed man. A doctor in Japan, he has built a shrine of remorse in his waiting room. Patients can watch videotapes of his trial in Nanking and a full confession of his crimes. The gentle and hospitable demeanor of the doctor belies the horror of his past, making it almost impossible for one to imagine that he had once been a ruthless murderer. “Few know that soldiers impaled babies on bayonets and tossed them still alive into pots of boiling water,” Nagatomi said. “They gang-raped women from the ages of twelve to eighty and then killed them when they could no longer satisfy sexual requirements. I beheaded people, starved them to death, burned them, and buried them alive, over two hundred in all. It is terrible that I could turn into an animal and do these things. There are really no words to explain what I was doing. I was truly a devil.”

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