

The Rape of Nanking: Reasons and Recrimination **By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.**

The Japanese general's who took time out to toast the early success of their China campaign in 1937 drew their jubilation not only from the quick rout of the numerically superior enemy, but from deep cultural roots. By the very act of fighting they were fulfilling the ancient role of the samurai – the medieval warrior whose fate was conquest or death. The Japanese warriors in China found plenty of both. Within two years after they swarmed over the Great Wall from attack points in occupied Manchuria, the Japanese had swept south and east 1,200 miles. On the way their 600,000-man force suffered 60,000 casualties and killed two million Chinese. Among those killed were civilians, butchered in a distinctly un-samurai-like orgy of murder at Nanking. The factors that lead to this uncharacteristic behavior can be traced to: the economic conditions that existed in Japan and the need for markets, the characterization of the Chinese people as morally deficient, harsh Japanese military training, and the circumstances on the ground leading up to the assault on Nanking. Debate continues between deniers of the genocide conducted at Nanking and those who cite the historical record. Perhaps the continuing debate has its origins in the same factors.

In his book *New History of the World* J. M. Roberts writes, "When Japan's wartime economic boom finally ended in 1920, hard times and social problems followed even before the onset of the world economic depression. By 1931, half of Japan's factories were idle. The position of the Japanese peasant deteriorated as millions were ruined and many had to sell their daughters into prostitution in order to survive." The political consequences were soon marked by the intensification of national extremism. The collapse of European colonial markets and the entrenchment of what remained of them behind new tariff barriers had a shattering effect. Japanese exports of manufactures were down by two-thirds, making Japan's export outlets on the Asian mainland critical. Anything that seemed to threaten Japan's markets provoked intense irritation.

Even as they were engaged in a struggle with the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese National People's Party and Chinese nationalism had done well with Russian help, to this point, and was beginning to reassert itself in Manchuria. The Japanese presence in Manchuria went back to 1905 and the theater was critical to them. At first the Chinese acquiesced, but in the 1920s began to question Japanese presence, with support from the Russians, who foresaw danger from the Japanese pushing their influence towards Inner Mongolia. There had been armed conflict in 1928 when the Japanese had tried to prevent the Nationalist Chinese soldiers from operating against warlords in north China whom they found it convenient to patronize. In 1929, the Chinese came into conflict with the Russians over control of the railway which ran across Manchuria and was the most direct route to Vladivostok. This conflict impressed the Japanese with the new vigor of Chinese power. At this time the effective power in Manchuria rested with the commanders of the Japanese forces there. In 1931 those commanders organized an incident near Mukden, which they used as an excuse for taking over the whole province. There followed the setting up of a new puppet state, Manchukio. Assassinations in Tokyo led to the establishment of a government much more under military influence which expanded the quarrel with China. In 1932 the Japanese replied to a Chinese boycott of their goods by landing forces at Shanghai. In the following year, they came across the Great Wall to impose a peace, which left Japan dominating a part of historic China and trying unsuccessfully to organize a secessionist north China.

By 1937, Japan was engaged in a full-scale war with China that they continued to call 'The China Incident.' Japan's expectations of a quick victory over China were shattered when the

battle for Shanghai stretched on for several months before that city finally fell in November 1937. The imperial troops advanced toward Nanking, the capital city of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, with heightened aggression, raiding small villages and razing entire cities to the ground. The Japanese army's march to Nanking created multiple factors that made the subsequent atrocities in Nanking highly likely. These were the combination of several factors, both old and new.

First, the near robbery-like requisitioning by Japanese soldiers caused the breakdown of their discipline. Quite a few cases of murder and rape recorded in private diaries were its natural consequence. In this respect, the Japanese troops degenerated into a pre-modern army living off the land to support themselves. Lack of logistical preparation for the Nanking campaign due to the typical decision-making process in the Japanese military—local command dragging the central authority—was its major cause.

Second, strong anti-Japanese feeling among the Chinese population in the region and the frequent encounters by Japanese troops with straggling and plainclothes soldiers led to the killing of POWs as well as ordinary civilians. Japanese soldiers conducted such ruthless killing because they were highly sensitive to and scared of the plainclothes soldiers. In this respect, the Japanese were fighting a new type of war against the 'inner front' as the German soldiers had done in Belgium in World War I.

Third; both sides resorted to burning for their own strategic or tactical purposes. The Chinese conducted a 'scorched-earth' policy and burned huge areas to deny the advancing Japanese troops any supplies—a campaign of destruction in line with their own tradition. Japanese soldiers frequently burned houses and villages to deprive Chinese irregulars or plainclothes soldiers of their staging bases. Other cases were attributable to the breakdown of discipline such as Japanese soldiers' carelessness or the sadistic pleasure they found in seeing houses in flames.

In December 1937, the Japanese army swept into the city of Nanking and within six to eight weeks, by most accounts, massacred more than three hundred thousand civilians, and raped eighty thousand women. According to Roy Brooks in his book *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy over Apologies & Reparations for Human Injustice*, "the Japanese turned murder into sport." They rounded up tens of thousands of men and used them for bayonet practice or decapitation contests. Sometimes they simply sprayed gasoline on them and burned them alive. Some men were skinned alive, tortured to death with needles, or buried up to the waist in the soil, where they were ripped apart by German shepherds. The Chinese women suffered far worse. Many of them were mutilated horribly after being raped. The Japanese even forced fathers to rape their own daughters, or sons their mothers, or brothers their sisters, all in an attempt to further degrade the victims. The Japanese were equally brutal to the small children. Babies were tossed into the air and bayoneted as they came down. Some were thrown into vats of hot oil and water. Despite compelling documentary evidence, eyewitness accounts, including some by Japanese soldiers, and photographic evidence, Japanese revisionists continue to reject charges that war crimes and atrocities that occurred there. This revisionist view is, to a large extent, associated with the resurgence of Japanese imperialism and militarism supported by the United States.

From the beginning of the armed conflict in July 1937, the Japanese government and its supporters, including the mass media, stressed that Chinese Nationalists had planned and initiated armed struggle. According to the official view, Japan had been seeking peace in Asia, only to be dragged into an unwanted military conflict with China. Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro's decision to dispatch additional forces to China received enthusiastic support

from the large national newspapers. In an article in *Asahi* titled "Obviously Planned anti-Japanese Armed Conflict; Firmly Decided to Dispatch to Northern China; Determined Statement by the Government to China and Other Countries," the editor used boldface to emphasize that this incident was no doubt an anti-Japanese armed conflict. He went on to say that, the incident was carefully planned by China and the Japanese government sincerely hopes that the Chinese side will immediately reflect on its attitude and that peaceful negotiations will be instituted in order not to worsen the circumstance. The media stressed that the Chinese soldiers and guerrillas were recklessly killing innocent Japanese civilians as well as combatants. Japanese casualties inflicted by unlawful Chinese shootings at the Marco Polo Bridge and other places were widely reported in the newspapers. When approximately 3,000 Chinese troops in Tongzhou attacked Japanese forces as well as civilians and killed some 200 Japanese and Korean residents, the Japanese war correspondents described the event in detail and expressed outrage. *Asahi*, for example, detailed Chinese looting and destruction in the Japanese community as well as the stabbing and killing of women, children, and infants. In another article on the same page, the *Asahi* correspondent Tanaka, who had met survivors of the incident, described his feelings of unprecedented fury and declared that July 29th must not be forgotten.

The official view of the time was clearly stated in elementary school textbooks. In the fifth-year geography textbook, written for 10 and 11-year-old children, which came into use in 1936, Japan was defined as consisting of the Japanese islands mainland Honshu, Hokkaido, South Sakhalin, Shikoku, Kyushu, Taiwan, Ryukyu Islands, the Kurils and the Korean peninsula. In the sixth-year geography textbook available in 1936, a description of Manchukuo was added in the chapter on Asia. The textbook stressed that relations between Manchukuo and Japan were extremely close and that Manchukuo was Japan's lifeline. According to the textbook explanation, Japan endorsed Manchukuo independence as soon as it became independent, then withdrew from the League of Nations, and has been making a substantial effort to develop this nation Manchukuo and to maintain peace in Asia.

After the China Incident in 1937, the textbook was again revised. The 1939 sixth-year geography textbook emphasized that Japanese efforts to preserve coexistence and co-prosperity with China, as well as Japanese development and sacrifice, were contributing to the development of Chinese transportation and foreign trade. In addition, the textbook blamed Chinese leaders for their incorrect attitude and for their provocative anti-Japanese ideology, both of which had led to the China Incident. Japan, according to the textbook, has been urging China to reflect on its mistaken policy toward Japan and continually carrying out its mission of eternal peace in Asia.

To condemn Japan as evil ignores many of the factors already mentioned, but does not mean that there were no aspects of Japanese military training that made Japan's forces more prone to violence. In his book *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* Joshua Fogel writes, "The bulk of Japan's frontline troops were poor farmers, industrial workers, and criminals, people who had rough lives of hard work and minimal reward." Once in the Japanese military system, they were treated harshly. Soldiers were routinely slapped and beaten by their superiors. Whole units were penalized with forced marches or punitive exercises for the actions of just one member. Complaints brought even worse retribution. Ideologically, Japanese were taught that their imperial hierarchy lay at the center of the world morality and that the Japanese were superior to all other peoples. As part of this philosophy, China was made the focus of contempt. Initially, some Japanese intellectuals used China in order to develop a more confident Japanese identity. Anti-Chinese attitudes spread in Japan as the popular voices of journalists and politicians condemned China as backward and encouraged Japanese expansion into Chinese territory. By the 1930s

Japanese school textbooks taught students to believe in Japan's superior position in Asia, to view China as a civilization in decline, and to consider Chinese people morally deficient. This view permeated the Japanese military, leading to racial slurs and contempt. Soldiers were told that expansion into China was Japan's destiny and that heroic behavior sought victory and death. The overall atmosphere of the Japanese military life created soldiers who followed orders, ignored personal feelings, and treated anyone beneath them with the same contempt that they experienced themselves.

Economic conditions, a mixture of harsh discipline and indoctrinated disdain created the potential for the Nanking Massacre, but to release that potential required the fourth and most important factor: the circumstances leading up to the assault on Nanking. The Japanese attacked Shanghai and began bombing Nanking in August 1937 with the expectation that all of China would fall in a matter of months. Instead, the siege of Shanghai required four months of bloody fighting. This angered the Japanese high command and the frontline soldiers who had watched their comrades die at the hands of the despised Chinese.

When Shanghai finally fell in November, military planners and leaders turned their eyes to the Chinese capital, Nanking, with the goal of retribution. Commanders pushed their units toward Nanking, quickly outpacing supply lines and telling their men to survive on what they could scavenge. Soldiers robbed villages they passed through and Chinese they came across. Peasants were forced to carry equipment and goods for the Japanese troops. Villages were razed in order to efficiently end any threat of resistance. Brutalities were excused in the name of war and capturing Nanking, and conquering the capital grew in importance with each new atrocity. The Japanese knew that their job was to kill the enemy, and the barely acceptable conditions of the frontline warfare grew worse, thereby amplifying the animal natures of these soldiers as they marched toward Nanking. To further encourage their men, officers promised women and plunder. When the soldiers reached Nanking, their expectations of revenge, sex, and goods combined with the heightened desire to make an example of Nanking and prove Japan's dominance.

John Rabe writes in his diary *Good Men on Nanking*, "The Japanese march through the city in groups of ten to twenty soldiers and looted the shops. If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed it. They smashed open windows and doors and took whatever they liked, allegedly because they were short of rations. I watched with my own eyes as they looted the cafe of our German baker Herr Kiessling. Hempel's hotel was broken into as well, as was almost every shop on Chung Shang and Taiping Road. Some Japanese soldiers dragged their booty away in crates, others requisitioned rickshaws to transport their stolen goods to safety."

In 1946, the Chinese prosecutor for the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) charged that Japanese troops had committed atrocities at Nanking in 1937. They stated the Japanese reason was to crush forever all will to resist on the part of the Chinese people. There was hardly a debate about the incident, called 'The Rape of Nanking,' until the establishment of formal diplomatic ties between Japan and the People's Republic of China in 1972. The lack of new information up to this point and original research allowed a rough consensus to form about the issue. The Chinese and the Westerners accepted the IMTFE indictment or ruling as their version of the Rape of Nanking, leaving no room for further discussion. In his book *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity* Masahiro Yamamoto writes, "The extremely negative image of pre-World War II Japan painted at the IMTFE had such a strong influence, even on the academic world, that few people voiced opposition to the IMTFE version of the Rape of Nanking."

The next round of debates about the Rape of Nanking started in the summer of 1982 when Japanese news media reported that the Education Ministry had directed writers of Japanese high school history textbooks to revise or modify the descriptions of modern historical events, including the Rape of Nanking. According to the initial Japanese news reports, among the revisions advised by the ministry regarding the China-Japanese conflict of 1937–45 was the change from “invasion” of China into “advance” to China. Although it became known later that there was no instance of such a change urged on any textbook, the news soon spread to other countries. There were, however, other revisions suggested by the ministry, including one concerning descriptions of the Rape of Nanking, with more emphasis on the provocation by the Chinese side as well as the deletion of the specific number of victims. The governments of Asian countries that had been subjected to Japan’s aggression before and during World War II filed immediate protests with the Japanese government.

From the end of the war until the early 1970s, some Japanese revisionists, such as Tanaka Masaaki, a World War II veteran, tried to discredit the conclusions of the Tribunal as ‘victor’s justice,’ but their efforts received little attention. From the 1970s on, the dominant view, that a massacre occurred in Nanking in 1937-38, has increasingly been challenged by revisionists, including conservative politicians, World War II veterans, and scholars in various disciplines, business executives, and popular commentators. Outraged by the revisionist challenges, progressives, who supported the IMTFE indictment, responded quickly to refute revisionist claims that the Massacre did not occur. The struggle between the two camps has raged since and the contest over how to characterize the Nanking Massacre along with other Japanese wartime atrocities continues.

From the 1950s on, as the Cold War took shape, the progressives endured a rising challenge from what they called “reactionary forces” and they struggled to resist what they regarded as a revived imperialism and militarism. In the face of Communist threats, a conservative Japan gained renewed support from the United States who looked for allies in the region. The Japanese government began to insist that textbooks were polluted by dangerous distortions. The Ministry of Education subsequently increased its control over textbook authorizations, and one-third of school textbooks were rejected as not meeting new government standards. The Ministry demanded that textbooks avoid tough criticism of Japan’s role in the Pacific War, and the government regarded as inappropriate any description of Japan as invading China. From the mid 1950s until the 1970s, the description of the Massacre completely disappeared from school textbooks.

In *Making of the Rape of Nanking: History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States*, Takashi Yoshida writes, “The end of the Cold War, Emperor Hirohito’s death, the loss of conservative party dominance in domestic politics, the more inclusive textbook descriptions of Japanese wartime atrocities, and the growing awareness of wartime devastations in Asia and the Pacific caused by Imperial Japan all combined to heighten the intensity of the disputes over the Nanking Massacre throughout the 1990s.” While discussed and debated in Asia, the Rape of Nanking remains an obscure incident. Unlike the atomic explosions in Japan or the Jewish holocaust in Europe, the horrors of the massacre at Nanking remain virtually unknown to people outside Asia. The massacre remains neglected in most historical literature published in the United States.

In the History Channel’s program entitled “The Rape of Nanking” in its “History Undercover” series on August 22, 1999, one of the themes presented was an alleged cover-up of the Rape of Nanking for half a century by the Japanese. But the heated controversy and debate about the incident in Japan appears to be more than enough to prove that there was no

cover-up. Instead, many Japanese scholars and journalists have discussed this issue openly and tried to obtain the truth. Although quite a few of them disagree with the prevailing opinion in the United States and in other Western countries, it is obvious that the expression of disagreement is not necessarily an act of cover-up.

The history of Nanking has been altered over time to meet the needs of changing societies in different sociopolitical contexts. While the details and the number of deaths continue to be debated, most historians agree that the Nanking massacre was an atrocity, in which 80,000 or more Chinese civilians and surrendered soldiers were killed and tens of thousands of women raped following the Japanese capture of the city. In Japanese publications seeking to deny or greatly minimize this event, a word like "so-called" is often placed in front of one of these names. Some seeking to link the event rhetorically or structurally with the more widely-known Holocaust in Europe during the Second World War use the term "Nanking Holocaust."

In conclusion, despite compelling documentary evidence, eyewitness accounts, including some by Japanese soldiers, and photographic evidence, Japanese revisionists continue to reject charges that war crimes and atrocities that occurred there. This revisionist view is, to a large extent, associated with the resurgence of Japanese imperialism and militarism supported by the United States. The debate continues as many Japanese find it difficult to accept the past actions of the Imperial Army while some search for the truth. Perhaps the old sense of moral superiority stands in the ways of acceptance. The truths and the actions of the conquerors of Nanking have their roots in the economic conditions in Japan which helped to foster the characterization of the Chinese people as beneath the Japanese and morally deficient. Bolstered by this sense of superiority, harsh military training, and the horrific conditions that the Japanese soldier had to endure on his way to Nanking, the atrocity committed there was perhaps inevitable, as is the continuing debate about its very existence.

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