

Introduction to Nanking Massacre: “The Rape of Nanking”

The Japanese invasion of China, prior to, and during World War II lasted from the early 1931 to 1945, with the eight years from 1937-1945 being the most intense and this period was known by the Chinese as the “Eight Years’ War of Resistance.” Japan’s ambition was to conquer China and the rest of Southeast Asia and to build a powerful empire, euphemistically called by the Japanese, the “Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.”

In July 1937, the Japanese army used the temporary disappearance of a soldier around the Marco Polo Bridge, south of Beijing, as a pretext to launch an attack on the city of Beijing, followed by a full-scale invasion of Northern China. The ill-equipped, dispirited Chinese armies put up a weak defense, so the Japanese quickly pushed its way southwards. After a ferocious battle, lasting three months and with heavy casualties, the Japanese occupied Shanghai and headed south towards Nanking [Nanjing], the capital of China at that time. Numerous atrocities were committed en route to Nanjing.

About 100,000 Japanese soldiers entered Nanking on December 13, 1937, encountering little resistance since most of the Chinese troops had evacuated the city. Nanking had a population of about one million, but approximately half of the residents had fled the city before the Japanese entered. The Japanese army went on a rampage in Nanking following a policy of slaughter known as “The Three Alls” —“Kill all, loot all, and burn all.” For the next six to eight weeks, the Japanese troops committed numerous atrocities with unbelievable intensity and is known as the Nanking Massacre or the Rape of Nanking.

The number of Chinese killed in the massacre has been subject to much debate, with most estimates ranging from 100,000 to more than 300,000, including tens of thousands of disarmed Chinese soldiers. They were systematically massacred using bayonets, guns, machine guns, and grenades. Some were burned alive with gasoline, or drowned, while others were buried alive or buried to their waists to be used for bayonet practice. According to the judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, also known as the Tokyo Trial in 1948, “Even girls of tender years and old women were raped in large numbers throughout the city, and many cases of abnormal and sadistic behaviour in connection with these rapings occurred. Many women were killed after the act and their bodies mutilated. Approximately 20,000 cases of rape occurred within the city during the first month of the occupation.” Many Japanese soldiers described these horrific scenes and their actions in diaries, and some even took photographs.

Nanking was looted and burned. It was verdict of the Tokyo Tribunal that one third of the city was burned to the ground and the *New China Daily* reported on January 23, 1938 : “...It has been thirty nine days since the city Nanking fell to Japanese hands. But many sites in the city are still burning with huge fires. The city is still in a terror period. All commercial areas have become ruins”

In addition to their atrocities committed, the Japanese also wanted to plunder the cultural heritage of the Chinese. Even before the attack on Nanking, the Japanese authorities had already set up a special committee for sorting, transporting, and cataloguing the looted books after the capture of Nanking. The loss of cultural treasures was devastating, including 897,178 volumes of books from public and private libraries in Nanjing and this plundered volume was more than the entire collection in the Japanese Imperial Library.

Prior to the fall of the city, all foreign citizens were ordered to evacuate by their respective embassies and institutions. Despite the approaching siege, however, a few Westerners decided to

remain behind and to try to protect Chinese civilians. This group of Westerners, composing of missionaries, doctors, nurse, journalists, educators, administrators and businessmen, established the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone and the International Red Cross of Nanking. A group of twenty seven western nationals were still inside Nanking when the Japanese military broke through the city wall on 13 December, 1937 and they witnessed the ensuing atrocities. Amongst them, five American and British journalists left Nanking on 15 and 16 December, 1937. The last remaining group of twenty-two western nationals was then composed of fourteen Americans, five Germans, two Russians and one Austrian.

This last remaining group of twenty-two western nationals took up the responsibility of managing the Nanking Safety Zone and the International Red Cross Committee of Nanking. On numerous occasions, they risked their lives by intervening to prevent the execution of Chinese men or the rape of women and young girls. Along with these selfless Westerners, a number of Chinese volunteers also risked their own safety to aid their fellow Chinese in the Safety Zone.

The Nanking Safety Zone was set up in an area of about 3.8 sq. km that encompassed the American, Japanese and other embassies, Nanking University, and Ginling College. It is estimated that when Nanking fell on December 13, 1937, the Safety Zone housed around 250,000 refugees. During the massacre the International Committee members found ways to provide these refugees with the basic needs of food, shelter, and medical care. The International Committee members vehemently protested the army's actions to the Japanese authorities, but the carnage continued.

In late January 1938, the Japanese army ordered all refugees in the Safety Zone had to return home by February 4. On 18 February, 1938 the International Committee was forced by the Japanese to change its name to [Nanking] International Relief Committee and to concentrate more on relief works. Out of the 25 refugee camps, 6 were closed in February or early March, and 13 more in March and April. Although by end May 1938, all refugee camps managed by the International Committee were closed, their relief work continued well into 1939.

In 1948, the Tokyo Trial convicted Iwane Matsui, commander of Japanese Imperial forces in central China, of Class B and Class C war crimes and sentenced him to death for responsibility over the Nanking Massacre. However, the other key culprit Prince Asaka who was uncle of Emperor Hirohito and commander of Japanese forces in the final assault on Nanking was never charged by the Tokyo Tribunal.

Today, many Japanese know little about the wartime atrocities their country committed throughout Asia. Seventy years later, the Nanking Massacre remains a divisive issue. Many Japanese believe stories of atrocities in Nanking are exaggerations and lies. Many in Asia are outraged whenever top Japanese politicians, including Japanese prime ministers or cabinet members paid homage at the Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto shrine that enshrines soldiers who died for the Japanese Emperor, including convicted class A war criminals of the Tokyo Trial.

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