

The 2006 World War II Essay Contest

First Place

Colonialism in China

Orgy of Cruelty - the Japanese "Rape of Nanking"

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"An example of...unmitigated evil,"¹ "an unspeakable orgy of brutal destruction,"² "the single most diabolical incident committed by the Japanese...one of the worst episodes of human barbarism in world history,"³ a "modern *Dante's Inferno*, written in huge letters of blood and rape."⁴

In a world whose recent history includes the systematic extermination of 6 million Jews and a total of some 100 million non-war deaths at the hands of totalitarian Communism, what is it about The Great Nanking Massacre,⁵ that elicits these extreme characterizations?

¹ Iris Chang, The Rape of Nanking (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 4.

² Rayne Kruger, All Under Heaven: A Complete History of China (Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2004), 392-93.

³ Chang, The Rape of Nanking, 8.

⁴ Martin Gilbert, A History of the Twentieth Century, Volume Two: 1933-1951 (Hammersmith, England: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1998), 165.

⁵ Chang, The Rape of Nanking, 8.

This essay will examine the Japanese methods of war against the Chinese, emphasizing the massacre in the historic capital of Nanking (Nanjing) of 260,000 to 350,000 of its inhabitants⁶. It will examine the mindset of the Japanese soldier and the contempt for the Chinese which the Japanese hierarchy inculcated in its citizenry. It will examine the world's reaction to news of the orgiastic bloodletting, both contemporaneously with its seven week duration and since. Finally, it will seek out the lessons to be learned from this dark event in history. Perhaps, through a willingness to examine humanity's most repulsive acts, today's men and women will forestall the development of an environment like that which resulted in the complete debasement of human beings by their neighbors.

Japan's "Three-all" policy, "[l]oot all, kill all, burn all," was only one of the ways in which this empire of the Chrysanthemum Throne gained notoriety for its ruthless military tactics.⁷ Using methods after which Saddam Hussein and his sons could have patterned their atrocities, the Japanese Imperial Forces carried out "a massive terrorist campaign...designed to exterminate everyone in the northern Chinese countryside

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Chang., 215.

...reduc[ing] the population there from 44 million to 25 million people.” Although the actual number murdered will never be known, a wildly conservative estimate would total close to one million.⁸

From experimental biological warfare in which plague-carrying fleas were sprayed from Japanese aircraft over metropolitan centers to the purposeful contamination of rivers and other water sources with deadly “cholera, dysentery, typhoid, plague, anthrax, and paratyphoid” microbes, Japan proved itself more than the equal of its Axis ally Germany. Its official policy toward civilians in the occupied territory of China was considerably harsher than that of the Third Reich. Perhaps more cruel even than the destruction of safe drinking sources was the Japanese lacing of foods with deadly microbes then given to unsuspecting, hungry peasants and prisoners of war. While denied as Chinese propaganda by many in Japan, documentary evidence of these and other horrific acts is readily available.⁹

“Unit 731” is the collective term for what were a number of experimental biological warfare programs used against the Chinese from 1931 to the end of the war. Vivisection procedures so heinous they can only be described as pure evil. Grenades, bombs, and flame throwers were tested on live victims. The depravity

⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁹ Chang., 216.

“Unit 731,” en.wikipedia.org (March 2006) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unit_731> [accessed March 20, 2006].

of scientific and medical experiments conducted on alert, living, unanesthetized humans was unspeakable.

But in the historic capital of Nanking, this depravity reached a level that “shocked even those familiar with the savagery of war.”¹⁰ As early as the 200’s A.D., Nanking was a thriving commercial and cultural center near the mouth of the Yangtze River and the capital of the Wu Kingdom. Less than 100 years later, in 317, the Eastern Chin founded the first southern dynasty at Nanking. By this time Nanking was known to “merchants and missionaries from halfway across the world.”¹¹

Although no longer the capital after Peking’s return to that status in 1421, Nanking remained a vibrant and important city, the site in 1842 of the signing of the Treaty of Nanking, ending the First Opium War.¹² Its destruction, along with the Taiping Kingdom in 1864¹³ was only temporary, for it would become the center of the provisional government, The Republic of China, established by Sun Yat-Sen in December, 1911. He would resign there, as promised, in favor of Yuan

¹⁰ Gilbert, History of the Twentieth Century, 162

¹¹ Kruger, All Under Heaven, 167-70, 178.

¹² Ibid., 344.

¹³ Ibid., 354-55.

Shih-k'ai, who was elected President in October 1912.¹⁴ It was this march of history that brought Nanking to its star-crossed fate.

In 1928 the Nationalist General Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Kuomintang or Citizen's Party, and his Nanking army had been defeated by the Japanese as they menaced China. By 1931 they controlled large areas of Manchuria and were intent upon "pacify[ing] their "brother"--China.¹⁵ In its quest for a "Greater East Asia," more land and resources for its rapidly expanding population, and a defense against the might of Soviet Russia, the Japanese initiated a fierce attack on Shanghai in late 1937 in which 250,000 of Chiang's troops were destroyed.¹⁶

The fate of the citizens of Nanking was sealed. In a mere seven weeks, an orgy of sickening depravity engulfed the historic city of Nanking. While the numbers of tortured and murdered is large (their bodies would have filled 2500 railroad cars¹⁷), the difference is the seven weeks in which such a large number of civilians was exterminated as compared to years in the European theater and the cruelty with which that extermination was carried out.

Chinese men were used for bayonet practice and in decapitation contests.

¹⁴ Kruger, 385-86.

¹⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹⁶ Kruger, All Under Heaven, 392.

¹⁷ Chang, The Rape of Nanking, 5.

An estimated 20,000-80,000 Chinese women were raped. Many soldiers went beyond rape to disembowel women.¹⁸ Unspeakable mutilation and degradation took place. Castration, live burials, roasting of humans was routine. People were staked and mauled to death by German Shepherds. Word of the horrors shocked even the Nazis.¹⁹ Out of a total population of 600-700,000, approximately half, including 150,000 soldiers, were annihilated. “The Rape of Nanking was to take its place among the massacres not only of the century, but of modern times.”²⁰

How could Japanese soldiers, doctors, and scientists be so cruel? What was the mindset of a society that could plan and perpetrate these horrors? There are a few theories. One theory espoused by those Japanese scholars willing to acknowledge the abuses is “a phenomenon called ‘the transfer of oppression.’”²¹

The Japanese soldier himself was treated with inordinate cruelty. Soldiers were brutally beaten and humiliated for no reason other than what their officers termed “an act of love.”²² This brand of sadistic treatment was in turned meted out to the Chinese when the soldiers got the chance to release their suppressed “anger,

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Chang., 6.

²⁰ Gilbert, A History of the Twentieth Century, 162.

²¹ Chung, The Rape of Nanking, 217.

²² Ibid., 217.

hatred, and fear.”²³ This transfer of oppression melded with a national obsession with war. From their earliest years, Japanese children were taught the glory of war. Stores were filled with martial symbols and toy weapons. The education system was harsh, authoritarian, especially for future members of the military, and children were cruelly and viciously punished while being inculcated with the glories of the Empire and their superiority over other races. Obedience and unconditional loyalty were paramount virtues. Individualism was not to be displayed.²⁴

Additionally, the Japanese were taught contempt for the Chinese in much the same way the Germans were taught contempt for Jews. Whereas, Jews were called dogs and rats, Chinese were called pigs. Soldiers, including officers, reported having no more remorse for killing a Chinese human than they felt when killing a pig. In fact, the Chinese merited less remorse--they would not serve as meat.²⁵

Finally, the Japanese religion played a part in the development of the “master race mentality,”²⁶ providing the justification for ruling its Asian neighbors. Theirs was a righteous mission: “[e]very single bullet must be charged with the

²³ Ibid., 217.

²⁴ Chang., 31.

²⁵ Ibid., 218.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

Imperial Way, and the end of every bayonet must have the National Virtue burnt into it,” said a Japanese general in 1933. “[I]t was the destiny of Japan to control Asia,” said another soldier.²⁷

But there was something else behind these heinous acts. According to Iris Chang, author of The Rape of Nanking, the single most important contributing factor was “the sheer concentration of power in government...only a sense of absolute unchecked power can make atrocities like the Rape of Nanking possible.” She makes a convincing case that it was not the Japanese race that was culpable, but the Japanese government.²⁸

What was the reaction of the world at that time and since? In general it was similar to the reaction of the world community to the recent slaughters in Rwanda and Bosnia and to that in Darfur today: a seeming paralysis, an inability or unwillingness to act. The events were distant, foreign. There was little indignation and no real call for aid to the Chinese or action against the Japanese. Had it not been for the European expatriate community in Nanking, particularly John Rabe, the German head of the Nazi party there, an American Presbyterian missionary, W. Plumer Mills, an American surgeon named Robert Wilson, and about two dozen others of various European nationalities, who set up a Safety Zone, many more

²⁷ Ibid., 218-19.

would have been killed, and the world might have known nothing about it until after the war ended.²⁹ Rabe even petitioned Hitler to put pressure on the Japanese, and on not a few occasions used his rank in the Nazi party to intimidate Japanese soldiers, preventing a few deaths in the process.

However, the rest of the world seemed to “little note nor long remember” the atrocities of Nanking. Of all the world’s influential men, Winston Churchill seems to have been alone in his encouragement of China. Though out of office for several years, he continued to write, and in a May 26, 1938, article in the London *Daily Telegraph*, Churchill wrote of Chiang Kai-shek:

He may well become a world hero, as a patriot and a leader who, amid a thousand difficulties and wants, does not despair of saving China from a base and merciless exploitation. It may thus be that from the opposite side of the earth will come that exemplary discomfiture of a brutal aggression which will cheer the democracies of the Western world and teach them to stand up for themselves while time remains.³⁰

In the ensuing years, little was said or written about the incident. Most of the world is ignorant of this egregious episode. Shockingly, even Mao “never made any comment, then or later, about this, the single biggest human tragedy of the Sino-Japanese War for his fellow countrymen.”³¹ Most offensive is the failure

²⁸ Ibid., 220.

²⁹ Chang, 105-37.

³⁰ Gilbert, *A History of the Twentieth Century*, 168.

³¹ Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *The Unknown Story of Mao* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 207.

of Japan to acknowledge its culpability and in some circles to deny the incident altogether. Many Japanese officials not only say they do not believe the accounts but also accuse the Chinese and others of fabricating the incident. No apology has been forthcoming, let alone reparations.³²

However, a recent surge of interest in publicizing the facts about the Rape of Nanking, including the Chang book, plans for a Chinese holocaust museum, and increasing pressure from the United States government for Japan to “confront their wartime past,” have stirred the waters. The Japanese are at a crossroads of history: either they will acknowledge their errors, or they will be known throughout history for their unconfessed sins against other nations, particularly China.³³

The all-powerful state, the inculcation of contempt for others, the use of cruelty against one's citizenry, these seem to form a nexus for extremism that becomes larger than the sum of its parts. These are characteristics of a nation, a government which must be resisted--whether it be in the halls of Congress and the White House, in madrasas or mosques, or in the current revival of nationalism in China.³⁴ State-sanctioned genocide has continued to rear its ugly head in the later part of the twentieth and

³² Chang, The Rape of Nanking, 219-223.

³³ Ibid., 224-25.

³⁴ John Bryan Starr, Understanding China, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 143.

early part of the twenty-first centuries. The world's foremost authority on "democide," his term for genocide and government-sanctioned mass murder, R. J. Rummel, puts it this way: "Power kills, and absolute power kills absolutely."³⁵ The world can no longer say it is uninformed about the atrocities at Nanking; it is no longer the "forgotten holocaust."³⁶ Those with more knowledge have more responsibility, and it now is the responsibility of those who know this history to ensure continued reflection upon it and to be the John Rabes of today and tomorrow, unwilling to allow unbridled power in the hands of any government.

³⁵ Chang, The Rape of Nanking, 220.

³⁶ Ibid., x-xi.

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