

*“What I am about to relate is anything but a pleasant story; in fact, it is so very unpleasant that I cannot recommend anyone without a strong stomach to read it. For it is a story of such crime and horror as to be almost unbelievable, the story of the depredations of a horde of degraded criminals of incredible bestiality, on a peaceful, kindly, law-abiding people ... I believe it has no parallel in modern history.”*

– George Fitch, 1937

In *The Rape of Nanking*, Iris Chang exposes to the world the tragedies of the forgotten holocaust of World War II. While most Americans are familiar with the tragedies in Nazi Germany, the majority are completely unaware of the atrocities that occurred during the Japanese occupation of China. Chang’s riveting writing forces the reader to unflinchingly contemplate the horrific nightmare of December, 1937. Even though the book clearly displays a bias sympathetic toward the Chinese, with over fifty pages of citations, it projects great credibility in its meticulously researched detail.

After providing a brief background to the events at Nanking, Chang spends the first half of the book painting a picture of the horrors that occurred during the six weeks following the Japanese invasion of the city on December 7, 1937. Next, the book documents the quantity of information available to the rest of the world during the six week occupation of Nanking and the world’s failure to take any action during the massacre. Finally, Chang concludes by addressing what she considers to be “The Second Rape,” i.e., the Japanese attempt to cover-up and the rest of the world’s failure to remember the atrocities of Nanking.

During the Japanese invasion of China, beginning in July 1937, the Japanese troops encountered much more resistance than they had originally anticipated. The battle at Shanghai proved to be particularly difficult because the Chinese troops initially outnumbered the Japanese by a ten to one ratio; however, after a lengthy battle and many casualties, the Japanese succeeded in conquering the city. After Shanghai was defeated, “the mood of the imperial troops had turned ugly, and many it was said, lusted for revenge as they marched toward Nanking” (34). Marching from the southeast, the Japanese troops formed a semi-circle around Nanking with the Yangtze River completing a full encompassment of the city. The Chinese troops wielded surprisingly little resistance and the Japanese gained control of the city in just four days.

Due to the quick Chinese surrender, the Japanese had many POWs that they could not feed or house. As a solution, an order was issued to “KILL ALL CAPTIVES.” Further directions continued by stating that the prisoners were “...to be brought out from their imprisonment in groups of 50 to be executed” (41). Carrying out the orders proved to be more difficult because there were roughly 90,000 Chinese troops trapped in the city. Thus, the strategy for killing the troops was centered on deception. First, the troops were coaxed into surrendering peacefully in exchange for protection. Once the men surrendered and allowed their hands to be bound, they were divided into groups of one to two hundred soldiers, lured to open fields surrounding Nanking, and brutally murdered.

The worst massacre occurred on December 17 when 57,000 soldiers and civilians had their hands bound behind their backs and were forced to march to the edge of the Yangtze River. The Japanese then encircled them with machine guns and opened fire upon the bound captives. After an hour, all the captives had been shot. To ensure that they were all dead, the Japanese bayoneted each individual body – a task that took from evening until dawn. Disposing of such a great number of bodies was a significant problem for the Japanese. They attempted to burn the bodies, but ran out of enough gasoline to cremate them to ashes, resulting in a huge mountain of charred corpses.

The Japanese did not just kill soldiers; they also massacred over 300,000 Chinese civilians. Most of the civilian corpses simply piled up in the streets. Many were thrown into the Yangtze River so that it flowed red with blood. From the diary of a Japanese military correspondent, “About fifty to one hundred people were toiling there, dragging bodies from the mountain of corpses and throwing them into the Yangtze River. The bodies dripped blood, some of them still alive and moaning weakly, their limbs twitching” (47). In another diary chronicling Chinese prisoners 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 non-stop, from morning until night” (48). Beheading was one of the more humane forms of murder employed by the Japanese. They also used such tactics as disembowelment, nailing people alive to walls, burying thousands alive,

hanging individuals by their tongues, feeding them alive to dogs, running over people in tanks, setting them on fire, and dousing them in acid.

The brutality was not limited to murder, however. The Japanese also raped an estimated 20,000 to 80,000 women. No woman found in Nanking was safe, as the Japanese indiscriminately raped girls as young as 8 to great-grandmothers in their 80s. Because the Japanese military policy forbade rape, nearly all the victims were subsequently killed. In the words of one soldier, “It would be all right if we only raped them. I shouldn’t say all right. But we always stabbed and killed them. Because dead bodies don’t talk” (49). The Japanese soldiers apparently felt little guilt about their actions. As one Japanese veteran stated, “Perhaps when we were raping her, we looked at her as a woman, but when we killed her, we just thought of her as something like a pig” (50).

The Rape of Nanking is not entirely an entirely dark story, however. A ray of light shone brightly from a group of approximately two dozen international businessmen and missionaries living in Nanking who became the heroes of the Rape. In November 1937, realizing that violence in Nanking was forthcoming, an eclectic group of internationals decided to collaborate to form an International Safety Zone where civilians could seek shelter. What began as a small effort to secure protection for the innocent quickly escalated to a huge sanctuary housing 200,000 to 300,000 Nanking residents. This is staggering when one considers that only 600,000 citizens were in Nanking during the invasion. If 200,000 to 300,000 sought sanctuary in the Safety Zone, then virtually everyone (over 300,000) who did not make it to the Safety Zone was killed.

Providing food and shelter for such an enormous mass proved to be impossible. Safety Zone residents slept huddled together in the streets, under bomb rubble, or in makeshift tents. The dedicated group behind the Safety Zone spent their own personal fortunes trying to supply the large mass with enough food; by the end of the Rape, some of the wealthiest businessmen owned nothing but the clothes they were wearing.

The informal leader of the group was John Rabe, a German businessman and leader of the Nazi Party in Nanking. He was known to the Chinese as “the living Buddha of Nanking,” but the Japanese were perplexed by their Nazi ally’s apparent support of the Chinese. Chang describes Rabe as “the Oskar Schindler of China” (109) for his dedication and personal sacrifice for the people of Nanking. Rabe not only organized the details of providing for such a large number of people, but also used his influence as a Nazi Party leader to send messages to Germany requesting assistance in forcing the Japanese to recognize the safety zone. Even though he never received an official response, the Japanese respected the Safety Zone with few exceptions.

In addition to assisting the victims of Nanking, the Safety Zone served a second important purpose: the volunteers carefully documented the occurrences in Nanking and informed the world of the atrocities. After the Japanese gained control of the city, reporters were banned from Nanking. However, due to the efforts of the Safety Zone volunteers, the world was informed of the horrors occurring in the city. Perhaps the Japanese underestimated the power of the eclectic team behind the Safety Zone; they were educated at the best universities

and had spent years writing sermons, papers, and books – more than adequate preparation for serving as the liaison between Nanking and the rest of the world. The riveting accounts recorded by the Safety Zone volunteers were published in *Time*, *Reader's Digest*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Daily News*. Even motion picture footage was smuggled out and shown in theaters in America and Europe. During the six weeks of horror in Nanking, the world undoubtedly knew the gory details of what was occurring, yet the knowledge did not lead to any action as thousands continued to be raped and slaughtered.

The Rape of Nanking, an event that once was on the front page of American newspapers is now almost entirely forgotten by Americans. Even though nearly every child in the United States learns of the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, most are unaware that the Rape of Nanking even occurred. Why does such a discrepancy exist? Chang concludes that the main distinction lies in the difference between the German and Japanese treatments of their own wartime crimes. The Germans conceded that the government itself, in addition to individual Nazis, was guilty of war crimes, while the Japanese government refused to take any responsibility for its soldiers' actions. Even today, the Japanese government continues to deny what occurred in Nanking. As recently as 1990, Ishihara Shintaro, a Liberal Democratic Party member and author of *The Japan That Can Say No*, was quoted in a *Playboy* interview as claiming, "People say that the Japanese made a holocaust there [in Nanking], but that is not true. It is a story made up by the Chinese. It has tarnished the image of Japan, but it is a lie" (201).

The Japanese government has never been held responsible for their actions. Even though the War Crimes Trials found a few officers and individuals guilty, the government itself has never acknowledged wrongdoing. In contrast, the German government has been forced to pay over \$60 billion in reparations, while the Japanese have paid close to nothing. The Japanese government claims that reparation issues were resolved by the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty. However, chapter 5, article 14 of the Treaty reads, "It is recognized that Japan should pay reparations to the Allied Powers. Nevertheless it is also recognized that the resources of Japan are not presently sufficient ..." thus postponing payment of reparations until Japan achieved a better financial position.

Japanese textbooks still do not mention the Rape of Nanking and are censored by the Japanese Ministry of Education. One Japanese high school teacher was quoted in the November 3, 1991 issue of the *New York Times* as saying that most Japanese students were surprised to learn that Japan had been at war with the United States and that, "The first thing they wanted to know was who won" (205). A few Japanese intellectuals have researched and documented the Nanking massacres, but many of their findings remain unpublished out of fear of Japanese retaliation. One such individual, Ono Kenji, reported some of his findings in the Japanese weekly magazine, *Shukan Kinyobi*, but he lives in constant fear, refusing even to be photographed.

The "Second Rape" of Nanking is the modern world's failure to remember the massacres that claimed 300,000 innocent lives. For the victims who

survived, the physical and psychological scars will be a constant reminder of the six weeks of horror. But for the rest of the world, Nanking seems to be no more than an intriguing newspaper headline from the war era. With the rise of *The Rape of Nanking* to the *New York Times* bestseller list, the modern world can no longer claim ignorance as an excuse for apathy. The Japanese government still has not made war reparations. Japanese officials still deny wrongdoings at Nanking. The Japanese Ministry of Education stills censors the truth from being taught in their schools. 300,000 victims still remain buried in ditches.

*“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it ...”*

– George Santayana