

THE RAPE OF NANKING



INTRODUCTION



THE CHRONICLE of humankind's cruelty to fellow humans 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 in world history compare in intensity and scale to the Rape of Nanking during World War II.

Americans think of World War II as beginning on December 7, 1941, when Japanese carrier-based airplanes attacked Pearl Harbor. Europeans date it from September 1, 1939, and the blitzkrieg assault on Poland by Hitler's Luftwaffe and Panzer divisions. Africans see an even earlier beginning, the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini in 1935. Yet Asians must trace the war's beginnings all the way back to Japan's first steps toward the military domination of East Asia—the occupation of Manchuria in 1931.

Just as Hitler's Germany would do half a decade later, Japan used a highly developed military machine and a master-race mentality

to set about establishing its right to rule its neighbors. Manchuria fell quickly to the Japanese, who established their government of Manchukuo, ostensibly under their puppet, the deposed emperor of China, but in fact run by the Japanese military. Four years later, in 1935, parts of Chahar and Hopeh were occupied; in 1937 Peking, Tientsin, Shanghai, and finally Nanking fell. The decade of the thirties was a hard one for China; indeed, the last Japanese would not be routed from Chinese soil until the end of World War II in 1945.

No doubt, those fourteen years of domination by the Japanese military were marked by countless incidents of almost indescribable ruthlessness. We will never know everything that happened in the many cities and small villages that found themselves prostrate beneath the boot of this conquering force. Ironically, we do know the story of Nanking because some foreigners witnessed the horror and sent word to the outside world at the time, and some Chinese survived as eyewitnesses. If one event can be held up as an example of the unmitigated evil lying just below the surface of unbridled military adventurism, that moment is the Rape of Nanking. This book is its story.

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. For months the streets of the city were heaped with corpses and reeked with the stench of rotting human flesh. Years later experts at the International Military Tribunal of the Far East (IMTFE) estimated that more than 260,000 noncombatants died at the hands of Japanese soldiers at Nanking in late 1937 and early 1938, though some experts have placed the figure at well over 350,000.

This book provides only the barest summary of the cruel

and barbaric acts committed by the Japanese in the city, for its aim is not to establish a quantitative record to qualify the event as one of the great evil deeds of history, but to understand the event so that lessons can be learned and warnings sounded. Differences in degree, however, often reflect differences in kind, and so a few statistics must be used to give the reader an idea of the scale of the massacre that took place in 1937 in a city named Nanking.

One historian has estimated that if the dead from Nanking were to link hands, they would stretch from Nanking to the city of Hangchow, spanning a distance of some two hundred miles. Their blood would weigh twelve hundred tons, and their bodies would fill twenty-five hundred railroad cars. Stacked on top of each other, these bodies would reach the height of a seventy-four-story building.

Using numbers killed alone, the Rape of Nanking surpasses much of the worst barbarism of the ages. The Japanese outdid the Romans at Carthage (only 150,000 died in that slaughter), the Christian armies during the Spanish Inquisition, and even some of the monstrosities of Timur Lenk, who killed 100,000 prisoners at Delhi in 1398 and built two towers of skulls in Syria in 1400 and 1401.

It is certainly true that in the twentieth century, when the tools of mass murder were fully refined, Hitler killed about 6 million Jews, and Stalin more than 40 million Russians, but these deaths were brought about over some few years. In the Rape of Nanking the killing was concentrated within a few weeks.

Indeed, even by the standards of history's most destructive war, the Rape of Nanking represents one of the worst instances of mass extermination. To imagine its comparative size, we must brace ourselves for a few more statistics. The death toll of Nanking—one Chinese city alone—exceeds the number of civilian casualties of some European countries for the entire war. (Great Britain lost a total of 61,000 civilians, France lost 108,000, Belgium 101,000, and the Netherlands 242,000.) Air bombing is considered by those who reflect on these things one of the most awesome instruments of mass destruction. Yet even the worst air attacks of the war did not exceed the ravages

of Nanking. It is likely that more people died in Nanking than in the British raids on Dresden and the fire storm that followed. (The figure 225,000 was accepted internationally at the time, but more objective accounts now place the number of Dresden casualties at 60,000 dead and at least 30,000 injured.) Indeed, whether we use the most conservative number—260,000—or the highest—350,000—it is shocking to contemplate that the deaths at Nanking far exceeded the deaths from the American raids on Tokyo (an estimated 80,000–120,000 deaths) and even the combined death toll of the two atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the end of 1945 (estimated at 140,000 and 70,000, respectively).

The Rape of Nanking should be remembered not only for the number of people slaughtered but for the cruel manner in which many met their deaths. Chinese men were used for bayonet practice and in decapitation contests. An estimated 20,000–80,000 Chinese women were raped. Many soldiers went beyond rape to disembowel women, slice off their breasts, nail them alive to walls. Fathers were forced to rape their daughters, and sons their mothers, as other family members watched. Not only did live burials, castration, the carving of organs, and the roasting of people become routine, but more diabolical tortures were practiced, such as hanging people by their tongues on iron hooks or burying people to their waists and watching them get torn apart by German shepherds. So sickening was the spectacle that even the Nazis in the city were horrified, one proclaiming the massacre to be the work of “bestial machinery.”

Yet 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 of the historical literature published in the United States. A thorough examination of secondary-school history textbooks in the United States revealed that only a few even mention the Rape of Nanking. And almost none of the comprehensive, or “definitive,” histories of World War II read by the American public discusses the Nanking massacre in

great detail. For instance, no photograph of the event, not even one word, appears in *The American Heritage Picture History of World War II* (1966), which for many years was the best-selling single-volume pictorial history of the war ever published. Nor can a word of the massacre be found in Winston Churchill's famous *Memoirs of the Second World War* (1959) (1,065 pages) or in Henri Michel's classic *Second World War* (1975) (947 pages). The Rape of Nanking is mentioned only twice in Gerhard Weinberg's massive *A World at Arms* (1994) (1,178 pages). Only in Robert Leckie's *Delivered from Evil: The Saga of World War II* (1987) (998 pages) did I find a single paragraph about the massacre: "Nothing the Nazis under Hitler would do to disgrace their own victories could rival the atrocities of Japanese soldiers under Gen. Iwane Matsui."

I first learned about the Rape of Nanking when I was a little girl. The stories came from my parents, who had survived years of war and revolution before finding a serene home as professors in a midwestern American college town. They had grown up in China in the midst of World War II and after the war fled with their families, first to Taiwan and finally to the United States to study at Harvard and pursue academic careers in science. For three decades they lived peacefully in the academic community of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, conducting research in physics and microbiology.

But they never forgot the horrors of the Sino-Japanese War, nor did they want me to forget. They particularly did not want

Throughout the book I use either pinyin or Wade-Giles for Chinese names, depending on the preference of the individual (as specified by business cards or correspondence) or the popularity of one name's transliteration over the other (for instance, "Chiang Kai-shek" instead of "Jiang Jieshi"). For Chinese and Japanese names of people, I use the traditional system of listing the surname before the given name. For cities and landmarks, I typically (but not always) use the form of romanization most commonly employed by Westerners during the era of the narrative, such as "Nanking" instead of the present-day name "Nanjing."

me to forget the Rape of Nanking. Neither of my parents witnessed it, but as young children they had heard the stories, and these were passed down to me. The Japanese, I learned, sliced babies not just in half but in thirds and fourths, they said; the Yangtze River ran red with blood for days. Their voices quivering with outrage, my parents characterized the Great Nanking Massacre, or *Nanjing Datusha*, as the single most diabolical incident committed by the Japanese in a war that killed more than 10 million Chinese people.

Throughout my childhood *Nanjing Datusha* remained buried in the back of my mind as a metaphor for unspeakable evil. But the event lacked human details and human dimensions. It was also difficult to find the line between myth and history. While still in grade school I searched the local public libraries to see what I could learn about the massacre, but nothing turned up. That struck me as odd. If the Rape of Nanking was truly so gory, one of the worst episodes of human barbarism in world history, as my parents insisted, then why hadn't someone written a book about it? It did not occur to me, as a child, to pursue my research using the mammoth University of Illinois library system, and my curiosity about the matter soon slipped away.

Almost two decades elapsed before the Rape of Nanking intruded upon my life again. By this time I was married and living a quiet life as a professional author in Santa Barbara, California, when I heard from a filmmaker friend that a couple of producers on the East Coast had recently completed a documentary on the Rape of Nanking but faced trouble getting funds to distribute the film properly.

His story rekindled my interest. Soon I was on the phone talking to not just one but two producers of documentaries on the subject. The first was Shao Tzuping, a Chinese-American activist who had worked for the United Nations in New York, served as a past president of the Alliance in Memory of Victims of the Nanjing Massacre, and helped produce the videotape *Magee's Testament*. Another was Nancy Tong, an independent filmmaker who had produced and codirected with Christine Choy the documentary *In the Name of the Emperor*. Shao Tzuping and Nancy

Tong helped plug me into a network of activists, many of them first-generation Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians who, like me, felt the need to bear witness to the event, to document and publicize it, and even to seek restitution for the atrocities of Nanking before all the surviving victims passed away. Others wanted to pass their wartime memories down to their children and grandchildren, fearful that their assimilation into North American culture might cause them to forget this important part of their historical heritage.

What strengthened much of this newly emerging activism was the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, which prodded Chinese communities all over the world to form networks to protest the actions of the People's Republic of China. The pro-democracy movement left behind vast, intricate webs of Internet relationships; out of this network a grassroots movement emerged to promote the truth about Nanking. In urban centers with high concentrations of Chinese—such as the San Francisco Bay Area, New York City, Los Angeles, Toronto, and Vancouver—Chinese activists organized conferences and educational campaigns to disseminate information about Japanese crimes during World War II. They exhibited films, videos, and photographs of the Nanking massacre in museums and schools, posted facts and photographs on the Internet, and even placed full-page advertisements on the subject in newspapers like the *New York Times*. Some of the activist groups were so technologically sophisticated that they could at the push of a button send messages to more than a quarter-million readers worldwide.

That the Nanking massacre of my childhood memories was not merely folk myth but accurate oral history hit me in December 1994, when I attended a conference sponsored by the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia, which commemorated the victims of the Nanking atrocities. The conference was held in Cupertino, California, a San Jose suburb in the heart of Silicon Valley. In the conference hall the organizers had prepared poster-sized photographs of the Rape of Nanking—some of the most gruesome photographs I had ever seen in my life. Though I had heard so much about

the Nanking massacre as a child, nothing prepared me for these pictures—stark black-and-white images of decapitated heads, bellies ripped open, and nude women forced by their rapists into various pornographic poses, their faces contorted into unforgettable expressions of agony and shame.

In a single blinding moment I recognized the fragility of not just life but the human experience itself. We all learn about death while young. We know that any one of us could be struck by the proverbial truck or bus and be deprived of life in an instant. And unless we have certain religious beliefs, we see such a death as a senseless and unfair deprivation of life. But we also know of the respect for life and the dying process that most humans share. If you are struck by a bus, someone may steal your purse or wallet while you lie injured, but many more will come to your aid, trying to save your precious life. One person will call 911, and another will race down the street to alert a police officer on his or her beat. Someone else will take off his coat, fold it, and place it under your head, so that if these are indeed your last moments of life you will die in the small but real comfort of knowing that someone cared about you. The pictures up on that wall in Cupertino illustrated that not just one person but hundreds of thousands could have their lives extinguished, die at the whim of others, and the next day their deaths would be meaningless. But even more telling was that those who had brought about these deaths (the most terror-filled, even if inevitable, tragedy of the human experience) could also degrade the victims and force them to expire in maximum pain and humiliation. I was suddenly in a panic that this terrifying disrespect for death and dying, this reversion in human social evolution, would be reduced to a footnote of history, treated like a harmless glitch in a computer program that might or might not again cause a problem, unless someone forced the world to remember it.

During the conference I learned that two novels about the Nanking massacre were already in the works (*Tree of Heaven* and *Tent of Orange Mist*, both published in 1995), as well as a pictorial book about the massacre (*The Rape of Nanking: An Undeniable History in Photographs*, published in 1996). But at

the time no one had yet written a full-length, narrative nonfiction book on the Rape of Nanking in English. Delving deeper into the history of the massacre, I learned that the raw source material for such a book had always existed and was available in the United States. American missionaries, journalists, and military officers had all recorded for posterity in diaries, films, and photographs their own views of the event. Why had no other American author or scholar exploited this rich lode of primary source material to write a nonfiction book or even a dissertation exclusively devoted to the massacre?

I soon had at least part of an answer to the strange riddle of why the massacre had remained relatively untreated in world history. The Rape of Nanking did not penetrate the world consciousness in the same manner as the Holocaust or Hiroshima because the victims themselves had remained silent.

But every answer suggests a new question, and I now wondered why the victims of this crime had not screamed out for justice. Or if they had indeed cried out, why had their anguish not been recognized? It soon became clear to me that the custodian of the curtain of silence was politics. The People's Republic of China, the Republic of China, and even the United States had 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 the Republic of China 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.

Moreover, an atmosphere of intimidation in Japan stifled open and scholarly discussion of the Rape of Nanking, further suppressing knowledge of the event. In Japan, to express one's

true opinions about the Sino-Japanese War could be—and continues to be—career-threatening, and even life-threatening. (In 1990 a gunman shot Motoshima Hitoshi, mayor of Nagasaki, in the chest for saying that Emperor Hirohito bore some responsibility for World War II.) This pervasive sense of danger has discouraged many serious scholars from visiting Japanese archives to conduct their research on the subject; indeed, I was told in Nanking that the People's Republic of China rarely permits its scholars to journey to Japan for fear of jeopardizing their physical safety. Under such circumstances, gaining access to Japanese archival source materials about the Rape of Nanking has been exceedingly difficult for people outside the island nation. In addition, most Japanese veterans who participated in the Rape of Nanking are for the most part unwilling to give interviews about their experiences, although in recent years a few have braved ostracism and even death threats to go public with their stories.

What baffled and saddened me during the writing of this book was the persistent Japanese refusal to come to terms with its own past. It is not just that Japan has doled out less than 1 percent of the amount that Germany has paid in war reparations to its victims. It is not just that, unlike most Nazis, who, if not incarcerated for their crimes were at least forced from public life, many Japanese war criminals continued to occupy powerful positions in industry and government after the war. And it is not just the fact that while Germans have made repeated apologies to their Holocaust victims, the Japanese have enshrined their war criminals in Tokyo—an act that one American wartime victim of the Japanese has labeled politically equivalent to “erecting a cathedral for Hitler in the middle of Berlin.”

Strongly motivating me throughout this long and difficult labor was the stubborn refusal of many prominent Japanese politicians, academics, and industrial leaders to admit, despite overwhelming evidence, that the Nanking massacre had even happened. In contrast to Germany, where it is illegal for teachers to delete the Holocaust from their history curricula, the Japanese have for decades systematically purged references to

the Nanking massacre from their textbooks. They have removed photographs of the Nanking massacre from museums, tampered with original source material, and excised from popular culture any mention of the massacre. Even respected history professors in Japan have joined right-wing forces to do what they perceive to be their national duty: discredit reports of a Nanking massacre. In the documentary *In the Name of the Emperor*, one Japanese historian dismisses the entire Rape of Nanking with these words: "Even if twenty or thirty people had been killed, it would have been a great shock to Japan. Until that time, the Japanese troops had been exemplary." It is this deliberate attempt by certain Japanese to distort history that most strongly confirmed in me the need for this book.

As powerful as this one factor has been, however, the book is also a response to something quite different. In recent years sincere attempts to have Japan face up to the consequences of its actions have been labeled "Japan bashing." It is important to establish that I will not be arguing that Japan was the sole imperialist force in the world, or even in Asia, during the first third of this century. China itself tried to extend its influence over its neighbors and even entered into an agreement with Japan to delineate areas of influence on the Korean peninsula, much as the European powers divided up the commercial rights to China in the last century.

Even more important, it does a disservice not only to the men, women, and children whose lives were taken at Nanking but to the Japanese people as well to say that any criticism of Japanese behavior at a certain time and place is criticism of the Japanese as people. This book is not intended as a commentary on the Japanese character or on the genetic makeup of a people who would commit such acts. It is about the power of cultural forces either to make devils of us all, to strip away that thin veneer of social restraint that makes humans humane, or to reinforce it. Germany is today a better place because Jews have not allowed that country to forget what it did during World War II. The American South is a better place for its acknowledgment of the evil of slavery and the one hundred years of Jim Crowism that followed emancipation. Japanese

culture will not move forward until it too admits not only to the world but to itself how improper were its actions during World War II. Indeed, I was surprised and pleased by the number of overseas Japanese who attend conferences on the Rape of Nanking. As one suggested, "We want to know as much as you do."

This book describes two related but discrete atrocities. One is the Rape of Nanking itself, the story of how the Japanese wiped out hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians in its enemy's capital.

Another is the cover-up, the story of how the Japanese, emboldened by the silence of the Chinese and Americans, tried to erase the entire massacre from public consciousness, thereby depriving its victims of their proper place in history.

The structure of the first part of my book—the history of the massacre—is largely influenced by *Rashomon*, a famous movie based on a short story ("Yabunonaka," or "In the Grove") by the Japanese novelist Akutagawa Ryunosuke about a rape-and-murder case in tenth-century Kyoto. On the surface, the story appears simple: a bandit waylays a traveling samurai and his wife; the wife is raped and the samurai is found dead. But the story grows more complex when it is told from the perspective of each of the characters. The bandit, the wife, the dead samurai, and an eyewitness of the crime provide different versions of what happened. It is for the reader to pull all the recollections together, to credit or discredit parts or all of each account, and through this process to create out of subjective and often self-serving perceptions a more objective picture of what might have occurred. This story should be included in the curriculum of any course treating criminal justice. Its point goes to the heart of history.

The Rape of Nanking is told from three different perspectives. The first is the Japanese perspective. It is the story of a planned invasion—what the Japanese military was told to do, how to do it, and why. The second perspective is that of the Chinese, the victims; this is the story of the fate of a city when

the government is no longer capable of protecting its citizens against outside invaders. This section includes individual stories from the Chinese themselves, stories of defeat, despair, betrayal, and survival. The third is the American and European perspective. These outsiders were, for one moment at least in Chinese history, heroes. The handful of Westerners on the scene risked their lives to help Chinese civilians during the massacre and to warn the rest of the world about the atrocities being carried out before their very eyes. It is only in the next part of the book, treating the postwar period, that we deal with the convenient indifference of Americans and Europeans to what their own nationals on the scene told them.

The last part of my book examines the forces that conspired to keep the Rape of Nanking out of public consciousness for more than half a century. I also treat the recent efforts to ensure that this distortion of history does not go unchallenged.

Any attempt to set the record straight must shed light on how the Japanese, as a people, manage, nurture, and sustain their collective amnesia—even denial—when confronted with the record of their behavior through this period. Their response has been more than a matter of leaving blank spaces in the history books where the record would have been too painful. The ugliest aspects of Japanese military behavior during the Sino-Japanese War have indeed been left out of the education of Japanese schoolchildren. But they have also camouflaged the nation's role in initiating the war within the carefully cultivated myth that the Japanese were the victims, not the instigators, of World War II. The horror visited on the Japanese people during the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped this myth replace history.

When it comes to expressing remorse for its own wartime actions before the bar of world opinion, Japan remains to this day a renegade nation. Even in the period directly after the war, and despite the war crimes trials that found a few of its leaders guilty, the Japanese managed to avoid the moral judgment of the civilized world that the Germans were made to accept for their actions in this nightmare time. In continuing to avoid judgment, the Japanese have become the ringleaders of an-

other criminal act. As the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel warned years ago, to forget a holocaust is to kill twice.

My greatest hope is that this book will inspire other authors and historians to investigate the stories of the Nanking survivors before the last of the voices from the past, dwindling in number every year, are extinguished forever. Possibly even more important, I hope it will stir the conscience of Japan to accept responsibility for this incident.

This book was written with George Santayana's immortal warning in mind: *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*