



“Memorial ceremony in Nanjing on the 80th anniversary of the massacre.” Sun Can/picture alliance/ZUMAPress. Deutsche Welle, December 13, 2017.

Abstract

This paper examines the United States’ direct role in the erasure of accountability for the Rape of Nanking, specifically through its postwar encouragement of Japan’s military culture. While the Rape of Nanking and its events have been widely documented, little has been confirmed about the motivations of the Japanese soldiers, largely due to Japan’s refusal to acknowledge the events in Nanking. This article argues that U.S. World War II and Cold War policy prioritized its geopolitical interests in having a capitalist ally in the east over pushing for necessary reform of Japanese military culture. By analyzing first-hand accounts and scholarly research, this article will argue that the actions of the U.S. directly played a role in preventing both the proper recognition of the Rape of Nanking by the Japanese government as well as the purposeful erasure of the Japanese soldiers’ motives behind their actions in Nanking. Instead of dismantling or holding Japan’s military accountable, the U.S. reinforced it in favor of securing Japan as a Cold War and geopolitical ally, directly undermining any chance of reform. This discussion will also utilize explanatory frameworks behind the events in Nanking, including the transfer of oppression within the Japanese military and the role of racial-imperial ideologies in Japanese military hierarchy and conduct.

Introduction

While some Westerners understand the conflict of World War II as beginning with the United States’ entrance into the conflict, the war began much earlier for countries in East Asia. For many in the region, the conflict began in 1931 after Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria, leading to additional occupations of surrounding cities driven by Japan’s imperialistic ambitions and beliefs of racial purity. One such event of this expansion was the Rape of Nanking, which occurred after the city of Nanking fell to Japanese forces on December 13, 1937. Over a six-week period, Japanese soldiers committed widespread atrocities against Chinese civilians. This paper will examine the short- and long-term effects of the Rape of Nanking and the resulting efforts by the Japanese government to cover up the events. While the Japanese government has apologized, many in Japan still refuse to acknowledge

the brutality and severity of the Rape of Nanking, which directly harms both Chinese citizens as well as East Asian geopolitical relationships, largely due to the United States' role in the situation. During and following the Rape of Nanking, the United States played a direct and deliberate role in erasing accountability of the Japanese military and government by encouraging the continuation of Japanese military culture after World War II, largely to secure Japan as a strategic Cold War ally. Therefore, rather than dismantling or helping with reforming Japanese structures that led to the events in Nanking, the U.S. knowingly preserved and allowed the dismissal of the Rape of Nanking, directly undermining any possibility of justice or reform for Chinese citizens.

The Rape of Nanking

The Rape of Nanking consisted of mass extermination and purposeful, barbaric acts of wartime rape and inhumane treatment of humans. Historians have estimated that at least 260,000 noncombatants were killed by Japanese soldiers in Nanking over this period, and an estimated 20,000-80,000 women in Nanking were raped by the soldiers.¹ Iris Chang, author of *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, greatly contributed to the documentation and remembrance of the events that took place in Nanking.² Most accounts of what unfolded during the occupation of Nanking come from outsiders who were there while it took place, survivors willing to share their stories, and the few Japanese soldiers who came forward after the fact to confess what happened.

While many were unaware of the events unfolding in Nazi Germany inside of concentration camps, the same did not apply to the Rape of Nanking, as stories of survivors were continuously plastered in newspapers around the world. United States correspondents such as Frank Tillman Durdin from the *New York Times* and C. Yates McDaniel from the *Associated Press* published numerous stories detailing what they witnessed in Nanking, with continuous follow-up articles leading into World War II, but none were ever truly addressed by the United States.³ McDaniel reported that the “streets [were] filled with dead Chinese” and that Chinese citizens were actively being targeted and executed by Japanese soldiers.⁴ Similarly, Tillman Durdin reported on the front page of the *New York Times* in 1937 that “Nanking’s streets were littered with dead” and that the “Japanese [appeared] to want the horrors to remain as long as possible, to impress on the Chinese the terrible results of resisting Japan.”⁵ A year later, Tillman Durdin reported that the “Japanese indulged in slaughters, looting and rapine” and that the “helpless Chinese troops, disarmed for the most part and ready to surrender, were

¹ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 6.

² Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*.

³ Daqing Yang, “Atrocities in Nanjing: Searching for Explanations” In *Scars of War: The Impact of Warfare on Modern China*, ed. by Diana Lary and Stephen MacKinnon (University of British Columbia Press, 2001), 76-96.

⁴ C. Yates McDaniel, “Newsman’s Diary Describes Horrors of War in Nanking,” *Associated Press*, December 17, 1937, <https://www.readex.com/sites/default/files/Readex/newsletters/The%20Readex%20Report/April2012/images/LuSeatleDailyTimes12-17-1937DISPLAY.pdf>.

⁵ F. Tillman Durdin, “ALL CAPTIVES SLAIN: Civilians Also Killed as the Japanese Spread Terror in Nanking,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1937.

systematically rounded up and executed.”⁶ Durdin continues to describe the events of Nanking, detailing the atrocities, stating “often old men were to be seen face downward on the pavements, apparently shot in the back at the whim of some Japanese soldier.”⁷ Although these journalists warned the world of what was happening in Nanking with stories about the horrors on the front page of newspapers, it was willingly brushed over by the American people as well as the United States government, with some who deny the Rape of Nanking ever happened to this day.⁸



“Nanjing Massacre Memorial,” author unknown, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

Some outsiders in Nanking, such as M.S. Bates and Professor Wilhelmina “Minnie” Vautrin, often mailed letters to inform parties within the United States and others outside of Nanking of the events unfolding in Nanking. They also documented what they witnessed in diaries to preserve proof for future records while staying in the city to help protect the people of Nanking. After initial reports of the Rape of Nanking were published, such as in the *New York Times*, Bates sent a letter reaffirming the events to J.C. McKim, who had said that the reports were false allegations. Bates wrote to McKim in response, “If I had not seen with my own eyes the things that I have seen I could not have believed that such things could have happened in the modern world,” and went on to compare the horrors to Assyrian rape – reaffirming the reporting done by the *New York Times* was accurate with what he saw in

Nanking.⁹ He states later in the letter that he witnessed a “child’s mother [who] was raped and then had a bottle rammed up her vagina. Two daughters of this woman, aged 14 and 16, were stripped, raped several times apiece and then killed, the older girl [had] a stick rammed up into in the same barbarous manner as the mother had been treated.”¹⁰ Similarly, Vautrin also worked to protect Chinese citizens during the occupation while she was president of Ginling College from 1919 to 1928

⁶ F. Tillman Durdin, “Japanese Atrocities Marked Fall of Nanking After Chinese Command Fled,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1938.

⁷ Durdin, “Japanese Atrocities Marked Fall of Nanking After Chinese Command Fled.”

⁸ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 221.

⁹ M.S. Bates, “Letter from M.S. Bates to Rev. J.C. McKim, c/o Dr. John Wood, 281 Fourth Ave, New York City, regarding *New York Times* stories on Nanjing atrocities,” (Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library), 1.

¹⁰ M.S. Bates, *Letter*, 2.

and as faculty until 1940, where she housed and protected thousands of refugees during the war. In her diary, she noted three days after the city fell that “there probably is no crime that has not been committed in this city.”¹¹ Vautrin documented brutal attacks and assaults against the people of Nanking, detailing, “twelve-year old girls up to sixty-year-old women raped, [and] husbands forced to leave bedroom and pregnant wife at point of bayonet,” and further noting in her writings, “if only the thoughtful people of Japan knew facts of these days of horror.”¹² Despite their attempts to smuggle information out of Nanking, the U.S. government and others were already aware of the events in Nanking but were inactive in response.

While many survivors did not share their stories, particularly the women, due to the sensitive nature of what happened, there are some survivors who have spoken about the brutality of the Japanese soldiers and the horrific methods of terror they employed. Among the six weeks of horror, Japanese soldiers began their killing contests, in which they competed amongst themselves to see how many Chinese citizens they could kill. Chang recounted the experience of Tang Shunsan, a survivor of one of these many killing contests, who said the killing contests would consist of one soldier standing watch to shoot anyone who attempted to run, and “in each team, one soldier beheaded prisoners with a sword while the other picked up heads and tossed them aside in a pile.”¹³ Tang stated that the Japanese soldiers would laugh and take pictures of the contests. In one instance, the soldiers dragged a pregnant woman away from the group in order to rape her.

Nobody helped her, and in the end the soldier killed her, ripping open her belly with his bayonet and jerking out not only her intestines but a squirming fetus. That, Tang believes, should have been the moment for them all to rebel, to do something, to fight back and try to kill the soldiers even if they all died in the process. But even though the Chinese prisoners greatly outnumbered their Japanese tormentors and might have been able to overwhelm them, no one moved. Everyone remained eerily docile. Sad to say, of all the people around the pit, Tang remembers only the pregnant woman showing the slightest bit of courage.¹⁴

Chang also documented the forms of torture and brutality directed towards the Nanking victims, including live burials, mutilation, and death by fire, ice, and dogs.¹⁵ Among the mass amounts of wartime rape, the Japanese soldiers also employed particularly barbaric forms of assault, including holding “comfort women” inside of compounds to be raped by groups of soldiers every day, slicing vaginas of young girls to improve “effectiveness,” and using family members in a form of emotional torture (whether it be through forcing the family members to watch soldiers sexually assault their female family members and then be killed or forcing them to commit the acts themselves).¹⁶ Tillman Durdin reported this beginning in 1937, stating that “many Chinese men reported to foreigners the

¹¹ Minnie Vautrin, *Diary of Wilhelmina Vautrin, 1937-1940*, (Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library), 113.

¹² Vautrin, *Diary*, 115.

¹³ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 87-89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89-99.

abduction and rape of wives and daughters,” and provided this information to reporters and missionaries, including Vautrin and Bates.¹⁷ Additionally, some of these “comfort women” were brought from other occupied territories, such as Korea and the Philippines, to Nanking to serve the soldiers as well. Despite the many eyes on the situation, American action was purposefully nonexistent.

While the Rape of Nanking lasted for more than six weeks, the spring of 1938 brought some comfort to Nanking residents as it appeared the worst was over despite the continued occupation. Nanking continued to endure an authoritarian and brutal occupation, with the Japanese government inflicting methods of abuse through financial oppression, purposeful drug addiction, and forced medical experimentation. During World War II, Nanking was continuously occupied and controlled by an intimidating military until the Japanese surrendered in 1945. After the surrender, Japanese soldiers fled Nanking and left the city on its own, with its residents questioning if Japan was truly gone and what would be done.



“Nanjing Massacre Memorial,” author unknown, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

War Trials and American Action

Prior to the end of the war, the Allies had begun planning war trials for both German and Japanese soldiers and officials involved in the war. After the war ended, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) trials began on May 3, 1946, in Tokyo, Japan.¹⁸ In the global context, as the trials progressed, the Chinese Civil War came to an end in 1949, with the Nationalist Chiang Kai-shek and his government fleeing to Taiwan, leaving Mao Tse-tung and his Communist government to take over China. A year later, the

Korean War began and ended with the division of Korea into North and South, with North Korea resulting in another communist threat to the United States. The fear of communism during the Cold War drove many U.S. policy choices, specifically by identifying “China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea as its new postwar enemies, the United States suddenly viewed Japan as a country of strategic importance, [and] Washington decided to maintain a stable government in Japan in order

¹⁷ Durdin, “ALL CAPTIVES SLAIN.”

¹⁸ “International Military Tribunal for the Far East,” judgment of 12 November 1948, in John Pritchard and Sonia M. Zaidé (eds.), *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial*, Vol. 22. https://crimeofaggression.info/documents/6/1948_Tokyo_Judgment.pdf.

to better challenge communism in Asia.”¹⁹ In a fight against communism and a financial strategy post-war, Japan had become the United States’ trading partner and Cold War ally, thus directly causing the Rape of Nanking not to be properly dealt with in the Tokyo trials.

Despite this, the trials brought the horrors of Nanking to the forefront, which included the prosecution learning about more hidden forms of torture the Japanese employed in secret military programs, Unit 731, based in Manchuria, China, and Unit 1644, based in Nanking. Both programs were responsible for conducting human experimentation and biological weapons research using Chinese citizens. Methods of torture included the Japanese “water treatment,” in which they would pump water into the victims until their bowels ruptured, and the “Three All Policy,” where Japanese soldiers would “kill all, burn all, loot all,” among other tactics.²⁰ Additionally, the trials brought light to evidence regarding Japan’s war crimes against those outside of China, most notably through the Bataan Death March. This event entailed the forced transfer of American and Filipino prisoners of war (POWs), in which Japanese soldiers consistently tortured and abused the POWs during the length of the march through forced “sun treatment” or systematic executions if the POWs stopped marching or fell. During the trials, it was determined that “Japanese treatment of their POWs surpassed in brutality even that of the Nazis. Only one in twenty-five American POWs died under Nazi captivity, in contrast to one in three under the Japanese.”²¹ Those responsible for the Bataan Death March were sentenced to death, which was a justice that was not seen throughout the remaining Japanese war crimes. Among the actions prosecuted in the IMTFE, the Bataan Death March was the most punished event, despite other horrific events uncovered, as the death march directly involved and killed U.S. citizens, which required the U.S. government to act and punish Japanese soldiers.

In examining the U.S.’s role in the erasure of Japanese postwar accountability, the differing treatment of biological warfare conducted by Germany versus Japan provides a clear determination of the U.S. motive. After discovering both countries’ respective experiments on human beings, the U.S. directly brought Nazi doctors and perpetrators to trial. In contrast, Japan deliberately obscured details about its experiments in Unit 731 and Unit 1644. Due to the rise of the Cold War, Japanese officers argued that the “information given to the US [would] ‘be discovered by Communists and passed to Russia,’” prompting U.S. officials to move towards immunity for those involved in these biological warfare facilities.²² Furthermore, through the rise of the Cold War, American scientists and officials decided that “a new war was being waged and that national security and wartime exigency justified exonerating the perpetrators of Unit 731 and covering up their crimes.”²³ This cover-up, while only a section of the crimes that were erased and bypassed by the United States, exemplifies the overarching

¹⁹ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

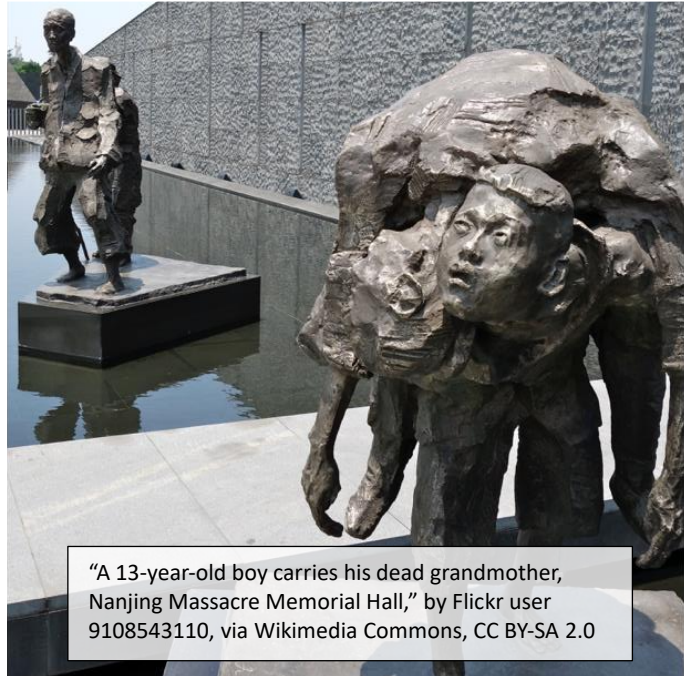
²¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

²² Howard Brody et al., “United States Responses to Japanese Wartime Inhuman Experimentation after World War II: National Security and Wartime Exigency,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* CQ: The International *Journal of Healthcare Ethics Committees* 23, no. 2 (April 2014): 220–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180113000753>.

²³ Brody et al., “United States Responses to Japanese Wartime Inhuman Experimentation after World War II.”

mindset of the U.S. government in addressing the rape of Nanking, as any prosecution or reforms had to further U.S. interests. Moreover, in comparison to the United States' treatment of German scientists during the Nuremberg trials, it became apparent that it was in the U.S.'s best interest to promote and protect their sole capitalist ally in the east, whereas the U.S. could further prosecute German scientists, beyond those they recruited to their nuclear science departments through Operation Paperclip.²⁴

In comparison to the trials of Nuremberg, the German population was able to condemn Germany's actions because of their condemnation of Hitler and the Nazis. As the Tokyo trials began to unfold, part of Japan's surrender included Emperor Hirohito's guarantee of immunity from trial as well as all members of the imperial family. Because of the omission of the emperor from the war trials, "The consequences of this discursive failure have been twofold: the Tokyo judgment has united some Japanese in rejection not of their leaders' actions but of the court's judgment, and it has united Chinese in the conviction that Japan has still to bear its full 'legal burden' for what it did in the war."²⁵ While the youth of Germany condemned the Nazis and learn the horror of what happened,



"A 13-year-old boy carries his dead grandmother, Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall," by Flickr user 9108543110, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

the omission of Hirohito permitted the Japanese to reject the court's judgement, which was significantly reinforced by the Japanese soldiers on trial heavily denying any wrongdoing, such as General Matsui Iwane, commander-in-chief for Nanking. Matsui's defense in the war trials largely consisted of either stating he knew of no atrocities in Nanking beyond Japanese soldiers defending themselves, or he would admit horrific acts in Nanking may have happened, but he was not responsible for the atrocities.²⁶ During the trials, the courts divided Japanese war criminals into different class systems of severity, with Class A war criminals at the top of the list in brutality. By the end of the trials, seven Class A war criminals, including Matsui, were sentenced to death for crimes committed during the war.

While the trials did hold some responsible, many actively involved in the events of the Rape of

²⁴ Annie Jacobsen, *Operation Paperclip: the secret intelligence program to bring Nazi scientists to America* (Little, Brown and Company, 2014): 5-7.

²⁵ Timothy Brook, "The Tokyo Judgement and the Rape of Nanking," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Aug. 2001), 676.

²⁶ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 175.

Nanking, or those who had the ability to stop what happened, were never prosecuted, largely due to the U.S. interest in protecting these officers. Under the immunity agreement from the end of the war, Prince Asaka, Emperor Hirohito's uncle, was not prosecuted despite his active involvement in the rape of Nanking, most notably through the order to "Kill All Captives" in December of 1937.²⁷ Through the emperor's immunity, the Japanese government rewrote the narrative and downplayed Japan's crimes to the Japanese people moving forward. Many scholars still debate whether Hirohito knew about what was happening in Nanking, with most arguing they believe he was aware, just as the rest of the world was aware, and still chose to do nothing. One scholar stated, "Although nobody has found the single smoking gun in the form of a written order, it is almost certain that Japanese commanders at the division level and above accepted mass execution as a method to dispose of the large numbers of surrendered Chinese soldiers."²⁸ Regardless, while some details were unknown prior to the war ending, the rape of Nanking and some of its horrific atrocities were widely publicized internationally. Despite this, the vast majority of perpetrators during the rape of Nanking were largely left untouched by the trials.

Most survivors of Nanking were never able to fully recover from the atrocities they lived through, both because of the torture and oppression and because of the political maneuvers following the war. Many of the crimes and atrocities committed left short- and long-term physical, mental, and financial damages on Nanking residents. In her interviews with Nanking survivors, Chang noted, "While many of the Japanese who tormented the Nanking citizens received full military pensions and benefits from the Japanese government, thousands of their victims suffered (and continue to suffer) lives of silent poverty, shame, or chronic physical and mental pain."²⁹ After the Tokyo trials concluded in 1948, many in Nanking hoped for reparations from Japan as well as for an official apology from the Japanese government, which Nanking residents quickly understood would not be the case, as it did not line up with U.S. postwar interests in the height of the Cold War.

Although the United States played a large role in the propping up of Japan, China and its new government played a key role in ignoring and bypassing the rape of Nanking when the People's Republic of China (PRC) pursued a relationship with Japan and stated on multiple occasions that China had forgiven Japan for Nanking and other atrocities when its people had not. Chang, through talking to many survivors, explained, "Hearing such news was like being raped a second time, and some saw themselves as the victims of a double betrayal – first by the [Kuomintang] KMT soldiers who fled from Nanking before the city collapsed, then by the PRC government, which sold out their futures to the Japanese." Although some of those responsible were put on trial while China attempted to heal, most of what happened in Nanking was swept under the rug. In comparison to the Nuremberg trials and the resulting changes in Germany, "while the Nazi regime was overhauled and replaced and numerous Nazi war criminals were hunted down and brought to trial, many high-ranking wartime Japanese

²⁷ Ibid., 176.

²⁸ Daqing, "Atrocities in Nanjing," 90-91.

²⁹ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 181.

officials returned to power and prospered. In 1957, Japan elected a man who had been imprisoned as a class A war criminal to prime minister.”³⁰ Evidently, Nanking survivors were forced to move on as it was not in the geopolitical interest of the United States, the PRC, or the Republic of China to force Japan to repair and properly acknowledge what they had done.

Attempts in Understanding and Japanese Justifications

Historians have tried to use sociological theories or historical context to attempt to find an explanation for the Rape of Nanking, including examining the role of the “fog of war” as well as Japanese racial purity teachings. Chang in particular examines this by looking at how Japanese soldiers were possibly overtaken by a haze of unlimited power given to them by a “dangerous government, in a vulnerable culture, in dangerous times, able to sell dangerous rationalizations to those whose human instincts told them otherwise.”³¹ Similarly, some scholars have examined how the military officials and the emperor encouraged racially motivated violence against Chinese citizens due to long-standing beliefs and teachings of Japanese racial purity, which appears consistently in Japan’s military culture and their armies’ interactions with other nations. Moreover, this centralized importance of the emperor directly contributed to this idea of purity, as some soldiers believed Japan was “the natural ruler of the world, that the Japanese were racially superior to the rest of the world, and that it was the destiny of Japan to control Asia.”³² The role of the emperor was only reinforced after Hirohito secured immunity following Japan’s surrender, as that unquestionable status was employed yet again for future generations learning about Japan’s history and actions during the Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Additionally, Japan’s militarism and occupation of Nanking exemplified how “the Imperial Japanese military embodied contempt, and at times even hatred, for the Chinese and other Asian peoples...The overwhelming majority of soldiers shared this contempt, which served to lessen psychological resistance to massacres and other atrocities against the Chinese population in Nanjing.”³³



“Nanjing massacre bronze head,” by Cernavoda, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0.

The racialized dehumanization of Chinese citizens was a highly prevalent attitude throughout

³⁰ Ibid., 182.

³¹ Ibid., 220.

³² Ibid., 218-219.

³³ Daqing, “Atrocities in Nanjing,” 87.

the Japanese army, with these same attitudes expanding to but not as strongly executed through their actions against other countries or populations they were oppressing, such as Korea and the Philippines. During and after the trials, some former soldiers began speaking out about what took place in Nanking.³⁴ According to the various soldiers, the attitude surrounding the brutality of their actions was very business-like, with a significant lack of remorse. In an interview for a documentary, former Japanese soldier Azuma Shiro spoke about what he witnessed and participated in during the occupation of Nanking. He recalled referring to the word “pikankan,” which individually translates to “hip” and “look,” but when put together, meant looking at what is between a woman’s legs. He went on to explain that the soldiers would take turns, stating that “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.”³⁵ This shared dehumanization and hollow attitude was common among all levels of the Japanese military in Nanking, including the officers. Many officers would partake in these atrocious acts and advise soldiers on the best way to keep the women quiet after raping them, which included either paying, kidnapping, or killing them.

Japanese soldiers’ ingrained beliefs to see Chinese citizens as subhuman and animal-like allowed them to justify their brutal actions, furthering this deep-rooted dehumanization to enable the actions in Nanking.³⁶ This was documented through interviews and written testimonies, such as when Japanese soldier Azuma Shiro wrote that “a pig is more valuable now than the life of a [Chinese] human being...because a pig is edible.”³⁷ The Japanese soldiers did not see the Chinese as an actual enemy but rather as genetically impure sub-humans, with whom they would not be engaging in warfare, but rather something that was expected or deserved. Further, the Japanese generational beliefs of their racial superiority and religious devotion to Japan and the emperor are vital to understand the motivations of the Japanese soldiers in Nanking, as when soldiers defended their actions after Nanking was freed, it often came back to the idea that the Chinese were not human “enough” for their actions to have mattered.

In addition to the United States’ refusal to both intervene in Nanking and properly address Japan’s actions for their own geopolitical reasons, the United States also shared a sense of dehumanization that stayed present throughout the crisis. For instance, in addressing the Bataan Death March, Japan’s actions were properly prosecuted in that act as it directly affected U.S. citizens, but other acts that harmed Chinese or Korean citizens were left relatively untouched by the trials. In the U.S., Chinese immigrants faced decades of dehumanizing immigration policies and political

³⁴ “International Military Tribunal for the Far East.”

³⁵ Azuma Shiro, *In the Name of the Emperor*, interview by Christine Choy and Nancy Tong, Film News Now Foundation, documentary, 1998.

³⁶ Daqing, “Atrocities in Nanjing,” 76-96.

³⁷ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 218.

rhetoric from the 19th century.³⁸ Chang details this dehumanization by further expanding that some scholars argue that in the context of the Nazi's actions, most did not believe the reports until Allied soldiers entered the concentration camps and knew the reports were undeniable, in contrast to the reports of Nanking, which were plastered internationally, and nothing was done.

The Rape of Nanking was front-page news across the world, and yet most of the world stood by and did nothing while an entire city was butchered. The international response to the Nanking atrocities was eerily akin to the more recent response to the atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda: while thousands have died almost unbelievably cruel deaths, the entire world has watched CNN and wrung its hands...Apparently some quirk in human nature allows even the most unspeakable acts of evil to become banal within minutes, provided only that they occur far enough away to pose no personal threat.³⁹

While newspapers in the 19th century played a significant role in the dehumanization of Chinese immigrants in American culture, American newspapers instead tried to bring Japanese atrocities in Nanking to the forefront in America, but their reports were left unaddressed for a multitude of reasons. The first being that President Franklin D. Roosevelt believed that the priority of the war needed to stay in the European theater, not in East Asia, which directly furthered the lack of action in Nanking.⁴⁰ Until Pearl Harbor, this isolationist standpoint was to be expected, but Roosevelt still took a direct role to erase and tone down the outrage toward Japan, particularly after the purposeful bombing of the *Panay* ship. Two reporters had filmed Japanese actions as the Nanking fell to be released in a film, and Roosevelt asked one of the reporters, Norman Alley, to remove the film that painted Japan in a bad light in the context of the bombing. Chang noted that “the sinking of the *Panay* caused more of an uproar in the United States than all the wholesale rape and slaughter in Nanking combined.”⁴¹ Moreover, as U.S. hatred of the Japanese and dehumanization of the Chinese grew, U.S. citizens and government officials further distanced themselves from the events in Nanking and across Japanese occupation, particularly after the U.S. granted immunity to various Japanese war criminals.

³⁸ Jacquelyn Burrer, “Applying an Intersectional Lens to Chinese Exclusion As Seen in Comparing Cartoons from The San Francisco Wasp and Harper’s Weekly,” *Texas State Undergraduate Research Journal* 12 (i) (2024), <https://doi.org/10.58997/0bhctc41>.

³⁹ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 221.

⁴⁰ Cade Marcus Beck, “Priority of Life: U.S. Response to Atrocities in East Asia During World War II,” Thesis. Whitman College, 2015. https://arminda.whitman.edu/flysystem/fedora/2021-10/Priority_of_life_U_S_response_to_atrocities_in_East_Asia_during_World_War_II.pdf.

⁴¹ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 146.

The culture of militarism and brutality within the Japanese army also largely influenced how Japanese soldiers viewed violence against other people, as violence was consistently inflicted on each other in a hierarchical manner to make the soldiers believe they deserved this punishment. For instance, the military often utilized the concept of “bentatsu,” which translates to an “act of love,” which was the routine striking of Japanese soldiers until they bled. Among other reasons, Chang points out, “the modern Japanese army had great potential for brutality from the moment of its creation for



“The Nanjing Massacre Memorial,” by Huang Sir (hyocean1989), via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA.

two reasons: the arbitrary and cruel treatment that the military inflicted on its own officers and soldiers, and the hierarchical nature of Japanese society, in which status was dictated by proximity to the emperor.”⁴² The internal setup of the Japanese military, as well as Japanese culture through its relationship with the emperor, directly contributed to the culmination of the events in Nanking. Similarly, among Japanese soldiers and officers, there was also a common attitude that helped the army rationalize their actions against the people of Nanking through the belief that the oppression and terrorization of Nanking was for their own good. General Matsui explained, they “do not do this because we hate them, but on the contrary, we love them too much. It is just the same as in a family when an elder brother has taken all that he can stand from his ill-behaved younger brother and has to chastise him in order to make him behave properly.”⁴³ Through understanding these misguided notions of justifying oppression for the good of the

oppressed, the soldiers may have believed their actions were “helping” Chinese citizens. While Matsui’s explanation justifies the perspective of Japanese military officers, the introduction of this reality comes into conflict with the forced dehumanization instilled in Japanese military culture that allowed soldiers to rationalize the horrific acts, including the mass rape and brutalization of women and the calculated execution of the killing contests.

⁴² Ibid., 217.

⁴³ Ibid., 219.

Conclusion

With the development of World War II and its eventual ending, addressing the rape of Nanking was only prioritized insofar as it aligned with the geopolitical interests of the countries involved. Once their postwar strategy changed, particularly as the United States realized the importance of cementing Japan as a Cold War ally, so did the importance and acknowledgement of what happened to Nanking. Some scholars have noted that “ultimately, an event like the Nanking Atrocity must be understood in the context of warfare in general,” as well as the context of the alternate realities that the Japanese soldiers had constructed to understand and rationalize their actions.⁴⁴ However, warfare does not exist in a vacuum, and it is vital to understand and contextualize all perpetrators’ roles and their individual motivations. While the world will likely never know why the Rape of Nanking escalated to such a horrific scale, utilizing theoretical frameworks that explore Japan’s military culture and ideology can provide insight into Japanese soldiers’ mindsets and how such warfare was internally justified. Although Japan did formally demilitarize and enact some reforms, elements of its military culture have remained, particularly in relation to nationalist memory. This continuance reflects the United States’ role in postwar reformations that left many crimes unpunished, prioritizing Cold War strategy over justice. The Rape of Nanking provides a crucial lesson in understanding how postwar politics can determine whether justice is pursued or suppressed, depending on the interests of those in power.

⁴⁴ Daqing, “Atrocities in Nanjing,” 76-96.

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