



Iris Chang. *The Rape Of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997. xi + 290 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-06835-7.

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The Rape of Nanking

In December, 1937, the Chinese army abandoned Nanking (Nanjing), the Nationalist capital, and the Japanese army occupied the city without a fight. The notorious "Rape of Nanking" that immediately ensued began as a wholesale murder of Chinese prisoners of war and civilian men on pretext that they were fleeing soldiers who had discarded their uniforms. As the discipline of Japanese troops collapsed they began indiscriminately killing civilians. Estimates of the number of victims range widely. In the middle range are the numbers presented at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials: 42,000 killed in city and over 100,000 in the surrounding area over six weeks. The local war crimes trials held in Nanking immediately after the war estimated that 190,000 were killed. Iris Chang accepts the highest plausible estimate of 300,000 dead. The incident was also a rape in a literal sense. According to evidence presented at the Tokyo War Crimes Trails, Japanese soldiers raped at least 20,000 Chinese women, many of whom were murdered afterwards. The massacre began with prisoners or suspected soldiers, then extended to those unambiguously civilian, including women, children, and old men.

Iris Chang asks why this atrocity is so little remembered. The Western historical memory of World War II, of course, focuses on the struggle against Nazi Germany and generally pays little attention to the war in Asia before Pearl Harbor. But that does not fully explain the relative obscurity of the Rape of Nanking.

I can refer to my own modest contribution to the literature here. When I was a graduate student about eighteen years ago I was commissioned to write a few short articles relating to China for the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (9 vols., Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983). One of my contributions was on the "Nanjing Incident." A member of the editorial staff with whom I worked, whose name I have forgotten, told me that as a comprehensive reference the encyclopedia had to include the Japan's negative side as well as its glories and accomplishments. My entry,

however, was only 179 words long, following the guidelines I was given. Yet that is more than one can find in the *Cambridge History of Japan*, where in volume VI there are two one-sentence references.[1] *The China Quagmire*, one volume of the English translation of a Japanese study of the origins of the war in the Pacific, does not mention the incident at all.[2]

Iris Chang attributes this neglect to a politically-motivated conspiracy of silence and an alleged atmosphere of intimidation that prevents Japanese from facing their history. Research on this subject can be "life-threatening," she claims, and ". . . the Japanese as a nation are still trying to bury the victims of Nanking - not under the soil, as in 1937, but into historical oblivion" (p. 220). The present generation, she writes, "can continue to delude themselves that the war of Japanese aggression was a holy and just war that Japan happened to lose solely because of American economic power . . ." (pp. 224-25). The flyleaf of the cloth-bound edition states that "the story of this atrocity . . . continues to be denied by the Japanese government," although that assertion, which is false, does not appear anywhere in the paperbound version.

Chang seems unable to differentiate between some members of the ultranationalist fringe and other Japanese. A Japanese translation of the diary of John Rabe, a German businessman who helped protect civilians in the Nanking Safety Zone, is a best-seller in Japan. Moreover, despite what Iris Chang maintains, current Japanese textbooks discuss the massacre, giving figures of between 150,000 to 300,000 killed. A 1994 opinion poll found that eighty percent of respondents in Japan believed that their government had not adequately compensated victimized peoples in countries Japan colonized or invaded. "This is hardly the response of a people suffering from acute historical amnesia," as John Dower notes.[3] Chang generalizes from extremists who deny that the incident took place, fanatics motivated by ultra-

nationalism and ethnic prejudice, who have as little credibility and moral authority as Holocaust deniers have in the West. Moreover, although Chang explicitly rejects explanations of national character, her own ethnic prejudice implicitly pervades her book. Her explanations are, to a large extent, based on unexamined ethnic stereotypes.

Many in Japan would certainly prefer that the incident be forgotten, feeling that unpleasant and shameful things should not be talked about. But that is not the same as denying it occurred. In any case, many Japanese have dealt with the Nanking massacre, and have done so for many years. As early as 1940 Yanaihara Tadao, an economist and specialist in colonial policy, courageously criticized his fellow Japanese Christians for honoring General Matsui Iwame, commander of Japanese troops in Nanking.[4] Immediately after the war Maruyama Masao dealt with the incident in his attempt to understand Japan's wartime behavior.[5] My first reading about the Nanking massacre was in Ienaga Saburo's *The Pacific War*, originally published in Japanese thirty years ago. In recent years other Japanese, including Hora Tomio, Honda Katsuichi, and Tanaka Yuki, have published significant studies of the Rape of Nanking.

The Japanese historical background Chang presents is clichéd, simplistic, stereotyped, and often inaccurate. She writes that ". . . as far back as anyone could remember, the islands' powerful feudal lords employed private armies to wage incessant battle with each other . . ." (pp. 19-20) - a description appropriate to the Warring States period of the sixteenth century but not to any other period. She places the Tokugawa unification of Japan in the wrong century (p. 21). She asserts that the conditions of Japan's unconditional surrender "exonerated all members of the imperial family . . ." (p. 176). Her use of sources is uncritical and credulous, treating hearsay as the equivalent of more reliable evidence. She engages in implausible speculations, for example about "Emperor Hirohito's role in the Rape of Nanking" (p. 177). "We will probably never know exactly what news Hirohito received about Nanking as the massacre was happening," she writes, "but the record suggests that he was exceptionally pleased by it" (p. 179). Chang confuses Japanese leaders' delight in the fall of the Chinese capital with exulting in the massacre that occurred afterward.

So why has this book become so widely acclaimed? Probably because of her account of the massacre itself, a vivid and gut-wrenching narration. Moreover, she brings out of oblivion the neutral foreigners who established the Nanking Safety Zone to protect non-combatants, partic-

ularly the enigmatic Nazi party member John Rabe. Yet her description of the massacre itself, the strongest part of the book, is also open to criticism. The Japanese historian Hata Ikuhito makes some telling criticisms, although Hata himself minimizes the extent of the massacre.[6] He questions Chang's estimate of the number of victims, a ghoulish exercise perhaps, but an important one. He argues that Chang's figure of 300,000 is impossibly high, but his own figure of 40,000 killed, although similar to the estimates of some Western witnesses, is implausibly low. Hata claims that eleven photographs in Chang's book are "fakes, forgeries, and composites," although he succeeds in demonstrating that with only two. One, a photograph of a row of severed heads, depicts bandits executed by Chinese police in 1930 rather than victims of the Nanking massacre. Another photo, which appeared in the November 10, 1937 issue of *Asahi Guraifu*, is a propaganda picture of Chinese villagers returning from fields "under the protection of Japanese soldiers."

Chang also does not adequately explain why the massacre occurred. Maruyama Masao suggested that because Japanese soldiers lived in brutal hierarchical social order, they developed a habit of submitting to power and authority from above and dominating the weak and powerless below. They assumed their superiority over other races, especially the Chinese. Japanese soldiers were regimented, confined, and harshly treated by their officers. When discipline broke down they lacked any sense of individual responsibility for their actions. Chang argues simply that the Japanese army did not have the means to feed such a large number of prisoners of war, and therefore killed them. This is plausible for the slaughter of young men, but doesn't explain the rapes and the murder of women and children. Perhaps part of the answer lies in the way enemies were dehumanized, one of the distinctive features of World War II. The Nazis described Jews as vermin. Japanese soldiers in Nanking, similarly, regarded their Chinese victims as animals, comparing killing of Chinese to slaughtering pigs. It was not only Japanese and Germans who dehumanized enemies that way: John Dower describes the American use of bestial imagery about the Japanese in World War II.[7]

World War II, of course, had broken all the rules of war. It was fought with a new technology that targeted civilians, creating what Omer Bartov calls industrial killing: "mechanized, rational, impersonal, and sustained mass destruction of human beings, organized and administered by states".[8] Civilians were considered as legitimate military targets, and the notion of civilian immunity all but disappeared. Women and children became targets in warfare.

Yet the Rape of Nanking was not committed by impersonal or distant perpetrators, nor was its intent genocidal. The incident is difficult to explain, even in the context of a war which routinely violated the norms of civilian immunity. To return to theme of rape and sexual violence, for example, why were Chinese women subjected to these outrages? Rape was a weapon against “enemy” women, an action that was both misogynist and xenophobic. It humiliated the victims and demonstrated power, over both women who were the immediate victims and men who traditionally were regarded as their protectors.[9] The Japanese military encouraged a rape culture, and rape as well as murder was a means to avenge the 70,000 Japanese soldiers killed or wounded in first six months of the war in China.

Explanations for the behavior of Japanese soldiers should probably focus on their brutalization, in training as well as in warfare, and the military culture that encouraged them to see enemy human beings as animals. This was not exclusively a trait of the Japanese army, of course, but it was carried to an extreme there. Specific conditions of a particular time and place, not national character, led to the massacre. The Rape of Nanking was one of the greatest atrocities of modern times, and Iris Chang’s book helps preserve the memory of that outrage. But as an attempt to explain it, it falls far short.

Notes:

[This review is adapted from “Remembering and Explaining the Rape of Nanking,” a talk given at the Presidential Panel on Women and Sexual Violence in Asia, Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs, Milwaukee, September 26, 1998. I am grateful to Wendy Doniger, Laura Hein, and Louis Perez for their comments on my talk, although the opinions expressed and any errors committed are my own.]

[1]. “By mid-December, the Nationalist capital of Nanking had been seized and raped by the Japanese; in early January 1938, Konoe had pledged to eradicate Chiang’s government” (126), and “In December 1937 the city fell, Chiang Kai-shek fled, and the inflamed Japanese soldiery went on a rampage of killing, looting, and raping” (320). Peter Duus, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, Volume VI: The Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 1988).

[2]. James William Morley, ed., *The China Quagmire: Japan’s Expansion on the Asian Continent, 1933-1941*, Selected translations from *Taiheiyo senso e no michi: Kaisen gaiko shi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). This is an abridged translation, and I have not consulted the Japanese original (7 volumes, Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1962-63). The chapter covering the military campaigns of 1937-38, where the Nanking incident is not mentioned, is by Hata Ikuhiko, a bitter critic of Iris Chang’s book (see below). Hata also fails to mention the Rape of Nanking in his contribution to volume VI of *The Cambridge History of Japan*, chapter 6: “Continental Expansion, 1905-1941” (pp. 271-314).

[3]. John W. Dower, “Three Narratives of Our Humanity,” in Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), p. 71.

[4]. Ienaga Saburo, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 209-210. This is a translation by Frank Baldwin of *Taiheiyo senso* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968).

[5]. Maruyama Masao, *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, ed. Ivan Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). See especially the essay on “Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism,” published in *Sekai* magazine in May, 1946.

[6]. Hata Ikuhito, “The Nanking Atrocities: Fact and Fable,” *Japan Echo*, August 1998, pp. 47-57.

[7]. John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

[8]. Omer Bartov, *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 3.

[9]. I am drawing here from a seminar paper by one of my former students, Elizabeth Kratz, which compares sexual violence in the Rape of Nanking with the current war in Bosnia.

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