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Remembering the Nanking Massacre

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by Herbert P. Bix

After Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria in 1931, the Nationalist Party government of Chiang Kai-shek sought to resist diplomatically. But as the Japanese imperium widened, Chinese resistance stiffened. In autumn 1937 small-scale fighting between Japanese and Chinese forces in North China spread to Shanghai and turned into full-scale war. In early November, Nationalist Chinese troops abandoned the Shanghai front, where for nearly three months they had battled the Japanese. Pursued by the invaders who killed prisoners on the spot, Chinese soldiers, accompanied by civilian refugees, retreated through villages and towns along the Yangtze River toward the walled-city of Nanking. Encircled on all sides, the Nationalist capital fell after five days of resistance on the night of December 12-13.

In the course of occupying Nanking and its surrounding administrative districts, tens of thousands of frustrated, vengeful, war-weary Japanese soldiers entered the area and began to execute, en masse, military prisoners of war and unarmed deserters who had surrendered. Order and discipline, already frayed on the Shanghai front, collapsed completely. An unprecedented rampage of arson, pillage, murder, and rape ensued. Though unplanned by the high command in Tokyo, the criminal violence abetted by field commanders and staff officers lasted over two months. The total number of Chinese atrocity-victims remains in hot dispute to this day. Chinese sources range as high as 340,000; the best Japanese estimates put the figure at "no fewer than 200,000." Future collaborative research could well alter the latter figure.

Japanese public exposure to the crimes of Nanking did not occur until the Tokyo trials, nearly a decade later, even then the story was not followed up and the issues soon disappeared from public consciousness. In Japan some right-wing researchers and nationalist critics later claimed that no massacre ever occurred; others insisted that the atrocities have been greatly exaggerated by Chinese political propaganda. Through four long decades of cold war, issues of war responsibility were covered up. Only since the mid-1980s have ordinary Japanese citizens gradually become aware that their country once fought a war of aggression symbolized by the Nanking massacre.

The re-discovery of Nanking in Western countries occurred in the late 1990s, sparked by Iris Chang's best-selling The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II.

Commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of this dark event, students at Princeton University organized a conference out of which grew the eleven short essays that comprise Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing, edited by Fei Fei Li, Robert Sabella and David Liu (M.E. Sharpe, 2002). The authors address Japanese crimes in China from different viewpoints, and probe postwar issues of remembrance by both victims and perpetrators. Some try to make sense out of the post-cold war interregnum during which progressive people in many nations tried to come to terms with past atrocities; all mean to be suggestive rather than exhaustive in their treatment.

Perry Link's eloquent "Foreword" highlights "the long silence of the Chinese people over Nanking" and furnishes a context for what follows. Journalist Ian Buruma and international law scholar Richard Falk place the atrocities in a global framework. Buruma sees the massacre as a "historical symbol" of Japanese militarism but finds much to ponder in the myths that have arisen over its reception. He is especially wary of comparing Nanking with the Nazi Holocaust. "[T]o what extent," he usefully asks, was the "Massacre a deliberate policy of terror to force Chiang Kai-shek to give up his resistance to Japan"? "Did [superior officers] encourage the troops to run wild, as a payoff for their deprivations during a long and nasty campaign?" If historians are to learn the truth about what actually happened at Nanking, Buruma urges them to avoid the tendency, common among some in the Chinese community in the United States to "build their identities around symbols of collective suffering."

Falk's insightful essay is an expression of his primary concern with globalization, world order, and the normative dimension of international relations. He suggests that interest in the Nanking atrocity rekindled in the late 1990s, partly because of "the acceleration of history—the sheer speed of change—that seems to be making our political consciousness more sensitive to various aspects of the dimension of time." Another reason for "recall[ing] unacknowledged grievances from the past" has nothing to do with our age of immediacy. It is the persistence, despite the "domination of realist thinking," of an "earlier moral orientation" to international relations, which makes it impossible to ignore concern with redressing past injuries.

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Perhaps because treating Japanese historical events is of lesser interest to Falk, some of his brief references to Nanking are inaccurate. Most Japanese during and long after the occupation period did not, as he claims, regard the Tokyo Trials as "the outcome of 'a kangaroo court.'" On the contrary, they accepted as just and deserved the guilty verdicts on the twenty-five principal defendants. The four dissenting opinions of the tribunal's justices merely reinforced the popular impression that the entire proceeding had been fair. So even though Tokyo was indeed a one-power tribunal, convened by an American authority that overlooked defective procedures and made excessive exemptions from prosecution both of individuals and war crimes, the majority of Japanese at the time did not view it as mocking the principles of law and justice. An important subject for future study, one not explored in this book, is how Japanese conservatives and rightists, many in the Liberal Democratic Party, came to make a specialty of distorting the achievements of the Tokyo trial, just as they falsified Nanking, while progressives have struggled ever since to deepen understanding of both.

Furthermore, the Indian judge Radhabinod Pal, whom Falk mis-describes as a "neutral analyst," was, in fact, a supporter of the pro-Axis Indian nationalist Chandra Bose, and thus hardly a reliable guide to understanding why Japanese interpretations of the Asia-Pacific War still inhibit Japan's redress of past grievances. An ardent nationalist who viewed the imperialism of Western white men as the main source of evil in Asia, Pal was the only judge who justified, whitewashed, or cast doubt on virtually all evidence of Japanese atrocities submitted by the prosecution, even going so far as to deny that large numbers of rapes had occurred at Nanking.

In the first of three essays comprising Part II of this collection, Chinese historian Sun Zhaiwei identifies two major causes of the massacre: "Japanese militarism and ideological indoctrination," and the hope of Japanese leaders that "large-scale killing of people in the capital" would "force the Chinese people to stop resisting." The idea of quelling the legitimate resistance of an occupied people by the application of massive, gratuitous violence and murder, is not of course peculiar to Japan. Sun, however, misses an opportunity to follow this theme outside of a bi-national (Sino-Japanese) context to its comparative and global conclusion.

Chinese researcher Lee En-Han explores "the Sino-Japanese controversy over the factual number of massacred victims," and he is similarly disinclined to take a broad comparative approach to his subject. Sun rightfully laments the efforts of those whom he calls the "total deniers" such as Tanaka Masaaki and the "partial deniers," of whom historian Hata Ikuhiko is the most notorious, to "use every possible tactic to resist the figures." If Sun had compared the numbers issue in the Nanking massacre with American war atrocities (including the brutalization of women) throughout Indochina, as symbolized most notoriously by the My Lai massacre, he too might have helped us to see how stubbornly most Americans, not just the Japanese, have sought to vindicate their young men in uniform even when some of them are shown in a court of law to have been war criminals fighting imperialist wars.

Japanese historian Kasahara Tokushi notes how Japanese academic historians, researchers and writers have struggled long, hard, and relatively successfully to remember Japan's perpetration of the Nanking massacre. Yet "voices in the mass media...for political reasons repeatedly make the denials that have already been proved bankrupt." So, "[w]hy is it that the Japanese cannot feel deep regret and cannot support compensation for the victims of the Nanking Massacre?" His reflections on the difficulties encountered in making the truth take hold (pp. 84-91) are among the best in the book. Kasahara understands well how the need to confront war responsibility for aggression remains on the agenda for the postwar generation. Future studies must set the problem in a broad imperial context, that links up with other histories of war atrocities since World War II. Next, intellectual historian Higashinakano Shudo presents the Japanese "revisionists" reasons for denying the Nanking atrocities and legitimizing Japan's war.

Of the remaining essays, comprising Parts III ("Remembering Nanking") and IV ("Healing the Wounds"), Haruko Cook discusses censorship and self-censorship by Japanese reporters, editors, diarists, and fiction writers in 1937-8. She suggests, by her comments on Ishikawa Tatsuzo's Living Soldiers (1938), that the very nature of the war had much to do with the atrocious behavior of Japanese forces. Historian Takashi Yoshida turns to a different problem: how changing political concerns and perceptions of the "national interest" in Japan, China, and Western countries, have shaped collective memory of the Nanking massacre. With each passing decade the event has acquired different meanings. Yoshida is particularly critical of Iris Chang's account for its simplistic, one-dimensional portrayal of the event, which he puts on a par with works penned by Japanese revisionist historians.

In a reflection on the Nanking atrocity "in light of Jewish memory," China scholar Vera Schwarcz asks "When and how does a narrative of victimization become necessary for nation-building?" She warns of the dangers in comparing "holocausts" and declares that the time has now come "to explore the strategies used to evade, allegorize, and romanticize genocide." Atrocity events challenge historians to translate their "knowing" into "telling," so that the pain and anguish of the survivors can be effectively conveyed in discourse. To see the possibilities for reconstructing the Nanking massacre, read this essay.

International law scholar Onuma Yasuaki then samples aspects of the Japanese debate on war responsibility and

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"postwar responsibility." His piece, originally published in 1984, lacks freshness and vigor, and is marred by a superficial view of the Tokyo Trials as mere “victors’ justice.” Finally, Daqing Yang questions whether a common historical understanding of the mass atrocity is even possible, and suggests a framework for the "recognition by all of the universal lessons of atrocities in Nanking."

Nanking 1937, a rich collection of perspectives on an important event in the history of the Asia-Pacific War, has deep ramifications for future Japan-China relations. Equally important, it is a compendium of insights into why aggressors commit war crimes, and suggestions for preventing their recurrence. It fails to probe these depths mainly because it fails in many cases to universalize elements of human depravity, imperial design, and state power through reference to recent historical and contemporary events. Without these comparisons, it may be difficult for readers to discern which elements of the Nanking massacre were particular to its time, place and cultures, and which fit into larger patterns of human behavior that may be addressable through means other than force.

In short, Nanking 1937 needs to be read in a way that highlights the universal within the particular. Set it against the background of the Russian rape of German women in postwar occupied Germany (1945-49), or the French torture of civilians during the Algerian War (1954-62) or the American atrocities at No Gun Ri hamlet early in the Korean War (1950-53). Compare the logic of Japan’s campaign in 1930s China with the American colonial war of aggression in Iraq, now generating war atrocities on a virtually daily basis, or with the American murder of Afghanis prisoners at the U.S. Baghran air base in Afghanistan, or the American mistreatment of war prisoners held in cages at the U.S. Guantanamo base in Cuba. And don’t forget the lessons of the atrocities in Nanking when reading of the atrocious policies that Israeli governments (past but especially present) pursue against the Palestinians for the sake of Israeli "settlements" and "outposts" built illegally on stolen land. By conjuring the sight of these still fresh, unhealed crimes this book should enlighten and anger its readers.

Herbert Bix received the Pulitzer prize for his book Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan. This is a revised version of a review that appeared in Z Magazine, Vol. 16, No. 9 (Sept. 2003). It was originally written for The China Journal (forthcoming).

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