

Deniers of Japanese Genocide

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

Japan's efforts to seize control of China were marked by the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Japan was engaged in a full-scale war with China by 1937. Japan's expectations of a quick victory over China were shattered when the battle for Shanghai stretched on for several months before that city finally fell in November 1937. The imperial troops advanced toward Nanking, the capital city of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, with heightened aggression, raiding small villages and razing entire cities to the ground. In December 1937, the Japanese army swept into the city of Nanking and within six to eight weeks massacred more than three hundred thousand civilians and raped eighty thousand women. According to Roy Brooks in his book *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy over Apologies & Reparations for Human Injustice* the Japanese turned murder into sport. They rounded up tens of thousands of men and used them for bayonet practice or decapitation contests. Sometimes they simply sprayed gasoline on them and burned them alive. Some men were skinned alive, tortured to death with needles, or buried up to the waist in the soil, where they were ripped apart by German shepherds. The Chinese women suffered far worse. Many of them were mutilated horribly after being raped. The Japanese even forced fathers to rape their own daughters, or sons their mothers, or brothers their sisters, all in an attempt to further degrade the victims. The Japanese were equally brutal to the small children. Babies were tossed into the air and bayoneted as they came down. Some were thrown into vats of oil and water. Despite compelling documentary evidence, eyewitness accounts, including some by Japanese soldiers, and photographic evidence, Japanese revisionists continue to reject charges that war crimes and atrocities that occurred there. This revisionist view is, to a large extent, associated with the resurgence of Japanese imperialism and militarism supported by the United States.

In 1946, the Chinese prosecutor for the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) charged that Japanese troops had committed atrocities at Nanking in 1937. They stated the Japanese reason was to crush forever all will to resist on the part of the Chinese people. There was hardly a debate about the incident, called "The Rape of Nanking," until the establishment of formal diplomatic ties between Japan and the People's Republic of China in 1972. The lack of new information up to this point and original research allowed a rough consensus to form about the issue. The Chinese and the Westerners accepted the IMTFE indictment or ruling as their version of the Rape of Nanking, leaving no room for further discussion. In his book *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity* "The extremely negative image of pre-World War II Japan painted at the IMTFE had such a strong influence, even on the academic world, that few people voiced opposition to the IMTFE version of the Rape of Nanking."

The next round of debates about the Rape of Nanking started in the summer of 1982 when Japanese news media reported that the Education Ministry had directed writers of Japanese high school history textbooks to revise or modify the descriptions of modern historical events, including the Rape of Nanking. According to the initial Japanese news reports, among the revisions advised by the ministry regarding the China-Japanese conflict of 1937-45 was the change from "invasion" of China into "advance" to China. Although it became known later that

there was no instance of such a change urged on any textbook, the news soon spread to other countries. There were, however, other revisions suggested by the ministry, including one concerning descriptions of the Rape of Nanking, with more emphasis on the provocation by the Chinese side as well as the deletion of the specific number of victims. The governments of Asian countries that had been subjected to Japan's aggression before and during World War II filed immediate protests with the Japanese government.

From the end of the war until the early 1970s, some Japanese revisionists, such as Tanaka Masaaki, a World War II veteran, tried to discredit the conclusions of the Tribunal as "victors' justice," but their efforts received little attention. From the 1970s on, the dominant view, that a massacre occurred in Nanking in 1937-38, has increasingly been challenged by revisionists, including conservative politicians, World War II veterans, scholars in various disciplines, business executives, and popular commentators. Outraged by the revisionist challenges, progressives, who supported the IMTFE indictment, responded quickly to refute revisionist claims that the Massacre did not occur. The struggle between the two camps has raged since and the contest over how to characterize the Nanking Massacre along with other Japanese wartime atrocities continues.

From the 1950s on, as the Cold War took shape, the progressives endured a rising challenge from what they called "reactionary forces" and they struggled to resist what they regarded as a revived imperialism and militarism. In the face of Communist threats, a conservative Japan gained renewed support from the United States who looked for allies in the region. The Japanese government began to insist that textbooks were polluted by dangerous distortions. The Ministry of Education subsequently increased its control over textbook authorizations, and one-third of school textbooks were rejected as not meeting new government standards. The Ministry demanded that textbooks avoid tough criticism of Japan's role in the Pacific War, and the government regarded as inappropriate any description of Japan as invading China. From the mid 1950s until the 1970s, the description of the Massacre completely disappeared from school textbooks.

The end of the Cold War, Emperor Hirohito's death, the loss of conservative party dominance in domestic politics, the more inclusive textbook descriptions of Japanese wartime atrocities, and the growing awareness of wartime devastations in Asia and the Pacific caused by Imperial Japan all combined to heighten the intensity of the disputes over the Nanking Massacre throughout the 1990s. While discussed and debated in Asia, 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 historical literature published in the United States.

In the History Channel's program entitled "The Rape of Nanking" in its "History Undercover" series on August 22, 1999, one of the themes presented was an alleged cover-up of the Rape of Nanking for half a century by the Japanese. But the heated controversy and debate about the incident in Japan appears to be more than enough to prove that there was no cover-up. Instead, many Japanese scholars and journalists have discussed this issue openly and tried to obtain the truth. Although quite a few of them disagree with the prevailing opinion in the

United States and in other Western countries, it is obvious that the expression of disagreement is not necessarily an act of cover-up.

The history of Nanking has been altered over time to meet the needs of changing societies in different sociopolitical contexts. While the details and the number of deaths continue to be debated, most historians agree that the Nanking massacre was an atrocity, in which 80,000 or more Chinese civilians and surrendered soldiers were killed and tens of thousands of women raped following the Japanese capture of the city. In Japanese publications seeking to deny or greatly minimize this event, a word like "so-called" is often placed in front of one of these names. Some seeking to link the event rhetorically or structurally with the more widely-known Holocaust in Europe during the Second World War use the term "Nanking Holocaust."

In conclusion, despite compelling documentary evidence, eyewitness accounts, including some by Japanese soldiers, and photographic evidence, Japanese revisionists continue to reject charges that war crimes and atrocities that occurred there. This revisionist view is, to a large extent, associated with the resurgence of Japanese imperialism and militarism supported by the United States. The debate continues as many Japanese find it difficult to accept the past actions of the Imperial Army while some search for the truth.

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