

Massacre in Nanjing

The 1930's saw the beginning of another terrible world war, which would cause untold suffering in many nations. This document focuses on Japan's capture in 1937 of China's capital city Nanjing (also called Nanking).

The fall of Nanjing occurred during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945. After years of friction caused by Japanese pressure on China, full-scale war broke out in the summer of 1937. Invading Japanese forces attacked the port city of Shanghai and advance on Nanjing, which lay west of Shanghai on the Yangtze River, surrounded and unable to escape, 300,000 Nationalist Chinese soldiers surrendered and Japanese soldiers entered Nanjing on December 13.

The scenes that followed shocked even some Japanese observers. Unable or willing to deal with up to 300,000 prisoners of war, the Japanese slaughtered their captives mercilessly. Treatment of civilians was equally brutal, as tens of thousands of men and women bayoneted, raped, beheaded or otherwise mistreated. The mayhem continued into January 1938. These events are now known as the Nanjing Massacre, or the rape of Nanjing. The toll of dead has been estimated at a total of 100,000 and 300,000.

The first document is by a Japanese military correspondent covering the war.

A. The Massacre

On Hsiakwan wharves, there was a dark silhouette of a mountain made of dead bodies. About fifty to one hundred [Chinese] people were toiling their, dragging bodies from the mountain of corpses and throwing them into the Yangtze River. The bodies dripped blood, some of them still alive and moaning weakly, their limbs twitching. The laborers were busy working in total silence, as in a pantomime [a play in which the actors substitute body movement for speech]. In the dark one could barely see the opposite bank of the river. On the pier was a field of glimmering mud under the moon's dim light. WOW! That's all blood!

After a while, the. . . [laborers] had done their job of dragging corpses and the soldiers lined them up along the river. Rat-tat-tat machine-gun fire could be heard. The. . . [laborers] fell backwards into the river and were swallowed by the raging currents. The pantomime was over.

A Japanese officer at the scene estimated that 20,000 persons had been executed.

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The second document is from a diary kept by John Rabe, a German resident of Nanjing who became the unofficial leader of the city's foreign community in protesting against Japanese actions. Rabe was a Nazi party member who reported directly to Hitler, yet he was unsparing in his criticism.

B. A Foreigner's Reaction

December 24, 1937

I have had to look at so many corpses over the last few weeks that I can keep my nerves in check even when viewing these horrible cases. It really doesn't leave you in a "Christmas" mood; but I wanted to see these atrocities with my own eyes, so that I can as an eyewitness later. A man can not be silent about this kind of cruelty!

Japanese military leaders involved in the massacre were charged with war crimes and put on trial by the Allies at the end of World War II. Matsui Iwane, who held command over the armies that captured the city, was convicted and executed. So was Tani Hisao, a lieutenant general.

Review Questions

A. The Massacre

1. What did the Japanese military order the Chinese laborers to do?
2. What eventually happened to Chinese laborers?
3. Why do you think the books which this document was excerpted refer to the fall of Nanjing (Nanking) as a "rape" and a "forgotten holocaust"?

B. A Foreigner's Reaction

1. Why did John Rabe feel that he had to see that atrocities that the Japanese had committed against the people of Nanjing?
2. Why did Rabe refer to a "Christmas Mood"?
3. Why did later atrocities make Rabe's criticism of the Japanese ironic?