

The 2005 World War II Essay Contest

First Place

World War II in China

Gerardo Rios
San Diego State University

World War II truly was a global conflict, engulfing the entire world into hitherto unprecedented barbarism, and destruction. In the end of the conflict, more than fifty million people perished due to the belligerence. Most egregious, however, is the fact that more than half of those who died were innocent civilians. Unfortunately in the United States the global conflict is only thought of as a European conflict, and the European theatre of the war is given center stage.

This is done so ignoring the fact that the Asian conflict was just as significant, and that the atrocities committed by the Japanese equaled or surpassed Nazi brutality in many instances. In the tenth grade, California students analyze the major issues during World War II. Standards 10.8 are to cover the period. Students are to know about Emperor Hirohito in Standard 10.8.4 and analyze the human cost of the war in China and Japan. However, the European theatre is given far more importance, as said conflict is to be analyzed in every major standard and substandard. Recalling from past experience as a high school student in California, the Asian theatre was always only mentioned in relation to the European conflict.

That is exactly the way in which the California History/Social Science Curriculum Standards are set up. It is apparent that our educational system does not believe that the Asian conflict can stand on its own as an event of paramount importance in the history of humankind.¹ In the eleventh grade, the Asian conflict is treated specifically Japanese-United States conflict. The decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is given great importance, as well as Roosevelt's foreign policy during WWII. Included is wide coverage of Pearl Harbor, and the major battles of Okinawa, Midway, Iwo Jima, Peleliu, and the bombings of Tokyo. However, the standards make no mention about the horrific struggle between China and Japan, which was the most significant event of WWII

¹ California History/Social Science Curriculum Standards 10.8-Students analyze the causes and consequences of World War II. Sub-standards 1-6.

in the Pacific, and which sadly cost more lives, and mass destruction than any of the aforementioned battles. The standards fail to mention the significance of the Sino-Japanese conflict in further exacerbating Japanese-American relations. The eleventh grade United States history standards pay attention to Hitler's brutal genocide against the European Jews, but nowhere are students to analyze Japan's brutal genocide against Chinese civilians.²

One event which should be given serious attention is the Rape of Nanking. Standard 10.8-1 postulates that students are to: Compare the German, Italian, and Japanese drives for empire in the 1930's, including the 1937 Rape of Nanking, other atrocities in China, and the Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939. Again such an important event like the Rape of Nanking and other Japanese atrocities in China are not given enough importance to stand on their own, as discussions of the European dictatorships have to be incorporated, obviously given heightened attention and importance. In comparison, the Jewish Holocaust is devoted an entire sub-standard, which is generally covered in an entire week of instruction or more. The Japanese atrocities on the other hand are probably presented in a class period or less, if they are mentioned at all.³

High school students become familiarized with the European conflict and the Jewish holocaust, however, knowledge on the Asian conflict is minimal. Our educational system is to blame for its obvious Euro-centricity. This essay will cover an analysis of the aforementioned Rape of Nanking, and why greater attention should be devoted to said issue as a microcosm for the wider Asian conflict. The Rape of Nanking is truly one of the most ignominious episodes in world history. Japanese brutality equaled or surpassed Nazi brutality in many specific instances. Students must be made aware of such brutality by engaging in serious discussions and readings on the massacre of Nanking civilians, just as extensive as those on the Jewish Holocaust.

History teaches us that those who do not know the past are condemned to repeat it. If this is so, the gruesomely egregious atrocities which were perpetrated on Nanking citizens should never be emulated by any regime anywhere in the world. Fortunately there exists a plethora of resources on the massacre, most notably Iris Chang's book, The Rape of Nanking. Upon reading the text, the reader becomes painfully aware of why Chang subtitled her book The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II.

² Ibid, 11.7-Students analyze America's participation in World War II. Sub-standards 1-8.

³ Standards 10.8, Sub-standards 1-6.

By the summer of 1937 Japan waged a full scale war on China. By December 13, 1937, Nanking had fallen to the Japanese, and the latter initiated an orgy of blood and human degradation, where human beings were disemboweled, defeated soldiers were used for bayonet practice, war captives were decapitated in mass numbers, women of all ages were raped, including little girls, and many other egregious atrocities were committed on Nanking's civilian population. By sheer numbers alone the Rape of Nanking surpassed many of history's better known massacres like the Roman massacre of Carthage. In intensity it rivaled or surpassed Stalin's Purges of the 1930's and Hitler's genocide of the Slavs and Jews. Hitler's and Stalin's genocide took years to carry out indeed, brutally killing millions in the process, but in the Nanking genocide, as many as 400,000 people were brutalized and butchered in six weeks.⁴ The number of people murdered in Nanking far exceeds those who were killed by the atomic blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, making it one of the worst tragedies of the entire war, not just the Asian conflict.

Just how many people were massacred at Nanking is still hotly debated. Numbers range anywhere from as high as 400,000 to as low as 3,000. However at one former Japanese owned Nanking railway alone, 30,000 bodies were found buried in mass graves. Sun Zhaiwei, who is a historian and statistician of the massacre found that charitable organizations buried at least 185,000 bodies, private individuals buried at least 35,000, and the Japanese puppet government buried 7,400. Sun calculated the total numbers at 227,400. In addition, the confession of Ohta Hsiao must also be taken into consideration when counting the total numbers. Hsiao, who was a Japanese imperial officer, confessed that the Japanese secretly disposed of as many as 150,000 bodies. This postulates a staggering total of 377,400 massacred, a figure which surpasses the number of deaths at Hiroshima and Nagasaki following the atomic blasts.⁵

The Nanking Massacre however, is not just about staggering numbers. It is a catastrophic event that the world knows very little about. Many Japanese officials to this day deny that the massacre ever took place or offer extremely conservative numbers of those who were killed, in what Chang described as historical amnesia. For this reason it is the duty of educators, at all educational levels to inform the general public about what exactly occurred at Nanking. We live in an era where historical distortions or omissions should not be tolerated. As mentioned earlier,

⁴ Chang, Iris, The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) 4-6.

⁵ Chang, Iris, The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II.

fortunately there now exist, a plethora of resources on this catastrophic event.

Many American missionaries and German Nazis were present when the atrocities took place, and they left their recollections of the event in memoirs, from which Chang gathered much of her research. John Rabe's diaries of the Nanking Massacre have been translated for American readers by John Woods. Rabe, who ironically was a loyal member of the Nazi party and adored his Fuhrer, risked his own life on many occasions to rescue Nanking civilians from the brutal onslaught of the Japanese invaders. On the 17th of December 1937, Rabe wrote, "Last night up to 1,000 women and girls are said to have been raped, about 100 girls at Ginling Girls College alone. You hear of nothing but rape. If husbands or brothers intervene, they're shot. What you hear and see on all sides is the brutality and bestiality of the Japanese soldiery."⁶

Because of his willingness and bravery in saving Chinese civilians Rabe has been regarded as the Oskar Schindler of Nanking. Chang wrote that on many occasions, while driving around Nanking, Rabe was stopped by Nanking civilians to beg him to stop a rape in progress. Rapes, which usually involved their sisters, mothers or wives, or daughters.⁷ The rapes perpetrated upon the women of all ages were truly cases of unprecedented ignominy and human degradation.

Even Buddhist nuns were not spared from brutal gang rape. The Japanese soldiers went from home to home looting and pillaging, rounding up the men for firing squads and took off with women to rape them.⁸ Traps lay everywhere for Nanking women. Japanese rapists would fabricate stories about markets where women could exchange bags of flour or rice for ducks or chickens, when the women arrived, they only found bands of Japanese soldiers waiting to gang rape them. The Japanese went as far as recruiting Chinese collaborationists to seek out potential rape victims.⁹

The ways in which women were raped and brutalized are almost unbearable to read, much less comprehend by the modern reader. As Iris Chang wrote:

"Even advanced stages of pregnancy did not render women immune to assault. The Japanese violated many who were about to go into

⁶ Woods, John, The Good Man of Nanking. The Diaries of John Rabe, Edited by Dr. Erwin Wickert, Translated by John Woods, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 1998) 77.

⁷ Chang, Iris, The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II, 118-119.

⁸ Chang, Iris, The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II, 90.

⁹ Ibid, 90-91.

labor, were in labor, or who had given birth only a few days earlier. One victim who was nine months pregnant when raped suffered not only still birth but a complete mental collapse."

On some occasions the Japanese soldiers would slice open the vaginas of preteen girls to ravage them with greater ease.¹⁰

Other cases of Japanese brutality rivaled or overshadowed anything the Nazi SS perpetrated on Jewish victims and other undesirables in the concentration or extermination camps of the Third Reich. Examples of Japanese brutality included: live burials, death by fire, death by ice, and death by dogs. During the live burials, Nanking civilians were forced to bury each other layer upon layer. When several layers had been piled up, those who buried themselves last had to bury themselves from the neck down. With only their heads exposed they were then run over by tanks or horses or hacked to pieces by swords. During mass mutilations it has been reported that hundreds of men at a time had their eyes gouged out and had their noses and ears were hacked out before being burned alive. People were also tied together in groups often, then, gasoline was poured all over their bodies. Once they were soaking wet in gasoline they were ignited. Others who were killed by ice were ordered to strip naked and jump on the frozen ponds. When their bodies hardened into floating targets they were immediately shot numerous times. German shepherds were also used to tear people to pieces.¹¹

Other more egregious forms of brutalizing and killing people included saturating people in acid, impaling babies with bayonets, severing the genitalia of victims, and ripping out hearts and livers of those who had been slain to be eaten by Japanese soldiers.¹² Many foreign observers bore witness to the genocidal murders at Nanking. Dr. Robert Wilson, in his family letters wrote extensively on the atrocities of Nanking, On December 18, 1937 he wrote:

"Today marks the sixth day of the modern Dante's Inferno, written with huge letters with blood and rape. Murder by the wholesale and rape by the thousands of cases. There seems to be no stop to the ferocity, lust and atavism of the brutes."¹³

¹⁰ Ibid, 90.

¹¹ Chang, Iris, The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II, 88-89.

¹² Ibid, 88.

¹³ Brook, Timothy, Documents on the Rape of Nanking, (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1999) 214.

Miner Searle Bates, who earned a Ph.D. in Chinese history from Yale University in 1935, was laboring to save as many people as possible in the Nanking Safety Zone. He wrote to the Japanese Embassy numerous grievances, on December 27, 1937 he wrote:

"Last night between eleven and twelve o'clock, a motor car with three Japanese military men came to the main University gate, claiming that they were sent by the headquarters to inspect. They forcibly prevented our watchman from giving an alarm, and kept him with them while they found and raped three girls, one of them is only eleven years old. One of the girls they took away with them."¹⁴

At the Bible Teachers' Training School for Women that same night Japanese soldiers looted the educational institution, took much needed food, clothes, and money, and raped thirty-four women savagely, including a girl of twelve. As a whole, Bates described the situation of the people in Nanking as, "...the whole people are filled with suffering and fear ...all caused by soldiers...every day injure hundreds of persons, most seriously."¹⁵

It is evident from the testimonies of foreign observers that Iris Chang's book was in no way exaggerated or that many of her claims had been fabricated. The hard proof is in the diaries and letters of the many foreigners working in the safety zone. Even in Japan, a country which diligently attempted to exonerate itself or condescend, the magnitude of the atrocities, many writers have come out to write objective histories of the Nanking massacre.

Honda Katsuichi, a Japanese journalist wrote a book titled The Nanjing Massacre, in which as he describes it, he confronts Japan's national shame. The book is truly a remarkable recollection of a wide abundance of testimonials from Japanese and Chinese soldiers, and Chinese civilians who were witnesses or survivors of the massacre. The pictures contained in Katsuichi's book are just as graphic as those presented in Iris Chang's book. Doubters should engage in meticulous readings of his book to gain a true appreciation of the Massacre through the eyes of survivors, and become aware that the Nanking massacre is not a fabricated historical event.

¹⁴ Kaiyuan, Zhang, Eyewitnesses to Massacre: American Missionaries bear witness to Japanese atrocities in Nanjing, (New York, An East Gate Book, 2001) 11.

¹⁵ Ibid, 11.

As stated earlier the evidence cannot be denied, and such an important historical event should be taught at all levels of the American educational system and the world at large. Some could conceivably argue that the Rape of Nanking is too gruesome of an event to be presented in public schools, but are students not exposed to similar material with the Stalin Purges, and the horrors of the Soviet labor camps, as well as detailed information about Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Dachau? Are these students not exposed to numerous pictures of emaciated Jewish victims, or the bodies of people piled up in mountains of human flesh?

Our educational system needs to eradicate Euro-centrism, and stop presenting history as the story of Europeans and their descendants. Students in American high schools read the diaries of Ann Frank, and justifiably so, but they should also be reading the diaries of John Rabe, and Iris Chang's masterful and compelling work on the Nanking massacre. Serious discussions should be held about the relationship between inhumanity, imperialism, racism, World War II in Asia and the Rape of Nanking. Students should be engaging in more critical readings in history, by studying issues in comparative genocide, and viewing such events as the lowest points in the story of humankind, as the worst of the human condition, events that should never in anybody's lifetime be repeated. Education, a proper and objective education, free of distortions, omissions, and racism, is the only way to achieve this goal, and ensure a better future for generations to come.

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Other Publications

California History/Social Science Curriculum Standards. Please consult the tenth and eleventh grade high school standards at:
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/hstgrade10.asp>