

The Willful Ignorance of Japan's Past

By Brian N. Magelssen



1945 was the final year of the Second World War and saw the end of fighting in Europe with the surrender of Germany on May 7 and the surrender of Japan on August 15.

Unfortunately, many Americans are ignorant of the role China played in the overall conflict, and unaware of the aggressive tactics employed by the Japanese military in China and elsewhere throughout Asia. 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two, and to best honor those who fought and died in this massive conflict it is imperative that the modern generation remembers and learns from the past.

It is particularly important to remember the Japanese invasion of China because of the many atrocities that were committed by the Japanese, such as the Northern Campaigns, the Rape of Nanking, and the use of biological and chemical weapons against Chinese soldiers and civilians.

In addition, many contemporary Japanese historians and policy makers deny this history, and argue that some Japanese atrocities were fabricated or the scope has been exaggerated. This essay examines the war between Japan and China with a focus on the atrocities committed against Chinese civilians.

This is a topic that is largely glossed over by American history curriculums, yet due to the cruelty and extent of what occurred it deserves as much attention as the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Europe. To forget or ignore this aspect of the conflict is dangerous and foolish, and could allow such events to occur again, *as those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.*

Japan's expansionist ambitions in China began to manifest in 1931, when Japan's Kwantung Army instigated the occupation of Manchuria. Japan established a puppet government and renamed Manchuria 'Manchukuo', and encouraged Japanese civilians



Invasion of Nanking

to begin settling the region. The relationship proved unstable, and a racial hierarchy was established with the Japanese occupiers on top and the native Chinese treated as second-class citizens in what used to be their home.

Conflict and tensions rose between Japan and China from 1931-1937. The Manchurian occupation did little to satisfy Japan's territorial ambition. The climate of extreme tension finally boiled over in July of 1937, when a manufactured misunderstanding about a missing Japanese soldier led to a confrontation at the LuGou Bridge. What began as a minor skirmish escalated into a major conflict as each side sent in more troops and refused to back down. This came to be called the LuGou (or Marco Polo) Bridge incident, and marks the beginning of the Second World War in Asia.

Japanese troops soon began to push back the Chinese forces defending the LuGou Bridge, and started to advance South towards Shanghai and the Nationalist capital, Nanking. The Japanese were outnumbered but they had the decisive advantage in equipment, utilizing naval support, aircraft, artillery and tanks that Chinese forces had little hope of countering effectively. The Japanese expected to advance quickly and capture the capital, but the Chinese defenses established along the Yangtze River around Shanghai and Nanking proved more resilient than expected, despite the difference in equipment.

Japanese military leaders had believed China could be conquered in the span of three



Invasion of Shanghai



Vicious, brutal atrocities began to take place against Chinese soldiers and civilians as soon as Japanese troops entered the city of Nanking although Japan had been victorious and captured the city.

months, but this thought was immediately proven to be foolhardy in the Battle of Shanghai which alone lasted from August to November of 1937. Chinese forces fought ferociously for every block of the city and carried the fight on for months. They had mustered nearly 500,000 men to hold back approximately 200,000 Japanese with naval and air support.

After thousands of casualties were taken by each side, the Chinese were outflanked and forced to retreat and reestablish a defensive perimeter around Nanking. The retreat proved costly, as Japanese aircraft and mechanized units slaughtered the Chinese infantry as they fell back.

Shanghai proved frustrating for Japanese forces expecting an easy victory. For the Chinese, it was a near disaster. Out of a force nearly half a million strong, around 250,000 casualties were sustained by Chinese forces in Shanghai, many due to inadequate protection from naval and air

strikes. Thousands more soldiers were killed on the 180 mile retreat to Nanking, further weakening the already-reeling Nationalist forces. By the time these soldiers reached Nanking they were tired, unorganized, and demoralized.

Nanking had been the capital of Nationalist China since 1928. The Nationalist government worked to modernize the city with asphalt roads and electricity, but Nanking retained much of its ancient foundation up to the time of the Japanese occupation. With and subsequent retreat to Nanking, it was believed that the city would be able to hold against invasion for months, thanks in part to the city walls, large stocks of ammunition and the natural barriers of the Yangtze River in the West and the Purple Mountain to the East.

On December 8th of 1937, when the battle started, Nanking was inhabited by hundreds of thousands of civilians plus close to 90,000 Chinese soldiers. A long siege of the city had been expected due to the defensible position of the Chinese, but the organized and well-armed Japanese forces overpowered the city and by December 12th Nanking had fallen.

Vicious, brutal atrocities began to take place against Chinese soldiers and civilians as soon as Japanese troops entered the city. Though Japan had been victorious and captured the city, the troops were in a dangerous mood after taking serious losses in Shanghai and Nanking. This mood compounded with the general disdain towards the Chinese felt by many Japanese to create a whirlwind of violence, murder, rape, and cruelty of the highest degree. Men, women, children, infants and the elderly were murdered and tortured indiscriminately by the occupying soldiers.

In the months of occupation directly following the battle, the number of Chinese deaths is estimated to be between 200,000 and 350,000, with the highest estimates reaching half a million people. The low estimate of 200,000 was accepted by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal after the war, but many Japanese sources claim

the count was lower. This is likely a result of Japanese researchers attempting to decrease the guilt associated with the atrocities in Nanking. No matter how low or high the estimated death toll, the atrocities of Nanking cannot be denied due to extensive coverage of the occupation by Western, Chinese and Japanese journalists who wrote about, photographed, and filmed murder, torture and rape within and around the city.

The Japanese claimed the deaths were because their food supply could not support any Prisoners of War, and that many of the people murdered were Chinese soldiers pretending to be civilians. This does not explain the deaths of



The bombings of Chungking and other cities by Japanese aircraft from 1938 to 1941 were carried out with no intent to hit military targets, instead utilizing conventional and incendiary explosives to wreak havoc among the Chinese population.

thousands of women, children, and men too old or young to resist the occupation. It also in no way explains the wanton brutality of the Japanese troops, exemplified by the rape, torture and murder of countless women, or the 'killing contests' held between Japanese soldiers.

The once beautiful cultural center of Nanking quickly degraded into a place of death and torture, where Chinese civilians were subjected to the most unimaginably cruel and sadistic treatment at the hands of their Japanese oppressors.

Japan had hoped the capture of Nanking would potentially end the war by forcing Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist government to accept terms of peace. This hope was destroyed by the Nationalists, who retreated to the mountain city of Chungking and vowed to fight to the bitter end against the occupiers. In fact, Chinese strategists had already decided to pursue a war of attrition utilizing guerrilla tactics and a no-retreat philosophy called the "revolutionary tactic" which commanded troops to hold every post to the last man, since Japan's immense superiority in armor and air power meant any retreat was suicide.

The atrocities at Nanking showed the Japanese military had absolutely no regard for Chinese lives, and the years following the massacre proved to be even more disastrous due to Japan's implementation of campaigns of annihilation against the overall population.

Following the capture of Nanking, the Japanese began to systematically attack the Chinese population, through the bombing of Chinese-held cities packed with civilians and the annihilation campaigns carried out in an effort to stymie both Nationalist and Communist guerrilla units, largely in Northern China. Because civilians and soldiers were both targeted, death toll of these campaigns eventually proved far greater than that of Nanking, as the attacks were carried out until the end of the war in 1945.

The bombings of Chungking and other cities by Japanese aircraft from 1938 to 1941 were carried out with no intent to hit military targets, instead utilizing conventional and incendiary explosives to wreak havoc among the Chinese population. These attacks had little tactical value and were carried out with no regard for potential civilian casualties. In Chungking, the raids resulted in over five thousand civilian casualties in the first two days, and resulted in an American embargo on the export of airplane parts to Japan.

However, the indiscriminate damage to civilians and their property caused by these air strikes is overshadowed by the annihilation campaigns carried out largely in the Northern regions against Communist guerrillas. These operations started in 1938 as an attempt by the North China Area Army to destroy Chinese guerrilla strongholds. They began relatively small, calling for the execution of "all males between the ages of fifteen and sixty whom we suspect to be enemies" in the Hebei province.

As the war progressed, the Japanese North China Area Army grew increasingly frustrated by Chinese guerrillas and gradually broadened their campaigns to the general population. This eventually was known as the "three alls policy," meaning "burn all, kill all, steal all." It entailed the burning of entire villages, confiscation of grain, and coercion of peasants into forced labor camps to build Japanese fortifications.

These campaigns did not prove particularly effective against the guerrillas, but caused widespread misery amongst the civilian population. The "annihilation campaigns" were systematic, intentional, and resulted in the deaths of an estimated 2.7 million Chinese civilians. Taken as a whole, the Northern campaigns were Japan's greatest atrocity of the Second World War due to the total number of people killed.

A telling example of the Japanese army's utter disregard for their enemies is the extensive use of poison gas on Chinese troops prior to 1942.

The use of gas was closely regulated by Imperial command, which ordered both poison and tear gas to be used against the Chinese. Biological weapons were also utilized by the Japanese in China until 1942.



Biological weapons were also utilized by the Japanese in China until 1942.

Research for these weapons was carried out by the Kwantung Army's notorious command in charge of biological warfare, Unit 731, and included testing the effects of the plague, cholera, typhoid and other diseases and ailments on live human subjects.

Research for these weapons was carried out by the Kwantung Army's notorious command in charge of biological warfare, Unit 731, and included testing the effects of the plague, cholera, typhoid and other diseases and ailments on live human subjects.

This included horrific instances of torture in which test subjects were infected with a disease and then dissected alive once they were nearly dead to determine the disease's effect on the body as a whole. Such experiments were also carried out to test the human body's resilience against freezing or burning, as well as amputation or mutilation. The murderous nature of Unit 731 is seen in their referral to test subjects as logs or lumber. The work carried out by Unit 731 was so sinister that they tried to conceal it by burning,

pulverizing or dynamiting all human remains after all the prisoners had been executed.

Though the number of Chinese casualties resulting from Japan's use of chemical and biological weapons and research is unknown, the psychological impact on Chinese soldiers unable to retaliate in kind must have been significant.

Unlike in China, Japan's initial assaults on the Western powers were mostly successful. The air assault on Pearl Harbor failed to destroy the American Pacific Carrier fleet, but otherwise inflicted heavy losses with the destruction or heavy damage of eighteen American warships, including eight battleships, and hundreds of military aircraft from the army and navy.

It also resulted in nearly 4,000 U.S. casualties. However, the carrier fleet's survival ensured a continued American presence in the Pacific so the ultimate result of the strike was that America entered the war with a unified population seeking immediate retribution.

The simultaneous southern advance against the British and Dutch colonial powers was far more successful. The Japanese army swept through Southeast Asia, achieving spectacular victories against numerically superior European forces. Japan conquered the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and numerous islands all the way down to New Guinea in a matter of months. At Singapore alone, approximately 95,000 British Commonwealth soldiers were captured.

The Dutch East Indies provided Japan with essential war materials like oil and tungsten. The Southern advance was devastating to the Allied powers, and for the most part knocked Great Britain and the Netherlands out of the Pacific conflict.

Despite Japan's early victories against European and American forces in the region, they still had to maintain a large occupying force in China to protect the assets they had already won and to try and continue their expansion into the mainland.

Even though Japan was driven from China 70 years ago, conflict continues to this day over the history of the war and what actually happened during the invasion. To forget or ignore the aspects of this conflict is dangerous and foolish, and could allow such events to occur again, *as those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.*



However, the war turned against Japan and Allied forces approached the Japanese islands, forcing Japanese resources out of China.

By August of 1945 Germany has surrendered and Japan was fighting a lone war of attrition against China, the United States, and other allied forces. After the atomic bombs were dropped and Soviet forces swept through Manchuria, destroying the Kwantung army, Japan finally gave up the fight.

Even though Japan was driven from China 70 years ago, conflict continues to this day over the history of the war and what actually happened during the invasion.

As mentioned in the introduction, people must learn from history or else they will make the same mistakes that others made in the past. The current prime minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, refuses to acknowledge many of the atrocities committed by Japan's military during the Second World War. Abe is a member of Nippon Kaigi, a powerful political organization which advocates for Japan's history to be revised and argues the atrocities committed by Japan have been exaggerated over time, or were fabricated in the first place.

Unfortunately, Abe is not unique in his views, and has been able to use his political power to advance the agenda of Japanese revisionist history. Members of Nippon Kaigi believe Japan's atrocities in China have been largely inflated by history, particularly referring to Nanking and the coercion of women into sexual slavery for use by the Japanese army as points of injustice, despite overwhelming evidence to suggest the contrary.

If Prime Minister Abe is able to successfully implement his desired agenda, future students will not be taught about the atrocities of the past and thus more susceptible to committing the same mistakes in the future.

One must look at the good and bad of their national history in order to see the whole picture. It is important that German students must learn about the holocaust, or American students must learn about westward expansion and subsequent displacement and destruction of Native American tribes across the continent.

These are important facets of the national history of those countries, and without studying and learning about them the students of the future would have a skewed perspective on their countries actions.

It is very concerning that the Prime Minister of Japan is willfully seeking to cover up the mistakes of his nation's past, particularly because Japan has recently been allowed to re-arm and form an active military for the first time since 1945.

Abe's refusal to acknowledge the past could mean that modern Japan is more likely to follow in the territorially aggressive footsteps of early twentieth century Imperial Japan.

###

Brian N. Magelssen graduated from Western Washington University with a BA in History and Social Studies in 2011. This article was condensed from his thesis.

He is currently working on his Master's degree at the University of London and maintains a deep interest in Chinese history and current affairs.