

# The Rape of Nanking

## Book Review

[ SARAH BOOMGARDEN ]

**T**he *Rape of Nanking*, written by Iris Chang, begins by telling the story of how the Japanese set the stage for their invasion of China through brutal military influence on the everyday lives of citizens. The author describes how the children of Japan were so ingrained in a military society that “teachers instilled in boys hatred and contempt for Chinese people” and were subjected to physical beatings by their teachers for even the slightest mistakes.<sup>1</sup> Chang then explains that once the second Sino-Japanese war had begun and Shanghai fell, there was no stopping Japan’s military ego.

When the Japanese arrived at Nanking, they had but one order: “Kill all captives.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for the Chinese soldiers attempting retreat and for the innocent Chinese civilians, this order was accompanied by the fact that the city of Nanking was surrounded by a massive wall, where the Japanese blocked the only exit. Chang’s book mostly consists of the countless tales of individual and inventive accounts of torture the citizens of Nanking faced if they were caught. Families were forced to commit incest at gunpoint for the entertainment of Japanese troops.<sup>3</sup> Women were kidnapped into sexual slavery and sometimes even raped to death.<sup>4</sup> Even the elderly women were subjected to rape.<sup>5</sup> The men of Nanking faced torture as a form of entertainment for the troops. They were buried alive, used for target practice, frozen to death, lit on fire, and even had their genitals mutilated.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 30-31.

2 Ibid, 40.

3 Ibid, 95.

4 Ibid, 95.

5 Ibid, 60.

6 Ibid, 87-89.

There were also contests among the battalions to see which soldier could kill the most captives the fastest.<sup>7</sup> Severed heads were often used to keep score.<sup>8</sup>

While reading *The Rape of Nanking* I asked myself why I had never heard of these atrocities before. The German Holocaust committed during the same world war as the rape of Nanking is taught to every American public-school child since at least middle school. Yet, the rape of Nanking seems to have been ignored by school history books across the country; however, by the end of the book, I understood. While reading about these terrible, disgusting atrocities I found myself not once, but twice, feeling physically ill. There were several occasions in which I broke down sobbing because I couldn't fathom the amount of complete disregard for human life that took place. I feel it is pertinent that schools teach this event alongside the Holocaust, as the persecutions in Germany were not the only horrendous war crimes of second world war. Educating our children on this sensitive matter can perhaps prevent a similar event in the future.

*The Rape of Nanking* combines direct quotes from interviews, letters, etc. from survivors and witnesses pulling drawing the reader in and allowing them to experience the atrocities first hand. The author's style is more relaxed, and less overtly scholarly, making the text more palatable to the every-day reader. This book has permanently shifted my perspective on World War Two and I can feel nothing but deeply rooted disgust toward the soldiers that committed these war crimes against so many innocent civilians.

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7 Chang, 83-86.

8 Ibid, 83-86.