THE RAPE OF NANKING AND A FORGOTTEN GENOCIDE  
by Mike Kubic 2016

*In this article, former Newsweek correspondent Mike Kubic discusses the historical events that have informed the state of relations between China and Japan, which have long been in tension with one another. For many years, Japan’s foreign policy was defined by the concept of “sakoku,” which literally translates to “closed country.” This isolated the Japanese and allowed for the reinforcement of a sense of nationalistic and ethnic superiority. As you read, take notes on the factors that prompted members of the Japanese military to behave the way they did during the discussed wars.*

The modern history of Asia has no chapter more sordid[[1]](#footnote-1) and despairing of human nature than Japan’s aggression against China during the first half of the 20th century. It can be argued that the revolting era originated from an American action: the 1853 arrival of two black, smoke-belching ships—the first steam-powered, heavily armed vessels ever seen by the Japanese—in the Tokyo Bay, a port that, like all Japanese ports at that time, was banned to foreigners.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Coming ashore from one of the intruding ships was Commander Matthew Perry, an American naval officer, with a letter from U.S. President Millard Fillmore. The message, which profoundly shocked the Japanese rulers, was a demand that they end their centuries-old isolation and open their islands to trade with other nations. The Japanese—who had no weapons to match the cannons of Perry’s ships—agreed to do this, although they did so with a profound sense of humiliation and anger.

Fifteen years later, still smarting[[3]](#footnote-3) from the insult of Fillmore’s demand, a new generation of Japanese nationalists embarked on an astonishingly fast transformation of the islands’ fiefdoms[[4]](#footnote-4) into a modern military-industrial state.

Their goal was to make their country powerful enough to never have to bow to anyone by raising generations of militant zealots[[5]](#footnote-5) dedicated to conquest under the slogan “Revere[[6]](#footnote-6) the Emperor! Expel the barbarians!” With insufficient farmland to feed their fast-growing population, combined with a lack of natural resources to support the industrial and military buildup, the Japanese set out to prey on the vast and resource-rich China.

## **The First Sino-Japanese War**

From late 1800s on, Japan’s well-equipped, well-trained conscript army and navy[[7]](#footnote-7) repeatedly dealt heavy blows to the weak Qing Dynasty, which had ruled China for over 200 years. In 1885, Japan forced the dynasty to cede[[8]](#footnote-8) to it half of its rights in Korea, which was then China’s vassal state.[[9]](#footnote-9) In 1894, a Japanese expeditionary force delivered China an even more humiliating defeat by forcing the dynasty—after mere six months of fighting—to give up to Tokyo the island of Formosa and the Pescadores (a big part of Manchuria, a resource-rich Chinese province), and to increase the number of ports open to the Japanese navy.

The fallout from what historians call “The First Sino-Japanese War” consisted of three major developments that, in the short term, served Japan’s purposes.

One was the overthrow of the tottering Qing Dynasty by Chinese nationalists who in 1912 founded the Republic of China, a state so weak that it promptly disintegrated into separate principalities[[10]](#footnote-10) run by warlords.

The second development was the rise of the Chinese Communist Party[[11]](#footnote-11) and its Red Army (RA),[[12]](#footnote-12) which under the leadership of Mao Zedong[[13]](#footnote-13) was preparing to seize power in the republic.

And the third ill-fated aftermath was an attempt in 1927 by General Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese republic’s president and the head of its National Republican Army (NRA), to defeat the warlords and destroy the communist Red Army. His expedition achieved the first objective, but the Red Army survived and Mao declared a war on the nationalists.

In 1931, the Japanese took advantage of this chaotic state to argue that they had suffered “120 infringements” of their “rights” in Manchuria, and to again invade the Chinese mainland with a large force. This time, they seized the entire province, changed its name to Manchukuo, and placed it under a puppet regime.[[14]](#footnote-14) When The League of Nations, a predecessor of the United Nations, condemned the brazen conquest, Japan defied the international community by walking out of the organization.

For the next six years, the Japanese army harassed the Chinese ports while Chiang Kai-shek frantically tried to modernize his weak army.

This interlude ended on the evening of July 7, 1937, when the Japanese launched a full-scale invasion of China and quickly seized Beijing and Tianjin, its seaport. This was the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, which lasted until September 1945 and was only terminated by the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

## **The Second Sino-Japanese War**

There were several curious aspects of the hostilities in China. One of them was the cunning strategy of Mao Zedong and his Red Army, which in 1935 succeeded in breaking out of the encirclement created by the republican forces. After a 6,000-mile hike called the Long March, the Red Army set up a new base in northwestern China.  
  
In the relative safety of that remote region, Mao limited the Red Army’s role to guerrilla warfare[[15]](#footnote-15) while waiting for the National Republican Army to exhaust itself fighting the Japanese. His main focus was on establishing new strongholds of the Communist Party behind the front lines.  
  
The Soviet Union followed a similar tactic. Though a U.S. ally, it did not enter the war against Japan until the last month of the hostilities, and then it launched a massive offensive against the Japanese in Manchuria. The venture enabled the Soviets to gain benefits as a participant in the peace-making.  
  
But what was most exorbitant—and terrifying—about the Second Sino-Japanese war were the heinous crimes committed by members of the Japanese military, which reached depths of depravity[[16]](#footnote-16) unmatched in modern warfare.  
  
The Chinese were not the only victims of Japanese atrocities during WWII. In the early 1940s, the imperial troops massacred Australian nurses, Dutch civilians, and thousands of American and Filipino prisoners of war, including the sick and the wounded. Some captured American pilots were cannibalized.  
  
But nothing matched the genocidal hatred of the Japanese troops that ravaged China during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The roots of their inhumanity, and their almost unimaginable disdain for the Chinese people, have been attributed by Western historians to such causes as an education system that for decades glorified an alleged Japanese racial superiority, religion, and the sadistic[[17]](#footnote-17) training of the Japanese army.  
  
The dreary result was memorably summed up by Iris Chang in her classic, meticulously researched book The Rape of Nanking by quoting a Japanese general telling a group of foreign correspondents: “To be frank, your view of Chinese is totally different from mine. You regard the Chinese as human beings while I regard the Chinese as pigs.”  
  
The perception of an entire nation as disgusting, subhuman beings fit for slaughter explains the viciousness of Japan’s pursuit of its war aims, which were to destroy the Chinese republic and replace it with subservient “Manchukuos”—provinces run by Quislings[[18]](#footnote-18)—who would supply Japan with the needed food and natural resources.  
  
A rational strategy would have invited such cooperation by adopting a civil attitude toward the conquered people. Instead, the hundreds of thousands of Japanese troops in China were given so-called “Three alls:” government-endorsed orders to “Loot all, kill all, burn all!”

## **The Nanking Massacre**

The mayhem began shortly after the Japanese invaders followed their capture of Beijing and Tianjin by laying a siege to Shanghai.  
  
Infuriated by the stubborn defense of the city by Chiang Kai-shek’s troops, the victors marched hundreds of captured Chinese to a riverbank and slaughtered them by machine-gun fire in full view of observers aboard foreign ships.  
  
Following this outrage, the Japanese marched on Nanking, an ancient city that, at the time, was the Chinese capital. The officers and soldiers were given to understand that, while taking the city, they would be free to loot and kill as they wished. This policy was endorsed by the Tokyo-appointed commander of the expeditionary force, Prince Yasuhito Asaka, who issued a written order to “kill all captives.”  
  
The troops reached Nanking on December 9, 1937, and for the next 6-7 weeks, they carried out a carnage that was filmed, photographed, and written about by the Japanese press and the generally unharmed European members of the city’s foreign community.  
  
The campaign’s officially estimated victim toll of 300,000 Chinese, about 60,000 of whom were civilians, included the following incomplete list of Japanese atrocities:

* The rape of approximately 20,000 Chinese women, many of whom were killed or mutilated;
* The contest between two Japanese officers, Toshiaki Mukai and Tsuyoshi Noda, over who could first kill 100 Chinese with a sword (The murders, which were covered by two Japanese newspapers like a sports event, was won by Toshiaki, whose total was 106 victims, one more than Tsuyoshi);
* The burials of live civilians and prisoners of war, who were rounded up in groups of ten, tied by a rope, and then pushed into mass graves to be either covered with soil or burned;
* The disembowelment of captured Chinese soldiers and the eating of their roasted hearts and livers;
* The torching one-third of the city, and widespread looting and theft.

The Nanking tragedy was followed by a stalemate. Chiang Kai-shek, who lost his best units in the defense of Shanghai, retreated into China’s vast interior until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, after which the U.S. took charge of the fighting.  
  
Shortly after the end of the war in the Pacific on September 2, 1945, the most senior officers in charge of the Japanese troops at Nanking were put on trial by an international Nanking War Crimes Tribunal.  
  
As a member of the imperial court, Prince Asaka was granted immunity, and only two top Japanese commanders and the sword-wielding Toshiaki and Tsuyoshi were executed. Eighteen other members of the Japanese forces received lesser sentences.  
  
In the epilogue of her best-selling history of the Nanking massacre, Iris Chang concluded:

“There are several important lessons to be learned from Nanking, and one is that civilization itself is tissue-thin...The Rape of Nanking should be perceived as a cautionary tale – an illustration of how easily human beings can be encouraged to allow their teenagers to be molded into efficient killing machines, able to suppress their better natures.”

Chinese casualties in the Second Sino-Japanese War were estimated by Western historians at least 20 million, about half of them civilians. Japanese casualties have been estimated at less than 2 million, all military.

**EOC QUESTIONS:**

1. **What does the word “exorbitant” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 16? [RI 4]**
   1. fully sanctioned by those in power
   2. outrageously and unconscionably excessive
   3. comically large or grand
   4. perpetuating injustice or unfairness
2. **Which of the following phrases from the text best supports the answer to question 1? [RI 1]**
   1. “gain benefits as a participant in the peace-making” (Paragraph 15)
   2. “members of the Japanese military” (Paragraph 16)
   3. “depths of depravity unmatched” (Paragraph 16)
   4. “modern warfare” (Paragraph 16)
3. **Which of the following statements best identify one of the MAIN ideas of this article? [RI2]**
   1. The unswerving leadership of Chairman Mao and the success of the communist party created a more unified and defensible China.
   2. The acts of brutal violence perpetrated against Chinese people by Japanese soldiers were allowed for largely by widespread prejudice.
   3. Intervention from the United States prompted the Japanese government to enact more nationalistic policies and promote a disdain for foreigners among citizens.
   4. Japanese people during the time period discussed were inherently sadistic.
4. **Which phrase from the text best support the answers to question 4? [RI 1]**
   1. “…the cunning strategy of Mao Zedong and his Red Army, which in 1935 succeeded in breaking out of the encirclement created by the republican forces.” (Paragraph 13)
   2. “…the imperial troops massacred Australian nurses, Dutch civilians, and thousands of American and Filipino prisoners of war…” (Paragraph 17)
   3. “But nothing matched the genocidal hatred of the Japanese troops that ravaged China during the Second Sino-Japanese War.” (Paragraph 18)
   4. “As a member of the imperial court, Prince Asaka was granted immunity, and only two top Japanese commanders and the sword-wielding Toshiaki and Tsuyoshi were executed.”
5. **What is the author’s main purpose in writing this article? [RI 6]**
   1. to explain Japan’s motives for expansion
   2. to offer a defense of Japanese tactics in Nanking
   3. to provide readers with an in-depth understanding of Chinese suffering in Nanking
   4. to caution readers of the potential for human beings to behave inhumanely
6. **Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to question 5? [RI 1]**
   1. “It can be argued that the revolting era originated from an American action”
   2. “‘There are several important lessons to be learned from Nanking, and one is that civilization itself is tissue-thin’”
   3. “Chinese casualties in the Second Sino-Japanese War were estimated by Western historians at least 20 million, about half of them civilians. Japanese casualties have been estimated at less than 2 million, all military.”
   4. “The campaign’s officially estimated victim toll of 300,000 Chinese, about 60,000 of whom were civilians, included the following incomplete list of Japanese atrocities”

1. Sordid (adjective):involving dishonorable, shameful actions or motives; deserving of moral distaste or contempt [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The first successful, replicable commercial steamboat was created by American inventor Robert Fulton in 1807. Japan’s policy of isolation prevented them from becoming aware of foreign innovations such as this one [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Smart (verb):to sting; to be a source of sharp (yet often superficial) pain [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fiefdoms were the central aspect of feudalism, a system under which people were granted a piece of land, or “fiefdom,” upon which to work in return for services or fees surrendered to the lord who owned the lan [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Zealot (noun):a person who is fanatical and uncompromising in pursuit of his/her religious, political, or other ideals [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Revere (verb):to feel deep respect or admiration for something or someone [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A “conscript army and navy” consists of soldiers who were drafted compulsorily, meaning that they had no choice in the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cede (verb): to give up (power or territory) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Any state that is subordinate to another [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. States ruled by princes [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Chinese Communist Party, of the Community Party of China (CPC) was founded as a political party and a revolutionary movement for China in 1921. Its founders embraced communist ideology, a socioeconomic system built upon the principles of common ownership and the absence of defined social classes. The CPC remains the ruling political party of the People’s Republic of China to this day. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The CPC’s Red Army was so named for the association of communism with the color red, which dates back to the creation of the Red Flag—a symbol of the movement—in 1848. The color red was intended to represent the blood of the workers who lost their lives in the struggle against capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mao Zedong (1893-1976), commonly referred to as Chairman Mao, was a Chinese community revolutionary and founder of the People’s Republic of China, which he ruled from its establishment in 1949 until his death. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A "puppet" regime or government is a metaphor for a state that is supposedly and officially independent, but is really dependent upon and being controlled by an outside power. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. "Guerrilla warfare" is a form of irregular combat in which a small group of combatants use military tactics including ambushes, sabotage, raids, petty warfare, hit-and-run tactics, and mobility to fight a larger and less-mobile traditional military. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Depravity (noun): moral corruption; wickedness [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sadistic (adjective):deriving pleasure from inflicting pain or suffering upon others [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A person who betrays his or her own country by aiding an invading enemy, often serving later in a puppet government [↑](#footnote-ref-18)