

The Nanjing Incident: Japanese Eyewitness Accounts

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Society for the Dissemination of Historical Facts, 2020

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On December 13, 1937, the capital city of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's empire, Nanjing, fell into the hands of the Japanese military. This should have been the pivotal moment in the undeclared war between the Republic of China and Japan—"foreign devils" took the Nationalists' sacred capital. About a week earlier, on December 7, Chiang and his staff quietly abandoned Nanjing (and its defenseless Chinese residents) in exchange for space and time, hoping to draw the Japanese into a war of attrition within the vastness of China. (Designated Nanjing Garrison Commander Tang Shengzhi, and other top military officers, abandoned Nanjing on December 12, leaving remaining conscripts to fend for themselves.) Like a Hollywood film, America and its allies would arrive in time to save Chiang and his cronies from the clutches of the dastardly Japanese. The Chinese nationalist narrative has us believe that the Japanese treated Nanjing as the British did with Washington, D.C. during the War of 1812: systematic sacking. Unlike the British, however, the Japanese had no such plan for Nanking. In fact, Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Tse-tung, vying with Chiang for domination of China, in his 1938 *On Protracted War*, chided Japan for its "five errors" including not being aggressive enough to "annihilate" the Nationalists.

Events leading up to the capture of Nanjing have been exquisitely elaborated elsewhere (e.g. Higashinakano, S., 2005, *The Nanking Massacre*. Tokyo: Sekai Shuppan). Readers should also be aware of Chinese Communist infiltration of the Nationalist leadership. The Nationalists' goals were to secure international aid, for Chiang and his cronies, and to expel the Japanese barbarians from China (Higashinakano, S., 2008, *Top-Secret Chinese Nationalist Documents Reveal the Truth about the Nanking Incident*. Tokyo: Sekai Shuppan). Having a broad understanding of the background to the so-called "Nanjing Massacre" will give readers much needed context for the current book.

Author and freelance historian Ara Ken'ich interviewed Japanese who ended up in and around Nanjing before, during and after its fall. When they were interviewed, many were in their 70s and 80s—a few were in their 90s—yet they were generally lucid and healthy enough to recall their days in Nanjing. Nonetheless, readers should be aware that memories, even of traumatic experiences, are fluid over time. Ara mentions that a few of the interviewees' memories were not entirely clear or confused. Witnesses can also be made to "remember" a past event that is either entirely made-up ("false" or "implanted" memory) or distorted. One of Ara's interviewees, reporter Suzuki Jiro of the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun*, claimed to have seen a "massacre", and based solely on his recollections, Suzuki asks us to believe him. While eyewitness accounts aid in bringing the past to life, it should be remembered that the mind is not a video recorder and physical evidence should be used to corroborate eyewitness accounts. A few of Ara's interviewees did have photographs from their days in Nanjing, but none showed anything suggestive of a massacre or any "war crime".

The interviewees were mainly Japanese military personnel and journalists attached to military units (particularly to headquarters). Japanese civilians, such as Japanese business owners, were not included, as most likely left Nanjing: with news of the massacre of about 200 Japanese in Tongzhuo in July, the beginning of an undeclared state of war in August in Shanghai and the November 27 statement by Nanjing garrison Commander Tang calling for foreign residents to leave.

With the fall of Nanjing on December 13, the most striking observation was the absence of people, either soldiers or civilians, within the walled portion of Nanjing, the “castle”, except for Chinese civilians in the so-called international safety zone. (While the International Safety Zone Committee claimed 200,000 refugees within the safety zone, numbers in Ara’s book ranges from 20,000 to 300,000.) Interviewees said that the castle was “empty and quite,” that there was “no gunfire,” “the town and the streets looked clean” and there were “no abandoned bodies”.

Within the castle, reporters used abandoned buildings for their headquarters as well as for lodging. Around the time of the Japanese military ceremonial entrance on December 17, interviewees noted that Chinese residents opened businesses throughout the castle. These observations contrasts with the orthodox history, that endless waves of Japanese soldiers massacred civilians and raped tens of thousands for the next two months.

The overall commander of Japanese forces, General Matsui Iwane, previously sent orders to all field commanders to maintain “strict military discipline” and authorized limited numbers of troops into the castle; about 8,000 were eventually allowed in. As for most of the units that participated in the capture of Nanjing, by the end of December, they moved on to areas of operation, beyond Nanjing.

Not all interviewees were able to access all areas of the castle, as Japanese sentries were posted to keep order, especially of the safety zone. (One reported “Chinese guards” at the entrance of the safety zone.) Indeed, many of the interviewees, including former soldiers, were concerned of guerillas, stragglers and deserters among the civilians within the safety zone. Okada Takashi, assistant to Commander Matsui, saw Chinese military uniforms “scattered around the town.” On first entering Nanjing, reporter Minami Masayoshi of the *Shin-Aichi Shimbun* stated that he saw “two to three” corpses of partially burned Japanese soldier hanging from plane trees on Zhongshan East Road. In terms of the “massacre” claimed by the Chinese, it is likely that guerilla corpses were mistakenly identified as those of civilians. Adachi Kazuo of the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun*, suggested that the “several thousand” (he was not sure) guerrillas were killed both inside and outside of the castle. It should not be forgotten that urban warfare is not a “cakewalk,” as blithely stated by a self-righteous Assistant Secretary of Defense Kenneth Lee Adelman before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. With a few corpses of non-uniformed terrorists lying in the street, perhaps it should not be surprising that liberal democracies today wail the loudest in protest of alleged “war crimes”.

In general, reporters are a rich source of massacre stories. “Stories” is used in the sense that reporters neither witnessed first-hand nor bothered to verify massacres. For example,

Sato Shinju of the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun* heard that “3,000 Chinese prisoners” were caught, lined up and “shot with a heavy machine gun” at Xiaguan, a port town outside of the castle, to the northwest. (It was also through this town that the Chinese military leadership fled from Nanjing before the Japanese arrived.) Sato later visited Xiaguan and saw no bodies. Reporter Suzuki claimed to have seen “more than 1,000” bodies at Xiaguan. Hosonami Takashi of the *Domei Tsushin* claimed to have seen about “100 or so Chinese prisoners” being burned to death at Xiaguan. He also “heard around 20,000” prisoners were killed, with “10,000 or fewer” killed at Xiaguan. Hosonami mentioned a colleague who would be a good reference to interview concerning Nanjing around the time of the so-called “massacre”. However, Hosonami had forgotten that his colleague passed away. Mori Hiroshi of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* heard that “many” Chinese prisoners were taken to the Yangtze River (presumably to Xiaguan) and shot. Mori also “heard” that the “shore was full of bodies.” However, reporter Taguchi Risuke of the *Hochi Shimbun*, also went to Xiaguan and “saw nothing”.

There were stories of “massacres” within the castle as well. Reporter Suzuki was adamant that he witnessed a massacre—Japanese soldiers threw “smiling” and “laughing” Chinese prisoners down a rampart and survivors were killed with a pickax. He heard of bodies piled up at the Guanghua Gate entrance to the castle—there were so many corpses that Japanese tanks ran over them. Ara notes that Suzuki was confident that he saw “massacres”. However, Suzuki does not clearly remember when he entered the castle. He also took for granted as true of the two Japanese officers who claimed to be in a “100-man killing contest”. However, because of his story, the Nationalists executed these men as war criminals after the end of the war. On reading Ara’s interview, Suzuki appeared rather blasé about it all. (Asami Kazuo, reporter for the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun*, one of the originators of the “100-man killing contest” story, stated to Ara that he has “no clear memory of the time” but fervently believes in the Nanjing “massacre of the century.”)

Aside from the ugliness of war, reporters spoke of normal life following their entry into the castle. After the Japanese military ceremonial entrance, reporters such as Higuchi Tetsuo, cameraman for the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, frequented the red-light district in the castle. Higuchi was in Nanjing for about a month after the ceremonial entrance. As far as Higuchi could tell, Japanese soldiers were not allowed to enter the red light district. Reporter Minami concurred. When asked, Higuchi said he did not know if there were military “comfort stations” near Nanjing. That Japanese military personnel were not allowed into civilian brothels has been mentioned elsewhere (Hata, I., 2018. *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield). In fact, a staff officer with the Shanghai Expeditionary Army, Captain Onishi Hajime, confirmed that a comfort station for soldiers was set up (either within or outside the castle).

Unlike the soldiers who left the immediate area to chase the retreating Nationalist army, a few reporters were in Nanjing during the period of the “massacres” and “mass rapes”. For example, Mitoma Mikinosuke, of the *Fukuoka Nichinichi Shimbun* lived in Nanjing for 6 years after the capture of Nanjing and then, after the end of the war, another half year near Nanjing with “10,000 Japanese residents”. He did not hear of a “massacre”, at all, during his time in Nanjing.

The soldiers interviewed by Ara also have enlightening first hand observations of war, that it is an extremely dirty and morally and physically demanding task. Indeed, several reporters empathize with the military's point of view—as they had to share limited rations, sleep wherever there was shelter during a cold December while avoiding enemy fire. The current book does bring the past to the present—but rebukes claims of the past, in that that the Japanese deliberately sought Chinese in Nanjing to murder.