

Nanjing -- The City With a Long Memory

By

William R. Polk

When Japan invaded China in 1937, it quickly conquered the land along the Pacific rim. Chang-kai Shek retreated ahead of the advancing Japanese army. However, the Japanese began to meet resistance, mainly from guerrillas, as their forces moved inland. In one battle just outside Nanjing, a Japanese royal prince was killed. The Japanese commanders regarded that as an affront to their honor and decided to take revenge upon the population of Nanjing in a manner not seen since the Mongols built pyramids of skulls outside of cities that tried to resist them.

The senior Japanese commanders either ordered (as prosecutors at the International Military Tribunal of the Far East later charged) or allowed (as their defenders claim) their soldiers a week to wreak revenge on the hapless inhabitants of the city. In an orgy of rape and wholesale murder the soldiers bayoneted, burned or shot an estimated 300,000 civilians.

Astonishingly, an Episcopalian minister by the name of John Magee wandered for days through the blood and gore, armed only with a camera, a notepad and a pencil, to record at least some of the grisly events. Apparently his bravery protected him. Magee was in a state of shock as he saw “dead bodies in every street and alley in the city, so far as I could tell, and I went around quite extensively... The raping of the women has been beyond description or imagination.” He did not try to describe, but his photographs were more vivid than anything he could have written. His photographs are now on view at the Nanjing “holocaust” museum.

The museum is an austere reconstruction of the events of that terrible week. As one enters, the naked foot prints of some of the survivors are etched into the cement walk way so that one almost literally walks with them through a small field of partially uncovered skeletons. Then, turning into the museum building, he passes a low shelf where mourners and visitors place candles in memory of the dead. Next, past a macabre collection of skulls and assorted bones, he files along corridors of Magee’s photographs showing the soldiers pointing bayonets already smeared with blood at the bodies of terrified Chinese peasants, half clothed young women who have been gang-raped before being murdered and one scene of a beheading. The effect is numbing. Emerging into the sunlight does not do much to lessen it.

Tens of thousands of Chinese pass through this experience each year. Few Europeans or Americans ever see it. And, of course, it is off-limits for Japanese.

Japanese, indeed, are rarely seen in Nanjing. Nanjing is practically the only city in China with almost no visible indication of anything Japanese. There are, I was told by Robert Daly, the American director of the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University

Center, a few Japanese restaurants in the city, but they are hidden away in hotels and do not advertise. On the billboards that in Nanjing, as in all Chinese cities, cover the walls along the streets, I saw only one advertisement for a Japanese product. And I was told by a young Chinese student that when a Japanese tourist braved the city and took a boat ride on Nanjing's river, his Chinese fellow passengers threw him overboard.

What keeps Nanjing's hatred smoldering is not just the memory of the event, vivid as this is made by the museum and undoubtedly by family tales, but particularly by the fact that Japan has never officially acknowledged what it did. Worse, in the value system which China, Korea and, to some extent, Japan share, is the lack of "apology." Japan is criticized, often bitterly, for the fact that the Japanese have not apologized for the massacre. Had they done what the Germans did about their holocaust, Professor Daly observed, the issue would have been resolved with the passage of time.

Worse than the lack of apology, a number of prominent Japanese officials, journalists and scholars have persisted in denying that the massacre took place. Ishihara Shintaro, a prominent Japanese politician, wrote a book on how to deny atrocities and gave a magazine interview in which he said that the accepted account of the massacre "is a story made up by the Chinese. It has tarnished the image of Japan, but it is a lie." While not denying that it happened, others have described it as "just a part of war." Finally, even those who tentatively and privately admit national guilt have said that what was done was "excused" by American bombing of Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Whatever is said about it, there is no doubt, at least here that the rape of Nanjing has poisoned the relations between Japan and China for nearly a century. In a world of terrible and continuing cruelty of mankind, Nanjing is preeminent.

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