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Rape of Nanjing: Massacre, Facts & Aftermath

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5–6 minutes

In late 1937, over a period of six weeks, Imperial Japanese Army forces brutally murdered hundreds of thousands of people—including both soldiers and civilians—in the Chinese city of Nanjing (or Nanking). The horrific events are known as the Nanjing Massacre or the Rape of Nanjing, as tens of thousands of women and girls were sexually assaulted. Nanjing, then the capital of Nationalist China, was left in ruins, and it would take decades for the city and its citizens to recover from the savage attacks.

Preparing for Invasion

During the early years of [World War II](#), and following a bloody victory in Shanghai during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese turned their attention towards the capital city of Nanjing.

Fearful of losing his military forces in battle, China's Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek ordered the removal of nearly all official Chinese troops from the city, leaving it defended by untrained auxiliary troops.

Chiang also ordered the city held at any cost, and forbade the official evacuation of its citizens. Many ignored this order and fled, but the rest were left to the mercy of the approaching enemy.

Did you know? Once one of China's most prosperous cities and industrial centers, Nanjing took decades to recover from the devastation it experienced in the Rape of Nanjing. Abandoned as the national capital in 1949 for Beijing, it later grew into a modern industrial city during the communist period and today is home to many of China's largest state-owned firms.

A small group of Western businessmen and missionaries, the International Committee for the Nanjing Safety Zone, attempted to set up a neutral area of the city that would provide refuge for Nanjing's civilians. The safety zone, opened in November 1937, was roughly the size of New York's Central Park and consisted of more than a dozen small refugee camps.

On December 1, the Chinese government abandoned Nanjing, leaving the International Committee in charge. All remaining citizens were ordered into the safety zone for their protection.

Japanese Destroy Nanjing

1 On December 13, the first troops of Japan's Central China Front Army, commanded by General Matsui Iwane, entered the city. Even before their arrival, word had begun spreading of the numerous atrocities they had committed on their way through China, including

killing contests, arson and pillaging. Chinese soldiers were hunted down and killed by the thousands, and left in mass graves.

Many of the Japanese troops—hungry, undisciplined and exhausted by weeks of marching and brutal fighting in the battle for Shanghai—were seeking revenge for the comrades lost in that earlier battle.

2 Entire families were massacred, and even the elderly and infants were targeted for execution, while tens of thousands of women were raped. Bodies littered the streets for months after the attack. Determined to destroy the city, the Japanese looted and burned at least one-third of Nanjing's buildings.

3 According to numerous eyewitness reports and later analyses, between 20,000 and 80,000 women were brutally raped and tortured, including young girls and elderly women. Many of them—including victims of gang rapes—were mutilated and killed after being assaulted.

4 Though the Japanese initially agreed to respect the Nanjing Safety Zone, ultimately even these refugees were not safe from vicious attacks. In January 1938, the Japanese declared that order had been restored in the city, and dismantled the safety zone—but killings continued until the first week of February. A puppet government was installed, which would rule Nanjing until the end of World War II.

There are no official numbers for the death toll in the Nanjing Massacre, though estimates range from 200,000 to 300,000 people. Soon after the end of the war, Matsui and his lieutenant Tani Hisao were tried and convicted for war crimes by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East—both men were soon executed.

Anger over the events at Nanjing continues to color Sino-Japanese relations to this day. The true nature of the massacre has been disputed and exploited for propaganda purposes by historical revisionists, apologists and Japanese nationalists. Some claim the numbers of deaths have been inflated, while others have denied that any massacre occurred.

Today, the victims of the Rape of Nanjing are memorialized at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall in Nanjing, located near a mass grave known as the “pit of ten thousand corpses.” UNESCO, a [United Nations](#) agency, added the Nanjing Massacre Memorial's historical documents to its Memory of the World Register.

Sources

Nanjing Massacre. [USC Shoah Foundation](#), [University of Southern California](#).

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Tokyo slams UNESCO in row over Nanjing massacre documents. [CNN](#).