Book Reviews

Peter Harmsen

Nanjing 1937: Battle for a Doomed City. Philadelphia and Oxford: Casemate, 2015. pp. 368. \$ 19.99. ISBN 978-1612002842.

Nearly eight decades later, the atrocities committed by the Japanese military forces in and around the Chinese capital city of Nanjing in 1937, commonly known as the Nanjing Massacre or the Rape of Nanjing, continue to stir strong emotions and arouse considerable interest as a subject in the politics of memory. Witness the unprecedented National Commemoration at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial on December 13, 2014, attended by China's President Xi Jinping, or China's successful effort to have the Documents of Nanjing Massacre accepted as part of UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2015. The latter event in turn produced such negative reactions in neighboring Japan that Tokyo has threatened to withhold its contributions to UNESCO.

Peter Harmsen should be commended for bringing that tragic event back into history from the overheated realm of memory politics. Subtitled "Battle for a Doomed City," *Nanjing 1937* is a solid and riveting account of the military operations culminating in the Japanese occupation of Nanjing in late 1937. Whereas the Japanese advance to Nanjing and the Chinese defense of the city have been told in other works in several languages, his book stands out due to its comprehensive scope, attention to detail, and comparative angle. Harmsen has succeeded in writing a highly readable, informative and nuanced account that sheds light on one of the most important episodes of World War II in Asia.

The book's nine chapters follow a chronological order, starting on November 11 and ending in early 1938. Unlike most of the existing publications on Nanjing in Chinese and English, the bulk of Harmsen's book is devoted not to the atrocities but to the unfolding military, and to a lesser extent, diplomatic and political drama, culminating in the city's fall. Deploying what can be best described the method of a pan-optic cameraman, he trains his narrative lens in and out of the battlefield, moving effortlessly across frontlines as well as between military and diplomatic fronts. Harmsen provides one of the most comprehensive

account of the military operations of the Japanese and Chinese armed forces in the lower Yangtze region.

Military historians will find many nuggets here and there. For instance, Harmsen describes in great detail the landing operation of the Japanese 30th Infantry Brigade on November 13 and goes on to place it in the longer history of Japanese amphibious warfare going back to Japan's wars with Qing China and Czarist Russia at the turn of the 20th century. "These victories went almost unnoticed," notes Harmsen, "as the amphibious operation that attracted the most attention during the global conflict was the Allied landing at Gallipoli and the accompanying slaughter." (69) Later, he notes the Japanese "tactical innovation" to overcome the difficult terrain between Shanghai and Nanjing, in which Chinese defense had placed much hope of slowing down the Japanese. (91) In contrast, Harmsen paints a grim picture of the organization—or rather disorganization—of the Chinese army before and during the battle of Nanjing. He casts doubts on the Chinese reliance on the 500-years-old city wall of Nanjing for defense against the invading Japanese army, quoting from a western spy's secret report: "for thousands of years walls have played a dominant role in defense in China," and perhaps consequently "Chinese commanders could not and would not see them as useless or even as a liability against modern military." (140) Citing a trend since the battle of Shanghai, Harmsen points to the Chinese military's concern for material and equipment over men, and offers a damning account of the nearly nonexistent medical service of the Chinese army. Finally, Harmsen's book is not limited to the two main protagonists on the ground. In fact, he devotes considerable space to the aerial combat over the lower Yangtze in gripping detail. Besides the Japanese and Chinese aviators, his book includes a detailed account of how Soviet pilots played a pivotal role during these early months of the war in Chinese skies.

Harmsen's book also addresses issues concerning the Japanese decision to attack Nanjing. He places the weight on Japanese field commanders like Lt. Gen. Yanasawa Heisuke for pushing for crossing the "line" in pursuit of retreating Chinese forces, against the wishes of the General Staff in Tokyo. He does not avoid the issue of war atrocities and discusses those after the fall of Nanjing in his final chapter. He is wisely cautious on the contentious question of the scale of the Japanese massacres of Chinese captives and civilians in Nanjing, concluding that "regardless of the exact death toll in the Chinese capital, it was clear then and remains clear today that something almost uniquely sinister happened there." (237) He rejects the parallel drawn by some with the Holocaust in places like Auschwitz, and compares the massacres in Nanjing

instead to the early Holocaust killings by German *Einsatzgruppen* in eastern Europe.

Still, the reader may wish to see a discussion of some of the contentious topics in this comprehensive history of the military operations. Missing is the infamous but still hotly debated “killing contest” between two Japanese field-grade officers. Reported extensively in the wartime Japanese press to have taken place between Shanghai and Nanjing, the alleged contest later led to the execution of the two Japanese officers in China after the war.¹ While Harmsen asserts “[in] the end there were too many of these individual horror stories to dismiss them as isolated excesses” (237), he seems to shy away from asking if anyone in the Japanese high command issued orders for executing Chinese captives or who should bear the ultimate responsibility.

Harmsen’s book differs from many earlier works on World War II that focus on the top level leadership, instead devoting considerable attention to those doing the actual fighting (soldiers as well as frontline officers) as well as those bearing its impact (Chinese civilians, Western doctors, among others). Several dozens of wartime photos depicting ordinary soldiers on both sides also bring the reader close to the events in 1937. More importantly, he writes in a captivating style, giving voices to these individuals and their experiences, quoting extensively from personal diaries and letters that have come to light in recent decades.

Beginning in the early 2000s and supported by generous funding from the government, Chinese historians in Nanjing launched a massive project to collect and publish materials related to the Japanese atrocities there. By 2011, seventy-eight volumes had been published, making available in Chinese for the first time a large number of documents translated from Japanese and other foreign languages. This in turn formed the bulk of the documents submitted to UNESCO. A Danish journalist with many years of work and residence in Greater China, Harmsen is probably the first non-Chinese author to make extensive use of these publications, as demonstrated by his copious citations. In addition, he uses a few published English-language sources and adds several in

1 He also overlooks some of the “revenge” massacres by Japanese units between Shanghai and Nanjing, brought to light first by the Japanese journalist Honda Katsuichi in his reportage. In 2006 this reviewer uncovered the diary of a Japanese army doctor who recorded one such massacre in Changshou in late November 1937. See “The Diary of a Japanese Army Doctor, 1937,” in *Researching Japanese War Crime Records: Introductory Essays* (Washington, DC: Interagency Working Group on Nazi War Crimes and Imperial Japanese Documents, 2007), ix–xi.

German and other languages overlooked by historians. A number of secondary works were consulted, including the semi-official Japanese war history known as the *Senshi sosho*, but the important recent book edited by Bob Wakabayashi and Japanese works by Tokushi Kasahara are missing from the bibliography. Although the book is aimed at the general public, a more critical examination of the documentary evidence would have placed it on firmer grounds. After all, dispute over the veracity of certain sources has been part of the larger controversy over Nanjing.

In recent years, Japan's war in China has been increasingly viewed as part of the worldwide conflict with global implications. Harmsen's previous book on the Chinese defense of Shanghai, subtitled *Stalingrad on the Yangtze*, is one example that connects the war in China with developments in Europe and offers broad comparisons. Students of modern East Asia as well as those of the military history of World War II will stand to benefit from his latest fine contribution.

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