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This Day: The Nanjing Massacre

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“Stripping away all the Japanese excuses about military necessity...the stark fact remains that the conditions in Nanking one month and ten days after the victorious Japanese Army crashed the gates of China’s former capital are so lawless and so scandalous that Japanese authorities continue to refuse permission to any foreigners except diplomatic officials to visit the city...Again on Jan. 7 Japanese authorities apologetically admitted to the writer that conditions in Nanking were still deplorable but gave assurances that the division of troops then out of hand and daily criminally assaulting hundreds of women and very young girls would be removed from Nanking within two or three days.”

More than a month into the “Nanjing Massacre,” in which Japanese troops entered the city and, in search of fleeing Chinese troops, killed tens of thousands of Chinese civilians, the *Times* piece was part of a steady stream of reports to the U.S. via AP, Reuters, and various other news bureaus. Topics ranged from what might be considered, in the context of broader events, rather innocuous—like the *Times* report on January 23 that the American ambassador to Japan had lodged a formal complaint about looting of American property by Japanese troops—to first-hand accounts of violence that are heart-wrenching even seventy years later. Even so, the coverage of the Nanjing events in the American media was remarkably stark and prescient in its read of what the massacre augured for Sino-Japanese relations in the coming years.

Commemorations of the massacre have taken place already in China this year, though they have been remarkably low-key given that this winter marks the 70th anniversary of the massacre. As in past years, Japanese officials have protested those commemorations—this year focusing on the renovated massacre museum in Nanjing—with particular objection (again, a redux of earlier years) to the Chinese victim count of 300,000, which Japan views as an overestimate. (For an investigation of how the massacre has been remembered in both countries, interested readers might look at *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, edited by Josh Fogel.) But both the objections from Japan and the nationalist rhetoric from China have been at a lower level than in previous years; in China commemorations of the massacre were dampened by the government, preventing nationalistic fervor from reaching the peaks it did three years ago when there were widespread anti-Japan protests focused on Japan’s continuing struggles over accurately representing wartime atrocities in school textbooks.

The continued debates over how and when to commemorate the Nanjing Massacre point to its incredible power—right from the beginning—to focus larger political struggles, in great part because evidence of the massacre emerged from a new, evocative, popular media environment. As is frequently noted in American narratives of the massacre, from Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking* a decade ago to the American-made documentary out last year (“Nanking”; rights in China have been sold to CCTV), it wasn’t just newspaper reporters who were recording the events. The most stunning accounts of the massacre are the photographs and film footage taken by regular people who were in Nanjing, from the 16mm footage shot by American missionary John Magee to the celebratory or mocking photos taken by invading Japanese soldiers themselves. It is in part this evidence of atrocity—caught on tape because the timing of the Nanjing events coincided with the popularization of cameras and the emergence of film technology—that has made this particular event a flashpoint for Japanese-Chinese relations.