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A Piece of History You Might Not Have Learned in School

December 8, 2014 | Filed under: [Books](#), [Facing History and Ourselves](#), [Facing History Resources](#), [Genocide/Collective Violence](#), [History](#), [Teaching Resources](#)

This weekend marks the 77th anniversary of the Nanjing Atrocities, a seminal event in the history of World War II, yet one that few know much about.

Extensive scholarship exists about The Atrocities, and many films explore the events. There are numerous organizations dedicated to educating and remembering

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this history, including China's Nanjing Memorial Museum, which opened its doors in 1985. Yet despite these important efforts, many people—including, as of a couple years ago, myself—know very little about the context and importance of The Atrocities in our collective past.

Two years ago I began working as the primary writer on a new [Facing History and Ourselves](#) resource exploring the mass violence that took place in the city of Nanjing between mid-December 1937 and early 1938. I had worked at Facing History for 11 years when I started the project, and I was a high school social studies teacher before that. I had spent hours reading, writing, teaching, and developing materials about World War II and the [Holocaust](#), but I had never spent time looking in-depth at how World War II played out in Asia—not as a student, not as an educator, and not at Facing History.

Here is a brief overview of the events:

On [December 13, 1937](#), Imperial Japanese forces began their occupation of China's capital city, then called Nanking. [Soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army](#) carried out a spree of violence, [mass rape](#), looting, and murder of civilians and noncombatants throughout the city that lasted until approximately the end of February 1938. The carnage did not go unnoticed. Journalists and [Westerners living in the city](#) documented the violence in photographs and film, and wrote about The Atrocities for the world to know. And within China, stories of the Japanese Imperial troops' brutality before, during, and after the attacks spread far and wide.



A procession of cavalymen passes beneath Nanking's arched Chungshan Gate on Jan. 4, 1938, marking the successful capture of the city by Japanese forces. Image by © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

I started my research on The Atrocities in the same way as I would start a Facing History lesson—with an exploration of [identity](#). I looked at [survivor testimonies](#) from the period, read letters and diary entries from the Westerners who saved thousands of Chinese, and surveyed the extensive scholarship on World War II in East Asia. The deeper I dug, the more I began to ask myself, *Why, as a student and teacher of World War II and as an educator deeply committed to teaching about the Holocaust, don't I know very much about how the war played out in China and throughout Asia? Why was Imperial Japan's record of war crimes and crimes against humanity during World War II often overlooked or outright ignored in my classroom—and many others like it in the western world?*

The more I read, spoke to educators, and investigated current standards and contemporary textbooks to see how they addressed The Atrocities, or more generally World War II in China, I confirmed that my questions were neither unfounded

nor naïve. In the West, we study World War II and the Holocaust primarily in the European theatre, but we cannot fully grasp the significance of this time period and its legacies today without also understanding the events that took place throughout Asia.

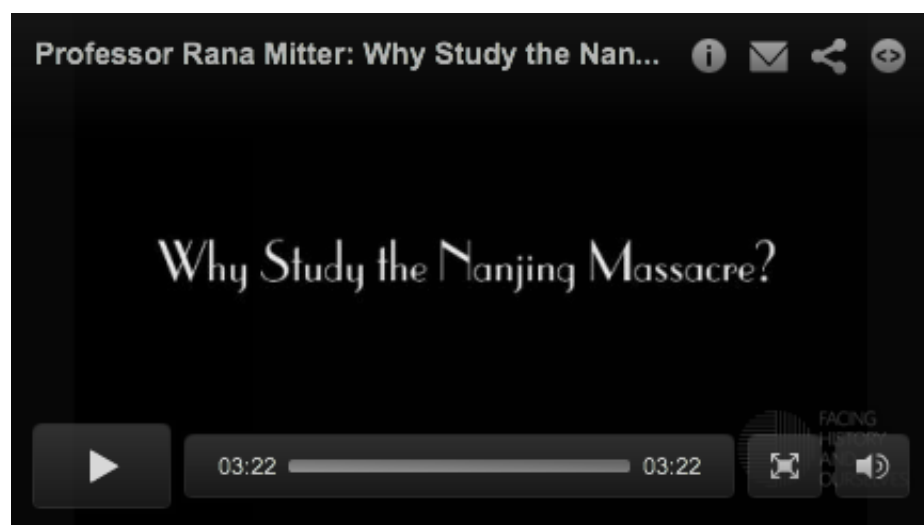
To begin to comprehend the gravity and legacy of the Nanjing Atrocities, we need to look at much more than the immediate events of 1937 and 1938. We need to know the context and factors that led to the outbreak—longstanding tensions with Western colonial nations in the region, [conflict between China and Japan](#) and [differences between the two cultures](#), and decisions individuals and leaders made at the time. We need to understand the relationship between [nation building](#) and nationalism, [nationalism and imperialism](#), and [nationalism and militarism](#), and recognize the role each played in the violence that unfolded.

As we study the history of The Atrocities, we also have to consider the terms used to describe what occurred and how they influence the ways in which this event is remembered today. At times, the mass violence of 1937 and 1938 is referred to as the “Rape of Nanking,” but mass rape was sadly only one of the crimes committed to demoralize, terrorize, and instill fear in the populace. The “Nanjing Massacre” has also served as a term of reference, but again, massacre of civilians, noncombatants, and prisoners of war was only one of the crimes. Facing History ultimately decided to refer to the events as the “Nanjing Atrocities” or The Atrocities, a phrase we borrowed from Professor Wakabayashi of York University to more accurately describe the full scope of the war crimes committed.

This fall, we published *The Nanjing Atrocities: Crimes of War*. The forward is written by Ben Ferencz, a Facing History speaker who served as the Chief Prosecutor for the United States at the

Nuremberg war crimes trials. “It must be recognized that there is no such thing as a war without atrocities,” Ferencz writes. And that is at the heart of this study. How can we help to prevent these atrocities? How can our study of this moment in history be more comprehensive, so that we as citizens of today can help prevent similar atrocities from taking place?

I believe this resource is an opportunity to confront the consequences of war while also changing our understanding of this watershed moment in history. It is a small step in preventing future war and crimes against humanity. Studying the particular history of the Nanjing Atrocities can also help young people and teachers attain a more balanced and complex understanding of World War II. It provides an opportunity to deeply examine the role of identity and culture in the shaping of a nation’s history and its historical memory from a different perspective. Ultimately, studying the Nanjing Atrocities will help students and educators examine in-depth the dangers and consequences that can arise when nationalism and militarism remain unchecked, and when a nation’s institutions are manipulated to foster climates of superiority and intolerance of others.



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