



Nanjing 1937: Battle for a Doomed City by Peter Harmsen.

Philadelphia: Casemate, 2015. Pp. 336. ISBN 978-1-61200-284-2.

Review by Katherine K. Reist, University of Pittsburgh–Johnstown (kreist@pitt.edu).

Veteran journalist Peter Harmsen¹ has now followed up his earlier book, *Shanghai 1937*,² with a compelling account of Japan's decision to take Nanjing, the capital of Nationalist China, and its consequences, as opposed to simply consolidating its victory in Shanghai. He seeks, in particular, to go beyond a dense rehearsal of military operations and tactics to convey the personal perspectives of the city's attackers and their victims, making good use of, for example, diaries and letters.

During the course of six terrible weeks in late 1937 and early 1938, Nanjing was transformed from a name into a symbol. Nanjing, or Nanking as it was known in the West at the time, became the victim of the intense and indiscriminate violence of a victorious army bent on revenge. Its helpless people were subject to rape and murder on a scale that maintains its capacity to shock, even in a world that has been exposed only too often to man's ability to inflict pain on fellow human beings.... The lengthy battle for Nanjing, the five-week campaign that preceded the six weeks of slaughter, is much less known to the Western public, and for that matter to the Chinese public as well.... Nanjing 1937 is remembered as a tale of Chinese victimhood, but prior to that it was also a tale of Chinese heroism. (13)

Besides the personal experiences of Chinese and Japanese participants discussed here are those of foreigners like an American teacher at Ginling College, a German businessman, Soviet pilots, and many others caught up in the battle for Nanjing and its aftermath.

Harmsen's lucid, engaging account will appeal to and inform readers ranging from professional historians and military analysts to the merely curious. The book proceeds chronologically and features helpful maps and photographs. The author also maintains a slick website—*China in WW2*—with additional resources, including a comments section to facilitate dialogue with and between his readers.

Regarding foreign policy matters, the author describes Germany's initial efforts to arrange a cease-fire and/or peace accord to maintain good relations with both sides. After it began to favor Japan, the Soviet Union started to provide materials and pilots to the Chinese. The Soviets calculated that keeping the Japanese preoccupied with China would lessen the likelihood of their attacking along the border with Manchuria; the Chinese hoped for a more positive rationale for Soviet aid efforts. Indeed, some Japanese officers saw the USSR as a more tempting target than China, complicating the decision-making in regard to Nanjing.

Harmsen clarifies the differing military aspects of the battles for Shanghai and Nanjing. At Shanghai, German-trained and equipped Chinese troops were able to mount a fierce defense, offset only by Japanese air power. The fighting at Shanghai had been essentially static, like the trench warfare of World War I. The battle for Nanjing was more "kinetic" in today's parlance; it included the bombing of civilian populations, which became so commonplace later in the war. Also addressed are matters of morale, supply, and maneuver: both sides cursed the ubiquitous mud and lack of equipment and sup-

1. He has reported on Asia for some twenty years in publications like the *Financial Times* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, among others.

2. Subtitle: *Stalingrad on the Yangtze* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2013).

plies. Careful physical descriptions of the city, its walls and terrain, make clear the challenges both sides confronted.

The author writes that Chiang Kai-shek deliberately maneuvered the Japanese towards Nanjing, where the terrain was less suited to tank assaults and the battle would be witnessed by foreigners, as at Shanghai. Chiang hoped international sympathy would stimulate increased aid for his military. The Japanese, for their part, believed that seizing Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Nanjing would destroy the Chinese government and end the war. For both sides, then, the city of Nanjing carried great strategic and symbolic significance.

Some foreigners organized a “Safety Zone” for Chinese noncombatants during the battle for Nanjing. Though overcrowded and not perfectly secure, it saved many Chinese lives. The Japanese dropped leaflets assuring the humane treatment of the inhabitants, a grimly ironic promise, given the horrific butchery later inflicted on the city. Harmsen acutely observes that, “like the early Holocaust killings...,” the insensate brutality in Nanjing was “of an almost intimate kind” (243).

Harmsen stresses that, despite their crushing defeats in 1937 at the hands of an enemy who had not been beaten by anyone in modern times, the Chinese proved the futility of the fight to their foe by refusing to capitulate. Also explored are ongoing disputes about the number of casualties in Nanjing and the pervasive use of atrocities by the Japanese to humiliate their defeated victims. In the end, Harmsen concludes, Japanese cruelty was self-defeating.

As compared (inevitably) with Iris Chang’s controversial bestseller, *The Rape of Nanking*,³ Peter Harmsen’s book evinces a broader, more balanced perspective on its subject. To be sure, the atrocities are described, but *as a part of* rather than the whole story. I heartily recommend *Nanjing 1937* to anyone interested in the history of the battle and the lingering controversies associated with it.

3. Subtitle: *The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (NY: Basic Books, 1997).