

Documents on Nanking

On November 11, when the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the armistice was observed, few newspapers failed to comment sardonically on the events of the twenty years—on the fact that the period ended with war in Asia, civil strife in Spain, and the fascist states of Europe shaking the mailed fist. Democracy, instead of being safe everywhere, is safe nowhere.

But no satire achieved on the editorial pages could equal that of a little paper-covered book of documents, prepared by H. J. Timberley, China correspondent of the Manchester Guardian, and published on November 11 by the Modern Age Press of New York city. The volume, entitled "Japanese Terror in China," deals in particular with the capture of Nanking. It includes eyewitness accounts from members of the international committee which had charge of the so-called "safety zone" in Nanking. To release on Armistice day this record of current brutality was nothing less than devastating to the self-respect of the world.

Most of Nanking's population of 1,000,000 had fled ahead of the armies, but 200,000 crowded into the safety zone, and there twenty-seven white men (eighteen Americans, five Germans, one Englishman, one Austrian and two Russians) tried to look after them. The Chinese army collapsed and the leaders fled. Dead bodies were piled high in the city gates. The United States gunboat Panay started down the river to its fate. The bombing stopped and on December 14, 1937, Japanese troops were pouring into the city.

From this point on we will confine ourselves largely to quotations from the eyewitnesses, and persons lacking strong stomachs should go no further:

I have already described the conditions at the gate—we actually had to drive over masses of dead bodies to get through. . . . Soldiers were taking all 1300 men in one of our camps to shoot them. Not a whimper from the entire throng. . . . That morning the cases of rape began to be reported. Over a hundred we knew of were taken away by soldiers, seven of them from the university library. . . . At our staff conference at four we could hear the shots of the execution squad nearby.

December 17—A rough estimate would be at least a thousand women raped last night and during the day. Resistance means the bayonet. . . . A boy of five stabbed with a bayonet five times. . . . Some houses are entered five to ten times a day and the poor people looted and robbed and the women raped. . . . Went with Sperling to see fifty corpses in some ponds. Were they used for saber practice? . . . Forty-three of the fifty-four employees of the power plant were taken out and shot. . . . A man was led to headquarters with his head burned. His story was that he was one of a gang of some hundred who had been tied together, then gasoline thrown over them and set afire. . . .

A survey of the Nanking scene made early in January when conditions had quieted down somewhat indicated 40,000 new-made graves. A member of the safety-zone committee who got out the city gate and penetrated the countryside for 20 miles did not see a single Chinese or a single farm animal. Just desolation.

The reader turns down the book with the conviction that the Japanese army, lacking a background of Christian idealism, is using western weapons with a ruthlessness and brutality which the west cannot yet envisage.