



# JAPANESE WAR CRIMES

DURING WORLD WAR II

ATROCITY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY  
OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

FRANK JACOB

# **Japanese War Crimes during World War II**

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## **Atrocity and the Psychology of Collective Violence**

**Frank Jacob**



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# Introduction

The late Iris Chang (1968–2004) wrote an important book, yet not a good one.<sup>1</sup> Like others who followed her example, she used the term “Asian Holocaust”<sup>2</sup> and thereby tried to highlight the events related to the so-called “Rape of Nanjing” or “Nanjing Massacre” in which soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army raped, tortured, and murdered Chinese civilians in the Chinese city of Nanjing in 1937 and 1938. The history and knowledge of these events, as Gayle K. Sato correctly remarked, “did not figure prominently in Asian American war memory.”<sup>3</sup> Although a comparison with the historical dimensions of the Holocaust is rather inappropriate,<sup>4</sup> Chang and later authors chose to bring greater attention to the topic. However, in pursuit of gaining this attention, Chang delivered what can be called a “controversial international bestseller”<sup>5</sup> that was more Japan bashing than a provision of profound discussion about why violence erupted in Nanjing.<sup>6</sup> The narrative served the victims and their families, who still directed their anger toward Japan as the enemy, but it did not allow readers to understand why the event occurred<sup>7</sup>; why these people became victims of the Japanese soldiers’ violence was not explained. The Japanese were claimed to be evil by nature, incapable of sympathy toward their victims and therefore deemed not as equals, but rather as dangerous enemies. Chang was correct when she claimed that “even by the standards of history’s most destructive war, the Rape of Nanking represents one of the worst instances of mass extermination.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, however, she would “condemn all Japanese people for not acknowledging the facts, even if there are parts of the modern Japanese society that do understand the meaning of the Rape of Nanking and recognize it as a Japanese war crime.”<sup>9</sup>

Nanjing was not Auschwitz. However, Jürgen Habermas emphasized that “Auschwitz has changed the basis for the continuity of the conditions of life within history,”<sup>10</sup> and this also applies to the victims of Nanjing who endured rape and torture in China under Japanese rule. Regardless of this fact, it would

not serve the Chinese survivors well to compare their own history with that of the Holocaust survivors. It does not matter if the lives shattered by war number in the thousands or in the millions—every single one deserves to be remembered, and human deaths should not become meaningless simply because more people had been killed elsewhere. Although Saul Friedländer argued that the Holocaust must be understood in its contemporary and geographical context,<sup>11</sup> the same should be done with the atrocities against the Chinese, the Koreans, and many others in East and Southeast Asia under Japanese rule.<sup>12</sup> The events of Nanjing had nearly been forgotten (especially when civil war struck China), but it is now the basis of the antipathy between the People's Republic of China and Japan, who are incapable of “fruitful or even civil dialogue” but instead possess “venom now flow[ing] at peak levels” for one another.<sup>13</sup> While the Nanjing Mausoleum is “for the Chinese what Yad Vashem is for Israelis and Jews worldwide,” the Chinese people are particularly angry about the lack of the Japanese people's courtesy to apologize for the Imperial Japanese Army's war crimes, especially because Prince Asaka Yasuhiko (1887–1981), an uncle of the Shōwa Emperor and commander of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force, had been directly involved in the events related to the Rape of Nanjing.<sup>14</sup>

Although Chang was partially right regarding the Japanese denial faction, which continues to doubt the legitimacy of the anti-Japanese claims,<sup>15</sup> other Japanese journalists and scholars have done important work to uncover the crimes of the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Pacific War (1941–1945).<sup>16</sup> Yet further discussion beyond Asia was definitely stimulated by Iris Chang's work, which is why her impact on the development of research on Japanese war crimes in general and the Rape of Nanjing in particular can be considered crucial. Yamamoto Masahiro's *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity* (2000)<sup>17</sup> answered questions and addressed the need for the discussion that had been initiated by Chang in 1997. Further studies in other parts of Asia added to the history of Japanese war crimes from specific national perspectives.<sup>18</sup> New documents were also found over the years that helped reconstruct some of the atrocities and massacres committed by the Japanese Imperial Army, whose soldiers had, to name just one example, been ordered to execute thousands of unarmed Chinese soldiers during the war.<sup>19</sup>

Naturally, one would argue that such acts are war crimes. However, to quote historian Daqing Yang, “what is considered a war crime—a prosecutable war crime, in particular—is as much a political issue as a legal one.”<sup>20</sup> For many years, the American public was not concerned about the crimes committed by Japanese soldiers between 1931 and 1945 in the Pacific theater and in parts of China. Whereas crimes against U.S. prisoners of war (POWs) were widely acknowledged in memoirs and in stories by survivors, the fate of Asian victims was of no interest to the U.S. public. When the 1990s saw a revival of interest in the crimes committed by the Japanese soldiers in the name of the early Shōwa Empire (1926–1945), it became obvious that many war criminals

had not been punished—instead, they continued to live life uncontested by criminal investigations in postwar Japan.<sup>21</sup> Even three postwar prime ministers, Hatoyama Ichirō (1883–1959), Ikeda Hayato (1899–1965), and Kishi Nobusuke (1896–1987), were guilty of war crimes, and a Class A war criminal who had been convicted during the trials in Tokyo, Shigemitsu Mamoru (1887–1957), regained his position of foreign minister in 1954. The fact that these criminals, as well as Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989), were treated so favorably by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964),<sup>22</sup> explains the anger about the lack of interest that Chang expressed in her book. U.S. military historian Edward J. Drea emphasized that

Chang's moving testament to the Chinese victims of the sack of Nanjing in 1937 graphically detailed the horror and scope of the crime and indicted the Japanese government and people for their collective amnesia about the wartime army's atrocious conduct. The bestselling book spurred a tremendous amount of renewed interest in Japanese wartime conduct in China, Korea, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific.<sup>23</sup>

It is also important to consider that the U.S. public had been informed about the atrocities in China early on when reports about the rape, killings, and executions of unarmed Chinese soldiers appeared in American newspapers and when returning missionaries and other eyewitnesses reported their experiences in the war zone.

However, the events faded away from public view, and something specific caused Japan's lack of interest in critically dealing with its own past; in contrast to Germany, whose authorities took responsibility to express guilt for its crimes against peace and humanity between 1933 and 1945, the Japanese government rejected and downplayed such a responsibility.<sup>24</sup> An official apology was never granted, and the history textbook controversy<sup>25</sup> and the non-depiction of war crimes at the Yasukuni Shrine museum in Tokyo<sup>26</sup> caused anger in Asia. If there were any official or nonofficial comments about the Japanese military's war crimes, they usually insisted that the numbers stated in the accusations were exaggerated. Deniers continue to have a strong lobby in Japan, and the government seems to have backed such voices thus far. The number of people actually brought to trial in Japan is also rather low; although 28 Class A war criminals had been brought to trial during the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal between May 1946 and November 1948—to be accused of crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, eventually reaching 25 convictions—the imprisoned war criminals were released in 1956, and most of the Japanese perpetrators never saw the inside of a courtroom and continued their lives as if nothing had happened. There was never a large-scale prosecution of former war criminals in Japan, and too many went on to pursue careers in the political and economic sectors. However, the Allied

Powers held trials in 49 locations in Asia between October 1945 and April 1956. Britain prosecuted the Japanese war criminals who had been involved in planning and constructing the Thai-Burma Railway due to which many British POWs died, and Australian prosecutors tried Japanese war criminals at several locations as well. Dutch judges tried Japanese people who were responsible for war crimes in the Dutch East Indies during the war, and the Soviet Union brought former members of the Biological Warfare Unit 731 to trial at Khabarovsk in 1949.<sup>27</sup> In total, only 5,379 Japanese war criminals were tried, 4,300 of whom were convicted (almost 1,000 with death penalties).<sup>28</sup> Considering the number of atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army between 1931 and 1945, far too few people were tried after the war, and the longer it took to arouse public interest in the crimes, the easier it was for those guilty of murder, rape, and torture to disappear forever to lead a normal life. Additionally, most of them got away because documents that could have proven their guilt were destroyed before U.S. forces could reach Japanese soil.

From when a ceasefire was announced on August 15, 1945, until August 28, 1945—when the first American troops arrived in Japan—the Japanese military and civil authorities invested a large amount of work in destroying compromising archival materials, especially those related to the war years between 1942 and 1945. Field units were ordered to burn materials that would have provided evidence of violence and torture against POWs, among other things. It is estimated that 70 percent of the existing sources were destroyed in these two weeks,<sup>29</sup> leaving behind a gap in history that can never be filled again and providing former war criminals with a chance to lead ordinary lives. Regardless of this intense purge of Japan's official documentation of the war, the U.S. military was still able to collect more than 350,000 documents related to the war and the crimes committed during it.<sup>30</sup> Although most historians today agree that the vast majority of the documents that could have incriminated more Japanese war criminals were destroyed due to orders from the military command during the aforementioned 13-day period,<sup>31</sup> the remaining ones provide a glimpse of the cruelties that dominated the war in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Once the Allied Powers had concluded the trials, interest in Japanese war crimes faded quickly, as the Cold War demanded new allies in the region against the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Because Japan became important again, the harsh prosecution of war criminals might have complicated the new alliance against communism.

In Japan itself, the situation remained dominated by right-wing powers. When in 1957 a group of returning veterans, who had spent years in a Chinese prison, published their own first-person accounts of war crimes<sup>32</sup> that had been committed in China during the war, it generated great interest. However, a reprint of the book, whose first edition sold out within three weeks,

was prevented due to political pressure. It took almost four decades until historians actively began to do research related to the issue when the Japan Center for Research on War Responsibility (Nihon sensō sekinin shiryō senta) was established in 1993 and began to publish the quarterly journal *Research in War Responsibility* (Sensō sekinin kenkyū). In a way, this followed the lead of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, whose members had established a quarterly journal in *Studies of the War of Resistance against Japan* (Kang-Ri zhanzheng yanjiu) in 1991 that also often addressed the issue of Japanese war crimes. In the years that followed, Chinese Americans and Korean Americans played a vital role in arousing public interest in specific issues related to Japanese war crimes (e.g., the so-called comfort women issue).<sup>33</sup> Japan's biological warfare program, usually referred to as Unit 731, also caused interest and further research since the early 1990s when the first document collection related to the work of this unit was published in Japanese.<sup>34</sup>

Works published on Japanese war crimes usually tend to cover four specific areas<sup>35</sup>:

1. Japanese war crimes in general
2. Violence and torture against POWs and civilian work forces
3. The Japanese biological warfare program known as Unit 731
4. Forced prostitution and the so-called comfort women system

Single events, such as the massacre of 100,000 Filipinos during the Battle of Manila in early 1945, have also attracted interest.<sup>36</sup> However, the greatest number of English books was probably written on the treatment of Allied POWs, which were stimulated by the first-person eyewitness accounts by many American soldiers and sailors who had survived mistreatment in such prison camps. The issue naturally aroused public interest, especially since 27 percent of American and British POWs died in Japanese captivity, in contrast to the 4 percent death rate of POWs in German and Italian camps.<sup>37</sup> The event most familiar to American readers related to the mistreatment of U.S. POWs is the Bataan Death March, during which up to 2,000 American and up to 16,500 Filipino prisoners lost their lives after the surrender of Bataan on April 10, 1942.<sup>38</sup> Another POW-related case is the building of the Burma-Thailand Railway, which entered common memory through cinema and remained alive through the images in David Lean's film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). Thousands of POWs and Asian people who were forced to work on the railway died in the jungles of Burma and Thailand under the yelling and beating of their Japanese supervisors.<sup>39</sup> Many POWs (ca. 30,000) were also transported to Japan, where they were used as workers in mines and factories alike. To reach Japan, they had to cross the ocean on so-called "hell ships," which were unmarked and very often sunk by submarines under

Allied command who were unaware the ships carried their own troops. Ten percent of these POWs—3,526, to be exact—died before the war ended; they drowned at sea, starved, or were beaten to death while being exploited by Japanese companies.<sup>40</sup>

The treatment of POWs by the Japanese soldiers was extreme and surprising to many, because Japan was considered to have set an example of how to treat POWs, especially during the first conflicts of the 20th century such as the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and the First World War (1914–1918).<sup>41</sup> Even harsher, however, was the treatment of Asian civilians who were also regularly exploited by Japanese troops. Estimations list up to half a million Southeast Asian people being mobilized for Japanese construction projects, due to which many of them died a horrible death amidst the whips and insults of the soldiers who supervised and mistreated them in the name of the emperor.<sup>42</sup> To name another example, Chinese laborers were also forced to work in Japan; nearly a quarter of them died by the end of the war.<sup>43</sup> Japanese officials, however, claim that these people were recruits who had voluntarily decided to serve in Japan. The same argument was used in addressing the claims of former sex slaves, the so-called “comfort women” who were forced into prostitution by the Japanese army. Although the list of war crimes could be continued here, the issue of comfort women shall be discussed briefly.<sup>44</sup>

American scholar Ustinia Dolgopol was right when she emphasized that “[t]he history of the comfort women is the story of voices being denied and suppressed,”<sup>45</sup> as for years nobody would follow the leads that would have demanded attention on the issue. When the first survivors testified, the Japanese government ignored the truth of their accounts. While the Japanese Embassy in South Korea has “acknowledged the comfort women issue and extended official apologies on many important occasions,” the survivors themselves “reject such statements on the grounds that these gestures were short in both legitimacy and reparations.”<sup>46</sup> The matter of a formal Japanese apology to former “comfort women” (*ianfu*) is a “hot-button issue in the Far East,”<sup>47</sup> regularly causing tension between China and Korea on one side and Japan on the other. The problem involves not only the issue of a formal apology, but is also affected by memory policies and nationalism within the three countries involved. When former comfort women testified before the U.S. Congress in 1996 demanding that the American government put pressure on Japan to acknowledge the Japanese army’s responsibility in forcing young Korean and Chinese women into prostitution, the issue became global and has remained so ever since.<sup>48</sup> Of course, the fact that up to 200,000 women were forced to be prostitutes—being sexually abused, beaten, and even killed by Japanese soldiers—is an issue that causes tension, especially because Japan tends to neglect the matter without accepting guilt about its military plans to establish the comfort system since the early 1930s. Women and girls were

“kidnapped, enslaved, tortured, and brutally raped,”<sup>49</sup> and if they survived, they were simply forgotten. Although Prime Minister Abe Shinzō expressed his sympathies and apologized for the situation these women were in, a formal apology that acknowledged Japan’s responsibility is still lacking.<sup>50</sup> The prime minister even denied the coercion by the Japanese military in 2007. In his claims, as Hayashi Hirofumi remarked, he “was supported by more than a few politicians, and his opinion may be viewed as a reflection of the nationalistic atmosphere of Japanese society.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, Abe leads a faction in Japanese politics that is interested in reversing the research done so far for the sake of reestablishing Japan’s honor, which is why members of the group around the prime minister claim that “the Nanjing Massacre was fabricated, that comfort women were regular prostitutes rather than victims of war crimes, and that Japan did not act aggressively”<sup>52</sup> during the Second World War. Neo-nationalists like Katō Norihiro argue that the “distortions” that exist within Japan’s postwar society make a sincere apology impossible.<sup>53</sup> He claimed that significant problems have been left out of the discussion in postwar Japan, especially the Japanese war dead. In addition to such revisionist arguments, those Japanese who were born after 1945 have to decide “what kind of opinions they should have about the wartime atrocities Japanese committed against other Asians.”<sup>54</sup> To achieve such a decision, the research results related to Japanese war crimes would have to be broadly communicated within Japan’s society, an approach that is regularly sabotaged by revisionist interest groups, and Japanese scholars who are truly interested in shedding light on the cruelties of the past are sometimes better known outside Japan than in their home country.

The situation is also complicated by the fact that the victim narrative is affected by existing nationalism in countries where survivors tend to be politically instrumentalized.<sup>55</sup> When the prosecution of Nazi crimes took place, the prosecutors were accused of being either too eager or too slack; the penalties were either too harsh or too soft.<sup>56</sup> Although the trials reflect a certain “good will,”<sup>57</sup> this sentiment seems to be lacking in Japan, where a war crime trial was never initiated without pressure from a foreign power. Moreover, the general population detests identifying with the perpetrators, so closely examining the past might cause people inconvenience and lead to unpleasant questions about one’s individual or familial roles during those dark times.<sup>58</sup> Regarding such atrocities and war crimes, witnesses cannot adopt a neutral approach lest their accounts lose power; as with the Japanese, if there are no documents to back up their reports, witnesses themselves will be accused as liars.<sup>59</sup> Herein lies another problem: many of the perpetrators remain anonymous and will probably never be brought to justice. It thus seems more important to understand how it became possible for “ordinary men” to be so violent against women forced into sex slavery, POWs, and civilians.

First of all, violence is still present in modern societies even if we tend to believe that so-called postmodern nation-states have been able to overcome violence simply because war has not affected them in the last seven decades.<sup>60</sup> As Steven Pinker highlighted, violence is of interest to anyone who seeks to learn about human nature.<sup>61</sup> Although he also argues that we must take a closer look at the numbers to see if violence is increasing or decreasing, he makes it clear that all suffering, whether it affects one person or many, deserves our sympathy.<sup>62</sup> It consequently seems redundant to discuss numbers and dates; it is far more important to discuss violence itself, especially because the history of war is the history of organized violence meant to kill.<sup>63</sup> War itself is often considered a form of ordered, organized, and collective violence that re-establishes a space-time continuum and creates a struggle for its control.<sup>64</sup> Within a specific space-time continuum, however, violence can also take a form that is no longer bound by existing law and order and thus become indefinite. The possibility of otherwise criminal acts having no punishment in war creates a new space-time continuum that imposes no limitations on the violence used within it. Consequently, war also creates specific group identities: soldiers, men, Japanese people, etc. Such group identities are often dichotomous among existing enemy groups and often seek to violently extinguish each other.

Of course, we must accept that no theoretical approach toward violence can explain its complexity,<sup>65</sup> but it is important to understand the processes that enable the acts of common soldiers and ordinary men within conflict. The question of why they act so violently can then be at least partially answered and help prevent similar violent scenarios in the future. People in general seem to have three options during a violent conflict such as war: they can try to escape, they can suffer, or they can participate.<sup>66</sup> Noncombatants are the victims in such circumstances because they may not be able to escape war and be doomed to suffer; this has been the case in many past wars, and it will most likely be in the future as well. The question that remains, however, is about the atrocities and cruelties that some wars are particularly well known for. The Rape of Nanjing, to name just one example, stands out because its violence was so indefinite that it exceeded all known and usually accepted limits of violence, despite the conflict being part of a war. The German sociologist Trutz von Trotha (1946–2013) connected levels of extreme violence or cruelty to the social preconditions of the perpetrators when he stated that

[c]ruelty is a mirror of the living conditions and achievements of a society. It appears to be as old as humanity itself and crosses societal and cultural boundaries. No society can say that it does not allow cruelty to exist, even if societies differ to an extreme in the amount of space they give to cruelty and which forms are practiced in these particular spaces.<sup>67</sup>

It is therefore society that creates the potential for violent eruptions in a newly established space-time continuum by planting the seeds of cruelty—chauvinism, prejudice, racism, or other ideological beliefs—into its members. In addition to that, acts are usually based on certain emotional conditions, which are usually also dictated by a society's narrative, for example, about its enemies who supposedly only deserve to be hated, degraded, and tortured.<sup>68</sup> The self-identity of the perpetrator, as a member of a specific society that bases its beliefs on the aforementioned negative factors, allows him or her to act violently against nongroup members, particularly in a space-time continuum that is molded by war.

Violence, being an extremely complex phenomenon, is often the expression of all those factors combined.<sup>69</sup> In addition, it can not only lead to danger, but also become a plausible way for human beings to act, which is why regulating violence must be a precondition for the peaceful coexistence of different human identity groups. Democratic states usually prevent violence because it is monopolized and controlled by the state.<sup>70</sup> Particularly in a reshaped space-time continuum in a war zone, limitations disappear, narratives for legitimization are overemphasized, and eventually violence grows to have no purpose beyond its own sake. For the perpetrators, ideologies and cultural factors—including existing military culture—can be decisive for the use of violence.<sup>71</sup> For the war in Asia from 1937 to 1945, historian John W. Dower emphasizes that “considerations of race and power are inseparable” and that “governments on all sides presented the conflict as a holy war for national survival and glory, a mission to defend and propagate the finest values of their state and culture.”<sup>72</sup> The participating combatants considered the war to be a “race war,” and the level of violence was most likely “fueled by racial pride, arrogance, and rage on many sides.”<sup>73</sup> Yet one cannot solely explain the perpetrators' acts with racism, especially because, to quote Alan Kramer, “compliance of perpetrators with orders to carry out genocidal acts was founded in a range of motivations.”<sup>74</sup> We should therefore not forget that “sheer pleasure in danger-free killing” might also have played an important role in the cruelties that were committed in the specific war zone.<sup>75</sup> It is always shocking to find out that those who are engaged in such unthinkable acts are quite ordinary,<sup>76</sup> and as such, it is important to understand how violence was made possible in a specific space-time continuum without using the nationality of the perpetrator as an explanatory factor. Violence does not know any nationality, much like the suffering of the victims knows no nationality and should be grieved without national limitations.

Memories of genocidal acts always lie with those who survived war; as Lawrence Langer put it, a “remnant of a ruined past.”<sup>77</sup> After the violence ends, a struggle for the power to dictate memory of the events begins and “for the perpetrators and their apologists, the incomplete erasure of their

deeds must be followed by a redefinition of their meaning, lest the memory of the victims monopolize the narrative of the past.<sup>78</sup> It is thus difficult for many victims to come forward with their own witness accounts, especially because many of them would rather forget what had happened to them during the war. Holocaust survivor Heda Kovály (1919–2010) described the process of remembering as follows:

I do not want to write. I do not want to remember. My memories are not simple recollections. They are a return to the bottom of an abyss; I have to gather up the shattered bones that have lain still for so long, climb back over the crags, and tumble in once more. Only this time I have to do it deliberately, in slow motion, noticing and examining each wound, each bruise on the way, most of all the ones of which I was least conscious in my first headlong fall.<sup>79</sup>

Lawrence Langer also further emphasized the problem of the memory of those who perished for those who survived; victims are frustrated by their “efforts to see survival as a simple chronology of returning from an abnormal to a normal world. Without denying the reality or the significance of [a] present life, [they insist] on the discontinuity between it and [the] past, an unresolved and . . . unresolvable stress that nurtures anxiety.”<sup>80</sup>

However, there is another problem regarding memories of cruelty and atrocity in war and genocide. Primo Levi (1919–1987) emphasized that “[reality] slides fatally towards simplification and stereotype, a trend against which I would like to erect here a dike. . . . It is the task of the historian to bridge this gap, which widens as we get farther away from the events under examination.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, it must be the historian’s task to better understand not only what happened, but how it happened. It is not important to consider the nationalities of the victims or perpetrators beyond the specific national factors that might play a role in the violence involved. However, it is unproductive to establish a ranking of violent nationalities. The Japanese are not inherently more violent than the Germans or the Americans. What must be established is a set of factors that would possibly increase violence in a specific space-time continuum and then to prove if in such a continuum the predetermined factors existed or not. The memories of the perpetrators and victims alike are of importance, even if I would argue that none of them can provide the truth behind the events.

It is the “historian’s very stock in trade”<sup>82</sup> to remember the past, but memories are often far away from the past itself. Although testimonies about the Holocaust, Nanjing, the comfort women system or any other form of genocidal violence are considered “acts of resistance in the face of the systematic destruction of a whole people, tradition and culture,”<sup>83</sup> they must be treated carefully when examined by the historian. As Levi convincingly argued, “We

also tend to simplify history; but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single, unequivocal fashion, and therefore different historians may understand and construe history in ways that are incompatible with one another.<sup>84</sup> Prisoners or victims of a totalitarian and violent system, Levi continued, are forced to very often admit a co-perpetrator status within the system of a POW camp, a concentration camp, or a destruction camp: a *lager* or a camp “on a smaller scale but with amplified characteristics reproduced the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state, in which all power is invested from above and control from below is almost impossible.”<sup>85</sup> The victims are eventually even further victimized upon accepting their statuses as those who existed within a system of torture and violence: “We [the perpetrators, F.J.] have embraced you [the victims, F.J.], corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together.”<sup>86</sup> Another thing that is important in the historian’s perspective is that we will never be able to reconstruct all the victims’ suffering: “There is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused: a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows. Perhaps it is necessary that it can be so. If we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live.”<sup>87</sup> Although Levi eventually emphasized that “one is never in another’s place [and e]ach individual is so complex that there is no point in trying to foresee his behavior, all the more so in extreme situations; nor is it possible to foresee one’s own behavior,”<sup>88</sup> historians should try to deal with the past to determine the factors that could, but not necessarily coercively, lead to greater eruptions of violence in war.

Even for a substantial number of sadistic perpetrators who enjoyed killing victims in the cruelest ways possible, there were always “unexpected acts of humanity,”<sup>89</sup> although they were rather rare. Those who have survived genocide will usually become part of a “victims’ culture,”<sup>90</sup> but how much it is accepted by following generations depends on the society at hand. There is, however, also the danger of abusing such a “victims’ culture” for political instrumentalization. The same could be done with a “perpetrator culture” that would be based on a specific nationality and used as a tool of reprimand within an existing political struggle. When China, Korea, and Japan struggle more than 70 years after the Second World War about the interpretation of the past—rather than agree to prevent similar forms of violence—it emphasizes how bad the overemphasis of specific memory-narratives (particularly that of victim vs. the perpetrator) can be in political struggles. That said, many perpetrators choose to remain silent instead of confessing their sins against humanity and are often unknown.<sup>91</sup> Usually, former perpetrators avoid being accountable and instead blame the political system or their own group

dynamics for what happened. They may not even discuss guilt per se, which usually leads to conflicts among families if members of the following generations ask about their parents' roles during the war.<sup>92</sup>

As such, it is dangerous to leave out the perpetrators' perspectives when discussing violence. When public memory only focuses on victims of a given tragedy, it detaches the events from the perpetrators; this distance can become solidified in history and create a self-image that is less problematic and morally superior.<sup>93</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that violence committed by one's own identity group is considered legal, whereas that of others is considered cruel and despicable.<sup>94</sup> Hannah Arendt, however, made it clear that intellect does not protect us from crime.<sup>95</sup> She continued her theoretical discussion of pure evil by emphasizing that unlimited and extreme evil is only possible when limitations to such evil are nonexistent.<sup>96</sup> It is particularly the loss of the self within a group identity, which is determined by the society to be violent against another group identity, that is supposed to be a legitimate victim of violence that creates the pure evil. This pure evil eventually becomes so endemic in a specifically created space-time continuum that it is considered normal, even banal.<sup>97</sup> Simply put, "What somebody does relies upon who somebody is."<sup>98</sup> The present book's goal is to find out who the Japanese perpetrators were and what specific space-time continuum allowed them to be as violent as they were. The aim is therefore not to write an apologetic account; what the Japanese soldiers did was horrible, and so, too, is it horrible that the Japanese government cannot express guilt for the past. Yet it would help to understand how such cruelties come into existence and condemn them in the future.

The first chapter will continue the discussion about violence and perpetrators and form a theoretical framework for the discussion about Japanese war crimes related to these categories. Chapter 2 will analyze the space-time continuum of the Rape of Nanjing to find out what triggered the immense eruption of violence in late 1937 and early 1938. After that, another theoretical chapter will deal with sociobiological theories on rape before the fourth chapter discusses the sexual abuse of the "comfort women" to see how victim-perpetrator identities affected the cruel sexual exploitation of so many young women in Asia.

Chapter 5 will analyze the Bataan Death March and the interrelationship between the specific group identities of the Japanese soldiers and the American and Filipino POWs. The subsequent chapter will continue this analysis about the POW camps by the Japanese and the building of the Burma-Thailand Railway. The last chapter will then deal with the war crimes related to Unit 731 and the Japanese Biological Warfare Program that caused several plagues to spread in China, exploiting mostly Chinese human beings as guinea pigs in deadly experiments. All of the named chapters will deal with extremely cruel human behavior, and it is not easy to explain why human beings could

act in the ways described. However, it must be emphasized that every one of us, including me and you, would be capable of doing the same under the appropriate circumstances. Nobody possesses an exclusive right to be violent. Every human being can be as violent as the Japanese soldiers tended to be in Nanjing, at Bataan, at the comfort stations, and beyond. We must be extremely careful in understanding how violence works to actively prevent it from spreading again; the present book is just a minor step in achieving that, but it seeks to further explain and elaborate on the “how and why” of extreme violence during the wars in East and Southeast Asia between 1937 and 1945.

# On Violence and Perpetrators

Before dealing with the specific dimensions of Japanese war crimes, it is important to further analyze the theoretical aspects of violence, the perspectives of perpetrators, and how the likelihood of violent behavior in war increases. This analysis will serve as a precondition for a better understanding of violence, a factor of history that Hannah Arendt called a phenomenon of human action.<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) defined violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.”<sup>2</sup> However, when discussing violence, we must understand—as American psychologists Robin R. Vallacher and Christopher Brooks have emphasized—that violence “is not considered an end-state or a goal but rather a readily available means by which higher-order concerns can be redressed or goals can be achieved.”<sup>3</sup> In human historical records, violence has always been used at the individual, group, or even state levels to achieve specific aims. Consequently, voluntary, planned, or direct violence, as well as involuntary, affective, and indirect violence, has been used as tools for one’s own or society’s advantage. Arendt highlighted the importance of violence within this historical process when she stated that “no one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs; and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration.”<sup>4</sup> Arendt even went a step further and declared violence to be the “midwife of history,” but also a force that “creates history as less as the midwife creates the child.”<sup>5</sup> Whenever the individual or societal interests lead to a dichotomy, the danger of violent outbreaks increases; much like power, strength, and authority, violence is a tool to dominate others.<sup>6</sup>

German historian Karl Heinz Metz, who wrote *History of Violence (Geschichte der Gewalt)*, came to a similar evaluation of violence in relation to human existence and its history:

In history there is always violence—and always the longing for peace. The question about violence is probably the seminal question of the human being. From violence all religion and all politics evolve: Religion as the attempt of a symbolic answer to the question, why humans are not able to abolish violence, politics as the attempt to practically overcome violence by rule, which might tame it. And yet, violence never disappears, neither in the state, which cannot secure inner peace without the threat of violence, and which often uses excessive violence, as war, towards its external, nor in religion, which also becomes violent against heretics and pagans, as soon as religion begins to wish to order society after its own values.<sup>7</sup>

Evidently, violence is always “instrumental by its nature”<sup>8</sup> and usually needs a purpose to be used. Because violence is a tool used to achieve goals, it requires justification.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, violence is a form of social action, which can be omnipresent and contingent at the same time. There has never been a society without violence, and it is likely that humanity will never be able to fully abolish violence.<sup>10</sup> Even postmodern societies that often claim to have achieved this status will never exist without it, if one is to believe the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017).<sup>11</sup> In any society, violence is usually not an “ontological or pre-social category, but a normative, moral, and ethical one.”<sup>12</sup> Violence must also be defined by existing social norms, meaning that what is perceived as violent depends on the “specific chronological, social, and cultural condition and order.”<sup>13</sup> What is individually and collectively considered violent depends on developmental processes that determine and reconfigure the social order and its understanding or categorization of violence. Sociologist and director of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, Wolfgang Knöbl, warned against analyzing violence with “totally new methodological and theoretical approaches,” as they are “neither helpful nor necessary.”<sup>14</sup> Instead of making violence seem exotic and far-removed, which enables the Western perspective of having “outlived” it, examining violence closely may help people understand its probable endlessness. To analyze violence and its occurrences within specific time periods, its geographical and sociocultural contexts and the number of active players within it can be used to both characterize and comparatively analyze violence.<sup>15</sup>

Forms of violence are usually standardized by social norms; that is, society determines what is allowed and what is not, but these norms are changeable

based on redefinitions of socially accepted values or limitations. Violence, however, can never cease to exist, as it provides “an always existing possible course of action for human beings and is therefore always at least present as a menace.”<sup>16</sup> As such, violence is a likely expression of specific human emotions—no more, no less. It is “nothing uncommon.”<sup>17</sup> Excluding ordered violence or genocide during war, violence is usually not planned in the long term. Instead, everyday perpetrators unthinkingly use violence to achieve ends driven by anger or hate. However, if a perpetrator develops a positive emotional perception of using violence, it becomes self-serving and goes beyond specific emotions, and, as such, becomes purposeless. The use of violence for its own sake becomes something else: cruelty.<sup>18</sup> One must emphasize that in this context, violence is seldom rational and cannot be explained following rational categories and rules.<sup>19</sup>

The desire or impulse to be violent is often contained by existing social norms; as such, motives need not fuel violence, and motive alone cannot fully explain violence. In most cases, violence is not premeditated, as it usually arises from specific interactions between human beings—perpetrators and victims, to be more precise—that determine if and to what extent violence is used.<sup>20</sup> Historians and social scientists refer to assailants’ motives to explain violence, but they often realize that motives are frequently constructs to explain acts after the fact and do not explain the true root of the violence in question.<sup>21</sup> For example, murderers might try to legitimize their actions by formulating motives such as self-defense. Because soldiers kill as part of their professions, their jobs can be considered their motives. To name one possible narrative, this form of “work” can be legitimized by war itself or by self-defense against enemies during war. That also means that postact narratives may be fabrications that cannot fully explain acts, and as American sociologist Jack Katz put it, “If research subjects can reliably report why they do the things we want to understand, who would need us?”<sup>22</sup> The “why” of certain acts can therefore only be partially reconstructed; yet if we compare different scenarios of actual violent eruptions (e.g., by soldiers) to develop a palette of factors that reappear whenever violence occurs, we might narrow down possible violence-stimulating parameters to better understand in which situations violence is most likely to manifest. Although motives can be any one of such parameters, they alone do not create perpetrators. To put it simply, those who hate their neighbors are not often violent against them by default, even if they would like to be. To legitimize violence, a space-time continuum must exist that allows people to be violent without fearing legal consequences. War is such a space-time continuum in which law and order are reshaped and the use of violence is sanctioned as a tool to wage and eventually win the conflict at hand.

## Violence in War

During a war, violence is legal to kill the enemy; because it is only considered excessive if it is deemed illegitimate, violence is as normal as it can be in the context of war.<sup>23</sup> War itself is based on organized violence and a space-time continuum in which killing and dying are essential. Destruction is the purpose of war, and killing the enemy without being killed is the task. Violence is therefore functional in war, and as discussed earlier, it becomes legitimate for securing victory and/or self-defense.<sup>24</sup> Yet there are two perspectives on this form of violence; soldiers' and society's views on their own cohort's use of violence is often positivistic, whereas the "other's" use of violence is condemned as cruel, excessive, and illegitimate.<sup>25</sup> Especially in colonial armies, the use of violence against an "inferior" enemy (a narrative similar to that used by the Japanese Imperial Army fighting against Chinese troops) caused no conscious issues for soldiers. In expansive or pacifying wars in the colonial era, the use of brute force almost became a military habitus.<sup>26</sup> Guerilla warfare tends to arise in such a circumstance and is chosen to fight a superior force. It blurs the line between civilians and combatants, leading to extreme forms of violence against those who, in the soldier's minds, may or may not be enemies.<sup>27</sup>

If we consider the Japanese army's war in China as a form of colonial conflict, we must take these preconditions into consideration to better understand the violent eruptions in the region (e.g., in Nanjing). The paranoid fear of guerilla fighters, which were unidentifiable to the Japanese, might have led to a preventive form of violence against those whom the soldiers perceived as dangerous enemies. However, the specific space-time continuum involving the Rape of Nanjing will be discussed in detail later. Colonial wars also paint enemies as they are portrayed in stereotypical colonial narratives. Furthermore, if professional translators are unavailable to solve language barriers between soldiers and civilians, then violence may result from miscommunication. Another factor that can stimulate violence is the geographical distance between soldiers and legal jurisdictions; the farther away a war takes place from home, the less control the state seems to have, which is why conflicts in colonial environments tend to follow different rules.<sup>28</sup> German historian Susanne Kuss explains forms of violence in colonial conflicts by analyzing the following aspects:

1. geographical setting;
2. cultural geography;
3. local protagonists;
4. foreign protagonist groups;

5. aims and purpose of the conflict, and
6. the friction between military plans and reality.<sup>29</sup>

In the case of the Japanese Imperial Army and the violence committed in the specific colonial contexts of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War, the factors of the specific conflicts are:

1. China and Southeast Asia
2. Non-Japanese civilians
3. Local soldiers and cooperative natives, as well as resistant natives (e.g., guerrilla fighters)
4. Japanese soldiers and foreign (American, British, Dutch, etc.) soldiers
5. The extension of the Japanese empire, ideologically to free Asia from white colonialism
6. Japanese expectations of swift victories not correlating with military realities

To better understand the violence that may occur in such conflicts, Susanne Kuss also recommends considering the following aspects related to assailants:

1. the motivation of the soldiers;
2. military training and armament;
3. the image of the enemy and ideological disposition;
4. the space and the existing enemy;
5. the existence of diseases or wounds;
6. the perception of the enemy's reason to resist colonial rule; and
7. the legitimizing narratives for your own acts.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of the Japanese soldiers who committed atrocities in China and other regions of Southeast Asia, these aspects would be:

1. Serving the Japanese empire and the Tennō
2. Violent military training
3. A sense of Japanese superiority
4. Foreign environments and fear of an invisible enemy
5. Venereal diseases and other war-related diseases
6. The Chinese or other enemies' resistance being considered unreasonable
7. Racism, jingoism, and chauvinism as narratives that legitimize Japanese actions