

Track C: War
Case Study 7: Week 9
The Different Nature of the 1937 Invasion of Nanking

After Japan invaded Nanking in 1937, it was able to maintain a hold over China through its political power and total destruction. This presented a new form of imperialism, unlike the Western examples of colonialism seen in the past which relied on mercantilism. Through this invasion, Japan betrayed the Pan-Asian interests and emerged as a new imperialist power on the global stage.



The Japanese imperialism that emerged in China after the Nanking disaster was primarily destructive in nature. Unlike the Western forms of colonization that we have seen in previous years, which co-opted the colonized land's people, existing governments, and natural resources for economic profit,

the Japanese aimed to completely eradicate the Chinese people. This was likely due to racism and a sense of cultural superiority. According to a diary entry written by John Rabe, a German businessman living in China during the Japanese invasion, Japanese soldiers looted the shops in Nanking, causing irreparable destruction to the city's property and economy. Soldiers also dragged people out of their homes and even went so far as bombing, pillaging, raping, and murdering within the established safe zone. The aftermath was horrific, with dead bodies littering the streets of Nanking (Rabe).¹ An article written by Frank Durdin for The New York

¹ John Rabe, *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*. Edited by Erwin Wickert (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998), pages 50–51

Times elaborates on the atrocities that took place in Nanking, revealing that Japanese soldiers killed anyone who came across their path, including civilians with no connection to the army. Hundreds of war prisoners were rounded up and executed in masses (Durdin)². This demonstration of “total war” was an early characterization of Japanese imperialism in China going forward.

Another example of the nature of Japanese occupation of Nanking and other Chinese lands is through political nature. First, as can be seen through Source 1³ and Source 2⁴, the brutality Japanese troops used against Chinese and even foreigners such as a German owned bakery and the American Mr. Sone is visible. Although these events have been analyzed as an example of the destructive nature of the Japanese, these events also show that the Japanese are not a country to be reckoned with, with the Japanese wanting to be seen as equal in capability to the Western powers, not another land that can be occupied by Western powers.



The Germans, British, Americans, French, and Russians each had overseas territories, and in order to compete with these nations, the Japanese would also need territories, furnishing new ideas in Japan. In addition, this was also a demonstration of force against

international standards and against Western bureaucracy that was prevalent for centuries prior. However, the political nature of these actions is not only present in Japan, but also within China itself. As can be seen in Source 3, the Chinese resistance was not all one common group. Mao

² Frank Tillman Durdin, "All Captives Slain," The New York Times, December 18, 1937, pages 1, 10.

³ John Rabe, The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe. Edited by Erwin Wickert (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998), pages 50–51

⁴ Frank Tillman Durdin, "All Captives Slain," The New York Times, December 18, 1937, pages 1, 10.

Tse-tung was one of the figureheads of China's Communist Party.⁵ However, there were people in China who aligned with the KMT, as said in Source 3.⁶ Although these entities believed in different ideologies on how to govern, the Japanese invasion temporarily called for a truce and alliance in order to unite and fight against a common enemy. This is more significant given the fact that Mao wrote this 2 years before the Nanking massacre. However, by this point, the Japanese had invaded and installed a puppet government in Manchuria, and this fact can further reinforce the importance of setting their differences aside temporarily and fighting against a common enemy. If not, the might of the Japanese would easily defeat two, disjoint Chinese resistance groups. This however, has further political implications, because it begs to ask, if the Japanese were defeated, how would the political landscape of China evolve in the postwar years.

Although the destructive and political nature of the Japanese imperialism in China are separated above, they are really intertwined. The destructive nature shown through Japanese expansion created a scenario in China where multiple, conflicting ideologies had to set aside major differences to fight and claim land back from a common enemy, creating this political nature both in China and in Japan.

Sources:

- Frank Tillman Durdin, "All Captives Slain," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1937, pages 1, 10.
- John Rabe, *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*. Edited by Erwin Wickert (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998), pages 50–51.
- Mao Tse-tung, "On Tactics Against Japanese Imperialism, December 27, 1935," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. 1*. (Links to an external site.) (Peking: Foreign Languages Press).
- ThoughtCo. 2021. *Japan Carries Out the Rape of Nanking, 1937*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.thoughtco.com/the-nanking-massacre-1937-195803>> [Accessed 13 November 2021].

⁵ Mao Tse-tung, "On Tactics Against Japanese Imperialism, December 27, 1935," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. 1*. (Links to an external site.) (Peking: Foreign Languages Press).

⁶ Mao Tse-tung, "On Tactics Against Japanese Imperialism, December 27, 1935," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. 1*. (Links to an external site.) (Peking: Foreign Languages Press).

- "Nanjing Massacre." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2 Nov. 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanjing_Massacre.