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Cover -- NANKING -- Contents -- Illustrations -- MAPS -- CHARTS -- Acknowledgments -- Abbreviations -- Introduction -- NOTES -- 1 What Causes War Atrocities: A Historical Analysis -- HISTORY OF WAR ATROCITIES -- From Ancient Time to Napoleonic Wars -- 19th Century -- Hague Convention and World War I -- ATROCITIES IN ASIA -- Chinese Military Conduct through the 19th Century -- Japanese Military Conduct through the 19th Century -- Massacre at Port Arthur -- NOTES -- 2 The Battle of Shanghai and the Prelude to Nanking -- THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND SINO-JAPANESE WAR AND THE BATTLE OF SHANGHAI -- JAPANESE ARMY'S MARCH TO NANKING -- FALL OF NANKING -- NOTES -- 3 Nanking: Analysis of Military Actions and Number of Victims -- CASUALTIES FOR WHICH THE CHINESE FORCES WERE RESPONSIBLE -- COMBAT CASUALTIES -- EXECUTION OF PLAINCLOTHES SOLDIERS, POWS, AND MEN OF CONSCRIPTION AGE -- Cases of the SEF: Mass Surrenders and Mass Executions -- Cases of Tenth Army: Sporadic Killings -- TOTAL NUMBER OF VICTIMS -- NOTES -- 4 Nanking: Analysis of Individually Committed Crimes and Nature of Atrocities -- CRIMES INDIVIDUALLY COMMITTED -- Murder -- Disorder and Looting -- Incendiarism -- Rape -- NATURE AND CAUSES OF ATROCITIES IN NANKING -- Execution of Plainclothes Soldiers, POWs, and Men of Conscription Age -- Crimes Individually Committed -- Historical Analysis -- NOTES -- 5 Aftermath and Reaction until 1945 -- JAPAN -- CHINA -- THE WEST (ESPECIALLY THE UNITED STATES) -- NOTES -- 6 War Crimes Trials -- CHINESE PREPARATIONS FOR WAR CRIMES TRIALS -- TRIAL OF TANI HISAO -- TRIAL OF THREE OFFICERS-MUKAI, NODA, AND TANAKA -- TOKYO WAR CRIMES TRIAL -- The Prosecution's Case -- The Case for the Defense -- The Verdict -- The Origins of Controversy -- NOTES -- 7 Sounds of Controversy -- START AND RENEWAL OF CONTROVERSY -- CRITICAL REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF REVISIONIST VIEWS. CRITICAL REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONALIST VIEWS -- THE EMERGENCE OF CENTRIST VIEWS AND THE BALANCE SHEET OF THE DEBATE -- RECENT CHINESE AND WESTERN VIEWS -- NANKING AND THE HOLOCAUST: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS -- SUMMARY OF THE RAPE OF NANKING DEBATE: ANALOGY WITH A COURT OF LAW -- NOTES -- Conclusion -- NOTES -- Appendix A: Japanese and Chinese Forces in Nanking -- JAPANESE ARMY UNITS IN NANKING -- Central China Area Army [Matsui Iwane] -- CHINESE ARMY UNITS IN NANKING -- Nanking Garrison Force [T'ang Sheng-chih (Wade-Giles)/ Tang Shengzhi (Pinyin)] -- Appendix B: Burial Statistics of Red Swastika Society in Nanking -- Appendix C: Burial Records of Ch'ung-shan-t'ang -- Appendix D: Civilian Losses Based on Smythe's Data -- Bibliography -- PUBLISHED COLLECTIONS OF PRIMARY MATERIALS -- UNPUBLISHED COLLECTIONS OF PRIMARY MATERIALS -- ARCHIVAL MATERIALS IN ENGLISH (1): CORRESPONDENCE AND REPORTS -- ARCHIVAL MATERIALS IN ENGLISH (2): IMTFE DOCUMENTS -- ARCHIVAL MATERIALS IN JAPANESE (1): DIPLOMATIC RECORDS -- ARCHIVAL MATERIALS IN JAPANESE (2): MILITARY RECORDS [IN THE ORDER OF COMMAND SUPERIORITY] -- ARCHIVAL MATERIALS IN CHINESE (1): MILITARY RECORDS -- ARCHIVAL MATERIALS IN CHINESE (2): WAR CRIMES TRIALS -- DIARIES AND PRIVATE TESTIMONIES -- SECONDARY SOURCES: (A) ENGLISH -- SECONDARY SOURCES: (B) FOREIGN LANGUAGES -- NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES -- VIDEOS, INTERNET WEB SITES, AND OTHER SOURCES (ALL WEB PAGE ADDRESSES ARE THOSE AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF RESEARCH) -- Index -- About the Author.

While acknowledging that a tremendous loss of life occurred, this study challenges the current prevailing notion that the incident was a deliberate, planned effort on the part of the Japanese military and analyzes events to produce an accurate estimate of the scale of the atrocities. Drawing on Chinese, Japanese, and English sources, Yamamoto determines that what happened at Nanking were unfortunate atrocities of conventional war with precedents in both Eastern and Western military history. He concludes that post-war events such as the war crimes trials and the impact of the Holocaust in Europe affected public opinion regarding Nanking and led to a dramatic reinterpretation of events. The Rape of Nanking consisted of two distinct phases: the mass execution of prisoners of war (as well as conscription age men who appeared to be combatants) and the delinquent acts of individual soldiers. The first phase, which occurred immediately after Nanking's fall and which claimed most of the atrocity victims, was the result of the Japanese military's attempt to clear the city of Chinese soldiers thought to be in plain clothes. The second phase, which lasted approximately six weeks, was horrible, but resulted in a much smaller number of fatalities. It was characterized by numerous criminal acts, ranging from rape and murder to arson and theft, committed by unrestrained Japanese soldiers. The root cause for both phases was the Japanese military's bureaucratic inefficiency and command irresponsibility. While both Chinese and American contemporary sources initially attributed the incident to these causes, subsequent Japanese atrocities against both military and civilian Allied personnel during World War II and evidence presented at war crimes trials would come to reshape perceptions of the Nanking events as an Asian counterpart to the Nazi Holocaust.

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