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Japan attacked the Chinese city of Nanking (Nanjing) during December of 1937. This Japanese illustration, by an unknown artist, depicts a scene as "Invincible Japanese Naval Planes Attack Nanking."

Are there firsthand accounts of Japan's invasion of China? F. Tillman, a *New York Times* reporter, witnessed events in Nanjing (then called Nanking). His report, "[All Captives Slain](#)," was published in the newspaper on December 18, 1937 (pages 1 and 10).

Having witnessed numerous atrocities, Tillman observed:

The killing of civilians was widespread. Foreigners who traveled widely through the city Wednesday found civilian dead on every street. Some of the victims were aged men, women and children.

Policemen and firemen were special objects of attack. Many victims were bayoneted and some of the wounds were barbarously cruel.

Any person who ran because of fear or excitement was likely to be killed on the spot as was any one caught by roving patrols in streets or alleys after dark. Many slayings were witnessed by foreigners.

The Japanese looting amounted almost to plundering of the entire city. Nearly every building was entered by Japanese soldiers, often under the eyes of their officers, and the men took whatever they wanted...



Map locating Nanjing, China.

As bodies piled up in the city, Japanese soldiers allowed few (if any) provisions to be made for burials. Tillman continues:

The Japanese appear to want the horrors to remain as long as possible, to impress on the Chinese the terrible results of resisting Japan.

What did Japanese officials say about these events?

Koki Hirota (while serving as Japan's foreign minister) sent a cable to the Japanese Embassy in Washington (on 17 January 1938) regarding a report of casualties in Nanjing. Most scholars believe that Hirota - later sentenced to death at the Japanese War Crimes trial in Manila - was forwarding information (which Hirota himself disbelieved) from *Manchester Guardian* reporter Harold Timperley (who may have been elsewhere at the time of the Nanjing killings).

Hirota's cables (there were actually two - #175 and #176) were intercepted by American intelligence (at the time) and later publicly released by the U.S. National Archives (in September of 1994). The forwarded cable (#176), which deals with Nanjing and its environs, states, among other things:

(Not) less than three hundred thousand Chinese slaughtered.

Actual numbers of people killed in the Nanjing vicinity are still hotly (and bitterly) debated. Despite conflicting evidence on the actual number of casualties, primary sources (including survivor interviews and observer diaries) reveal that atrocities occurred.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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Media Stream



Map Depicting Location of Nanking, China

Image online, courtesy Yangtze River.org.

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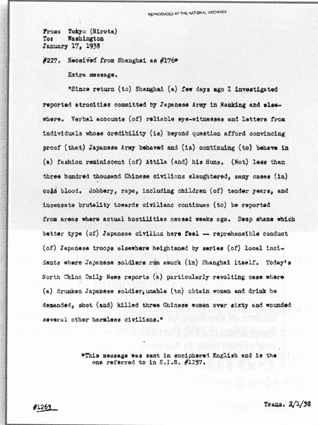
Koki Hirota, Japan's Foreign Minister, at Death Sentence

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives. ARC Identifier 292617.

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Koki Hirota - Cable #176

Image of translated, intercepted cable #176, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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