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### **Road to Nanking - The Fall and Rise of the Samurai**

The word genocide evokes images of bodies filling mass graves or scattered across the landscape lying where they fell, limbs akimbo. The efficiency of the Nazi killing in Europe overwhelms the psyche with the hollow look in the eyes the victims, long since dead. The acts of brutality that man visits on his fellow man in the name of God and country are the stuff of horror movies, except all too real. One such orgy of violence was perpetrated in Nanking, China in 1937 and 1938. What leads men to the point where another man is less than human, or even less than an animal in his eyes?

The suppression of the Samurai by Meiji and influx of western values may have ultimately contributed to this horrific debacle. The Samurai had been humiliated by their inability to do little more than acquiesce to the demands of the United States Navy, and had been stripped of the very symbol of Japanese chivalry by the new government.<sup>1</sup> In the years before the start of World War II, the descendants of those Samurai sought to reincarnate the glory of their noble fathers, even reviving the carry of the famed katana. They succeeded in building a hardened army on a foundation of Bushido and harsh discipline, all to honor the divine Emperor Hirohito.<sup>2</sup> With that army, they began to conquer Asia. The Japanese soldiers and leadership in Nanking may have seen

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<sup>1</sup> Steven R. Cunningham, "Kano And Kata: Reply To Geof Gleeson" *Judo America*, September 23, 1998, <http://www.judoamerica.com/coachingcorner/kano-kata.shtml/> (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Cunningham, "Bushido: World War II," *ABC-CLIO, United States at War*, 2009, <http://www.usatwar.abc-clio.com.ezproxy.apus.edu/> (accessed April 10, 2009).

themselves as glorious warriors triumphing over the hated enemy, but their actions betrayed none of the honor one would expect of the formerly noble Samurai.

The Shogunate and by extrapolation the Samurai, had been seen as woefully inadequate to preserve the sovereignty of Japan. This was illustrated by the forcible “peace” negotiated by American Admiral Perry in 1854. Meiji took advantage of the inherent nationalism and militarism of the Japanese people to build massive conscript armies that were billed to the people as a way to protect Japan from Western Imperialism and threats from mainland Asia. After the westernization of the Japanese military that emasculated the Samurai in the Meiji era, Nippon was a nation struggling to make sense of the reality of Western domination both economically and politically.<sup>3</sup>

The era brought about major change in the basic structures of Japanese society. Industrialization superseded the agrarian feudal system of the Tokugawa and previous eras. Traditional education and government became westernized. A nation ruled by the sword and subservient to various Shoguns was rapidly transformed into a Constitutional Parliamentary Democracy, albeit under the guiding hand of the seemingly altruistic Emperor, Meiji.

The ban on the open carry of the symbol of nobility for the Samurai was, at best, begrudgingly accepted. Some renegade Samurai even attempted to regain power and their swords in a series of insurgencies that all failed. One stinging defeat in 1877 may have crystallized the situation for the Samurai and led to the later resurgence of Bushido. The Satsuma Rebellion left thirteen thousand Japanese killed and twenty one thousand

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<sup>3</sup> *Military History Magazine*, "Satsuma Rebellion: Satsuma Clan Samurai Against the Imperial Japanese Army," *Military History Magazine*, <http://www.historynet.com/satsuma-rebellion-satsuma-clan-samurai-against-the-imperial-japanese-army.htm>. (accessed April 10, 2009).

wounded. The rebels under Field Marshal Takamori Saigo fought to the last man. The bloody rebellion was crushed when a final charge of forty Samurai dashed itself against a wall of a thirty thousand-man army loyal to Meiji.<sup>4</sup> While obviously futile, it showed that the Samurai spirit was not easily dismissed.

The Japanese fought two major wars in the same period, against the Chinese and Russians respectively. The Meiji "Restoration" aided in these victories with industrial innovations such as telecommunications and rail travel as well as the modernization of its army and navy on Western models that, when blended with the warrior spirit of the Samurai, led to some surprising victories. The Japanese were kept from keeping many of its gains against the Chinese as the Western powers intervened. However, in its war against Russia, the Japanese were able to keep its gains, including acknowledgement of the international power that it had become.<sup>5</sup>

The death of Meiji in 1912 led to the coronation of Yoshihito and subsequent coronation of his well-traveled and educated son, Hirohito. This was perhaps the beginning of the rise of the Samurai, and the downfall of Imperial Japan. While the Emperor was vested with enormous power and was worshipped as a god, the military establishment held the real power. Hirohito gave lip service to squashing the runaway train that was the Japanese military. He did nothing, however to stop the military

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<sup>4</sup> *Military History Magazine*, "Satsuma Rebellion: Satsuma Clan Samurai Against the Imperial Japanese Army," <http://www.historynet.com/satsuma-rebellion-satsuma-clan-samurai-against-the-imperial-japanese-army.htm>. (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2009, "Meiji Restoration," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/373305/Meiji-Restoration/> (accessed April 10, 2009).

suppression of the civilian government or the spiral into all out war with China in 1937, which could be considered the real start of World War II.<sup>6</sup>

The Hirohito era saw the restoration of katanas to the officers and NCOs of the Japanese military and the rise of Bushido concepts even to the large conscripted army. The training was harsh, and brutality was seen as a way of hardening leaders and troops alike. Just as a child in an abusive family learns that beatings are normal, the average Japanese soldier learned that brutality was equally normal. The katana that was the symbol of Bushido and the Samurai way was soon to become the symbol of genocide in Asia.

As the Japanese marched into Nanking, capturing the capital of Imperial China, the Japanese Army descended into a tacitly approved morass of human depravity that unfortunately is all too common throughout history. Beheadings and rape were the order of the day, quite literally. Even when rape was later banned, it only insured death for the victims as Chang discovered, because “dead bodies don’t talk”.<sup>7</sup> The horrors that these new Samurai visited on their fellow man was anathema to the honor that most associate with the feudal Samurai. However, the katana and seppuku were ready symbols of what had once been.

The Japanese military had elevated the god-king that was the Emperor to *the* reason for fighting, and had used Bushido to justify everything from seppuku before capture to kamikaze attacks on Allied ships and banzai attacks against Allied troops. This begs the question, how could such chivalry be perverted to such an extent that beheading

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Cunningham, "Bushido: World War II," *ABC-CLIO, United States at War*, 2009, <http://www.usatwar.abc-clio.com.ezproxy.apus.edu/> (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 55-59.

competitions were seen and accepted as good sport? The simple answer is indoctrination. The Japanese military had become powerful by using brutal training and discipline regimes in its own ranks. This lowered the standard of what was considered acceptable on the battlefield. Combined with dehumanizing the “enemy” that included all of the civilian population and the “glory” of battlefield conquest, this created a culture where rape, torture and murder were simply the way to conduct total war. All under the guise of aspiring to Samurai ancestry.

Did Admiral Perry’s expedition to Nippon and, subsequent “enlightenment” of Japanese society during the Meiji era, impute the horror of Nanking? Did the willingness of the Samurai under Saigo, that would die fighting their own countrymen in a bid to protect Samurai values, portend the complete collapse of those same chivalric values in the capital of China? Perhaps the truth is that men of war can sometimes be given over to the evil deeds when they are conditioned to do so. Perhaps when training a fighting force, and conditioning for victory on the battlefield, the national and military leadership has a responsibility to instill restraint, respect and the basic values of human dignity.

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