

An Unlikely Hero - John Rabe and the Nanking Safety Zone

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ABSTRACT

The annals of war history are full of bizarre and unusual instances of pockets of peace breaking out for short periods of time during the madness of battle. The most famous of these events is the Christmas Truce, a widespread ceasefire along the lengths of the Western Front during World War I on Christmas Day 1914. Another less well-known example happened during the Korean War in 1951 when soldiers of the UN Forces, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, and the North Korean forces spontaneously came out of their trenches to greet and fraternize briefly with the enemy. This article shines a light on a similar event in China in 1937-1938, the Nanking Safety Zone and the man who spear-headed the movement to save the innocent during the brutal attack on Nanking: John Rabe. A contradictory man in many ways, Rabe was a Nazi businessman residing in the city of Nanking during World War II. However, when Japanese forces, allied with Germany, sieged the city in the infamously barbaric 'Rape of Nanking,' John Rabe utilized the tools of debate and diplomacy to safeguard the lives of countless civilians. This article examines the full extent of Rabe's actions and cautious political maneuvering during one of the most horrifying battles in history.

Keywords: diplomacy, political maneuvering, safety zone

1. INTRODUCTION

Human history is littered with the horrors of war. One of the most horrendous events of a 20th century war is undoubtedly the Nanking Massacre of 1937-38, otherwise known as the Rape of Nanking. Taking place over the course of six months, the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Nanking and quickly took over the city. Hundreds of thousands of unarmed combatants and innocent civilians were murdered, and countless women were raped in the ordeal.¹ In the weeks leading up to the massacre, most foreign diplomats and private businessmen stationed in the city fled to safety with their families.² Of the estimated 27 that stayed, 5 reporters fled early on, leaving only about 22 foreigners in the city throughout the siege as the Japanese approached on foot and assaulted the city by aerial bombing campaign in August of 1937.³ One of these foreigners was John Rabe, a man with unusual credentials who went on to play a paramount role in lessening the humanitarian crisis.

John Rabe was the mediator that communicated with all groups involved in the massacre, including the Chinese military, Chinese civilians, the Japanese military, and even the German government. He debated fiercely, acting as an unofficial and unappointed diplomat, with the invading Japanese army in an effort to guarantee the safety of noncombatants within the city.⁴ He pleaded with the Chinese soldiers to lay down their arms when he felt that there were no other options for them, especially considering the Chinese government fled the city a

¹ Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015.

² Rabe, John. *The Good Man of Nanking the Diaries of John Rabe*. London: Abacus, 2000. pg. 42.

³ Kaiyuan, Zhang, and Donald MacInnis. *Eyewitnesses to Massacre: American Missionaries*

Bear Witness to Japanese Atrocities in Nanjing. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2015. pg. 42.

⁴ Hsu Shuhsi, "Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone," in *Documents on the Rape of Nanking*, ed. Timothy Brook (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999)

month into the siege.⁵ He even tried to contact Hitler directly in a desperate effort to stop the fighting, though it was unsuccessful.⁶ He communicated with an unknowable number of Chinese civilians, including those working under him and those simply seeking refuge from warfare.⁷ He debated with other foreign businessmen offering help to the Chinese, with whom he created a civilian-operated diplomatic group which created a safe zone for noncombatants in Nanking, called the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone.⁸ John Rabe made huge sacrifices, at the risk of his own life, in an attempt to alleviate the rampant suffering that occurred during the Nanking massacre.

2. BACKGROUND

John Rabe was a German businessman living in Nanking at the time of the massacre and was a loyal member of the Nazi Party. He had lived in the city and had been a successful businessman for 29 years and stated, "I cannot bring myself for now to betray the trust these people [the Chinese] have put in me... Under such circumstances, can I, may I, cut and run? I don't think so."⁹ Rabe justified his decision by quoting the socialist manifesto- *'we do not leave workers when times are hard'*. He observed that the Chinese had treated both him and his family well, and made the ultimate decision to stay in order to try to protect Chinese civilians without a means to escape.¹⁰

In the days preceding the Japanese invasion, members of the Japanese embassy met with Rabe on numerous occasions in an effort to get him to leave the city, but he continuously refused.¹¹ Finally, a Japanese major by the name of Oka met with him to ask him why he was so adamant to stay. To this, Rabe replied, "I am happy and successful here. I have always been treated well by the Chi-nese

people, even during the war. If I had spent 30 years in Japan and were treated just as well by the Japanese people, you can be assured that... I would not leave the side of the people in Japan." At this answer, the Japanese major was both impressed and satisfied, seeing how it aligned with Japanese Bushido themes of loyalty, even at the cost of death, left after performing a simple bow.¹²

3. TIME OF THE INVASION

3.1 Formation of the International Committee For the Nanking Safety Zone

As the invasion grew imminent and Rabe remained adamant to stay in Nanking, he had a bomb shelter constructed in his backyard and opened it to nearby Chinese people. When the bombing continued relentlessly and more and more people sought shelter on his grounds, he desperately hung a swastika flag above his house in an effort to deter the Japanese from bombing the area, sheltering hundreds of people.¹³

When the Chinese government abandoned Nanking in early December¹⁴, leaving the many who had been unable to escape vulnerable against the invading Japanese Army, the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone was created - composed of 15 Americans and Europeans, many of whom were doctors and professors.¹⁵ John Rabe was an integral member throughout both its official foundation on November 22nd, and its operation throughout the massacre, being elected the Chairman. The Committee's main goal was to create a refugee camp, or a neutral zone inside or outside of the city, where "noncombatants could take refuge in case the city comes under fire."¹⁶

⁵ Zong, Yongzhe. Tech. *A Humanitarian Success: Westerners' Protection of Chinese Refugees in the Rape of Nanking, 1937-38*, 2014.

⁶ Rabe, John, pg. 90.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Han, Soul. 2012. "Foreigners Establish Safety Zone and Intervene to Save Civilians during Nanking Massacre, 1937-1938," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*. Retrieved November 29, 2021.

⁹ Rabe, John, pg. 43.

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 44-45.

¹¹ Chang, Iris. "The Nazi Leader Who, in 1937, Became the Oskar Schindler of China." *The Atlantic*, January 18, 2012.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dowell, Pat. "Shelter Under The Swastika: The John Rabe Story." NPR. NPR, June 14, 2010. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127482829>.

¹⁴ *The Nome daily nugget. Volume 38 No. 345.* (Nome, Alaska), 10 Dec. 1937. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

¹⁵ Askew, David. "The International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone: An Introduction." *Sino-Japanese Studies*. Monash University, March 23, 2014.

¹⁶ Rabe, John, pg. 81.

Once the initial bombing subsided, ground invasion became imminent nearing the end of November.¹⁷ The Committee was quick to take action by sending a telegram to the official Japanese ambassador in Shanghai. They stated: “An international committee... desires to suggest to the Chinese and Japanese authorities the establishment of a Safety Zone for Civilian Refugees in the unfortunate event of hostilities...”¹⁸ The Chinese government was quick to agree, with the first meeting about the Safety Zone taking place on November 22nd¹⁹, but the Japanese had no response. In desperation, Rabe attempted to send a telegram to Hitler to plead for help to ensure the establishment of the Safety Zone, stating “...asks his Führer kindly to intercede with the Japanese government to grant permission for creation of a neutral zone for noncombatants...”²⁰ It is doubtful, however, that the telegram even reached Hitler’s office.²¹

3.2 Japanese Military Response & the Formation of the Safety Zone

On the 1st of December, the Japanese sent a telegram stating “Japanese authorities have duly noted request for safety zone but regret cannot grant it... [we will] endeavor to respect the district as far as consistent with military necessity.”²² Though refusing to grant the safety zone, the telegram “leaves a backdoor open”, as stated by John Rabe, and therefore the Committee quickly went through with the formation of the Safety Zone, agreeing to keep Chinese military involvement as low as possible.²³

On December 9th, the Japanese military reached the gates of Nanjing. Upon doing so, they spread leaflets into the city. The leaflets stated,

We have surrounded the city of Nanjing... The Japanese Army shall show no mercy toward those who offer resistance, treating them with extreme severity, but shall harm neither innocent civilians nor Chinese military [personnel] who manifest no hostility... Open the gates to Nanjing in a peaceful manner, and obey the [f]ollowing instructions.²⁴

However, the Chinese army resisted, and thus, the massacre began in earnest.²⁵ The Japanese invasion of the city started on December 13th 1937, and throughout the brutality, thousands of civilians looked for sanctuary in the Safety Zone established within the city.²⁶

3.3 Violence in the Safety Zone

The violence continued with an estimated 90,000 Chinese soldiers unable to flee as the Imperial Army successfully surrounded the city.²⁷ The Japanese, as they had promised, were ruthless, and systematically cut down war prisoners, soldiers, and civilians alike.²⁸ John Rabe, in an effort to save the lives of Chinese soldiers, tried to convince them to put down their weapons and join the refugees, stating that if they “stopped being potential threats in the eyes of the Japanese army”, he could try to get them to let the soldiers live as noncombatants, or find a way to hide them amongst the thousands of

¹⁷ Gordon, Josh. Tech. *The Nanking Massacre: Analysis of Japanese and Chinese Interpretation and Remembrance of Nanking 1940s-The Present*. Eau Claire, Wisconsin: UW, 2014. pg. 4.

¹⁸ Lu, Suping. *The 1937 - 1938 Nanjing Atrocities*. New York, New York: Springer Singapore, 2019. pg. 249.

¹⁹ “Rescue and Resistance in Nanjing.” Web log. *Facing History & Ourselves* (blog). Facing History and Ourselves. Accessed December 21, 2021.

²⁰ Rabe, John, pg. 90.

²¹ “A Question of Morality: John Rabe.” Web log. *Facing History & Ourselves* (blog). Facing History and Ourselves. Accessed December 21, 2021.

²² Lu, Suping. *They Were in Nanjing: The Nanjing Massacre Witnessed by American and British Nationals*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. pg. 48.

²³ Ibid. pg. 49.

²⁴ Abend, Hallett. “JAPAN LAYS GAINS TO MASSING OF FOE; Welcomes Further Chance at Nanking to Wipe Out the Nation's Armies HUGE AREA IS LAID WASTE Foreign Military Officers Are Amazed by Chinese Destruction in Their Retreat Massed Forces Bombed Best Troops Threatened Others Vast Wealth Destroyed.” *The New York Times*, December 9, 1937.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Yamamoto, Masahiro. *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000.

²⁷ Gavin, Philip. “The Rape of Nanking 1937-1938.” The History Place. The History Place, 2000.

²⁸ “‘I Will Never Forget’: Voices of Survivors.” Facing History and Ourselves. Facing History and Ourselves.

refugees living in the safety zone.²⁹ The soldiers agreed and took asylum in the safety zone.

However, the Japanese army soon entered the refugee zone in search of the former soldiers, finding them despite Rabe's best efforts to hide them in the crowd by searching for signs on their bodies of war. Almost 1300 men were found and arrested to be executed on December 14th³⁰, even those who were simply suspected of being soldiers and may have been innocent civilians. Many of these prisoners of war were bayoneted or decapitated with swords for "fun and training".³¹ Others were shot down with several machine guns and had their bodies burnt in fire.³²

3.4 Action Toward Safety

After his failure to protect the Chinese soldiers, John Rabe realized that in order to keep the thousands of civilians under his jurisdiction in the safety zone safe, he had to come up with a stronger and more foolproof strategy to ensure their safety. The International Committee gathered in order to make a new plan, and on the very day that the former soldiers were executed, John Rabe, as chairman of the Committee, sent a letter to the Japanese authorities in an effort to protect the Safety Zone and the refugees sheltered there.³³ He respectfully asked for Japanese guards at the entrances of the Safety Zone, permission to have a lightly-armed Chinese police force within the zone, an opportunity to restore water and electric services within the zone, and the sale of rice.³⁴ He also asked for the establishment of a medical facility within the zone to treat wounded civilians and unarmed soldiers (non-combatants).

These few requests were carefully crafted to try to ensure the safety of those residing in the zone from possible bombings or violence from the Japanese, while still trying to offer basic human necessities to

the hundreds of thousands of civilians who were seeking refuge.³⁵ With Japanese soldiers stationed around the zone, the Japanese would be more hesitant to bomb the zone, and the presence of a medical facility made it even more difficult for the Japanese to bomb the area without breaking global human rights laws.³⁶ As the days went on and the sheer brutality of the Japanese soldiers became apparent³⁷, the Committee sent a multitude of letters (many of which were written by Rabe) in an effort to plead the Japanese authorities to prevent the physical harm (including rape, murder, torture, harassment, and et cetera) against civilians both in and out of the Safety Zone, though many of them went unanswered and the Japanese made little to no effort to stop the violence.³⁸

Realizing that help would not come and that the Japanese would not stop their brutality, John Rabe and two of his fellow German businessmen decided to personally drive around the city despite the dangers during the siege to actively seek out the violence and rape conducted by the Japanese soldiers and to confront it head-on and attempt to stop it.³⁹ They believed as they were part of the Nazi Party, they could utilize the alliance between Japan and Germany to stop the Japanese soldiers from their violence. Every day, they would put on the symbol of the Nazi Party on their arms and shoulders⁴⁰ and go out in search of civilians in need of help, dashing through war-torn areas to deliver rice and stopping soldiers from raping Chinese women.⁴¹ In his desperation, Rabe did a great number of things to try to dissuade the soldiers, including yelling at them, showing them the symbol of the Nazi Party, and even physically trying to stop the violence.⁴² After doing this, Rabe realized that this was the most effective way of trying to stop the soldiers, and decided to hand out whistles to

²⁹ Han, Soul. 2012. "Foreigners Establish Safety Zone and Intervene to Save Civilians during Nanking Massacre, 1937-1938," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*. Retrieved November 29, 2021.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Margolin, Jean-Louis. "Japanese Crimes in Nanjing, 1937-38 : A Reappraisal." Open Edition Journals. OpenEdition.

³² Lu, Suping. "The Nanjing Atrocities Reported in the U.S. Newspapers, 1937-38." Readex Report. Readex, April 2012.

³³ Rabe, John, pg. 134.

³⁴ Hsu, Shuhsi.

³⁵ Rabe, John, pg. 134-136.

³⁶ Han, Soul.

³⁷ Appendix A. Appendix B.

³⁸ Hsu, Shuhsi.

³⁹ Shigenobu, Tomisawa. "Using Primary Sources To Clarify the Nanking Incident," n.d. pg. 6.

⁴⁰ Appendix C.

⁴¹ Chen, David W. "At the Rape of Nanking: A Nazi Who Saved Lives." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, December 12, 1996.

⁴² Rabe, John, pg. 149-155.

refugees living within his house, telling them to blow the whistle when they were assaulted or they saw violence. Whenever the whistle was blown, Rabe would run out and rush to chase the soldiers away.⁴³

3.5 End of the Massacre

After months of the brutal massacre, in late January of 1938, the Japanese army forced all civilians residing in the Safety Zone to return home, claiming that “order had been restored”, also forcing the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone to be renamed the “Nanking International Rescue Committee” and shutting down the Safety Zone.⁴⁴ Not much more could be done, and the violence continued as civilians returned home.⁴⁵ The violence eventually subsided in February of 1938 due to the formation of a new Chinese led but Japanese based government.⁴⁶ Despite this, the Committee and John Rabe left huge impacts through their actions.⁴⁷

4. IMPACTS OF RABE

After the atrocities of World War I, in 1929, a French man named Saint-Paul suggested the creation of neutral zones where non-combatants could be protected during wartime, and a man by the name of Father Jacquinot was the first to carry out with this concept in the creation of a Shanghai Safety Zone in World War II.⁴⁸ However, the Third Geneva Convention, which primarily debated about humanitarian protections during warfare (international humanitarian law), did not mention any kind of protection for noncombatants.⁴⁹ Due to this, the concept of a safety zone was not globally accepted by many, including Japan, and therefore any establishment of a safety zone for noncombatants was to an extent, considered

illegitimate, and countries involved had no clear obligation to respect these zones.⁵⁰ Similarly, it follows, as mentioned above, that the Japanese never clearly agreed to the establishment of the Nanking Safety Zone.⁵¹ However, despite all of these setbacks, the International Safety Committee was able to form the Nanking Safety Zone for noncombatants and keep refugees relatively safe there through carefully devised debate and diplomacy. Through this, they were able to keep over 250,000 Chinese civilians safe by negotiating calmly with all parties involved.⁵²

Their involvement had many consequences, including changing Chinese views on western influence in China.⁵³ Prior to World War II, China had had multiple anti-western revolutions and revolts such as the Boxer Rebellion. However, the critical role of Westerners in the formation of the Nanking Safety Zone and the protection of Chinese people quelled anti-western sentiment in the highly conservative and, at the time, politically volatile country.⁵⁴ There are several museums in present day Nanjing that are dedicated to the Nanking Safety Zone that still give much praise and gratitude to the International Safety Committee, with a particular spotlight on John Rabe.⁵⁵ John Rabe’s house was turned into a museum as well, with his statue standing outside in his memory.

5. CONCLUSION

Of course, despite all of this, the Committee were unable to save every single person there, nor did they have the power to stop the massacre itself from happening. It is estimated that over 300,000 civilians were brutally murdered and 20,000 women raped in the horrible event.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, considering the arduous circumstances, the International Safety

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “Nanjing Massacre.” USC Shoah Foundation. University of Southern California. Accessed January 30, 2022.

⁴⁵ Appendix E.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Appendix D.

⁴⁸ Ristaino, Marcia R. *The Jacquinot Safe Zone: Wartime Refugees in Shanghai*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.

⁴⁹ Wylie, Neville, and Lindsey Cameron. “The Impact of World War I on the Law Governing the Treatment of Prisoners of War and the Making of a Humanitarian Subject.” Oxford Academic. Oxford University Press, November 2018.

⁵⁰ Zong, Yongzhe. *Tech. A Humanitarian Success: Westerners’ Protection of Chinese Refugees in the Rape of Nanking, 1937-38*, 2014. pg. 5.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Smalley, Martha Lund. *American Missionary Eyewitnesses to the Nanking Massacre: 1937-1938*. New Haven, Conn: Yale Divinity School Library, 1997. pg. 3.

⁵³ Gordon, Josh. pg. 11.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lim, Louisa. “Museum Recalls Hero of ‘The Rape of Nanjing.’” NPR. NPR, November 1, 2006. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6415407>.

⁵⁶ Margolin, Jean-Louis.

Committee and John Rabe were able to use careful diplomacy and cautious debate to contribute to all of their success in humanitarian efforts during the Nanking Massacre.

In their precarious situation under the power of the Japanese government and authorities in Nanking, there was little more that the International Committee and John Rabe could have done to prevent the brutality and protect non-combatants from harm. With their careful diplomacy and passionate debate to save as many refugees as possible, they were able to save the lives of more than 200,000 civilians.⁵⁷ John Rabe and his efforts will never be forgotten in China, leaving behind a great legacy.

6. APPENDIX

[1] Appendix A



This shows the bodies of various persons executed by the Japanese soldiers laid out in various parts of Ku Ling Temple in Nanjing after the city's fall on December 12th, 1937.

Forster, Ernest, and Clarissa Forster. *YDS-RG008-265-0002-0001*. December 12, 1937. Photograph. Yale University Library.

[2] Appendix B



This shows the bodies of various persons executed by the Japanese soldiers laid out in various parts of Ku Ling Temple in Nanjing after the city's fall on December 12th, 1937, second view.

Forster, Ernest, and Clarissa Forster. *YDS-RG008-265-0002-0004*. December 12, 1937. Photograph. Yale University Library.

[3] Appendix C



Taken at the headquarters of the Nanking Safety Zone Committee. From the left to the right, the people shown include: Mr. Zial (Russian); Mr. Hatz (Austrian); Mr. Rabe (German, Chairman of the Safety Zone); Rev. John Magee (American Church Mission); Mr. Cola Podshivaloff (Russian). Photo taken on December 13th, 1937.

Forster, Ernest, and Clarissa Forster. *YDS-RG008-265-0002-0009*. December 13, 1937. Photograph. Yale University Library.

[4] Appendix D



The scene of farewell tea given to Mr. John Rabe, Chairman of the Nanking Safety Zone Committee by members of staff, given his departure for Germany. Prominent persons in photo include: Mr. Magee, Mr. Sperling (German), Dr. Rosen (German,

⁵⁷ Han, Soul.

Embassy Staff), Mr. Rabe, Mr. Paul Scharffenberg (German Embassy Staff). Photo taken February 21st, 1938.

Forster, Ernest, and Clarissa Forster. *YDS-RG008-265-0002-0010*. February 21, 1938. Photograph. Yale University Library.

[5] Appendix E



A group of Chinese refugees gathered at the headquarters of the Nanking Safety Zone Committee to receive cash relief issued by the Committee to aid them to return to their homes and resume their lives. Taken February 1938.

Forster, Ernest, and Clarissa Forster. *YDS-RG008-265-0002-0020*. February 1938. Photograph. Yale University Library.

[6] Appendix F



The effects of the damage of the fighting that took place in the Nanking massacre in the southern section of Nanking, where most of the fighting important to the fall of the city took place. Photo taken March 17th, 1938.

Forster, Ernest, and Clarissa Forster. *YDS-RG008-265-0002-0049*. March 17, 1938. Photograph. Yale University Library.

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