

OBSERVATIONS ON THE FILM JOHN RABE

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The German-French-Chinese film *John Rabe*, directed by Florian Gallenberger, made its debut in Germany on April 2, 2009. The first showing of the film in China took place on April 28. The production budget for the film must have been huge. However, anyone who perceives *John Rabe* as a non-fiction film, or a re-enactment of events that transpired in Nanking in late 1937, is operating under a grave misconception. The many problems that plague the film are exemplified by subtitles that appear at the end of the film: “Three hundred thousand Chinese were massacred. Even today, right-wing elements in Japan refuse to recognize this fact.”

I shall provide a detailed explanation later in this essay, but for the time being, suffice it to say that John Rabe does not mention having witnessed even one murder in any of his journal entries (published as *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*¹). How do we explain an extrapolation from zero to 300,000? This figure reflects the prejudices of the film’s creators. No film based on fact could have arrived at such a conclusion. *John Rabe* film is not non-fiction, nor is it even historical fiction. It is — pure and simple — a propaganda film.

Why Rabe headed the International Committee

As Japanese forces neared Nanking in November 1937, 15 resident foreigners from Western nations (seven Americans, four Britons, three Germans and one Dane) formed the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone (hereafter referred to as “International Committee”); the members selected John Rabe as chairman. The committee agreed to establish a neutral safety zone within the Nanking city limits, which would accommodate the city’s civilian population and protect it from the ravages of war. The zone was 3.86 square kilometers in area, approximately the size of New York City’s Central Park. Its boundaries were marked, but there were no fences.

The International Committee asked the Japanese military to formally recognize the Safety Zone as neutral territory. The Japanese responded that they would make every effort to respect the Safety Zone, but declined to grant the request officially because the zone had neither walls nor barriers that would prevent Chinese troops from infiltrating it.

And in fact, when the Japanese occupied Nanking, a huge number of Chinese troops discarded their uniforms and took refuge in the Safety Zone. The Japanese found huge caches of their weapons and ammunition there, and discovered anti-aircraft gun emplacements and other military installations, all of which compromised the zone’s neutrality.

¹ John Rabe, *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*, ed. Erwin Wickert, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Knopf, 1998).

In any case, the 200,000 civilians remaining in Nanking had assembled in a rather small space — the Safety Zone. On December 8, 1937, Tang Shengzhi, commander of the Nanking Defense Force, issued an order instructing all noncombatants to gather in the Safety Zone, which was under the control of the International Committee. Without a special pass, it was impossible to leave the Safety Zone. International Committee members took responsibility for the city's 200,000 remaining residents when Nanking's mayor, Ma Chaojun, fled the city (having handed over food and other supplies to the committee). To understand the situation at the time, it is important to know why Rabe, a German, was selected as the committee's chairman, since most of the members were American or British.

Chiang's German military advisors

Many people assume that John Rabe was chosen to head the International Committee because Japan and Germany were both party to the Tripartite Pact. However, this was not the case. Japan and Germany had concluded the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936, which Italy later signed. But that agreement must not be confused with the Tripartite Pact, which dates from September 1939. The Anti-Comintern Pact was, as its name implies, directed against Comintern activities. The Germans were lobbying the Chinese to join as well. We know that Japanese national policy was not restricted by that agreement because on December 6, 1938, the Japanese government adopted an official Action Plan Concerning Jews, which states clearly that Japan would not discriminate against members of the Jewish faith.

However, Germany had made binding commitments to China. In 1928, a team of German military advisors was dispatched to China. In 1934, Gen. Hans von Seeckt, former chief of the German General Staff, was appointed the fourth head of that team. His priority was the modernization of the Chinese military. Von Seeckt was succeeded by Gen. Alexander von Falkenhausen, who was determined to form 60 modernized Chinese divisions. He advised the Chinese to erect pillboxes in the Shanghai area. Von Falkenhausen's primary goal was preparing Chinese forces for war with Japan. On October 1, 1936, he counseled Chiang Kai-shek to attack the Japanese in Hankou and Shanghai. This was 10 months before regular Chinese troops launched a full-scale offensive in Shanghai. In the spring of 1937, von Falkenhausen again urged Chiang to attack the Japanese in Shanghai.

The German advisory team did not stop at guiding the Chinese toward military modernization. They exhorted the Chinese to purchase German weapons, as well as products of the German chemical and heavy industries. Such encouragement also involved the Federation of German Industry, and even a campaign to promote the development of the chemical and heavy industries in China with German support. China was on the verge of becoming Germany's best customer. Siemens, the leading German electrical engineering firm, actively solicited Chinese business. Rabe, who had been in China for quite a few years and who headed Siemens' Nanking operation, was chosen as chairman of the International Committee because of his close military and economic connections with the Chiang administration.

What happened in the Safety Zone?

On December 13, 1937, Nanking fell; on that day, some Japanese units entered the city. The soldiers were bewildered to find themselves surrounded by silence. The defending Chinese forces had retreated, and there were no civilians to be seen. The Japanese soon discovered that all civilian residents of Nanking had assembled in one section of the city (the Safety Zone). Accordingly, accusations made at the Tokyo Trials to the effect that Japanese military personnel stormed into Nanking, killed everyone in sight, and left mountains of corpses and oceans of blood in their wake, are utterly ludicrous.

On December 14, the International Committee submitted a letter signed by Rabe and addressed to “the Japanese Commander of Nanking.” The letter commences as follows: “We come to thank you for the fine way your artillery spared the Safety Zone and to establish contact with you for future plans for care of Chinese civilians in the Zone.”²

What happened in the Safety Zone later on in the month? Did Japanese soldiers go on a killing spree there?

The International Committee made a variety of requests of Japanese military authorities. They also submitted typed reports in English of unlawful acts allegedly committed by Japanese military personnel, on practically a daily basis. Copies of those letters and reports issued by the International Committee over a two-month period were compiled and published in 1939 under the title *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone*. The publishing house was Kelly & Walsh, a Shanghai firm. The compiler and editor was Hsü Shuhsing, an advisor to the Foreign Ministry, whose work was supervised by the Council of International Affairs in Chunking (Chongqing), then the seat of the Chinese government. Therefore, we may assume that the government believed that publishing the documents would work to its advantage. Or conversely, that doing so would work against Japan’s interests, as the book showed the Japanese in a bad light.

Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone contains accounts of 517 alleged unlawful acts. However, it is difficult to imagine that the 107 crimes supposedly committed at night were the work of Japanese soldiers. It was pitch dark at night in a Nanking without electricity. According to a Chinese officer who infiltrated the Safety Zone, “the barbarian soldiers [the Japanese] were too fearful to venture into the city at night, either inside or outside the Safety Zone. (...) That was the time when we (the refugees) could do whatever we wanted.”³ Guo was right: Japanese military personnel would not have exposed themselves to such danger.

Furthermore, the case reports are rife with hearsay and rumors. For instance, only 30 out of 517 reports (less than 10%) state that the crime in question was witnessed. Twenty-six of the cases involve murders, but only one of the reports mentions a witness. However, the International Committee acknowledged that that case (which involved a Chinese soldier

² Hsü Shuhsing, ed., *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1939), p. 1.

³ Guo Qi, *Lamenting the Fall of Our Capital*, reprinted as *The Nanking Massacre* (Taipei: Zhongwai Tushu Chubanshe, 1978).

whom the Japanese discovered hiding in the Safety Zone) was a lawful execution. Not one report describes a witnessed murder. There was no killing spree. Two hundred thousand souls were crowded into an area the size of New York City's Central Park, meaning that there were 200,000 potential witnesses, but *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone* mentions no witnessed, unlawful killings.⁴

Nanking's population increases by 50,000

What does *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone* have to say about demographics? When it became clear that the Japanese would attack Nanking, the city's residents began to leave. The government announced that it would be withdrawing from Nanking; Mayor Ma Chaojun departed on December 3. The population of Nanking, once one million, had shrunk to 200,000 by the beginning of December 1937, according to statistics released by Wang Gupan, head of the National Police Agency. The International Committee based its activities (procurement of food, etc.) on that figure.

According to *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone*, the population remained 200,000 for the entire month of December (reports are dated December 17, 18, 21 and 27). By January 14,⁵ 1938, it had risen to 250,000, where it remained for some time.

The members of the International Committee noticed absolutely no decline in the number of people living in the Safety Zone. Since those were turbulent times, the 200,000 figure cited by Wang Gupan was not precise, but was the best estimate possible under the circumstances. The International Committee obviously agreed with that estimate, and did not detect any major change in the population throughout December. Some people may speculate that there were people living outside the Safety Zone, but if there were, they were rare exceptions and very few in number. Document No. 9 (a letter from the International Committee to the Japanese Embassy dated December 17), which states that "on the 13th, when your troops entered the city, we had nearly all the civilian population gathered in a Zone,"⁶ is ample proof. It also jibes with the testimony of Japanese military personnel who were in Nanking at the time. (Incidentally, in *The Rape of Nanking*, Iris Chang invents 300,000 -400,000 Chinese living outside the Safety Zone, all of whom were massacred.⁷ Others set the number of victims at 50,000 or 100,000; the actual population being what it was, massacre victims would have had to be invented, regardless of their number.

When January arrived, there was an upward revision of the population estimate, for the following two reasons. First, at the end of 1937, the Japanese had conducted a census, issuing

⁴ For a detailed analysis of Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone, see Tomisawa Shigenobu, "Using Primary Sources to Clarify the Nanking Incident" at http://www.sdh-fact.com/CL02_1/57_S4.pdf.

⁵ Hsü, *op. cit.*, pp. 17, 18, 48, 57, 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

⁷ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York : Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 81, 100.

civilian passports to every person they counted; they recorded 160,000 persons. The Committee estimated that the population was 250,000 if children under 10 and elderly women, who had not been counted, were included. Second, civilians who had fled Nanking to avoid the hostilities began returning to the city, proof that it was safe again. No one would have been so foolish as to go anywhere near the scene of a massacre.

The lies of an anti-Japanese Nazi

How do Rabe's diary entries for December 1937 and January 1938 compare with the content of *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone*, which cover that two-month period?

First of all, Rabe reports seeing the dead bodies of many noncombatants during a tour of Nanking on December 13, after the city fell.⁸ However, the streets of Nanking could not have been strewn with such corpses for the very reason that civilian residents of Nanking had taken refuge in the Safety Zone. If there were bodies in the streets, they must have been those of fallen soldiers, but Rabe implies that they were murder victims for whose deaths the Japanese were responsible. However, he stops short of claiming that he personally witnessed the murders of any civilians.

But he does make outrageous claims in a report addressed to Adolf Hitler:

1. Suspected of once having been soldiers, thousands of individuals were killed with machine guns or hand grenades.
2. Gasoline was poured over civilians, who were then burned alive.

And despite the fact that *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone* states that the population had increased, and Rabe himself had not witnessed even one murder in the jam-packed Safety Zone, he states in his report to Hitler that "Chinese sources report that the Japanese murdered 100,000 civilians, but we foreigners believe that 50,000 or 60,000 are more accurate estimates." It would be difficult to find a bigger liar.

As the head of the International Committee, Rabe was responsible for administering what he presented as a neutral zone. That notwithstanding, he hid two Chinese colonels named Long and Zhou there.⁹ He also describes giving shelter to an air force officer named Wang Hanman in the Safety Zone.¹⁰ Such actions were obviously a complete betrayal of the neutrality claim.

This was the real Rabe, the man who is now hailed as a humanitarian, as the "Schindler of Nanking." Rabe's actual behavior stands to reason, because he traveled in the same circles as von Falkenhausen, who we know was pro-Chinese and anti-Japanese because he urged Chiang Kai-shek to regard the Japanese as China's main enemy, and to launch a preemptive

⁸ Rabe, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

attack against them. Rabe also appears to have had a misplaced superiority complex with respect to the Japanese, as indicated by one entry, which reads, “Usually all I have to do is shout ‘Deutsch’ and ‘Hitler’ and they turn polite”¹¹ Japanese military personnel would not have understood German, and they were not nearly as intimidated by Germans as Rabe, with his jaundiced view of the Japanese, would have us believe.

As stated earlier, Japan was party to the Anti-Comintern Pact, but its nondiscrimination policy regarding Jews was adopted at the Five-Minister Conference held in Tokyo on December 6, 1938. Because that policy was in place, Sugihara Chiune was able to issue visas that saved the lives of 5,000 Jews. Similarly, Maj.-Gen. Higuchi Kiichiro of the Harbin Special Agency succeeded in helping a great many Jewish refugees enter Manzhouguo from bordering Otpor. Higuchi also supported a congress of Jewish communities in the Far East held in Harbin.¹²

Stop perverting history!

As stated previously, the Germans allied themselves with the Chinese in the 1930s against the Japanese. It would seem that they are repeating history today. This time, burdened with the guilt of Nazi crimes, the Germans are attempting to lighten their consciences by convincing the international community that the Japanese committed worse war crimes than they did. Perhaps that was the true motive behind the production of the propaganda film *John Rabe*, and its claims regarding 300,000 massacre victims in Nanking.

However, this will prove to be a futile attempt. Based as it is on Rabe’s diaries and reports (both of which are rife with spurious accounts), and on blatant prejudice, the film has no distinction other than as propaganda conveying a distorted image of Japanese military personnel. Its worst offense is the “300,000-victim massacre” accusation, that in the face of evidence in *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone* to the effect that the population of Nanking actually increased during the Japanese occupation.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned the allegation (at the end of the film) that Japanese right-wing elements refuse to accept the 300,000-victim-massacre charge as historical fact. The inclusion of “right-wing elements” is a tired old ploy used with the knowledge that it will trigger knee-jerk hostility. I urge that this portion of the text be replaced with “*Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone* in no way supports the 300,000-victim-massacre charge.”

It was the Japanese (unlike the Germans, who massacred millions of Jews) who adopted a national policy of nondiscrimination against members of the Jewish faith, and who rescued a great many of them from certain extermination. Accusing the Japanese of crimes worse than those perpetrated by the Nazis is revisionist history of the worst kind!

¹¹ Rabe, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹² For further information, see Uesugi Chitose, *Japan that Helped the Jewish Refugees*, http://www.sdh-fact.com/CL02_1/25_S2.pdf.

In today's world it should not be possible to fabricate history, and the notion that enemies of the truth would attempt to do so is unbearably painful and absolutely untenable. There are only two options open to them, however. They can hold book-burnings (a method favored by both the Nazis and the Communist Chinese) to suppress the evidence in *Documents of the Safety Zone*. Or they can heed the advice proffered in an old saying attributed to propagandist Joseph Goebbels: "A lie repeated 100 times becomes the truth."