

Document 11.5: Excerpts from the diary of John Rabe,¹ a witness to the Nanjing Massacre, 1937

German-born John Rabe first came to China in 1908, when he was twenty-six years old. He worked there as a businessman for the next three decades. In 1937, he was among the small group of Western missionaries, doctors, and businessmen who established the International Safety Zone in Nanjing, trying to protect the populace from Japanese atrocities. In September 1937, he began keeping a meticulous diary.

September 21, 1937

All the rich or better-off Chinese began some time ago to flee up the Yangzi to Hangzhou. In courtyards and gardens, in public squares and on the streets, people have feverishly been building dugouts, but otherwise everything remained calm until two days ago, when I received my baptism by fire during four air raids on Nanjing.... I haven't the least desire to put my life at risk for the sake of either the company's [Siemens] or my own property; but there is a question of morality here, and as a reputable Hamburg businessman, so far I haven't been able to side-step it.

Our Chinese servants and employees, about 30 people in all including immediate families, have eyes only for their "master." If I stay, they will loyally remain at their posts to the end....

The rest of the poor servants, most of whom are actually from northern China, simply don't know where to go. I wanted to send off the women and children at least, offered their husbands money for the trip, but they don't know what to do. They want to go back home to the north, but there's war there, too; and so they would rather just huddle here around me.

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Under such circumstances, can I, may I, cut and run? I don't think so. Anyone who has ever sat in a dugout and held a trembling Chinese child in each hand through the long hours of an air raid can understand what I feel.

Finally—subconsciously—there's a last, and the not least important, reason that makes my sticking it out here seem simply a matter of course. I am a member of the NSDAP² and temporarily even held the office of local deputy leader. When I pay business calls on the Chinese agencies and ministries who are our customers, I am constantly asked questions about Germany, about our party and government, and my answer always is:

Yes indeed—
We are soldiers of labor;
We are a government of workers,
We are friends of the working man,
We do not leave workers—the poor—
in the lurch when times are hard!

To be sure, as a National Socialist I was speaking only about German workers, not about the Chinese; but what would the Chinese think? Times are bitterly hard here in the country of my hosts, who have treated me well for three decades now. The rich are fleeing; the poor must remain behind. They don't know where to go. They don't have the means to flee. Aren't they in danger of being slaughtered in great numbers? Shouldn't one make an attempt to help them? Save a few at least? And even if it's only our own people, our employees?...

November 25, 1937

According to the radio, the Japanese have thus far given no definitive answer to the question of a neutral zone for noncombatants. I have decided to telegraph Hitler and Kriebel³ via the German general consulate in Shanghai and Lahrmann, the national group leader there. I managed to get off the following telegram today:

² Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeitpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party)

³ Between 1929 and 1933, Kriebel was a German military advisor to Chiang Kai-shek. In 1934, he became consul general in Shanghai.

German Consulate General Shanghai

I respectfully ask National Group Leader Lahrmann to send on the following telegram
STOP

First to the Führer STOP

Undersigned Deputy Group Leader Nanjing, chairman of local International Committee, asks his Führer kindly to intercede with the Japanese government to grant permission for creation of a neutral zone for noncombatants, since imminent battle for Nanjing otherwise endangers the lives of over two hundred thousand people STOP

With German greetings Rabe Siemens agent in Nanjing STOP

Second to General Consult Kriebel STOP

Urgently request support of my petition to the Führer for his intercession with the Japanese government concerning creation of a neutral zone for noncombatants, since dreadful bloodbath otherwise inevitable in imminent battle for Nanjing STOP Heil Hitler! Rabe Siemens representative and chairman of International Committee in Nanjing STOP

...

December 17, 1937

In one of the houses in the narrow street behind my garden wall, a woman was raped, and then wounded in the neck with a bayonet. I managed to get an ambulance so we can take her to Kulou Hospital. There are about 200 refugees in the garden now. They fall on their knees when you walk by, even though in all this misery we barely know up from down ourselves.... Last night up to 1,000 women and girls are said to have been raped, about 100 girls at Ginling Girls College alone. You hear of nothing but rape. If husbands or brothers intervene, they're shot. What you hear and see on all sides is the brutality and bestiality of the Japanese soldiery.... There's hardly a shop in the city that has not been broken into and looted....

December 19, 1937

The following plea for help has come from a refugee camp at Canton Road No. 83–85:

**To the International Committee of the
Nanjing Safety Zone, Nanjing**

There are about 540 refugees crowded in Nos. 83 and 85 on Canton Road. Since the 13th up to the 17th those houses have been searched and robbed many many times a day by Japanese soldiers in groups of three to five. Today the soldiers are looting the places mentioned above continually and all the jewelries, money, watches, clothes of any sort are taken away. At present women of younger ages are forced to go with the soldiers every night who send motor trucks to take them and release them the next morning. More than 30 women and girls have been raped. The women and children are crying all night. Conditions inside the compound are worse than can be described. Please give us help.

Yours truly

ALL THE REFUGEES

Nanjing, 18 December 1937

6:00 P.M.

Six Japanese climbed over my garden wall and attempted to open the gates from the inside. When I arrive and shine my flashlight in the face of one of the bandits, he reaches for his pistol, but his hand drops quickly enough when I yell at him and hold my swastika armband under his nose. Then, on my orders, all six scramble back over the wall. My gates will never be opened to ruffraff like that. ... The 300 to 400 refugees here in my garden—I no longer know how many there really are—Have used straw mats, old doors, and sheets of tin to build huts for a little protection from the snow and cold.

December 24, 1937

I have had to look at so many corpses over the last few weeks that I can keep my nerves in check even when viewing these horrible cases. It really doesn't leave you in a 'Christmas' mood; but I wanted to see these atrocities with my own eyes, so that I can speak as an eyewitness later. A man cannot be silent about this kind of cruelty!

December 25, 1937

A good number of healthy robust civilians have already been "selected," meaning that their fate is either forced labor or execution. And a good number of young girls have also been selected, because the Japanese want to set up a large military bordello....

December 26, 1937

I have just received a Christmas present better than any I could have wished. I have been given 600 human lives. The newly founded Japanese committee was here to investigate prior to registering my refugees. Each man was called out individually. They all had to form ranks, women and children on the left, men on the right.... No one was led away, as happened at nearby Ginling Middle School, where they had to hand over more than 20 men: they were to be shot as suspected ex-Chinese soldiers. My Chinese are all very happy, and I thank my Creator with all my heart that everything went smoothly....

December 28, 1937

The reports we are hearing from all sides today are so hair-raising that I can hardly bring myself to put them to paper. Before registration began at some of the schools where refugees are camped out, the Japanese first demanded that any former Chinese soldiers in the crowd step forward voluntarily. They were given promises of protection. They were merely to be put into labor crews. At that, a good number of refugees stepped forward. In one case, about 50 people. They were led off at once. As we learned from one of the survivors, they were taken to a vacant house, robbed of all valuables and clothes, and

then completely naked, tied up together in groups of five. Then the Japanese built a large bonfire in the courtyard, led the groups out one by one, bayoneted the men and tossed them still alive on the fire. Ten of these men were able to slip free of their ropes, leap over the courtyard wall, and vanish into the crowd, who gladly found clothes for them. This news has come to us in much the same form from three different sides. Another group, larger than the first, is said to have been bayoneted in the graveyards in the West City....

January 30, 1938

At 4 o'clock this afternoon, my car was stopped on Hangzhou Road by a group of about 50 Chinese, who asked me to rescue a woman whom a Japanese soldier had led away to rape. ... I find the house completely looted, the floor covered with all sorts of debris. In one of the open rooms is a coffin on a bier, and in the room adjoining, lying on a floor covered with straw and junk, I see the soldier, who is about to rape the woman. I manage to pull the soldier out of the room and into the entryway. When he sees all the Chinese and my car, he pulls away and disappears somewhere in the ruins of nearby buildings. The crowd stands at the door, murmuring, but quickly disperses when I tell them to, so as not to attract more Japanese soldiers.

February 3, 1938

The same spectacle can be seen now in all the refugee camps. In my garden, about 70 girls and women are on their knees, banging their heads against the ground. Their weeping and wailing would melt a heart of stone. They don't want to leave my garden camp, because they are quite rightly afraid that they will be raped by Japanese soldiers. They keep wailing the same thing over and over: "You are our father and our mother. You have protected us till now, don't stop half way! If we are going to be violated and have to die, then we want to die here!"...

I hope Hidaka told the truth when he said that the Japanese military will not use force to drive the refugees from the Zone. I have had so many disappointments by now that I am ready for anything....

Chang has just told me that of the seventeen people living in a small house near the end of the street where our old house used to be, six have been killed because they sank to their knees outside the house and begged the Japanese soldiers to spare their daughters. After the old people had been shot, the girls were dragged away and raped. Out of the entire family, only one girl is still left, and she has been taken in by sympathetic neighbors.

You can't breathe for sheer revulsion when you keep finding the bodies of women with bamboo poles thrust up their vaginas. Even old women over 70 are constantly being raped....

On February 23, 1938, John Rabe left Nanjing for Shanghai. In mid-March he sailed for home, arriving in Munich, Germany on April 13. There he tried to use his influence as a member of the Nazi party to alert Germans and Nazi leaders, including Adolf Hitler, about the atrocities. He lectured and showed film footage taken in Nanjing. The Gestapo interrogated Rabe, confiscated the movie, and barred him from lecturing about the Japanese atrocities.

June 8, 1938

My Führer,

The majority of my friends in China are of the opinion that you have not been provided a detailed report about the actual events in Nanjing. In sending you the enclosed copy of a lecture I have given, which however is not intended for the broader public, I am fulfilling a promise made to my friends in China that I would inform you about the sufferings of the Chinese populace. My mission will have been fulfilled if you would be kind enough to let me know that the enclosed copy of my lecture was presented to you.

I have since been notified that I am to abstain from delivering other lectures of this sort or to show any pictures dealing with the subject. I shall obey this order, since it is not my intention to work against German policy and German government offices.

Let me assure you of my allegiance and honest devotion.

John Rabe

April 18, 1946

Tomorrow is Good Friday, and our mood fits the day. We have suffered hunger and more hunger. I didn't have much of anything to report, which is why I stopped making diary entries. To supplement our diet, we ate acorn-meal soup, from acorns that Mutti [Rabe's wife] secretly harvested last fall. For days now, ever since our supply ran out, we've been eating nettles, which taste as good as spinach.

My petition to be denazified was denied yesterday. Although as head of the International Committee of the Nanjing Safety Zone I saved the lives of 250,000 people, Chinese people, my petition was turned down because I was temporarily the local group leader of the NSDAP in Nanjing and—or so the newspaper writes—a man of my intelligence ought never to have joined the party.

I'll file an appeal... I don't know how we're supposed to live, or to keep on fighting—I'm so tired.... If I had heard of any Nazi atrocities while I was in China, I would never have joined the party, and if my views as a German had clashed with those of the other foreigners in Nanjing, the English, Americans, Danes, etc. in Nanjing would never have chosen me to be *chairman* of the International Committee of the Nanjing Safety Zone. The "living Buddha for hundred of thousands"⁴ in Nanjing, and a pariah, an outcast here!...

⁴ On the Chinese New Year in 1938, the refugees Rabe was protecting "lined up in rows in the garden and bow[ed] to me three times." They then handed him a large red silk banner on which they had written "You are the Living Buddha for a hundred thousand people."

June 7, 1946

On June 3, I was finally denazified by the Denazification Commission for the British Sector in Charlottenburg. The decision reads: “Despite your having been the deputy local leader in Nanjing and although you did not resign from the NSDAP on your return to Germany, the commission has nevertheless decided to grant your appeal on the basis of your successful humanitarian work in China, etc.”

June 7 is John Rabe’s final diary entry. The following year, at age 65, he retired. The Chinese military mission in Germany learned where Rabe was living and provided him with extra food to supplement his small pension. The wife of an American missionary, who had known Rabe in China, sent him care packages. The Chinese government offered him an apartment and a pension if he would return to China to appear as a witness in the Tokyo war crimes tribunal. Rabe declined. In a note he left his grandchildren, he wrote: “I didn’t want to see any Japanese hang, although they deserved it.... There must be some atonement, some just punishment; but in my view the judgment should be spoken only by their own nation.” John Rabe died in 1950. His granddaughter rediscovered the diary among his papers in 1996.

Source: Wickert, Erwin, ed. *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. 4-6, 32-33, 77, 81-82, 92, 96-97, 101, 166, 171-172, 212, 250-252.