



The Rape of Nanking and the Faith of John Rabe

December 13, 2012 marks the 75th anniversary of one of the most odious chapters of 20th-century totalitarianism. The Japanese Army, upon invading Nanking (Nanjing), China, in 1937, began a reign of murder, rape, and mayhem that would be known forever after as simply “The Rape of Nanking.” The number of Chinese who died in this orgy of violence and violation will never be known with certainty, but credible estimates put the figure at around 300,000 men, women, and children.



The methods used by Japanese soldiers almost defy belief and betray the absence of any human conscience. Women and girls were submitted to a hellish orgy of mass rape, often until death, that could be equaled in history perhaps only to the conduct of the Russian communist army as it passed through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and then Germany. And men, women, and children were bayoneted or otherwise impaled with bamboo or other objects.

In both instances, Red Army and Japanese Army troops, the slave soldiers of sadistic totalitarian regimes that cared no more for their own people than for anyone else on Earth, brutalized into near madness by their own leaders, were unleashed upon women and children as a reward for their fighting. Rape, of course, is a cruel companion of war, and it has been since the beginning of history. Yet never, perhaps, has it been so carefully nourished in the bosoms of fighting men.

Military leaders could largely stop rape if they were of a mind to do so. Even in the most savage fighting, such as in Sherman’s March to the Sea during the American Civil War, as Victor Davis Hanson has noted, rape could be constrained. In that campaign there were almost no reported cases of rape at all.

Among the sordid and sad history of Nanking, however, shines one bright light: Christians stood up, often at grave personal risk, to protect tens of thousands of Chinese girls. In some instances, this nobility seems macabre by our thinking today. John Rabe, a German in Nanking and nominally a Nazi (although it is clear he rejected Nazism) intervened again and again against Japanese soldiers holding only a swastika as a talisman to frighten them away, and it worked.

Rabe’s diaries, published after the war, make it clear that he was a deeply religious man whose Christian faith trumped any superficial association with Nazism.

On October 17, 1937, as the menace to Nanking was growing, Rabe wrote: “My prayer each morning and evening goes: ‘Dear God, watch over my family and my good humor; I’ll take care of the rest.’” Then in the very bowels of the Hell that was Nanking in December 24, 1937: “I’ll close today’s entry with a prayer in my heart: May a gracious God keep all of you from ever again having to face a crisis like this one in which we now find ourselves.” Two days later Rabe wrote: “I thank my Creator with all my heart that everything went smoothly.” On January 9, 1938, Rabe told his diary: “We 22 foreigners who remained here in Nanking have behaved as bravely as the first Christians in Rome who



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were devoured by lions in the arena.”

When he returned to Germany, having repeatedly asked the German government to protest the massacre, Rabe was interrogated by the Gestapo and prevented from discussing the massacre. He was soon sent off to Afghanistan, safely out of the way.

As WWII progressed, Germany was bombed and her cities were gutted. After the Allied victory over Hitler, Rabe lived in great poverty and deprivation in Soviet-occupied Germany, where he saw nearly every woman he knew repeatedly raped by Soviet soldiers in a replay of the horror in Nanking.

Even so, Rabe’s diaries — his private records to himself — reveal a man trusting God. And they reveal the secret heart of a man who lived through sadistic treatment by three of the most ghastly totalitarian regimes in history, as when he wrote on May 9, 1945, “When need is greatest, God is nearest.” What saved Rabe, a man who belonged to one of the most odious organizations in human history? His Christian faith was greater than any Nazi infection of the soul, the same spirit which led him to resist, in a faraway land, the depredations of dehumanized Japanese soldiers dying and murdering for their Divine Emperor.

If we want to know the surest safeguard against the dark evils which descended upon Nanking 75 years ago this December 13, then the answer is clear: a man who lived 2,000 years ago and changed the world forever, a man whose birthday we commemorate 12 days after the day on which the Rape of Nanking began.

Photo of Japanese soldiers entering Nanking (Nanjing) in January of 1938



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