

# *Constructing the Past*

---

*Volume 10, Issue 1*

2009

*Article 10*

---

## Can a Nazi be a Hero?

Emily Paras\*

\*

This paper is posted at Digital Commons@ IWU. <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol10/iss1/10>

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

# Can a Nazi be a Hero?

Emily Paras

## **Abstract**

This paper centers on John Rabe, a German businessman and Nazi, who, according to several historians, helped save roughly 250,000 lives during the Rape of Nanking. He did this by establishing and serving as director of the “International Safety Zone.” This paper’s research question is how did Rabe reconcile his Nazi beliefs with his heroic actions during the massacre? This paper will argue that Rabe’s heroic actions were not inconsistent with his membership in the Nazi Party.

**Can a Nazi Be a Hero?**

Emily Paras

“John Rabe is the Oskar Schindler of China.”

—Iris Chang, 1997.

During the infamous Rape of Nanking during the winter of 1937-1938, John Rabe, a German businessman and Nazi, helped save so many lives that he was honored by author Iris Chang’s comparison to Oskar Schindler, a fellow Nazi who saved roughly 1,200 Jews by having them work in his factory during World War II. Schindler used all his money and political influence to keep his workers from being deported to extermination camps. Schindler’s heroic actions were brought to life through the Academy Award winning film, *Schindler’s List*. Like Schindler, Rabe was a hero. Yet unlike Schindler, his story remains unknown to many people around the world. During the massacre, Rabe helped establish and served as director of the “International Safety Zone,” which saved more than 250,000 lives.

One might wonder how it was that a member of Hitler’s notorious Nazi Party came to display such compassion and bravery towards the Chinese people, whom Hitler would have considered a weaker and lesser race. How did Rabe reconcile his Nazi beliefs with his heroic actions during the massacre? By comparing Rabe’s actions and thoughts documented in his diary with the basic tenets of Nazism, this apparent contradiction can be further examined.

The Nazi Party’s original principles are consistent with Rabe’s beliefs and actions. However, when Adolf Hitler assumed power in 1933, he began to make sweeping modifications to better fit his ideas. Therefore, when Rabe joined the party in 1934, he did so unaware of where the Party was headed. As Hitler came to power, Rabe stayed in the party because of his misinterpretations of the Nazi Party’s basic tenets and his ignorance of the atrocities that were committed by Nazis in Germany because he was living in China. After the war, Rabe was denazified, meaning that he could no longer reconcile his beliefs with that of the Nazi Party. After a careful study of the evidence, Rabe’s heroic actions were not inconsistent with his membership in the Nazi Party. His involvement during the Rape of Nanking was possible because of his good human nature and compassion. These combined allowed him to act so bravely in the face of brutality and genocide.

This paper will begin with a history of John Rabe’s actions during the Rape of Nanking, and the role the “International Safety Zone” played during the massacre. Then the basic program of the Nazi Party is presented. Following this outline of the program a comparison is made between the basic beliefs of the Party and Rabe’s beliefs, as evidenced in his diary. After this comparison the conclusions of other historians on the research question are presented. Finally, a summary of this paper’s findings are reviewed, and the thesis is reaffirmed.

The life of John Rabe was quite ordinary until the Rape of Nanking began. Born in Hamburg, Germany on November 23, 1882, he was the son of a sea captain. He completed an apprenticeship there, after which he worked in Africa for a few years. In 1908, he moved to Peking, China to work for the Siemens China Company. In 1931, he was transferred to the Nanking office, during which time he sold telephones and electrical equipment to the Chinese government. He acquired a respectable reputation in the German community, in which one of his many accomplishments was administering his own German school. His reputation was also marked by his staunch support of the Nazi Party, which he joined in 1934. He served as the local group leader.<sup>1</sup>

In September of 1937, when it became apparent that Nanking would come under attack from the Japanese, the Siemens office in Shanghai sent a telegram to Rabe requesting that he leave for the sake of his own safety. However, Rabe refused to leave. In his journal he wrote of several reasons why he did not evacuate to safety. Primarily, it was “to protect my property and to represent Siemen’s interests.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, he noted the existence of “a question of morality,” and his feelings of loyalty towards his Chinese servants and employees, who had placed their trust in him. He concluded this thought when he wrote, “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.”<sup>3</sup> His sympathy and compassion towards these people is one reason why he stayed to protect them. Last of all, he noted his membership in the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP), and how principles of this group led him to believe that “we do not leave workers-the poor-in the lurch when times are hard!”<sup>4</sup> In brief, the combination of his business interests, sympathy for his Chinese workers, and beliefs in the NSDAP principles account for the fact that Rabe chose to stay in Nanking even in the face of impending war.

The Japanese bombing of Nanking intensified in September of 1937, so much so that Rabe wrote that “the bombs were like a hailstorm.”<sup>5</sup> In order to prepare for these bombings, Rabe created a small homemade dugout with a maximum capacity of twelve people in his yard, which at times sheltered up to thirty people. Many of the Chinese people had no where to go during the air raids, and thus Rabe allowed anyone and everyone in who could fit, even though it meant that they “sat like sardines in a can.”<sup>6</sup> He also laid out a 20-by-10 foot piece of canvas on which a swastika was painted. He had hoped that this would deter the Japanese bombers. This type of resourcefulness and creativity helped him save many lives throughout the massacre. Rabe described the bombings’

---

<sup>1</sup> Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 109.

<sup>2</sup> John Rabe, *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*, ed. Erwin Wickert, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

detrimental impact on the people and his observations during the air raids: “What a wretched sight, I’m tired of watching their torment, especially the women with little children in their arms.”<sup>7</sup> Although this environment was harsh to Rabe, he never waived in his commitment to stay in Nanking, often reassuring his servants that he was “definitely staying on in Nanking, come what may.”<sup>8</sup> He continued to make arrangements for the inevitable attack by the Japanese on Nanking.

On November 17, 1937, the government began its evacuation. During this time, Rabe also was packing many of his things to be delivered to his wife in Shanghai for safe keeping. On November 19, Rabe learned of an International Committee which was forming to create a refugee camp or a neutral zone in the city, and he agreed to join it. A few days later he attended its first meeting and was elected chairman, which he accepted with some reluctance. The result of this meeting was a telegram that outlined their goal to create a “Safety Zone,” which would house civilian refugees in the event of hostilities at or near Nanking. The zone was to be free of military personnel and equipment. This telegram requested permission from the Chinese and Japanese governments to create such a zone for the sake of humanitarian reasons. When no official reply from the Japanese government was received, Rabe decided to write a letter to Adolf Hitler himself and to Hermann Kriebel, who was the head of personnel in the Foreign Ministry. In it he asked Hitler “kindly to intercede with the Japanese government to grant permission for creation of a neutral zone for noncombatants.”

For weeks there was no reply from Hitler or the Japanese government. But Rabe never lost his faith in his leader, often writing in his diary, “My hope is Hitler,” or noting that he was “firmly convinced that the Führer will not refuse to help.”<sup>9</sup> These types of comments are found throughout his diary, emphasizing his unflagging confidence in Hitler. In fact, help did come. Although there was no reply, “Rabe soon noticed something unusual in the Japanese bombing pattern in the city. Before he sent the telegrams, Japanese planes bombed areas within Nanking indiscriminately; afterwards they attacked only military targets, such as military schools, airstrips, and arsenals.”<sup>10</sup> Whether this was coincidence or not, it still left quite an impression on Rabe and his American friends. He wrote in his diary, “This...was the goal of my telegram [to Hitler] and it made quite a lasting impression on my American colleagues.”<sup>11</sup> This statement appears to suggest that not only was Rabe extremely pleased by the response from his telegram to Hitler, but there is also a sense of pride in that Rabe’s American friends were impressed with Hitler’s response.

<sup>7</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Chang, *Rape of Nanking*, 111-2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

While still awaiting reply from the Japanese government, the International Committee made the decision to go ahead and make preparations. They created a list of problems for the group to tackle: finances, food, transportation, housing, utilities, sanitation and health, policing the borders, and keeping the military out of the safety zone.<sup>12</sup> These were daunting tasks, but the committee was up to the challenge. The committee consisted of sixteen men of German, American, British, or Danish descent. Of these ten were in the city during the siege: John Rabe, Eduard Sperling, Dr. M.S. Bates, Rev. W.P. Mills, Dr. C.S. Trimmer, Christian Kroger, George Fitch, Lewis S.C. Smythe, P.H. Munro-Faure, and Rev. John Magee.<sup>13</sup>

On December 2 the committee finally received a reply from the Japanese, but it was vague at best. The telegram stated that the Japanese government could not grant the request, but that they would respect the zone “as far as consistent with military necessity.”<sup>14</sup> The committee took this as a victory, and thus proceeded with its work. From the beginning they met challenges. The first was from the Chinese administration, whose military continued to “encroach”<sup>15</sup> into the Safety Zone, and even dug trenches and installed antiaircraft batteries. In response Rabe confronted a Chinese general and threatened to resign and inform Hitler about the situation. This was enough to convince the Chinese general to remove the troops and artillery. This is another example of how Rabe used his membership as a Nazi to the advantage of the Chinese people, because if Chinese military were allowed to stay within the Zone, the Japanese would have been justified in attacking it, thus probably killing many Chinese refugees.

On December 13, 1937, Nanking fell to the Japanese army. Chinese civilians immediately began to flee into the Safety Zone. The two and a half square mile zone was now housing roughly 250,000 refugees. The Committee soon broke their own rules by allowing Chinese soldiers to throw down their weapons and enter the zone. Rabe wrote a letter to a Japanese military commander, explaining the situation, and begged them to show mercy on the former soldiers. To his relief, he was promised that the soldiers’ lives would be spared. But this promise was broken almost immediately, as the Japanese dragged thousands of men from the zone. As Chang described the scene, “The Japanese killed thousands of innocent men who happened to have calluses on their fingers, foreheads, or feet—men who were rickshaw coolies, manual laborers, and police officers.”<sup>16</sup> There was nothing for Rabe to do but write letters to the Japanese embassy, which were received with courtesy, but always given the same answer: “We shall inform the military authorities.”<sup>17</sup> Eventually

---

<sup>12</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 42-3.

<sup>13</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> General Tang, who was in charge of defending the city, had promised the International Committee that all military personal and arms would be kept out of the “Safety Zone.” Therefore I felt it appropriate to use the word “encroach,” even though technically it was Chinese land.

<sup>16</sup> Chang, *Rape of Nanking*, 117.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Rabe and the Committee understood the real problem: it was the military, not the embassy, that was in charge.

When the city fell, rape, murder, and looting occurred throughout the capital for almost six weeks. Rabe decided to tour the city on December 13 to see the extent of the damage. He recorded what he witnessed: “We come across corpses every 100 to 200 yards. The bodies of civilians that I examined had bullet holes in their backs. These people had presumably been fleeing and were shot from behind.”<sup>18</sup> He also witnessed Japanese soldiers looting the shops. Rabe was in disbelief, and wrote, “If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed it.”<sup>19</sup> Three days later Rabe recorded, “There is not a single shop outside our Zone that has not been looted, and now pillaging, rape, murder, and mayhem are occurring inside the Zone as well.”<sup>20</sup> As days went on, more and more Chinese were executed in large groups. At this point, roughly 650 Chinese were being housed on Rabe’s property alone. Japanese soldiers often climbed over the garden wall to loot or grab women to rape. It became Rabe’s job to scare them off. He did this by showing his party badge, swastika armband, the German flag, or shouting “Hitler.” As long as Rabe was around, his property and the Chinese living in the Zone were safe. This was true for all Europeans. However, if they were absent, the Japanese did whatever they wanted, for they had no regard for the Chinese people. The soldiers also had almost no regard for their officers, which was one reason why the soldiers were hard to control. Fires also began to breakout in the city and within the Zone, about which Rabe wrote “There can no longer be any doubt that the Japanese are burning the city, presumably to erase all traces of their looting and thievery.”<sup>21</sup> Rabe often went into the city to try and prevent atrocities himself. All his other efforts to help the people, such as writing letters and talking with Japanese officials, had been unsuccessful. Therefore he took matters into his own hands. Often times when he was driving through the city someone would run up to him and beg him to stop a rape. One typical example was recorded in his diary:

The mother of a young attractive girl called out to me, and throwing herself on her knees, crying, said I should help her. Upon entering [the house] I saw a Japanese soldier lying completely naked on a young girl, who was crying hysterically. I yelled at this swine, in any language it would be understood, ‘Happy New Year!’ and he fled from there, naked and with his pants in his hand.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-4.

<sup>21</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Chang, *Rape of Nanking*, 119.

These situations were very dangerous for Rabe, who was usually equipped with just his swastika armband. However, he was fortunate enough to have not incurred any injuries during his stay in Nanking.

Rabe was especially disturbed with the rape occurring in the city. In a report to Hitler he wrote,

They would continue by raping the women and girls and killing anything and anyone that offered any resistance, attempted to run away from them or simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were girls under the age of 8 and women over the age of 70 who were raped and then, in the most brutal way possible, knocked down and beat up. We found corpses of women on beer glasses and others who had been lanced by bamboo shoots. I saw the victims with my own eyes-I talked to some of them right before their deaths and had their bodies brought to the morgue at the Kulo hospital so that I could be personally convinced that all of these reports had touched on the truth.<sup>23</sup>

It was very important to Rabe to record these events and relay them to Hitler. He felt that Hitler would surely intercede, and thus he wrote several reports to him throughout the massacre.

As the year 1938 began, many changes took place. First of all, an Autonomous Government Committee was set up by the Japanese. This group was supposed to take over for the Zone Committee. The Japanese also reported that all refugees were to leave the Zone by February 4. However, when Chinese families did this, they were assaulted and women were raped. Around this time, Rabe received telegrams from Siemens to return to Shanghai. He began to close down the Siemens Nanking branch and make final preparations to leave Nanking. Before he left, the Zone Committee had a meeting in which the name of the group was changed to the Nanking International Relief Committee. This group was made up of Japanese officials as well. After farewell dinners, Rabe boarded the English gunboat *Bee*.

On February 28, 1938, Rabe left Nanking to join his wife in Shanghai. From there the two traveled home to Germany. Upon returning home, Rabe was determined to alert the government and people to the situation in China. One way was through a series of lectures in Berlin, the first of which was at Siemen's Schuckert Administration Building. He presented photographs and a special film that Reverend John Magee had made of atrocities committed by the Japanese. He also read selections from his diary. Although the lectures were very important to Rabe, his most urgent wish was to report to Adolf Hitler about the situation in Nanking, especially the suffering of the people. In his letter to Hitler, he explained that he was "fulfilling a promise made to my friends in

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

China that I would inform you about the sufferings of the Chinese populace.”<sup>24</sup> He ended the letter by confirming that he would obey the order he received to not deliver any more lectures on the subject. After all, he was a good and devoted German through and through. Shortly after sending this letter, Rabe received a surprise--he was arrested by the Gestapo. He was interrogated for several hours but released after he promised not to deliver any further lectures, publish any books, nor show the film given to him by Magee. In fact, that film was confiscated and never returned. One might think that the most common reaction from an event like this would be anger, disbelief, and possible termination of membership. John Rabe did none of these; instead he followed orders, shrugged it off, and uttered his motto, “Right or wrong--my country.”<sup>25</sup> After this incident he was sent by Siemens on a brief mission to Afghanistan, and then back to Berlin, where he worked until the end of the war. This is where his diaries resumed, although not as in great detail or volume.

From the end of World War II until his death, Rabe lived a life of poverty and sickness. He was living in Siemensstadt with his family at the time of Germany’s surrender. They endured constant air raids and shortages of food. At times they had nothing to eat and had to beg on the streets. Rabe was also chronically ill, and thus could not work. The Russians occupied their city beginning at the end of April, 1945, but were “very amiable” to the Rabes. After the Russians left the British occupied the town. For a short while Rabe was hired by the British as a translator, but had to leave because of his membership as a Nazi. Although he petitioned to be denazified, it was denied on the grounds that as an intelligent man he should never have joined the party. In addition, once he returned to Germany, the board argued, he should have seen National Socialism for what it was, and immediately resigned. However, he appealed and it was eventually granted. In early 1947 he was pensioned off at age sixty-five, but was still able to work part time for Siemens. Around this time his address was discovered by the Chinese military mission in Berlin. They soon began sending him extra food and CARE packages. Madame Chiang Kai-shek offered him an apartment and pension in China if he was willing to be a witness during the Tokyo war crimes tribunal. Rabe refused, and explained to his grandchildren that “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.”<sup>26</sup> On January 5, 1949, John Rabe died of a stroke.

The National Socialist German Workers’ Party was founded in Munich in 1919. It slowly began gaining power. In the election of 1928 it had won no more than 2.6 per cent of the votes. However, two years later it increased its share to 18.3 per cent. In July 1932 it became the largest party in the Reich

---

<sup>24</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 212.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

when it captured 37.3 per cent of all the votes cast.<sup>27</sup> Once Hitler assumed power in 1933, the Party gained even more political support, capturing 43.9 per cent of the votes.<sup>28</sup> Although the Nazi Party did not capture more than half the votes, it was the largest party in the Reich, and thus held large amounts of power in the political arena. The citizens who joined the Party were mainly from the urban and rural lower middle classes. General membership broke down as follows: seven per cent upper class, seven per cent peasants, fifty-one per cent middle class, and thirty-five per cent industrial workers. In 1933, the Nazi Party had roughly two million members. By the time of the Party's dissolution in 1945, there existed almost eight and a half million members.<sup>29</sup>

In order to examine the relationship between Rabe's membership as a Nazi and his actions in Nanking, an evaluation of the NSDAP is necessary. Its official program laid out the party's basic beliefs and goals. One crucial belief was in the Aryan race's superiority. This was also expressed in the program as anti-foreignism. Anti-Semitic remarks are not explicit in their program, but there are some noted undertones. The fourth point in the program was that "only a person of German blood... can be a racial comrade [citizen]. No Jew, therefore, can be a racial comrade."<sup>30</sup> Under the program, noncitizens were excluded from jobs in public office. The program included detailed laws concerning newspapers. Noncitizens could not be editors or contributors to newspapers. They could not hold any financial share in a German newspaper, nor have a non-German newspaper without permission from the government. Also, further immigration of non-Germans was to be prevented. If there was a food shortage, noncitizens would be expelled from Germany.

Another crucial tenet of the NSDAP was strong socialism. Many of the points in the program demanded rather progressive reforms, but only for German citizens. For example, point seven was, "we demand that the state make it its primary duty to provide a livelihood for its citizens."<sup>31</sup> Other points stress equality and benefits. Point nine stated: "All citizens are to possess equal rights and obligations."<sup>32</sup> Along these lines, the NSDAP demanded "generous development of old age insurance," the "creation and support of a healthy middle class," and "to open the doors of higher education... to every able and hard-working German."<sup>33</sup> They also demanded higher national health standards, land reform, abolition of ground rent, and freedom for all religious

---

<sup>27</sup> Dick Geary, *Who Voted for the Nazis?* (History Today, Oct 1998, Vol. 48, Issue 10), 8).

<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia, "National Socialist German Workers Party," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NSDAP> (accessed April 10, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Joachim Remak, ed., *The Nazi Years: A Documentary History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 28.

<sup>31</sup> Remak, *The Nazi Years*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

denominations. This strong socialism also indicated anti-communism, which is noted by author Joachim Remak: “anticommunism was a constant element.”<sup>34</sup>

One final crucial tenet of the NSDAP was strong nationalism. For example, point three stated that “we demand land (colonies) to feed our people and to settle our excess population.”<sup>35</sup> This point is a little disturbing considering the imperialist undertones of the word “colonies.” Point one was similar, stating that “We demand, on the basis of the right of national self-determination, the union of all Germans in a Greater Germany.”<sup>36</sup> This also suggests imperialism, and foreshadows some of the actions taken by Germany during World War II.

After analyzing these basic tenets, one might wonder how the Nazi Party came to be seen as inherently evil. These tenets seem rational. Some are even quite progressive, and seem to have the German peoples’ best interests at heart. While there is a strong sense of nationality and racial superiority, there is nothing to suggest that the Nazi Party would eventually participate in the murder of six million people, referred to now as the Holocaust. So how did the Party transition from these basic tenets to an irrational program of murder? The answer lies mostly with Adolf Hitler. When he assumed power in 1933, he began to alter the program. He de-emphasized the socialist part while emphasizing the party’s antiparliamentary mood, which he replaced with what he termed “Führerprinzip,” meaning the utter authority of a leader. He also placed the party’s anti-Semitism at the core of the party’s ideology.<sup>37</sup>

Now the task is to compare these basic tenets with Rabe’s beliefs and actions during the Rape of Nanking. There are four tenets of the Nazi Party that are evident in Rabe’s diary. First of all, Rabe made a few anti-Semitic comments. One such entry describes when his friend Herr Woltemade came to visit him. He had decided to travel by car, using the Central China Express Company. The company promised him that the trip would take only eight hours, when in fact it took eighteen hours. Rabe blamed this on the Jewish driver, and wrote, “The allegedly German chauffeurs of this company, however, are in fact out-of-work Jews, who maybe don’t know much about driving but are that much better at making money.”<sup>38</sup> This quote emphasizes the stereotype of the Jews as money hungry people who take advantage of others. Another racially charged comment concerns Dr. Rosen, who was the German embassy official. In one entry Rabe described how one day Dr. Rosen shared with him his life story. Dr. Rosen’s grandfather was a friend of Beethoven, and his family had been in diplomatic service for nearly one hundred years. However, Rabe wrote that “His father was once foreign minister, but he will probably stay a legation secretary all his life--a Jewish grandmother in his family has ruined his

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>38</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 15.

### *Constructing the Past*

career. A tragic fate!”<sup>39</sup> As the editor explains, the reason for Dr. Rosen’s family’s “tragic fate” was due to Hitler’s discriminatory race laws. Rabe’s choice of words suggests that although he sympathized with Dr. Rosen, he saw nothing wrong with Hitler’s race laws, and did not dispute the morality or legality of Dr. Rosen’s situation.

Another tenet that Rabe agreed with was anti-communism. This is supported by one of Rabe’s diary entries concerning the news that a “nitchevo-mood” was spreading among the Chinese. This “nitchevo-mood,” according to the editor of Rabe’s diary Erwin Wickert’s notes, is a reference to the widespread sympathy among intellectuals for Mao’s cause. The spread of this mood was reported to him by Herr Riebe, who was asked by some Chinese workers “whether a man wouldn’t be a lot better off if he became a Communist.”<sup>40</sup> Rabe was very disturbed by this, and called it “some rather ugly news.”<sup>41</sup>

Rabe also agreed with the Nazi Party’s strong socialist ideals. He wrote in his diary that when Chinese agencies question him about Germany, its party and government, he always gave the same answer: “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!”<sup>42</sup> Rabe followed this principle very closely. In fact, it is one of the reasons he gave for why he decided to stay in Nanking. He did not want to leave his Chinese workers, to whom he felt such loyalty and allegiance.

Lastly, Rabe followed the basic tenet of strong nationalism and authoritarian leadership. Not only did he write several letters to the Führer believing that he would help and guide him, he also expressed absolute faith in his leader throughout his diary. As described earlier, after he sent Hitler his first telegram requesting him to intercede with the Japanese government in order to receive permission to create the Safety Zone, he continually expressed his confidence that Hitler would help him. He wrote, “I’m certain now that help will come. The Fuhrer won’t leave me in the lurch,”<sup>43</sup> and “[I am] convinced that a single word from Hitler, and only from him, would have the greatest possible effect on the Japanese in helping establish our proposed neutral zone, and he will speak that word!”<sup>44</sup> Finally, when he returned to Germany, his first priority was to seek an audience with Hitler to report to him the situation in China. He felt very strongly that Hitler would see him, and upon learning the news, immediately send help to Nanking.

After the war, and the downfall of the Nazi Party, Rabe changed his mind. When he was approached by others as to why he had joined the party, he responded that “one reason among the others...was to receive a subsidy from the

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 40.

German Reich for our German School in Nanking.”<sup>45</sup> Subsidies for education did exist under the German Reich at this time.<sup>46</sup> He further justified his decision by writing that “all the overseas Germans joined the party for the sake of solidarity.”<sup>47</sup> It may well be the case that Rabe truly believed this, but the statement is most likely an exaggeration.<sup>48</sup> All that is certain is that Rabe never listed these reasons any where in the diary he kept during his time in Nanking. As to why he remained in the party, he responded that because he was overseas, he never came into contact with any eyewitnesses of the atrocities committed by the SS.<sup>49</sup> He also described himself and his fellow overseas Germans as “idealists of the first water,”<sup>50</sup> meaning that they believed any unpleasant stories were just rumors and enemy propaganda. In fact, he wrote that if he had heard of any Nazi atrocities while in China, he would not have joined the Party in the first place. He also defended himself by stating that he would not have been elected chairman of the International Committee of the Safety Zone if the beliefs of the other foreigners in Nanking clashed with his German beliefs. This statement’s validity is questionable. In a letter written by Dr. Wilson in which he praised Rabe’s behavior in spite of his Nazi Party affiliation, he stated, “He [Rabe] is well up in Nazi circles and after coming into such close contact with him as we have for the past few weeks and discovering what a splendid man he is and what a tremendous heart he has, it is hard to reconcile his personality with his adulation of Der Fuhrer.”<sup>51</sup> This statement suggests that at least Dr. Wilson, and perhaps more foreigners, did have issues with the Nazi Party. This difficulty in reconciling Rabe’s personality with the party also suggests that Dr. Wilson saw a contradiction of beliefs.

There are several different conclusions that have been drawn as to whether a contradiction existed. Ursula Reinhardt, granddaughter of Rabe, firmly believes that Rabe saw the Nazi Party only for its socialist beliefs, and did not support the persecution of Jews and other ethnic minorities in Germany. Chang seems to agree with this conclusion, offering as evidence Rabe’s visits to ministries in Nanking, during which he “summed up his Nazi philosophy in socialist terms: ‘We are soldiers of work, we are a government of workers, we are friends to the worker, we will never leave the worker’s side in times of crisis.’”<sup>52</sup> Chang also noted that she believes Rabe’s membership in the party may have simply been naïveté.

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>46</sup> J. Noakes and G. Pridham, ed., *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 434.

<sup>47</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 243.

<sup>48</sup> There is little statistical evidence to look at in order to analyze this claim. However, during an interview with Professor Gordon Horwitz, he states that he does not believe this statement, and that he is very wary of it. He believes it is an exaggeration.

<sup>49</sup> Professor Horwitz believes there is some truth to this statement. The amount of information that made it out of Germany and to China is questionable.

<sup>50</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 242.

<sup>51</sup> Victor M. Parachin, *Nazi party member John Rabe, the ‘Good Man of Nanking,’ saved thousands of lives*, (“World War II,” Jan 2001, Vol. 15, Issue 5), 78.

<sup>52</sup> Chang, *Rape of Nanking*, 110.

Author David W. Chen also brings up many important points in one of his articles published in the New York Times. After Rabe returned home and began speaking out on behalf of the Chinese people, his career was arguably ruined. He was arrested by the Gestapo, and it has been suggested by some that he was sent to Afghanistan by Siemens for his own well being. Chen disagreed with Ursula Reinhardt about Rabe's membership in the Nazi Party. He wrote that "It is not clear whether Mr. Rabe embraced the oppression of Jews and other groups in Nazi Germany."<sup>53</sup> He is not as certain as Reinhardt about Rabe's membership and beliefs in the Nazi Party. He is certain, however, of Rabe's outspoken support of the party. When Rabe returned to Germany he delivered a lecture in which he stated that "Although I feel tremendous sympathy for the suffering of China, I am still, above all, pro-German and I believe not only in the correctness of our political system but, as an organizer of the party, I am behind the system 100 percent."<sup>54</sup> This statement supports Rabe's evident nationalistic sentiments expressed in his diary.

Erwin Wickert, the editor of Rabe's diary, offers one last opinion on the issue. He generally believes that Rabe misinterpreted the beliefs and principles of the Nazi Party. He stated, "How very much he misjudged the realities of National Socialism can be seen from his attempt to present his humanitarian efforts in Nanking as simply those of a National Socialist party member doing his duty."<sup>55</sup> Wickert believes that Rabe truly thought that Hitler would be shocked about the situation, and thus rethink his policies concerning Japan and China. He did not think that Hitler probably did not give a damn about the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Chinese.<sup>56</sup> After all, at this time Hitler was giving more consideration about how he was going to conquer Poland and Czechoslovakia. Once Rabe learned about the atrocities committed by the Nazis he reached new conclusions about them. Wickert supported this claim by pointing to the fact that Rabe applied to be denazified, and that in his last diary there is little to no mention of Hitler and the Nazi Party. After evaluating Rabe's last diary, this argument holds true. The only mention of Hitler is of rumors Rabe had heard of his death. The only mention of the Nazi Party was when Rabe applied to be denazified.

After evaluating all the evidence, it appears that John Rabe's understanding of the Nazi Party was misperceived. Although he held some of the party's basic tenets, he stressed the socialist ideas above all others. It is most likely that because he was living abroad, he was not kept informed about the changing of the Nazi Party's principles. Unfortunately, Rabe did not keep a diary from the time between his arrest by the Gestapo, and 1945. Therefore there is little evidence to look at to see how much he really knew about the Nazi Party's activities. To answer the question posed by the title of this paper, 'Can a

---

<sup>53</sup> David W. Chen, *At the Rape of Nanking: A Nazi Who Saved Lives* (The New York Times, 1996), 1-3.

<sup>54</sup> Chen, *At the Rape of Nanking*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Rabe, *Good Man of Nanking*, 211.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

Nazi be a Hero?’ I believe the answer is yes. John Rabe is the perfect example of such a person. Rabe and Schindler both offer examples of “the durability of humanitarian impulses in the cruelest of times.”<sup>57</sup> The emphasis of Rabe’s story should not be the fact that he was a Nazi, but that he saved almost 250,000 lives. He never saw himself as a hero, but rather he was just performing his duty as a Nazi, and did what he believed any other person would have done in his situation. Rabe’s story deserves wider recognition, in order to shine light on all of the massacres and genocides witnessed in history. Behind every disaster there are individuals or groups who courageously helped out their fellows. The stories of these individuals are some of the most important ones of history.

---

<sup>57</sup> Chen, *At the Rape of Nanking*, 1.