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Letter From China

China Hails a Good Nazi and Makes Japan Take Notice

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

Correction Appended

NANJING, [China](#) — From the outside it does not look like much: the shell of a two-story brick building with scaffolding running up its sides and, on a drizzly winter day, a pair of construction workers kicking around in a courtyard littered with building materials.

But 69 years ago the courtyard was filled with hundreds of Chinese seeking refuge from Japanese troops who were rampaging through the city, then China's capital. The invaders subjected Nanjing to a six-week reign of terror, killing large numbers of Chinese soldiers who had thrown down their weapons and murdering and raping thousands of civilians.

The property was the home of John Rabe, a Nazi Party member and employee of Siemens. In addition to sheltering people in his own compound, Mr. Rabe led a score of other foreigners in the city to form an international safety zone that shielded more than 200,000 Chinese from the Japanese.

Despite his heroism, Rabe was for decades all but forgotten here. Even the location of his house, today all but swallowed up by the sprawling campus of Nanjing University, was unknown.

But now, amid a political and intellectual cold war with [Japan](#) that revolves to a great extent around the history of China's conquest by its neighbor, this country is seizing on the memory of a man often called "the Good Nazi," and even China's Oskar Schindler.

Since the publication of Mr. Rabe's diary in 1997, his story has become a central theme in narratives of the Nanjing Massacre, much as the massacre story itself has become an important pillar in China's emerging new nationalism. In addition to the Rabe museum there is a new, minutely detailed 28-volume history of the massacre, and academics are rethinking the way the episode is taught in schools.

Why this sudden interest in an event that took place nearly 70 years ago? Historians cite two reasons: to refute Japanese denials and to encourage patriotism among Chinese youth.

"The Japanese right is becoming stronger and stronger, and they have denied causing the war in Asia," said Zhang Xianwen, the editor of the recently published history and director of the Center for the History of Republican China at Nanjing University. "We have decided to fight back and force Japan to admit its responsibility."

Yet seven decades after the event there is still serious academic dispute, even over something so fundamental as the death toll. Estimates range from a few tens of thousands to more than 300,000, the official Chinese number that is literally set in concrete above the entranceway to the expansive Nanjing Massacre memorial here.

China is by no means alone in this. In Japan, denial of the killings — once restricted to the far-right fringe — has entered the mainstream as the country's politics have shifted rightward. Today, in the face of the best evidence, many Japanese textbooks minimize the event, playing down suggestions of Japanese atrocities.

Experts say the fact that there were mass killings is beyond any reasonable dispute. "It was not until we toured the city that we learned the extent of the destruction," Mr. Rabe wrote on Dec. 13, 1937, just a day after Japan took control of the city. "The bodies of the civilians that I examined had bullet holes in their backs. These people had presumably been fleeing and were shot from behind."

His account is backed up by the few remaining survivors from his courtyard, like Mu Xifu and Li Shizhen, who fled there for shelter and married each other years later. "The Japanese were killing people and raping people," said Mr. Mu, who is 83. "You could see dead bodies in the river and all over the road."

But official records tend to be scarce or unreliable. During the war Japan rigorously counted its own dead but paid little attention to Chinese casualties. The defeated Japanese military also took care to burn its records in the city.

China's accounting of the incident has been consistently marred by politics.

During the war Nanjing was the capital of the Chinese Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, which mounted a brief investigation after the Japanese defeat in 1945. From the time of the Communist takeover in 1949 until the early 1980's, when disputes over Japanese textbooks first arose, Chinese experts say there was no serious study of the massacre.

More curious still, there is no record to show that Mao, who died in 1976, ever spoke publicly about it. Save for a brief mention in a 1960 middle school textbook, the Nanjing Massacre was not featured in Chinese textbooks until the early 1980's. As recently as the early 1990's, historians

and others who wanted to organize conferences about the event were barred from doing so.

The decades of silence were owing in part to the government's unwillingness to recognize the resistance that China's Nationalist armies put up against the Japanese. Although recently the Nationalists' role has been acknowledged more, official histories of the war have always credited Mao's Communist armies with defeating Japan.

There was also a deep sense of humiliation surrounding the fall of the city, in which scarcely trained Chinese conscripts stripped off their uniforms and fled the invading Japanese. "It is a natural Chinese character to be ashamed to speak of being raped, about being massacred while hardly resisting," said Shao Tzuping, a founder of the Alliance in Memory of the Nanjing Massacre, a private association.

In recent decades, partly in response to Japan, Beijing has itself looked toward nationalism as a spur to unity and a way to quell social troubles, especially in light of Marxism's fading relevance. "It was in the last 20 years, with the Japanese denials, that we found it essential to intensify our propaganda, to make sure that our people remember this better," said Zhang Lianhong, a historian at Nanjing University.

Such efforts mirror those of Japan's new rightists, who say their aim is to bring an end to what they call a masochistic style of teaching history and make young people feel proud to be Japanese.

"Both the Japanese and the Chinese have clung to a sense of victimhood: the Chinese for what happened during the war, the Japanese for what happened after," said David Askew, a professor of law at Ritsumeikan University in Japan. "They are not so much interested in Nanjing as their country's place in the world."

Correction: March 20, 2006

The Letter From China article on Wednesday, about China's new effort to educate citizens about the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, in which invading Japanese soldiers killed many thousands of Chinese, misstated the affiliation of Zhang Lianhong, a historian who said the campaign was partly a response to Japan's denials of wartime atrocities. He is at Nanjing Normal University, not Nanjing University.