

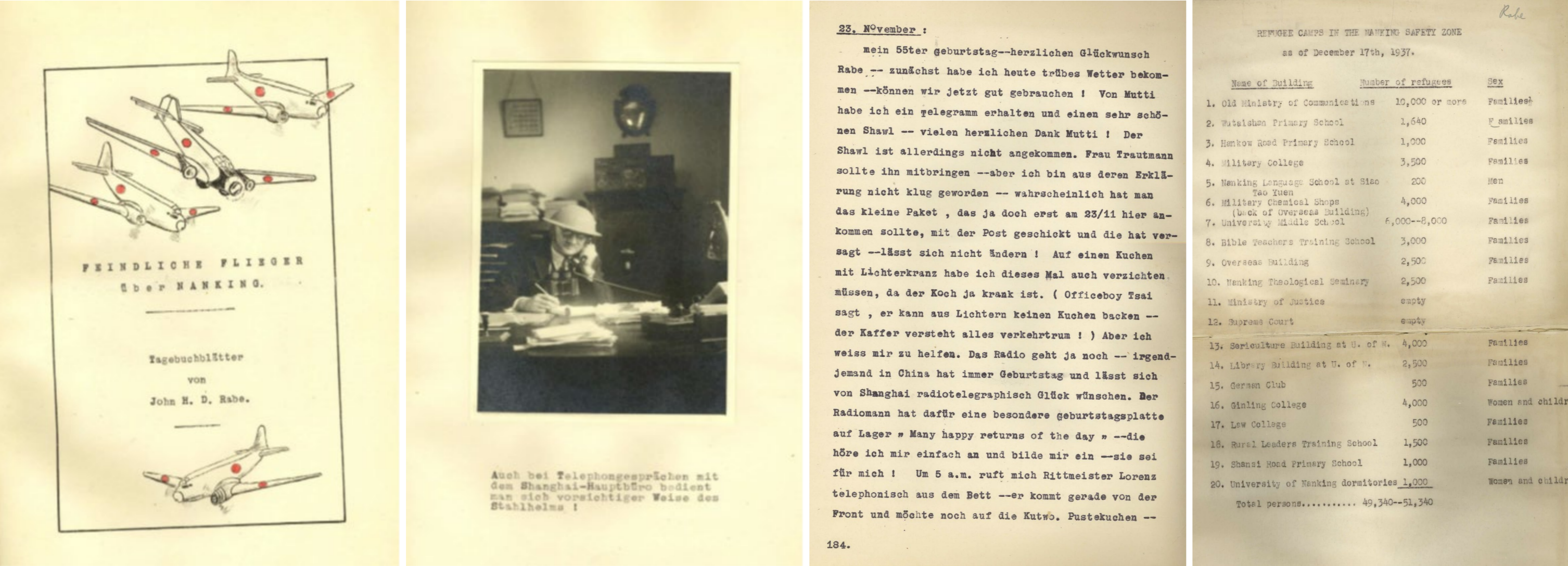
Testifying and Contesting War Experiences – John Rabe’s Nanjing Diaries

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Studying the perspective of the German businessman John Rabe (1882-1950), this project focuses on the events of winter 1937/38 in the Chinese capital city of Nanjing (Nanking) which led to its fall and occupation by the Japanese military. Originally from Hamburg, John Rabe had moved to China in 1908 and spent most of the following decades there as a representative of the Siemens company. When the Japanese military began its attacks on the city, Rabe decided to remain in Nanjing. Together with other foreigners, he formed the International Safety Zone and served as its chairman. In this position as ‘de facto mayor’ of Nanjing, he helped save thousands of Chinese from death of starvation, cold, or atrocities committed by the Japanese military (‘Nanjing Massacre’).

During the critical period from September 1937 to February 1938, Rabe wrote a detailed diary comprising more than 1600 pages. The diary also includes related materials such as letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings. Its discovery in 1996 caused an international sensation and Rabe was called the ‘Oskar Schindler of China’. A small selection of this source was published in 1997 in German as well as in English, Japanese, and Chinese translations. For the first time, this project examines the two unabridged versions of John Rabe’s Nanjing Diaries (originally written in Nanjing in 1937/38, re-written in Berlin in 1942) and places them into the context of related sources, including other war diaries, memoirs, news reports, and diplomatic documents.



Pages from Rabe’s original Nanjing Diaries, 1937 (© Thomas Rabe)

War diaries as ‘dialogue’

War diaries are no factual accounts although many diarists claim so. They are products of the “diarists’ desire for a purposeful and significant life” in difficult times (J. Hellbeck, 2006). They also serve as means of reflection, justification, and coming to terms with extreme experiences. The diary therefore becomes a medium in the dialogue between the diarist and his experiences. Rabe too called his diaries *Tatsachenbericht* (factual accounts) when in fact they contain a mix of factual reports, witness accounts, hearsay, and media consumption. A critical study of Rabe’s diaries must therefore address issues of verifiability, plausibility, and reliability by contextualizing and comparing his diaries with other sources.

Primary sources (selection)

- John Rabe, *Feindliche Flieger über Nanking* [Enemy Planes over Nanjing], Nanjing 1937-38 (6 volumes)
- John Rabe, *Bomben über Nanking* [Bombs over Nanjing], Berlin 1942 (2 volumes)
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- 資料ドイツ外交官の見た南京事件/石田勇治 編集・翻訳 (Tokyo 2001).
- 南京大屠杀史料集/张宪文主编 (Nanjing 2005-14, 78 volumes)



Above: Members of the International Committee for the Nanjing Safety Zone, 1937 (E.H. Forster, W.P. Mills, J. Rabe, L. Smythe, E. Sperling, G. Fitch); right: official seal of the Committee

Research questions

- How and why do the two versions of the diaries differ?
- How does Rabe characterize the activities of the International Safety Zone and his own role as chairman?
- How does Rabe evaluate the activities and behaviour of the Japanese and the Chinese in Nanjing?
- How do Rabe’s accounts differ from those by other foreigners, by Chinese, and by Japanese who were in Nanjing in 1937/38? How do we account for these differences?
- How did Rabe reflect upon his time in China after his return to Germany in 1938?

Japanese-Chinese ‘history wars’

Ever since their discovery, the Rabe Diaries have been politicized as part of the ‘history wars’ between China and Japan over the Nanjing Massacre. While some have claimed that Rabe’s accounts are ‘ironclad proof’ and represent ‘the truth’ about Nanjing, others have dismissed them as ‘full of lies’ or anti-Japanese propaganda. This research project seeks to contribute to the scholarly debate about war diaries as historical sources, problems of witnessing, and contested war memory. It will also contribute to research on global aspects of the Second World War, Japanese-Chinese, Japanese-German, and Chinese-German relations during the first half of the 20th century.

John Rabe commemorated in China today (John Rabe House, Nanjing), photo: T. Weber

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