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A testament to war's barbarity and madness

By Ty Burr Globe Staff / January 25, 2008



To help tell the story of Nanking, filmmakers use footage shot by newsreel cameras, Japanese soldiers, and Westerners. (think film company inc.)

"We are contending with the powers of evil," wrote a European missionary during the six-week convulsion of atrocity that history calls the Rape of Nanking. Starting with the fall of the capital city of China to the Japanese Imperial Army on Dec. 13, 1937, and continuing into early February 1938, the occupation was the occasion for a savagery so intense it beggars description. Numbers are somehow less daunting: 200,000 Chinese shot, bayoneted, bombed, and burned to death. 20,000 women and girls raped.

"Nanking," the thorough and sadly engrossing documentary that opens at the Kendall Square today, takes an unusual approach to this under-remembered genocide. Using the late Iris Chang's 1997 bestseller on Nanking as a springboard, filmmakers Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman have assembled a stunning pool of historical footage shot by newsreel cameras, Japanese soldiers, and Westerners intent on documenting the horrors. They get

firsthand and still raw memories from aging survivors, as painful to hear as they are to tell.

Nanking

Directed by: Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman

Written by: Guttentag, Sturman, and Elisabeth Bentley

Starring: John Getz, Mariel Hemingway, Woody Harrelson, Rosalind Chao, Jürgen Prochnow

At: Kendall Square

Running time: 90 minutes

Rated: R (disturbing images and descriptions of wartime atrocities, including rape)

In English, Cantonese, and Japanese, with subtitles

The directors also have a wealth of letters and memoirs written by the Europeans and Americans who remained in Nanking to offer what help they could to the Chinese, and these are read directly to the camera by actors, some well known, in period dress and hair. It's jarring at first to see Woody Harrelson as surgeon Bob Wilson or Mariel Hemingway as Minnie Vautrin, dean of Ginling Women's College, but the dissonance soon passes.

The reason for the star wattage is that "Nanking" has a story to tell, that of the handful of Westerners who established a shaky but effective two-mile safety zone in the center of the city and in the process saved an estimated quarter of a million lives. One of the most compelling figures is John Rabe (played by Jürgen Prochnow), a German businessman and Nazi party member who, with the Americans and other Europeans, helped spearhead relief efforts, negotiated with Japanese authorities, and hid dozens of Chinese in his house, often confronting hostile Imperial soldiers at bayonet-point.

This "Schindler's List"-style subnarrative is fascinating, and it allows a few rays of human hope to pierce the blackness, but it occasionally struggles with the larger historical canvas for dominance of "Nanking." There are enough Chinese voices heard in the film to provide balance, but you could also argue there could never be enough. The Rape of Nanking is one of the signal genocides in a century filled with genocide, and it needs to be comprehended from the ground up.

Japanese soldiers entered the city from the south in the second week of December, after 114 air raids had reduced Nanking to rubble. Preceding them was their reputation for the "Three Alls: kill all, burn all, loot all." Underprepared Chinese troops tossed their uniforms and tried to blend with the general populace. The invaders' response was to kill

all men of enlistment age. The Yamada Unit "processed" 20,000 "prisoners of war" in a matter of days.

One former Japanese soldier recalls, "In Nanking, we had time on our hands and nothing to do. So we raped girls." The desperate attempts by Westerners to hide Chinese women from their attackers provides the movie with moments of drama: Rabe brandishing his Nazi armband to chase away soldiers who'd broken into his house; Wilson sending the nurses upstairs when troops came by; Minnie Vautrin ordered to choose girls from the refugees on her campus to provide "comfort" and certain death, and devastated when 25 prostitutes volunteer.

It is a portrait of atavism, of the numbed madness that descends on groups of men in war. Just as disturbing is the lack of interest from other governments. Both Rabe and American businessman George Fitch (John Getz) returned to their countries with atrocity footage shot by missionary John Magee (Hugo Armstrong). Fitch sewed the reels into his coat to get them out of China, showed them to US audiences, and pleaded with Washington policymakers to no avail.

Rabe sent his films to Hitler himself - and was promptly arrested by the Gestapo and told to shut his mouth. Years later, when the German was living in poverty, the mayor of Nanking collected thousands of dollars from those Rabe had saved and delivered it in person. Minnie Vautrin returned to America in 1940 and, overwhelmed with a sense of failure, committed suicide a year later. There are no winners in this story, and that needs to be remembered, too.

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