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Minnie Vautrin

In the history of the 20th Century, there are few events quite as infamous as the 1937 Rape of Nanking. Iris Chang’s 1997 book *The Rape of the Nanking* exposed and immortalized the horrific events that few Westerners had even heard of, writing a story that seemed to be relentless in its pain and despair. The Rape of Nanking seems to be a story without hope, without redemption, and without any glimmer of selfless humanity. However, there were those who fought to stop the evil. One of them was a woman named Minnie Vautrin.

Minnie was a missionary who first travelled to China to work as an educator in 1912. She soon became the president of Ginling College in Nanking, staying there even when the majority of faculty fled the approaching Japanese invasion. She did not consider herself to be doing anything heroic, but rather thought of her actions like many educators do. A diary entry from April 14, 1940 reveals how she felt: “I’m about at the end of my energy. Can no longer forge ahead and make plans for the work, but on every hand there seems to be obstacles of some kind. I wish I could go on furlough at once, but who will do the thinking for the Exp. Course?” She was dedicated to the task of educating, and when the Japanese came into Nanking, she did not leave, defying the orders of the American embassy.

The Rape of Nanking began in December of 1937 when the Japanese entered the city, and soon became an orgy of raping, looting, murder, torture, and sadism. Actions too terrible to warrant description were perpetrated on women of all ages, and the Yangtze River ran red with blood for days on end as the Japanese soldiers beheaded thousands of unarmed Chinese soldiers. And in the midst of all this, Minnie Vautrin tried with all her might to protect whomever she could.

Her diary entry from December 16, 1937 describes the carnage: “There probably is no crime that has not been committed in this city today. Thirty girls were taken from the language school last night, and today I have heard scores of heartbreaking stories of girls who were taken from their homes…Tonight a truck passed in which there were eight or ten girls, and as it passed they called out ‘Ging ming! Ging ming!’—save our lives…Oh, God, control the cruel beastliness of the soldiers in Nanking.”

According to a prominent book written on Vautrin: “When the Japanese soldiers ordered Vautrin to leave the campus, she replied: ‘This is my home. I cannot leave.’ Facing down the blood-stained bayonets constantly waved in her face, Vautrin shielded the desperate Chinese who sought asylum behind the gates of the college. Vautrin exhausted herself defying the Japanese army and caring for the refugees after the siege ended in March 1938. She even helped the women locate husbands and sons who had been taken away by the Japanese soldiers. She taught destitute widows the skills required to make a meager living and provided the best education her limited sources would allow to the children in desecrated Nanking.”

When Japanese soldiers tried to ransack the university, Minnie refused to let them enter. When soldiers tried to abduct refugees under her care, she bravely stood in between them. And when the Japanese finally completed their hellish masterpiece with over three hundred thousand people butchered, Minnie started the hard work of caring for the city's wounded.

Minnie Vautrin is credited with saving up to ten thousand Chinese women and children at the risk of her own life. She saw her responsibility to those around her, and answered that call unswervingly. Her actions during one of the century’s greatest crimes should be an inspiration to all of us who desire to make a difference in the lives of those who suffer around us.

1. Why was Minnie Vautrin in Nanking, China?
2. When the Japanese entered Nanking, what did the American embassy instruct Vautrin to do?
3. When ordered to leave the campus by a Japanese soldier, how did Vautrin respond?
4. How did Vautrin attempt to help the Chinese in Nanking?
5. The reading passage describes the actions of Vautrin as inspirational. How is Vautrin an inspiration?