

bafflement, they did realize an essential difference between the two sides: "It was a struggle between men who want to die and men who fight to live."

— Abé Mark Nornes

### Civilian Victims of Military Brutality

U.S.A. Production: Rev. John Magee and George Fitch, *Photography*: Rev. John Magee et al, *Editing*: George Fitch, *Print*: 16mm, silent, English, b&w, 20 min., 1938.

*Civilian Victims of Military Brutality* is a bed-to-bed tour of a hospital in China. A doctor simply points out wounds on the bodies of Chinese peasants, with plain, grey intertitles explaining how they were inflicted by Japanese soldiers. It is not a pleasant experience to watch, however, the film's violence is a fact of war and we are morally obligated *not* to look the other way. The film confronts us with crucial issues about the relationship between documentary and history. At the same time, *Civilian Victims of Military Brutality* naturally raises other questions (and blood pressures) because of the fact of its (probable/possible/apparent) location: Nanking.

In August of 1991, Kyōdō News Service announced it had found 10 minutes of Rev. John Magee's 20-minute *maboroshi* Nanking film. "Maboroshi" is a favorite word of the media, for it means those things which are known to exist but whose locations are uncertain. They are phantom-like things, and thus are the subject of intense fascination, desire, and media attention. Magee was a member of the American Church Mission and Chair of the "International Red Cross Committee of Nanking," which was set up to manage the hospitals within the Red Cross' Safety Zone. This was a demilitarized zone (whose sanctity the Japanese soldiers largely ignored) that contained 25 refugee camps housing some 60,000 people, depending on the stage of the occupation. George Fitch, who eventually smuggled the film to Shanghai, was with the YMCA and helped the committee organize food relief for the refugees. The letters generated by this committee pleading to Japanese officials to control their men are collected in *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone*. Interspersed among memos concerning the running of the camps are lists of hundreds of incidents involving looting, rapes, and shootings. This running log was sent regularly to the Japanese Embassy in Nanking, and it provides a feel for how the city's Westerners desperately attempted to intervene in the mischief of Japan's occupation forces. As we will see, this list's narrative style forms an important backdrop for the intertitles of *Civilian Victims*, and for this reason it's worth an extended quote. A typical excerpt:

"25. On December 16 Japanese soldiers took two cows and two men from the Hsu Dairy at Yin Yang Ying. (Fitch)

26. On December 16 Japanese soldiers turned 40 volunteer workers with our armbands out of their residence at 9 Chih Pi Lu and would not allow them to take their bedding or baggage with them. Two of our trucks were taken at the same time. (Fitch)

27. On December 16 Japanese soldiers entered the residence of our chief sanitary inspector at 21 Kuling Road and took several motor-cycles, one garbage bucket and five bicycles. (Fitch)

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28. At 4 p.m. on December 16 Japanese soldiers entered the residence at 11 Mokan Road and raped the woman there. (Fitch)

29. On December 16 Japanese soldiers tried to take the ambulance from the University Hospital and were only prevented by prompt arrival of an American member of the Committee, Rev. John Magee. (Magee)

30. On December 16 Dr. Smythe's house at 25 Hankow Road was entered five times by stray soldiers looking for *hao kuniang* (literally: good girls). (Riggs)<sup>1</sup>

There are over 400 of these short, dry descriptions, which start out polite, gradually adopt a snide irony and a touch of rage, and then eventually peter out as their memos were obviously being ignored by Japanese officials. Unlike a long-narrative account or an academic description, they conjure a patchwork of events, unrelated except for their common context: a scene of loose, disorderly misconduct ranging from petty thievery to massacre.

This film was shot with an amateur 16mm movie camera at one (or several) of the hospitals within the Zone, with some additional footage from Shanghai, Nanking, and environs. Magee remained in Nanking, however, Fitch made several attempts to leave and finally succeeded:

"I was crowded in with about as unsavory a crowd of soldiers as one could imagine in a third class coach, a bit nervous because sewed into the lining of my camel's-hair great-coat were eight reels of 16mm negative movie film of atrocity cases, most of which were taken in the University Hospital. My baggage would undoubtedly be carefully examined by the military when we got to Shanghai. What might happen if they discovered these films?! Fortunately they weren't discovered, and as soon as I could after my arrival I took them to the Kodak office for processing. Most of the exposures were made by John Magee, of the American Episcopal Mission, later Dean of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington. They were so terrible that they had to be seen to be believed. The Kodak representative rushed through four sets for me, and of course I was asked to show the film at the American Community Church and one or two other places.

"Miss Murial Lester, of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (British) happened to see one of the showings and expressed the thought that if some of the Christian and political leaders in Japan could see the film they would work for an immediate cessation of hostilities. She offered to go to Japan and show it there to selected groups if we would supply her with a copy. I didn't have much faith in the success of her plan but nevertheless gave her one of the copies which I then had. Some weeks later she reported that she had shown it before a small group of leading Christians in Tokyo but that they felt only harm could come from an effort to show it further so she finally abandoned her plan."<sup>2</sup>

Fitch sent another print to Germany and brought the others to America. This first version was hastily edited. He simply strung the hospital scenes together, followed by an assemblage of unrelated shots from around Nanking and Shanghai. Finally, Fitch supplemented the images of the hospital tour with plain, grey intertitles that duplicated the "objective," matter-of-fact style Fitch used in his many Red Cross entries. Once in America, he re-edited the footage into a film specifically to use for fundraising on lecture tours. This new version, entitled *China Invaded*, has a much more passionate tone. The intertitles look clean and professional. They're infused

with an offended rage and a touch of melodrama ("The dead are dead."), and the final title is a call for relief donations. The images may be identical, but these are two very different films. *Civilian Victims* is a simple record of military brutality; *China Invaded* borders, in a sense, on a call for military brutality. The film itself asks only for relief money for China, however, in the context America in the late 30s and early 40s, the film certainly fueled troubling thoughts about Japan. It demonstrates how editing and writing can *push* images between professional and just violence.

Fitch writes that audiences were always shocked, sometimes physically ill, when they watched his film. *Life* magazine devoted an entire page to nine frame enlargements, with the overly hopeful headline, "These Atrocities Explain Jap Defeat."<sup>3</sup> Fitch took it to Washington D.C. and screened it for the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee and the Office of War Information. The latter probably made their own copy, for the footage was worked into Capra's *The Battle of China*. Fitch screened it all across America and in parts of Asia. Then it disappeared.

...Sort of. The U.S. Government copy eventually ended up in the National Archives.<sup>4</sup> Fitch's prints and outtakes were handed down to his granddaughter, who deposited them at Visual Communications in Los Angeles. For Japanese the film became *maboroshi*. Its existence was known; its whereabouts was not. Then, in 1991 Mainichi Broadcasting's Katō Hidetoshi heard about the film, sensed a hot story, and began searching for it. Just as he was closing in on Fitch's old prints, Kyōdō New Service (Japan's largest) was following their own leads concerning a Chinese women's group in New York which supposedly held a copy. Ironically, while these communication giants spent the summer fighting to claim credit for this high-profile discovery, Fukushima Yukio and I had already stumbled upon the National Archives print earlier in the year and had programmed it for the Yamagata retrospective. After Mainichi found Fitch's grand-daughter and his prints, they kept their video copy under lock and key. Ironically enough, anyone could have dropped in the National Archives and bought a copy. When the story broke and swept through Japan, we could look with some amusement at the media war between Mainichi and Kyōdō over the "Maboroshi Nanking Massacre Film."

The discovery once again brought the question of the Nanking occupation to the media foreground. Every network showed photographs — Mainichi managed a coup by reserving the right to show moving images. Every newspaper carried stories (including Japanese American newspapers). Debates ensued about the film's veracity, Fitch and Magee's trustworthiness, and every other conceivable point. Typical articles are Tanaka Masaaki's "There Was No Massacre or Anything Else at Nanking" and Ara Ken'ichi's "The Ability of the 'Maboroshi Film' as Evidence."<sup>5</sup> In the end, Katō probably won his media war. He eventually went to Nanking with a crew and a video tape of Fitch and Magee's film. He actually found the victim described in *Civilian Victims'* first intertitle. Now an old woman, she showed the scars of the bayonet wounds that Magee filmed, and led Katō to the cellar where she had been raped, bayoneted, and left to die 50 years before.

At the height of the media fervor, Katō invited a distinguished group of historians (including an aid to Ishihara Shintarō, the outspoken politician who remained surprisingly quiet and polite about the entire matter), to Mainichi's Tokyo office across from the Imperial Palace in Kudanshita. After introducing ourselves, Katō

screened a video tape of *Civilian Victims* shot-by-shot. Never has film been used so intensely and exclusively for its *documentary value*, as an object of history. These historians (most of them hostile to Kato's intentions) poured over every shot to verify the film's location and determine whether it stands up as evidence of a massacre. They stopped the motion of the picture and scrutinized the very depths of the screen. They squinted through the grain to read signs and wonder at the objects suspended in cinematic space. And there are countless things to wonder about.



Fig. 26. This French man makes an appearance in both Kamei Fumio's *Shanghai* and *Civilian Victims of Military Brutality*.

The original edit consists of two reels. The first seems largely shot in Shanghai. French troops mill around crowds of Chinese refugees. Japanese soldiers pose for (Magee's?) camera on a large gun (is that a Caucasian at the edge of the screen?). A French man wearing a beret smiles for the camera. The same man also makes an appearance in Miki Shigeru and Kamei Fumio's *Shanghai* (1937), in which he compliments the Japanese military for their kindness towards the Chinese people. Why he's in a Japanese propagandist film and Magee's film is difficult to imagine. According to the historians, Magee did not go to Shanghai, and they wonder who shot this section. The National Archives catalog card calls *some* of the same images, "captured footage," but we will probably never be certain. The final sequence consists of other unrelated shots: Japanese tanks drive down a snowy road; a woman kneels, pleading for mercy before Japanese soldiers rounding up Chinese men; a procession of men (are they tied to together?) are led down a distant, country road. These images are shot through trees and dark windows. The image trembles, suggesting the camera operator's nervousness...perhaps.

The second reel begins with the title *Civilian Victims of Military Brutality*. Explanatory titles are intercut with a Western doctor pointing out wounds on Chinese peasants (both dead and alive). The title describing the woman Katō found — one of the *least* horrific — reads, "Pregnant with her first child, this 19-year old woman was bayoneted when she sought to resist raping at the hands of a Japanese soldier. When admitted to a refugee hospital she was found to have no less than 29 wounds." This tone is supremely banal, literal, leaving everything to the imagination. One can't help wondering *why* and *for whom* this film was created. These are more of the unanswerable questions that the film begs us to ponder.

Looking closely at *Civilian Victims of Military Brutality*, only three things are beyond doubt.

- 1) The fact of Shanghai.
- 2) The fact of Nanking.
- 3) The fact of hateful violence.

Like the Magee film, the Nanking Massacre itself is maboroshi. This is an event, as Rea Tajiri puts it in *History and Memory*, for which there were no cameras present. The (apparent) fact that this is an event for which there are no images bothers us as much, or more, than the violence itself. This itself is troubling, for it reveals the depth of history's dependence upon the photographic image. The problem is that the photographic image is always a messy text. It's always con-



Fig. 27. *Civilian Victims of Military Brutality's* banal inter title: "Two Japanese soldiers tried to decapitate this woman, severing the neck muscles to the vertebral column."

textualized by editing, written and spoken language and countless other factors (including the shifting, fickle relationship to a historical viewer). Katō didn't inform his hostile historians that he possessed two versions of the film. They would have dismissed the images based on the apparent anti-Japanese attitude of *China Invaded*. The two films also describe the incidents contained in images with occasionally conflicting "facts." Even without this knowledge, some of the historians seemed smugly delighted that the film features only the bodily *traces* of Japanese military brutality, violence in the past tense. They pointed out that the film shows only a handful of bodies, and argued about the number of victims, as if it were important.

I dare say that too much energy is put into such debates, and perhaps we can escape this wheel-spinning by drawing a distinction between "atrocities" and "massacre." There is violence which is sanctioned by society for its political expediency and less obvious psychological reasons (see the essays in this catalog by Renov and myself). At the same time, some violence crosses the line of acceptability, transforming as if by magic into atrocity. The line demarcating sanctioned and atrocious violence is constantly shifting, as we've clearly seen concerning violence against civilians in the last five decades. Massacre, on the other hand, is an accumulation of atrocity. It involves severe violence against many, if not countless, "improper" victims. The atrocities of World War II (on both sides) are beyond doubt, as is the violence (barely) contained in these images. It happened everywhere the Japanese went, not just Nanking. We need to stop arguing about names and numbers, and start asking, "Why?" If we refuse to look away and confront the question squarely and honestly, when faced with the option of fighting our only available choice is peace.

#### NOTES

1. *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone*, ed. by Hsü Shuhsi (Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1939).
2. Fitch, George A. *My Eighty Years in China* (Taipei: Mei Ya, 1974).
3. "These Atrocities Explain Jap Defeat," *Life* IV/20 (16 May 1938): 14.
4. The National Archives holds two prints of *Civilian Victims* under the same call number (242.307). One has the original dull, grey intertitles; the other has recently restored intertitles using a slick,

unserifed typeface. The new titles are also tinted blood-red, which certainly covers the film with a new layer of meaning.

5. Tanaka Masaaki. "Nankin ni daigyakusatsu nado nakatta — 'maboroshi no firumu' wa maboroshi ni arazu" [There Was No Great Massacre in Nanking — The 'Maboroshi Film' is not Maboroshi], *Seiron* 229 (September 1991): 140-146. Ara Ken'ichi. "'Maboroshi no firumu' no shōkonōryoku" [The Ability of the 'Maboroshi Film' as Evidence], *Shokun!* XXIII/9 (September 1991): 104-111. Also see "How Bad Was the 'Rape of Nanking?'" *Asiaweek* (9 August 1991): 43.

— *Abé Mark Nornes*

#### INTERTITLES FROM CIVILIAN VICTIMS OF MILITARY BRUTALITY

1. Pregnant with her first child, this 19-year old woman was bayoneted when she sought to resist raping at the hands of a Japanese soldier. When admitted to a refugee hospital, she was found to have no less than 29 wounds.
2. This 11-year old girl was standing with her parents near a dugout in the international refugee zone as the Japanese entered. The soldiers bayoneted her father to death, shot her mother, and gave the girl herself a horrible slash in the elbow with a bayonet.
3. Bayoneted five times in the abdomen, this 7-year old youngster died three days after admission to the hospital.
4. Sole survivor of 80 men taken from their houses in the international refugee zone and shot, this man escaped by feigning death, making his way to a refugee hospital with wounds in the neck, cheek and arm.
5. This stretcher-bearer was taken to the river bank with several thousand others, and there machine-gunned. He was one of a score to escape death.
6. This man owned a small saipan on the Yangtze River. He was shot through the jaw by a Japanese soldier, then soaked in gasoline and set afire. The upper and lower parts of his body were horribly burned and quite black. He died after two days in hospital.
7. After having been beaten by Japanese soldiers with an iron bar, this 13-year old boy was bayoneted in the head.
8. Two Japanese soldiers tried to decapitate this woman, severing the neck muscles to the vertebral column.
9. This entire family was massacred by the Japanese when they entered the city. Two of the women were raped, and then put to death, one of them in a particularly horrible fashion.

#### INTERTITLES FROM CHINA INVADED

1. Peaceful pacifist China at work and play.
2. A war-ridden nation as seen by an amateur's camera.
3. Hundreds of thousands of civilians deceived by the invader's promises of goodwill remained in Nanking after the retreat of the Chinese troops.
4. Instead of goodwill — Invaders march the menfolk to execution grounds in batches of 20 to 30.
5. Women beg for the lives of their menfolk who were seized on suspicion of being ex-soldiers.
6. Country people were ruthlessly slaughtered by the invading army.

7. The dead are dead.
8. A grandmother returns home, her entire family massacred. Eye witnesses report her two daughters raped, mutilated and horribly killed.
9. Hands tied behind their backs, shot or bayoneted, civilians were thrown into the many ponds in and near the city.
10. Civilians transport victims of military brutality for hospitalization.
11. Hospitals overflowing with the injured, mutilated and dying.
12. Sadistic, war-crazed invaders burned, mutilated, pillaged, raped in the most terrible war orgy of modern military history.
13. Bayoneted five times in the abdomen, this 7-year old youngster died three days after admission to the hospital.
14. A 13-year old boy, who was mercilessly beaten and bayoneted after being forced to work more than a month for the Japanese army.
15. Eleven years old, she was forced to witness the murder of her parents. She herself received a horrible bayonet wound.
16. Kept for 28 days, raped ten to twenty times daily, this 18-year old girl contracted every form of venereal disease and was then discarded.
17. Pregnant, this 19-year old woman was bayoneted when she resisted rape, receiving 29 wounds on her head and body.
18. Another woman, with head nearly severed by soldiers who had raped her repeatedly.
19. A similar case, this woman was found in a pool of blood, taken to the hospital and recovered later.
20. Unable to meet soldiers demands for women, this man was shot through his hand — a typical retribution.
21. Shot through the jaw then soaked in gasoline and set afire, this man died after two days in the hospital.
22. A similar case of burning, this man had no other wounds on his body.
23. A group of refugees moving from one camp to another in search of greater safety.
24. Farmers, their homes burned, seek protection in refugee camps, building their own straw huts.
25. Millions are facing starvation, epidemic, plague.
26. The need for relief is urgent! \$1 will maintain one adult for a month. \$20 will keep a child for a year.
27. The End.