

BOOK REVIEWS

The Jacquinet Safe Zone: Wartime Refugees in Shanghai.

By Marcia R. Ristaino. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. Pp. 224.

ISBN 10: 0804757933; 13: 978-0804757935.

Reviewed by Janet Y. Chen, Princeton University

E-mail jychen@princeton.edu

doi:10.1017/S1479591409000230

In a remarkable career of service that spanned twenty-seven years, Father Robert Jacquinet de Besange witnessed some of the most tumultuous conflicts in China's modern history. In 1937, as war broke out between Japan and China, he played an instrumental role in establishing a safe haven for non-combatants in Shanghai. Until its closure in 1940, the "Jacquinet Zone" provided refuge and relief to approximately 300,000 Chinese civilians, and inspired similar efforts in cities across the country. But despite the historical import and contemporary resonance of Father Jacquinet's humanitarian activities, Marcia Ristaino explains, his life and contributions have largely been forgotten. In resurrecting Jacquinet from the ashes of history, this book provides both a compelling biography of one extraordinary individual and the first detailed account of his pioneering effort to protect civilians in wartime.

The opening chapters of the book trace Jacquinet's lengthy training as a young Jesuit, followed by his arrival in Shanghai in 1913 to take up his first missionary assignment. After a year of intensive language studies, Jacquinet assumed the position of vicar of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Hongkou, and also taught English and science at the Jesuit-run Aurora University in the French Concession. During one fateful chemistry demonstration, when the priest tried to show his students how to make fireworks, an explosion tore off half of his right arm. He became known thereafter as the "one-armed priest of Shanghai". But losing one limb hardly deterred Father Jacquinet. During the Northern Expedition in 1927, for instance, he went into the war zone and rescued nuns and children trapped at the Holy Family Convent in Zhabei. When floods devastated the region in 1931 and refugees poured into Shanghai, Jacquinet worked tirelessly to raise money and distribute relief. The following year, during the Japanese attack on Shanghai, he negotiated a four-hour ceasefire and helped to evacuate more than 2,000 civilians from the war zone.

The core chapters of the book address the history of the Jacquinet Zone, from the complicated negotiations for its establishment in November 1937 to its closure in June 1940. Ristaino explains how Father Jacquinet's ability to finesse an "understanding" between the warring parties was a crucial factor. His skills as a negotiator were particularly important in the tense weeks of November and December 1937, when sniper fire and security breaches nearly ruptured the fragile agreement. Through multi-lateral diplomacy and immense courage, Jacquinet secured the acquiescence of the Japanese authorities to allow his Refugee Committee to manage the Zone's affairs. Then, as the Japanese military turned its attention from Shanghai and the battlefield migrated, so did the concept of the Jacquinet Zone. Efforts to establish similar areas of safety for civilians followed the Japanese advance to Nanjing and inland to Hankou, but with mixed results. The short-lived Nanjing International Safety Zone failed to prevent the massacre that has become a flashpoint of historical contention. Similar efforts were more successful elsewhere (e.g. in Hankou and Canton). The Japanese authorities, however, rebuffed an attempt to create a safety zone in Fuzhou. Noting that in this case it was American officials in Shanghai who approached the Japanese, Ristaino asserts that "Had the request been made through Father Jacquinet, with his guarantees ... the Japanese

most likely would have formally recognized the requested safe zone" (p. 103). Chapter 7 returns to Shanghai and describes, in vivid detail, the realities of life in the Jacquinet Zone. With 104 separate refugee camps, the logistical challenges of distributing food and clothing, providing medical care, and maintaining order were substantial. When the Zone closed after nearly three years, Father Jacquinet returned to France. For the remaining years of his life, he traveled across Europe and the United States as a Vatican envoy for refugee relief. Shortly after his death, the 1949 Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians during war cited the "Jacquinet Zone" as a model for emulation.

As its inclusion in the Geneva Convention indicates, the Zone and its founder were well known and highly respected in Jacquinet's own time. Indeed, the priest won the trust of warring parties in a bloody conflict, the effusive praise of diplomats and local residents, as well as commendations from numerous governments. During his 1938 fundraising tour, he met successively with Foreign Minister Hirota Kōki in Tokyo and President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. Why, then, were Jacquinet's accomplishments so quickly forgotten? Ristaino attributes this historical amnesia to the general lack of attention to and interest in the Sino-Japanese War (until recently). Regarding the Society of Jesus, the author suggests that ecclesiastical jealousies and discomfort with Jacquinet's independent streak are probably the reasons why the Catholic Church has overlooked his contributions. The great irony is that John Rabe, the German Nazi and engineer who (unsuccessfully) ran the Nanjing International Safe Zone, has claimed the historical spotlight far more than the founder of the Jacquinet Zone.

Marcia Ristaino's book does much to redress this lacuna. In her account, Father Jacquinet was a "man of action" but regretfully few words. We see his skillful diplomacy in action, and his energetic advocacy on behalf of war victims. Apart from three poems and occasional quotations in press reports, however, we rarely hear Jacquinet's own voice and personal thoughts. What did he think of the French Concession government's decision to lock the gates, preventing Chinese victims from seeking refuge there? Was he aware of the widespread allegations that Chiang Kai-shek's government – in particular, members of his wife's family – embezzled spectacular sums from donations for refugee relief? What did he think of the Japanese occupation, especially those individuals who created the devastating conditions of war – and then contributed token sums for refugee relief (p. 77)? The author has combed through the priest's letters and personal papers from the Jesuit Archives, but the results are surprisingly impersonal.

Ristaino describes Jacquinet as "entirely apolitical" (p. 82) and moved to action solely on humanitarian grounds, but by the end, he had "allowed himself to become deeply enmeshed in political and military relationships and activities in Shanghai and even Chongqing" (p. 135) – not to mention Washington and Tokyo. Indeed, Jacquinet's efforts on behalf of a humanitarian cause could not avoid such entanglements, and he himself recognized that the zone was neither "neutral" nor "demilitarized" (p. 55). In a time of war, seemingly uncontroversial acts, such as arranging for the repatriation of refugees back to their hometowns, could mean sending people to live under Japanese occupation. As the "genial mayor" (p. 117) of the safety zone, Father Jacquinet apparently wielded some penal authority, as did Japanese and French police forces. Finally, there are hints of the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to recruit refugees. These examples allude to the complex politics of charity, a line of inquiry that remains subterranean to the book. In a slim volume with just 155 pages of text, Ristaino has focused her narrative tightly on Jacquinet's life, at the expense of the broader context of wartime refugees suggested by the book's subtitle. The Sino-Japanese War, and in particular the refugee crisis that ensued, are currently burgeoning topics for research. *The Jacquinet Zone* is a welcome addition to this new scholarship that promises to enrich our understanding of a crucial period in China's modern history.