



Warships in the harbor and smoke from bombing raids give evidence of the weight that Japan's military put on Shanghai, China's largest city and port in the 1930s. Jesuit Robert Jacquinet responded to the need of city residents for sanctuary.

by John Meehan, SJ

IN 2005, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) marked a milestone. Twenty-five years earlier, Superior General Pedro Arrupe, SJ, created JRS to minister to those displaced by the Vietnam War. Few today, however, know of even earlier work with refugees by a pioneer in the field, Fr. Robert Jacquinet de Bésange, SJ (1878–1946), a spirited French Jesuit who set up a “safety” zone in Shanghai in 1937.

During the undeclared Sino-Japanese war that began that year, the so-called Jacquinet zone sheltered some 250,000 Chinese refugees, inspiring the creation of a similar area in Nanking. Much has been written on atrocities in the latter city after its seizure by Japan in December 1937 and the efforts of a number of Westerners to care for Chinese civilians there. Little attention, however, has been paid to Jacquinet's initiative, praised by others at the time and cited in the commentary to the Geneva Conventions as an important precedent of a neutral zone in time of war.

Japan's expansionism in East Asia during the 1930s began with its seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and resumed after clashes

The Savior of Shanghai

Robert Jacquinet, SJ, and his safety zone in a city at war, 1937



with Chinese troops near Beijing in July 1937. The fighting soon reached Shanghai, China's largest city and commercial port. After two Japanese marines were killed in the city on August 9, Japan launched a major offensive at Shanghai, ostensibly to protect its 27,000 nationals there, a move vigorously denounced by Chinese generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

The metropolis of 4 million had witnessed similar clashes in 1932, but this conflict was bloodier. Chinese civilians were again the most vulnerable but, this time, residents of Shanghai's International Settlement, occupied and run by British, Americans, and civilians of other countries, were not spared. The



Hundreds of thousands of Shanghai's residents fled to adjacent international settlements to escape Japanese air raids in 1937. By subtle and, as necessary, blunt diplomacy, Robert Jacquinot, SJ, pressured the Chinese and Japanese military to respect the neutrality of the zone he established, saving an estimated quarter-million lives in the process.

fiction of their immunity was revealed on August 14, 1937, soon dubbed "Bloody Saturday," when Chinese bombers mistakenly bombed the area, killing more than 1,700. Two weeks later, the British ambassador to China was wounded in a Japanese air strike. Preoccupied by troubles in Europe, Western powers did little to oppose Japan, opting for appeasement to forestall a global conflict.

Sanctuary

For the hundreds of thousands of Shanghai's Chinese, whose neighborhoods were pounded by Japanese bombers, the international settlements, "concessions" under foreign control, offered the only hope of refuge. The Garden Bridge, spanning the Suchow Creek between Chinese and Western areas, became a veritable "bridge of death" where, as one observer noted, one "walked on the bodies of children and elderly thrown to the ground."

Such a tide of humanity caused the population of the foreign concessions to swell from 1.5 to 3 million. To respond to the crisis, municipal authorities and aid societies created nearly two hundred "welcome camps." Thousands of refugees were housed in schools, hospitals, and temples; others were left to live—and die—in the street.

At the Jesuit mission at Zikawei on the outskirts of the city, more than 11,000 refugees were fed daily and some 4,000 were housed at St. Ignatius College.

Horrified by the crisis, Jacquinot considered a more ambitious plan. In early November 1937, he approached Chinese and Japanese authorities with a proposal for a safety zone of one square mile in Nantao, the old Chinese city near the French Concession. His credentials as president of an international commission for refugees and vice president of the local Red Cross committee bolstered his request.

After three days of negotiations, the area was granted to the Nantao Area Supervisory Committee headed by Jacquinot and made up of seven other foreign residents. They accepted responsibility for administering the zone, gaining tacit agreement from the belligerents not to enter the area. The local press greeted the zone's opening on November 9 with enthusiasm, dubbing it the "Jacquinot zone" and praising the French Jesuit as the "Christian savior" of Shanghai.

At first glance, Jacquinot seemed an unlikely savior. Tall, gaunt, bearded, and one-armed, he went about his mission of mercy in his usual attire, a long, threadbare cassock and a floppy blue beret. Born in 1878 in Saintes, France, he had arrived in Shanghai in 1913 to study Chinese and serve as pastor of a



Japanese marines ranged freely on Shanghai's streets after conquering the city proper, but they were harangued by Jacquinot to respect the neutrality of his safety zone.

Chinese parish. He soon was also teaching science at the Jesuits' Aurora University, established in 1903. It was here that he lost his right forearm in a laboratory accident, though he was able to save his eyesight and a student in the mishap.

Despite this handicap, Jacquinot left a "virile and imposing" impression on others, doing "more with his left hand," as one colleague noted, "than most people do with two." Such claims were justified by his humanitarian work. In 1927, he saved a group of nuns from Communist attack and was commended by the Chinese government for his valor. During hostilities in 1932, he secured cease-fires on several occasions, earning a *Croix de Guerre*

for evacuating more than 2,000 civilians and setting up camps for some 20,000 refugees. Jacquinot also established relief committees for flood victims in 1932 and 1936.

Many attributed such success to his sheer force of personality. A born organizer and diplomat, Jacquinot possessed, behind a disarming smile, a deep strength of character. Fearless to a fault, he demonstrated great resolve in the face of danger. On several occasions he deterred Japanese soldiers from committing atrocities by staring them down or, for more obstinate ones, knocking them on the head with his wooden stump of an arm.

Kindly smile, worrisome independence

While confreres praised his "gift of winning over hearts with his kindly smile," superiors could be less complimentary. "He displays a worrisome independence," wrote Fr. Georges Germain, SJ, the rector at Aurora. "I don't have full confidence in his apostolic methods."

The imprint of his personality extended to many aspects of life in the zone, highlighting the differences between this area and the one it inspired at Nanking. The Shanghai zone, unlike its Nanking counterpart, operated under the watchful eye of a large Western presence, and Jacquinot, through skillful diplomacy, secured the goodwill of the belligerents. Eight

days after its opening, more than 100,000 civilians had fled to the zone. By month end, some 250,000 had found refuge there. The zone's neutrality was respected until refugees began to disperse in 1938.

Meeting the needs of this multitude was a challenge. Three-quarters of Shanghai now lay in ruin, water and rice were scarce, and winter was approaching. The day after the zone's creation, Japanese forces arrived at its borders to fire on Chinese positions further south. After several days of clashes, Japanese troops set fire to Nantao, sparing only the Jacquinot zone. His city restored to a fragile peace, Jacquinot returned to the arduous task of feeding and housing the refugees, all without political power, military force, or adequate resources.

Impressed by his "absolutely disinterested manner," Shanghai's Chinese mayor gave him 50,000 *yuan* (about \$14,000 then) for his efforts. Japanese officials, aware of the zone's propaganda value, were generous. General Iwane Matsui, Japan's commander at Shanghai, donated 10,000 *yen* (about \$3,000 then), and equal amounts came from Vice-Admiral Kiyoshi Hasegawa, several Japanese cabinet ministers, and Emperor Hirohito. The Japanese foreign minister, Koki Hirota, praised Jacquinot for his "humanitarian task . . . accomplished in a spirit of complete service and sacrifice."

Enforcer

Such praise did not prevent hostilities from returning to Nantao, however. With bombs exploding only yards from the zone, Chinese forces urged Jacquinot to set up gun posts in the city. Jacquinot found it necessary to leave the zone to remind Japanese troops, again at the gates, of their agreement to honor the zone's neutrality. According to some, a grenade exploded close enough to him to tear his cassock, but the soldiers had recognized him before firing.

He again secured a cease-fire, enabling the evacuation of those still in the war zone. Canadian Jesuit Maurice Belhumeur was among a dozen volunteers who joined him on these rescue missions. Going by truck from house to house, they looked

Though Jacquinot and volunteers drove Shanghai's streets to evacuate more residents to the safety zone, they could not save all who wanted to make the journey.



Jacquinot and his team, which included Canadian Jesuits, managed to establish refugee camps in the safety zone for 250,000. Their struggle to supply food, water, sanitation, and security for these residents was epic.



for survivors who were so numerous, Belhumeur claimed, that only half could be saved. Still more shocking were rumors that Japanese soldiers had entered the zone to plunder, steal, and rape.

To keep the peace in this maze of alleys, Jacquinot relied on a ragtag police force that included a dozen armed White Russians—the term for those on the czar's side during the Bolshevik revolution. Officially stateless, some had found their way to Shanghai, a free city where no entry visa was required.

In administering justice, however, he remained the chief magistrate for civil and criminal cases, sentencing looters to forced labor and public parades through the zone's lanes. Residents saw him as “almost a god,” according to one observer, and other committee members considered themselves merely “the tail of Father Jacquinot's kite.”

On official occasions, Jacquinot was accorded quasi-diplomatic status, even reviewing troops on board visiting naval vessels. With great tact, he obtained electricity and clean water from French authorities and helped organize a lottery to finance the zone, raising more than \$45,000. Visitors soon noted the good condition of the zone's inhabitants and the cleanliness of its streets. Encouraged by such success,

Jacquinot sought to extend the zone farther south.

Japan's army put an end to these plans when it captured Shanghai proper on November 12 after 92 days of fighting and took over control of the zone two days later. However, it left the administration to Jacquinot's supervisory committee until it felt ready to assume the daunting task of providing for the daily needs of a quarter of a million refugees. Fears of outright occupation surfaced on December 11, after a sniper allegedly fired on a Japanese sentry from within the zone. Without providing details, a Japanese spokesman claimed the zone had outlived its purpose since it was no longer in the midst of hostilities. Jacquinot's attempts to defend its neutrality fell on deaf ears, and rumors soon were heard about the seizure of refugees for forced labor.

Most residents were allowed to remain in the zone or return to their devastated neighborhoods. Japan assumed responsibility for keeping order in the zone, though Jacquinot's committee continued its humanitarian work until Japanese forces took up this task. Soon, a corrupt regime was established, financed by organized crime and maintained by the secret police. But the Jacquinot zone remained true to its mission, looking after the destitute until its closure in 1940.



Jacquinet's forceful personality made him an army of one in dealing with occupying Japanese military and civilian authorities alike.

Measures of success

How successful was the Jacquinet zone? By most accounts it saved some 250,000 Chinese from almost certain death, surpassing the number of refugees at Zikawei and, most likely, the number at Nanking. The French government, in making Jacquinet a member of the Legion of Honor in 1938, claimed he had saved 200,000 lives. Accolades came from other quarters as well. China's nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, received him officially in March 1938 and, in May of that year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt welcomed him at the White House, offering a special tribute and a donation of \$750,000.

Organizers of the safety zone in Nanking that had been inspired by Jacquinet urged him to negotiate a truce with the Japanese. This time, unfortunately, the consummate Jesuit diplomat was unable to persuade Japan to respect the Nanking zone; horrific atrocities ensued.

A lasting effect, nonetheless, of the Jacquinet zone was its citation in the commentary to the Geneva Conventions (1949) as an "encouraging precedent" of a neutralized zone, but Jacquinet, the so-called "Father of Refugees," did not live to see this last fruit of his labors. In 1940, after 28 years in China, he returned to France to help war victims in suburban Paris

with the Red Cross. In December 1945 he became head of a Vatican delegation for refugees in Berlin where, a few months later, he died of exhaustion at age 68.

Though military and ecclesiastical honors were given him at his funeral, a far more touching homage had been offered before his death by a humble rickshaw puller in Shanghai. After taking Jacquinet to the place where he would be inducted into the Legion of Honor, the driver refused fare for the ride. Carrying the "Savior of Shanghai" had been enough reward. **C**



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