

The One Time Nazis Helped China Fight Japan



Chinese cadets with German helmets in the 1930s

Most people who stayed awake for at least half of their high school history class knows that the Axis Powers in World War II consisted of Germany, Italy and Japan. But few know that German tactics and weapons—not to mention some actual Germans—helped the Chinese Nationalists stall Imperial Japan’s conquest of China.

For about a decade, German soldiers advised Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek in his campaigns against Chinese Communists ... and also against Germany’s future allies, the Japanese.

It’s one of history’s most unexpected—and frankly unknown—wartime partnerships. It all began in the aftermath of the Chinese revolution of 1911, as warlords carved up the country and battled each other for power.

European and American arms dealers, unable to find customers in the war-weary countries of the West in the years after World War I, found enthusiastic buyers in the Chinese. The warlords imported firearms and heavy weaponry and, in some cases, manufactured their own copies.

One of the most powerful, the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin had his own private air force of almost 100 of the latest aircraft, including light bombers. He

also maintained close ties with Japan, in particular courting investment from the Japanese South Manchuria Railroad Company.

Some warlords hired foreign military instructors, many of them World War I veterans. The advisers made their way to China in both official and unofficial capacities. The influx of foreign soldiers would soon include Germans.



Chiang Kai-Shek, at right, in 1929.

Rise of the nationalists

The greatest threat to the warlords were not each other, but revolutionaries under the banner of the Chinese Nationalist Party, also known as the Kuomintang. Led by Sun Yat-Sen, a republican and educated medical doctor, the Kuomintang sought to unify China and transform it into a modern state.

The Kuomintang, aligned with the Chinese Communist Party and backed by Soviet advisers under the command of Vasily Blyukher, launched the Northern Expedition to defeat the warlords.

Under the military leadership of Chiang Kai-Shek, the Nationalist army scored victory after victory against the warlords. With the death of Sun Yat-Sen of liver failure, Chiang began to consolidate control of the movement. That put him at odds with the Communists, several of whom were themselves plotting to take control of the revolution.

When the army reached Shanghai in 1927, Chiang enlisted local crime syndicates, notably the powerful Green Gang, to crack down on labor unions and violently purge Communists from the ranks. He then expelled Blyukher and the other Soviet advisers, unceremoniously sending them back to Moscow. The last major warlord was Marshal Zhang Zuolin. Failing to protect Japanese investments, Zhang had fallen out of favor with his backers in Tokyo .

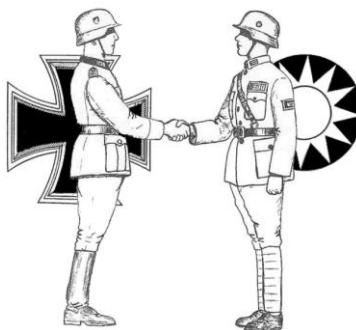
On June 4, 1928, while traveling an SMR rail line, a bomb detonated underneath Zhang's armored train, killing him. Most believe the Japanese Kwantung Army planted the explosive device.

Zhang was succeeded by his son Zhang Xueling, the Young Marshal. The Young Marshal, whom the Japanese expected to be a spineless puppet they could easily control, surprised everyone by quickly aligning himself with the Nationalists. The warlord era was fast ending.

But Chang realized he had a problem. Severing ties with the Soviets had left him without any significant foreign backer. There were still a few warlord holdouts—who often *did* have foreign backing—plus a growing Communist insurrection. Japan also loomed just across the China Seas.

On the advice of a German-educated friend, Chiang looked to Berlin to fill the void the Soviets had left. Germany was an attractive partner to Chiang. Berlin had lost all of its holdings in China after World War I and would be less likely to interfere in China's politics than comparable Western powers.

And the forced downsizing of Germany's once-mighty army also resulted in a wealth of highly experienced but unemployed German soldiers who'd be eager for work in China.



From a Chinese military pamphlet. Wikimedia Commons art

Here come the Germans!

Chiang sent an invitation to Gen. Erich Ludendorff to bring military and civil experts to China. Ludendorff declined the invitation, fearing his high profile would attract unwanted attention. Still, he saw potential in the offer, and recommended retired Col. Max Bauer—a logistics specialist with war experience—to lead a proposed German Advisory Group.

After a quick tour of China, Bauer returned to Berlin and handpicked a team of 25 advisers. Immediately upon arriving in November 1928, the advisers set to work training young Chinese officers.

Despite most of the advisers being retired—and technically civilians—in the employ of the Chinese government, the activities of German military men abroad was a touchy subject due to post-war limitations on what Germany could legally do.

As a result, Bauer gave strict orders to the group to avoid diplomats and journalists. Despite this, American military observers in 1929 reported seeing Chinese troops undergoing close-order drill under German supervision.

Bauer worked to standardize the acquisition of equipment and weapons, urging Chiang to cut out expensive middlemen and buy directly from manufacturers.

Unsurprisingly, many of these manufacturers were German, resulting in increased business for German companies. But the retail boom was cut short by Bauer's unexpected death in May 1929.

Bauer was succeeded by Col. Hermann Kriebel, a Nazi fanatic. He had been a member of the paramilitary *Freikorps* and had a long record of putschist activity with Hitler in Bavaria. One rumor has it that as a member of the German 1919 Armistice delegation, his parting words were, "See you again in 20 years."

Kriebel was arrogant, contemptuous of the Chinese and clashed with Bauer's selected officers. His attitude almost doomed the mission, and Chiang demanded he be replaced.

Kriebel was succeeded by Gen. Georg Wetzell. He helped plan anti-Communist operations and advised Gen. Ling during the 1932 Shanghai War against the

Japanese. He also convinced Chiang to set up an artillery school. Chinese artillery would play a huge role years later against Japanese invaders.

Gen. Hans von Seeckt, an influential German army staff officer and Wetzell's successor, built Chinese capacity further. Seeckt, vividly recalling the bloody cost of static trench warfare, believed in a war of *movement*.

He used his connections with German industrialists to bring in a huge influx of modern German equipment, ranging from helmets to artillery. One journalist suggested that as much as 60 percent of Chinese war material at this time was imported from Germany.



Alexander von Falkenhausen in Japan in 1911.

The last and arguably best chief adviser was Gen. Alexander von Falkenhausen. He had been military attaché in Tokyo from 1910 to 1914 and traveled to China to observe the revolution in 1911. During World War I, he served in France, East Prussia and Turkey and as a commander was credited with two victories over the British in East Jordan in 1918.

As a world traveler and professional soldier who'd worked in a variety of cultures, Falkenhausen was immune to the extremism that drove many of his predecessors.

He also had little love for the Nazis, having lost his brother to a violent internal struggle in the party that solidified Hitler's control.

As a result, he was better able to develop close personal and professional ties with the Chinese.

Chinese in Germany

With Germans increasingly entrenched in China, some of their Chinese counterparts found themselves in Germany. Chinese businessmen, government officials and students hoped to learn from Germany's rapid rebound from an economically crippled failed state into a world power. German industry was of particular interest.

The Nazis were split on their opinion of the Chinese. Joseph Goebbels and Hermann Goering in particular were in bitter disagreement. Goebbels was decidedly pro-China and favored continuing German business interests—he also viewed Chiang as a burgeoning fascist.

Goering, however, saw the Japanese as the stronger and most worthy power in Asia—especially considering their disdain for the Soviets—and pushed for the Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and *Japan*.



Chiang Wei-Kuo.

One of the most notable Chinese in Germany at the time was Chiang Kai-Shek's adopted son Chiang Wei-Kuo. He went to study military tactics with the German army, training in military schools and taking part in military operations.

He even commanded troops during the annexation of the Austria.

As Falkenhausen took over the group in 1936, tensions between Japan and China were escalating. Around the same time, The Young Marshal Zhang Xueling, tasked by Chiang to eradicate the communists, was fed up with battling fellow Chinese while the Japanese only grew stronger.

Zhang conspired with Communist leader Zhou Enlai and proceeded to kidnap Chiang and forc him into a truce with the Communists. Upon his release, he promptly had Zhang imprisoned. Falkenhausen set to work advising Chiang on how best to resist Japanese aggression. One of the great ironies of this episode is that Falkenhausen and Chiang's interactions were always in Japanese, their only common language.



Japanese Marines in Shanghai in 1937.

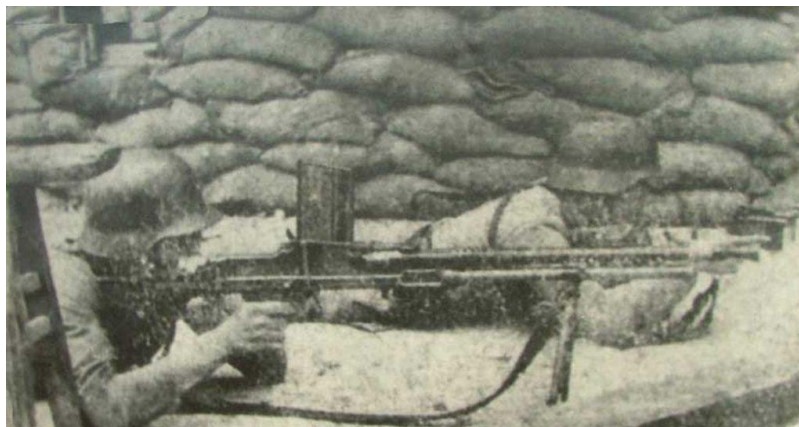
Japan invades

The July 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident marked the beginning of Japan's full-scale invasion of China. The poorly-trained Chinese troops in the north were quickly routed. When the fighting broke out in Shanghai, Tokyo expected a quick victory.

However, among the Chinese troops dispatched to Shanghai was the German trained — and equipped — 88th Division. Against all expectations, the division's infantry inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese in vicious urban combat. The Japanese responded by shelling and bombing the Chinese troops—and by sending in tanks.

During this time, German advisers including Falkenhausen were often near or in the fight in Shanghai, despite Berlin's preference that they not get directly involved.

“We all agreed,” Falkenhausen wrote, “that as private citizens in Chinese employment there could be no question of leaving our Chinese friends to their fate. Therefore I assigned German advisers wherever they were needed and that was often in the front lines.”



Chinese troops with German gear hold out at Sihang Warehouse.

Despite being present for some heavy combat, no German advisers are known to have died.

The Chinese held out until November, but eventually retreated in the face of Japanese armor, air and naval attacks. Tokyo was badly bruised by the Chinese

defensive and livid at being defied by an “inferior” race. Particularly embarrassing was the showdown at Sihang Warehouse, in which a lone battalion from the 88th Division held out against Japanese attacks in full view of the international district.

But now the Japanese were ready to strike at the Chinese capital of Nanjing. En route they took out their frustration on Chinese civilians, killing and looting wantonly. Even Kriebel, who had been so contemptuous of the Chinese before and was back in China as the German consul general in Shanghai, expressed his disgust at the atrocities. But the march on Nanjing was just a preview of how ugly things were to become.



Japanese troops bayonet Chinese prisoners.

Fall of Nanjing

Chiang called a meeting of his generals with Falkenhausen to plan their next move. Generals Li Zongren and Bai Chongxi—the latter a favorite of Falkenhausen—advocated withdrawing forces from Nanjing to regroup. Next, the generals proposed declaring Nanjing to be an undefended city so that the Japanese wouldn’t have any excuse to slaughter civilians.

Falkenhausen backed Li and Bai. The only dissenter was Gen. Tang Shengzhi, who demanded a last stand against Japan in the capital. Chiang, wanting to preserve his prestige and at least make an effort to defend Nanjing, deferred to Tang.

John Rabe, a German businessman and prominent Nazi living in Nanjing, was aghast “[Nanjing] cannot be effectively defended,” he wrote. “Sitting in this crook in the Yangtze is like sitting in a mousetrap.”

“I continue to hope that Hitler will help us,” Rabe continued. “A man of firm will and steady eye — the same as you and I — has deep sympathy not only for the distress of his own people, but for the anguish of the Chinese, as well.”

Rabe speculated that if Hitler were to demand a stop to the Japanese advance, it would halt immediately. The consequences of this last stand were disastrous. The Chinese defenders were obliterated. Many of the remnants of the elite 88th Division were destroyed in the fighting, though some were able to rejoin the army in the west or blend into guerrilla bands in the countryside.

However, the worst consequence was one of history’s bloodiest massacres, today known as the Rape of Nanjing. Japanese troops entered the city in December 1937 and indulged in an orgy of rape and pillage that lasted until late January. Although exact numbers are disputed, most historians agree that thousands of women and girls were raped by Japanese troops—and somewhere between 180,000 and 300,000 civilians died.



Rabe.

Rabe, along with other Western residents of the city, labored hard to aid the refugees and was instrumental in setting up the International Safety Zone. He was known for wearing his Swastika armband as he escorted Chinese nationals around, standing up to Japanese soldiers and officials.

Despite the initial hesitance of other American and European expats to work with an avowed Nazi, Rabe earned the respect of both westerners and the residents of Nanjing.

Unfortunately for Rabe's faith in Hitler and in Germany's commitment to China, the defeat at Nanjing led Hitler to believe that China was a lost cause. It was the beginning of the end for Sino-German ties. To Hitler, the Japanese had proven to be a superior race to the Chinese.

But one more battle was to take place before Germany quit China for good. In the Battle of Taierzhuang in early 1938, Chinese troops under Generals Li and Bai engaged Japanese troops in the small town of Shantung. The Chinese troops, led by German-trained battalion commanders, maneuvered at night to avoid Japan's superior air assets and used German-built howitzers to smash Japanese entrenchments.



Chinese troops at Taierzhuang, the first clear Chinese victory of the war.

German legacy

The Chinese prevailed at Taierzhuang. After the battle, the Japanese demanded that the Germans withdraw the advisory group. Hitler complied without reservation. German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop told Falkenhausen to withdraw, which he did only under extreme pressure.

Falkenhausen and his staff reluctantly returned to Germany. Unlike former Italian advisers who profited by selling detailed aerial surveys of China to Japan, many of the Germans refused to divulge Chinese secrets to Japan, even under pressure from the Nazis. Chiang Wei-Kuo, by that time commanding a panzer on the border with Poland, was recalled back to China.

Westerners were horrified by the devastation in China. Urban warfare up to this point had been a fairly rare occurrence in modern warfare. Certainly the scale of death and destruction, particularly among non-combatants, seemed new. In a few years, such bloodshed would all too common all over the world.

After the German Blitzkrieg tore through Western Europe beginning in late 1939, Falkenhausen was appointed to serve as the German military governor of Belgium—a position in which he took neither joy nor pride. Among his tasks were the suppression of Belgian resistance and the rounding up of Jews and other undesirables. Throughout much of his tenure in Belgium, Falkenhausen was secretly in touch with anti-Nazi conspirators and those helping to rescue Jews.



Falkenhausen in Belgium.

The rescuers included Qian Xiuling, a Chinese woman who had married a Belgian man she'd met while studying chemistry at the Catholic University of Louvain. Qian's cousin was an officer in the Chinese army and had been trained by

Falkenhausen. He told her through correspondence that if she needed anything, she should go to Falkenhausen.



Qian Xiuling

The general helped Qian save the lives of many Jews and dissidents. After an attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944, Falkenhausen was imprisoned and spent the remainder of the war in concentration camps, at one point being interned in Dachau.

He was eventually liberated, but then subsequently arrested by U.S. troops. He was sent back to Belgium to be put on trial for crimes against humanity. Qian and others he had aided came to his defense, but he was nevertheless sentenced to 12 years hard labor.

He was pardoned after only three years and moved back to Germany. Chiang, having heard of his fate, began sending money and gifts to his old comrade. But Faulkenhausen was so embittered by his experiences that he lived out the rest of his life a jaded, reclusive old man. He died in 1966 at the age of 88. In 2001, when a journalist [asked an aging Qian](#) how she saw Falkenhausen, she replied simply, "A man with morals."

Rabe fared little better after the war. Living in Germany again by then he was arrested first by the Soviets and then by the British. Although never directly implicated in any crimes, his history as a high profile party member meant he had to be declared "de-Nazified."

Unable to find work, he sold off his collection of Eastern art to buy food and quickly became destitute. According to some accounts, he received aid from prominent citizens of Nanjing who had heard of his plight. This help ceased after the Communists took Nanjing from the nationalists. Rabe died of a stroke in 1950.

His headstone has since been moved to Nanjing and his house made into a museum.

The strange tale of the Germans in China's wars demonstrates how quickly loyalty and national interest can shift—and alliances with them. It also reveals that personal ties formed in the crucible of combat can transcend these shifts and last a lifetime.

Unfortunately for men like Falkenhausen, the saga also shows how steep the price of integrity can be.

[Source: War Is boring | Kevin Knodell | January 3, 2014 ++]