

'Shanghai has fallen without a fight' from Le Monde (27 May 1949)

Caption: On 27 May 1949, the special correspondent of the French daily newspaper Le Monde describes how Mao Tse-Tung's Communist troops took Shanghai.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 27.05.1949, n° 1 348. Paris: Le Monde. "Changhaï est tombé sans combat", auteur:Guillain, Robert , p. 1; 2.

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Shanghai has fallen without a fight

Despite Chiang Kai-shek's determination to fight to the very end

(By cable, from our special correspondent Robert Guillain.)

Shanghai, 25 May. — This morning, I saw the Communist spearhead arrive at the heart of Shanghai along the Nanking Road and the Bund. At the foot of the giant buildings, small, khaki-clad, mud-spattered young men advanced methodically. They were moving in small groups, hugging the walls in the empty streets and jumping from one crossing to the next.

The immediate impression was one of skilled and disciplined troops specialised in street fighting. The patrols, moving in single file and covering one another, knew exactly where they were going behind their leaders. Fifteen minutes after the arrival of the communications brigade, the telephones had been fully installed. The pillboxes, erected but never used by the nationalists, were immediately taken over. Guards were posted at the entrance of the main buildings where white flags flew.

Yet these troops who were about to conquer China's first city were not accompanied by any motorised transport or artillery. Old rifles and machine guns, worn-out shoes, uniforms faded by the sun and the rain: it was a troop of hardened, but visibly exhausted, foot soldiers. During their short periods of rest, these peasant-soldiers craned their necks to stare at the tops of the 15- or 20-storey buildings, an obviously unfamiliar sight to them.

Shanghai's 'Marne taxis' going the wrong way

From the 18th floor of the Broadway skyscraper where I live, I witnessed yesterday the Chinese equivalent of the famous march of the 'Marne taxis'.

The taxis were replaced here by thousands of rickshaws and bicycle rickshaws powered by mobilised coolies who, pedalling frantically in a mad rush, bore thousands of officers and soldiers perched on their luggage racks. However, unlike the Marne taxis, this procession was not moving towards the front but returning from it, evidently part of the 'elastic defence' tactics. This perhaps explains why the enemy, less than 500 metres away, did not even bother to shoot. Battalion after battalion of rubber-shod soldiers emerged from the depths of the city, a surprising phenomenon for anyone who had noticed during the past days how the fronts skirting the city were being held by just a few handfuls of men.

As a send-off for the fleeing defenders, the entire city had been ordered to hoist flags bearing the blue star on a red ground, as well as banners congratulating the victorious heroes. 'A spontaneous expression of the people's gratitude for the recent victories', the General speaking for the garrison told the foreign journalists who had been invited, adding: 'The battle against the Communist bandits will continue to the very end, no matter what the final outcome may be.' Another episode happened right before my eyes: at night-time, on the river, barges filled with troops trying to cross from the opposite embankment came under heavy Nationalist rifle fire. However, as they approached, moving out of the darkness, it became clear from their shouts, raised hands and calls to stop firing that they were actually friendly troops engaged in a strategic withdrawal.

There was, however, no doubt that the end was at hand: during the day, three ships had unloaded 20 000 tonnes of rice at the mouth of the Huangpu, and the well-provisioned city was ripe for the taking.

Despite some pockets of resistance, the occupation continues

The occupation has so far taken place under unexpected conditions of order and correctness. Above all, Shanghai had feared that the intermediate period might give rise to riots and pillaging by mobs of the licentious soldiery and by refugees. The speed of the advance, however, dispelled these fears. One of the rare skirmishes in the city centre broke out at the Park Hotel: the previous night, a handful of Nationalist

soldiers, whose conduct at the front had earned them the title of national heroes, had been guests of honour at a Propaganda Committee banquet with Chinese wine and dancers. Surprised at dawn while still in the ladies' company, they decided to die a hero's death, which they accomplished quite properly, despite being improperly dressed.

The invisible snipers whose bullets still resounded in the morning around the Bund have disappeared, and the first Chinese have opened their shop fronts a crack to risk a few steps outside their barricades, taking cover against the walls. In the western parts of the city, the first to be liberated, life was already back to normal this morning, and the Chinese cooks of the European households did their market rounds as usual.

In the early afternoon, the Nationalist lines, which I crossed this morning just in time to reach the 'liberated zone', had already come under Communist fire. These are part of Chiang Kai-shek's troops of Blue Shirts who expect no mercy from the Reds. They continue to defend the bridges and embankments of the Suzhou Canal, enfiling the streets of the former International Concession located on that side. They have moved as far as the garden of the Soviet Consulate, at the notorious Garden-Bridge corner, having climbed over the gates. The British and American consulates are surrounded by crossfire that can be heard all the way to our telegraph office, two blocks away.

The troops that left yesterday are trying to board some 30 ships in the outer harbour of Wusong, taking with them substantial, and totally unused, weaponry. However, the last three leaders, the Mayor, the Commander-in-Chief (General Tan Gen Po) and the notorious Mao Sen, Head of the Secret Police, whose street executions spread terror during the siege, took off last night from Lungwa airport, which had, paradoxically, stayed open. The censor has also disappeared.

It is now possible to tell the story of how Chiang Kai-shek's visit, about ten days ago, nearly turned Shanghai into a real battlefield. General Tan Gen Po was negotiating quietly with both friends and enemies, bargaining with either side for large numbers of gold bars in return for slipping away with the defenders' army. The Generalissimo's unexpected arrival interrupted these discussions. His main idea — it is universally acknowledged — was to defend Shanghai to the very end in the hope of creating an international incident that would draw the foreign powers into the wasps' nest with him. Reinforcements arrived from Formosa, and the fighting was prolonged for another ten days or so. Chiang, who has a terrible temper, greets his subordinates with violent outbursts of temper, accusing them: 'You too, a traitor? Go on, disappear. I don't need you.'

The city is without rice. The troops have stopped fighting, despite princely wages paid in silver dollars and massive reinforcements of 'comfort girls'. The Generalissimo, not feeling at all safe, sleeps in a different place almost every night. His friends claim that he is having a nervous breakdown. When he finally left, hopes for peace arose once more. However, while each of the three leaders tried to negotiate behind the scenes, they all continued to fear the punishment of their master and the Kuomintang Party. Fighting has flared up again in the Wusong suburbs, troops have been sacrificed, and the farce of this absurd war has been on the brink of turning into a tragedy over the last four days. There is talk of a scorched-earth policy and of massive destruction when the collapse of the defences, particularly in Putong and on the western front, precipitates the general rout.

However that may be, this war is very different from the one I knew in 1937 when the Japanese attacked Shanghai, the self-proclaimed Paris of the Far East, when evenings came to an end in evening dress at the front, that is to say at the end of the street. War has come this time to a Shanghai dilapidated as a result of the disappearance of the foreign concessions, ruined by three years of civil war and spoilt by runaway inflation.

What emerges now from the end of every suburban street is not so much war as misery and confusion, with hordes of refugees intermingled with a worrying crowd of soldiers that no longer belong to any unit.

Robert Guillain