

## History is Written by the Victors

Since the rise of the Communist Party in China, its history in relationship to the West has changed. Of course the facts haven't changed, but history is a human endeavor, a human invention. It is the linchpin of national mythology, the foundation of what a nation believes about itself and about other nations.



*Members of the Chinese Labor Corps on the WWI Front Lines*

With the victory of the Communists in China, both they and the West had reason to rewrite history. But even before that, the West, with little or no respect for the Chinese, wrote them out.

On August 14, 1917, China declared war with Germany and Austria-Hungary. They seized German ships in Chinese ports and assets in Chinese banks. They offered troops to fight in Europe but the Allied Force commanders considered this impractical.

The French convinced the allies that the Chinese could work as paid laborers. They suggested hiring 50,000 Chinese to work on the front lines. They would carry ammunition, dig trenches, and bury the dead. They would not engage in combat, and served unarmed. The Chinese workers found this hazardous duty very attractive because it paid much more than any job they could find at home.

At the deployment's peak, about 140,000 Chinese worked on the front lines, about 100,000 for the British and 40,000 for the French. Of those, official Western history claims about 2,000 died, but Chinese history has the number at ten times that. The Chinese claims are not unrealistic, trench warfare was brutal and deadly. The Chinese ran ammunition to the entrenched soldiers, often exposing themselves to reach them.

At the end of the war most of the remaining laborers were repatriated. They took home a sense that European society was far from ideal, and that Europeans considered the Chinese less than human. They were often bitter, disillusioned, and suffering from the terrible stresses of war.

After the war, in spite of the substantial contribution of the Chinese both politically and in human terms, the Europeans and Japanese ignored their demands at the Treaty of Versailles. The West and Japan essentially ignored the "sick man of East Asia", an appellation which was the source of great insult to China. The Germans ceded control of Chinese concession ports in Shandong to the Japanese without consulting them. The Chinese were outraged that their sovereignty was so abused and refused to sign the treaty. The Japanese ultimately used their access to ports to stage an invasion of China, resulting in the unspeakable brutalities of the "Rape of Nanking".

Mostly, this is forgotten. China turned from the West and so the West from China. But we can see that, in fact, the face of the West was already turned away. We, in the West, know little of this history. Recently there has been more focus on the facts of a history so unimportant to us that we don't even include the stories of it in our national history. If our national myth raises us on the backs of other nations what have we gained? If we are blinded to the essential humanity of other nations, what do we get? History, read without mythical blinders can tell us that. We dehumanize others at our own peril. If we can imagine what it is like to live an other's myth, we stand a chance of being human ourselves.