



Japan and the Centenary of the First World War

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Historical events have a strange habit of occurring on particular dates. For example, November 9 has been the date of several important events in German history. On that date in 1918, Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated and fled to exile in the Netherlands. The night of 9 November 1938 is known as “Kristallnacht,” the beginning of the darkest period of anti-Semitism in modern times. The same date in 1989 is the night the Berlin Wall came down after separating West Berlin from East Berlin and East Germany for twenty-eight years.

Japan fought its first war as a modern state in 1894, against Qing Dynasty China. A decade later, in 1904, Japan began a desperate war with Imperial Russia. Precisely another decade later, in 1914, Japan declared war against the German Empire and thereby entered the First World War on the allied side. Japan won all three of these wars, each of which events shaped the course of twentieth-century Japanese history.

In just two decades, Japan rose from a quaint oriental archipelago that hardly anybody could identify to become one of the smaller major powers. Of the three wars it fought in this period, the First World War is somehow the strangely forgotten war. Numerous articles and special issues commemorating the centenary of the First World War have been published this year, but all I have seen so far regard the war as being European rather than Japanese. However, if one looks closely, this war has also influenced the course of Japanese history very much.



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Around the turn of the century, Japan played the strange role as the gravedigger of ailing empires. Both Qing and Romanov dynasties were consigned to history soon after losing their respective wars against Japan, and the First World War marked the end of the Deutsches Reich. Yet Japan was still emerging in those days, barely regarded as a major power. It was fortunate that the two first modern wars it fought were against old empires — glorious, but inefficient. Western cartoons of the day depicted Japan as a small Samurai warrior delivering a sting to giant bears. Japan's strategy was to win a succession of quick, dazzling battles against heavy giants and thereby negotiate a favorable peace.

The conflicts were fought on the peripheries of empires; the decisive battles won on the seas, not land. The strategy marked the beginning of Japan as a modern naval power. It also revealed clearly its limitations as a land power. The battles were fought on the far eastern edges of the continent, even while Japanese logistics were stretched to the limits. Japan did not penetrate into the heart of either the Qing or Romanov empires. Had Japan dared to proceed further inland, it would have met the same fate as Napoleon.



Satirical drawing in Punch Magazine in London (29 September 1894), showing the victory of "small" Japan over "large" China. Japan's 1894 victory over China
Source: "JapanPunch29September1894" by Unknown - Japan Punch 1894. Reproduction in [1]. Licensed under Public domain via Wikimedia Commons - <http://goo.gl/Xk7dGH>

Japan was never happy with the peace treaties struck with either Qing dynasty China or Russia. After Japan and China signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki concluding the Sino-Japanese War, Russia, France and Germany intervened and demanded that Japan withdraw from the Liaodong Peninsula including the harbor city of Port Arthur. Japan had no choice but to accede to what it called the "tripartite intervention" on the terms of the treaty. It was a great humiliation, and the entire nation vowed someday



to pay back the “injustice.” This sentiment sowed the seeds of the subsequent Russo-Japanese War, a battle for the control of Northeast China and the Korean Peninsula. Liaodong Peninsula and Port Arthur were the Crimean Peninsula and Sebastopol of the Far East. In the Russo-Japanese War, the Siege of Port Arthur was one of the fiercest-fought battles, costing the Japanese side more than 15,000 lives.

The Russo-Japanese War was also ended by a negotiated peace, this time in Portsmouth, the United States. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt played a crucial role mediating the peace, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. Japan, meanwhile, was hugely unhappy with the prize it got. Russian influence in Korea and Manchuria had been rolled back, but Japan received only the southern half of Sakhalin and no reparations. The Russian delegation at Portsmouth was packing its bags, ready to continue the war if Japan insisted on receiving reparations. Russia had lost several battles, but had four new divisions arriving in the Far East by Trans-Siberian Railway and was confident it could win the war if it fought on. Japan, on the other hand, was stretched to its limits and almost broke. It acquired Russian lease rights in the southern half of the Liaodong Peninsula including Dalian and Port Arthur, along with some mining and railway concessions as well as fishing rights, but received no reparations. A rally in Hibiya Park, Tokyo, on 5 September 1905 protesting against the Peace Treaty soon broke into a riot, causing damage throughout the city over the next two days. The disturbances spread to Kobe, Yokohama and other cities, leading to the collapse of Prime Minister Taro Katsura's cabinet on 7 January 1906.

Compared to these two close victories, the First World War for Japan was an easy victory, and is probably largely forgotten for this reason. Japan had no direct or vital national interest in the war. Japan declared war on Imperial Germany because it was a British ally after conclusion of the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which stipulated that if either signatory became involved in war with more than one power, the other power would come to its support. So, Japan landed on the Shantung Peninsula to lay siege on the German port of Qingtao. Joined by a symbolic British force, Japan started bombardment of Qingtao on 31 October 1914 and by November 7 had overwhelmed the German defense. During this battle, the Japanese Navy conducted the world's first naval-launched air raids, dispatching aircraft from the *Wakamiya* to attack German targets in Qingtao and ships in Qiaozhou Bay. To further its sphere of



influence in China, Japan presented “Twenty-One Demands” to the Chinese President in January 1915. Some of these demands were withdrawn as a result of major-power intervention, but the episode gave rise to a serious wave of anti-Japanese feeling in China and served as a warning in Europe and the United States that Japan was pushing its interest in mainland China to its limits.

In October 1914, the Japanese Navy seized German colonial possessions in the Pacific — the Mariana, Caroline and Marshall Islands — without much resistance. Japan offered naval assistance to the allies. The Japanese Navy escorted European Allies’ ships in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, providing protection from German U-boat attacks. In recognition of these services, Japan was allowed to keep the Shantung Peninsula and the islands north of the Equator it had taken from the Germans. The Pacific islands were placed under Japanese administration through the League of Nations’ South Pacific Mandate. Some 100,000 Japanese emigrated to these islands, which became strategic strongholds for the Imperial Navy.

At the Versailles Peace Conference, in which Japan participated as one of the victorious nations, Japan submitted a racial equality clause for inclusion in the peace treaty, which would have become part of the Covenant of the League of Nations had it been adopted. The first draft read as follows:

“The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of states, members of the League, equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.”

Although the Japanese proposal received a majority of eleven “yes” votes from the seventeen delegates present, the chairman, President Woodrow Wilson of the United States, overturned the result, saying that in this particular case, a unanimous vote would be required, since strong opposition had manifested itself. In those days, black people were segregated in many southern states in the United States, while the British possessed an Empire which rested on the principle of superiority of the British race.

Another episode shows the ambivalent position Japan held at that time. Although Japan had won a



quick victory against the Germans, the nation treated the German prisoners of war very well and with respect during their captivity in Japan. They were given relative freedom to indulge in cultural activities. Some among them were the first to introduce the music of Beethoven and Bach to Japanese citizens. Most of the 4,700 prisoners returned home in 1920, but 170 chose to remain in Japan after the war.

The legacy of the First World War for Japan is mixed. It was another quick victory, and this time an easy one against a major European power. That would probably have emboldened the Japanese to fight against European nations in the 1930s. They had also seen the weakness of the defense of the European colonial possessions in Asia. Their naval escort operation was conducted out of Singapore, which was one of the first targets of the Japanese Pacific campaign. Under the terms of the South Pacific Mandate, the “Japanese Empire” became much more maritime and multi-ethnic, and acquired naval operation bases in the Pacific. The quick victories over European colonial possessions were repeated after 1940, against French, British and Dutch colonial possessions in Southeast Asia. The pushing of demands on China and the consequent rise of the anti-Japanese movement did not cease during the interwar period.

Beginning in 1894 Japan fought three wars in succession in just two decades. Perhaps the easiness of the victory after 1914 led the Japanese to forget how close and difficult the first two victories had been. Sweet memories are easier to retain, but they can prove fatal in the end.

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