

The Shock of the First World War: Japan and Total War

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Introduction

The First World War, which began with the shooting in Sarajevo in the summer of 1914 and ended in the fall of 1918 with Germany's surrender, differed greatly in many aspects from previous wars. In particular, the length of the war, which lasted four years, and its nature as a great war of attrition, which required the commitment of huge amounts of men and material by all of the participating nation, exceeded greatly the predictions which had been made at the war's beginning. Japan participated in this war, too, on the side of the Allies, in order to fulfil its obligations under the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, but the scope of its participation was limited to the occupation of German possessions in the Pacific Ocean, various naval escort missions and the assignment of a small naval force to the Mediterranean. It is often suspected that Japan's limited participation prevented her from adequately comprehending that future wars would likely be long wars of attrition similar to World War One. The historical event which is most often given as proof of this is Japan's entry into World War Two some twenty years later. This time, Japan, as a member of the Axis powers, opened hostilities against the United States, Great Britain and the other allies, even though she had no outlook for fighting and winning a long war of attrition, and instead placed her bets on winning initial victories, in which she was confident and which were somehow supposed to lead to ultimate victory. This concept of war, however, in which initial tactical victories would result in final victory, was more suitable for the wars fought in the pre-total war era, i.e., in Japan's case, for wars such as the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. It is often said that "Generals always prepare to fight the last war." The question therefore must be asked whether the "last war" for the Japanese generals and admirals in the years immediately preceding the Second World War was the Russo-Japanese War, rather than World War One, and whether such military leaders really lacked any understanding of total war, which was the big lesson of World War One. From that standpoint, this report first of all examines how Japan's army and navy each viewed and reacted to the First World War. An examination of the effect the First World War had on the Japanese leaders' views of war before World War Two will be next. Finally,

a few observations will be made on Japan's views of war in the post-World War Two period, especially in connection with such views held before the war.

1. The Japanese Army's Reaction

In order to study the military implications of the First World War, the Japanese Army established the "Temporary Military Study Committee" (Rinji Gunji Chosa Iinkai) as early as 1915, the year after the start of the war, and began studying various aspects of the conflict. By mid-1917, about halfway through the war, the Army was using the term "Total National Mobilization" (Kokka Sodoin) to refer to the total war nature of the war.¹ The results of such studies were organized after the war into reports such as the "Views concerning Total National Mobilization" (Kokka Sodoin ni kansuru Iken) of 1920, and the Army began to study various measures which should be taken to respond to the arrival of the age of total war. It is interesting to note that such measures were not limited to purely military issues. As can be seen in the saying, "If the Sino-Japanese War of 1895-96 was thumb-wrestling, the Russo-Japanese War was arm-wrestling, and the First World War was a Grand Sumo match using the entire body,"² it was well understood, at least within the Army, that the First World War differed greatly in scale from previous wars. As Japan considered how she should prepare for the age of total war, the biggest problem she came to face was how she should develop the economic power which would inevitably be needed to fight a long war of attrition which total war would necessarily entail, and which would expend an enormous amount of national power and wealth. This was a particularly pressing problem for Japan, because she had few natural resources within the home islands, and because her industrial production capabilities were still far behind those of the other major powers. Japan eventually concluded that externally, sources of natural resources would have to be secured, which specifically meant the resources-rich areas of China, while domestically, a reorganization of the state's systems which would enable the total mobilization of all human and material resources would be necessary.³

¹ Fumitaka Kurosawa, "Dai-Ichiji Sekai Taisen no Shogeki to Nihon Rikugun: Gun Kindaika-Ron Oboegaki" (The Shock of the First World War and the Japanese Army: Memorandum on Military Modernization), in Takeshi Takita, ed., *Tenkanki no Yoropa to Nihon* (Europe and Japan at the Crossroads)(Nansosha, 1997), p. 178.

² Ryoichi Tobe, *Nihon no Kindai 9: Gyakusetu no Guntai* (Japan's Modernization, Vol. 9: the Paradoxical Military)(Chuo Koronsha, 1998), p. 220.

³ Fumitaka Kurosawa, "Senzen Nihon no 'Taiheiyo Senso e no Michi': Rikugun no Soryokusen Koso wo Chushin ni shite" ("The Road to the Pacific War' of Prewar Japan: the Army's Concept of Total War," in Akio Nakai, Kimitada Miwa and Michio

Opinions within the Army split, however, concerning this issue of total war and Japan's economic power, which was bound to be the key issue in any discussion about preparations for total war. One side was represented by the views of Ugaki Kazushige,⁴ who insisted that overall national power, including economic power, should be strengthened from peacetime, in order to prepare for the possibility of fighting a long war in the future. The other viewpoint was held by the believers in a short, decisive war, who felt that a country such as Japan which was deficient in national power should concentrate on developing and maintaining a powerful military during peacetime, so that in the event of a war, she could attain her war aims quickly through a short war. This latter viewpoint, the premise of which was that Japan's overall national power would be deficient anyway, also tended to stress the importance of willpower as a means of making up for such material shortages.⁵ This standoff between the believers in the development of overall national power and those believing in the development of overwhelming tactical military strength ended in the late 1920s in the victory of the former, under the leadership of Ugaki, who at the time was Army Minister. Partly in order to reduce the burden of military expenditures on the rest of the economy, Ugaki carried out a major peacetime reduction of the Army at this time. In the 1930s, however, debate within the Army intensified once again concerning future force and armament structures. This was caused partly by the strong resentment felt by the Army as an organization towards the arms reductions forced through by Ugaki. At this time, at least, the Army evidently forgot that its organizational role was national defense, and instead let its instinct for organizational self-protection take precedence. In addition, the increasing tension in international relations in the 1930s had an effect. The concept of strengthening overall national power in preparation for total war required that stable access to the natural resources of the Chinese mainland be secured; rising Chinese nationalism and the strengthening of Soviet national power through the latter's new economic policies, however, threatened Japan's so-called special interests in China, and especially Manchuria. The expansion by the Army into the Asian mainland, starting with the Manchurian Incident of 1931, was carried out partly in response to such a need to develop national power. In addition, the Army felt that certain domestic problems hindered the development of overall national power. The Army believed that the realities of Japanese domestic politics at that time, which saw political battles waged

Royama, eds., *Dokuso Nichibei Kaisen to Gojyu-nen Go (Start of the Russo-German and Japan-U.S. Wars, and 50 Years Later)*(Nansosha, 1993), pp. 35-36.

⁴ Japanese names in this paper have been written in the traditional Japanese order, i.e. family name first, given name last.

⁵ Tobe, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

repeatedly solely for their own sake, was nowhere near the national system which it felt was required to permit the total mobilization of domestic resources. The Japanese Army's interventions into domestic politics, which occurred with ever increasing frequency in the 1930s, was closely related to this issue of developing overall national power.

The factional conflicts within the Army between the "Control" and the "Imperial Way" cliques climaxed in February 1936, with the so-called "2.26 Incident." Ishiwara Kanji, who was then the Chief of the Operations Section, Army General Staff, was extremely concerned about the Army's lack of progress in its preparations for total war, especially since the Soviet Union, the Army's Hypothetical Enemy Number One, was strengthening herself considerably, both economically and militarily.⁶ Ishiwara used his rather unique position of leadership within the Army to make more serious efforts to construct systems and institutions aimed at fighting a total war with the Soviet Union, such as by implementing a "Five-Year Plan for Critical Industries" and other means. The five-year plan stalled, however, due to the outbreak and escalation of the China War in 1937. Ishiwara, who by that time had been promoted to Chief of the Operations Division, vehemently opposed escalation of the China conflict, in order to buy time to develop his total war system. In the end, however, he lost out, and the China War turned into a quagmire for Japan.

The Army, therefore, had fully understood the total war characteristic of the First World War while it was still in progress, and its implications for future wars, and had begun to take steps to prepare Japan for this new age of warfare, but was unable to carry out a coherent, sustained policy for creating a system for preparing for total war in the interwar period because of the factional infighting. Furthermore, the need for the securing of natural resources, which could only be satisfied by an overseas source, and the restructuring of domestic systems, meant that the Army's energy and resources would be dispersed – overseas, by the deployment of troops in China, and domestically, by its more active involvement in domestic politics. In addition, the Army was ultimately unable to carry out various reforms which were necessitated by scientific and technological developments, as well as the modernization of its weapons and weapon systems, even though the lessons of World War One had made clear the need for both. This was perhaps the biggest difference from the Japanese Navy's response to the experience of the First World War.

⁶ Kurono Taeru, "Showa Jyunen-dai Hajime ni okeru Kokubo Kokusaku no Sakutei: Ishiwara Kanji no Kokubo Koso wo Chushin ni" (The Determination of National Defense Policy in the late 1930s: Ishiwara Kanji's National Defense Concept), *Kokusai*

2. The Response of the Japanese Navy

Like the Army, the Navy also set up a “Emergency Navy Committee to Study Naval Affairs” (Rinji Kaigun Gunji Chosa Iinkai) in the autumn of 1915, and began to study the possible effects and lessons of the war. As a result of its studies, the Navy also came to understand that future wars would be long wars of attrition, i.e. total wars. In contrast with the Army, however, the Navy’s studies tended to center on issues related to weapons development and naval tactics, partly as a result of the Navy’s traditional emphasis on scientific technology. The lessons which were derived as a result, such as “It will be difficult for a naval force, which has less than sixty percent of the enemy’s navy, to attain a decisive victory,” or “Dreadnoughts still have not lost their value as the nucleus of naval strength,” greatly affected the Navy’s response to the war.⁷

It should be noted that opinions regarding how the Navy should prepare for total wars split in connection with the naval arms reduction issue, which arose during the Washington Conference of 1921-22. It is interesting to note that the same sort of opposing viewpoints arose within the Navy as had in the Army concerning the question of how Japan should deal with her relative economic backwardness. Kato Tomosaburo, the Navy Minister at the time and the ambassador plenipotentiary at the Washington Conference, believed that national defense was no longer “the exclusive domain of the armed forces,” and that the development of economic and industrial strength in particular, and overall national power in general, would be necessary in order to survive the age of total war. He further felt that peacetime armaments which were at a level “proportionate to national strength” would be adequate, and recommended that the proposal which would limit Japan’s capital ships to sixty percent vis-à-vis the U.S. and Great Britain be adopted. Kato Hiroharu, chief of the naval delegation to the Conference, adamantly opposed this proposal, arguing as follows. Since Japan was deficient in national power relative to her hypothetical enemies, it would be all the more important for her to maintain a high level of armaments from peacetime, given that enormous amounts of natural resources and industrial power would be required to fight a total war. In such an age of total war, Japan would also have to seek an early victory in the event of war, by concentrating all her available forces against the enemy in the very early stages of the conflict. In order for Japan to maintain this capability, she absolutely could not accept a sixty

Seiji No. 120 (February 1999), p. 196.

⁷ Hiramata Yoichi, *Dai-ichiji Sekai Taisen to Nihon Kaigun: Gaiko to Gunji no Rensetsu* (The Japanese Navy and the First World War: the Interwining of Diplomacy and

percent ratio in capital ships vis-à-vis the United States, because such a limitation would make it impossible for the Japanese Navy to win a quick, decisive victory against the United States Navy, which was the Japanese Navy's Hypothetical Enemy Number One at the time. Seen from a purely military standpoint, Kato Hiroharu's argument was entirely in line with the experiences of the First World War.⁸

This conflict of views was ultimately settled in Kato Tomosaburo's favor, i.e. Japan accepted the restrictions of the naval arms conference, partly due to his strong leadership. Kato Hiroharu's views on national defense, however, thereafter became the mainstream opinion within the Navy concerning the Japanese Navy's preparations for total war. Believing that the Washington naval treaty ratio on capital ships would endanger its ability to win a fleet battle against the U.S. Navy, the Japanese Navy threw itself into efforts to overcome this perceived inferiority by expanding and strengthening its cruiser and submarine fleets and other auxiliary forces. When such auxiliary forces were placed under restrictions as a result of the 1930 London Naval Conference, the Japanese Navy countered by building up its air arm, which was not covered by the Washington and London treaties. The Japanese Navy thus was able to incorporate many changes of a purely military nature, e.g. the modernization of weapons, or development of scientific technology, and with far greater success than the Army. Ironically, resentment towards the naval arms reduction treaties also served to unify the Navy, since it resulted in a commonly felt resentment towards the United States, its Hypothetical Enemy Number One. It was under such circumstances that Japan opened hostilities against the United States and Great Britain in December 1941, at which time the Japanese Navy's strength was greater than seventy percent that of the U.S. Navy. Furthermore, the Japanese Navy had succeeded in the modernization and development of its new weapons system, the air arm. If the "next" war had been of a short, decisive nature, these weapons should have been quite effective.

3. The Decision to Go to War Against the U.S. and Great Britain and Perceptions of the Age of Total War

From the preceding explanation, in which the Japanese Army and Navy's post-World War One response to the dawn of the age of total war was described, it should be clear that both were unprepared to fight a total war, which would

Military Action)(Keio Gijuku Daigaku Shuppansha, 1998), pp. 271, 277.

⁸ Asada Sadao, *Ryo-taisenkankei no Nichibei Kankei: Kaigun to Seisaku-kettei* (Japan-U.S. Relations Between the Wars: The Navy and Policymaking)(Tokyo

necessarily be a long war of attrition, when they opened hostilities against the United States and Great Britain in December 1941 and entered World War Two. In the interwar period, the Army had sporadically felt the need to prepare for a total war, but internal conflicts of opinion had prevented it from carrying out any effective measures to that end. On the other hand, the Navy, from relatively early in the interwar period, had decided to concentrate its efforts on developing its front line fighting capabilities in anticipation of a short, decisive war, in which emphasis would be placed on decisive tactical victories in the initial stages of the war, even though it fully understood that the age of total war had arrived. To what degree, if any, did such lack of preparations for total war by the Army and Navy influence Japan's decision to enter World War Two?

Just one month before the start of the war in the Pacific, in November 1941, the Japanese government and her military leaders held a Liaison Conference and adopted the "Proposal to Quicken the End of the War Against the U.S., Great Britain, the Netherlands and Chiang Kai-Shek" (Tai-Ei Bei Ran Sho Senso Shumatsu Sokushin ni kansuru Fukuan). This proposal determined the overall framework of Japan's plan for fighting the war against those countries, and the outline of how the war was expected to proceed, which was contained therein, was as follows. "The (Japanese) Empire shall execute a quick armed conflict and secure a strategically superior position in East Asia and the Southwest Pacific, and shall also secure the Area of Critical Materials and major lines of communications, thereby establishing a long-term, self-supply capability."⁹ The premise was therefore a significant tactical victory in the early stages of the war, while preparations for a long war of attrition, i.e. a system for fighting a total war, would be made "as the war was being fought," through the development of the economies of occupied areas and other means. Of course, the leadership at the time fully understood that such an "haphazard" prospect for fighting a long war would not easily result in an actual victory. The Chief of the Naval General Staff, who was the leader of the high command of the Navy, which would inevitably bear the brunt of the fighting in a war against the U.S. and Great Britain, clearly stated that the Navy could not foresee victory if the war extended to three years or beyond.¹⁰ On the other hand, however, the leadership did not have any

Daigaku Shuppankai, 1993), p. 153.

⁹ Inaba Masao, Kobayashi Tatsu, Shimada Toshihiko and Tsunoda Jun, eds., *Taiheiyo-senso e no Michi, Bekkan: Shiryohen* (The Road to the Pacific War, Supplement: Documents)(Asahi Shimbunsha, 1988), p. 585.

¹⁰ Gunjishi Gakkai (Military History Society of Japan), ed., *Daihonei Rikugunbu Senso Shidohan Kimitsu Senso Nisshi jyo* (War Leadership Section, Army High Command, Supreme Command, Secret War Diaries Vol. 1)(Kinseisha, 1998), p. 180.

prospects for keeping the war short and ending it within two years. They fully understood that the nature of war now had made it impossible to achieve a quick decision, such as in the case of the Russo-Japanese War. It was thus fully clear to the military leaders that the “transition to the age of total war,” which was symbolized by the First World War, had taken place.

Why, then, did Japan’s military decide on war, even though they understood that the conflict would be a total war and that there was very little, if any, prospect for Japan winning it? The answer lies in their reasoning for going to war against the United States and Great Britain, which has some extreme similarities to the reasoning that lay behind Japan’s decision to go to war against Russia in 1904.¹¹ While it is true that the Russo-Japanese War ended in a victory for Japan, very few in Japan’s political and military leadership had been convinced of Japan’s ability to emerge victorious when the war began. This was a natural reaction by anybody who made a simple comparison of the national strength of Meiji-era Japan, where it was still just thirty-five years since she emerged from self-imposed isolation and opened her doors to the outside world, and Russia, the traditional continental power. Despite the huge disparities in the national strengths of Japan and Russia, Japan placed her existence as a nation on the line and went to war against Russia, in order to deal with Russia’s southward advance in East Asia, because it was believed that Russia would pose a threat to the very existence of Japan anyway, even if hostilities were not commenced at that time. The political and military leaders in 1941 likewise felt that “the nation shall perish, whether we fight or not,” when they considered whether or not to resort to war. This perception may be seen in the following comments. Tojo Hideki, Prime Minister and Army Minister at the time of Pearl Harbor, said the decision to go to war was akin to “jumping off the stage of Kiyomizu Temple,” while Nagano Osami, Chief of the Naval General Staff, said “even if we are not victorious in battle, our spirit of defending and preserving the homeland shall survive.” Whether this perception of “the nation shall perish (even if we do not fight)” was a correct understanding of the objective situation at the time is a different question. What is important here is that such was the perception of Japan’s leadership as they prepared to actually fight a total war, and that such a perception was similar to that felt by Japan’s leadership in the earlier Russo-Japanese War. It was also natural that “all of Japan’s national strength would be committed” to such a war, in which the nation’s fate was at stake. Such was the reasoning behind Japan’s

¹¹ Aizawa Kiyoshi, “Shosan’ no Hikaku: Nichiro Senso to Taiheiyo Senso” (Comparison of Victory Prospects: the Russo-Japanese War and the War in the Pacific), *Gunji Shigaku*, Vol. 23, No. 1, June 1987, pp. 62-63.

decision to go to war in the first half of the Twentieth Century against the United States and Soviet Russia, both of which became global superpowers in the second half of the century. In both the Russo-Japanese War and the War in the Pacific, the difference in national power between Japan and her opponents meant that the wars would be a total national effort on Japan's part.

Closing

The War in the Pacific ended in Japan's complete defeat, in a way which left no doubt about the disparity in national strength between Japan and the United States. Such a result might have been expected, given that Japan fought the war "without any preparations for total war." In closing, the question of how such a complete defeat in total war has affected postwar Japan shall be considered.

After regaining independence after the war, Japan adopted a policy of light armaments, which would be adequate only for fighting limited conflicts. Any conflicts on a greater scale, including total wars fought with nuclear weapons, would be handled by alliance diplomacy, i.e. by depending upon the United States' "nuclear umbrella," which would be extended over Japan as a result of the alliance between the two countries. The pre-World War Two dilemma of "how to prepare for total war" was solved when Japan gave up on unilateral efforts to prepare for such a war. This was partly a result of the fact that Japan fully felt the limits of her capability to prepare for, and fight a total war on her own in the war in the Pacific. Of course, no country, including the U.S. and USSR, could have completely defended herself had a nuclear war occurred during the Cold War, but even in such circumstances, Japan did not even experience a small war, let alone a nuclear conflict, during that period. It is thus possible to say that Japan's policy of light armaments, coupled with the alliance with the United States, was successful in keeping Japan out of armed conflicts during the Cold War. It is also true, however, that many limited wars were fought in numerous regions around the globe during this same period. It is quite probable that such limited wars and armed conflicts will continue to be fought in the post-Cold War era.

What role will Japan's military capabilities, which are still limited but of increasingly higher quality, play in the post-Cold War era? The discussions which are now underway regarding the review of the U.S.-Japan alliance relationship and participation of Japan's military in United Nations' operations will have to take this question into account.