

The Significance of Combat History Research and Its Future Direction: A Perspective from an Officer-Scholar of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force

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Abstract

This short paper presents the author's reflections as an officer of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) engaged in military history research. Based on the author's lived experience, it explores why combat history should be studied, the significance of such study, and how and with what points of emphasis it ought to be studied going forward.

Combat lies at the foundation underpinning war as a phenomenon. When examining war, it is essential not only to look at the structure of war itself—important though that is—but also to develop a firm understanding of its foundations before attempting to grasp the whole. For military personnel directly involved in war (including members of the GSDF), and particularly for officers, there is clear significance in researching the foundational aspects of war, especially combat history, given the unique environment of warfare and their responsibilities in planning and conducting military operations.

Conversely, studying combat history also means immersing oneself in the past and probing the very core of war. By doing so, one gains a broader understanding of the surrounding context in a given era. For military professionals (including Self-Defense Force personnel and civilian researchers), such research also yields both specialized expertise and a form of vicarious experience.

On the other hand, issues have been raised regarding the treatment of combat history as the subject of academic research. First, a degree of military expertise is necessary in order to understand combat history. Second is the problem of extracting lessons in an arbitrary manner. Third is the fact that war histories themselves are often compiled through a filter shaped by the needs and preferences of the military. For these reasons, debate has long centered on whether combat history should be a technique intended to serve military education, or whether it should aspire to be a scholarly discipline in the field of history. This paper argues that combat history ought to pursue the latter as a field of scholarship. To that end, it is necessary to study combat history from an empirical and neutral standpoint after gaining a thorough understanding of the overall character of war, while bearing in mind that one must possess specialized knowledge of military affairs, refrain from drawing facile lessons, and ensure that war records remain faithful to historical fact.

Reviewing a Decade of Second Sino-Japanese War Studies in Japan

FUJII Motohiro

Abstract

This paper reviews the body of scholarship on the history of the Second Sino-Japanese War that has accumulated in Japan mainly since the 2010s, and considers the future direction of research in the field. Since the 2000s, Japanese scholarship on the Second Sino-Japanese War have made significant progress. Two major developments account for this advancement: (1) the growth of research methodologies based on multi-perspectival approaches and sources using prior studies and historical materials from mainland China, Taiwan, and Western countries; and (2) the expansion of scholarship based on new perspectives, including society, international relations, military affairs, and information.

These developments have led to an increase in studies addressing themes that previous studies—long centered on Sino-Japanese relations and Japan’s conduct of the war—had tended to overlook. For example, research on China’s wartime mobilization and conscription has become one of the leading trends in Japan today. Moreover, the two developments have not only opened new fields of inquiry but have also substantially updated earlier research on Japan’s China policy and Sino-Japanese relations since the Manchurian Incident by incorporating new sources and perspectives.

From the above, this report analyzes these research trends and, taking into account the current state of available sources, explores future directions for the field. Its primary focus is on Japanese scholarship concerning the Second Sino-Japanese War. At the same time, it also addresses, wherever possible, related topics judged to bear a direct connection to the war, including Sino-Japanese relations from the 1930s to the 1940s, postwar repatriation and settlement issues.

Organizational Dynamics and Technological Innovation from the Perspective of Military History: Examining the Air Force Independence Debate in Prewar Japan

MATSUBARA Jikichiro

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges faced by military organizations amid the rapid advancement of military technology in the course of military capability development, using the issue of air force independence in the prewar Imperial Japanese Army and Navy as a case study. During the formative period of aviation in the early 20th century and through the experience of the First World War, both the Army and Navy came to recognize the military value of aircraft. In the 1920s, a debate emerged from the Army advocating the establishment of an independent air force. Proponents argued that under conditions of limited resources, national defense could be carried out more economically through such independence. However, the Navy opposed that argument by citing the distinct characteristics of naval aviation, and the issue was ultimately deferred. At the time in the 1920s, the independence of air forces was not yet the global norm, and the capabilities, expected roles, and scale of the Army and Navy's air power remained limited. These factors contributed significantly to the deferral. Even in the 1930s, when European countries established independent air forces and Japan's own air capabilities, expected roles, and scale had expanded considerably, independence was still not realized. A major reason was that the Army and Navy envisioned different theaters of war, and the Navy retained firm control over the long-range bombers it regarded as a key asset for future warfare. This case demonstrates to modern readers not only the importance of integration at the strategic level, but also the significance of carefully determining which service branch is best positioned to maximize the potential of emerging military technologies when they are introduced.

The Process of Escalation in the Sino-Japanese War: The Failure of Political Maneuvering and the Causes of Prolonged Warfare, 1938-1940

IWATANI Nobu

Abstract

After the issuance of the First Konoe Statement in January 1938, the Imperial Japanese Army initially adopted a policy of suspending offensive operations to focus on stabilizing occupied territories. However, after yielding to requests from field commanders, it launched the Xuzhou operation. In pursuit of the retreating main Chinese forces, the Army then advanced to capture Wuhan while simultaneously seeking to occupy Guangzhou.

Even after the fall of Wuhan and Guangzhou, China refused to capitulate. Japan's "operations-first doctrine" reached an impasse, leading to a gradual shift toward seeking a resolution through political maneuvering. The initial plan was to establish and consolidate a pro-Japanese regime and then formalize diplomatic relations with it. However, the process stalled due to difficulties such as selecting a suitable head of government.

The Army then singled out Wang Jingwei, hoping he could undermine the Chongqing government. Yet, the military figures Wang relied upon failed to respond, and his autonomous peace movement ended in failure. Wang reluctantly assumed leadership of a new regime under Japanese protection, but it failed to garner the anticipated level of popular support.

Eventually, the Army concluded that a genuine resolution required peace with the Chongqing government. Consequently, it pursued a dual approach: establishing and recognizing the Wang Jingwei regime while simultaneously exploring peace maneuvers with Chongqing. As a result, efforts to foster the Wang regime were neglected; meanwhile the "Kiri Maneuver" aimed at Chongqing was exposed as a Chinese counterplot and collapsed.

The failure of these negotiations forced the Army to prepare for prolonged warfare. This imposed even heavier burdens on the Wang regime—the very entity Japan had intended to cultivate—leading to further alienation of the public, deepening Japanese disappointment, and ultimately the reduction of the Wang regime to a mere puppet government.

編集後記

『戦史研究年報』第29号をお届けします。

巻頭言にある通り、2025年は先の大戦が終結してちょうど80年に当たります。そのため、本号は特別号として、様々な新機軸を採り入れて発刊しております。

最初に紹介するのは、戦史研究センターのOBでもある北海道大学の岩谷将先生の論文で、日中戦争の拡大に関し、戦局が泥沼化していく過程を明らかにしています。次に、先の大戦に関連して、戦史研究センターに所属する研究者3名の論考を収録しました。第一の齋藤論文は、戦後80年という節目に当たり、歴史研究の中でも一般に軽視されがちな作戦戦闘史の研究・学習の重要性を述べるものです。第二の藤井論文は、同じく、近年注目される日中戦争の研究史の整理を行い、新史料の公開や多面的かつ国際的視野を備えたアプローチからの研究増加による、同研究分野の将来性に言及しています。第三の松原論文は、旧日本軍における空軍独立問題を題材に、急速に発展する軍事技術の成果を発揮するため、軍事組織がいかに対応すべきかを論じています。

また、本号は戦後80年の特別企画として、各研究の権威ともいべき研究者5名による特別座談会を開催、先の大戦が世界史、特に現在に続く戦後世界秩序に与えた影響について、示唆に富む議論を記録しています。

最後に、例年、その年に招へいた海外研究者の発表成果を「研究会記録」として掲載していますが、本号は、世界的に有名な戦略家で、昨年、今年と戦史研究センターで講演を行ったエドワード・ルトワック氏からの寄稿文を掲載しています。氏は「中国は戦争できるのか？」と題し、主に2020年に中印国境ガルワン溪谷（ラダック）で生じた両国の衝突事件を取り上げ、中国軍の戦意をめぐる国内状況について詳細な分析を行っております。

他にも、「国際会議参加報告」として、ダカールで開催された第50回国際軍事史学会大会の概要、同大会において進藤主任研究官が発表した論稿（英文）を掲載、更に「活動報告」では、令和7年中に当センターが実施した諸活動を記載しました。

最後になりましたが、戦後80年を機に企画された本号発刊のためにご協力いただきました関係各位に厚く御礼を申し上げます。

(塚本 勝也)