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Historiography 1918-Today (Japan)

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Still largely overlooked in the international scholarship on the First World War, Japan's involvement in the conflict has been studied by East Asia specialists chiefly from the standpoint of diplomatic and military history. For decades, the bulk of research focused on Japan's troubled relations with China and the Anglo-Saxon powers and intervention against revolutionary Russia. Since the 1990s, however, greater attention to interdependencies between domestic, international, and transnational issues has led to a significant reappraisal of the Great War as both a watershed in Japanese history and a global event.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Imperial Japan](#)
- [3 The Cold War Era](#)
- [4 1990s to Present](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

Historical narratives on modern [Japan](#) have long neglected the First World War in comparison to other events such as the [Russo-Japanese War](#) of 1904-1905 and the Manchurian Incident of 1931. Until the 1990s, analyses that stressed the importance of the Great War as a catalyst of change came mainly from economic and social historians, who pointed at the manifold effects of the wartime boom and the subsequent recession. In most cases, however, these authors touched on the war

years simply as a background for discussion of the following decades, or within broader examinations of trends of long duration. The result was a scarcity of works that dealt specifically with the First World War. Meanwhile, in the field of political history, the dominant approach was that of investigating Japan's role in the war from the standpoint of power relations between states.^[1] Prominent themes were the 21 Demands to [China](#) and the Shandong question; the consequent frictions between Japan and the [United States](#), as well as the decline of the Anglo-Japanese alliance; and the Siberian Intervention of 1918-1922. The latter expedition, which in terms of military and financial effort far exceeded that of all previous engagements from 1914, continued well past the official conclusion of the Great War at the [Paris Conference](#). The withdrawal of troops from Siberia (except Northern Sakhalin, which remained occupied until 1925) followed closely the establishment of a new set of international treaties at the Washington Conference (1921-1922), which eased tensions over China and the Pacific. This explains why many studies have taken the period 1914-1922 as their time frame.

This brief article aims to provide an overall picture of major shifts in research approaches rather than a detailed evaluation of the originality and impact of individual contributions. The following paragraphs illustrate the development of historiography on the Japanese experience of the First World War by dividing the literature into three periods. The first period covers the latter part of the imperial age, when political constraints and limited access to sources posed major barriers to critical enquires into the recent past of the country. The second coincides with the Cold War, a time of ideological divisions in which Marxist theory exerted a strong influence on Japanese historians. There was a widespread tendency to define the Great War as a step in the leadup to the Sino-Japanese conflict and the Pacific War. The current stage, which began in the 1990s, has been marked by a reappraisal of the First World War in its global dimension. Japan's national case has been re-examined to highlight entanglements with other countries and responses to cross-border issues. Although most of the literature now available was written in Japanese for a domestic readership, there is a growing body of research published in English in order to reach an international public.

Imperial Japan

In 1914, Japanese observers labelled their country's brief intervention against [Germany](#) in China and the Pacific as the "Nippo-German War" (*NichiDoku sensō*), suggesting a lack of commitment to fight on the side of the Entente beyond the sphere of national interests. This did not mean, however, that public opinion was either unaware of or unconcerned with the consequences of the "European War" (*Ōshū senran/sensō*) on a global scale, even at an early stage. Press coverage, as in the illustrated magazine *Ōshū sensō jikki* (1914-1917), fed a profusion of analyses of the conflict, including discussions of Japan's place in the future world order. As these essays dealt with the war and its settlement in terms of current affairs, they do not belong to the realm of historiography proper. Nevertheless, they have become key sources for research on the domestic impact of the war, as presented further here.

The interwar period saw the publication in Japan of an appreciable number of books on the Great War. The Army General Staff, in particular, edited a series that focused on the military aspects of the conflict in Europe, to be used as reference material.^[2] In 1916, the same authority provided an illustration of the Nippo-German War to the general public, while keeping for itself a fuller account.^[3] A short narrative followed in 1925.^[4] In similar fashion, officers wrote separately a classified record of the Siberian expedition and two purged histories for the public.^[5] The navy edited an account of its 1917 mission to the Mediterranean.^[6] Other authors who wrote on Japan's involvement in the conflict did so within broader works on military, diplomatic, or financial history.^[7] While the style of these books was mostly descriptive, their tone was sympathetic with the course of action that the [government](#) in Tokyo had taken. For their sources, writers had to rely on what was already available to the public, such as press articles, parliamentary debates, and relevant passages in a few memoirs and celebrative biographies of statesmen.^[8] Open criticism at the scholarly level came only from the Marxists, who followed [Vladimir Il'ich Lenin's \(1870-1924\)](#) interpretation of depicting the Great War as the inevitable clash of competing imperialisms.^[9] Meanwhile, a wider range of opinions appeared in books for the general public and academic works published abroad in English.^[10]

The Cold War Era

Democratic reforms carried out in the wake of the Second World War in Japan laid the foundation for vigorous academic debate on the country's modern history. Marxist scholars, who played a leading role in this field until about the 1970s, initially framed their analysis of the Great War in terms of maturation of the "emperor's system" (*tennōsei*) to the stage of monopolistic capital. According to this thesis, an aggressive foreign policy and domestic exploitation of the working class were interconnected aspects of the same regime.^[11] In retrospect, it seemed a logical necessity that imperial Japan would eventually take an even more militaristic turn, wage war on China, and meet with disastrous defeat in the second world conflict. Primary sources available for scrutiny grew considerably over time, thanks to the disclosure and editing of both official documents and private papers.^[12] While retaining a holistic approach, Marxist historiography grew more creative in its interpretation of the rise and fall of the Japanese empire. By stressing the socioeconomic impact of the First World War, and the intellectual challenges posed by the [Russian Revolution](#), this current pushed other scholars to move beyond the study of foreign policy. It also spurred a further shift towards social and cultural issues, which emerged more clearly at the turn of the century.^[13] Although the focus of less ideologically committed scholarship remained primarily on diplomacy, and to a lesser extent on military affairs, historians developed a keen awareness of the interplay between domestic and international factors. This led to sophisticated analyses of the motives of different actors in policy-making. Regardless of their political sympathies, in this period researchers shared a concern for explaining the origins of conflict with China and the United States. They were compelled to address this issue as they faced a tense international environment, which was the outcome of a

relatively recent war.

From the 1950s, specific studies explored Japanese policy towards each of the main national counterparts of the war, as well as negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference.^[14] Relations with China, starting from the issuance and reception of the 21 Demands in 1915, occupied a prominent place in the literature.^[15] Research that tackled bilateral exchanges with either [Great Britain](#) or the United States also largely revolved around the issue of Japan's interests in China.^[16] Concerning [Russia](#), most of the attention was on Japan's interference in the [civil war](#) that followed the Bolshevik Revolution and the negative legacy it left for diplomatic relations with the main powers.^[17] Within the stream of military studies, scholars detected in the Imperial Army and Navy the emergence of "[total war](#)" strategic thinking as a lesson from the European and American experiences.^[18] Their findings, which offered a key to understanding the logic behind the military's engagement in politics, would later turn useful for enquires into the wider influence of the Great War on Japanese society. Although several studies touched on public opinion in order to add context to the study of diplomacy and state institutions, at this stage society's response to war remained on the side lines of non-Marxist research.^[19] The main contribution of foreign scholars lay in their analysis of diplomatic relations.^[20]

1990s to Present

The fluid international scenario that arose from the end of the Cold War stimulated new approaches to the study of modern Japan. Teleological views of history appeared ever less adequate to explain long-term processes, especially as in the 1990s economic stagnation and political instability challenged previous assumptions of patterns of development in Japan. Although investigating the causes of militarism and war remained an important concern for scholars, the reign of the Taishō emperor (from 1912 to 1926) was widely reappraised as a crossroad period rich with possibility. In other words, instead of portraying it as just a station on the "path to Pearl Harbor", historians endeavoured to trace a well-rounded picture of the diverse trends running through the early decades of the twentieth century. Research on foreign relations led to a more positive assessment of the shift towards cooperative diplomacy that had occurred in the wake of the First World War. It also stressed the interdependence between this policy change and developments in domestic politics, such as the advance towards parliamentarianism in government practice.^[21]

Since the turn of the century, a number of publications that dealt directly with the Great War years have enriched the literature on diplomatic and military history, shedding further light on the linkages between international and domestic issues. The framework for analysis has remained largely centred on bilateral relations,^[22] but there is a growing effort to encompass the regional and multilateral spheres.^[23] Military studies have continued to explore the strategic visions of the army and navy with respect to politics.^[24] There has also been some progress in the editing of first-hand accounts of the experience of war.^[25] The most innovative side of research, however, lies in the

exploration of how the Great War not only changed the Japanese perception of the country's place in the world, but – as elsewhere abroad – also raised questions about national identity and the organisation of the state. Scholars have demonstrated that such debates unfolded both within the elites and among wider society.^[26] Multi-authored books published on the occasion of the Great War's centennial bear evidence that it has by now become standard to appreciate the multi-faceted significance of this conflict as a turning point in Japanese history, and place it firmly in its global context.^[27]

Conclusion

Historiography on the First World War as related to Japan has developed in roughly three stages. In the imperial age, despite the importance of the subject in current affairs, academic production remained limited in scope and quality. Next, during the Cold War, elaborations on the Marxist paradigm encouraged the inclusion of economic and social aspects in empirical research on diplomatic and military history. Finally, since the 1990s there has been a steep rise in interest for interdisciplinary approaches and perspectives that highlight entanglements between the national, regional, and global dimensions. These changes, which are in tune with the broader trends of the historical discipline internationally, find support in the growing mutual understanding and cooperation between Japanese and foreign scholars.

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Notes

1. ↑ For a bibliographic essay arranged by theme, see Burkman, Thomas W.: Japan. In: Higham, Robin / Showalter, Dennis E. (eds.): *Researching World War I. A Handbook*, Westport, CT et al. 2003, pp. 293-313. Also, forthcoming: Jan, Schmidt / Shimazu, Naoko: *A Historiographical Turn. Interpretations of Japan in the First World War*, in: Cornelissen, Christoph / Weinrich, Arndt: *Writing War History. 100 Years of Historiography on the First World War*.
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3. ↑ Sanbō honbu (ed.): *Taishō 3 nen NichiDoku senshi [History of the Nippo-German War of Taishō Year 3]*, 4 volumes, Tokyo 1916 <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/956838>, <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/956839>, <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/95684>, <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/3441845>. For a reprint of the secret version, with the addition of a critical essay, see Saitō, Seiji (ed.): *Hi Taishō 3 nen NichiDoku senshi [Secret History of the Nippo-German War of Taishō Year 3]*, 6 volumes, Tokyo 2001.

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<http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/annai/honsho/shiryō/archives/mokuji.html>. For selected translations in English with interspersed explanations, see Kajima, Morinosuke: *First World War, Paris Peace Conference, Washington Conference*, vol. 3 of *The Diplomacy of Japan, 1894–1922*, 3 vols., Tokyo 1980.
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