JAPAN AND THE GREAT WAR

Japan’s gambit in WWI set stage for a dark future

BY ERIC JOHNSTON

One hundred years ago, on June 28, 1914, Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo. It was the spark that led, one month later, to the beginning of World War I, which originally was expected to be confined to Europe and end in weeks. By the time it ended on Nov. 11, 1918, an estimated 10 million combatants and 7 million civilians from Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania had been killed.

Japan fought on the side of Great Britain, France, Belgium, Russia and, later, the United States. But whereas Europe is marking the centennial with ceremonies, books and movies, Japan seems to have largely forgotten the War to End All Wars.

Nevertheless, the choices Tokyo made during 1914 and 1918 continue to reverberate today.

**When and why did Japan choose sides?**

When Germany invaded Belgium in early August 1914, Japan’s leaders were divided. Its army had modeled itself on the 19th-century Prussian Army, and many Japanese intellectuals saw Germany as Europe’s most civilized and enlightened nation. They wanted the government to side with Berlin or remain neutral.

But the Imperial Japanese Navy and many in the Foreign Ministry who were Anglophiles wanted to honor the 1902 Anglo-Japan Alliance, which had been renewed in 1911. This required Japan and Great Britain to support each other if one became involved in a war with more than one power.

On Aug. 7, 1914, already at war with Germany and Austria-Hungary, the British requested that Japan honor the agreement. The powerful foreign minister, Takaaki Kato, agreed and overcame the pro-German faction in the Cabinet. On Aug. 15, an ultimatum was sent to Germany ordering it turn over Tsingtao, its
colony in China, to Japan and to withdraw its warships. The ultimatum was ignored and Japan declared war on Aug. 23.

**Where did Japan intervene after declaring war?**
A blockade of Tsingtao by the Imperial Japanese Navy, with limited support from Great Britain, began in late August. This was followed by a naval bombardment of Tsingtao and then a siege by the Japanese army. In addition, the navy captured coaling stations in the Marshall Islands used by German naval ships. In early November, the German and Austrian troops in Tsingtao surrendered and Japan took control of the city on Nov. 16.

During the campaign, 236 Japanese were killed and more than 1,200 wounded, while the Germans suffered 199 dead and 500 wounded. Nearly 4,700 Germans became POWs, and Japan’s major military role in the war ended.

**How did Japan use the war to advance its interests in China?**
Long coveting a greater role in China, especially following its 1905 victory over Russia, Japan surprised and angered Great Britain and the United States in early 1915 by issuing a set of 21 demands to a weak Chinese government for greater Japanese control in northern China, especially mineral-rich Manchuria, and over China’s economy and government.

With these Twenty-One Demands, Japan also wanted China to accept Japanese advisers to run its financial system and police forces.

While many Chinese protested, the Chinese government, in no position to stand up to Japan militarily, agreed to a final set of demands in May 1915, after the condition about accepting Japanese financial and police advisers was dropped.

**Did Japan get involved militarily in Europe itself?**
Japan did not send troops to fight on the Western Front, but the navy got involved.

In April 1917, Japanese warships arrived in the Mediterranean to serve as escorts for British and French ships transporting soldiers to and from Europe and the Middle East and Africa. They clashed with German and Austrian submarines dozens of times during the campaign. By the end of 1918, the navy had escorted nearly 800 ships carrying more than 700,000 troops across the Mediterranean.
Did the U.S. enter the war partially out of fears Japan would side with Germany?
Yes, in part. The U.S. was officially neutral until 1917 (though it was an important supplier of arms to Great Britain).

It declared war on Germany in April 1917 in response to two moves. The first was Germany’s resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917.

The second was the interception of a telegram sent to Mexico by German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann promising German assistance to help Mexico recover the U.S. states of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if it joined Germany in fighting the U.S.

But the Zimmermann telegram also suggested that Mexico reach out to Japan, and played upon American fears, especially on the West Coast, of a Japanese invasion.

Japan disavowed the telegram, but suspicion between Tokyo and Washington over each other’s aims in the Pacific was to linger long after the war.

What’s World War I like in the popular imagination today?
Unlike the English-, French- or German-speaking worlds, Japanese popular works of fiction or nonfiction devoted to Japan’s role in the war are rare.

Standard English-language historical works touch on the Battle of Tsingtao, and make mention of the fact that Japan participated in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. But detailed information, in English or Japanese, about Japan’s role is hard to find.

If it is remembered at all, it is likely because Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, performed each year around Christmas throughout the country, was said to have been played for the first time in Japan by German and Austrian prisoners of war at the Bando prison camp in Naruto, Tokushima Prefecture. A film starring German actor Bruno Ganz and Ken Matsudaira (“Baruto no Gakuen”) about the Bando camp, which was extraordinarily humane in its treatment of POWs, was released several years ago.

More recently, NHK aired a drama based on the story of Japanese nurses sent by the Red Cross to Paris to care for wounded soldiers, and films about Tsingtao
have appeared in the past. But compared with World War II, or even the Russo-Japanese War, there is little in the way of popular film or literature.

**What was World War I’s political legacy for Japan?**

Japan’s choice to side with Great Britain over joining Germany or remaining neutral meant it had a place at the peace talks after the Armistice was declared on Nov. 11, 1918. There, Japan fought hard to keep its influence in China, creating suspicion and mistrust among its wartime allies, who wanted a return to the prewar status quo in China and Asia.

Ultimately, as in Europe, World War I would sow the seeds in the Pacific for World War II.