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From the Ground Up: Japan's Siberian Intervention of 1918–1922 from the Perspective of Infantryman Takeuchi Tadao

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Japan's Siberian Intervention was the nation's most significant strategic and political failure between the Russo-Japanese War and the Asia-Pacific War. While historians have focused on its military and diplomatic aspects, the individual experiences of soldiers in this messy "forgotten war" remain little explored.

This article foregrounds the perspective of ordinary Japanese soldiers dispatched to Siberia between 1918 and 1922. In particular, it draws on archival material left by Takeuchi Tadao, a conscripted farmer who spent six months in the Russian Far East in 1920. A talented artist, Takeuchi produced two richly illustrated accounts, the only examples of non-photographic visual narratives of the Intervention available today. These provide a unique view of the conflict "from below." For the higher echelons of the Imperial Japanese Army, the occupation of Siberia had the potential to increase Japan's influence in Northeast Asia and showcase their might and efficiency. To the rank-and-file servicemen, however, the rationale for combat was unclear. Their frustrations were compounded by impossible logistics, excruciating cold, and uncertain allegiances in a zone of lawlessness and brutality. Mounting public opposition at home and the failing military strategy in Siberia made the year 1920 an especially challenging time. Takeuchi Tadao's records reveal an implicit criticism of the Siberian operations, highlighting the strategic and situational confusion surrounding them, and hence the prospect of a meaningless death that confronted ordinary soldiers in Siberia in 1920.

Keywords: Siberia, Imperial Japanese Army, view from below, Russian Civil War, Bolshevism, strategic confusion

On 17 January 1920, private Takeuchi Tadao 竹内忠雄 (1897–1955) departed the military barracks of Takada, located in what is now Jōetsu City in Niigata Prefecture, in heavy snow. Following a long journey by foot, ship, and train, Takeuchi arrived at the city of Chita in the Transbaikal region of eastern Siberia, where he would remain until the summer.¹ As an infantryman in the Fifty-Eighth Regiment of the Thirteenth Division of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA), he was among the over seventy thousand troops dispatched to the region in 1920 as part of the Siberian Intervention. This military campaign lasted for fifty-two months, from August 1918 to October 1922, with the estimated aggregate involvement of two hundred and forty thousand imperial soldiers.² A complex and messy military venture, the Intervention flung Japanese forces into the chaos of the Russian civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The government and military’s official designation of the Intervention as a “stability operation,” rather than a war per se, caused confusion among its soldiers. Ominously, it laid bare the Imperial Army General Staff’s opportunism and territorial ambitions, and concluded in a strategic debacle, with nothing gained and many lives unnecessarily lost.

Today, there is little awareness of the conflict, or even a willingness to remember it, among most Japanese. When Siberia and war are mentioned together, what generally comes to mind is the grim experience of some six hundred thousand Japanese servicemen and civilians sent to captivity in Soviet camps at the close of the Pacific War in 1945, the repatriation of whom lasted well into the 1950s. Indeed, historian Asada Masafumi refers to the earlier Siberian Intervention, or Expedition, as a “forgotten war.”³

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¹ Takeuchi 1921a, p. 2.

² Coox 1985, p. 9. Unofficially the conflict lasted until May 1925 as the occupation of North Sakhalin persisted for almost three years after the withdrawal of Japanese troops from the rest of the Russian Far East.

³ Asada 2016.

This general desire to forget the Intervention is reflected in studies conducted of it. English-language scholarship on the topic—most recently by Paul Dunscomb—has focused almost exclusively on its diplomatic, political, and military aspects.⁴ Japanese scholars have essentially adopted the same top-down approach to the conflict.⁵ Works of historical fiction that reverse this perspective exist, such as the celebrated *Hahei* 派兵 by Takahashi Osamu 高橋治, but they are limited in scope and number.⁶ Virtually forgotten are the experiences of ordinary soldiers like Takeuchi Tadao, who were required to participate in the Intervention with limited understanding of its rationale, and at a time when, ironically, a culture of peace and international cooperation seemed to be flourishing at home.

In his own way, however, Takeuchi was lucky. A farmer in civilian life, he was also a talented artist. Rather than direct involvement in combat, he was assigned the task of chronicling the experience of his regiment through his writing and drawing, records that were possibly intended to be kept as a testament to glorious deeds overseas.⁷ Not only did his skills likely save him from falling on the Siberian plain like several of his companions, but they allowed him to document his encounter with war on Russian soil in a very personal and expressive manner. Indeed, Takeuchi's accomplished visual records, which he produced both on-site in 1920 and on his return to Japan in 1921, constitute the only comprehensive non-photographic accounts of the Intervention available to this day.⁸ They depict with raw immediacy the lived experience of members of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment in the Russian Far East.⁹ Uniquely, they reveal a view of hostilities from below.

⁴ Dunscomb 2011. See also Morley 1957; Humphreys 1995 [1996 in refs]; Linkhoveva 2019.

⁵ See among others Hara 1989; Asada 2016; Izaio 2003; Hosoya 2005.

⁶ Takahashi 1973–1977; see also Muneta 1975.

⁷ Conversation with the Takeuchi family on 7 June 2020.

⁸ These family-owned papers include one set of 109 drawings made by Takeuchi on-site in 1920 (a first draft, or *nagurigaki* 殴り書き), and another set of seventy-four drawings realized a year later back in Japan on the basis of the first set and colored in. There are also two notebooks compiled by Takeuchi in 1920 and a written narrative of the military operations from 1921.

⁹ The area concerned in this article is the territory east of Lake Baikal, referred to as Siberia and alternatively the Russian Far East.

Historians of the modern era have investigated numerous personal accounts of life on the frontline by Japanese soldiers. Naoko Shimazu has scrutinized diaries penned by servicemen during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, concluding that despite ambivalent attitudes towards death and different perceptions of their duty towards the state, soldiers did express feelings of patriotism, fuelled by their participation in the war.¹⁰ Similarly, Aaron Moore and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney have examined first-person accounts relating to the Asia-Pacific War, the study of which has succeeded in challenging the idea that the lower ranks of the Japanese military simply consisted of an homogenous mass of indoctrinated men.¹¹

By contrast, the Siberian Intervention has yielded only a scant number of personal narratives. The Takeuchi papers complement these, and offer a valuable opportunity to revisit the military venture from the perspective of rank-and-file soldiers. They poignantly illustrate that Japanese servicemen were perplexed regarding the reasons for their presence in Siberia as well as the nature of the enemy. Soldiers were also affected by impossible logistics, compounded by a merciless climate, on a daily basis. Crucially, 1920—the year of Takeuchi’s participation—proved especially challenging since the IJA rapidly became the only foreign power in Russia, even as the political and military situation there and waning support at home increasingly worked against them. If risking one’s life “for the state” persisted as the conventional trope justifying going into battle, death in Siberia seemed particularly pointless. Thus, this article probes the distinctive records produced by Takeuchi for insights into the mindset of recruits like him. It attributes the implicit criticism conveyed in the records to the strategic and situational confusion, and hence the prospect of a meaningless death, that confronted ordinary soldiers in the Russian Far East in 1920.

The Siberian Intervention

¹⁰ Shimazu 2001 and 2006.

¹¹ Moore 2013; Ohnuki-Tierney 2006; see also Yoshida 2020, and Muminov 2022 for a study of the recollections by returnees from Siberia after 1945.

In March 1918, Soviet Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, defaulting on all of the commitments made by Tsarist Russia to the Allies in World War I, which resulted in the collapse of the Eastern front. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's request in July 1918 for a joint operation in Siberia set the stage for the deeper involvement of Japanese forces in a global conflict. The government of Terauchi Masatake 寺内正毅 (1852–1919) had turned down an earlier request from France and Britain that Japanese troops intercept any German advance in the east, a strategy supposed to restore the Eastern Front and therefore relieve pressure in the west.¹² Although the U.S. was initially opposed to any intervention, by the summer of 1918 there were mounting concerns that stockpiles of ammunition stored in Vladivostok could fall into German hands. The precarious situation of the Czechoslovak Legion—about fifty-three thousand combatants stranded in non-allied territory—also motivated calls for a rescue mission.¹³ Pressured by its military, and desirous of an alliance with the U.S., the Japanese government finally agreed to a joint intervention.

Eager to exploit the instability created by the Russian civil war, the Imperial Army General Staff had already envisioned the establishment of a communist-free buffer zone in Siberia under Japanese control, a scheme that could help prevent the infiltration of anti-colonial activists into the Japanese Empire.¹⁴ The IJA therefore pushed for heavy investment in the campaign, with Japan sending more than ten times as many men as suggested in Wilson's proposal. The troops of the Intervention landed in Vladivostok in August, with the stated objectives of rescuing the Czechoslovak Legion and protecting stores of Allied war material.¹⁵ However, the IJA made its presence felt as far west as Irkutsk in Transbaikalia and also sent reinforcements to northern Manchuria, aiming to control the Trans-Siberian and

¹² Asada 2016, p. 15; Hosoya 1958, p. 93.

¹³ The combatants were Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war who joined the Russian Army and, after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, for a while fought Bolshevik forces in Siberia. See Hayashi 2018.

¹⁴ Korea had been part of the Japanese Empire since 1910 and shared part of its border with the Russian Far East. Japan also feared for the security of its interests in Manchuria. See Izaio 2000; Linkhoeva 2018.

¹⁵ Contingents from Japan, the U.S., France, Britain, Italy, Canada, Poland, Belgium, Serbia, Romania, and China participated in the Intervention.

Chinese Eastern Railways. This was in addition to operating in the Russian Maritime Province, the Amur Province, part of Kamchatka and on the island of Sakhalin.¹⁶

After the end of the First World War in November 1918, the anti-German rationale of the Intervention shifted to a vaguer anti-Bolshevik position.¹⁷ From the start, however, public opinion expressed reservations about the wisdom of the Intervention. The situation on the ground deteriorated following the collapse of the White, that is anti-Communist, government of Admiral Alexander Kolchak (1874–1920) in late 1919, which had been backed by Allied forces and based in the central Siberian city of Omsk. The U.S. suddenly informed Japan in early January 1920 of its intention to withdraw its troops. By spring 1920, all other foreign forces had departed or were on their way out, including the Czechoslovak Legion.

In the wake of the collapse of the Kolchak regime, the government of Hara Takashi 原敬 (1856–1921) hesitated about the appropriate course of action. One immediate response to the departure of the American troops, though, was the dispatch of Takeuchi's regiment as reinforcements for the Fifth Division already stationed in the Transbaikal region around the city of Chita.¹⁸ There, the Japanese were allied with a local White leader, Ataman Grigory Semenov, or Semyonov (1890–1946), who controlled the strategic railways and fought the eastward progress of the Reds. In the spring, Takeuchi's regiment would participate in the "Chita Operations" in defence of Semenov's base.

In early 1920, Hara envisaged the withdrawal of Japanese troops, albeit under conditions.¹⁹ He faced, however, not only internal dissension within the government, but also opposition from the General Staff, which asserted its Right of Supreme Command (*tōsuiken* 統帥権). Developments in Nikolaevsk-on-Amur in early March, which resulted in the massacre of about seven hundred Japanese civilians and soldiers, convinced Hara that withdrawal was not an option.²⁰ Tokyo soon announced its decision to remain in Siberia, thus

¹⁶ Asada 2016, pp. 73–74.

¹⁷ Dunscomb 2006, p. 59.

¹⁸ Sanbōhonbu 1972 (*jō*), p. 43.

¹⁹ Dunscomb 2006, p. 111.

²⁰ Dunscomb 2006, p. 59. For more on the Nikolaevsk massacre, see later in this article.

marking the start of Japan's unilateral Intervention.²¹ The stated objective of Japan's military presence was now to protect local Japanese citizens, whose numbers had continued to rise since 1918, as well to offer assistance to the Russian population and "reestablish order" in East Asia.²²

In the context of the civil war, however, the presence of Japanese forces galvanised nationalist feelings and ultimately worked in favor of the Bolshevization of the Russian Far East.²³ In the second half of 1920, Japan withdrew its troops, including Takeuchi's regiment, from Transbaikalia and removed its forces from northern Manchuria, but the Intervention persisted in the Vladivostok area.²⁴ The establishment, on Moscow's initiative, of the Far Eastern Republic (F.E.R), a nominally independent state aligned with the Bolshevik-dominated Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, led to the withdrawal of the remaining Japanese troops, who finally departed by the end of October 1922.²⁵

The IJA had hoped that military success in Siberia would enhance its prestige at home and overseas, and this was one of the motivations put forward for intervening.²⁶ Instead, the Intervention was largely viewed as a senseless waste, encapsulated in the popular wordplay of the time that referred to the "*shiberia shippai*" シベリア失敗, or Siberian failure.²⁷ The ill-conceived military venture cost the lives of over three thousand Japanese servicemen, including 1,717 who died of disease.²⁸ Violent clashes with civilians involved Japanese troops on several occasions. As noted by a contemporary witness of the Intervention, by the

²¹ Dunscomb 2011, p. 119.

²² Izaō 2000, pp. 176–179. The number of Japanese residents in eastern Russia (east of the Urals) was 8,295 in 1919, compared to 4,470 in 1915. See Hara 2015, p. 177.

²³ Sablin 2019, p. 133.

²⁴ Dunscomb 2006, p. 59.

²⁵ The Japanese, however, occupied Northern Sakhalin until May 1925, where they had been stationed since 1920 in retaliation for the Nikolaevsk incident. For the role of the F.E.R., see Sablin 2019.

²⁶ Kurokawa and Matsuda 2016, p. 13; Dickinson 1999, p. 195.

²⁷ This references the Siberian "*shuppei*" 出兵 (intervention).

²⁸ Tucker 2006, p. 969.

end, the Japanese managed to antagonize both the Whites and the Reds, and when they left, nobody thanked them for having been there.²⁹

The View from Below

Leaving Japan's shores in January 1920, Takeuchi Tadao was thus sent on a mission whose rationale was far from straightforward, albeit one that increasingly reflected anti-Bolshevism.³⁰ In his 1921 written narrative of these events, he referred to the “subjugation of extremist forces” (*kagekihagun seibatsu* 過激派軍征伐) but provided no details on who these forces were and why they needed subjugation. Most of the time he wrote about the “enemy” in the abstract. Although his status as the appointed chronicler of events may have promoted a certain caution, the vagueness of the term also suggests that he lacked a clear understanding of why he was there. A similar incomprehension seemed to have circulated among other Allied troops.³¹

Soldiers' accounts of war sometimes express excitement when beginning their journeys to the conflict zone. Young men who embarked for the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905 wrote about their joy and pride in joining the campaign.³² Some who left for Siberia in 1918 had similar feelings, noting for example the merriness and conviction of “no regret” that prevailed inside the train carriages on the day of departure.³³ Takeuchi's records, however, produced two years into the hostilities, expressed more ambivalence than enthusiasm. He recalled the departure from the port of Tsuruga on the Sea of Japan as a sober affair. The men aboard the ship “turned toward Tokyo and made a respectful salute in the direction of the Imperial Palace, thinking that it may be the last time for them to see their country” (figure 1).

INSERT Figure 1 AROUND HERE

²⁹ Yamanouchi 1923, pp. 5–6.

³⁰ Sanbōhonbu 1972 (*chū*), p. 610; Kurokawa and Matsuda 2017, p. 3.

³¹ Dunscomb 2011, pp. 87–88.

³² Shimazu 2006, pp. 42, 48.

³³ Kuriyama 1993, p. 8.

Thirty members of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment lost their lives in the “Chita Operations” in Siberia in 1920 and over a hundred and forty sustained injuries. Takeuchi, a farmer from the village of Otagiri 小田切 in the Nagano mountains and a conscript at the age of twenty, was aware of the implications of his duty as an infantryman. The letter of welcome into the army he received in November 1917 from the local Imperial Military Association urged him “to be prepared in case of emergency to bravely offer his life to the state.”³⁴ The readiness to give one’s life “for the state”—*kokka no tame* 国家の為—constituted one of the ideological tenets of the modern army that the rulers of Meiji Japan strove to implement. Even though not all men were called to serve, the conscription ordinance of 1873 defined the blood tax (*ketsuizei* 血税) as a moral obligation for citizens.³⁵ Similar to conscripts in other modern nations, notably France, young men interiorized the concept.³⁶ The consecrated formula of *kokka no tame* became part of public discourse and crept into personal records. Stationed in the Russian Maritime Province from August 1918, first-class private Matsuo Katsuzō 松尾勝造 urged his family to rejoice at the event of his death because he would have fulfilled his duty toward the state and the Japanese empire.³⁷ Takeuchi described the thrill of an upcoming battle in terms of *chi waki niku odoru* 血沸き肉踊る (literally, “the blood heating up, the flesh dancing”) and with the understanding that, “the time has come for us to spill our blood for the sake of the state.”³⁸

Beyond the formula’s rigidity, however, lay a transformed meaning. In the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, the Meiji Emperor appealed for his subjects to fight Russia in

³⁴ Teikoku Zaigō Gunjinkai 1917.

³⁵ Ōhama 1978, pp. 7, 26–27.

³⁶ See for example Frühstück 2017. France imposed universal military conscription as a condition of citizenship in 1798 and held to the principle of *L’impôt du sang* (Blood tax). The army created in Japan after the Meiji Revolution of 1868 was in part based on the French model. See also Barclay 2021 about the connection between state and soldiers maintained through decorations, ceremonies of enshrinement, memorials, and other means.

³⁷ Matsuo 1978, p. 73. Matsuo was born in 1897. Date of death unknown.

³⁸ Wareware no chi o nagashite kokka no tame hataraku aki wa koreru nari 吾々の血を流して國[国]家の爲 [為]働く秋は来[来]れるなり. Takeuchi 1921a, p. 2.

order to preserve Japan's sovereignty, threatened by instability on the Korean Peninsula.³⁹ In that context, while not all soldiers accepted the concept of *kokka* 国家, “dying for the state” carried some significance.⁴⁰ The Siberian Intervention was a different matter. Presented as an expedition in support of the allied powers—a “stability operation”—it did not constitute a confrontation between states in which the emperor would visibly act as the Supreme Commander.⁴¹ In any case, the ailing Emperor Taishō was much less of a symbolic presence than his predecessor Emperor Meiji, which diluted the links between state, monarch, and military. Moreover, in 1920, when Takeuchi embarked for Siberia, the Intervention was morphing into a unilateral undertaking, rather than the initial joint operation that had been expected to showcase Japan's commitment to international cooperation.

During his six month stay in Transbaikalia, Takeuchi witnessed about three weeks of actual combat and smaller clashes with Soviet aligned troops and Bolshevik partisan fighters. Two major offensives by the Reds took place in the Chita area between 10 and 13 April, and between 25 April and 5 May, when units of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment assisted Ataman Semenov's forces in protecting the railways and repelling the enemy.⁴² All the active deployment of Takeuchi's regiment was concentrated in this specific period in the spring, and involved confrontation with thousands of enemies.⁴³ How the young recruit chronicled the events tells of much grief and chaos, as the men experienced night fighting, surprise enemy attacks, pursuits through deep forests and mountains, and villages caught in the crossfire—resulting in corpses littering the fields in their hundreds. As Takeuchi noted with some pathos, among these scattered corpses were companions who died “an honorable death” with the monthly wage of six yen and thirteen *sen* in their pockets, received just the night before.⁴⁴

³⁹ Nishikawa 2021, pp. 4–5.

⁴⁰ Shimazu 2001, p. 85.

⁴¹ Asada 2016, pp. 61–62.

⁴² See Sanbōhonbu 1972 (*chū*), pp. 701–721.

⁴³ Takeuchi 1921b.

⁴⁴ Takeuchi 1921a, p. 28.

The pictorials, however, notably eschew the glorification of death. Instead, they depict the utter misery of war, which is shown to affect the Japanese forces, their Russian allies, the enemy, and locals alike. Takeuchi's drawings repeatedly depict death on the battlefield, not as the price of victory, but as a tragic yet all-too-common reality, one only loosely related to the IJA's strategic aims. The young artist represented soldiers picking up the injured and lifeless bodies of their friends and allies on stretchers. He drew combatants falling in action, and fields covered with corpses and red with blood (figures 2 and 3). In his illustrations, heroism hardly held any place, and when it did appear, it was to highlight the bravery of an ordinary soldier retrieving the body of his superior through a rain of bullets, rather than a triumph in battle.⁴⁵

INSERT Figure 2 and Figure 3 AROUND HERE

The representation of inglorious and seemingly pointless death is a striking characteristic of Takeuchi's series of sketches. This clearly contrasts with *sensōga* 戦争画, those illustrations produced in wartime that had been particularly popular during the Sino-Japanese War and, to a lesser extent, the Russo-Japanese War. *Sensōga* possessed a well-established propaganda function that persisted throughout the Meiji era (1868–1912).⁴⁶ In the case of the Siberian Intervention, however, the only pictorial rendition commercialized at the time was a set of seventeen lithographic prints produced between 1918 and 1920 by the publisher Shōbidō.⁴⁷ These prints shared features with many of their predecessors in the *sensōga* genre that reinforced the narrative of Japanese strength. They depict Japanese combatants contrasted with less valorous and, sometimes, less civilized opponents. Typically, the choice of a bird's-eye view highlighted territorial control and strategic mastery. Heroic actions that celebrated a specific military figure were meant to appeal to patriotism, and only

⁴⁵ Takeuchi 1920b, p. 67.

⁴⁶ Bourke 2017, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Kyūro Tōdoku Enseigun Gahō 救露討獨遠征軍畫報. Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2005680037/>

then was the representation of the Japanese dead acceptable (figure 4).⁴⁸ The technological superiority of the Japanese military constituted a theme of choice that the bird's eye view served to emphasize (figure 5). Takeuchi's approach was very different. He shows the vulnerability of his comrades to danger from the skies, and some drawings point to the IJA's inferiority rather than superiority. A caption indicates for instance that, "While we are living in train carriages in Chernovsky, enemy planes come over our heads every day, dropping bombs and firing machine guns. Nothing compares to the fear that people are experiencing" (figure 6).

INSERT Figures 4, 5 & 6 AROUND HERE

Takeuchi's scenes of combat, captured from a position at eye level and in real time, inverted this perspective, both metaphorically and literally. His drawings leave the viewer implicitly questioning the rationale for the war. That the "faces" of the enemy were not easily recognizable became emblematic of the Siberian Intervention and affected military morale.⁴⁹ It was never clear to soldiers how much their presence in Siberia related to their country's sovereignty or even who the enemy was. In contrast to the two previous state-to-state conflicts, distinguishing enemy from foe, or "extremists" from ordinary villagers, was not an easy matter. They all spoke Russian, wore similar clothing, most had similar facial features, and did not indicate their political allegiance with colors or a badge.⁵⁰ In the words of a lower-ranking officer referring to the Russian "extremists," "It's not as if they have two noses and three eyes."⁵¹

As the Intervention proceeded and Bolshevism spread into Siberia, the IJA became increasingly aware of the dangers of radicalization among Korean and Chinese nationals, particularly after the 1919 March First and May Fourth Movements. These indicated growing

⁴⁸ For propaganda and *sensōga*, see among other works, [de Sabato Swinton 1991](#); Fröhlich 2014; [Szostak 2017](#); Morello and Auslin 2021; and Dower 2008a; 2008b.

⁴⁹ Hiroiwa 2019, pp. 98–99; Hara 1989, pp. 420–427.

⁵⁰ Hiroiwa 2019, p. 97.

⁵¹ Quoted in Dunscomb 2011, p. 178.

anti-Japanese and anti-imperialist sentiments in Korea and China respectively, and made the subduing of potential rebellions against Japanese rule a pressing preoccupation.⁵² In North Manchuria in late 1919, several soldiers of the Fifty-Third Regiment met an “honorable death” in a clash against “insubordinate Koreans” (*futei senjin* 不逞鮮人).⁵³ In early February 1920, the possible radicalization of Koreans was presented to the United States as a reason why Japan would wait before withdrawing its troops from the region.⁵⁴ Thus, if Japanese forces were involved in the “subjugation of extremists,” the term covered protagonists from a variety of backgrounds and motivations, a situation that further blurred the lines between ally and enemy.

Army and Society

The contradictions and confusion that characterized Japan’s Siberian Intervention largely reflect the opposing societal trends that defined the Taishō period at home. On the one hand, Taishō was about being modern, or *modan*, and all it implied in terms of daily life, including mass communication, consumerism, and cosmopolitanism.⁵⁵ A vibrant and diverse cultural scene encouraged self-expression, non-conformism, and dissent rather than group thinking and obedience. A heightened sense of individualism had emerged after the Russo-Japanese War in tandem with waning public sentiment for the institutions of the state. As somewhat derogatively suggested by poet Kaneko Mitsuharu 金子光晴 (1895–1975), “rather than their country, the children of Taishō only thought about themselves.”⁵⁶

Although more prevalent in the cities, the vocabulary of self-expression and self-realization was not absent in the countryside. That a farmer like Takeuchi Tadao, brought up in an isolated mountainous environment, chose to devote time and the limited means at his

⁵² Linkhoeva 2018, p. 269.

⁵³ Ōya 1989, p. 837.

⁵⁴ Linkhoeva 2018, p. 269.

⁵⁵ Dower 2012, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Kaneko 2015, p. 8.

disposal to the pursuit of his artistic endeavors, attests to the reach of this vocabulary.⁵⁷ In chronicling the war experience of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment in Siberia, Takeuchi demonstrated confidence in his skills while conveying his views and impressions. In addition to the drawings, he composed *tanka* 短歌 and variations on popular songs. They not only lamented the loss of life incurred by the military operations in which he had been drafted, but also highlighted the discordance between peace at home and war abroad (figure 7).

INSERT Figure 7 AROUND HERE

A *tanka* poem included in the 1921 narrative of the Chita Operations echoed such sentiments:

My beloved family	<i>Kawaii saishi</i>	可愛妻子
Now abandoned	<i>suterumo</i>	捨るも
For the sake of the nation	<i>kunkoku no tame</i>	君国の為
Corpses are littered	<i>kabane o sarasu</i>	屍をさらす
On the Siberian plains	<i>Shiberi no hara</i>	西伯利の原

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On the other hand, the IJA watched these new societal trends with alarm. In the first instance, the higher echelons were perturbed by the disaffection with military values among conscripts, suggested by draft evasions, cases of misconduct, and suicides among soldiers, both in peace and wartime. These increased after the Russo-Japanese War and corresponded to a general erosion of traditional bonds in society.⁵⁹ The reverberations of the vocal nonwar movement that emerged in 1903 and the influence of Tolstoy, perceived in Japan as an apostle of

⁵⁷ Conversation with Takeuchi Masayuki on 1 February 2021. Takeuchi Tadao took some drawing lessons from Ogawa Ryūsui 小川柳翠 (1862–1928), an artist and teacher active in the Shinano region. A burgeoning Farmers Art Movement also promoted the work of amateur artists, which for some led to an extra source of revenue.

⁵⁸ Takeuchi 1921a, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Tobe 1998, pp. 184–186; Drea 2009, p. 134.

humanism, persisted long after the peace treaty of 1905.⁶⁰ In 1908, Tayama Katai 田山花袋 (1872–1930) published *A Soldier* (*Ippei sotsu* 一兵卒), a short story in which a private marches alone away from his barracks while crying in pain because of the effects of beriberi. The book encapsulated in a few pages the disillusion brought about by war and the military that seemed to infiltrate the IJA ranks. At the close of the First World War, Japan’s newly acquired status on the global stage as a participant in the discourse of peace and international cooperation also shaped the collective mindset. The country sat at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 as a fifth power, and Woodrow Wilson’s vision of peace—the Fourteen Points issued in January 1918—concerned Tokyo as well as the main European protagonists of the conflict.⁶¹ The discourse of peace in the immediate postwar was difficult to ignore and constituted a legitimate worry for the IJA.

During those years, *Kaikōsha kiji* 偕行社記事, the journal of the army’s main fraternal organization comprising its active and retired officers, dedicated its pages to debating the ills faced by the military institution and referred to worrying changes in people’s thoughts. These new ideological threats included anti-militarism and pacifism, ideas of freedom (*jiyū* 自由), equality (*byōdō* 平等), and humanism (*jindō* 人道), and demands for self-realization, democracy, and radicalism.⁶² The latter became a serious preoccupation after the Bolshevik Revolution. In Siberia, the military police intercepted revolutionary propaganda material held by soldiers on several occasions, incidents that stoked fears of rebellion within the forces while at war.⁶³ Although apparently immune to revolutionary influences, Takeuchi Tadao was a youth of his times and the rhetoric of peace seems to have been on his mind. The sketch of what looks like a giant heron, or crane, mounted by a Japanese man dressed in civilian clothes, drawn on-site and captioned as “Peace in the World” (*sekai no heiwa* 世界の平和), illustrates the pervasiveness of such rhetoric (figure 8).

⁶⁰ See Konishi 2013, pp. 149–208; Kobayashi 2008, pp. 231–232. For the importance of Tolstoyanism in Japanese intellectual history, see for example Solovieva and Konishi 2021.

⁶¹ See Dickinson 2021, pp. 249–252.

⁶² Asano 1994, pp. 85–89, 99.

⁶³ Kenpeishireibu 1976, pp. 388–389, 411, 432. See also Linkhoeva 2018, p. 267.

INSERT Figure 8 AROUND HERE

Anticipating a war that would at one point require full mobilization of the population, and long critical of the fighting capabilities of conscripts, the IJA grew determined to counteract the perceived laxity of the times with enhanced discipline and public relations campaigns.⁶⁴ More importantly, it started to believe that heightened fighting spirit and the morale of troops would make up for material inferiority and lagging technology on the battlefield.⁶⁵ Thus, the Siberian Intervention provided a golden opportunity to tighten discipline and test the endurance of soldiers. Kuroshima Denji 黒島伝治 (1898–1943), known today for his commitment to proletarian literature and his anti-war stance, harshly criticized the IJA. Stationed in Siberia as a military nurse in 1920, he reflected in his diary that the non-officer class were treated “like pigs.”⁶⁶ It was all well and good to invoke duty to the state, but he wondered about the individual rights granted by this same state, which the army so evidently trampled.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the IJA had to contend with public opinion, where dissent about both the military and the Intervention itself were cause for concern. The army’s reputation was reeling from the Ōura scandal 大浦事件 of 1915, which had revealed vote buying to ensure endorsement in the Diet of higher military spending, a major issue of controversy during the period.⁶⁸ In early Taishō, the public increasingly turned hostile to the clique-ridden structure of politics in which the military played a prominent role.⁶⁹

The Siberian Intervention intensified rather than assuaged this kind of criticism. The dispatch of forces to the Russian Far East did not generate much popular war fever. On the contrary, the planned provisioning of rice for the troops had contributed to a major price hike, which in turn motivated a series of riots around Japan between July and September 1918.

⁶⁴ Drea 2009, p. 134.

⁶⁵ Tobe 1998, p. 152.

⁶⁶ Kuroshima 1955, p. 142.

⁶⁷ Kuroshima 1955, p. 159.

⁶⁸ Mitchell 1996, pp. 31–37.

⁶⁹ Nakamura and Tobe 1988, p. 518.

The army was called in to suppress the most violent ones, a mission that went directly against the long campaign of gaining ordinary citizens' confidence and support for the institution.⁷⁰ The irony of course is that Japanese soldiers in Siberia suffered from empty stomachs most of the time and regularly craved rice.⁷¹ As the presence of Japanese troops dragged on, debates about the benefits and rationale of the Intervention raged in the press.⁷²

In March 1919, news reached Japan of the almost complete annihilation of the Tanaka detachment of the Seventy-Second Regiment by Bolshevik partisans. The incident had taken place near Yufta, in Amur Province, leading to the death of over three hundred men hailing from Japan's southern city of Oita, their fate partly caused by their unfamiliarity with the extreme cold and heavy snow conditions at the time.⁷³ Japanese forces retaliated with the destruction of the Russian village of Ivanovka.⁷⁴ The incident motivated intellectual Ishibashi Tanzan 石橋湛山 (1884–1973) to renew in April of that year calls for the withdrawal of the troops.⁷⁵

Waning Support for the Intervention

What happened at Yufta also suggests that the IJA felt the growing need to bolster its public relations campaign at home. On 18 January 1920, the *Tokyo Asahi Daily* featured an interview with Lieutenant General Nishikawa Torajirō 西川虎次郎 (1867–1944), the head of the Thirteenth Division quartered in Takada. On the eve of his departure for Siberia, he appeared relaxed and self-assured, declaring that he had been composing poetry in preparation for his military duties. When queried about the objectives of the Intervention and the responsibility of the IJA, now that the Czechoslovak Legion was on their way home, he quickly dismissed the question, arguing that he was not qualified to broach such a difficult

⁷⁰ Drea 2009, p. 144.

⁷¹ Takeuchi 1921a, p. 26; Kuriyama 1993, p. 43.

⁷² See Dunscomb 2006.

⁷³ Izaō 2017, pp. 169–170.

⁷⁴ On 22 March 1919, Japanese troops killed 216 villagers in the belief they were Bolshevik partisans, and burned 130 village houses.

⁷⁵ Dunscomb 2011, p. 90.

topic (. . . *shuppei ni oite tetteiteki setsumei? Sonna muzukashii hanashi wa shiran . . .* 出兵に於いて徹底的説明？そんな難しい話は知らん. . .), and that he would rather elaborate on some good news about the Thirteenth Division. According to him, the Takada youth were blessed with good health and hardly affected by the influenza epidemic that was hitting other Japanese troops. Additionally, as mountain men, they were used to the cold and to the rigors of the snow.⁷⁶ Nishikawa also rejoiced at the successful fundraising drive in the Nagano area in support of the division, which in his view indicated that the public sympathized (*dōjō* 同情) with the role of the Takada men in Siberia.⁷⁷

Effectively, the division head intimated that military goals and responsibility were an elite affair, which he was not prepared to share with ordinary readers. What mattered in his view was the image of the IJA, and the physical and mental resilience of the young men sent to fight in unfamiliar territories for unspecified objectives in the midst of a worldwide flu pandemic! As a member of the Thirteenth Division and chronicler of the movements of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment in Siberia, Takeuchi Tadao, too, endeavored to portray the Takada men as resilient and brave. Nonetheless, despite having been brought up in the mountains, he found it difficult to cope with the Siberian winter. He described the winter uniform worn by infantrymen, part of which was made from animal skin, as essential for survival (figure 9). But it was by no means warm enough. The cold sliced into his body.⁷⁸ Siberia—with its relentless snow (*furisosogu kansetsu* 降り添ぐ [注ぐ] 寒雪)—was a treacherous and desolate plain, one “without east or west and not a bird flying in its sky.”⁷⁹ Indeed, newspapers carried regular reports of soldiers afflicted by frostbite and other cold-related conditions, a situation that further affected the morale of the troops.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Unlike the Oita-based unit annihilated at Yufta almost a year before.

⁷⁷ “Shusseï no Nishikawa shidanchō” 出征の西川師団長. *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun*, 18 January 1920.

⁷⁸ Takeuchi 1921a, p. 10. Sometimes soldiers put cotton rags under their uniforms and in their boots in order to better resist the cold.

⁷⁹ Takeuchi 1921a, pp. 4, 6.

⁸⁰ See for example “Shiberi shusseigun no kanku” 西伯利出征艱苦. *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun*, 11 January 1920.

INSERT Figure 9 AROUND HERE

Kuriyama Tōzō 栗山東三 (1897–1963), a member of the reserve corps, wrote in his diary about a two-month long grueling reconnaissance mission in the winter of 1919 near the Manchurian border, with temperatures falling to forty degrees below zero almost every day. He suffered from frostbite of the nose, which handicapped him for the rest of his life.⁸¹ For soldiers, the cold was indeed excruciating and in some cases was a direct cause of death. Kuriyama, whose diary was only found after his death and who had never even mentioned its existence when alive, expressed resentment about his time in the army. In retrospect, military recruits had come to see such reconnaissance missions as chiefly motivated by the need to test the endurance of ordinary soldiers. With a view to further military campaigns, the idea was to measure the extent to which Japanese soldiers could withstand extreme temperatures and physical exhaustion.⁸² This sinister “experimental dimension” could well have been in the minds of some lower rank soldiers, given the infamous precedent of the Hakkōda Incident (Hakkōda Secchū Sōnan Jiken 八甲田雪中行軍遭難事件) of January 1902, in which 199 men out of 210 lost their lives, with 193 of them freezing to death en route during a training expedition across the Hakkōda mountains in Aomori Prefecture.

The diary of mid-ranking officer Tsukamoto Shōichirō 塚本正一郎, which records thoughts and events during the several months he spent in Amur Province in 1919, highlights the divide between the life of officers and that of rank-and-file soldiers on the front line.⁸³ It suggests, for example, that the former indulged in drinking and partying on a regular basis, sometimes mingling with their Russian allies while vodka and sake flowed in abundance.⁸⁴ On the other hand, military hierarchy dictated that the lower ranks routinely carry out hard

⁸¹ Kuriyama 1993, pp. 33–62.

⁸² Kuriyama 1993, p. 128. These remarks were made by Kuriyama’s son in a postface to the diary.

⁸³ The birthdate of Tsukamoto is unknown. He died in 1920.

⁸⁴ Tsukamoto 1978, pp. 256–257.

labor and abide by the whims of their superiors.⁸⁵ But the diary also reveals tensions within the officer class itself. Tsukamoto berated the arrogance and petty-mindedness of the commanding officer, who he accused of losing sight of the priorities for the Japanese occupiers.⁸⁶

Stationed in the town of Nikolaevsk-on-Amur, Tsukamoto lost his life in the spring of 1920 in the Nikō Incident (Nikō Jiken 尼港事件) a few months after writing these lines. The incident involved the massacre of about seven hundred Japanese civilians and soldiers, and the obliteration of an entire garrison of the Fourteenth Division. The attackers were guerilla fighters, a motley group of Bolshevik-aligned partisans, including Russians, Chinese, and Koreans.⁸⁷ The leader of the group, Yakov Tryapitsyn (1897–1920), ordered his troops to surround the town in February 1920, demanding the surrender of the outnumbered Japanese forces. Instead, the Japanese launched a surprise attack in March but were wiped out. By late May, the Russian and Japanese inhabitants of Nikolaevsk had been slaughtered and the town burnt to the ground.⁸⁸

When news of the fate of the Japanese residents of Nikolaevsk reached Japan, it caused uproar.⁸⁹ The frictions that were mounting within the commanding corps—and that Tsukamoto alluded to—suggest that the IJA was disorganized and divided in the weeks prior to the events. The Nikō Incident played an important part in the history of the Intervention, granting the government a pretext for maintaining its presence in the Russian Far East despite growing political opposition and realization that the venture was turning into a quagmire. Tokyo also used it as an excuse to keep troops stationed on the northern part of Sakhalin, a region rich in natural resources that Japan hoped to exploit to its advantage.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Already in the Meiji period, soldiers were taught that the army was a big family. The cruel treatment of subalterns—the “whip of love” 愛の鞭—was not uncommon. Ōhama 1978, p. 33. See also Dunscomb 2011, p. 179.

⁸⁶ Tsukamoto 1978, p. 260.

⁸⁷ Dunscomb 2011, p. 116.

⁸⁸ Dunscomb 2011, pp. 115–126.

⁸⁹ Asada 2016, p. 162.

⁹⁰ The occupation came to an end in May 1925 following the signature of the Basic Convention between Japan and the U.S.S.R in January of the same year.

The Nikō Incident is also notorious for the brutality exhibited by Tryapitsyn and his men, allegedly bayonetting victims before trapping them in icy water where they were left to die.⁹¹ The slaughter was indiscriminate too. Like the Yufra massacre of February 1919, the Nikolaevsk Incident generated a high number of Japanese casualties, hence intensifying the public's calls for the withdrawal of the troops. The comments of Zumoto Motosada 頭本元貞 (1863–1943), publisher of the English-language weekly *The Herald of Asia* and attached since May 1919 to the Press Bureau of the Imperial Expeditionary Force, highlighted the increasingly bitter tone of public opinion regarding Japan's presence in Siberia. Originally, Zumoto welcomed collaboration with the U.S. and the potential establishment of an independent government in Siberia that would enjoy friendly relations with Japan.⁹² By early March 1921, however, he had no doubt that supporting the Whites against Bolshevism was unproductive and that local neutrality must be respected. He questioned the “use of stationing an army in Siberia at an enormous cost when its utility is confined to the protection of a few thousand Japanese residents,” and asserted that “(w)ithdrawal was the only rational policy,” a conviction he had held since early 1920.⁹³

No Place for Mercy

In *Imperial Apocalypse*, Joshua Sanborn makes a clear-cut assessment of the Russian Civil War:

The end of the Great War brought the end to whatever restraints had been in place regarding atrocity. The Civil War was marked instead by the valorization of violence and the open practice of terror campaigns. Both Whites and Reds utilized extralegal, arbitrary, and merciless violence to achieve political ends or simply to satisfy their desires in the territories they marched through.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Stone 1995, p. 74.

⁹² Zumoto Motosada. “Situation in Russia and Siberia.” *The Herald of Asia*, 1 November 1919.

⁹³ Zumoto Motosada. “A Siberian Retrospect” & “The Siberian Question.” *The Herald of Asia*, 5 March 1921.

⁹⁴ Sanborn 2014, p. 252.

The Japanese soldiers dispatched to Siberia quickly became involved in an unprecedented climate of gratuitous violence and lawlessness. In Transbaikalia, the Fifty-Eighth Regiment encountered the methods of the local White leader, Ataman Grigory Semenov, with whom they were in close contact. A pitiless terror reigned in the Cossack's name, which tainted the Japanese operations in the region.⁹⁵ Of mixed Buryat-Mongol and Russian descent, Semenov learned his trade in the Imperial Russian Army. Following the October Revolution, he spearheaded an anti-Soviet rebellion and, after an initial setback, managed to assert his influence over the region of his birth. In 1919, he appointed himself Ataman of the Transbaikal Cossacks, whose support of the White movement became increasingly significant. Because of the need for reinforcement, Semenov had early on encouraged men from various non-Slavic ethnic groups to join his movement, which included Buryat-Mongols, Chinese, and other indigenous people of the region. Altogether, more than ten different ethnicities were represented.⁹⁶

The Japanese government had from the start given backing to Semenov under strong pressure from the IJA. They hoped he would establish a pro-Japanese independent zone in Eastern Siberia.⁹⁷ They also saw in the Cossack Ataman a destabilizing force in the Transbaikal region, which they could ultimately use to their advantage.⁹⁸ And since the Cossacks fiercely guarded the major railway links, they were deemed very valuable. Overall, Semenov was thought by the Japanese as the most strategic among regional leaders in motivating the region's population to form a viable and efficient anti-Bolshevik opposition.⁹⁹

If the IJA had good strategic reasons to side with Semenov, it is also apparent that the Cossacks exerted a strong impression on the Japanese. Their presence in Takeuchi's pictorials is noticeable, as several drawings prominently featured them. Takeuchi depicted the Cossacks as he saw them: tall and with strong shoulders. On horseback and with their trademark head-covering fur toques, they were even taller (figure 10). From a purely

⁹⁵ Youzefovitch 2018, p. 69; Pereira 1996, p. 55.

⁹⁶ Asada 2016, pp. 48–49.

⁹⁷ Asada 2016, pp. 48–49.

⁹⁸ Pereira 1996, p. 56.

⁹⁹ Tairo Dōmeikai 1920, pp. 11–19.

iconographic point of view, the drawings convey a faithful image of the physique of Semenov and his troops. By comparison, the Japanese physique was often smaller.¹⁰⁰

INSERT Figure 10 AROUND HERE

But the visuals also suggest that Semenov's personality was itself imposing. The understanding between the Cossacks and the higher echelons of the IJA was based on reciprocity. Semenov relied on Japanese help in terms of men and equipment while the Japanese needed a local ally in order to solidify their presence in Siberia. Yet there was something else at work, more akin to personal affinity, or even affect, that bound the two parties. In his memoirs, Semenov wrote fondly about some of his Japanese counterparts. Referring to his flight from Vladivostok in the autumn of 1921, he claimed to have been deeply moved by the heartfelt farewell address of General Tachibana Koichirō 立花小一郎 (1861–1929), then commander of the Expeditionary Forces in Vladivostok. Interestingly, Semenov attributed this depth of feeling, directed to someone like him who was sent into exile because of his thorough dedication to the fight against Communism, to the spirit of *bushidō* 武士道 (the way of the samurai) which in his view Tachibana's greatness and sincerity embodied.¹⁰¹ It was not the first time that the samurai and Cossack traditions appeared to fuse. In the Meiji period, Japanese interest in the way of life of the Cossacks as accomplished fighters had already inspired the establishment and training of the *tondenhei* 屯田兵 (farmer-soldiers) of Hokkaido.¹⁰²

Close ties also developed between Semenov and Lieutenant-General Suzuki Sōroku 鈴木壯六 (1865–1940), who headed the Fifth Division's contingent in Transbaikalia. The diary he left at his death makes clear that the Japanese were aware of the plunder and brutality exercised by the Cossack troops, and deemed these actions concerning.¹⁰³ Suzuki noted that

¹⁰⁰ Earlier *sensōga* illustrators tended to distort reality by representing Japanese bodies as tall as Western ones. In 1920, a Japanese man was on average 160cm tall. See Kawata 2013.

¹⁰¹ Semenov 1990, p. 3.

¹⁰² See Hokkaidō Sōmubu Bunshoka 1966, p. 54. See also Youzefovitch 2018, p. 66.

¹⁰³ Kurokawa and Matsuda 2016, pp. 20, 38; Kurokawa and Matsuda 2017, p. 25.

Russian peasants were more afraid of Semenov than of the Bolsheviks.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the recollections of French General Maurice Janin, the chief commander of the allied troops in Siberia, intimated that the devastations committed in the Transbaikal area by Japanese detachments were guided by Semenov's men giving their allies false information.¹⁰⁵ Although well disposed towards the Japanese, Janin deplored their irrational faith in the Cossack leader and warned Suzuki about antagonizing the local population.¹⁰⁶ Yet, the Japanese officer stood by Semenov. And when the two were about to part in the summer of 1920, Suzuki referred to the Ataman as a friend, also describing his plight in emotional terms.¹⁰⁷

This kind of affinity with Semenov, however, was not necessarily shared by the lower ranks of the IJA. For his part, Kuriyama Tōzō remarked on the Cossack's arrogance, reporting on an episode in a train carriage where a heated discussion with the Japanese had almost resulted in bloodshed. Violence had only been averted thanks to the skill of the interpreter, who had somehow defused the argument.¹⁰⁸ In Takeuchi's records, the disregard for the life of prisoners during the Russian Civil War is illustrated on two occasions by the summary execution of a Red captive—recognizable by the Bolshevik star insignia on his clothing—by one of Semenov's men (figure 11). Takeuchi neither condemned, nor condoned the practice—in one of the drawings a Japanese soldier is standing in the background, watching—but did document the ruthless campaign waged by the anti-Bolshevik troops in Transbaikalia.

INSERT Figure 11 AROUND HERE

Japan's backing of someone like Semenov did nothing to attenuate the endemic brutality that raged throughout the Russian Civil War. That the civilian population of Siberia

¹⁰⁴ Kurokawa and Matsuda 2016, p. 28.

¹⁰⁵ Janin 2017, p. 299.

¹⁰⁶ Janin 2017, p. 302.

¹⁰⁷ Kurokawa and Matsuda 2017, pp. 25, 36.

¹⁰⁸ Kuriyama 1993, p. 29.

suffered under the hands of the Japanese for no other reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time explains in part why the conflict has to a degree been consigned to oblivion.¹⁰⁹ The confusion in the soldiers' minds about who the enemy was provides an element of explanation for some of the summary killings of civilians perpetrated by Japanese forces.¹¹⁰ Matsuo Katsuzō gave an example of one such incident and expressed incomprehension and distress at the cruelty of the human heart.¹¹¹ In personal accounts left by soldiers, there is sometimes palpable anger at the IJA's higher ranks, who expected "subjugation" of the enemy by the troops but did not have to carry out the dangerous and inhumane work of breaking the spirit of the local population themselves.¹¹² The notebooks left by Fujimori Masatoku 藤森政徳 (1896–1967), who was stationed near Vladivostok for half a year in 1920 as part of the Fiftieth Infantry Regiment of Matsumoto, denounced the unnecessary violence and absurdity of the Intervention (*bakabakashii koto da* 馬鹿ばかしい事だ).¹¹³

Takeuchi's records express the feeling of helplessness experienced by rank-and-file soldiers confronting the misery they inflicted on civilians. In a 1921 picture the young recruit represented the shelling of the village of Popovo, which lay in the line of fire of Japanese artillery during the Chita operations of April 1920. He commented that:

Our artillery does not hesitate to fire over the village while the inhabitants flee in order to avoid harm. I feel sorry for them because they have done nothing wrong. But these things are to be expected on the battlefield. It cannot be helped (*sennaki koto nari* 詮ナキ事ナリ).¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ For example, very little is devoted to the Intervention in history textbooks, while the Yūshūkan 遊就館, the war museum associated with Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, makes only a passing reference to it.

¹¹⁰ Hiroiwa 2019, p. 104.

¹¹¹ Matsuo 1978, pp. 202–203.

¹¹² Matsuo 1978, p. 260.

¹¹³ Fujimori Masatoku, "Ah sentō wa hisan nari—kotoshi de hyakunen Shiberia shuppei jūgunhei no nikki" あー戦闘は悲惨なり—今年で100年シベリア出兵従軍兵の日記. *Shinano Mainichi Shinbun*, 5 July 2018.

¹¹⁴ Takeuchi 1921b, p. 33.

For ordinary soldiers like him, the reality of war could only be formulated in terms of unavailability (figure 12).

INSERT Figure 12 AROUND HERE

Violent clashes were at odds with the appreciation of Russian life and traditions cultivated by the Japanese. Takeuchi reported about the warm and generous welcome received during the same period from villagers in Domno-Klyuchevskaya, who treated the Japanese troops with bread, tea, and milk.¹¹⁵ Notes also indicate that the young recruit was keen to learn Russian and practised conversation in the language while in Transbaikalia. Since official objectives included restoring peace in East Asia and helping the “good” Russian people, there was some rationale in getting to know the locals, if only to court their goodwill.¹¹⁶ The government supplied food and medical care to Russians in need during the civil war precisely for that reason, although competing with the United States as provider of assistance constituted a further motive too.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the affinity with Russian culture—and willingness to explore it—pervades the personal accounts of servicemen.¹¹⁸

The disjunction between the need to subjugate enemies—“bad” Russians—and appreciate a rich civilization of the “good” Russians likely compounded the feeling of incomprehension experienced by Japanese soldiers regarding the purpose of their mission. For Takeuchi, the contrast between Russian splendor and sudden brutality was puzzling. He was for example impressed by Chita, the “Kyōtō of Siberia” and a highlight of Russian civilization. But in 1920, he could observe scenes of chaos and desperation as “the citizens of the magnificent city, who yesterday enjoyed a carefree and peaceful life, saw their dreams shattered under a hail of fire”¹¹⁹ (figure 13). Of the damage done, Takeuchi was both a sorry witness and a participant.

¹¹⁵ Takeuchi 1921a, p. 32.

¹¹⁶ Izaō 2017, p. 168.

¹¹⁷ Uematsu 2014, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ Kuroshima 1955, p. 148; Tsukamoto 1978, p. 252.

¹¹⁹ Takeuchi 1921a, p. 32.

INSERT Figure 13 ROUND HERE

The long history of Russian cultural inspiration to Japan could not be dismissed so easily and created the paradox of soldiers fighting against people whose country they respected—one more confusing aspect of the conflict in the mind of combatants. The last words of Ōtani, an interpreter with the Fourteenth Infantry Regiment who fell on the battlefield in April 1919, revealed the depth of this respect: “There are one thousand rubles in my pocket. Please do not send those back to my parents in Japan, but make a donation of half the sum to a Japanese orphanage and the other half to a Russian orphanage.”¹²⁰

Conclusion

In 1918, the IJA hoped that the Intervention would help restore the image of the military at home and further raise its prestige overseas. Over four years later, as Japanese troops withdrew from most of the Russian Far East, failure and bitterness were the predominant sentiments. The Intervention became for most Japanese a military undertaking better forgotten. Despite the claim of non-interference in the internal affairs of a third country, in reality the IJA took sides in a bloody civil war, which, as time went on, dragged Japanese forces into an ever deeper morass.

Takeuchi Tadao’s records illustrate aspects of this messy undertaking and invite us to revisit the Intervention from the perspective of an ordinary soldier. The pictorials he carefully assembled plunge the viewer into scenes of desperation and violence that carried no glory. His sketches, poems, and testimony raise the question of whether sacrificing one’s life for the nation and creating so much misery made sense. An ambivalence about the nature of the enemy—the difficult distinction between the “good” and the “bad” Russians—runs through the narrative. And the relentless references to the cold suggest that it was a traumatizing, almost incomprehensible feature of the Japanese soldiers’ experience. As a proletarian writer, someone like Kuroshima Denji held leftist beliefs that were

¹²⁰ Quoted in Matsuo 1978, pp. 261–262.

uncompromising about what he perceived as the evils of imperialism and militarism. Those beliefs gave a sharp edge to his criticism of the Intervention. “Siberia Under Snow,” a short story he published in 1927, depicted the war as lived by two hapless soldiers whose humane qualities were no match for the viciousness of the institution that slowly squeezed the life out of them.¹²¹ Kuroshima’s dissenting voice constituted one form of Taishō self-expression, blunt and critical of the capitalist state apparatus, albeit also putting him at the risk of censorship and repression. Takeuchi Tadao’s questioning was less ideologically motivated and hence less explicit, but he possessed the means to visualize the incoherence of the conflict. Thanks to his efforts, there exists a powerful and realistic picture of what the experience was like for an ordinary soldier.

The Takeuchi records are significant because they were created at the start of Japan’s unilateral phase of the Intervention, which attracted opprobrium both at home and abroad. They give an insight into the mindset of soldiers whose mission received limited public endorsement. Furthermore, a study of the Intervention cannot ignore the growing arrogance of the officer class and tendency to consider young privates as pawns in the service of military self-aggrandizement and experiments. A logical consequence of the chaos that occurred in Siberia is that it sharpened the IJA’s determination to bolster the fighting spirit of soldiers at all costs. While the figure of the emperor was more or less absent in this particular conflict, it returned to the center of military life and training a few years later, in an obvious bid to strengthen discipline and prepare for total war.

Over the years, the Yufta and Nikolaevsk incidents, where many Japanese lost their lives, have tended to define the memory of the Siberian Intervention to the exclusion of the many other incidents that took place and the complexity of the conflict’s global context. It is no coincidence that the records carefully compiled and kept by Takeuchi failed to reach the public eye for so long. That specific military venture made for uncomfortable memories not only because of the victimization of civilians by all sides, but also perhaps primarily because it lacked coherence.

¹²¹ Kuroshima (1927) 2006.

The unintelligibility of the conflict for rank-and-file soldiers remains a striking feature of the Siberian Intervention. Someone like Takeuchi, who was a farmer before being a soldier, could not fully understand why he was struggling against the rigors of the Siberian winter and taking sides in a bloody and savage internecine war with increasingly weak support from the Japanese public. Although the notion of “dying for the state” belonged to his vocabulary, the overriding impression of the deaths he witnessed and sketched is of meaninglessness and confusion. Like many others, he resorted therefore to the idea of inevitability to explain the events he was witnessing. That villagers who had done nothing wrong would find themselves in the line of Japanese artillery fire was deemed “unavoidable.” The expectations of Japan as a modern state shaped Takeuchi’s military experience. As a conscript born in a rural setting, he was constrained by his low-level status in the army and the culture of obedience it fostered. It is as far as “complicity” went, but at the very least it set a chilling precedent. The Siberian Intervention deserves to be remembered for all these reasons, and especially because there is much to learn from seeing events “from the ground up.”

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