Japan and the Wider World in the Decade of the Great War

Introduction

The 1910s and the Periodization of World History

How does the decade of the 1910s fit into the broader narratives of world history? It has generally been seen as a bifurcated period, divided between an early half that was the final stretch of the “long nineteenth century,” and a latter half when the Great War raged in Europe and transformed the globe. Hobsbawm’s classic formulation of that periodization, running from the French Revolution of 1789 through to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, defined the era.¹ Scholarship on the 1910s has been dominated by two main questions: a search for the origins of the Great War,² and an inquiry into the formation and impact of the peace settlement.³ In this view of the past, Europe is the center and the motivating force of human history, which is seen as an evolutionary process that progressed in stages from medieval through Renaissance and Enlightenment, ultimately bringing modernity into the world. The First World War marked the endpoint, or perhaps the beginning of the end, of that

historical arc, because it was the moment when the nation-states of Europe and their affiliated empires began to destroy each other and themselves. A few recent works have attempted to globalize the study of the 1910s, but even here, perhaps because of the overwhelming focus on the war and its peace, the Western world and the sense of rupture have remained the primary focus for most scholars.

However, this Eurocentric vision is, quite simply, insufficient for understanding recent world history because it does not account for the fundamental changes that occurred in East Asia – within individual states, in the relations among those states, and in the connections between East Asia and the wider world – over the course of several decades. In contrast to the above narrative, this volume argues that the 1910s should be primarily conceived of as the interplay between two conceptions of time. One is the more traditional narrative, and what we might refer to as the “short 1910s,” in which the war and its immediate aftermath had a transformative impact on both domestic and international contexts. The other is the “long 1910s,” an era that stretched backwards and forwards beyond the chronological limits of 1910–1919. As a whole, the essays show that the events of those ten years accentuated trends that had been underway since the late nineteenth century, and that the Great War itself was a catalyst for some subsequent transformations, but largely peripheral to other crucial developments. By looking beyond Europe, and beyond diplomatic and military relations, this volume describes the 1910s as a pivotal period with deep connections both to the imperialist heyday of the 1880s–1890s, and to the vibrant global politics, commercial expansion, and social movements of the 1920s.

For East Asia, the most important transition of this broad era was its shift from being a China-centric to a Japan-centric region. This regional restructuring

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5 This interpretation of the 1910s was first developed at a roundtable at the Association of Asian Studies annual conference in March 2011, in Honolulu, HI. The presenters on that panel were Evan Dawley, David Howland, Youngran Hur, and Guoqi Xu, with commentary by Akira Iriye. The editors would like to thank them for their participation in that roundtable, which was essential to the development of the ideas presented in this volume. Comments by members of the audience at that panel were also extremely helpful.