Chapter 5

Brücken, Beethoven und Baumkuchen: German and Austro-Hungarian Prisoners of War and the Japanese Home Front

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Introduction

The siege of Tsingtao is one of the often overlooked fronts, at least in European historiography, of the First World War. Although only lasting a little over a week, the defeat of the German Reich in East Asia opened up important new inroads into China for the Japanese imperial mission. It led to the imposition of the infamous Twenty-One Demands on Chinese President Yuan Shikai and helped consolidate a more militant form of politics in Tokyo. With the acquisition of Tsingtao (Qingdao), Japanese diplomats concentrated their efforts on gaining territory and influence in China which strained and led to the beginning of the end of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. By the end of the war it was clear to the Japanese that Germany, having lost all its overseas possessions, no longer presented any immediate threat to the empire’s existence. The roughly 4,800 prisoners of war (POWs) taken at Tsingtao faded into the political background and would have become the forgotten soldiers of the First World War were it not for Japanese public interest in them.¹ This paper will consider the reasons why the Japanese treated their German enemy with such grace while they were in captivity, and propose reasons for this, as well as challenge some prevailing notions of how good this treatment was. It will also discuss the cultural impact that these prisoners had on Japan during and after the war.

Although an enemy country, once defeated the image of the Germans quickly changed from foe to friend; the prisoners were greeted on arrival at most Japanese ports not with jeers and stones but with cheers and flowers.²

¹ 4,700 including approximately 500 Austro-Hungarian sailors mainly from the SMS Kaiserin Elizabeth. Figures from Takehiko Seto, Chintau kara kita heishitachi (Soldiers from Tsingtao) (Tokyo: Dogakusha, 2006), 8.
² The welcome was not as warm in the port at Fukuoka, perhaps as the soldiers from that area had borne the brunt of the fighting and casualties. Hans Joachim Schmidt, and Karl-
Despite the keen public interest in the war in Europe, the Japanese home front was not directly affected by the fighting or rigours of warfare and therefore hatred of the enemy was not as prevalent as in Europe. Apart from the effects of inflation, only the presence of POWs reminded the Japanese public that they were involved in the Great War at all. Although meant in a different context, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker’s comments apply to Japan when they argued that the camps delineated a new and different map of the war, with a front line at home very different from the battlefield. Through engineering, music, cooking and even their general conduct, the German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners left an imprint on the Japanese public that still endures today.

Existing literature on the First World War in Japan focuses on the political developments caused by the successful military campaign in Tsingtao. Most histories of the war focus mainly on Japan’s external relations with emphasis on its expansion into China. The war played an important role in the breakdown of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, as Ian Nish has pointed out. Although the British and the Japanese maintained the alliance for the duration of the war, tensions rose between the two powers over Japan’s reluctance to send part of its navy to the Mediterranean and through its actions in China. Britain could not afford to focus resources in East Asia so the Alliance was given a reprieve until the full effects of the conflict could be brought to bear on Anglo-Japanese relations. US-Japanese relations and the threat to the Open Door policy caused by Japan’s actions and US reaction to them have been written about. The conflict has also received attention in terms of the impact on Sino-Japanese relations. Frederick Dickinson’s book War and National Rein-

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3 Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 14–18 Understanding the Great War (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 82.