CHAPTER 9

Rathenau and Ludendorff: Two Japanese Images of Germany in World War I

Kudō Akira

In August 1914, a month after the outbreak of World War I in Europe, Japan declared war on Germany, attacked the German colonial concession at Kiaochow (Jiaozhou) Bay, and in November captured its administrative center at Tsingtao (Qingdao). A year later, both the Imperial Japanese Army (hereafter cited as IJA) and the Imperial Japanese Navy (hereafter cited as IJN) established research organizations to study the Great War in Europe. As the fighting in Europe protracted and turned into “total war,” the Japanese military’s interest in this phenomenon increased greatly and any new developments were intensively studied. After the war, the results of the IJA’s research were compiled in a report released in May 1920 titled Kokka sōdōin ni kansuru iken (Opinion Concerning National Mobilization; Rinji Gunji Chōsa Iin 1920).  

The IJA focused its research on Germany, and following the end of the war, this interest intensified because the Japanese army had long taken the Prussian-German army as its model. It was now more important than ever to understand the causes for Germany’s defeat. The Japanese concept of total war emerged from the studies of wartime Germany, and the image of total war in Japan was largely based on the German model. It is therefore crucial to examine closely the IJA’s perceptions of Germany, as well as of total war. These images had a profound influence on Japan’s historical trajectory from World War I to the Sino-Japanese War beginning in 1937 and the Pacific War of 1941–1945. 

The IJA’s view of total war derived from the concept of “total national mobilization” (kokka sōdōin), which was seen as comprising “industrial mobilization” (kōgyō dōin) and “manpower mobilization” (kokumin dōin). Through a study of Germany’s wartime system of total war, this chapter will show that the IJA connected industrial mobilization to the industrialist Walther Rathenau (1867–1922) and manpower mobilization to General Erich Ludendorff (1865–1937) (figs. 9.1 and 9.2). Later, these two images—the Rathenau and the Ludendorff image—were amalgamated into a single concept of total national

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mobilization. How were these two images unified? And could these two disparate images even have been easily unified in the first instance?

In order to answer these questions this chapter will investigate the formation of the Japanese IJA’s perception and image of total war, in particular, as it emerged during its study of Germany during World War I. First, I will examine the aforementioned report, Opinion Concerning National Mobilization, and the various earlier reports of the Commission for the Investigation of Military Affairs (Rinji Gunji Chōsa Iin). Next, I will look at articles from the journal for army officers, Kaikōsha kiji. Finally, I will discuss writings by Nagata Tetsuzan (1884–1935), who spearheaded the army’s total war preparations after the end of World War I.

Images of Wartime Germany in the Reports of the Commission for the Investigation of Military Affairs

Rathenau’s Industrial Mobilization and Ludendorff’s Manpower Mobilization

In November 1915, one year after the occupation of Qingdao, the IJA established the Commission for the Investigation of Military Affairs. This organization studied the belligerent European nations during the Great War, including Germany. Furthermore, it investigated military preparations in the United States and published its results in various format. The earliest report, dated January 1917, was titled “Ōshū kōsen shokoku no rikugun ni tsuite” (On the Armies of the Belligerent Nations of Europe; Rinji Gunji Chōsa Iin 1917a). The historian Kōketsu Atsushi states that this report

... concentrated on the research of purely militaristic issues regarding the various nations participating in the Great War. Nevertheless, it included the section “Overview of the Current Condition of Industrial Mobilization in the Belligerent Nations” and outlined the status of wartime preparation for industrial mobilization in the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Italy.... However, by introducing these preparations, the military-industrial mobilization of each nation was presented as an operation that merely complemented the mobilization of troops. The idea of coherent “national mobilization” had yet to emerge (Kōketsu 1981: 34).

In May 1917, four months after the report, the Commission published a translation of a lecture by Walter Rathenau on Germany’s enforcement of