
<Review of the 101st International ARC Seminar (Dr. Nadine Willems)> Going to War During the Taisho Period: Japan's Siberian Intervention of 1918–1922 as Illustrated by the Pictorial Diaries of Infantryman Takeuchi Tadao

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1. Introduction

This event report provides an overview and analysis of the research currently undertaken by Dr. Nadine Willems on the depictions of the Siberian Intervention (1918-1922) in the pictorial diaries of soldier Takeuchi Tadao. Dr. Willems presented her recent findings and thoughts on the project at the 101st International ARC Seminar held on the 11th May 2022¹.

The objectives of Dr. Willems' research are rooted in the importance of learning the realities of Japanese military life during the Siberian Intervention directly from the voice of the rank-and-file, and her discoveries bring new light to an often overshadowed conflict of the early twentieth century. This report will discuss the contents of the seminar, and the future of the project.

2. Outline of seminar

Dr. Willems is inherently interdisciplinary in her work, with past research on Japanese twentieth century history, poetry, geography, and ethnography, including a new monograph: *Ishikawa Sanshirō's Geographical Imagination: Transnational Anarchism and the Reconfiguration of Everyday Life in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*, published in 2020². From 2021, she has been the principal investigator in a project at the University of East Anglia, entitled "The Siberian Diaries of Japanese Soldiers (1918-1922)." Dr. Willems came across the 109 drawings and pictorial diary entries from Takeuchi by chance, as they were

kept by Takeuchi's family, and the materials lacked thorough investigation into their value as chronicles of the Siberian Intervention from the perspective of the Japanese infantry.

As Dr. Willems highlighted during the session through detailed visual analysis, the sources produced by Takeuchi are valuable in demonstrating the contradictions and exaggerations of the authoritative narrative found in state-sponsored propaganda or *senso-ga* published during the conflict. While propaganda regarding the Siberian Intervention never came to the same volume as during other conflicts such as the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) and Russo-Japanese War (1904-5,) there are still examples such as from Shobido & Co. and Japanese artist Ryōzō Tanaka, which focus on the sheer number of Japanese soldiers stationed in Siberia, and the organised military might of Japan in this landscape³. Therefore, the drawings made by Takeuchi serve as rare, even unique counter narratives, portraying the personal experiences and emotions of his regiment in an organic, immediate way.

Takeuchi Tadao (1897-1955) was one of 73,000 troops deployed to Siberia during the intervention. Originally growing up in the mountains of Otagiri in Nagano prefecture raising silkworms, he was also a talented artist. Takeuchi's talents may have saved his life, as he was assigned by his superiors to record the military excursions of his regiment in 1918. Takeuchi was stationed at Chita, a city on the Trans-Siberian railway route, with the 58th regiment of the 13th infantry division of the Japanese army. The allied forces, particularly

Woodrow Wilson, requested that Japan occupy this territory in North Sakhalin, in order to assist with the aftermath of the collapse of the Eastern front in the closing years of World War I, as well as help anti-Bolshevik forces during the Russian Civil War (1917-22).

Dr. Willems describes the drawings and diary entries recorded by Takeuchi as showing a hostile and harsh environment filled with inglorious deaths, a stark comparison to the *senso-ga* of the same Siberian scenes. She suggests that Takeuchi wanted to show the reality of life “on the ground” and the experience of the Siberian Intervention as it really was for the rank-and-file. Throughout the seminar, her explorations of these realities are visually supported by examples of Takeuchi’s pictorial diaries, demonstrating their significance in conveying such ideas.

3. Taishō Individualism

The Taishō period began in 1912, and Takeuchi's drawings demonstrate a fascinating concept brought up by Dr. Willems, of "Taishō Individualism" and the reaction to the "omnipresence of the state" which intensifies during this period. Sharon Nolte, in her examination of individualism in Taishō Japan, notes that the “simultaneous growth of an individualistic ethos and of state managerial capacity underlay much of the political and intellectual confusion of the era,” and Dr. Willems asserts that Takeuchi’s self-expression through his drawings, despite living in a rural area, are symptomatic of the impact of Taishō individualism and calls for democracy on the masses⁴.

Furthermore, Dr. Willems suggests that Japanese soldiers during the Siberian Intervention, six years into the Taishō period, lacked the "clear rationale" evident in the Russo-Japanese War as they began to question the role of the Japanese state. There was disillusionment in dying for the state as more and more soldiers attempted to evade conscription or “blood tax.”

4. Reliability of Pictorial Diaries

However, when considering the limitations and value of these sources, the context in which

Takeuchi was producing these diaries is critical, and this reflects the reliability of his depictions. Once conscripted, he was assigned to capture the events of the war, sketching the scenes while in Siberia and then once returning, drawing the illustrations again with ink and colour. As this was an assignment, there would be expectations on how events were depicted, and the Taishō period also saw rigid censorship enforced by the state to uphold the power of the Japanese army in the face of emerging doubts on Japan’s involvement in Siberia, and the unnecessary bloodshed of this conflict. This censorship, and the position Takeuchi had within the rank-and-file gave him limited freedom to draw the complete reality of his time in Siberia, and this would have undoubtedly influenced what Takeuchi depicted in his sketches.

Adding to this, in the aftermath of the conflict there is a tendency for what Dr. Willems terms “selective memory” regarding the atrocities committed on both sides. Dr. Willems asserts that the Siberian Intervention has not been remembered compared to the First Sino-Japanese War, and Russo-Japanese War. Japanese soldiers, as did civilians, encountered extreme hardship, with a lack of food, water, and vulnerability to disease and climate, but there is a tendency to focus on instances of the Japanese as victims, rather than on the full complexity of this conflict. Takeuchi’s drawings contribute to a more nuanced discussion on the Siberian Intervention, showing multiple narratives one can attribute to both the rank-and-file, and higher authority when considering censorship.

5. Future Research and Digitisation

Professor Ryo Akama of Ritsumeikan University has agreed to assist in digitising the materials being researched in this project, and Dr. Willems gave thanks to Dr. Ryoko Matsuba and Ritsumeikan University for continued work on the digital exhibit of Takeuchi’s drawings and writings which will be launched later in 2022. Dr. Willems independent research is ongoing, and more connections and discoveries are sure to be uncovered.

6. Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, analysing rare primary sources of the rank-and-file during the Siberian Intervention allows for a more nuanced narrative of a complex conflict which often falls into the trap of "selective memory" in not only Japanese, but global scholarship on this conflict. It also opens up new avenues of exploring the relationship between individual and state during the Taishō period, and challenges dominating concepts of Taishō individualism and democracy.

Dr. Willems introduced students to an under-represented and valuable area of research through previously unknown visually sources that are both engaging and accessible. This report has covered the major themes of her talk, and the digital face of this project in the near future.

[Notes and References]

- 1) The webinar is available on the Arts Research Centre, Ritsumeikan University YouTube channel, which can be accessed here:
<https://www.arc.ritsumei.ac.jp/e/news/pc/013527.html>. (accessed: 2022-06-23).
- 2) Willems, Nadine. Ishikawa Sanshirō's Geographical Imagination: Transnational Anarchism and the Reconfiguration of Everyday Life in Early Twentieth-Century Japan. Leiden University Press, 2020, p. 291.
- 3) Lithograph prints of the Siberian Intervention published by Shōbidō & Co. and drawn by Ryōzō Tanaka are available on the US Library of Congress digital archive, the majority of which can be viewed here:
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2005680027/>. (accessed 2022-06-23).
- 4) Nolte, Sharon Hamilton. "Individualism in Taishō Japan." *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 1984, vol. 43, no.4, pp. 667–84.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2057149>. (accessed: 2022-06-23).