



Activity 3 - World War I in Asia: The Siege of Tsingtao, 1914

In Asia, all the German colonies except for Tsingtao were under Australian or New Zealander control by mid-September 1914. The fortified city of Tsingtao, essential as it was for sustaining German naval operations in the Pacific, was better defended: 3,000 German marines stood against a small British force comprised of the 2nd South Wales Borderers and 36th Sikhs dispatched from Hong Kong and Tientsin. However, what Germany had failed to plan for was the Japanese empire, eager to cement its place as the rising Asian power in the shadow of declining Chinese dominance by scoring a decisive victory against the German colony. To this end, 57,000 Japanese troops landed outside the city throughout September 1914.

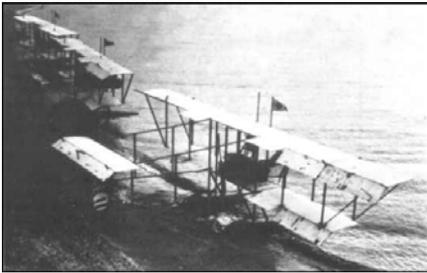


British and Japanese troops landing at Tsingtao, September 24 1914

The German Empire had attained a 99-year lease on the city of Tsingtao (Qingdao) and the surrounding area of Kiaochow (Jiaozhou) from the Chinese government in 1898, which was at the time under extreme duress from the imperial powers following its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War. It was at this time that Britain also secured its 99-year lease on the area surrounding Hong Kong. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Germany fortified the area with a strong naval base and coaling station, and transformed the urban environment in Tsingtao into an analogue of a typically German town, including, naturally, a brewery - still in operation today. "Expensive and resplendent public buildings rose on these frontages. Gardens were laid out on the model of those in Berlin, and German officialdom took its leisure along an imitation Unter den Linden, or displayed itself in the novel tea-grounds. The natives, too, were given the benefit of schools, where the German language was taught."¹ Chinese residents of the colony, however, found themselves treated as second-class citizens living in substandard housing away from the modern, manicured German quarter. Tsingtao was not only a battle of the First World War but also part of a series of conflicts in China taking place between 1895 and 1922.

Question 1: How relevant do you think the western conception of the war as neatly starting in 1914 and ending in 1918 is? Is there an argument for taking a wider view?

¹Edmund Dane, *British Campaigns in Africa and the Pacific 1914-1918* (London, 1919), p. 198



Modern war: Japanese navy seaplanes; shell damage on a German-style café in Tsingtao.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1081-046-10
Foto: Froehner, Abrecht Dr. | 1915 ca.

The joint British and Japanese force began their landings at Tsingtao on 2 September, and the fighting that took place over the following two months was reminiscent of the European war, characterised by the digging of trenches and heavy reliance on artillery. On 7 November, after an opportunistic night attack by the Japanese, the German marines submitted, seeing no further point in fighting to the death. The Japanese and British were surprised by the swiftness of the surrender, though the Germans did have time to destroy war materiel and scuttle their ships to prevent them falling into the hands of the enemy. They did not, however, surrender completely graciously: "the Germans showed a certain disregard or grudging respect for the Japanese, but nothing of the sort for the British; one group of German soldiers supposedly about-faced as the first British soldiers arrived and bared their backsides to them as a mark of disrespect."²

Ultimately, while it was important to knock out Germany's naval capability in the Far East, the British interest in the Tsingtao campaign was to keep an eye on Japanese imperial expansion: "They had single-handedly beaten the Chinese in 1895, the Russians in 1904-05 and, with only minor assistance from the British, the Germans in 1914. There can be little doubt that the Japanese saw the Tsingtao campaign as a great success which signalled their arrival on the world stage."³ Given this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Japanese did not think much of the British and their imperial attitudes, and the two armies did not get along. Colonel Calthorp said of his men:

"They regarded [the Japanese] as an inferior race, as coolies in uniforms whose good opinion it was quite unnecessary to cultivate. The expedition was unpopular, and it was felt that the units should be preserved as intact as possible for the subsequent operations in Europe. The most favourable explanation that can be given from the British point of view is that they did not try."

The Japanese viewed the British as an antiquated imperial power, in contrast to their modern, rising empire. According to Lieutenant Simson, the South Wales' Borderers' interpreter,

"[we] did nothing to impress the Japanese with the British Army - rather the reverse. The Japanese are a critical people... from what I saw there must have been many instances where our men quite unintentionally and quite unthinkingly

² John Dixon, *A Clash of Empires: The South Wales Borderers at Tsingtao, 1914* (Wrexham, 2008), p. 207

³ *Ibid.*, p. 232



did things that did not anger and offend the Japanese so much as hurt their feelings... [on the other hand] the Britisher would unmistakably express his disapproval of what the 'native' had done... But more important than all these things, the Japanese who saw most of us and worked most with us were not impressed with our work... they admired and liked the Sikhs, who were always well turned out on parade... Their officers too, seemed to have no difficulty with the Japanese and no prejudice against them... I do not think they admired us as soldiers, whereas they did admire the Sikhs."⁴

The Japanese also considered the upper-class British officers to be unsuited to the rigours of campaigning, compared to the more middle-class officers in the Indian service.

Question 2: Do you consider the differences of race and class between these armies to be significant to the study of the war? Is it possible that these prejudices had a tangible effect on the outcome of battles, or indeed the war itself?

The mentalities displayed by the British soldiers in the Far East illustrate that, at the time, it was not considered to be a significant theatre of the war - the Borderers resented being away from the 'main event' in Europe. Before long, however, they were indeed dispatched to the Western Front, while the 36th Sikhs returned to garrison duty in Tientsin. The Japanese occupied Tsingtao, and the German population was largely spared the looting and violence visited on Chinese villages by the invaders in the early stages of the campaign. The surviving German marines were interned in Japan for the remainder of the war.

Question 3: Despite the British troops' attitude, do you think that, looking back, this early action was actually important to the progress of the First World War?

Though it might have done little to reconcile the tensions between the empires vying for dominance in the former Chinese sphere of influence, the fall of Tsingtao brought an end to Germany's flirtation with empire in the Far East. China attempted to enforce its claim over Tsingtao, but was too militarily weak to do so in the face of the Japanese, who held the city until 1922. Japan was granted former German Pacific islands as mandates in 1918, which twenty-three years later would become battlefields once again when the United States entered the Second World War.

⁴Calthorp and Simson quoted in Dixon, pp. 235-7