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Fighting the Last War

The 1937 Battle of Shanghai Through the Prism of WWI

by

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Abstract

Today the conflicts of the 1930s are generally seen as preludes to World War II, but for the contemporaries they were late echoes of the Great War. Few could have known that they lived not in the “postwar era” but the “interwar years”, and that an even bigger cataclysm was approaching. The battle between Chinese and Japanese forces for Shanghai from August to November 1937 is a case in point. It took place just 19 years after the end of World War I¹, reflected in a widespread tendency to look at the hostilities in China’s largest city through the prism of the global conflict two decades earlier. Many of the German advisors to the Chinese Army had been through the war in the trenches and took the tactics they had honed there with them to Shanghai. This resulted in near-impregnable Chinese defenses in and around the city, and it also manifested itself in the introduction of shock tactics designed to bring about an early decision rather than being bogged down in a costly war of attrition. Among Chinese combatants, cultural references to World War I abounded. One officer described a period of relative peace as reminiscent of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. A young pilot found inspiration in the memoirs of Eddie Rickenbacker, an American fighter ace of the Great War. Foreign spectators of the Shanghai battle, too, used World War I as a frequent metaphor. Many had seen active service in Europe during the earlier conflict and tried to make sense of the events unfolding around them by contrasting them with their own experiences. The Japanese belligerents, on the other hand, had little interest in the example of World War I, using the Russo-Japanese War as their main point of reference, and perhaps they benefited from that. Those who lived through the battle of Shanghai and actively looked for parallels with World War I failed to appreciate aspects of the fighting that were truly new and would come to characterize World War II: Mobile tank warfare, amphibious tactics and air power as key determinants, and above all an offense-dominant rather than a defense-dominant outlook.

1.0 Introduction

On November 11, 1937, representatives of Shanghai’s foreign communities gathered at the Cenotaph on the left bank of the Huangpu River to commemorate the end of the Great War in Europe 19 years earlier. It was a surreal event. As speakers eulogized those who had fallen in the previous conflict, the sound of people dying in a new conflict could be heard just a couple of miles away. In Shanghai’s Nanshi district, Japanese soldiers were weeding out the last pockets of Chinese resistance, as a three-month battle for control of China’s largest city was nearing its end.

It was symbolic that the last day of the 1937 battle of Shanghai was the same day that the War to End All Wars had come to a close. The campaign in and around China’s largest city had involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides and had put the lives of three million civilians at risk. It was arguably the bloodiest military event since 1918, and it had happened right in front of a foreign audience who for the most part had some kind of personal recollection of the Great War. They had made comparisons between the two wars repeatedly during the long weeks of combat.

¹ The term “World War I” is used here to describe the global conflict that raged from 1914 to 1918. This is for the sake of convenience, and it should be born in mind that to the people in 1937 that great conflict was known primarily as “the Great War” or simply as “the war.”

It may be hard today to appreciate the extent to which people of the 1930s still lived in the shadow of World War I. At the time, it had the undisputed position as the bloodiest catastrophe in European history, worse even than the Thirty Years War, and it was only 20 years in the past.² It had marked an entire generation of young men and women, and it had determined the overall mood for the two subsequent decades. Small wonder, then, if eyewitnesses of the battle of Shanghai would immediately, perhaps even reflexively, seek parallels with the Great War.

This paper will investigate how prior knowledge about World War I, whether obtained directly through own experience or indirectly by listening to or reading about the experience of others, helped participants and spectators cope with the experience of battle in Shanghai the late summer and fall of 1937. At the practical level – for the combatants – World War I served as a source of inspiration and imitation as they sought to act efficiently as soldiers, and at the cognitive level – for the combatants as well as for the spectators – the previous war served as an aid in grasping the events intellectually and putting them into a meaningful context.

The main emphasis in what follows will be the legacy of World War I as a *military* event and how this influenced perceptions and steered actions during the 1937 battle of Shanghai. Needless to say, the war had numerous other effects on China and Japan, ranging from the political to the economic and cultural spheres, but they will not be considered here.³

1.1 The battle

The battle of Shanghai was the largest battle between Chinese and Japanese forces during the first year of the 1937-1945 Second Sino-Japanese War.⁴ It broke out as the Chinese side successfully lured the Japanese Army away from the northern plains, where the invader could use his material superiority, especially in armor, to the maximum extent, towards the eastern regions around the lower Yangtze, where a terrain marked by numerous waterways made the technical advantage enjoyed by the Japanese side less decisive.

After a brief intensive period in mid-August when the Shanghai battle was characterized primarily by urban combat, the main front moved from the downtown area to the countryside and smaller towns and villages outside the city. Despite initial Japanese advances following landings made on the southern bank of the Yangtze, their infantry almost ground to a halt, slowed down not just by determined Chinese

² Whether World War I was also up till then the bloodiest conflict in *world* history is somewhat uncertain. It is likely that some events in Asia, for example the 1851-1864 Taiping Rebellion, claimed more lives.

³ Among the best-known examples is the May Fourth Movement, arising in reaction to Japan's "21 Demands" and its claims on Shandong territory, both a direct consequence of World War I in Asia. Another example, demonstrating how the legacy had far-reaching and not always obvious consequences, it has been argued that Japan's development into a modern mass consumer society was also, at least in part, a result of the war. See Dickinson, Frederick R. *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan, 1914-1931*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 193)

⁴ The conventional view is for the war to have started in 1937. A good case can be made that it actually began in 1931. For a detailed account of the Shanghai battle, see Harmsen, Peter. *Shanghai 1937: Stalingrad on the Yangtze*. Havertown PA: Casemate, 2013.

resistance, but also by the difficult terrain and by protracted autumn rains. As several Japanese divisions attempted to break through the Chinese defenses in the countryside west of Shanghai during September and October, scenes of static warfare played out, reminiscent of the trenches on the Western Front less than a generation earlier.

The near-stalemate only ended in early November, when the Japanese Tenth Army landed in Hangzhou Bay, south of Shanghai. The troops disembarked against light resistance and proceeded rapidly through thinly defended areas, threatening to link up with the Japanese forces west of Shanghai, thus cutting off a Chinese retreat from the city. This triggered a rushed Chinese withdrawal from Shanghai, during which lack of preparation and organization combined with incessant Japanese attacks to cause massive loss of life on the Chinese side. By November 11, the Chinese Army had lost the battle and moved west, and the country's government had stepped up preparations to defend the capital Nanjing and other strategic areas further inland.

Chinese estimates of their own losses during the battle range between 187,200 and 300,000 casualties.⁵ The Japanese calculated the Chinese losses to about 250,000 by the end of October.⁶ By contrast losses on the Japanese were significantly lighter, albeit still significant, totaling 9,115 killed and 31,257 injured, according to what may be a low estimate.⁷ This makes the battle comparable to some of the most vicious battles of World War I, at least in terms of losses on the Chinese side. For example, according to one estimate, the 1916 battle of Verdun resulted in 281,000 German and 315,000 French casualties.⁸

1.2 'Fighting the last war'

Did the combatants in Shanghai in 1937 "fight the last war" by, consciously and subconsciously, adopting a cognitive framework shaped by the experience of World War I? Did this in turn determine how they understood the events around them and reacted to them? Did the spectators on the fringes of the fighting, too, "see the last war" as they tried to make sense of what they had observed? To answer these questions it is helpful to investigate how common it is to "fight and see the last war" when faced with a new conflict.

As a common phrase in the English language, "fighting the last war" appears to have emerged in the immediate aftermath of World War I. One of the earliest documented instances of the expression is from the January 29, 1923 issue of the *Register-Gazette*,

⁵ Xu Yongchang. 徐永昌日记 [*Xu Yongchang's Diary*]. Taipei: Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Jindaishi Yanjiusuo, 1991; Ch'i Hsi-sheng, *Nationalist China at War: Military Defeat and Political Collapse*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982, p. 43.

⁶ *North China Daily News*, October 27, 1937.

⁷ 支那事变陸軍作戦 (1) 昭和十三年一月まで [*Official Military History, vol. 86: Army Operations During the China Incident, part 1, to January 1938*]. Tokyo: Asagumo shimbunsha, 1975, p. 387. General Matsui Iwane, after three additional months of campaigning, noted in his diary on February 7, 1937, that more than 18,000 soldier had died in combat or from disease, see 南京大屠杀史料, [*Collection of Historical Records on the Nanjing Massacre*]. vol. 8, Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, p. 176.

⁸ Foley, R. T. *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870–1916*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 259.

which lamented that “the trouble with statesmen who come over here from Europe is that they all come over to fight the last war and we don’t mind saying that the last war is a very tender and embarrassing subject in this neck of the woods.”⁹ In 1929, the adage was more directly associated with the military profession as the periodical *The Military Engineer* stated “it has been said critically that there is a tendency in many armies to spend the peace time studying how to fight the last war.”¹⁰

More specifically, the term was used after the outbreak of World War II to describe the way the victorious side of World War I, and especially the French Army, tended to rest on 20-year-old laurels. In particular, it was applied to the French interwar strategy of relying heavily on defense. This strategy, motivated by the dominant role of defensive weapons in World War I, was most expensively and disastrously expressed in the construction of the Maginot Line, which proved no match for the mobile German forces during the war in the Western Europe in the spring and summer of 1940.

This is not the only example in which the lessons of World War I were applied, sometimes erroneously, on the practical challenges of World War II. The Battle of Jutland in 1916, the key Naval encounter of World War I, had been decided mainly battleships. As a result, interwar navies spent significant resources on battleship design and construction, and were in some cases slow to grasp the growing importance of naval aviation. The Royal Navy paid dearly for this when in late 1941 it dispatched the battleship *Prince of Wales* to the Far East without sufficient air support, only to be sunk by Japanese planes in the South China Sea.

However, the idea that belligerents draw conclusions – sometimes flawed – from past conflicts predates the 20th century. Historians have argued that the massive casualty figures in the American Civil War were partly due to the adoption of Napoleonic tactics, which required soldiers to advance in battle in tightly closed formations. This had made sense at a time when battle was mainly a psychological game and the decisive moment was when an advancing unit attacked the enemy with fixed bayonets, often succeeding in making the opposing side to disintegrate in terror simply by presenting a tight, disciplined mass of determined men. However, the Civil War generals who wanted to repeat this tactics did not take into account the significant development in firearms and ballistics in the course of the 19th century, which turned a tight formation of attackers into easy prey for defending forces, able to send off volley after volley of precisely aimed rifle fire long before physical contact.

Similarly, in the latter part of the 19th century naval officers in all countries were fascinated by the promise of fitting battleships with ram bows, based on a single incident, the naval battle of Lissa in 1866. Ram bows led to far too many instances of accidental sinking and never proved a viable option. This also illustrates the point that in modern times, periods of peace have tended to last longer than periods of war. As a consequence, military establishments eager to draw lessons from the last war have

⁹ “On the Spur of the Moment,” *Register-Gazette*, Rockford IL, January 29, 1923, p. 13.

¹⁰ Schley, J. L., “Some Notes on the World War”, *The Military Engineer*, January-February 1929, p. 55.

frequently risked being too focused on tactics that were used decades in the past, ignoring the fact that they have been rendered obsolete by more recent technical advances.

It should be added that occasionally, soldiers have been determined *not* to fight the last war. Ever since the departure from Vietnam, the US military establishment has seen it as a key part of its mission to avoid a repetition of the Indochinese debacle, even to the extent that in Iraq it banned the use of the word “insurgents” to describe enemy combatants. This, in an oblique way, goes to confirm the fact that the previous war casts a dense shadow over the present one, either as an example to emulate or, less often, as a disaster to avoid repeating.

2.0 World War I and the 1937 Shanghai battle

As has been shown, it is quite common for belligerents and bystanders to experience war through the filter provided by the most recent conflict. In what follows it will be shown that this was also true during the 1937 battle of Shanghai for the Chinese belligerents, their German advisors and the bystanders, who all found similarities with World War I. The Japanese belligerents, by contrast, seems not to have been impacted by the earlier conflict to any significant extent.

2.1 Chinese belligerents

F. F. Liu, a Chinese officer who later became an academic in the United States, compared the Shanghai battle with Verdun, the climactic battle of World War I, when he authored a history of the Chinese military, based partly on his own experiences. “On August 13 (1937),” he wrote, “the Chinese defenders of Shanghai resolutely confronted the Japanese invaders in the bloodiest battle that the world had seen since Verdun.”¹¹

The extent to which World War I appears in the diaries and memoirs of Chinese soldiers and officers taking part in the battle of Shanghai is surprising. Since no record has emerged to suggest that any professional Chinese soldiers had been actual participants in World War I, their knowledge of the war was necessarily of a second-hand nature. The two likeliest sources for this knowledge are the training they had received and the popular culture – including most importantly literature – they had consumed.

2.1.1 Training

One of the most important ways in which the World War I experience impacted the Chinese soldiers who took part in the battle of Shanghai was in the form of a constant awareness of the danger of enemy use of gas as a tactical weapon. Gas had been the source of supreme dread in World War I, and it marked the soldiers and officers who went on to have military careers after the end of the hostilities.

¹¹ Liu F. F. *A Military History of Modern China, 1924-1949*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956, p. 104.

According to the Dutch officer de Fremery, who was attached as an advisor to the Chinese army, training in the defense against gas was introduced into the Chinese military in 1935.¹² This coincides exactly with General Alexander von Falkenhausen taking over as head of the German advisory group.¹³ von Falkenhausen was junior enough to have experienced actual frontline duty in World War I, and the new emphasis on protection against gas could very well reflect the growing impact of German advisors with personal experiences of chemical warfare.

There are several reports of gas being adopted offensively in Shanghai in 1937. For example, in a complaint filed to the League of Nations on October 14, 1937, China said a total of 45 of its soldiers had fallen victim to Japanese gas attacks in the month alone.¹⁴ However, it is unclear if gas was actually used during the Shanghai battle. Zhang Fakui, one of the senior Chinese commanders in the theatre, was not aware of any instances of Japanese deployment of the weapon. The fact that both sides in the battle accused the other side of having used it can perhaps be explained by the propaganda victory that could be achieved with domestic and world public opinion due to the global opprobrium attached to the weapon following the horrific experienced of World War I.

Apart from gas being reported possibly for propaganda purposes, there are examples of other reports reflecting more genuine fear of enemy use. In October 1937, Chinese soldiers attacking a Japanese position near Wusong Creek west of Shanghai mistook a Japanese smoke grenade for a shell containing poison gas,¹⁵ and again in November, Chinese units defending positions south of Suzhou Creek believed to be the targets of a poison gas attack, which, likewise, turned out to be artificial smoke.¹⁶

Given the fact that gas was sparsely used in Shanghai in 1937, if at all, it is all the more remarkable that it was a source of significant and constant dread in the Chinese ranks. There was no prior use of gas in any of the civil wars that had ravaged China in the years before, and therefore there is a high probability that their German advisors had instilled the dread of this particular weapon in them.¹⁷

2.1.2 Literature

“Just like *All Quiet on the Western Front*.” For Liu Jingchi, one of the top Chinese commanders in the downtown segments of the front during the battle for Shanghai, this was the immediate reaction as he surveyed the frontline in late August 1937,

¹² Teitler, Geir et al. *A Dutch Spy in China: Reports on the First Phase of Sino-Japanese War*. Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 138-139.

¹³ Mohr, E.G. *Sino-German Relations in the Period of Chiang Kai-shek*. Paper delivered at Conference on Chiang Kai-shek and Modern China in Taipei, October 1986, p. 13.

¹⁴ Associated Press. “China Accuses Japan of Using War Gas,” in *Christian Science Monitor*, October 15, 1937.

¹⁵ Second Historical Archive of China. *抗日战争正面战场 [The Frontal Battleground in the Anti-Japanese War]*. Nanjing: Fenghuang Chubanshe, 2005, p. 452.

¹⁶ Shen Keiqin. *孙立人传 [A Biography of Sun Liren]*. Taipei: Taiwan, Xuesheng shuju, 2005, vol. pp. 103-106.

¹⁷ For a fuller treatment of the influence of the German advisors before and during the Shanghai battle, see 2.2 below.

when after days of intense combat the battlefield had suddenly turned eerily quiet.¹⁸ The role of World War I literature in forming Chinese soldiers' perceptions during the battle of Shanghai should not be underestimated.

That an educated Chinese like Liu would resort to this particular comparison is no surprise. Eric Maria Remarque's anti-war novel was an immediate bestseller in the west when it was published in 1929, and it soon found its way to East Asia as well. It was translated into Chinese within a year of its publication in German, and, in a sure sign of its popularity, it also appeared in various pirated versions, in addition to becoming a stage play and eventually even being distributed in comic book format.¹⁹ At about the same time, another World War I classic, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, was published in China, translated by the poet Xu Chi.²⁰

Another literary product of World War I, which attained bestseller status in the immediate postwar years but has now been forgotten by most, was *Fighting the Flying Circus*, the memoirs of Edward Rickenbacker, a famous American ace in the skies over France.²¹ In the battle of Shanghai, it served as a source of advice and guidance for Gong Yeti, a 22-year-old lieutenant with the Chinese Fourth Air Group, who had recently completed his training as a pilot but had no personal experience with war.²²

Within the pages of *Fighting the Flying Circus*, Gong got some inkling of the combat that lay ahead of him. It also offered him consolation when his best friend during 18 months of flight school was suddenly killed in a flying accident. Gong leafed through Rickenbacker's book and found the following passage:

Friendships in flying squadrons are curious affairs. Where is it one's daily business to go out looking for trouble it is plainly imperative that one keep oneself always fit and clear-minded. It would never do so to occupy one's mind with emotions of love or friendship that one's fighting perceptions are dulled. The enemy's mind can be counted upon to be burdened with no such heavy weight. It is a matter of life or death to every airfighter – this quick-thinking unburdened mind. Hence I had steeled my heart against that intimate kind of friendship with my comrades that prostrates one upon the death of a friend... All the pilots... eventually came to look with a callous indifference upon the sudden death of their dearest chum. This necessity is to my mind one of the greatest horrors of the war.

After reading this, Gong declared in his diary: "I must learn from Rickenbacker."²³

¹⁸ Liu Jingchi. 《淞沪警备司令部见闻》[“Account of Songhu Garrison Command”], in *八一三淞沪抗战：原国民党将领抗日战争亲历记* [*The August 13 Songhu Battle: Personal Recollections from the War of Resistance against Japan by Former Nationalist Commanders*]. Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1987, p. 45.

¹⁹ Eksteins, Modris. “All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 15, no. 2, April 1980, p. 353.

²⁰ Leo Ou-fan Lee. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 127.

²¹ New York NY: Frederick A. Stokes, 1919.

²² Gong Yeti. *抗战飞行日记* [*A Flight Diary of the War of Resistance*]. Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2011, p. 30.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 31.

How representative were soldiers like Liu and Gong? How many other young Chinese men sought guidance from literature about World War I? Possibly there were many like them. Literature as a source of personal enrichment was gaining ground in China due to factors that had some similarities with the situation as it had developed in the West.

For instance, in England during the years before World War I, two powerful historical currents combined to create a highly literate if not literary culture. One was an “aristocratic” trend, insisting on the educating power of classical and English literature. The other was a “populist” trend, borne out of belief in the beneficial power of spreading literature among all classes of society, including those who had only recently learned to read.²⁴

Although literacy rates in China in the 1930s was at a completely different and much lower level than the United Kingdom in the first decade of the 20th century, education was spreading through Chinese society, and it is likely that this raised educational level manifested itself especially strongly in the military, an occupation that was gradually becoming more prestigious and thus attracted higher-caliber recruits. “Sure they read,” a western journalist wrote about the Chinese soldiers fighting in Shanghai. “In fact, there are less illiterates in the army than in the civilian population in China.”²⁵

Western war literature is likely to have influenced young Chinese both directly, by impacting those who actually read the books, and indirectly, by becoming part of a general cultural discourse that all Chinese of a certain age and background could recognize and understand. It is possible, for example, that Liu had not read the *All Quiet on the Western Front*. As a piece of anti-war fiction, it was not the typical reading material for a professional soldier and may even have been discouraged by his superiors. Indeed, his use of the book title reveals no particular understanding of the deep and bitter irony that clings to the words in the book, where the day when the “all is quiet on the western front” is also the day when the chief protagonist is killed. However, the mere fact that the title of the book comes to mind for Liu as he surveys the quiet battlefield in front of him reveals a more interesting fact: That Remarque’s book had become so well-known in China by the late 1930s that the title had made its way into the public consciousness. It had become part of a general frame of reference that educated Chinese could use among each other and expect to be understood.

The question is: Why did Chinese soldiers seek guidance in literature about a foreign war, even though China itself had been the scene of numerous wars in the recent past? There are at least two possible answers. The first and most obvious answer is the absence of any Chinese literature about the country’s own recent wars. None of the conflicts from the Taiping Rebellion to the First Sino-Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion and the various civil wars afflicting China over the recent generations had given rise to a literature that sought to describe modern war in a way that was useful to a young man going into battle for the first time. Second, the western literature

²⁴ Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 157.

²⁵ Bruce, George C. *Shanghai’s Undeclared War*. Shanghai: Mercury Press, 1937, p. 14.

provided Chinese readers with access to the “cutting edge” knowledge of modern war, and more generally was representative of a Eurocentric world culture that many Chinese of that age wished to tap into as a source of knowledge helpful in China’s transformation into a cosmopolitan, modernized society.

2.2 German advisors

The contingent of German advisors sent to assist Chiang Kai-shek’s government in building up a new, modern army was numerically small, but highly influential. Altogether 130 German advisors served in China at one time or another during the decade before their forced return, on German government orders, in 1938.²⁶ By the time of the outbreak of full-scale war between China and Japan in the summer of 1937, they totaled about 50 officers, perhaps slightly fewer.²⁷

The fact that they ended up having an impact far exceeding their modest numbers was the result of a deliberate Chinese decision to utilize them to the full possible extent. They were placed in key positions where their experience could be of maximum use, including the Chinese central command, the military schools and the divisions expected to become the elite of the future Chinese military.²⁸ All of these elite units, including the 36th, the 87th and the 88th divisions, were sent to fight in the Shanghai battle in 1937, along with their German advisors.

During the three months the struggle for the city lasted, the advisors’ influence was so significant and so conspicuous that some Japanese soldiers later referred to that part of the conflict with China as “the German war.”²⁹ Chinese commanders, from Chiang Kai-shek on down, held the Germans in high regard and signaled this with public gestures of respect.³⁰ Only towards the end, when it was clear that China was headed for defeat in the Shanghai area, were there indications that the Chinese officers were starting to ignore the input they received from the Germans.³¹

No exhaustive study has been made yet of the backgrounds of the German officers who went to China as advisors of in the 1920s and 1930s. However, a brief review of the backgrounds of the senior members suggests that World War I played a major role in their professional histories, and in some cases was probably the key formative experience of their early careers.

²⁶ Hsin Ta-mo. *A Review of German Military Advisors’ Work in China*. Paper delivered at Conference on Chiang Kai-shek and Modern China in Taipei, October 1986, p. 20.

²⁷ Liang Hsi-huey. *Foreign Tributes to Chiang Kai-shek: The Case of Alexander Von Falkenhausen*. Paper delivered at Conference on Chiang Kai-shek and Modern China in Taipei, October 1986, p. 9. Liang on p. 14 in the same paper gives the number of German officers returning to Germany in 1938 as 47.

²⁸ Hsin Ta-mo, pp. 20-25. Some of the advisors served for extraordinary periods of time. For example, a German officer identified as Captain Meyer was continuously attached to the 87 division from 1929 until 1938, *ibid.* p. 13.

²⁹ Harmsen, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

³⁰ Mohr, *op. cit.*, p. 12. There were exceptions. “I had always had a bad impression of the Germans,” senior Chinese commander Zhang Fakui later told an interviewer. See Zhang Fakui. *Reminiscences of Fa-k’uei Chang: Oral History, 1970-1980*. Columbia University Libraries, Oral History Research Office. p. 477.

³¹ *Die Schlacht bei Shanghai*. Berlin: Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, 1939, p. 43.

Max Bauer, who was sent to China in the late 1920s and laid the groundwork of Germany's military advisory mission to the country, had been the right hand man of Erich Ludendorff, who shared overall command of the German military with Paul von Hindenburg during the World War I.³² Similarly, Hans von Seeckt, who acted as chief German advisor in China from 1933 to 1935, had played a key military role in the 1914-1918 conflict. After a brief period on the Western Front at the outbreak of hostilities, he had been transferred to the Eastern Front and helped in 1915 direct the Gorlice-Tarnow offensive, one of the most successful military operations of the entire war. In 1917, von Seeckt was sent to Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire, to serve as chief of staff of the Ottoman Army, a position he held until the end of the war.³³

Von Seeckt's successor Alexander von Falkenhausen, who played a more crucial role than any other German during the Shanghai battle, also had served during all four years of the war in various capacities. He had been general staff officer at the 31st Infantry Division before, like Seeckt, being dispatched to the Ottoman Empire in May 1916. For the remainder of the war, he was attached to the Ottoman Army and experienced the war in the Middle East, which was at times characterized by significant mobility and therefore in some ways very different from the stationery warfare that was the norm on the Western and Eastern Fronts during much of the war.³⁴

Even so, it was the experience of the static war on the Western Front that left its biggest mark on the instruction the German advisors gave their Chinese students. During the first battle of Shanghai in early 1932 and again during the second battle five years later, the Chinese side showed repeatedly that they had acquired superior skills in preparing near-impregnable World War I-style defenses, consisting of successive lines of deep trenches protected by dense walls of sandbags and thick forests of barbed wire, each position skillfully located in coordination with other positions to provide interlocking fields of fire.

A foreign correspondent taken on a tour of the Chinese positions in Shanghai's Zhabei area towards the end of the battle in 1937 was impressed:

Every street was a defense line and every house a pocket fort. Thousands of holes had been knocked through walls, linking the labyrinth of lanes into a vast system of defense in depth. Every intersection had been made into a miniature fortress of steel and concrete. Even the stubs of bomb-battered walls had been slotted at ground level for machine guns and rifles.³⁵

The strength of the Chinese positions was obvious not just in downtown Shanghai but also in the battlefields outside the city, where the terrain favored defense. Nohara Teishin, a Japanese soldier, later recalled how operations west of the city had been turned into a slow, dreadful slog against an entrenched and partly invisible enemy. Nohara and his comrades would run for a short stretch, then fall on their stomachs to

³² Martin, Bernd. "Germany Between China and Japan: German Far East Policy of the Interwar Period," in *近代史研究所集刊* vol. 7, June 1978, pp. 598-599.

³³ Meier-Welcker, Hans. *Seeckt*. Frankfurt am Main, 1967.

³⁴ Liang Hsi-huey. *The Sino-German Connection*. Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1978, p. 21.

³⁵ Farmer, Rhodes. *Shanghai Harvest: A Diary of Three Years in the China War*. London: Museum Press, 1945, p. 81.

dodge the Chinese bullets before being urged on by their officers to continue the advance. Out of a company of 200 soldiers, only about ten were fit to fight at the end of the battle.³⁶

While the Chinese army focused on defenses during much of the Shanghai fighting, encouraged by German officers who had learned their lessons in the trenches of France and Belgium, it also launched offensive operations during the battle for the city, again employing tactics that were explicitly derived from World War I. The Chinese side did so by resurrecting the concept of the *Stosstrupp*, or “shock troop”, developed by the German military 20 years earlier in a desperate bid to bring to an end the costly stalemate on the Western Front.

The *Stosstruppen* marked a radical departure from earlier tactics, relying on small nimble forces to prevail where larger masses of infantry had failed. After intensive artillery bombardment, an elite group of determined, well-trained and well-armed men would punch through enemy lines and fight its way deep into the opposing camp before the defenders had even had a chance to recover from the initial surprise. The main means of weakening the enemy line was infiltration rather than massive frontal attack, and mobility was prioritized over firepower.

Stosstrupp tactics were employed during the first crucial week of fighting in downtown Shanghai in August 1937, when members of the 88th Division used it in a bid to dislodge Japanese Marines from their positions near the Huangpu River. The assault, which was masterminded by the German advisor attached to the division, Colonel Hans Vetter, was the most ambitious Chinese offensive in the first month of the Shanghai campaign, and it came close to achieving its objective of securing the center of the city for the Chinese side. However, it ultimately failed, partly because the Japanese defenders were supported by massive naval artillery on board Japanese ships in the river.³⁷

Another more successful attempt at using *Stosstrupp* tactics took place in October, once again carried out by members of the 88th Division. It was a strike meant to cut off a major supply line from the Japanese-controlled docks to the Japanese units in the north of the city. After a brief bombardment by artillery and mortars, the lightly equipped Chinese soldiers moved at great speed and managed to take the dazed Japanese defenders by complete surprise, occupying key positions. As a result, the supply chain using the road was interrupted for several days afterwards.³⁸

³⁶ Cook, Haruko Taya et al. *Japan at War*. New York: The New Press, 1992, pp. 31-32.

³⁷ Jiang Zhongzheng (Chiang Kai-shek) (ed.). *抗日战争史：淞沪会战 [The History of the War of Resistance against Japan: The Songhu Battle]*, vol. 3. Taipei: Guofangbu shizhengju, 1962, pp. 267-268. Zhang Boting, the chief of staff of the 88th Division, directly attributed the plan for the operation to the German advisor assigned to the division, but does not name him, Zhang Boting. *淞沪会战纪要 [Summary of the Songhu Battle, in 八一三淞沪抗战：原国民党将领抗日战争亲历记 (The August 13 Songhu Battle: Personal Recollections from the War of Resistance against Japan by Former Nationalist Commanders)*, Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1987, pp. 135-136. However, Hsin Ta-mo identified the German advisor assigned to the division during the battle as Hans Vetter, op. cit. pp. 16, 23.

³⁸ *Die Schlacht bei Shanghai*, pp. 30, 47-48.

2.3 Japanese belligerents

While World War I had left a heavy mark on the Chinese officers and soldiers and their German advisors, it exercised a much weaker influence on their Japanese opponents. The 1914-1918 conflict, which had dealt a near-mortal blow to European civilization, had only touched Japan peripherally. It did not seize the imagination of the Japanese the way it came to dominate the mood in Europe and set the tone for attitudes towards war in a manner that is arguably still with us today. For the Japanese, World War I was not “the last war”. Rather, to the extent that Japanese officers and soldier were “fighting the last war”, they were repeating the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, a much more crucial chapter in modern Japanese history.

2.3.1 Soldiers

Although Japan had been a member of the Entente in World War I, the Japanese population had been spared the traumatizing experience of trench warfare that had consumed a generation of Europeans and, to a lesser extent, North Americans and left lasting scars on their societies. “Japan’s wartime experience,” in the words of a leading scholar in the field, “was a far cry from the inferno that engulfed the Western and Eastern Fronts.”³⁹ It was not an event that had entered the public consciousness in Japan, and it was no particular source of either inspiration or dread to the young Japanese who went to war in 1937.

World War I seems nowhere to be found in the diaries and memoirs of the Japanese soldiers taking part in the battle of Shanghai. A telling example is the diary of Ogishima Shizuo, a 27-year-old reservist in the Japanese 101st Division, who took part in some of the most intense fighting near Wusong Creek in the countryside northwest of Shanghai. His entries from early October are particularly pregnant with emotion and despair:

The rain keeps falling, and the soldiers in the trenches are covered in mud from top to toe... The enemy has launched several attacks, and our 3rd Battalion has carried out counterattacks. The casualties keep rising. There is not enough food. We don’t get supplies... Injured soldiers are lying helpless in the mud in no-man’s-land. If anyone from our side tries to creep out to help them, the enemy immediately kills him... Soldiers in the frontline only have one thing on their minds: To escape to the rear. It’s a common view that you are lucky to receive a light wound and then be evacuated, and those it happens for indeed look very happy. But those healthy enough to stay in the frontline have no idea when they will receive their death sentence.⁴⁰

For a western reader exposed since childhood to narratives of life and death in the trenches of World War I, these passages come across as almost clichéd descriptions of the dreariness of the soldier’s lot on the Western Front. But Ogishima, an extremely literate and copious diary writer, is not tempted even once to draw a parallel between his experiences and those of soldiers in the Great War twenty years earlier. It seems

³⁹ Dickinson, op. cit., p. 193.

⁴⁰ Ogishima Shizuo. 获岛静夫の日记 [*Ogishima Shizuo’s Diary*]. Xindian, Taiwan: Lixu wenhua, 2005, pp. 58-63.

that World War I is simply not part of the cultural baggage he has brought with him from home.

2.3.2 *Officers*

For the Japanese officers deciding the conduct of war in China in the late 1930s, the formative experience appears to have been the Russo-Japanese War, which, despite its immense bloodshed, was widely considered to be the proudest moment during Japan's rise to great power status during the decades following the Meiji Restoration. World War I, by contrast, had been a far less glorious chapter in recent history, auguring in a period after 1918 of significant disarmament, accompanied by a drop in the public prestige of the Japanese officer caste.⁴¹

In Shanghai in 1937, the men in command of both the Japanese Army and Navy were people whose careers as officers had been launched during the Russo-Japanese War, while their activities during World War I were considerably more limited. As is the case of the German advisors on the Chinese side, there is no comprehensive and easily accessible database on the profiles of the Japanese officers fighting in Shanghai. However, a quick glance at the biographies of some of the higher-profile participants on the Japanese side can give an indication of their general backgrounds.

The senior Japanese Army officer Matsui Iwane, supreme commander of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force and thus the main person responsible for the entire campaign for the city, had fought in the Russo-Japanese War but spent the majority of World War I attached to the General Staff in Tokyo. In other words, he was not in a position where he would have been put in direct contact with the realities of combat in any of the 1914-1918 war's major battlefields. This may help explain why his detailed field diary does not mention the previous world conflict even once.⁴²

Similarly, the senior Japanese Naval commander, Admiral Hasegawa Kiyoshi, who headed the Third Fleet during the Shanghai hostilities, had taken part in a number of naval actions during the Russo-Japanese War, including the crucial and, in Japanese eyes, glorious Battle of Tsushima. In World War I, he had participated in the brief Siege of Qingdao, but spent most of the war at the Naval Ministry, followed by his appointment in 1917 as assistant naval attaché at the embassy in Washington.

The officers one level below the top commanders in the Shanghai battle had usually not been involved in the Russo-Japanese War personally, but graduated from the military educational system at a time when it was digesting the lessons of that conflict. Like their superiors, they had extremely modest experiences from World War I. Yanagawa Heisuke, the commander of the Tenth Army, which landed in Hangzhou Bay in November 1937, had spent World War I as an instructor at the Army Cavalry School, followed by a period as his country's military attaché in Beijing. In 1918, he had served as an instructor at the Beijing Army College.

A review of these biographies suggests why World War I may have been considered of less significance to the Japanese officers in Shanghai than to their opponents.

⁴¹ Dickinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 193 ff.

⁴² Published in *南京大屠杀史料*, vol. 8.

Unlike the German advisors, they had at best played marginal parts in the Great War, and unlike the Chinese commanders and soldiers, they had not been under protracted, deep influence from foreigners. Most importantly, perhaps, there was no perceived need to look to World War I for lessons on modern battle, as the Japanese benefited from the experience of the war with Russia, an event that was still in living memory in 1937.

2.3.3 Doctrine

The armies of the world derived different lessons from the Great War, reflected in the doctrines they developed in the post-war period, or what we now call the inter-war years. The French Army, with its heavy emphasis on defense and the material aspects of war formed one extreme, while the Japanese Army formed an extreme at the other end, calling for a relentlessly offensive spirit to be fostered throughout its ranks and relying on morale and physical courage to achieve victory on the battlefield.

The doctrine of the Japanese Army, expressed in the *Principles of Command*, had been amended in 1918 to take into account the lessons of the Great War. However, those lessons were somewhat paradoxical, given that the global conflict had been one of mechanized, dehumanized warfare of an extent and scale never before seen in history. The 1918 revisions called for modernized materiel, but at the same time argued that “victory in battle ultimately depended on devotion to duty, patriotism and self-sacrificing service.”⁴³

This emphasis was even more pronounced a decade later, when the *Principles of Command* were issued in a new version and now made élan the decisive factor in war, stressing the need for “intense spiritual training” and elevating the heroic bayonet-led breakthrough to become the central action that could tip the balance against a materially superior foe. The message was reinforced in the manual *Principles of Operations*, published one year later, in 1929. Attack was to be the default option of Japanese commanders at all levels and in all situations. Even if forced into the defensive, they were to launch a counterattack at the earliest opportune moment.⁴⁴

Those were curious lessons to draw after a war which, in the eyes of most military establishments around the world, had proved beyond doubt that the technological development had entered into a phase where it favored defensive weaponry. However, the Japanese cult of the offensive was based on the country’s unique historical experience, most importantly the war with Russia in the early part of the century, and it turned out to help prepare the Japanese armed forces better for the future. While technology had favored the defense in World War I, by the time of World War II the balance had shifted, and the development of especially tanks and aircraft had radically strengthened offensive operations. Even if Japanese military technology was not always state of the art – a claim particularly true for its tank arm – a military force indoctrinated in the need to attack, even when on the defensive, was extremely well suited for this new type of warfare.

⁴³ Drea, Edward J., “The Japanese Army on the Eve of War,” in Peattie, Mark et al. (eds.). *The Battle for China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 111.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

2.4 Foreign eyewitnesses

The battle of Shanghai took place in a part of China with an unusually high concentration of foreigners. The city's International Settlement and French Concession were home to thousands of expatriates, and the entire lower Yangtze area was teeming with westerners, too. It's likely that almost all of them had some kind of personal recollection of World War I, and a large number had directly served as soldiers in that terrible conflict.

They used their recollections from the earlier war to make sense of the events they now saw unfold around them. The familiarity with slaughter on a massive scale could help explain the casual attitude that they occasionally displayed when encountering the carnage in and around Shanghai in 1937. For example, a White Russian, who probably witnessed much bloodshed both during the World War and the Russian Revolution, displayed sangfroid bordering on cynicism when he sifted through the debris of a hotel lobby that had just been hit by a bomb. Holding up a severed thumb, he asked the people around him: "Any of you lose this?"⁴⁵

One particular occupational group among the foreigners in the Shanghai area – the journalists – could be particularly counted upon to look for an apt phrase to describe the dramatic events around them. Indeed, journalists' accounts should be taken with a grain of salt, as any mention of World War I could merely have been added for effect. However, as will be shown below, the tendency to see echoes of the past conflict in the battle of Shanghai was common to other occupational classes as well, which strengthens the case for arguing that the memory of the previous war formed a filter through which people in 1937 interpreted contemporary events.

2.4.1 Civilians

During the 1937 battle of Shanghai, World War I veterans would sometimes turn up in the unlikeliest places. When soldiers of the Japanese Tenth Army arrived at a French Catholic church known as the Sheshan Basilica in the countryside west of Shanghai in early November, they were met by a lone French priest. They tried to explain what they were doing in halting English, but the middle-aged French gentleman waved his hand and interrupted them. "I know exactly what's going on," he told the Japanese infantrymen. "I was a captain in the Great War."⁴⁶

When the battle of Shanghai suddenly broke out in the middle of August, the residents of the city's foreign districts were usually not directly impacted, being able to watch the events from a safe distance.⁴⁷ However, they occasionally did come under fire, mostly as a result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was "the most exciting three hours since my own war days," said an unnamed foreigner who had been caught near the center of a Japanese naval barrage while picnicking north of Shanghai.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁴⁶ *南京大屠杀史料*, vol. 62, p. 28.

⁴⁷ There were tragic exceptions, such as the killing of hundreds of civilians when Chinese aircraft dropped bombs by mistake on packed crowds on August 14, 1937.

⁴⁸ *North China Daily News*, August 14, 1937.

Mostly, however, the foreigners were spectators, watching the dramatic and bloody events from afar. One of them had been a pilot in World War I and looked on with professional interest when on August 14, Chinese planes attacked the Japanese cruiser *Izumo*, which was moored in Shanghai's Pudong River, but were prevented from getting too close by the Japanese Navy's efficient anti-aircraft batteries. "It was their first taste of Archie," the former aviator, who was not identified by name, told the newspaper *North China Daily News*, using military slang for anti-aircraft artillery. "When the shells began to burst round them they got the wind up and dropped their eggs as quickly as possible."⁴⁹

Some of the foreign observers had certain expectations of what would happen in the evolving conflict between China and Japan, based on what they had seen during World War I. Occasionally, they were struck not by the similarities, but by the differences. Minnie Vautrin, an American teacher in Nanjing, had witnessed how her own compatriots had turned violently anti-German after US entry into the war in 1917, and she had expected a similar change in Chinese public opinion with the outbreak of hostilities with Japan. To her surprise, this did not happen. "Strangely enough," she wrote in her diary, "I have found little hatred among the Chinese in this crisis. I marvel at it when I think of my own country during the Great War."⁵⁰

2.4.2 Correspondents

Hubert Hessel Tiltman, a veteran war correspondent, compared the fighting north of Shanghai in September with what he had seen and heard as a journalist on the Western Front 20 years earlier. He could recognize the various types of shells used by the Chinese and Japanese – six-inch grenades and "whizz-bangs" – from the sound they made. What surprised him, a seasoned observer of the war in the trenches in Europe, was the intensity of the battles near Shanghai. A "quiet" night near Shanghai was like an average night in the trenches of the Great War.⁵¹

Verdun, that symbol of pointless carnage, was the most frequent comparison among correspondents. Pembroke Stephens, Shanghai reporter for the *Daily Telegraph*, referred to the hotly contested town of Dachang as "Shanghai's Verdun."⁵² Even foreigners who were not old enough to have experienced World War I as adults were tempted to find parallels with Verdun in the Sino-Japanese War. After Shanghai had fallen, the French correspondent Robert Guillain, born 1908, toured the battlefields west of the city, describing scenes of utter destruction: "Even the smallest villages, consisting of huts made of soil and bamboo, had received showers of bombs, and some areas were as devastated as the battlefields of Verdun."⁵³

American correspondent Edgar Snow, born 1905, also used this specific World War I metaphor to describe the unreality of much of the fighting, which took place with

⁴⁹ *North China Daily News*, August 15, 1937.

⁵⁰ Vautrin, Minnie. *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing: Diaries and Correspondence, 1937-38*. Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008, p. 35.

⁵¹ *North China Daily News*, September 12, 1937.

⁵² *Daily Telegraph*, October 28, 1937.

⁵³ Guillain, Robert. *Orient Extreme: Un vie en Asie*. Paris: Arlea/Seuil, 1986, p. 47.

great intensity next to foreign districts in Shanghai as people in those protected enclaves went about their lives as before: “It was as though Verdun had happened on the Seine, in full view of a Right Bank Paris that was neutral.”⁵⁴ For both Guillain and Snow, World War I was part of the general frame of reference among people in the 1930s, and the simple mention of the word “Verdun” conjured up images of blood, mud and meaningless horror.

3.0 Conclusion

The way in which World War I shaped perceptions in the 1930s cannot be overestimated, although this aspect of thinking during that tumultuous decade has tended to be downplayed or ignored by later generations. For an observer viewing history from the safe vantage point of the early 21st century, it is a truism that people of the 1930s lived in the pre-war decade, but it is often forgotten that the contemporaries could not possibly have known this.

Throughout the post-1945 era there has been tendency to focus on those few who could sense “the gathering storm,” such as future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, but an exaggerated emphasis on this minority entails the risk of forming an unhistorical view of the 1930s in which most people were supposedly looking with dread at the approaching war. In all likelihood, the vast majority of the 1930s generation, to the extent that its members were even thinking about it, had no idea whatsoever that they were seeing through the last peaceful years before war.

What this means is that the average person of the 1930s saw himself or herself as living not in “the prewar period” or “interwar period”, but the “postwar period”. The tone of many of the references to World War I made during the Shanghai battle was one of happily having put the war behind oneself, as exemplified in the remark by the picnicking expatriate, who, when caught too close to Japanese shelling, described it as the most exciting time “since my own war days.”

Why is this important? It is important because it helps the historian understand how contemporaries understood the events that unfolded in front of them and in turn equips him or her to better evaluate their testimony about what they witnessed. It may in fact be that the battle of Shanghai was more similar to the battles of World War II than the battles of World War I than the surviving testimony suggests, for example by being less static in nature. Because the witnesses did not know the world war that was to come but knew the previous one all too well, they highlighted the aspects of the battle that resembled the latter the most.

Even more crucially, appreciating how people saw events at the time helps understand why they acted and reacted the way they did. The German advisors, mostly veterans of World War I, had decisive clout in the early stages of the Shanghai battle and prepared for the campaign by urging the Chinese Army to construct impressive defenses. The defensive “World War I mindset” that they brought to Shanghai was mitigated by offensive elements, most importantly in the form of *Stosstrupp* tactics, but the latter only acted as a complement to the fundamentally defensive stance of the Chinese side in the battle – exactly as it had done in the Great War.

⁵⁴ Snow, Edgar. *The Battle for Asia*. Cleveland OH: The World Publishing Company, 1941, p. 45.

The Japanese also “fought the last war,” but it was a different war – the Russo-Japanese War rather than World War I. The central lesson of the conflict with Russia in 1904-1905 had been the need to attack relentlessly and with little thought for the casualties. Had the Japanese Army played a bigger role in World War I and tasted the bitter realities of trench warfare, it might have adopted a much more defensive attitude in Shanghai. As it were, the Japanese officers did not “know” that the attack had become an obsolete tactical maneuver, and therefore they launched a series of offensives, the last of which, combined with the amphibious operation at Hangzhou Bay, handed it victory. Of course, this is not to say that an offensive spirit alone produced the Japanese triumph at Shanghai. Other factors contributed as well, including a weak Chinese supply system. But without a will to advance, sometimes at great risk, the campaign could have dragged on for a significantly longer period of time.

Finally, it should be emphasized that there is no value judgment involved in describing the Chinese belligerents and their German advisors as “fighting the last war.” “Fighting the last war” is what most belligerents do most of the time, and they do so because it basically makes sense. As the future is essentially unpredictable, the past is the only guide for things to come. Faced with the need to prepare for the next war, military establishments have no choice but to seek lessons from the previous war. The question is how to draw useful lessons from earlier conflicts. There is no fixed formula for making these right choices. However, given the laws of probability, the future will, on average, most likely be an extension or extrapolation of the past. Statistically speaking, therefore, “fighting the last war” is the safest bet.