1 Introduction

Nobody would doubt that the First World War had a transnational impact or that it tremendously affected both participating and non-participating countries. The “seminal catastrophe,” as historian and diplomat George F. Kennan (1904–2005) would describe it, was indeed a global one. While much attention has been paid to the European theater of war and its major battles still have the potential to attract a large number of interested readers, during the centennial of the events, one could observe a growing interest in non-European contexts and topics that went beyond “classical military studies.” However, there were also publications that, despite intending to cover the First World War in its broadest possible sense, did not succeed in offering more space for non-European and, in particular, East Asian perspectives. The war was a watershed for many national histories, and its impact was not only felt politically or economically but went much further than that, as it changed human thoughts and beliefs as such.

The present book is not especially interested in major battles, as there were not many of those in East Asia in the first place, but rather in the impact of the

6 For a broader debate of the war’s impact on the humanities see Frank Jacob, Jeffrey Shaw and Timothy Demy (Eds.), War and the Humanities. The Cultural Impact of the First World War, Paderborn 2019. For the debates in East Asia in relation to the peace talks in Versailles and a possible new “world order” also see Urs Matthias Zachmann (Ed.), Asia After Versailles: Asian Perspectives on the Paris Peace Conference and the Interwar Order, 1919–33, Edinburgh 2018.
First World War in this geographic region. It is also intended for a general audience as well as for introductory undergraduate courses on East Asian history or the history of the First World War from a global perspective, as the single chapters on China, Japan, and Korea, which could be read or assigned individually or in totality, provide basic introductions to the respective national histories and contextualize them to highlight the role and impact the First World War had in East Asia. The chapters have been written so that they can be understood without reading the others, and they can therefore also be rearranged to fit in different types of courses as well. The main aim is to arouse further interest in East Asian history in general and the region’s involvement and transformation during the First World War in particular. Due to this specific intention, there are, of course, shortcomings with regard to a variety of topics that could have been more heavily emphasized or described in greater detail. However, the author still hopes that students and colleagues will find the work helpful and consider it an encouragement to look deeper into the relationship between the First World War and the respective histories of China, Japan, and Korea, which were much more impacted by the “European war” than Western historians have been willing to acknowledge or to emphasize in their works,\(^8\) in which Asia is often nothing more than a side note.

A truly global understanding of the 20th century’s “seminal catastrophe” demands a broader approach to the topic, and it is hoped that the present book will be part of the endeavor to provide it. As so many lives and individual stories were influenced by the First World War in East Asia,\(^9\) the history of the region during and after the war cannot be ignored if the decisive developments related to the further history of the 20th century, especially in an Asian context, are taken into consideration from long-term perspectives. While the focus of the book is East Asia, repercussions from the European and American contexts are also highlighted to show and further emphasize that the history of the world at the beginning of Hobsbawm’s “age of extremes” cannot be understood in national isolation. The history of East Asia during the First World War must consequently also be read as a regional one that was embedded into a global course of events.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) See Jan Schmidt, Nach dem Krieg ist vor dem Krieg. Medialisierte Erfahrungen des Ersten Weltkriegs und Nachkriegsdiskurse in Japan (1914–1919), Frankfurt am Main 2021, pp. 9–16. The recently published study shows that the impact of the First World War on Japan was much more important than previous historical studies assumed.
