Civil Censorship, Japan and the Great War

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The letter in Figure 1 was posted at Vancouver, British Columbia; DEC 24 / 1918 and sent to Yokohama. It is a single weight letter less than one oz. using the 5¢ Admiral blue adhesive. The route was direct from Canada. This letter was posted just over a month after European armistice. Japan was an ally country yet apparently UPU mail from about January 1917 to Japan was still subject to civil censorship. Censorship was discontinued in May 1919. This is the only example of mail censored to Japan recorded that is related to the Great War. Why was mail for Japan, an ally, subjected to Civil Censorship in Canada?

Japan was an ally during the First World War, declaring war on Germany on August 14th 1914. During the war Japan attacked German colonial outputs including Tsingtao, and the island colonies of Mariana, Caroline and Marshall. While at Singapore in 1915, Japan suppressed an Indian mutiny against the British. However, Japan’s involvement in the war seems to have expansionist undertones. In 1915 Japan presented demands to China which would essentially make it a Japanese Protectorate. Some western nations, particularly the USA, objected and the Japanese demands were withdrawn. Japan signed a treaty with China that year.

Figure 1: 5¢ UPU letter to Japan, December 1918.
Beginning in 1915 and in 1916 Germany attempted to sign a peace treaty with Japan. Japan signed a treaty with Russia agreeing not to have separate peace treaties with Germany and in doing so, Japan gained future considerations for Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. In 1917 Japan assisted the Allies in other theatres of war, and in particular Malta. As a result of the important help, Great Britain recognized Japan’s territorial gains in the Pacific north of the equator, including Shantung in China. The USA found itself an ally of Japan despite past differences over China. While the war in western Europe had ended on November 11, 1918, the war with White Russia as an ally continued in the Murmansk area of present day Russia and in Siberia. In 1918, Japan, the USA and other countries (including Canada) sent troops to Siberia, in support of the White Russian attacks on the Red Army of the Bolshevik movement. Japan desired to extend operations further into Russia as far as Lake Baikal, but the USA objected and this offensive was never undertaken. One cannot help wondering if the Japanese agenda was for a better position regarding Mongolia.

Initially Japan benefited economically from the war, supplying arms and goods, but towards the end of the war began suffering from inflation. After the war Japan was back in a period of debtor-nations status. However the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 confirmed ownership of former German Island colonies and the transfer of Germany’s rights in Shandong to Japan.

Canadian civil censorship for mails to and from Japan may have been in place as early as October 1917, based on known Canadian censored covers sent from Japan to the USA. The reasons for the censorship of mail for Japan, including the period after the Armistice of November 11, 1918, are not known, but it possibly is related to its past treaties with Russia, the occupation of Russian ports from November 1918, suspicions over its intentions in China, or uncertainties overall. The Great War marked a period of many secret pacts and treaties which, in the case of Europe, led to a rapid escalation into all-out war.

Another reason for censorship may be that the censorship policy was still in place for American ships taking mail to the Far East; but this seems unlikely as the USA ceased being neutral in 1917. Still other reasons for censorship were that fact that Japan was still in possession of Tsingtao, the former German outpost and the fact that Great Britain recognized Japan’s claim to Shantung. Thus Japan was considered subject to the same censorship as that of the rest of China. The March 1919 Monthly Supplement to the Postal Guide indicated there were at least three post offices in the province of Shantung under the control of Japan:

(7) Japanese Parcel Post Offices in Shantung, China.—The Japanese post offices of Tsinan, Tsingtau, Weihsien established in the Province of Shantung, China, have been authorized to transact International Parcel Post business. The rate will be the same as to Japan.

In May 1918, mail for German Mennonite missionaries in China was censored in Vancouver, due to suspicions of support of an uprising. This was directed to
Honan and Kiangsu Provinces (Civil Censorship ..., p.43); but were apparently not under Japanese control. On the same page of the same source, Steinhart mentions a general censorship in place for mail to Japan in 1918, including a formal civil censorship at Vancouver. That there was a formal censorship in Canada for mail from Canada to Japan is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

There seems to be a plethora of theories for the censorship of Japanese mails. Yet another possible reason for censorship was that in November 1918, Japan occupied all Russian ports in Siberia. Finally Steinhart (Civil Censorship ..., pp.58, 76-77) lists several covers from Japan to the USA which passed through Vancouver and were subjected to civil censorship by Canadians in Vancouver. It would seem that the USA influenced Canada in having all Japanese mail passing through Canada censored and this may have resulted in all mail originating from Canada to Japan being censored. Indeed Steinhart illustrates this censorship applied to printed matter from Japan to the USA (Civil Censorship..., p.60).

Perhaps we may never know why mail from Canada to Japan proper was censored. The period of Canadian civil censorship was an intriguing period of World War I history and there is a lot more to be discovered and written. For whatever reason, it seems that that because of the various peace treaties of 1919, culminating in the formation of the League of Nations; all Canadian civil censorship, including to and from Japan, ceased.

RESOURCES

1. Data regarding Japan’s involvement in the Great War (now called World War I) is largely summarized from Wikipedia online, taken November 28th 2010.

2. Steinhart, Allan L., Civil Censorship in Canada During World War I, various pages as noted.

Figure 2. 5¢ UPU letter to Japan, December 1918, reverse side