The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War

Edited by
Rotem Kowner

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The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War

The Russo-Japanese War was the major conflict of the first decade of the twentieth century. The struggle for mastery in northeast Asia, specifically for control of Korea and Manchuria, was watched very closely at the time by observers from many other countries keen to draw lessons about the conduct of war in the modern industrial age. The defeat of a traditional European power by a non-white, non-Western nation served as a trigger for the deterioration in the balance on the eve of World War I, and became a model for emulation and admiration among people under, or threatened with, colonial rule. This book examines the very wide impact of the war. It explores the effect on the political balance in northeast Asia, looks at reactions in Europe, the United States, East Asia, and the wider colonial world, and considers the impact on different sections of society, on political and cultural ideas and ideologies, and on various national independence movements. It concludes that the global impact of the Russo-Japanese War was far more important than the effect of any colonial war, and probably any other conflict, that took place between the Napoleonic wars and the outbreak of World War I.

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Preface

History seems at times to be a partial and even unfair judge. Not only does it focus on certain events and personalities and overlook others, it also tends to display preference for the recent over the earlier, and concentrate on what is at hand rather than what is important. Furthermore, the current importance of a specific event is often determined not necessarily because of its significance once it occurred or for its repercussions afterwards, but rather because of its place within certain historiographical trends and fads—the outcome of various needs and transient agendas. No wonder, then, that the chronicles of humanity are full of instances in which certain trivial events drew more attention than they deserved, whereas other more significant events were ignored all the way through, and sometimes even eventually faded into total oblivion.

The Russo-Japanese War may serve as an example of a historically underrepresented event. Certainly, it has never vanished completely from public memory nor has it ever been ignored, but it definitely received at certain times and places less attention than it probably deserved. Despite its resounding echoes at the time of its occurrence, it took this war, in fact, less than a decade after its conclusion to start fading from public memory, notably in the West. Within a few decades it received very few references in the records of Japan and Russia (by now the mighty Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) as well, turning into another negligible and futile conflict, off-center and seemingly unrelated to the great conflicts of the twentieth century.

This is no longer the case, however. In recent years this first armed conflict between Russia and Japan has emerged from being long forgotten to return to the limelight of historical research. Due to the changing political circumstances in Japan since the 1980s and in Russia since the 1990s, and partly perhaps also because of its centennial celebrations, the war has been given much attention recently. It has been commemorated in public ceremonies, scholarly conferences, and exhibitions, and through many popular as well as academic publications. Most of this recent commemoration has dealt with its origins, its military record, and even its artistic representation.
and place in collective memory, but it has overlooked the sweeping impact of the war.

This book is the first endeavor, definitely in English, devoted solely to providing a broad comprehensive assessment of the international impact of the war.1 I undertook this enterprise not because it has not been done before, but because I firmly believe that in its repercussions, and perhaps only in this respect, the Russo-Japanese War has changed from being considered a peripheral conflict, one more in a series of “colonial wars,” to being regarded as an event of global significance. When examined in this perspective, it is evident how far-reaching and pervasive have been the ramifications of the Russo-Japanese War. Some of its repercussions lasted only a decade, as in the case of the European balance of power, although they led indirectly to the outbreak of a still more pivotal event—World War I. Other repercussions of the war lasted four decades, as in the case of the continental grip of the Japanese Empire, whereas some resonate even now, as in the case of the divided Korean peninsula.

The massive clash between Russia and Japan heralded the rise of the Japanese Empire and shaped the features of East Asia until 1945. As for Europe, far removed from the battle arena, the long-standing, delicate equilibrium between the powerful nations broke down, and thenceforward a rapid deterioration began toward direct military confrontation known later as World War I. Globally, the greatest loser of the war was tsarist Russia, and the humiliating blow it suffered hastened the coming of the Bolshevik Revolution. Another significant outcome is evident among the nations under colonial rule. As a global turning point, the role of the war is recognizable in the newer definition of race relations in the world. This was the first modern conflict in which an “oriental,” “non-white” nation overcame a “Western,” “white” nation. For the first time the myth of the superiority of the “white man” was shattered. For this reason, the Japanese victory caused strong reverberations not only among the Powers but also among the nations then living under colonial rule, and even more so among future revolutionaries. It led to renewed fears in Europe of the “yellow peril” in Germany, France, and Britain, which shared growing concern for the fate of their Asian colonies. In the United States, notably on the west coast, it stimulated American opposition to Japanese immigration. The Russo-Japanese War was probably also the first “modern” war—a conflagration on sea and land enormous in its scope and logistic requirements—in which many warfare patterns were tested on a large scale for the first time, only to appear in full maturity a decade later.

It is not a simple task to determine the consequence of a historical event, or to identify the cause-and-effect relations between two events. Rarely, if ever, are events of major significance, let alone social or political processes, the result of a single factor. In most cases, complex human actions are determined by interactions between far-reaching and proximate causes. Among the various chapters in this book one may discern different approaches to
the question of historical causality, and consequently divergent willingness to link the war with increasingly remote events and developments in the future. This variance notwithstanding, it is evident that all contributors believe the war had far-reaching consequences, often of immense importance, for their respective topics.

During this project I had the good fortune to discuss various issues related to this book with numerous colleagues. Several of them ended as contributors to it. However, many others with whom I have met and corresponded in recent years, too many to name here, contributed indirectly by sharing with me their insights regarding the significance of this historical event. The financial support provided by the Research Authority at the University of Haifa was essential and is highly appreciated, and similarly the research environment facilitated by Kenneth Grossberg at the Institute of Asia Pacific at Waseda University was beneficial for the completion of this project. I thank Ido Blumenfeld for his assistance in designing the maps in this book, and I am grateful also to Peter Sowden of Routledge for initiating this project and supporting it throughout its long gestation.

The book is dedicated to my parents, Carmela and Leon Kowner, who have instilled in me the urge for learning and taught me the importance of history.

Rotem Kowner

Note

1 For partial attempts to account for the war’s impact, regionally or globally, see Kang, 1981; Hirama, 2004. For book sections devoted to the repercussions of the war, see Steinberg et al., 2005; Kowner, 2007.