The Memory and Significance of the Russo-Japanese War from a Centennial Perspective

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The Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) was the first great war of the twentieth century. Advances in communications at that time made it also the most reported war in the world until then, with a flood of news stories, commentaries, analyses, essays, photograph collections, books, and even movies in dozens of languages. To contemporaries, that war looked dramatic, epoch-making and unforgettable, something that many generations would recount and remember.

One book of that time, entitled *The Japan-Russia War*, which appeared in Philadelphia in 1905, opened with the words: “The Japan-Russia War goes into history as the greatest military struggle the world has known.”¹ The siege of Port Arthur, the author Sydney Tyler asserted, “has no duplicate among all recorded military achievements.”² Referring to the nineteenth-century English prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, he affirmed: “Lord Beaconsfield once said that there were only two events in history—the siege of Troy and the French Revolution. It seems more than possible that the Russo-Japanese War will have to be recorded as a third supreme factor in the progress of the world.”³ Other contemporaries were startled by the possible repercussions of the clash. The American war correspondent, Murat Halstead, for example, believed in 1906 that it “is a logical war and it may spread until it sweeps over the Continent of Europe and Asia.” He was certain it would continue “to be of universal and almost unparalleled interest,” and wondered, among all colossal eventualities the war might lead to, whether Europe would conquer Asia, or Asia would conquer Europe.⁴

These contemporary eulogies and admiring notes notwithstanding, the Russo-Japanese War was soon forgotten. World War I, which broke
out nine years later, overshadowed it, and then World War II overshadowed them both. By the middle of the twentieth century, all the countries that had been involved in that war had forgotten it and in time were even pleased to have done so.

ORCHESTRATED AMNESIA AND ACTS OF TRIVIALIZATION

The historical amnesia about the war was shared by people of virtually every nation, but principally by the two belligerents. For many years sad and sentimental songs of the Russo-Japanese War, like In Memory of Variag and On the Hills of Manchuria, were sung in Russia, but the war itself was quickly forgotten. The Russians, in both their tsarist and their Soviet garb, had good reason to draw a veil over that war. They wished to forget the national humiliation that they had suffered at the hands of a country which they traditionally regarded as a political and military inferior. They wanted to hide from their newly acquired Asian friends their colonial ambitions in northeast China (once called Manchuria) and Korea. Soviet historians had to decide which side in the Russo-Japanese War was right and which was wrong. If the good guys were the Russians the tsar was right and his expansionist policy was just. But this would mean that the revolutionaries who opposed the tsar and his foreign policy were wrong. When Port Arthur fell in 1905, Lenin declared: “The European bourgeoisie has its reasons to be frightened, and the proletariat has its reasons to rejoice.”

No good communist would dare to claim that Lenin was wrong, but no good communist could claim either that imperial Japan was right. By Stalin’s time, exonerating Japan’s position in its first war against Russia sounded unpatriotic. When Port Arthur was retaken by the Soviets in the Second Russo-Japanese War in 1945, Stalin declared that “the defeat of Russian troops in 1904 . . . left bitter memories in the mind of the people . . . Our people believed and hoped that a day would come when Japan would be smashed and that blot effaced. Forty years have we . . . waited for this day.”

The Japanese remembered the war vividly until 1945. The very name of the war in Japanese, nichiro sensō, which means Japan-Russia War, can be also read poetically as the war between the sun (nichi, that is Japan) and the dew (ro, that is Russia), in which the sun naturally evaporates the dew. This was their greatest military triumph in modern times, and the last one to be hailed by most of the world. The legacy of the war became a point of departure for any military plan and commemoration until the final days of the empire. The date of the victory in the land battle in Mukden, March 10 (1905), was celebrated annually as Army Day, and the date of the victory in the naval battle of Tsushima, May 27 (1905), was celebrated every year as Navy Day. After their deaths, General Nogi Maresuke (1843–1912) and Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō (1847–1934) were apotheosized as gunshin (war gods) and shrines were built to them in Tokyo — the Nogi Jinja in-1937, and the Tōgō Jinja in 1940 — where they can still be worshipped today. They were also the two only modern figures who appeared on Japanese postage stamps.
During World War II, Japan's bold decision to attack the United States navy in Pearl Harbor was often compared to its bold decision to attack the Russian navy in Port Arthur. In both cases Japan was fighting a gigantic Western adversary and in both cases, it was believed, the spiritual superiority of the Japanese would prevail over the material superiority of its white enemies. It was indeed ironic to some, macabre to others, that the greatest American air raid, which devastated most of Tokyo in the spring of 1945, was carried out on Army Day, which commemorated the victory at Mukden. The war against the United States (the Pacific War, 1941–45) was lost, however, and Japanese heroism and devotion in the four years of titanic struggle was overlooked by most Western historians. Many of them were inclined now also to ignore the campaign against Russia four decades earlier, which heralded Japan's ascent as a regional and consequently a global power. After the surrender, in fact, the Japanese themselves wished to delete the Russo-Japanese War from their collective memory. Following the collapse of Japanese imperialism and militarism, the previously extolled war looked like a flagrant case of Japanese aggression on the Asian continent, paving the way for the consequent annexation of Korea, the seizure of Manchuria, and the invasion of China. Postwar Japanese historians, like their Soviet contemporaries, were troubled over how to treat that war. If it was so sinister and imperialistic, as they often claimed, then why was it hailed, at the time, by Asian intellectuals and revolutionaries, including Chinese? Why did modern-minded Japanese writers and intellectuals of the time, like Futabata Shime, Ishikawa Takuboku, and Nishida Kitarô, praise it? And why did the Japanese "masses," as expressed in the victory demonstrations, favor it?8

Not only did the belligerents wish to forget the Russo-Japanese War by the middle of the twentieth century, so did other countries that in one way or another had been involved in it. The Chinese were ashamed of their erstwhile admiration for Japan, especially of the high hopes that their "national father" Sun Yat-Sen had placed in the Japanese. Sun Yat-sen supported Japan in that war, but he also supported Japanese right-wing Pan-Asianist leaders like Tôyama Mitsuru.9 The Koreans after 1945, in the south and in the north, rued their former weakness and servility. They repudiated the treachery and incompetence of their Great Han Empire (taehan cheguk), which was unable to stop the Japanese from occupying their country and annexing it with full international support, as a result of the Russo-Japanese War.10

The Americans might have wished to remember the Portsmouth Peace Treaty, for which their president Theodore Roosevelt won the first Nobel Prize for Peace in 1906. But by the mid-twentieth century they too were filled with remorse over their earlier barefaced imperialism in Asia, and preferred to forget it. The British, who had been proud of their victorious ally Japan in 1905, felt by 1923 uneasy about that alliance, and dissolved it out of concern over potential market encroachment by Japan, coupled with both countries' vying for American political cooperation. After World War II they too preferred to forget the war, in which they had
encouraged Japanese expansion on the Asian mainland, which in the event brought about the destruction of their own empire in the 1940s.

The historical amnesia about the war on all sides is staggering. If we look at the current English-language history books of Japan and Russia, we may see how little importance they attach to the Russo-Japanese War. Conrad Totman's recent *A History of Japan* (2000), for example, devotes only a few lines to the war, or less than 0.1 percent of its 620 pages. Even books that focused on modern Japan have increasingly attached less significance to that conflagration. The 540-page *Japan's Modern Century* (1970) by Hugh Borton devotes as much as six pages, or 1.1 percent of its length, to that war, whereas *The Rise of Modern Japan* (1990) by William Beasley, dedicates a little more than one page, or 0.4 percent of its 277 pages, to it. Finally, *The Making of Modern Japan* (2000) by Marius Jansen refers to it through just one page, or merely 0.2 percent of its 510 pages.

Books on Russian modern history do not fare better. Melvin Wren's *The Course of Russian History* (1968), for example, has slightly more than a page on the war, or less than 0.2 percent of its 750 pages, and Sidney Harcave's *Russia: A History* (1968) devotes some four pages to the war, or less than 0.6 percent of its 787 pages. Books that focus on modern Russia show no greater interest in the war. Warren Bartlett Walsh's *Russia and the Soviet Union: A Modern History* (1958), for example, devotes two pages, or 0.3 percent of its 640 pages, to it, and Graham Stephenson's *A History of Russia, 1812–1945* (1969) devotes to it even less space: about a page, or 0.2 percent of its 467 pages. Like many other authors they both pay much more attention to the 1905 Revolution. In relative terms, however, the now classic *Endurance and Endeavour* by J.N. Westwood (published in five editions since 1973) is somewhat an exception. Westwood devotes little more than four pages to this issue, or 0.8 percent of its 551 pages (third edition), but having written several books specifically on the Russo-Japanese War his lack of brevity here is understandable. With so little overall interest, no wonder that university graduates who have studied these books do not regard that war as a major event.

**REASONS FOR REMEMBRANCE: CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE AND CONSEQUENCES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

As we look back at the Russo-Japanese War of a hundred years ago, we can see how much it influenced the whole twentieth century, and how important it is to resurrect it from oblivion and restore to it its place in history. Why was that war so important? First, leaving aside the Boer War, which was a colonial conflict, this was the first great war of the twentieth century, to be followed closely by the two world wars and the Cold War. While far from a global conflict on the scale of the two subsequent World Wars, being the first, it contained the seeds of the others. On the effect of the war on the road to World War I, see Kowner, 2007c.

In several respects the Russo-Japanese War was the first modern war, in the first place in terms of its sheer scale. The battle of Mukden, which raged
for two weeks during February-March 1905, was fought along a frontline of 150 kilometers, on which 300,000 Russian soldiers (275,000 according to other estimates) engaged 270,000 Japanese soldiers, altogether more than half a million soldiers in a single battle.\textsuperscript{20} This was the largest battle in human history until then, followed in terms of number of soldiers by the battle of Liaoyang six months earlier and the battle of Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.\textsuperscript{21} The logistics of that war were tremendous. The Trans-Siberian Railway, which carried the Russian troops from Europe to the Manchurian front, was 9,311 kilometers long, the longest in the world until then and since then. The Baltic Fleet, which in October 1904 sailed from St. Petersburg to reinforce the Russian naval units in the Pacific, carried altogether more than 13,000 sailors and officers aboard fifty-two vessels, and traversed 33,000 kilometers to reach its destination, the longest voyage that any armada had ever sailed. Firepower in that war was unprecedented: During the battle of Sha-ho, for example, forty-eight Russian guns fired 8,000 rounds in forty minutes and at the battle of Tashihchiao a battery fired 500 rounds per gun. It was the first modern war in the massive use of machine guns, land and sea mines, quick-firing field guns, and even in the sheer number of war correspondents and photographers who covered it on both sides for newspapers all over the world.

In other respects, however, the Russo-Japanese War can be regarded as the last campaign of the nineteenth century: a classic clash between two colonial powers, fighting each other on the territory of a third party for the domination of weak peoples and rich lands. It could be regarded as a colonial war also in its denouement, as it ended as such wars usually did in a compromise, in which the adversaries agreed to share the colonial spoils. Furthermore, despite the many technological advances, it was still only partly mechanized. Soldiers marched long distances from railway stations to the battlefields; much of the equipment was carried by beasts of burden and men. Although firepower in this war was unprecedented, the 900,000 artillery rounds the Imperial Russian Army, for example, spent during the entire war was only a tiny proportion of the 65 million artillery shells manufactured and imported by Russia alone during World War I, and a fraction of the 360 million shells and bombs the Soviet Union manufactured during World War II.\textsuperscript{22} Critically, while taking place only a decade before World War I, the Russo-Japanese War missed much of the technological innovations of the former. True, the Japanese Navy used radio telegraph equipment for communication for the first time in military history, and both belligerents employed balloons for artillery observation, but by and large the war did not feature any revolutionary weapon, certainly not on the scale of the airplane, automobile, tank, or submarine, or even the Dreadnought as in World War I.\textsuperscript{23} All in all, it seems to have resembled the Crimean War or the American Civil War much more than any global conflict of the scale the world would experience twice during the following thirty-five years.

Dissimilar to many other modern conflicts, this was the last gentlemanly war, a duel between two antagonists, in which the rest of the
world acted as spectators. The fighting was bloody, but only soldiers participated in it. There were few civilians in the war zone, hence little of the atrocities, looting, and uprooting of populations that would characterize the later wars. The rules of war were observed by both sides. They did not use poison gas or any other non-conventional weapon, and they treated their prisoners properly. Whereas the Japanese captured 79,454 Russian soldiers, the Russians captured only 2,088 Japanese soldiers. It was the first time that a nation had to cope with such numbers of war prisoners, and despite the disproportionate size, Japan's treatment of its prisoners was exemplary. They were well fed and treated fairly, the sick and wounded received good medical treatment and all were allowed to correspond with their families. Prisoners were not forced to work, and those who performed camp duties received a salary. Prison camps in Japan were provided with electricity, fresh food, and clean water — better conditions than most Russian soldiers had at home. It was a far cry from the mistreatment of prisoners of war by the Japanese and the Russians in World War II. The decent behavior of the belligerents was apparent in the surrender of Port Arthur, when the victorious General Nogi Maresuke met the vanquished Lieutenant General Anatolii Stoessel. Nogi commended Stoessel for his gallant fighting, and the latter consoled the former on the death of his two sons in the war. The two sides toasted each other, and Nogi allowed Stoessel and other high-ranking Russian officers to return to Russia with their swords. No other wars of the twentieth century witnessed such an exchange between victors and vanquished.

On the geopolitical level, the war had major and indisputable repercussions in East Asia. It stopped Russian expansion there and ensured a Japanese foothold in the continent. By 1904, the Russians had become deeply involved in Manchuria and Korea, with extensive economic enterprises and a formidable military presence. Had the war not erupted, or had the Japanese lost it, these two rich and important areas would have been incorporated into the Russian empire, as they were later incorporated into the Japanese empire. It is hard to tell which of the two alternatives would have been better for the Koreans and the Chinese, but it is clear that a third, optimal, alternative, of independence and self-determination for both of them, did not exist at that time. The war's aftermath pitted the two emerging maritime powers of the Pacific Ocean, the United States and Japan, against each other, preparing the ground for their later collision. The military and naval successes of Japan frightened the Americans and seemed to threaten their position in the Pacific Ocean and southeast Asia. The Japanese victory, which caused the Russians to lose interest in East Asia, worked the opposite effect on the Americans. Thus the Russo-Japanese War created the conditions which led ultimately to the outbreak of the Pacific War some thirty-six years later. On the effect of the war on the American policy vis-à-vis Japan, see Tovy and Halevi, 2007.

The war had a great impact on internal and external developments in Russia and Japan alike. By losing the war, the tsar, initially eager to wage
a "short, victorious war" to quell internal unrest, caused that unrest to explode. The revolutionary fires that were set by the defeats on the Manchurian front turned twelve years later into a conflagration in the form of the Russian Revolution. On the international level, the tsar, unable to achieve a victory in East Asia to prop up his sagging popularity at home, turned his attention to southeast Europe, where nine years later he supported his ally Serbia against Austro-Hungary, leading the way to World War I. Thus, both the Russian Revolution and World War I can be considerably attributed to the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War.

In Japan, the victorious war produced inflated self-confidence, bolstered the position of the conservative leaders, and strengthened belief in military solutions. A generation later these trends would take Japan into a war with China, Britain, and the United States. The Russo-Japanese War provided a spurious model for the Pacific War. It convinced the Japanese that they could again defeat a strong Western adversary, if only they mobilized all their material and spiritual resources. It was widely believed that because yamato damashii had beaten Russia, it would also beat the United States and Britain. The central position that the victory of 1905 occupied in the collective memory of prewar Japan was a major reason for the tragedy of 1945.

The Russo-Japanese War has often been described as a historic clash between East and West, in which an Eastern nation, for the first time since the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, defeated a Western, Christian one. Indeed, all movements of national liberation in Asia were inspired by that outcome, which seemed to prove that the white man was beatable. When Sun Yat-sen sailed through the Suez Canal in 1905, the Egyptians, mistaking him for a Japanese, congratulated him, saying that Japan's victory was a triumph for all the colored peoples in the world. Muslims across the world from the Ottoman Empire to the Dutch East Indies celebrated Japan's victories as harbingers of their own liberation from the European yoke.

In Russia, and among its European allies, the war was regarded as a confrontation between Asia and Europe, but in an opposite sense. Russia claimed to be the eastern outpost of Christendom, guarding Western civilization against the yellow, heathen hordes. A decade earlier the German Kaiser had warned against the "yellow peril" that was rising in the east, and a German newspaper lamented in 1905 that the Russian debacle must cause grave anxiety among "all those who believe in the great commercial and civilizing mission of the white race throughout the world."

However, the Japanese government and people at that time did not regard themselves as representatives of the colored East against the white West. From the time of the Meiji Restoration, the government had tried to remodel the country into an advanced Western nation. Fukuzawa Yukichi's call to "leave Asia and enter Europe" (datsu-a nyū-dō) was widely accepted. By the beginning of the twentieth century Japan was the most Westernized nation in Asia, with modern institutions, Western education, and the latest technology. The vision of liberating Asia from European
domination, which many people in Asia attributed to Japan, was not part of Japan's agenda. Ten years after its victory over China and five years after its participation in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, Japan's goal was not to free Asia but to carve its own empire on the Asian continent in concert with the Western powers.

Japan, in fact, did its utmost before and during the war against Russia to persuade the West, notably public opinion in Britain and the United States, that it was not a weak, effeminate, and semi-civilized oriental nation, but deservedly a member of the civilized nations. This view was internalized first in Japan itself. No wonder then that by the time of the Russo-Japanese War the Japanese saw themselves as more Western than the Russians. In the *nishiki-e* illustrations of the war, Japanese soldiers appear civilized and clad in smart Western uniforms, while the bearded and shabbily dressed Russians look like Asian barbarians. These depictions were not far from reality. The Russo-Japanese War, in this sense, can be seen as a clash between East and West in the opposite sense, because in 1904–05 Russia was probably the "East" and Japan was the "West." Japan was more democratic than Russia, it had a constitution, an elected parliament, political parties, and a parliamentary opposition, none of which existed in Russia. Its press had more freedom than the Russian press to criticize the government. Japan enjoyed higher literacy: many Russian soldiers could not read the orders or the instruction manuals and some of them could not even speak Russian, while the majority of Japanese soldiers had a basic primary education.

Overall, the Russo-Japanese War was a momentous conflict in regional and global terms. It affected mostly the two belligerents and the Korean kingdom, but the decline of Russia and the ascent of Japan had far-reaching repercussions on Europe, vast areas in Asia and the Pacific basin. Although in purely military terms it cannot be regarded as a global conflict or anything close to the two world wars, the Russo-Japanese War was an important event in modern history. As such it must be given a more prominent place in our collective memory regardless of our national affinity. The recent centennial commemorations of this conflict mark the emergence of a historical perspective sufficient to promote such a view, as well as universal willingness to take it in account in the future.

NOTES

1. Tyler, 1905: 5.
3. Tyler, 1905: 16.
7. On the military legacy of the war see Kowner, 2007a; Wilson, 1999.
9 On the legacy of the war in present-day China, the northeast Provinces (ex-Manchuria) in particular, see Wolff, 2005: 307–308.
11 Totman, 2000: 323. The war is mentioned in passim in 312, 319, 335, 357.
20 For the figures, see Kowner, 2006: 245.
21 As a whole, the two belligerents numbered close to 300,000 in Liaoyang.
23 On technical innovations in weapon development the war missed, the submarine and the airplane in particular, see Kowner, 2007b.
24 For detailed figures, see Kowner, 2006: 308.
26 For a vivid description of the gentlemanly negotiations for the capitulation of Port Arthur, see Ashmead-Bartlett, 1906: 400.
27 For counter-factual history of the war, see Duus, 2007.
28 The desire for a “short, victorious war” is usually associated with Viacheslav Plehve, Russia’s interior Minister during the early stages of the war, although it is possible that his adversaries invented this notorious expression. See Liubimov, n.d., 141–142; Judge, 1983: 171–172.
29 Schiffrin, 1980: 104.
30 See Akmese, 2005; Esenbel, 2004, and in this volume; Rodell, 2005; Laffan, 2007, and Bieganiec, in this volume.
32 See, for example, Henning, 2007.
34 Japan’s Westernization was also reflected in the calendar. In Japan, like in the rest of the West, the war was declared on February 10, 1904, but in Russia, which still upheld the old Julian calendar, the date was then January 26. It would take Russia fourteen more years to adopt the Gregorian calendar.