

The Russo-Japanese War



Introduction

Two rising Powers, two Great Powers, two sneak attacks, two diplomatic conferences, one war, and one “might-have-been” war...

The Russo-Japanese War of 1905, at the intersection of trends and contingencies, was a geopolitical pivot which had significant implications across the world. While often lost in the historical shadow of World War I, there are important parallels and linkages between the events of 1905 and “The Great War.” Each included countries on the rise and those who felt their situation was precarious. Each featured multiple countries’ involvement in a regional power vacuum. And each illustrated the intimate connection between military defeat and domestic revolution. In addition, the Russo-Japanese War includes a curious incident, 10,000 miles from the front, which *could* have set off another war and driven the 20th century in an entirely different direction! But first, a bit of background...

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Context of the Russo-Japanese War

Most historians tie the rise of modern Japan to the “Meiji Restoration,” a political and cultural realignment of the 1860s–70s. It was spurred by reform-minded feudal nobility who ‘restored’ the emperor from figurehead status to power, and ousted the Shoguns - the dominant feudal lords for the last 700 years. This political change was closely linked to 1) an opening of the country to international trade and cultural influences, 2) rapid industrialization, and 3) the emergence of a centralized national identity and culture. By 1894, Japan was strong enough to defeat a much-larger Chinese Empire and assert control over Korea. However, Japan was not the only rising power claiming influence in the region.

China had an immense population of about 450 million people and a centuries-long history of political dominance in East Asia. However, the Qing dynasty, which had ruled China since 1644, was weakening. European powers, particularly Britain, and the United States had been nibbling away at Chinese autonomy throughout most of the 19th century, taking small bits of territory and intruding into Chinese trade and financial policy. The Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), the most deadly war of the era, likely cost more than 30 million lives, and had demonstrated the Qing regime’s political, social, and cultural instability. As the Chinese Empire declined, claims to its vast territory by European imperial powers and the United States continued.

Key Terms:

The Russo-Japanese War

Japan

Meiji Restoration

Chinese Empire

Russian Empire

Tsar Nicholas II

“Yellow Peril”

Port Arthur

U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt

Sergei Witte

Komura Jutaro

Treaty of Portsmouth

Map of Japan, Korea, and Manchuria, 1903



**Map of the Trans-Siberian Railway,
Opened June 21, 1904**

European powers did not view Japan as their equal. In fact, following their victory over China in 1894, European leaders even pressured the Japanese government to give back some of the territories it had won. This demand caused Japanese resentment and a renewed drive for (especially military) modernization.



In addition to western European imperial incursions, the other major territorial power in the Far East was the Russian Empire. From its base in Eastern Europe, Russia had been expanding across Siberia since the 16th century. Though thinly populated, the Russian Far East had rich natural resources, and starting in 1891, the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (eventually over 5,700 miles long) promised to link the entire country, and facilitate resource extraction and industrial production.

In part, this drive to industrialize was spurred by Russia's focus on Europe and motivated by the desire to compete with the rapid industrialization unfolding there. Since the reign of Peter the Great in the 18th century, Russian elites had tended to be economically, militarily, and culturally focused on Europe and saw themselves within that sphere of competition. To be sure, Russia differed from other major European powers in many ways. By the 19th century, large parts of Russia's vast empire remained largely agrarian, and, with the exception of some major cities, less industrialized than western Europe. Yet its leaders thought of themselves as European. Russian elites spoke French and travelled to Italy and Paris. Russia had also been a central player in major European wars and diplomacy since the late 18th century. Thus, the Russian government's diplomatic and economic endeavors to the east were often in service of supporting its position *vis a vis* Europe, and, like other European imperial powers, Russian leaders tended to look down on their neighbors in East Asia.

By the end of the 19th century, China's waning power had left a vacuum in East Asia, which various states, including Russia, sought to fill for their own purposes. During the "Boxer Rebellion" in China in 1900, Russia seized the Chinese province of Manchuria. Now, the Russian Empire bordered Japanese-controlled Korea, setting the stage for an inter-imperial conflict. Russian leaders, dismissive of Japan as a rising power, failed to reach an agreement with Japan on how they would manage this border relationship, and understood their position in the region through the lens of European imperial and racial superiority.



Tsar Nicholas II and King George V

In fact, encouraged by his cousin, German Emperor Wilhelm II, Russian Tsar Nicholas II believed that Russia had been "chosen" by God to save the "entire white race" from the "Yellow Peril", and that Russia was "entitled" to annex Korea, Manchuria, and northern China. Nicholas' inability to focus on the affairs of state was well-known; he couldn't be bothered to engage with diplomacy way off in the Far East. He dismissed the threat of war; not imagining that Japan would have the boldness to attack a European power. However, Russia's refusal to form a border agreement led to Japanese frustration. In February 1904, Japan attacked Russia-controlled Manchuria.



Commander of the Japanese Imperial Combined Fleet at the Russo-Japanese War, 1904

The Russo-Japanese War

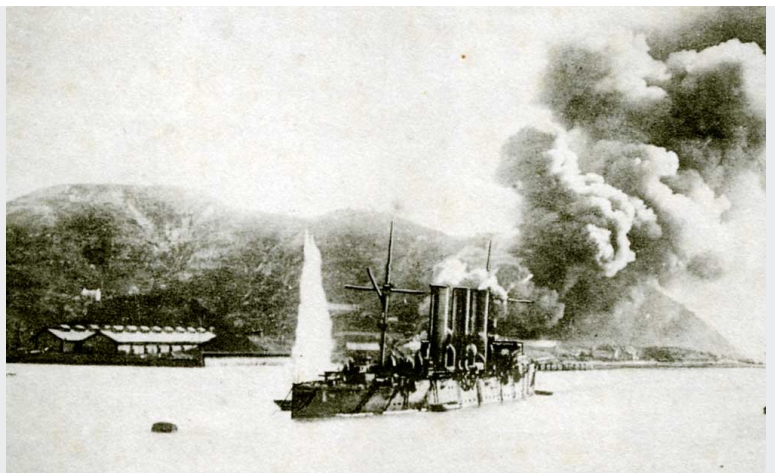
Without prior warning or a formal declaration of war, the Japanese navy attacked the Russian fleet at the Russian naval base in Port Arthur on February 8, 1904. Three hours later, Russia received Japan's declaration of war, and declared war itself eight days later.

The attack at Port Arthur was only the beginning of an eleven-month siege. However, even this initial attack did not prevent the Russians from continuing to underestimate Japanese military prowess. While the battle continued at Port Arthur, the main land action occurred in Manchuria, where Russian and Japanese armies fought along the Korean-Manchurian border throughout the year. A major battle in August 1904 resulted in another Japanese victory.

Pressing on, the Japanese finally cracked Port Arthur in the beginning of 1905. The final land battle occurred in February/March 1905 at Mukden, where, despite their exhaustion, Japanese forces again triumphed over the disorganized Russian army. Over 500,000 men participated, making it one of the largest battles in world history. The Russians, though consistently beaten, remained in the field, but there were no further land battles in the war.

While all of this was unfolding, the far-off Russian Baltic Fleet made its way around Europe, Africa, and Asia to face off against the Japanese Navy. They arrived too late to save Port Arthur and its naval contingent, but, more importantly, it was wholly decimated upon arrival by the Japanese navy in Tsushima Straits (the waterway between Japan and Korea) in May 1905.

Defeated on all fronts, the Russians agreed to peace talks.



Russian cruiser Pallada under fire (above); map of Port Arthur (below)



The Peace

Japan was not the only non-European power on the rise. Another, the United States, had its own vested interests in the outcome of the conflict. Following a devastating Civil War in the 1860s, the United States boomed in terms of economic growth and industrial production, and by late in the century its leader sought to take a full place in global affairs. To facilitate their expanding their global trade networks, Americans seized Caribbean and Pacific Islands from the Spanish in 1898 and annexed Hawai'i. Alongside European powers and Japan, they also intervened in East Asia as China weakened. With the new century, the United States was led by the brash President Theodore Roosevelt, who saw his country (and himself) as a player on the world stage.



Komura Jutaro, Japanese Foreign Minister

Neither Roosevelt nor Secretary of State John Hay were well-disposed towards the Russians. Instead, they saw the Japanese as more aligned with expanding American interests in East Asia. More centrally, they sought to expand American prestige as a basis for American positioning in China and elsewhere in the Pacific.

Russia, for its part, struggled to come to terms with its on-going military disaster. Tsar Nicholas II rested his hopes on Russia's Baltic squadron moving across the world to engage the Japanese, but with its annihilation at Tsushima Straits, the game was up. Simultaneously, domestic upheaval had led to strikes and protests demanding increased civil rights and a government with more popular participation than the absolutist tsar was willing to contemplate (this is the subject of the following lesson). The combination of these two factors finally pushed the Russians to agree to peace talks. The tsar, even then reluctant to concede defeat, named his former modernizing finance minister, and then member of the Committee of Ministers Sergei Witte, to negotiate.

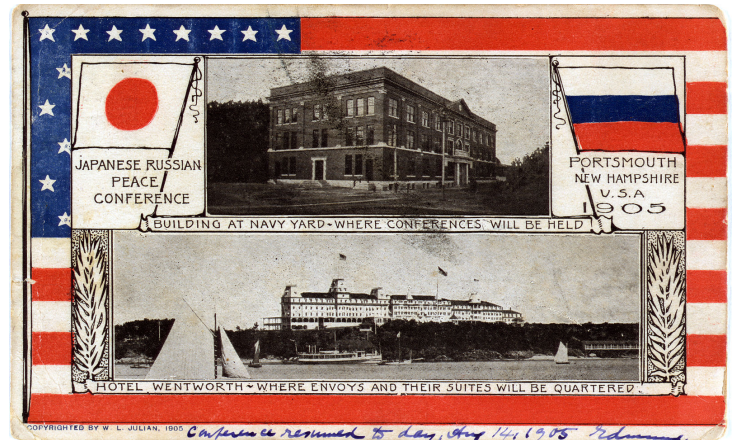
Witte met Japanese Foreign Minister Komura Jutaro for peace talks in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in August. The meeting was "stage-managed" by US President Theodore Roosevelt from his summer home on Long Island, New York. The principal issues were territorial concessions from the Russians on the Asian mainland, as well as the large island of Sakhalin north of Japan, and a compensatory payment to cover Japanese war costs. The negotiations were contentious, hampered by the Russian tsar's refusal to acknowledge his country's defeat by a power he viewed as inferior, and parallel discussions were held by U.S. diplomats in both combatants' capitals.



Treaty of Portsmouth delegations: Sergei Witte in center of far side; Komura Jutaro in center of near side

Eventually, Russia agreed to the bulk of Japanese demands. But, there were two key sticking points: the tsar remained obstinate about giving up the island of Sakhalin (immediately north of Japan) and resistant to paying for the war. He even threatened to revive the conflict. The Japanese, while victorious, were financially and militarily exhausted, and subject to considerable pressure from the United States to come to an agreement. Finally, they backed down on the financial compensation and agreed to take just the southern half of Sakhalin (which Russia re-took at the end of World War II). Nicholas II was deeply pleased with Witte's work, and Roosevelt had his triumph. For his work facilitating the negotiations and final settlements, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the following year. It was the first time the award was given for diplomatic peace-making, and the first time it was awarded to a non-European.

However, neither Japan nor Russia was particularly happy with the results of the Treaty of Portsmouth. The Japanese felt that Western pressure denied them the deserved fruits of their victory. The Russians were unable to come to terms with their defeat, or the difficulties of modernity either at home or in international relations. Still, they managed to come to a *modus vivendi* in the decaying Chinese empire. As later historians would notice, this arrangement also kept East Asia out of World War I.



American postcard commemorating the Treaty of Portsmouth, 1905

Conclusion

The Russo-Japanese War was an inflection point on several fronts. On one level, the conflict accelerated military industrialization, and highlighted the adoption of communications technologies in war. During the naval battle that unfolded between Russia and Japan in 1905, older methods of constructing ships with a mix of small and larger guns had proven ineffective. As a result, navies increasingly shifted to ships with a single-sized gun. This was only one change: taking lessons from the conflict, navies around the world pursued faster engines, heavier armor, and larger ships in an effort to remain on the cutting competitive edge of military power. In addition, the 1905 naval battle at in the straits between Japan and Korea marked the first use of the wireless telegraph in battle, enabling much closer communications between local commanders and headquarters.

Japanese cavalry cross the Yalu River, 1904



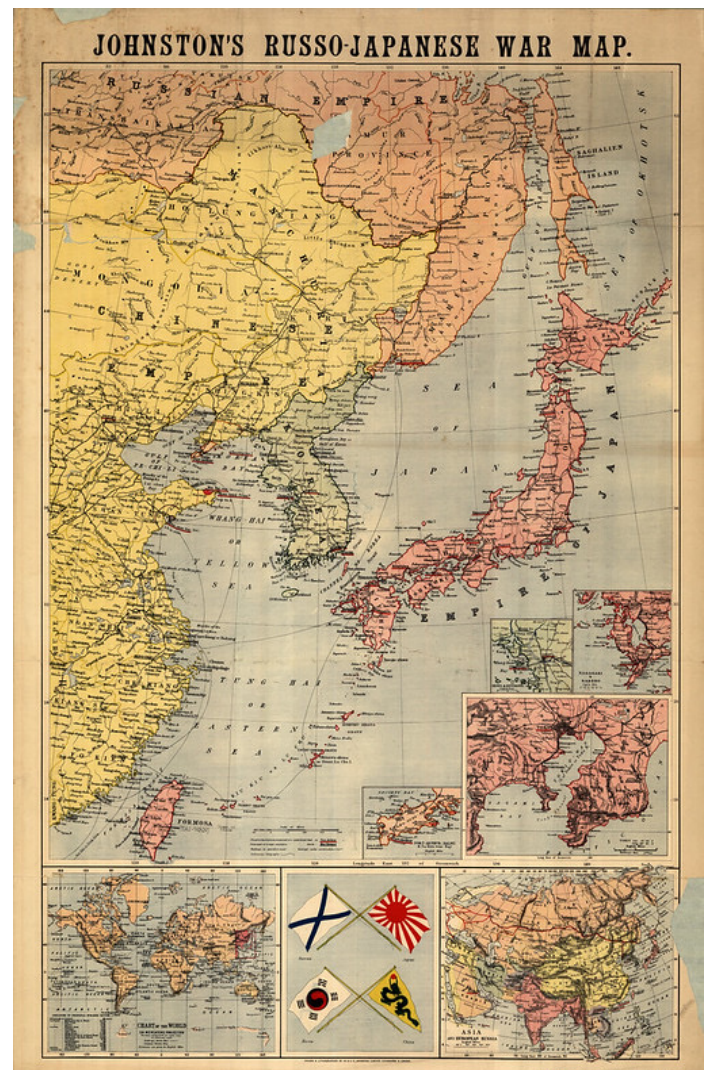


Japanese print showing Tsar Nicholas II waking from a nightmare, with Russian forces in defeat

More broadly, however, the war's outcome and Japan's victory disrupted assumptions about global power and European imperial pre-eminence in the world. Russia, even if not on the leading edge of military prowess, was a first-rank European Great Power. Its defeat by Japan forced a reassessment not only of the idea that Europe dominated military technology and tactics, but, more fundamentally, of the Eurocentric global order. More rapid communications, the need to move Russian naval assets from the Baltic to the Pacific, Japan's victory, the emergence of the US, and the engagement of all the major powers in China demonstrated that the shape of the geopolitical world had expanded. Regions that had once seemed peripheral now required global attention, and the events that occurred there were now happening within a global framework.

While geopolitics may seem like an elite endeavor, the repercussions of the Russo-Japanese War were not confined to political leaders, either. Imperial subjects around the world, particularly non-white people, now had tangible evidence that the countries ruled by white men in Europe and North America could be defeated. This was recognized at the time in many locations in Asia and Africa (for example India and Egypt), and helped to spark a new assertiveness against European colonial controls. Modern communications had not only shaped the way the war itself unfolded, they also made the world aware of the Japanese victories. Mass media, particularly newspapers, reached indigenous elites and spread the dramatic stories of the war. Rabindranath Tagore, one of the leading Indian intellectuals of the era, saw the Japanese as forcing the West to respect Eastern cultural values. Mahatma Gandhi cited Japan as a model of self-determination built on nationalism to inspire other Asians.

Map of the Russo-Japanese War, 1905



Finally, the war and the diplomatic sparring that followed were also connected to political, economic, and social changes within Russia and Japan themselves. In contrast to Japan, where the drive to modernize was led “from above,” Russia’s political and social systems struggled to adapt to the challenges posed by modernity. The tsar and his court, as well as powerful forces in St. Petersburg and Moscow, hoped to suppress, or at least control these changes. However, frustration with the current system spurred widespread public demands for political and economic reform, and produced mass protests and strikes in urban centers.



Battle of Mukden, 1905, by Fritz Neumann

Moreover, the sorry performance of the Russian military in the Russo-Japanese war weakened confidence in the government among many members of society, including the military. The 1905 mutiny by the crew of the battleship Potemkin was illustrative of this lack of faith, and tested the ability of the tsar’s government to maintain order. As we will see in the next lesson, these developments contributed to the Russian Revolution of 1905.

As for the Russo-Japanese War itself though, it was an event that, even at the time, was recognized as holding tremendous global significance. In hindsight, this appears even more apparent. Though often overshadowed by the outbreak of World War I, it highlighted the emergence of new military technologies and tactics, and new players in global politics. It challenged European dominance, and illustrated the interactions between international relations and the internal politics and economics of participating countries. In these ways, it is illustrative of both the ways major events often play out day-to-day, and the flow of many of the larger-scale trends characterizing “modernity,” even if people didn’t quite see this so clearly at the time.

***Street view of Tokyo
with trams, c. 1905***



Further Reading

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Portrait of Komura Jutarō, taken before 1911, Public Domain,
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Treaty of Portsmouth delegations: Russians (far side of table) – Korostovetz, Nabokov, Witte, Rosen, and Plancon; and Japanese (near side of table) – Adachi, Ochiai, Komura, Takahira, and Sato, 1905, Public Domain,
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View down Tokyo street with tram cars in center background, c. 1905, Public Domain,
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