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The Russo-Japanese War and the Decline of the Russian Image

by

Frank JACOB

Introduction

In early November 1914, shortly after the outbreak of the Great War the *Deutsche Zeitung* (German Newspaper)¹ stated, “that more than ever before we must be interested in the events of the Russo-Japanese War, because both states have thrown the gauntlet to us.”² This underlines the fact that the war in East Asia had consequences that influenced events until the First World War. However, it was not just the interest at the beginning of the “the great seminal catastrophe” of the 20th century that was affected by the events of the geographical periphery. I will argue that the “imperialist war par excellence”³ was not just a “regional confrontation with substantial global aspects, important and enduring international implications and immense [...] military reverberations”⁴, but that it was tremendously important for the decline of the Russian image as a potential military power one had to fear to wage war with.

The termination as World War Zero, which was proposed by the concise anthology edited by John W. Steinberg for the centennial of the Russo-Japanese War, seems to be very suitable⁵, because even if the other great powers were not involved directly, e.g. the financing of the war was a global one. However, the European perspective of this war in general, and the German perspective in particular have not been researched sufficiently yet, which seems to be a result of

¹ A newspaper published by the Pan-German League between the 1890s and 1930s.

² *Deutsche Zeitung*, Nr.561, 4. November 1914, BArch R8034-II/8171.

³ David Goldfrank, “Crimea Redux? On the Origins of the War,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 88.

⁴ John W. Steinberg, “The Operational Overview,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 105.

⁵ *Ibid.* 106.

the still dominant research focus on the First World War that overshadowed the Russo-Japanese conflict. While the “fight for East Asia”⁶ tended to be seen as a simple “war of expansion”⁷ on the edge of the Euro-centric world, it had a higher impact on the European theater of politics and war strategies than people had believed. Therefore, the conflict cannot just be viewed “as an inevitable clash between two expanding nations in a zone where their prospective territories clash between two expanding nations in a zone where their prospective territories overlapped”⁸, it has to be analyzed from a more global perspective to determine its long-term consequences for the history of Asia, Europe and the United States, as a whole.

For this reason, I will provide a survey of the international reasons for the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, followed by a short description of the war itself. Consequently, the national and international effects of the war itself will be analyzed to finally focus on the German perception of the event itself. This will underline the impact of the war on the events in East Asia, with regard to the image of Russia that would tremendously change, a fact that paved the way for the events in 1914 when the Tsarist Empire was no longer seen as a major military threat to German strategic planning. It must consequently be argued that the Russo-Japanese War was responsible for the decline of the image of a Russian threat; Russia finally could be encountered by the well prepared and well trained German army as well, even if the last would have to face superior Russian numbers. What the Japanese could achieve, the Germans definitely would achieve as well. However, some of the lessons learned from the war were not sufficiently acknowledged. If the European powers had evaluated the reasons for the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in a more efficient way, they could possibly have prevented the outbreak of a major war in Europe just a decade later.

⁶ Klaus Hildebrand, “»Eine neue Ära der Weltgeschichte«. Der historische Ort des Russisch-Japanischen Krieges 1904/05,” in *Der Russisch-Japanische Krieg (1904/05)*, ed. Josef Kreiner (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2005), 28.

⁷ Ian Nish, *The Russo-Japanese War: Planning, Performance and Peace-Making*, in *Der Russisch-Japanische Krieg (1904/05)*, ed. Josef Kreiner (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2005), 12.

⁸ Rotem Kowner, “Becoming an Honorary Civilized Nation: Remaking Japan’s Military Image during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905,” URL: <http://www.mconway.net/page1/page14/files/Russo%20Japanese%20War.pdf>, 20

The Russo-Japanese War

In general, the Russo-Japanese War “had its origins in two weak countries – China and Korea.”⁹ Despite this fact and the results, which decided the supremacy in East Asia, the reasons have been occurring for decades. The geopolitical and strategic threat Russia posed for Japan could be traced back to 1792, when the Russians tried to negotiate for the establishment of a trade post in Japan.¹⁰ In the following years, further missions were sent to the Japanese island to attempt further negotiations, however, the government, still led by the shogun, was not willing to grant such rights to a foreign country, especially to one that was threatening the northern borders of his country.¹¹

In 1855, two years after the arrival of the U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794-1858), the Russians were granted an unequal treaty, which determined the exact borders between the Tsarist and Japanese Empires. In the late 1850s, after the end of the disastrous Crimean War, Russian ambition in East Asia grew again and Nicholas Muravev (1794-1866) was ordered to press forward with the expansionist advance in this region.¹² In another case, British intervention saved the isles in the Tsushima Strait that were to be occupied by Russia. These actions underlined the threat that Japan feared. Japan tried to secure its influence on the Korean Peninsula, which was seen as a geostrategic dagger pointing to Japan, which was to be conquered to secure the mainland against possible foreign invasions. Despite the fact that a contract was signed in 1875, exchanging Sachalin for the Kuril Islands, Japan was still willing to strengthen its influence in Korea.

⁹ Ian Nish, “Stretching out the Yalu: A contested Frontier, 1900-1903,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 45.

¹⁰ Michael R. Auslin, “Japanese Strategy, Geopolitics and the Origins of the War, 1792-1895,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 3-4.

¹¹ Ibid. 8-9.

¹² Ibid. 13

Following the rules of international law, which had forced the Japanese islands to end their isolation, Japan itself, just two decades later, forced the Hermit Kingdom to open for international trade and to sign the Treaty of Kanghwa. The growing Japanese influence on the Korean Peninsula finally led to a conflict with China, which expected Korea to remain a part of its traditional tribute system. War broke out in 1894 and the Japanese army and navy lead a victorious war. Having just revised the unequal treaties with Britain in 1894, Japan showed that it had become a power that was also willing to participate in the imperialist division of East Asia.¹ However, though Japan was able to win the war, Russia, France and the German Reich intervened and forced the new Asian power to retreat from its claim to occupy the Liaodong Peninsula, because possession by Japan could have been dangerous for international interests in China.¹⁴ Consequently, the Japanese government had to agree that it could not expand without international permission. At the same instant, Russia became the number one enemy for a possible future war, which revised the power system in the region.

It must have been especially humiliating for Japan that the Russian Empire gained greater influence in China due to its intervention and finally leased the harbor town of Port Arthur on the Liaodong Peninsula.¹⁵ However, this was not the only evidence of the danger that was posed to Japanese ambitions by the Eastern European power. Following the Boxer Rebellion of 1900¹⁶, Russia occupied Manchuria and was unwilling to end its occupation of this region. While the government in St Petersburg depicted the occupation as temporary, the troops were not leaving Manchuria and the first withdrawal phase was launched and then canceled again.¹⁷ Furthermore, Nicholas announced Yevgeni Ivanovich Alekseyev (1843-1917) as the vice king of the Far East

¹³ Josef Kreiner, "Der Ort des Russisch-Japanischen Krieges in der japanischen Geschichte," in *Der Russisch-Japanische Krieg (1904/05)*, ed. Josef Kreiner (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2005), 54.

¹⁴ Auslin, *Japanese Strategy*, 21; Kreiner, *Ort*, 55.

¹⁵ David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "The Immediate Origins of the War," in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero Vol. 1*, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., *History of Warfare Vol. 29* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 23.

¹⁶ Diana Preston, *Rebellion in Peking. Die Geschichte des Boxeraufstandes* (Munich: Dt. Verlagsanstalt, 2001).

¹⁷ Schimmelpenninck, *Immediate Origins*, 38.

and “thereby placed all authority for this empire's military and diplomatic policy on the Pacific in the hands of his leading hard-liner.”¹⁸ While the Japanese were trying to negotiate for a *Man-Kan kokan* (Manchurian-Korean exchange), which would have exchanged the exclusive rights in Korea for Japan, for exclusive rights for Russia in Manchuria, the Russian government was not willing to accept such a solution, because it wanted to keep all possible options open. For the Japanese government this attempt was just natural, because “[t]he more Russia established herself in Manchuria, the more important was it for Japan to claim supremacy on the Korean peninsula”¹⁹. However, the Tsarist Empire considered its relations with China as an exclusive and bilateral one, which is why it was not willing to accept Japanese, U.S. and British arguments against the occupation of the northeastern parts of China.²⁰

The road to war was further paved by a local dispute at the Yalu River, the natural border between Korea and Manchuria. Aleksandr Mikhailovich Bezobrazov (1855-1931) was trying to use the tsarist ambitions to expand in the Far East to gain money. He had bought wood concessions at the Yalu in 1898²¹ and had to start cutting wood during the next five years. He and his supporters, the so-called Bezobrazovtsky, also tried to receive further concessions in this area from the Korean government but failed because the Japanese had intervened. Bezobrazov’s plan seemed simple: He wanted to prepare for the annexation of Korea by building a Russian bridgehead at the border. However, his plan failed due to a lack of sufficient financial support.²² His approach was different from that of finance minister Sergei Witte (1849-1915), who wanted to achieve a rather slow Russification of the area by building a stronger infrastructure as a tool of the so called railway imperialism.²³ When Witte and other moderate politicians were finally able

¹⁸ Ibid. 39.

¹⁹ Nish, *Yalu*, 55.

²⁰ Goldfrank, *Redux*, 91.

²¹ Igor V. Lukoianov, “The Bezobrazovtsky,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 68.

²² Ibid. 74.

²³ Ibid. 77.

to persuade the Tsar to recall Bezobrazov in March 1903 it was too late, because the Japanese had already prepared for the coming war, even if it was not finally decided until December of the same year.

Consequently, the Japanese broke diplomatic relations with Russia in early February 1904 and withdrew all diplomats from the embassies in the Tsarist Empire. However, Alekseev did not fear a possible war, because he just could not believe that an Asian power would be willing to go to war with Russia, which was seen as an unstoppable war machine as soon as its troops were fully recruited. The image was still a strong one so why would a small island nation be willing to go to war over the influence in Korea. Despite this opinion, the Japanese had prepared for a large-scale war and Admiral Tôgô Heihachirô (1848-1934) had left Sasebo with two fleets to start the attacks against the Russians on the night of February 8, 1904. Against all Western expectations and Japanese hopes “within a year Russian dreams of an Asian destiny had metamorphosed into a nightmare of military defeat and revolution”²⁴.

The two fleets Tôgô attacked the main Russian fleet at Port Arthur as well as some of the Russian ships, which had come from Vladivostok when the Japanese fleet tried to secure a bridgehead for the landing Japanese troops at Chemulpo.²⁵ The Russians were shocked by the attack and it took them several weeks to send Vice-Admiral Stepan Makarov (1849-1904)²⁶, whose ship *Petropavlovsk* hit a mine during its first battle against the Japanese fleet. The hope of the Russian navy died without achieving victory, a fact that destroyed Russian morale instantly.²⁷ While the sea power seemed to be in the hands of the Asian fleet at that time, the army of the Japanese Empire approached the border of Korea and its first major battle. While Alekseev demanded protection of Port Arthur against the approaching Japanese threat, General Alexei Kuropatkin (1848-1925) wanted to remain defensive until his troops became stronger than the

²⁴ Schimmelpenninck, *Immediate Origins*, 26.

²⁵ Steinberg, *Overview*, 107-108.

²⁶ For a biography of this admiral see: Sergej N. Semanov, *Admiral Makarov* (Kalininigrad: Izdat. Jantarnyj Skaz, 1997).

²⁷ Steinberg, *Overview*, 109.

opponent's army was; however, this required time because the Trans-Siberian Railway was still just a one-track line.

On May 1, 1905 (Battle of the Yalu) his army met the Japanese army for the first time and the end of this combat would not only be shocking for the Russians. The intelligence network of Japan²⁸ had worked better than the Russian one and the army of the island nation could win a tremendous victory by building bridges over the river and surprising their enemy with a fast and well-structured attack.²⁹ When the tsarist soldiers decided to retreat it was easy for the Japanese cavalry to follow them and take possession of their field guns.³⁰ The battle had shown that the Russian army was in bad shape, shown by the incident where they fired at their own men during the battle. Because of Tôgô's failure to block the maritime entrance to Port Arthur successfully, the Japanese forces divided. While the First, Second, and Fourth Armies proceeded to the north, General Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912) was ordered to besiege and conquer Port Arthur, which was still a danger, because the Tsar had ordered a Second Pacific Fleet to the East Asian seas. Until these ships arrived, the fortress at Port Arthur needed to stay in Japanese hands.³¹

It was already clear that the siege would not be an easy victory, especially in regard to the use of modern weapons that had made the fighting more destructive to the lives of the common soldiers. Sakurai Tadayoshi had described this very clearly:

“The sublimity of battle can only be seen in the midst of showers of bullet and shell, but the dismal horror of it can best be observed when the actual struggle is over. The shadow of impartial Death visits friend and foe

²⁸ This network consisted also on the work of right-wing secret societies like the Amur Society. For a survey of the history of this society see Frank Jacob, *Japanism, Pan-Asianism and Terrorism. A Short History of the Amur Society 1900-1945* (Palo Alto: Academica Press, 2014).

²⁹ Lieut.-Colonel C. V. Hume, “First Japanese Army. The Battle of the Ya-Lu; lecture given by a Japanese General Staff Officer, with remarks by Lieut.-General Sir Ian Hamilton,” in *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers Attached to the Japanese and Russian Forces in the Field*, Vol. I (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1908), 15-16.

³⁰ Ibid. S.16-17

³¹ Steinberg, *Overview*, 116.

alike. When the shocking massacre is over, countless corpses covered with blood lie long and flat in the grass and between stones. What a deep philosophy their cold faces tell! When we saw the dead at Nanshan, we could not help covering our eyes in horror and disgust. But the scene here, though equally shocking, did not make us shudder half so much. Some were crushed in head and face, their brains mixing with dust and earth. The intestines of others were torn out and blood was trickling from them. The sight of these things, however, did not horrify us very much.”³²

The 80,000 men that were forced to assault Port Arthur would have to have seen the same image of death and violence for many days. Nogi's strategy was very simple. Nikudan kôgeki, the attack of human bullets, should secure victory.³³ Therefore, Nogi sent rows of his men again and again to the battlefield of Port Arthur, where they had to face the Russian machine guns and their death. What was later mystified as a supremacy of Japanese will, and described by the Western observers as an expression of the Japanese bushido was just a reflection of “incompetence more than ruthless brilliance.”³⁴ During the three assaults in August, October, and November 1904 the Japanese losses numbered 59,000 soldiers. It was the arrival of Kodama Gentarô (1852-1906) that changed their fate. The Japanese army finally conquered 203-Metre-Hill and was able to fire heavy artillery shells against the city of Port Arthur. On January 2, 1905, the Russians surrendered and the Japanese navy was able to prepare itself for the arrival of the Second Pacific Fleet. Nogi became a symbol of heroism, and a growing bayonet cult in Japan was the consequence of the Siege of Port Arthur, misinterpreting the death of so many brave soldiers.

While the southern battles were won the northern force also went further, gaining victory after victory over the Russian enemy. Kuropatkin retreated too early, because he often had no reliable information about the Japanese strength. At Mukden, from February 20 until March 10, 1905, both armies fought the largest land battle in military history, counting 90,000 Russian and 70,000

³² Sakurai Tadayoshi, *Human Bullets. A Soldier's Story of Port Arthur* (Boston/New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907), 149.

³³ Matsukata Yoshihisa Tak, “Human Bullets, General Nogi, and the Myth of Port Arthur,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 179.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 180.

Japanese casualties.³⁵ Despite the fact, that the Japanese won the battle, the enemy still existed, meaning that the war was not over yet and the army of Japan was exhausted. However, when the Second Pacific Fleet under the command of Admiral Zinovy Petrovich Rozhdestvensky (1848-1909) arrived after a long journey³⁶ complicated by international relations³⁷, the Russian navy, which had not been well prepared or performed well during the Russo-Japanese War, and its ships in particular, now had to face its most humiliating defeat.³⁸

The conflict used to be an asymmetric one, so this victory was not a final decision yet, especially because the strategy of the war itself could not rely solely on Mahan's or Moltke's theoretical approaches.³⁹ While Mahan focused his theories solely on naval assumptions, Moltke did the same with regard to a continental war. As the Russo-Japanese War took place in an ambivalent scenario, which combined land and sea operations, both theories itself were not sufficient for such a war. Thereby the victory of Tsushima did not resemble the victory of the war, even if Japan was willing to end it with a peace treaty that would grant Japan reparation and territorial gains, a fact that German journalists commented on in a very sarcastic way:

“Poor Japan! It has not killed the bear yet, but is already interested in dividing it. The friends of Japan would do it a grand favor, if they could bring this rowdy and martial, but promising nation back from the clouds of victory to the cold and serious earth. It has to accept the real political situation and the power relations with

³⁵ Steinberg, *Overview*, 126.

³⁶ Dominic Lieven and Nicholas Papastratigakis, “The Russian Far Eastern Squadron's Operational Plan,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 203-227.

³⁷ “Der Seekrieg und die Neutralen,” *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, Nr. 392, 22.8.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170. The *Deutsche Tageszeitung* was a Berlin based rather conservative newspaper, published since 1893.

³⁸ Pertti Luntinen and Bruce W. Menning, “The Russian Navy at War, 1904-05,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 229-259; Nicholas Papastratigakis, *Russian Imperialism and Naval Power: Military Strategy and the Build-Up to the Russo-Japanese War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

³⁹ Bruce W. Menning, “Neither Mahan nor Moltke: Strategy in the Russo-Japanese War,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 130-131.

regard to its enemy.”⁴⁰

It should have been the international relations that were used to end the war, and the American president “Theodore Roosevelt was perfectly willing to serve as the arm-twisting apostle of compromise”⁴¹.

At Portsmouth, the negotiations began in August 1905 and the Treaty of Portsmouth should have ended the Russo-Japanese War. However, none of the Japanese expectations was met and they left with the feeling that they had been victimized by the Western powers.⁴² Roosevelt acted with regard to the American interests in the Far East, and the

“power, which hoped to change the Pacific Ocean into an American Ocean had no interest in wishing that one supreme power would rule the opposed side of it. In contrast it needed to be eager to keep there a political balance in existence.”⁴³

At the same time, England was not willing to lose a strong Russia in the European concert of power, which was needed to encounter the German ambitions for supremacy there.⁴⁴ Due to these wishes, Japan had to accept the treaty, even if riots were the natural result when the Japanese public recognized that so many soldiers had been victimized for almost nothing in return. However, this was not the only consequence of the Russo-Japanese War in Japan.

⁴⁰ “Aussichtslose Bemühungen,” *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, Nr.415, 4.9.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁴¹ Menning, *Mahan*, 155.

⁴² Steinberg, *Overview*, 128.

⁴³ Carl Peters, “Der Friede zwischen Japan und Rußland,” in Carl Peters, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 3 (Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1944), 367.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Consequences

“Through the abundant grace of Heaven and the illustrious virtue of His Majesty, the Imperial forces defeated the great enemy both on land and sea. Our arms were crowned with an unparalleled success and our country with awe-inspiring dignity and world-wide glory”⁴⁵, was the formula the already mentioned Sakurai used to describe the impact of the Russo-Japanese War. For Japan, it marked the moment when the nation was accepted as a great power, even if it could not secure its ambitions during the negotiations for the Treaty of Portsmouth. The Japanese army and navy had shown their abilities and Japan definitely became a factor of international policy. The development of strong nationalist feelings throughout the country followed and a real unification of the different areas, whose soldiers had fought side by side in a major war. Yet, the war did not just have consequences for Japan. For Russia, the situation at the end of the Russo-Japanese War was even more dangerous.

During the war, the Bloody Sunday at St Petersburg⁴⁶ had shocked the Russian population when the soldiers opened the fire against their own population. The subsequent losses of the war increased the political pressure on the tsar and his government, because the ordinary people were not willing to support an imperialist war at the edge of the world just for the fame and dreams of the royal ruler.⁴⁷ Consequently, the steady growth of the revolutionary movement was highly related to the war itself. If the soldiers were sent to Manchuria there was no sufficient security against a possible revolution and the increasing number of rebellions due to recruitment attempts of the government underlined this development – one counted 107 violent incidents connected to the recruitment of new troops between September and December 1904.⁴⁸ Finally, it was internal reasons that led the tsar to seek peace and in October 1905, the October Manifesto was granted to

⁴⁵ Sakurai, *Human Bullets*, xv.

⁴⁶ For a description what happened on Bloody Sunday see George Gapon, *The Story of My Life* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1906), 174-185.

⁴⁷ John Bushnell, “The Specter of Mutinous Reserves: How the War Produced the October Manifesto,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 334.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 335.

contain the revolutionary aspirations of the Russian radicals and to end a general strike in the country.⁴⁹

Despite the consequences the war had for the struggling powers, there was also an international perspective as well as a global effect that was visible in many different countries. For the Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), the Japanese victory was an obvious symbol for a possible future of China:

“When Japan began her reforms, she was a very weak country [...]. And yet now Japan is one of the strongest Powers in the world. Her people have given up their old prejudices, they have learned the lessons of the West, reformed their administration, created an army and fleet, organized their finances, and has done all this in the space of fifty years. [...] Consequently, if we base ourselves on these standards and relationships China can become a very powerful State”⁵⁰.

However, these ambitions were not only expressed in China. The national self-confidence in Egypt and India tremendously increased and streets or places were named after the Japanese heroes of the recent war against Russia.⁵¹ Intellectuals were demanding more Japanism of their people.⁵² In Asia, the war mainly influenced the countries, which had already developed a movement for independence, like Thailand⁵³, instead of those whose national movements were actually still in their genesis, like Indonesia or the Philippines.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ibid. 346.

⁵⁰ Sun Yat-Sen, *Memoirs of a Chinese revolutionary. A programme of a national reconstruction for China* (Taipei: China Cultural Service, 1953), 65.

⁵¹ Steven G. Marks, “‘Bravo, Brave Tiger of the East!’. The Russo-Japanese War and the Rise of Nationalism in British Egypt and India,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., *History of Warfare* Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 609-614.

⁵² Ibid. 618

⁵³ Paul A. Rodell, “Inspiration for Nationalist Aspirations? Southeast Asia and the 1905 Japanese Victory,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., *History of Warfare* Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 630-632.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 636-652.

The highest impact was achieved with regard to the recognition of tactical and technological changes in warfare, especially when the war was compared to the last major battle between Britain and the Boers in South Africa.⁵⁵ The armies and navies of Japan and Russia were able to test technological innovations⁵⁶, which made it clear that cavalry⁵⁷ or spirit alone would never decide the next war. Barbwire, machine guns, and heavy artillery were the new rulers of the European battlefields. Sakurai had described the cruelty of the changes these innovations brought with them, but it seems that they were not sufficiently received in Europe, where soldiers had to face the same cruel battle situations a decade later:

“After this battle we captured some machine-guns; this was the firearm most dreaded by us. A large iron plate serves the purpose of a shield, through which aim is taken, and the trigger can be pulled while the gun is moving upward, downward, to the left, or to the right. More than six hundred bullets are pushed out automatically in one minute, as if a long, continuous rod of balls was being thrown out of the gun. It can also be made to sprinkle its shot as roads are watered with a hose. It can cover a larger or smaller space, or fire to a greater or less distance as the gunner wills.”⁵⁸

There was also a discussion about the rifles, because people tended to believe, that the use of smaller bullets would make the war itself more human.⁵⁹ However, this war already provided an image of the new industrialized way of warfare that would strike Europe just a few years later as well. With regard to this the Russo-Japanese War is tremendously important, because one factor that led the Germans to believe that they were able to fight a war against France and Russia at

⁵⁵ “Buren- und japanische Taktik,“ *Der Tag*, Nr.445, 22.9.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁵⁶ Steinberg, *Overview*, 105. With regard to this aspect see also: Philipp Vogler, *Torpedos, U-Boote, Zerstörer* (Bonn: Minifanal, 2014).

⁵⁷ For a survey of the development of cavalry warfare from the Boer War to the Russo-Japanese War see: Frank Jacob, “Vom kriegsentscheidenden Faktor zum Sinnbild antiquierter Kriegsführung – Pferde im Burenkrieg und im Russisch-Japanischen Krieg,“ in *Pferde in der Geschichte*, ed. Frank Jacob (Darmstadt, Büchner Verlag 2014) (in print).

⁵⁸ Sakurai, *Human Bullets*, 152.

⁵⁹ *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, Nr.202, 28.8.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

the same time was the fact that Russia had lost its image as an unbeatable great power as a consequence of the Japanese victory. That is why the *Deutsche Zeitung* was demanding a closer look into the events of 1904/05. If Japan was able to beat Russia, Germany would be able to as well and the reports about the Tsarist Empire at that time seemed to underline the weakness of the Eastern European colossus very well.

The Russian Image

The German perspective on the war was a very simple one at the beginning. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 had made Japan an equal participant in international relations and this alliance would secure a regional war. By this war, the German borders would have been unburdened, because Russia needed her troops in East Asia.⁶⁰ While Japan fought for its survival, the Tsar just defended the prestige of a great power hoping for a ‘splendid little war’. The international sympathies during the war went with Japan, which resembled the biblical David fighting against the Russian Goliath. For this reason, this fight was also depicted by the Anglo-American press as a war between constitutionalism (Japan) and absolutism (Russia).⁶¹

However, another aspect of the war was the obvious weakness of the Russian military and navy. It was not only “poor rations and munitions supply and a command expectation of reinforcements, which explained the inactivity that had such a debilitating effect on morale”⁶². The education of the Russian reserve forces with regard to their weapons seemed to be minimal, which is why the mainly mixed units of the Tsarist army remained weak throughout the whole campaigns.⁶³ The education of the officers was also minimal, which is why they were not able to

⁶⁰ Hildebrand, *Ära*, 29.

⁶¹ Shimazu Naoko “‘Love Thy Enemy’: Japanese Perceptions of Russia,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 369.

⁶² Oleg R. Airapetov, “The Russian Army's Fatal Flaws,” in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., History of Warfare Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 163.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 164-165.

develop sufficient tactics for such a new kind of war. Furthermore, while the ordinary soldiers were dying on the battlefields, the Russian home front was not as supportive as the Japanese one.

The German press and several writers also summarized all the mentioned perspectives of the war. “By the distraction of the Russian military might to the Far East, the defensive position of the German Empire (...) is strengthened”⁶⁴ and it seemed to be clear, that especially from a European perspective “much depended on the outcome of this war.”⁶⁵ At the same time the press stated, that Russia seemed to not be serious with regard to the events in East Asia: “military people are just shaking their head, when the Russian noblemen spend their time in Petersburg or at a spa”⁶⁶ instead of thinking about strategies for the war. It was also reported, that Russia’s army mobilized too slow⁶⁷, something that led to German miscalculations in 1914. While the outcome of the Battle of the Yalu could still be seen as a “Russian misfortune”,⁶⁸ it was also

Figure 1: Russian Artillery Brigade leaving Gatchina, James E. Hare (ed.), *A Photographic Record of the Russo-Japanese War* (New York; P. F. Collier & Son, 1905), 51.



recognized as a battle in which a modern equipped army of a Western race was beaten by “a yellow nation”.⁶⁹ Therefore, the Japanese were being regarded as an equal antagonist of the “white race”.⁷⁰

It was furthermore reported about Kuropatkin’s late but final decision to actively and offensively go to war against the Japanese⁷¹ hoping for a success at “Russia’s stronghold of East Asia”⁷², Port Arthur. However, the officers there seemed incapable of winning the fight against the Japanese⁷³ and the situation of the Russians was an “almost desperate”⁷⁴ one, even if the fortress itself was depicted as a strong factor of modern warfare.⁷⁵ While the German press tended to favor the Japanese as well at the beginning of the war, the Russian deaths due to the siege of Port Arthur and the fear of the ‘Yellow Peril’ changed this opinion gradually.⁷⁶ Japan was even condemned for starting the fights without an official declaration of war, and a Bavarian newspaper hoped for a Russian punishment for the Japanese actions.⁷⁷ However, Russia was unable to do that. Despite the announcement of a fast approach of the Second Pacific Fleet,⁷⁸ its journey lasted too long and the tremendously feared Cossacks had no effect with regard to the

⁶⁹ “Die gelbe Gefahr,” *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, Nr.115, 18.5.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8169.

⁷⁰ Carl Peters, “Der Ostasiatische Krieg und Europa,” in Carl Peters, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 3 (Munich: C.H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1944), 345-346.

⁷¹ “Vom Kriegsschauplatz in Ostasien,” *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, Nr.468, 5.10.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁷² Peters, *Der Ostasiatische Krieg*, 350.

⁷³ “Der Krieg in Ostasien,” *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, Nr. 391, 20.8.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁷⁴ “Die Lage Port Arthurs verzweifelt,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, Nr.431, 25.8.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁷⁵ *Berliner Börsen Zeitung*, Nr.123, 14.3.1905, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁷⁶ “Der Japanismus im Schwinden,” *Hamburger Nachrichten*, Nr.710, 8.10.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170. The *Hamburger Nachrichten* were published between 1849 and 1939. After 1930 the newspaper openly supported National Socialism.

⁷⁷ “Der japanisch-russische Krieg,” *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, 23.10.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170. The *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* was one of the most read newspapers in Southern Germany in the 1930s. It was published between 1848 and 1945 and used to be rather conservative oriented, even if it was published for a short time period central committee of the Munich Soviet Republic in 1919.

⁷⁸ “Die Ausfahrt der baltischen Flotte,” *Vorwärts*, Nr.215, 13.9.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170. The *Vorwärts* is published since 1876 and is the central newspaper of Social Democracy in Germany.

events of the war.⁷⁹

The general image of the Russian soldier was depicted as bad⁸⁰, especially with regard to the military education of the officers⁸¹ as well as the military support with food.⁸² Despite this bad initial position, the tsar declared that he was willing to fight against Japan, no matter how many soldiers died and no matter how long the war might last.⁸³ However, the number of victims increased, especially as a consequence of modern warfare. Reports from the battlefields were brought to the German public⁸⁴ and the observing officers made it very clear: “it is not a war that is waged now, this is a slaughter.”⁸⁵ After more and more lost battles, the destiny of the Russian army seemed inevitable⁸⁶ and the last Russian offensive came too late again.⁸⁷ The largest battle in world history so far, the Battle of Mukden, finally underlined the inequality of the Russian and Japanese armies.⁸⁸

While the Russians seemed to hope for an end of Japanese abilities, the German press was not sure about a fast peace and underlined, why Russia had lost: Because it had underestimated

⁷⁹ “Das japanische Pferd, der Besieger Rußlands,” *Rheinische Volkszeitung*, Nr.200, 30.8.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170. The *Rheinische Volkszeitung* was a regional newspaper, published in Wiesbaden.

⁸⁰ “Das japanische Pferd, der Besieger Rußlands,” *Rheinische Volkszeitung*, Nr.200, 30.8.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸¹ “Die Zustände in der russischen Armee,” *Vossische Zeitung*, Nr.248, 27.5.1905, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸² “Russische Konserven,” *Schlesische Zeitung*, Nr.813, 18.11.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸³ “Rußlands Entschluss zur Durchführung des Krieges,” *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, Nr.430, 13.9.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸⁴ E.g. “Erstürmung des 203-Meter-Hügels vor Port Arthur,” *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, Nr. 564, 1.12.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸⁵ “Das Elend der russischen Offiziere,” *Kleines Journal*, Nr.336, 3.12.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸⁶ “Völlige Niederlage des Generals Kuropatkin,” *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, Nr.415, 4.9.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸⁷ *Berliner Tageblatt*, 4.2.1905, BArch R 8034-II/8170.

⁸⁸ *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 10.3.1905, *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 10.3.1905, *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 11.3.1905, BArch R 8034-II/8170; *Vossische Zeitung*, 11.3.1905, „Die größte Schlacht der Weltgeschichte“, BArch R 8034-II/8170. All mentioned newspapers were published in Berlin and were sold to different audiences.

Japan.⁸⁹ It seems to be ironic that the Germans suffered the same failure with regard to Russia some years later.

Germany was not directly participating in the Russo-Japanese War; however, the international consequences should be important for the European country as well.⁹⁰ For Europe, it was of high importance as to how the Russian Empire reacted in the aftermath of the war and how the result of the events in East Asia would influence the European theater. Would Russia return as a European great power, willing to broaden its influence on the Balkans?⁹¹ It returned, however, it never recovered from the loss of its image as an unstoppable military giant and when the Germans went to war in 1914, they would think of the Russo-Japanese War rather than the military reforms the Tsarist Empire had undergone during the last years.

Conclusion

Historians always mention that the European powers had learned too little from the battles that were waged during the Russo-Japanese War with regard to the outbreak as well as the tactics of the Great War.⁹² It was definitely a failure to underestimate the Russian power in 1914 as the Russians had underestimated the Japanese a decade before. The mobilization of the Tsarist soldiers was not as slow as the German general staff would have expected it to be. With regard to this factor, the military planners repeated the mistakes of their Russian colleagues. However, they also believed that a frontal assault, backed by sufficient spirit of the soldiers, could achieve something that seemed to be impossible.

⁸⁹ “Der japanische Bauer und der Krieg,“ *Bayrische Rundschau*, Nr.208, 6.9.1904, BArch R 8034-II/8170. The newspaper is a regional one, which is published since 1903 in the region of Kulmbach, Bavaria.

⁹⁰ Peters, *Der Ostasiatische Krieg*, 349.

⁹¹ Peters, *Friede*, 369.

⁹² David McDonald, “Tsushima's Echoes: Asian Defeat and Tsarist Foreign Policy,“ in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero* Vol. 1, ed. John W. Steinberg et al., *History of Warfare* Vol. 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 560; James D. Sisemore, “The Russo-Japanese War, Lessons not Learned“ (M.A. thesis U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2003), 1.

With regard to all these factors, the European powers in general, and Germany in particular, did not learn enough from the events in East Asia. It might be speculated as to why. Was it too far away to be seen as a real war? Was it too exotic to be taken seriously? Or was European arrogance responsible for the underestimation? These questions cannot be answered from this chapter. What can be answered is the question of what Russia had lost due to their defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. It had lost its threat image. The Tsarist Empire was no longer respected for its military might, because even little Japan was able to beat the giant. Therefore, everyone else should be able to as well. This mistaken belief cost the lives of many innocent men, women, and children all around the globe.

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