

Was the Russo-Japanese War World War Zero?

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As with any war in history, the Russo-Japanese War enjoys its share of myths and legends that range from Admiral Alekseev's barber being a Japanese spy to the saga of the Baltic Fleet becoming the "fleet that had to die." Perhaps because of such legends, or perhaps because World War I broke out less than a decade after the Russo-Japanese War formally ended with the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, the centennial anniversary of Japan's stunning victory witnessed a resurgence in Russo-Japanese War studies. Scholars from around the world responded to this date by convening various seminars, workshops, and conferences to reopen the study of a conflict that, while never completely forgotten, was largely overlooked after World War I. Always considered a bilateral engagement between two military powers, which it was in its most basic sense, the aim of all of these scholarly endeavors was to broaden our understanding of not only the war but also its global impact. The three following articles represent the work of one of the first such intellectual endeavors, a conference on "Re-imagining Culture in the Russo-Japanese War" that was held at Birkbeck College in London in March 2004.¹ By addressing the impact of the conflict on society from its art and literature to the public reaction to the war as it progressed, Naoko Shimazu, Rosamund Bartlett, and David Crowley exhibit the depth of engagement that existed at every level of the civil-military nexus. Cultural history, therefore, provides a deeper understanding of the impact of conflict on the societies that military establishments absolutely depended on especially at the time of the Russo-Japanese War.

The beginning of the twentieth century became synonymous with the dawn of a new age based on a belief in hope and human progress because of the accomplishments of industrialization and the accompanying maturing of some form of participatory government that could be held responsible to the body politic. Citizens/subjects of nations/empires

¹Other meetings held included a two-day conference held in Haifa in 2001 and a five-day conference jointly held in Jerusalem and Haifa in 2003. The 2003 winter seminar of the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan, focused on the Russo-Japanese War. Formal seminars and symposiums held in 2005 included the "Centenary International Symposium on the Russo-Japanese War and Portsmouth Peace Treaty," held at Nichinan City, Miyazaki, Japan, May 19–22, 2005, "World War 0: Reappraising the War of 1904–05," held at Keio University in Tokyo, May 23–26, 2005, "Portsmouth and its Legacies: An International Conference Commemorating the Centennial of the Russo-Japanese Peace Treaty of 1905," held at Dartmouth College, September 8–10, 2005, and "Managing Asymmetrical Alliance: The Portsmouth Treaty Then and Now," held at the Wentworth Hotel in Portsmouth, NH, November 3–5, 2005. All of these conferences are supposed to produce separate publications in the near future.

expected greater accountability from their governments especially during periods of conflict because of the direct impact war had on their lives. With these broad themes in mind, the editorial team behind the research project that I coedited decided to entitle its work *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective, "World War Zero."* "World War Zero" sparked controversy wherever we presented the term and, ultimately, this controversy appeared in the reviews of volume 1.² In the pages of this esteemed journal, William C. Fuller debunked the notion of the Russo-Japanese War being anything other than a regional conflict.³ But, in the *Slavic Review*, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa agreed with the idea that the Russo-Japanese War could be considered World War Zero because of the newly developed capacity of industrialized powers to wage war on an unprecedented scale.⁴ This debate underscores the significance of the Russo-Japanese War to twentieth-century history in that a fundamental issue emerges: was the conflict that occurred between Russia and Japan a precursor to World War I and, as such, an early example of the type of conflicts that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century?

At the root of this question rests the issue of why the Russo-Japanese War occurred at all. Not surprisingly, the war was a product of its time. Both Russia and Japan had imperial ambitions over the territories where they fought—Manchuria and Korea. For the Russians, expansion into Manchuria was the continuation of a policy that can be traced as far back as the reign of Ivan the Terrible or to as recently as the nineteenth-century Imperial government's colonial policy. In the course of building an empire through Central Asia and into the Far East, the gulf between the tsar and Russian society widened and became irreparably compromised, but war in 1904 was greeted with an outburst of Patriotic support! Nicholas II, who could least afford to ignore the growing chasm between his autocracy and Russian society, squandered this support through his reckless system of governance. His inability to firmly control the empire's policy of expansion into the Far East aptly demonstrated why everyone from peasants to educated society to aristocrats lost confidence in their tsar, particularly after he foolishly stumbled into conflict with Japan. As a result, studies that focus on late Imperial culture help readers better understand both the patriotism that led to outburst of support upon the outbreak of war and the dissent that culminated in the Revolution of 1905.

Japan's rise to prominence among nations, however, had been nothing short of spectacular. Without an industrial revolution or any form of a participatory political franchise when Commodore Perry's great black fleet arrived in Edo Bay on July 8, 1853, Japan found itself vulnerable to the power politics of the Great Powers at the apex of the Age of Imperialism. From this point on, the Japanese, understanding the confrontational politics of the Western world, sought to maintain their autonomy by evading the grasp of imperialism and colonialism. The 1868 Meiji restoration became the Japanese response to the challenges of the modern world. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century Japan as a

²The concept of World War Zero was first presented in John W. Steinberg et al., eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 2005); and David Wolff et al., eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, vol. 2 (Leiden, 2007). The articles published in these volumes were, for the most part, presented at the conference held at Keio University in May 2005. The participants who presented papers at the symposium held at Miyazaki, also in May 2005, are in the process of publishing their two-volume collection, of which the first volume has appeared at the time of this writing. See Rotem Kowner et al., eds., *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–05: Centennial Perspectives*, vol. 1 (Kent, England, 2007).

³*Russian Review* 65 (October 2006): 705–7.

⁴*Slavic Review* 65 (Winter 2006): 824–25.

nation embraced all of the scientific, technical, and political know-how of the West that their leaders deemed appropriate. When they defeated the Chinese in the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese believed they had made a convincing case to be accepted as *the* great power in Asia. Even after being manhandled by Great Power politics in the aftermath of the treaty of Shimonoseki, the Japanese maintained their convictions about their perceived place in the world: They were going to have their own empire and not become a colonial possession of a Western power. Studies of Japanese culture, therefore, reveal the ethos of a rising nation determined to assert its place in the international community.

Studies that focus on the impact of the Russo-Japanese War on the culture of both nations as well as other regions of the world, provide revealing views of how this conflict contributed to the development of early twentieth century global society. And the three articles here help to contextualize the war and highlight its enduring significance.⁵ To accept the notion of the Russo-Japanese War as World War Zero, it must also be seen as a “total war,” a twentieth-century phenomenon that affects every aspect of a nation’s economic, cultural, and political life, and, once hostilities ceased, had a transforming impact on the politics and societies of both belligerents. The idea of “total war,” of course, is not new to the history of conflict. It can be dated back at least to the age of the French Revolution and Napoleon, if not even further back in history to the Thirty Years War and Gustavus Adolphus’s military revolution.⁶ Indeed, the nineteenth century was littered with short wars and confrontations that were related to the larger goals of national unification or imperial expansion. What makes the Russo-Japanese War stand apart from the idea of a short Imperial war in the age of “total war” was a host of factors ranging from the relationship of the front to the rear to the lethal killing fields that became its zone of combat, to the methods used to fund a war in Manchuria on the London, Paris, and New York financial markets. In this regard, the Russo-Japanese War conflict looked more like World War I than anything that had occurred previously, including the recent Spanish-American and Boer wars. With this fact as an essential precedent, appreciating the broad impact of the Russo-Japanese War on the belligerent nationals as well as on the history of the world heightens the understanding of the war not only in military and political but also in social and cultural terms.⁷

From the time it began, military observers, journalists, and analysts (and later on military historians), treated the Russo-Japanese War as a regional conflict that resulted in an unexpected outcome. At first they downplayed the lessons that could be learned from the after-action studies of the war because the war was fought on the other side of the world between a weak great European power and a rising Asian nation. Then, these same lessons became a part of the history of the war whose size, scope, and significance paled in comparison to the carnage of World War I. But the legacy of the war weighed heavily on

⁵It should be noted that of the fifty-three articles published in volumes 1 and 2 of *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective*, eleven examined the impact of the war on “cultural” topics that ranged from Japanese and Russian perceptions of each other to the influence of the war on the art and literature of each nation.

⁶While the bibliography is immense, see, for example, William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Forces, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago, 1982). More specifically see R. Chickering, “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept,” in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, ed. Manfred F. Boemeke et al. (Washington, DC, 1999), 13–28; and J. Y. Guiomar, *L’invention de la guerre totale* (Paris, 2004).

⁷An earlier effort to note the cultural impact of the war should be noted here. See David Wells and Sandra Wilson, eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Cultural Perspective, 1904–05* (New York, 1999), 1999.

world history. Even if everyone failed to grasp the immediate lessons to be learned from the new, higher lethality of the twentieth century battlefield, then because of the impact it had on political history, the victory of the Japanese forever transformed the image that people of color, the colonized people of the world, had of their Imperial masters. Japan's victory started them down the road of creating an Asia for Asians while the people of Asia recognized that a new military power had asserted its authority in their region of the world.

The failure of the Great Powers to act on the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War in a timely fashion is testimony to the folly of the politicians and nations during the *Belle Epoch*. In military terms, all of the belligerents combined mobilized over 2.5 million men and armed them with sophisticated weapons that were the product of late nineteenth century industrial production. Not only were the standards of these weapons superior to any previously used in the history of warfare, but they also could be made available to military establishments in numbers greater than ever before. This alone required the management of resources to a degree unprecedented in the history of the civil-military matrix. It revealed the need for professional management on every level from the acquisition and production of raw materials and equipment to the recruitment, training, supply, and command of soldiers. By necessity the requirements of this "modern" battlefield forged a relationship between the military front and civilian rear closer than anyone had considered possible at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In fact, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the marvels of the Industrial Revolution had pitched warfare to a higher level; to wage war necessitated a firm relationship between the government, industry, and the rest of the economy.

The early twentieth-century battlefield proved to be far more lethal than ever before. This heightened killing power was a direct result of the development of modern armaments, ranging from rapid firing artillery to machine guns and more accurate carbines. Most army commanders envisioned using these weapon systems to dominate the battlefield on an operational and tactical level as Moltke had accomplished at Sedan. What they got in 1904–5 was something the strategic planners had not envisioned: prolonged engagements that lasted for days across large-scale (in geographic terms) battlefields; engagements that, in the end, produced not decisive victory, but rather massive casualties. The revolution in military armaments also transformed the capabilities of navies. With the construction of iron-clad, steam-driven ships that had large-caliber guns and heavy armaments, the immediate precursors to the H.M.S. *Dreadnought*, the navies of the Great Powers believed they had the capabilities to fight a decisive battle in Mahanian terms, one that would culminate with the victorious power dominating the sea. Whether it was through the introduction and development of naval mines and torpedoes or through greater communication (telegraph) and transportation (railroads) capabilities, science also played a decisive role in restructuring battlefields in the twentieth century. Be it on the land or on the sea, greatly enhanced twentieth century military capabilities first appeared on the Liaodung peninsula and in the Yellow Sea, the theater of operations of the Russo-Japanese War.

The actual military engagements of the Russo-Japanese War, however, are not what allow us to refer to the conflict as World War Zero. The Manchurian war of maneuver that started with the Japanese invasion of Korea on February 9, 1904, and effectively concluded approximately one year later with the battle of Mukden: the surprise attack on and siege of Port Arthur; the Battle of Tsushima—all of these events did occur, after all, within a confined region of the world. (Ironically, the war was fought in China and Korea, two neutral countries who found themselves embroiled in a conflict between imperial powers.) What makes this war different from the German Wars of Unification or the more recent Spanish-American

and Boer wars was the scope of international involvement that occurred during or after the conflict.

While the international community strove to maintain neutrality throughout the war, all of the European powers were implicated in one fashion or another because of treaty obligations to either Russia or Japan. No event made this clearer than the saga of Russia's Baltic Fleet, soon to be known as the 2nd Pacific Squadron as it plodded its way out of the Baltic and North Seas, not to neglect the incident in the English Channel, and then meandered around the globe on its eighteen-thousand-mile trek. The progress of this fleet, including the efforts to keep it in fuel and other provisions, made it a *cause célèbre* in the press and for international readers. More to the point, however, was how each side managed to finance the war. Be it through French loans to Russia or loans to Japan from a syndicate of British and/or American bankers, the belligerent nations needed to reach outside of their own resources to finance this conflict. The demands of the industrialized battlefield had made the cost of war skyrocket. Warring nations in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War were going to have to develop credit lines to finance future conflict. This opened the door for bankers to have an impact on international events. The Americans, led by Jacob H. Schiff, decided to support the Japanese in response to Russia's persecution of their Jews. And when this same syndicate, using its own intelligence-gathering capabilities, understood that the Japanese had run out of men after the Battle of Mukden (February/March), it cut off loans to Japan and effectively ended that country's capability to wage war on land.

An even more poignant testament to the global implications of the war is how it ended. While the Russian army and navy had lost all of their significant battles, after Mukden the Japanese could only wait for the tsar to decide when he was going to call it quits. Nicholas II, after all, had a second fleet churning up the seas as it sailed to the Far East and, while it took from February 1904 until May 1905 to accomplish the task of reinforcing his armies in Manchuria because of the limitation of the Trans-Siberian railway, by the spring of 1905 the Imperial Russian forces had a sizable numerical advantage over the Japanese in Manchuria. But the reliability of this force was questionable because of the 1905 Revolution and the mutiny that had spread throughout Russia's armed forces, so Nicholas II waited for the outcome of the naval battle before determining his next move. Ironically, the Battle of Tsushima proved to be the major naval engagement between early twentieth-century battleships and its decisive outcome, combined with the serious threat of domestic revolution, forced Nicholas II to the peace table. The tsar refused to acknowledge defeat but he also could no longer afford to fight because of domestic concerns. And as a result, he insisted that he would not pay any indemnities, which set the stage for the peace negotiations that occurred in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in September, 1905.

But why would a war fought in two neutral Asian countries between a European Great Power and an emerging Japan be resolved in the United States? Of course, the role of President Theodore Roosevelt, who won the Nobel Prize for his efforts, can not be underestimated in evaluating a response to the role of the United States in the peacemaking (or is it war termination?) that occurred in 1905. But the events at Portsmouth clearly marked another significant step in the rise of the United States as a Pacific power. After courting the Japanese, Roosevelt's decided to support the tsar's refusal to pay indemnities, a move that policymakers in Tokyo interpreted as signifying that the United States had more than a passing interest in Asian affairs. Indeed, the argument can be made that the conduct of the United States during the treaty negotiations that ended the Russo-Japanese

War not only contributed to the broader recognition of its growing role in the Pacific, but also started U.S. and Japanese policymakers down the road that resulted in Pearl Harbor and culminated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Contributing to this growing and new international system was the emergence of such transnational and nongovernmental organizations as the Red Cross. While not born out of the Russo-Japanese War, the Red Cross did make its presence felt in the region of conflict. Because this war was fought on neutral territory, the belligerents did not consider themselves responsible for the displaced people who became victims of their conflict. After all, Chinese and Korean people were not subjects of the Russian or Japanese emperor. With the emergence of a massive refugee problem, the Chinese government in particular needed assistance. But so did both of the belligerents. Simply put, no one anticipated the tens of thousands of deaths and even more wounded that occurred during the conflict thanks to modern weapons, and as a result, neither the Russians nor the Japanese had the medical facilities to cope with the scale of this human catastrophe. In this situation, nongovernmental agencies that transcended nations and regions found a place where they were needed and this role, first defined during the Russo-Japanese War, would continue throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Their existence symbolized the beginning of the melting of civilizations through the identity of common problems and challenges, and they would become more necessary as the twentieth century progressed.

Along with the emergence of nongovernmental organizations, a new Asia/Pacific regional order also grew out of this conflict. Japan, as the rising Asian power, had demonstrated that its military establishment could tangle with a European Great Power and emerge victorious. Its military victory, combined with its defeat of China in the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War, revealed not only the political and economic weakness of the Manchu dynasty, but also Japan's willingness and readiness to take an active and leading role in Asian affairs. Such Japanese activism made a widespread contribution to emerging nationalism across the region. Aggravating persistent European imperial encroachment across Asia was the ever-growing strength of the United States which represented a developing threat to the autonomy of the region. U.S.-Japanese relations would go through a period of rapprochement in the early twentieth century, but by the Washington Naval Conference of 1922, few in Japan believed that the United States meant anything positive for the future of Asia. By the 1930s, the presence of the United States in Asian affairs, combined with the turmoil in China and the collapse of the Western economic order, resulted in Japan's aggressive action in China and the rhetoric that ultimately culminated in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere. While there were many steps in-between, the argument can be made that Japan's road to World War II began not when it won the Russo-Japanese War, but when it lost the peace.⁸

The role of cultural history in this scenario strengthens the link between the Russo-Japanese War and the idea of "World War Zero." In Naoko Shimazu's article, "Conflicting Emotions: Japanese Society at War 1904–5," readers are provided with a rare and unique glimpse of how Japanese society not only responded to the war, but also how it reacted to the peace. Most Western readers will read for the first time that the Japanese learned at Portsmouth that you can win a war and still lose the peace. Rosamund Bartlett's "The Russo-Japanese War in Russian Cultural Consciousness" first places the war in the context

⁸On the rise of nongovernmental agencies and Asian nationalism/regionalism see Akira Iriye's introduction to Wolff et. al., *Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective* 2:1–13.

of Russia's eastward colonial expansion and then reveals what was to become a familiar pattern to late Imperial history: the initial response of Russian society to the midnight attack on the fleet at Port Arthur was one of outrage followed by loyal patriotic support. Then, as the tide of battle turned so did support throughout Russian society. The third article, David Crowley's "Looking for Poland in Japan: Polish Art World Responses to the Russo-Japanese War" engages with the impact of the war from the viewpoint of nonbelligerents, in this case the long-suffering Poles. For Poles, deprived of political autonomy, cultural statements whether in art or literature were political statements. Not surprisingly, Poles of the early twentieth century dreamed of nothing less than the collapse of the Russian Empire to achieve their own political aspirations. Just like the colonized people of the Far East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, the Poles hoped that Russia's defeat in the Far East meant their liberation from the tsar's yoke was imminent. Thanks to tsarist censors, however, one of the few places these hopes could be expressed was in the work of Polish artists.

In May 1905 the Japanese had fought the Russians to a stalemate in a hotly contested Manchurian campaign, laid siege to and conquered Port Arthur, and achieved total victory on the sea. To fight this conflict both sides had to mobilize large parts of their military, which in turn required extensive economic support, from the production of equipment to the transportation of everything from soldiers to the arms, munitions, and supplies they needed to prevail on the battlefield. Neither side could sustain this military effort without domestic support and foreign financing. And studies such as the three that follow, when they focus on "cultural" topics as wood-block prints, the popular press, literature, or art rather than on "military" or "strategic" topics, provide us with crucial insights into a critical early twentieth-century issue; in an age of growing political participation in national life, neither tsars nor emperors could disregard society's reaction to their policies. Analyzing cultural markers reveals how each society responded to a "modern" conflict. Be it the Revolution of 1905 or the Hibiya riots in Tokyo, the tsar and the emperor, along with the educated elements of both societies, had to take note of how the war had destabilized both nations, socially, economically, and in the case of Russia, politically.

The Russo-Japanese War, therefore, had all of the elements that historians have discerned in World War I. Its origins were linked to the imperial expansion of the European powers, its battlefields were stocked with the weapons and munitions of the industrial revolution, and neither the civilian nor the military leadership was prepared for the war that actually occurred in Manchuria. When hostilities ceased, both countries faced dire financial and political consequences and nongovernmental agencies were needed to aid victims and restore a semblance of stability to the region where the conflict was fought. Moreover, the peacemaking process at Portsmouth, like the events that would occur at Versailles in 1919, would leave as many issues unresolved as solved, thereby planting the seeds for future conflict. Historians may argue among themselves over the viability of the Russo-Japanese War as World War Zero, and the arguments both pro and con will remain persuasive. What can not be questioned, however, is that the Russo-Japanese War was a modern twentieth-century conflict that offers much evidence revealing the direction in which the policies of the Great Powers, both internal and external, were taking the rest of the world. Sadly for the development and progress of modern civilization, little good can be said for the culmination of these policies since they had in fact been the introduction to the century of total conflict, the twentieth century.