

Russo-Japanese War

By [Siobhan Peeling](#)

Summary

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, caused by Russian and Japanese expansionism in the Far East, inflicted humiliating defeats on Russia at land and sea. The war contributed to domestic unrest in both countries, catalysing the revolution of 1905 in Russia. The rise of Japan also sent reverberations across the world.

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Causes

The war between [Russia](#) and [Japan](#) was provoked by strategic issues, the international context and personal factors. Russian expansionism and rapid Japanese military growth and modernisation generated clashes over military, political and commercial interests in East Asia. In the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Japan eliminated Chinese power in [Korea](#) and won control over the Liaotung Peninsula in Manchuria. An alliance of Russia, [France](#) and [Germany](#), however, pressured Japan to give back the peninsula in return for increased reparations. Tensions increased as Russia founded the Russo-Korean Bank, demanded a twenty-five-year lease from [China](#) of the Liaotung Peninsula for itself and moved troops into Manchuria in response to the Boxer Uprising.

Furthermore, in 1897 Russia had embarked on [railway](#) building on Chinese territory to open it up to commercial exploitation. The potential of the railway as an instrument of economic control, colonisation and military policy caused alarm among Japanese leaders. In 1902, Japan signed a treaty with [Britain](#) that secured British intervention should any country join Russia in a war against Japan, effectively removing the threat of other European powers'

involvement if hostilities erupted. Influential individuals disrupted attempts at conciliation. The Russian viceroy for the Far East, [Yevgeni Ivanovich Alekseyev \(1843-1917\)](#), for example, encouraged the Tsar to strengthen his Far East forces when they were supposed to be withdrawing from Manchuria. As negotiations stalled, on the night of 8-9 February 1904 Japanese destroyers launched a surprise attack on Russian warships at Port Arthur in Manchuria and Chemulpo (Inchon) in Korea. On 10 February 1904, after the initial assaults had taken place, Japan declared war.

Military Conflict

The War at Sea

Japanese naval manoeuvres at Port Arthur beginning in February 1904 failed to block the harbour, but largely confined the Russian squadron to the port. On 13 April 1904, a [mine](#) sunk the Russian flagship Petropavlovsk in the harbour, taking with it Vice-Admiral [Stepan Osipovich Makarov \(1848-1904\)](#) and 662 crew members. Japanese forces pursued the remaining Russian ships, under the command of Admiral [Vil'gel'm Karlovich Vitgeft \(1847-1904\)](#), when they broke out to join with cruisers at Vladivostok. The ensuing Battle of the Yellow Sea was a significant defeat for Russia. Admiral Vitgeft was killed and no Russian ships succeeded in reaching Vladivostok. Some were interned in foreign ports, one destroyer was sunk and another captured. The rest of the squadron was forced back to Port Arthur. In December 1904 all but one of the Russian battleships still anchored there were sunk by Japanese shelling. The final large-scale encounter of the war was the Battle of Tsushima between the fleet of Admiral [Heihachiro Togo \(1848-1934\)](#) and the 2nd Pacific Squadron led by Rear-Admiral [Zinovii Petrovich Rozhstvenskii \(1848-1909\)](#). The newly formed 2nd Pacific Squadron had left the Baltic in October 1904. On the way it caused a diplomatic incident at Dogger Bank by firing on English trawlers mistaken for Japanese torpedo boats. By the time the fleet approached Japan in May 1905 it was weakened by problems with fuelling, mutiny and tropical disease. The Japanese fleet routed the squadron and captured the badly injured Rozhstvenskii. Thousands of Russians were killed, taken prisoner to Japan or interned in [neutral](#) countries, while Japan lost just three torpedo boats and 700 men killed or wounded.

The War on Land

At the end of April 1904, the first major land battle, the Battle of the Yalu River, took place on the boundary between Korea and Manchuria. It resulted in Russian retreat, their exclusion from Korea and the surrender of part of the Russian army. A few days later, the Japanese 2nd Army was able to land unopposed on the Liaotung Peninsula, north of Port Arthur. At the

Battle of Nanshan, the 2nd Army drove the Russians to abandon the commercial port of Dalny and the outer defences of Port Arthur despite heavy casualties. From the end of July 1904, Japanese forces besieged Port Arthur's fortress town, accepting the surrender of the garrison on 2 January 1905. In the meantime, in 1904 Japanese divisions had advanced into Manchuria, driving back the much larger Russian army of General [Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin \(1848-1925\)](#) at Liaoyang, albeit with greater losses, and inflicting heavy casualties on the Russians at the Battle of Sha-Ho. The Russian offensive at San-de-pu in January 1905 ended in failure. Reinforcements arrived on both sides and in February and March 1905, in the town of Mukden, the armies fought the longest land battle of modern history to that point. The battle cost both sides almost a third of their forces as Japanese troops outflanked those of Kuropatkin and took the town.

Peace Settlement

Japan had won clear victories at Mukden and Tsushima; however, Japanese forces were exhausted, low on ammunition and the country's economy was strained. Russia could draw on more substantial reinforcements than Japan, but the Tsar was preoccupied with domestic unrest. In August 1905, peace negotiations began in the United States. The Treaty of Portsmouth signed in September 1905 recognised Japanese rights in Korea and ceded Port Arthur, Dalny and the adjacent territory to Japan, along with control over the South Manchurian Railway. It provided for Russian evacuation from Manchuria. The [Japanese government's](#) demands for financial reparations were not granted, however, and the island of Sakhalin, seized by Japan at the end of the war, was divided between the two powers.

Consequences and Significance

The war took a bitter toll on each side, contributing to domestic unrest in both countries. In Japan, many felt the peace settlement cheated them of the fruits of victory. Riots lasted for days and the authorities instituted [martial law](#). In Russia, news of defeat seemed to justify the political opposition's criticism of the autocratic regime's incompetency. Discontent at military humiliation and economic disruption, compounded by the domestic absence of the troops, relied upon by the regime to quell domestic protest, heightened social unrest. Waves of oppositional activity culminated in the [Revolution of 1905](#), in which protests by liberals, socialists, workers, peasants, ethnic minorities and even some soldiers and sailors, for example on the Black Sea fleet's battleship Potemkin, forced the Tsar to grant [Russia's first parliament](#).

The shame of defeat also prompted long-delayed military reform to bring Russia's capability in line with her Great Power status, a programme interrupted by the outbreak of the First

World War. In addition, military humiliation contributed to currents of [nationalism](#) and [pan-Slavism](#) that found release in the eruption of war in 1914. There was also a significant international dimension to the Russo-Japanese war. Its global reverberations have led some scholars to term it “World War Zero.”¹ It changed the balance of power in East Asia, elevated Japan to potential inclusion in the ranks of the Great Powers and inspired anti-[imperialists](#) across Asia. The victory of an Asiatic country over a European power shattered illusions in the west and the general staffs of European and American militaries pored over reports sent back by their observers. Unfortunately, erroneous inferences were often drawn, for example that future warfare would be short, mobile and won by spirited offensives, lessons which had to be quickly unlearned as the First World War unfolded.

Siobhan Peeling, University of Nottingham

Notes

1. Wolff, David et al. (eds.): *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. Volume II World War Zero*, Leiden 2007, p. xiii. ↑

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External Links

- [Ono, Giichi: War and Armament Expenditures of Japan, New York 1922 \(Internet Archive\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Silent Film - Sergei M. Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin," 1925 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video-Clip\)](#)
- [Story, Douglas: The Campaign with Kuropatkin, 1904 \(Internet Archive\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The Anglo-Japanese Alliance / 日英同盟, 30 January 1902, in both languages \(Japan Center for Asian Historical Records\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Treaty of Portsmouth, in English and Japanese \(Japan Center for Asian Historical Records\) \(Article\)](#)

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