

The Russo-Japanese War in Russian and Japanese Public Opinion and Historical Research

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Abstract This research is aimed to analyze the perception of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 and its consequences for Russian and Japanese public opinion and research. During the study it proved out that the cultural differences, mutual misunderstandings, and wrong interpretation of each other's intentions could lead to unresolvable deadlocks, which affect political, economical and cultural relations. Besides, the interpretations of this conflict by officials and its vision by common people have a great impact on the outcome of the war and are also subject of this study. Finally, this research focuses on the territorial issue, which has been dominating the Russo-Japanese relations for centuries and continues to block any attempts of rapprochement on political and in many cases on economical levels.

Key words: Russo-Japanese War, territorial issue, public opinion, Far East.

"Again war. Again sufferings, necessary to nobody, utterly uncalled for; again fraud, again the universal stupefaction and brutalization of men."

Leo Tolstoy

1. General outlook on the territorial issue

Two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia's political, economic as well as ideological future remains uncertain, and the historical question of Russia's identity in the world gathers growing importance. As 100 years ago the discussions of Russia's being a western or eastern country are continuing to interest scholars and common people. Japan is another important world power, whose development was more constant, rapid, and less affected by foreign invasions. Despite huge cultural and historical discrepancies, their growth is characterized by some important similarities, very well analyzed by Cyril E. Black in his book "The modernization of Japan and Russia: comparative analysis", which reveals political, economic and social features in common. Nevertheless, Russia and Japan still have some crucial unresolved problems regarding the "Northern territories", which are sensitive to both populations and are considered to be a question of "national pride" in both countries and an important card in the political game but mainly (which is rarely articulated by both governments) the economic worth of the sea, washing these territories with its endless fish resources so attractive to all. In a book, written by a group of Japanese historians of the beginning of XXth century they claim that Russians have failed in colonization of Saghalien (Sakhalin) island and the Northern territories, further stating that "The Japanese and the Japanese alone have in their power to get the utmost use of the natural resources of the island", considering the possibility of making the Okhotsk sea a "Japanese lake" and taking the trade of Kamchatka in their hands. Nevertheless they conclude in the propaganda key that Japanese "value Saghalien for sentimental more than for any other reasons", comparing it to Alsace-Lorraine for a "patriotic" Frenchman (Maruya, 1904, 256). In fact vast territories of Russia, poor administration and undeveloped transportation system delayed the economic growth and repopulation of the island. Therefore, before the Soviet period it remained a backward province of the enormous Russian Empire. Unfortunately, even now country's officials keep forgetting about people actually inhabiting these territories, still little have been done for the economic progress of these lands, their huge distance from the central government conditioned their destiny in both positive and negative way: giving them relative freedom and depriving them from most technological achievements and attention from the Russian government.

This situation affects both Japan and Russia's foreign policies and the question of any Russo-Japanese conflict and their relations cannot be studied outside the territorial issue. Lack of understanding and limited personal interactions affect also populations' perception of each other: Japanese still consider Russia and Russians as "big and aggressive", trying to offend small innocent Japan, while Russians see their territorial demands as an attempt to invade Russian Far East (though these fears are rather small and less relevant in comparison to the fear of the rapid growth of Chinese

population and its economic progress). In this context seems interesting to analyze the origin of these misunderstandings, which lies in history, culture and wrong interpretations of each other's intentions, which became dramatically evident during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 but had started long before then¹.

2. Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 and its literary and historical interpretations

Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 is an event both of high importance and of a very controversial interpretation for modern Russian historians as well as their Soviet predecessors.

This conflict was traditionally ignored by Soviet and Russian scholars as a "shameful" page of Russian history. Difficulty in interpretation of economic, political and social impacts of these events on Russia and its history had led to the complete ignoring of Russo-Japanese war at all levels either in research or in school program, where it is usually mentioned briefly in the list of historical dates in the end of a manual. At the same time, the events of the War were very romanticized by various authors in their novels and even poems dedicated to that period, such as "Port-Arthur", a novel by Aleksandr Stepanov, "Tsushima", by Aleksey Novikov-Priboy, "Servitude: A tragedy of years ago", by Valentin Pikul. These novels naturally deal with personal tragedies and emotions rather than serious historical analysis. One can observe even stronger tendency to present the war in a romantic and heroic light in the post-war Japanese literature as it made part of an important state propaganda of Shintoism ideology, which intended superiority of the Japanese nation and the divine origin of the Emperor. Japanese novelists Shiba Ryotaro², author of "*Saka no Ue no Kumo*", the story of the destruction of the Baltic fleet during the Russo-Japanese War, combined in his work historical fact and literary fiction to "restore" the gaps in the Japanese official military history of the campaigns. Surely the Japanese high command's decision to perpetuate myths about Japan's wartime performance contributed to the historical "gaps" and that subject merits further treatment. One of historians working on the problem was Sandra Wilson, a prominent American historian, her research on *The Russo-Japanese War in Cultural Perspective 1904-05* offers an excellent analysis of the sharply divergent reactions to the war of the Japanese establishment and marginalized ideologues of the extreme right- and left-wing persuasions. She notes that "Later Japanese reconstructions of the total conflict ignored such unpleasant realities as that the government consciously supported the metamorphosis of a costly and divisive struggle into 'Japan's Good War' by manufacturing a series of national and military myths that endured through World War II" (Wells, Wilson, 1999, 53).

In Russia it is possible to point out two periods of a relatively high scientific interest to this topic from the part of scholars: the period right after the War, analyzed by its witnesses and contemporaries, such as historical and critical comments of General Kuropatkin, one of the main figures of the events or "The price of blood" diary of Commander Vladimir Semenov, written during the blockage of Port Arthur and the voyage of Admiral Rozhdenstvensky's fleet, the book was translated in most European languages. The second wave of interest occurred in the beginning of XXIst century, 100 years after the Russo-Japanese War and is marked by works of Vitaly Elizariev, Soviet and Russian scholar, who has lived in Saghalien since 1949. In his work "The Russo-Japanese war and its consequences on colonization of Saghalien" he analyzes how the wrong interpretation and falsification of Saghalien and Kuril's history affects perception of many historical facts. Aleksey Shishov devoted many years of research to the topic of the Russo-Japanese relations. In

¹ Sakhalin is a strategically important island in the Far East for Russia as for Japan, belonging nowadays to the Russian Federation. Japanese settlement on Sakhalin island dates to at least to the Edo period. Otomari was established in 1679, and cartographers of the Matsumae marked the island on maps, and named it "Kita-Ezo". Japan unilaterally proclaimed its control over the whole island in 1845, but its claims were ignored by Russia, as it considered itself the first to start colonization of the island. The Treaty of Shimoda of 1855 acknowledged that both Russia and Japan had joint rights of occupation to Sakhalin, without setting a territorial demarcation. As the island became settled and inhabited in the 1860s and 1870s, this ambiguity of the frontier led to increasing friction and quarrels between settlers. Attempts by the Tokugawa Shogunate to purchase the entire island from the Russian Empire failed, and the new Government of the Meiji period was unable to negotiate a division of the island into separate territories. In the St.Petersburg's treaty Japan agreed to give up its claims on Sakhalin in exchange for undisputed ownership of the Kurils (Hawes, 1903, 44). Then, following the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, Japan regained control of Sakhalin Island south of 50° latitude. Japan then took control of the entire island after the Russian Revolution of 1917 but abandoned control of the island in 1924. Finally, at the end of World War II, the Soviet Union took control of the entire island, along with the Kurils and forced the Japanese population to leave.

² Ryōtarō Shiba (司馬 遼太郎 *Shiba Ryōtarō*) born Teiichi Fukuda (福田 定一 *Fukuda Teiichi*, August 7, 1923–February 12, 1996) in Osaka, Japan was a Japanese author best known for his novels about historical events in Japan and on the Northeast Asian sub-continent, including the Russo-Japanese War. He is also known as an outstanding essayist, picturing Japan and its relationship to the rest of the world.

2001 was issued his book "Russia and Japan. The history of conflicts", followed by a book "The unknown pages of the Russo-Japanese War", issued in 2004. In this research he not only analyses the reasons for the conflicts, mentioned above, but raises also the issue of cooperation between the Japanese spies and Russian revolutionary movement, aiming to destruct the country from the inside. It is not much lack of scientific interest as certain indifference of the main part of Russian population to the topic due to the huge distance from the Far East, that make this question understudied in Russia. Despite this relative indifference to the subject by Russian scholars, at the international level some interesting studies have been made, though mostly by American and Japanese historians (Sandra Wilson, David Wells, Koto Hoshino, John Albert White, Cyril E. Black). Japanese historians were also highly engaged in the propaganda of the war before it had started. Thus, Koto Hoshino in his volume "The Mission of Japan and the Russo-Japanese War" along with the message of Japanese nation's superiority, gives some clear-cut reasons (from Japanese point of view) to start war with Russia, he also notes that "Ten years ago China labored under the illusion that Japan was merely aping civilization and suffered an ignominious defeat at her hands in consequence; and it looks as if a similar revelation and fate were now awaiting Russia." and concludes "It comes upon her (Japan's) as a personal and a social duty to fight Russia" (Hoshino, 1904, 31).

3. War propaganda and Peoples' attitude to the war

In Japan, conviction on the necessity of the war was widespread among the population, unhappy with the government slow to react to the unacceptable reinforcement of Russia's economic and political positions in Korea and Manchuria. Koto Hoshino in his work on Japan's mission assumes that "...young and old were all united as one man ready to go forth to battle. The press without any discordant note joined in one universal appeal to arms as the only arbiter of the long continued dispute. All the political parties became loyal supporters of the Government's policy of war. When asked for the war bonds to the amount of yen 100,000,000, the people responded with an offer of yen 450,000,000" (Hoshino, 1904, 50). Of course one can be rather skeptical regarding this blind support from the part of Japanese. So, it seems important to take into consideration the very character of a Japanese person, formed and influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism and Shintoism ideologies. It explains their patience, tolerance, ability to face any difficulty with dignity, which they proved once again to the world after the tsunami and earthquake on March 11th 2011. But it also explains their awe and respect for those, superior to them in the hierarchy. Therefore, the orders from the above are blindly followed not because of fear, but because of deep respect and conviction that this is the right thing to do. Thus, along with impressive financial support, various charity and "work relief" associations were organized in Japan for the war time such as "Tokyo Kobayashi-ku Nursing Place for Young children of those serving in the front", "Osaka Women's Charity Society", "Association for the relief of those serving in the Army and Navy", the "Ladies' Patriotic Society" and so on. All these organizations provided moral as well as financial help to the soldiers and their families, taking care of the children, providing widows and wives with work.

In Russia, the situation was quite different. The country was deeply unstable and shaken by internal troubles and problems. The population was deeply unsatisfied with the political and the economical situation in particular. The war was imposed on the weakened country, the decision to start it had been taken by few ministers in St. Petersburg, who understood nothing or very little about the situation in the Russian Far East to say nothing about the Far East in general. These ministers persuaded Tsar to start the war and insured him in victorious outcome. Even in the face of repeated setbacks, Nicholas II maintained a steadfast confidence that Russia would ultimately triumph. Throughout the first summer of the war, many Russians shared this confidence. An "informant" who was sent to Russia by the Japanese reported in July 1904 that the ruling class of Russia, though experiencing deep humiliation from the defeats, expected final victory. Even a chairman of the Committee of Ministers Sergei Witte, who would emerge as the strongest proponent of peace, initially shared this expectation. In June he talked with the British Ambassador, Sir Charles Hardinge, about the terms that a victorious Russia would impose upon Japan.

Moreover, official newspapers and magazines, which underwent strict censorship and were basically controlled from above, staunchly supported the War despite all the battles lost and pitiable condition of Russian troops. Thus, the biggest magazines gave "encouraging" comments:

"Let us earnestly pray God for those who have laid down their lives for the sacred Fatherland, without doubting for one moment that the Fatherland will give us new sons, equally virtuous, for the further struggle, and will find in them an inexhaustible store of strength for a worthy completion of the work," writes the St. Petersburg "Viedomosti".

Another important Russian journal "Russ" insists that a mature nation will draw no other conclusion from the defeat than that it should continue, develop, and conclude the strife; therefore it concludes that Russia should find new strength; new heroes and the spirit will arise³. Nevertheless the public opinion was already impossible to change. One of the brightest representative of Russian thought and literature and a progressive aristocrat in his book-essay on the Russo-Japanese war "Bethink yourselves", where he strongly criticize a new war and actions of both government, writes: "People enthusiastically admire the martial spirit of the volunteers who, having come unexpectedly upon fifty of their fellow-men, slay all of them, or take possession of a village and slaughter all its population. News about these crimes is reported in pompous telegrams to their chief director, the Tsar, who, in return, sends to his virtuous troops his blessing on the continuation of such deeds". Unlike the intellectuals, common people were rather indifferent to the war and the situation on the front. This proves the so-called "Bloody Sunday", the tragedy that burnt out on 5th of January 1905, in front of the Winter Palace, the residence of Tsar Nicolas II, when a peaceful manifestation of workers, calling for tsar's protection from exploitation from the part of the plant owners was violently shot down. Among the political and economic demands of the workers the Russo-Japanese war was not even mentioned.

The proof of this nonchalance can be observed in a research, carried out by an Italian scholar Antonello Folco Biagini, in which the testimonies of the events confirm country not being ready to conduct the War. Thus, Colonel Paolo Ruggeri Laderchi, Italian attaché in Saint Petersburg at that time, who carried out this mission from the year 1901 to the year 1909 describes carefully all the events of the War as well as the political and military conditions of the parties concerned, paying much attention to the internal conditions of Russia on different stages of the War and right after it. Being in Saint Petersburg, he is well aware of the immense internal problems of the tsarist Russia and until the beginning of war hopes for the possibility of a peaceful solution and predicts a dramatic end for Russia in case of War. He also notes that the very attitude of Russian population to the war with Japan is rather indifferent. "Big, but not immense (disappointments of war), for the reason of the press censorship, an exaggerated national pride, the distance from the battlefield, internal disorders and the very Russian character, in a sense indifferent to anything" (Biagini, 1977, 32). Indeed, Leo Tolstoy in his "Letter to the Russo-Japanese war" heavily criticize the war in general and the hypocrisy of the governments, officials and press from the both side "under cover of patriotism" (Tolstoy, 1904, 126).

4. Conclusion

Nowadays, the interpretation of the war remains controversial. If you ask a common Japanese about the Russo-Japanese War, he would probably have a mixed feeling between the pride for his country and the injustice of the peace terms⁴, while a common Russian person, especially someone from the European part of Russia, would hardly have any opinion or give any comments on the topic. Even though with accelerated development of the Asian countries the question of domination in the region cannot be taken in consideration, the territorial issue continues to be the deadlock of any negotiation between two countries and remains for the generations to come to resolve and to reevaluate.

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³ "Russ" and "Vedomosti" are two major Russian magazines in the beginning of XXth century.

⁴ Witte, Russian foreign minister managed to make peace without cession of Northern Saghalien and without paying any money to Japan, while Japan initially expected to obtain the entire island or 600 million dollars for the return of the northern part.

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