The Russo-Japanese War

The Russo-Japanese War was a brief conflict fought between Russia and Japan alone in 1904 and 1905. It was brought about largely by Nicholas II and his desire to expand the Russian Empire into Asia. The tsar’s determination to incite a war with Japan was overconfident and haughty. He considered the Japanese an easy foe: a feudal nation of barefooted samurai and daimyo that was still emerging from medieval feudalism. But this was a gross underestimation of Japan and its recent development. Unlike Russia, Japan had undergone a period of rapid industrial, technological and military modernisation and growth. Because of this, the war with Japan proved a disaster for Russia’s military and humiliating for the tsar. In less than 18 months Russian ground forces were besieged and defeated, her ageing Baltic Fleet was annihilated at Tsushima and the international prestige of the tsar and his empire lay in tatters. The war also had a devastating impact on Russia’s domestic economy, causing a spike in prices and considerable suffering, particularly among the industrial working class. As Russia plunged into recession and the tsar was exposed as a blundering imperialist, the forces of revolution began to take shape.

Like his father, Nicholas II had long equated imperial expansion with successful leadership. This gave the tsar a strong interest in the acquisition of new territory, particularly in Asia. One priority was increasing Russia’s footprint in China, where the weakening Qing dynasty had been undermined and carved up by European imperialists. Russia already controlled Manchuria, a large area of north-west China, since 1860. In 1898 St Petersburg also gained control of Port Arthur, a harbour town in China around 200 miles east of Peking (now Beijing). Port Arthur was strategically important to the Russian navy because it provided a safe warm-water harbour for its Pacific fleet (Russian port cities like Vladivostok were further north and prone to ice floses). The Russians began constructing a branch from the Trans-Siberian railway through Manchuria to Port Arthur. This improved access allowed Russia to increase its military and economic presence in China, as well as enlarging and better utilising its naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

But this growing Russian presence posed problems for Japan, which had its own strong imperial ambitions in Korea and northern China. The Japanese had controlled the Korean peninsula since the mid-1890s – but as Russian traders moved into Manchuria in numbers they began to encroach on Japanese interests in and around Korea. The Japanese government, supported by its British allies, attempted to short-circuit a territorial dispute and possible war by initiating negotiations with St Petersburg. In essence, Japan promised to recognise Russian autonomy in Manchuria, provided the Russians recognised Japanese control of Korea. But Russian diplomats, confident that Japan would not go to war, attempted to stall the negotiations, before insisting that Japan minimise its military presence in Korea. The negotiations eventually collapsed and in early 1904 the two countries severed diplomatic ties. Bolstered by support from the British, Japan declared war on Russia in February 8th 1904 – three hours after Japanese forces began an assault on Port Arthur.

“At the outset, the government presented the war as a religious struggle, with Serafim as its patron saint. Officers setting out for the front made pilgrimages to Sarov, and parents of soldiers traveled to Sarov to beg the protection of Serafim. Priests blessed the troops with his icon. The grand duchess Elizabeth Fedorovna carried the relics of Serafim with her when she attended to the war casualties in Moscow’s military hospitals.”

Boris Pasternak

Despite the surprise attack, the tsar and most of his advisors felt confident of victory. Japan had only opened its borders to imperial powers in the mid-1800s; while it had made considerable advances in industrialisation and Western military techniques, few believed it could defeat a major European power like Russia. Propaganda of the day ridiculed the Japanese military for its lack of size and lack of firepower, criticism that was partly justified. But Japan also had several advantages. Its small navy was equipped with several British-supplied warships of recent
construction, in comparison to Russia’s larger but more antiquated fleet. Japanese culture was militaristic; its generals and admirals were trained in both ancient and modern Western strategy and tactics; they were promoted on merit and achievement rather than social status. Unlike the Russians, the Japanese respected the enemy and were acutely aware of his strengths and weaknesses.

By August 1904 the Japanese had encircled and laid siege to Port Arthur. More than 100,000 Japanese soldiers surrounded the port city, digging kilometres of trenches and attacking the city’s fortifications with gunfire, artillery, mortars, mines and tunnels. Japanese warships patrolled offshore, blocking Russian ships from leaving the harbour and preventing any chance of Port Arthur being relieved or resupplied by ship. The siege lasted for five months before Port Arthur eventually fell to the Japanese, a week before the ‘Bloody Sunday’ shootings in St Petersburg. Around 6,000 Russian personnel had been killed and around four times this number were wounded; the Japanese took approximately 20,000 Russians as prisoners-of-war. The loss of Port Arthur, Russia’s only military stronghold in the region, was both strategically decisive and politically humiliating.

In September 1904, several weeks into the siege, St Petersburg decided to deploy its Baltic Fleet to Asia, to engage the Japanese and relieve Port Arthur. A total of 28 Russian ships left Europe in October, a voyage that took eight months and was plagued by comic errors. Days after leaving the Baltic, Russian ships fired on British fishing boats in the North Sea, thinking they were Japanese warships in disguise. Three British fishermen were killed; the incident almost drew London into the war. The Russians also shelled one of their own ships by accident, while conducting firing drills off the coast of Africa. Meanwhile the world press published accounts of the Russian Baltic fleet’s progress down the African coast and across the Indian Ocean. The Japanese Imperial Navy was well aware of the fleet’s progress, the number of ships and their likely course; they had months to plan their response. When the Russian ships arrived in the Straits of Tsushima in May 1905 they were ambushed by a smaller but faster Japanese fleet. Almost the entire Russian fleet was either sunk or captured. This disastrous defeat occurred in front of an audience of foreign dignitaries, admirals and generals who came to observe the much anticipated battle between ‘old Europe’ and ‘new Asia’.

The embarrassments of Port Arthur and Tsushima, along with the growing domestic unrest of 1905, forced the tsar’s government to seek peace terms from the Japanese. The Russian peace negotiators were led by the former finance minister Sergei Witte, who managed to secure reasonable terms, given Russia’s weak position. The Treaty of Portsmouth, signed in September 1905, saw Russia cede control of Port Arthur to the Japanese and acknowledge Japan’s authority over Korea. The war not only eroded the credibility of the tsar, it sharpened the impact of an economic recession gripping Russia. The tsar’s government increased military spending by 50 per cent, at a time when production levels and government revenues were both falling. Military-related industries also increased pressure on their workers, which heightened discontents that had been festering for some years.