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## The Russo-Japanese War—Primary Causes of Japanese Success

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## THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

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### Primary Causes of Japanese Success

*Vice Admiral Yoji Koda, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force*

**T**he year 2005 is the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. It also marks the hundredth anniversary of the end of the Russo-Japanese War. For Japan, and for Western powers as well, that war, fought in the Far East in 1904 and 1905, has significance in many respects.

Japan joined the international community in the mid-nineteenth century. That period of history is known as “the age of imperialism” and was characterized by the dominance of Western nations on the world scene. The Japanese, however, because of their eagerness to learn, capacity to adapt, discipline, and frugality, caught up with the West much more quickly than was expected.

As Japan expanded its contacts with foreign nations, however, many problems with those countries emerged. Japanese leaders, though they had little experience in handling diplomatic issues, dealt with these issues in ways that in most cases proved advantageous to Japan. Through the successful settlement of such issues, they raised the nation’s stature in the international community. In the process, the Japanese government developed appropriate strategies for coping with diplomatic problems and showed excellent leadership, firmness, and coordination skills in the execution of those strategies. They also showed a sense of balance in estimating situations. Of all the episodes that vitally affected Japan in that era, the Russo-Japanese War (like the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95) most changed the future of the nation. This article will examine Japanese strategy and policy as well as leadership in the Russo-Japanese War. Japan’s success in the Russo-Japanese War (in implicit contrast to its failure in World War II thirty-five years later) shows that its leaders at the turn of the twentieth century did a much better job than their successors with respect to management of

public opinion, goals, alliances, risk assessment, intelligence, sabotage, interservice cooperation, and negotiated war termination.

#### THE EAST ASIAN SITUATION IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE JAPANESE PERCEPTION

In 1639, Japan closed itself to all Western powers except the Netherlands. In 1854, following the visit of U.S. warships under Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry in 1853, Japan reopened its doors to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. The following year, France was included by the Treaty of Amity. Of these Western powers, Britain and Russia had the strongest impact on the national security policy of the Japanese government, which had just assumed power after the 250-year Tokugawa shogunate. Japanese leaders judged that the British intended to include Japan within their sphere of influence (see map 1).

Similarly, the Japanese leaders were in general unfavorable to Russian policy in the Far East. Russia, defeated in the Crimean War in 1856 by the United Kingdom and France, had lost an opportunity to expand into the Balkan states. In addition, and in spite of the Russian victory in the Russo-Turkish war, the chancellor of unified Prussia, Otto von Bismarck, had wisely and effectively stopped the southward momentum of Russia toward the Balkans, by the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. As a result, Russia turned its foreign policy from southward to eastward, accelerating the speed of its expansion to the east. This switch inevitably generated friction with the British in Asia. The first incident was conflict between Great Britain and Russia in Afghanistan, which ended in political compromise. The compromise practically stopped the momentum of Russia's southern expansion, forcing even greater Russian emphasis on expansion toward the Far East.

Here, a review of the chronology of Russian eastward expansion is necessary. In 1847, Russia established a governor general for eastern Siberia, whose office at Petropavlovsk acted as headquarters for eastern and southern movement in the Far East. The Russians expanded their influence to the mouth of the Amur River, where they established a principal base, Nikolayevsk, substantially increasing their power in the region. But this expansion generated friction with China. The territorial dispute was settled by the treaties of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860). Reconciliation meant, however, the end of further expansion toward China.

At this point, Russia was forced to change its focus to the coastal areas of the Sea of Japan and the Korean Peninsula. The Russians reached the best natural harbor in the area, Vladivostok, in 1860. At about this time Russia tried to force the Japanese off Karafuto (Sakhalin Island). This was accomplished, but at the expense of another territorial dispute. Russia finally acquired Sakhalin Island in exchange for the cession of the Chi-Shima Retto (Kuril Islands) to Japan in 1875.

MAP 1



Furthermore, to Japanese eyes Russia appeared to be trying to annex Hokkaido (the second-largest main island of Japan, only thirty nautical miles south of Sakhalin), by regularly sending Russian ships and people there. The reason was that many ports on Hokkaido did not freeze in winter; that would have made the island an acquisition of immense importance. Russia also noted the strategic importance of the Tsushima Islands, which lie between Japan and the Korean Peninsula. In 1861, only a year after the seizure of Vladivostok, four Russian ships were sent to Tsushima, and a landing force occupied a small port on the island. However, the then-helpless Tokugawa shogunate

government asked for help from the British, who sent two warships from the East India Fleet. This Russian expansion attempt was thus frustrated.

In 1884, Russia established at Khabarovsk a governor general for the Amur region, to be responsible for the development of Far Eastern Russia. A new shipping route was opened between Odessa, on the Black Sea, and Vladivostok the following year. More importantly, in 1891 construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad commenced and the East Asian Squadron was reinforced. These developments triggered serious “Northern concern,” as it was known, among Japanese leadership of both the Tokugawa shogunate and the succeeding Meiji government.<sup>1</sup> This pattern of Russian southward expansion in the Far East was

perceived by a majority of ordinary Japanese as aggression. A cornerstone-laying ceremony for the Trans-Siberian Railroad at Vladivostok in 1891 made a particularly strong impression.

### THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR AND TRIPLE INTERVENTION

The widespread and strong sense of a Russian threat produced in the minds of the Japanese a conviction that it was necessary to establish buffer zones between Japan and Russia. Japan saw the Korean Peninsula and southern Manchuria as potential buffers and therefore made it a policy to prevent these areas from being possessed by Russia. In the early 1890s, however, Japanese leaders estimated that it would be difficult for Russia to seize and permanently occupy them until the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, probably more than ten years in the future.

The Japanese in the 1890s saw China, which under the Qing dynasty had long been a teacher as well as historical rival, as, like Russia, a potential threat.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Japanese saw Qing as capable of attempting to annex Korea, which made the threat urgent. In light of domestic chaos that had existed in Korea since 1884, Japan decided to forestall Qing intervention. In 1894 and 1895 Japan fought the Sino-Japanese War with the goal of thwarting the expansion of Qing into the Korean Peninsula, by way of establishing a buffer zone there. This objective was partially realized by an advantageous settlement at the end of the war. For Russia, however, the outcome of the Sino-Japanese War was an opportunity to strengthen its “proceed east and south” policy, which had once been stopped by its treaties of 1858 and 1860 with China. For the major world powers, the war served to expose the incompetence of the Qing military.

The peace treaty concluded at the Japanese western port city of Shimonoseki in March 1895 that ended the Sino-Japanese War contained the following major points (see map 2):

- Qing recognized the right of self-determination of Korea.
- Qing ceded the Liaotung Peninsula, Taiwan (Formosa), and the Pescadores Islands to Japan.
- Qing paid war reparations to Japan (200 million *tael/liang*).<sup>3</sup>
- Qing gave Japan most-favored-nation status.
- Qing opened several ports and gave Japan free navigation rights along the Yangtze River.

Russia, for which Japan’s presence in China and Korea, especially in the Liaotung Peninsula, had become an obstacle to expansion, concentrated its efforts on expelling Japanese forces from China and Korea. Russia perceived Japan as a potential, and maybe the most dangerous, challenger to its interests in China. To

MAP 2



this end, Russia—along with France (a partner in the Franco-Russian entente) and Germany (which wanted to turn Russian eyes away from Europe)—cunningly reacted with superficial anger to the reconciliation between Qing and Japan. In April 1895, immediately after the conclusion of the Shimonoseki Treaty, all three nations declared that Japanese possession of the Liaotung Peninsula represented an obstacle to peace and stability in the Far East, and “recommended” that Japan relinquish its rights there.

### A SOUND DECISION BY THE JAPANESE GOVERNMENT

The government of Japan, headed by Prime Minister Hirobumi Ito, considered the following three options in response to the pressure being applied by Russia, France, and Germany:

1. Declare war against these three nations
2. Request a conference of the major powers
3. Accept the “recommendation” and return control of the Liaotung Peninsula to Qing.

Option one proved impracticable. Japan was too weak to declare war against these major world powers. Option three was considered too humiliating. The Ito cabinet therefore attempted to implement option two, with some behind-the-scenes diplomacy, but it quickly realized the hopelessness of the attempt. When Ito saw the real situation, he was quick enough to switch his strategy. The Japanese government reluctantly decided to abandon the Liaotung Peninsula, which had been obtained at the cost of a large number of Japanese soldiers’ lives, and return it to Qing. The decision was conveyed to these three nations on 5 May 1895, and the Meiji emperor officially announced the decision directly to the Japanese people.<sup>4</sup> This willful intervention by Russia, France, and Germany

fueled resentment, particularly against Russia, which had obviously been, in Japanese eyes, the principal perpetrator of the Triple Intervention.

It was in this episode that the Japanese experienced for the first time since the opening of their country the reality of the international power game. The Japanese people, whose nation had joined the Western-governed international club only twenty-five years before, now saw the cold reality of international relations—that the weak were the victims of the strong. Both the Japanese people and their government believed that the concessions gained through the treaty of 1895 were lawful in light of current international custom and, further, had been bought with the blood of Japanese soldiers. But these gains were now negated and finally lost due to what seemed an absurd intervention of three nations. Moreover, the Japanese people were angered that their country was so weak that it had no choice but to accept the actions of the great powers. This quickly encompassed the nation. It did not take long for a strong hatred of Russia and a desire for revenge to grow in most Japanese minds.

There was a positive side to this incident. The Japanese leaders learned the lesson that well-balanced national power was the most important condition of survival in the international community, where the law of the jungle largely prevailed. In order to cope with the seemingly helpless situation in which Japan now found itself, the government started a vigorous nationwide campaign, known as *Ga-Shin-Sho-Tan*—“Submit to any hardships to achieve revenge,” or, “Accept the humiliation now; revenge will come later.”<sup>5</sup> The campaign united the Japanese people.

Meanwhile, the Japanese government decided to build up national power, especially military, in the quickest possible manner. The Diet accepted an ambitious force buildup plan in its first session after the intervention. The size of the Imperial Army was to be increased from seven divisions to thirteen. The Imperial Navy program (purchases from foreign countries, mainly Britain and the United States) called for 104 new ships, including four battleships and eleven armored cruisers, to be completed between 1896 and 1905.

#### THE SITUATION IN CHINA

The Western powers fully took advantage of postwar chaos in China (see map 3).

- In 1896, Russia gained the right to build the “East Qing Railway” through Manchuria, a shorter route than the Trans-Siberian Railway.
- In 1897, Germany sent warships and troops to occupy Tsingtao, in response to the murder of three German missionaries on the Shantung Peninsula.
- In 1898, Germany forced Qing to grant a lease to Tsingtao.

MAP 3



- Immediately after the signing of the German lease, Russia sent a fleet to Port Arthur and Talien to intimidate the Qing government into a lease of the former, at the tip of the Liaotung Peninsula. This maneuver was successful; Russia gained the port and extended to it a branch line of the East Qing Railway. Thus the Liaotung Peninsula, which was one of the major objectives of the Triple Intervention and had been a main concern as well, fell into the hands of Russia, a ringleader of the intervention.
- In the same year, Britain concluded a lease on Weihaiwei, on the Shantung Peninsula.
- In 1899, France signed a lease for Kwangchowwan.

The growing Chinese nationalism against outrageous activities by Western great powers was transformed into a campaign to expel them. The campaign expanded rapidly within the country in 1899, and in 1900 the violence against foreigners escalated into a severe incident, the Boxer Rebellion.

In order to ensure the security of Beijing, eight nations, including Britain, the United States, France, Russia, and Japan, sent troops to the city, which they barely secured by the end of 1900. As a part of this military campaign, Russia sent a large force to Manchuria; however, the force remained in the area even

after the cessation of hostilities in Beijing. In spite of opposition by the Qing government, which was backed up in this regard by Japan and Britain, Manchuria was for all intents and purposes occupied by Russia in that year. Russia also proposed that Japan would agree to neutralize the Korean Peninsula, but the Japanese government refused the proposal. It was felt that neutralization of the peninsula would eventually lead to an unwilling ratification of Russian control of Manchuria.

#### THE ANGLO-JAPANESE TREATY

If the Korean Peninsula fell into their hands, the Russians, who already maintained a large force in Manchuria, would gain substantial freedom of action in the Far East. Additionally, the security of Japan would be weakened; the independence of Japan itself could be seriously jeopardized. The Japanese government's options for favorably resolving this difficult situation were to expel Russia from Manchuria by military means or forestall a Russian invasion into the Korean Peninsula through a diplomatic treaty or an agreement with Russia.

The initial assessment by the government was that the first option was practically impossible, because the military power of Japan at that time was still too small to counter the Russian force in Manchuria. Therefore, and somewhat surprisingly, given Japan's hostility toward Russia, the Japanese leaders started thinking of ways to implement the second option. The idea was that Japan would accept Russian seizure of Manchuria if Russia accepted Japanese control over Korea. Heated debates arose within the government, and no conclusion was reached.

#### *A Unique Decision-Making Body: The Genro*

In order to clarify the decision-making process of the government of Japan in the Meiji era, a unique Japanese mechanism or entity widely referred to as the *Genro* must be mentioned.

*Genro* is an informal, collective term embracing several of the most influential and experienced politicians and military leaders of the Meiji era. There are minor disagreements today as to which particular individuals it comprised. But four people—ex-prime minister Hirobumi Ito, ex-financial minister Kaoru Inoue, hero of the Meiji Restoration War and Army general Aritomo Yamagata, and ex-prime minister Masayoshi Matsukata—are generally considered to have been the most influential *Genro* members at the time. The *Genro* served as special advisers to the Meiji emperor. Many fundamental issues of the nation were brought to them. They discussed issues, identified the underlying problems, and developed strategies and policies for dealing with them. They also assisted in the implementation of those strategies, by coordinating not only within the government but also between the government and the military. The group also acted as

a go-between for the government and the economic community. The advantage of the Genro was that its members had no official portfolios, as it was not an official organ. Thus, the Genro could act collectively as honest brokers, free from “noisy and willful” external influences and so in a position to provide ideal “classroom answers.” Their well thought out recommendations often helped the government make sound “real world” decisions about the vital issues of the day.

The Genro input to the decision-making process immediately before the Russo-Japanese War included advising Prime Minister Taro Katsura on reasoned approaches to many crucial decisions. The most important point was that although Japan’s Western-style constitutional monarchy was tempered to this extent by a traditional Japanese approach to problem solving, the final decision was made by the prime minister—and once the prime minister had decided, the Genro did not take any further action unless he asked it to do so. Otherwise, what it had to do, and actually did, was keep complete silence. This custom prevented the emergence of two different national policies on single issues. Thus, the mechanism of the Genro guaranteed the credibility of the government in the international community as well as before the Japanese people.

#### *Approaches to the Russian Issue*

With regard to policy toward Russia, there were two schools of thought in the Japanese government. The first was a pro-Russia school, backed by Ito when he was the prime minister, and two major Genro, Inoue and Matsukata. They strongly supported the second, diplomatic option mentioned above—accepting the status quo in Manchuria in return for preeminent Japanese influence in Korea; Ito started an effort toward a possible Russo-Japanese treaty in 1901. However, the Russian government would accept only economic Japanese activities on the Korean Peninsula, not political influence. This hard-line Russian position proved fatal to this approach. Ito’s idea was shown to be impracticable, gradually lost support, then finally collapsed. In June 1901 Ito turned over power to Taro Katsura, becoming an “uncrowned giant.”

The second school of thought was a pro-Anglo/Germany faction, supported by Genro Yamagata and Katsura (prime minister as of June 1901), as well as Foreign Minister Jutarō Komura (appointed in September 1901). These men opposed the idea of a Russo-Japanese treaty. They felt that if Japan were to secure its sovereignty and interest in China, confrontation with Russia might be unavoidable. They acknowledged that Japan, acting alone, could not stop Russia, let alone defeat it, but argued that it could handle Russia if supported by Western countries that shared its interests in the region. The Japanese leadership started thinking about the possibility of an alliance with nations whose policies were counter to Russian expansion in the Far East—that is, Britain and Germany. The

new Katsura cabinet began negotiations with the two nations. However, it found Germany reluctant to support the idea, due to its complicated ties with Russia, and quickly modified the plan to a single Anglo-Japanese alliance. Foreign Minister Komura eagerly explained to his colleagues the advantages of alliance with the British and the disadvantages of alliance with Russia, and in December 1901 he convinced the cabinet to seek an alliance with the United Kingdom. The treaty was concluded in February 1902.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Japanese Sense of the Russian Threat*

As previously stated, Japanese suspicion of Russia was a result of the Triple Intervention of 1895 and was reinforced by the Russian occupation of Manchuria after the Boxer Rebellion. In addition to this, a buildup of the Russian East Asian Squadron at Port Arthur and a naval exercise in the Yellow Sea in May 1903 were perceived as a menace. Russian troops stayed in Manchuria beyond an October 1903 deadline that had been agreed between Qing and Russia in April 1902. Far from withdrawing, Russia reinforced its force in Manchuria that month with troops from European Russia. At the same time, Japanese intelligence sources in Europe reported that additional Russian naval forces, including a battleship, two armored cruisers, seven destroyers, and four torpedo boats, had left European waters for the Far East and had reached the Mediterranean by December 1903. In January 1904, a substantial increase in Trans-Siberian Railroad traffic was reported.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the Japanese military and political leaders before the Second World War, the government of this period emphasized intelligence and conducted well-organized collection activities. The Japanese legation in London played a key role in this effort; London, which was in those days the center of the world in many respects, was flooded with an almost infinite variety of information from everywhere. As for regional intelligence, the government conducted ambitious collection activities in Beijing. Japan was able to obtain from such sources a vast amount of invaluable intelligence, which had a strong influence on its decision making.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, it was intelligence reports that in 1903 persuaded the Japanese government that Russian war preparation was in the final phase and that the breakout of war was imminent.

### THE JAPANESE NAVAL BUILDUP

Immediately after the Triple Intervention in 1895, the Diet approved a new ten-year naval buildup program for the period from 1896 to 1905. Because the goal was a fleet of six battleships and six armored cruisers, this plan was widely known as the “six-six fleet program” in Japan. The last ship was the *Mikasa*, which was to be Admiral Heihachiro Togo’s flagship at the Battle of Tsushima. Eventually, Japan started the war with this six-six fleet.

In 1903, an additional shipbuilding program was put in place to implement an amendment to the Anglo-Japanese treaty, ratified by the Diet, obligating Japan to maintain a fleet larger than that of any third nation in the region. This supplement added three battleships and five armored cruisers. These ships, however, were not ready in time for the war.

On 28 December 1903 the Japanese government decided to accelerate the construction program. It also tried to purchase two battleships being built in Britain for the Chilean navy. The Russian government made strong objections; the British rebuffed this Russian opposition, but the Japanese government failed to allocate funds for the purchase before the dissolution of the nineteenth Imperial Diet. The Diet was dissolved for domestic reasons that had nothing to do with the naval buildup, but the ultimate result was the failure of the attempt to purchase the two battleships. (The British government frustrated a Russian attempt to acquire the warships itself by purchasing them for the Royal Navy.)

The Japanese government took immediate action to make up for this failure to purchase battleships in the United Kingdom. First, it issued an imperial ordinance allocating funds for a domestic naval buildup. Second, the government purchased two armored cruisers under construction in an Italian shipyard for the Argentine navy. The two ships, *Kasuga* and *Nisshin*, arrived at Japan in April 1904, two months after hostilities broke out, and effectively made good the combat loss of two battleships, the *Hatsuse* and *Yashima*, to Russian mines on 15 May 1904. Admiral Togo assigned these two armored cruisers to the battleship force, so as to take full advantage of the long range of their eight- and ten-inch guns, which could fire almost as far as the twelve-inch guns of the remaining four battleships. This purchase allowed the Imperial Japanese Navy to maintain its intended “six-six fleet” throughout the war.

#### JAPANESE STRATEGY AND POLICY

In late 1903 Supreme Headquarters (the Combined Staff Office of the Imperial Japanese Army and Imperial Japanese Navy) and the Japanese government, working together, made an estimate of the current situation and identified several advantages that Japan could use in its strategy.

##### *Elements of the Japanese Estimate and Strategy*

First, revolutionary factions in Russia were generating serious domestic instability. There was no national consensus in Russia for war against Japan. The Japanese strategy to exploit this weakness was to support Russian revolutionary groups. The government decided to send a special mission to Europe to conduct activities supportive to the Russian revolutionary groups.<sup>9</sup>

A second Japanese advantage was that Russia could not fully concentrate its army in the Far East because it had to keep some forces in western Russia as a counter to Turkish, German, and Austrian forces. That meant that by concentrating most of the Imperial Army in Manchuria, the Japanese could field an army with strength equal to that of the Russian force it faced there. Further, the goal of that army was less to win than not to lose. Meanwhile, a third party, probably the United States, would be asked to mediate a peace before the war became prolonged enough for Russian reinforcements to arrive from Europe.

At sea, the Japanese Combined Fleet was slightly superior to the Russian Pacific Fleet. But the true Japanese advantage was the fact that Russia had to divide the Pacific Fleet into two forces, one at Port Arthur and the other at Vladivostok. In addition, most reinforcements from Europe would have to take the long route

around the Cape of Good Hope, along which few ports would be available to them, because of British diplomatic pressure on other nations, including France. The Japanese strategy was therefore to concentrate its fleet and engage divided Russian forces separately.

	IJN Fleet	Russian Pacific Fleet		
		Port Arthur	Vladivostok	Others
Battleships	6	7		
Armored Cruisers	6	1	3	
Cruisers	12	4	1	2
Destroyers	22	21		
Torpedo Boats	28	7	15	

Japan badly needed to secure its sea line of communication to Manchuria, the lifeline of the Japanese army there. In addition, the Japanese government undertook to encourage Britain to exercise fully its influence to ensure that no third parties supported a Russian reinforcement from Europe.

The fourth Japanese advantage was that the Trans-Siberian Railway was a single-track line and not fully complete. The Russian lines of communication, from European Russia to the Far East and within the Manchurian plain, would be extremely long, difficult to maintain, and of limited capacity. The Japanese strategy was to hit and destroy the Russian field army in Manchuria before its logistic network became fully functional. Interestingly, the Japanese leaders fully recognized that they had a similar problem and that accordingly the Japanese army there could not afford to drive the Russian army too fast or too deep into Manchuria, even in an advantageous situation. Further, the Japanese leaders planned to employ a cavalry battalion to disrupt the Russian rear area.

Finally, the Russian army was too cumbersome and unwieldy to wage the warfare of maneuver that the vast expanse of the Manchurian plain required. The Russian formations—too large in size, their training inadequate, and their communication poor—could not conduct coordinated mobile operations and night engagements. The Japanese response was, first, to organize and employ

army corps of only “adequate size,” two or three divisions, with maximum mobility, and use them in a way that took maximum advantage of relative Russian immobility and poor communication. Second, the Japanese soldiers were trained specifically for night engagements.

*“Sixty-Forty Reconciliation”*

The operations planning room in the General Staff Office in Tokyo was already looking ahead to advantageous war termination. Public opinion in Japan supported a war of revenge against Russia, but the leaders of the government and military were still prudent and careful in their analysis. As we have seen, their general consensus was that Japan could not win outright but might be able to bring the war to a draw or even to a situation that was slightly advantageous to Japan—a possibility they called a “sixty-forty reconciliation.” If this was to occur, several conditions had to be fulfilled.

First, the Japanese army would have to establish superiority over the Russian army in Manchuria. This seemed to be the most difficult requirement, because of the shortage of strategic reserves, an insufficient stockpile of ammunition, and poor field heavy artillery. Well thought out operational plans and effective tactics on the battlefield were therefore considered the keys to making up, at least partly, for the underlying Japanese handicaps. Indeed, the Japanese leaders had confidence in the soundness of their operational plans, based as they were on superior strategy, and in the hard discipline of their soldiers.

Second, it was essential for the Combined Fleet to destroy the Pacific Fleet before the arrival of Russian naval reinforcements from Europe. Further, it was necessary in the meantime for Admiral Togo to preserve his strength, to ensure that he had a fleet capable of destroying the reinforcements when they arrived. The government and military leaders were convinced that both goals, though difficult, were achievable if the Imperial Navy wisely and carefully executed its tailored operational plans.

Third, Japan—a newly rising and still poor nation—would have to guarantee, before a decision to go to war, that it had sufficient funds to meet a vast wartime expenditure. The Anglo-Japanese alliance proved favorable here, enabling Japan to raise capital in several countries. Additionally, Japanese economic leaders agreed to support fully the national war effort. These factors convinced the government that a war would be at least barely affordable.

Finally, to bring the war to an end, Japan required the cooperation of the United States. Washington, it was hoped, would mediate the dispute at a time that would be advantageous to Japan. The government decided to send a special envoy, Kentaro Kaneko, who was a member of the House of Peers in the Imperial Diet and an old acquaintance of the U.S. president, Theodore Roosevelt. His

mission was to convince the president to support Japan and, at the same time, to elicit American public support for Japan, so the U.S. government would be willing to mediate.

#### FINAL DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

Notwithstanding its advantages and strategy, the Japanese government felt that the risks of war were still too large, that hostilities against giant Russia should be undertaken only as a last resort. The government pursued every possibility, no matter how small, of achieving a settlement. In the face of the fait accompli of a forcible Russian military presence in Manchuria, Tokyo decided to start diplomatic negotiations with Russia, and by 23 June 1903 it had developed a basic negotiating policy. A key point was that the two countries would mutually accept Russian rights in Manchuria and Japanese rights on the Korean Peninsula. The rationale was that if Japan was to protect its national sovereignty from Russian pressure in the long term, the Korean Peninsula had to be kept outside of any Russian influence, a buffer zone between Russia and Japan. This proposal was officially passed to the Russian government on 12 August.

Thereafter, despite repeated requests for an answer, the Russian government kept silent for almost two months, finally responding to Japan on 3 October. The answer was far different from the proposal and disappointing to the Japanese government. Russia made a counterproposal that mentioned nothing about Manchuria but imposed a total ban on military use of the Korean Peninsula, establishing a neutral zone in the peninsula above thirty-nine degrees north latitude and banning fortifications along its coasts.

The Japanese government was patient enough to propose on 30 October an amendment, to establish a neutral zone thirty miles wide on either side of the border between Korea and Manchuria. The Russian response, presented almost a month afterward, was basically the same as its first answer.

To the Japanese government, this new Russian position was quite uncomfortable and unreliable. However, on 21 December it again offered a compromise, removing the ban on military use of the Korean Peninsula but establishing a neutral zone. The Russian answer, which was brought to the Japanese government on 6 January 1904, was again almost the same as the initial offer, with minor modifications. Again, and particularly disappointing to Japan, the Russians made no mention of Manchuria.

At this point the Japanese leaders came to the conclusion that the Russian government had no intention of settling the dispute on the Manchuria and Korean Peninsula issues. Instead, the Russians had merely drawn Japan along, buying time for a military buildup in Manchuria, for intimidation and warfare. The Japanese leaders, dejected at the failure of their diplomatic efforts, became

inclined to go to war. But on 12 January the Meiji emperor directed the leadership to make one last effort for peace. In full compliance with the emperor's directive, on 16 January 1904 the government issued a *note verbale* to the Russian government requesting resumption of the negotiations; it was completely ignored. Furthermore, progress in Russian military preparations in Manchuria and at Port Arthur was reported. To the Japanese government, this meant that the more time Japan spent in diplomacy, the more difficult would be the military position it would eventually face. The diplomatic effort to reach a compromise with Russia had ended in failure.<sup>10</sup>

In parallel with the fruitless six-month-long diplomatic effort, Japan's leaders had assessed their national power and compared it with that of Russia. They made a dispassionate review, ignoring the public anti-Russian feelings and instead counting guns and warships, estimating expenditures, and analyzing Russia's overall situation. In their view the gap was too large to make up, but they became convinced that all their goals for war would be satisfied if they managed to steer Japanese strategy and policy well, integrating everything necessary and taking all possible factors into account. On 4 February 1904, the government decided to go to war against Russia.

Diplomatic relations were officially broken on 6 February 1904, and this fact was conveyed to the Russian foreign minister in St. Petersburg (then the capital) the same day. War was officially declared on 10 February 1904 by the government of Japan, in the name of the Meiji emperor.

## CAMPAIGNS AND BATTLES

While it is not the main objective of this article to examine all the engagements of this war, there are, aside from Tsushima, two battles worth discussing in some detail: the campaign at Port Arthur and the Battle of the Yellow Sea (10 August 1904). First, however, a short review of the general concept of operations is necessary.

### *Order of Battle of Japanese Forces and Their Concept of Operations*

Japanese military leaders coordinated the development of a cooperative, integrated plan by the Army and Navy, in which the roles for each were clearly defined and assigned.

The Imperial Army's operations in the Russo-Japanese War were envisioned in two phases, the first lasting through the autumn of 1904 (see map 4). The Japanese First Army was to land at Inchon, on the Korean Peninsula, and then proceed to Manchuria. The Second Army was to land on the southern coast of the Liaotung Peninsula and likewise move toward Manchuria, coordinating with the advance of the First Army. The Third Army was to land on and secure the

**MAP 4**  
**ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY**



Source: Zusetsu Togo Heihachiro; Me de miru Meiji no Nihon Kaigun, "Pictorial Reference of Adm. Togo and IJN in Meiji," Togo Association, Japan.

Liaotung Peninsula, then capture Port Arthur. The Fourth Army was to land on the northeastern coast of Po-Hai Bay and proceed to Liaoyang, coordinating with the Second Army. The General Staff of the Army in Tokyo estimated that large-scale winter operations would be difficult due to severe weather conditions. All the armies were in late autumn to bivouac for the winter of 1904–1905, north of Liaoyang.

Phase Two was to begin in the early spring of 1905 and extend to the end of the war. In this phase, the four armies were to combine and concentrate for battle with the Russian main force.

As for the Imperial Navy, the fleet had two missions. The first was to destroy the Russian Pacific Fleet and secure the seas around Japan. The main Russian naval force was the East Asian Squadron, at Port Arthur; a second force was at Vladivostok. The second mission was to support the landings of Army forces on the Korean and Liaotung peninsulas. The Navy organized the Combined Fleet to bring this plan to fruition. The Combined Fleet comprised the First Fleet (six battleships and a cruiser force) and the Second Fleet (six armored cruisers plus

other escorting cruisers). The General Staff of the Navy tasked the various parts of the Combined Fleet to destroy the divided Pacific Fleet. The First Fleet was to take the Russian Port Arthur squadron; the Second Fleet's target was the Vladivostok force. In addition there was the Third Fleet (not part of the Combined Fleet), composed of cruisers and coastal defense ships; this the General Staff of the Navy assigned to escort Japanese shipping and support landing operations of the Army.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Port Arthur Campaign*

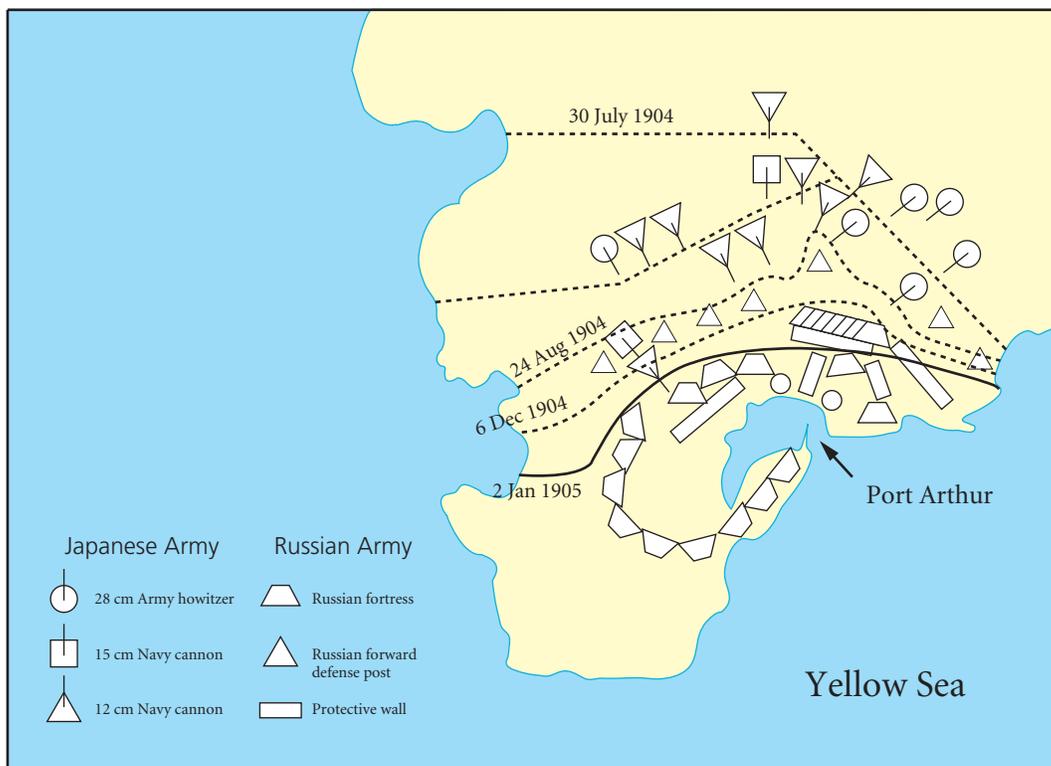
The expected naval reinforcements from Europe—in the form of the Baltic Fleet, under Admiral Zinovi Petrovich Rozhdestvenski—was known to be preparing for its voyage to the Far East (which it actually began on 15 October 1904). Japan needed to engage and destroy the divided Pacific Fleet before the Baltic Fleet could arrive. The Combined Fleet chose as its primary target in the first phase of the war the East Asian Squadron at Port Arthur. Its total destruction would have significance for the Army, in that it would guarantee the security of sea lines of communication from Japan to Korea and China, which, as noted, were vital to the Imperial Army operations in Manchuria.

*Imperial Navy Operations during the Port Arthur Campaign.* The Combined Fleet was tasked with the destruction or neutralization of the Russian squadron at the earliest opportunity. It was considered imperative that this be completed early, so repairs and training could be accomplished before the arrival of the Russian Baltic Fleet. The Combined Fleet developed three alternative strategies. The first was a night torpedo assault by destroyers, to be carried out if the Russians stayed in the outer portion of Port Arthur. The second was a blockade of the port, by sinking ships or laying mines in the channel at the entrance of the harbor.<sup>12</sup> The last strategy was indirect naval gunfire from outside the reach of Russian coastal artillery, to lure the Russian squadron into a fleet engagement in the Yellow Sea.

Whatever the merits of these three strategies, Admiral Togo's tactical execution of them was rather poor and inadequate, and the results proved insufficient. Despite the dedication of his sailors, Togo failed to complete his assigned missions during the first three months of the war. Worse, Togo's fleet also suffered serious casualties, which was considered the last thing he could afford to do, with the Baltic Fleet soon to be on the way. Recognizing that he had a problem, Admiral Togo asked Admiral Sukeyuki Ito, Chief of Naval Staff in Tokyo and in a position to coordinate closely with the Army General Staff and government, to reinforce the Third Army against Port Arthur. The leaders in Tokyo met immediately and issued orders to provide the necessary support for the ground campaign against Port Arthur.

*Imperial Army Operations during the Port Arthur Campaign.* The Imperial Army tasked General Maresuke Nogi's Third Army to isolate, attack, and take the well-protected fortress of Port Arthur (see map 5). Nogi's army started its campaign on 26 June 1904, employing simple infantry assault tactics against the fortified defensive line that the Russians had built up in the surrounding mountains and hills. Unfortunately, General Nogi continuously repeated these brutal tactics, making his infantrymen easy targets for the Russian defenders, whose carefully prepared positions allowed a continual cross fire.

**MAP 5  
PORT ARTHUR CAMPAIGN**



Source: Zusetsu Togo Heihachiro; Me de miru Meiji no Nihon Kaigun, "Pictorial Reference of Adm. Togo and IJN in Meiji," Togo Association, Japan.

Due to the inflexibility of General Nogi and his staff officers, and to their overconfidence in the fighting spirit of the Japanese soldier, which was a long tradition of samurai, the Third Army suffered a tremendous loss of young soldiers—who, if properly employed, would have been precious as reinforcements during the last ground campaign, around Mukden, in March 1905. Nonetheless, the Third Army eventually conquered a key hill overlooking the harbor of Port Arthur from which Japanese heavy artillery was able to bombard Russian ships and base facilities. Shelling started on 7 August, inflicting substantial damage to

facilities, personnel, and ships. By that time, all of the Liaotung Peninsula had been taken by the Second Army, completely isolating Port Arthur.

A new concern now arose in the Japanese General Staff—the possibility of an escape attempt by the Russian naval squadron in Port Arthur. Japanese war planners did not want the squadron to join the remainder of the Pacific Fleet at Vladivostok.

*The Outcome of the Port Arthur Campaign.* The Japanese Army and Navy coordinated well, and in the end they attained their military objectives. Admiral Togo learned from his early mistakes and corrected them. One area of weakness that was uncovered was low levels of skill and inadequacy of tactics in the destroyer force; another was ineffectiveness of fleet gunnery. One underlying reason could be that Japanese sailors were being called upon to fight the world's first modern sea engagement, using state-of-the-art equipment and newly developed tactics with which they were not totally familiar. Most of the senior officers and petty officers were veterans of the Sino-Japanese War of ten years before; however, even they had not fully caught up with the new and unknown challenges of modern naval warfare. For their part, Admiral Togo and his staff officers were learning “on the job” how to employ their assets properly.

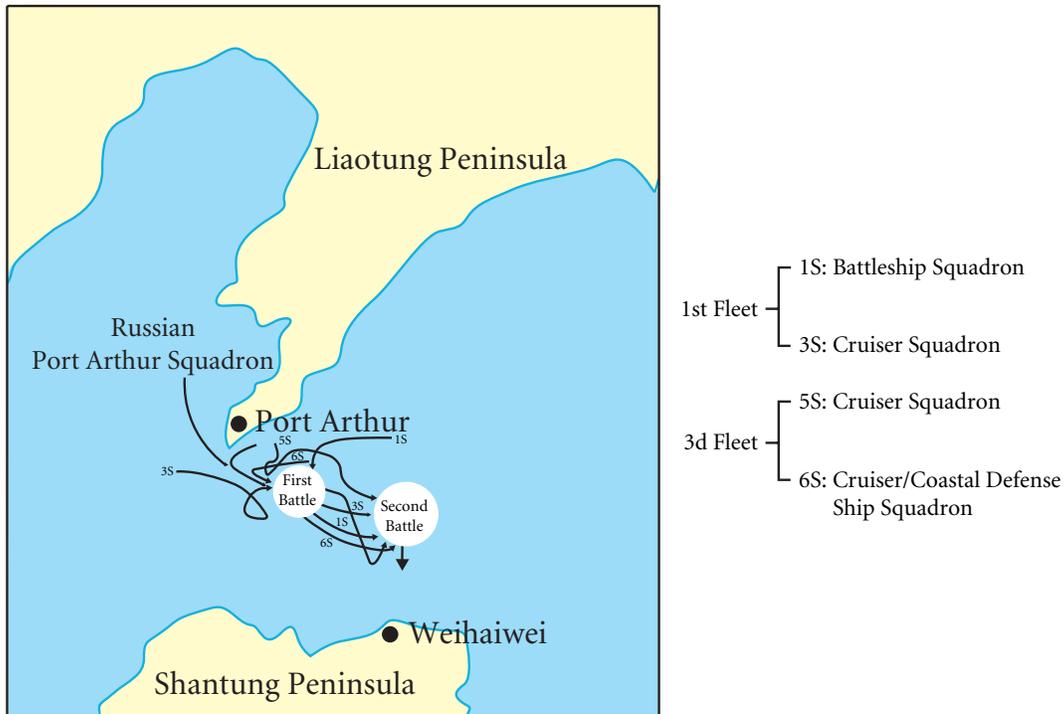
On the Army side, the loss of tens of thousands of soldiers in General Nogi's badly managed battles seriously affected other operations in Manchuria and generated grave concern. The Japanese leadership feared the possible loss of the whole Third Army, which they had counted on to reinforce the other three armies, now already in Manchuria. It was a last-minute change of tactics from unsupported infantry assault to a combination of infantry assault and artillery barrage, as well as the capture of positions suitable for shelling, that saved the Third Army.

This change does not excuse General Nogi's initial mistake. Having said this, however, we must note General Nogi's superb leadership. History shows that in cases of serious operational failure and incredibly high casualties caused by poor command, most generals lose the support and loyalty of their soldiers. This in turn brings final collapse and, for the general, disgrace. But General Nogi's soldiers never lost their trust in him or their loyalty to the nation and their army. Something in his leadership that is difficult to identify today strongly appealed to his soldiers. One reason might have been that General Nogi lost both his sons during the campaign—meaning the extinction of the family line, the most important social value of that period—but asked for no special treatment. Moreover, one of the most important points here is that many Japanese fathers and mothers shared the same kind of mental pain at this time.

*The Battle of the Yellow Sea, 10 August 1904*

As the Combined Fleet attempted to block Port Arthur and the Second and the Third Armies progressively isolated and began to attack the port, the commander of the Russian naval squadron became increasingly worried (see map 6).

**MAP 6**  
**BATTLE OF THE YELLOW SEA, 10 AUGUST 1904**



Source: Zusetsu Togo Heihachiro; Me de miru Meiji no Nihon Kaigun, "Pictorial Reference of Adm. Togo and IJN in Meiji," Togo Association, Japan.

In addition to continuing attempts to lure out and engage the Russian squadron, the Japanese fleet tried three times to bottle it up inside Port Arthur—on 24 February, 27 March, and 3 May—by sinking ships at the mouth of the harbor. These attempts were not fully successful and Admiral Togo suffered some vital losses in the process, but the operations imposed an emotional drain on the Russian sailors. Meanwhile, the Third Army had landed on the Liaotung Peninsula, on 6 June, and the Second Army was isolating the peninsula. These army operations too caused serious psychological stress for the Russian leaders, whose nightmare was, of course, the complete closure of the port by land and sea.

On 23 June, Admiral Togo got the chance he had awaited so long; the Russian squadron attempted an escape from the port. However, after brief contact between the two forces, the Russians quickly reversed course and headed back to the port. Togo was unable to bring on a traditional fleet engagement; the

Russians' sudden turning back was far different from his expectation and quite disappointing.

When the Third Army seized the heights and, on 7 August, shelling began, the Russian Navy General Staff ordered the squadron to leave Port Arthur and join the Vladivostok force. It sailed on 10 August. When Admiral Togo received the report of the Russian sortie, he quickly reacted, believing it to be the best, but maybe last, opportunity to destroy the enemy fleet. With his First and Third Fleets Togo eagerly engaged the enemy fleet of six battleships and four cruisers.

The first engagement of the day took place in the early afternoon. Togo saw two objectives: one was to destroy the enemy fleet; the second was, if the first was not successful, to prevent the enemy's return to Port Arthur, as had been allowed to happen on 23 June. Determined not to repeat that experience, he now used all means to prevent a Russian retreat to Port Arthur. The result was that Togo, not having decided on a single course of action, attempted to pursue both objectives and so maneuvered his fleet poorly. This time the Russian squadron concentrated all of its efforts on escaping; Admiral Togo, too focused on cutting off a retreat, was outfoxed again and almost allowed the enemy fleet to get away. Additionally, his fleet engaged the enemy (at 1:30 in the afternoon) at such long range, about eleven thousand yards, that his guns were ineffective. Togo at about 3:30 ordered his fleet to cease firing and started to close the distance.

Two hours later a second engagement started at a distance of about seven thousand yards. The second engagement lasted for about three hours. At about 6:30 one, or maybe two, shells from Japanese warships hit the bridge and armored conning tower of the Russian flagship, *Tsesarevich*, killing the squadron commander, Rear Admiral V. K. Vitgeft, and severely wounding the ship's commanding officer. The hit, destroying the Russian command structure, caused confusion within the Russian squadron, which now scattered.

A follow-on torpedo assault by Japanese destroyers and torpedo boats against the surviving Russian warships was badly executed and gained no success. The remnants of the squadron escaped—although they never reached Vladivostok or joined the forces there.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the main Russian naval force in the Far East, the Port Arthur squadron, was totally incapacitated.

### *The Battle of Ulsan*

The Vladivostok force of three armored cruisers—*Rossiya*, *Gromoboi*, and *Rurik*—sortied on 12 August, not knowing the result of the battle involving the Port Arthur squadron (see map 7). The Japanese Second Fleet, which had been assigned to fight the Vladivostok force, had moved, upon notification of the sailing of the Port Arthur squadron two days before, and had taken station near the

## MAP 7



Source: Zusetsu Togo Heihachiro; Me de miru Meiji no Nihon Kaigun, "Pictorial Reference of Adm. Togo and IJN in Meiji," Togo Association, Japan.

Tsushima Strait, a choke point where it could intercept either Russian group. On the morning of 14 August, the Japanese Second Fleet and Russian Vladivostok force encountered each other east of Tsushima Strait, off Ulsan, Korea. The Vladivostok force was destroyed, never to revive for the rest of the war.

By December 1904, the Russian Pacific Fleet was completely disabled, allowing Admiral Togo to bring his fleet back to Japan for rest, maintenance, and training. Port Arthur was occupied by General Nogi on 2 January 1905.

### THE TSUSHIMA STRAIT

If the conduct of Admiral Togo in the Battle of the Yellow Sea was flawed, he faced a serious dilemma—the Pacific Fleet was only one of two Russian fleets that he must fight with his single Combined Fleet. The basic strategy of Japan was to destroy both Russian fleets, one after the other.

#### *Lessons Learned by Admiral Togo*

In the spring and summer of 1904, while Admiral Togo was facing the first set of strong enemy forces, the second force, the formidable Baltic Fleet, was preparing to leave European Russia. Every Japanese sailor—every Japanese citizen, for that matter—knew that it was impossible to replace even a single major combatant in the time the war was expected to last. Togo, then, had the nearly impossible task of sweeping away the Russian Pacific Fleet at the earliest opportunity, while avoiding the loss of any of his major ships. However, in May 1904 he lost two

battleships to Russian mines near Port Arthur. It was this loss that, luckily for Togo and Japan, was followed by the arrival, just in time, of the two armored cruisers purchased from Argentina.

It is easy to imagine the psychological pressure upon Togo at the Battle of the Yellow Sea, just over a hundred years ago. He could have fought the battle at closer range to guarantee victory, but it would have increased the risk of damage and losses. This fear of losing battleships probably dominated the tactical thinking of Admiral Togo and his staff, and therefore became one of the reasons for his ineffective gunnery and maneuver during the Battle of the Yellow Sea.

This factor also drove Togo to reemphasize torpedo attack. Though he knew it would result in losses to his small destroyers or torpedo boats, these losses, though serious, could possibly be absorbed because of the relatively large number of these smaller warships. In addition, the ability of torpedoes, if they hit, to inflict serious damage on enemy warships was also attractive to Togo. So it was understandable that Togo expected much from his torpedo tactics, but the reality was that they were unsuccessful in the Yellow Sea battle.

If, generally speaking, Admiral Togo's tactics in the Battle of the Yellow Sea were questionable, what he won was significant. Further, from the Japanese navy's point of view, several aspects of the battle strongly influenced the result of the Battle of Tsushima and the final outcome of the war.

First, although Admiral Togo did not completely destroy the enemy fleet by gunfire, the end result fully met the strategic objectives of Japan. That is, the Japanese destroyed the Russian Pacific Fleet well before the arrival of the Baltic Fleet, which departed European Russia only in October.

Second, the Imperial Navy was able to send the main force of the Combined Fleet back to Japan for refit. The Combined Fleet took the opportunity to incorporate the lessons learned throughout all the naval operations and engagements in the war to date. Admiral Togo personally used the time to assess the previous naval campaigns and prepare for the coming battle against the Baltic Fleet.

Togo's assessment revealed that, third and most important, he was now freed from his dilemma completely—Togo was no longer required to destroy a fleet without losing any ships. He started full-scale preparations for the coming battle against the Russian Baltic Fleet.

#### *A Practical Combat Concept*

Admiral Togo, of course, developed before the war many combat concepts, including an operational doctrine (*Sen-Saku*), an operations plan (*Sakusen-Keikaku*), and tactics. In general they were well conceived by his staff officers, but they were not yet combat proven.

At the Battle of the Yellow Sea, Togo applied these doctrines, plans, and tactics. However, the Japanese navy's original and overall combat concept of operations was flawed, in that it did not envision that the Combined Fleet would conduct "reactive" engagements (as actually happened). Rather, the concept of operations had assumed an ideal and traditional head-on engagement between two fleets. In the Yellow Sea battle, because of his ongoing blockade operations, Admiral Togo was not fully prepared for the sudden sortie of the Russian squadron out of Port Arthur; therefore, he simply had to react to it. The concept of operations was, maybe, not bad in theory, but some of its elements were too sophisticated and theoretical to execute in a confused battle environment—too difficult even for combat-experienced officers and sailors of the Combined Fleet. Indeed, there was a gap between the envisioned concept of operations and actual execution in the battle, a gap that made the position of Admiral Togo very difficult.

Togo recognized the necessity of filling this gap and strongly felt the need to tailor a concept of operations with no such gap for the upcoming fight against the Baltic Fleet. Admiral Togo directed Saneyuki Akiyama, an operations officer, to develop a detailed and practical concept of operations that was suited to the level of expertise of Japanese officers and sailors. Togo issued a new operational doctrine, the centerpiece of his new concept, on 12 April 1905, and he made sure that all the commanders and commanding officers clearly understood it.

A distinctive feature of the new concept of operations was "engagement in depth."<sup>14</sup> What Togo meant by this was the complete destruction of the Baltic Fleet by repeated attacks. This was the operational goal to which Akiyama devoted all his energy, and it was one of the real roots of the Japanese success at the Battle of Tsushima. Several main elements supported the new doctrine.

*The Competence of Gunners and Spotters.* A core tenet of the operational doctrine of the Combined Fleet had been gun engagement between main forces—the battleships and armored cruisers. Specifically, the battleship force (the 1st Squadron) was to concentrate its fire on the leading ship, presumably the flagship, of the enemy's main force at the very outset of an engagement. In that way Admiral Togo intended to take an advantageous position over the enemy fleet, but at the Battle of the Yellow Sea, due to poor fleet handling Togo failed to comply with this doctrine, and as a result the doctrine itself was nothing but pie in the sky.

Admiral Togo understood that his maneuvering and long-range gun engagement at the Battle of the Yellow Sea had been inadequate, and he tried to develop all possible solutions that would address the lessons he had learned. In that connection, he ensured that his officers, gunners, and spotters were thoroughly retrained.

Specifically, Togo tried to implement a new fire-control concept that switched from independent firing of each turret to controlled firing of all guns.

Through the Battle of the Yellow Sea, after “open fire” was ordered, each spotter fired his gun at his own discretion at the target designated by the gunnery officer. The essence of the new concept was that, first, the target and firing range were determined by a gunnery officer on the bridge; the spotters of all guns set their sights on the same chosen target, at the designated range. When all the guns were ready, they simultaneously fired at the same target on order from the gunnery officer. He alone observed the impacts and the fall of shot, and made corrections and adjustments. Each gunnery team was trained to repeat these procedures until they became automatic and routine. This new firing procedure, combined with upgrades in guns and range-finding equipment, which had broken down several times at the Battle of the Yellow Sea, produced real improvements in the gun-engagement capability of Admiral Togo’s fleet.<sup>15</sup>

Fully understanding that the competence of his gunnery officers, gunners, and spotters was the key to success in the coming battle, Togo dedicated everything to improving and strengthening their training. He never made any compromise but strictly imposed practical discipline on these specialists.

*Basic Formations for Gun Engagements.* Another lesson that Admiral Togo learned from the Battle of the Yellow Sea was that overly complicated maneuvers caused the failure of long-range engagements. At the beginning of the battle, the forces under Togo were scattered around the coastal waters of the Yellow Sea, and he quickly tried to assemble them; however, they joined the battle separately, one after another, and fought independently. This very much complicated his command over the force as a whole. Admiral Togo now decided to concentrate all of his Combined Fleet in the theater and task each force in compliance with the new operational doctrine and plan. In addition, he chose to fight at shorter range, seven to eight thousand yards or less. He also decided to employ a “single line” formation as the basic gunnery disposition.

Togo also made the coordination between his two main forces clearer. The First Fleet was first to concentrate its firepower on the enemy flagship in order to gain an initial advantage. The First and Second Fleets together were then to coordinate and make “repeated” attacks on the remainder of the enemy’s main force until it was totally destroyed.

*Torpedo Employment.* As we have seen, and contrary to the expectation of Admiral Togo, torpedo attacks had achieved poor results in blockade operations outside Port Arthur. They also exposed inadequacies during the engagements on 23 June and 10 August.

The torpedo, because of its capability of inflicting a blow beneath the waterline and so causing serious flooding, was considered an effective and sometimes a lethal weapon—even against well-protected ships, such as battleships and

armored ships. That was the torpedo capability for which the Imperial Japanese Navy strove. But the actual use of torpedoes at sea, especially during combat operations, was much more difficult than the theory stated in the doctrine suggested. There were two main reasons.

One was that Japanese tactics for torpedo attack were not well developed. For example, some vital elements—target designation, types of engagement (day or night), attack formation and speed, firing range, etc.—were not well defined. In other words, there was no unified concept or standard procedure for torpedo attacks. Torpedo attacks were simply left to each independent commander and commanding officers of units.

The second was that the technology was immature, and torpedo systems on the ships were poor. For example, there was no ranging gear to determine firing distance. In practice, on these very small destroyers and craft, ranging was done by the “Mark 1 eyeball” of experienced officers. Additionally, some torpedoes misfired or failed to run straight.

Togo directed his officers to develop the best possible torpedo tactics, approaches that reflected all the lessons of the first six months of the war. All possible corrective actions were taken to improve torpedo equipment on the launching ships. The torpedomen, like the gunnery teams, were thoroughly retrained until they became solid, combat-ready teams. In addition, in conjunction with a reshuffling of major staffs and commanders on 12 January 1905, Togo changed the commanders of all five destroyer divisions. The admiral now had full confidence in his torpedo forces and their engagement capability.<sup>16</sup>

These were to be real, if hidden, reasons for the Japanese success at the Battle of Tsushima. In other words, without the Battle of the Yellow Sea, which was almost no victory at all, Admiral Togo probably would have gone into the Tsushima battle without thorough preparations—without the best concept of operations, doctrine, or plan, and without the best tactics or fully trained forces and sailors. If that had been the case, the result at Tsushima, the decisive battle between Admirals Togo and Rozhdestvenski, might have been completely different. So it can be said that for all intents and purposes, the stage for success at Tsushima was set at this time. Togo had an almost 90 percent chance of success at Tsushima before the battle started. The remaining 10 percent was left to Togo and his determination to execute the plan within a real combat environment, where fear, uncertainty, and the unexpected can overwhelm the “weak human.” Ten percent seems small, but this determination is the most important factor in the ability of any combat commander to win a battle. For the Imperial Navy and Japan, it was fortunate indeed that Togo truly had this strong will and could sustain it in any situation on the battlefield.

### ENDING THE WAR: WALKING A TIGHTROPE

The Japanese strategy at this point in the war was on a high wire: if Japan miscalculated, the result would be devastating. Prior to the war, the Japanese leadership had drawn up a single war plan. It was believed to be the only possible course of action, because the weak and nascent state of Japanese national power did not seem to allow any alternatives. As we have seen, Japan intended to take full advantage of the slow reaction of the Russian giant in a series of quick strikes, showing Japanese superiority to the world. Before the giant could make a full-scale counterattack, Japan would ask for mediation by a neutral party, the United States, and thereby obtain a favorable settlement. Initial, local Japanese military superiority over Russia was believed to be the key to building worldwide credibility, which was expected, in turn, to facilitate foreign loans to cover war expenditures and, at the same time, convince the American government and people to mediate.

But if Japan missed any one of these steps, the strategy could instantly fall from the wire; the nation would lose the war and be ruined. Understanding the risk this plan entailed, Japan managed with great difficulty to integrate its national war efforts, both diplomatic and military strategies, into one goal, the advantageous “sixty-forty” reconciliation. The Japanese leaders did not think the country could win a full victory over Russia, only achieve favorable war termination.

The level of coordination within the government, as well as between political and military branches, was matchless. In particular, the high quality of planning, resolve to execute plans, sound management of military campaigns, and the bravery of Japanese soldiers were characteristic of Japan’s success in this war.

Russia, in contrast, failed. The Russians overestimated their own power, ignored that of Japan, and provoked the Japanese people—whom many Russians, particularly Tsar Nicholas II, called “Asian small yellow monkeys.” They did not study Japan or the Japanese people carefully. Because of the significant difference of power between the two nations, the Russians even thought that Japan would never opt for war, whatever the Japanese security concern was. Without sufficient knowledge of Japan, they first optimistically thought that war was not possible for Japan; even in case of war, they felt, they could knock down the weak and barbarous Japanese forces at the first blow. The provoked and angry Japanese showed the baselessness of this thinking.

Even after the war broke out, St. Petersburg considered it a sideshow, a matter for the local authority in the Far East. The Russians in the region had no integrated grand strategy based on correct information about Japan. What the local Russian forces, commanded by General A. N. Kuropatkin, intended was simply to slaughter the Japanese army with overwhelming forces early in the war. But the Japanese fought desperately on every battlefield and defied the estimates of

the Russians. As they accumulated more combat experience against the Japanese military—at Liaoyang (August–September 1904), Shaho (October 1904), and Hei-Kou-Tai (January 1905)—the Russians realized that the Japanese might be a different enemy than they had thought.

General Kuropatkin now tried the traditional Russian military strategy that had been used against Napoleon. The intent was to withdraw, lure the enemy deep into an area where Russia had the advantage, build up their forces, and then deliver a fatal blow with overwhelming troop strength. If the Russian army had properly executed this strategy, the Japanese army in Manchuria might have been annihilated. Particularly at the Battle of Mukden, and despite an

### MAJOR LAND BATTLES OF THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

**Liaoyang.** This was the first head-on ground engagement. The Japanese army of about 134,000, commanded by General Iwao Oyama, contained all available forces other than the Third Army, which was at Port Arthur. The Russian army, commanded by General A. N. Kuropatkin, was about 225,000 strong. Both sides expected to deliver fatal blows. Fighting started on 30 August 1904 and ended on 3 September in the retreat of the Russian forces. The Russians outnumbered the Japanese but fought with less spirit and skill. The Russian retreat put the Japanese force in an advantageous position, but the victory was far from decisive. This first battle exposed the Japanese Achilles' heel—poor logistic capability and insufficient reserves—which prevented pursuit and destruction of the retreating enemy.

**Shaho.** As the situation became increasingly unfavorable to the Russians, the tsar became determined to save both Port Arthur and, more importantly, face for the Russian Empire. He directed General Kuropatkin to reverse the tide of the war. General Kuropatkin duly attacked the Japanese in overwhelming force at Shaho, but an unexpected and fierce Japanese counter-attack pushed the Russians back. If Kuropatkin had had the indomitable spirit necessary to carry on regardless of casualties and operational inertia, he could have smashed the Japanese force. But he did not, and his attack failed.

**Hei-Kou-Tai.** After the Battle of Shaho, the two forces faced each other until the frozen Manchurian winter began. The Japanese field commanders thought no major battle was possible and assumed that the Russians had the same view of the difficulty of winter combat. However, General Oskar-Ferdinand Kazimirovich Gripenberg, the newly arrived commanding general of the Russian Second Army, quickly grasped the operational center of gravity—the Japanese left wing, which jutted northward into Russian territory at Hei-Kou-Tai. Against the strong opposition of Kuropatkin, Gripenberg planned and executed the attack with firm determination. The Japanese forces, “hibernating” in winter quarters, were completely surprised. Their command chain lost coherence, and some forces fell into helpless chaos. The uncoordinated Japanese forces were almost defeated. But units and individual soldiers did not give up, striking back fiercely and instinctively against the enemies in front of them. They restored, barely, the front in a series of independent engagements.

Suddenly the Russian Second Army was ordered to stop attacking. The advancing Russian soldiers, their morale extremely high because they knew they were winning, could not understand the reason. The answer was the jealousy of a legendary military leader, General Kuropatkin. The Japanese forces were again saved by the Russian leadership—not, this time, by irresolution but by a truly scandalous discord. (See Yoichi Hiram, *Nichi-Ro Senso ga kaeta sekaishi* [World history changed by the Russo-Japanese War] [Tokyo: Fuyo-Shobo-Shuppan].)

advantageous tactical situation, the Japanese supply line was stretched almost to the breaking point. Force strength and the logistical stocks were precariously low in the field. The situation was the same in Japan itself.

If the Russian leaders, particularly Kuropatkin and his successor, had had a firm resolve to execute the plan, the Russian forces could have smashed the Japanese. But they did not. Unlike that of the Japanese leaders, their resolve was weak, and this weakness itself led the nation and its army to failure in this war. To be sure, for Russian leaders failure would not mean the collapse of Great Russia; for them the war against Japan was just an affair in the distant Far East. But for Japan, the war was a matter of the life or death of the nation and its people. Japan, particularly the Japanese army, was saved by this fatal flaw in the Russian leadership of those years.

After the Battle of Mukden in February–March 1905, Japanese leaders, despite their victory and seizure of the capital of Manchuria, knew they could not continue combat. Due to the lack of combat-ready reserves, ammunition, and supplies, the Japanese force could not hit and sweep away the retreating Russians. The Japanese, knowing they were losing the chance of a lifetime, could only witness the escape of the helpless Russian units. There was no hope that Japan could recover quickly from this state of exhaustion; this was the consensus from the lowest to the highest in the field and among the leaders in Tokyo.

The Russians, however, though they accepted that their position was now unfavorable and tactically disadvantageous, knew that they were still strong enough to fight another large battle—and that Japan could not afford to. Particularly, they pinned their hopes on the Baltic Fleet, which was expected to arrive in Japanese waters soon. If it destroyed the Japanese fleet and gained control of the sea, it would shut off supplies to the already starving Japanese army. That would mean, the Russians were confident, victory.

Thus, the battle between the Japanese Combined Fleet and the Russian Baltic Fleet was to be crucial for both countries. If Japan was to maintain its advantageous position in Manchuria and save its army, it had to win the battle utterly. Russia had to do the same to save its own forces in Manchuria. This is the real meaning of the Battle of Tsushima—a battle that, as we have seen, Admiral Togo had 90 percent won before it started.

#### THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR IMPERIAL JAPAN

By the 1930s, the Japanese leadership no longer looked back to the efforts of their predecessors in the Meiji era and did not consider the lessons learned and taught by their seniors who had managed the Russo-Japanese War successfully. Of course, the leaders in the Showa era thought they were taking due account of the past, but their conduct showed that in fact they were just skimming through

the old lessons, never digging into the true nature of the experience gained at such cost.<sup>17</sup> We can readily point out a number of sharp contrasts between the leadership in the Meiji era and that in the first twenty years (1926–45) of Showa.

*Public Consensus.* Meiji leaders achieved near unanimity of public opinion by making full use of the Triple Intervention. Showa leaders, however, managed poorly the Manchurian Incident of September 1931 and the series of incidents in China that followed. This ten-year-long military episode in Manchuria and China gravely shook Japanese morale. Ordinary Japanese people were still strongly loyal to the country, but they also had a gloomy sense of never-ending “quagmires” in China. In addition to this, many were revolted by a series of tawdry power games in Tokyo. The Japanese people in Showa were tired of a decade of chaos and crisis, both at home and in China. The Showa leaders never established a real consensus among the people.

*Clear and Realistic Goals.* Meiji leaders set clear national objectives and military goals: protection of the sovereignty of Japan and achievement of a generally favorable (“sixty-forty”) resolution of Russian issues. From any point of view, the potential enemy was easy to identify—Russia—against which Meiji leaders developed a well-thought-out strategy, involving Britain. They executed this strategy well and firmly.

The Showa leaders, in contrast, confused their objectives. If it was to have been a settlement of the collision with U.S. interests in China, the focus should have been the United States; with the cooperation of other Western countries, with which Japan had some common interests in China, Japan might have preserved some of its rights there. If the objective, instead, was to liberate colonies in Asia, European colonial states like Britain, the Netherlands, and France would have been the countries of concern. The United States and Australia, although the latter was a member of the British Commonwealth, could in that case have been aligned with Japan. Additionally, and surprisingly, an ally of Japan, Nazi Germany, was helping Chiang-Kai-shek, who was fighting Japanese forces in China. Thus the Japanese leaders of the period failed to focus on real national objectives and so could not sort out which countries to fight and which to join. In the end, Japan went to war against all the Western countries with presences in the region. Additionally, the Showa leadership had no long-range strategy for handling the relationships with the United States, Britain, or China—only stop-gap measures essentially in reaction to a single incident.

*Carefully Chosen Alliances.* Meiji leaders allied themselves with the United Kingdom, the strongest and the most influential country in the world at the time. Japan received great benefits from this alliance with Britain. The alliance

also isolated Japan's adversary, Russia, from the international community, at least partially, and made the Russian war effort more difficult.

Showa leaders, however, were not shrewd enough to identify their real partner, in terms of national interests. They led the country into war against the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and China, choosing instead a triple alliance (with Germany and Mussolini's Italy) that in fact isolated Japan itself from the rest of the world. Other than political propaganda and some psychological effects, the Axis alliance provided almost no practical benefits to any of its members. In fact, due to global sea control by the United States and Britain, mutual assistance between Japan and the other, very distant Axis countries was practically impossible throughout the war. Japan's triple alliance meant nothing to its war effort.

*The Risks of Confrontation.* Meiji leaders, fully taking into account the capability of their opponent, planned and built a well balanced military force that could meet the need in a timely manner. They ensured that adequate assets were available at the right times and in the right places.

Showa leaders were not so foresighted. They did their best, but the national capacity of the United States, let alone the combined capability of the United States and Britain, was too large to match. As time went by, the gap expanded very rapidly, driving Japan into a tight and hopeless corner.

*The Value of Intelligence.* Meiji leaders recognized the value of high-quality intelligence. They made maximum efforts to collect information and extensively used intelligence for war planning and actual operations.

Showa leaders similarly emphasized the importance of intelligence, but only in theory, not practice. The Japanese intelligence structure at the time was poor in both quality and size. Except for a few successful campaigns, military use of intelligence was generally inadequate. The level of maturity of Japanese intelligence was far from that of the United States and Britain.

*Sabotage.* Meiji leadership succeeded in disrupting the enemy by supporting internal revolutionary elements. Those activities surely had a negative impact on the Russian war effort. The Showa leaders, however, did not even attempt this type of campaign. The United States certainly had problems that Japan could have capitalized upon—for example, nationwide historical racial issues, and the relationship with Mexico.

*Cooperation between the Navy and Army.* In the Meiji period, coordination between the services was excellent. A telling example was the victorious campaign at Port Arthur.

In Showa, interservice relations were generally dominated by rivalry. Even in 1941, the Army still considered its potential enemy to be the Soviet Union, and it was preparing for campaigns in the north. The Navy's main concern was a southward movement for natural resources, of which Japan was short. At the last minute the Army reluctantly provided troops for southern operations, but it kept its main forces in China and Manchuria. Again, except for a few successes, coordination between the two services in the Showa era was rudimentary.

*Knowing When to Quit.* The Meiji leaders knew when to terminate their war and whom to ask to mediate the peace. Showa leaders went to war against multiple nations without any concrete plan for conflict termination.

Of course, these contrasts are matters of hindsight. However, the magnitude of the change in Japanese leadership during the thirty-five years from 1905 to 1940 is easy to see. For the Japanese it is hard to accept, but this was the reality. We should understand that for Japan the successful Russo-Japanese War was effectively the beginning of the end of Imperial Japan; the great Meiji leaders were succeeded by poor ones. The two groups were so different that we may well ask whether the Japanese leaders in the Showa era, who led the country to total devastation, were of the same Japanese race as their predecessors in Meiji, who had led the nation to historic success.

There is an old Japanese saying, "A conceited and arrogant winner never lasts long." Unfortunately, we Japanese followed it exactly.

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#### NOTES

1. Meiji ("Enlightened Rule") was the name given to the reign of Emperor Mutsuhito (1868–1912).
2. The Qing (also known as Manchu) dynasty lasted from 1644 until the 1911 revolution.
3. The sum of 200 million *tael/liang* was equivalent to 360 million yen at the time. This was 4.3 times as large as an annual budget of Japan then. Hiromi Tanida, *Nichi-Ro Senso yari-kuri monogatari* [A Balance Sheet of the Russo-Japanese War], Togo (published by the Togo Association, Japan), 16-7.8.
4. *Sekai Kaisen-Shi Gaisetsu, Dai II Kan* [Outline History of Major Naval Battles of the World, vol. 2] (Tokyo: JMSDF Staff College, Research Department, 1981).
5. *Ga-Shin-Sho-Tan* (Chinese reading, *Wo-Xin-Chang-Dan*—literally, "Lie on a layer of charcoal and lick liver") was a story of the "Spring and Autumn period" of China (770–476 BC). In order to prepare himself to avenge the death of his father, the king of Wu, Prince Bu-Cha, slept on a layer of charcoal, never on a bed. Bu-Cha denied himself all luxuries and submitted himself to hardships. He was afraid that a luxurious life would erode his determination. Meanwhile, Gou-Jian, king of Yue, a longtime rival of Wu, was cutting out his own luxuries as well. He avoided all delicious foods, preferring to lick bitter-tasting raw liver. He wanted from the bottom of his heart to remove his worst humiliation, a defeat by Wu at the Battle of Hui-Ji-Shan. He was determined to wage and win a new war against Wu,

and like Prince Bu-Cha he decided to spend his days in hard living in order not to diminish his resolution (see the *Kojien Dictionary* [Tokyo: Iwanami Shuppan]). This old story is interpreted in Japan as “To accomplish fully a long-standing objective, encourage yourself through diligence and dedication.”

6. With regard to the decision about Anglo-Japanese alliance, the four Genro and Prime Minister Katsura met at Katsura’s summer house in Hayama, a small town about thirty miles southwest of Tokyo, on 4 August 1901. At this meeting, the detailed idea that had been developed by Katsura was introduced to the members. Only Ito was against the alliance; however, when Ito saw the support of the other three Genro, he compromised and lent his support to the idea. With the Genro behind the idea, Katsura was convinced that it was the correct course and he proceeded to enact the plan. But Ito was not fully convinced yet. He was still afraid of the overwhelming Russian power. This fear drove him to make an additional but last-minute personal attempt to seek a Russo-Japanese treaty. One thing the Russian government should have taken into consideration was the real position of Ito. In other words, he was one of the Genro, who were still influential in Japan, but at the same time, as an individual, he was simply a Japanese ex-politician with no official authority. Although Ito was not in a position to represent Japan, the Russian government took him to be the right person to talk to about the issue. The Japanese government, however, was embarrassed by his private diplomatic activity. In addition to its initial mistake, the Russian government showed poor understanding of Japanese society and of Ito’s influence in the government by making a fool of him when he visited St. Petersburg. They tried to buy time by a display of cooperativeness on Manchuria and Korea. But the final position, sent to Ito in Berlin, was disappointing, insisting upon unlimited Russian rights in Manchuria and only limited Japanese rights in Korea. Thus Ito was betrayed and his private diplomacy, which might have broken Katsura’s pro-Western attempt, finally failed. This failure eventually gave a boost to Katsura’s effort. At the same time, Russia lost all credibility within the Tokyo government. The mistaken selection of a negotiating

partner and the mistreatment of Ito gave a powerful weapon to the Japanese government. Ryotaro Shiba, *Saka-no-ue-no-kumo* [A Biography of the Akiyama Brothers] (Tokyo: Bungei Shinju, 1970), vol. 2.

#### 7. *Sekai Kaisen-Shi Gaisetsu*.

8. The key elements of intelligence available were the following (*ibid.*).

#### Europe:

- The Russian army in the Far East had been reorganized and concentrated into two separate army corps, one responsible for operations in southern Manchuria and the other stationed in the Ussuri area.
- Additionally, two active army corps, four reserve infantry divisions, and one active cavalry brigade in European Russia were assigned as ready reinforcements for the Far East.
- All troops east of the Baikal were reorganized into one army corps (III Army Corps) and were to be transported to the Ussuri area.
- A food supply for six months was stored in Asian Russia.
- The Russian governor general in the Far East had been delegated the authority to defend the area by the tsar. He thought a war against Japan was necessary; however, he needed to buy some time to allow III Army Corps to arrive. Construction of dock facilities at Port Arthur was another consideration.

#### The Far East:

- Two Russian infantry battalions were stationed at the Yalu River.
- Construction of troop camps was under way.
- Stockpiling of war material and purchase of twenty thousand army horses in Manchuria were being expedited.
- The first reinforcements, two thousand troops, had arrived at Liaoyang.
- All Japanese residents in Vladivostok had been ordered by the Russian governor to evacuate to Khabarovsk.
- The Russian Far East Force had been mobilized.

9. Colonel Motojiro Akashi was assigned this mission and conducted various activities to support revolutionaries in Russia. He also helped secessionists in Finland and Poland, mainly by providing funds, to support Russian revolutionists indirectly. It is difficult to identify specific footprints of his activities in Europe, due to the clandestine nature of his mission, but his postwar promotion to general clearly shows the government's satisfaction with him. Yoichi Hiram, *Nichi-Ro Senso ga kaeta sekaishi* [World History Changed by the Russo-Japanese War] (Tokyo: Fuyo-Shobo-Shuppan, 2004).
10. Hiram, *Nichi-Ro Senso ga kaeta sekaishi*.
11. *Sekai Kaisen-Shi Gaisetsu*.
12. This second idea was developed by the operations officer of the Combined Fleet, Commander Saneyuki Akiyama. The Japanese navy had sent Akiyama, as a lieutenant, to the United States to study tactics and operations of the U.S. Navy. During his stay he met many of its leaders. He tried to become a student of the Naval War College, at Newport, Rhode Island, but failed. The most important thing, for him as well as the Japanese navy, was that he met Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan several times and learned the basic tenets of Mahan's teachings. Though he would display a strong sense of rivalry against Japan in later years, Mahan took good care of this young Japanese officer. During the Spanish-American War, Akiyama joined Admiral William T. Sampson's fleet at the blockade of Santiago de Cuba, a fact that might give insight into his ideas for blockading Port Arthur. After his return to Japan, the Navy assigned Akiyama, now a lieutenant commander, to develop basic tactics and operational concepts for the Japanese fleet, looking ahead to the coming warfare against a formidable Russian fleet. Finally, as a commander, Akiyama was appointed as Admiral Togo's operations officer, which he remained for the duration of the war, developing all the operations and campaign plans of the Combined Fleet. So, in terms of naval operations, it could be said that Akiyama designed the war and Togo executed it. Kinji Shimada, *Amerika ni okeru Akiyama Saneyuki* [Lieutenant Saneyuki Akiyama: His Day in America] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun, 1975).
13. Some of the warships retired to Port Arthur, where they were ultimately destroyed by the Imperial Army's Long Range Heavy Artillery for Hard-Targets Unit, which started shelling the harbor on 18 August. Five ships—the battleship *Tsesarevich*, the cruiser *Novik*, and three destroyers—escaped to Kiaochow Bay, China, where *Tsesarevich* and the destroyers were interned by local German officials. *Novik* was able to resupply and headed for Sakhalin but subsequently was destroyed near there by two Japanese cruisers. All of the other ships of the squadron suffered similar fates.
14. *Sekai Kaisen-Shi Gaisetsu*. The "engagement in depth" concept comprised search and reconnaissance by scouting ships employed ahead of the main force; a daytime gun engagement by the main body of battleships and armored cruisers; a follow-on engagement by cruisers; a night torpedo assault by destroyers and torpedo boats; a second gun engagement by the main force, possibly the next day; continued torpedo assault by destroyers and torpedo boats the next day; a final gun engagement by the main force near Vladivostok; and minelaying at the mouth of Vladivostok Harbor.
15. Keigo Yoshida, "Track of Imperial Navy to Create Perfect Victory at Battle of Tsushima," in *Soshyutsu no koseki* [Research on the Battle of Tsushima] (Tokyo: Suzusawa-Shoten, 2000).
16. *Ibid.*
17. The Showa ("Enlightened Peace") era was the reign of Emperor Hirohito, 1926–89.

