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Japan’s ‘Fifteen Minutes of Glory’: Managing World Opinion during the War with Russia, 1904–5

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the major conflicts in which Japan participated in modern times, the Russo-Japanese War marks the apex of its international image. Only against tsarist Russia did Japan appeal to both its Asian neighbours and a majority of the Western nations. During this nineteen-month conflict, Japan’s image as a backward Asian nation evaporated, supplanted by the vision of a determined and advanced martial nation. Japanese soldiers were depicted abroad as valiant and physically attractive, and their monarch lofty and benevolent. Alas, these images would never recur. While regarded as David fighting the ursine Russian Goliath in the early stages of the war, in its aftermath Japan was recognized as a regional power on an equal and occasionally superior footing to that of Western powers in the arena. In retrospect, it was perhaps an inevitable juncture in the rapid transformation of the image of the Japanese from benign, somewhat feminine children to yellow brutes – an image that receded only in the wake of the Pacific War.

The war was indeed a unique moment in Japan’s struggle to enhance its international image. A decade earlier, during the war against China (1894–5), Japan was considered a dwarf fighting a giant, but its rival, in fact, was a collapsing Asian nation unfit for a modern military clash. Chinese weakness harmed Japanese efforts at image improvement as much as the combat behaviour of the Japanese themselves. The atrocities Japanese troops committed on the local population and the garrison of the Manchurian town of Lushun (Port Arthur) in November 1894 sullied the military credit the nation had gained.1 Finally, Japan’s capitulation to
the Russo-Franco-German collaboration (known as the Three Power Intervention) sealed the common assessment by Western military experts that China’s weakness rather than Japan’s strength determined the outcome. Four decades later, the rise of ultranationalism in Tokyo, coupled with fears of further Japanese expansion, demolished what remained of a positive image associated with Japan. During the so-called Fifteen Year War (1931–45), Japan was thoroughly demonized in East Asia, by China in particular, and by most of its former Western allies.

The positive images Japan won in its war against tsarist Russia were fairly true to reality. Japanese forces were victorious in every single campaign of the war, and their conduct was by and large proper (adhering strictly to the Geneva Convention of 1864 and the Hague convention of 1899) and humane (as far as the fighting allowed). Yet this behaviour alone does not account for the positive images. Reality contains many facets, but the desired concentration on positive facets, especially in wartime, requires favourable circumstances, skilful public relations and a willing audience. This chapter explores foreign images of the Japanese military during the Russo-Japanese War, examines the circumstances surrounding those images and the way Japan manipulated them, and seeks to explain the Japanese success in creating positive images of its military and of nation as a whole in the world opinion.

THE CIVILIZED SUPERMAN: THE EMERGENCE OF FAVOURABLE IMAGES OF JAPAN

In the early months of 1904, the Japanese soldier became, at least momentarily, the emblem of an imaginary Oriental knight. It was, in fact, the only time in modern history that portrayals of masculine and aggressive Japanese were accepted, even with a certain enthusiasm, by an applauding Western audience. In the years before the war, Western media and popular culture depicted the Japanese military with contempt mixed with sarcasm (Pl. 13). Frequently, the very sight of Japanese soldiers evoked laughter among Western observers. They were dressed, many thought, in ill-fitting uniforms, and behaved in a way that some interpreted as feminine and childish. The British writer and poet of imperialism, Rudyard Kipling, who visited Japan in 1889 and 1892, might be representative of Western criticism of the Japanese Army during the late nineteenth century. Attentively observing Japanese military personnel on several occasions, Kipling felt that the delicate fans and tea-sets he noticed in an army barracks in Osaka ‘do not go with one’s notion of a barrack’. While admitting that the Japanese soldier ‘makes a trim little blue-jacket’, he concluded that ‘he does not understand soldiering’.

Impressions aside, in reality the Japanese military advanced dramatically towards the end of the nineteenth century. As Japanese victories in the war with China were known, Sir Henry Norman, a British military expert who had visited Tokyo in the early 1890s, wrote that Japan had not been taken seriously prior to the war. National images change