German Policy and the Russo-Japanese War

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THE GERMAN ATTITUDE BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

At first glance, Germany was in no way involved in the Russo-Japanese War, having promised to observe strict neutrality, though without issuing an official declaration.¹ If one examines the political context more closely, however, one finds that Germany had been trying for several years to turn Russia against Japan. These attempts had been successful as early as 1895 with the Triple Intervention against the peace treaty of Shimonoseki, when Germany had succeeded in inciting Russia against Japan, with France falling into line, so that Japan had to return the Liaotung Peninsula to China. When Germany acquired Kiaochow/Tsingtao in 1898, Russia responded to this provocation with the lease of Liaotung with Port Arthur, while Great Britain took over Weihaiwei. The connection from Siberia to Port Arthur was established via railway. After the Boxer War in 1900, Russia kept her hold on Manchuria, the vast Chinese area through which the railway ran, in contradiction to international commitments – thereby provoking not only Japan but also the United States which had extensive economic interests in the area under occupation.

Emperor Wilhelm understood from an interview with his cousin Tsar Nicholas II that the Russian monarch was following developments in East Asia with special interest considering the consolidation and expansion of Russian influence there as the key task of his government. The tsar was clearly irritated by Japan not only because of the rival claims to Korea but also because he himself as crown prince had been the victim of an assassination attempt and was wounded during a visit in 1891 to Japan.² It is unlikely, however, that Nicholas reckoned with an outright war since, to Germany’s disappointment, his attitude thereafter tended to be hesitant rather than intensifying tensions with Japan.
The motivation for Germany's interest in a Russo-Japanese war lay in her isolated position in Europe: the Russo-French alliance of 1894 had raised fears in Germany of a two-front war. Efforts, however, to strengthen its own position by concluding an alliance with Great Britain had failed in 1901 due to Germany's naval rearmament and the reluctance of Britain to be tied to the Central Powers for fear of becoming embroiled in Balkan affairs. On the other hand, Germany did not agree to a variety of Entente Cordiale of that kind Britain was to sign with France in 1904. Although the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 had a basically anti-Russian character, it also had a certain degree of anti-German bias, since it allowed Great Britain to pull its naval forces back from East Asia to European waters, in order to defend herself against the expanding German fleet. The short-lived German interest in joining this block proved illusory as a result of German naval rearmament. In this situation, a Russian engagement in the Far East would distract the attention of the tsar's empire away from the Balkans, where it would confront Germany's ally, Austria-Hungary, as well as from the Turkish Straits at a time when Germany had begun to gain influence in the Ottoman empire by constructing the Baghdad railway. (Stingl 1978, II: 506–07) Furthermore, a Russo-British rapprochement would become almost impossible. In East Asia, a Russian victory would be welcome to the Germans, since a Japanese victory could endanger Germany's colony of Tsingtao and her privileged position in Shantung province.

Already at the planning stage of the Triple Intervention against the treaty of Shimonoseki, Wilhelm had assured Nicholas in a letter that he would do everything in his power to keep Europe quiet and also guard the rear of Russia so that nobody should interfere with Russia's move towards the Far East.3 As Bernhard von Bülow, German Chancellor from 1900 to 1909, claimed, in the late 1880s Bismarck had already hoped that Russia would be involved in Asian affairs so that peace in Europe would not be endangered. (Bülow 1930, I: 130–31) Bülow himself expected one decade later that Russia would have to rely on German benevolence the stronger Japan became.4 In 1900 the German legation in St Petersburg had noted that the Russian Baltic fleet had already lost its significance since all newly built ships had been sent to Far Eastern waters in expectation of a clash with Japan, although Russia was interested in delaying the outbreak of conflict as long as the Trans-Siberian railway was not ready.5

Therefore, Germany, and particularly Kaiser Wilhelm, pressed Russia for several years to defend Europe, the Christian faith, and the predominance of the white race against Asian barbarism, emphasizing the 'yellow peril'. (Gollwitzer 1962: 42–43, 206–213; Shinobu/Nakayama 1959: 164; Iikura 2004: 45–100) Though Wilhelm did not invent the catchword he made it popular, reviving the fear of the hordes of Attila, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. This ugly term was initially linked to China, but began to be directed more and more against the rising power of Japan, where the term was seen as an insulting expression of extreme