The Memory and Significance of the Russo-Japanese War from a Centennial Perspective

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The Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) was the first great war of the twentieth century. Advances in communications at that time made it also the most reported war in the world until then, with a flood of news stories, commentaries, analyses, essays, photograph collections, books, and even movies in dozens of languages. To contemporaries, that war looked dramatic, epoch-making and unforgettable, something that many generations would recount and remember.

One book of that time, entitled The Japan-Russia War, which appeared in Philadelphia in 1905, opened with the words: “The Japan-Russia War goes into history as the greatest military struggle the world has known.” The siege of Port Arthur, the author Sydney Tyler asserted, “has no duplicate among all recorded military achievements.” Referring to the nineteenth-century English prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, he affirmed: “Lord Beaconsfield once said that there were only two events in history – the siege of Troy and the French Revolution. It seems more than possible that the Russo-Japanese War will have to be recorded as a third supreme factor in the progress of the world.” Other contemporaries were startled by the possible repercussions of the clash. The American war correspondent, Murat Halstead, for example, believed in 1906 that it “is a logical war and it may spread until it sweeps over the Continent of Europe and Asia.” He was certain it would continue “to be of universal and almost unparalleled interest,” and wondered, among all colossal eventualities the war might lead to, whether Europe would conquer Asia, or Asia would conquer Europe.

These contemporary eulogies and admiring notes notwithstanding, the Russo-Japanese War was soon forgotten. World War I, which broke
out nine years later, overshadowed it, and then World War II overshadowed them both. By the middle of the twentieth century, all the countries that had been involved in that war had forgotten it and in time were even pleased to have done so.

ORCHESTRATED AMNESIA AND ACTS OF TRIVIALIZATION

The historical amnesia about the war was shared by people of virtually every nation, but principally by the two belligerents. For many years sad and sentimental songs of the Russo-Japanese War, like In Memory of Variag and On the Hills of Manchuria, were sung in Russia, but the war itself was quickly forgotten. The Russians, in both their tsarist and their Soviet garb, had good reason to draw a veil over that war. They wished to forget the national humiliation that they had suffered at the hands of a country which they traditionally regarded as a political and military inferior. They wanted to hide from their newly acquired Asian friends their colonial ambitions in northeast China (once called Manchuria) and Korea. Soviet historians had to decide which side in the Russo-Japanese War was right and which was wrong. If the good guys were the Russians the tsar was right and his expansionist policy was just. But this would mean that the revolutionaries who opposed the tsar and his foreign policy were wrong. When Port Arthur fell in 1905, Lenin declared: “The European bourgeoisie has its reasons to be frightened, and the proletariat has its reasons to rejoice.” No good communist would dare to claim that Lenin was wrong, but no good communist could claim either that imperial Japan was right. By Stalin’s time, exonerating Japan’s position in its first war against Russia sounded unpatriotic. When Port Arthur was retaken by the Soviets in the Second Russo-Japanese War in 1945, Stalin declared that “the defeat of Russian troops in 1904 . . . left bitter memories in the mind of the people . . . Our people believed and hoped that a day would come when Japan would be smashed and that blot effaced. Forty years have we . . . waited for this day.”

The Japanese remembered the war vividly until 1945. The very name of the war in Japanese, nichiro sensō, which means Japan-Russia War, can be also read poetically as the war between the sun (nichi, that is Japan) and the dew (ro, that is Russia), in which the sun naturally evaporates the dew. This was their greatest military triumph in modern times, and the last one to be hailed by most of the world. The legacy of the war became a point of departure for any military plan and commemoration until the final days of the empire. The date of the victory in the land battle in Mukden, March 10 (1905), was celebrated annually as Army Day, and the date of the victory in the naval battle of Tsushima, May 27 (1905), was celebrated every year as Navy Day. After their deaths, General Nogi Maresuke (1843–1912) and Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō (1847–1934) were apotheosized as gunshin (war gods) and shrines were built to them in Tokyo — the Nogi Jinja in 1937, and the Tōgō Jinja in 1940 — where they can still be worshipped today. They were also the two only modern figures who appeared on Japanese postage stamps.