The Russo-Japanese War fundamentally altered both the scope and intent of Russian war planning in the Eurasian continent, creating both internal tensions as well as concrete reforms that were eventually to fundamentally affect the manner in which the Russian army also performed in 1914. Before 1904, the Russian General Staff had accurately foreseen conflict in Northeast Asia, but due to a complex mix of personal, administrative, and financial reasons, both the General Staff and the armed forces as a whole were still largely unprepared for war with Japan when fighting actually began. Part of the reason for this lack of readiness lay in the deep legacy of strategic thinking from the nineteenth century, a body of thought which since at least the early 1870s had strictly guided where the majority of strategic planning time and material resources were devoted by Russia within the Eurasian space.

The Russian commanders who went to war in 1904 were to a large degree inevitably the intellectual, spiritual, and doctrinal descendants of the generation who had earlier lived through and helped direct Russia’s “Great Reforms” in the 1860s. This previous generation had helped in organizational terms to create tsarist Russia’s first truly conscript army, whilst in doctrinal terms they had also laid the basis for modern Russian military intelligence, through the inculcation of whole generations of tsarist General Staff officers in the then relatively new academic discipline of “military statistics.” Russian war planning from at least the 1840s onwards gradually came to be shaped by a strategic assessment of the military capabilities of neighboring states, incorporating careful analysis of their physical geography, culture, technological level, demographic potential, and political-societal structure. Over time, this form of
analysis created a series of set criteria, or potential-threat indicators, against which states of any type could be measured and assessed. Knowledge of such factors assisted force structuring, war planning, and deployment proposals, as well as Russian internal reform; conscription within Russia itself was only conceivable within a context in which the natural physical and human resources of the empire were themselves becoming an increasingly better-known quantity to the decision-makers in St. Petersburg.

It was no coincidence, therefore, that the staff officers engaged on such intelligence-gathering activities were also frequently members of the Russian Imperial Geographical Society, nor that their extensive mapping activities frequently also facilitated civilian infrastructural and governmental projects within the borders of the empire itself. The Corps of Military Topographers formed in 1822, in particular, became an invaluable arm of the Russian state, and the later construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway (a vital part of the Trans-Siberian line before 1904) across Northern Manchuria would have been simply inconceivable without their extensive preliminary mapping and surveying efforts. Over time, these diverse and vibrant activities in the various fields of espionage, map-making, ethnography, and anthropology facilitated the creation of a distinct “world-view” amongst key St. Petersburg decision-makers which then permitted the formulation of long-term grand strategic thinking for the Russian Empire.

The geopolitical views of Russia’s most brilliant reform-minded War Minister, Dmitrii Miliutin (1816–1912; War Minister between 1861–81), and his deputy and close assistant, General Nikolai Obruchev (1830–1904; Chief of the Main Staff 1881–97) meant in practice that during the latter part of the nineteenth century by far the greatest strategic attention was devoted to the Western frontier and the critical border region with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Threat-analysis studies conducted by both Miliutin and Obruchev in the 1860s and 1870s demonstrated that the greatest strategic danger to Russian state interests came from this direction, and these assessments in turn dictated the prolonged and expensive reform of Russia’s western military theaters. The enormous Polish salient in particular represented a region of critical strategic vulnerability, and during the 1880s a whole series of new measures was undertaken to militarily strengthen this theater, including the construction of a new rail network and the building up of a series of elaborate and expensive new artillery fortifications.

By contrast, threats from the direction of Central Asia or Northeast Asia represented a strategic distraction compared to the political menace presented by Germany and Austria-Hungary, and war scares from across this period in Asia – the Eastern Crisis of 1878, or the Penjdeh Incident of 1885 – produced only slim contingency schedules, with the promise of reinforcement by one or at most two army corps from European Russia. Characteristic of official St. Petersburg’s more general disinterest in Asian affairs was the subsequently scathingly reported at second-hand warning