Beginning with the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, railroads have played a central role in modern warfare. By making possible the rapid concentration and supply of forces, rail transport revolutionized combat logistics. By the time the Russo-Japanese War had ended, railroads had become so vital to the success of military campaigns that a magazine writer could declare: “the mobilization of the great armies . . . is but the systematized work of train dispatchers.”

Railroads indeed figured prominently in the Russo-Japanese War, leading one scholar to describe that conflict as “very largely a railway war.” In doing so, he and others generally have in mind the intense rivalry for control of railroads in Korea and Manchuria and the negative impact of the Trans-Siberian Railway as both “the fundamental cause of the hostilities” and the decisive factor in Russia’s defeat. Historians typically contrast the enormous difficulties Russia faced in moving troops and supplies more than five thousand miles from Europe over the poorly equipped, single-track Trans-Siberian line, whose rupture at Lake Baikal persisted until late September 1904, with the advantages Japan enjoyed of proximity and easy deployment by sea. Unlike the Russians, with their dependence on a deficient railway system, the Japanese relied for military transport primarily on their extensive merchant marine. Having won command of the sea early in the conflict, Japan could send its troops quickly from ports in the home islands and land them “at almost

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1 On these first cases of effective railway use in war, see, for instance, John E. Clark, Jr., Railroads in the Civil War: The Impact of Management on Victory and Defeat (Baton Rouge, 2001), and Geoffrey Wawro, The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871 (Cambridge, 2003).
3 John Westwood, Railways at War (San Diego, 1981), 112.
4 Ibid.
any point on the seaboard of the theatre of war.” Consequently, whereas Russian reinforcements reached the Asian front “in dribs and drabs,” Japan’s entire army was in the field within months of the outbreak of hostilities.

This standard juxtaposition of slow Russian trains and fast Japanese ships misses the point that, for Japan, military transport during the war was not just smooth sailing. With its army divisions scattered across the four main islands, Japan faced a huge logistical challenge in assembling troops and materiel at the major sending ports. In every case, it gathered its forces by rail, although the distances they had to travel at home averaged in the hundreds rather than thousands of miles. The Japanese did not escape problems of land transport on the continent: for instance, with Korea’s trans-peninsular trunk railroad more than a year away from completion at the start of the war, the First Army took one month to slog the 125 miles from Pyongyang to the Yalu on roads “bad beyond description.” But, even within Japan, the authorities had to contend with a railway system divided among the state railways, which accounted for less than a third of the total length of line open, and dozens of private companies. Moreover, the railways themselves equaled, if not exceeded, the Trans-Siberian in terms of limited carrying capacity, with their dearth of double-tracking, their generally cheap construction, and their use of the 3’6” narrow gauge as opposed to the 5’ Russian standard. In fact, in nationalizing the principal private lines in 1906, the Japanese government cited, among other reasons, the inconveniences and delays the military had experienced at home during the war with a fragmented rail network badly in need of renovation and expansion. The actual wartime performance of the Japanese domestic railroads as military conveyers demonstrates that, for Japan as well, the conflict was as much a “railway war” on the home front as on the battlefield.


7 German General Staff, Historical Section, The Russo-Japanese War: The Ya-lu, tr. Karl von Donat (London, 1908), 147.