Russia and Japan in the Late 19th to 20th Centuries: the Road to War and Peace

Igor V. Lukoyanov

A study of the complicated history of Russo-Japanese relations at the turn of the 20th century should not be interpreted simply as a string of events that would result in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. The primary issue in this discussion is determining whether the conflict was inevitable and when relations between the two countries irreparably broke down. Russian historiography offers various versions about which trajectory ultimately led to the war. The military historian Panteleimon N. Simanskiĭ, the first Russian scholar to examine this era in depth, asserted that Japan was entirely responsible for the conflict (Simanskiĭ 1910a).1 After 1917 the Russian monarchy and its policies were blamed. Those who hold Russia accountable believe that it rested on the country’s “military-feudal” imperialism or its “trading capital” and that the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, beginning in 1891, already predetermined the future struggle for Asian markets and global trade routes. Another factor was that later Soviet historiography tried “to reduce” the aggression of Russian imperialism (Kutakov 1988). Russian historians today are less interested in apportioning blame, however, than in analyzing the ineffectualness of the Russian imperial government that was “being split and burdened by ‘irresponsible influences,’” as well as its inconsistency and failure in formulating and defending its position (Ignat'ev and Melikhov 1997, 161). This essay will investigate the incidents that resulted in the Russo-Japanese War and outline the diplomatic outcomes of the conditions of the peace treaty following the conflict.2

1 The Lead-Up to War: Prewar Negotiations

In the second half of the 19th century, relations between Russia and Japan were not hostile, as seen in the resolution of a territorial dispute in 1875 that ended

---

1 This text is an abridged version of Simanskiĭ’s secret three-volume book, of which only seven copies were printed (Simanskiĭ 1910b).

in Russia securing Sakhalin and Japan the Kuriles. In the autumn of 1892, instructions to the new envoy to Tokyo, Mikhail A. Hitrovo, specified that “no essential controversy” existed between Russia and Japan (Kutakov 1988, 210). St. Petersburg’s interest in the Far Eastern periphery was limited to concerns over the weak defenses of the Russian borders, which was one reason for the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (1891–1901). Tokyo viewed the railway as proof of St. Petersburg’s expansionist intentions in the region (Valliant 1974, 47–67).

In 1892, the new Minister of Finance Sergei Yu. Witte expressed interest in the Far East. He pushed for extensive economic involvement in China since he wished to take control of its markets in order to promote the products of Russia’s rapidly growing industries. Most Russian dignitaries and diplomats viewed China as a rival, but the government in St. Petersburg did an about-turn in its policy in the spring of 1895 with the conclusion of the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April 17, 1895, that stipulated that China cede the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan. At a special consultation earlier on March 30 (April 11) Witte declared that Japan had become Russia’s principle rival in the Far East and that it should not be allowed under any circumstances into the Asian continent. He was concerned about the possible expansion of the Japanese into Manchuria, which the minister wished to see exclusively within the Russian sphere of influence (Popov 1932, 78–83).

Although Emperor Nicholas II had not approved the “consultation journal,” the views on Russo-Japanese relations shifted.3 In the first half of April 1895, Prince Esper E. Ukhtomskii published a belligerent article in the newspaper Moskovskie vedomosti in which he urged that the empire remain firm when dealing with Japan: “not an inch of land or a measure of influence on the Asian continent.” Nicholas II assessed this article as “very good” (RGIA [n.d.], f. 1072, op. 2, d. 246). Russia’s anti-Japanese stance was formally acknowledged in a secret Sino-Russian agreement concluded on May 22 (June 3), 1896, with Russia promising military aid to China in the event of a Japanese attack.

The Korean issue drove a further wedge between Russia and Japan in the mid-1890s. Despite its renewed contacts with Korea after the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, Russia did not take advantage of its “insider” position vis-à-vis the kingdom. For example, the Korean king Gojong fled from Japanese

---

3 The term “consultation journal,” often translated as “conference” in English sources, is a very special institution of autocracy (osoboe soveshchanie). This “consultation” or “conference” is a temporary meeting of appointed bureaucrats or dignitaries to discuss special problems. The foundation of the consultation took place after the emperor’s decision and would only have been in the form of advice (i.e., the “journal”). This was not a committee.