
Survey Article

What Caused the Russo-Japanese War—Korea or Manchuria?

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The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) has become the focus of academic attention again owing to the recent observance of the 100-year anniversary of the war. This survey article examines new scholarship that has appeared on the historical significance of the war in the wake of this anniversary from among researchers located around the world. This paper will focus on the causes of the war, by questioning the significance of Korea and Manchuria in the diplomatic negotiations leading up to the outbreak of the war. The origins of the war are closely connected to the 'Korea question' and the 'Manchuria question': if Korea was the reason for the Russo-Japanese War, the war was a defensive war for Japan; if Manchuria was the reason for the war, it was an imperial war. However, I believe that the connections between the Korea question and the Manchuria question became entangled in a way that the actors involved did not realize clearly at the time.

1. Introduction

The Russo-Japanese War began on 6 February 1904, with an initial strike by Japan followed by formal declaration of war on 10 February, and ended on 5 September 1905, with the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth. While scholarly attention on the origins of Japan's first war with a Western power had mostly concluded, with the recent observance of the 100-year anniversary of the Russo-Japanese War, new scholarship has appeared on the historical significance of the war from among researchers located around the world. In this article, I will examine some of the recent trends to emerge from this new focus on the Russo-Japanese War. In particular, I will focus on the causes of the war, by questioning the significance of Korea and Manchuria in the diplomatic negotiations leading up to the outbreak of the war.

Among the many international conferences convened in Japan during 2004–2005 in recognition of the centennial observance of the war, two drew the most attention. The first was the 'Centenary International Symposium on the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–05' held during 19–22 May 2005, in Nichinan-shi, Miyazaki prefecture (home of Komura Jutarō, the Japanese Foreign Minister at the time of the war), which had at its center the Russo-Japanese War Association represented by Inaba Chiharu of Meijō University. The second conference, 'World War 0: Reappraising the War of 1904–5', held at Keiō University during 23–27 May 2005, originated at the suggestion of Japanese and American

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researchers in Russian history, who were joined at the conference by specialists in Japanese and Russian history. Hereafter, I will refer to the first conference as the Nichinan Conference and the second conference as the Keiō Conference. To add some explanation, these two meetings did not reflect differences between academic schools; moreover, there was not an exclusive distinction between the two events, such as researchers who attended the Nichinan Conference not attending the Keiō Conference, or vice versa. In fact, many researchers and presenters attended both conferences. However, when we look at the topics emphasized or adopted as themes at these conferences, the distinguishing features of the respective conferences become readily apparent. What were these distinguishing features?

2. The Nichinan Conference

The organizers of the Nichinan Conference emphasized three points in their opening remarks delivered at the conference. First, they wanted to include China and Korea in a constructive way because conventional research on the war lacks the viewpoints of these two countries, even though the war was fought in Korea and Manchuria (i.e. northeastern China). Second, scholarship must grasp the international character of the war because Euro-American powers—including Great Britain, the US, Germany and France—participated in the buildup to the war. Third, there is a need to view the war with respect to its economic, social, public relations (*kōhō*), ethnic (*minzoku*) and literary dimensions.

The primary research presented at the conference has been collected and published as *Nichiro Sensō Kenkyū no Shin-shiten* (2005). This article introduces new directions in research and significant analytical viewpoints illuminated in the arguments presented at the conference and in the conference volume.

The first distinguishing feature of the Nichinan Conference was its attention to prewar diplomacy conducted between Japan and Russia. Recent research from Japan emphasizes the fact that up until the last moment before the war began, there existed the possibility of an agreement between Japan and Russia or perhaps other options that would have avoided the outbreak of war. Such is made clear in minute detail in primary sources that present the opinions of Itō Hirobumi, Yamagata Aritomo, Katsura Tarō and Komura Jūtarō, all of whom participated in the formation of diplomatic and national defense policy. Chiba Isao of Shōwa Women's University examined the centrality of proposals made by both Japan and Russia during the period of diplomatic negotiations held between the two countries immediately prior to the outbreak of the war (July 1903 through February 1904), as well as changes in the content of meetings of Japan's *genrō* council convened during that time period.¹ In previous scholarship, for the most part no differences in opinion appeared between Yamagata, Katsura and Komura, all of whom actively pursued war, and Itō, who had a halfhearted stance toward war. Not only did the *genrō* continue to hope until the end of 1903 for an agreement between Japan and Russia but so did Prime Minister Katsura and Foreign Minister Komura.

According to Itō Yukio of Kyoto University, the line of financial arrangements promoted by Itō Hirobumi and Inoue Katsu, the *genrō* who led the Seiyūkai (the political party that held over half the seats in the House of Representatives of the Imperial Diet), continued to hold persuasive power. Moreover, if Itō had not resigned as Seiyūkai president and been established as head of the Privy Council in July 1903, then the Seiyūkai line calling for Russo-Japanese appeasement would have continued and might have sidestepped the road to war. Even though Itō Yukio (2000) holds in high regard the writings of Ian Nish, a scholar of Japanese diplomatic history who holds tremendous

1. See Chiba (1996a, 1996b).

influence, he criticizes Nish's (1985) research for insufficiently contextualizing the political diplomacy of 1903, which was marked by an appeasement line toward Russia that was shared by the Seiyūkai and *genrō* Itō and Inoue. This criticism stems from the fact that Nish's research relies upon published primary sources to analyze movements in Japan at the time of the war, such as Gaimushō (1967) and Tsunoda (1967).

The second distinguishing feature of the Nichinan Conference was its renewed attention to an issue concerning the cause of the war, namely, how should we view the 'Korea question' and the 'Manchuria question'. Until now, researchers in Japan understood the Sino-Japanese War as the war in which Japanese power caused China to regard Korea as an 'independent' state, or put another way, a war waged to establish Japanese control over Korea. Moreover, by regarding the Russo-Japanese War as the war that caused Russia to accept the open door policy in Manchuria—Japan's next goal—or in other words, a war waged to establish Japanese control over Manchuria, the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War have come to be seen as sequential steps. This way of thinking fits the Russo-Japanese War into position within a strongly rooted background—the background of Japanese historiography—as a gauge for displaying the development and progression of Japanese capitalism. In this way, if Korea was the reason for the Russo-Japanese War, the war was a defensive war for Japan; if Manchuria was the reason for the war, it was an imperial war.²

Yi Sunhan (2005) of Keimyung College in Korea provided a quite profound perspective on this recurring issue. King Kojong's government in Korea was caught in the middle of the deepening crisis between Japan and Russia, and up until the end it pursued neutrality as Korea's diplomatic policy. However, Korea's grasping for neutrality had an extremely low likelihood of success when we consider that Japan, which had been undertaking diplomatic negotiations with Russia since before the start of the war, negotiated with the view that the Korea question and the Manchuria question were inseparable. Nevertheless, Yi questions why the Korean government persisted in pursuing a policy of neutrality up until the outbreak of the war. He concludes that the Korean government mistakenly regarded Manchuria as the actual issue within Russo-Japanese diplomatic negotiations and held the optimistic view that Korea was not the issue. Thus, the problem comes back once again to this: what was the actual point of contestation between Japan and Russia that led to the Russo-Japanese War?

In addition to discussing Korea, the Nichinan Conference made much of the viewpoint of China; after all, paying attention to China and Korea was the second point emphasized by the conference organizers in their opening comments at Nichinan. Let us now shift to the third distinguishing feature of the conference: illuminating the Chinese government's aims regarding the war. Kawashima Shin (2004) of Tokyo University analyzed the aims of the Chinese government, which adopted a policy of neutrality toward the war. In reports sent back to his superiors in the Chinese government, Hu Weide, the Chinese minister stationed in Russia, questioned whether it would be better for China if Japan or Russia won the war when it came to the probability of the victor acknowledging Chinese sovereignty regarding rights and interests in Manchuria. Hu reasoned that in the event that Japan was victorious, it was inconceivable that Russia would simply hand over rights and interests in Manchuria to Japan, and therein would lay an opening that China could use to its advantage. Additionally, Hu emphasized that it would be best to adopt a stance of strict rather than amiable neutrality toward Japan because the extent of Japanese ambitions toward Manchuria was unclear. China decided upon wartime neutrality at some point during November–December 1903, and on 12 February 1904, issued a declaration that made all of China—including Manchuria—neutral territory. However,

2. For fundamental debates that examine the war from a Marxist perspective, see Nakanishi and Naraoka (2005), and Chiba (1997).

neither Japan nor Russia complied with China's demand because they regarded Manchuria to be a war zone.

The work of Hirakawa Sachiko (2004) of Waseda University reveals the aggressive posturing that China should have brought to the Portsmouth Peace Conference. On the occasion of the opening of the peace conference, which had been arranged by the US, the Chinese government sent requests to Japan, Russia and the US questioning whether it should send a group of representatives to the conference and inquiring in advance on matters relating to Chinese sovereignty. However, these three countries did not entertain these requests, and that was the end of the matter.

The fourth distinctive feature of the Nichinan Conference was its attention to noteworthy advances in corroborative research by Japanese researchers concerning the prewar Russian political system. Hirono Yoshihiko (2005) of Osaka University has examined the journal kept by Russian War Minister General Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin during his visit to Japan in 9–29 June 1903, and analyzes the contents of conversations held between Kuropatkin and Japanese Foreign Minister Komura. A point that must be emphasized is that Kuropatkin and Komura discussed the Korea question. At the time of Kuropatkin's visit, Russia had a number of rights in Korea granted by Article Four of the Komura-Weber Memorandum of 1896, such as the right to station troops in Korea to protect the Russian legation as long as the number of Russian troops did not exceed the number of Japanese troops in Korea. However, when it came to Russia's primary rights in Korea, Kuropatkin repeatedly acknowledged during his visit that Japan did not actually recognize such rights. It seems a difference existed in how Russia and Japan each regarded the importance of rights in Korea.

Having taken note of this difference, Hirono (2005: 44) concludes that '[o]nce negotiations commenced between Japan and Russia, Russia scaled back its demands and claims regarding Korea bit by bit, making a series of concessions that Japan regarded as serious compromises on Russia's part. Give the gap in mutual understanding that existed between the two parties, it was perhaps in a certain sense only to be expected that diplomacy did not resolve the question of Manchuria and Korea (*Mankan mondai*).' Viewed in light of such considerations, it seems that we must answer the question 'could the Russo-Japanese War have been avoided?' in the negative. We are led to the conclusion that the war was inevitable upon examining the situation from the angle of a 'gap in mutual understanding' between Japan and Russia regarding the Korea question. This point apparently contradicts the first distinguishing feature of the Nichinan Conference, namely, the call to heed prewar diplomacy conducted between Japan and Russia. Thus, depending on the nature of the historical material under examination, at this point it appears that the answer to the question—could the Russo-Japanese War have been avoided?—could go either way.

In addition to the aforementioned political analysis, there has also been an analysis of influential Russian periodicals. Kanō Tadashi (2005) of Seiji University analyzed changes in the contents of special investigatory councils on Russian policymaking in the Far East that were convened many times in the former Russian Empire. Kanō has also examined articles published in the antigovernmental magazine *Kaihō* (Liberation) and emphasizes that the Russo-Japanese War was not inevitable. Additionally, there is the study of Russian activities in support of the war (*senō shien katsudō*). Tsuchiya Yoshifuru (2005) of Nihon University looks at the Russian home front and examines support efforts for the families of dispatched soldiers as well as relief measures for wounded soldiers. Tsuchiya's research is one product of the third point emphasized by the conference organizers at the start of the Nichinan Conference: the need for a multifaceted view of the Russo-Japanese War. When it comes to the economic history of the war, Suzuki Toshio (2005) of Tōhoku University adopts a relative point of view to appraise Takahashi Korekiyo, the Special Loan Commissioner of the Japanese government and Vice President of the Bank of Japan who was involved in negotiations regarding the issuance of foreign

bonds for the purpose of procuring war expenditures.³ Takahashi firmly believed that a ‘stroke of good fortune’ won him success of the loan issues, but it was merchant banks’ global business network that enabled the Japanese government to manage the huge loan issue operations in London, New York, Berlin and Paris.

3. The Keiō Conference

Up until now, I have been focusing on studies prepared by researchers who participated in the Nichinan Conference, but at this point I want to look at studies prepared for the Keiō Conference, which have been edited into two volumes by John W. Steinberg, Bruce W. Menning, David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, David Wolff and Shinji Yokote (Steinberg *et al.* 2005). Additionally, the discussions of the Keiō Conference are accessibly and helpfully presented in *Kenshō—Nichiro Sensō* (Verdict: The Russo-Japanese War) (2005) prepared by the Yomiuri Shinbun Research Institute, one of the sponsors of the conference. The genesis of this international conference can be traced back to the work of American researchers knowledgeable about Russian and Soviet military affairs, such as Bruce W. Menning of the US Army Command and General Staff College and John W. Steinberg of Georgia Southern University.⁴ The distinguishing feature of this group of researchers is a shared analytical framework in military history that situates the Russo-Japanese War within world history. Until recently, the Russo-Japanese War has been regarded as a regional war of colonialism, but this group repositions the war as ‘World War Zero’, or in other words, these researchers view the Russo-Japanese War as the war that preceded World War I and set the pattern for that later war. A commonality between the two wars is that they both featured home fronts as well as fighting fronts. The additional war front created out of domestic politics and public debate at home elevates the two wars to the level of ‘twentieth-century wars’ possessing a close and indivisible relationship between the home and fighting fronts. Moreover, in regard to the fighting methods that the nation-states were able to use, there was a point of similarity between the Russo-Japanese War and World War I in that both wars employed new military techniques: naval warfare, mobile operations (using railways, machine guns and siege artillery) and siege warfare.

Even before now, researchers have understood the importance of incorporating the military perspective into scholarship on the war, but it seems fair to say that until recently there were no researchers who could assess the individual military engagements of the war by bringing together the military history with historical materials from both Japan and Russia. This was likely because Japanese and Russian are difficult languages to master. However, the situation changed greatly thanks to David Wolff of Hokkaidō University and Yokote Shinji of Keiō University. Wolff (1999) uses historical documents written in Chinese as well as Japanese and Russian, and has written about the intelligence war between Japan and Russia in Manchuria that involved Chinese spies. Yokote has written books aimed at a general readership in which he addresses three questions: How did the war begin? Why did the emergent nation (*shinkō kokka*) of Japan win and the Great Russian Empire lose the war? What were the consequences of the war?⁵ Above all, Yokote’s writings are significant because they present Japan’s narrow victory over Russia by examining the cooperative tactics of the Japanese Army and Navy. The Russo-Japanese War was the first modern war to feature joint, full-scale tactics conducted

3. In English, see Suzuki (1994).

4. See Menning (1992).

5. See Yokote (2005).

by an army fighting on land and a navy fighting at sea. According to Yokote, the Russo-Japanese War, which set a pattern of total war waged jointly by an army and a navy, marked the first stage of 20th-century military tactics.

The point of view that the Russo-Japanese War must be understood as a world war (*sekai sensō*) also appears in *Nichiro Sensō no Sekai-shi* (2004) written by the Korean scholar Ch'oe Mun-Hyong. However, Ch'oe's emphasizing of the war as a world war does not rest on a military history rationale that regards the war as the model for the First World War. In the view of Ch'oe, the Russo-Japanese War was 'not simply a war fought between the two nations of Japan and Russia. It was an Asian war (*Ajia no sensō*) engulfing Korea and Manchuria, and can be regarded as a world war in which the European and American Great Powers were involved, and in which interests of imperialisms were intertwined in direct and complex ways' (2004: 10). The US and Great Britain could not react to Russia's advance to the south into Manchuria because Great Britain was embarking on conflicts in South Asia and the US was coping with a rebellion by the Filipino military. Additionally, there were factors that made Germany and France hesitant to support Russia. As a result, a situation emerged in which Japan and Russia alone faced off against each other. However, Ch'oe takes the Russo-Japanese War to be a world war with the unique early 20th-century characteristic of being fought on a limited basis between two nations under the gaze of the Great Powers. This is a convincing argument.

Specialists in the domestic political history of Russia have detailed in a corroborative manner conflicts that existed within Russian politics, and Japanese researchers have been able to analyze such conflicts and connect them to Japanese historical materials that address the possibility of a diplomatic settlement between Japan and Russia immediately prior to the outbreak of the war. Igor Vladimirovich Lukoianov (2005) of the St. Petersburg Section of the Institute of Russian History has analyzed the policies and claims of the Bezobrazovtsy clique that gained the backing of Czar Nicholas II in 1903 and held considerable power in deciding Russia's Far Eastern policies. The Bezobrazovtsy clique held the following two views: first, Russia must withdraw troops from northern Manchuria and deploy them to Dalien and Port Arthur in southern Manchuria's Liaodong Peninsula and second, Russia should develop the region of the Yalu River that borders upon the Japanese sphere of influence (*seiryokuken*), or in other words, actively advance upon Korea.

At this point, I want to return to an issue raised during my discussion of the Nichinan Conference: it appears that points brought up by Lukoianov touch upon the debate over the Korea question and the Manchuria question. The Japanese statesmen involved in the negotiations between Japan and Russia that began on 12 August 1903 thought that the negotiations could be resolved if Japan yielded to Russia on the question of Manchuria and thus focused their attentions exclusively on Korea, for such a strategy would be a compromise to the Russian side. When these facts are squared with research from the Russian side, it seems that the possibility existed of a negotiated agreement between Japan and Russia. But assuming that the Bezobrazovtsy clique, which had decisive power when it came to the formation of Russian policy in the Far East, also wielded power with respect to Korea, then it appears that the possibility of an agreement was low.

There was a large conceptual difference between, on the one hand, the Bezobrazovtsy clique's way of thinking about Korea and, on the other hand, Japan's thoughts about agreeing to negotiate when it came to a compromise over the Manchuria question, even though Japan was not necessarily aware of the Bezobrazovtsy clique's ideas. Such was my conclusion upon hearing Lukoianov present his report at the Keiō Conference. Lukoianov's points relates to issues raised at the Nichinan Conference. Yi Sunhan clarified Korea's misunderstanding that the Manchuria question was the point of contention within Russo-Japanese negotiations, but it seems that Japan for its own part neglected Russia's attachment to Korea. Even the analysis of Kanō Tadashi, who indicated that the Korea question

complicated the discussions between Army Minister Kuropatkin and Foreign Minister Komura, is consistent with the above points.

4. Conclusion: What Caused the Russo-Japanese War?

In conclusion, I want to return to the issue related to the outbreak of the war: why did the connections between the Korea question and the Manchuria question become so entangled and why did the actors involved not realize this clearly at the time? The main reason why is that after August 1903, Japan, which had exchanged mutual proposals with Russia three times, aimlessly negotiated up until the start of the war as if Korea and Manchuria were one entity, doing so in a way that blurred the connections between the Korea question and the Manchuria question. Japan had to wrangle with Russia over the Korea question to the point of risking war, and it took the state a surprisingly long time to determine what to do. At last, the cabinet of Katsura Tarō took steps on 21 December 1903, and decided upon the following two points. First, the Manchuria question should be left as much as possible to negotiations carried out through diplomatic means, and as such going to war would not be adopted as the final means for resolving the issue. Second, with regard to the Korea question, Japan would sufficiently explain its revised proposal, and should Russia not accept this, as a last resort Japan would push through its demands by going to war. In this way, we see that according to Japanese government officials, in December 1903—two months before the start of the war—the Korea question alone was understood as vital issue worth fighting for.⁶

However, there were people who thought that the Korea question alone was an insufficient *casus belli* for an emphatically war-weary nation to turn toward war with Russia. For example, Ugaki Kazushige, who later served as army minister during the 1920s, had been stationed in Germany from September 1902 through April 1904. Ugaki took stock of his home country before the start of the Russo-Japanese War and wrote in his journal, ‘Japan’s foreign policy is defensive towards Russia. Originally, this was done to solve the “Manchuria question,” but it seems that all-of-a-sudden Russo-Japanese negotiations are only discussing the problem of the Korean peninsula. It should be expected, then, that the Great Powers—England, France, Germany—would misunderstand the cause of the strife between Japan and Russia to be the “Korea question” and not the “Manchuria question.” This is detrimental for Japan’ (Tsunoda 1968: 23).

If the Great Powers saw only the Korea question, then they would not likely have actively concerned themselves with the Russo-Japanese War. There were people who worried that foreign support would be difficult to attain when it came to issues such as the collection of foreign debts should the Great Powers not affirm the war’s goals. Should there be no foreign affirmation, the slogan that Russia was an uncivilized country (*hibunmei kuni*) concerned with closing the open door economically while Japan was a civilized country (*bunmei kuni*) advocating an open door in Manchuria was suitable logic for justifying the war to Great Britain and the US.⁷ Later, Yoshino Sakuzō, the standard bearer of ‘Taishō democracy’, expressed the following statement soon after the opening of hostilities between Japan and Russia, in which he claimed that Russia was the enemy of civilization: ‘Personally, I am not opposed to Russian territorial expansion, but the policy of territorial expansion is certainly uncivilized. Since territorial expansion brings with it the rejection of foreign trade, Japan must oppose Russian expansion in order to defend itself fiercely.’

6. This is the gist of a letter written to Yamagata Aritomo by Katsura Tarō reprinted in Shōyū Kurabu Yamagata Aritomo Kankei Monjo Hensan Inkai (2005).

7. For this argument, see Chapter 3 of Katō Yōko (2005).

In addition to those people who shared Yoshino's opinions, there was also a popular movement that expressed its impatience with the government's reluctance to display clearly its intent to go to war—a movement that became conspicuous in the spring of 1903. Russia had planned to evacuate troops from Manchuria on 8 April 1903, but this second withdrawal never happened. Together with faculty members from Tokyo Imperial University's School of Law, Ogawa Heikichi and a group of his fellow Seiyūkai members increasingly demanded that Russia withdraw its troops from Manchuria as a matter of legal principle. Ogawa raised the issue of Russia's treaty rights in Manchuria and addressed the House of Representatives of the Imperial Diet, but his speech was not a fiery argument agitating for war. Thus, when we adopt the point of view that Japan's position was divided between that of the government and that of the people, we can see that, on the one hand, the government and the *genrō* thought that only the Korea question was a vital issue, but on the other hand, the people, political parties and intellectuals advocated war and raised the banner of the open door in Manchuria as Japan's justification to the world for going to war. The general picture is that the government privately discussed Korea, while the people publicly discussed Manchuria. With such a gap, it is no wonder that the Korean government erred in its observations. Perhaps this is the reason why negotiations between Japan and Russia never reached a satisfactory conclusion.

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