

4. JAPAN BATTLES RUSSIA IN DESPERATE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Negotiations with Russia break down

Now I shall resume my discussion of the fraught relationship between Japan and Russia. In August 1903 it became obvious that Russia had designs on both Manchuria and Korea. Therefore, Japan opened negotiations, which lasted for five months, until January of 1904, with Russia. The essentials of Japan's requests of Russia, made during those negotiations, were as follows.

- (1) Russia must respect the independence and territorial integrity of China and Korea, and agree to equal commercial opportunity for Japan and Russia in both nations.
- (2) Russia must recognize the supremacy of Japanese interests in Korea, and Japan must recognize Russian special interests relating to railways in Manchuria.
- (3) Russia must recognize the fact that Japan has the exclusive right to offer advice about reforms and good government, and to provide assistance (including military assistance) to Korea.

Russia had no good reason to object to any of the above requests. Nevertheless, the Russians presented counterproposals, as shown below.

- (1) Russia will respect the territorial integrity of Korea. However, Russia will not negotiate about Manchuria, as it is not within the Japanese sphere of influence.
- (2) Russia recognizes Japanese assistance to Korea only if such assistance is not military; Japan may not use Korean territory for strategic purposes.
- (3) Korean territory north of the 39th parallel should be considered a neutral zone.

By refusing to negotiate about the independence and territorial integrity of Manchuria, by prohibiting Japan from sending troops to Korea, and furthermore, by creating a neutral zone in northern Korea, the Russians were assuming that they had free rein in Manchuria, which was taking a great deal for granted.

In response, Japan proposed the following:

- (1) Russia must respect the independence and territorial integrity of China and Korea.
- (2) If Manchuria is to be considered outside Japan's sphere of influence, then there must be reciprocal recognition that Korea is outside Russia's sphere of influence.
- (3) If a neutral zone is to be established, it should include not only Korea, but also 50 kilometers on each side of the Manchuria-Korea border.
- (4) Russia must recognize Japan's right to provide military assistance to Korea

A comparison of demands issued by both nations clearly reveals the spirit of compromise and reciprocity that distinguishes the Japanese proposals.

If the Russians had been prepared to compromise, tensions might very well have eased, but they refused to back down. Moreover, during the negotiations, the Russians were frantically preparing for war, issuing mobilization orders to their troops in the Far East and imposing martial law in

Manchuria. On January 13, 1904, the Japanese submitted their final proposal to Russia. Even after three weeks, there was no reply from the Russians, who were busily completing war preparations. On February 4 the Japanese decided to suspend communication and commence hostilities with Russia. On February 6, they notified the Russians that they were breaking off diplomatic relations.

Hostilities between Japan and Russia commence

The rupture of diplomatic relations between Japan and Russia marked the beginning of hostilities. On February 7, 1904 Combined Fleet Commander in Chief Tōgō Heihachirō departed from Sasebo. Early on the morning of February 9 the Japanese torpedoed the enemy fleet off Port Arthur, and inflicted grievous damage on three of its vessels. On the same day, the 4th Squadron, commanded by Rear Admiral Uryū Sotokichi, attacked and sank the Russian ships *Varyag* and *Koriets*. On February 10 an imperial edict declaring war against Russia was promulgated; Russia reciprocated on that same day.

Russia's condemnation of Japan and Japan's rebuttal

On February 18 in an official document, Russia condemned the Japanese Navy for having launched an attack before declaring war on Russia. On February 20 the Russians disclosed the particulars of the severance of diplomatic relations and the commencement of hostilities. The gist of their complaint was that breaking off diplomatic relations is not equivalent to a declaration of war. Therefore, since the Japanese declared war on February 10, prior attacks on Russian vessels were in violation of international law.

On March 2 Japan's Foreign Minister Komura responded, unofficially, via the domestic and foreign press, to Russian censure as follows:

In an official document Russia maintains that Japan took advantage of Russia, a nation that was striving valiantly to preserve the peace, and won an unexpected victory through trickery. However, Russia's self-characterization as a peace-loving nation is false, because the Russians temporized needlessly during negotiations, all the while assiduously engaging in military expansion both on land and sea.¹

Komura continued his vehement rebuttal by citing a multitude of instances in which the Russians had engaged in military expansion in the Far East since April 1903, when Russia reneged on its promise to execute the second phase of troop withdrawal from Manchuria.

Who would have the temerity to claim that the Russians were not behaving like belligerents, or that they were not preparing for war? Japan, realizing that the situation was grave and that there was not one moment to spare, had no choice but to break off futile negotiations and take the measures necessary for self-defense. It was, without doubt, Russia that provoked hostilities, not Japan.²

¹ Gaimushō (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), *Komura gaikōshi, jōge* (History of Komura's diplomacy, 2 vols.) (Tokyo: Shinbun Gekkansha, 1953).

² *Ibid.*

About criticism of the Japanese for attacking Russian vessels prior to declaring war, Komura presented the following rebuttal:

Japan ended talks with Russia on February 6. We then advised Russia that we would, independently, take whatever action we thought best to ward off threats to our position and our interests. We severed diplomatic relations and vacated the Japanese legation. “Independent action” can be interpreted in many ways, but it includes the commencement of belligerent acts. The Russians may be incapable of comprehending this fact, but whatever the case, it is certainly not Japan’s responsibility to enlighten them. Furthermore, any scholar of international law will tell you that declarations of war are not necessary conditions for the opening of hostilities. Only in recent years has it become customary to issue a declaration of war subsequent to the commencement of hostilities.³ Consequently, action taken by Japan was not in the least reprehensible within the realm of international law. Moreover, we find it exceedingly curious that criticism of this sort is emanating from Russia. There have been numerous instances throughout history in which none other than Russia has suddenly engaged in hostilities without issuing a declaration of war. Not to mention the fact that, in 1808, Russia sent troops to Finland at the very moment when diplomatic negotiations were taking place!⁴

In *History of Komura’s Diplomacy*, the author refers to an opinion lodged by the Irish scholar Dr. E.J. Dillon, who served as adviser to Sergei Witte. Apparently, Dillon was not overly critical of Japan, but by the same token, he did not have much to say in Japan’s defense. Still, later on after he had discovered previously unknown facts about Russian history, he concluded, “Japan was condemned for having launched a surprise attack against the Russian fleet, and remains the target of criticism to this day for having done so. I have investigated the historical facts pertaining to that year as thoroughly as possible, and can now conclude with certainty that in wartime, just as in peacetime, the Japanese have always demonstrated moderation and chivalry at its finest. The claim that Russia has never launched a similar sort of surprise attack does not hold water. At the time in question, the Russian empire sent telegraphic instructions to the Guandong governor-general that read, in part, as follows: ‘In the event that the Japanese fleet advances north of the 38th parallel north in western Korea, we shall attack it without waiting for the Japanese to fire the first shot.’ That telegram is a valuable record, and it is very much extant.”⁵

The telegram in question can be found in confidential Russian records of the time, where it was referred to as “Telegraphic Instruction No. 39.” A later section of the telegram contains the following language: “In the event that Japanese warships support a landing force in western Korea, and that landing force advances north of the 38th parallel north, (Russia) shall attack it immediately without waiting for Japanese troops to fire the first shot.

³ Not until 1907 was it made mandatory per the Convention Relative to the Opening of Hostilities concluded in The Hague to declare war prior to commencement of hostilities.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Gaimushō, *op. cit.*

At the time, the Japanese were not able to acquire this powerful piece of evidence, but the telegram demonstrates eloquently that the Russians had in fact already entered a state of war against Japan prior to declaring war.

Japanese gain great victories, both on land and sea

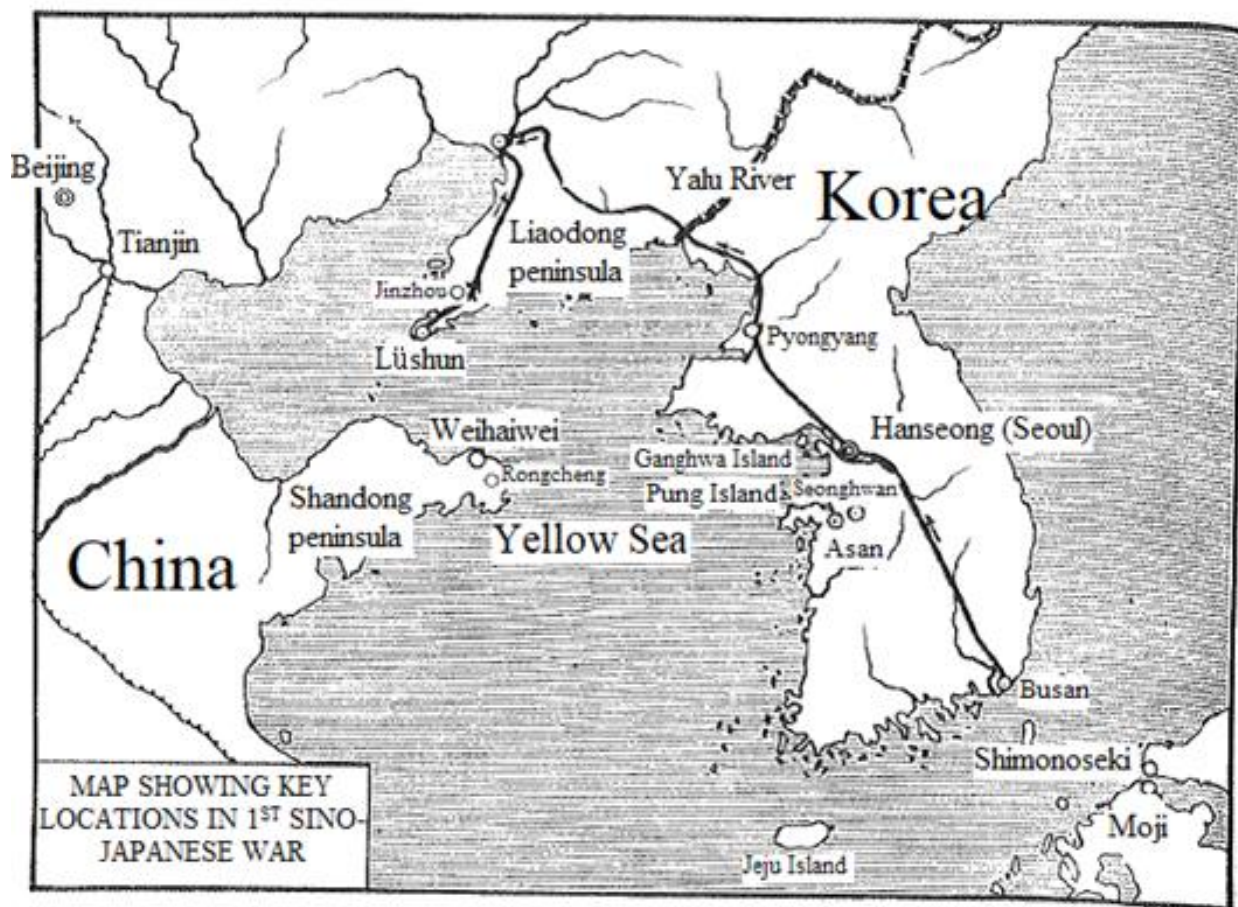
Now I shall provide an overview of the war situation after hostilities commenced.

(1) Battles of Liaoyang and Shahe

In March 1904, with Army Gen. Kuroki Tamemoto in command, the 1st Army landed at Chinnampo, Korea. The Japanese swept northern Korea of enemy troops, crossed the Yalu River, and then captured Jiuliancheng and Fenghuangcheng. In May, with Army Gen. Oku Yasukata in command, the 2nd Army landed at Yandao on the Liaodong peninsula and took Jinzhoucheng on May 26. Within one day they occupied what the Russians had thought to be a semi-permanent stronghold in the steep hills of Nanshan. They then drove a wedge separating Russian Manchurian forces in the north and south. Advancing further northward to Delisi (Telissu), they defeated a large Russian army, which was advancing southward to bolster troops in Port Arthur. Advancing further, the 2nd Army had occupied Gaiping and Dashiqiao by July 25. Meanwhile, on June 20 Field Marshal Ōyama Iwao was appointed commander in chief of the Japanese Manchurian Army, and Army Gen. Kodama Gentarō, chief of staff. They established the 4th Army (commanded by Gen. Nozu Michitsura), which was ordered to proceed to the north, while remaining in communication with the 1st and 2nd armies. The northward advance of the three armies was marked by victory after victory, but the Japanese were kept at bay by the forces of enemy Commander in Chief Aleksey Kuropatkin. When it seemed that the Russians were about to go on the offensive, the 1st, 2nd, and 4th armies, under the command of Field Marshal Ōyama, launched a combined offensive on Liaoyang on August 30. On September 4, after six days of heavy fighting, the Japanese occupied Liaoyang. Russian troops, which had fled to Fengtian (Mukden), returned with reinforcements and launched a full-force attack. Consequently, the Japanese encountered a host of Russian troops at Shahe on October 10. After several days of fierce combat, the Japanese won yet another great victory.

(2) Japan achieves maritime control

As soon as the war erupted, the Japanese Combined Fleet made numerous attempts to destroy the enemy fleet at Port Arthur. Since at times the Russians left the harbor to attack Japanese transport ships, the Japanese blockaded Port Arthur three times (on February 20, March 26, and May 2). It was during the second blockade that Lt. Col. (then Maj.) Hirose Takeo died a heroic death. On April 13 the Japanese lured the Russian fleet out of the harbor and soundly defeated it. On that day *Petropavlovsk*, the enemy flagship, made contact with a Japanese sea mine and sank. The death of one of the world's leading strategists, Adm. Stepan Makarov, on that occasion severely dampened Russian morale. Subsequently, as the Japanese rear attack on Port Arthur progressed, Russian ships broke through the blockade and escaped from the harbor in an attempt to reach Vladivostok. The Japanese fleet succeeded in destroying them in the Yellow Sea. Among the enemy vessels that had managed to escape the Japanese and return to Port Arthur were some that had entered neutral ports, where they were disarmed. Others fled to Sakhalin, only to be sunk by Japanese vessels. Four enemy ships that had been berthed in Vladivostok often appeared in waters near Japan where they attacked and sank Japanese commercial vessels and troop ships. But in August Japan's 2nd Fleet



sank one of them and inflicted severe damage on two others. With that success, Japan had achieved complete maritime control.

(3) Fall of Port Arthur

In June 1904 the 3rd Army, under the command of Gen. Nogi Maresuke, set out to lay siege to Port Arthur. By August it had trapped the Russians within its defensive line several kilometers from the city of Port Arthur. At that point Emperor Meiji made it known to Commander Nogi that he wished to avoid a repetition of noncombatant casualties. (Emperor Meiji was referring to civilian casualties during the assault on Port Arthur during the Sino-Japanese War.) On August 16 Gen. Nogi sent an envoy to the enemy bearing a missive stating the wishes of the emperor and recommending that the Russians surrender. The message, addressed to Russian Commander Anatoly Stessel, was signed both by Gen. Nogi and Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet Tōgō Heihachirō. However, the Russians refused to surrender, and on August 19 the Japanese began an all-out offensive. But the Russians had taken advantage of natural defenses and made use of the latest fortification-building techniques to create an impregnable fortress at Port Arthur. The Japanese sent out suicide squad after suicide squad, but each foray resulted in their annihilation. From time to time the Japanese would receive news of the Baltic Fleet's eastward progress. Moreover, the Japanese Navy could not continue its blockade of Port Arthur forever. It needed to seize Port Arthur quickly. On December 5, after intense fighting, the Japanese succeeded in capturing 203-Meter Hill, the Russians' most impenetrable stronghold. They then proceeded to

destroy enemy ships within the harbor by firing on them from that vantage point, and then captured several batteries in the vicinity. On January 1, 1905 Stessel surrendered, signaling the fall of Port Arthur. The opposing armies signed a capitulation agreement on January 2. When Port Arthur fell, Emperor Meiji praised Gen. Stessel for fighting so valiantly for his country, stating further that Stessel deserved a place of honor in the pantheon of warriors. The meeting between Gen. Nogi and Stessel, which took place on January 5 at Shuishiyang, has been memorialized in song.

(4) Occupation of Fengtian (Mukden)

After the fall of Port Arthur, the 3rd Army continued its northward journey, joined up with the Japanese Manchurian Army, and headed for Fengtian. The Russian Gen. Kuropatkin, intent on redeeming himself after a series of shameful losses by pouring all his effort into this one battle, assembled his best troop strength at Fengtian. The ensuing battle involved a total of approximately 600,000 men; the front line stretched out for nearly 25 kilometers. Hostilities began in late February 1905. The fighting was fierce, but ultimately Japanese forces encircled the enemy, and on March 10, after casualties had mounted to 100,000 and 40,000 prisoners of war had been taken, the Japanese occupied Fengtian. The Battle of Fengtian was the largest land conflict fought during the Russo-Japanese War. At a later date March 10 was designated Army Commemoration Day.

(5) Battle of Tsushima

The Russian Navy had been on the defensive since the beginning of the war. However, in an attempt to reverse its declining fortunes, the Russians assembled the best of its Baltic Fleet and formed the Second Pacific Squadron, under the command of Adm. Zinovy Rochestvensky. The fleet set out from the military port Libau (today Liepaja) in Latvia in October 1904. It greeted the new year at Madagascar, and in early May rendezvoused with the Third Pacific Squadron. Later in that same month the two fleets reached the coastal waters of Japan. Since leaving their homeland, the Russians had sailed 20,000 kilometers, a distance equivalent to a journey halfway around the world; this prolonged passage lasted for more than six months. The Russians arrived with a total of 38 vessels. Waiting to attack them were the more than 40 vessels of Japan's Combined Fleet, which had completed exhaustive training maneuvers at Junhae Bay in Korea. Adm. Tōgō was certain that the Russian fleet's voyage would end at the Tsushima Strait. His intuition served him well, for at 4:45 a.m. on May 27, he received information from a patrol boat, *Shinano Maru*: "Enemy ships sighted." Commander Tōgō wired his first communiqué to Imperial General Headquarters: "In receipt of report that enemy ships sighted. Will sail at once and meet and destroy enemy near Okinoshima. Weather is fair but waves are high." He waited until the enemy fleet was at an appropriate distance, and then gave the order to engage the enemy, at the same time hoisting the famous Z flag high on the masthead of the flagship *Mikasa*. The flag had special significance: "The fate of the Empire rests on the outcome of this battle; let each man do his utmost." The time was 1:55 p.m. A fierce battle raged for two days, with Japanese ships sinking 21 Russian vessels, and destroying or damaging five others that eventually sank. Six Russian ships reached neutral ports where they were detained. Of the 38 vessels that made the journey to Tsushima, only one small cruiser and two destroyers managed to return to Vladivostok. The Japanese had obliterated the Baltic Fleet, but had lost only three torpedo boats. This battle determined, once and for all, the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War. In honor of this great victory, May 27 was designated Navy Commemoration Day.

(6) Occupation of Sakhalin

In early July the Japanese organized a Sakhalin Offensive Force, which completed its occupation of the entire island on July 31.

Conclusion of Treaty of Portsmouth

World powers made three attempts to broker peace talks between Japan and Russia.

The first attempt was made when Port Arthur fell to the Japanese. US President Theodore Roosevelt, with France serving as intermediary, encouraged the Russians to enter into peace talks with the Japanese. However, the Russians, still hopeful that their Baltic Fleet and Kuropatkin's several hundred thousand troops in Fengtian would prevail, declined his offer. The second attempt was made when Japan asked President Roosevelt to arrange for peace talks after it defeated Russia in the Battle of Mukden. Russia, however, having placed its last hope in the Baltic Fleet, demurred.

But the Japanese obliteration of the Baltic Fleet in the Battle of Tsushima provided the decisive momentum for peace talks. The Japanese did not wish to continue fighting. In any case, they had asked Roosevelt to arrange for peace talks soon after the war began. Now the US officially recommended such negotiations.

Peace talks began in August 1905 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Representing Japan with plenipotentiary powers was Foreign Minister Komura; representing Russia, also vested with full powers, was former Finance Minister Witte. Negotiations hit a snag when the Russians objected strenuously to the conveyance of Sakhalin and to paying war reparations to Japan. However, they ended successfully when the Japanese withdrew their demand for reparations and the Russians consented to the transfer of southern Sakhalin to Japan.

The main points of the Portsmouth Treaty, signed on September 5, 1905, follow:

- (1) Russia acknowledges that Japan possesses paramount political, military, and economic interests in Korea, and has the right to take measures it deems necessary for guidance, protection, and control in that nation.
- (2) Both nations shall remove their troops from Manchuria within 18 months.
- (3) Russia assigns the lease of the Liaodong peninsula to Japan, with the consent of the government of China.
- (4) Russia transfers the South Manchuria Branch Line (between Changchun and Port Arthur) of the Chinese Eastern Railway, together with pertaining coal mines, to Japan.
- (5) Russia assigns the portion of Sakhalin south of the 50th degree of north latitude to Japan.

The conclusion of the treaty marked the end of a desperate struggle between Japan and Russia. By emerging victorious, the Japanese rescued Manchuria and Korea from the clutches of the Russians, and preserved Japan's own independence and security.