

Chapter 3: The Russo-Japanese War

5. THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR AND THE JAPANESE PEOPLE

Dilemma faced by advocates of war with Russia: my country or myself

When it became clear that Russia was planning aggression against Manchuria and Korea, and that Japanese protests were futile in the face of Russian ambition, the Japanese people seethed with hostility toward the Russians. In June 1903 it became obvious that the Russians had not honored their promise to complete the second phase of troop withdrawal from Manchuria. Legal scholar and Tokyo University Professor Tomii Masaakira and seven other scholars reacted to this turn of events by preparing a memorandum urging that Japan initiate hostilities against Russia immediately, and submitting it to Prime Minister Katsura. In December, when negotiations with Russia stagnated, the Anti-Russia Society, chaired by Konoe Atsumaro, presented a written opinion to Emperor Meiji advocating the commencement of hostilities.

The Japanese people, who had been nursing the wounds caused by the Tripartite Intervention for 10 years, had exhausted their patience with abhorrent Russian behavior. Indicative of the extent to which the tide turned in favor of war with Russia was the fact that even *Yorozu Chōhō* (Morning News), which was owned by polymath Kuroiwa Ruikō, and had previously fiercely opposed war with Russia, did an about-face and declared itself in support of war. The story about how Uchimura Kanzō, Kōtoku Denjirō (Shūsui), and Sakai Toshihiko resigned when *Yorozu Chōhō* changed its tune is familiar to every Japanese. Why did the newspaper alter its stance? Kuroiwa Ruikō supplied the answer in that publication's pages on October 13, 1903, the day after the three men resigned.

Is *Yorozu Chōhō* a bellicose publication?

Three colleagues have departed from *Yorozu Chōhō*: Uchimura, Kōtoku, and Sakai. Is *Yorozu Chōhō* a bellicose publication? If I were compelled to provide a brief response, I would say, "No, absolutely not." In that case, why did my three pacifist colleagues feel compelled to depart from *Yorozu Chōhō*? Again, I cannot provide a simple answer. I ask readers to keep a cool head while contemplating this matter.

Imagine a quarrel between husband and wife. A thief lurking in the vicinity overhears their angry voices. He senses an opportunity that should not be missed. The thief enters the house, steals valuables, and attempts to make off with them. Spying him, the married couple forgets their differences, and join forces to attack the intruder. Do they act so because of their emotional attachment to their home, or because they enjoy conflict? If we conclude that this married couple enjoys conflict, then we must conclude that *Yorozu Chōhō* enjoys conflict as well.

Kuroiwa went on to explain the difference between his stance and that of the three men who resigned.

Is war unavoidable?

Along with 50 million other loyal Japanese I am an ardent seeker of peace. We must assume that whatever our beliefs, every single inhabitant of this planet seeks peace.

However, circumstances have changed suddenly, so much so that it may be impossible to avoid going to war. We must not censure our diplomats for their inability to sustain peace through negotiations.

When it becomes perfectly clear that war cannot be avoided, we must face that fact. We must do our utmost to avoid mistakes. Instead, we should do all we can in aid of our government, devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to the war effort, so that we may protect our honor and interests, and achieve peace.

Warfare against another state is conducted not only by our Army and Navy, but also by every citizen of our nation. All 50 million loyal Japanese must be prepared to join together and fight to the best of their ability. Our efforts will determine whether peace comes slowly or quickly.

Since all diplomatic means have been exhausted, war cannot be avoided, just as when all medical means have been exhausted, death cannot be avoided. Attempts to avoid war now would be like attempts to stave off death. The time has come when we can no longer avoid war. And if we must fight, what is our duty as citizens of Japan? Should we disregard the fact that hopes for a diplomatic solution have vanished and that, for all intents and purposes, we have entered into a state of war, instead bemoaning diplomatic blunders and refusing to accept the notion of war? Or should we set aside our grudges against the negotiators for now, consider our nation's war our own war, and join together in using every possible means available to us to aid our nation? I personally have chosen the latter course of action.

The great majority of public opinion was in agreement with Kuroiwa. His editorial reflects the soul-searching and agony experienced by those who long for peace during their journey from pacifism to support for those who advocate going to war. It is wrong to dismiss those in favor of waging war against Russia as thoughtless, reckless nationalists. Faced with the threat of Russian aggression and the peril in which Japan found itself, the Japanese of the time overcame the ideological dilemma (my country or myself), arriving at the bold decision to go to war because the destiny of their nation was more important.

That ideological dilemma is still with us today, perhaps to an even greater degree. Suppose one nation's sovereignty, independence, and integrity are threatened by another nation, and it becomes clear that they cannot be preserved through peaceful negotiations or persuasion. That leaves no choice but to decide quickly whether to engage in warfare to protect those rights. Under those circumstances, true pacifists will become advocates of war. They will do so because they know that there will be no peace for them in a nation in which there is no integrity. Peace that exists within injustice is, after all, nothing but peace in slavery. It is inexcusable to facetiously label those who have arrived at such a decision, after giving the matter careful consideration warmongers or militarists. It is the responsibility of a citizen of the modern world to summon up the generosity to form fair judgments of those who have gone through a contemplative process and suffered much anguish before they shifted from an untenable pacifist stance to one that favors war.

Kōtoku Shūsui's feeble argument against the war

Kōtoku and Sakai, who had abandoned *Yorozu Chōhō* because of its stance favoring war with Russia, founded the *Heimin Shinbun* (Commoner's News), an antiwar newspaper, on November

15, 1903. What were their reasons for opposing war? In the following year, soon after hostilities commenced, the Diet passed legislation increasing taxes. The *Heimin Shinbun*'s reaction appeared in an editorial entitled "Lamenting the Tax Increase." Here is an excerpt:

The words "for the war effort" are a potent anesthetic. A tax increase of ¥60 million, intended to bolster the war effort, is a massive burden indeed. But this is a burden that the citizens of Japan should not be forced to shoulder, even for the sake of the war. Why are we compelled to pay this tax? We are told that the increase is unavoidable. I find myself relating these very sad, though true, facts: the international wars of today, while benefiting a select few, disturb the peace of the general public, impair our well-being, and obstruct progress. Furthermore, for this war we must thank ambitious politicians for championing it, fame-hungry military men for rejoicing over it, and cunning speculators for praising it. Add to their numbers the hordes of newspaper reporters who follow them blindly and fall over each other in an effort to arouse and persuade innocent, citizens.¹

Was the Russo-Japanese War in fact one that benefited "only a select few"? Did it really "disturb the peace of the general public and "impair our well-being"? We need not take the trouble to argue these points. As far as "obstructing progress" is concerned, this claim is incompatible with historical fact, which tells us in no uncertain terms that the war awakened the peoples of Asia, and provided encouragement to their independence movements. The argument that "ambitious politicians" and "fame-hungry military men" provoked the war completely baseless, but it is not worth rebutting, contradicted by the facts as it is.

Unsurprisingly and fortunately, the sensible citizens did not accept the simplistic antiwar opinions of Kōtoku Shūsui and his confederates. Because of the aforementioned editorial, the government withdrew the *Heimin Shinbun*'s publishing privileges. But suppressing such ruinous, reckless assertions in a national crisis, i.e., on the brink of war, was a very reasonable step to take.

Irresponsible nonsense: "My brother, you must not die"

Those who wish to fuel antiwar sentiment about the Russo-Japanese War invariably cite a poem entitled "My brother, you must not die" by female poet Yosano Akiko. The poem appeared in the September 1904 issue of *Myōjō*, a literary monthly. Excerpts from the poem, dedicated to Yosano's younger brother, can be found in accounts of the Russo-Japanese War in virtually every high school history textbook in Japan.

It is hard to believe that such a poem saw the light of day at a time when Japan was fighting a war, one on whose outcome its future depended. The general tendency is to praise the work unconditionally as an expression of personal awakening or of candid human sentiment. However, though this poem is candid and audacious because it regards the sentiment of one human being as an absolute truth, it is nothing more than thoughtless, irresponsible, and self-indulgent whining, disregarding as it does both the gravity of the then-current state of affairs and Japan's destiny. Yosano Akiko was not the only person who was concerned about the safety of a loved one or family member. Hoping for the safe return of a relative who has gone to war, anyone, anywhere

¹ *Heimin Shinbun*, 13 March 1904.

in this world, in any age, would experience those exact same emotions. Yet it behooves a person of letters to show responsibility and humility when making such emotions public. Interestingly enough, poems Yosano produced some years later were more patriotic.² It is understandable that in the magazine *Taiyō* poet Ōmachi Keigetsu described Yosano as a traitor and a subversive.

Here is an excerpt from another poem, a long one entitled “Hundred-Prayer Pilgrimage.”³ Written by Ōtsuka Kusuoko, also a female poet, it appeared in *Taiyō*. Here is an excerpt.

When I take my first step, I think of my husband,
With my second step I think of my country.

With my third step I think, again, of my husband.
Oh, the guilt in a woman’s heart!

...

If I were asked which is dearer to me,
My country or my husband,
I could not answer, only weep.⁴

This poem, too, is often cited as a denunciation of the Russo-Japanese War, due to its revelation of raw, genuine emotion.

However, neither it nor “My brother, you must not die” is worth getting excited about. All residents of this planet desire peace; no one is an unfeeling bundle of flesh and bone. Yet we suppress our own desires and, with good grace, we go off to war. We hold back our tears and head for the place where death awaits us. There is no hypocrisy involved, nor are we tools of national policy. This is a decision of great import, made at a critical juncture in an individual’s life; though private, it is precious and solemn. Who would venture onto a battlefield motivated only by the desire to kill? Anyone who sneers at this painful decision but finds “human truth” in the empty words of the aforementioned poets cannot escape censure for espousing a shallow, narrow-minded, self-righteous view of humanity.

Despite some pockets of antiwar sentiment, the great majority of Japanese fully appreciated the gravity of the situation and confirmed their determination to devote their lives to the war effort in this time of crisis. Judging from the huge number of subscriptions for national bonds issued by the government to finance the war, we know that Japanese of all classes were united in support of the war. If the ideology of Kōtoku, Sakai, Yosano and others of their ilk had become mainstream

² I will discuss poems written by Yosano Akiko on the occasion of the [Mukden Incident](#) and the Greater East Asian War later.

³ The hundred-prayer pilgrimage (*Ohyakudo mairi*) involves walking between the entrance gate of a temple or shrine and the main building or shrine, offering a prayer, and returning to the entrance gate. This journey is repeated 100 times. Those who embark on it are usually in great need of the object of their prayers.

⁴ *Taiyō*, January 1905.

public opinion, imagine what the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War would have been. The Russians would certainly have taken over Manchuria and Korea, and even possibly Japan.

Japanese history books devote a huge amount of space to Kōtoku Shūsui and Yosano Akiko. But would it not make more sense if they passed down the stories of the 100,000 soldiers, famous and unknown, who metamorphosed into supermen in defense of their country, served as human bullets, and died leaving their earthly remains on the plains of Manchuria, in the Yellow Sea, and beneath the waves of the Sea of Japan? We must be mindful that Japan is here today, and we are here today, because of the heroic deeds and sacrifices of those brave, loyal soldiers.

Government bond issues met with enthusiasm

For the first domestic bond issue in March 1904 in the amount of ¥100 million, there were 1.34 million subscriptions, for a total of ¥450 million, which represents an oversubscription of more than four times. The response to both the second issue, in June of the same year, also for ¥100 million, and the third issue in November for ¥80 million, was a subscription rate at least three times higher than the offer. Obviously, the Japanese rose to the occasion because they were fully aware of the objective of the war. Nor was it only the wealthy who applied for those government bonds. Middle- and even working-class Japanese supported the bond drives, even if they had to economize. When they learned that there was a shortage of gold, women practically competed to do their public duty, donating as many rings, hair ornaments, and other jewelry as they could.⁵

Japanese government first applied for foreign loans by offering bond issues in the UK and US, each amounting to £5 million. The bonds proved to be very popular, and clearly showed that both Britons and Americans hoped for and were confident of a Japanese victory.

It was Takahashi Korekiyo, deputy governor of the Bank of Japan, who took charge of obtaining the foreign loans. He intended to limit the first subscription to £5 million, but Jacob Schiff of the US banking firm Kuhn, Loeb & Co. in New York generously offered to underwrite £5 million in the US, arranging for the bonds to be issued by the National City Bank of New York. Schiff was Jewish. He hoped that the Japanese would win the war, and when they did, the resulting upheaval would bring a halt to the persecution of Russian Jews.

Textbooks ignore Commander Tōgō's heroism

Japanese history textbooks devote copious space to antiwar messages. But inexplicably, those same textbooks completely ignore the heroes who contributed so greatly to Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War. They are apparently unworthy of even one line of text. The implication would seem to be that the textbook authors regret Japan's victory, or find it contemptible.

Here is example that supports my assertion: In May 1988 the *Asahi Shinbun* and other left-leaning media launched a campaign opposing the inclusion of Commander Tōgō in an elementary school

⁵ Watanabe Ikujiro, *Nisshin Nichi-Ro sensō shiwa* (Chronicles of the 1st Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars) (Tokyo: Chikura Shobō, 1937).

social-studies textbook, where he would be described as a luminary in Japanese history about whom students should be taught. Minister of Education Nakajima Gentarō, without the slightest hesitation, had Admiral Tōgō's name expunged from the textbook in question. (Perhaps he had a great fear of newspapers, for whatever peculiar reason.) But in February of the following year, when the next Minister of Education, Nishioka Takeo, issued his Curriculum Guidelines for Elementary School, he authorized an account about Commander Tōgō for inclusion in social studies textbooks for the upper grades of elementary school.

It is easy to imagine further debate about this issue, but at its crux is our perception of the Russo-Japanese War. I have already explained that in the annals of Japanese history, the Russo-Japanese War occupies a position comparable to that of the Mongol invasions during the Kamakura era (1185-1331). Both were national crises of the highest order. I have also explained that the Battle of Tsushima was a confrontation of great import that decided the outcome of the war. It is important to remember that not until they lost that battle did the Russians finally agree to enter into peace talks mediated by US President Roosevelt.

Let us suppose that the Combined Fleet under the command of Tōgō Heihachirō had been defeated by Russia's Baltic Fleet. The supply line from Japan to China would have been severed, and in the face of a huge Russian army that was continuously acquiring reinforcements, Japanese units in Manchuria would surely have been isolated and annihilated. The Baltic Fleet would have attacked Japan proper, and the Russians might well have ventured a landing there. Needless to say, Port Arthur would once again have fallen into the hands of the Russians.

If Japan had been defeated, what would the situation in Asia have been in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War? All of Manchuria and all of Korea would have been swallowed up by the Russians, and Japan's own independence would certainly have been in great danger.

The withdrawal of Russian troops from Korea and Manchuria after Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War marked the first time Russia relinquished Asian territory that it had occupied. Not until the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989 was there another such occurrence. Given this information, we should have no trouble understanding the huge significance of both the Russo-Japanese War and the Battle of Tsushima.⁶

Accolades for Japanese victory in British media

Subsequent to the Battle of Tsushima, every British newspaper congratulated the Japanese on their victory and sang their praises. The *Daily Mail* carried an editorial that described the victory

⁶ *Asahi Shinbun's* inexplicable stance: It was a front-page article in the May 16, 1988 edition of the *Asahi Shinbun* that was so disapproving of mention of Admiral Tōgō in elementary school social studies textbooks. The very same edition carried an article announcing the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan. If the withdrawal news was so momentous, the historical significance of Admiral Tōgō's heroic deeds in the Russo-Japanese War, which ousted the Russians from East Asia was even more important. His appearance in textbooks made perfect sense, and it should have been celebrated. Yet while the newspaper welcomed the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, it spurned a hero who made a huge contribution to the victory in the Russo-Japanese War. If the *Asahi Shinbun's* stance was not rooted in frightful ignorance of Russia's history of aggression in East Asia, then it must be attributed to extreme political bias and anti-Japanese sentiment. Whatever the case, it was an outrageous, shameful article.

as “surpassing Trafalgar.” In connection with the Battle of Tsushima, the *Standard* wrote that the high quality of the Japanese soldiers, who proved that humans can be superior to machines, contributed greatly to the victory, adding that that victory will bring the gift of several years of peace to us, although the oppressive Russians must be carefully watched. The *Daily Telegraph* also weighed in, calling the Battle of Tsushima remarkable, and congratulating Japan, Britain’s ally, for launching a brilliant strategy in the Orient that culminated in victory.⁷ It is interesting to compare these contemporaneous reports in the British press with the deplorable opinions expressed in the aforementioned *Asahi Shinbun* article written more than 80 years later, well after the historical significance of the Battle of Tsushima had been amply demonstrated.

By all accounts every British child is aware of Horatio Nelson’s exploits in the Battle of Trafalgar. Yet in today’s Japan virtually no young people have heard of Admiral Tōgō, and it is entirely possible that their teachers too are ignorant of the significance of the Russo-Japanese War.

The two greatest crises to confront Japan — the Mongol invasions of the Kamakura era and the Russo-Japanese War of the Meiji era — should occupy prominent places in history textbooks, and should be engraved in the minds of all students. In actuality the great significance of the Mongol invasions, which occurred more than 600 years ago, was not felt until after the Russo-Japanese War began. At the height of the later war, In May of 1904, Emperor Meiji honored Regent Hōjō Tokimune, who is buried at Enkaku Temple in Kamakura, with the Junior First Rank of Court in recognition of his heroic deeds during the Mongol invasions.

Once we are aware exactly how consequential the Russo-Japanese War was to the Japanese people, we realize that the inclusion of Admiral Tōgō in Japan’s textbooks was long overdue.

Japan awakens to the value of external public relations

When the Japanese made the decision to open hostilities against the Russians, they also decided to dispatch Baron Kaneko Kentarō to the US. A legal scholar, Kaneko had studied at Harvard University while President Theodore Roosevelt was a student there. The government sent a second envoy, Suematsu Kenchō, son-in-law of Itō Hirobumi, and a graduate of Cambridge University who was conversant with British affairs, to the UK. The government was essentially launching a public-relations campaign, instructing the envoys to convince the citizens of both nations that despite strenuous Japanese efforts toward peace, Russian actions had forced Japan to enter into a defensive war. The two men were also entrusted with promoting favorable public opinion about Japan in the UK and the US, a mission that also involved attempting to dispel and banish the Yellow Peril concept fomented by Russia, which cast Asians as a threat to the West. An important assignment for Kaneko was to foster positive feelings about Japan in the mind of US President Roosevelt in the interest of asking him to mediate future peace talks.

The dispatching of the two envoys during the war in order to pave the way for peace talks that would be advantageous to Japan clearly demonstrates prudence and foresight on the part of Japanese government officials then.

⁷ *Ōsaka Mainichi Shinbun*, 02 June 1905.

Itō Hirobumi asked Kaneko to travel to the US on the evening of February 4, 1904, the day of the Imperial Council meeting at which the decision was made to open hostilities against Russia. At first Kaneko refused to go, citing the impossibility of affecting American public opinion, which was always difficult to sway. Itō's response follows.

No one believes that we are going to win this war. But at this point we have only one choice — to risk our country's future and fight. Speaking for myself, if our Army is routed from Manchuria, our Navy's fleet is sunk in the Tsushima Strait, and Russian troops draw near Japan's shores, I shall shoulder my rifle and, together with my comrades-in-arms, shall journey to the San'in region or the Kyushu coast, and fight, until my last breath, to keep the enemy from setting foot on Japanese soil. Enough of this talk about success or failure. Your mission is to devote every ounce of your energy to gaining the empathy of the Americans.

Persuaded by Itō's impassioned speech, Kaneko agreed to travel to the US, vowing to make as many speeches as it took to win over the Americans.⁸

Once he arrived in the US, Kaneko met with eminent representatives of various spheres of activity, including President Theodore Roosevelt; he gave speeches whenever an opportunity arose. When he spoke he would emphasize the fact that Japan's war against Russia was a defensive war, a just war. He would explain that Japan was far from a nation of barbarians (as Russian propaganda would have it), having brought about the Meiji Renovation, an era of civilization and enlightenment. He would add that in the conduct of the current war, Japan was, unlike Russia, adhering to humanitarian principles and to the letter of international law. Kaneko also touched upon Japanese history and national spirit. The impact of his efforts cannot be overestimated. His powerful speeches, delivered in flawless English, made a huge impression on Americans, with their strong sense of justice. I shall comment further on Kaneko's activities later on.

In the meantime, in the UK Suematsu was putting forth his best effort by delivering speech after speech in an attempt to convince the British public that Japan felt obligated to conduct the current war in the spirit of modern civilization.⁹

It is worthy of mention that though the Japanese are not skilled at self-promotion, they were quick to attend to public relations in Europe and the US when the Russo-Japanese War broke out, and their attempts met with success. It is regrettable that in later years Japanese diplomatic strategists tended to place little value on public relations and propaganda, though that deficiency may be attributable to national character.

⁸ Kaneko Kentarō, *Nichiro sen'eki hiroku* (Confidential records from the Russo-Japanese War) (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1929).

⁹ Matsumura Masayoshi, *Nichiro sensō to Kaneko Kentarō: kōhō gaikō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Shin'yūdō, 1980); Matsumura Masayoshi, *Baron Kaneko and the Russo-Japanese War: A Study in the Public Diplomacy of Japan*, trans. Ian Ruxton (Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu Press, 2009).