

Chapter 3: The Russo-Japanese War

6. RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR VIEWED IN THE CONTEXT OF WORLD HISTORY

Japan's victory electrifies Asia

Other consequential effects of the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War were the confidence and hope it provided to the peoples of Asia, and to oppressed people in other parts of the world, and the encouragement it gave to independence movements. Nevertheless, Japanese history textbooks fail to devote even one line of text to the impact of that conflict on world history.

Asia was plagued for years, for centuries even, since the Western world discovered it, by Western encroachment, and became the victim of exploitation and subjugation by the white race. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the nations of the Asia-Pacific region suffered the fate of either being colonized by Western powers or losing portions of their territory to Western usurpation. The one exception to this rule was Japan. Only Japan was a fully independent nation that boasted a constitutional government, a parliamentary system, and a modern army. There was simply no other country in Asia with a constitution and a parliament.

The Russo-Japanese War was a conflict in which people of color defeated the white race, and a constitutional state defeated a despotic one. The impact of Japan's brilliant victory on the undeveloped countries of Asia then groaning under the fetters of Western oppression was monumental. The Russo-Japanese War awakened and aroused all of Asia, and because of it, independence movements arose or expanded.

"Asia cheered the Japanese victory," wrote Dennis and Peggy Warner in *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War*.¹ The thirst for independence spread to all of Southeast Asia: the Philippines, Vietnam, Burma, and Indonesia.

Another nation it inspired was India. In his autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru recalled that "Japanese victories stirred up my enthusiasm and I waited eagerly for the papers for fresh news daily. (...) Nationalistic ideas filled my mind. I mused of Indian freedom and Asiatic freedom from the thralldom of Europe."²

An Englishman traveling in India made the following observation: "Excitement spread throughout all of India. Even in remote villages Indians sat in circles, or at night gathered around a hookah to talk about the Japanese victory."

¹ Dennis Warner and Peggy Warner, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905* (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, 2002).

² Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography: With Musings on Recent Events in India* (London: The Bodley Head, 1955), 16; <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.98834/page/n33/mode/2up> (retrieved 4/2023).

But the most shocked of all were the Chinese. Since the 1st Sino-Japanese War, the number of Chinese exchange students in Japan had steadily increased, but after the Russo-Japanese War it ballooned. In 1906, the year after the war ended, there were 15,000 Chinese exchange students in Tokyo.

After China's defeat in the 1st Sino-Japanese War, Chinese intellectuals were at a loss to understand how Japan had become so powerful. But after the Russo-Japanese War, Chinese students were able to come into direct contact with Japanese society; they began to understand the path of Japanese history by learning how Japan had overcome foreign pressure by initiating the Meiji Renovation, and had made a giant leap to modern-nation status by establishing a constitutional monarchy and adopting a slogan: Revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians! It is not surprising that their new knowledge about Japan imbued the students with hope of rescuing their native land, China, from the abyss of ruin. Beginning in 1905, the desire for revolution began to gain momentum among Chinese exchange students.

Encouraged by like-minded Chinese in Tokyo, Sun Yat-sen returned to Japan from London in July 1905, a time when Asia was enveloped in gratitude and excitement because of the decisive Japanese victory. There were three Chinese revolutionary movements active in Japan at the time, including Sun Yat-sen's Revive China Society. But when Sun arrived in Japan, they all joined forces, and in August 1905 the Tongmenhui (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance) was born. The Russo-Japanese War had greatly inspired the Chinese revolutionary movement.

Japanese victory encourages independence movements in other Asian nations

Like the rising sun, the symbol of Japan, the Japanese victory encouraged and inspired ethnic groups in Asia and other parts of the world then struggling under the yoke of white imperialism. I have already mentioned the sudden increase in the number of foreign students who were drawn to Japan; one of them was a man who would later cross swords with Japan, but in describing his early feelings about Japan, Chiang Kai-shek wrote the following:

At that time [1906], I was indignant about the evil tyrants running rampant in my hometown, oppressing the peasants. I had witnessed my country being exploited by imperialists. The fact that a minor power like Japan was inspired to become powerful and succeeded in defeating Russia was an immense stimulus to my spirit. I begged my mother for permission to go to Japan to study military affairs. I vowed to do my duty to my country, and make a strenuous effort to redeem myself outside of China.

(...)

On board the ship that took me to Japan, I saw a Chinese student spit onto the deck. A Chinese seaman who had observed him do so, provided some advice: "The Japanese do not make a habit of spitting in public places. They use a hand towel or a handkerchief, which they fold up and take home, where they wash it or throw it

away.” What he said impressed me deeply, and I remember that incident just as if it had happened yesterday.³

The impression Chiang received then of a hygienic Japan stayed with him, and helped form the foundation for the New Life Movement he founded 30 years later. The shipboard incident was clearly a formative experience for him.

Another Chinese who studied in Japan after the Russo-Japanese War was Zhou Zuoren, younger brother of the distinguished writer Lu Xun. Zhou later reminisced about how the Japanese victory inspired him.

The first time I went to Tokyo was in 1906, the year after Japan won the Russo-Japanese War. I doubt that many young Chinese remember that conflict today; possibly it is rather vague in the minds of even the Japanese. In any case, I was greatly impressed by two Japanese achievements of that era: the Meiji Renovation and the Russo-Japanese War. At that time Chinese intellectuals were painfully aware of the crisis that confronted our country. They were struggling desperately to think of a way to protect China from Western encroachment. When they learned that the Meiji Renovation had been a success and that the Japanese had discovered a path to strengthening their nation through widespread reforms, they were greatly encouraged. When Japan defeated Russia, they were even more heartened, realizing that it might just be possible to find a way to preserve Asian integrity and resist the Western powers.

(...)

Using the vernacular of that time, I would say that everyone was consumed with ardent enthusiasm for the blossoming of Asia. It is very strange to reminisce about those days, and to recall how very much impressed we Chinese were by Japan’s Meiji Renovation, and how very much we hoped that Japan would emerge victorious from the Russo-Japanese War. To be perfectly frank, those feelings were more real and passionate than those we experienced last year when the Greater East Asian War broke out.⁴

Moreover, what Mao Zedong, the Chinese communist revolutionary and Japan’s archenemy, told Edgar Snow about it tells us that the Japanese victory made a deep impression on the Chinese.

Many of the students disliked the “False Foreign Devil” (a teacher who had returned to China after studying in Japan) because of his inhuman [false] queue, but I liked hearing him talk about Japan. He taught music and English. One of his songs was Japanese and was called “The Battle on the Yellow Sea.” I still remember some charming words from it.

³ Furuya Keiji, *Shō Kai-seki Hiroku 1: Higeiki no Chūgoku tairiku* (Confidential records of Chiang Kai-shek: Tragedy of the Chinese continent, vol. 1) (Tokyo: Sankei Shinbunsha, 1975).

⁴ Zhou Zuoren, *Kucha suibi* (Jottings from Bitter Tea Studio) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2002).

The sparrow sings,
The nightingale dances,
And the green fields are lovely in the spring.
The pomegranate flowers crimson,
The willows are green-leaved,
And there is a new picture.

At that time I knew and felt the beauty of Japan, and felt something of her pride
and might, in this song of her victory over Russia.⁵

Nor was it only the Chinese who were inspired. Rash Behari Bose, despite having been born into one of the higher Indian castes, was a patriot whom Japan's victory encouraged to become active in the Indian revolutionary movement. In 1906, the year after the Russo-Japanese War ended, Bose joined the Indian National Congress, a radical group that advocated armed revolutionary action. Later he fled to Japan, where he was sheltered at the home of Sōma Aizō in Shinjuku, Tokyo through the good offices of Tōyama Mitsuru and other proponents of pan-Asianism.⁶

Japan's victory provided encouragement and hope to independence activists and boosted the momentum of nationalism. It also provided impetus to similar movements in other nations, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Burma, and Indonesia.

Its impact was not limited to Asia. Finland, Poland, Sweden, and other European nations that had been suffering under violent Russian oppression fervently hoped for Russia's defeat and rejoiced with the news of each Japanese victory. It is not hyperbole to state that Japan's triumph in the Russo-Japanese War has great historical significance on a worldwide scale.

⁵ Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Random House, 1938), 133.

⁶ Sōma Aizō, *Ichī shōnin to shite* (From a merchant's perspective) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1938).