

## **1. HIGH COST OF THE TRIPLE INTERVENTION**

### **Secret pact between Russia and China**

The primary cause of the turmoil in the Far East that commenced with the Russo-Japanese War and culminated in the Manchurian Incident was monumentally foolish policy decisions made by the Chinese. When the Japanese retroceded the Liaodong peninsula to China via the Triple Intervention, instigated by China, the Chinese were now obligated to disburse huge sums of money. Russia was the first creditor to demand payment.

In May 1896, about a year after the 1<sup>st</sup> Sino-Japanese War, Russia invited Li Hongzhang to Moscow for the coronation of Emperor Nicholas II. The Russians entertained him grandly. During Li's sojourn, Finance Minister Sergei Witte approached him, saying "The Japanese are certain to attempt to recapture the Liaodong peninsula. I propose that we conclude an offensive and defensive alliance." As a result, Li and Foreign Minister Lobanov signed the Li-Lobanov Treaty in June of 1896.

The treaty pledged mutual support in the event that Japan invaded Russia, China, or Korea. According to its main provisions, China would allow the Russians to construct a railroad crossing Manchuria with Vladivostok as its terminal, to facilitate the transport of Russian troops. In the event of war against Japan, Russia would be permitted to use the railroad for military purposes. The Russo-Chinese Bank was established for the purpose of building the railway, as was the Chinese Eastern Railway Company.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that the proposed railroad was to be built on Chinese territory, the Chinese Eastern Railway Co. was not required to pay taxes on income from it or the land it traveled over. Also, the company would enjoy absolute and exclusive authority over that land. Thus began Russia's conquest of China through the establishment of railroads and a bank. Construction on the Chinese Eastern Railway commenced in August 1898, and eventually connected with the Trans-Siberian Railway, on which construction had begun in 1891. The railway would provide the shortest journey to Transbaikal and Vladivostok. It was completed in October 1901, and began operating in July 1903. It served as the vehicle for Russian encroachment on Manchuria, and served as a crucial medium for the incubation of the Russo-Japanese War.

### **Vivisection of China**

Once Russia had reaped the rewards of the Triple Intervention, other powers followed suit. Germany was first to act; in November 1897 it sent a battleship to Jiaozhou Bay, using the murder of two German missionaries in Shandong province as a pretext. In the following year, in collusion with Russia, Germany extracted a 99-year lease on Jiaozhou Bay from the Chinese, as well as railroad-construction and mining rights in Shandong.

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<sup>1</sup> The Japanese did not learn of this secret treaty until the Washington Naval Conference in 1922 (see Chapter 6.2).

Russia had kept abreast of German activities and, wasting no time, sent troops to the Liaodong peninsula in December 1897, occupying Port Arthur and Dalian Bay. Then, using the excuse that they were protecting China from the encroachment of other nations, the Russians demanded a long-term lease on Port Arthur, Dalian and their hinterlands. By “other nations,” the Russians meant Japan. The Chinese complied with Russian demands, and in March 1898 Russia acquired 25-year leases on Port Arthur and Dalian (the extension of those leases was to be decided at negotiations to be held at a later date). Soon thereafter Russia acquired the right to extend the Chinese Eastern Railway to Dalian, thus fulfilling its long-cherished desire for an ice-free port. The ever-greedy Russians soon succeeded in extending the scope of their lease to the entire Liaodong peninsula. Only three years earlier they had forced Japan to return the peninsula to China, using the excuse that Japanese possession of it would threaten lasting peace in the Far East. Now, as a reward for its interference, the Russians had gobbled up the entire peninsula. Though these events were extremely frustrating to the Japanese, their only choice at that point was to observe them impassively.

France joined Russia in the scramble for Chinese spoils. In November 1898 it obtained a 99-year lease on Guangzhou Bay in South China. The UK entered the competition, acquiring a 99-year lease on the Kowloon peninsula in June of that same year, and acquired a lease on Weihaiwei in July to counter Russia’s lease on Dalian.

Then, in 1898 the UK extracted a promise from the Chinese not to cede land on the coast of the Yangzi River, and France agreed to do the same with respect to Hainan Island, Guangxi and Yunnan provinces, as did Japan with respect to Fujian province, located across from Taiwan, thus embracing them in the various spheres of influence. An American historian referred to these ghastly usurpations as the “vivisection of China.”<sup>2</sup>

The Triple Intervention, whereby China had asked Russia and its cohorts to restrain Japan, came at a very high price to China. Additionally, it ended up enmeshing the entire Far East, including Japan, in utter turmoil.

Here is the aforementioned Chinese historian Wang Yunsheng’s opinion on the matter:

Since the Triple Intervention was so clumsily handled, it invited the scourge of further partition, and furthermore served as the origin of many tragedies that later afflicted the world. When Qing court officials saw that one word from the three nations involved in the Triple Intervention sufficed to return Liaodong to them, their superstitions about Russia deepened further. Not only did they conclude that with Russia on its side, China had nothing to fear from Japan, but also that other powerful nations would avoid antagonizing Russia and keep their distance. By entering into a secret agreement with the Russians, Li Hongzhang was planting the seeds of the misfortune that was the Manchurian problem. He was also provoking fierce rivalry among the Western powers, and setting the scene for tragedy after tragedy: from the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, ca 1980), 479.

Boxer Rebellion, through the Russo-Japanese War, to the War in Europe, all of which are interconnected. China, originally fearful of anything and everything, ended up enmeshed in world chaos from which there was no escape.<sup>3</sup>

Wang argues that China's attempt to pit one barbarian against another, i.e, the Triple Intervention, especially the imprudence it demonstrated by depending upon help from Russia, was the primary cause of subsequent Asian turmoil. His view serves as an excellent historical treatise, providing as it does a glimpse into the background and nature of modern Far Eastern disputes. When three foreign, faraway powers intervened, it was China that tilled the soil, planted the seeds, and provided the breeding ground for the Manchurian Incident.

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<sup>3</sup> Wang, *op. cit.*