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THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR: THE RISE AND FALL OF EMPIRES

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JCSP 41

Exercise Solo Flight

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
JCSP 41 – PCEMI 41
2014 – 2015

EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Word Count: 2738

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INTRODUCTION

After the Tsar had sent icons to boost morale a Russian general retorted, “[t]he Japanese are beating us with machine-guns, but never mind: we’ll beat them with icons.”¹ This quote provides a definitive indication of the difference in philosophic pragmatism between two nations, particularly with Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias. The 19th Century was a time of change; empires rose and fell. The French empire fell twice under Napoleon I and finally to the Prussians under Napoleon III which led to the proclamation of the German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm I. Germany experienced ‘the year of the three emperors’, Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India, the Ottoman Empire was in decline and the Holy Roman Empire became the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Russian Empire was also facing change; Alexander II abolished serfdom and was eventually assassinated while his successor, Alexander III, succumbed to illness after a brief reign. The Empire of Japan had recently gone through the Meiji Restoration which saw the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and restored power to the emperor. Russia as a pre-eminent world power and Japan as rising power on the global scene had much to gain as well as all to lose with an eventual showdown in eastern Asia. Foreign policy of the 19th Century was a dynamic based on the balance of power with the Great Powers of Europe and it was always a constant and never ending endeavor to keep the peace.

¹ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891-1924*, (4 May 2015), http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/21461.Orlando_Figes.

This essay will show how the strategic foreign policy of Imperial Russia and Japan failed which led to declarations of war and a disastrous defeat of Tsarist Russia. In doing so it will explore Russian and Japanese goals in eastern Asia, the predominate factors that led to war, the reasoning behind Russia's pursuit of these goals and the eventual outcome for both empires.

Russian Goals

Two goals of the Russian Empire were expansionism into the Far East and the acquisition of a warm water port. Since Peter I (the Great) Russia had been pursuing an expansionist policy throughout Europe and Asia. Not only was the Tsar Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, he was also Grand Duke of Finland and King of Poland. To go a step further, Russia has had ambitions in Manchuria dating back to the reign of Ivan the Terrible.² Even today this policy is still prevalent with Putin's annexation of the Crimea. So the question must be asked, 'what is expansionism?' The Oxford dictionary defines expansionism as, "[t]he policy of territorial or economic expansion."³ The definition is brief but clear and shows a trend the Great Powers of Europe were following. While France and Britain, and to a lesser extent Germany, were expanding into Africa and South East Asia, Russia was heading east. Without a support network to sustain the territory, Russia embarked on the construction of a railway network to Vladivostok. The British had the Royal Navy to support their vast empire so it would

² John W. Steinberg, "The Russo-Japanese War and World History," *Education About Asia*, Vol. 13, no. 2, (4 May 2015), 19, <http://www.asian-studies.org/EAA/EAA-Archives/13/2/806.pdf>.

³ "Expansionism," *Oxford Dictionaries*, (4 May 2015), <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/expansionism>.

make sense that the Russians have a naval presence in the region. The naval base at Vladivostok was only operational during the summer so a port available year round was required. Russia had been attempting to gain an ice free port in the Far East for decades. This finally came to fruition with a twenty-five year lease of Liaotung Peninsula with the strategic naval base of Port Arthur at the southern tip.⁴ The Russian Empire succeeded with its expansion into the Far East and their ice free naval base but the Empire of Japan, as this essay will show, was not so amenable to the current state of affairs.

Japanese Goals

Japan had ambitious and far reaching aspirations for the future of the Empire; “[t]hey were going to have their own empire and not become a colonial possession of a Western power.”⁵ Japan had embarked on an extensive campaign to realize these objectives particularly with an eye towards Korea. Japan saw that, ‘Korea occupied a strategically important geographic position’ just across the Sea of Japan.⁶ Japan perceived Korea as the first step in realizing the imperialistic endeavours it had envisioned. This led to the First Sino-Japanese War against the Qing dynasty in which the defeat of China was achieved along with the acquisition of Taiwan. After the demise of Qing influence in Korea, Japan now set its sights on the diminutive peninsula but with Russian expansion in Manchuria and encroachment on Korea the Empire of Japan’s imperialistic goals came

⁴ Seung-young Kim, "Russo-Japanese Rivalry Over Korean Buffer at the Beginning of the 20th Century and its Implications," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, (7 Aug 2006), 622.

⁵ Steinberg, *The Russo-Japanese War and World History*, Vol. 13, (4 May 2015), 20.

⁶ Bill Gordon, "Explanations of Japan’s Imperialistic Expansion, 1894-1910," (4 May 2015), <http://wgordon.web.wesleyan.edu/papers/imperialism.htm>.

to a standstill. The fact that Japan saw the importance of Korea's geographic location as a potential 'stepping stone' to launch further campaigns into China, as was later proven in the Second Sino-Japanese War, it also saw Korea as its 'Achilles Heel'. Japan considered Korea as the, "[d]agger against the heart of Japan" and because of this, intended to wield its influence on the peninsula.⁷ In essence, the Empire of Japan viewed Korea both as an offensive and defensive asset and would stop at nothing to ensure this objective was achieved. Japan has already gone to war once over Korea so what was to stop the aspiring global power from perpetrating a similar act.

Causes

It must be clearly understood that neither empire initially had a taste for war but two predominant factors that eventually changed 'the playing field' were the failure in negotiations and the creation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. When negotiations commenced in 1903 the basic premise of Japanese strategy was solely centred on Korea; Japan was content with Russian influence in Manchuria as long as Japan had an exclusive claim to Korea. Japan viewed Korea as a buffer zone between Russian dominated Manchuria and itself.⁸ The Russians were unwilling to compromise to the satisfaction of the Japanese. In 1902 the Japanese made a pact with the United Kingdom to forge the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Once this occurred, "Japan gained a formidable Western power

⁷ Kim, *Russo-Japanese Rivalry Over Korean Buffer at the Beginning of the 20th Century and its Implications*, 620.

⁸ Yoji Koda, "The Russo-Japanese War: Primary Causes of Japanese Success," (4 May 2015), 24, <https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/41943426-2ee1-45d3-8c6d-79f640fc3464/The-Russo-Japanese-War--Primary-Causes-of-Japanese.aspx>.

as an ally that made war with Russia an option.”⁹ The alliance drastically changed the landscape from an isolated disagreement between two empires into a global affair that gave the Empire of Japan the extra push required to go to the next level; Japan no longer had any apprehension of another nation siding with Russia. With the two powers and their imperialistic ambitions essentially at a stalemate, no longer a fear of reprisal from a third nation and Japanese sovereignty threatened; war was inevitable.

Russian Reasoning

As discussed, Russia’s expansionist policy was the cause for the advancement in Manchuria and Korea but what was Russia’s reasoning for taking such an aggressive approach in a war against a perceived lesser power? There were three mitigating factors that drove this stance which include Russian prestige, nationalism and divine right, as viewed by the Tsar, Nicholas II. Nicholas had been Tsar for just over ten years and the empire was fraught with difficulties. With expansion into Manchuria and Korea there came a price, “the gulf between the [T]sar and Russian society widened and became irreparably compromised.”¹⁰ But there were benefits that were indispensable for the Tsar at the time; “the war in 1904 was greeted with an outburst of patriotic support!”¹¹ What better way to unite the empire than a war with another empire. The war evoked a

⁹ Tosh Minohara, *Consequences of the Russo-Japanese War in East Asia: The Portsmouth Conference and the Establishment of a New World Order*, (4 May 2015), 89, http://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&ved=0CDYQFjAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fmercury.ethz.ch%2Fserviceengine%2Ffiles%2FISN%2F35361%2Fichaptersection_singledocument%2F440e2c95-0d64-474e-a6de-6e12433b581a%2Fen%2FChapter7.pdf&ei=DKZPVb6fL4n_yQTR54GwCA&usg=AFQjCNHnpjZ1jt1LOHeSeUGRV4CmQeYtiA&sig2=0ZnepmcwllPAgAaB_2mCPQ.

¹⁰ Steinberg, *The Russo-Japanese War and World History*, Vol. 13, (4 May 2015), 19.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 19.

reactionary sense of nationalism that Nicholas could never have dreamed of. To follow on to the nationalist aspect of Russia, it was a Great Power and along with that came a certain amount of prestige that had to be maintained; “[m]aintaining prestige was an important concern for Imperial Russia and it was not about to be humiliated by this non-European nation of the yellow race.”¹² Russia could not comprehend the thought of a lesser power having any influence over its affairs or defeat in war. With the exception of Crimea, Russia had suffered no major defeat as far back as the Napoleonic Wars. Due to this Great Power persona that Russia had envisioned it essentially backed itself into a corner with no way out. To add to the situation Nicholas II believed in his divine right as Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias. He regarded himself as, “as God’s anointed vicar [-] on earth who had been divinely appointed to care for the Russian nation.”¹³ Along with this it can be surmised that Nicholas viewed himself as undefeatable since he had God on his side. When one adds up the benefit of nationalism, the defence of prestige and the protection of God the Russian Empire could not back down, had the world to gain and could not lose.

Results and Aftermath

As a result of the defeat to an inferior nation such as Japan, the situation on the home front faltered. Of note, three consequences that affected the Tsar were popular

¹² Tosh Minohara, *Consequences of the Russo-Japanese War in East Asia: The Portsmouth Conference and the Establishment of a New World Order*, (4 May 2015), 91.

¹³ Robert K. Massie and Dr Dwight Page, "Nicholas and Alexandra: The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty," *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, Vol. 3, no. 7, (4 May 2015), http://www.aijernet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_7_July_2013/7.pdf.

discontent, humiliation and, some may argue, ‘planted the seed’ for the October Revolution of 1917. No one can argue the humiliation the Russians suffered after their defeat. In *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-5* it is pointed out that the war had, “tarnished its military image at home and abroad.”¹⁴ As a Great Power along came the authority to wield power and influence over global affairs. Russia no longer had this ability and, to ‘pour salt on the wound’, it came at the expense of a non-Great Power. As previously mentioned, the domestic situation in Russia was not favourable before the war, during the war or, especially, after the war. As an autocrat the blame can be directly attributed to Nicholas as, “everyone—from peasants, to educated society, to aristocrats—lost confidence in their [T]sar, particularly after he foolishly stumbled into conflict with Japan.”¹⁵ As divinely ordained by God, or so he thought, he had failed in his sole mission to protect the Russian people. Ironically, the loss of the aristocracy could be seen as crucial since they were the last line of defence in the legitimacy of his throne. The war with Japan was not the motivation for the Revolution of 1905 but was certainly a significant factor. Some may argue that the Revolution of 1905 was indirectly responsible for the eventual October Revolution of 1917 but the fact that the Tsar was not able to fully subdue the former ultimately led to the fall of the Romanov dynasty.¹⁶ These effects caused by the war were definitely noteworthy factors that were all interconnected. Humiliation and discontent are fuel to a revolution and without resolution the seeds are definitely planted for further insurrection.

¹⁴ Chiharu Inaba and J. W. M. Chapman, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-5* (Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental, 2007), 348.

¹⁵ Steinberg, *The Russo-Japanese War and World History*, Vol. 13, (4 May 2015), 20.

¹⁶ Chiharu Inaba and J. W. M. Chapman, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-5* (Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental, 2007), 295.

As the victor of the Russo-Japanese War Japan had a distinctly different and diverse destiny. With success came status as a world power, increased nationalism throughout the region and, ultimately, Japan's entrance into World War Two as part of the Axis Powers. The Empire of Japan aspired for prestige and status on the world stage and was not disappointed. Multiple agreements were signed with such world powers as the United States, the United Kingdom and France thus ensuring the recognition it had desired. In the end the Russo-Japanese War accomplished what the First Sino-Japanese did not; all the European powers identified with Japan's influence in East Asia.¹⁷ From the Meiji Restoration to the war with the Russian Empire, in less than forty years, Japan had successfully achieved a level of power and influence not thought possible. This rise set a precedent of other nations to follow. With Imperial Japan's overwhelming victory over a western power there came a new wave of Asian nationalism. The example that Japan demonstrated gave hope that, "Asians could build up their country's military and economic strength to a very advanced level."¹⁸ With the prevalence of European colonialism widespread throughout South East Asia there came a glimmer of hope that these nations could strive for. This optimism was short lived as the Great Powers remained and, unbeknownst at the time, the Japanese Empire would later place most of these colonial possessions under the flag of 'the rising sun'. Lastly, the most significant result of the Russo-Japanese War is the link between this war and road to World War Two. One has to take into consideration that Russia did not pay any war reparations after

¹⁷ Tosh Minohara, *Consequences of the Russo-Japanese War in East Asia: The Portsmouth Conference and the Establishment of a New World Order*, (4 May 2015), 98.

¹⁸ D.R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia, Past & Present*, (Boulder, 1997), 148.

the war which caused turmoil in Japan.¹⁹ Because of this lack of indemnity Steinberg concludes, “one can argue that Japan’s road to World War II began not when it won the Russo-Japanese War, but when it lost the peace.”²⁰ To go a step further, the Russo-Japanese War gave Japan the confidence that it could be a great power and gave cause to the eventual rise in militarism.²¹ Japan’s new found world status can be viewed as sort of aphrodisiac in which the nation could not stop at Korea. It enjoyed the power and sought more. It believed militarism gave it the edge required to pursue further ambitions and ultimately the advantage over the United States.

As a result of the Japanese victory there were global effects that could never have been predicted; the balance of power had shifted. In order to appreciate just what the balance of power represented to the Great Powers of Europe the Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as, “the posture and policy of a nation or group of nations protecting itself against another nation or group of nations by matching its power against the power of the other side.”²² With Russia’s defeat its global status as a Great Power caused a ‘ripple effect’ that had significant repercussions. Gerhard Krebs concluded that, “it changed the balance of power in Europe by leading to the Entente and finally the Triple-Entente, thereby isolating Germany and leading to a large-scale arms race.”²³ The balance of

¹⁹ "The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero." *History of Warfare* Vol 29, (4 May 2015), 506, <https://ahkyee.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/wolff-2005-russo-japanese-war-in-global-perspective-i.pdf>.

²⁰ Steinberg, *The Russo-Japanese War and World History*, Vol. 13, (4 May 2015), 24.

²¹ "The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero - Volume II," *History of Warfare*, Vol. 40, (4 May 2015), 378, <https://ahkyee.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/wolff-2007-russo-japanese-war-in-global-perspective-ii.pdf>.

²² "Balance of Power." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (4 May 2015), <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/473296/balance-of-power>.

power in Europe had always been delicate and led to numerous wars over the centuries. The issues of Austrian, Spanish and Bavarian succession and the Napoleonic wars were all fought based on the balance of power. They were all conflicts predicated on no single nation gaining too much power and influence so as to threaten another. With Russia's fall came an imbalance that Britain, France and Germany could not ignore. In the end the imbalance was insurmountable and as a result the 'stage was set' and disaster was imminent.

CONCLUSION

It must be noted that this essay could not possibly cover the all the failures of either empire or the rationale behind their motives. This essay only provided a brief glimpse into a few of the causes and outcomes that sped up the fall of one empire and led the other to believe it was destined for greatness. Regardless, this essay has shown how the strategic foreign policy of two empires failed which led to war. It explored Russian and Japanese goals in eastern Asia, the predominate factors that led to war, the reasoning behind Russia's pursuit of these goals and the aftermath of this imperialistically motivated undertaking. It is understandable to assume that the Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, was dealing with a crumbling empire and could ill afford to accept any challenge to Russia's position in world affairs as a member of the elite Great Powers 'club'. At the outset he saw an opportunity to 'set things right' and set out to punish an inferior who

²³ Gerhard Krebs, "World War Zero? Re-Assessing the Global Impact of the Russo-Japanese War 1904-05," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 10, Issue 21, no. 2, (4 May 2015), <http://japanfocus.org/-Gerhard-Krebs/3755/article.html>.

would dare to challenge his divine right. The Japanese Empire, who less than a half a century before, was a feudalistic society ruled by a supreme warlord, made immense progress to modernize itself and challenge a Great Power. Japan's militaristic approach to world affairs fueled an overzealous appetite for power and prestige. Negotiations were futile; the empires would not give in to their aspirations in Korea. Korea was the supreme prize and neither was willing to give up this pawn for the sake of their own ambitions. It is safe to say that Russia's failure was catastrophic both at home and abroad; revolution was inevitable and its status as a great power was forever tarnished. Japan continued to 'ride the wave' of victory by reveling in the prestige of a regional power which culminated in its role as an aggressor in World War Two. The balance of power in Europe had shifted and the Great Powers scrambled to stabilize the imbalance. Russia's perceived weakness was devastating in the sense that Germany could no longer be contained unilaterally. In the end, the world was ready for change. Two empires with imperialistic goals failed in their strategic foreign policy which, it can be argued, led to a war that played a pivotal role in the fall of an empire, aided in the initiation of World War One and eventually led to World War Two.

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