

The Russo-Japanese War and the Perception of the Japanese Army in Imperial Germany

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The Russo-Japanese War (1904/5) between Czarist Russia and Imperial Japan was an expansionist war for influence in Korea. It was also the first war between industrialized powers in the 20th century and should, with all its new technologies and the increased level of destruction, have pointed towards the First World War a decade later. Contemporaries like Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) realized that the Russo-Japanese War highlighted the interrelations between events far away from Europe and the great power politics in the capitals of the latter continent.¹ The war was, after all, a historical watershed of global importance.² In Japan, this war was even more important than the Great War, as it marked the end of Japan's successful modernization process and international acceptance of a great power of equal rank to the Western ones.³ The role of the Japanese Empire during the war was also often perceived as that of a defender of democratic ideas against an autocratic and backward Czarist Empire, an image as depicted, for example, in the writings of famous US travel writer and "Russia expert" George Kennan the Elder (1845-1924).⁴ This image was also

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- 1 Rosa Luxemburg, "In the Storm," (1904). Accessed June 27, 2015. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/05/01.htm>.
 - 2 For a detailed analysis of this global impact see: Frank Jacob, *The Russo-Japanese War and Its Shaping of the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).
 - 3 The importance of the war in Japan is also resembled in many publications related to its centennial in 2004/5. Some of them are *Nichi-Ro Sensō to Higashi Ajia sekai* (The Russo-Japanese War and the East Asian World), ed. Higashi Ajia Kindaishi Gakkai (The Academic Society for the Modern History of East Asia) (Tokyo: Yumani Shobō, 2008); Numata Takazō, *Nichi-Ro rikusen shinshi* (A New History of the Land Battles of the Russo-Japanese War) (Tokyo: Fuyō Shobō, 2004); Tsuchiya Yoshifuru, *Teikoku no tasogare, mikan no kokumin: Nichi-Ro Sensō, Däiichiji kakumei to roshia no shakai* (The Twilight of the Empire, the Unfinished Nation: The Russo-Japanese War, the First Revolution and Russian Society) (Tokyo: Seibunsha, 2012); Yomiura Shinbun Shuzaihan, *Kenshō Nichi-Ro Sensō* (Analysis of the Russo-Japanese War) (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2005). Despite these rather recent publications, which are just a few examples, there are also very good earlier studies, like Shimomura Fujio, *Nichi-Ro Sensō* (The Russo-Japanese War) (Tokyo: Jinbutsu Ōraisha, 1966), to name just one example.
 - 4 Kennan published more than 20 articles on the war, e.g. George Kennan, "War by Prearrangement," *Outlook* 77 (August 13, 1904), 977-983 and George Kennan, "A Japanese Naval School," *Outlook* 77 (August 27, 1904), 890-896.

shared by British news reports, and the military correspondent of *The Times* highlights the importance of the Japanese victories over the Russian armies in Manchuria for international observers:

No great campaign fought out within the memory of this generation offers such a vast and fruitful field for study by men of the British race as the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. For the first time for nearly a hundred years we have seen an island Empire at grips with a first-rate continental Power. For the first time the new machinery with which science and modern invention have endowed the navies of the world has been put to the practical test of serious war. For the first time, almost in the history of the world, we have seen naval and military forces, directed by master hands, co-operating in close and cordial fashion to impose, by their united efforts, the national will upon the enemy.⁵

The present chapter, however, will focus on the perception of the war and the Japanese soldiers by the German military, whose representatives were quite interested in the events of the Far East. The government in Berlin and Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941) had hoped to bind Russia closer to Germany during the conflict, but failed to gain a full reciprocal alliance with the Czarist Empire, although the Emperor and the Czar had drafted such an agreement during the war.⁶ More important, however, was the impact of the war, when it came to German military planning in the aftermath. It was the perception of Japanese strength and Russian weakness that would define Germany's future military goals and chances alike, which will be discussed in more detail in the second part of the present chapter.

The German Observation of the War

In the beginning, German military and naval officers were sceptics when the chance of a Japanese victory in a war against Russia was considered. Like many others, the German military observers did not believe that the tiny island

5 Military Correspondent of *The Times*, *The War in the Far East 1904-1905* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1905), 1.

6 Nicholas II to Wilhelm II, Peterhof, October, 7, 1905 in *Die Große Politik der europäischen Kabinette, 1871-1914: Sammlung der diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes*, eds. Johannes Lepsius et al., 40 vols. (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1922-1927) (henceforth GP), No. 6247. I will identify the specific documents by their No. All the relevant documents can be found in vol. 19.1 and 19.2.