

A wounded Russian soldier is carried from the front down to the hospital in Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War.

## Russo-Japanese War (1904-5)

**Tsar Nicholas II:** 'The Japanese are infidels. The might of Holy Russia will crush them.'

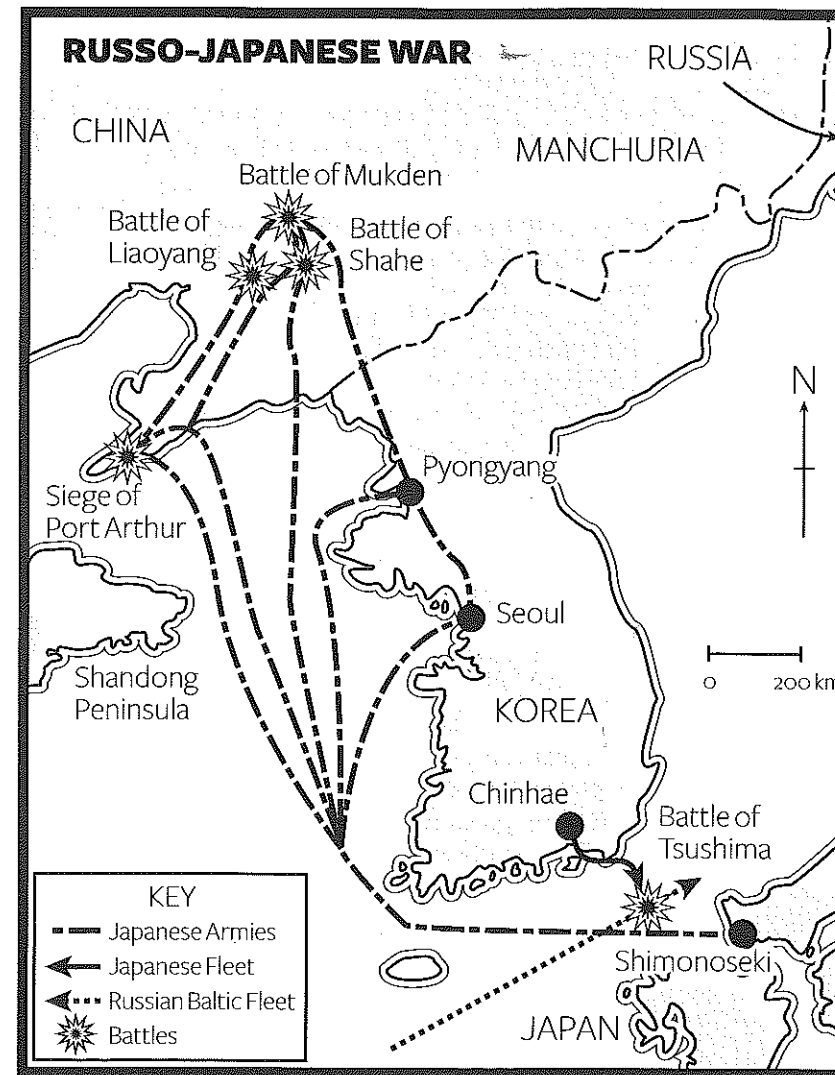
At the turn of the century Imperial Russia, like many European powers, sought to expand its empire. Of particular interest was land to the east, especially China and Korea. The Trans-Siberian railway was a direct move to expand towards this area, laying the infrastructure to connect western Russia with the East.

Japan, a rising Asian power, was also looking to expand its empire and had recently succeeded in its territorial war with China. At the end of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), the European powers – Russia, Germany and France – intervened in the peace negotiations, hoping to gain benefits for themselves. This 'triple intervention', as it became known, resulted in Russia convincing Japan to relinquish her hold in Manchuria (northeast China) in return for payment. Russia and Japan had long been engaged in disputes over this territory and tensions began to escalate in the region. Subsequently, Russia gained permission from China to build a railway across Manchuria. In 1898 Russia secured a twenty-five year lease on the Liaodong Peninsula and with it, permission to extend the railway to Port Arthur. In 1903 Russia annexed Manchuria. The region was now on the brink of war.

In an attempt to prevent conflict, Japan proposed the creation of well-defined spheres of influence; it suggested that in return for recognition of the Russian presence in Manchuria, Russia should recognise Japan's influence in Korea. Upon Russia's rejection of the plan, Japan broke off diplomatic negotiations in February 1904. Japan had recently signed the Anglo-Japanese alliance (1902) with Britain, which ensured the European superpower would not come to Russia's aid in a conflict. Through rapid western modernisation initiated by Emperor Meiji (1869-1914), Japan had built a strong military and naval force. The country was well positioned for war.

On 8 February 1904, Japanese Admiral Togo sent a naval fleet to the Korean harbour of Chemulpo (Inchon) to disperse Russian ships stationed there, signalling the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War. A Japanese siege on Port Arthur soon followed, as nine Japanese destroyers sank much of the Russian fleet and forced the evacuation of the remainder of the Russian ships. Port Arthur eventually surrendered to the Japanese in January 1905 after months of seemingly futile fighting and a loss of approximately 31 000 Russian men. In a crushing blow to the Russians, the Tsar's land army was defeated by the Japanese at the Battle of Mukden in February 1905. Approximately 90 000 men were lost. In May the Russian Baltic Fleet was defeated in less than twenty-four hours in the Battle of Tsushima, destroying Russia's naval power.

When the Russian public learned of the humiliating defeats in Asia, they reacted with anger, heightening an already tense situation in a nation in the midst of crisis. The situation in Russia, coupled with Japanese war-weariness, saw diplomatic negotiations commence in mid-1905, resulting in US mediation and an agreement to sign an armistice. The Treaty of Portsmouth was signed in September 1905, officially ending the conflict. Japan retained control of Port Arthur and maintained Korea in its 'sphere of influence'. Russia was forced to evacuate Manchuria and cede the Liaodong Peninsula, as well as the southern half of Sakhalin, to Japan. On account of the diplomatic skills of Sergei Witte, Russia escaped having to pay compensation for its involvement in the war.



## Domestic impacts of the war

**Russian soldier:** 'The Japanese are giving it to us with shells; we're giving it to them with icons.'

The effect on Russia of its war with Japan was far-reaching at a time of great social unrest. While some have reported that the Minister of the Interior, Vyacheslav Plehve, encouraged the Tsar to actively provoke 'a little victorious war to stem the revolution'<sup>3</sup>, it has been suggested by Richard Pipes that 'the origins of the Russo-Japanese conflict have long been distorted by the self-serving accounts of Sergei Witte.'<sup>4</sup> Pipes argues that Witte himself bore a great deal of the blame for the war through his vigorous economic policy in the Far East. He also suggests that while Nicholas II wished to avoid conflict with Japan, a sentiment supported by some of his ministers, he was encouraged by people such as General Kuropatkin, Minister of War, to engage in a short war in order to win an easy victory and boost national pride in a time of crisis. Whether the reasons for war stemmed from the government's desire to expand the empire and secure an ice-free port, or from the hope for a distraction from internal crisis, the results were

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### DID YOU KNOW?

The Baltic Fleet took eight months to sail around the world and join the conflict in the Russo-Japanese War. The Fleet nearly sparked a war with England when it sank a group of fishing boats off Scotland. They mistook the fishing boats for Japanese torpedo boats!

<sup>3</sup> Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, (Pimlico: London, 1997), 168.

<sup>4</sup> R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, 12.



disastrous. While the mainstream of Russian society was initially drawn together in patriotic enthusiasm, the population grew disenchanted as news of the humiliating land and sea defeats reached Russia. Instead of diverting public attention from the dire economic and social situation, the war highlighted Russia's poor technological infrastructure (basic equipment and services).

It became clear to ordinary Russians that their country was seriously under-equipped for military engagement, with its ineffective and ill-informed military leadership and inadequate supplies, largely due to the unsuccessful transport system. (The pride of the nation, the Trans-Siberian railway, lay incomplete in some sections and sabotaged in others, being of little assistance to a fledging military force.) In the ensuing social, political and economic upheaval, which included terrorist attacks, student demonstrations and worker strikes, the liberal and radical movements gained ground. This resulted in domestic revolution before the war had even finished.

On 15 July 1904, Plehve was assassinated. As mentioned above, Plehve was regarded as the driving force behind Russia's involvement in a war with Japan and as a consequence was greatly disliked. Responsibility for the killing appears to have sat with members of the Socialist-Revolutionary Combat Organisation (the SR terrorist branch). The move was applauded by many.

Upon Plehve's death, his post was filled by Prince P.D. Sviatopolk-Mirskii, who was quick to adopt a more liberal approach to politics. It was his belief that in order to effectively govern Russia, both state and society must respect and trust each other. Mirskii's appointment was generally well accepted, since he relaxed censorship, abolished corporal punishment and restored some prominent members of local government boards, zemstvos, to their posts.

This liberal approach inspired the holding of a public congress addressing both zemstvo affairs and national issues, including proposals for a constitution. (Until that point zemstvos were limited in scope, being restricted to local, rather than national, issues<sup>5</sup>). Plans were made for the congress to be held in early November. However, upon learning of the plans to discuss a constitution, Mirskii suggested the meetings be held in private. The congress was preceded on 17 September by a secret meeting in Paris between various oppositional groups, such as the Union of Liberation and the Socialist Revolutionaries. Known as the Paris Conference, the meeting proposed a united front against autocracy. The national Zemstvo Conference then met unofficially in St Petersburg on 6-9 November 1904, effectively serving as the first national assembly in Russian history. Under the guise of dinners and banquets, the group engaged in political meetings to discuss democratic possibilities. It was this group that called for a constitution, among other reforms.

Mirskii presented the proposed reforms to the Tsar, who rejected most of them. He proclaimed to Witte, 'I shall never, under any circumstances, agree to the representative form of government because I consider it harmful to the people whom God has entrusted to my care.'<sup>6</sup> On 12 December the Tsar's decree was passed, strengthening the rule of law, easing restrictions on the press and expanding the rights of the zemstvos. A parliamentary body, however, was not approved. It was an opportunity missed and tensions continued to mount.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Ulyannikova, 'Continuity and Change in the Russian Revolution', paper given at the HTAV's Unit 3 Conference, Melbourne, February 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Sergei Witte, cited in Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, 172.

Cartoon 1



JAPAN — "I SEEM TO HAVE SOME ALLIES"

The war was marked by several accidents to Russian warships, which were blown up by their own mines. Another of Japan's allies was old Boreas, who froze thousands of Russians to death.

#### His Internal Troubles

*The Russians* "How can a fellow fight, troubled internally as I am? For goodness' sake, give me some of your peace pills!"

*The Mikado* "Not so fast my friend, these pills are worth one hundred million guineas a box, and you must pay, pay, pay!"

Cartoon 2



Melbourne Punch, 1905.

## A

### ACTIVITY 1

#### Visual Analysis

Look carefully at Cartoon 1 and Cartoon 2, both regarding the Russo-Japanese War. (Note: Boreas refers to the North Wind)

- 1 Make a list of the visual techniques used to portray both the Japanese and the Russians in Cartoon 1.
- 2 What messages are conveyed about the war? Which side is portrayed as being in a superior position? Explain.
- 3 Complete the same two steps for Cartoon 2.
- 4 In 400-600 words, compare and contrast the two cartoons. What similarities and differences are there in the portrayal of the Russo-Japanese War?