

The First Sino-Japanese War, 1894-95 & the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05

by William Jones

June 5—The tremendous surge of optimism as the Nineteenth Century came to a close, engendered as it was, by the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, and the great scientific discoveries of the previous decades, would come to an abrupt end with the dawning of the Twentieth Century. The First World War would ring its death-knell. After Kaiser Wilhelm II's firing of Bismarck in 1890, and after the 1901 overthrow of the American patriotic faction of the martyred President William McKinley by British Empire stooge Theodore Roosevelt, the stage was set for that first great conflagration of the century.

It had all been designed and choreographed by that evil manipulator, Britain's King Edward VII. While Edward would be long gone before the great destruction of that war began, he had already set the stage in his carefully designed system of alliances, which required only a spark to set off the conflagration. This war would produce a rampant cultural pessimism which still deeply infests the cultural life of the Western world. While what was then called "The Great War," was to be followed by another that was even greater in its extent and in its casualties, the First World War essentially created the disastrous trajectory from which the Western world has never yet been able to free itself.

But the origins of that war were already visible beforehand in events occurring in the Far East. The British Empire still reigned supreme there, although its sea dominance was being called into question by the growing maritime power of the United States. Also in Asia, the 1852-54 opening of Japan by Commodore Matthew Perry, and the "unequal treaties" imposed on China, were impelling these nations to move rapidly onto the road to industrialization, if they were to remain independent. In British India there were also rumblings by patriotic elements eager to overthrow the British yoke.

Faced with the impending curtailment of its global power by all of these new factors, the British Imperial elite was seeking allies in the region on which to pin its hopes. The choice fell on the fellow island nation of Japan. U.S. policy, while often compromised by self-seeking comprador elements eager to make a killing in the Far East, was generally geared to safeguarding and maintaining the independence of the nations there, and, on the basis of trade and economic growth, to preserving mutually beneficial relations with all of its countries.

This policy was underlined by former President Ulysses S. Grant, when he visited these countries during a trip around the world in 1877. In a letter to the State Department from Tokyo on Aug. 13, 1879, Grant wrote:

In the vast East, embracing more than two-thirds of the human population of the world, there are but two nations even partially free from the domination and dictation of some one or other of the European powers, with intelligence and strength enough to maintain their independence: Japan and China are the two nations. The people of both are brave, intelligent, frugal, and industrious. With a little more advancement in modern civilization, mechanics, engineering, etc., they could throw off the offensive treaties which now cripple and humiliate them, and could enter into competition for world commerce. Much more employment for the people would result from the change, and vastly more effective would it be. They would become much larger consumers as well as producers, and thus the civilized world would be vastly benefited by the change, but none so much as China and Japan.

Grant had also seen on his trip the oppressive nature of the British yoke in India, and was appalled by it.

In his visits to Japan and China, both countries asked Grant to help mediate between them, over their conflicting territorial claims to the Ryukyu Islands—claims eventually resolved in favor of Japan. Chinese Minister Li Hongzhang appealed to Grant to use his prestige to attempt to negotiate a solution to the conflict. Grant agreed to do so, and encouraged the State Department to continue to work to preserve amity between these two nations, noting that if the two parties came to war, the British would subdue them both.

Japan's First War With China

Before long, however, Great Britain was working on Japan to transform it into its “marcher-lord” in the Asia-Pacific region. From 1872 until 1888, the British ran a program to train Japanese naval officers. British naval officers taught at the Tokyo Naval College. From 1870 to 1900, most Japanese battleships were built in British yards. Although the two nations would not sign a formal mutual defense treaty until 1902, their collaboration was already well advanced when Japan became intent on eliminating Chinese dominance in Asia, in order to establish their own control over Korea.

Korea was formally under Chinese suzerainty, but Japan, now building up its military power, had a growing diplomatic presence on the peninsula. Russia also had significant political influence over the Korean king. Both China and Russia were seen by the Japanese as potential competitors in their attempts to dominate Asia. A contrived “uprising” by Korean nationalists led to the pro-Japan faction at the Korean court “requesting” Japanese troops to help suppress the rebellion in 1894, and the movement of Japanese troops to Korea

placed them in direct conflict with China. This, not 1914, was the actual date on which the First World War began.

While China was also attempting to build up its military power and was purchasing warships from abroad under a program laid out by Li Hongzhang, the main diplomat and modernizer at the Qing Court, the training of Chinese sailors lagged behind, and the Japanese scored an easy naval victory over China in this first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. Afterwards, the Japanese considered the Liaodong Peninsula in Manchuria to be part of their “war booty.” The successful efforts of Russian Finance Minister Sergei Witte to mobilize the other European powers (except for Britain) to prevent Japan from occupying the Liaodong Peninsula, left even greater animosity among the Japanese militarists against Russia. The war did, however, place Korea, Taiwan, and the Pescadores Islands under the Japanese Empire. Japan's quick victory over China also increased its confidence in taking on the more powerful Russia in the Far East.



ALLIES
An October 1905 cartoon of Britain (left) and Japan (right) cementing the Anglo-Japanese alliance. Published in *Punch*, a British satirical magazine.

A Eurasian Land-Bridge

Russia was interested in far more than the Korean situation. Witte was attempting to unite the far-flung Russian Empire by the construction of a railroad through Siberia. For Witte, a student of German economist Friedrich List, the railroad would also provide a corridor of development for Russia, making Russia the prime conduit for the transportation of goods between Asia and Europe, and, as the British were keen to note, the major competitor to the British sea-based trade.

As construction on the railroad was proceeding,

Witte developed the idea of building it to the coast via a shorter route through Chinese Manchuria. This would help to cement Russia's relationship with China, and would serve to make inroads for Russia into the Chinese market as well. Witte negotiated a twenty-year lease with Li Hongzhang to build and operate the railroad during that time, with the intent of then handing it over to China. Aware of the rising tensions with Japan, Witte was also aiming to bring Japan into a commercial relationship whereby it also could ship their goods along the railroad line. Witte wrote:

It's possible, that thanks to the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railroad, in the near future, we will become closer to Japan because of our trade and industrial interests, and closer relations between countries in that realm seems one of the most powerful factors in the elimination of military conflict between nations.

But in the end, the Japanese drive for hegemony, and the British manipulation of their "marcher-lord" in an effort to undermine Russia, would bring Witte's plans to naught.

Witte's railroad also presented an obstacle to British domination over the Eurasian heartland. Witte had effectively brought together the major land powers of Europe—France, Germany, and Russia—in a de facto alliance for development. The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad would serve to unite the rail links from the Atlantic to the Pacific, a land-bridge which would relegate British control of the sea to a subordinate status in world trade. The outlines of the Edwardian policy toward this development were elaborated most succinctly by Halford Mackinder, who warned of loss of British control over the Eurasian landmass, were this railroad to become a reality. Britain was intent on destroying the Witte alliance.

Britain Backs Japan's War vs. Russia

Witte's policy was quickly undermined by British operations in the Far East. In 1902, the British signed a mutual defense treaty with Japan, the Anglo-Japanese Treaty, which assured Japan that Russia would have no allies if Japan were to go to war against it. Secondly, the British had encouraged Kaiser Wilhelm to pressure Tsar Nicholas to move against Japan, by raising the

specter of the "Yellow Peril." In addition, a profitable logging operation on the Yalu River by a Tsarist court cabal, was pushing for the occupation of Manchuria, an action which would effectively torpedo Russia's relations with China and be seen as a direct provocation by Japan—something that Witte strenuously warned against. But Nicholas foolishly went along with the scheme.

In the ensuing Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, which was considered the first modern war of the Twentieth Century, the Russian Navy was annihilated. While the Russian Army was still intact and fighting, the still-uncompleted railroad made it difficult to maintain its needed logistical support. Anglophile Teddy Roosevelt, who had taken over the White House after the assassination of President McKinley, offered his "services" as a mediator, to bring the two parties to the peace table. While the Japanese were largely victorious, they had suffered heavy losses and were therefore prepared to talk, knowing that the American President was in full sympathy with their demands.

Witte, who was assigned as the Russian representative at the peace talks, was a tough negotiator. Although Russia had to cede the Kurile Islands and half of Sakhalin Island to Japan, Russia avoided paying the heavy indemnity that Japan had demanded. Russia's military defeat, however, had more serious consequences—leading ultimately to the downfall of the Tsar and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

The stage was now set for the main drama to unfold. Japanese ambitions had been whetted by its military successes against China and Russia. Japan was now prepared to strike out in a bid to become the dominant power in the Far East. Manchuria, which Witte had withheld from them, would be the first major territory to fall to the Japanese, providing the springboard for its attack against China in 1938, an attack which was the actual beginning of the Second World War.

In Europe, a Russian Empire sapped by war and revolution (indeed already in its death-throes), would be easily enticed into the British web. Russia concluded a treaty with Great Britain in 1907, which brought Russia and its French allies in a tripartite alliance pitted against Germany. World War I had now been fully prepared; it was just waiting for a spark to set it off. The spark came on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, with the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand.