Global Recognition through the Russo-Japanese War?

Daniel Garrett
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Van Lieu

Abstract

This paper examines the role the Russo-Japanese War had in Japan gaining global recognition and respect from the Western powers. During the mid to late 1800s, Japan signed a series of treaties which severely favored western countries over Japan, but shortly after the war, Japan was considered one of the most powerful countries in the world. While the war itself was important to Japan, it was not essential for Japan to achieve the level of recognition gained after the war. Japan developed a strong economy and military due to the reforms of the Meiji Reformation, not because of the Russo-Japanese War. As a result of the changes, Japan gained global recognition and respect from the rest of the world.

On May 27, 1905, the Japanese naval fleet intercepted the Russian Baltic Fleet at the Strait of Tsushima in what became known as the Battle of Tsushima. The Japanese handed the Russians a crushing defeat. The Russian navy suffered heavy casualties with nearly 5,000 dead.\(^1\) Russia also lost nearly every ship in her Baltic Fleet with only an armed yacht and two destroyers returning to a Russian port. By comparison, only 110 Japanese soldiers died in battle, and Japan only lost three torpedo boats. Several other ships incurred damage but were able to be

The Battle of Tsushima is generally agreed by historians to be the decisive battle for Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War. Shortly after the battle, the war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth.

Current literature on the Russo-Japanese War looks at the war as a sort of turning point or coming of age for Japan. The war was the first time a non-western power defeated a western power. As a result, historians look to the war to say it was the critical point in Japan’s history, where they gained worldwide respect. This claim is correct in the sense that most people in Europe and the United States still believed Asian countries were inferior prior to the war. However, the leaders of these nations recognized Japan’s progress, and as a result, Japan already had respect from the leading nations before the war.

The Russo-Japanese War demonstrated Japan’s military capabilities; the world had already begun to recognize Japan as a powerful force both on the Asian scene as well as the global picture. The unfair treaties, which the Japanese Shogunate signed, were all undone by 1900. Extraterritoriality had ended for all foreign countries, and Japan agreed to several alliances, which promoted both Japan and the other country, not just one of the countries. The Anglo-Japanese alliance was remarkably similar to treaties signed by European countries prior to World War I. Even though the United States never entered a formal alliance with Japan, the Taft-Katsura Agreement essentially recognized Japan as an ally of the United States. The Russo-Japanese War was important but not as a defining moment for Japanese recognition. Rather, the defining moment was a process which began with the Meiji Restoration.

Historians are correct in saying Japan had gained worldwide respect following the Russo-Japanese War, however, the war itself was not necessary for Japan to show its power. Japan had

---

already demonstrated its growth and change before the war. The outcome of the war was simply a product of the reforms that had been ongoing as a part of the Meiji Restoration. The war was won by the events which transpired when Japan chose to become more like western countries in terms of their government and military.

One of the first materials written in English on the Russo-Japanese War was a book by K. Asakawa, known as *The Russo-Japanese Conflict: Its Causes and Issues*. The book was first published in 1904, which is the same year the war began. While the material in the book may not be as updated as other sources, the book is important because it demonstrated the attitude towards the conflict during the war. It is also written without hindsight, which has advantages and disadvantages. An advantage would be that it is not subject to later nationalistic ideas. Dr. Asakawa traces the events leading up to the war beginning with the Sino-Japanese War. He explained that his intent in writing the book was to outline the issues and explain how the events between Japan and Russia led to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. Further, he sought to explain that a Japanese victory would mean more free trade in Manchuria and Korea.\(^3\) The value of this book lies in how it provides a look at how the war was viewed at the time it was actually being fought.

An article was published by *The American Historical Review* in 1911, which reflected the idea that prior to the Russo-Japanese War, East Asia was seen as inferior. The article was titled *The Literature of the Russo-Japanese War, I*, and it summarized the sources which were known for the Russo-Japanese War. However, the article also commented on the Russo-Japanese War. According to the article, prior to the Russo-Japanese War, Europe was prepared to split up and

conquer East Asia due to Asia’s inferiority. This mentality reflected the people of the nations, not necessarily their leaders.

*Roosevelt and the Russo-Japanese War,* written by Tyler Dennett, evaluated the role President Theodore Roosevelt played in the Russo-Japanese War. Dennett utilized exchanges both to and from the President in order to make the argument that the United States had the opportunity to exert a great deal of influence over both Europe and Asia. He claimed the United States was the deciding factor in tipping the scale, and at the top of the United States was President Roosevelt. Therefore, Dennett uses Roosevelt to evaluate how the United States reacted to the war between Russia and Japan. His main focus is on Roosevelt’s mediation of the peace talks at the war’s conclusion.

In contrast to looking at just the Russo-Japanese War, Kenneth Scott Latourette outlined what he called the development of Japan from the 700s through what was the present at the time, 1938. In his book, *The Development of Japan,* Latourette focused on the events which occurred between the arrival of Mathew Perry from the United States until 1938. To place his book in context, Latourette stated in the introduction that his purpose for writing the book was so that people in the West may better understand Japan in order to hopefully prevent the outbreak of what we now know as World War II. Latourette views the Russo-Japanese War as one event in the process of Japan’s development as a nation, rather than pointing to the war as having a significant immediate impact for Japan on the global stage.

---

6 Latourette, X-XI.
Dennis and Peggy Warner wrote a history of the Russo-Japanese War in their book, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905*, published in 1974. In this book the Warner’s essentially view the Russo-Japanese War as a shift of power. It was the first time a non-western country had defeated a European power. “It was the biggest, most stunning victory the world had ever known.”7 Dennis and Peggy Warner pointed to the war as the first modern war, and noted that for many Asian people World War I was simply a European Civil War. The Russo-Japanese War was the first truly global war according to the Warner’s.8

More recent writing on the war include J.N. Westwood’s *Russia Against Japan, 1904-1905: A New Look at the Russo-Japanese War*, which was published in 1986. Westwood explained that this book was written to include only historically accurate accounts. He claimed that many previous works on the Russ-Japanese War had been written using unreliable accounts.9 In making his argument, Westwood manly focused on previously unused Russian sources. Westwood argued that the war was fought as both Russia and Japan attempted to emulate the western countries in an effort to avoid being overtaken by them. He pointed to both countries actions for territorial advancement both in Korea and Manchuria as evidence of a western approach.10

The Japanese government underwent a major change in 1867 when the Bakufu gave way to the Emperor as the supreme leader in Japan. Today we know this shift in power as the Meiji Restoration. Prior to the Meiji Restoration, Japan had limited contact with foreign traders. The contact Japan did have often resulted in unfair treaties. However, the new government under the

---

7 Warner, X.
8 Warner, IX-XI.
10 Westwood, J.N., 7.
emperor adapted a new policy which involved allowing trade with foreign nations. The new Meiji government not only opened Japan to trade, it also sought to model its economy and government after western nations. The basis for this new approach can be found in the *Charter Oath of Five Articles*. The articles outline a new government where all people regardless of class participate in government. The last article stated, “Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to invigorate the foundations of imperial rule.”\(^{11}\) Japan sought to learn in an effort to accelerate economic growth. The Meiji Restoration is generally agreed to be the beginnings of Japan’s move towards becoming a “westernized” country, and therefore, a country which was recognized by the west as a major power in the Far East.

Following the Meiji Restoration, the new government in Japan sought to rapidly grow both the economy and the military. One of the things they did was to renegotiate unfair agreements the Bakafu had made with the United States and Europe. Commodore Perry signed the first treaty with Japan, known as the Kanagawa Treaty, in 1854. Under this treaty, the United States gained access to the ports of Simoda and Matsmai in order to resupply their ships. Japanese ships were obligated to assist any wrecked United States’ ships. The treaty also required Japan to give the United States any privilege which it gave another country.\(^{12}\) Article IV read, “Those shipwrecked persons and other citizens of the United States shall be free in the other countries and not subjected to confinement but shall be amenable to just laws.”\(^{13}\) They established extraterritoriality which meant United States’ citizens could not be tried in Japan’s court sytem. Japan also forfeited its ability to set tariffs. The treaty known as the Harris Treaty


established tariffs for the United States. The treaty was extremely one sided. Japan agreed to give access to ports, did not require United States’ citizens to follow Japanese law, and agreed to assist United States’ ships. Meanwhile the United States gave up very little.

In 1858, Great Britain signed the Treaty of Yedo which was very similar to the agreement the United States entered into with Japan following the Kanagawa Treaty in 1854. Great Britain was granted access to ports at Nagasaki, Kanagawa, and Hakodate. Also, Great Britain was able to have a diplomat stay in Japan, and Great Britain’s citizens were granted extraterritorial rights. Export and import duties were determined for five years by the treaty, and Great Britain was given most favored nation treatment. The treaty while not as one sided as the treaty with the United States, still strongly favored Great Britain. By favoring Great Britain the treaty demonstrated that Japan was looked down upon as a nation. The treaty was not equal because Great Britain did not have the same respect as it did for other countries in the west.

For Japan and Great Britain the Treaty of Yedo lasted until 1894, when the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation was signed. This treaty effectively repealed the Treaty of Yedo and was a much more balanced treaty. According to the treaty, it was “based upon principles of equity and mutual benefit.” The new treaty stood in stark contrast to the old treaty where Japan was subject to Great Britain’s will. Article I of the new treaty ended extraterritoriality for Great Britain in Japan. British citizens were now subject to Japanese law. The Treaty of Commerce and Navigation represented a new level of recognition gained by Japan. Great Britain recognized Japan as an equal country rather than an inferior. The treaty was signed ten years before the Russo-Japanese War began which demonstrated the war in no way influenced the treaty. While

---

14 Latourette, 110.
the war did impact Japan’s global standing, the transformation of Japan from the interior is what truly brought them onto the world stage.

As early as 1878, the United States was willing to end extraterritoriality in Japan. However, the United States was unwilling to do so unless the other European powers agreed to make similar concessions. Therefore, it was not until Great Britain signed the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation that the United States agreed to such a treaty. By 1899, extraterritoriality ceased to exist with any foreign country in Japan.\(^{17}\) Japanese courts were now recognized by Europe as valid. Foreign citizens were subject to the same laws as Japanese citizens. Symbolically this showed a level of equality between Japan and Europe. It demonstrated that western countries viewed Japan on an equal level. Japan did not have to fight a war to prove equality with the West. The battle for this equality occurred with the internal reforms of the country. One of these reforms was the strengthening of the military, but war is not necessary to show military and economic strength.

Look forward to 1905 and Japan once again sought an agreement with the United States but over a slightly different matter. The Taft-Katusra Agreement was a conversation between Count Katsura, Japanese Premier and Minister of Foreign Relations, and a personal representative of President Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft. The agreement was made in secret, but it still carried the weight of an official treaty or agreement. The argument could be made that the United States only entered this agreement because it saw Japan was going to win the war, as the discussion did not occur until July 29, 1905. The agreement, however, “was a full statement of policy to which President Roosevelt had freely committed himself at least six

\(^{17}\) Latourette, 155-156.
months earlier.”18 At that time, it looked as if the war could go to either Russia or Japan. While Japan had won the early battles, Russia’s Baltic Fleet had been deployed but had not yet reached the Pacific. It was six months before July when President Roosevelt formed the policy in the Taft-Katusura Agreement, which meant his decision was likely uninfluenced by the outcome of the war.

As for the agreement itself, it is clear Japan was treated much differently in the Taft-Katusura Agreement than it had been in earlier agreements with the United States. The Taft-Katusura Agreement outlined that Japan had no interest in the Philippines, sought peace in the Far East, and wanted an end to the so-called Korea question. Japan felt Korea, if allowed to negotiate with other nations, would put Japan in a situation where Japan had to go to war again. Taft agreed that Japan had valid claims.19 The United States had essentially viewed Japan as an equal like Great Britain had, all of this happening before the Russo-Japanese War. The agreement was not slanted in one direction or another. Also, “Count Katsura observed that the maintenance of general peace in the extreme East forms the fundamental principle of Japan’s international policy.”20 Japan had injected themselves into world affairs by attempting to maintain peace in East Asia. They looked beyond themselves, which showed a certain military strength. Further, Count Katsura suggested the best way to maintain peace would be an alliance between Great Britain, the United States and Japan. An alliance suggested a level of equality between the three countries rather than one or two of the countries being over the other.

---

18 Dennett, Tyler, 112.
Great Britain recognized Japan as a major player in East Asia prior to the Russo-Japanese War. Japan and Great Britain signed the Anglo-Japanese Agreement in 1902, which acknowledged both Japan’s interest in China and Korea and Great Britain’s interest in China.\textsuperscript{21} The treaty is important because it demonstrated that even before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, Great Britain realized Japan could be a valuable ally. Unlike earlier treaties signed between Japan and western nations, the Anglo-Japanese Agreement of 1902 was not an unequal agreement. In addition to recognizing the others interest, the agreement also stated in Article II, “If either Great Britain or Japan in defense of their respective interests as above described, should become involved in war with another Power, the other High Contracting Party will maintain a strict neutrality, and use its efforts to prevent other Powers from joining in hostilities against its ally.”\textsuperscript{22} This article of the treaty is in no way slanted towards favoring Great Britain. It provided the same protection for both nations. Further, the use of the phrase another “Power” implied that the two nations were considered “Powers.” The recognition of Japan was not instantly changed because of the Russo-Japanese War. It began before the war and continued through the war.

Articles III and IV of the Anglo-Japanese Agreement are also important. Article III stated, “If in the above event, any other Power or Powers should join in hostilities against that ally, the other High Contracting Party will come to its assistance, and will conduct war in common, and will make peace in common.”\textsuperscript{23} Both Great Britain and Japan agreed to assist the other if they were attacked. They would make war in common and make peace in common. The

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] Latourette, 174.
\end{footnotes}
level of commitment by Great Britain to Japan demonstrated a level of respect, which according to several scholars, was not obtained until after the war. However, this agreement showed that Great Britain was committed to Japan. Article IV said, “The High Contracting Parties agree that neither of them will, without consulting the other, enter into separate arrangements with another Power to the prejudice of the interests described above.” Article IV again showed a level of respect which suggested the two nations were equal allies with neither having the advantage over the other. Each country was equally bound by the agreement.

In addition to respecting each other’s power, the treaty was also similar to other treaties signed by European nations at the time. For example, the Triple alliance between Germany, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire and the Triple Entente between Russia, Great Britain, and France have clauses very similar to the ones found in the Anglo-Japanese Agreement. The Austro-German Agreement of 1879 said, “Should, contrary to their hope and against the loyal desire of the High Contracting Parties, one of the two Empires be attacked by Russia, the High Contracting Parties are bound to come to the assistance one of the other.” These two alliances were formed by the powers of Europe in the late Nineteenth to early Twentieth Century. Like the Anglo-Japanese Agreement, these agreements were based on the premise of respect for the other country as a sovereign power. Great Britain recognized and respected Japan prior to the Russo-Japanese War showing that the war was not necessary for Japan to gain recognition, nor was it a coming of age moment for Japan. Those moments were found dispersed beginning with the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

In the mid-1800s Japan mostly avoided contact with foreign nations. Clearly the arrival of Commodore Perry and the Meiji Restoration changed that stance. When Japan did begin to negotiate the treaties, as mentioned, they were unfair. Japan was unable to provide enough of a threat to prevent unfair treaties. However, Japan changed, and as a result, the treaties changed. Japan finally refused to back down to a western power in Russia. Russia had interests in Manchuria, and Japan had interests in both Manchuria and Korea. Neither Japan nor Russia was willing to give in.\textsuperscript{26} In 1903, Japan reached out to Russia in an effort to assure an “open door” policy in Korea and Manchuria. On August 12, 1903, Japan called for “mutual definition of their interests in Manchuria and Korea, which would lead to the evacuation of the former.”\textsuperscript{27} Japan had placed itself in a position to negotiate with Russia. If Japan had not made significant progress, they would not have had any leverage to utilize against Russia. However, due to the advancements in the economy and military by Japan, they were able to make demands against a foreign nation.

Japan was already immersed in world affairs before the Russo-Japanese War. They had taken to the ideas of balancing power. Neither Russia, nor Japan wanted to see the other gain an upper hand in the East. Before the war began, this war was not like other wars between European and Asian countries, such as the Opium Wars, which were fought by Great Britain to open China to trade.\textsuperscript{28} The Russo-Japanese War was different in that Japan was not fighting a directly defensive war. The war was being fought over expanded control of territory, or imperialism as it


\textsuperscript{27} “Sir Ernest Mason Satow to Uchida” August 23, 1903, in \textit{Korea and Manchuria Between Russia and Japan 1895-1904: The Observations of Sir Ernest Satow British Prime Minister to Japan (1895-1900) and China (1900-1906)}, (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1966), 227.

\textsuperscript{28} Melancon, Glenn, “Honour in Opium? The British Declaration of War on China, 1839-1840,” \textit{The International History Review} 21, no. 4, (December, 1999), 855.
is commonly called.\textsuperscript{29} This alone demonstrated that Japan believed itself to be strengthened in world affairs. They were willing to inject themselves in an issue not directly involving Japan to prevent Russian expansion into China.

President Roosevelt recognized Japan as a valid opposition to Russia prior to the Russo-Japanese War. He saw Japan standing up to Russia as protecting American interests in Asia. “As his (Theodore Roosevelt) concern over Russian expansion had increased and his awareness of the administration’s helplessness had grown, he turned more and more to Japan as a balance against Russian power on the mainland of Asia.”\textsuperscript{30} President Roosevelt recognized that Japan had the capabilities to defend not only its own country but also to prevent other countries from expanding into East Asia. Roosevelt saw Japan as a powerful nation even before the first shot of the Russo-Japanese War began.

In the early 1900s, the western world was still under the impression that East Asia was inferior to Europe and the United States. This view was still reflected after the war. An article written in 1911 stated, “Prior to it (Russo-Japanese War), the Far East was regarded by the nations of European blood as a prey, a spoil, ripe for division. The eagles had gathered from afar and had already fixed their talons on the carcass.”\textsuperscript{31} The author is correct in that this seemed to be the way most people viewed Asia at the time. However, the assumption is incorrect by saying the nations. The leaders of these countries, mainly Great Britain and the United States recognized that Japan had in fact changed. Therefore, the countries acted differently toward Japan.

\textsuperscript{31} “The Literature of the Russo-Japanese War, I,” 509.
The Russo-Japanese War was an important war. It was the first time an Asian country defeated a western power. However, the war is not significant for the recognition it gained Japan. The process of gaining global recognition had already begun. The United States and Great Britain had already agreed to equal alliances with Japan. By 1900, Japan shed the unfair treaties signed by the Shogunate. Japan began to undergo massive military and economic changes after the Meiji Restoration. The people of Europe and the United States may have realized Japan’s power after the Russo-Japanese War, but the leaders of these two countries realized it prior to the war. It was by these changes that Japan gained respect from the West.

Bibliography

Reference Source


Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


**Journal Articles**


The Russo-Japanese War was triggered by Nicholas II and his desire for imperial expansion in Asia - but instead it produced humiliation and domestic unrest. The Russians began constructing a branch from the Trans-Siberian railway through Manchuria to Port Arthur. Quite independently, global powers were worried lest China become a belligerent in that Russia might respond by calling on France to intervene alongside her. This would create a worldwide crisis. John Hay, the US secretary of state took the initiative (as he had earlier done in 1899) in discouraging China. While Japan is today known as a leading nation in terms of technology, this was not the case in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After a long. The Japanese also sent advisors to learn army tactics and training methods from the Prussians and other European powers. Perhaps the most important result of this policy was the wholesale imitation of the British navy. The new emphasis on training was taken to heart by the new and growing Japanese navy and crews drilled constantly on their newly constructed modern naval fleet. Battleships were built with the latest technologies including better reinforcements for the hulls and more accurate targeting systems.