



The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War

Ian Nish



THE ORIGINS OF THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The third volume to be published in this series deals with the origins of a war very different in scope and scale from that of 1914–18 with which Professor James Joll's volume dealt, and very different in character from the Arab-Israeli conflicts with which Dr Ritchie Ovendale's volume deals. The search for common factors in the origins of the three conflicts is perhaps a vain and unrewarding task, yet certain general points of interpretation emerge.

James Joll noted the inadequacies of intelligence and imagination of individual men in positions of supreme authority in 1914, and how those inadequacies helped to lead to the catastrophe. In the present volume Professor Nish shows how Tsar Nicholas II, essentially a man of peace, and sometimes a shrewd observer of what was happening, was for a large part of the time of the crisis on holiday or unobtainable, and was anyhow a weak man who could not halt the impending disaster. There is an irony in the fact that essentially pacific men have often been in authority at the outbreak of wars – Lord Aberdeen in 1854 (a war with which Dr Agatha Ramm will be dealing in the series), Asquith in 1914, Neville Chamberlain in 1939 (a war with which Mr Philip Bell will be dealing in the series). The limitations of Nicholas II contributed in 1904 and 1914 to tragedy on a scale which he certainly did not intend or envisage.

Another question which must be asked about the origins of wars is that of the role of simple miscalculation – the miscalculation regarding the ease with which the war can be won. Ian Nish shows that Russian ministers could not believe that their vast and powerful empire could possibly be defeated by a small upstart Asian nation. The Japanese, ironically in view of their overwhelming victory in the war, were far more cautious. But they were, in Professor Nish's words, 'cool and calculating'. Russian confidence in victory was a proud but somewhat nebulous one; Japanese confidence was less extravagant, but more firmly based on military and naval facts.

That the Arab-Israeli wars with which Ritchie Ovendale dealt in his volume in this series did not lead to a direct Russo-American

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confrontation was partly due to the very complexity of the situation in the Middle East. Fortunately the Russians and the Americans have never been quite sure whom to back there. Even the basic sympathy which Washington has felt for Israel has sometimes wavered. But the problems dividing Russia and Japan in 1904 were also complex, and the complexity on that occasion did not permit successful bargaining, and so did not prevent war. Yet there was certainly more room for bargaining and negotiating than some of the politicians and diplomats on both sides had the wit to realize. But Professor Nish finds the statement that the war was 'unnecessary' too simplistic. 'If the two sides could not find an agreeable basis for compromise,' he writes, 'it is hard to see how the war can be described as "preventable".' It came to be regarded as necessary in the eyes of both governments, but perhaps not equally necessary in the eyes of all politicians and diplomats concerned. Ian Nish shows very clearly that the holding of a significant post by a certain individual at a particular moment in a crisis may well affect the way the negotiations develop. The foolish belief that the will of individual diplomats or officials can have no influence on developments – that they are all in some mystical way caught up in an inevitable process – is belied by Professor Nish's account. In a classic statement in the early eighteenth century Giambattista Vico pointed out that while it may be true that God made nature, it is certainly true that Man made history: humanity cannot escape that responsibility. Someone – some people – were responsible for wars, and more often than not those people were not all on the same side.

Another general question which can be asked about most wars is whether public opinion was more eager for war than the government, or vice versa. Ian Nish suggests that in 1904 the Japanese people were more eager for war than their government, while the Russian public was less interested in the Far East than were some of their ministers. But Japan was a constitutional state while Russia was still a monolithic autocracy, so that 'public opinion' means something rather different in the two countries. Before a war there is usually a peace party and a war party – doves and hawks. As soon as the war starts the doves appear discredited, but in a defeated nation the hawks in their turn are discredited. Professor Nish tells us, in one of his brilliantly lucid concluding points, that in 1904 'there was in both countries an expansionist group tussling with a more moderate one which was equally determined to pursue national interests but in ways which would avoid confrontation or offense to other powers. The attainment of rational solutions was often lost because of the factional infighting.'

One general point of interest mentioned in this volume relates to the diplomatic paraphernalia of going to war in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A government 'declared' war before waging it, although usually not before mobilizing its armies. Thus Japan was condemned for making war in 1904 without formally declaring it.

Editor's foreword

Again, half a century later, she was to be condemned for the same reason after her attack at Pearl Harbor, a point which will probably be considered by Professor Akira Iriye in the volume he is writing for this series. In 1914 the Powers went through the formalities of issuing ultimatums and declaring war, as did the British in 1939. Such niceties seem now to have been forgotten. The British and French governments made war on Egypt without declaring it in 1956, and more recently Argentina and Britain have made war on each other in the Falklands without declarations of war.

One final general point is worth noting from Professor Nish's book. When it looked extremely likely that Japan and Russia were going to war the other Powers felt that there was an obligation for them to 'appease' the conflicting parties. Their interests in keeping peace in the Far East were not, however, sufficiently strong for them to take any firm action. Still, 'appeasement' was not yet a dirty word. It became a dirty word only when a gross aberration appeared in world history, the aberration of Nazi Germany. Even then the problem of 'appeasement' was perhaps less simple than the Winston Churchills and the Anthony Edens would have had us believe. The time has surely come for the world to realize that appeasement is better than war, and that crude analogies between the present and 1938 are desperately dangerous. The sense of a duty to 'appease' felt by Western diplomats in 1904 – even though they did not carry out that duty – is not entirely without a message for the present.

HARRY HEARDER

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was originally approached by the series editor to write this volume in 1976. I was then engaged in research on Anglo-Japanese relations in the 1920s and 1930s which I set aside for the time being in order to take up this project. It proved to be a more extensive subject of study than I had originally imagined and has taken much longer to reach published form. In pursuing research on this theme, I was fortunate to visit Japan twice – in 1978 (with the help of a Hayter grant) and 1982; Korea in 1982; and Canada and the United States in 1981. This enabled me to consult a number of private papers which added to my understanding of the war.

Many excellent studies of the subject have been published (Malozemoff, White, Warner and Lensen to name but a few). Indeed a number of important new studies appeared as this book was going to press, notably Lieven, Lensen's *Balance of Intrigue* and Quested on Russia in Manchuria. I still thought that the origins of the Russo-Japanese war which was my remit within the series was a worthwhile subject for investigation. On the one hand, the Russo-Japanese war seemed to have characteristics which made it relevant to any series studying the origins of war. On the other, it seemed to me that new materials had been published recently which threw light on these origins.

The new publications on the Japanese side are also particularly rich through the typically thorough coverage of Meiji historical materials by the publisher, Haro Shobō. In addition, several important translations have been published: three volumes of *The Diplomacy of Japan, 1894–1922* by Kajima Morinosuke; Mutsu Munemitsu's *Kenkenroku*, edited by Gordon Berger; and Miyazaki Tōten's *My 33 Years' Dream* by Etō Shinkichi and Marius Jansen. Each of these has vital evidence for our study. We are also grateful for the appearance of selections from the correspondence of four important figures taken from the foreign community engaged on the China coast: the correspondence of Sir Robert Hart in *The I.G. in Peking* (edited by J. K. Fairbank *et al.*); George Lensen's selections from the letters of Baron d'Anethan and Sir

Preface and Acknowledgements

Ernest Satow; and the correspondence of Dr George Ernest Morrison by Dr Loh Hui-min. Each of these sheds important light on the actual operations of Russia and Japan in China; and, while there may be a British or continental bias in them, they were well-informed and perceptive observers.

I was less satisfied by the picture of decision-making in St Petersburg which emerged from my reading. In order to take a fresh look at this problem I consulted the private papers of three British diplomats at the Russian capital: Sir Charles Scott, the ambassador from 1898 to 1904, (Sir) Charles Hardinge, the secretary (1898–1903) and then the ambassador, and (Sir) Cecil Spring-Rice, who was *chargé d'affaires* at the critical juncture of the outbreak of war. In view of the multi-dimensional nature of Russian decision-making, it was necessary to consult these three sources from time to time for contemporary political assessment and for background information. Taken together, they serve as a sort of Greek chorus, making comments on, without being part of, the drama. At the same time, I should stress that this is neither a study of British policy – or indeed of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in another disguise – nor a mere recapitulation of contemporary British attitudes. Perhaps fortunately for my purpose, Scott tended to be receptive to the Russian side of the case, while Hardinge and Spring-Rice were sceptical. The views of these three diplomats on the changing Russian scene will be found in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print: Russia 1859–1914*, edited by Dominic Lieven (General Editors: K. Bourne and D. C. Watt), 6 vols, University Publications of America, 1984, which, unfortunately, came to hand too late for inclusion in this volume.

I am under a great obligation to a wide variety of people. For help with material, thanks are due to Mrs E. A. Malozemoff of Oakland, California; Professor J. A. White of the University of Hawaii; Mr E. W. Edwards; Mr I. Gow; Mr R. Scoales; Dr Ann Trotter of the University of Otago; Professor-Doctor A. Schwade of the University of Bochum; Dr D. Mills, of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and the late Professor G. R. Storry of St Anthony's College, Oxford. I owe debts to my colleagues at the London School of Economics, especially Dr A. Polonsky and Professor M. S. Anderson. I must also thank the series editor, Professor H. Hearder, for many improvements. Among Japanese scholars, Dr Yūichi Inouye of the Foreign Ministry, Mr Setsuya Beppu, Dr Matsumura of the Japan Foundation, Professor Okumura and Emeritus Professor Uchiyama of Keio University, have all assisted me by supplying materials. In the final stages, I have received much help from Mrs Irene Perkin and Mrs Susan Shaw.

To librarians in half a hundred libraries who have helped me beyond the call of duty I express my gratitude and appreciation. In particular, I should thank the British Library of Political and Economic Science; the

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Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London; the British Library, London, the Public Record Office, Kew; the Houghton Library, Harvard University; the Sterling Library, Yale University; the Diplomatic Records Office, Tokyo; the National Diet Library, Tokyo; and the Libraries of the Nissan Centre, St Antony's College, Oxford, of Churchill College, Cambridge, and of Cambridge University. In cases where citations have been made from papers held by these libraries, permission has been sought from their custodians and given by them. This is gratefully acknowledged. And more particularly, for permission to quote from papers in their custody, I am grateful to the Syndics of Cambridge University Library (Hardinge papers); to Churchill College, Cambridge (Spring-Rice papers); to the Department of Manuscripts, the British Library (Balfour and Scott papers). Public Record Office documents cited in this work are British Crown copyright and are reprinted by permission of Her Britannic Majesty's Stationery Office.

Many thanks are due to my wife who has tolerated my infatuation with this subject over such a long period.

IAN NISH

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>BD</i> | <i>British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914</i> (see under Great Britain in Bibliography) |
| <i>DDF</i> | <i>Documents Diplomatiques Français</i> (see under France) |
| <i>d'Anethan</i> | |
| <i>Dispatches</i> | Albert d'Anethan, <i>The d'Anethan Dispatches from Japan, 1894–1910</i> |
| 'Eve of War' | 'On the Eve of the Russo-Japanese War' in <i>Chinese Social and Political Science Review</i> , a translation of 'Nakanune Russko-Iaponskoi Voiny' in <i>Krasnyi Arkhiv</i> , 63 (1934) (see under <i>Krasnyi Arkhiv</i>) |
| FO | Foreign Office: General correspondence, deposited in the Public Record Office, London |
| <i>Itō Hiroku</i> | <i>Itō Hirobumi Hiroku</i> (see under Hiratsuka Atsushi) |
| <i>NGB</i> | <i>Nihon Gaikō Bunsho</i> (see under Japan) |
| <i>NGNB</i> | <i>Nihon Gaikō Nempyō narabi ni Shūyō Bunsho</i> (see under Japan) |
| <i>Forty Years</i> | Rosen, <i>Forty Years of Diplomacy</i> |

For Fiona and Alison

INTRODUCTION

Now that peace is assured, the time seems to have arrived for the world to reflect more calmly than ever upon the origin of one of the greatest wars ever recorded in history; and upon the ideals and notions, as well as training and aspirations, of the Japanese, that one of the belligerent parties which had not, perhaps, been sufficiently known to the world before the war. And above all the time has come to observe how faithfully Japan has maintained her ambition of deserving the name of a civilized nation, and to reflect how securely we may take her steady progress of the past, and especially during the last ten years, as a guarantee of her continued advance in the future.¹

So wrote Baron Suematsu in a semi-official book of essays, published just after the treaty of Portsmouth had brought the Russo-Japanese war to an end. In it he invites his readers in the various European countries to reflect on the origins of the war. It is relatively rare in the history of war for governments to invite enquiries into the origin of wars, more common for them to conceal and distort these origins and to discourage and frustrate the study of their root causes. In this case Japan's readiness to encourage the study of the origins of her war with Russia suggests the existence of great confidence on her part that her war aims were justified and shared by many other countries.

It was of course easier for Japan as the victor to issue such an invitation than it was for the defeated. To be sure, the Russians held that they were the wronged party, against whom warlike steps had been taken without provocation. But for them the war became subsumed in the revolutionary year of 1905. One Russian leader wrote in February 1905: 'If the war had ended in a few months, it would have strengthened Russia's spirit, her international prestige. Even if she had not achieved real benefits from it, she might perhaps have taken heart and her prestige been revived. But the war has grown sour . . . and Russia's social fabric has gone to pieces.'² The Russians still claimed that they had gone to war in a righteous cause. But they chose not to dwell on the muddled origins of the war unless it was for the purpose of self-justification.

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Even without an invitation from the parties, there are ample grounds for studying the war's origins. The Russo-Japanese war was an important war of the twentieth century. Although it was confined to two countries, it was significant because of the vast number of those who took part in it: the Russian forces in the area starting at 100,000 troops and growing in 1905 to 1,300,000 and the Japanese starting with 300,000 and growing in 1905 to roughly triple that strength.³ The war was equally important because of the bitterness of the fighting and the toll it took of the manhood of both countries: the lengthy siege of Port Arthur ended with a loss of 58,000 killed to the victorious Japanese and a loss of 31,000 to the Russians, while the immense battle of Mukden is estimated to have caused casualties of 85,000 to the Russians as against 70,000 to the Japanese. Its sheer scale would justify the description of 'a large and significant war of a bilateral kind'. It attracted the interest of army-navy officers around the world who competed to serve as attachés and its strategic and tactical lessons were soon the staple diet for study in the world's military academies. Most of the European nations deemed it to be sufficiently relevant to them to publish their multi-volume histories of the war.⁴

Even if the Russo-Japanese war was not a world war, it had repercussions throughout the world. Though the outside powers were not belligerents, they were surely 'involved'. France was the reluctant associate of Russia, while Britain and the United States were coming to be increasingly aligned with the cause of Japan. The fact that these countries avoided a declaration of war was sometimes a close-run thing. It will be necessary for us to test the argument often heard that Germany egged on Russia to expand in the Far East, while Britain egged on Japan to resist Russian expansion. The role of European countries in the origins of this war is, therefore, a subtle and complex one. The impact on Asia was equally strong. The war fundamentally changed the balance of power in east Asia and affected the destinies of Russia and Japan in the region. At another level the war was a victory for a coloured race against a white one and thereby shattered many nineteenth-century illusions.⁵

The Russo-Japanese war did not originate purely from a failure of diplomacy, though that was one factor. A diplomatic history would not therefore give an adequate account of its origins. Among its many-sided origins, there was a strong strategic factor. On the military side there were too many Russian troops in Manchuria in 1904 for Japan's conception of her own security and she did not succeed in negotiating for their withdrawal. On the naval side Russia wanted naval supremacy in the Korean straits, and Japan as an aspiring naval power could not accept that.⁶ There were also economic origins. It was not so much that Russia and Japan were competitors in trade as that they seemed to be competing for the same raw materials in Korea and Manchuria. The situation looked even more menacing for Japan as the Russian railway empire in north-east Asia came to a state of operational readiness. This

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improved the position of Russia and necessarily worked to the disadvantage of Japan. There were no basic political incompatibilities between Russia and Japan. Both had elements of stability and instability. Indeed there were resemblances between them and no great ideological differences.

In this introduction we offer certain reflections on the policy-making process in Russia and Japan. This is not the place to undertake a detailed study of the Russian or Japanese state systems, especially as most of the issues which would arise could be highly controversial. We then turn to a brief account of the two areas of political weakness in northeast Asia at the turn of the century: the kingdom (sometimes the empire) of Korea and the empire of China, together with the economically unexploited area of Manchuria. In the age of imperialism these were the natural targets for 'protection' (as it was called) by the stronger powers. These were notably Russia and Japan. We close the introduction with a brief description of the effect of the various railway systems which brought the crisis to a head.

Our story starts in 1894 with the Sino-Japanese war but treats the next six years with brevity. From 1900, the time of Russia's occupation of Manchuria, to the last six weeks of peace in 1904, the subject-matter is treated in increasing detail. Such a deliberate imbalance in treatment seems inevitable when one is considering how attempts to prevent a conflict come eventually to nothing.

RUSSIA AND FAR EASTERN POLICY

In Russia an autocratic emperor had the final say in determining foreign affairs. In the decade covered by this book, there was no prime minister in Russia. For want of this, the emperor had to act as the coordinator to whom all the ministers made direct reference. The state secretaries followed the practice of sending official communications (including of course diplomatic correspondence) to the emperor, attaching their own views and recommendations as to the action that was needed and occasionally (generally too rarely) having audiences with him. There was no automatic opportunity for advance consultation with other ministers in the ordinary course. One consequence of this was that the emperor might receive differing advice from his state secretaries. Without a proper coordinating mechanism, it was not impossible for the emperor to endorse on different occasions courses of action which were mutually contradictory. This led to the accusation that one of the ministries had greater leverage with him and caused jealousies between departments. But at times in our story we shall also find that committees

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were set up to deliberate on the knotty problems of east Asia and to try to work out a consensus before advising the tsar.

In its formulation, far-eastern policy had to take account of commercial, strategic and diplomatic considerations. The tsar had to weigh the advice of the war ministry, the navy ministry, the finance ministry and the foreign ministry. Those in charge of these offices were not politicians but bureaucrats. Being officials, they did not have to serve constituents; make speeches or answer interpellations in a parliament (before 1905); justify their policies in public; or adjust them in order to make them publicly acceptable. There was not much pressure of public opinion in Russia which affected decisions on east Asia, as distinct from those on the Balkans where pan-slavic doctrines had their influence. Policies could be drawn up more coolly and implemented without fear of stirring up emotional scenes. The reverse of this was, however, that the Russian ministers had little understanding of any system, such as that of the Japanese, where ministers had to make parliamentary speeches and issue white papers on foreign policy. They were also impatient with the critical exposure which Russia received from speeches made in foreign countries.

Much depended upon the personality of the new Autocrat of all the Russias, Nicholas II (r. 1894–1917). He was born in 1868, the son of Alexander III and the Empress Marie from Denmark, and was well educated by private tutors. When his father became tsar, Nicholas was notoriously – and deliberately – kept out of touch with affairs of state. A rare exception to this was his world cruise in 1891 which included visits to India, Japan and Vladivostok. Among his adventures was the episode at Ōtsu in Japan when a disgruntled policeman attacked him with a sword and injured him in the head. The exact cause is still unclear; and the consequence of this incident for Nicholas's later judgements is equally unclear.⁷ On his return to Russia, he became engaged in April 1894 to Princess Alexandra of Hesse-Darmstadt. But the euphoria of this event was soon broken by his father's sudden illness which resulted in his death at the age of forty-nine on 1 November. Nicholas acceded to the throne at the age of twenty-six in the midst of the war between China and Japan. His marriage took place later in the month, on the day following his father's funeral. He was formally crowned in May 1896 after a period of court mourning and amid a flurry of diplomatic activity.

What can be said of Nicholas in his first years on the throne? It is important not to read back to earlier times qualities which became manifest later in his reign when personal tragedies affected his mind. The impression left by his performance in the decade before the Russo-Japanese war is that of a dedicated, hard-working sovereign, who was caught up in paperwork, in audiences and ceremonial, and was unable to find a permanent adviser on whose judgement he could rely. Young, shy and diffident, he sought to avoid argument and confrontation and

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often firm decisions. But he was proud of his role as an autocrat, was strongly nationalistic and had a high sense of duty to his country. Surrounded by intrigue at his own court and swamped by advice from friendly senior monarchs abroad, he was apt to retreat into domestic life as a form of escapism from the harsh decisions which he alone could take.

Nicholas certainly had an unenviable role. In performing it, he seems to have suffered from lack of training and from the protected life he led. Sir Charles Scott, the British ambassador, reported that Nicholas was 'incapable, either from want of sufficient experience or by natural diffidence, of taking a decided initiative on his own judgement and inclined to throw his whole weight of responsibility on Count Mouravieff'.⁸ This judgement probably applied equally to his other ministers. It was a dilemma for Russia: the decisions had to be made by the tsar; but he was unsure of himself and untrained for the office. Moreover the environment of his life was not ideal for making judgements. Because of the insecurity felt in court circles since the assassination of Alexander II, Nicholas generally lived in Tsarskoye Selo, some 15 miles from the capital, and never left his palaces without a strong guard. Surrounded by a small intimate coterie, he was cut off from awareness of public opinion and was the victim of those who reported to him. Since he had a self-contained character, he was content with this life of social isolation. Through the narrow window of Tsarskoye Selo he surveyed the affairs of Europe in the diplomatic papers he so conscientiously studied. Because of his world tour in 1891, he kept especially in touch with east Asian affairs and was evidently a strong believer in his country's prospects in Siberia and the far east.

The conduct of foreign affairs was made difficult by the strange pattern of the emperor's calendar. He had the custom of taking very long holidays, considering the crucial place that he occupied in policy-making. Nicholas would go in August to Wiesbaden for the sake of the tsarina; to the imperial hunting lodge at Spala in Poland; and later in the autumn to the Livadia Palace at Yalta in the Crimea. In these places, he was generally attended by some of his ministers, who only chose to stay close to the throne because of jealousy of their colleagues, who might be trying to steal a march with the tsar. Russian diplomats' reports went straight to these holiday places from capitals abroad, though foreign communications were delivered at St Petersburg where the foreign ministry maintained a nominal existence but where policy decisions could rarely be taken. These months (when so many of the crises in the east arose) were therefore a 'close season for diplomacy': the British ambassador generally took furlough from September to just before Christmas, by which time the court had returned to the capital, though this was not feasible for Japanese diplomats.

The fact that diplomacy at the Russian capital was difficult did not mean that the foreign policy pursued by the tsar and his ministers was

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other than moderate. The emperor frequently professed to be pursuing the object of peace. We know of the personal initiative which he took over the peace conference at The Hague in 1899. If it was regarded by professional diplomats as naïve and innocent, it was none the less representative of his style – and that of Nicholas I before him. It was his own handiwork, not that of his ministers. Contemporary witnesses confirm ‘the emperor’s innate love of peace’.⁹ Indeed the closer people went to the emperor’s family circle, the more they were impressed with this peace-loving quality. But Nicholas wanted peace on Russia’s terms and failed to understand how objectionable her actions appeared to others or when a conciliatory approach was desirable.

Russia’s foreign ministers were officials, not politicians. Whether Nicholas was well served by them is doubtful. He had three foreign ministers during the first ten years of his reign: Prince Lobanov-Rostovskii; M. N. Muraviev; and V. N. Lamsdorf. Lobanov was at the end of a long and distinguished diplomatic career in Europe; but he was ‘often in the country and it was almost impossible to see him except on his reception day’.¹⁰ Muraviev was appointed after a less distinguished career in less prominent capitals, while Lamsdorf came to prominence through service in the ministry itself. Their subordinates in the ministry were as always a mixed bag. On the one hand, they could be loyal and competent. On the other, some serious criticisms were made about their lack of professionalism. Thus Dmitrii Abrikosov, himself a junior in the service, wrote that ‘the stagnation in the Foreign Ministry is indescribable. Everybody is asleep’.¹¹ The Germany ambassador also reported: ‘Nor have I in my whole life ever seen so much laziness as in the ministries here. All officials arrive at 11 or 12 o’clock and disappear at 4 never to be seen again. During office hours they do nothing but smoke and promenade in the corridors’.¹² There was certainly slackness in the head office; and this reflected itself in some lack of control over legations and consulates overseas.

The weakness of the foreign ministry played into the hands of the already powerful finance ministry. The increasing preoccupation of the Russian state with railway building and industrialization which had been started under his father was a matter beyond Nicholas’s competence. He tended to leave the problems associated with it – private capital and foreign loans – to the finance ministry and its new luminary, Sergei Witte (1849–1915). Witte’s successful career began in a private railway company from which he had entered government service in 1888. He was chosen to head the railway department in the finance ministry in 1891 and became, first, communications minister and then finance minister in the following year. In this role he succeeded in restoring the state finances, returning the country to the gold standard and arranging state and private loans from abroad. Through his influence with the tsar, he was able to nominate those loyal to him to ministerial positions.¹³

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Whether or not the relationship between Nicholas and Witte was one of trust, it was certainly on Nicholas's part one of dependence in the early stages. The power of the ministry of finance bureaucracy and its ability to manage state funds was something that Nicholas could not challenge. It came close to being a superior banking house, channelling the resources of the state into many ventures in Asia, notably the Trans-Siberian railway. Because these undertakings were so wide-ranging in their implications, Witte became the focus of much of the frenzied political activity in the east at the time.¹⁴ Since he was by nature high-handed and self-confident, he often went ahead without due consideration for other political forces and parts of the bureaucracy. Naturally Witte became unpopular. But, so long as he enjoyed the support of the tsar, as he did until 1902, he had not much to fear. Nicholas, inheriting Witte as one of his father's ministers, kept on relatively good terms with him. When, however, the tsar turned against him Witte never forgave him and had many harsh things to write about the young tsar in retrospect in his memoirs, *Vospominaniya*.¹⁵ It is, however, a distortion to believe that this was representative of his sentiments throughout the years he served the tsar.

Like Bismarck before him, Witte had by no means a guarantee of power. Firstly, he was disliked by many of his influential colleagues. Though they were dazzled by his brilliance, they were put off by his overbearing manner and dictatorial intrusions into their preserves. Secondly, his power derived from his ministry of which he had to make a success. The Russian economy being what it was, that could not be guaranteed in the long term. Thirdly, he had to kowtow to the tsar who was fickle in his likes and dislikes. Witte had to lobby to keep his views before his master. Naturally the supreme autocrat resented too much power falling into the hands of any of his subordinates and from 1902 onwards began to keep his distance from Witte, who was having less success with the economy.

There were many competing groups in the Russian court. The ministers, the grand dukes, the armed services – to name but a few. Thus conflicting policies would be put before the tsar with whom the final decision lay. Sometimes the tsar might be won over to one group and be used to do down its rival. On other occasions information might be withheld from the Sovereign: 'In the middle of all the tiraillements between contending Ministers, Grand Dukes and other influences, it is difficult to make out how much the Emperor is told.'¹⁶ It was baffling to the diplomats who had to fathom which voice was speaking for Russia. It came as second nature to them to recognize that there were many voices and many policies operating simultaneously. Was it the voice of the armed services which were not kept under adequate central control? Was it the voice of the grand dukes, the four brothers of Nicholas's father, each an independent, strong-willed man, that carried weight? There was a Babel of voices and little coordination. Russian government

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was disorganized, inefficient and only kept abreast of the modern industrialized world with difficulty.¹⁷

In these circumstances it would be unreasonable to expect that Russian 'policy' at the frontier would be crystal clear to the outside observer. There was inefficiency, rivalry and contradiction there too. Yet it has to be said that Russia exhibited remarkable skill in dealing with China, the central problem of east Asia in the 1890s, despite the fact that she had no integrated colonial service and had to improvise with officials from many walks of life. These officials seem to have succeeded in convincing at least some of the potentates of the Middle Kingdom that Russia was the true friend and best protector of China, despite the evidence that she was, on the contrary, the most expansive of outside countries. The Russians seem to have understood better the foibles of the Chinese officials of the Tsungli Yamen (Board of Foreign Relations) and its successor, the Waiwupu; the court and the eunuchs; and especially the Manchu clansmen. They seem to have grasped successfully the subtle relationship between central government and the viceroys in the provinces. Russian diplomats often saw long periods of continuous service in the east and had a good command of languages of the area. They were also skilful in adapting to the mores of the Chinese court. J. O. P. Bland, the experienced British commentator on things Chinese, wrote: 'The Russians pay their Chinese friends well not only for what they want but also to block our roads. They have the foremost men in the (Chinese) Empire in their employ and interest while we go on blundering in the dark; violating every principle of mandarin livelihood.'¹⁸ This judgement doubtless reflects the distrust between Britain and Russia in coping with the problems of China and may therefore be unfair.¹⁹ But it underlines the reputation which Russia had for maintaining good relations despite her inclination for racialism. One of the most effective experts was D. D. Pokotilov, the finance ministry man with special responsibility for the Russo-Chinese Bank and the Chinese Eastern Railway. Coming to China at the age of 22 in 1898, he acquired an unsurpassed knowledge of the Chinese language. His skill in handling Peking officials was outstanding; and the adherence of Li Hung-chang to the Russian cause was in large measure his doing. He was to become minister to China from 1905 to 1908.

JAPAN AND ASIAN POLICY

In Japan and Russia there were like and unlike elements. Unlike Russia, Japan was a constitutional state with a monarchy limited by the Meiji constitution of 1890. Like Russia, Japan reserved many prerogatives and autocratic powers to the emperor who for the period of this study

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was the Emperor Meiji (r. 1868–1912). By 1894 he had become an important ruler with abundant experience in seeing his country developing through years of rapid change. This did not mean that the emperor took an active part in state affairs. But at moments of crisis, he either convened an imperial conference or in other ways made clear his views. In foreign affairs he took a part in decision-making over Japan's part in the relief of the Peking legations in 1900, the signing of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1902 and in the decision to declare war on Russia. In general, he was able to hold up decisions while the substance was further studied. He did not tend in the second half of his reign to put up alternative policies of his own so much as to serve as a corrective or delaying force.

One example of the emperor's prerogatives was to refer issues to a body called the *genro* or elder statesmen. This was a group of cautious leaders, products of the Meiji restoration, and former prime ministers who were by the 1890s mainly in their late fifties. In foreign affairs these men were a counter-force to the political party leaders who were often fiery and belligerent. They restrained the more extreme groups and urged them to take account of the strengths of foreign powers. This body was extra-constitutional and depended on the exercise of the emperor's prerogatives. It has to be remembered that Japan was not stable politically in the 1890s and 1900s and the volatile members of political parties were often advocates of quite extravagant policies in foreign affairs. Only a senior body, backed by the emperor's authority, was in a position to keep them in check.

In Japan as in Russia, it is difficult to assess the exact weighting of those in the uppermost echelons of power. Because of the divinity ascribed to the Japanese emperor, it was difficult for commentators to estimate his role, though it was clear that he did not make the ultimate decisions as the tsar had to do. In order to find out who counted in Japan's decisions, it is sometimes necessary to look at the writings of foreign observers who were admitted to inner court circles. Such a person was Sir Claude MacDonald, the British diplomat who stayed in Japan for the first decade of this century. He wrote:

I sat opposite to the Emperor at the lunch given to Admiral Noel and the officers of our Fleet. Besides plying a very healthy knife and fork, His Majesty chatted most amicably with everybody all around. The Imperial Princes, Arisugawa and Kanin who sat on either side, treated him with marked deference but Marquis Ito and Count Inouye (the latter sat next to me) seemed to speak on absolute terms of equality and cracked jokes which made this direct descendant of the Sun roar with laughter. It was a great revelation to me and one which pleased me very much for though a Mikado he seems very human.²⁰

The high standing of the elder statesmen in the counsels of the Emperor Meiji comes out strongly from this passage which lifts the veil a little on the relationships between those at the top.

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During the period covered by this study, Japan grew from being a regional power, able to gain ascendancy over Korea and China, to being a world power. From 1895 Japan set about a fundamental restructuring of her army and navy. It was to be completed within ten years and was to be funded by the large indemnity obtained from China after her victory over that country in war. Not only would both services be modernized but ordnance factories and shipyards would be developed so that Japan could speedily become self-sufficient in arms and naval shipbuilding. There was unquestionably a spirit of national pride in Japan's progress and achievement which began to show itself in nationalist rhetoric. All too often this was to be directed at Russia.

By contrast with Russia, the foreign ministry was young and small. But its bureaucracy was efficient and farsighted. The service became highly professional when the system of competitive entry by examination was instituted in 1894. Japanese diplomats were thereafter drawn from the elite of the university system; and even senior diplomats in the Japanese service were young by European standards.

The foreign minister was a junior, but important, member of the cabinet. By 1894 he was generally a career foreign ministry bureaucrat recalled from posting overseas to enter the cabinet. He had normally no political affiliation and to that extent did not count in the battles that the political parties were waging. The office holders changed often. Four of the foreign ministers in our period were strong characters who were able to hold sway by force of personality but not political clout: Mutsu (1892–96); Aoki (1898–1900); Katō (1900–1); Komura (1901–5). The foreign minister had to keep on good terms with the prime minister and through him with the genro if he was to steer through his policies. But serious disputes could arise among the ministers and between the anti-Russian foreign ministry and the pro-Russian genro.

As in the case of Russia, we must speak of 'many policies' rather than 'one policy'. Not only were there several policies in Tokyo (as we shall see as the study advances); but those on the frontier assumed that they had a certain degree of licence. Thus, consuls in China and Korea who often did not have a high opinion of the Chinese or the Koreans but tended to share the opinions of European diplomats, took certain liberties. They and the soldiers were often pursuing active policies of advance. The Russo-Japanese incident at Masampo in 1899 was a case where local officers tried to ensure that their own nation did not come off second best (probably without the knowledge of Tokyo). The time after 1895 was one of patriotism and confidence *vis-à-vis* Asian countries as expressed in the publications *Kokumin no tomo* and *Nipponshugi*.

There was already evidence of the divide between the army and the civilians which was to dog Japan's policies in the 1930s. That it did not unduly affect Japan's fortunes in the 1895–1905 period was due to the institution of the genro which put a brake on precipitate action by the

army. But it was due even more to the fact that the *genro* contained within its membership both General Yamagata and General Ōyama, the military heroes of the Sino-Japanese war and the military leaders of the Chōshū clan from which the officer corps was in the main drawn. While the *genro* were often divided – and the tension between Yamagata the soldier and Itō the civilian politician was often considerable – it was generally possible to work for a consensus between any hard-line military position and more moderate lines of policy. Such was the contribution to Japan's international affairs of the *genro*, who had the personal confidence of the emperor and used it to intervene at crucial junctures in the interest of restraint.

The instrument for these consensual decisions was the imperial council (*gozen kaigi*) or council in the presence of the emperor. At these gatherings which were held irregularly, the senior members of the cabinet were summoned along with the *genro* to sit in front of the emperor to discuss policy. This procedure came to an end after the death of the Emperor Meiji in 1912. But, while it lasted, it kept an eye on the political and military hotheads and imposed some discipline over them.

The 1890s was a time when the political standing of the army and navy grew. The root of their power was the special position which the military held under the Meiji constitution of 1889–90. This recognized for the army the independence of the right of supreme command (*tōsuiken no dokuritsu*): there could be no civilian interference over the command and operation of forces. The army leaders had the right of direct access to the throne, the emperor being commander-in-chief. Even the cautious General Yamagata tried to use this right in 1894 against the wishes of Tokyo but was recalled from the field.

Japan had a remarkable knowledge of things Russian including culture and literature, in spite of being at a stage of development where she admired Europe and turned her back on Asia. The yearning of Japanese academics and intellectuals for the writings and social thought of Tolstoy, Gorky and Dostoevsky was immense. There were colleges in Tokyo for the study of the Russian language, both government-controlled and private. There were also many translations of the Russian nineteenth-century classics appearing in Japanese at the turn of the century.²¹

It would be misleading to judge the Japanese establishment by reference to the attitudes of Japan's progressive intelligentsia, which was in so many ways opposed to it. The establishment was much more taken up with the menace of Russia, seeing that country as the major threat to Japan's national security. As the interests of Russia and Japan came into conflict and their armed forces clashed from the 1850s onwards, there was published a substantial literature speculating about Russia's military and diplomatic objectives in the area of north-east Asia. After the confrontation of 1895 the Japanese government took positive steps through the army and navy to collect intelligence about

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Russia and the vulnerability of the Russian Empire in Europe, especially Finland and Poland.²² Thus, there was no shortage of information about Russia and her doings, even if it was largely hostile in tone.

There was no real counterpart to this in Russia. While there was academic instruction about things Japanese and while the Russians had built churches in Japan, even a cathedral (St Nikolai) in Tokyo, the Russian approach to Japan was similar to that towards other parts of east Asia, namely, superiority and a desire for assimilation.²³ It was understandable therefore if the majority of Japanese at the turn of the century looked on Russia as a menace, as a country whose interests and possessions impinged on their own and threatened to harm them.

EMPIRE OF CHINA

The two areas of north-east Asia which are the focus of this study are Korea and Manchuria, the latter a sparsely inhabited part of the Manchu empire of China. Korea had been historically a tributary state of China, though she had concluded commercial treaties with Japan and the western countries since the 1870s. After the appointment in 1883 of a vigorous Chinese viceroy, China regained some of the prestige she had lost but at the cost of antagonizing the Japanese. Increasingly the Korean king turned for protection towards Russia which saw this as a convenient opportunity. But the largest foreign community was the Japanese with 20,000 residents.²⁴

Manchuria was one of the wealthier but under-populated parts of the Manchu empire which had reached its zenith in the eighteenth century. But the Manchus had more recently failed to come to terms with the challenge presented by western commercial states in their determination to stay in power. To be sure, they took steps towards consolidation and modernization; they created an army and navy with modern weapons; and they built factories. But, when a major test of strength came in the war with Japan of 1894–95, the Manchu institutions were found wanting and China came to be spoken of as ‘the sick man of Asia’.

In the atmosphere of weakness which prevailed in China towards the end of the nineteenth century, the bureaucrats had to adapt their tactics accordingly. They were loyal to the dynasty in the main but they were also self-seeking. A bureaucrat like Li Hung-chang (1823–1901) was loyal to his monarch and to his country and to his family and friends. For him the survival of the dynasty was probably the prime priority, more important than the survival of the country. Li had a sense of national need as shown in his awareness of the need for a navy, for shipbuilding yards and ordnance factories. But he was at the same time not averse to feathering his own nest. From 1895 till his death he was the

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leader of the pro-Russian party at the Chinese court and received subventions from Russia for his services. 'Squeeze' was not, of course, purely a western importation; it was native to China. The Manchu court was heavily implicated in 'squeeze'. The leaders of the day had not a strong enough sense of nationalism to wage a campaign against these corrupt practices.

The illusion of 'sickness' was if anything increased by the uniqueness of the Chinese government system. This can be illustrated by remarks made by Sir Ernest Satow at the end of a six-year stint as British minister to China:

China is not a centralized state of modern type, but rather a congeries of semi-autonomous satrapies, a confederacy of territories each possessing a separate financial, military, naval and judicial organization, in fact a sort of 'Home rule all round' system, presided over by a central committee for deciding questions referred to it by the provincial authorities.²⁵

With this sprawling, amorphous, decentralized structure, China was unfamiliar to Europeans who had become used to the triumph of the centralized nation-state in the nineteenth century. To locate the focus of power in China was much more complicated. For foreigners the first point of access was to the Tsungli Yamen (Board of Foreign Relations) which possessed no real power. They reported to the grand council, a loose cabinet consisting of those who presided over the various boards. These had audiences daily with the empress dowager (1834–1908) who for most of our period was the dominant force. Behind her was the emperor who did not count especially after his attempts at reform in 1898. Then there was the legendary power of the two hundred or so palace eunuchs who exerted influence over the empress dowager. The independent authority of the provincial governors could be great as for instance at the time of the Boxer rebellion in 1900. Alongside them were the statesmen, some like Li Hung-chang himself who owed their position to successes achieved in the role of provincial governor. Li, who will be prominent in the early part of our story, and Prince Ching, a member of the imperial family who became prominent after Li's death, are the only two Chinese statesmen who can claim to have been world figures of any significance.

Manchuria was the name given to the territory known to the Chinese as the Three Eastern Provinces. It was divided for administrative purposes into the three provinces of Liaoning (Fengtien), Kirin and Heilungkiang. Of these Heilungkiang to the north was by far the largest while Liaoning was the smallest and most accessible. In the 1890s Manchuria had been regarded mainly as a place valuable for its strategic situation; but gradually, with the development of railway building in the area, it came to be recognized as a territory rich in agricultural, forestry and mineral resources. The railways attracted large numbers of Chinese labourers mainly from the province of Shantung and Hopei who stayed

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on in the north and, when the rail network was completed, impoverished Chinese farmers took advantage of it to establish themselves in the newly opened territory. So too did the Koreans who tried to set up farms across the Yalu river.

Our concern is largely with Liaoning and especially with its most southerly tip, the Liaotung peninsula. This possessed very special strategic significance, being so close to the approaches to the Chinese capital of Peking and commanding the Gulf of Chihli. It included, in particular, the naval base of Port Arthur (Lushun), the home port of the Chinese Northern (Peiyang) fleet. The dockyard there had been built at great cost by French contractors. The entrance to the harbour was a narrow one since the bay on which the town stood was shielded from the Yellow Sea by a vast peninsula, the Tiger's Tail. The harbour's east side had a depth of water of 9 metres while the west side was open to commercial traffic. Moreover its naturally strong position was improved by having the strongest fortress in China. Still it was basically a small place with a small population in 1894.

Talien, known to the Japanese as Dairen and to the Russians as Dalny, was in 1894 not much more than a fishing-village. The harbour was ice-free, like that of Port Arthur. It was intended by Witte to be an entrepôt for ordinary export items from Manchuria like soya beans, bean cake, coal etc.²⁶ In practice, however, it proved to be hard to attract trade to Talien. The Chinese merchants who were the dominant group in the coastal trade were not inclined to promote the growth of the port, while the foreign trading houses were content to work through existing channels. Like the rest of the Liaotung peninsula, Talien was a place of unmade roads and very primitive conditions, which were only redeemed by its accessibility to the sea. The coming of the railway age to this area was to bring about a transformation in its fortunes, as it became the headquarters of the new line.

A special part in our story will be played by Niuchuang (Newchwang), which was the only treaty port on Manchurian soil. There is some confusion about the proper terminology for this town. Niuchuang was about 30 miles up-country and not a port; it had seen its best days in the seventeenth century. On the Liao river was Yingkow, sometimes referred to as 'Port Newchwang', which was in fact the treaty port and the site of the foreign settlement. 'Newchwang' was the name used for it by foreigners, even though the official Chinese place-name was Yingkow. Yingkow was about fifteen miles from the mouth of the Liao river, which was navigable for 200 miles to beyond Mukden. Niuchuang had therefore great potential as a market for produce coming down from the Manchurian plain. Niuchuang was the place of settlement for foreigners, mainly Russians, Japanese, British and Americans, a community of 7,700 of which the Japanese made up 7,400. Opened as a treaty port in 1861, it had become a prosperous town by the 1890s with customs offices, consulates, warehouses of foreign merchants and the