

A Closely Lost Victory

Could the Russians have won the Russo-Japanese War?

Despite the Japanese advantages in 1904, concluding the Russians could not have won the Russo-Japanese War, or at least achieved better conditions upon the Peace of Portsmouth, ignores significant historical evidence. The concerns and subsequent actions of the Japanese government, Army, and Navy, throughout the war show that with slightly different courses of action on the part of the Russians, or with a small change of fortune, the outcome could easily have been different.

While arguments can be made that the conflict might have been avoided in the first place, (Fuller, NWC lecture, 4 Jan 2001) there remained numerous alternatives for the Russians once the war began. Even if no action had been taken until after the Japanese attack on Port Arthur, a better outcome, if not outright victory, was possible.

The Japanese were desperate to gain a peace settlement at Portsmouth. By August 1905, they were under the impression that to maintain the war for much longer was potentially disastrous. General Yamagata, after reviewing the situation in Manchuria, was convinced that a decisive battle was beyond Japan's resources. The army was in bad condition with most of its best officers casualties of the fighting. (Warner, p. 529.) Logistical bottlenecks on the Trans-Siberian railroad were cleared and two new Russian army corps were about to arrive from Europe. To counter the Russian reinforcements, the Imperial Japanese Headquarters estimated that only about one and a half divisions could be scraped together. General Oyama was badly outnumbered and had few reserves. (Warner, p. 529, 533.) Additionally, Japan had just secured a third war loan, leaving them £52 million in debt, a large sum for the times. (Warner, p. 525.)

Thus, it would appear that the victory gained by Japan, despite the reduction of Port Arthur and the sinking of the Russian fleet at Tsushima was narrowly won. With the Japanese army nearing collapse in Manchuria and Japan staggering under tremendous personnel and material losses as well as war debt, to press on much longer was inviting a military reversal and loss of all the hard earned gains. If the Russians delayed the peace settlement by only a few months, it is possible to imagine a Russian counterattack driving the Japanese army back, perhaps even regaining Port Arthur.

The usual analysis of the Russo-Japanese War revolves around Russian strategic errors and operational mistakes on the one side, with Japanese strategic wisdom and successful operational execution on the other. It is clear that the Japanese were better prepared for the war. They were at the zenith of a decade long period of establishing themselves as a modern military power in East Asia. The Japanese Army was trained by the best models Europe could offer, first by the French and then, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, the Prussian Army. The Navy was the best money could buy with ships built by the British and sailors trained by the Royal Navy.

Japanese war plans even included a well-conceived termination strategy. Understanding that the war had to remain limited in scope, their work began nearly simultaneously with the attack on Port Arthur, laying the groundwork for American intervention and mediation. Kaneko Kentaro, a member of the Japanese governing elite, and a former classmate of Roosevelt, went to the United States to encourage American sympathies. Taking advantage of President Theodore Roosevelt's proclivity toward the Japanese, the Embassy in Washington, DC, encouraged his fascination with *bushido* and *jujitsu*. (Warner, p. 205.)

The Russians, on the other hand, despite an Army much larger than the Japanese, was hamstrung by a thin supply line, the Trans-Siberian Railroad, that was unable to support a large scale military operation. It became clear during the war that the general officers were not aggressive combat leaders and several opportunities were lost to reverse Japanese gains. The Cossack cavalry, despite its excellent reputation in Europe, proved to be nearly useless militarily. (Warner, p. 388.) The fleet was old and divided between east and west. Even the Pacific Fleet was split between Port Arthur and Vladivostok, mutual support being difficult if not impossible.

The ability to effectively wield political power was limited as well. The Tsar was gradually losing control of the government and the country. There was little doubt that revolution was in the wings and Nicholas focused heavily on controlling a potential uprising. On 12 August 1903, the Nicholas, without the knowledge of his ministers, created the Far Eastern Viceroyalty. This move effectively isolated the central government from managing affairs in the Far East and short-circuited Russian initiatives that might have avoided war altogether. The War Minister, General Kuropatkin, resigned in protest. Shortly thereafter, Serge Witte, the finance minister, possibly the only other individual who had a clear grasp on the full strategic picture, was dismissed as well.

Once the war began, Russian operational mistakes seemed to make the job easier for the Japanese. Russian commanders were unable to act aggressively, in once instance watching the Japanese unload troops from ships for over three weeks without taking action. The lack of aggressive action by the Russian fleet and failure to concentrate early enough to make a difference in the outcome only underscore the basic incompetence of the Russian military leadership. Russian losses aggravated the political situation in St. Petersburg and made the

Tsar's position untenable. The destruction of the Baltic Fleet by Togo at Tsushima was all it took to break Nicholas' will to keep fighting.

Despite Russian mistakes and poor decisions, and in spite of the poor military showing of the Russian Army and Navy, in the summer of 1905 the Japanese were nearing collapse in the field, not the Russians. The leadership in St. Petersburg was beginning to listen to Kuropatkin and Linievitch who had been reporting that the Japanese were showing signs of war weariness and had little will to fight. Desertion was high in the Japanese Army and it was nearly at the breaking point. (Warner, p. 526.) With the margin of victory (and loss) being so narrow, it would appear that only slight changes could have made a difference in the outcome of the war.

Any one of several opportunities or changes in the conduct of operations after the beginning of the war would have given the Russians a chance to change the outcome. If more than one had been implemented, the Japanese would have been in serious trouble, contemplating the potential collapse of their armies in the face of superior and growing Russian numbers. The opportunities and alternatives were:

- Cavalry raids on isolated Japanese positions and supply lines
- Naval raids on lines of communications from Port Arthur and Vladivostok
- Negotiate better French support for the Russian fleet in French Indochina
- Decide to continue fighting (12 June 1905)
- Lure the Japanese Army into following the Russian Army into the hinterlands of Manchuria and Siberia

Cavalry raids.

The Japanese Army, particularly in the latter months of the war, were under-strength and unable to maintain continuous coverage of the front lines. Such conditions were ideal for Russian cavalry raids into the rear of the Japanese lines, causing disruption of supplies and forcing the Japanese to use troops needed on the already thin front lines to guard their lines of communications. Only a few raids would have been necessary to bring about great concern on

the part of the Japanese leadership. The Mischenko raid in the winter of 1905, while poorly executed, wrecked railroad equipment, disrupted telegraph communications, and destroyed Japanese supplies. (Warner, p. 461. Fuller, NWC lecture, 4 Jan 2001.) Additional raids would likely have resulted in better execution with experience and required the Japanese to respond in defense. Further thinning the Japanese front line units and stressing the already weak supply pipeline would have made a successful Russian counterattack easier to achieve.

Naval raids.

The Japanese were always worried that the Russian Navy would attempt to disrupt their sea lines of communications. (Warner, p. 230.) Operations of the Vladivostok squadron caused the British to cease shipping to Japan and brought about riots in the streets of Tokyo. (Mahnken, NWC lecture, 8 Jan 2001.) Warner estimates that the guns and supplies sunk by the Russian cruisers delayed the eventual fall of Port Arthur by “many months.” (Warner, p. 285). Given the serious effect of so small a force, had the effort been increased, even by a small amount, the fall of Port Arthur may have been delayed long enough to permit a successful Russian counterattack to relieve the garrison. At a minimum, reduction in supplies reaching the Japanese forces in Manchuria would have further stressed the already strained army.

Along the same lines as naval raids, a more aggressive use of the Russian fleet, particularly the destroyers, would likely have had good result. In early March 1904, Admiral Makarov sent two destroyer flotillas to sea, surprising the Japanese with their aggressive action. The *Japanese Official Naval History* wrote, “We saw that the enemy still had a fleet which could not be despised.” (Warner, p. 228) Makarov’s aggressive use of force and intensive training turned the spirit of the Russian Navy around almost overnight. (Warner, p. 224)

One small change in fortune might have also made a great difference in the balance of power at sea. Had *Petropavlovsk* not catastrophically exploded, killing Admiral Makarov, he possibly could have escaped with his force to Vladivostok or caused serious damage to Togo's fleet. With both the Port Arthur and Vladivostok squadrons combined, the Russians would have been better able to attack the Japanese sea lines of communications.

Once combined, the two Russian squadrons would have been a dangerous problem for Togo. With the Baltic Fleet enroute and a combined Pacific Fleet able to operate in either the Sea of Japan or Pacific Ocean on the east coast of Japan, Togo's operational problems would have been difficult to overcome. The Vladivostok squadron, consisting only of cruisers, was able to operate for over six months without serious opposition, as Admiral Togo was reluctant to use his fleet aggressively. (Warner, p. 304, 591) Togo knew the Baltic Fleet was enroute and was husbanding his resources for the ultimate sea battle. Faced with a combining enemy fleet and having already lost two battleships to Russian action, he could withstand few losses and remain an effective force.

Better French support in Indochina.

The Russian Baltic Fleet was not ready for combat when it arrived at Tsushima. Laden with coal and in desperate need of repairs and resupply, the Japanese had an easy target. Some of the problems could have been mitigated with better upkeep, maintenance, and resupply while the fleet stopped in Cam Ranh Bay, Indochina. Russian coordination for the resupply was poorly and the ships received little of what they required. Food was especially short causing a tremendous drop in morale. The French response to the arrival of the Russian fleet was, on the surface, in compliance with international law. French Rear Admiral de Jonquieres required Rozhdestvenski to take his fleet to sea each day, thus not remaining in territorial seas for more

than a day. The French must have been aware that the Russian fleet was merely anchoring in a nearby bay rather than actually going to sea. If the French were actually interested in strongly supporting international law, they would not have permitted such a shallow subterfuge. Given how long it took the fleet to arrive in Cam Ranh Bay after its Baltic Sea departure, time was available for Russian diplomacy to work some arrangement for adequate resupply. Had the fleet been better cared for in its last port call prior to the battle at Tsushima, the Russian sailors would have been better able to fight, perhaps changing the outcome.

Alternatively, Rozhdestvenski could have taken the fleet to Vladivostok by voyaging around Japan avoiding Tsushima. While he was short of coal, he could have consolidated coal on his larger ships, leaving some smaller ones behind to catch up later. If he had accomplished this, he would have been able to take advantage of the good facilities in Vladivostok prior to engaging the Japanese fleet.

A different decision by the Tsar on 12 June 1905.

Tsar Nicholas made a fateful decision on 12 June 1905 to enter negotiations with the Japanese. The loss of the fleet at Tsushima and his fears that the Japanese would capture Sakhalin persuaded him to agree to Roosevelt's invitation to direct discussions. If Nicholas had delayed agreeing to begin talks and listened to the advice of Linievitch and Kuropatkin, the pressure would have been on the Japanese. The Japanese invasion of Sakhalin would have occurred anyway, but Japan would have been faced with considering the possibility of a more protracted fight in Manchuria. Despite Nicholas' depression over the loss of the fleet, As evidenced by his ordering additional army reinforcements eastward, he was apparently not so devastated by the loss of the fleet that he refused to order that he could possibly have been convinced to delay such a decision.

Lure Japanese Army into the hinterlands.

The Russian operational plan throughout the entire war was to delay the Japanese until sufficient reinforcements were in place to begin a counterattack. Falling back into the vastness of Manchuria and even into Siberia would have swallowed up the Japanese Army. With the Russians falling back on their source of supply and the Japanese moving away from theirs, the ability of the Japanese Army to maintain effective combat power would have been mitigated. The Russians were quite successful on several occasions in avoiding Oyama's desired Sedan-like encirclement. Such a course of action was certainly within the Russian experience, as the 1812 victory over Napoleon was routinely celebrated in Russia.

General Oyama was apparently aware that such a strategy on the part of the Russians would be dangerous to the Japanese Army. Kuropatkin may have been able to lure Oyama by offering tempting openings, such as apparent easy access along a major avenue of approach or easy victory over a small force. If successful, Kuropatkin may have been able to stretch the Japanese Army a bit more thinly than they already were, perhaps giving the Russian Army the edge they needed to open a counteroffensive.

A Closely Lost Victory.

The Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War was a closely won conclusion. If it was closely won, then it was closely lost. Despite all the Russian mistakes and all the Japanese skill, the Japanese were the more desperate for a peace settlement at Portsmouth. With only small changes in Russian operational decisions and perhaps some change in fortune, the outcome would not have been as favorable for the Japanese. As it was, despite the world calling Japan victorious, it was Witte who was feted as the great statesman and the Japanese people who went

to the streets demonstrating in protest. The *New York Times* best summed up the situation in a 6 September 1905 article:

The judgement of all observers here, whether pro-Japanese or pro-Russian, is that the victory is as astonishing a thing as ever was seen in diplomatic history. A nation hopelessly beaten in every battle of the war, one army captured and another overwhelmingly routed, with a navy swept from the seas, dictated her own terms to the victors. (Warner, p. 535.)