An Analysis of Russian Military Intelligence in the Russo-Japanese War

Connor L McLeod, Michigan State University
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The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 was the first major conventional war of the 20th century. It was fought over territory in Manchuria and Korea resulting from disputes after the Sino-Japanese War. Many experts around the world believed Russia, the older, more established imperial power, would easily defeat Japan in a military confrontation. In reality, the Japanese surprised the world and defeated Russia in multiple land and naval battles. There are many reasons why the Japanese defeated the Russians, but the main reason was intelligence failures by the Russians, which failed to provide an accurate report of Japanese military capabilities for Russian commanders.

By 1904, there had been a sense of a Russian threat among the Japanese for over a century, but the origins of the Russo-Japanese War lie in the Sino Japanese War of 1894-95. At the end of the war, the Treaty of Shimonoseki ceded the Liaotung Peninsula, Taiwan, and several minor islands to Japan. Almost immediately after the treaty was signed, the Triple Intervention of Russia, France, and Germany intimidated Japan into relinquishing the Liaotung Peninsula. Three years later, the Russians leased the peninsula and placed military forces there. The Japanese people placed blame solely on the Russians for the Triple Intervention, and it was not forgotten.¹ A newspaper written during the Russo-Japanese War said, “ever since…Japan was prevented by Russia and others from establishing herself at Port Arthur and other places on the mainland, she has cherished a spirit of vengeance against Russia and bided her time.”² The Japanese people were angered and embarrassed to have surrendered territory that their soldiers had bled for, yet which the nation was too weak to defend. It led to a campaign called Ga-Shin-

Sho-Tan, or “Accept the humiliation now; revenge will come later.” Ten years later, the Japanese people got their revenge on 6 February 1904 when the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked the Russian fleet at Port Arthur by surprise and introduced a blockade. The Russians made several attempts to break the blockade, but none were successful. A Japanese land invasion soon followed, and Port Arthur fell after a bloody battle that cost over 90,000 Russian and Japanese lives. Other land battles in Manchuria led to heavy casualties on both sides, and the Russians were forced to retreat northward. Both sides were drained economically and militarily, and could hardly afford to continue the war past May 1905. Three months later, the two sides signed an American-mediated peace treaty at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The Russo-Japanese War was the first major conventional war of the 20th Century, and it ushered in an era of modern warfare, including machine guns, modern field artillery, and modern warships.

Scholars have argued there are several important factors that explain Japanese success in the Russo-Japanese War, such as the instability of the Russian government, modernization of the Japanese military, or the division of Russian military forces between the Far East and Europe. These are all valid points. The Japanese sent financial and material support to Russian revolutionary groups to undermine the Russian government and create civil unrest. After the Triple Intervention, the Japanese government initiated a massive military modernization program, and the number of Imperial Japanese Army divisions was doubled, while the Imperial Japanese Navy bought four new battleships and eleven new armored cruisers from the United States.

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States and Britain. The presence of the Turks, Germans, and Austrians in Europe forced the Russians to keep a substantial number of troops and warships in Europe to counter the threat, which meant that Japan could concentrate most of its troops in Manchuria and would not be at as great of a disadvantage than if the Russians could have brought their full force to bear in the Far East. Any Russian reinforcements would have to travel thousands of miles along the Trans-Siberian Railway, while Japanese forces could be reinforced much quicker.

These factors are among many which led to the Japanese victory, but the intelligence failures by the Russians in the months and years leading up to the war were the most critical factors to the Russian defeat. When planning military operations, Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) is one of the most critical phases because it gives the commander the means of “analyzing the threat and other aspects of an operational environment within a specific geographic area.” Bruce Menning noted, “The overall quality of Russian military and naval intelligence about the Japanese was uneven…[and it] obscured Russian perceptions of war imminence and Japanese intentions.” Russian generals had no idea of the strengths of the Japanese army in Manchuria, because in their words, “anything related to the numerical composition of the [Japanese] army consists of a great secret in Japan, and the attainment of any information occurs only occasionally.”

As a result of this “great secret,” Russian military planners assumed there would be only 160,000 Japanese troops in Manchuria at the start of the war, but the real number was upwards of 200,000. Furthermore, the Russians estimated the total

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8 Ibid., 21-22.
11 Ibid., 149.
mobilized strength of the Japanese Army was approximately 359,000, yet the true number of mobilized men was nearly 1.2 million. The situation was “akin to a boxer stepping into the ring blindfolded.” Such a colossal blunder in military intelligence is inexcusable. Russian military strategists also paid little mind to the Japanese in professional military journals. For example, in the Morskoi Sbornik (Naval Digest), the professional journal of the Russian Navy, there were no articles about Japan and its burgeoning navy. There were, however, several articles about the British and German Navies, and even a few on Austria-Hungary.

In the years leading up to the war, Russian military attachés failed to perform their secondary duty as intelligence officers. Between 1896 and early 1904, only three Russian Army officers and two Russian Navy officers served as attachés in Tokyo. All five of these officers were reasonably well-educated, and had previous experience as staff officers, but they were not suited to serve as intelligence officers. They had little knowledge of Japanese culture, and none of them spoke Japanese, which made it difficult to make observations and collect information. Instead, they had to rely on interpreters and translators who came “with all the shortcomings, inadequacies, and vulnerabilities inherent in conducting sensitive work through intermediaries.” The closed culture made it difficult to recruit these interpreters, which meant that even open-source information, such as Japanese newspapers and government documents, were of little or no use. In addition, the men found it difficult to do their side job of intelligence work because they were simply too busy. The complex processes of travelling and making constant reports on Japanese military developments was too much for them to do on top of their official diplomatic duties. It did not help the Russian officers that any time they observed

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12 Ibid., 154.
13 Ibid., 161.
14 Ibid., 143-146.
Japanese military exercises their Japanese counterparts kept them under close watch and never allowed the Russians to go anywhere alone.\textsuperscript{15} The final attaché to serve in Japan, Colonel Vannovskii, was a particularly poor choice, and he was in Japan from 1900 to 1903, the worst time to be an inefficient intelligence officer. At that time, the Japanese military was quickly expanding and preparing for war. His reports “lacked substance, focus and frequency…[and] the main staff in St. Petersburg…observed that English-language newspapers…provided more and better intelligence.”\textsuperscript{16} Colonel Vannovskii was also notable because he was the lone officer in 1902 to give “an extraordinarily low assessment of the combat qualities of the Japanese…in contrast with the overall cautiousness of other participants.”\textsuperscript{17}

The mounting list of intelligence failures finally culminated in severe setbacks for the Russians in the first days of the war. Even though the Japanese had broken off diplomatic relations with Russia on 6 February 1904, Rear Admiral O.V. Stark, commander of the Russian Pacific Squadron, did not perceive the Japanese to be a threat to his fleet. In his eyes, all intelligence reports indicated that it was business as usual with the Japanese. Rear Admiral Stark did not instruct his fleet at Port Arthur to prepare its ships for action with the Japanese, and the Pacific Squadron paid dearly for Stark’s mistakes on the night of 8-9 February. The lighter Japanese ships stealthily closed to within torpedo range of the Russian ships floating outside the port and damaged several of them. Thus, the Russian fleet had to withdraw back into the inner harbor where it would be unable to intercept Japanese troopships landing forces in Korea and Manchuria in the following days.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 151.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 151-152.
The surprise attack at Port Arthur was the start of a very costly war that could have turned out very differently if Russian intelligence resources had been more developed. The Russians had no idea of Japanese intentions or preparations for war. Russian officers who were posted in Japan to gather intelligence ultimately failed at their jobs because they did not have the proper means at their disposal, such as cultural and linguistic knowledge. The Russian military had no respect for its potential Asian foe. It appeared as if Russian analysts had studied every other potential adversary in depth except for the Japanese. The consequential military Russian defeat was one of the contributors to the downfall of the Russian Empire, and a catalyst for the rise of Japan as a regional and global power in the 20th century.
Bibliography


