



# GEOGRAPHIC DETERMINISM & THE RUSSO- JAPANESE WAR

By Starlene Justice

**N**icholas Alexandrovich Romanov became the last tsar of Imperial Russia in 1896. His vast empire encompassed many provinces, countries, and regions, yet territorial expansion was on his mind in the early 1900's. Russia's ability to act, however, was crippled by her geography.

Though Russia had long oceanic borders, she could not be considered a maritime state.

None of her bordering seas were ice-free more than a few months each year, rendering them useless as a means of transportation. The deep-seated desire for an ice-free port was at the core of the drive to expand, and specifically of geopolitical maneuvering that led to the Russo-Japanese War.

The acquisition of the port city of Vladivostok from China in 1860 solidified Russian eastward expansion through Siberia. The

beginnings of the Trans-Siberian railway in 1891, for which a shortcut through Manchuria was granted by China in 1896, made clear Russia's intent to become a power in the Pacific.

Japan, only recently opened to the world and now emphatically expansionist, could not help but feel threatened by this giant appearing on her doorstep. Suspicion grew to rivalry in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese

War of 1895. The modern Japanese Army trounced China's feudal assemblies, forcing the independence of Korea (under Japanese sway) and cession of the Liadong Peninsula and Port Arthur (modern Dalian) to Japan. Russia interceded on China's behalf and threatened war if Japan did not withdraw from Port Arthur.

Not yet ready to try conclusions with Russia, Japan backed down and the Russians occupied the port—which, not coincidentally, was just the sort Russia coveted.

Russia was well on its way to absolute control of the Northwest Pacific coastline and realization of the dream of an ice-free port. The only thing lacking was Korea, which now became the focus of all three regional powers. Control of the peninsula would give the possessor control of access to both the Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan, a buffer against the other powers, and, for Russia, a connection between Vladivostok and Port Arthur. Long-standing Chinese ties were already being undermined by the Japanese, who in turn lost their patience when Russia took steps to cultivate forestry and mining operations in Korea.

Japan made diplomatic overtures to limit Russian involvement in Korea. Convinced they possessed superior military might, the Russians were cavalier in their rejection of Japanese proposals. Amid the social turmoil surrounding the Tsar at this time, there were some who even thought a war with Japan would produce an easy victory that might have favorable repercussions for the Romanovs.

Given this mind-set, and the fact that no Asian country had yet defeated a European power, it is not surprising that Russia seemed generally unconcerned about the possibility.

On 8 February 1904, Japan's Vice-Adm. Togo Heihachiro's Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) attacked the Russian flotilla in Port Arthur. Caught off-guard, the Russians suffered heavy losses, including their two most modern battleships.

Russia now faced a distant war in Japan's backyard. Aside from the fleet at Port Arthur and some troops in Manchuria, her military was concentrated in western Russia. The empire was about to become a victim of its own size.

Every soldier sent to engage the Japanese would have to cross more than 5,000 miles of steppe and frozen wasteland. The Trans-Siberian Railway was nearly complete, but a gap existed at Lake Baikal, one of the largest lakes in the world. Construction had begun on a link around the southern end of the lake, and though accelerated with the advent of war, would not be completed until after the end of hostilities. In the meantime, soldiers and supplies had to be shipped across the lake by boat in summer, sleigh in winter. The deployment of a battalion from Moscow to Mukden took about a month.

The situation was even worse for the Russian navy. The fleet in the Far East had to be divided between Vladivostok and Port Arthur. Neither alone—nor, indeed, the two combined—could effectively take on the IJN.

Reinforcements were necessary, and they could travel only by sea. The bulk of the fleet was in St. Petersburg, at the tip of the Baltic. To get to the Pacific, ships would have to descend the Baltic and North Atlantic, circumnavigate Africa, cross the Indian Ocean, brave the Straits of Malacca, and sail through the South China Sea, a staggering 18,000-mile journey. The Suez Canal would have shortened the route considerably, and some ships—unfortunately so decrepit they would prove more hindrance than help—did travel that way. The official reason for not sending the Baltic Fleet through the canal was insufficient depth to accommodate the hulls of the newest battleships. More likely, however, the Russian government simply feared falling hostage to the British, who had mentored the IJN and sided openly with Japan.

The advantages in the early stage of the war thus were all with Japan. Port Arthur was soon under siege by land and sea. Its steady progress threatened the annihilation of the remainder of the flotilla in the harbor. Nicholas accordingly ordered it to Vladivostok. On 10 August 1904, as the fleet made its escape attempt, Togo attacked. The Russian flagship, *Tsarevitch*, was hit several times and badly damaged. Dead and dying crewmen wedged against the steering wheel caused her to circle and cut across the paths of other Russian vessels, leaving the Russian fleet in disarray. Togo took immediate advantage, turning all Japanese fire on *Retzivan*—the only Russian ship still fighting—until it, too, was

disabled. Part of the fleet limped back to Port Arthur, the rest dispersing to meet individual fates. Port Arthur would fall in December, allowing the Japanese to drive north against the Russian Far Eastern forces.

Adm. Zinovy Rozhdestvensky's Baltic Fleet meanwhile set off in October. It would not arrive in the theater of war for seven long months. Several weeks of that time were spent in Madagascar awaiting the older vessels going via Suez. Rozhdestvensky tried desperately to avoid the rendezvous as the Japanese could use the time to repair their ships. The Tsar's wishes naturally prevailed.

When Rozhdestvensky's travel-weary fleet finally arrived, there was nothing left for him to reinforce. His only real option was to proceed to Vladivostok, which would take him through the narrows between Korea and Japan, divided into three channels by the islands of Tsushima and Iki. Togo was at anchor in the Korean port of Pusan (Busan), waiting to ambush the Russians.

The resulting Battle of Tsushima (27 May) was over in 45 minutes, though surviving vessels were hunted down through the following night. The Russian fleet was annihilated: four battleships captured and 11 sunk, along with four cruisers, six destroyers, and several smaller vessels. The Japanese lost only three torpedo boats.

Humiliated, Russia submitted to a peace brokered by US President Theodore Roosevelt. It came just as Russian land strength was benefitting from the completed

railroad and Japan was going broke from the cost of the war, continued victories notwithstanding. The defeat triggered the Revolution of 1905, which forced the Tsar to make concessions to his autocratic rule and put the country on a trajectory for the more violent revolution that would end the Romanov dynasty 12 years later.

The course and outcome of the war had been driven by geography: the size of Russia itself, the frigid waters around her, the location of Korea, the distance by sea from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok, and the unfortunate location of a lake containing twenty percent of all the fresh water on Earth. Those obstacles could only be overcome at great cost, but in the end the cost of not overcoming them was unimaginably high.