BECOMING AN HONORARY CIVILIZED NATION: REMAKING JAPAN’S MILITARY IMAGE DURING THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR, 1904–1905

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The image of the Japanese military in the eyes of Western public opinion has changed dramatically since the forced opening of Japan by American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1854. At first, the West ridiculed Japan’s cultural backwardness, perceiving its people in general and soldiers in particular as weak, childish, and feminine. Yet, under the Meiji government, which succeeded the feudal regime of the shogunate in 1868, Japan embarked on a rapid campaign to transform itself into a modern industrial state. Studying abroad and assisted by foreign experts at home, the Japanese emulated Western technology, political institutions, and military science, and within a few decades reorganized their civil administration along Western lines and created a modern, efficient army and navy.

Western nations saw clearly the results of Japan’s efforts to modernize during the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, in which Japan easily defeated China. Even earlier, some experts praised the training methods and battle performance of the Japanese artillery and the navy, but the war proved Japan’s advances. Still, although German Kaiser Wilhelm II saw in the victory a rising “yellow peril,” most experts believed the war with China to be a mere military promenade and that Japan would never be recognized until it “crossed swords with an European power.”

Under the Treaty of Shimonoseki that ended the war, Japan gained control of Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula in Manchuria, between China and Korea, thus enabling Japan to control the gateway to north China and build a preliminary naval network in the Pacific (see map). Alarmed at Japan’s rapidly expanding influence, Russia, France, and Germany took steps to contain Japanese expansion. Within a week of the treaty’s signing, this so-called “Triple Intervention” forced Japan to cede control of Liaodong Peninsula to China. A year later Russia leased the peninsula and built up the fort at Port Arthur. Thereafter, Russia’s growing involvement in Korea

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was a catalyst for anti-Japanese strife, and the subsequent escape of the Korean king to the Russian legation in Seoul brought Russian influence in the area to a new zenith.

Nine years after the Triple Intervention, Japan was ready for a showdown against tsarist Russia. In broad perspective, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 can be viewed as an inevitable clash between two expanding nations in a zone where their prospective territories overlapped. Russian tsars had a long history of expansionism, but the costly construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, begun in 1891, was the ultimate demonstration of their earnest intentions in the region. Japan, on the other hand, expanded partly as a reaction to external threats and partly as a quest for recognition and status. As Japan moved toward its closest neighbor, Korea, Russia aimed at the same territory.

On the morning of 8 February 1904, Japan made a surprise attack on Port Arthur, where the Russian fleet was stationed. The Japanese acted without a prior declaration of war, which earned them further disapproval of Western nations. In the days following the attack, Japanese forces landed in Korea and attacked Russian positions in neighboring Manchuria in an effort to protect Japan's interests from Russian encroachment. The ensuing Russo-Japanese War, in which the little island nation trounced the Russian Empire, was fought for a year and a half with total personnel close to two million.

The image of the Japanese, especially in the eyes of the tsar, Nicholas II, played an important role in the Russo-Japanese War. Influenced by what he had seen during his visit to Japan in 1891 and the prevailing stereotypes, Nicholas perceived the Japanese as feminine, weak, and racially inferior, a view that led him to underestimate the Japanese national character and military capability. As the war unfolded, this cognitive bias led him to erroneous strategic decisions that partly accounted for the Russian fiasco.

Outside Russia, however, Japan and its military machine were applauded by the media, and rather than stimulating suspicion, fear, or mockery, Japan’s victories led to great popularity in the West. The image of Japanese soldiers as resolute warriors willing to fight until the bitter end—but compassionate toward their defeated foes—took firm root in Western imaginations of the time. How did Japan overcome European fears of the yellow peril that had predominated so recently? What factors shaped public images of the Japanese military? This paper will argue that during the Russo-Japanese War, Western political and economic interests, as

\[2\text{Peter Duus, The Abacus and the Sword (Berkeley, 1995); Ian Nish, The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War (London, 1985).}

\[3\text{See Kownert, “Nicholas II and the Japanese Body.”} \]
well as a deliberate public relations campaign by the Japanese that stressed proper military behavior, combined to promote a positive image of Japan to the West. Japan's campaign to promote a respected image in the West began in 1898, when a small group of Foreign Ministry officials conducted a systematic survey of Western public opinion about Japan in the foreign press. Seeking admission to the "club" of the developed and "civilized" Western nations, Japan took an active role in the shaping Western perceptions. The first goal of Japan's public relations campaign was to reshape any lingering views of Japan as weak, feminine, and semi-civilized. The second was to mitigate Western criticism of Japan's military conduct during the first Sino-Japanese War, such as occurred after a massacre of Chinese civilians at Port Arthur, and any rising fears of Japan's newfound military might following that war. Japan also wished to mitigate any international opposition such as occurred when a victorious Japan saw most of its spoils taken away by the European powers.

To this end, in 1900 officials established a communications network in Europe designed to gather information on Japan published in the European press and to promulgate the Japanese government's official line. As the conflict with Russia approached, the cabinet met on 30 December 1903 to discuss ways to prevent the clamor of yellow peril from rising again in the West. Consequently, the government appointed two special envoys to coordinate public relations activities. The envoys, Suematsu Kencho in Europe and Kaneko Kentarō in the United States, attempted to put a positive face on Japanese actions, meeting with correspondents and politicians and writing promotional articles.¹

A month after the Russo-Japanese War broke out, more than 50 British, American, French, and German correspondents assembled in Tokyo, looking forward to joining the Japanese forces at the front. In the following months the number of foreign reporters visiting the Japanese side increased dramatically, while far fewer reporters visited the Russian side, in part for logistical reasons. For a reporter to visit the Russian side demanded a long and exhausting trip across Siberia, whereas visiting the Japanese side required only a fairly pleasant voyage across the ocean. The correspondents who came to Japan, many of them celebrated military reporters, were welcomed warmly with parties and banquets. Still, Japanese authorities, concerned lest foreigners disclose military secrets, kept them away from the combat zone and under tight control. Military secrets, complained popular American author Jack London, reporting for the newspapers owned by press baron William Randolph

Hearst, included "practically everything." Still, the stream of reports from Western correspondents who crossed the Pacific helped swing public opinion behind Japan.

The Japanese also granted approval to a number of American missionaries and nurses to assist in their war efforts by making "comfort bags" of needed accessories for soldiers at the front, visiting military hospitals, and bringing flowers to the wounded. Their help, suggests historian Joseph Henning, struck a chord at home, as many Americans were interested in the missionaries' reports and impressions. Aware of the role missionaries played in American society, Japanese officials and clergymen encouraged them to promote the view that the war was neither a religious nor a racial conflict, but only a dispute between two nations. These pro-Japanese missionaries were in fact instrumental in attenuating American affinity for Russia as they stressed the differences between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Christianity of the "progressive nations in the West," as well as the lack of freedom of thought and religious practice in Russia. In contrast, although Japan was a non-Christian state once depicted as "heathen," missionaries now presented Japan as "Christianity's proxy in Northeast Asia."6

At the same time, Japanese authorities suspected Christian activists of serving as agents of hostile Western powers. The Japanese chapter of the YMCA, for example, attempted for more than a decade prior to the war to convince the authorities that it was a sufficiently Japanese organization by working to aid Japanese national goals. Finally, in August 1904, the chapter, consisting almost entirely of Japanese volunteers, received permission to approach the front, partly due to expectations of positive press coverage in the United States. It pitched comfort tents for soldiers in Manchuria and in the fall also landed in Korea. Eventually, the need to prove its allegiance to Japan's nationalistic cause made foreign and local YMCA activists more fervent than others in their support for the war.7


Anxious not to reveal any military secrets, Japanese officials censored Western reporters. In “The Wisdom of the East,” which appeared in the 16 March 1904 edition of Punch, a Japanese officer blindfolds a reporter with a scarf labeled “censorship” while telling him, “Abjectly we desire to distinguish honourable newspaper man by honourable badge.”
Protests of the Western correspondents and their newspapers gradually forced Japanese officials to yield, and they began to allow small numbers of reporters to approach the front, although officials still censored press dispatches and prevented correspondents from getting too close to the action.\textsuperscript{8} Japan's battlefield victories against the Russian army won praise in the West, as did the Japanese navy's astonishing destruction of the Russian Pacific fleet in a single battle.

Attempting to account for the Japanese success, Westerners initially emphasized the strong character of the ordinary soldier. As Lieutenant General Sir Ian Hamilton, the senior British observer during the war, wrote in May 1904, "When war was declared, the Japanese were formidable enough in all conscience. They were brave, disciplined, enthusiastic, efficiently officered, honestly administered."\textsuperscript{9} British military attaché J. B. Jardine concurred:

The main quality that makes the Japanese infantryman what he is is the quality that enabled the cavalryman to prove himself superior to the Cossack. We call it "bravery," which is but a feeble translation or equivalent for Yamato-damashi—the term used by the Japanese themselves. Added to that is his superior fighting skill, for they are better educated at school before entering the army and are better trained.\textsuperscript{10}

British correspondent Frederick McKenzie also praised their education, describing the Japanese soldier as a man who "reads diligently, and follows the movement of the world after the same fashion as does the smartest bombardier in Dover Castle."\textsuperscript{11} Many observers were impressed by the Japanese soldier's unselfish willingness to die. In August, as fighting around Port Arthur intensified, Hamilton noted that the Japanese soldier was willing to die on the battlefield for his country "not [to] reap some glorious reward, but in the hope that he may be worthy of those who have preceded him, and that his example may usefully guide the unknown generations who are to follow him in the hereafter."\textsuperscript{12} Such was the Japanese soldier's courage that, as Hamilton again recorded,


\textsuperscript{9} Sir Ian Hamilton, 27 May 1904, in A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book during the Russo-Japanese War, vol. 1 (London, 1906), 133.


\textsuperscript{11} Frederick Arthur McKenzie, From Tokyo to Tiflis (London, 1905), 146.

\textsuperscript{12} Hamilton, 21 August 1904, A Staff Officer's Scrap Book, vol. 2, 26.
His love of fighting and his individuality combine to render him almost independent of leadership and formations. . . . The functions of the Japanese officers are mainly to administer and to instruct. The leading is noble, could not be more dashing; but it is not really so necessary in battle as it is with most other nations.\textsuperscript{13}

The American war correspondent Frederick McCormick, who reported for \textit{Collier's Magazine} from the Russian side, praised the soldiers' tenacity: “When one considers the burrows, warrens, trenches, redoubts and forts the Japanese had to subdue, their efforts seem the achievements . . . of the gods they revere.”\textsuperscript{14}

Hamilton compared Japanese infantry soldiers to redoubtable Gurkhas, the native Indian troops of the British Army who were celebrated for their bravery. They have, he wrote, “[t]he same ready smile; the same jolly good-humour; the same independent manner, evincing . . . the soldier’s pride and his conscious superiority to any.”\textsuperscript{15} British war correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett commented that no soldiers “can compare with the soldiers of Japan in sustained courage, devotion to duty, and hardihood.”\textsuperscript{16} The greatest praise for the Japanese fighting spirit, however, was given by none other than Theodore Roosevelt himself. They are “the most dashing fighters in the world,” the American president wrote in a letter to his son.

The Anglo-Saxon or Slav may be courageous, but when they get into a hot place they count the cost and consider the chances of getting out again. The Jap goes in to return no more forever, and such an end is his wish.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to their combat skills, Japanese soldiers were singled out for their humility. Hamilton wrote in his diary that their modesty “is a trait which above all others has won my profound and unstinted respect. Never has there been so much as a tinge of exultation . . . about the officers.”\textsuperscript{18}

The Japanese soldier was also capable of offering friendship to the foe. At the siege of Port Arthur, Ashmead-Bartlett reported that soldiers in one Japanese position near the Twin Dragons Fort were surprised to see a stone thrown from the

\textsuperscript{13} Hamilton, 21 October 1904, \textit{A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book}, vol. 2, 280.

\textsuperscript{14} Frederick McCormick, \textit{The Tragedy of Russia in Pacific Asia} (New York, 1907), vol. 2, 324.

\textsuperscript{15} Hamilton, 1 April 1904, \textit{A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book}, vol. 1, 9–10.

\textsuperscript{16} Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, \textit{Port Arthur: The Siege and Capitulation} (Edinburgh, 1906), 481.


\textsuperscript{18} Hamilton, 3 August 1904, \textit{A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book}, vol. 2, 21.
Russian side. Attached to it, they found a note from a Russian soldier asking them to telegraph his mother and let her know he was alive and well. A ten-ruble note was attached to defray the expenses. The Japanese fulfilled the request and informed the soldier by the same method that the money was not sufficient. Minutes later, they received another stone with the additional money attached. McCormick was also surprised "at the apparent friendliness of the two armies," and "that hostile men and firearms could have such consideration for one another." 

Around the city of Mukden, where the final battle of the war took place, correspondents noticed that friendly relations were frequently established between soldiers of the two armies. When Marshal Oyama and General Kuropatkin exchanged communications, McCormick reported that their officers "fraternized over Russian and foreign wines," and later when the Russians rode down to see the Japanese, they came without a white flag and were "well received. . . . Japanese and Russian soldiers met and exchanged cigarettes and trinkets." Camaraderie between soldiers was even less restrained when combat actions ended. When Port Arthur had surrendered and the commanders of the two armies were holding their first meeting, the soldiers of their escorts fraternized outside "in the most friendly manner," Ashmead-Bartlett reported. He was amazed to see that the rank and file in both camps "evidently considered it their duty to sink all differences and become friends, now that their Generals had set them the example." 

Once the combat was over, a few Western observers were allowed to survey the battlefield. Russian bodies were scattered everywhere. "Pinned on to the breast of one of their dead . . . was a slip of paper, on which was written, in English, 'Brave Japanese, bury our dead.'" Hamilton remarked that the Japanese "not only complied with this touching request, but put flowers upon these Russian graves." Such gestures of compassion and respect were not rare on the Japanese side.

The Japanese understood that treating helpless prisoners in a civilized manner would attract favorable Western attention. As early as 1864, Japan adopted the conventions of warfare and the human rights standards for prisoners of the first Geneva Convention, followed by the Brussels Declaration of 1874 and the 1899 Hague Convention. The Japanese followed these rules scrupulously and courted witnesses

21 Ibid., 330.
23 Hamilton, *A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book*, vol. 1, 264.
to testify to their adherence. At the outbreak of the war, the Japanese government issued regulations regarding the humane treatment of enemy prisoners and established a POW Information Bureau in the Army Ministry. These precautions were followed in a strict manner, and the results were impressive. Japanese representatives proclaimed their compassionate attitude loudly, constantly stressing cultural differences between their nation and Russia. The best messengers were foreign visitors and the POWs themselves, as the benevolent attitude toward prisoners of war started on the battlefield and carried through in the prison camps back in Japan.

At the end of the battle on the Yalu River, bordering Korea, British correspondent Frederick McKenzie observed the treatment of a captured half-conscious Russian officer: “A Japanese, whose uniform proclaimed him high in the General Staff, came up and spoke gently and pitifully to him in his own tongue.” As for the wounded remaining in the field, he noted that “The surgeons treated friend and foe alike.”

Another means of shaping world public opinion was the Japanese Red Cross, established 18 years before the war in an effort to demonstrate Japan’s cultural legitimation. Highly organized, with the largest membership in the world in 1903, it became a symbol of Japanese civilized humanitarian efforts. Wounded Russian soldiers from the battle scene were transferred to field hospitals where they received careful medical treatment. Ethel McCaul, a British nurse and Red Cross representative who served as an inspector for the Japanese Red Cross, was impressed by the treatment Russian soldiers received when she visited one such hospital at the front. One of the Russians was very ill, and upon meeting her, he burst in tears. McCaul was “much impressed” by the medical officers’ kind behavior towards him, and she felt they were “on quite friendly terms with them all.”

Captured Russians continued to receive careful medical attention after their arrival at prison camps in Japan. At the largest Red Cross hospital in Matsuyama, McCaul was surprised to see that each Russian patient had a room for himself and

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27McKenzie, From Tokyo to Tiflis, 153–54.


29Ethel McCaul, Under the Care of the Japanese War Office (London, 1904), 122.
Japanese officials realized that upholding international conventions of warfare by providing Russian prisoners with proper medical care would win Western approval. In the above engraving, from Cassell’s History of the Russo-Japanese War, published in London in 1905, Japanese soldiers and porters carefully remove a wounded Russian soldier from the battlefield. The caption continues, “By this method of conveyance jolting is almost obviated, as the short bamboos on which the slings are hung act like springs. In dealing with the wounded the Japanese have cared for friend and foe alike.”

that “Flowers had been most generously given, and many sacred prints so dear to the Russian, hung upon the walls.” Some of them told her “they were sorry to leave.” The situation at the adjacent military hospital was not much different: “The surroundings of the cleanest, and there was an air of European comfort everywhere pervading.” One of the Russian officers told her that “they were all doing well, and were thoroughly well looked after.”

30Ibid., 195–96.
Another impressed foreign inspector was the American army surgeon Dr. Louis Seaman, who noticed that one of the Russian wounded in a military hospital had received a letter from the Japanese navy minister expressing sympathy and wishing for his quick recovery. In treating Russian wounded, Japanese medical authorities emphasized they did not cut costs. The wounded were also fitted with some 175 artificial arms and legs, as well as with artificial eyes. Releasing these medical details to the press, the Japanese pointed out that the money came from imperial sources, presented by the Empress Shoken.

On the naval front as well, Western observers stressed the common compassion of the Japanese. When the Russian cruiser Rurik was sunk, the American naval attaché in Russia, Newton McCully, recorded that the Japanese "used utmost endeavor to rescue the crew who were floating about on mattresses, wooden articles, and swimming, all boats having been destroyed." The British war correspondent Seppings Wright, who observed the naval operations from the Japanese side, confirmed that the Japanese treated the Russian weak and wounded with dignity. Clearly identifying with the Japanese, Wright reported,

Our doctor immediately proffered his services, which were gratefully received. Our sentry at the gangway saluted, which the Russian officer returned. The Russian sailors were assisted up the gangway by the Japanese... and one of the Russian wounded kissed the Japanese sailor who was assisting him... We supplied them with everything they asked for.

Western reporters especially praised the Japanese for their sensitivity and respect toward the defeated Russians. In one the most famous incidents of the surrender, General Maresuke Nogi, who had directed the Japanese siege operations against Port Arthur, treated the surrendering commander, General Anatoli Stoessel, with great delicacy. The day after the capitulation General Nogi dispatched one of his assistants, Captain Tsunoda, to Port Arthur to arrange a meeting with Stoessel. Tsunoda conveyed his respects to the general and his wife, and asked if anything could be done for their comfort. On 4 January, Tsunoda returned with a present for

31 Louis Livingstone Seaman, From Tokio through Manchuria with the Japanese (New York, 1905), 63.
34 Seppings H. C. Wright, With Togo: The Story of Seven Months' Active Service under His Command (London, 1905), 72.
Mrs. Stoessel, consisting of 24 chickens, 12 bottles of champagne, and 12 bottles of wine. At the two commanders' first meeting, they shook hands. General Nogi, Ashmead-Bartlett noted with admiration, "expressed great pleasure at meeting General Stoessel, who thanked Nogi for bringing about the meeting, and expressed great pleasure at shaking hands with such a warrior as General Nogi."

Stoessel was given a special room to receive his staff officers, who were allowed to wear their swords, and then gave them his last orders. The Russian officers were given the choice to be sent to Japanese prisoner-camps along with their troops or to return to Russia with the pledge not to participate in the war. Stoessel, along with about half of his officers, chose Japan. On his departure, the Japanese kept only a guard of honor at the station, leaving the main bulk of their troops a mile away. Wright, who witnessed General Stoessel's departure from Port Arthur after his surrender, was moved: "The Japanese, with chivalrous consideration, avoided as far as possible anything that might emphasize the brave general's unfortunate position."

Only a day after the departure of the Russian garrison, the Japanese army entered Port Arthur. For Ashmead-Bartlett, one of the most astonishing features of the arrangements "was the desire on the part of the Japanese Headquarters Staff to avoid anything in the nature of an appearance of triumph over the fallen foe." General Nogi waited to enter the town until the last commander had departed with most of his garrison. Divisional and brigade commanders followed Nogi's policy, remaining in place with their troops at the captured positions for 12 days before entering the city.

Nogi kept his commitment to Stoessel, even requesting the governor of Nagasaki that General Stoessel "be treated with special consideration" during his brief stay in the port. Hamilton, who returned to Japan aboard a ship with a thousand Russian prisoners, was surprised to find them guarded by only a Japanese corporal and 12 men. The Japanese treated these rank and file "most considerately and kindly," he wrote, with "no assumption of superiority or swagger of any sort. The Russians, for their part, are obedient."
The Japanese were more than willing to show some of their facilities and demonstrate their humane treatment of the over 72,000 captured Russian soldiers. The main site for foreign visitors was the largest camp, located in the city of Matsuyama on the island of Shikoku. Ethel McCaul, the Red Cross inspector, was impressed by the condition of the prisoners, whom she found "cheerful and in good health." Dr. Seaman, who also visited Matsuyama, attributed the fine mental condition of the prisoners to their treatment. His description of them was almost identical to that of McCaul: "They were cheerful, surprisingly happy, and amused themselves with card-games, ball-playing and wandering about." Testimonies of Russian prisoners indicate that the conditions in Matsuyama and other camps were not just a show for visitors. The prisoners had expected cruelty, explained Seaman, but "were astonished to find themselves surrounded by what they were pleased to call paradise." Many of them attested that they had "never fared better in their lives." When five prisoners escaped and were recaptured after four days, Seaman was mystified at the light punishment they received. Their leader was asked to give his parole, and when refused he was placed in close confinement. Another Russian officer who had assaulted a guard was put under "open arrest" for seven days.

McCaul concluded her inspection with praise: "I had witnessed a treatment of their enemies which would reflect the greatest credit on any nation. The Russians were being treated as guests of the country, not mere prisoners of war." Seaman also was impressed. "In the treatment of her prisoners, [Japan] had not only surpassed all previous records, but had established a new standard of humanity for the nations of the future." Based on various reports of foreign representatives regarding the treatment of Russian prisoners, the Belgian minister in Tokyo, Baron d'Anethan, summed up the general view of his contemporary observers:


41McCaul, *Under the Care of the Japanese War Office*, 201.

42Seaman, *From Tokio through Manchuria*, 62–63.

43Ibid., 60; see also McCaul, *Under the Care of the Japanese War Office*, 203.


45McCaul, *Under the Care of the Japanese War Office*, 205.

46Seaman, *From Tokio through Manchuria*, 71.
The solicitude of the Japanese for the Russian wounded and prisoners is . . . admirable. . . . The myth of Japanese hatred for the foreigner will vanish like many other myths unfavorable to Japan by the very testimony of her enemies, who will bear witness to the humanitarian feelings of their conquerors.47

The image of the able Japanese military heroes constructed in the Western reports contrasted sharply with foreign perceptions of Japan prior to the Russo-Japanese War, when Western media had depicted Japanese military, dressed in ill-fitting uniforms, with contempt and sarcasm. Frequently the very sight of Japanese soldiers "evoked loud laughter among Western observers," who perceived them as feminine and childish. "Europeans think it is very funny that on the march on hot days every Japanese soldier should use a fan," the Tokyo-based German physician Erwin Baelz wrote.48 The British writer and poet of imperialism Rudyard Kipling, who had visited Japan in 1889 and 1892, agreed that the delicate fans and tea sets he noticed in an army barracks in Osaka did "not go with one's notion of a barrack." Although he noted that the Japanese soldier "makes a trim little blue-jacket," he concluded "he does not understand soldiering."49

Impressions aside, in reality the Japanese military had advanced dramatically in modern technology by the end of the nineteenth century. As the outcome of the Sino-Japanese war became known, Sir Henry Norman, a British military expert who had visited Tokyo in the early 1890s, wrote that Japan had not been taken seriously prior to the war.50 Still, national images change slowly, and in Tokyo many military observers, such as Georges de Man of the Belgian Embassy, remained unconvinced. As late as November 1902, de Man sent his government a lengthy report about the Japanese army in which he criticized the level of studies at the Japanese military academy and emphasized the docility and lack of discipline among the soldiers.51 Nothing could be more effective in changing Western images of Japan than success itself, however, and the image of the short and undernourished soldier changed rapidly as the first reports of the Japanese victories came in 1904. On the eve of the war, McKenzie professed that the early ideas regarding Japan

48Baelz, 15 October 1904, Awakening Japan, 317.
49Rudyard Kipling, From Sea to Sea, and Other Sketches: Letters of Travel, vol. 1 (London, 1900), 356.
51Georges de Man to de Favereau, no. 224/37, 5 November, 1902, quoted in Lensen, The d'Anethan Dispatches, 157–58.
had changed: “This was no child nation, wandering heedlessly through sunny paths, but a great, grim, determined people, on the eve of what all knew would be a long, hard, life-and-death struggle.”52

While the enthusiastic reports of Western correspondents who covered the war on the Japanese side rarely dealt directly with racial characteristics, the accumulated perception signaled a transformation in Western images of the Japanese body. Many of the Western observers referred to the physique of the fighting men, who seemed to have become taller, stronger, and better nourished. Hamilton wrote that they “look taller and bigger men, as if a great weight had suddenly been rolled off their shoulders.”53 Even characteristics that formerly were considered inferior now were seen more positively. “They are wonderful little men,” Frederick Villiers, correspondent for the Illustrated London News, reported. “[T]hese Japs with their moon faces, snub noses, beautiful, strong, white teeth, [have] the pluck of the very devil.” His impression of the Japanese serving in the navy was similar: “I have been on British warships while in action, or on the verge of meeting the foe, but I never saw any decks more trim, and the men and officers neater and smarter, than the crowd on the [battleship] Mikasa.”54 The French physician J. J. Matignon, who joined the Japanese army in Manchuria, was also impressed:

The Japanese soldier is small, vigorous, square shouldered, strongly built with well-developed muscles, and very resistant. His chest is bulging, his shoulders are large, and his waist is in shape. His trunk is a little long, the legs are a little short, and the calves are very large.55

McKenzie reported that “Both sides were brave to a very high degree [and] showed their ability to endure great exertion and severe physical discomfort over a sustained period. . . . The Japanese soldier can stand prolonged exertion as can no other soldier I know.”56 Moreover, Japanese soldiers maintained their strength despite poor nourishment by Western standards. “The Japanese soldier can live for days on rice,” noted British Army Captain F. R. Sedgwick, “No European troops . . .

52McKenzie, From Tokyo to Tiflis, 2.
54Frederic Villiers, Port Arthur: Three Months with the Besiegers (London, 1905), 164, 68.
56McKenzie, From Tokyo to Tiflis, 223.
could march and fight on such a diet.” Lloyd Griscom, the American minister in Tokyo, reported that the soldiers

were like athletes unused to luxuries. Men who had spent their lives toiling in the fields on a diet of rice found it no hardship to plod along all day with heavy packs on their backs. The Japanese were probably the greatest marchers in the world.

Ashmead-Bartlett contemplated the link between civilization and the body. “Few will deny,” he argued, “that the improvements, or the so-called improvements, of civilisation have a disastrous effect on the physique and stamina of a nation; and as a race declines physically, so also does it decline in courage, determination, and war-like prowess.” Yet, the Japanese were undoubtedly the finest race physically that exists—not in point of actual size, for they are extremely small . . . but as regards their physical qualities; size does not in any way enter into the calculation. They are very thick-set and well-made, especially about the legs, and are a perfect height for soldiers. Their training makes them very agile and quick on their feet. To see a Japanese soldier jump is a revelation.

Such admiration did not extend to other Asians. Seppings Wright despised the “Chinamen” he encountered in the city of Liaoyong, writing on several occasions of their “little pig’s eyes” and crediting them with “the same order of intelligence as the animals [donkeys] in their charge.” All were “evil-smelling” and utterly filthy. Nurse McCaul also made ethnic distinctions as she watched Japanese soldiers pushing transport carts to the front. “What a brave, cheery man the [Japanese] transport soldier is. . . . The nearly naked Chinaman, also assisting with his quaint, squeaking wheel-barrow . . . lent the one Oriental touch to this moving mass, for in the distance the men looked European in their trim uniform.”

Ethnicity aside, dress could also influence Western perceptions. As Wright wrote, “the Japanese politicians and officials . . . are as fine-looking and well tailored a lot
of gentlemen as it is possible to see everywhere." Well dressed Japanese were effectively promoted to honorary white men: "Admiral Saito, the Vice-Minister, is a good specimen of a Japanese sailor, big and burly and with a kindly face. He might easily have been mistaken for a sun-tanned British Admiral." Vice-admiral Ijuin, Wright continued, "looked not unlike the great Prussian general Von Moltke," and Vice-admiral Count Ito had a "head like Bismarck."62

Hamilton compared Lieutenant-general Baron Kodama to a Sir Michael Biddulph in miniature, noting that "Several British officers noticed this strong resemblance. . . . Marshal Kuroki has a charming face, and a gentle sympathetic smile. He looks intelligent. . . . Prince Kanin is slight and very handsome. He looks every inch the beau sabreur."63 Of all Japanese officers, General Maresuke Nogi, the hero of Port Arthur, won the greatest adulation. Ashmead-Bartlett compared Nogi to American General Ulysses Grant,64 and the American correspondent of the San Francisco Chronicle, Richard Barry, concurred: "How handsome he was—and how simple and friendly, how easily pleased, how innately courteous!"65

Even Emperor Meiji attracted Western attention. When the emperor celebrated his fifty-second birthday ten months into the war with a parade of 10,000 men, all foreign representatives attended. The annual imperial review went off well, and Baelz wrote in his diary: "[T]he German officers who were present, and the other foreign observers, were much less critical than in former years, when they used to speak contemptuously of the Japanese army and Japanese drill. Those days have gone for ever."66 War correspondent James Miller assembled a collection of news and data into a thick book he entitled Thrilling Stories of the Russian-Japanese War. He dedicated the first chapter to the "Mikado" (emperor) who, he reported, had a "pleasant appearance" and was "almost six feet" tall. "He is muscular and well-proportioned, [with] a broad, high forehead, and judged by the most exacting standard of manly beauty, he is a handsome sovereign."67

Such positive images of Japan constructed during the Russo-Japanese War were the outcome of unique circumstances that arose only once in the modern history of Japan and its international relations. Part of Britain's support for Japan stemmed from hostility with Russia at the turn of the century over middle-eastern oil fields,

62Wright, With Togo, 10.
63Hamilton, A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book, vol. 1, 28, 67, and vol. 2, 156.
64Ashmead-Bartlett, Port Arthur: The Siege and Capitulation, 115.
66Baelz, 3 November 1904, Awakening Japan, 324.
India, and the partitioning of China. Russia had repeatedly rejected British offers for a general agreement in the years preceding the war. British-Russian relations sank to their lowest point when, eight months into the war, the Russian Baltic fleet sank a number of British trawlers in the North Sea, mistakenly believing them to be Japanese torpedo boats.68

Americans were also critical of Russian expansion in the Far East, of the cruelties of Russian despotism, and of the persecution of Jews, especially after the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 when 50 Jews were massacred by a mob without government interference. A number of historians dealing with the Russian-American relations in this period argue that the American administration exploited the Kishinev Pogrom as part of its pressure against Russian policy in Manchuria.69 George Kennan, a leading Russian scholar and confidant of Theodore Roosevelt, was a notable figure in shaping the American public image of Russia as a dark and despotic state. He depicted Russia in his writings as a "police state" and Japan as a civilized nation equal in many aspects to the United States.70 Many Americans and Europeans viewed Russia as a semi-Asian nation—Russia, not Japan, was the real yellow peril—and they applauded the efforts of the little underdog island nation.71

The American naval attaché in Russia, Newton McCully, concluded that

the root of all their disasters is found in the Russian character. ... [W]ith all their splendid physical material, endurance, patience, courage and good temper, the Russians fail because of sluggish and undeveloped mentality. With the bodies and appetites of grown men, they have the mental equipment, and logical and reasoning power, the faculty of properly estimating the value of facts, and the occasional hysterical excesses of women or seventeen-year-old boys.72

Both Russians and Japanese trusted American officials to be nonpartisan, but many private individuals in the United States did not hesitate to express their

68Keith Neilson, Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894-1917 (Oxford, 1995), 238-64.
70George Kennan, "Which is the Civilized Power?" Outlook, October 1904, 515-23, see also Frederick F. Travis, George Kennan and the American-Russian Relationship, 1865-1924 (Athens, Ohio, 1990).
sympathy for Japan, including President Theodore Roosevelt. Long before the war Roosevelt had been intrigued by the issue of race, manifesting a peculiar mixture of racial progressiveness and a belief in white superiority. Although he believed Caucasians had the best civilization, he admitted the Japanese to the circle of “civilized nations.” Japanese representatives, including fellow Harvard graduate Kaneko Kentarō, cultivated his interest in Japan, emphasizing the mutual interests of the two nations in Asia. Roosevelt appreciated Japan’s modernization efforts. On the eve of the war, he noted that although they were not Christians, the Japanese were in many ways closer to the white man than were the Slavs. As the war drew to a close, however, Roosevelt’s attitude to Japan changed and his references to it became ambivalent, even predicting that Japan might jeopardize Western hegemony in the future.

The positive representation Japan attained during the Russo-Japanese War underwent another radical transformation following World War I, when Japan emerged as a leading regional superpower, and further in the 1930s. When an aggressive and strongly nationalistic Japanese military began to advance on the Chinese mainland, Western attitudes hardened. The image of the Japanese military that dominates Western popular culture today stems from the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, which led to war in the Pacific. In that war, the Western press depicted the Japanese as quintessential murderous villains, rapacious invaders, subhuman little yellow men.

But from the Japanese perspective, the Russo-Japanese war and the Pacific theater in World War II stemmed from similar circumstances. Historian Robert Butow has noted that when describing to the emperor the situation before the Russo-Japanese war, “the Japanese premier reportedly declared: ‘Things have come to such a pass that our Empire cannot avoid fighting for the sake of the peace of the Orient.’” Thirty-seven years later, Hideki Tojo and his colleagues were to use largely the same argument in their reports to the throne prior to the decision for war in 1941. Yet in the


decades that had elapsed since the Russo-Japanese War, many of the international circumstances that formerly had favored Japan had changed. Japan itself had undergone a startling transition to an ultranationalist imperialist power, whose attacks on the West were intended to set Asia free for the Asians—meaning that Japanese domination would replace Western imperialism in Asia.

Post-World War II public opinion in the West memorized the fresh and painful images of Japanese military conduct in World War II and has tended to see Japan's conduct as a reflection of national character. The long forgotten images of the Russo-Japanese War suggest a more complex picture of Japan and compel us to reconsider national stereotypes in general, and those of Japan in particular.