

FRANK FUREDI explores how the defeat of Russia by Japan 100 years ago this month had long lasting implications for race relations

**T**HIS MONTH is the centenary of the Treaty of Portsmouth (in New Hampshire), the settlement on 5 September 1905 that ended the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05.

At the time and in subsequent decades the defeat of Russia by Japan was perceived as the precursor of portentous events, for this was the first time in the modern era that an Asian nation succeeded in vanquishing a European power.

At the start of the 20th century rivalry between Russia and Japan for dominance in Korea and particularly Manchuria inexorably led to a military conflict between these two expansionary powers. A series of swift Japanese triumphs over the Russian army and navy culminating in the fall of the strategic seaport of Port Arthur (the old Western name for Lushun, China) in January 1905 astonished Western observers. After this event international race relations would never be the same again.

Although the war was an outcome of conflicting imperial ambitions, it was also perceived as a war between races. In the decade leading up to the war and during it, both sides sought to play the race card to consolidate racial support. The Russian Government continually promoted fears about the “Yellow



A contemporary Russian cartoon shows Japan trampling Korea into the ground on the way to Russia

# The rise of the rising sun

Peril” in order to consolidate support amongst people on the Siberian frontier. In the aftermath of the war, its slogan was that “we held the line of Western civilisation against the onswEEPing yellow hordes since Jenghis Khan”. In turn the Japanese Foreign Ministry described the war as the first round in the “vital struggle” between the white and yellow races.

It is worth noting that as the 20th century began, the political and cultural elites of the major world powers possessed

a strong sense of racial consciousness. Western powers tended to interpret their relations with Africa and Asia in racial terms. Acts by non-white interests were assessed not merely in terms of how they affected the particular European power concerned but also from the perspective of its impact on race relations. That is why the reaction of the western elites to Japan’s victory tended to be informed by racial calculations. Consequently, Japan’s victory was understood to have implications not only for the vanquished nation but also for the entire race, of which Russia was a part.

This event served as a catalyst for bringing to the surface fears about the durability of a Western-dominated world order. The reaction of Alfred Zimmern – then a young lecturer at Oxford, and later an eloquent defender of the British Empire – to Japan’s victory illustrates the response. He informed his class that he was cancelling the subject of his lecture that morning: “Because, I said, I feel I must speak to you about the most important historical event which has happened, or is likely to happen, in

A Japanese unit assumes fighting formation during the war



The moral authority of the West and the claims of superiority of the white race were now called into question



our lifetime; the victory of a non-white people over a white people’.

A reading of the literature of the period indicates that Zimmern’s response reflected the mood of the European elites. As far as they were concerned the moral authority of the West and the claims of superiority of the white race were now called into serious question.

### The myth of white invincibility

From 1905 onwards expressions of Western racial fears were frequently expressed through allusions to Japanese power. Whenever Western powers were challenged, someone would point to the Japanese-Russian war as the beginning of a new era in international affairs. Even distant events, such as the emergence of African nationalist protest, would be linked to it. A British missionary lecturing his colleagues in Zambia in 1931 remarked that the myth of white invincibility was exposed in 1905. ‘Indeed it marked a new era in the attitude of Coloured peoples to the White race’, he noted. In the United States liberal publications warned that black people saw the Japanese as ‘a man of colour’, as an ally rather than as a foe.

As events were to show, Western racial fears towards Japan were borne out by subsequent experience. Throughout the colonial world from Asia to Africa through the Middle East, people embraced the Japanese victory as if it was their own. Many nationalist and Muslim publications celebrated the

event and Egyptian, Turkish and Persian poets wrote odes honouring the Japanese nation. But it was in Asia where the victory of Japan over Russia was to have the greatest impact. The colonial powers in Asia regarded Japan as a direct threat to their moral authority. That is why in the years leading up to the Second World War, they continually accused the Japanese of ‘exploiting’ the ‘colour feeling’ of Asians. One Foreign Office report observed that one of the impulses behind Japanese expansionism was ‘colour and race-feeling’ against Western powers.

Western fears were to be borne out during the course of the Second World War. Japan’s rapid military advance through Asia in the early 1940s and its ability to mobilise significant local support for its anti-Western propaganda were interpreted as representing a rejection of the colonial regime of racial domination. British policy-makers felt bitterly humiliated at the speed with which their Asian colonies collapsed in face of the Japanese advance. It forced policy makers to recognise the fact that

the racist practices of the Empire undermined the authority of Britain.

British propagandists in London complained that Japanese criticism of imperial race relations was the one issue for which they had no convincing answers. According to one Whitehall memorandum on the subject, the only way to counter Japanese propaganda was through the ‘active abandonment of racial priorities and the

creation of a public relations organisation to expand and solidify equal relations between peoples of all races, colours and creeds’. On an ominous note, the memorandum concluded that if the Empire did not solve this problem it would be ‘broken by it’.

Russia’s defeat in 1905 unleashed a process that eventually forced Western diplomacy to deracialise international relations. By 1945, Anglo-American officials believed that it was better to take the moral high ground and embrace racial equality than to lose the initiative to others. The ideology of white supremacy now stood discredited. To a significant extent, its decline is a legacy of Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905. **FI**

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## FACTFILE

### Why did the Russo-Japanese War happen?

The conflict was an outcome of a rivalry between the two powers for hegemony in north east Asia, specifically in Manchuria and Korea, mainly at the expense of China. Russia refused to negotiate a deal with Japan and believed that it could easily triumph in a war.

### When was it?

The war began on 8 February 1904, when the Japanese navy launched a surprise attack on the Russian fleet stationed at Port Arthur. In April Japan widened the war by crossing the Yalu River into Russian-occupied Manchuria. After several land battles the Russians were forced back into Port Arthur. Throughout the summer of 1904 Russia suffered a series of reversals on land and on sea. The Japanese began a long siege of Port Arthur and succeeded in taking the city in January 1905. From this point onwards it was only a matter of time before Russia conceded defeat.

### How did the war end?

The Battle of Tsushima in May 1905 was the largest naval battle in history up to that time. Nearly 5,000 Russian sailors were killed and 6,000 captured. In contrast only 117 Japanese sailors died. The Russian navy was destroyed and Japan emerged as a major power. After a month of secret diplomacy and negotiations conducted under the aegis of the American President Theodore Roosevelt an armistice was signed on 5 September 1905.

### Which figures came out of it best?

Admiral Togo Heihachiro, who was responsible for destroying Russia’s naval power emerged as the hero of the hour. The American President Theodore Roosevelt, who presided over the negotiations and the peace settlement, strengthened his reputation for statesmanship as well as the status of the United States as a global power.



A 1904 journal covering the war

## JOURNEYS

### BOOK

**The Silent War: Imperialism and the Changing Perception of Race** by Frank Furedi (Pluto Press 1998); **Race, Conflict and the International Order** by Hugh Tinker (Macmillan 1977); **The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05** by Denis and Peggy Warner (Frank Cass, 2001)