

## Chapter 6: Russia's Occupation of Manchuria

—Given Russia's Intention, War Seems Inevitable—

### Advancing Russian Army

“We must make Manchuria a second Bukhara.” This was what Russian Minister of War Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin stressed when the Boxer Rebellion erupted in 1899 to Sergei Yulyevich Witte, who later became Komura's counterpart in the negotiations on the Treaty of Portsmouth. Bukhara was a Khanate located on the border of present-day Afghanistan and Uzbekistan neighboring the Khanates of Khiva and Kokando. With its capital city Samarkand captured by Russia in 1868, the year of the Meiji Restoration, Bukhara had been a Russian territory since 1882; it remained so until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Kuropatkin actually sounded much milder on this issue in his own memoir. Witte, on his part, was scheming to acquire Manchuria peacefully—in principle, without resorting to military might—by manipulating Li Hongzhang, whom Witte had bought over by bribery.

Judging from the way Russia had occupied the Khanates of Khiva and Kokando, however, these episodes are minor details that are insignificant against the overall turn of events. Russia's ambition for Manchuria was as clear as day.

It was on July 9, 1900, that the Russian army was ordered to advance to Manchuria, taking advantage of the Boxer Rebellion.

Having crossed the border in late July-August, the Russian army seized Qiqihar on August 26, Changchun on September 21, Jilin on September 23, Liaoyang on September 26, and Mukden on October 1. One city after another, Russia put all of Manchuria under its control.

As always, Russia announced that it had no intention of occupying Manchuria permanently. On September 1, Russian minister to Japan Alexander Izvolsky hand-delivered the note on Russia's policy toward Qing to Foreign Minister Aoki Shūzō (青木周蔵). The note contained statements that can be summarized as follows:

Our conduct this time was a temporary measure that we had to take due to circumstances beyond our control, and it was not based on a selfish plan which was not at all a part of Russia's policy... As long as the security of the Siberian Railway is guaranteed... and its operations are not obstructed by other countries, Russia will not fail to withdraw its troops from the territory of Qing.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this note, Komura, who was at that time Japanese minister to Russia, sent a telegram to the foreign ministry in Tokyo on as early as September 24, observing, "While Russia's immediate concern might be the security of the railroad, I suspect it will end up controlling Manchuria completely and permanently."<sup>2</sup> Komura also sent another lengthy telegram on October 19, predicting that, "While Russia might withdraw its regular troops from Manchuria pro forma after the Boxer Rebellion is settled, Manchuria will de facto remain occupied by the Russian army."<sup>3</sup>

Already at this stage, Komura had started pursuing a scheme to barter Manchuria for Korea with Russia. This was the scheme that elder Japanese statesmen had been determined to pursue as the last defense line until the very eve of the Russo-Japanese War.

On July 20, the first day of Russia's invasion of Manchuria, Komura submitted a proposal to the Japanese government that it was high time for Japan and Russia to demarcate their spheres of influence so that each could have a free hand in Korea and Manchuria, respectively. On October 2, Komura himself visited Witte during his recreation in Yalta to sell this idea directly. Komura believed it beneficial for Japan to secure its free hand in Korea in exchange for the early recognition of Russia's occupation of Manchuria now that Russia obviously intended to seize Manchuria no matter what it proclaimed.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Nippon Gaiko Bunsho-Hokushin Jihen no Chū* (Boxer Rebellion Volume 2, Documents of Japanese Foreign Policy), p. 337. Quoted in Tsunoda Jun. 1967. *Manshū Mondai to Kokubō Hōshin* (Manchurian Issue and National Defense Policy), Hara Shobō, Tokyo, pp. 24–25. Text in Japanese was translated to English by the author.

<sup>2</sup> *Nippon Gaiko Bunsho-Hokushin Jihen no Jō* (Boxer Rebellion Volume 1, Documents of Japanese Foreign Policy), pp. 735–6. Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Tsunoda (1967), pp. 31–2.

Witte, however, did not buy this argument. In the conversation with Komura in Yalta, Witte responded as follows:

It would be easy for Russia to occupy Manchuria if it wished to do so. Whether Russia occupies it or not solely depends on Russia's will. At this point Russia has no intention to do so. But circumstances beyond our control might force us to annex Manchuria as our territory, and when that happens, Japan may argue that for its part it would occupy Korea. However, that is not what will actually happen. When Manchuria becomes a Russian territory, Russia's influence on Korea will be much greater than that of Japan. Therefore, Russia cannot allow Japan to harm Korea's independence.<sup>4</sup>

What Witte meant by "Korea's independence" was, of course, the state in which demarcation of the spheres of influence between Russia and Japan over Korea remained unsettled, which Russia could take advantage of when the chance emerged to occupy Korea. This was basically the same tactic that Russia employed earlier when it had left the territorial demarcation unsettled in Sakhalin and Primorsky Krai. Japan itself had also employed it when it advocated the independence of Korea during the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War.

On this particular point, Minister Chinda Sutemi (珍田捨己), who succeeded Komura, made a similar observation in his January 1901 telegram as follows:

Witte holds a hardliner view on Korean affairs. When and if Manchuria becomes a Russian territory, Korea will be a neighboring country sharing the border with Russia, and Witte seems to believe that this will make Korea all the more important for Russia. Russia's argument for Korea's neutrality is nothing but a temporary façade put forth to leave room to accomplish its ambition in the future.<sup>5</sup>

By this time, Komura had already given up on negotiating with Russia and

---

<sup>4</sup> Kin Masaaki, ed. *Nikkan Gaiko Shiryo Shusei* (Collection of Documents on Japan-Korea Diplomatic Relations) Vol. 8, pp. 406–7. Quoted in Tsunoda (1967) pp. 34–5.

<sup>5</sup> Tsunoda (1967), p. 35.

considered that the confrontation with that country was inevitable. Realizing the futility of the Manchuria-Korea bartering scheme, Komura had begun to act on the argument that Manchuria and Korea are inseparable in confronting Russia.

### **Why Russia Hung on to the Korean Peninsula**

It would be a waste of time to prove Russian ambition over the Korean peninsula by referring to Russian documents. That would be as futile as attempting to find North Korea's motivation for its southbound advance at the beginning of the Korean War in its official announcements. It often happens that international situations can be grasped much more accurately through common sense judgment rather than by studying documents.

Compared to North Korea at the time of the Korean War, however, statements made by Russia in this period were generally more audacious. Some of them are worth quoting. For instance, on December 10, 1901, Russian foreign minister Vladimir Lamsdorff wrote in his letter to war minister Kuropatkin, "We should not conclude a new agreement with Japan if it costs us dearly. It would be too costly to give up Korea and allow Japan to take it."<sup>6</sup>

Two months earlier in October 1901, Czar Nikolai had the following to say to Prince Heinrich of Prussia, who was visiting Russia at that time: "If Japan attempts to gain a firm footing in Korea, it will provide Russia with a reason to start a war with Japan. Japan's footing in Korea is tantamount to the emergence of the Far Eastern version of the Dardanelles issue, and Russia will never allow that."<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Czar Nikolai declared that Russia would not allow a situation in which the navigation of Russian vessels would be obstructed by the Japanese through the Korea Strait, revealing Russia's wish to control not only the southern part of the Korean Peninsula but even Tsushima Island if the situation allowed. All it takes is common sense to speculate what Russia had conspired. If you put yourself in the shoes of a monarch or a leader of a

---

<sup>6</sup> Lamsdorff memorandum to the Tsar, December 5, 1901. (*The Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, July 1935, pp. 251–2). Quoted in Tsunoda (1967) p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Bulow's Note, November 4, 1901. (*Die Grosse Politik der europaischen Kabinette, 1871–1914*. 19 Band, I Teil, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, pp. 34–5). Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 113.

country in the midst of the age of imperialism and study the map of the Far East, you would immediately know what you could and should do.

Acting French Ambassador to Russia M. Boutiron sent the following observation with foreign minister Théophile Delcassé in October 1901:

It is beyond doubt that Russia would not allow Japan to occupy the Korean Peninsula. If this peninsula falls into the hands of the Japanese, it would nullify as well as deadlock Russia's efforts in the region encompassing Lushun to Beijing. It would also put Russia's sea traffic from the Liaodong region to Vladivostok at the mercy of Japan, the new owner of the Korea Strait. Russia will undoubtedly seek an opportunity to block Japan's occupation of Korea before the yellow race nation completes its war preparations and form an alliance of nations that would be harmful to Russia. While Russia may pretend to be indifferent, it will remain very much alert and watch for the best chance.<sup>8</sup>

As a matter of fact, immediately before Russian foreign minister Lamsdorff visited Itō Hirobumi in December, he said this much to M. Boutiron:

We need Korea to be neutral. If Japan does not like the expression "neutral," we can change the expression—but not the state of affairs. Japan must understand that Russia will never give away Korea to Japan. If Korea is not free, all of our strategies in the Far East will be threatened. We are not at all concerned about Japan's economic activities on the Korean Peninsula, but we like to keep the route between Lushun and Vladivostok obstacle-free. If Japan does not agree to this, Japan should be prepared to pay the sacrifice of land and sea battles with Russia.<sup>9</sup>

This statement should make it obvious to anyone what Russia had in mind. In fact, an ordinary person with good common sense may have a clearer view of Russia's intention, i.e., the neutrality of the Korean Peninsula was

---

<sup>8</sup> Boutiron to Delcasse, October 10, 1901 (*Documents diplomatiques français, 1871-1914* 2e Serie. Tome I, pp. 519–21). Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> Boutiron to Delcasse, December 3, 1901 (*ibid.*, p. 649–59). Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), pp. 114–15.

synonymous to Russia's refusal to Japan's occupation of the peninsula so that Russia itself could occupy it once it put Manchuria under its control. With this accomplished, a geographically stable Russian Far East encompassing Sakhalin, Primorsky Krai, the Korean Peninsula, Manchuria, and the Liaodong Peninsula would be completed.

### **Russia's Gateway to the Open Sea**

As far as a gateway to the open sea is concerned, Russia is truly a hapless nation; even with the realization of this continental Russian Far East, Russia would not necessarily have free access to high seas. On its European side, even if it controlled the Dardanelles, Russian vessels could not go out into the Mediterranean Sea, not to mention the Atlantic Ocean, if the British navy controlled the Aegean Sea. Even though some Russian vessels ventured out into the Baltic Sea during the reign of Peter I the Great, the Denmark Strait denied their entry to the open sea.

In the Far East, also, even if Russia controlled the Korean Peninsula, its free sea traffic would be obstructed by the Japanese on Tsushima Island. The Kuril Islands in the north and the Nansei Islands (南西諸島) through Taiwan in the south also blocked Russia's free entry to the open sea.

Russia's geopolitical desire for an exit to the outer seas was partially fulfilled in 1945 during World War II when its troops invaded and seized the southern half of the Sakhalin and Kuril Islands despite the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact. Even this route, however, was not navigable during the freezing season. Therefore, Russia's desire could have been realized in this corner of the world only when it occupied the northern half of Hokkaido Island, as the Soviet government insisted at the time of Japan's defeat in the war.

Thus, Japan's worry about Hokkaido being snatched by Russia at the eruption of the Russo-Japanese War was not groundless. It was indeed a commonsensical judgment on the part of Japan, given Russia's geographical constraints.

### **"Japan Must Be For Ever Crippled"**

If the territorial expansion to secure a gateway to open seas was indeed

Russia's intention, Japan must be prepared for the inevitable military clash with Russia. Preparation was easier said than done in the face of Russia, which was one of the two superpowers of the time along with Britain. Japan's leaders must have become horror-struck when they speculated on what would happen to Japan if the country was defeated.

In late June 1904, half a year since the eruption of the Russo-Japanese War, Witte shared the following candid view with British Ambassador Charles Hardinge:

Since the Russian troops occupied Manchuria, this region has become a de facto protectorate of Russia. In actuality its economy has been in the hands of Russia, which has already obtained preferential rights on all disputed enterprises and privileges. It would be impossible for other Western powers to obtain a similar position in Manchuria even if they tried. . . . Although we had signed an agreement with Qing on the withdrawal of our troops from Manchuria, we have never seriously intended to have our forces withdrawn. Because Japan entered the war with Russia demanding the withdrawal of our troops from Manchuria and equal treatment there, I do not believe the Czar intends to make concessions on these points when we win the war.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, from the beginning Russia had no intention of making any concession to Japan's demand. Moreover, Witte continued and stressed what Russia should impose on Japan as the conditions for peace after winning the war, that “. . . apart from the question of absorption of Manchuria . . . opinion was unanimous that Japan must be for ever crippled and the predominance of Russia on the Pacific Coast assured. For this purpose, Japan must be forbidden from possessing naval fleets.”

Judging from past Russian conduct, making Japan “for ever crippled” was only the first step toward the settlement of the issue, rather than Russia's final goal. One only has to imagine what would happen to Japan when it had

---

<sup>10</sup> Geore Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914*, vol. 4, “Hardinge to Lansdowne, June 30, 1904” (London: Foreign Office, 1926–38), p. 3. Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 218.

to face the neighboring mighty Russia after being deprived of all of its military capabilities.

According to Winston Churchill's memoir, while U.S. President Roosevelt insisted on the unconditional surrender of Japan and Germany at the Yalta Conference in 1945, Premier Stalin of the Soviet Union argued that they could coerce Japan and Germany for whatever they wished once the two countries accepted the surrender.

In Cold War jargon, Russia's intention could be described as the "Finlandization" of Japan. But the Japanese situation could have been much worse than that of Finland. In the crisis situation toward the end of the Soviet-Finish "Winter War" in 1940, General Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, who is highly adored in Finland today as the hero savior of the country, insisted on the early conclusion of peace, claiming, "Our troops are still sanguine. Once our military collapses, the last chance for Finland would be completely lost." It was obvious to him that once the national military was gone, so would the chance for peace or even the independence of Finland.

It should be noted here that it was to the ambassador of Britain, Japan's alliance partner, that Witte made the above remarks. Thus, these should be interpreted as Witte's subtle inquiry of Britain on the conditions Russia should impose on Japan after winning the Russo-Japanese War. Witte made no reference to specific conditions that Russia must have desired in order to secure "Russia's superiority on the Pacific coast," such as occupation of Tsushima and Hokkaido and the lease of military ports on Honshu Island. Witte must have constrained himself to a vague discussion of principles in fear of possible objection or even interference from Britain. As long as Britain tolerated the condition of stripping Japan of all of its combat capabilities, Russia could do anything it wished to Japan. At the same time, predicting that Britain would have no means to interfere with Manchuria and Korea once Japan was defeated, Witte communicated Russia's intention explicitly to the British side.

To fight such a dreadful foe must have taken true fortitude and determination on the part of Japan. It is easy to accuse, after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, that Japan had waged the war to seize Korea and Manchuria, which would be its gateway to advance into the Asian continent. Japanese leaders on the eve of the war, however, were not in the

frame of mind for such a grandiose scheme. They were simply faced with the peril of the loss of national independence.

### **The Very Survival of Japan**

One can start a war only when one is convinced that evading a war is at least as bad as being defeated in a war. If Japan does not fight Russia now, the latter will sooner or later advance to the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. If this happens and if Russia starts making unreasonable demands on Hokkaido and Tsushima, Japan must confront Russia because these demands would threaten the very survival of Japan. If we end up fighting a war with Russia anyway, we might as well fight it now before Russia's military buildup in the Far East becomes impossibly formidable. This must have been how the thinking went at the time.

Judging the international situation in those days objectively, perhaps the above was a correct conclusion. Nevertheless, it still took tremendous courage to put this thinking into practice as a policy. There was no better person than Komura to do so.

In retrospect, the year 1901 was the turning point for Russia's fortunes. That year, Itō Hirobumi, almost the only person who could promote mutual compromise between Russia and Japan, according to Alexander Izvolsky, resigned from the prime ministership in May, and Li Hongzhang, whom Russia had gotten under its thumb, passed away in November. In the Katsura cabinet that succeeded Itō's government, it was Komura who served as foreign minister.

Komura's hardline view on Russia and his perception of Russia's true intention was shared commonly among the second-generation Meiji Restoration leaders, including Prime Minister Katsura Tarō and Katō Takaaki, who was foreign minister before and after Komura.

As soon as Russia had nearly completed its occupation of Manchuria, Witte sent a secret envoy to Li Hongzhang with the purpose of making Qing approve the de facto occupation of Manchuria by Russia. As pro-Russia as Li was, he could not quite give in that far and suggested, as a tentative measure, a local agreement on the Russian occupation instead of a formal agreement between the two governments. Consequently, the Second Sino-Russian

Secret Treaty was concluded in November 1900. This treaty in a nutshell stipulated that the Qing troops stationed in Manchuria would be put under the de facto command of Russian generals after being disarmed. Naturally, Qing officials in Manchuria showed reluctance at first. In response, Russia detained Qing negotiators and demanded unconditional approval of the secret treaty in return for the safe return of the detained officials to Mukden. Thus, this secret treaty was finally signed.

### **Initiation Ceremony for Japan**

In response to the signing of the Second Sino-Russian Secret Treaty, Foreign Minister Katō of the Itō cabinet (in office from October 1900 through May 1901) demanded an explanation from the Russian government. Minister Izvolsky reported to his home office on this incident, analyzing it as a revelation of “a conflict between the moderates within the Japanese government headed by Lord Itō on the one hand and the young bureaucrats headed by Foreign Minister Katō on the other. . . as I have repeatedly called to the attention of the home government.”<sup>11</sup>

Japanese minister to Russia Chinda Sutemi executed the order from the foreign minister and demanded Russian Foreign Minister Lamsdorff to give an explanation. Lamsdorff in return flatly replied, “Because the Manchurian issue is a matter between Russia and Qing, the Russian government is not obliged to explain its position on this affair to a third party.”<sup>12</sup> Simply put, Lamsdorff’s message was that Japan should not meddle with what Russia had agreed on with Qing.

Subsequently, Katō requested support for Japan’s protest from the British and German governments, who had advocated the open-door policy for Qing, but neither of them had any intention to intervene in the Manchurian affair. They seemed to be resigned to letting Russia do whatever it wished in Manchuria.

Meanwhile, Russia applied an increasing amount of pressure on Qing. The Russian intra-government conference on November 13, 1900 adopted a set of

---

<sup>11</sup> Isvolsky to Lamsdorff, January 27, 1901 (*The Chinese Social and Political Science Review*. January 1935, p. 577). Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 46–7.

<sup>12</sup> *Nippon Gaiko Bunsho-Hokushin Jihen* Vol. 34, p. 107. Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 50.

eighteen demands on Qing, to be imposed as the draft treaty. This draft treaty demanded that Qing expel all foreign concessions in Qing's territory north of the Great Wall and leave the defense of Manchuria entirely to the Russian troops. According to this draft, no Qing official or policeman was allowed to be appointed in Manchuria without Russian approval.

The content of this draft treaty was immediately communicated to Japan from the Qing government, which had already been keenly aware of the Russian threat and expected help from Japan. Meanwhile, Qing's political leaders secretly warned the Japanese side, both in Tokyo as well as in Beijing, that the Japanese government should be aware of Li Hongzhang's special relations with Russia.

Foreign Minister Katō once again requested the cooperation of the British and German governments, but they remained undecided. This situation finally prompted the Itō cabinet to adopt Katō's proposal for the Japanese government to protest to Russia singlehandedly. On March 25, 1901, the Japanese government instructed Minister Chinda in Saint Petersburg to convey a protest to Russian Foreign Minister Lamsdorff, who once again brushed off Japan's protest saying that the situation was an affair between two independent sovereignties. In response, Katō immediately sent a telegram to Lamsdorff on April 5 to communicate his disagreement with the Russian view. The telegram was preceded by the Japanese foreign ministry's strong protest to Russian Minister Izvolsky in Tokyo, denouncing Russia's unlawful conduct of not only occupying the Liaodong Peninsula but also the much larger Manchuria after having opposed Japan's seizure of the Liaodong Peninsula at the end of the First Sino-Japanese War six years earlier.

At this point, Russia abruptly changed its attitude and recalled the Second Sino-Russian Secret Treaty. While Lamsdorff himself stated, "I had no idea that Japan attached such great importance to the Manchurian affair, which surprised me," what Russia really realized was the reality of power relations at the time.

Judging from the letter that Lamsdorff sent Kuropatkin in later days, it appears that the true reason for Russia's abrupt change in its attitude was the realization that the Russian army and navy in the Far East were relatively much weaker than their Japanese counterparts. Moreover, Russia

feared that hasty remedial attempts to strengthen its army and navy in the region would prompt an early Japanese attack on Russia by Japan before its war readiness was complete.

Russian historian Boris Romanov described this Japan's single-handed and frontal protest to Russia without British support as "an unprecedented bold act."<sup>13</sup> And according to British historian Ian Nish, this accomplishment of Russia's retreat was an initiation for young Japan.<sup>14</sup>

From beginning to end, the Russo-Japanese War was, essentially, a competition between Russia, which planned to overpower Japan after expanding its military strength in the Far East, and Japan, which attempted to expel Russia from the Far East before the latter's war preparedness was complete.

Once Russia made a full-scale advance into Manchuria, Japan could never rival it. This was widely understood in Japan, as Ozaki Yukio's (尾崎行雄) criticism of the proposal to expand Japan's naval buildup during the Diet session following the First Sino-Japanese War reveals. Ozaki, a long-time parliamentarian who was later called "the father of parliamentary government," said, "Japan's government revenue is ¥250 million, while that of Russia is ¥2 billion. Japan has absolutely no chance of winning an arms race with such a great power." Since the Napoleonic wars, Russia had maintained the world's largest army, boasting its two million regular troops compared to 200,000 troops for the Japanese Imperial Army.

If one million Russian troops had been concentrated in Manchuria and had advanced southward, as Kuropatkin had envisioned, Japan really would not have had any chance of defeating Russians anywhere between Manchuria and the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, no matter what it tried.

The only problem for Russia was the underdevelopment of the transportation infrastructure which would have enabled the delivery of such a massive force to the Far East across Siberia. Thus, it was self-evident that the situation would become increasingly unfavorable for Japan as time went

---

<sup>13</sup> Romanov, B.A. *Russia in Manchuria 1892–1906* (English translation), p. 217. Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> Nish, Ian. *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The Diplomacy of Two Island Empires—1894–1907* (Athone Press, London, 1966), p. 119 and p. 123. Quoted in Tsunoda (1967), p. 73.

on.

### **Czar Nikolai II's Ambition to Rule the Far East**

The idea of constructing the Siberian Railway had already been conceived when Russia captured Primorsky Krai and Vladivostok in 1860. Around that time, the transcontinental Union Pacific Railroad in the United States was being extended steadily toward its full operation in 1869. While the extension of the railway from the Ural Mountains to Siberia was a natural course for Russia to take in order to facilitate its eastbound advance, it was actually Czar Nikolai II and Sergei Witte that promoted its full-scale construction.

Czar Nikolai II once visited Japan as the crown prince, and attended the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the new railway in Vladivostok in 1891 on his return trip home.

Incidentally, while he was visiting Japan, Nikolai was assaulted with a sword by a constable named Tsuda Sanzō, who was one of the guards on duty for the Russian prince. The assault left Nikolai with a lifelong scar on his forehead. It is believed that after this incident Nikolai bore an intense hatred of Japan and the Japanese.

Throughout the entire process toward the start of the Russo-Japanese War, there had naturally been a variety of arguments, both hard and soft, within the Russian government on policies toward Japan. Witte stressed in his memoir how hard he had constantly tried to avoid the tragic Russo-Japanese War. Witte's memoir also revealed that leading up to his final decision on the war, the Czar had almost always sided himself with the hardliners.

In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that it was Czar Nikolai who had constantly driven the turn of events toward the final showdown. The British government's observation was accurate when it predicted that "Russia will simply abolish its international commitment when it becomes inconvenient. Who in Russia could restrict and criticize the deeds of the great czar?" Indeed, in those days, no one in Russia could resist the wishes of its absolute ruler. Friedrich von Gentz, who was adviser to Austrian Minister of State Klemens Wenzel von Metternich around the time of the Congress of Vienna (1814–15), had the following to say about the Russian czar: "There

exist no constraints on the Russian czar, such as division of powers, constitutional restrictions, or public opinion, that have forced other monarchs to restrain themselves or abandon their desires. He can even carry out in the morning what he dreamed the night before.”

On top of possessing absolute power of such magnitude, Czar Nikolai consistently remained highly opinionated and, moreover, positively engaged in policies toward the Far East. Even though he had traveled to the Far East only once, this experience was nevertheless a great asset for Czar Nikolai in those days when people knew little about the Far East.

Besides, it appears that Czar Nikolai had felt empathetic with the “yellow peril” argument of Prussia’s Wilhelm II. Surprised to find that Japanese military officers stationed in Beijing had been put in charge of the reorganization of the Qing army, Wilhelm II sent the following private note to Czar Nikolai:

We must not overlook the emergence of twenty to thirty divisions of powerful Qing troops supported by six Japanese divisions under the command of dauntless, fearless, and anti-Christian Japanese officers with the unforgivable purpose of expelling all the foreigners from Qing. Nevertheless, the day may come in the future when this kind of situation actually emerges. In fact, the situation has already emerged. Although I had warned about the danger of the yellow peril years ago, most people have ignored my warning.

According to Romanov, Witte regarded these remarks by Wilhelm II as a German stratagem to lure Russia into adventures in the Far East in order to reduce the threat from Russia. Of course, Wilhelm II genuinely believed in the danger of the yellow peril to a certain extent, which found its echo in Czar Nikolai, who had the “uncontrollable desire to advance into the Far East and conquer various locations in the region.” Czar Nikolai’s notion was to “utilize this opportunity to prevent Korea from becoming a Japanese territory before the yellow race completes its war readiness” as predicted by a French diplomat stationed in Saint Petersburg. Thus, a logical consistency is found between Wilhelm II’s yellow peril argument and Czar Nikolai’s expansionism.

## **The Approaching Echo of Cossack Horseshoes**

At this point, Russia's advance into the Far East depended on the completion of the Siberian Railway. According to American historian Denis Warner, the railway had been extended at an average speed of 620 kilometers a year between 1892 and 1895 after Prince Nicolai's cornerstone-laying ceremony in 1891. In 1895 alone, Witte ordered the construction of 1,338 kilometers, stimulated by Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War.

But the Siberian Railway was incomparably more difficult to construct than the American intercontinental railway. For more than half a year the land surface was frozen up to two meters deep, defying any attempt at pile driving, while during summer it turned into a sea of mud. Fighting this surface condition, construction had to go across great rivers, including the Yenisei and Ob Rivers, and over frigid mountains. The greatest obstacle of all until the very end was the route bypassing Lake Baikal. South of the lake, which would be a shorter route, was impassable because it is lined with a sheer cliff. To pass the northern shore required a detour of as much as 700 kilometers, where the frozen ground of the tundra posed another difficulty. Workers were forced to rely on the ferryboat across the lake for transport, but it too became unavailable when the lake froze over completely during the winter. To switch to transport on sleighs, they had to wait until the ice became thick and hard enough. A large number of convicts were mobilized as labor. They were motivated to work speedily because of a special incentive system that made eight-months of labor for the Siberian Railway equivalent to a year's labor in prison.

Thus, the Siberian Railway was being constructed steadily. The Japanese side watched this development with a sense of fear as if hearing the approaching echo of horseshoes made by massive Cossack troops.

In 1892, the very next year after the construction of the Siberian Railway was started, Lieutenant Colonel Fukushima Yasumasa of the Japanese Imperial Army traveled across Siberia alone to observe the construction. Through subsequent intelligence activities, the Japanese side was able to judge, based on the information it had collected, that the transportation

capacity of the single-track Siberian Railway could not exceed seven trains per 24 hours, which was exactly the same capacity that the Russian side had envisioned.

Once the Russo-Japanese War erupted, however, Russia zealously strived to expand the railway's transportation capacity. The southern route around Lake Baikal was completed within seven months after the start of the war. The Russians even resorted to such an extreme measure as abandoning cargo trains without deadheading them back, a measure totally unimaginable for such a poor nation as Japan. In the end, a total of 1,294,565 troops, 230,269 horses, and 9.5 million tons of cargo were transported to Harbin via the railway during the war, according to *Kindai Nippon Sensō-shi* (History of Modern Japanese Warfare). Those were all ordered to the battlefield, forcing Japan to face an uphill battle.

Because Russia's transportation capacity was greatly expanded toward the end of the war, it is obvious that Japan could not have won the war had it been prolonged any further.

It should be obvious from the above observations that Komura's decision to hasten the start of the Russo-Japanese War was an accurate one. It is even justifiable to go so far as to say that it was this Komura's decision that saved Japan.