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THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR AND THE PHILIPPINES

The Russo-Japanese War had far reaching consequences throughout Southeast Asia, most countries of which had been colonized by Western powers. Rising nationalist movements, and suspicion and wariness among the colonial powers were given impetus. Many young nationalist leaders were inspired by the Japanese victory in the war, while the colonial powers now looked towards securing their colonies against the new movements and potential threats to their powers. The Philippines, as a colony of the United States, tended to epitomize the changes brought about by the Russo-Japanese War.

When the Russo-Japanese War broke out, the Philippines had been under American colonial rule for five years, and the war did not immediately have much direct impact on the archipelago. There were, after all, many changes going on in domestic affairs, such as local elections, preparations for the Filipino legislature, educational and economic changes and so on. 1904 also was the year of the St. Louis World's Fair, in which Filipinos and Philippine products were to be displayed to the Americans.

But there were still many active resistance movements against the American occupation. It was only six years since Filipinos had proclaimed their independence, established a government and constitution, only to have it defeated by American arms. The movement for Philippine independence was very strong among the people, despite the changes being brought in by the colonial government. Because of the guerrilla resistance in various provinces, as well as protestations in the press, theater and other outlets, the American colonial government had imposed severe laws to suppress the independence movements, among them a sedition law which banned the public advocacy of independence or separation from the U.S. The Brigandage Act had been passed in 1902 which similarly outlawed

all resistance movements, considering members as brigands or outlaws. Violations of these laws were punishable by death or long terms of imprisonment. These laws attempted to suppress anti-American resistance and the quest for independence. While many Filipinos adapted to the changed conditions, the independence movement remained active, with some Filipinos channeling their efforts within legal bounds.

It was in this context then that the Philippines learned of the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war. The U.S. quickly proclaimed its neutrality, and the Philippines being an American colony was remained neutral during the war. Since the battle zone was far away, the direct impact was initially not too strong.

But there was an impact, and as Japan's victories mounted, many interested eyes watched the developments in mainland Asia. On one level, the American government, although quite sympathetic with Japan, recognized that the Philippines were vulnerable to aggressive designs from other powers, including Japan. On another level, Filipinos keenly read about the progress of the war, recognizing its significance in Asia and its potential influence on the Filipino quest for independence. Veterans of the Philippine Revolution — the Filipino war for independence — saw Japan as a potential ally and source of inspiration, as some of them had already looked at Japan as such in 1896 and before. Some members of the younger generation also saw the war as a positive sign not just for the Philippines, but for Asia as well. And the closeness of war was brought home when three Russian cruisers, which had survived the Battle of Tsushima, arrived in Manila Bay in June 1905. There, for all to see, was concrete evidence of the war and Japan's victory in the naval battle.

Impact of the War on the Americans and the Philippines

President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed neutrality soon after the Russo-Japanese War broke out¹. While the U.S. maintained its neutrality, American sympathy lay with Japan. However, as the

¹ Proclamation, 11 February 1904, in: Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. United States Department of State. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904. P. 32–35. Quoted in: [Braisted 1958: 155].

Japanese victories mounted, Roosevelt and other key officials of the government and the U.S. armed forces began to worry about the vulnerable position of the Philippines. One American historian noted:

The Russo-Japanese War, and particularly the battle of Tsushima, turned upside-down Washington's naïve worldview within which the problem of Philippine security had been addressed. Prior to Tsushima, Washington viewed the Far East as a somewhat volatile but tolerable equilibrium of imperial powers with colonies in the area — Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Japan and the United States. The strategic problem raised for the United States by its Philippine colony, therefore, was that of developing an adequate naval base in the Philippines where the American battle fleet could be concentrated and maintained [Golay 1997: 104].

Indeed, the Battle of Tsushima brought out many questions which strategic planners had not confronted. One was how to utilize the American battle fleet, since the battle had shown that concentration was paramount. If so, where should it be based so as to ensure American security? If bases were to be built, then where? An unresolved issue in the Philippines was whether to base the U.S. Asiatic Squadron in Manila Bay or in the more secluded Subic Bay. The debate was brought out by the war and for a while it seemed feasible to pour money into developing a naval base at Subic, which was more suitable for naval purposes. The plan was defeated when Army officers pointed that it could not be defended from land attack, particularly in the light of what had happened in Port Arthur. For the rest of the American colonial period in the Philippines, Subic would remain a secondary base, ready to be given up if necessary. (After World War II, however, the opposite decision was reached [Golay 1997: 104–105; Braisted 1958: 175–180, 216–223]).

Farther reaching was the realization that the Philippines were vulnerable to attack. An American historian wrote: “Tsushima transformed the Philippines overnight into an exposed and vulnerable salient in the American defense perimeter, as Japan emerged as a possible enemy of formidable strength” [Golay 1997: 105]². This

² See also: [Braisted 1958; Morton 1955].

would be especially obvious after the San Francisco School Crisis and the resultant war scare of 1907, where President Roosevelt wrote his Secretary of War: “The Philippines form our heel of Achilles. They are all that makes the present situation with Japan dangerous. I think that in some way and with some phraseology that you think wise you should state to them that if they handle themselves wisely in their legislative assembly we shall at the earliest possible moment give them a nearly complete independence”³. This was a complete turn around in Roosevelt’s thinking relating to the Philippines.

Because of the vulnerable position of the Philippines, and the change in the balance of power in Asia, the Joint Army-Navy Board reexamined American defense plans, thus contributing to the development of the so-called “Color Plans.” A special board led by Secretary of War William Howard Taft was formed to review and recommend projects for American defenses of Panama, Hawaii and the Philippines. The Taft Board’s recommendations included fortifying the islands at the mouth of Manila and Subic Bay — islands which would become known to the world in the defense of the Philippines in World War II. A floating drydock, the Dewey was immediately sent to the Philippines, where it was homeported until its loss in 1942 [Braisted 1958: 216–223; Lewis 1979: 77–96; Morton 1955: 222].

So serious was Roosevelt’s concern for the American hold on the Philippines that he had Secretary Taft meet with Japan’s Prime Minister Taro Katsura in late July 1905 — before the Treaty of Portsmouth. The talks sought to assure that Japan would recognize the U.S. position in the Philippines. This would be reinforced by the Root-Takahira agreement which followed the war scare of 1907 [Golay 1997: 107–108; Esthus 1966: 102–107, 181–195; Braisted 1958: 181–182, 191–202; Morton 1949].

Since Filipinos were also watching the progress of the war, the possible connection with the resurgence of anti-American resistance and the strengthening of the independence movement was feared and closely monitored, even as pacification campaigns continued in

³ Theodore Roosevelt to Taft, 21 August 1907, quoted in: [Ethus 1966: 195]. Also see: [McAllister Linn 1997: 84–87].

Southern Luzon. Possible links with Japan were especially noted and reported; the potential threat to American rule by a Filipino insurrection remained serious enough to develop a war plan against this [McAllister Linn 1979: 158]⁴.

Impact of the War on the Filipinos

When the war started, rumors quickly spread in the foreign community that the Russians would soon win, and dictate their terms to Japan. But Filipinos from all walks of life closely followed the progress of the war. In one of the most popular Filipino newspapers of that day, “*El Renacimiento*” — a strongly nationalist and pro-independence newspaper — reported the war regularly. Its staff read the news cables with intense interest everyday.

Pedro Aunario, a writer of that newspaper, wrote: “We people at the office eagerly devoured every news dispatch that came our way. I remember how we, younger newspapermen, rejoiced over the triumphal entry of the Imperial Japanese Forces led by Gen. Kuroki into Yalu, in hot pursuit of the fleeing Siberians under Gen. Zassulith of the Russian Imperial Army” [Aunario 1942].

A Filipino law student remembered: “Moved by racial affinity, most of the students in Manila, particularly the students in our school who were in spirit the leaders of the new enthusiasm, turned thoroughly pro-Japanese.” Another Filipino recalled, “The brilliant victories of Japanese arms in that war elicited great jubilation among the Filipinos, who watched with keen interest the course of the military operations”⁵.

In particular, Admiral Togo’s victory at Tsushima so inspired the students of a law school in Manila that they wrote a congratulatory memorial and presented it to Consul Goro Narita. One of the signatories of that memorial (who rose to be Associate Justice in the government), Antonio Horrilleno, recalled that “before the Russo-Japanese War, the Orient, as it seemed to us Filipinos, had no future, no prospects.

⁴ The first formal appearance of this plan — Plan Brown — was in 1923, but contingency plans had existed throughout American rule.

⁵ Dr. Mariano V de los Santos, Director of Oriental Culture, at roundtable discussion, Army Club, March 10, 1944, in: [1905 Nippon Victory... 1944: 5].

It seemed as if there was no morning; that the sun which rose in the East was a sun not for Orientals but for peoples of other countries. Up to that time, there was no Oriental country, no Oriental people that could look the peoples of the West face to face.

“Thus, when Japan defeated Russia, the college students especially, received the news with great enthusiasm and rejoicing. We saw in that victory the dawn of a new day for us people of the East: and so much more so because Japan was forced to accept a war waged against her, at a time when nobody believed that she would dare to fight Russia. For very few knew and appreciated the spiritual strength of Japan; very few understood the spirit of the Japanese Army to die rather than to surrender.

“We had been subjected to abuses and excesses by our foreign dominators. Other Oriental peoples suffered such abuses too, so that even the independent among them inwardly protested those excesses. But due to a lack of a truly vigorous spirit among them, nothing could effectively be done to correct those evils. Japan alone was the nation we had learned to look up to as one possessing that valiant spirit necessary to eject the dominators from the Orient” [Horilleno 1942].

From 1905 onwards, attempts to organize popular revolutionary groups grew in number in Luzon. It was reported in 1907 that the potential revolutionaries in northern Luzon were expecting aid from the Japanese in their quest for independence. Japan’s defeat of Russia had inspired hopes of a Japanese fleet coming to the aid of Filipino freedom fighters. Other groups, some led by leaders of the 1896 and 1898 revolutions, also hoped for Japanese assistance [Ileto 1979: 254–255].

Japan’s victory over Russia had a strong impact as well on other European colonies in Asia. A Filipino historian noted that “all over the colonies of Asia, Japan became the source of inspiration for a relatively new generation of nationalist intellectuals and politicians” [Ileto 1984: 100–101]. An American writer at that time noted that many young Filipinos, among them those who had been educated in the U.S., “joined with the radicals, and the work of educating the masses to demand independence was commenced under their directions”⁶. The editors of “*El Renacimiento/Muling Pagsilang*” belonged to this group. As an

⁶ Quoted in: [Ileto 1984: 100–101].

example of their activity, on November 19, 1909 the newspaper “Muling Pagsilang” carried an editorial arguing that America was the “Russia of the Orient” and would suffer the same fate as Russia did in the Russo-Japanese War. The newspaper urged its readers to work for the victory of the Filipino cause. For the next several years, Japan would loom as a source of inspiration for Filipino nationalists and freedom fighters. In the war scare which followed the San Francisco School crisis, Filipinos from all walks of life were reported by the constabulary as being inclined to support Japan. The possibility of an armed uprising against the Americans, with potential support from the Japanese, became more real as nationalist revolutionary leaders attempted to rouse the people and contact Japanese pan-Asianists [Ileto 1984: 100–101; Mojares 1992: 51–55; Goodman 1971: 169–171; Goodman 1970: 49].

Although many saw in Japan’s victory a positive impact on Asian nationalism and independence movements, a few were able to discern potential danger. Faustino Aguilar of the newspaper “Renacimiento Filipino”, in reaction to Japan’s actions in Korea, asked whether Japan was a liberator or destroyer. He recognized that Japan was a modern, strong country, with an old civilization, but that it could go either way. He would remember this when World War II broke out ⁷.

Russian Cruisers in Manila

The impact of the war became more direct when three Russian cruisers arrived in June 1905 from Tsushima. When they arrived in Philippine waters, they could not at first be identified by the Americans, and the governor general reported to Washington that they claimed to be French. It was then found out that they had survived the Battle of Tsushima, and that they were the Russian cruisers “Oleg”, “Aurora” and “Jemtchug”, under the command of Rear Admiral Oscar Enquist. Admiral Enquist had decided to head for the Philippines after he had been cut off by Japanese ships in his attempt to head northward [Golay 1997: 104]⁸.

The three ships entered Manila Bay on June 3, and Admiral Enquist requested permission to obtain supplies and conduct repairs.

⁷ [Aguilar 1945?: 2–4], on September 14, 1910.

⁸ See also: Rear Admiral Enquist. Report, Manila, 5 June 1905 (Appendix in: [Mizuno 1944: 208–209]).

U.S. naval officers inspected the ships and estimated that it would take from a week to fifty days to complete repairs. Since the U.S. was neutral, Roosevelt did not give permission on the ground that “such permission would virtually be allowing Russia to augment her forces in a neutral port,” and instead demanded that the ships leave within twenty four hours or else consent to internment. Adm. Enquist chose internment, and the Americans formally interned the ships on June 8. The ships stayed in Manila Bay until the end of the war [Braisted 1958: 168; Dennett 1959: 195–196]⁹.

While anchored in Manila Bay, the ships were in plain view of all who walked the coastal road. The Spaniards in Manila felt it was disaster: “This is the deluge,” said some, “the Czar has been completely barred from Asian waters.” But Filipinos who saw the ships — and some were even able to go aboard and view the damage at close hand — they were a symbol of Japan’s victory and the potential for what a determined Asia could achieve.

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⁹ *Oleg* suffered 15 killed and 30 wounded; *Aurora*, 14 killed and 90 wounded and *Jemchug*, 12 killed and 20 wounded [Mizuno 1944: 170]. The Russians were indignant over Roosevelt’s decision, but were unable to get it changed.

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