When The West Looked East:
British Observations On The Russo-Japanese War

Senior Thesis

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Introduction:

On March 16th, 1904, General Sir Ian Hamilton arrived in Tokyo to take up his position as chief British observer with the Imperial Japanese Army. The Russo-Japanese war had already been raging for a month, since the surprise attack on Port Arthur, and armies and fleets were in motion now for the first time equipped with machine-guns, bolt-action rifles, wireless telegraphy, steel-clad battleships, quick-firing artillery, and all the other accoutrements of modern warfare. It was the first major war of the 20th century, and Europe was watching eagerly. “European—and American—military and naval observers with the fighting forces sent back expert reports on the operations, which were digested and mulled over by their general staffs.” General Hamilton described the upcoming conflict as “An impending world drama; a world drama more fascinating than any staged since.....the plains of Marathon.” General Hamilton was an experienced soldier, with a career stretching back to 1870. He first saw combat in the Second Anglo-Afghan War, and then served for years all across British India, from Burma to Pakistan. He fought in both Boer wars, suffering a serious injury in the first one at the Battle of Majuba, and being recommended twice for the Victoria Cross in the second.

It is safe to say that by the time he was dispatched to Tokyo he was one of the most respected officers serving in the British army. Over the following year, the British team of observers would travel alongside Field Marshal Ōyama and his Japanese soldiers as they brutally cut their way into Manchuria, defeating the armies of the Czar again and again, until the final

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cataclysmic naval victory at the Battle of Tsushima forced Russia to the negotiating table. Their reports, and others from Europe, would form the basis for European military leaders’ conceptions of what a modern war would be like. In addition to the official accounts, Hamilton would publish his own book on the war as well. A decade later, the great war he had been sent to prepare for finally arrived, and he would finally be given a chance to demonstrate what he had learned at the infamous Gallipoli Campaign.

It was a disaster. During the eight months in which Hamilton was in command of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, Allied efforts to force the Dardanelles and break through to Istanbul were stymied at every turn. British and ANZAC troops landed on the beaches at Suvla Cove under horrendous fire and then found themselves trapped, pinned under murderous Turkish fire from the bluffs. Confident British claims of the power of offensive withered and died, and the casualties mounted. On the 16th of October, 1915, Ian Hamilton was removed from command of the operation. He would never again hold a significant military command.

How was a disaster of this magnitude possible? Perhaps more than any other officer in British service at the time, Hamilton should have had a proper understanding of the realities of 20th century warfare. He had served with distinction in the bloody counterinsurgency of the Second Boer War, and had watched the entire course of the Russo-Japanese from up close. In Manchuria he had seen the power of machine-guns and breach-loading artillery on attacking infantry......and yet as his doctrine he still held to the frontal assault. And in this he was not alone. This attitude was pervasive amongst the officers of the British Empire throughout the early years of the Great War. This belief in the efficacy of the offense existed not in spite of the
lessons of the Russo-Japanese War but *because* of it. British attempts to glean knowledge from the northeast Asian conflagration were marred by a number of mistakes and assumptions that rendered much of what they learned useless, or actively harmful.

There already exists a fairly extensive literature documenting the failure of the British to learn the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War, as well as a general acknowledgment that the British and other foreign observers drastically overestimated the extent to which their armies would be able to duplicate the swift and decisive offensive of the Imperial Japanese Army. Although My thesis will draw upon this at times, it will be mainly based on primary sources. These will include the actual reports filed by the British observers with the War Office, as well as General Hamilton’s diaries, which he published shortly after the war under the title of *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*. Using this material, I will attempt to address two related questions that I have rarely seen discussed. Firstly, why was Japan in 1904-1905 able to successfully undertake the kind of costly frontal assaults that would bring the armies of the European Great Powers to so much grief in 1914? What made this war so different? Secondly, I hope to explore the question of *why* the British were incorrect in so many of their conclusions.

Although Hamilton and the observers noted the devastating power of new weaponry, they consistently overestimated the impact of morale and other ‘immaterial factors’ on performance in combat, a phenomenon that jibed with the popular British theory of the
“psychological battlefield”. They credited the successful Japanese advance to this and ignored the circumstantial and topical reasons that allowed a triumphant Japanese offense against prepared Russian defenses. Compounding these errors, the British, and Hamilton in particular filtered much of what they saw through the lens of their own racial biases. General Hamilton was convinced that Europe had become decadent and lacking in the martial virtues. According to his theories, which appear to be an offshoot of Social Darwinist thought, new, vigorous, ‘primitives’ would soon overtake the White Man to assume the mantle of world rule. Hamilton associated the supposed ‘martial virtues’ of these newcomers explicitly with their use of offensive and aggressive attacks, a quality he admired deeply in the Japanese. Meanwhile, the Russian’s stolid and steady defense was seen as merely an example of their racial failings. It was, in some sense, a racialized Cult of the Offensive. And to Sir Ian Hamilton, the Russo-Japanese War was the test case.

Chapter One: Mistaken Assumptions

From their observations of the Imperial Japanese Army, British officers attempted to compile a set of precepts, a compendium of lessons on strategy and tactics they could divine from the course of the fighting. Most of these revolved around a single theme: the frontal assault. With modern weaponry growing ever more powerful as the 20th century wore on, many were questioning: had the time of the glorious charge come to an end? Upon completion

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of the Russo-Japanese War, the answer from European military men was a resounding no. Though a defensive advantage clearly existed thanks to machine-guns and rapid-firing rifles, the British believed that the successful Japanese advance across North China had decisively proven that the offensive could still carry the day. “‘The Manchurian experience’, as one British military writer put it, ‘showed over and over again that the bayonet was in no sense an obsolete weapon.’”\(^5\) The British came to believe that with the aid of superior \(\text{élan}\) and strong artillery support, infantry could still make frontal assaults against entrenched enemies and carry the day.

By 1914, artillery would be the undisputed queen of the battlefield, its size and power making the difference between defeat and success. Cannons had always provided long-range support to the infantry, but by 1916, generals on both sides of the war were attempting to use artillery fire to annihilate enemy forces before battle was even joined. This was unprecedented in military history, but the roots of this folly can be traced to the Russo-Japanese War. This was one of the first major wars to see the use of the recoilless, rapid-firing guns pioneered by France in 1900, and it also saw the first use of what we would today classify as ‘siege artillery’ in field battles. Hamilton noted that “They must have known perfectly well they were going to use heavy guns in the impending action. I suppose they are 12-centimetre howitzers.”\(^6\) The Japanese also expanded the role of conventional siege artillery, using dismounted 28-centimetre naval guns during the siege of Port Arthur, a size of cannon never before deployed on land. All of this meant that Japanese artillery fire in Manchuria was of a size and scale never

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\(^5\) Michael Howard, “Men Against Fire”, pg. 16

\(^6\) Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 45
before seen, and the British observers noted this keenly. Impressed by the Imperial Japanese Army’s tactics, several observers began to place more and more stock in the performance of the big guns, giving them credit for every victory. At the Battle of the Yalu River, for example, “The Japanese claim that their artillery was so deadly that the Russians could not hold their heads up. There may be something to this.”\(^7\) Later in the war, during the Battle of Shaho, Captain Vincent of the Royal Artillery quoted a Japanese officer describing an attack. “One lieutenant of the 3\(^{rd}\) Battalion who was with the leading company said that when he reached the top of the hill, 140 Russian dead were lying at this particular point, nearly all of whom had been killed by Japanese shrapnel fire.”\(^8\) Obviously, it was not a mistake to note the devastating power of artillery in aiding the attack. And though some British officers may have overstated how effective it could be, this is hardly surprising given the circumstances.

Over and over again, the British observers watched Imperial Japanese infantry storm forward, up hills and over rivers, capturing the enemy fortifications, and taking startlingly light casualties in many of their battles. Though today we remember the horrific death tolls of the Battle of Mukden and the Siege of Port Arthur as foreshadowing of WWI, in many of the smaller battles the Japanese took relatively few casualties, especially considering that they were continually on the offensive. At the Battle of Liaoyang, 120,000 Japanese troops stormed a series of hills lying between them and their objective, fortified with three lines of entrenchments, breastworks, bunkers, well-concealed gun-pits, and belts of barbed wire, manned by a substantially larger army. As Lieutenant-Colonel Haldane noted, “It will perhaps

\(^7\) The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers attached to the Japanese and Russian forces in the Field. 1908. Reprint, University of Michigan Library, 2015. Pg. 21
\(^8\) The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 613
be apparent that the Shou-shan-pu position was not deficient in natural defensive power, and in order to enhance that power the Russian engineers turned to account nearly every device which forms fortification in the field.\textsuperscript{9} Though the battle proved to be indecisive, both Ōyama and Kuropatkin (the Russian commander) believed the engagement to have war-winning potential. And yet, the Japanese troops drove the Russian bear out of his heavily-fortified den in less than 48 hours, losing only 5,216 men in the process.\textsuperscript{10} A smaller but more extreme example of this can be seen at the Battle of Hsimucheng, where Japanese troops evicted the Russians from a small village at the cost of 550 casualties, while killing at least a 1,000 Russians\textsuperscript{11}. This is, once again, despite the fact that the Imperial Japanese army had employed a frontal assault. Fresh off their bloody experience in the Boer Wars, the British understood how deadly attacks on well-defended positions could be. Describing the Russian fortifications at the Yalu River, General Hamilton compares them to the Afrikaner position at the Battle of Colenso, a humiliating British defeat from just a few years ago. “How, under such circumstances, was it possible for the Japanese Guard to advance upon the position...to cross the river under rifle fire and to actually enter the trenches whilst a few of the Russians still occupied them?”\textsuperscript{12} For many observers, the answer was artillery. And, to be fair, they were not entirely wrong. Modern artillery, amassed in batteries larger than ever seen before, featuring calibers previously only deployed on battleships was capable of working miracles upon the battlefield. The Japanese artillery was superior to its Russian counterpart, at least in terms of doctrine and training, and it

\textsuperscript{9}The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 235
\textsuperscript{10}The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 268
\textsuperscript{11}The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 219
\textsuperscript{12}The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 21
was a major factor in achieving their victories. But in their unwavering faith in the power of the
cannon, British observers began laying the groundwork for the idea that a strong enough
bombardment prior to an assault could cripple the enemy before battle is even joined.

Though this concept was not explicitly advanced by any of the British observers in
Manchuria, one can clearly see its genesis in Haldane’s musings on the power and might of the
artillery. “Provided that every gun could be concentrated against the main points to be assailed
success might be attained but it was clear that a position whose front and flanks bristled with
obstacles under the close fire of musketry was practically impregnable to assault.”13 But while
the British clearly overestimated the offensive potential of artillery, their real mistake was in
underestimating its defensive capabilities. With the Czar’s forces suffering defeat in virtually
every clash of arms, the value of defensive tactics was obscured by the larger course of the war.
Nowhere did this happen more than with artillery.

Artillery fire can be as devastating to attacking troops as it can be to ones huddled in
their trenches; perhaps even more so, as the former are inherently more exposed. Owing to a
variety of factors, the Russians were never able to fully exploit these advantages. Thus it seems
understandable that the British would have underestimated them. Still, the result was to
reinforce existing British biases regarding offensive tactics and a downplaying of contrary data.
A good example of this was the persistent British belief in the inefficacy of artillery fire in
stopping Japanese attacks. At the Battle of Shaho, Lieutenant-Colonel Haldane notes the
“Comparative immunity of infantry from loss when moving, even in close formation, under the

13 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 240
fire of the Russian Q.F field gun.”

During the incident in question, two battalions of Japanese troops advanced under heavy Russian fire, with shrapnel shells reportedly bursting amidst their ranks. And yet, only five casualties were suffered. Anyone who knows the devastating effects of shrapnel must be struck by this very singular occurrence. And yet, it was apparently common. Captain Vincent of the Royal Artillery claimed at one point that “The losses when crossing the valley were comparatively small, thanks to the rapidity with which the infantry covered the ground. The Russian artillery burst shrapnel over it the whole time.” Supposedly, the Japanese formulated it in their actual doctrine. In his observations on the Battle of Shaho, Haldane claims that “The custom, by day, is not to halt, lie down and await artillery support, but to double forward to the nearest cover, a course which proves not only safer, but has the great virtue of improving moral.” It should be noted that this was precisely the tactic used by British generals in the initial great offensives on the Western Front. When faced with what appeared to be the overwhelming evidence of their own eyes, it not surprising that these observers took the Japanese at face value. But in extrapolating general doctrines from specific cases, the British continued to make the same flawed assumption that military science had been making since the American Civil War: that troops making a frontal assault could move swiftly and determinedly enough to take the enemy fortifications and secure victory.

Weak Russian artillery fire could not explain it all, of course. The Japanese had won every major battle of the war, taking the offensive in nearly all of them. But while the British attempted to define the role of artillery scientifically, identifying its supposed strengths and

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14 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 453
15 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 599
16 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 454
weaknesses, British analysis of the infantry retreats into a more primal level. The Japanese emerge in the observer’s eyes as a nation straddling the primitive and modern. “It is the Dervish charge made by men with modern rifles in their hands, and supported by an artillery which seems to be almost as good as ours in personnel and better in material.” Though there is respect and acknowledgment for the Japanese skill with modern weaponry, many of the British still see Japan as inextricably linked to their warrior past. And the observers did not necessarily see that as a bad thing, in regards to training and discipline. There is much discourse in the British reports on the vim and vigor of the troops, their morale and their willingness to fight, as well as their iron-clad discipline in the face of enemy fire. Small-unit tactics seem less important than the possession of a healthy amount of élan. General Hamilton makes this explicit in his comments on an exercise performed shortly after the Battle of the Yalu. “It was clear that less attention was paid to the correctness of the drill and to the precision of intervals than to the amount of energy and intelligence brought to bear on the exercise.” British fixation on this point makes more sense when ones considers their recent unfortunate experience in South Africa. There, British arms had suffered innumerable defeats despite being armed with the best weapons money could buy. To some officers, including Hamilton, this could only be explained by the poor quality of the British soldier, motivated only by his wages and sadly lacking in patriotic feeling. He spills much ink extolling the superior position of the Imperial Japanese Army in its society relative to that of the British military. “The parade march of the 5th German Army Corps impressed me far less than the little Japanese boys and girls I saw marching down

17 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 143
18 ibid
in their companies to say good-bye to the soldiers. ‘There,’ I said to myself, ‘go the world-renowned, invincible armies of 1920’\(^{19}\) Japanese patriotism and ‘martial ardor’ became easy ways for the British to explain how the Japanese could so continuously advance against the kind of defenses that would have likely shredded British regiments in the Transvaal.

This narrative emerges early in war, at the Battle of Nanshan. A force of 17,000 Russian soldiers were dug into a two-mile long line of hills cutting across the Liaodong peninsula and blocking any access to Port Arthur further south. There was no way of approaching the fortifications that did not involve charging uphill, and both flanks were firmly anchored on the water. A correspondent from \textit{The London Times} present on the scene expressed it this way: “If a Russian division of 8,000 to 12,000 men, backed by 50 or more siege guns and 16 quick-firing field guns, cannot hold 3,000 yards of front, strongly entrenched and secure on the flanks, against the rush of infantry in the open restricted to a frontal assault, it is hard to say what position it can expect to defend with success.”\(^{20}\) Initial Japanese assaults seemed to live up to this prediction. The Japanese 2\(^{nd}\) Army took heavy casualties from Russian artillery and machine-gun fire and was forced back from the enemy lines at every point. But then, after almost a full day of fighting, the tide turned just as darkness fell. Japanese gunboats arrived offshore to bombard the left flank of the Czar’s troops, suppressing their fire. While most Russian attention was still occupied with massive, ongoing frontal assault, soldiers of the 4\(^{th}\) Division waded out into the bay so as to attack the supposedly-secure Russian flank, capturing a

\(^{19}\) Ian Hamilton, \textit{A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War}, pg. 15

trench and driving enfilading fire deep into the Russian lines. Taken by surprise, their defenses unraveled, and within a few hours they were in retreat towards Port Arthur.

To what factor did Haldane, the observer at the scene, attribute this victory? “To the resolution of the General commanding the Second Army, who refused to accept defeat, backed by the determined bravery of his troops, the superiority of the Japanese artillery...may be attributed this brilliant victory.” It cannot escape attention that such a conclusion ignores the tactical acumen of the Imperial Japanese Army, which carried out a very difficult maneuver that most would have thought impossible. This also disregards certain failings of the Russian army that undermined what should have been a virtually impregnable defensive line. In his comments on the battle, the American observer John Pershing states that “It seemed surprising that the Russian position was so easily taken, but it was made clear when we learned that they had held back a large force that had never got into the battle at all.” Indeed, of the approximately 17,000 Russians present on the peninsula, only 3,500 ever seem to have actually seen battle. Nanshan was a victory that the Japanese could rightfully take pride in. But not entirely for the reasons assumed by the British. This, however, is not the only time they would make such mistakes. Consistently, they took the high morale of the Japanese troops and used it as an excuse to not examine other factors that also played into the course of the war.

Take for example, Haldane’s description of an attack on the Russian entrenchments during the Battle of Liaoyang. “The cannonade was resumed, but the enemy betrayed no signs

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21 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 73
of weakness. The assault on a position so well defended, except under cover of night, meant little less than extermination."23 The Japanese continued to bombard the position, but there was little change in the enemy’s dispositions, and the Russian cannons and machine-guns continued to kill anyone who got too close. Finally, after a full day’s bombardment, the Japanese decided to attempt another assault. “The whole line of Japanese infantry, impelled by a common desire to terminate the bloody business, spontaneously attacked...nearer and nearer they came, like the swelling waves that will not be denied, they came.”24 Putting aside their storming of a position declared impregnable by the same report less than a paragraph before, it is worth noting the way in which Lieutenant-Colonel Haldane portrays the Japanese advance. Their victory is not put down to tactics or strategy, but to the spontaneously-expressed willpower of the soldiers. Their attack is depicted as an inexorable force of nature sweeping across the lands. Not only does this continue to privilege immaterial factors over physical ones in regard to military analysis but it feeds into the notion that a successful assault is inevitable if the given the proper soldiers. All of this would haunt the British army in the decades to come.

These observers were far from stupid. With the benefit of hindsight we see that many of their conclusions were false, but matters were not so obvious at the time. And not all the lessons that General Hamilton and his officers drew from the war proved to be so hollow. Though the British deeply admired the Japanese culture of the offensive and their willingness to resort to frontal assaults, they were alarmed by the Japanese continued use of close-order drill, a relic of the Imperial Japanese Army’s original training by the Prussians, a point made by

23 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 251
24 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 251-252
General Hamilton when observing maneuvers. “I asked him if he did not think the employment of so dense a formation from the outset must entail useless loss of life? He gave me the stock German answer.”

At the time of that conversation, the Japanese had just successfully crossed the Yalu river in the face of sporadic and ineffective Russian resistance. In that battle, the Japanese answer to Hamilton’s criticism, that loss of life was necessary to get as many troops up to the front as fast as possible, seemed plausible, as Russian defenses melted away in the face of determined attack. This, however, would not hold true forever, and even those still longing for a traditional charge understood this. “To get the ranks half emptied of by rifle bullets and shrapnel at long ranges is not the best way to conserve weight for the bayonet work at the end.” This proved prescient in light of subsequent Japanese encounters with larger and more determined Russian forces. Indeed, within a few months, Hamilton was noting proudly that the formations of the Japanese army were already loosening up as the generals learned from their mistakes.

In the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, the British military was more convinced of the utility of the frontal assault than ever. This was the first major war of the 20th century, and everything seemed to prove what theorists had been saying. “A phenomenon which may be called a ‘cult of offensive’ swept through Europe. Militaries glorified the offensive and adopted offensive military doctrines.” With Japan attacking in virtually every major engagement and emerging triumphant, it is not hard to see why the foreign observers reached the conclusions

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25 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 143
26 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 144
they did. Japan, a small and newly industrialized nation was able to take on and decisively defeat one of the Great Powers of Europe. Resources could not explain such an outcome, nor could superior manpower or finances. Willpower and morale appeared to be the answer. This was believed in all sincerity by most senior military officers. Hamilton reported what he had seen—Japanese troops storming trenches and successfully emerging from hails of machine-gun fire and rains of shrapnel shells. The Russo-Japanese War truly did happen, and the Japanese truly did win it by a strategy of constant advance. But while British and other European observers were content to pin it on the near-mythical resolve and determination of the Japanese fighting man and the earth-shattering power of artillery, the reality was more complicated.

Chapter Two: Special Circumstances

The First World War was fought primarily in Europe, and for most of the British Army, it was fought specifically in northern France. The Russo-Japanese War was fought entirely in Manchuria. This seems obvious, but not all of the consequences of this were. Northern China is a very different place from northern France, with different terrain, different infrastructures, and different levels of political control. While the British observers in Manchuria were seeking precepts they could apply universally elsewhere, much of what they learned was specific to its time and context. The major battles of the Russo-Japanese War were fought in comparative isolation, in areas of outdated and overburdened infrastructure, making the sort of concentration of men and firepower that would become common on the Western Front
impossible to achieve. This factor was exacerbated by the small size of the Japanese army and population, compared to any of the European Great Powers, and the necessity faced by Russia of supplying and reinforcing their armies entirely through the 9,289 kilometer-long Trans-Siberian Railway, which remained incomplete at the start of hostilities. In addition, while the British noted the Japanese penchant for the frontal assault approvingly, they continually underestimated what that meant. In many cases described by the British as simple ‘attacks’ or ‘storming’, the Japanese were employing much more sophisticated tactics than the British gave them credit for. Together, these factors explain how Japan was able to win a decisive victory using tactics that would become suicidal on the battlefields of the Great War.

Logistics win all modern wars, but they were especially important in the barren wastelands of Manchuria. The entire province was only served by the Russian-built South Manchuria Railway, and roads were few, and often in poor repair. The harsh, mountainous terrain was difficult to traverse, and often retarded movement. For both the Japanese and the Russians, just getting supplies, equipment and reinforcements into the battle zone was a major problem. “Civilians frequently, and soldiers too, often forget that such a multitude of hungry stomachs cannot be whisked across mountains and rivers and miles of broken country.”28 Supply lines were long, tenuous, and often prone to attack from bandits or just delays from inclement weather, meaning that no one ever had as many troops or as much ammunition at the front as they wanted. This affected both sides, but the Russians were hit particularly hard, especially during the early months of the war. Russia’s initial resources in manpower and

28 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 177
supplies vastly outstripped their eastern neighbor, but its supply line was much longer. Worse, the Japanese declared war and launched the opening invasion and were thus well prepared for the trials and travails of the coming campaign. The Russians had the advantage in numbers, but found it difficult to concentrate their forces. Despite the massive size of the Russian army, its one great advantage, Japanese forces actually decisively outnumbered their opponents in Manchuria at the commencement of hostilities. As Hamilton marveled, “Yet, for this imminent battle of the Yalu—the first in the history of the world, consciously watched by the whole of Asia—the representative of the smaller army had brought with him to the point of contact a force seven times greater than that of his immediate opponent.”

It would take months for Russian High Command to be able to rectify this situation.

And yet, the British did not always grasp the significance of what the special circumstances of this battlefield entailed. While surveying the positions of the Russian army just after the Battle of Hsimucheng, General Hamilton sharply criticized the Russian generals for their limited movements. “If the Great Napoleon were to be offered his choice between a concentrated army at Liao-yang, or still widely divided armies posted where the Japanese armies are posted, there would be little doubt he would, after a study of the map, unhesitatingly elect for the former.” Hamilton went on to suggest a classically Napoleonic stratagem; concentrating the entire Russian army and rapidly moving south to annihilate each Japanese army column in turn, before they can unite. This strategy could work well in theory, but as one of Hamilton’s colleagues, General Nicholson points out in his comments on this

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29 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 74
30 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 177
report “I doubt whether General Hamilton attaches sufficient weight to Kuropatkin’s transport difficulties….What Napoleon might have done after a study of the map is one thing; what he would have done after weighing local conditions and the enemy’s distribution and strength, as well as studying the map is another.”\textsuperscript{31} Nicholson draws attention to the Russians exposed position, and precarious location at the end of a long rail network. Leaving aside the possibility of success, it is unlikely that any army could move through the Manchurian terrain at the pace Hamilton was envisioning. If the war had been fought closer to places of Russian strength and in territories with better infrastructure, more possibilities might have opened up to Kuropatkin. But even after Russia was able to deploy significant reinforcements into the warzone, the terrain continued to have an effect.

It is now generally accepted by military historians that a strong defensive advantage existed in warfare during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Machine-guns and artillery, well protected by entrenchments, could lay down such an interlocking field of fire so as to make any assault virtually suicidal. Until the development of tanks, scientific bombardment strategies, as well as infiltration tactics in the latter years of the Great War, any frontal assault was bound to fail, or at least take horrific casualties. However, this cruel calculus came with a catch: the defenses were only impregnable if enough weaponry could be concentrated in a small enough zone to completely lock down the approaches. In the Russo-Japanese War, this proved easier said than done. Neither army had enough guns to begin with, and the vastness of the battlefield made matters worse. “All these batteries were in entrenched positions, and the Japanese guns could

\textsuperscript{31} The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 174
not reply effectively on account of the ranges and the difficulty of finding positions on the very unsuitable ground.”\textsuperscript{32} The above incident, reported by Lieutenant-Colonel Hume during the Battle of Shaho, is representative of innumerable instances during the conflict where strong defensive lines (or attacks for that matter) were undermined by a lack of concentrated fire. In predicting that British troops would be able to make the same sort of attacks in a European theatre that the Japanese undertook in northern China, the observers failed to take into account the far greater massing of firepower allowed by the infrastructure of western Europe. Also, while the Imperial Japanese Army did make numerous frontal attacks, they were using tactics far more sophisticated than was acknowledged at the time. “The Japanese bayonet assaults came, it was true, only at the end of a long and careful advance...breaking completely with the European tradition of advancing in extended lines, they dashed forward in groups of one or two dozen men, each with its own objective, moving rapidly from cover to cover.”\textsuperscript{33} This is a far cry from, say, the slow, stolid advance ordered by Haig at the Somme.

Artillery was not the only weapon whose utility was limited. Another was absent: the machine-gun. Automatic weaponry had been in use in some form since the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, but it wasn’t until the First World War that it truly revealed how devastating it could be. Though both sides used machine-guns in the Russo-Japanese war, they were never amassed in enough numbers or used well enough to totally deny the field to the enemy the way they would do a decade later. This can be seen in early reports of Japanese victories, in which machine-guns are grouped in with the artillery. “Here 15 field guns and 8 Maxims were captured, which together

\textsuperscript{32} The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 441
\textsuperscript{33} Michael Howard, “Men Against Fire”, pg. 16
with the 6 field guns at Ma-kou made up a total of 21 field pieces and 8 Maxims.”

The Russian forces at the Yalu river numbered 16,000 strong, guarding a front miles long. And yet, they only possessed a total of eight machine guns. Machine-guns only reached their true potential when grouped in large enough numbers and in a small enough area to completely fill the air with bullets, making an advance effectively impossible. This would not be fully understood until the bloody opening battles of World War One made it clear, but even by the standards of the times, the Russian forces at the Yalu were severely under-equipped. French regiments of 3,000 men in 1914 possessed six machine-guns each, which was a far greater number than their Russian counterparts in 1904 could bring to bear.

The sheer size of the Manchurian warzone had an effect on the tactics displayed by the Japanese, weakening the defensive advantage of the Russian entrenchments. But this also had an effect on the strategic situation. Over the course of the war, Russia deployed approximately 294,000 troops to the theatre of operations. This seemingly large number meant little, spread out across the vastness of the Manchurian wilderness. Japan took advantage of this fact numerous times to force Russia out of a strong defensive position through a combination of frontal assaults and flank attacks. In such terrain, Russian armies found it nearly impossible to secure their flanks, and so were never safe from such maneuvers. We saw earlier how they pulled off such a maneuver at the Battle of Nanshan, and it was even more effective in the interior, where the flanks of the Russian army hung loose by necessity. As noted by Haldane, “To force the Russians from their position secure the town of His-mu-cheng, General Nodzu

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34 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 55
planned to assail them in front and at the same time operate against both their flanks.”

At the Battle of Hsimucheng, the Japanese hit the Russians with a frontal attack that initially stalled, unable to overcome the Russian firepower. But after several hours, pressure from the flanks grew too great to ignore and the Russians were forced to withdraw. This pattern repeated itself often, and many of the seemingly-miraculous victories of the Imperial Japanese Army can be explained by looking at the broader context of the battle.

We can see it again, on a smaller scale, at the Battle of Feng-Shui Ling. Here, numerous bloody frontal attacks failed to dislodge the enemy from his positions. Still, reports Haldane, victory belonged to the Rising Sun at the close of the day. “The operations...had terminated favorably for the Japanese, who by vigorously demonstrating with a portion of their forces against the front of the Russian position, while at the same time throwing well-timed detachments against the flanks and rear, had secured the passage of the main Chien Shan range.” However, the largest example of this phenomenon was at the culminating clash of the war, the Battle of Mukden. There, once again, Japanese troops launched a major attack at the center of the Russian positions while simultaneously throwing assaults at both Russian flanks. Though it was an extraordinarily sanguinary fight for both sides, and though Japan was not able to accomplish its objective of cutting off and annihilating General Kuropatkin’s army, it was still a major victory of the Japanese, giving them secure control of southern Manchuria and rendering the Russian army incapable of any more real fighting in the war.

37 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 122
38 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 119
While the British observers may have been oblivious or ignorant of so many of tactical nuances displayed by the Imperial Japanese Army during their frontal attacks, their consistent use of this strategy did not escape notice. Noting its successful utilization at the Battle of Hsimucheng, Hamilton put it forward as a way of making frontal assaults more economical. “The power of the magazine rifle was now so great upon anything fairly exposed to its action, that if even half-a-dozen men could penetrate and enfilade the held by an army, they might cause such local loss and confusion as to enable a frontal assault to be delivered across the open without excessive loss.”³⁹ This is interesting, as it demonstrates the tendency of contemporary military thinkers to interpret advances in military technology as enablers of offensive action, as opposed to reinforcers of the defense-advantage status quo. It had been becoming clear at least since the failure of Picket’s charge in 1863, during the American Civil War, or perhaps even since the Charge of the Light Brigade in the 1854 Crimean War, that developments in modern weaponry rendered traditional charges costly and ineffectual. Hamilton, however, like many others, believed that the next wave of military developments would reverse that, allowing the attackers to bring up so much firepower that the defenders would be overwhelmed. In some ways, he was ahead of his time. New developments in military science emerging from the bloody failures of the First World War would indeed bring about a re-orientation of warfare towards the offensive, enabled by tanks, assault rifles, and tactical air support. Unfortunately for Hamilton, and the millions who would die attempting to prove him right, all of that was still several decades in the future when he made his confident predictions.

³⁹ *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc.* Pg. 185
The Japanese advances took advantage of the vastness of terrain and subsequent freedom of their armies to maneuver. Though they proved quite willing to make direct attacks upon the enemy when necessary, they rarely made these in isolation. Rather, they created situations where the enemy’s position became untenable due to the number of threats arrayed against him from every side; front and flanks both. For many generals in the First World War, such a tactic would be impossible. Whether you were Douglas Haig on the Western Front, facing an unbroken line from the English Channel to the Swiss Alps, or Ian Hamilton, pinned down on an Anatolian peninsula, British strategy was forced to become linear.

Though this came as a surprise in 1914, perhaps it shouldn’t have. For six long months, the Japanese army besieged the Russian fortress-city of Port Arthur, unable to break through the rings of entrenchments, bunkers, and artillery emplacements. Flanking maneuvers were impossible, and the soldiers of the Second Army threw themselves at the defenses with predictable results. Casualties were shockingly high, over 50,000 in total by the time the city surrendered in January of 1905.40 In Europe, news of the capitulation was greeted as a glorious feat of arms. In Japan, the mood was much less celebratory. General Nogi, commander of the siege, expressed his feelings in a poem written shortly afterwards.

“As a leader of the Imperial Army, I took a million soldiers in hostage/The battle resulted in a mountain of dead bodies/I am so ashamed of facing their old fathers/A song of triumph? But how many men can return home?”41

In 1912, Nogi Maresuke committed seppuku. In his letter, he cited the destruction of his army at Port Arthur as the reason for his shame.

Chapter Three: An Imperfect Enemy

British observers failed to take into account what fighting in barren Manchuria meant for the conduct of the war, and they drastically understated the complexity of Japanese tactics and strategy. In addition to this however, there was another problem. A vast disparity of skill was on display between the contending armies, a gap that made rigorous analysis difficult. The Russo-Japanese War was the first major war of the 20th century. But few of the global conflicts it presaged would be fought between armies of such wildly differing abilities. The Russian army in 1904 was at one of the low points in its history in terms of training, equipment, and morale, and the troops sent to the backwaters of Siberia and Manchuria were hardly the Czar’s best and brightest. Though the British observers were aware of this, and in fact displayed a great contempt for the Russian army by and large, they never fully contextualized what this would mean for the conclusions they were busily drawing.

The flaws of the Russian army faced by Ōyama’s men can be seen in one of the most basic attributes of a solder: his accuracy. All accounts agree that the marksmanship of Russian soldiers left much to be desired. This problem was acute enough that Lieutenant-Colonel Hume took special note of the Japanese respect for the 21st East Siberian Rifles, a unit that was unusually accurate. “One Japanese soldier told his officer in all good faith that they were so brave, exposed themselves so much, and shot so straight, that at first he thought there must be
some mistake, and that they must be Japanese.” General Hamilton flatly states that “The Russian soldier is the worst shot existing in any great army in Europe.” The problem was not one of matériel. By 1904, virtually all nations armed their troops with bolt-action, magazine rifles. The Russian Empire was no exception. Its weapon of choice in the Russo-Japanese War was the Mosin-Nagant, a gun that has since become famous for its reliability and effectiveness. Simple and easy to use, the Mosin-Nagant remained the standard-issue Russian rifle up to the end of the World War II, and can still be found in service worldwide to this day. It was certainly a match for the Japanese Arisaka rifle, technologically speaking. And yet, Russian infantry could not hit their targets. The problem lay in the soldiers training.

The Russian army suffered from profound problems in training doctrine and practice that rendered much of the advantage they derived from their modern weaponry useless. Specifically, the root of much of their problem seems to have been an adherence to volley fire long after it became obsolete. When firearms first became common in European warfare, volley fire was essential to their use. Individual muskets and arquebuses were too inaccurate to be of much use, so soldiers were forced to coordinate their fire so as to launch volleys of projectiles at the target all at once. By the 20th century, however, this had become a dangerously obsolete tactic that robbed Russian troops of much of the full utility of their weapons. Watching the Russian defense at the Battle of the Yalu, Hamilton reflected on his last combat experience, in the Second Boer War. “The Japanese were in luck to have had volley-firing Russians behind the parapets, instead of a few hundred Boer sharpshooters.” The Japanese infantry at this battle

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42 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 201
43 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 112
44 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 113
charged in close order ranks across a river and up a hill at the entrenched enemy, and took shockingly few casualties. As Hamilton rightly notes, any troops willing and able to take aim and fire individually could have wrecked terrible carnage of their advancing opponents. Unfortunately, this is not how the Russians were trained. “He [the Russian soldier] gets but few rounds for practice, and these are fired mostly in volleys. A volley is the negation of marksmanship as far as the individual is concerned, for he never knows, and never can know, whether his bullet was one of those that missed.” This failure in training drastically slowed down the rate of fire from Russian regiments, and reduced their accuracy sharply. A bolt-action rifle is capable of firing much faster and with much greater accuracy than a smoothbore musket, but only if used with modern training. Use it the same way one would fire a flintlock, and that ability is lost. During the Second World War, the Mosin-Nagant rifle was used by some of the USSR’s best snipers with devastating accuracy. None of that potential was one display in 1904 Manchuria.

The Czar’s army was, at this time, dominated by a school of thought that held that the most realistic and helpful method with which to train their troops is to have them fire away in large groups at faraway targets out in the field. These officers disdained the firing range as being completely irrelevant to modern combat. Opponents criticized this, arguing that without spending time on the rifle range, individual soldiers would have no ability to really increase their own accuracy. The Imperial Japanese army followed this second school of thought much

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45 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 112
more closely. Hamilton succinctly sums up the results. "The Russian infantry shot badly, the
Japanese infantry shot excellently."46

Inaccurate shooting was not the only flaw displayed by the Czar’s legions during the
Russo-Japanese war. In general, Russian officers displayed a lack of tactical acumen in many of
their engagements, as well as an attachment to outdated or obsolete maneuvers. This can be
clearly seen at the Battle of the Motien Pass on the 17th of July, 1904. Japanese troops had
secured control of the pass seven days previously, and the Russians were attempting a
counterattack. Inconclusive fighting began at around 5:00 in the morning, and continued until
8:00, when the Russians made the mistake of launching a frontal attack. Unlike the Japanese
attacks discussed earlier, there was no simultaneous flanking attack to distract the attention of
the Japanese commander, nor did the Russians display any of the innovative ‘leapfrog’ tactics
used by advancing Japanese troops on many occasions. “Those reinforcing the left centre
showed a solid line and advanced shoulder to shoulder up the valley which lies between the
New Temple ridge and Rocky Hill. The Japanese guns got a better chance here than has been
offered to any artillery since the Battle of Omdurman.”47 One cannot fault the bravery of the
Russian leader, Count Fyodor Keller, as he was killed by Japanese shrapnel during the battle. In
many ways, that merely demonstrates the problem. Russian soldiers and generals were
undoubtedly courageous and willing to give their lives for the Czar. But all too often, lives were
lost unnecessarily. Omdurman, of course, is remembered today primarily as one of the clearest
demonstrations of what happens when an army of extremely brave, but badly disciplined and

46 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 46
47 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 150
equipped troops goes up against a small, elite army. The fact that the comparison was made by someone for whom Kitchener’s campaign was within fairly recent memory, and who was a member of the British Army himself only makes the comparison stronger. 12,000 of the Khalifa’s warriors fell that day in the Sudan. The Russians did not pay that high a price, but over 300 of them died in that valley before the day was done.

Other Russian stratagems were equally archaic, if less destructive. One of the few areas of military affairs in which all observers saw a distinct Russian advantage was the cavalry. The czar had the service of the famed and feared Cossacks, while the mountainous terrain of the Home Islands had not bred a particularly noteworthy equestrian culture in Japan. “Their cavalry is very weak, so they will have to depend almost entirely on their infantry.”48 In January of 1905, General Kuropatkin finally decided to try and put this superiority to use. To be fair, his attempt to integrate cavalry into 20th century warfare was far more innovative than many other such efforts. Rather than launching a futile charge at the enemy lines, of the sort that had been ending in disaster since the Napoleonic Wars, the Russians looked to the American Civil War for inspiration. In that conflict, Confederate commanders such as Nathan Bedford Forrest and Jeb Stuart became famous for their deep raids, taking their cavalry far behind Federal lines and wreaking havoc on supply lines and isolated outposts. Kuropatkin attempted to emulate this success, sending 6,000 troopers and six batteries of artillery on a sweep designed to cut the South Manchuria Railroad and to destroy the Japanese supply stockpile at Yingkou. This would have been far more effective, however, if executed thirty years before. “Though Mischenko was

48The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 10
striking at a poorly defended area there were soon troops to oppose him. Wisely, perhaps, the 
Japanese did not oppose cavalry with cavalry but sent up infantry reinforcements by rail.” The 
raid was not a disaster, but it was a failure. Everywhere the Cossacks struck, they were met by 
defending infantry who soon drove off the cavalry with rifle fire.

A traditional cavalry raid had been turned back by the use of fully integrated modern 
communications and transportation systems. The initial concept and the attempt to make use 
of one of the Russian army’s main advantages made sense. Unfortunately, as the war dragged 
on, it became increasingly clear that while Russian cavalry may have been superior to that of 
the Japanese, it may not have been particularly useful. The primary arm of Russian mounted 
troops in the Far East were Cossacks, who, while being rightly noted for their bravery and 
ferocity in combat, suffered from a number of notable defects. Hamilton quotes a Japanese 
officer as describing the Cossack as “Simply a yokel who is living on the Napoleonic legend; 
sometimes he is brave, sometimes not brave…. but he is never disciplined, and is almost 
invariably badly officered and led.” Given its source, this judgement must be taken with a 
grain of salt, but events seem to have proven it correct. The harsh, unforgiving terrain of 
Manchuria would seem to encourage the use of constant raids and ambushes to try and cut the 
already-tenuous Japanese supply line. The Japanese, who barely had any cavalry to speak of, 
made extensive use of the native Manchu Honghuzi bandits to raid the Russian rear areas. And 
yet, Russian cavalry probing was quite weak, with the exception of the already mentioned 
Mischenko Raid, which failed. And, it must be noted, much of the reason for its failure was the

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50 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 33
inability to move rapidly enough or stealthy enough to escape Japanese detection, which jibes well with complaints about the Cossacks’ lack of discipline and order.

This may explain Russian defeats when on the offensive, but the armies of the Czar fought most of their battles defensively. And yet, defeat was still their perennial fate. Traditionally, Russian troops have fought best when defending. This marginalizes their often poor training and lack of modern weaponry, and maximizes their strengths: dogged determination and a stubborn refusal to abandon their Czar and country. In Manchuria, however, this was not enough. From the opening battle at the Yalu to the climactic conclusion at Mukden, Japanese forces pushed the pace of the war, constantly attacking the Russians and pushing them back. As we saw at the Siege of Port Arthur and the Battle of Liaoyang, the Russians were capable of constructing proper defensive works if given time. Most of the time, however, Russia did not have that luxury, and her troops suffered greatly for it. At the Battle of Hsimucheng, Russian general Zasulich had either parity with or a distinct advantage over (depending on the source) the Japanese armies advancing on him. Well-dug into a strong defensive position, he should have been able to delay the enemy advance considerably. His position, however, left much to be desired, if General Hamilton is to be believed. “It is difficult to understand how...the Russians elected to hold the ridge to their front, their only shelter, not only from view, but actually from fire, with a weak piquet, whilst they permitted the remainder of troops to ‘turn in’ to their tents.”51 This refusal or neglect to choose a proper place to fortify was compounded by further errors. The encamped Russian troops apparently pitched their

51 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 181
tents between their line of outposts atop the ridge and the reserves down below, making reinforcements difficult. Worse, no patrols were sent forward to sweep the surrounding terrain, which allowed the Japanese to surprise their adversaries. In his notes on Hamilton’s report, General Sir W.G Nicholson is generally critical of his colleague’s conclusions. He does, however, concur in one area. “As regards spade work, my impression is that the Russian soldier is far inferior to the Japanese.” At Hsimucheng, it should perhaps be taken as a minor miracle that the Russians were able to hold out for an entire day before being forced to retire.

Another area of defensive warfare where the Russian army lacked expertise was the increasingly important art of concealment. Foreign observers constantly praised the Imperial Japanese Army for its innovate use of misdirection and camouflage. At the Crossing of the Yalu, the Japanese uprooted and moved an entire forest to cover the advance of their infantry, then built a fake bridge across the river to draw Russian fire away from their real crossing point. At Hsimucheng, they disguised gun pits with corn, blending seamlessly into the surrounding fields until the artillery spoke in anger. These were still new tactics at this time. “In the British army I have known generals who would consider such a _ruse de guerre_ as building dummy bridges or dummy fortifications, merely to draw enemy’s fire, as highly irregular and undignified.”

Hamilton and his colleagues would be much more sparing in praise of the Russians. At the Battle of Chiaotou, Captain Jardine noted of the Russian trenches that “There was no head-cover and no concealment. I could see rows of heads easily through my glasses.” If a visiting British officer could observe the Russians so clearly, undoubtedly his Japanese hosts could as

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52 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 174
53 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 46
54 *The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers*, etc. Pg. 166
well. This was a perennial problem for the Russians, and a fatal one for an army fighting primarily on the defensive. As the defenses of Port Arthur and Liaoyang show, the Russian fortifications could be quite formidable if their engineers were given considerable time to prepare. But when it came to hastily-prepared field fortifications, the Russians fell short. This can be seen again at the so-called ‘Affair at Sai-Ma-Chi’. Captain Jardine’s descriptions of the enemy lines are familiar. “There is no attempt at head-cover or clearing the bush in front of the trench, which obscures the field of view very much…. from such and position it follows that that the line of retreat is very bad indeed.” Given all this, the seemingly mystical élan that the British assume must be responsible for the success of Japanese assaults becomes increasingly less necessary.

Throughout the Manchurian campaign, the Russian Army was plagued by problems. Totally surprised by the Japanese surprise attack in February 1904, Russia never came close to recovering the initiative, spending the remainder of the conflict reacting desperately to the Japanese blitzkrieg. The war revealed to the world severe flaws in Russian training, as well as the lack of cohesion in the Russian high command. It is clear that the Imperial Japanese Army, though a very fine fighting force indeed, would not have won such an easy victory over any other major European army. Hamilton and the other British observers understood the failings of the Russian military, but failed to fully take them into account. Seen together in context with the already-discussed nature of the Manchurian terrain and climate, as well as the persistent underestimation of Japanese tactical acumen by the British, the nature of the Japanese victory

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55*The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 136*
becomes clear as it truly was: a limited tactical victory, won swiftly by virtue of superior Japanese skill and the advantages of the battlefield. This differs greatly from the British lessons on the universal applicability of the general offense, fueled by high morale and élan. But if we now know what mistakes were made, the question remains why? The next chapters will address that.

**Chapter Four: Hamilton, Race, and Japan**

To say that General Sir Ian Hamilton was a racist is neither surprising nor controversial. He lived in a time in which attitudes and views that we now consider deeply offensive were still widely supported, and spent the vast majority of his career in the upholding British rule in the colonies. An instinctive assumption of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon people over other nations is an attitude that most would expect him to bear, especially at a time when European fears over the so-called ‘Yellow Peril’ were increasing. And yet, this was not entirely true. Hamilton was a racist, yes, and believed firmly that national and racial characteristics played an important role in determining individual quality. But rather than believing (as most of his contemporaries assuredly did) in the inherent advantages of the ‘white’ races, Hamilton subscribed to a more complex set of racial theories regarding the Decline of the West and the rise of formerly primitive or savage races to global prominence. In Hamilton’s mindset, the quality of a race or ethnicity could be determined by their ‘martial virtues’, which are in turn linked to more primitive societies that had yet to give in to the luxuries and decadence of
modern life. Operating in this worldview, Ian Hamilton would come to see the Russo-Japanese War as a test case for his racial theories.

When Hamilton arrived in Japan in the spring of 1904, he saw a world in crisis. As a senior British army officer, one might think he would have reasons to be confident. The United Kingdom was nearing the height of its global power, and European-American global dominance seemed assured for the foreseeable future. But Hamilton was concerned. The West may have ruled the world for now, but its hegemony would soon be challenged by those it has long held under its sway. The recently-concluded Second Boer War, in which Hamilton fought, is presented as a harbinger of things to come. “The Boers furnished one example of those primitive peoples whose education and intelligence had just reached a stage at which they could avail themselves of modern rifles and guns. City-bred dollar-hunters are becoming less and less capable of coping with such adversaries.”56 The fact that Britain eventually triumphed in South Africa was not enough to assuage his fears. This was just the beginning of a civilizational crisis. Across the world, he saw nations beginning to rise to challenge the West. Amongst these, he lists the Afghans and peoples of the Northern Raj, the Ethiopian Empire, and the Zulus and other peoples tribes of South Africa.57 Though the Great Powers of Europe had mastered these people with relative ease for at least a century now, Hamilton believed they could no longer count on that being the case. “Up-to-date civilization is becoming less and less capable of conforming to the antique standards of military virtue, and that the hour is at hand when the modern world must begin to modify its ideals.”58 For Hamilton, the worth and vitality

56 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 5
57 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 6
58 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 5
of a civilization can be determined entirely by its military might and the prestige it bestows upon its fighting forces.

It is entirely possible that at least some of Hamilton’s philosophizing was rooted less in intellectual theories and more in his resentment about the treatment of the military in Great Britain. It is clear that he remained bitter, both about the criticisms levelled at War Office for its initial failures during the Boer War, and at the general lack of prestige accorded to the army in British society, especially compared to the Continental powers. Still, the association of civilization with martial prowess is not unique to him. In his book *The White Peril In The Far East*, Sidney L. Gulick credits the surprising Japanese triumph in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 as establishing full equality for Japan amongst the family of nations. “The victories of the China-Japanese war gave the entire people a sense of power and dignity….they now realized their ability to stand side by side with the white races.”

59 Whatever the roots of his reasons, Hamilton considered the current state of Western Civilization to be sadly lacking in all matters military, going as far as to compare Europe’s current situation to the Fall of the Roman Empire. “Western civilization must enlighten its eventual conquerors as Rome even dying enlightened the barbarians, lest when out modern world is finally defeated in the field Europe should be wrapped again in darkness. Is it not the old, old story? India is Gaul, Central Asia is Germany; Varus loses his legions at Maiwand.”

60 Besides demonstrating his knowledge of the Classics, the above quote displays an interesting mix of fatalism and optimism. The West is doomed. Eventually these new barbarians will overpower old, tired Europe and usher in a new

60 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 7
age. But if we move swiftly, we can inculcate our destroyers with the fruits of civilization, allowing us to live on through them. And it is this hope that brings us back around to Japan.

The Japanese Empire was still unmistakably a ‘primitive’ nation in Hamilton’s eyes, being a part of the Oriental and African world that he sees rising to challenge European hegemony. But while many of these peoples are barbarians to him pure and simple, Hamilton is delighted by how Japan has adopted the ways and methods of the West. More than any other country, it seems to exemplify his hopes for the future, in which modern technology and culture can be fused with the primal warrior spirit the Hamilton sees as essential to the maintenance of power. “In my presumptuous opinion, the Japanese are just as civilized as would be the Black Prince and his army if, by some miracle, they could now be resuscitated, and have a thorough good German education grafted on to their unformed, medieval minds.”

His choice of analogy is not random, and it is telling that Hamilton chooses to compare Britain’s eastern allies to the man often hailed as ‘The Flower of English Chivalry’. The romantization of Japan is a theme that will continue in the general’s writings on Japan, and can be particularly seen in comparison to other contemporary viewpoints. “However Japan may have adopted occidental methods of government, education.....commerce, industry, etc., all these things are as superficial, as the clothes a man wears.”

The idea of Japan as a superficially-civilized nation is not unusual. But Sidney Gulick goes on to define ‘occidental civilization’ as one that respects individual choices and liberties, and to express at least some concern about Japanese society’s progress in this

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61 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 16
62 Sidney L. Gulick, The White Peril In The Far East, pg. 87
area. Hamilton unconditionally praises Japan for its avoidance of some of those very same decadent fruits of civilization.

The first several chapters of General Hamilton’s *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War* are devoted to his impressions and thoughts on Japanese society, culture, and civilization. These are often condescending, but are almost always facets of admiration. In his delight at having discovered a society that seems to match his theorized future, Hamilton paints an idealized picture of Japan. At times, he inadvertently reveals his ignorance, pontificating on subjects he clearly knows little about. Two weeks after arrival in Tokyo, Hamilton passes judgement on the entirety of gender relations in Japan. This is an interesting passage, in that he seems to express theoretical support for a more modern conception of women’s rights, but also values said rights much less than his own pleasures. “Japanese women are not yet emancipated...If however, Europeans and Americans wax critical on this point, the Japanese can make the crushing retort that the result leaves their women the most charming example of the gender feminine in the world.”63 He continues on to assure readers that the relationship between the sexes in Japan is one of “general happiness”. Hamilton, it is worth noting, makes this sweeping statement on the state of gender and sex in Japan after interacting only with geishas and the wives of important politicians and generals. Though of dubious connection to the Russo-Japanese War, incidents like this cast doubt on Hamilton’s other claims and analyses about this island country, and gives us reasons to be skeptical.

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63 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 17
In the very first sentence of the book, Hamilton describes Japan as “That glorious and impressive survival from heroic times, a nation in arms.” In many ways, that is the best possible summation of Hamilton’s views of Japan. Though the general often casts aspirations on aspects of the Japanese ‘national character’, describing them as overly cautious and sometimes simple-minded, he has nothing but praise for the government and society of the Japanese islands. “In Japan the average citizen thinks, with the full acquiescence of his fellows, that under the Emperor he and all others are practically equal.” This is truly stunning statement to make. At the time Hamilton was in Tokyo, Japanese society was undergoing serious convulsions as the power of the oligarchy of the Genrō waned in favor of new political parties. 1906 would see the selection of Saionji Kinmochi as Prime Minister, first Japanese Head of Government to draw his support from a parliamentary majority and not the Emperor and his privy council. Underground socialist parties gained strength, and there was a flourishing, albeit small, women’s liberation movement. Hamilton’s praises of Japanese homogeneity say more about his prejudices than they do about the actual state of the Japanese Empire in 1904. Nevertheless, the general continues to elaborate on his statements, coming to the conclusion that “An autocratic government with a genuinely democratic society is better than a democratic government with a society divided into strata, each autocratic to its inferiors and servile to its superiors, as in England.” For Hamilton, Japan is superior to his own native Britain due to the unity of its people, who are joined together beneath an all-powerful oligarchy and dedicated solely to the defense and service of the Fatherland. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that General

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64 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. v
65 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 37
66 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 38
Hamilton was to become interested in fascistic philosophy during the 1930s, famously stating that he was "An admirer of the great Adolph Hitler." But leaving Hamilton’s later proto-fascist musings aside, it is clear that he drew clear connections between the military success of Japan on the field and the societal structures of the Empire at home. Moreover, it is clear that he was not merely interested in these connections out of obscure academic interest in a foreign country. Hamilton spends so much time enumerating praise-worthy attributes of the Japanese Empire specifically because he wants to present them as an example to be emulated by his homeland.

For every item of praise enumerated for Japan, Hamilton had a bitter counterpoint for his native Britain. Where Japan was a society of loyal men and women united under their benevolent Emperor, Britain was divided into “Petrified social castes, amongst which the financier plays Brahmin—the private soldier, Pariah. We have race pride, but it is almost swallowed up in caste pride.” Of course, Hamilton’s complaints are, as always, tinged by his bitterness over the perceived lack of status for the British Army in England. It is questionable whether he would complain about Great Britain’s ‘caste system’ if it were generals who were the Brahmins. Nevertheless, he puts forward a coherent series of claims. In Britain, being emblematic of the decadent and decaying West, individual desires and sentiment is placed before the needs of the nation. It is upon this failing that that he lays the blame for the unfortunate conduct of the British Army in the Second Boer War, and specifically on the English education system. “If our military system and our educational curriculum continue to neglect

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[https://regularturkeytours.wordpress.com/2015/06/21/ian-standish-monteith-hamilton/](https://regularturkeytours.wordpress.com/2015/06/21/ian-standish-monteith-hamilton/)
68 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 38
cultivating the old natural warrior spirit which made us a free people, then cowardice, followed by its antidote conscription, will soon be knocking at our gates.”

There is an explicit comparison made throughout Hamilton’s writings, one with a moral lesson attached. Britain has neglected to encourage sufficient patriotic feeling in her children, leaving the Empire with a professional army composed of those who were “Starved into the ranks by the pinch of a hard winter.” This is to be contrasted to Japan, where the army was well-trained, elite, and beloved and respected by civilians and government alike. The Empire of Japan had a conscription system at this time, explicitly based on the Prussian model, and one would think that that would be what made it fundamentally different from the British volunteer system.

But while Hamilton clearly admires universal service, that is not what he believes make the most important difference. Instead, he firmly places the blame on a severe lack of patriotic and national sentiments. As stated earlier, part of this problem Hamilton blames on the schools. But he also levels accusations at English motherhood, which has failed to sufficiently inspire the future soldiers of king and country. In Japan, according to General Hamilton, there is a constant barrage of indoctrination hurtled at the children of the empire throughout their lives, preparing them for their future service as warriors. “Our allies are warlike by taste and tradition; and upon the patriotism, which they have absorbed with their mothers’ milk, their government has been careful to graft initiative, quickness, and intelligence.” The government, through its educational system, must train children in the arts of war. But for this to be effective, the children must already be primed by their upbringing to

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69 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 13
70 Ibid
71 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pgs. 10-11
accept such lessons. This is sadly lacking in Great Britain, though Hamilton hopes to change that. “From the nursery and its toys to the Sunday school and its cadet company, every influence of affection, loyalty, tradition, and education should be brought to bear on the next generation of British boys and girls.” Every institution of society, from motherhood to Christianity to the state schooling system would be marshalled by Hamilton in his imaginary campaign to win the hearts and souls of the next generation. Of course, this sort of centralized government-run indoctrination is completely antithetical to the traditions of British government and society. Hamilton hoped that the Russo-Japanese War could inspire people to listen to his warnings.

Just as Japan represented everything that General Hamilton hoped Britain could become (or possibly return to), Russia represented what he hoped his homeland could escape. The fact that a ‘white’ people like the Russians were despised by Hamilton is indicative of how complex racism can and could be. Similarly, the Dutch-descended Boers are listed among the noble ‘savages’ that Hamilton thinks will inherit the Earth. Russia was part of the Old West, however, and was just as decadent as her peers. “The Japanese and Russian armies denote the overlapping of two great stages of civilization. Apart from its great military forces, the one saving strength of our old Western world lies in its education and intelligence; and yet, in this case, the representative of the East is the superior in these very factors.” Hamilton is describing the clash of Russia and Japan not as an imperial squabble over economic rights in Korea and Manchuria (as it was), but as the first battle in a civilizational war. East and West

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72 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 12
73 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 11
have fought many times before, and as a veteran of many campaigns of the British Raj, Hamilton knew that as well as any. But where before the West had always had the advantage in military strength and matériel, now it was the opposite, with Western Russia the inferior nation.

Of course, there is something strange about hearing Russia described as a representative of Western civilization at all. Russia is more often associated with the stereotypical East, and often specifically contrasted to the glories and wealth of the West. And this view is not an artifact of a post-Cold War world. It was quite common among contemporaries of General Hamilton, who often viewed Russia as a relic of the barbaric orient. Gulick, in discussing the modernization of Japan, defines Eastern government as being “Autocratic absolutism in government; it emphasizes the rights of the superior and the duties of the inferior.”74 This phrasing comes close to describing the Manifesto on Unshakable Autocracy75, issued by Czar Alexander III in 1881 to describe his policies. But while others may define East and West by culture or values or religion, for Hamilton it is power. Russia is part of the European hegemonic power structure that rules the world, and thus it is kin to the West. That, however, does not endear it to him. Russia is, perhaps, the worst example of the declining West. Compared to Britain or the United States, Russia was backwards technologically and financially, lacking in many of the advantages a Western nation could generally expect to have against one of the East. Ironically, this might have given them an advantage according to Hamilton. If the wealth and luxuries of Western Europe have been as corrupting to military

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74 Sidney L. Gulick, The White Peril In The Far East, pg. 88
strength as Hamilton claims, then poverty may be one’s best bet to recovering the lost military virtues of barbarism. Alas for Russia, they are lacking in these as well. “But they have neither the habitue of war, nor...do they possess that inborn vital spark of martial ardor which will compensate in battle for many defects in character or physique.” General Hamilton was a professional soldier, and he understood and could accurately analyze the effects and usages of modern weaponry and tactics. But in his mindset, and the view of many contemporaneous officers, all of this paled in comparison to the ‘that inborn vital spark of martial ardor’. Morale or élan is by far the most important factor present on the battlefield to many late 19th—early 20th century military writers. This is not unusual. But Hamilton racializes it. To him, all the races of the world can be divided up into those with or without martial ardor. And Russia is severely lacking.

In Hamilton’s eyes, Japan was militarily-proficient, honorable, and almost utopian in its social relations, while Russia was backwards, poor, and benighted. It is hardly surprising that a British army officer would be biased against Russia, given the high state of tensions between the two Great Powers at the time. Similarly, since the signing of the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance, public opinion in Great Britain had clearly favored Japan. “‘The gallant island race’ was the favorite expression and a number of purple passages suggested that the Japanese were really very like the British, industrious, patriotic seafarers.” But General Hamilton seems to have taken these typical British biases and added a new and special importance to them. To the general, the events of the Russo-Japanese war became important because they seemed to offer

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76 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 10
confirmation of the racial theories that he espoused. Henceforth, the events of the war would all be filtered through his racial bias.

**Chapter Five: Through A Glass Darkly**

Hamilton wanted Japan to win the war of 1904-1905. But unlike many of his fellows, Hamilton wanted and needed Japan to win the war due specifically to their innate, racial characteristics, thus demonstrating his theories about the decline of the West and the rise of the newly vigorous East. Simply put, Hamilton had an agenda. This is not to imply that he lied about or misrepresented what he witnessed in Manchuria. Nor is it to claim undue importance for Hamilton’s personal beliefs about race in the history of British military thought, before or after the Russo-Japanese War. But Hamilton was a respected member of the British military establishment prior to Gallipoli, and his thoughts and opinions must certainly have borne weight. Already there was an existing bias towards immaterial factors within much of European military planning, as shown by the popular British concept of the ‘Psychological Battlefield’. Given this situation, Hamilton’s racial partialities may have played a role in the way he and his subordinates analyzed the data that emerged from the Russo-Japanese War, by amplifying and exacerbating his biases.

This paper has already noted the presence of the ‘cult of the offensive’ in contemporary military thinking, and many of Hamilton’s comments and complaints about the conduct of the war can clearly be linked to this. But, there is consistently a greater emphasis on the national and racial origins of the troops in question in many British reports. Upon his arrival at the Yalu
river shortly after the battle there, Hamilton stated his intentions to “Determine whether this first engagement by its result merely gives proof of a superiority of armament, generalship, numbers, morale, or some of those other more or less ephemeral and accidental factors…. or whether it showed something infinitely more serious, namely, that the Russians, as a race, had found themselves overmatched on the battle-field.”78 Here, the general states ‘whether’, as if deciding between two verdicts, but in the weeks and months to come he would conclude that both of his initial statements were true. The Imperial Japanese Army was superior in both generalship and morale, and the Russians were an inferior fighting race. This question of Russian inability would become a running theme in Hamilton’s writings. This would not be problematic if he confined himself to military critiques, as it is undeniable that the performance of the Russian army in Manchuria was subpar to say the least. But Hamilton sharply criticizes not merely the Russian army, but the Russian people as a whole, displaying a startling level of contempt. “I distinguished that the face looked heavy and stupid, and that on it was imprinted a sort of dull bovine wonderment. A moment later another face looked out, and then I realized that they were the faces of Russian prisoners.”79 To Hamilton, these Russians are barely even human, but rather beasts of burden. This is not an isolated statement either, and he uses the analogy of bulls to describe Russian soldiers more than once. “He said that they put their heads down and rushed forward like bulls, holding out the rifle and bayonet before them.”80 These crude, animalistic depictions of the Russians presage much of his depiction of the Russian

78 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 62
79 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 217
80 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 238
army’s conduct, whose failures he blames on innate national or racial failings instead of, or in addition to tactical mistakes.

The opening land battle of the Russo-Japanese War was little more than a skirmish. Light Russian forces briefly attempted to interdict the Japanese crossing of the Yalu river before falling back before the superior numbers of the enemy. To the British observer, however, this was a battle of vital importance. “Is it not, after all, as easy to see the distinguishing marks of national character in a skirmish as in a battle, and even sometimes in an abstention as much as in an action?” Hamilton is right to criticize the Russian actions at the Yalu, for they were essentially a complete failure. General Kuropatkin sent out a force too small to accomplish anything of value, but too large to escape easily. In the end, all it did was provide an easy victory for the Japanese. But Hamilton does not merely see this as a failure of generalship, but of evidence of Russian racial failings. In the sluggishness of the Russian detachment, Hamilton sees the failure of the Russian race, remarking at one point on “The gulf that separates the Muscovite from the Boer.” This is only one of many times that Hamilton unfavorably compares the Russians to the Afrikaners. Considering his recently concluded combat experience in the Transvaal, this is only to be expected, and he is not wrong that the Boer generals were of much higher quality than any faced by Marshal Ōyama. Still, these comparisons are often unfair, and indicative of Hamilton’s biases. In the case of Yalu river crossing, Hamilton called for a bold raiding strategy. “The small Japanese detachment marching from Kasan would either have been attacked on its way to Wiji, or, having been permitted to arrive, would have had to

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81 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 85
82 Ibid
fight for its life against every enemy within a radius of thirty miles.”\textsuperscript{83} There is no doubt that the strategy outlined above would have been superior to the strategy actually carried out, that of building substandard entrenchments along the banks of the Yalu and awaiting the overwhelming Japanese assault. But in making these judgements, Hamilton omits several factors. The Boer army faced by the British Army in 1900 was small, elite commando force, well supported by the locals and operating on home soil. Compare that to the Russian army in the Far East, a conscript army with serious issues of training, discipline, and equipment, fighting in a foreign land. The two militaries are not analogous. Hamilton was correct to praise the Boer army for its superiority to the Russians in many martial aspects, but was incorrect to imply that the Russian generals are refraining from utilizing Boer tactics because of their ‘national characteristics’ of slowness and lack of initiative.

That, unfortunately, would not be the last time that the Russian military’s performance was attacked on racial grounds. Reacting to news of the Russian defeat at the Battle of Motien Pass, Hamilton would declare that “Had the Russian forces been boldly led….the Russians must have pierced the Japanese line at some point or another. Whether, having done so, they could have held their ground or not, is quite another matter. Just when the moment came to make the desperate, decisive effort, a strange lethargy, a sort of will paralysis, seems to have fallen upon the Russians; and it was the same at Gebato.”\textsuperscript{84} Hamilton suggests that the Russian attack on the Japanese lines could have been carried out successfully, if only they had been willing to really try hard enough. This is a questionable assertion. Hamilton himself admits that he was

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\textsuperscript{83} ibid \\
\textsuperscript{84} Ian Hamilton, \textit{A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War}, pgs. 277-278
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not sure if the Russians would have been able to hold the position against the inevitable counterattack, rendering the entire operation useless. In addition to this, it was at this very same battle that General Hamilton, in his official report, compared the effect of Japanese artillery on the Russians to that of the British guns at Omdurman. The Russians took three times as many casualties as their opponents, including the commanding officer, General Keller. Given that they were under murderous bombardment, had lost their commander, and had little hope of eventual victory, the Russian withdrawal in this situation seems most explainable by standard tactical reasons. But to Hamilton, it can only be due to the lethargy of the Russians, and their lack of adequate willpower.

Even when not despairing of the Russians racial characteristics, Hamilton was contemptuous of their tactics. Often this was warranted by their failures on the battlefield, but sometimes the criticism appears to be more the result of his biases. For example, at one point the general enters into a conversation with his Japanese hosts about the further prospects of the war. “We next talked about the Russian threat of bringing successive waves of highly trained Europeans from the Far West.... we all agreed that further victories and conquest of territory were the best antidote to this danger which largely existed in the imaginations of civilians, who fail to understand how each successive army would tend to become more and more atteinte en sa morale.”85 To be fair to Hamilton, Japan did win all the subsequent battles in this war. But to describe Russia’s vast resources and the dangers of advancing too deep into their territory as something that existed ‘largely in the imaginations of civilians’ is madness. In a

85 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pgs. 226-227
few lines, Hamilton dismisses the entire concept of defense in depth which has served Russia so well in so many wars. Japan had won victories, but only at a terrible cost. By the end of the war, Japanese strength was stretched to the limit. “It was becoming clear to Imperial Headquarters that they had seriously underestimated the Russian fighting capacity.”

Japan conquered southern Manchuria, but it had lost over 70,000 men in doing so. Moreover, it failed to ever completely destroy the Russian Army, which was always able to retreat in good order. When the peace was concluded, Russian generals were actually eager to continue the war, noting correctly that the Imperial Japanese Army was low on manpower and supplies. At the Portsmouth Peace Conference, the Japanese delegates had been instructed that a resumption of hostilities could not be tolerated, as the resources of the nation could not sustain it. But to Hamilton, none of this is important, compared to the morale of the Russian army.

Hamilton despised the common Russian soldiers, describing them as “very stupid—regular clods.” His attitude towards the Japanese, as previously demonstrated, was entirely the opposite, sometimes verging on the absurd in its idealizations. There is perhaps no better example of this than when Hamilton makes the claim that the Japanese language possesses no vulgarities! “The language used in the batteries would have rivalled that of our army in Flanders if the Japanese possessed any stock of bad words, which, by the way, they do not.” Leaving this nonsense aside, General Hamilton deeply admired the Japanese for their fighting capabilities. But, this admiration was not unqualified. General Hamilton heaped praise on the

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87 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 218
88 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 109
Imperial Japanese Army when it fought and won according to his preconceived theories about the importance of morale and innate, racially-based martial prowess. But when the army began to succeed via the use of methodical planning and preparation, Hamilton fiercely criticized it for deviating for his theories of victory.

What made the Japanese army and nation so worthy of emulation, according to General Hamilton, was their combination of modern military technology and technique with that ancient warrior spirit now lost to the men of the West. “If I ever saw the combination of moral and physical qualities which go to make the true warrior, here they are.”89 The physical qualities of the Japanese fighting man were easy to prove; the Imperial Japanese Army was equipped with the best in modern weaponry and trained by elite German instructors. It was the moral aspects that Hamilton had to argue for. True, the Japanese made many brave and brutal assaults during the course of the war, but that proved little. Hamilton had nothing but contempt for the Russians but even he admitted their bravery and willingness to fight. In order to prove his claims about the uniqueness of the Japanese ‘spirit’, Hamilton would have to make improbable and romanticized assertions about the common Japanese soldier. “He cares, so far, as I can see, nothing for the applause of crowds, or for banquets or feasts, and not very much indeed for any actually substantial reward…. I am struck with the feeling that this sense of participation in a life after death is to the soldier an incentive in life and makes death his great opportunity.”90 Not to denigrate the loyalty or enthusiasm of the soldiers of the Japanese Army, but it is highly unlikely that all, or even a majority of troops in this war were so committed to

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89 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 145
90 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 197
the cause as this. Many must have been there unwillingly, or reluctantly, and even of those eager to die for the Emperor I suspect many hoped for earthly awards as well. But none of these inconvenient facts can be allowed to stand in the way of Hamilton’s vision of a unified warrior race.

Examining the reports of the battles submitted by Hamilton and his colleagues, it is telling to see what aspects of war are emphasized and which are ignored. A picture soon emerges of a glorious struggle fought by brave and heroic men against savages, one quite at odds with the grim tableaus of mud and blood we have come to associate with modern warfare. Hamilton makes this choice of depictions explicit in his diary at one point, when approaching the battlefield of the Motien Pass. “Were I writing this to please any one but myself, now would be the moment to introduce some suitable reflections on that well-worn theme, the horrors of war. For the life of me, I cannot see these horrors to-day. Is it horrible to see these young heroes, scarcely cold, laid by other heroes beneath the fresh green turf of the Heaven-reaching pass?” Hamilton likes war. No, he loves war. When this is our narrator’s response to a field full of corpses, we should not be prepared for a nuanced or sentimental depiction of battle. Hamilton does not disappoint either, soon making special note of the exploits of one Lieutenant Yoshi, who “Is said to have killed eight Russians with his two-handed sword.” British accounts are full of little accounts like this, emphasizing the exceptional bravery and ferociouslyness of the Japanese soldiers. In his report on the sanguinary struggle at Liaoyang, Lieutenant-Colonel Haldane goes into the details of the heroic struggle of the 1st

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91 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 255
92 Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, pg. 234
Battalion, 34th Regiment. “Major ‘T.’, well-known in Japan as an expert with the sword, killed three Russians with that weapon...but received a shot through the thigh. He was supported for a time by his adjutant, already wounded...but receiving another wound fell dead, while the adjutant was slain by the last of two more bullets which struck him. The officer in charge of the regimental color...was thrice wounded.”93 By the time the battle was won, every man in the battalion was dead or wounded, but the flag had been saved from falling into enemy hands.

My point is not to deny that these events happened or to blame the observers for recording them. Individual heroism has always been a part of warfare, and the reports they compiled are much enlivened by their inclusion. But it must be admitted by even the greatest admirer of General Ōyama’s army that individual acts such as these were not the decisive factor that enabled Japanese victory. Even many of the foreign observers would have willingly said as such. The same Lieutenant-Colonel Haldane who related the above anecdote later described the secret of Japanese success as being “That patience and deliberation which characterize the Japanese infantry attack.”94 Hamilton, however, does not seem to have agreed. On more than one occasion, he takes the opportunity to severely chastise the Japanese for their ‘patience and deliberation’, calling them dangerous character flaws for the Japanese nation.

This critique of the Japanese is probably most fully articulated when describing the crossing of the Yalu. As the first major obstacle the Japanese would have to surmount for this long-planned campaign, the Japanese had drawn up detailed schemes for this battle months or years in advance. “Nothing was to be left to chance. Fords were to be sounded, mountain paths

93 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 266
94 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 453
explored, redoubts built against the possibility of a counter attack; timber, nails, cables, anchors were to be collected for bridges, and, in fact, every little detail was to be gone into and rehearsed.”

This level of planning paid off handsomely for the Japanese, and they were able to secure a fairly rapid crossing of the river. Despite their frontal assaults on the Russian entrenchments, the attacking Japanese were actually able to inflict twice as many casualties as they took. Though Hamilton appreciated this victory, he made no secret of the fact that he was not satisfied. The Japanese had crossed the Yalu and inflicted a sharp defeat on the enemy, yes, but Hamilton had hoped to see something more dramatic—either an encirclement of the entire Russian army or at least a vigorous pursuit and harrying of it as it retreated. The Japanese general in charge of the vanguard, Baron Nishi, refused to order such an attack. The Russians, he pointed out, still commanded the only main road with troops and artillery covering their retreat, and he had no artillery brought up yet. Given this, any further attacks would most likely be futile, and entail losses “Disproportionate to the advantage to be gained by forcing his way past.”

This is very reasonable, especially when one considers that the Japanese were still in the process of securing their bridgehead on the far side of the Yalu, and the Japanese commander General Kuroki concurred with his subordinate. Hamilton, however, is very critical of the entire affair. “It was a pity, but no doubt it is a very exceptional man who is able to detach his mind from the terribly impressive now of a hard-fought field into the then of the far future. Yet this is necessary to a full comprehension that what may seem heavy further sacrifices at such a moment may be literally trifling.”

Undoubtedly, a general must be willing

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95 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 86
96 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 119
97 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 120
to make sacrifices in order to win. But in this situation, it seems unlikely that the bloodletting that would have ensued from Nishi’s attack on the Russian defenses would have accomplished anything worth the cost. But this cautious, pragmatic approach to warfare does not jibe well with Hamilton’s demands for a glorious charge of mighty warriors.

Concluding his section on the Battle of the Yalu, Hamilton expands his earlier critiques of the Japanese penchant for caution into a general comment on the state of the Japanese military. “Nothing, however, would induce them to make the plunge until they had completed their most minute preparations. Let the Germans admire this if they will; it is not the principle by which Marlborough, Napoleon or Lee won their reputation. On the day they meet a first-class General this passion for making all things absolutely safe may be the ruin of our careful little friends.”98 This is an interesting quote, as it displays quite clearly the mix of admiration and condescension with which the British often described their Japanese allies. The British admired the Japanese for the rapidity with which they had risen from obscure ‘barbarism’ to a fully-industrialized and modern state. But at the same time they clearly viewed Japan as the junior partner in the alliance, and themselves as tutors as this promising, but still immature Oriental nation. Even Hamilton, who viewed the West and decadent and decaying, and Japan as the model of the future, was still confident enough in his attitudes of Anglo-Saxon superiority to lecture his ‘careful little friends’. The military critique in this quote is also interesting, implying a binary hierarchy of military talents and skills. Merely competent commanders are obsessed with logistics and preparations and ensuring that everything is accomplished precisely

98 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 134
according to plan, truly great generals can throw that to the wind and act with audacity and boldness. Far be for me to dismiss the value of audacity in war, but this strikes me as an oversimplification of the art of generalship. General W.G Nicholson, one of Hamilton’s fellow observers, criticized his comments in his official report, stating that “Instinct must be combined with professional knowledge and experience and intense application to the problem in hand. The careful deliberation and forethought displayed by Napoleon, Wellington, and Von Moltke, even in matters of detail, are notorious.”

Whether or not General Kuroki or Marshal Ōyama were ‘great generals’ is a question beyond the scope of this paper. However, this does go to show the degree to which Hamilton embraced a view of warfare which glorified grand, dramatic gestures over the minutiae of military detail of which most war is made up of.

Hamilton’s views on the war are most succinctly stated in his summing up of the results of the Battle of Liaoyang. “‘It was not strategy or tactics, or armament or information’ that won.... but rather ‘the souls of the Japanese troops which triumphed over the less developed, less awakened, less stimulated, spiritual qualities of the Russians.’”

General Ian Hamilton approached the Russo-Japanese with a set of preconceptions and biases, many of which were related to his theories on civilization and race. He believed that the Russian Empire was representative of the decadent, decaying West, and thus destined to fail due to the racial failings of its troops. Conversely, he believed that the Japanese were a warrior race, endowed with the primitive virtues that would lead them to success. Both of these beliefs were

99 The Russo-Japanese War. Reports from British Officers, etc. Pg. 175
influenced a general belief in contemporaneous European theories of the ‘psychological battlefield’ and the ‘cult of the offensive’, both of which encouraged him to judge the immaterial aspects of warfare as decisive. Though the general reported what he saw as accurately he could, his reports, and especially his diaries, emphasize certain aspects of the war while de-emphasizing or denigrating others. The net result is to encourage the belief that Japanese successes were due primarily to their high morale, bravery, and willpower, rather than the careful tactics, and detailed planning that actually made the difference. To a British officer corps that has already deeply bought into the Cult of the Offensive, it is likely that this would have fallen on willing ears.

Conclusion:

The Russo-Japanese War was the first major war of the 20th century, and like all the Great Powers of the day, Great Britain was eager to examine the new tactics and weapons in use for the first time. Unfortunately, the lessons brought back by General Hamilton and the other observers were riddled with mistakes and burden with pre-existing biases. While they correctly noted the outsize role that artillery would play in war from this point on, as well as they increasing size of caliber being deployed, they significantly overestimated the degree to which it could render frontal assaults feasible. Though never quite believing that it could totally replace infantry, they came to assume it could effectively neutralize the value of modern entrenchments. In addition, they underestimated the defensive value of artillery, consistently assuming that infantry moving swiftly enough could avoid taking casualties from the defender’s
bombardment. When discussing Japanese infantry and its uncanny ability to storm enemy lines, the British fell back from technical analysis and into description of more primal causes. The success of the Imperial Japanese Army’s infantry is attributed to their high élan, strong willpower, and dedication to their cause. If Hamilton is to be believed, this was the result of the superiority of the Japanese race and nation to the contemptable Russians.

All of this missed a number of important factors, which were either not mentioned or de-emphasized by the British observers. Though the infantry of the IJA were undoubtedly determined, their successes were more often due to tactical acumen then the application of warrior spirit. Rather than simply charging the Russian lines, Japanese troops often made use of innovative leap-frog tactics as well as the digging of approach trenches to minimize their exposure to enemy fire. Even with all this, their victories often came at a much higher price than was acknowledged or realized at the time. By the end of the war, Japan was running dangerously low on manpower and money, drained by the unexpectedly high costs of the war. “In spite of a general situation that appeared favorable to the Japanese, the observers with their armies freely predicted defeat for them in the next great battle.”

In addition, though the Japanese generals were willing to order frontal assaults when necessary, they rarely used such a blunt tactic alone. These attacks were almost always paired with assaults on the Russian flanks to put pressure on the enemy. Often, the frontal attacks, though drawing all the attention, only succeeded because the Russian general ordered a withdrawal to avoid encirclement. Such tactics were only possible due to the unique circumstances of the warzone,

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namely its vastness and isolation from supply routes that prevented the vastly-larger Russian army from ever fully concentrating.

Completely answering the question of why the British made these mistakes and assumptions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the examination of Lieutenant-General Hamilton’s particular biases and theories may provide some clues. As this paper has shown, Hamilton believed strongly in a set of racial theories centering on the decline of western civilization and the rise of threatening primitive nations who were in danger of gaining strength to overthrow Anglo-Saxon and European hegemony of the world. The Russo-Japanese War provided a test case for this, pitting Japan, a newly-powerful and modernized Oriental nation, against Russia, one of the old powers that had until then ruled the world. It seems natural that Hamilton would be biased on favor of Japan, Britain’s ally and the subject of a great deal of his fawning admiration in his diaries. And though I have no doubt that Hamilton was a conscientious officer who faithfully recorded what he saw, it is nearly impossible that his personal beliefs did not unconsciously affect his observations, as he filtered events through the lens of his racial biases. Great Britain should heed Japan’s example and embrace the ancient martial virtues, and this was a matter of some urgency. “England has time therefore—time to put her military matters in order; time to implant and cherish the military ideal in the hearts of her children; time to prepare for a disturbed and anxious twentieth century.”102 For Hamilton, this was no mere academic matter. It was necessary for Britain to heed his advice and rebuild a more militarized society if the kingdom was to survive the turbulence of the coming century.

102 Ian Hamilton, A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War, pg. 12
His published diaries, *A Staff Officers Scrap-Book During The Russo-Japanese War*, actively present his experiences and observations in Manchuria as evidence of his claims and convictions. It is impossible to know the extent to which Hamilton’s racial biases affected British military thought, but given his rank and importance, it seems unlikely that it was negligible.

The consequences of the mistaken analysis made by these British observers would not become fully apparent for a decade, until the First World War began in 1914. Only then, as the traditional military tactics and values of the British Army died in hails of machine-gun fire at Passchendaele and the Somme, did the limited value of Japan’s Manchurian experience become clear to all. Shorn of their localized contexts, the tactics of the Imperial Japanese Army became less than useless, they became actively harmful. Unlike Manchuria, Northern France and Belgium is a densely-developed region with excellent infrastructure and supply sources. Furthermore, constrained as it is between the North Sea and the Swiss Alps, the warzone was far smaller than the endless mountains and steppes of Northeastern China. Together, these two factors allowed both sides to concentrate their forces to a much greater degree than was ever possible in the Russo-Japanese War. More supplies, troops, and matériel could be brought to the battlefield, and it could be concentrated into smaller areas. In the entire Russo-Japanese War, the Imperial Japanese Army deployed approximately 300,000 soldiers. British casualties in the Battle of the Somme alone numbered over 400,000. In addition to all this, the vast skill disparity that existed between the Japanese and Russian armies did not exist on the Western Front, with the soldiers of Imperial Germany being more than a match for British and French

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troops. Given all of this, it is not surprising that attempts to apply the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War to the First World War failed so miserably.

Though they may have failed, we should not judge Hamilton and the other observers too harshly. They were able men, attempting to interpret a mountain of data in a very short time. That they were influenced by their preexisting biases is regrettable, but not surprising, and we must be careful not to judge too harshly when blessed with the benefit of hindsight. In Japan, Hamilton thought he saw a model for the reinvigoration of the primal warrior spirit that would sweep the Western hegemonic order from the world stage and usher in a new era. He was wrong in the details, but even his racially-biased speculation contained a germ of truth. Hamilton stood at the apex of Western dominance and glimpsed the long slide towards irrelevance that lay ahead. The Russo-Japanese War was the first significant defeat suffered by a European power at hands of an Asian nation in centuries. As Hamilton himself exclaimed at the Battle of Liaoyang “I have seen today the most stupendous spectacle it is possible for the mortal brain to conceive – Asia advancing, Europe falling back, the wall of mist and writing thereon.”

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