



Picture of Our Valorous Military Repulsing the Russian Cossack Cavalry on the Bank of the Yalu River by Watanabe Nobukazu (1874–1944), March 1904, copy located in Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

How Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield Led to One of the Greatest Military Upsets in History

by Captain Jordan M. Peters

Introduction

For decades, intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) has featured in western military doctrine as an analytical process. A systematic process, IPB facilitates the analysis of variables, including weather, terrain, and enemy forces, on missions within a specific operational environment.¹ While IPB may seem a relatively modern analytical methodology, its roots can be traced back to the dawn of the 20th century in a conflict that has, at least in the West, faded into relative obscurity. To many contemporary military historians, the Russo-Japanese War was a sharp, short conflict in which superior Japanese tactics (especially at sea) shocked the hapless, tottering Russian Empire into submission. This simplification of the conflict ignores what may be one of the most successful applications of IPB in modern military history. Through extensive preparation, the Japanese Empire defined in detail the operational environment and its effects on operations, identified the threat, and analyzed how their

foe would fight. This article will show just how an early form of IPB served as a sling that the Japanese David used against the Russian Goliath, shaping the course of both nations and the entire region during the 20th century.

The Russo-Japanese War (aka World War Zero)

“The Russo-Japanese War was a military conflict fought between the Russian Empire and the Empire of Japan from [February] 1904 to [September] 1905. Much of the fighting took place in what is now northeastern China. The Russo-Japanese War was also a naval conflict, with ships exchanging fire in the waters surrounding the Korean peninsula. The brutal conflict in the western Pacific changed the balance of power in Asia and set the stage for World War I...In fact, scholars have suggested that the Russo-Japanese War set the stage for World War I and, ultimately, World War II, as some of the central issues in the first conflict were at the core of the fighting during the latter two. Some have even referred to it as “World War Zero,” given that it took place less than a decade before the start of World War I.”²

Step 1—Define the Operational Environment

The first step of IPB, define the operational environment,³ involves identifying operational environment characteristics with significant effect on friend and foe. It is perhaps the clearest example of Japan's application of the modern IPB process. Unlike the Russians, the Japanese Empire spent the years preceding the war with Russia developing an accurate understanding of their opponent on multiple levels. The growth of nationalism in Japan, fueled by its successful modernization and victory against the Chinese in 1895, sparked the founding of several organizations dedicated to advocating aggressive foreign policies. One such group, the Kokuryukai, operated under the conviction that Russian expansionism in Asia had a direct and negative impact on Japanese security. In addition to spreading anti-Russian

propaganda, the organization's intelligence collection efforts proved beneficial to the state upon the outbreak of the war.⁴

The Kokuryukai was essential to Japan's preparation for war with Russia, serving as an important source of intelligence collection. Less than a month after its founding by Ryohei Uchida, the Kokuryukai established a Tokyo publishing house, which immediately began distributing geographical information that Uchida gathered in Russia during his travels. Subsequent publications proved so inflammatory that the Japanese government censored their publication. From this point until the outbreak of war, the group funded and promoted nongovernment organizations focused on Russia while learning and teaching Russian. Simultaneously, members took turns traveling to Korea and Manchuria,

mapping out ports, railways, and other key terrain while gathering intelligence on the strength and organization of the Russian military. This, contrasted with the fact that despite occupying Manchuria since 1899 the Russians had failed to create accurate maps at any point before the war, makes Japan's efforts all the more impressive. Clearly, the group was attempting to evaluate the threat well before the shooting started.⁵

Step 2—Describe the Environmental Effects on Operations

The second step of the IPB process, describe the environmental effects on operations,⁶ builds upon the first. After identifying significant environmental characteristics, analysts determine how these characteristics affect future operations. Long before the shooting began, the fight for control of key terrain in the form of telephone lines and telegraph stations pitted the Russian and Japanese Empires against one another. Both sides recognized that control of the communication systems on the Korean peninsula would provide a distinct advantage in a future war by enabling rapid communications between capitals, generals, and their armies. At the same time, the other nation's communications would be degraded and possibly even



P. F. Collier & Son, Russo-Japanese War, 1904

Battlefields in the Russo-Japanese War.



Japanese Pontoon train moving to Yalu River from Ping-Yang. Pontoons were built in Hiroshima before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 in preparation for crossing the Yalu River. The sections were later transported via horse teams.

disrupted or intercepted. Japan made the first move, capitalizing on its victory against China to assume control of a nascent Chinese communications infrastructure on the peninsula. Correctly assessing Japan's motives, Russia quickly reached an agreement with the Korean government that would allow the construction of telephone lines from Russia to Korea. During the invasion of the peninsula at the outbreak of war, Japan moved rapidly to seize Russia's communication infrastructure throughout the peninsula.⁷

Recognizing the severely degrading effects Manchurian winters would have upon operations, both sides equipped their forces with adequate winter clothing. The war would begin late in winter and range throughout the frozen Korean peninsula and Manchuria. Russian failures at the strategic and tactical level to counter Japanese landings on the Korean peninsula combined with the failure to attack the Japanese army as they crossed the Yalu River within sight of Russian lines demonstrates an abject failure to use natural obstacles in blocking or even delaying the Japanese.⁸ At the same time, Japanese agents monitoring the development of the Trans-Siberian Railroad correctly determined that until the line reached Vladivostok, Russia would be unable to move large quantities of men and equipment quickly enough over vast spaces and restrictive terrain to have any effect on the coming battles.

Step 3—Evaluate the Threat

In the third step of IPB, evaluate the threat,⁹ intelligence on enemy doctrine and capabilities is carefully analyzed. Japanese efforts to determine the composition, disposition, quality, and capabilities of Russian forces adopted unconventional methods. Despite government-sanctioned persecution in the mid-to-late 19th century, sympathetic Japanese leaders portrayed Buddhism as a useful tool, one that could easily serve an important role in covert human-

intelligence collection. In 1897, the Japanese government began actively deploying Buddhist missionaries deep into Manchuria and Siberia. One Buddhist sect, increasingly militarized and radicalized, went so far as to declare in 1904 that "putting Russians to death...is not only our duty as citizens, but as fellow Buddhists."¹⁰ The establishment of Buddhist branches in Vladivostok less than 10 years before the outbreak of war saw a massive increase in Japanese collection on Russia's Pacific Fleet, an intelligence coup for the Japanese that would go a long way in determining the course of the war.¹¹

One particularly enthralling example of the Japanese government's covert efforts to evaluate the Russian threat is found in the story of Shimizu Shogetsu, a Buddhist missionary with a secret. Between 1897 and 1899, Shimizu traveled the breadth of Siberia from Irkutsk in the west to Vladivostok in the east, even taking time to crisscross Manchuria. Unbeknownst to all he encountered, Shimizu was really Captain Hanada Nakanosuke, an officer in the Japanese Army. Focused on identifying Russian forces in Korea and Manchuria, Captain Nakanosuke's greatest success came in 1898 when he identified an illegal "maintenance yard" garrisoned by Russian soldiers just one kilometer from the major Manchurian city of Changchun.¹² In 1904 and still in disguise, Captain Nakanosuke resigned his commission to remain in Vladivostok and established the "Army of Justice," a guerilla group tasked with collecting and passing intelligence on Russian forces to the Japanese from behind Russian lines.¹³

In the months before the outbreak of war in February 1904, ethnic Japanese civilians living in and around Port Arthur provided the Japanese military with quality information on the Russian order of battle. This, combined

with information detailing the rising internal divisions within the Russian Empire, provided Japan with the opportunity to stoke dissent and foment rebellion. This strategy would prove remarkably effective in fixing the Russian intelligence services' focus toward combatting civil unrest rather than conducting collection or counterintelligence operations against Japan.¹⁴

Like Japan, Russia benefited from the service of uniquely capable individuals in the period surrounding the war. One such individual, Russian General Staff officer Vladimir

Samoyloff, neglected to report the size of Japanese reserves to be mobilized in the event of war.¹⁵ In fact, Japan maintained a trained reserve of 400,000 and increased defense spending by 56 percent in the 9 years from 1895 to 1904.¹⁶ Colonel Vannovskii's blindness was well known among foreign attachés, so much so that an agent of the French government, closely allied with the Russians, offered another Russian agent information on or about the Japanese Army under the strict condition that he not share it with Vannovskii but report it directly to Saint Petersburg [capital of the Russian Empire].¹⁷

Initially, Samoyloff found the task of collecting intelligence and evaluating the Japanese military extremely difficult. In reports to his superiors, Samoyloff claims the numerical strength of the Japanese military to be a closely guarded secret and asserts that everything he had collected up to that point had been through sheer luck.¹⁸ As events unfolded in the countdown to war, Samoyloff found himself to be virtually the only Russian official declaring the unpopular assessment that "Russia needed peace more than Japan." Events would prove Samoyloff correct in his assessment, though it doubtless brought him little satisfaction.¹⁹

Attachés such as Samoyloff and Vannovskii enjoyed full diplomatic immunity and worked in conjunction with officers of the Main Staff, or Glavnyi shtab, who were often undercover as minor officials at embassies or consulates. Further groups of junior officers

were dispatched under false pretexts on missions to nations neighboring Russia, pretexts that included everything from hunting trips to studying languages, when in fact these officers were collecting intelligence on border fortifications and locating military facilities. The Main Staff would be tasked with collection, analysis, and dissemination of military-statistical data concerning foreign powers as well as the handling of foreign agents.²⁰

Russian forces in Manchuria initially relied in part upon human intelligence collected from three agents stationed



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

Expecting an attack from Russian cavalry—alert Japanese near Tehling, Manchuria.

Konstantinovich Samoyloff, had the benefit of interacting with the Japanese for over a decade before the outbreak of war. In 1903, Samoyloff was posted to Japan and quickly realized that the entire Russian collection effort and subsequent evaluation of the threat up to that point had been entirely inadequate. Attempts to convince the Russian government otherwise proved a laborious and ultimately fruitless task. Colonel Gleb Vannovskii, Samoyloff's predecessor, had failed to recognize the superior organization, strength, and capability of the Japanese military, particularly by ne-

in Japan, Korea, and China. The armies in Manchuria were expected to build their own intelligence networks by recruiting agents from among the local populace. This was not altogether difficult, as many Chinese remembered bitterly their defeat at the hands of the Japanese just a decade before. For the Russians, however, rampant racial prejudice meant that many assumed the Chinese were spies for the Japanese simply because both nations were members of the Asian race. Thus racism, combined with the inadequate allocation of funds to recruit agents, meant that the First Manchurian Army's organic military intelligence organization, Section Seven, had to rely entirely on information collected from interrogating Japanese prisoners or captured documents. Considering only two documents of any value whatsoever were captured and that none of the 366 Japanese taken prisoner during the entirety of the conflict knew anything of real importance, even these sources of intelligence were wholly inadequate. Yet another factor limiting Russia's attempts to evaluate the Japanese threat was the astonishing fact that of the entire First Manchurian Army, only one soldier spoke even basic Japanese.²¹

Section Seven's wartime failures would be examined in detail following Russia's defeat. The stationary nature of the war (the Russians used trenches extensively), difficult terrain (which the Russians had failed to survey or chart), and extremely effective Japanese counterintelligence efforts would be listed as the primary causes of Russian military intelligence failures. Japanese counter-reconnaissance efforts undermined Russian attempts to detail Japanese positions to collect intelligence. These reconnaissance patrols were often detected shortly after their departure and, if not immediately engaged, were ambushed and captured by forward Japanese units. In those rare instances when the Russians did manage to infiltrate enemy lines, they found themselves unable to determine the unit or size of the force facing them. For many, responsibility for the failure of these patrols rested with the Russian commanders, who insisted upon employing their best officers and men in the doomed patrols while only providing them poor quality maps and inadequate instructions. As a result, both Cossacks and infantry failed to collect anything of intelligence value for the duration of the war.²²

Despite these severe intelligence limitations, portions of the Russian army managed to form a basic tactical understanding of the enemy units within their immediate vicinity through battle. Unfortunately for them, this could



Russian soldiers preparing fortifications in Port Arthur.

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

not make up for the fact that Russia never managed to evaluate the Japanese on a strategic level. Russia's failure to realize that Japanese forces freed from the Liaodong Peninsula following the fall of Port Arthur were moving north to support Japanese armies around Mukden. This failure would see the Japanese, albeit narrowly, victorious in the final major battle on land. Beyond collection, dissemination proved similarly difficult for the Russians. For the first 6 months of the war, no process existed whatsoever for the communication of intelligence to Russian commanders. It was only with the formation of the First Manchurian Army's Section Seven that daily intelligence summaries became available at Army Headquarters, although in another example of Russian ineptitude, these reports were very rarely disseminated to regimental, division, or even corps commanders, with predictably disastrous results.²³

Ultimately, the only form of Russian intelligence that proved somewhat accurate during the war would be naval intelligence collected primarily by Admiral Alexieff in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war. As Viceroy of the Russian Far East and commander-in-chief of Russia's military forces in Port Arthur and Manchuria, Admiral Alexieff methodically collected specifications of Japanese vessels under construction (the vast majority in British shipyards), reporting to Saint Petersburg that the Japanese appeared to be preparing for war by repurposing commercial vessels as troop transports. Months later, these same vessels would ferry Japanese armies to the Asian mainland.²⁴

Step 4—Determine Threat Courses of Action

The final step in the IPB process, determine threat courses of action,²⁵ sees the combination of the previous steps leading to the development and analysis of possible enemy courses of action, or methods for completing their overall mission.

While the Japanese employed hundreds of overt and covert agents meticulously engaged in collecting intelligence on Russian land and naval forces, the Russian government at the time chose to employ a single officer against the Japanese.²⁶ In addition to its obvious diplomatic functions, the Japanese Foreign Ministry performed an important role as a hub for intelligence collection networks. In European capitals, Japanese diplomats would daily gather several of their host-nation's leading newspapers and, with the help of translators, scan for any news concerning Japan or any other topics of interest to the government. At the same time, Japanese diplomats made it a point to attend parties and various social gatherings as frequently as possible to establish relationships that could be matured into sources of information and intelligence. Following the declaration of war in February 1904, many of these contacts in Western Europe and the United States would prove vital not only as sources of information but also as sources of funding for the war effort.²⁷

If IPB is supposed to take place not just during a conflict but well before, no one bothered to tell the Russians. The failure of Russian intelligence to detect the Japanese attack on Russian ships at the Battle of Port Arthur (and later at the Battle of Tsushima) enabled the Japanese to achieve complete surprise.²⁸ January 26, 1904, saw the Japanese ambassador informing his government of reports shared with him by Admiral Alexieff stating that the Japanese had dispatched large numbers of troops, munitions, and supplies to the Korean peninsula. Admiral Alexieff demanded an explanation, stating that such an action would endanger any future diplomatic discussions between the two empires. Ambassador Komura denied the accusations, stating that no troops had been dispatched and that while supplies had been sent, they were simply to provision the troops already stationed on the peninsula. Ambassador Komura then pivots, requesting explanations for newspaper reports detailing a Russian troop buildup along the north of the Yalu River.²⁹ Admiral Alexieff denied these reports, despite continued reports of a Russian buildup and the Russian purchase of large tracts of land on the Korean side of the Yalu—reports provided by a Japanese colonel disguised as a Buddhist monk.³⁰


If a single event could have allowed the Russians to determine Japan's likely course of action, the breaking-off of dip-

lomatic relations between Tokyo and Saint Petersburg would be that moment. In a final note to Russia, Japan reiterates the importance of Korea to her own national security, highlights the threat posed by Russia's continued (illegal) occupation of Manchuria, and laments Russian recalcitrance in refusing to make any concessions or enter negotiations. The note ends chillingly: "The Imperial Government reserve to themselves the right to take such independent action as they may deem best to consolidate and defend their menaced position."³¹ Believing now that they could achieve their political goals not through negotiation but armed conflict, this note captures Japan's shift to a preventative-war strategy, a fact that was entirely lost on the Russian government. Three days later, the Japanese navy opened fire on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur.³² The war had begun.

Conclusion

Japan's adherence to the analytical framework of IPB enabled a newcomer to the world stage to convincingly defeat a nation commonly accepted as a major world power. The methodical mapping of the operational environment, accurate analysis of the effects of the twin tyrannies of time and space on Russian operations, extensive evaluation of Russian capabilities, and persistent efforts to predict Russian courses of action all combined to forge a formidable sling in the hands of the Japanese David. It would prove to be just enough to humble the Russian Goliath.

Russian military historian Zvonarev writing on the Russo-Japanese War in the 1920s stated, "The Russian Army knew neither Japan nor its army. Even worse, it had an entirely false and distorted impression. Largely based on the lies and bravura of attachés and secret agents' reports, [the army] was entirely convinced that victory over the Japanese would be a simple matter."³³ Immediately following the war, General Kuropatkin claimed his armies lacked tactical intelligence support almost entirely. To put it bluntly, Russian intelligence failed at every level. At the strategic level, the Russians failed to define the operational environment, failed to describe its effects on operations, failed completely to evaluate their adversary, and neglected even to attempt to determine or predict enemy courses of action. From inadequate funding to incompetent personnel, racial bias to apathy, Russian intelligence efforts failed at every level. Even determining the size of the Japanese army proved beyond Russian capabilities, as their estimate of 200,000 was merely one-third of the forces the Japanese deployed to Manchuria. In the decades since the war, scholars liken the Russians to a blindfolded boxer stumbling into the ring, an apt description for any military absent intelligence support.³⁴

While Russia's economy conducted its own "pivot to the Pacific," its intelligence structures failed to shift focus and neglected intelligence preparation of the (new) battlefield. Those few collection assets available to them remained focused on China and Europe so much so that combined books of Russian intelligence reports from 1904 and 1905 contain hundreds of pages detailing German mobilization plans and maps of East Prussia. Dozens more pages cover Turkey, China, Persia, and Afghanistan, while in the section on East Asia under Japan remains recorded a cryptic phrase, *nichego ne predstavleno*, no submission.³⁵ 

Endnotes

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CPT Jordan Peters commissioned in 2014 through Dickinson College's Army Reserve Officer Training Corps program, earning his bachelor of arts in political science and security studies before earning graduate degrees in public policy and intelligence studies from Liberty University and American Military University, respectively. From June 2015 to January 2019, he served as a squadron assistant S-2, scout platoon leader, headquarters troop executive officer, squadron rear-detachment commander, and plans officer in 3rd Squadron, 89th Cavalry Squadron, 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, at Fort Polk, LA. CPT Peters is currently assigned to A Company, 304th Military Intelligence (MI) Battalion, MI Captains Career Course, at Fort Huachuca, AZ.