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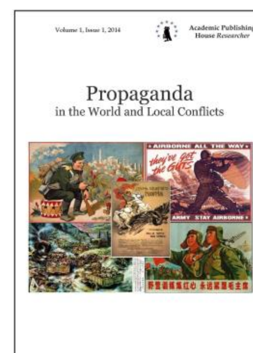

Russian Propaganda during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905

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Abstract

This paper addresses issues related to Russian government propaganda during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. The work analyzes the key reasons behind and the essence of the related ideological "warfare" and explores the effect the propaganda had on domestic political affairs in the Russian Empire during the First Russian Revolution (1905–1907). The paper describes some of the key forms and methods of ideological warfare used during the period, the "target audience", and some of the more prominent and effective propaganda "artifacts". The author provides insight into the efficiency of the propaganda campaign as a whole, the key effects it produced, its influence on the progress of the war, and some of the subsequent use of propaganda by the Russian government.

Keywords: propaganda, Russian propaganda, Russo-Japanese War, First Russian Revolution, Russian Navy, Russo-Japanese War battles.

1. Introduction

From the earliest times, humans have been aware of the incontestable fact that the morale of both a state's army and workforce is highly dependent on the ability to organize the government's ideological work in a proper way. Military history offers numerous examples of effective propaganda helping win a war, most importantly one of "attrition". Ancient Egyptians wholeheartedly believed in the impeccability and divine power of their pharaohs, someone who would lead their soldiers to victory at the expense of their lives, given for the benefit of the ruler and the state (in his position at the center of the Egyptian state the reigning pharaoh embodied a divine power). It is obvious that this faith was being cultivated and fueled quite masterfully by the nomarchs and priests. Furthermore, ancient Romans believed in the flawlessness of their own laws and state system – they were convinced that the Roman Empire represented the pinnacle of civilization and civility. Accordingly, they "felt free" to use the gladius and pilum[1] to provide some "culture" to all those "barbarians" – in doing so, they did, however, not scruple to engage in depredation of the latter's lands. In a similar fashion, the medieval spiritual orders of knighthood

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[1] The gladius was a short Roman sword. It may have been adopted from the ancient Spaniards. The gladius became part of the Romans' military arsenal in the third century BC. It was a symbol of quality, efficiency, and lethality, and was matchless in tight close combat (which Roman legionaries mainly relied upon). The pilum was a short Roman javelin. It was a common arm of the Roman infantryman since the second century BC. Just like the gladius, the pilum was a symbol of the unshakeable might of the Roman army.

acted in the name of Christianity when they were advancing the kingdom of Christ among the "barbarians" by fire and sword.

In the course of time, the government's methods and forms of ideological work on boosting the morale were becoming, on one hand, increasingly more sophisticated (in terms of the tools employed) and, on the other hand, more primitive (in terms of conceptual content), as they were intended for a broad little-educated "target audience". The best example of this is ideological work carried out by several totalitarian-authoritarian states during the 1930–1940s (the USSR, the Third Reich, Italy, and Japan), with 'Goebbels's propaganda' even becoming a household term, coming to symbolize barefaced lying and a focus on appealing to base instincts.

A sort of "practice" before the world wars of the first half of the 20th century was the Russo-Japanese War, and that is not only in terms of organizational, technical, and technological means of waging warfare but in terms of ideology as well. This paper attempts to explore some of the key technologies, methods, forms, and outcomes of Russian military propaganda during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905.

2. Materials and methods

The work relies upon a set of relevant sources, a body of relevant statistics, and some relevant scholarly literature. One of the key sources employed in writing this paper is 'Illustrated Chronicle of the Russo-Japanese War', published in Saint Petersburg between 1904 and 1905. The document was produced practically in real time – information was entered into the chronicle within months or even weeks of an event occurring, which suggests that it contains only fact-based material. This appears to be one of the chronicle's incontestable benefits, as it can hardly be regarded as overly pretentious from an ideological standpoint. However, there is a lot of information, like that related to Russian soldiers, sailors, and officers who returned from captivity, that did not make it into the chronicle, which may somewhat distort the truth of the events described in the document. Another plus of the source is that it provides meticulous coverage of the statutory framework and offers numerous illustrations (Letopis', 1904; Letopis', 1905).

The chronicle was apparently intended for the educated portion of the population, and, save for a few propaganda phrases like "attacked the ships at Chemulpo in a rapacious manner" (Letopis', 1904a: 85), was quite refined. Compared with the period's newspapers, many of which abounded in all sorts of caricatures on the military subject, the chronicle had very few illustrations of this kind in it. Therefore, it will not be an exaggeration to state that this particular source, which has been considered a definitive authority on the subject by many a serious researcher of the Russo-Japanese War, does not actually reflect the real scale of the period's ideological warfare. It should also be noted that the chronicle contains a few minor factual errors. For example, there is an illustration that actually depicts the armored cruiser Rurik, not Rossia (Letopis', 1904b: 19). That being said, inaccuracies like these are hardly something major. In fact, the above inaccuracy could well have been just a typo.

The first "ideological" tool employed in the Russo-Japanese War must have been Nicholas II's "address to the nation" – the Highest Manifesto, in which the emperor announced the start of military action, did not forget to mention the treacherous Japanese attack on the Russian Navy in Port Arthur, carried out without a formal declaration of war, and asserted a firm commitment on the part of all loyal subjects to "rising as one in defense of the Motherland" (Letopis', 1904: 6). Given the document's level, it contains no offensive, pejorative undertones. Yet, its ideological underpinning is quite obvious – judging by its content, the manifesto appears to be oriented toward, above all, the officers, i.e. Russia's military elite.

The more objective picture may be provided by the period's newspapers and magazines, i.e. its most mass-produced information products. This specific type of periodical publications would serve as a primary vehicle for the period's fierce military-political propaganda. In 1904, the newspapers Russkoe Slovo, Novoe Vremya, Pravitel'stvennyi Vestnik, Russkii Listok, Niva, Moskovskii Listok, and a few others would virtually compete in propaganda, with each oriented toward an audience of its own, whose intellectual-cultural level is what the "quality" of the ideological instrumentarium depended on. Another major propaganda vehicle at the time was luboks, inexpensive popular prints sold in the form of postcards or posters, which would become a sort of symbol of Russo-Japanese War propaganda.

3. Discussion

There has been quite a paucity of research into military propaganda during the Russo-Japanese War. A noteworthy work on the subject is D.V. Liventsev's 'Military Propaganda during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905'. The book covers the period's military propaganda in a somewhat diffuse, if not mediated, fashion. The author tends to "digress" onto other loosely related topics, like the overall sentiment within the Russian army and navy, the use of disinformation, the hardships of war and the ordeal of prisoners of war, the Russian Empire's unpreparedness for the war, the rivalry between opposing groups of high-ranking officers in the army and navy, etc. (Liventsev, 2012). Among other things, the work cites the extended abstract of a dissertation by A.O. Buranok (Buranok, 2009), devoted to information support for the Russo-Japanese War in a province (through the example of Samara Governorate). A.O. Buranok, in turn, likewise devotes a large portion of his dissertation to discussing various "contiguous" issues related to the Russo-Japanese War.

It may be stated in defense of D.V. Liventsev that the scholar (and the author of the present work too for that matter) is faced with a known problem – the obviousness and primitive content of the ideological instrumentarium employed, which can be summed up in just a few points, while to just cite and analyze a set of known (and reliably confirmed) propaganda posters and illustrations is a task that most historians may find to be quite thankless and uninteresting. This specific fact may explain the lack of fundamental works on the issue of military propaganda in the Russo-Japanese War. Indeed, during that war, which was quite short, the ideological instrumentarium did practically not change – compared with, say, World War II, when, as mainly applied to the USSR, the tools varied quite significantly in conceptual and objective content across all of the key periods: the pre-war, start of the war, middle of the war, and end of the war timeframes.

Therefore, one can hardly regard as a fundamental study of propaganda in the Russo-Japanese War the work of A.E. Kulanov and V.E. Molodyakov 'Russia and Japan: Image Wars', in which the subject is analyzed in quite a mediated fashion (Kulanov, Molodyakov, 2007). The same is the case with E.S. Senyavskaya's 'Russia's Opponents in the 20th century: The Evolution of the Image of the Enemy in the Consciousness of the Army and Society', quite an interesting integrated fundamental work (Senyavskaya, 2006), which, however, covers the subject only contextually.

It is also worth noting that most related materials available on various history-related forums on the Internet are mainly about just sharing all kinds of propaganda popular prints and talking points that were common back in the pre-revolutionary era.

Elsewhere, the subject has been investigated by a number of pre-revolutionary (Semenov, 1906; Semenov, 1907; Semenov, 1910; Semenov, 1911; Khudyakov, 1908; Klado, 1905), Soviet (Sorokin, 1956; Novikov-Priboi, 1977; Stepanov, 1983), and contemporary (Koktsinskii, 2002) researchers.

4. Results

The first ideological tool employed at the war's outset must have been the above manifesto of Nicholas II, which announced the start of the war with Japan. It is no wonder that the manifesto is written in quite a tactful form, as befits a "highest" statutory document. Yet, the emperor does not fail to mention the opponent's treacherous attack, carried out with no official declaration of war: "without providing advance notice of its intention to sever our [diplomatic] relations by way of commencing military action against us, Japan ordered its destroyers to launch a surprise attack on our fleet in the outer harbor of Port Arthur" (Letopis', 1904a: 6). Subsequently, the emperor communicates to his subjects a call to military action and seeks to inspire them: "In announcing our decision to do so, we reaffirm our unwavering faith in the assistance of Almighty God and our firm commitment to rising as one in defense of the Motherland and ask for God's blessing on the valiant personnel of our army and navy" (Letopis', 1904a: 6). Note that even the emperor's manifesto contains undertones of "shapkozakidatel'stvo"[1], which appears to have been typical of

[1] Derived from the phrase 'zakidat' shapkami' ('to beat someone by throwing a hat at them'), this facetious term was used as early as the first half of the 19th century by I.S. Turgenev (specifically, in his 'Three Portraits' (1846)). It means acting with a conceited and flippant attitude. There is little doubt that the phrase 'zakidat' shapkami' became idiomatic following the Russo-Japanese War specifically, coming to symbolize an attitude of acting as if victory were already in the bag. Another term that is apt in this context is

most of the Russian Empire's military top brass at the time. Worthy of note in this context is the role of the Far East governor himself, Admiral E.I. Alekseev, who had the reputation of Russia's top expert on the Japanese army and navy. Even Russia's top naval commanders, like S.O. Makarov, underestimated Japan's military might, which had increased sharply by the start of the war.

It is, perhaps, for this reason that from the very outset of hostilities propaganda luboks intended for a little-educated audience were imbued with a pronounced "victory-already-in-the-bag" attitude. Illustrations of this kind were printed in newspapers and magazines alike in the form of postcards and posters. In both scholarly (e.g., Leventsev, 2012) and popular literature this kind of popular prints are referred to as 'luboks' (derived from 'lub' – a special type of board on which pictures were printed), which is in alignment with pre-revolutionary tradition, although luboks would ultimately tend to be printed on paper.

A few words will now be said about some of the most famous of these luboks. One of the first and most famous popular prints was the poster 'Vasya Flotskii' ('Vasily the Navy Man') (Figure 1). It depicts a Russian sailor, wearing a pair of trendy shoes and smoking a pipe, who is sitting on a fortress and is shooting back at the Japanese Navy. Calm and with an ironic smile on his face, the sailor is throwing shells over his shoulder at the enemy, similar to someone playing with small rocks on the beach, while watching the "horseplay" of his opponents: a Japanese "puppeteer" admiral who is trying to manage some ships, a fat British military industrialist who is watching the battle with greed in his eyes, and a lanky American politician who is looking to "step" on yet another Pacific island. Behind the sailor, a little way away, there is sitting a Russian infantryman who is smoking a pipe in the same, calm, manner.

Fig. 1. Propaganda poster entitled 'Vasya Flotskii' ('Vasily the Navy Man')

'golovotyapstvo', employed by M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin in his works 'The History of a Town' (1869) and 'Letters to My Aunt' (1882), which means 'being incompetent, irrational, and negligent in performing one's duties'. The term is formed from 'golova' ('head') and 'tyapat'' ('to hit') – i.e. it implies a person who tends to hit their head against various objects due to carelessness.

The poster employs a special propaganda method for covering reality – the "exactly the other way round" technique, whereby facts are presented in upside-down form. The real story is that it is the calmness of Admiral O.V. Stark, who failed to take appropriate measures to protect the ships, that led to an attack on the First Pacific Squadron resulting in two of the Russian fleet's more powerful ships, Tsesarevich and Retvizan, being taken out of action (the sinking of the third ship, the protected cruiser Pallada, seems like "peanuts" compared to this). Only thanks to the crew's ability to provide a competent and efficient response, as well as by a stroke of luck, two of the Russians' top battleships did not sink. What is more, they would later display their true worth in the Battle of the Yellow Sea.

Fig. 2. Propaganda poster entitled 'The Sailors' Battle Song'

Another famous propaganda item is the poster 'The Sailors' Battle Song' (Figure 2). It depicts a Russian sailor (who seems to represent the battleship Retvizan) with a Cross of Saint George on his chest who is protruding from a ship's front section and, with a smile on his face, dealing a Japanese "ship sailor" a blow, knocking some of his teeth out.

The posters' content clearly suggests what the target audience is – peasants and workers, as in both illustrations the protagonists are not officers, i.e. someone from the noble estate, but "regular" soldiers and sailors.

Fig. 3. Propaganda poster entitled ‘The Don Cossacks’ Battle Song’

Propaganda did not, of course, pass the land forces by. The poster ‘The Don Cossacks’ Battle Song’ depicts a Don Cossack who is punishing a Japanese infantryman with a whip as if he were a lazy student. This is happening against the backdrop of the Port Arthur fortress, with an American and a Chinese watching the scene.

Fig. 4. Propaganda poster entitled ‘Japanese Victory’

What appears to be the most eloquent poster reflecting the “victory-already-in-the-bag” sentiment in Russian society is ‘Japanese Victory’ (Figure 4). It depicts a fluttering Russian flag, with the word ‘Tokyo’ written on it, on an island surrounded by a slew of sunken Japanese ships. Sitting on the island are two beaten members of the Japanese leadership – Prime Minister H. Ito and Admiral H. Togo, the man in charge of the fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy (what is depicted in the caricature is actually quite far from reality). They are being consoled by an “American” and a “Brit”, respectively. The main character here is a Russian officer who is using some finger-flicking and blowing to send a flying Japanese soldier onto the island. At a distance, a “Korean” and a “Chinese” are watching the scene in a terrified manner. Evidently, it was not until the Russian army and navy sustained heavy defeats that the government would stop assuring society of Russia being “destined” for victory!

In addition to the pictures, each of the posters comes with prankish jaunty verse songs of a patriotic and derogatory-ironic nature, which were to help “reinforce” the material’s propaganda effect on those who could read.

To conclude the examination of the period’s lubok caricatures, it is also worth touching upon posters with a direct focus on inspiring a sense of national self-esteem, which openly promoted chauvinism, propagandizing the national-cultural superiority of the Russian people over the Japanese. Take for example the poster ‘Our Women and Their Women’ (Figure 5).

Fig. 5. Propaganda poster entitled ‘Our Women and Their Women’

The illustration is split diagonally into two halves. The upper right half depicts a “woman” (as it says underneath) – a Russian nurse who is pouring some medicine into a glass. The bottom left half depicts a “broad” – a lady who is coquetting with a Japanese sailor. She is pouring him some liquor. It, however, is quite superfluous to state here that what is portrayed in the drawing was totally misaligned with Japanese mentality and cultural traditions. Promoting chauvinism and cultivating disrespect for the opponent at a national level must have been the only objectives pursued through the poster. Considering that back then Russian peasants and workers did not really know much about Japanese culture, posters of this kind were doing their ideological job pretty well.

Below is an analysis of the instrumentarium that was more “ideological”.

The illustrated chronicle of the Russo-Japanese War, unlike the period’s “mass-production” newspapers and popular prints, was written in a highly restrained and tactful form, with a pronounced reliance on verifiable facts. However, even the chronicle was not “free from ideology”. For example, in the work’s very first page there is an illustration depicting Saint George piercing an Oriental dragon serpent with pronounced Asian facial features! (Letopis', 1904a: 3)

What is definitely worthy of note is the large number of inaccuracies in the period’s propaganda materials, which, however, seemed to always be there for the benefit of the Russian army – and may, therefore, be regarded as a sort of ideological tool too. In particular, the chronicle tells us about the “sinking” of the Japanese second-class protected cruiser Takachiho in the Battle of Chemulpo Bay (Letopis', 1904a: 91), having eagerly bought into a report by a “tale-teller” named V.F. Rudnev. One by no means must downgrade the heroism displayed by First-Rank Captain

Rudnev in particular and the crews of the cruiser Varyag and gunboat Korietz as a whole, who had entered an inherently hopeless battle facing an opponent with an overwhelmingly larger crew – these men chose to die in battle with honor rather than submit to the enemy in shame. What excuses the "chroniclers" is that the above report was the only information that was available to them at the time of writing the document. The Japanese were doing their best to conceal their losses. Even the sinking of the battleship Yashima, which struck a mine off Port Arthur on May 15, 1904 and later sank on its way to Japan, became known to the wider public only subsequent to the Battle of Tsushima.

The chronicle did, however, distort some obvious facts too – and it, obviously, did so for propaganda purposes. For example, speaking of the same battle at Chemulpo, it asserts that Rudnev deliberately refused to exploit the dark and his ship's superiority in speed, which he could have done to leave the harbor at night, and instead heroically confronted the enemy at daytime in company with the slow Korietz (Letopis', 1904a: 90). However, in reality, it was hardly possible to do something like that at night, for, based on pre-war reports from none other than Rudnev himself, due to mechanical problems Varyag was not capable of developing a speed of more than 14 knots. It was either a deliberate distortion of facts or just mere incompetence on the part of the authors, who may have relied on "factory" figures for the cruiser's speed that were based on 12-hour tests conducted back in 1900 (23.2 knots) and have not been familiar with relevant reports. Couple this with the chroniclers' implausible lack of knowledge of the tactical situation, although there is a layout of Chemulpo Bay in the chronicle – its long and narrow channel was controlled by the Japanese destroyers, which even at nighttime could easily spot and torpedo any relatively large cruiser. This was perfectly understood by Rudnev, who deliberately led the ships into battle 15 minutes before the expiry of the surrender ultimatum issued by the Japanese, as hypothetically one had much better chances of inflicting more damage on the opponent at daytime. There seems to have been a deliberate distortion of facts for the sake of a "cute" propaganda maneuver.

The ideological instrumentarium was obviously a lot larger than what is discussed in this work. Nevertheless, an attempt is made to distinguish between "mass consumption" propaganda materials, intended for the illiterate portion of the population, and "intellectual" ones, intended for members of the intelligentsia. However, even the relatively small pool of materials that this work examines appears to be well capable of providing a general picture of military propaganda in the Russian Empire during the Russo-Japanese War.

5. Conclusion

In outline, the paper's key points are as follows:

1. In addition to the various scientific-technical achievements, the period of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 witnessed significant advances in ideological tools for waging warfare, with the target audience being, above all, the state's own subjects. Just as the case would be in the two subsequent world wars, these tools were being reproduced by mass media, which were emerging in a new industrial society.

2. The propaganda instrumentarium employed in the Russo-Japanese War was aimed at a clear-cut target audience. The period's official government documents (e.g., manifestos, chronicles, etc.) were written in quite a restrained and tactful form, as they were oriented toward an "intellectual" audience – members of the intelligentsia and the military leadership.

The period's military propaganda posters (referred to as 'luboks' due to similarities with primitive pictures with a simple plot printed on a special type of board), postcards, and illustrations in the nation's mass newspapers were, above all, oriented toward members of the lower estates – workers, peasants, and non-manual personnel (some would call this group 'raznochintsy'). This ideological instrumentarium was distinguished by primitivism, the presence of offensive undertones, a tendency to openly distort reality, and a tendency to arouse feelings of national superiority, cruelty, hatred, and chauvinism. Posters and postcards of this kind contained little text and were limited to short catchy phrases or had no text in them altogether.

3. The ideological work conducted by the government in the first months of the war was highly fruitful – it helped foster a patriotic sentiment among the public, with numerous volunteers rushing to join the army and navy. However, as the number of Russia's military failures rose, the scale of disappointment grew with the same vigor, with even the illiterate portion of the population, mainly workers and peasants, becoming convinced of the deceitfulness of most of the

propaganda materials. This would spark a revolutionary sentiment among the public, galvanizing the revolutionary element in Russian society. It is hard not to agree with the suggestion that, among other reasons, a decisive role in the outbreak of the Revolution of 1905–1907 was played by the nation's defeat in a "small victorious war". A major role in bringing about the drastic change in societal sentiment – from "hurrah-patriotism" to animosity toward the government – was also played by "unbridled" propaganda, which in the end would expose to society the lies of the nation's leadership in an equally illustrative way.

The defeat in the war had a particularly dispiriting effect on the Russian army's mid- and lower-ranking officers, whom it is in no way possible to reprove for being incompetent or cowardly. Eventually, Russian culture began to be dominated by melancholic trends, with sorrowful romance songs becoming increasingly popular among the masses, with even the emperor evincing a liking for the genre. Worthy of note is the fact that performer of "gloomy" Gypsy romance songs Varvara Panina, who was a favorite songstress with many Russian officers and Nicholas II himself, earned her popularity subsequent to the Russo-Japanese War specifically, which she did thanks to her talent and, most importantly, her repertoire. Furthermore, they would choose as the nation's defeatist "hymn" I.A. Shatrov's haunting waltz 'On the Hills of Manchuria'. With that said, a number of mid-ranking Russian officers who had gone through the "crucible" of the Russo-Japanese War would turn out to be psychologically tough enough to subsequently become prominent personalities radiating the glory of the Russian army (e.g., N.O. Essen and A.V. Kolchak).

4. Unfortunately, subsequently (i.e., during World War I) the government would fail to take account of the flaws of its ideological work during the Russo-Japanese War. Its propaganda would again be rampantly blatant and offensive toward the opponent, and, on top of that, its content would not be altered in alignment with the situation at the front. While poor propaganda may not have been the cause of the 1917 revolutions, it certainly did not help boost patriotic sentiment – that is for sure.

In this regard, worthy of note is the fact that subsequently the Soviet government would show quite a subtle understanding of both the positive and negative elements of its pre-revolutionary ideological work. During World War II, the toughest known trial for the Soviet state, USSR officials concerned with propaganda, including Joseph Stalin himself, would for the most part keep their "nose in the wind" – with a focus on modifying the ideological instrumentarium as required by the situation. While using the same pre-revolutionary methods of rough, primitive propaganda, intended primarily for the illiterate portion of the population, the Soviet government did not scruple to alter the style in which it addressed the nation – from offensive-ironic posters released at the very outset of the war (e.g., those portraying A. Hitler) to patriotic ones produced subsequent to the heavy defeats sustained between July and August of 1941 (e.g., 'The Motherland Calls!'), followed by those carrying a rough, offensive message again. Even Joseph Stalin began his speech of July 3, 1941 (his first speech following the outbreak of the war, i.e. an address delivered 11 days later!) with the words "brothers and sisters", something absolutely unimaginable in the second half of the 1930s.

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