

How this conflict in a northern Chinese port changed the world

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When Japan defeated Russia in Port Arthur, it was the first victory of an Asian country over a European power.

It is hardly credible that in an outer suburb of Dalian, a major port in China's north-eastern province Liaoning, is the site of the first major global conflict of the 20th century.

This was where the Japanese Imperial Army defeated the Russian Imperial Army. It was the first victory by an Asian power over a European power. It is long forgotten now, but at the time the world was shocked. A new world order was emerging.

Lv Shun, which until 1949 was known in English as Port Arthur, is a quiet leafy town next to a magnificent harbour. With its goose-like neck, the narrow entrance opens onto a wide, deep-water protected port with hills on three sides.

It was this strategic location arising from its unique topography, and that it remained open all year despite the bitter winters of the north-east, that made it of such importance to the great imperial powers at the time.

It was also the home base of China's submarine fleet, until in the early 2000s it was moved to Hainan Island in the south, in part reflecting a [shift in China's strategic interest](#) from the north-east to the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

I first visited in 2009. It was still officially closed to foreign visitors. At the end of a jolly evening drinking white spirits with the Liaoning Party Secretary – who was a trained mining engineer and had spent some time in the Pilbara – he escorted me out and, with his arm across my shoulders, asked if he could do anything for me.

I recalled that my ambassador in the late 1980s, an avid history buff, had always wanted to visit Port Arthur but could not because of the presence of the submarine fleet. So, I said yes, there was just one thing: could he arrange for me to visit Lv Shun? His promise to do so was delivered with a hearty slap on my back. Two days later I was there.

Waiting for the red chop

Old habits die hard. We were not allowed to walk around the docks but drove past along rows of single-storey wooden houses and shops that looked more Russian than Chinese, painted in pastel greens, blues and pinks. The streets had quaint names such as Lenin and Stalin.

Tourist infrastructure had been built around the battle sites in anticipation of Port Arthur being opened to foreigners. Small groups of Japanese and Russian tourists had already begun visiting the area. The local authorities explained that China's all-powerful State Council had some years before advised local officials that Port Arthur would be opened to international tourism. They went ahead and invested in the infrastructure.

But in China, nothing can proceed without an official paper with its red-wax chop. This had still not arrived, so a sort of grey opening had occurred. I had visions of officials each day peering into their mailboxes and wondering if snails had eaten the paper with the chop.

Port Arthur is now fully open, but foreigners still can't enter the naval dock area – although they are permitted to stroll outside the open-grid fence. The view did not seem different if one were inside or outside the fences. It all has the look and feel of Woolloomooloo naval dockyards in Sydney.

The battle sites of Port Arthur are mainly spread across three groups of hills, each of which has a commanding view over the harbour, from which to launch artillery attacks on ships trapped inside. The remains consist of a heavily fortified Russian citadel, trenches, cannon and machine gun batteries, and shells. It is eerily reminiscent of WWI battle sites in the Somme and Gallipoli.

The war began on the night of February 8, 1904, with a surprise Japanese attack on the Russian Far East Fleet which was at anchor in Port Arthur. In 1898, Russia had forced the Qing to lease Port Arthur for 25 years. This gave Russia its first

warm-water port in the Pacific. Moscow had already occupied large areas of Manchuria.

With the lease, it now extended the Trans-Siberian railway from Mukden (Shenyang) to Port Arthur, where the original, wooden, onion-domed station remains. Alarmed by Russia's push down the Liaoning Peninsula and its ambitions in Korea, Japan blockaded the entrance to the port and attempted to sink the Russian fleet using naval power.

This was only partly successful and by April the fighting shifted to land, with the Russians holding the commanding heights of the hills and the Japanese attempting to dislodge them.

A new order

The campaign at Port Arthur anticipated the mass slaughter of WWI, where powerful lethal new technologies of warfare were combined with outdated tactics and strategies. Just as the opposing armies were to pound each other to bits across the trenches of the Somme, so it was in Port Arthur 10 years earlier.

For the next eight months, the two armies bombarded each other relentlessly until in December, Japanese sappers successfully tunneled underneath the Russian citadel and blew up the massive structure from below. The cannons were then turned onto the Russian Fleet still trapped in Port Arthur.

In one evening, four battleships and two cruisers were sunk in quick succession. It was the only case in history where land-based forces wreaked such devastation on a navy. The Russian commander surrendered as the fleet had been lost. He was court-martialled in 1908, but his death sentence was eventually commuted.

All up, 130,000 to 170,000 troops were killed or wounded, and 20,000 Chinese died, presumably mainly civilians as the Chinese were not combatants. One of the many historical curiosities from this war was that when the Japanese first attacked the Russians, the Qing court supported Japan and offered to fight on its side. Japan refused the offer.

From this victory, the Japanese went on to overrun the Russians in Mukden, where the two armies numbered more than half a million troops. Japan was now

in control of Manchuria. But both sides were so exhausted from the war that they readily accepted Teddy Roosevelt's offer to mediate the peace.

The Treaty of Portsmouth, named after the US naval base in New Hampshire where it was negotiated, marked the entry of the US into global affairs.

A new order in which the Pacific would become increasingly important was emerging at the beginning of the 20th century out of the Battle for Port Arthur. This war also led to the founding of the Red Cross and the Second Geneva Convention on Rescue at Sea (Japan had refused to rescue Russian troops from ships they had sunk).

The treaty, signed on September 5, did not award Japan reparations, which became a long-standing source of nationalist criticism. Russia had to recognise that Korea was part of Japan's sphere of influence (Japan annexed Korea in 1910), and Russia agreed to leave Manchuria which Japan occupied, and signed over its 25-year lease to Port Arthur. Japan was denied the Russian Far East which it sought, and Sakhalin Island was handed to Russia.

Turmoil and revolution

Global history in the 20th century was cast at this brutal battlefield. From Port Arthur to St Petersburg, turmoil, revolution and refugees swept across Eurasia, and a new imperial power rose in East Asia. When viewed from Port Arthur, the fratricidal conflict in France 10 years later can be seen as just that, a family affair.

Japan's victory presaged many things: its rise and eventual military domination of East Asia; the looming collapse of Imperial Russia; and, although more distant, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

In 1911, the Qing Dynasty collapsed with hardly a puff from Sun Yat-sen's nationalists after 268 years in power. Their Manchurian language had long gone. From negotiating the peace in 1905, the US found itself in total war with Japan 36 years later.

The Russo-Japanese War was fought on neutral Chinese territory without any regard to the sovereign power. Many Chinese died in the war. Its settlement involved carving up Chinese territory in favour of Japan. The Qing court and the

Chinese people were powerless bystanders. Another act in the century of China's humiliation by imperial powers played out here.

As war raged at Port Arthur, a further act of humiliation of China was under way on the far opposite side of the country at the Buddhist oases along the Silk Road in Xinjiang. A Japanese expedition led by Count Otani was following earlier European excursions looting ancient religious treasures.

Count Otani either led or organised three expeditions to Xinjiang between 1902 and 1914. On my first visit to Port Arthur, I was amazed to find in the sturdy and refined Japanese-built Lv Shun Museum a collection of Count Otani's artefacts, including two perfectly preserved mummies and exquisite Gandhara Buddhist sculptures. In 1949, they were left when the Japanese hastily fled China, closing the door on 54 years of occupation which began at the Battle of Port Arthur.

After Mao and Deng, it is Xi's era, which is expected to be marked by greater state control and increasing isolation from the Western world.

At the time of the war, it is doubtful many in imperial Europe understood it marked the beginning of a new world order. By 1919, all the great empires had been swept away, starting with the Qing then the Russian. Japan emerged as the dominant imperial power; the Pacific for the first time as a major theatre of global competition; and the United States as a global actor.

For Chinese nationalists, the war was another egregious, callous act of imperial arrogance. It was another brick in building the edifice of the century of humiliation and opening China to Japanese occupation condoned by foreign powers. In China today, it is an important part of the historical narrative that underpins the Communist Party's legitimacy and which [Xi Jinping draws on](#) to unite the country around his theme of the Great Chinese Rejuvenation.

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