

University of North Carolina at Asheville

“A Rout and A Slaughter:”
How the Russian Bear Went to Davy Jones'

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“A foul smell floats up from . . . where the remains of the killed were burned in the . . . fires before the surrender. The charred remains were [then] piled up . . . where could be seen skulls and other human bones.”¹

The casual reader may be excused for mistaking this nightmarish passage for a survivor's account of Auschwitz or Treblinka. With our post-Holocaust expectations, macabre tales of incinerated bodies call to mind images of Nazi extermination camps. Yet this scene antedated the collapse of the Third Reich by four decades. In fact, the description is a recollection of the horrors which confronted a Japanese sailor as he inspected the Russian battleship *Orel* after her capture at Tsushima, the final naval engagement of the Russo-Japanese War. The setting was the ship's engine room, where Russian seamen had stoked their boiler fires with coal and corpses.

As reports of the Japanese triumph at Tsushima were telegraphed around the globe, an historical debate began over how an Asian power soundly defeated one of the largest European fleets of the era. For by the morning of 28 May 1905, following a day of intense fighting, Russia's Second Pacific Squadron virtually ceased to exist.² What astounded westerners the most was not merely the success of Japan's navy, but the magnitude of the Russian catastrophe. Even the squadron's pessimistic commander, Admiral Zinovy Petrovich Rozhstvensky, “had not foreseen such a disaster, and had hoped that after an indecisive battle, in which both sides would have suffered greatly, the Russian ships could reach Vladivostok.”³

As Rozhstvensky's statement made clear, the Second Pacific Squadron was never expected to win outright. Yet neither was the squadron expected to fight alone. Russian naval strategy in the Pacific called for a rendezvous between the Second Pacific Squadron and warships from Vladivostok and Port Arthur.⁴ That meeting never occurred because Port Arthur

1 Frederick McCormick, *The Tragedy of Russia in Pacific Asia* (New York: Outing Publishing Co., 1907), 172.

2 “Japan's Great Naval Victory,” *Harper's Weekly*, June 10, 1905, 847.

3 McCormick, 171.

4 “What Russia Hopes To Do,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1904, 2.

fell to the Japanese army three months before Rozhstvensky's fleet arrived in the Pacific.⁵ Hence, the catastrophe at Tsushima was caused by crippling delays which prevented the Second Pacific Squadron from reaching Port Arthur in time to unite with its fleet.

These delays were due to the Second Pacific Squadron's unsuitability for war. The squadron was an *ad hoc* formation of warships from the Baltic Fleet. When the decision was made to send the fleet to reinforce Port Arthur, few of its vessels were ready for immediate deployment. The sailors aboard them were worse. Most were conscripts with little experience of the sea. Rozhstvensky devoted precious months to fitting out ships and training crews. Damages to ships incurred during training exercises further delayed the fleet's departure. Worst of all, the squadron was tasked with steaming eighteen thousand miles from the Baltic coast to the Sea of Japan, a journey of several months under normal circumstances.

As if grimly determined to validate Murphy's Law, the voyage of the Second Pacific Squadron was plagued with difficulties. Scarcely had the fleet left port than it became embroiled in a diplomatic crisis, the Dogger Bank Affair. War with Great Britain seemed imminent. Although Rozhstvensky escaped that danger, he still had to cope with logistical and mechanical nightmares. Halts for repairs and refueling were a regular feature of the cruise. During one such stop, the squadron received news of Port Arthur's capture. Rozhstvensky had ample time to sail from Russia and trap the Japanese fleet between two pincers. At last, time had run out.

For in addition to denying Rozhstvensky the use of the Port Arthur battleships and dockyard, his delaying gave the Japanese admiral, Togo, time to prepare for the squadron's arrival. After almost a year of war, Togo's ships were in desperate need of refitting. Rozhstvensky's prolonged stays in neutral waters, where he awaited reinforcements from Russia, gave Togo the opportunity he needed. The fate of the Second Pacific was sealed.

⁵ "The Coming Sea Fight," *New York Times*, April 9, 1905, 8.

With the passage of Tsushima from the front pages of newspapers to the pages of history books, scholars sought to determine the precise causes of the Russian debacle. As early as 1911, there was already a substantial amount of historical material available, much of it written by survivors of the battle. In April of that year, *The American Historical Review* published an historiographical essay on Tsushima-related works entitled, “The Literature of the Russo-Japanese War.” The reviewer, an anonymous “British Officer,” evaluated a substantial number of primary sources, recently published in English for the benefit of western readers. The most significant passage in the article was a statement made by General Sir William Nicholson, who at the time of the battle was serving in China as the senior British military attaché.⁶ Referring to the siege of Port Arthur, Nicholson insisted that there was ample time “under normal conditions of naval mobility . . . for a squadron from the Baltic to reach the Far East.”⁷ Nicholson neglected to elaborate upon the obvious conclusion, that the condition of the Second Pacific Squadron was not normal. Since 1911, historians have tended to focus solely upon the condition of the fleet. Yet even they have failed to observe the connection between the state of the squadron, its delayed voyage, and its ultimate demise at Tsushima.

In the succeeding decades, the Battle of Tsushima remained a favorite topic for historians, who typically incorporated its story into larger works on the Russo-Japanese War. One such author was Reginald Hargreaves, who published *Red Sun Rising: The Siege of Port Arthur* in 1962. The work is relevant for the background information it provides on naval affairs prior to Tsushima. On February 8, 1904, the First Pacific Squadron, anchored in Port Arthur, was attacked and subsequently blockaded by the Imperial Japanese Navy.⁸ Yet Hargreaves traced no connection between the fall of Port Arthur and the defeat at Tsushima, even though he admitted

6 “The Literature of the Russo-Japanese War,” *American Historical Review* 16, no. 3 (1911): 520.

7 “The Literature of the Russo-Japanese War,” 521.

8 Reginald Hargreaves, *Red Sun Rising: The Siege of Port Arthur* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), 12.

the threat that a combined Russian fleet was to the Japanese.⁹ In actuality, the Russians' failure to combine their forces mitigated that danger, allowing the Japanese to divide and conquer.

Fascination with the story of the Russo-Japanese War continued into the 1970's with the publication of J. N. Westwood's *Witnesses of Tsushima*. Drawing from numerous primary sources, Westwood constructed a narrative account of the Second Pacific Squadron as it was seen through the eyes of men who served with the fleet. The structure of the work followed a pattern of long quotations interspersed with Westwood's editorial remarks. In scope, it detailed the saga of the fleet from its beginning to its bitter end. In Westwood's estimation, ultimate responsibility for the catastrophe lay with Admiral Rozhdestvensky, who “whether or not he suffered a full nervous breakdown . . . it is certain that after leaving Madagascar the 2nd Squadron had been led by a man . . . in need of a long holiday.”¹⁰ However, in summing up Rozhdestvensky's character, Westwood overlooked that it was in Madagascar that the admiral received news of the fall of Port Arthur.¹¹ As Westwood's words made clear, Rozhdestvensky was a changed man after that, and no wonder. As his entire strategy depended upon uniting the First and Second Pacific Squadrons, the loss of the former was an irreversible blow to Rozhdestvensky's hopes.

David Walder's *The Short Victorious War: The Russo-Japanese Conflict 1904-5* followed in 1973. Intended for a popular readership, this general history covered major events of the war, land actions as well as naval. Unfortunately, the broad scope of the work meant that Walder accorded the story of the Second Pacific Squadron only scant notice. Although he recorded facts concerning the difficulties faced by Rozhdestvensky in outfitting the fleet for sea, these occupied the space of a few pages. Nor did Walder relate the outcome of Tsushima to problems apparent in the Second Pacific Squadron before it sailed for the Far East. Rather, Walder decided that “it

⁹ Hargreaves, 132-133.

¹⁰ J. N. Westwood, *Witnesses of Tsushima* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1970), 230.

¹¹ “Rojestvensky Not Moving,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1905, 2.

was as if two well-matched heavyweights had been booked for a fight, but . . . one had to run a marathon before climbing into the ring.”¹² Thus, Walder not only incorrectly judged the opponents as “well-matched,” which they were not, but attributed the Russian defeat solely to the strain of the voyage. Yet the Russian “marathon” was not so arduous as Walder believed. From the start of the war until the fall of Port Arthur, it was Togo who had run a marathon of patrol duty, combat and blockade, not Rozhdestvensky. The Second Pacific Squadron frittered away weeks in neutral ports, giving the Japanese time to capture Port Arthur and refit their ships. As an ultimate irony, the defeat which Walder ascribed to haste was in fact due to lethargy.

A more nuanced analysis of inherent faults in the composition of the Second Pacific Squadron was provided just one year later by Denis and Peggy Warner in their 1974 history, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War*. The Warners, though they too were writing a comprehensive account of the war, devoted several chapters to describing the Second Pacific Squadron and its epic voyage. For its day, *The Tide at Sunrise* was one of the most detailed of the western secondary sources. If the book had a fault, it was that it lacked a clear thesis with which to explain the events at Tsushima, although the authors implied that the spread of revolutionary doctrine among the ships' crews put the squadron on the verge of mutiny.¹³ With more attention devoted to crafting a narrative than to interpreting events, readers of *The Tide at Sunrise* were left to draw their own conclusions.

After a brief hiatus from scholarly literature, the 1980's witnessed a resurgence in studies of the Russo-Japanese War. In 1988, two monographs appeared in print, R. M. Connaughton's *The War of the Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear* and Raymond Esthus' *Double Eagle and Rising Sun: The Russians and Japanese at Portsmouth*. Of the two, Connaughton paid more attention

12 David Walder, *The Short Victorious War: The Russo-Japanese Conflict* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 179.

13 Denis Warner and Peggy Warner, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War* (New York: Charterhouse, 1974), 484-487.

to the history of the Second Pacific Squadron from its inception onward. Like the Warners, Connaughton suggested that the the squadron was handicapped by mutiny, although witnesses seldom had anything but praise for the average sailor's bravery.¹⁴ Esthus, on the other hand, chose to detail the long-term consequences of the Japanese victory in its relation to the American-sponsored peace process. His was a study not in warfare, but diplomacy. The Battle of Tsushima was of interest to Esthus inasmuch as the result forced Tsar Nicholas to make peace.

The next author to explore the lessons of Tsushima was Peter Gatrell in "After Tsushima: Economic and Administrative Aspects of Russian Naval Rearmament," published in 1990 in *The Economic History Review*. Although Gatrell's main intent was to illustrate how the Russian Navy reinvented itself in the years following Tsushima, he also explored official reactions to the battle. In the words of one memorandum from the Naval General Staff, "We have lost precisely those ships that were no longer fit to serve in battle, as the experience of the recent war has demonstrated."¹⁵ With the acute vision of hindsight, the Russian high command appeared to admit its folly in sending obsolete craft to challenge a fleet made up of the best modern warships. However, evidence from the period shows that the squadron also contained many of Russia's most up-to-date vessels. Gatrell swallowed the General Staff's official line without question.

Following Gatrell, in 2002 *The Journal of Military History* published "The Russian Naval General Staff and the Evolution of Naval Policy, 1905-1914," which analyzed the Russian government's post-Tsushima reappraisal of naval policies. The article, written by the team of Eugenii F. Podsoblyayev, Francis King and John Biggart, highlighted the divisions that existed within the Russian command structure when it came to assigning blame for the disaster.¹⁶ The

14 R. M. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: A Military History of the Russo-Japanese War 1904-5* (London: Routledge, 1988), 256-257.

15 Peter Gatrell, "After Tsushima: Economic and Administrative Aspects of Russian Naval Rearmament," *The Economic History Review* 43, no. 2 (1990): 258.

16 Eugenii Podsoblyayev, Francis King and John Biggart, "The Russian Naval General Staff and the Evolution of Naval Policy, 1905-1914," *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 1 (2002): 43.

lesson to be learned from their study was that no clearly defined reason existed in the minds of Russian admiralty officials for the destruction of the Second Pacific Squadron.

Recently, Constantine Pleshakov's *The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima* helped to carry popular interest in Tsushima into the new millenium. At times, Pleshakov's showed more interest in relaying anecdotes of Rozhstvensky's bullying than he did for scholarly analysis. Nevertheless, Pleshakov's retelling was significant for its portrayal of Rozhstvensky after he received news of Port Arthur's surrender. Pleshakov revealed him to be a man who was impatient to depart Madagascar, but was forced to stay and await reinforcements from the Baltic.¹⁷ Pleshakov, who delighted in criticizing the administration, held Nicholas II responsible for the delay.¹⁸ Yet he failed to observe the implication that Rozhstvensky understood the importance of speed, while naval authorities in Russia did not.

Thus, one thing which none of these historians seriously considered was the purpose for which the Second Pacific Squadron was raised. As originally intended, Rozhstvensky's mission was to rendezvous with Russian vessels from Port Arthur and Vladivostok. The Second Pacific Squadron was not raised in order to fight the Imperial Japanese Navy by itself. That the fleet was forced to do so was due to the time lost between its departure from the Baltic and its arrival in the Sea of Japan. Historians were right to focus on the logistical problems of the squadron's voyage, but in so doing they neglected to consider the voyage in its proper context. Mechanical breakdowns or difficulties with coaling did not make the squadron unseaworthy. Instead, delays acted upon the fleet like ships' anchors, forcing Rozhstvensky to crawl when he ought to have sprinted. They destroyed the only chance the admiral had of uniting with other Russian warships, and trapped him into fighting a well-prepared foe single-handedly.

¹⁷ Constantine Pleshakov, *The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Voyage to the Battle of Tsushima* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 179-183.

¹⁸ Pleshakov, 181.

The Second Pacific Squadron was executed in the Sea of Japan, but it was condemned to death long before the first battleship left the Baltic. Strategists in the Russian Admiralty were happy for the “entire Baltic Fleet to be sacrificed if necessary,” provided that “it is able to cripple a sufficient number of Japanese ships.”¹⁹ That plan was made when the Port Arthur squadron was still a viable fighting force. By May 1905, the situation in the Pacific had changed dramatically. Port Arthur had surrendered in January.²⁰ A rendezvous between the fleets was no longer possible. In every respect, Rozhdestvensky's fleet was hopelessly outclassed by the Japanese. Yet the squadron represented Russia's only hope for securing an honorable peace. Rozhdestvensky had to fight. Ultimately, crewmen like those found roasting in the *Orel's* engine room were sacrificial victims to Tsarist naval policy. It was as if martyring legions of sailors were merely a formality to be gone through before the peace could be signed.

The disaster that befell Russia at Tsushima began in the dockyards of the Baltic Sea, where the Second Pacific Squadron was born. When war with Japan broke out in February 1904, Japanese naval intelligence estimated that the Baltic Fleet consisted of “six or seven battleships, mostly of recent construction.”²¹ The accuracy of that figure was confirmed by a representative of German naval intelligence in an interview with the *New York Times*.²² Even the Russian naval attaché in Washington, Commander Alexandre Boutakoff, was unable to deny that fewer than eight ships were available for service in the Far East, at least until the summer. Then, Commander Boutakoff boasted, “we will give the enemy a little surprise.”²³ He was certainly correct. Although, in the light of subsequent events, it was an unfortunate remark to let slip. One hopes that Boutakoff eventually learned to be more reticent when speaking to the press.

19 “What Russia Hopes To Do,” 2.

20 Emerson, Edwin, “The Surrender of Port Arthur,” *Harper's Weekly*, January 14, 1905, 47.

21 Hesibo Tikowara, *Before Port Arthur in a Destroyer*, trans. Robert S. F. Grant (London: John Murray, 1907), 94.

22 “Few Warships In The Baltic,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1904, 1.

23 “Russian Naval Attaché On Japanese Victory,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1904, 3.

Nevertheless, the armada which Rozhdestvensky assembled, when added to the warships already stationed in the Far East, outnumbered the Japanese fleet. When the Second Pacific Squadron left the Baltic, it consisted of seven battleships, an escort of armored cruisers, and two divisions of destroyers and torpedo boats.²⁴ The battleship *Orel* and two more cruisers followed later, once repairs were made to them.²⁵ In the east, Vladivostok sheltered an additional division of armored cruisers, “practically . . . battleships” in their own right.²⁶ A further five battleships, to say nothing of smaller craft, awaited Rozhdestvensky in Port Arthur.²⁷ The Black Sea Fleet, which would otherwise have contributed warships, was unavailable. Treaty obligations concerning the neutrality of the Dardanelles passage restricted its vessels to port.²⁸ On paper at least, the Second Pacific Squadron looked imposing.

Indeed, in terms of battleships, the Japanese were caught at a disadvantage. They barely had enough at sea to achieve parity with the five battleships of the First Pacific Squadron, which was strong enough to do Togo's forces “infinite harm” if it made a determined attack.²⁹ The real strength of the Japanese lay in the number of armored cruisers they had afloat, many of which were almost equal to the battleships in size, speed, and armaments.³⁰ To counter this threat, the Russians had to combine their squadrons, and for that, speed was of the essence.

Unfortunately, speed was not on the side of Russia, as events conspired to keep the Second Pacific Squadron stalled in port. During preparations for the voyage to Port Arthur, the battleship *Orel*, one of the newest vessels in the squadron, sank in the harbor of Kronstadt,

24 Nikolai Klado, *The Russian Navy in the Russo-Japanese War*, trans. J. H. Dickinson (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1905), 27-29.

25 Aleksei Novikov-Priboi, *Tsushima*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), 5.

26 “Reserve Forces of the Russian Navy,” *Harper's Weekly*, February 27, 1904, 313.

27 Tikowara, 206.

28 Theodore J. Grayson, “The War in the Orient in the Light of International Law,” *The American Law Register* 53, no. 12 (1905): 748.

29 Tikowara, 203.

30 Nikolai Klado, *The Battle of the Sea of Japan*, trans. J. H. Dickinson and F. P. Marchant (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), 34-36.

“owing to her sea valves being left open.”³¹ The *Orel* was salvaged intact, but repairs to her superstructure were still being carried out as late as September.³² In a cruel stroke of fate, the *Orel* had scarcely left drydock when she ran aground on a sandbar while being towed through the harbor.³³ Nor were the *Orel's* misfortunes isolated incidents. Eugène Politovski, an engineer assigned to the *Suvaroff*, noted in his diary that the battleship *Oslabya* was rammed in broad daylight by the *Buistry*, a torpedo boat.³⁴ Accidents like these were common across the squadron. Aleksei Novikov-Priboi, who served aboard the *Orel* as a paymaster's steward, heard rumors that discontented sailors sabotaged the ships.³⁵ Politovski, whose work took him across the fleet, agreed. Referring to the *Orel* in particular, he wrote, “probably there is some scoundrel on board who has been trying all along to injure the ship.”³⁶ How the villain contrived to place a sandbar under the *Orel's* keel in mid-tow, Politovski did not record.

Although suspicions of sabotage came back to haunt the squadron during its troublesome voyage to the Far East, there was probably nothing to them. Mishandling rather than malicious intent was the likely culprit. Apart from a few old salts like Politovski, Novikov-Priboi and their mates, Rozhestvensky's crewmen were raw hands. Captain Vladimir Semenov, a veteran officer recently arrived from Port Arthur, divided the men into two groups. In the first group were the conscripts, young men with no prior experience of naval life. The second group was made up of middle-aged reservists of questionable seamanship.³⁷ He deemed both sets worthless. In a fit of righteous indignation, Semenov bemoaned the disparity between Japanese and Russian sailors. “The Japanese fleet,” he wrote, “draws on its inexhaustible reserves of real seamen, and not of

31 “Baltic Fleet Cannot Relieve Port Arthur,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1904, 2.

32 Novikov-Priboi, 7.

33 Novikov-Priboi, 13.

34 Eugène Politovski, *From Libau to Tsushima*, trans. F. R. Godfrey (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1908), 3.

35 Novikov-Priboi, 12-13.

36 Politovski, 7-8.

37 Vladimir Semenov, *Rasplata [The Reckoning]*, trans. Louis Alexander Mountbatten (London: John Murray, 1909), 295.

clumsy rustics fresh from the plow.”³⁸ Nor was Semenov's opinion of his junior officers any higher. In general, he found them to be ill-disciplined and insolent. Only the fear of punishment compelled their obedience.³⁹ The commanding officer at Kronstadt, Admiral Birileff, concurred.⁴⁰ Whether the accidents were due to sabotage or stupidity, they accomplished the same end. The departure of the Second Pacific Squadron was postponed until October 1904.

Despite the delay, the Japanese were aware of the danger that a united Russian navy still posed to their fleet. Shortly after the squadron left Russian waters, Hesibo Tikowara, a destroyer commander blockading Port Arthur, wrote in his diary of discussions concerning the Baltic Fleet. While Tikowara and his fellow officers were confident about their ability to defeat either the Baltic or Port Arthur squadron on its own, the possibility of a union between the two was a growing source of anxiety to them.⁴¹ By October, the Japanese navy had been at sea for most of the year. Their ships had been in combat regularly, and patrolled in support of the blockade almost daily, “continually on the move with their engines and boilers under steam.”⁴² Worse, Port Arthur showed no signs of capitulating.

Here was the time for Rozhstvensky to attack. The warships and dockyards of Port Arthur were still in friendly hands. Rozhstvensky had allies there to aid in his victory, and asylum from Togo if he were defeated. For the men of the Second Pacific Squadron, everything depended upon reaching Port Arthur before the town was overrun by victorious Japanese. Had Rozhstvensky been in a position to strike Togo at once, the result of their encounter would have been very different from what occurred at Tsushima. Up until Tsushima, battles fought between Japanese and Russian ships were usually indecisive. When they fought, both sides suffered

38 Vladimir Semenov, *The Price of Blood: The Sequel to Rasplata and The Battle of Tsushima*, trans. Leonard J. Lewery and F. R. Godfrey (London: John Murray, 1910), 91.

39 Semenov, *Price of Blood*, 78-79.

40 “Baltic Fleet Cannot Relieve Port Arthur,” 2.

41 Tikowara, 193.

42 Tikowara, 94.

equally. Tikowara described his ship in the aftermath of one such engagement:

“On the deck lay stretched thirty or forty dead or seriously wounded, many of them horribly mutilated; and lying about the place were arms, feet, a head, a heap of entrails . . .”⁴³

Having been dealt punishment like that by the Port Arthur squadron, the Japanese were right to fear the arrival of Rozhstvensky and his eight battleships.

Moreover, the Japanese fleet was nearing the end of its usefulness after ten months at sea. Togo's crews were depleted, the rifling of his guns was worn smooth by constant bombardment, and the hulls of his ships leaked.⁴⁴ The Japanese were more unfit for war by the end of October than the Second Pacific Squadron was seven months later at Tsushima. Yet Rozhstvensky was still in Europe. The Japanese used the time afforded them by his delays to seize Port Arthur, return to their naval dockyards, and restore their ships to maximum efficiency. As the Second Pacific Squadron steamed across the globe, the Japanese had only to wait.

In the meantime, Togo relied heavily upon Japan's intelligence service. An English war correspondent, H. C. Seppings Wright, referred to the Japanese Intelligence Department as “one of the most wonderful branches of their perfect organization.”⁴⁵ Of course, Wright observed the Russo-Japanese War as a guest of Admiral Togo, and his memoirs of the conflict made no attempt to conceal his pro-Japanese bias. However, less prejudiced witnesses also testified to the superb management of the Intelligence Department. While in Japanese captivity after Tsushima, Captain Semenov was interrogated by an officer whom he had known in St. Petersburg before the war. Then, the officer's duties had been to monitor the Baltic Fleet, based in Kronstadt.⁴⁶ His reports gave the Japanese admiralty an insight into the fleet's combat readiness. Semenov also

43 Tikowara, 71.

44 Tikowara, 94-97.

45 H. C. Seppings Wright, *With Togo* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1905), 3.

46 Semenov, *Price of Blood*, 40-41.

discovered that the Japanese had access to a hoard of captured military documents, with which they followed the movements of Russia's army and navy.⁴⁷ Such knowledge was invaluable in helping Japanese strategists to coordinate operations against each of Russia's three naval divisions, particularly the Port Arthur squadron.

Even before the war began, Togo's staff had detailed information on the physical condition of the Port Arthur fleet, the number of its sailors, and the efficiency of their officers.⁴⁸ Within the Russian fortress, military secrets were collected by Chinese laborers, then smuggled out to their Japanese paymasters.⁴⁹ The information they conveyed was then relayed to Togo's fleet for decoding via a signal station behind the front lines.⁵⁰ Thus, Togo had a means of knowing when the Port Arthur squadron was being readied for a sortie to break the blockade.

To keep in touch with the activities of the Second Pacific Squadron, the Japanese military secretly maintained a telegraph station in Haiju Bay.⁵¹ Reports from Tokyo poured into the station, keeping Admiral Togo abreast of the latest developments. Seppings Wright was aboard the *Tainan-Maru* when one such telegram arrived bearing news of the Dogger Bank fiasco. The message was opened and read to a captivated audience. While navigating the English Channel, Russian battleships of the Second Pacific Squadron had opened fire upon an English fishing fleet and each other, believing the ships to be Japanese destroyers!⁵² Wright reported that the Japanese officers in the wardroom “collapsed with fits of laughter, and there were many who would not believe the story.”⁵³ Thereafter, the Japanese continued to receive intelligence reports about the Russian fleet until the day of the battle.

47 Semenov, *Price of Blood*, 44.

48 Tikowara, 2.

49 Emerson, 48.

50 Wright, 120.

51 Wright, 39.

52 “Russian Ships Duel In North Sea; 11 Slain,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1905, 2.

53 Wright, 189.

Togo did not have to rely solely on espionage to trace the voyage of the Second Pacific Squadron. After Dogger Bank, public demand for further news of the squadron's adventures goaded western newspapers into publishing regular updates on the fleet's activities. From their embassies in Europe and the United States, intelligence filtered back to Japan. One article in the *New York Times* revealed that Admiral Rozhstvensky intended to remain at anchor in the French port of Nossi-Bé, where he was completing coaling operations, through the end of February 1905.⁵⁴ Approximately two months later, the *Times* reported the Second Pacific Squadron's passage through the Strait of Malacca, en route to a coaling station in French Indochina.⁵⁵ Rozhstvensky's departure from French waters was likewise heralded by the press.⁵⁶ In each of these cases, monitoring western media outlets enabled the Japanese to accurately track the movements of their enemy. Moreover, foreknowledge of the Second Pacific Squadron's whereabouts allowed Togo to confront the Russians at a time and place of his choosing.

There is no doubt that the Japanese exploited their knowledge of the fleet's location to harass it through diplomatic channels. The point of contention was fuel. Since Russia lacked overseas colonies, the Second Pacific Squadron was dependent upon foreign coaling stations to complete its trans-global voyage. On an average day, the ships of the Second Pacific Squadron consumed more than three thousand tons of coal.⁵⁷ The amount required for a voyage of eighteen thousand miles staggered belief. Consequently, an agreement was reached with France, whereby the squadron was permitted to acquire shipments of coal in French colonial ports along its route.⁵⁸ However, at the start of the war, both Russia and Japan passed resolutions which made coal a contraband good, meaning that a neutral power could not provide it to either

54 "Rojestvensky Not Moving," 2.

55 "The Coming Sea Fight," 8.

56 "France Has Driven Russian Fleet Out," *New York Times*, May 9, 1905, 1.

57 Klado, *Russian Navy*, 41.

58 Grayson, 750-751.

belligerent for military use.⁵⁹ Giving coal to an armada on its way to fight in Asia certainly counted as a violation. The Japanese, aware of France's noncompliance, lodged a series of diplomatic protests with the French government in an attempt to force Rozhstvensky to leave neutral waters.⁶⁰ Although their protests were generally ignored, the Japanese demonstrated how diplomacy might be cunningly used to deprive an enemy fleet of shelter and provisions.

Still, the Japanese had to be very careful not to let their plan backfire. While Rozhstvensky managed to keep enough coal on board his vessels to continue the voyage, there was always a very real danger that pressuring the French to expel the squadron from their colonial waters might have sent it speeding across the Indian Ocean too soon. Up to a certain point in the war, any circumstances which hindered the progress of the Second Pacific Squadron were to Japan's benefit. This situation prevailed until Port Arthur surrendered in January 1905. From then on, the bulk of Togo's fleet was being repaired and refitted in Japanese naval yards, a process which generally took no more than a month to complete.⁶¹ Rozhstvensky learned of the loss of Port Arthur while at Nossi-Bé in French Madagascar.⁶² At approximately the same time, Japanese ambassadors began to lobby France for Rozhstvensky's expulsion.⁶³ The fact was, Japan no longer needed to delay the Second Pacific Squadron. Recourse to diplomacy signaled to the world that Japan was ready to fight. The balance of power in Asia had shifted dramatically in her favor. Now it was in Japan's best interests to hurry the fleet along, using her diplomats' tongues like whips to flog Rozhstvensky across the Indian Ocean to Tsushima.

Consequently, the Japanese intended not only to deny the Russian squadron facilities for refueling, but also to cut off its line of communications with home. In the days before warships

59 Grayson, 757.

60 "The Coming Sea Fight," 8.

61 Wright, 217-218.

62 "Rojestvensky Not Moving," 2.

63 "The Coming Sea Fight," 8.

were outfitted with radios capable of transmitting over hundreds of miles, fleets depended upon the land to send messages long distance. The Second Pacific Squadron was no exception. At Nossi-Bé, it was only through telegrams and letters that the squadron received its orders, men caught up with the news, and sailors received word from loved ones at home.⁶⁴ Politovski was particularly expressive of the squadron's need for contact with the outside world when he cursed the inefficiency of the mail steamer.⁶⁵ However, in addition to being the average sailor's last tangible link to civilian life, the telegraph and the mails were an important conduit for military information. The squadron remained in Madagascar long after coaling had completed, simply because Rozhstvensky was in prolonged communication with the admiralty in St. Petersburg and needed access to a telegraph office. Yet the admiral still believed in haste. "Each further day spent at Madagascar is harmful to us," he complained in a telegram to the Tsar.⁶⁶ While Nicholas vacillated, Rozhstvensky grew increasingly impatient.

Meanwhile, Japan continued to work through diplomatic channels. At some point during the fleet's sojourn in Nossi-Bé, Politovski was not certain when, Japan brokered a deal with France. The Japanese agreed to withdraw their objections to the Russian presence in Madagascar, provided that in future France barred the Russians from entering her ports, once the squadron finally departed French territorial waters. "If it leaves even for only three days, then it shall not have the right to enter a French port for three months," Politovski wrote to his wife.⁶⁷ Japan's intentions in the matter were transparent. Rozhstvensky was on the verge of sailing to Vladivostok. The Japanese, whose Intelligence Department scrutinized the fleet's progress, patrolled the sea lanes in between. On the coast of Asia, the only colonial power friendly to Russia was France. Japan hoped that the bargain she had struck would deny Rozhstvensky the

64 Pleshakov, 124-125.

65 Politovski, 175.

66 Pleshakov, 181.

67 Politovski, 171.

use of French Indochinese harbors. With no other ports in the region open to him besides Vladivostok, the admiral was checkmated. His fleet had to sail through hostile waters without any chance to rest after crossing the Indian Ocean. The scheme was a masterstroke for Japan.

In the event, neither Rozhstvensky nor French colonial officials were inclined to honor the agreement. After almost four weeks at sea, entirely out of sight of land until the fleet passed Singapore, the Second Pacific Squadron was running low on provisions.⁶⁸ Coal reserves were down to one-third of what they ought to have been.⁶⁹ The Japanese plan to starve Rozhstvensky into submission had been a delightful success. The only problem was that no one had bothered to tell the admiral that he was finished. An immediate decision was made to anchor the fleet in Kamranh Bay until supplies were replenished.⁷⁰ Then, too, Rozhstvensky was under orders to await the arrival of reinforcements. The Third Pacific Squadron was on its way.

Rozhstvensky was vehemently opposed to receiving the new ships. The new fleet had been the subject of Rozhstvensky's heated exchange of telegrams with Tsar Nicholas while his squadron lay at anchor in Nossi-Bé. Worse, the Third Pacific Squadron was the brainchild of Captain Nikolai Klado, one of Rozhstvensky's most outspoken detractors. Through publication of a series of newspaper articles, Klado argued for a new fleet to be raised for service in the Pacific.⁷¹ These articles attracted the attention of officials in the admiralty, who decreed that the Baltic Fleet was to be combed for any ships fit to sail. The motion was absurd. Even foreigners knew that much.⁷² Rozhstvensky was justifiably livid. He had striven to reach the Pacific with all speed. The Third Pacific Squadron transformed a cruise that ought to have been accomplished in three months or less into a seven month odyssey.

68 Politovski, 233.

69 Politovski, 236.

70 Semenov, *Rasplata*, 418.

71 Klado, *Russian Navy*, 86-89.

72 "Russian War Junk," *New York Times*, January 13, 1905, 8.

While Rozhstvensky waited for the Third Pacific Squadron to arrive in Kamranh Bay, his fleet's presence in French Indochina heightened diplomatic tension between the governments of France and Japan. The squadron's reappearance in French territorial waters was a violation of the informal Franco-Japanese pact. To add insult to injury, when two Japanese cruisers reconnoitered the bay, French torpedo-boats forced them to withdraw.⁷³ Naturally, the Japanese felt betrayed. Thanks to French duplicity, not only was the Second Pacific Squadron rested and resupplied, its commander was being reinforced.

The Japanese made frantic representations to the French authorities, but Rozhstvensky still did not leave the haven of Kamranh Bay until the first week of May 1905, having sheltered there since mid-April.⁷⁴ Shortly before the squadron sailed, the government of Indochina cut off all telegraphic communication with the mainland in a last ditch effort to appease Japan.⁷⁵ The gesture was small but significant, inasmuch as Rozhstvensky depended upon the telegraph for information about the wider world. With his access denied, Rozhstvensky unwittingly sailed north into the trap which Togo had prepared for him. If Japanese diplomacy had not crippled the squadron, it had at least blinded its commander.

The battle which subsequently ensued on May 27 was swift and bloody. Early in the morning, the Japanese cruiser *Idzumi*, on watch for the Second Pacific Squadron, made visual contact with the fleet.⁷⁶ The first shots of the battle were fired shortly after eleven o'clock, although the main engagement did not commence until mid-afternoon.⁷⁷ Almost at once, the Russian squadron was overwhelmed by a withering artillery barrage. Twice during the battle, Admiral Togo succeeded in "crossing the 'T'" of Rozhstvensky's column, and raked the Russian

73 Politovski, 243.

74 Semenov, *Rasplata*, 418.

75 "France Has Driven Russian Fleet Out," 1.

76 Vladimir Semenov, *The Battle of Tsushima*, trans. Alexander Bertram Lindsay (London: John Murray, 1906), 40.

77 Semenov, *Tsushima*, 45-50.

vessels with broadsides.⁷⁸ As Rozhstvensky recalled, innumerable fires broke out as Japanese shells reacted with the flammable paint which covered every ship, and enveloped the battleships in “a sheet of fire.”⁷⁹ At the same time, the force with which Japanese shells exploded jarred armor plating loose. Sea water poured through the open seams and flooded lower decks.⁸⁰ The descent of night halted the slaughter. When morning dawned, the survivors took stock of their losses. Out of thirty-six ships in the squadron, only three escaped, and one of these was later scuttled by her crew.⁸¹ Nearly fourteen thousand Russian seamen had been killed, wounded or captured.⁸² Admiral Rozhstvensky, who was gravely wounded during the previous day's firefight, was captured aboard the *Bedovi*.⁸³ Russia had suffered an astounding defeat.

In Washington, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote that, “No one anticipated that [Tsushima] would be a rout and a slaughter.”⁸⁴ Roosevelt's words marked the beginning of long years of inquiry into why the Second Pacific Squadron fared so badly. Despite the passage of more than a century since that fateful May afternoon in 1905, speculation continues. That arguments and counterarguments will continue to be made until at last, in the words of the proverb, the sea gives up its dead, is the only certainty historians have.

Only one man, Zinovy Petrovich Rozhstvensky, had no doubts about what happened. With his customary frankness, Rozhstvensky opined that, “If these same Russian crews had had to deal with Japanese crews . . . at the beginning of the war the result would doubtless have been very different.”⁸⁵ As Admiral of the Russian fleet, Rozhstvensky's words were revealing. They indicated that he understood the absolute necessity of reaching Port Arthur before it was captured

78 Klado, *Battle of the Sea of Japan*, 118-119.

79 McCormick, 170-171.

80 McCormick, 170.

81 McCormick, 172.

82 Esthus, 37-38.

83 McCormick, 174.

84 Esthus, 38.

85 McCormick, 170.

by the Japanese. Even one month's grace period, during which the Japanese warships were being overhauled after long months of sea duty, would have suited Rozhstvensky's plan:

“I had at first intended to proceed direct to the Far East . . . but the material obstacles were great, and it was therefore impossible to reach the Far East in time to fight the Japanese, when many of their ironclads were undergoing repairs . . .”⁸⁶

A rendezvous between Rozhstvensky's Second Pacific Squadron, the First Pacific Squadron in Port Arthur, and the cruisers of Vladivostok, was the key to Russian naval strategy when the war began. Everything hinged upon speed. Delay was fatal to Rozhstvensky's hopes. Yet delay dogged the Second Pacific Squadron. When war began in February 1904, the Baltic Fleet was not prepared for immediate deployment. Only a handful of the fleet's ships were fit for active service. The remainder did not become available until late summer. When they did come into service, inexperienced officers and crews were responsible for a series of accidents which kept even the newest battleships confined to the naval repair yards of Kronstadt. More than seven months passed before the rechristened Second Pacific Squadron at last weighed anchor.

Then, delays occurred the squadron's voyage which pushed its arrival beyond the acceptable time limit. Port Arthur fell while Rozhstvensky was still rounding Africa. Once that happened, with the Russian fleet still more than a month away, all hope of victory disappeared. Rozhstvensky no longer had a chance to fight an enemy whose own ships were worn out by months at sea. Instead, the tables were reversed, and it was the Second Pacific Squadron who had to fight a battle for which its crews were unprepared, after a voyage of more than eighteen miles. For Admiral Rozhstvensky and the men of his squadron, the only question left was how badly they would lose. Twelve thousand lives later, they knew.

⁸⁶ McCormick, 171.

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