

YELLOW PROMISE / YELLOW PERIL

FOREIGN POSTCARDS OF THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR (1904-05)

by John W. Dower

The Well-Watched War

Postcard "Realism"

Cartoon Adversaries

The Yellow Peril

Sources

The Well-Watched War

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 captured the attention of the world—partly because it represented a new level of “modern” warfare; partly because it offered an almost mesmerizing high-stakes confrontation between “East” and “West”; and partly because new modes of communication made it possible to share graphic images of the war with popular audiences everywhere.

One of these new modes of mass communication involved photographs. Photos began to be reproduced in periodicals in the late-19th century, when advances in printing made this possible, but they really came into their own as illustrations in books and magazines around the time of the Russo-Japanese War. The other great communications break-through was picture postcards, which coincidentally also burst onto the world scene just prior to the war between Japan and Russia. The postcard boom came about when national and international postal regulations were adopted that permitted the private manufacture and mailing of these lively popular graphics.

Although the war pitted Imperial Japan against Tsarist Russia, other powers also had a stake in the outcome. Japan financed the war in considerable part by raising loans in London and New York. By virtue of the bilateral military alliance it entered into with England in 1902, moreover, Japan was able to take on Russia without fear that any other nation would come in on Russia’s side (for this would have triggered England joining the war in support of Japan). Russia, on its part, looked to France for financial help and counted Germany as a sympathetic bystander.

Foreign journalists and military attachés flocked to Asia to observe titanic battles on land and sea first-hand. Photographers found an international audience for their largely black-and-white (occasionally tinted) images—and so did graphic artists, whose war paintings and drawings were now commonly replicated not merely in the print media, but also (in full color) on postcards as well. At the same time, talented illustrators and cartoonists back home also threw their talents into this new enterprise of international reportage and commentary.

One of the small ironies of this well-watched war was that it was observed most keenly outside the territories the two armies were fighting over—Korea and Manchuria in the northernmost part of China. Unlike Japan, neither Korea nor China had responded successfully to the challenge of the more technologically advanced Western world. They were going under, and lacked the infrastructure necessary to participate in this new world of mass communication. A French postcard of the war captures this situation almost inadvertently: while Russia and Japan fight it out and the Western world looks on as rapt spectators, the old “celestial empire” (here “China” and “Manchuria” in traditional garb) flees from the scene. Apart from the Japanese, other Asians were not churning out photographs and postcards for a national or international audience.



In this French postcard rendering of the well-watched Russo-Japanese War, the peaceful nations of Europe observe Russia and Japan fighting, while the now powerless “celestial empire” (China and Manchuria) withdraws from the scene.

[2002.6801]

The postcards in particular changed the way large numbers of people saw the world. They ranged from “realistic” to highly subjective, and they crossed national borders with remarkable ease. Pictures transcended language per se; and where language mattered, in the form of captions, entrepreneurs quickly learned how to cater to an international audience. The same postcard might appear in different languages, for example, or with the caption given in multiple languages (usually three or seven) on a single card.

Manufacturers of picture postcards also cultivated a clientele of international collectors. Cards might be issued in a numbered series featuring a common theme or artistic style, for instance. They might also involve a kind of comic-strip unfolding, in which it took two or more cards to play out a story line. Both foreign and Japanese postcards of the Russo-Japanese War were creative in this regard, and the foreign illustrators were particularly keen (and cynical) when it came to placing the war in a broader context of power politics among the great imperialist nations.

One of the liveliest “historical” sequences in this regard, for example, is a six-card run produced in Italy that requires no Italian whatsoever to understand. The setting is “Port Arthur,” where the Japanese navy initiated war in February 1904 with a surprise attack on the Russian Far Eastern fleet. The picture sequence, done as simple black woodcut “silhouettes,” begins with the Japanese kicking the Chinese out of that strategic port (in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95). Russia then kicks the Japanese out (the reference is to the so-called Triple Intervention of 1895) and settles into Port Arthur for a while itself (referring to 1898–1904). The final three graphics depict the Japanese sneaking up upon the Russians; giving them a blow from behind (the surprise attack); and, finally, kicking the Russians out just as they had done to the Chinese 10 years (and five postcards) earlier.





This Italian set of cards offers an ironic historical resume of power politics focusing on the strategic military base of Port Arthur between 1894 and 1904. (Port Arthur provided critical access to China, Manchuria, and Korea and was key to control of the surrounding seas.) In this sequence, (1) Japan kicks out China in 1894, (2) Russia shoves out Japan in 1895, (3) Russia occupies Port Arthur and the Liaotung Peninsula from 1898 to 1904, (4) the Japanese sneak back in 1904, (5) clobber the Russians in a surprise attack, and (6) kick the Russians out.

[2002.6771] through [2002.6776]

A nice example of sardonic foreign commentary on the power politics of the war—and, simultaneously, a good example of the manner in which these graphics jumped national borders—emerges in a pair of postcards, one in German and the other in French, that obviously derive from the same artist and original source. The first (in German) devotes half of the graphic to a detailed map of Korea and Manchuria, where the fighting took place. The Russian bear, with a French cap hanging on its stubby tail, confronts a female figure representing Japan (her theatrical costume is more Chinese than Japanese) behind whom stands an Englishman with a battleship on his head murmuring “Yessss... Allright!”



“The Russo-Japanese War”

[2002.5144]

This German postcard combines a map with humorous commentary on strategic alliances that lay behind the war. Russia (the bear) is backed up by France (a French hat on the bear's tail), while Britain (with a warship on its head, reflecting the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance) stands behind feminine Japan.

The German graphic is droll (so much so, indeed, that one suspects that it was probably not German in origin). A companion postcard in French depicting the end of the war has both sides bloodied and battered, blood trailing and vultures descending behind them, still backed up by their great-power supporters (France is now represented by a Joan-of-Arc figure in armor). Despite a succession of Japanese victories on sea and land, the brutal war did actually end in near stalemate, with both sides deep in debt and close to exhaustion. This is not, however, an image that one finds in Japanese postcard representations of the conflict, which tended to be overwhelmingly celebratory.

“End of the War”

[2002.3762]



This French rendering of the war's bloody end appears to come from the same series as the preceding German postcard. Both Russia and Japan have been severely battered and fallen deep in debt. Their allies (and creditors) look on with concern, while vultures feast on the carnage.

Postcards with the caption given in multiple languages commonly involve painterly and highly dramatic battlefront scenes. Here are representative examples from a sophisticated series printed with seven languages: Japanese, Russian, French, Italian, English, German, and Spanish.



Multi-language postcards included this sophisticated seven-language series, which carried captions in Japanese, Russian, French, Italian, English, German, and Spanish. The country of origin is unclear, but the artistic style is clearly European rather than Japanese.

Two of the great battles of the war are depicted—Admiral Markaroff recoiling on the deck of his flagship, which sank with few survivors in the decisive 1905 Battle of Tsushima; and early stages of the ferocious battle of Mukden, which pitted over 300,000 Russians against a quarter-million Japanese and ended in Japanese victory.

“Death of Admiral Makaroff”

[2002.3979]

“The Battle of Mukden in Manchuria in 1904”

[2002.3982]

A typical three-language (French, German, English) series includes detached and unbiased illustrations such as the following:

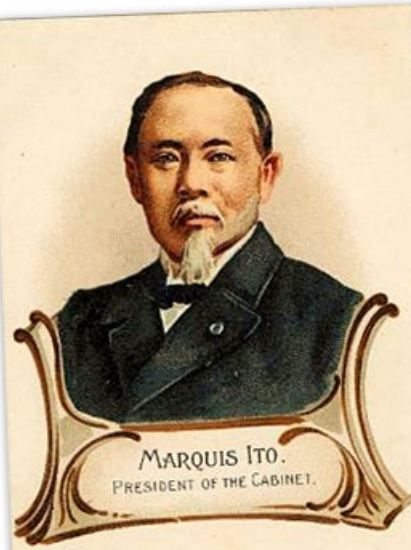


The trans-national audience for war postcards also emerges explicitly in this three-language series, where the caption is written in French, German, and English.

"The Japanese Army Crossing the Jho [Jho] River"
[2002.3967]

"Battle of Chemulpo; the Sinking of the Korejec"
[2002.3971]

There also existed a European and English-speaking audience for postcards featuring formal portraits of Japanese and Russian leaders. Again, the country of origin is often difficult to identify, for the same set might appear in different languages, as in the following series featuring both German and English versions:



MARQUIS ITO.
PRESIDENT OF THE CABINET.



MUTSUHITO
KAISER VON JAPAN.



GENERAL GRAF KATSURA.
MINISTER PRASIDENT



MARQUIS YAMAGATA.
CHIEF OF THE WAR COUNCIL.

Conseiller en chef



MARSCHALL OYAMA
CHEF DES GENERALSTABS.



GENERAL TERAUCHI.
MINISTER OF WAR.

This portrait series of Japan's most famous military and civilian leaders (including Mutsuhito, the Meiji emperor) appeared in both English and German versions. In these flattering treatments, the Japanese are virtually indistinguishable from European and British dignitaries.

"Marquis Ito, President of the Cabinet"
[2002.5554]

"Mutsuhito, Emperor of Japan"
[2002.5553]

"General Count Katsura, Prime Minister"
[2002.3681]

"Marquis Yamagata, Chief of the War Council"
[2002.5551]

"Marshal Oyama, Chief of the General Staff"
[2002.3682]

"General Terauchi, Minister of War"
[2002.5549]

The dignity and respect with which these eminent Japanese are portrayed is noteworthy: they are treated as leaders of a great nation, no different from Western dignitaries. A French portrait series in which Japanese leaders were often paired with their Russian counterparts on a single postcard follows this even-handed approach:



In this stylish French series, paired portraits of Russian and Japanese military leaders highlight their dignity and similarity.

"Russian General Stoessel and Japanese General Terauchi"
[2002.3672]

"Russian General Kuropatkin and Japanese General Kodama"
[2002.3666]

As will be seen, however, such complimentary “mirror images” were far from an invariable rule. The outpouring of foreign postcards of the Russo-Japanese War can indeed be used to illustrate the Western world’s acceptance and even admiration of Japan’s remarkably swift emergence as a powerful modern state. Just as often, however, these graphics also tell an entirely different story. Sometimes the mirror images are mutually derogatory. For every positive representation of the Japanese in particular, moreover, there is a negative one. On the one hand, Japan represents the promise of a modernizing Asia; on the other hand, the Japanese are presented as exotic upstarts, blood-soaked aggressors, the vanguard of a “Yellow Peril” that threatens Western civilization itself.

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Postcard "Realism"

Although much war photography was stiff, formal, and tedious, certain photos conveyed a gritty "realism" that no other mode of illustration—whether it be woodblock prints or paintings or cartoons—could match. And as it happened, much of this photography reached its audience in the form of postcards.

Even a small sample of photo postcards of the Russo-Japanese War suggests the way photography captured moments that would have appeared genuinely new and impressive to most people at the time. When the war ended with a peace conference convened in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, by President Theodore Roosevelt, for example, an English manufacturer responded with a composite postcard that included not only portraits of major dignitaries at the conference but also grisly images of the carnage on both sides. No other medium could have brought home the meaning of war and peace so dramatically.



The Russo-Japanese War ended with a peace conference at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, sponsored by U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt in September 1905. This British postcard juxtaposes portraits of major participants at the conference and photos of the human costs of the conflict.

"Russo-Japanese Peace Conference" (postcard with details enlarged)

[2002.5526]

Other photo postcards succeeded similarly in freezing certain scenes in an arresting manner—infantry surveying the battlefield through a telescope, for instance, and “wounded soldiers” being delivered to a hospital in a disconcertingly serene row of coolie-pulled rickshaws. (It is unclear if the injured men are Japanese or Russians captured and cared for by the Japanese—the latter act being a humanitarian gesture the Japanese took great care to emphasize in their own postcard propaganda.)



Photographs introduced unique themes, subjects, and perspectives to the new vogue of picture postcards. These British cards capture Japanese infantry at rest and wounded soldiers being taken to a hospital in rickshaws.

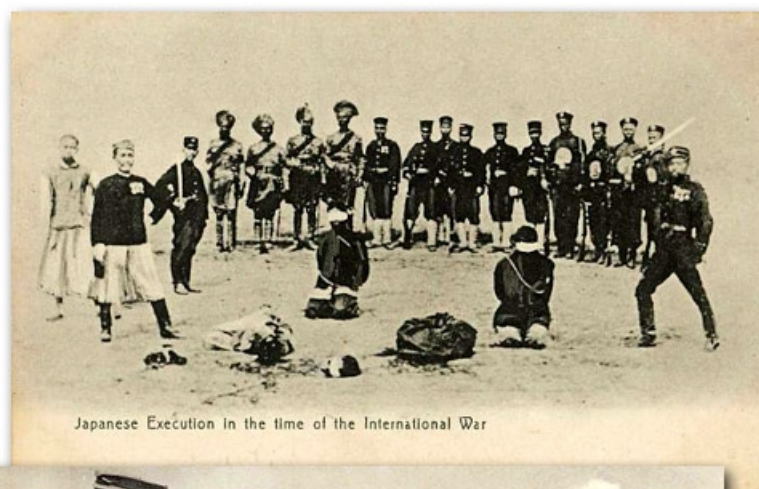
“Japanese Officers at Battle of Liao-Yang”

[2002.4020]

“Taking Wounded Soldiers to the Hospital”

[2002.4018]

The English clearly found particular titillation in “peculiarly Oriental” images of the latter sort. Their postcard offerings, for example, also include a puzzling photo cryptically captioned “Japanese Execution in the time of the International War,” in which the Japanese are beheading Asians (not Russians) and bystanders include turbaned Commonwealth observers. Another photo postcard, less perplexing but no less jarring, features Japanese soldiers cremating their dead.



Some British photo postcards were obviously offered for their shock effect, as seen in these scenes of an execution and the cremation of Japanese war dead. The execution scene is actually puzzling, for the victims are Chinese rather than Russians and the impassive observers include soldiers from India.

“Japanese Execution in the Time of the International War”

[2002.4031]

“Cremation of Japanese Soldiers”

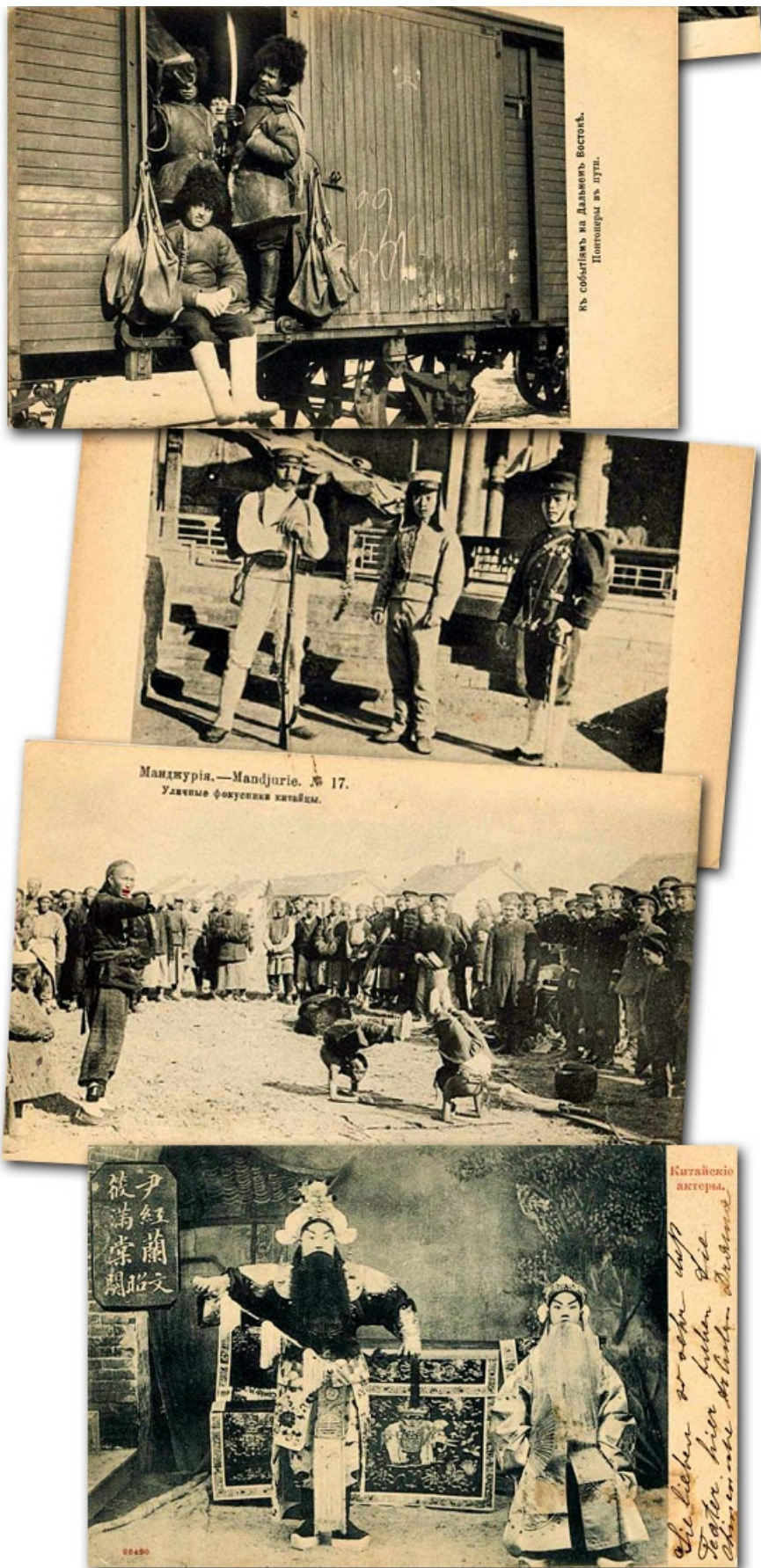
[2002.4017]

Russian postcard manufacturers relied particularly heavily on photos. A few of these offerings convey a sense of the forbidding landscape of Manchuria, where the great land battles took place. Some focus on military parades and send-offs in the homeland. Camerawork was perhaps most effective in capturing small groups of soldiers—such as the Cossacks—en route to the front. Russian postcards also included straightforward “representative” photos of the Japanese foe, as well as an occasional “tourist” shot of exotic China.



Къ событіямъ на Дальнемъ Востоке.
Пехота на оз. Байкалѣ.





Russian photo postcards, which were geared to the domestic Russian audience, ranged from formal parades to troop deployments in Manchuria to depictions of Japanese soldiers to touristy pictures of Chinese acrobats and opera performers.

"Soldiers in a Ceremony"

[2002.3868]

"Russian Soldiers in a Mountain Battle"

[2002.3879]

"Russian Soldiers in the Field"

[2002.3865]

"Traveling Troops in the Mountains"

[2002.3887]

"Russian Soldiers on a Train"

[2002.3861]

"Japanese Soldiers"

[2002.3878]

"Russian Soldiers Watching Chinese Acrobats "

[2002.3880]

"Chinese Opera Singers"

[2002.5542]

Photographs do not necessarily convey "truth," of course, and some samples of ostensible postcard realism were obviously staged. An Italian photographic depiction of the arrest and subsequent execution of Japanese "spies" is particularly delectable in this regard, for the scenes might well have come from an opera. All that is missing is the soprano jumping off a balustrade.



These obviously staged postcards, produced in Italy, call to mind an operatic melodrama. They purport to show the capture and execution of Japanese spies.

"The Russo-Japanese War: Arrest of a Spy"

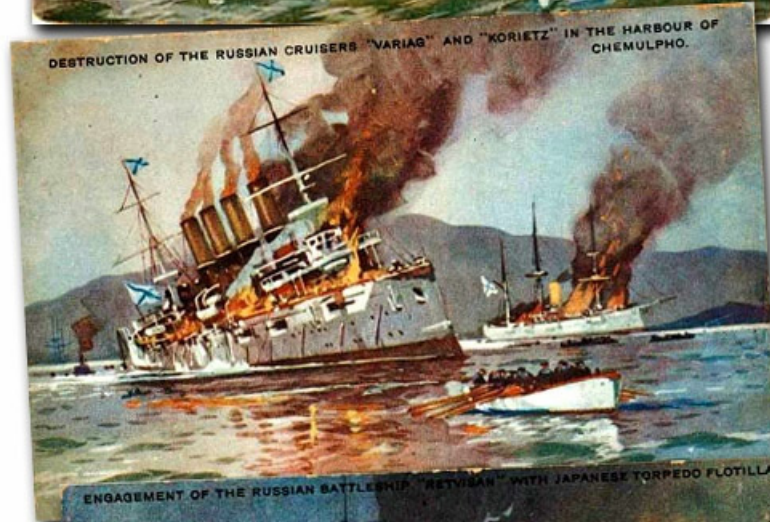
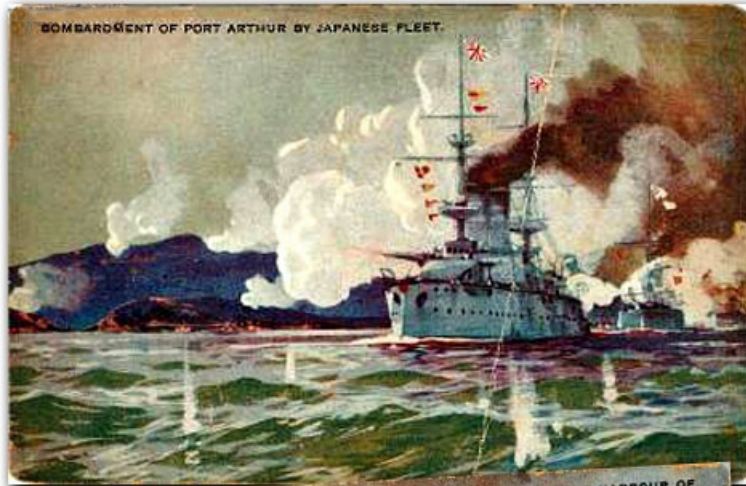
[2002.3917]

"The Russo-Japanese War: Execution of a Spy"

[2002.3918]

Paintings and drawings offered a livelier and more literally colorful sort of "realism" to the public interested in following the Russo-Japanese War. Indeed, we have become so used to being surrounded by splashy mass-produced graphics that it is necessary to remind ourselves how marvelous such images seemed to be at the beginning of the 20th century. An entirely new national and international audience had opened up for commercial art, and artists responded with enormous energy—sometimes working from photographs, sometimes from battlefield sketches, sometimes letting their imaginations run free based on a general understanding of uniforms and armaments and the general nature of the mayhem taking place on the other side of the world.

Painterly English renderings of the war at sea convey a sense of the more romantic approach to such ostensible realism. By contrast, an English series depicting great land battles captures the dynamism with which these more easily humanized confrontations could be brought to life by skillful painters.



These dramatic naval scenes are part of a British series. As seen here, postcard artwork sometimes includes the signature of the artist.

"Bombardment of Port Arthur by Japanese Fleet"

[2002.5580] & [2002.3925]

"Destruction of the Russian Cruisers 'Variag' and 'Korieta' in the Harbour of Chemulpho"

[2002.3926]

"Engagement of the Russian Battleship 'Retvisan' with Japanese Torpedo Flotilla"

[2002.3922]





The fury and human suffering of the battlefield is emphasized in this realistic British series. These color postcards were based on black-and-white drawings by artists in the field.

"The Battle of Wa-fang-kau"

[2002.3990]

"Russian Retreat after Kiu-lien-cheng"

[2002.3986]

"Destruction of Russian Battery"

[2002.3988]

"Port Arthur"

[2002.3992]

Some postcard illustrations that were explicitly identified as being based on photos carried realism in unexpected directions. One such English offering, for example, depicts “Japanese Soldiers paying respect to Russian Graves”—a scene the heathen Japanese would have been pleased to include in their own war graphics as evidence of their tolerant and “civilized” behavior. A less flattering photo-turned-painting in the same series pictures a Japanese soldier painting a circle on the cheek of a Chinese coolie “for identification.”



“Japanese Soldiers Paying Respect to Russian Graves”

[2002.3905]

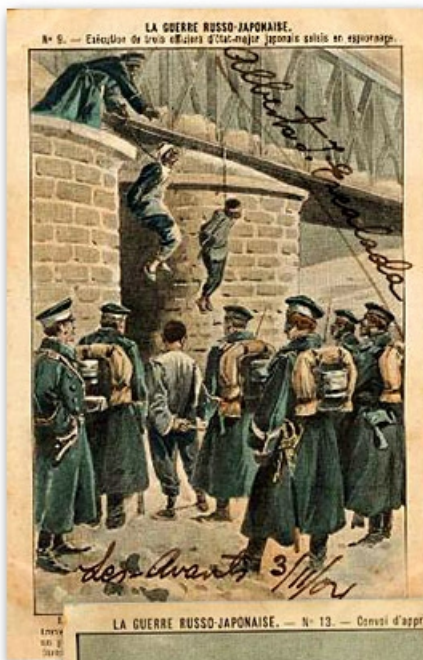
“Marking Coolie for Identification”

[2002.3904]



These British illustrations are based on photos from the war zone. Japanese took great care to demonstrate their “civilized” behavior to the international community, and paying respect to the Russian war dead was one aspect of this (top). The second scene (bottom), depicting a Japanese soldier painting an identification mark on the cheek of a Chinese “coolie” recruited for manual labor; is more unusual.

Postcard realism might also be enhanced by imbedding unsentimental illustrations in sufficient text to make them resemble excerpts from the popular press rather than independent pieces of artwork per se. A run of French postcards in this vein, for example, includes Russians hanging Japanese accused of “espionage,” fighting men battling and marching and engaging in street fighting in the snow, Japanese infantry occupying Seoul while Korean bystanders look on. A few of these strong graphics depict Russian Orthodox priests attempting to rally or comfort the troops. A few take the Japanese bombardment of Port Arthur into the parlors of the resident Russian community, where fashionable women as well as men suddenly find their lives blown to smithereens—like a heart-stopping scene from an epic French or Russian novel.





These gritty French postcards, with their extended captions, have the flavor of bonafide journalistic reportage. Executions, battlefield savagery, snow and bitter cold, occupation forces, priests accompanying the Russian troops, bombardment of civilian quarters—all have a place in this run of “realistic” postcards.

*“Execution of Three Japanese Administrative
Officers Captured while Spying”*
[2002.4001]

“Repulsion of the Japanese Attempt to Land, 11 February”
[2002.4000]

*“Convoy of Supplies and Munitions Heading
for Gensan in Seoul, Korea”*
[2002.4003]

*“Attack of a Manchurian Railway Station by
the Tanghouzes, 29 February”*
[2002.4004]

*“Occupation of Seoul by a Detachment of Japanese
Advance Guards, 10 February”*
[2002.3998]

*“The Second Russian Regiment Opening up a Passage with
Bayonets in the Ravines at the Battle of the Yalu River”*

[2002.3896]

“Prayer at Night in the Russian Quarters in Mukden”

[2002.3999]

“During the Bombardment of 10 March at Port Arthur”

[2002.4006]

Japanese postcard art of the Russo-Japanese War also includes gritty and graphic photos, paintings, and drawings—often, indeed, done in “Western” style. Yet in the final analysis, the foreign postcards tend to have their own unique take on events, and their own distinctive styles. “Realism” itself lay, as always, partly in the eye of the beholder.

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Cartoon Adversaries

By far the most eye-catching foreign postcards took the form of cartoons. Wit, cynicism, prejudice all came into open play here. Tastefulness rarely got in the way. Cartoon graphics ranged from clever caricature to barbed political commentary (by and large absent from Japanese postcards) to shockingly unbridled racism.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Russian postcard graphics included at least one run of sophisticated caricatures of Japan's leaders, extending from the emperor to top military officers and civilian officials.





These skillful Russian caricatures of Japan's highest military and civilian leaders are clearly based on careful scrutiny of available portraits of each individual. It is interesting that Russian audiences were offered such straightforward and even flattering renderings of the enemy.

"General Yamagata"
[2002.3721]

"Marshal Oyama"
[2002.3722]

"Admiral Tōgō"
[2002.3713]

"Meiji Emperor"
[2002.3718]

"General Kodama"
[2002.3719]

"General Kamimura"
[2002.3716]

"General Nogi"
[2002.3715]

"Marquis Itō"
[2002.3717]

More predictably, Russian cartoonists went to town on the despicable Japanese foe—who emerged, in one series, as a puny little yellow dog, stick figures being blasted to pieces by the Russian artillery at Port Arthur, and cooked lobsters trying to walk on the shore. In several exceptionally sharp propaganda graphics, Russian artists also offered incisive cartoon criticism of the foreign support Japan had marshaled against Russia, as well as the large purse Uncle Sam was dipping into to help finance the “little” Japanese.



Satirical Russian postcards mocked the Japanese as a little yellow mongrel dog, boiled lobsters at Port Arthur, and a “Rising Sun” fleet doomed to destruction.

"Giant Russian Soldier and Tiny Japanese Soldier as Dog"

[2002.3845]

"Japanese Sailors as Lobsters"

[2002.3844]

"Russian Sailor at Port Arthur"

[2002.3843]



*"Japanese Soldier Asking Help
from Uncle Sam" (above)*

[2002.3766]

*"Uncle Sam Sitting on a Big Purse
Attacked by Tiny Japanese
Soldiers" (right)*

[2002.3769]



These incisive Russian cartoons call attention to the role the United States played in helping to finance Japan's war. In fact, the Japanese government depended on large private loans raised in both New York and London to meet its enormous military expenses.

Predictably, the spectacle of little Japan versus mighty Russia (as well as small Japanese versus physically bigger Russians) inspired foreign artists to fall back on the familiar idiom we usually think of as "David and Goliath" or "Gulliver beset by the Lilliputians." The doughty little man taking on a giant was the theme of an extended postcard series sardonically titled "Great Russia" (*La Grand Russe*) that circulated both without any captions and with captions in German.



The “boundary-crossing” nature of European postcards can be seen in these samples from a series that carried the ironic French title “La Grand Russe” (Great Russia). Some versions of the series carried no captions at all; other versions had captions in German. This series is a perfect example of the popular David-and-Goliath theme in which giant Russia is humiliated by “little” Japan.

“Russian Soldier Sitting at Port Arthur”
[2002.3781]

“Little Biscuits at Port Arthur”
[2002.3779]

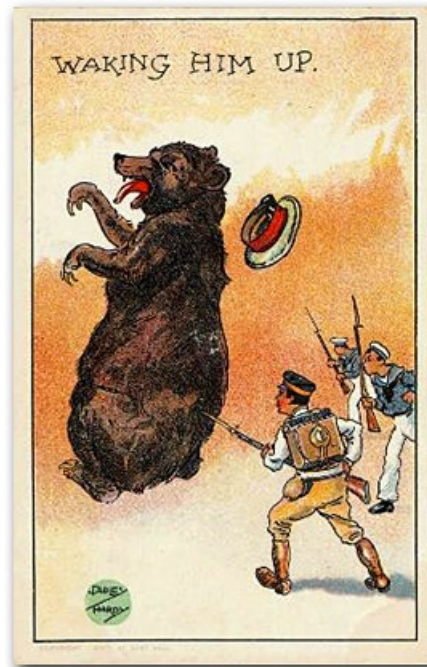
“Russian Fleeing from Japanese Soldier”
[2002.3660]

“Japanese Soldier Riding on a Russian Soldier”
[2002.3659]

*“Japanese Soldier Setting a Fire under
a Russian Soldier in a Pot”*
[2002.3663]

*“Wounded Russian Soldier with
Small Japanese Soldier”*
[2002.3662]

One card in the “Great Russia” series meshed the David-and-Goliath motif with another set symbol—the Russian Bear—to portray the conflict as a little Japanese soldier with a whip disciplining a huge polar bear wearing a tiny Russian cap. Foreign cartoonists in general found such “big bear” imagery irresistible. In one European rendering—this one quintessentially French—the large creature is seated, draped with various military paraphernalia, and being pissed on by a small Japanese dog.



"Great Russia" often emerged in popular graphics as a giant brown bear or huge polar bear—commonly confronting, as usual, a diminutive "Japan." In one particularly irreverent version (right), Japan is rendered as a small dog pissing on the big bear.

"White Russian Bear and Small Japanese Soldier" (above left)
[2002.3664]

"Waking Him Up" (above right)
[2002.3750]

"You Can't Do Such a Thing to Me" (right)
[2002.4141]



This juxtaposition of Great Russia versus Little Japan was, as it played out, far from just picturesque. Russia, like Gulliver, was the giant beset by a dwarfish people; like Goliath, it was a mature and manly nation challenged by a mere adolescent. The Japanese were, in yet another popular metaphor, "Tom Thumb" (*Le Petit Poucet*, in French)—undersized as individuals, as a culture, as a modern nation. When they not only displayed the audacity to challenge Russia, but then proceeded to victories on both land and sea, the first foreign response was, often explicitly, "surprise!"



In other graphic renderings of little Japan taking on giant Russia, Russia emerged as a sleeping Gulliver confronted by the Lilliputian Japanese (top). Or, again, the Japanese were referred to as “Tom Thumb” figures—“La Petit Poucet” in the French rendering (center). Whatever the cliché chosen, Japan’s victories were clearly a great “surprise” (bottom).

“Map of the Russo-Japanese War Situation”
[2002.6822]

“Tom Thumb”
[2002.6846]

“Oh, What A Surprise!”
[2002.3751]



Japan's strategic objective in the Russo-Japanese War, conveyed above, was to throw Russia "off its pedestal" as the dominant foreign power in Manchuria (top left), and to prevent it from making a meal out of Korea (bottom).

"Watch Out for the Whip, Boy!" (left)
[2002.6861]

"Russia: Well I Am Surprised" (right)
[2002.6811]

"The Japanese Puts His Foot In the Plate"
[2002.6791]

The second response to Japan's victories, hard on the heels of surprise, was frequently revulsion, horror, and fear. Giant-killers, after all, are in the business of killing. In myths and folktales, their symbolic trophy is the giant's head; and at least one foreign artist (the French cartoonist Orens) took grisly pleasure in placing the head of Nicholas II, Tsar of Great Russia, in the hands of his victorious nemesis. In one particularly dramatic severed-head rendering, the artist indicated that domestic upheaval within Russia (the stirrings of revolution) contributed to the tsar's sad fate; but the real death blow came from a Japan that symbolized the rising yellow sun of the Orient.



"The Fall of Port Arthur"

[2002.3820]



In these harsh French postcards, the pygmy-versus-giant imagery was carried to a grisly conclusion with images of Japan taking enemy Russia's head as a trophy. The decapitated head is highly personalized: it is Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia.

In the stunning graphic at bottom right, Japan is but one of the forces that is destroying the tsarist regime. The head of the "Japan" figure suggests both the Meiji emperor and the explosive emergence of a sun-like Yellow Peril ("Moukden" and "Tsou-sima"—Mukden and Tsushima—are the great land and sea battles in which the Japanese sealed their victory). The bomb exploding at the bottom of the graphic, however, represents revolutionary developments that were simultaneously undermining the tsarist regime from within ("liberty," "revolution," "suffrage," etc.)

Through the new medium of picture postcards, biting political graphics such as these—at which the French were particularly adept—reached a wider international audience than ever before.

"Nicholas II: Emperor of Icons" (left)
[2002.6785]

"Nicholas the Second...and Last" (right)
[2002.6863]

As Japan's partner in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance that dated from 1902, and as a major source (alongside the United States) of the foreign loans Japan depended on to finance its war, English artists might have been expected to treat their erstwhile ally with respect. As has been seen, some of their postcards did do this. The English were also race-conscious empire builders, however, and none of the other colonial powers in Asia (notably the French, Dutch, and Americans) managed to combine the mystique of white supremacy with comic put-down of "Orientals" in quite the same music-hall manner. It was England's own Gilbert and Sullivan, after all, who had produced the classic rendering of exotic Asian goofballs—*The Mikado*—in 1885.

This condescension emerged at various levels in English postcards. In a set depicting Japan's territorial ambitions on the Asian continent, for example, "Japan" is a young man whose garments are the very essence of pre-industrial Asian backwardness: the figure is barefoot and wears nothing more than a peasant's straw hat and rough working kimono.



Despite the bilateral Anglo-Japanese Alliance that committed England to strategic support of Japan, English graphics often treated the Japanese as inferiors. Here Japan is represented by a barefoot peasant and clearly still seen as a fundamentally backward, agrarian country.

"Who Gets Keeps" (left)
[2002.3737]

"Broadening the Line"
[2002.3741]

Some English illustrations depicting "the Japs at home" could pass as stage drawings for *The Mikado* itself, with care taken not to miss a single possible cultural cliché—Shinto *torii* gateways, temple roofs, stone lanterns, cherry blossoms, shapely pines, a blood-red sun, Mt. Fuji, rickshaw, parasols, girls in long-sleeved holiday kimono, doll-like children and young women (with one of the latter standing above the noxious caption "I am not a Russian"). An extended cartoon series includes the Russians being "bamboozled" (a pun on "bamboo") by "Jappy" and impressed by a "clever little Jap" on a tightrope. Where "Jappy" is male, his dress and posture are campy and exceedingly feminine.



These ghastly British postcards of “The Japs at Home” manage to replicate almost every visual cliché that is usually associated with the sentimental and simultaneously patronizing image of an “unchanging” Japan. These include Mt. Fuji, a rising red sun, pines, Shinto gateways, stone lanterns, rickshaw, girls in kimono playing “battledore and shuttlecock,” cherry blossoms, and thoroughly alien non-Western men and women.

“The Japs at Home” (top left)
[2002.4072]

“The Girl He Left behind Him” (top right)
[2002.4073]

“I Am Not a Russian”
[2002.4068]



Popular British depictions of the “clever little Jap” often reflected the sort of music-hall lampooning associated with Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera “The Mikado”—as seen in these samples from a particularly sophomoric postcard set.

“Jappy up in the Stilts” (top left)
[2002.3744]

“Clever Little Jap” (top right)
[2002.3747]

“Jappy ‘Rushing’ Him Everywhere” (above)
[2002.3749]

This music-hall stereotyping extended to other Asians, and may have reached its nadir in a “limerick” card ridiculing not the Japanese but the Koreans, whose beleaguered country was trampled in both the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. Here the “Korean” cartoon figure is in fact a grotesque amalgam of racial and cultural features commonly used in mocking Chinese and Japanese: slanted eyes, buck teeth, long queue or “pigtail,” exceedingly long (and braided!) mustache, sinister long fingernails. He holds a folding fan and wears a yellow kimono. The sophomoric jingle itself dwells on his being startled by explosions from the nearby fighting.

In this particularly offensive British “limerick” postcard, it is the Koreans —caught in the middle in the Russian-Japanese conflict—who are subjected to the gamut of visual “Oriental” stereotypes. The ludicrous Korean figure sports the queue, mustache, and long fingernails commonly associated with Chinese males. He wears a Japanese kimono, carries a Japanese folding fan, and has the buck teeth and slanted eyes always featured in Western cartoon mockery of the Japanese.

*“An Old Man of Korea”
[2002.4033]*



This sustained mockery of Asians on the part of English illustrators does not seem to have been offset by any comparably focused and derogatory cartoon treatment of the Russians (which is surprising, given the intense strategic rivalry between England and Russia). By contrast, other foreign artists generally disparaged the two adversaries in a more even-handed manner. Despite being ostensible allies of the Russians, the French in particular were equal-opportunity cynics whose sophistication left the English far behind. In their more witty, barbed, and adult cartoon commentaries, power politics and war itself are the primary targets. Carnage is the name of the game. The Japanese emperor and Russian tsar frequently stand together as leaders in a confrontation that has no real—or, certainly, no admirable—winner. War is folly, and its major legacy is death.

Such equal-opportunity cynicism could occasionally be scatological. The French, for example, found bare buttocks humorous. They ridiculed diarrhea among Japanese troops by portraying infantrymen hopping about with porcelain chamber pots affixed to their bottoms, and rendered “The Artillery of General Oku” as farting figures with no upper bodies. “The Music of General Oku”—four naked posteriors playing wind instruments with their rectums—had its Russian counterpart in a larger ensemble of bare bottoms topped with fur hats and blowing out “The Russian Music of General Kivatropatrine.”



The anal fixations of the French emerge in a number of scatological postcards. One of these (top) made fun of a truly serious and alarming phenomenon—the prevalence of sometimes lethal dysentery among troops in the field (here the Japanese). Other French postcards depicted Japanese artillery as flatulent bare posteriors, and even-handedly depicted the opposing armies of “General Oku” and “General Kivatropatrine” as orchestras making music with their rears.

“Soldiers Fighting with Chamber Pots”

[2002.3784]

“The Artillery of General Oku”

[2002.4167]

“The Music of General Oku”

[2002.4164]

“The Russian Music of General Kivatropolatrine”

[2002.4168]

More often and more effectively, French cartoonists focused on the Meiji emperor and the tsar. They sit on their pedestals like porcelain dogs, eying each other warily. When “Nicholas II, the Conqueror” is singled out for mockery, he is the bringer of death to his own fighting men, and not just to the enemy—riding a hobby horse and wearing a skull for a helmet, churning out soldiers for the Japanese to devour, squeezing his own people into a bloody pulp while the rest of the world looks on.

Many French artists focused on the tsar and the Meiji emperor as equivalent personifications of their countries, and were scathing in calling attention to the suffering each brought about. Here, for example, the two rulers are rendered as a pair of ceramic dogs, while the tsar alone is portrayed as a lethal despot (riding his hobby horse) who pressed the life out of his own subjects or fed them into the maw of the Japanese foe.

“Russia and Japan as Ceramic Dogs” (right)

[2002.4137]





"Nicholas II, the Conqueror" (above right)
[2002.3804]

"History of the Whole Russo-Japanese War" (above left)
[2002.3798]

"Prediction for 1905"
[2002.6821]

As the war progressed and Japanese victories accumulated, “the two emperors” still provided a vehicle through which to express this—in this case, the Japanese sovereign spinning the tsar’s head like a top.



In this rendering of “the two emperors,” the Japanese sovereign spins the head of his Russian counterpart like a top.

[2002.3809]

The milieu of power politics in which the Russo-Japanese War took place was skewered in predictable as well as unpredictable ways. A cartoon that appeared in at least two languages (French and German), for example, portrays both adversaries rather conventionally as puppets being manipulated from behind. In a harsher jibe along the same lines, a clownish John Bull tweaks a little Japanese stick figure on a string. More cynical yet, another postcard depicts England standing by while little Japan does the dirty work that will strengthen the British empire by taking down Russia (England’s rival in Central Asia). “Yes, I will help you when he is dead” says the cartoon Englishman.



Great Power politics is mocked in these graphics calling attention, in particular, to Great Britain's support and manipulation of Japan's war against Russia, which was also the archrival of England in Central Asia.

"Russo-Japanese War" (above left)
[2002.6858]

"Jumping Jack" (above right)
[2002.6794]

"Yes, I Will Help You When He is Dead!"
[2002.3794]

Georges Bigot, a French artist who actually lived in Japan for an extended period before the war and became known for cartoons chronicling the country's modernization efforts, also depicted the power game in a run of postcards in his distinctive style. Here the English push an unpleasant little Japanese soldier into taking on Russia, while America looks on approvingly; Japan, with China in tow, tramples Korea to get at the Russian foe; and the two antagonists lay hands on an attractive female "Manchuria."



Although Georges Bigot, the French creator of this cartoon sequence, actually lived in Japan for a number of years, his renderings of the Japanese were usually uncomplimentary. In this run, England and the United States push the Japanese military into taking on Russia (top). Japan, with China dragged behind by its queue, tramples Korea to get at the Russians (center), and Russia and Japan then struggle for possession of an attractive Manchuria (bottom). The stark contrast between the handsome Russian and runty Japanese is typical of Bigot's treatment of Japanese even before the war.

[2002.3731] [2002.3729] [2002.3730]

In Bigot's case, familiarity did breed contempt, as the saying goes: many of his graphics of the domestic Japanese scene were harsh, and some were overtly racist. (The most notorious example of the latter, from the 1890s, depicts a Japanese man and woman in fashionable Western clothing gazing in a mirror and seeing the reflection of two apes gazing back at them.) His sympathies in the war clearly lay with the Russians, and in one overly optimistic rendering Bigot even had his little Japanese figure being literally swallowed by Russia—a rare example of foreign cartooning in which the giant does dispatch his presumptuous enemy in the end. Not surprisingly, some of Bigot's propaganda was reissued in Russian versions.

In Bigot's wartime version of little Japan versus the Russian giant, it is Russia rather than Japan that emerges ferociously victorious. This was clearly wishful thinking on the artist's part.

"Giant Russian Soldier Holding Japanese Soldier"

[2002.3728]



In an even more incisive visual commentary, the always acerbic French cartoonist Orens skewered the Anglo-Japanese Alliance as the "Barnum, Bailey Alliance" (the reference is to a famous touring circus of the time). Stout, bemedalled Britain stretches an elastic-man's arm across Europe, Russia, and Asia to the Pacific, where its hand is kissed by a little Japanese military figure standing on wooden clogs. Britain's other hand holds a large anchor (England was master of the high seas), and skulls dot Africa and South Asia where England had imposed colonial rule. Small Russian and Chinese figures stand in Asia under the overextended British arm. In this rendering, the Russo-Japanese War was obviously but one more example of Great Britain's imperial overreach. Under the caption "Oh, the beautiful spectacle," Orens offers a smiling Brit in Tibet viewing the bloody spectacle in Manchuria through a telescope. The setting sun has become a skull, its rays reaching out like Japan's military flag.



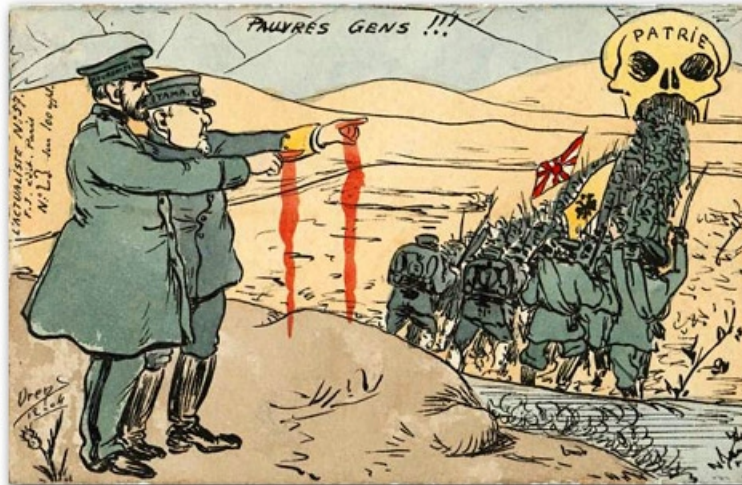
These two French postcards place British support of Japan in the broader context of Britain's global empire, on which, as the saying went, "the sun never sets." "Barnum, Bailey" was a famous circus, and in referring to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance under this label the artist was suggesting that the alliance was a joke—with little Japan (on tall wooden clogs) kissing the outstretched hand of an imperial Britain that had already brought death (the skulls) to much of Africa and South Asia.

In the bottom postcard, the British stand in Tibet and view the far-away war in Manchuria as "a beautiful spectacle." Here the familiar sun-with-rays military flag of the Japanese has been turned into the sun on the horizon, and the sun in turn into a bloody skull.

"Barnum, Bailey Alliance of Britain and Japan"
[2002.6852]

"Oh! The Beautiful Spectacle!"
[2002.3834]

Another postcard commentary by Orens is set in Manchuria itself, where the skull has become "homeland" (*patrie*) and fighting men from both nations march side-by-side into the gaping hollow of its mouth. Russian and Japanese generals point the way, blood dripping from their hands. The caption here is simply "Poor People!!!"

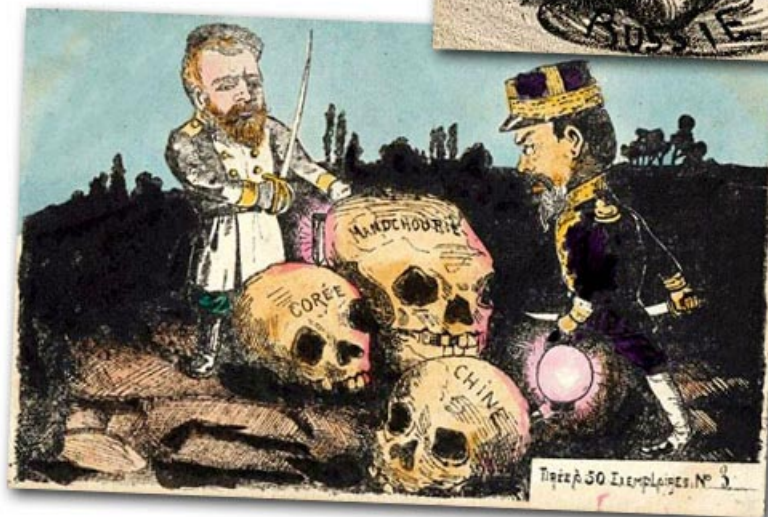


"Poor
People!!!"

[2002.3822]

In this evenhanded denunciation of the war, titled "Pauvres Gens!!!" (Poor People!!!), the bloodstained Russian and Japanese generals Oyama and Kuropatkin stand side-by-side commanding their troops to die in the name of patriotism.

Only infrequently did foreign (or Japanese) artists draw attention to the fact that Japan and Russia were hammering out their imperial ambitions in the lands of—and at the expense of—other people. Bigot did this, as seen above, with his rendering of Japan trampling on Korea. Another political cartoon in this vein depicts a supine Korea between the Japanese hammer and Russian anvil. In perhaps the most powerful of such exceptional postcard renderings, the tsar and the emperor, each wielding a sword, confront each other on a dark landscape; between them lie three giant skulls labeled China, Korea, and Manchuria.



Rare sympathy for the peoples of Korea, Manchuria, and China whom Russia and Japan were struggling to dominate is expressed in these French graphics.

"Today's Question"
[2002.6781]

"The Ones that They are Going to Split"
[2002.4134]

It is from this grim and non-partisan perspective that the French artist Bianco offered an especially effective graphic sendoff to the peace conference that was convened by President Theodore Roosevelt once the two sides had fought to exhaustion. The imposing American mediator stands between the stripped down emperor and tsar (Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1906 for brokering the Portsmouth peace settlement). The emperor is unscathed, while the tsar is maimed and wounded by great battlefield defeats (a bandage marked "Tsushima" round his head, his arm in a sling labeled "Mukden," one leg replaced by an artificial limb representing "Port Arthur"). The sun of "peace" rests on the horizon, while great mounds of skulls rise behind the two antagonists (Russia's higher, and marked with a cross). The caption has Roosevelt speaking one word in three languages: Assez! Enough! Genug!

“Roosevelt:
Assez!-
Enough!-
Genug!”

[2002.3761]



In this French commemoration of the end of the bloody war, U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt, who brokered the Portsmouth Peace Conference that ended the conflict, stands between the emperor and tsar. Both have exhausted their resources (and are almost naked). Skulls of their war dead are piled up behind them—higher on the Russian side than on the Japanese. The tsar has suffered more harm than the emperor—his wounds being marked with the greatest Japanese victories of the war (Tsushima, Mukden, and Port Arthur). The sun of “peace” rises on the horizon, and Roosevelt’s single word of admonition is given in three languages: “Assez!- Enough!- Genug!”

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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The Well-Watched War

Postcard “Realism”

Cartoon Adversaries

The Yellow Peril

Sources

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YELLOW PROMISE / YELLOW PERIL

FOREIGN POSTCARDS OF THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR (1904-05)

by John W. Dower

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The Yellow Peril

When push came to shove, however, even-handedness proved difficult if not impossible for foreign cartoonists to maintain. In the final analysis, race mattered. The Japanese were yellow, the Russians white, and the spectacle of Asia rising was forbidding and even terrifying.

Thus Bianco, who seemed so balanced in his portrayal of Roosevelt saying "Enough!" to carnage, also introduced postcard collectors to "the great duel between yellow and white." In this, the American president and other bystanders (representing France, Germany, and England) are spectators to a wrestling match between the Russian bear (a white polar bear standing on legs marked Korea and Manchuria) and the emperor of Japan, clad in a yellow kimono. The emperor is smaller in stature, but seemingly more adept. And, almost completely hidden, he has a secret weapon in the form of a dagger in his hand—presumably a subtle allusion to the stab-in-the-back of the surprise naval attack with which Japan opened the war.



*"The Great
Duel
between
Yellow and
White"*

[2002.3764]

In this "Great Duel between Yellow and White," the United States, France, Germany, and England look on as Japan (the emperor in a conspicuously yellow kimono) tries to knock the white Russian polar bear off its legs (labeled Korea and Manchuria). All but invisible is a dagger in the emperor's hand.

Postcard intimations of the Yellow Peril took many forms. Indeed, it seems fair to say that no other means of communication affords such a concentrated and accessible (and full-color) sample of this racial animus on the part of Westerners. The treatment might be witty—an angelic "Saint Russia" confronting a yellow Japanese devil with a blood-stained pitchfork in the clouds. It might be heavy with intimations of civilizational rape—in this case a beautiful blonde nude woman tied to a stake "at the mercy" of a leering, heathen Japanese soldier crouched at her feet. Russia itself is aflame in the background, threatened by revolutionary upheaval within and the revolutionary rise of Asia outside.



In this confrontation between “Saint Russia” and a Japanese devil (top), intimation of a conflict between Good and Evil is treated lightly, almost as a joke. By contrast, “Russia at the Mercy of Japan” (bottom) offers a truly satanic image of Russia (or the West) as a pure, white virgin tied to the stake and facing an unspeakable fate at the hands of the ominous crouching yellow man. Moscow already lies in flames in the background.

“Saint Russia and Devil Japan”
[2002.6796]

“Russia at the Mercy of Japan”
[2002.6831]

The yellow man’s stab-in-the-back at Port Arthur attracted colorful French attention, with the English and Americans depicted applauding in the background. (It was not until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor over three decades later that Americans really found such surprise tactics reprehensible.) This carried over—again, most conspicuously in French graphics—to a gallery of Japanese leaders wielding blood-stained swords, or hoisting a “*Banzai!*” flag of death.



The Japanese menace is conveyed in these four graphics not only by turning General Oyama and the Meiji emperor into murderers, and the Japanese military into a macabre skeleton shouting “Banzai!,” but also by depicting Japan’s surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur at the outset of the war as a sinister stab in the back (top). Britain and the U.S. applaud as the little yellow man (with sinister long toenails!) prepares to execute his dastardly deed.

“The Blow of Port Arthur”

[2002.6804]

“Marshal Oyama” (right)

[2002.3812]

“Banzai!”

[2002.3823]

“Mutsu-hito”

[2002.3824]

Visceral imagery of Japan swallowing the Russians—or, as will be seen, disgorging the yellow hordes of Asia from its maw—was also popular. An extended and usually balanced postcard series by “E. Muller” that features postage stamps from Russia and/or Japan on almost every individual graphic ends with the alarming image of the huge head of a Japanese soldier eating a uniformed Russian (the clinching Yellow Peril touch here is the Japanese soldier’s long, pointed fingernails). A crude French rendering captioned “Sunset on the Yellow Sea” sets the huge slant-eyed, buck-toothed head of a Japanese sailor on the horizon, mouth agape as if about to swallow the entire Russian fleet. (The sea’s name itself only enhances the message.)

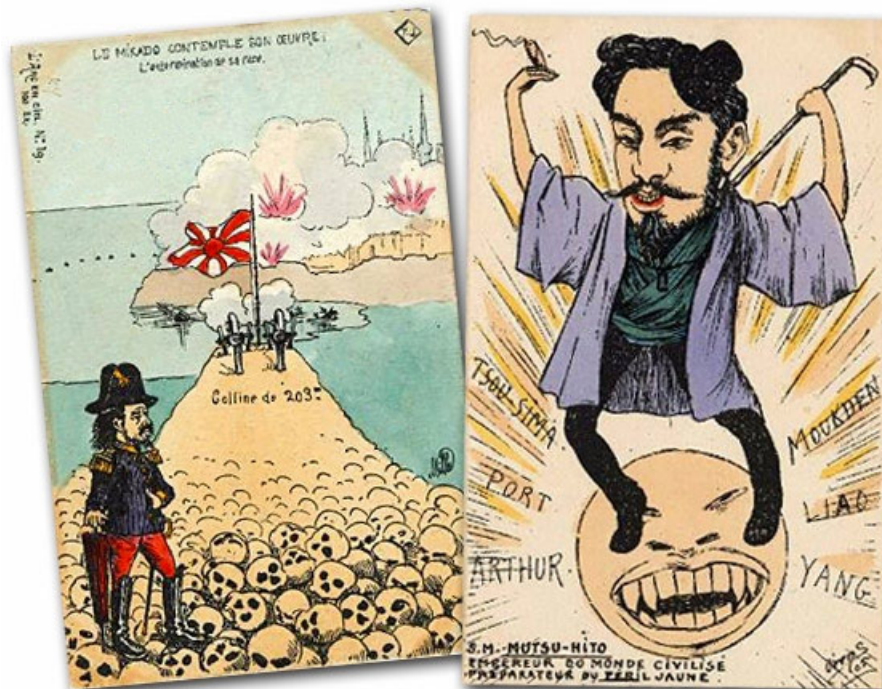


These grotesque renderings of Japan's insatiable appetite include almost reflexive little features associated with anti-Oriental racism—the sinister fingernails, for example (top), and the demeaning slanted eyes and buck teeth (bottom). Even the title of the second graphic—“Sunset on the Yellow Sea”—carries Yellow Peril overtones.

“Japanese Soldier Swallowing Russian Soldier”
[2002.4058]

“Sunset on the Yellow Sea”
[2002.6832]

When the Meiji emperor (“Mutsuhito”) was separated from his imperial counterpart Nicholas II, foreign artists were free to paint the scene yellow. Thus, in a postcard titled “The Mikado Contemplates His Work,” the emperor stands on a highway of yellow skulls stretching across the sea to the distant battlefields. In another French graphic, the emperor appears to be leaping in the air in front of a yellow sun (it has slant-eyes and sharp buck teeth). The place names of Japanese victories emanate from this sun like rays (Mukden, Liaoyang, Tsushima, Port Arthur). To make sure no one will miss the point, the artist has provided a caption reading “Mutsuhito—Emperor of the Civilized World, Facilitator of the Yellow Peril.”



In “The Mikado Contemplates His Work” (left), his work is not merely death but death colored yellow. This is made even more explicit in the cartoon on the right, which identifies Mutsuhito as “Emperor of the Civilized World, Facilitator of the Yellow Peril.” The rays of the slant-eyed and fanged yellow sun spell out the names of great war victories.

[2002.3800] [2002.6864]

Another rendering of the “Triumph of the Yellow,” almost out of control, offers a sword-wielding figure in a robe standing on a mound of bloody Russian corpses with a blood-red sun behind him. In this case, the figure could just as well be Chinese as Japanese; and, indeed, yet another foreign rendering in this vein explicitly turns the situation about to portray “The Chinese Menace,” with Japan suddenly—and certainly unexpectedly—metamorphosing into the defender of Russia and Europe by keeping China penned in.



Some Yellow Peril graphics border on hysteria. In “Triumph of The Yellow” (left), the swordsman atop a mound of corpses could as easily be Chinese as Japanese. In “The Chinese Menace” (right), China clearly IS the great peril—peering over the Great Wall toward Russia and Europe while Japan (!) stands guard.

[2002.3931] [2002.6779]

Historically, the rhetoric and visual representation of a “Yellow Peril” is usually traced to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany in the late 1890s, following Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War (the original German is *Gelbe Gefahr*). In practice, the Western bogey of an Asia menacing the security and well-being of Europe dates back to much earlier times—to the Mongol “hordes” that did indeed sweep over vast swathes of territory in the 13th and 14th centuries, and to later visions of China as a “sleeping giant” that, if awakened, could imperil all Europe. What held China down was its failure to acquire the science and technology that lay behind the West’s industrialization and global expansion.

Japan’s crushing victory over China in 1895 signaled that a turning point in the global balance of power had come about in two ways. Unexpectedly, Japan rather than gigantic China had emerged as the dominant power in Asia. And it had done so by becoming “Western” and “modern” through mastery, among other things, of military technology. The ominous horde was still yellow, however: it was difficult for Westerners to distinguish one Oriental from another, and what the Japanese and their racial brethren would do with their burgeoning power in the future was unknowable.

Exit China, Enter Japan—in the final analysis, this was a distinction without fundamental difference to foreigners who simply feared the rise of Asia in general. “Color” mattered as much or more than nationality, and commercial artists who turned attention to these matters almost always made yellow the overwhelmingly dominant color in their palette.



"Russian Anxiety"

[2002.5142]

The prevailing color of this graphic is the Yellow Peril giveaway, as stalwart Russia towers over an absurd, archaic Chinese figure and a menacing little Japan.

Even as Japan demonstrated its mastery of modern warfare, moreover—and even while many foreign commercial artists were indeed portraying Japanese leaders as “mirror images” to their Western counterparts—the abiding image remained that of a society that had not, in fact, really modernized fundamentally at all. Thus, in “Make Way for the Yellow,” which depicted Japan running over and trampling on the Europeans, the prolific postcard artist Mille fell back on the old pre-industrial clichés. “Japan” was a coolie pulling a rickshaw (and wearing a yellow *haori* coat), but while the rickshaw man was careless and irresponsible, his passenger was the other side of the Oriental coin—female, exotic, desirable in her traditional non-assertiveness.



"Make Way for the Yellows"

[2002.3799]

This French rendering of “Make Way for the Yellows” mixes various aspects of the most familiar Western stereotypes of Japan—the feminine and exotic (the comely passenger in the rickshaw); the backward and undeveloped (the rickshaw puller); and the threat of Japanese imperialism (the run-over or imperilled four great nations of Europe—Russia, Britain, France, and Germany).

In this milieu, Japan’s ability to take on white, Christian, “Western” Russia and bring it to its knees did not merely mark the nation’s ambiguous emergence as a modern power—although it certainly did do this. It also signaled Japan’s emergence as leader of the masses of Asia, who so greatly outnumbered the collective population of the West. This was “Europe’s nightmare,” and artists and writers did not hesitate to bring it to the light of day. Bianco, for example, nailed this with typical incisiveness in a striking two-postcard set titled, respectively, “Yellow Peril—the European Nightmare” and “Yellow Peril—the Awakening.” In the nightmare graphic, Western leaders sleep in their beds while the “Celestial Empire” cracks open and pours out its yellow hordes. In “the

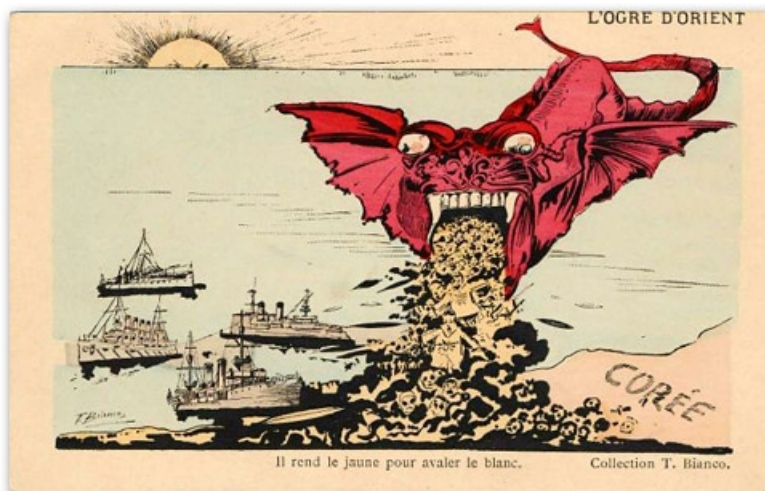
Awakening,” the Japanese emperor has materialized to lead these hordes, and only the tsar has awakened to challenge him. They point pistols at each other, as serpents at the emperor’s feet crawl toward the Europeans. In both graphics the color, as usual, is overwhelmingly yellow.



In this stark two-card sequence by T. Bianco, titled “Yellow Peril,” the first illustration depicts “The European Nightmare.” Here the national leaders of Europe lie asleep, tormented by dreams of a flood of yellow people spilling out of China, the so-called Celestial Empire. In the second graphic, titled “the Awakening,” Japan (the emperor) has suddenly assumed lead of the yellow horde; the horde is closer than ever, even turned into serpents at the foot of Europe’s beds; and only the tsar has awakened to take on the Japan-led menace.

[2002.6815] [2002.6816]

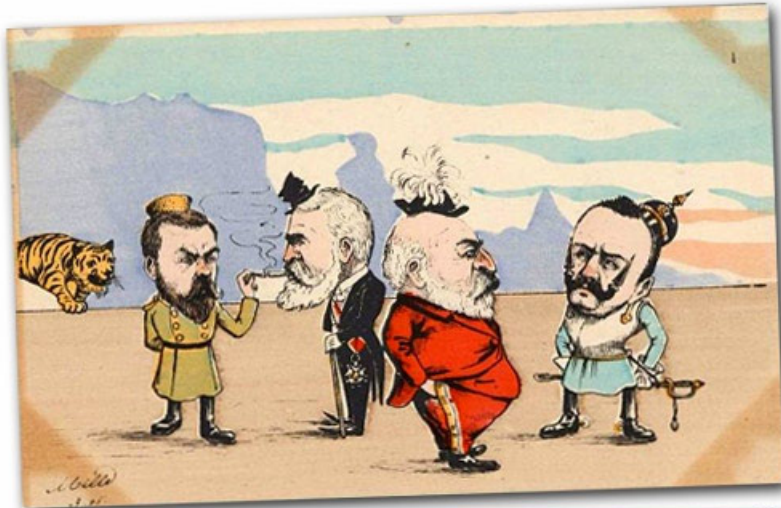
This alarming imagery slipped easily and naturally into Yellow Peril responses to the Russo-Japanese War that left out specific reference to Japan or the Japanese per se. Bianco, for example, also offered an “Ogre of the Orient” that resembled some sort of dragon with huge fins and a lion’s head. This monster was disgorging yellow masses into Korea, above a legend reading “He vomits the yellow to swallow the white (*Il rend le jaune pour avaler le blanc*).” Another French rendering, titled simply “Asia against Europe,” turned the Asian menace into a mythic chimera-like creature (with wings, a lion’s head, furry body, serpent’s tail, and the feet of a bird of prey). The bloodied corpse of Russia lay beneath its talons, while “Europe” trembled before the forbidding creature in the shocking form of a feeble old woman in ragged clothes.



Ultimately, the spectre of the Yellow Peril transcended Japan or China per se. It was a racist concept—an umbrella that indiscriminately covered the entirety of “Asia” or “the Orient.” In “The Ogre of the Orient” (top), the Yellow Peril is rendered as a particularly grotesque dragon vomiting the dregs of a yellow horde from Japan onto Korea and the Asian mainland. The monster “vomits the yellow to swallow the white.” In “Asia against Europe” (bottom), the yellow menace that has already killed off Russia takes the rather original form of a mythic chimera (a polyglot fire-breathing female creature), while Europe interestingly is portrayed as a weak old woman.

[2002.6812] [2002.3797]

The most stunning Yellow Peril sequence that has come down to us is a five-card postcard set by Mille that carries no text whatsoever. The Asian menace takes the form of a realistic tiger. The four great powers of Europe (Russia, France, England, and Germany), represented by their easily recognizable leaders, are naively unaware of the approaching danger as they appear in the first illustration in the series. The tiger pounces—and after killing off Russia takes down the other three powers in turn. Metaphorically, a subhuman force is destroying the fully human representatives of Western civilization. And, indeed, in the fifth graphic there are no humans left—only the tiger, blood dripping from its jowls, embracing the entire globe in its claws.



This stunning five-card sequence, as vivid as a comic strip, begins with the leaders of the great powers of Europe (Russia, France, Britain, and Germany) standing together unaware of the approaching menace: a tiger representing Japan, or the Yellow Peril more generally. The tiger then devours Russia and France in turn, to the naive amusement of Britain and Germany who are next on the menu. The sequence concludes with the insatiable yellow tiger taking on the whole world.

[2002.4118] [2002.4119] [2002.4120] [2002.4121] [2002.6792]

Bigot, the French cartoonist who had lived in Japan and at one early point in the war happily envisioned the Russians devouring their Japanese adversary, did not let his ineptitude as a prognosticator dampen his animus. On the contrary, he went on to produce an alarming image of a triumphant Japan that is almost impossible to forget. A Japanese soldier stands atop a globe floating in a blood-stained sea, a bloody dagger in his hand, the entire graphic saturated in yellow. Unsurprisingly, the Russians found this worth issuing as a postcard statement of their own.



In this almost psychotic rendering of Yellow Peril xenophobia by Georges Bigot, a Japanese soldier stands astride a globe saturated in yellow and red—the colors of race and blood that traumatized much of the Western world as it beheld Japan's emergence as an imperialist power.

"The Asian Empire," French version (left)

[2002.3727]

"The Asian Empire," Russian version (right)

[2002.3726]

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Postcard "Realism"

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The Yellow Peril

Sources

Sources

To come.

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Postcard images are from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Unless otherwise indicated, all are by unidentified artists and date from the 1904–1905 war years.

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The Well-Watched War

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