

# YELLOW PROMISE / YELLOW PERIL

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

by John W. Dower

The Well-Watched War

Postcard "Realism"

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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]

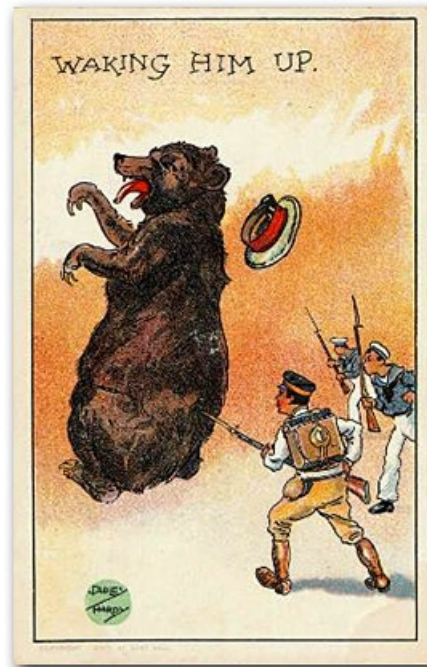
*“Russian Fleeing from Japanese Soldier”*  
[2002.3660]

*“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]*



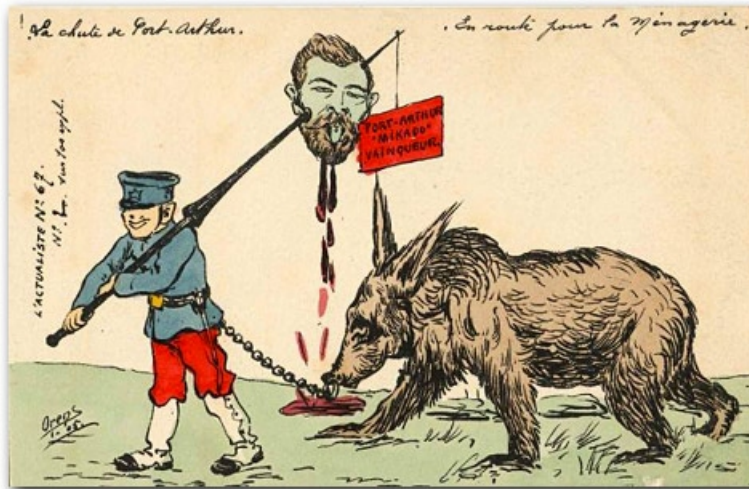
*Japan's strategic objective in the Russo-Japanese War, conveyed above, was to throw Russia "off its pedestal" as the dominant foreign power in Manchuria (top left), and to prevent it from making a meal out of Korea (bottom).*

*"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 Kivatropiatrine.”



*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 Kivatropatrine”*

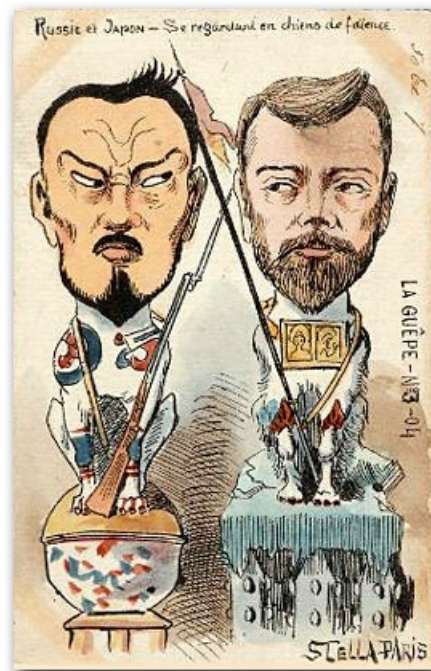
[2002.4168]

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.



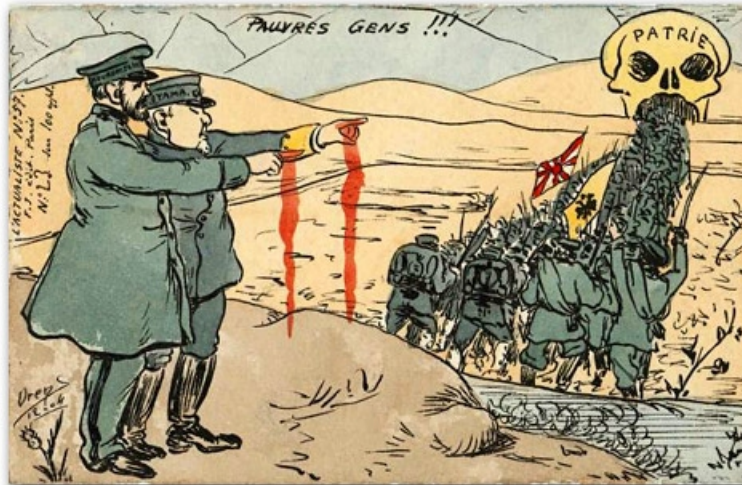
*These two French postcards place British support of Japan in the broader context of Britain's global empire, on which, as the saying went, "the sun never sets." "Barnum, Bailey" was a famous circus, and in referring to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance under this label the artist was suggesting that the alliance 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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Sources

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