

The Russian Armada 1904-5

By [David Woodward](#) | Published in [History Today Volume 3: Issue: 2 1953](#)



[Military Japan](#)

David Woodward recounts how, after a voyage from the Baltic of 11,000 miles, the Russian Second Pacific Fleet was dramatically destroyed off the coast of Korea by the Japanese.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, neither China nor Korea had adapted itself to the realities of modern politics or warfare. Russia and Japan, on the other hand, had successfully done so, and both countries were trying to increase their power in the Far East at the expense of the Chinese and Koreans, either by means of annexation or through acquiring economic concessions.

Russia was expanding southwards from Siberia into Manchuria and Korea, and Japan was moving northwards from her mainland into the same regions. By 1903 a collision between them seemed certain, and in the next year it took place. It took place in the very area disputed, so that nearly all the land fighting in the war that followed occurred in territory that was either Chinese or Korean, and therefore technically neutral. In July 1903, the Japanese government had suggested the opening of negotiations for a general settlement with Russia, one of the proposals being the partition of Korea at the 39th parallel. Negotiations were still in progress on the night of February 9th, 1904, when, without declaration of war, Japanese destroyers entered the roadstead of the Russian base at Port Arthur, and within a few minutes torpedoed and put out of action two Russian battleships and an armoured cruiser. The Russian ships were lit up as in peacetime, and the guns of the shore batteries were still in the grease and tarpaulins used to protect them against the winter weather. Having temporarily put the Russian fleet out of action, the Japanese started at once to move troops from Japan itself to the mainland with the object of occupying Korea, besieging and, if possible, capturing Port Arthur, and driving the Russian land forces out of South and Central Manchuria.

Before the Japanese attack, the Russian Pacific Fleet (known as the First Squadron) was roughly the equal of the Japanese navy, although handicapped by having to depend for supplies on the single track Trans-Siberian railway, and by lack of proper docking facilities. After the attack, there could be no question of the Russian fleet's attempting to tackle the six Japanese battleships, mainstay of the fleet, commanded by Vice-Admiral Heihachiro Togo. On the morning of the day after the torpedo attack, Togo took his fleet off Port Arthur and began a somewhat half-hearted bombardment. Had he pushed home the attack, he would almost certainly have destroyed the First Pacific Squadron then and there, but he knew that Russia had as many ships again in the Baltic which might be sent to the Far East, and that he had to fight the war in such a way as to keep his own fleet intact, while sinking two enemy fleets each as strong as he was. The Japanese were, in fact, fighting a war of limited liability. The sudden attacks on Port Arthur and Pearl Harbour are not the only parallel that can be drawn between the war that started in 1904 and the war of 1941; just as the Japanese in 1941 and 1942 dared not to exploit to the full their successes in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean, for fear of weakening themselves elsewhere, so in 1904 they could never risk all on a single move. Their strategy in both wars was to seize by surprise as much neighbouring territory as they could, then pause and defend their gains, hoping that they would be in so strong a position that sooner or later their enemy would not think it worth while to try to evict

them. In 1904-5 they were right in their calculations, though the outcome was much more closely run than is sometimes thought, for care must be taken to strip the situation of the pro-Japanese sentiment that coloured the reporting of events at the time.

If the fundamental problem for Japan was how to overcome total forces much stronger than her own, the Russians' problem was how to concentrate their greater strength in the Far Eastern theatre of war. Their navy was approximately three times the size of Japan's, but it was divided into three groups, each of about the same size, one in the Far East, one in the Black Sea and one in the Baltic. The Black Sea fleet, under the terms of the treaty of Berlin, was forbidden to pass the Bosphorus, and Russian diplomacy failed to persuade the powers principally interested—Turkey and Britain—to waive the relevant clauses of the treaty. Once war came in the Far East, there was no doubt in St. Petersburg what should be done. The Russian army in Manchuria was to stand on the defensive, awaiting the arrival of reinforcements by the Trans-Siberian railway. Port Arthur was to hold out, even though besieged, defended by its garrison and by the First Squadron. The Second Squadron—the Baltic fleet—would be sent around the world to the Far East. Once it had arrived, the combined First and Second Squadrons would defeat Togo's forces, and cut the communications of the Japanese army with the home country. Japan would surrender and, in anticipation of this event, plans had been prepared for the military occupation of the defeated country.

The actual task of moving the Second Squadron from the Baltic to the Far East has been described as the most difficult military enterprise since Hannibal took his elephants over the Alps. It involved a voyage, without bases, of some 11,000 miles. Not until the closing stages of the Second World War was it considered practicable for a modern naval force to operate more than 2,000 miles from a first-class base of its own. Up to a point, Russia was able to take advantage of her alliance with France; but, at the same time, Britain was allied to Japan. This, in the early days of the groupings of powers which preceded the First World War, brought Britain and France into an embarrassing diplomatic conflict, for the Entente Cordiale had scarcely been cemented. A further indication of the complexity of international groupings at this period is given by the willingness of the German government to permit private German concerns to supply the coal necessary for the Russian fleet all the way across the world—despite the fact that the general belief in Germany and Austria, as in France and Russia, was that war between the two groups of states was likely in the future.

First, the Second Pacific Squadron had to be formed, and to begin with, a Commander-in-Chief was selected. He was Rear-Admiral Z. P. Rozhdestvensky, Chief of the Naval Staff, a hard man with a furious temper, given to striking officers and men alike if they did not obey orders quickly enough, and who frequently reduced his Chief of Staff to tears. Nevertheless, he enjoyed the respect and confidence of his crews. Rozhdestvensky was faced with the problem of rapidly completing or working up new ships and fitting out old units. Though the war had started in February, it was not until September that the Squadron went to sea as a unit to carry out firing practice. The results were discouraging; two cruisers ran aground, the battleships time after time came within an ace of colliding with each other as they manoeuvred, mechanical breakdowns were frequent, and the standard of gunnery was appalling. Nevertheless, a month after these trials, the Squadron sailed from Libau, on October 15th. Even before the ships left Russia, it was clear that the stocks of ammunition were insufficient for practice; moreover, there was a danger of wearing out the guns long before a chance occurred of firing in anger. These guns were very soon in action, against the Squadron's own ships and against British trawlers. Rumours were current in the Squadron

and ashore that Japanese torpedo craft had been ordered to intercept the Russian ships as they emerged from the Baltic. No one in authority seems to have stopped to consider how it could be possible for these craft to reach Western European waters without having touched neutral ports, and been reported from them. After Port Arthur the Japanese were apparently credited with supernatural powers.

On the night of October 21st-22nd, the Squadron passed through the British fishing fleets off the Dogger Bank; some of the small vessels were taken for enemy torpedo boats, and fire was opened. One trawler was sunk, six were damaged; in addition, the Russian cruiser *Avrora* was hit four times by Russian shells. In Britain, there was an immediate outcry, both official and unofficial, in which anger and contempt were mixed. While questions of apology and compensation were being argued, the British Channel, Home and Mediterranean fleets were disposed to attack the Russian Squadron. For four days the Russians were constantly shadowed, and the British ships were at action stations. The nearest British force, the Channel Fleet under Lord Charles Beresford, was much more powerful than the Russian, so much so that the British admiral proposed, on grounds of chivalry, to attack it with only half his available ships—an idea which upset the Board of Admiralty, and provoked one of the conflicts that eventually led to his retirement. There is a story about Rozhdestvensky at this anxious time which must command admiration; off Tangier, a British cruiser squadron was watching the Russians, manoeuvring impeccably as it did so. Rozhdestvensky called for his officers, pointed to the British, and said:“Gentlemen, that is how it should be done.”

The crisis began to abate on November 1st, Russia agreeing soon afterwards to pay compensation. Meanwhile, the main body of the Second Squadron steamed on towards the Cape, while a light force of “cruisers and destroyers under Rear-Admiral Folkersham headed for the Suez Canal. The two forces were to make rendezvous in Madagascar. For the time being, the Squadron’s chief trouble was coaling at sea in the tropics, an operation that was performed, for the most part, outside the three-mile limit and from the German colliers. Coaling could go on in a single ship for more than twenty-four hours at a time, in shade temperatures ranging from 90 to 115 degrees, with clouds of coal-dust hiding the sun, and everyone, from captain downwards, working ceaselessly in holds, hoists and bunkers, with wads of cotton waste between their teeth to help them to breathe. This was accomplished by crews of which few had ever been outside the Baltic; one day Rozhdestvensky’s flagship, *Kniaz Suvorov*, by embarking 120 tons in an hour, broke the world’s record of 102 tons, previously held by the British navy. Coal was stowed not only in the bunkers, but in the ’tween decks of the ships as well, and the extra coal, with other extra stores on board, so dragged the ships down into the water that their main armour belts were submerged. There seems to have been no alternative to this, since the Russian High Command held out no hope, once the Squadron had reached the Far East, of being able to replenish it overland, the Trans-Siberian railway being far too busy supplying the army.

From Tangier the Squadron proceeded to Dakar and from Dakar to Great Fish Bay, Angola, mechanical breakdowns on one ship or another being almost continuous. At Great Fish Bay a 300-ton Portuguese gunboat ordered the Squadron away in the name of Portuguese neutrality, and the Russians went on to Angra Pequena in German South West Africa, where they were given the facilities they required. From there to Madagascar, where French hospitality could be counted on, was a comparatively easy run. The arrival in Madagascar, at St. Marie on the North East Coast, took place on December 29th. The Squadron then moved from St. Marie to Nossi Bé, at the extreme north-western tip of the island; there it learned that Port Arthur had

fallen, and that what was left of the First Squadron had scuttled itself. If it had ever been a good plan to send the Second Squadron to the Pacific, it was no longer so now.

Before the First Squadron had ceased to exist, however, there had been a moment when it seemed possible that, by itself, it might gain at least equality with the Japanese fleet. That had been in March, a month after the first Japanese torpedo attack. Like almost all the great happenings in the Russian navy, it was largely a one-man affair. Before the outbreak of the war there had been ordered to Port Arthur to command the Squadron Vice-Admiral Makarov, by common consent, both Russian and international, the finest commander in the Russian fleet, and an admiral who ranks - together with Togo, his victorious opponent— as one of the great seamen of the age of steam and steel. Makarov came from the people, both his grandfathers being noncommissioned officers—later, he was the first of the Tsarist officers whose name was given to a Soviet man-of-war. He had distinguished himself as an Arctic explorer, as an expert in damage-control whose ideas were far in advance of foreign navies, and as the commander of a flotilla of torpedo boats in the Black Sea during the Russo-Turkish war of 1876-77, when one of his commanders had been Rozhestvensky. Two days after his arrival at Port Arthur, Makarov went to sea with his flag in the small light cruiser *Novik* and conducted his first action; it was one that brought new hope to the discouraged officers and men of the First Squadron, who till then had had no opportunity to regain their confidence after the initial Japanese attack. Makarov saw clearly that the Squadron was not yet fit to fight the Japanese, but he also saw that it could be trained to be fit; more important, he convinced his officers and crews that they would shortly be equal to dealing with the enemy. This period of hope lasted thirty-seven days; then came disaster. On April 13th, flying his flag in the battleship *Petropavlosk*, Makarov took the squadron to sea to protect a destroyer that had been cut off by superior Japanese forces when returning from a reconnaissance; his battleships ran into a Japanese minefield. The *Petropavlosk* was sunk, and Makarov went down with her; another battleship, the *Pobieda*, was badly damaged. The mine that sank the *Petropavlosk* sealed the fate of the First Squadron and of Port Arthur. The Squadron went miserably back to port, and gradually its strength and its spirit drained away, despite the fact that, on May 15th, mines accounted for two of Togo's six battleships. Finally, on August 10th, the Squadron was forced out by orders from the Tsar; these arrived just at the moment when the Japanese had captured the positions on shore from which they could keep up a continuous bombardment of the Squadron as it lay at anchor. The sortie was a failure; most of the ships were driven back to be pounded to death by the Japanese 11-inch howitzers, and the rest fled to internment in neutral ports.

This was the news that reached the Second Squadron in Madagascar; Rozhestvensky's plan now was to hasten forward to Far Eastern waters before the Japanese had time to repair and refit their ships after the strenuous year they had spent before Port Arthur. He hoped to leave Madagascar within a week, but he was there for three months; it was a trying climate, and the ships seemed almost to become absorbed by the jungle alongside which they were moored, while the crews, when they were allowed to go ashore in the appropriately named Hellville, gave themselves up to the traditional amusements of sailors with nothing to do and plenty of [money](#) to spend—facilities for their amusements appearing as if by magic in this remote corner of a remote island, amid the monkeys, the rats and the reptiles, scores of which were soon on board the ships as pets. As the crews settled down to dissipation, tropical marine growth formed on the hulls of the ships which were to cut knots off their speed; meanwhile, Rozhestvensky waited, on orders from St. Petersburg, for reinforcements that in no way compensated the Squadron for what it lost in time. The fall of Port Arthur had entirely changed the situation. There was little possibility that the Squadron would be able to fight its

way through the Japanese-controlled waters to Vladivostok; and even if it could do so, it was even more unlikely to exert any influence on the conduct of the war. Rozhstvensky asked, without success, to be allowed to resign his command, and turned once more to trying to get his undisciplined crews in hand. At the same time, he faced the problems presented by the increasing unwillingness of the neutral powers to offend Japan by facilitating his voyage. Eventually, the Hamburg-Amerika line, which had announced its intention of suspending deliveries, agreed to resume the supply of coal up to the 12th parallel North.

In the meantime, other misfortunes were falling upon the Squadron; the crews were running short of food, clothing and even boots—and lack of boots was a real handicap on decks that were covered with coal, and in ships that would soon have to fight an enemy in the bitter spring weather of the Sea of Japan. The latest and almost the heaviest charge on Rozhstvensky's firmness of purpose was laid by a naval correspondent, named Captain Klado, whose sinister activities leave one at loss to guess his motives. Klado had been an officer on Rozhstvensky's staff, and had returned to Russia to give evidence before the international commission on the Dogger Bank incident, of which he himself had seen almost nothing. After participating in the commission's work, he began writing newspaper articles deploring the superiority of the Japanese fleet over the Second Pacific Squadron; this was true enough, but Klado's articles also succeeded in severely depressing the morale of the Russian ratings. Much more serious in its effects was the conclusion drawn by Klado. To make up for the deficiencies of the Second Squadron, he proposed the despatch of a Third, made up of old coastal defence vessels and obsolete cruisers that had been left behind as likely to prove a hindrance to Rozhstvensky when he first sailed. Now, however, these ships were brought forward, manned with the lees of recruiting depots, placed under command of Rear-Admiral Nebogatov, and despatched against Rozhstvensky's express pleading. The Commander-in-Chief knew that the addition of old slow ships to his Squadron would mean loss of the speed that would be essential either to avoid the Japanese, or to fight a way through their main fleet. Why Klado was given official and decisive support is one of those mysteries of human behaviour of which there are so many instances in the actions of the officials and politicians of Imperial Russia. The generally accepted explanation is that private contractors had done well out of equipping the Second Squadron, and were accordingly anxious for the despatch of a Third and even a Fourth.

There is evidence that Rozhstvensky endeavoured deliberately to miss Nebogatov, but it was in vain. He sailed from Madagascar on March 16th, setting off on a non-stop voyage of 4,700 miles to the coast of Indo-China. Mechanical breakdowns were frequent, and the long rollers of the Indian Ocean very nearly capsized the small and unseaworthy destroyers, which were under tow. Nevertheless, the coaling of the Squadron at sea went on—a feat unheard of then, and one that has never been paralleled in the history of the sea. Lost to the world for three weeks, the Squadron reappeared off Singapore on April 8th. On April 14th, it anchored in French territorial waters, in Kamranh Bay, only to be told by the French authorities a few days later that it must move on; so it did, to another part of the same coast, where on May 9th, Nebogatov at last arrived. On May 14th, the combined Second and Third Squadrons sailed North, to the Straits of Tsushima between Korea and Japan, where the Japanese, repaired, restored and refitted, were waiting for one of the decisive battles of history.

Early in the morning of May 27th, the Japanese patrols easily picked up the Russians, whose fleet was followed by a hospital ship fully lit; in those waters, however, detection was inevitable, nor was there any other channel through which the Russians might have hoped to slip past unseen. On board his flag-ship, the *Oslabia*, Folkershamn lay dead. For the sake of

morale, the rest of the fleet was not informed; even Nebogatov did not know that he would succeed to the command if anything happened to Rozhstvensky. After a brief cruiser engagement, the Japanese main force was able to steam across the head of the Russian line, concentrating all its fire on the Russian ships, of which only the leading one, the *Kniaz Suvarov*, was in a position to reply. This manoeuvre, known as “crossing the T,” had been the dream of all admirals since steam tactics were introduced. In fact, in all naval history it has only twice been successfully carried out, here at Tsushima, and thirty-nine years later when the Americans accomplished it at the expense of the Japanese during the battle of Leyte Gulf. Despite the immense advantage the Japanese had gained, it was a Japanese ship that fell out of line first. Captain Yatsushiro of the cruiser *Asama* had gone into action playing a flute upon his bridge. Now his damage-control parties were struggling up to their waists in icy water, working in ’tween decks to save the ship which was lit only by misty daylight leaking in through shell holes. The *Oslibia* was the first Russian to go and, as she sank, Folkershamn’s coffin floated clear, and a drowning Russian sailor clambered on it. Then the *Kniaz Suvarov* was almost completely put out of action and Rozhstvensky badly wounded. She fought on for four hours, her masts and funnels shot away, and only one small gun firing. Rozhstvensky was taken off, hardly conscious, in a destroyer. Togo’s *Mikasa* was hit over thirty times but the Russian shells were inferior, many of them having, for the sake of economy, been made of cast-iron instead of steel, and at the end of the day *Mikasa* was still battleworthy.

Between a half-hour and an hour was sufficient time for the Russian fleet to be knocked out as a combatant force; for these minutes the fleet had painfully steamed round the world. ... When they were over, it was merely a question of hunting down the fugitives and sinking the cripples; one armed yacht and two destroyers alone got through to Vladivostok. Nebogatov surrendered the brand-new battleship *Orel* and two coastal defence vessels, going, over the side to the Japanese flagship in full-dress uniform. Three out of the *Orel*'s four big guns were still in service, and she could steam 16 knots. Horrified at the surrender, some of her officers tried to scuttle her as the Japanese prize crew came on board; the Japanese hunted them through the ship, dragged them up on deck and shot them. Meanwhile, the destroyer in which Rozhstvensky had been placed was also caught and surrendered. Japanese losses in the action were three torpedo boats.

After the war was over, and Rozhstvensky, Nebogatov and the other prisoners had returned to Russia, a series of courts-martial were held. Rozhstvensky insisted on taking all the blame upon himself, but the authorities would not accept his admissions and refused to convict a man for a surrender which had taken place while he was unconscious. Nebogatov and the captains who had surrendered were condemned to death, but their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment; one of the captains survived to fight as a private soldier in the war of 1914-18.