



## *Anti-Russian Secret Actions – The Kokuryūkai and the Russo-Japanese War*

by Frank Jacob

### INTRODUCTION

The image of a country is mainly a construction of its popular perception.<sup>1</sup> Many stereotypes<sup>2</sup> are just the consequence of prejudices or single experiences, which have been made public and are responsible for the creation of resentment with regard to a particular country. Russia. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Russia became Japan's number one enemy for a possible forthcoming war. This image was mainly created and supported by the nationalist circles, led by the Amur society (Kokuryūkai),<sup>3</sup> which was founded to enforce a war against Russia.

This society tried to influence Japanese politicians as well as public opinion by reporting about Russia and frequently demanding a more aggressive course against the tsarist enemy. Russia's expansive course in East Asia was stigmatized as a threat to Japanese imperial aspirations with regard to the Asian mainland, especially for its influence in Korea. A war was declared to be suitable, and for the Kokuryūkai's planning a war seemed to be sure. Its leader, Uchida Ryōhei (1873–1937),<sup>4</sup> published

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<sup>1</sup> For this topic see Anderson 2006.

<sup>2</sup> For a general introduction see Qeybullayeva 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The works on the Kokuryūkai in Western languages are Jacob 2013 and Jacob 2014.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed biography of Uchida the before mentioned works of Jacob are recommended.



pamphlets and books<sup>5</sup> that underlined the anti-Russian ideology of the society and helped broaden support for a war against the tsarist empire.

The following article will outline the history of the Kokuryūkai from 1901 until the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 in order to provide a survey of the society and its activities. The society was founded as an offshoot of the Black Ocean Society (Genyōsha),<sup>6</sup> which was founded in 1881, but it did not have such an explicit anti-Russian stance. This paper consequently will also deal with the question of why the Kokuryūkai was founded at all in 1901. Was there a special catalyst for the creation of a particular society at this point? Alongside with this, the anti-Russian agitation of the society shall be taken into consideration to show how the society was trying to influence political and popular opinion. Furthermore, how it defined its aims as well as its enemy shall be considered. Finally, whether and how the members of the society were responsible for creating a negative image of Russia following the years of its foundation will be analyzed.

#### THE KOKURYŪKAI (1901–1905)

When American Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) and his small fleet of “Black ships” opened Japan to the West, their actions should have had tremendous effects on the Japanese society. The shogun was forced to sign the so-called unequal treaties<sup>7</sup> with the United States and other Western Great Powers. Now even Russia could force the Japanese government to sign a treaty with her, a wish that had been denied by Japan for decades (Lensen G. A. 1959). All in all, the opening of Japan had political, social, and cultural consequences.<sup>8</sup> The shogun finally had to abdicate his power and the following Meiji Restoration (See Beasley 1972), starting in 1868, laid the groundwork for the rule of the emperor, changed society as a whole by abolishing the Confucian based hierarchical division within it, and set the beginning of Japanese industrialization, which would Westernize Japan in the following years until the 1890s.<sup>9</sup>

The losers of these events were the samurai,<sup>10</sup> who had ruled Japan for centuries and now had to face their loss of influence and newfound roles as simple spectators. More and more former samurai were unable to integrate themselves into the new economic system. In addition, they were unwilling to serve as members of a conscript

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<sup>5</sup> Just two examples of the wide range of publications are Kokuryūkai 1940 and Kokuryūkai 1935/36.

<sup>6</sup> The Genyōsha also published its own history (Genyōsha 1917).

<sup>7</sup> Auslin M. R., 2006, *Negotiating with Imperialism: The Unequal Treaties and the Culture of Japanese Diplomacy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge. (MA).

<sup>8</sup> For a broad survey of the changes see Jacob 2013.

<sup>9</sup> During the process of Westernization the Japanese government hired several specialist from Western countries. See Shimada 1987.

<sup>10</sup> For a survey of the long history of the samurai, see Schwentker 2008.



army, fighting side by side with peasants. The consequence was an increasing potential for aggression, which finally broke out during the Satsuma Rebellion (See Mounsey 1979), led by the famous samurai leader Saigō Takamori (1828–1877) (See Ravina 2004), who died in battle and was unable to change the fate of the former warrior class. The *bushi*, as the former samurai called themselves, had to search for new ways to make a living. Some went to the Asian mainland where they tried to live as *rōnin* (masterless samurai) and were called continental *rōnin* (*tairiku rōnin*).<sup>11</sup> Some of those who remained in Japan tried to prosecute the fight of Saigō by founding secret societies.

The Genyōsha was one of them. Founded and led by Tōyama Mitsuru (1855–1944),<sup>12</sup> the society assembled mainly *bushi*, working in secrecy. Their aim was a Japanese expansion and a weakening of the government. For this reason, they supported not only Pan-Asianist leaders like Kim Ok-gyun (1851–1894), Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), and Emilio Aguinaldo (1869–1964), but were also even involved in the attempt to kill foreign minister Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922) in 1889, not to mention other political plots. The society tried to collect weapons to send a private army to Korea. However, this plan had to be abandoned, because a similar project – the so-called Ōsaka Incident of 1885 – was prevented by the police. Therefore the possibility that the government might also find out about the Genyōsha's intent for a private invasion of Korea became too dangerous and the project was canceled.

A few months before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1894/95) (See Paine 2003), the Genyōsha created a guerilla group of 14 members, called "Gallant Assistance from Heaven" (*Tenyūkyō*),<sup>13</sup> and sent them to Korea to use the already running Donghak Rebellion to create a reason for war between Japan and China. One of the group members was Uchida Ryōhei, who was trained in the Genyōsha *dōjō* and was selected for his specialization in explosives. In Korea, the members joined the ranks of the Donghak and led sabotage troops against the Korean army. The claim that these 14 men were responsible for the outbreak of the war seems to be just a myth, which was created by the Genyōsha itself in later years. The rebellion had already been successful before the Japanese men went to Korea and the government had pleaded with China to provide assistance as consequence of the revolutionary threat, not because it feared 14 Japanese men.

But either way, the war began in full force and Japan won its first major battle in Asia, showing that it had become modernized enough to win a war against the biggest Asian nation.<sup>14</sup> Its Westernization proved to be successful and Japan longed

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<sup>11</sup> For an account dealing with this phenomenon, see Siniawer 2008.

<sup>12</sup> For a biography of Tōyama, see Fujimoto 1967.

<sup>13</sup> The *Tenyūkyō* was formed of 14 men, who were recruited from the ranks of the Genyōsha but from the military as well.

<sup>14</sup> This led to the propaganda of a "Yellow Peril" in Asia in Western countries during the following years.



for economic and territorial reparations. The peace treaty of Shimonoseki<sup>15</sup> dictated the conditions of the Japanese victory:

1. China recognises definitively the full and complete independence and autonomy of Korea. [...]
2. China cedes to Japan in perpetuity and full sovereignty the following territories [...]
  - a) The southern portion of the province of Fēngtien [...]
  - b) The island of Formosa [...]
  - c) The Pescadores Group [...]
3. The alignment of the frontiers [...] shall be subject to verification and demarcation on the spot by a Joint Commission of Delimitation [...]
4. China agrees to pay to Japan as a war indemnity the sum of 200,000,000 Kuping taels [...]
5. The inhabitants of the territories ceded to Japan who wish to take up their residence outside the ceded districts shall be at liberty to sell their real property and retire [...]

But Japanese aspirations were not successful in this regard. The other great powers, namely France and Germany, led by a Russian initiative, intervened against the expansionist ambitions of the Japanese empire. The so-called Triple Intervention crushed Japanese dreams of a victorious expansion and Russia became seen as an enemy for the next war, because just two years later, in 1897, the Russian government leased Port Arthur<sup>16</sup> from the Chinese; it was the harbor Japan would have possessed following the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

However this was not the only reason why Russia was increasingly perceived as dangerous. Between 1899 and 1901, China was shaken by the Boxer Rebellion (See Cohen 1997). The increasing influence of Western powers led the Chinese people to revolt and a group, called the Boxers, assembled the population against the government. Only an international expeditionary force was able to end this rebellion. Japan sent the majority of soldiers to the Asian mainland. Russia had been hesitant during the main conflict, but in the final period the czarist army intervened and occupied the whole territory of Manchuria. While the other great powers protested, the Russian government was unwilling to abandon the Manchurian territory again and stated that it would only directly negotiate with China. Despite the negotiations, Russia did not end its occupation of the southern parts of the territory, which would have been under Chinese authority again in 1901. The permanent threat to Korea and the Japanese interest there, combined with the Russian unwillingness to withdraw her troops from Manchuria, motivated Uchida to found the Kokuryūkai, which focused on preparing Japan for a war against Russia.

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<sup>15</sup> <<http://www.taiwandocuments.org/shimonoseki01.htm>>.

<sup>16</sup> Port Arthur was a harbor at the southern tip of the Liaodong Peninsula and was of the highest strategic value.



## ANTI-RUSSIAN AGITATION

The Triple Intervention and Russian penetration of Manchuria were the culprits that led to anti-Russian resentment from Japanese nationalists, especially the members of the Genyōsha and Uchida Ryōhei, who had traveled through the tsarist empire before and was willing to fight for an end to this policy (Toyama 1980: 78-83). The future founder of the Kokuryūkai was not willing to grant the Russians a sphere of influence bordered by the Tae-dong River and wanted to drive the border back behind the Amur River. He started to think about an extension of the Tenyūkyō, which led to the foundation of the Amur Society. In January 1901, the foundation of the new organization was discussed and on February 3<sup>rd</sup> the society was finally founded with 59 charter members (Brown 1955: 139; Kokuryūkai 1940: 6; Kokuryūkai 1935/36 Vol.1: 678; Suga 2003: 107-144, especially 120; Takayanagi 2003: 67-105, especially 83).

Its members were men who were already engaged in the activities of the Genyōsha and the Tenyūkyō, but were also right-wing party activists. Tōyama Mitsuru remained their ideological leader, who discussed the actions and plans of the Kokuryūkai with Uchida, but took action from the background (Sabey 1998:10). Despite its connections to the Genyōsha, the society was a single and independent organization even if there were striking similarities with regard to their tennō-centrism, which was strongly favored by both groups.

The main reason for Kokuryūkai's existence was the need to prepare for war against the tsarist empire in order to save Japanese hegemony in Korea. Uchida, financed by Japanese plutocrats (*zaibatsu*) like Mitsui or Yasuda, longed for a Japanese realpolitik that would include expansion on the Asian mainland (Somura 1957: 463). Shortly after its establishment, the new society opened its own publishing house in Tōkyō on March 10, 1901; it was responsible for the publication of the anti-Russian *Bulletin of the Kokuryūkai (Kokuryūkai Kaihō)*.<sup>17</sup> This journal provided information for all those who were interested in Russia. Uchida, who had traversed Russia after the Sino-Japanese War, was able to describe the situation in the tsarist empire as well as various geographical settings. In addition to him, the former members of the Tenyūkyō and other nationalist writers were able to write about their own experiences and thoughts, which seldom missed an anti-Russian point. The second volume of the *Kaihō* was so full of such comments directed against Russia that the government prohibited the journal, which could have worsened diplomatic relations between the countries (Uchida 1982: 279).

As a consequence of the prohibition, the Kokuryūkai published another journal called *Amur (Kokuryū)* that pursued the anti-Russian course of the *Kaihō*. Uchida and his coauthors continued their demands for a more aggressive Japanese foreign policy, especially with regard to Russian expansion in the Far East. Again, the government

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<sup>17</sup> With regard to the society's publications, one is not able to provide an exact number of copies.



prohibited the publication of the journal. Consequently it was only published for the members of the Kokuryūkai until 1903 (Kokuryūkai 1940: 7).

But Uchida was unwilling to end his propagandistic campaign against Russia. On September 25, 1901, he published his *Disquisition of Russia's Ruin* (*Roshia bōkokuron*) (See Uchida and Yoshikura 1901); again, the government intervened and the book was forbidden. This time the members of the Kokuryūkai protested against the prohibition and the book was allowed to be republished in a more moderate version under the title *Discourse about Russia* (*Roshiaron*) (See Uchida 1901) in November of the same year.

Despite the more moderate formulations of Uchida's ideas, the general image of Russia remained the same: negative. The leader of the Amur Society demanded the expulsion of the Russians from Asia through the use of brute force – meaning a war against the tsarist empire. Due to its heavy-handed attacks, the book was banned again just some weeks after its republication. In addition to the propaganda crusade in written form, the Kokuryūkai prepared the public for war against Russia. During the years leading up to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, the society sponsored and promoted different organizations monetarily so that they would be able to run meetings and gatherings of those who were interested in Russia and Japanese foreign policy. Uchida and other members of the society gave lectures about the Russian problem at such meetings to promote the cause of war.

Furthermore, the society tried to become prepared for the coming war in several ways. The men of the Kokuryūkai were trained in Russian. Some were even sent to the Asian mainland to spy in Korea and Manchuria, where they were mapping strategically important points or regions and collecting information about the possible enemy's armies. They also bought a small island not far from Seoul, which would be used as an ammunition depot during the coming war. All in all, the society propagated the war in public by illustrating the reasons for an armed conflict and prepared it in secret by arming themselves for the future battle. But of even greater importance is the fact that they were at least partially responsible for the creation of a Russian image in Meiji Japan.

#### THE RUSSIAN IMAGE AND THE KOKURYŪKAI

Uchida was one of the first Japanese men to travel to East Asia – and not just the eastern parts, but even into Western Russia. Due to this, he had gathered many impressions that he was later able to publish. Despite the fact that he set out to create a rather negative image from the beginning, one has to admit that he was also responsible for the creation of a more detailed image of Russia as well.

No concrete number can be provided regarding this impact, but at the very least, the Japanese nationalist spectrum got an image of Russia, which was geographical as



well as political. Uchida had mapped a lot of territories during his journeys and was one of the few people who were able to provide a detailed image of the tsarist empire at all. Due to this situation, one should not underestimate the meaning and importance of the publications in the years after the foundation of the Kokuryūkai, which provided more detailed insight into Russia's political and geographical circumstances.

Even if it is impossible to determine who read the journals and publications, there must have been at least some attention paid that must have led to the governmental prohibitions. Beside the aggressive political demands, a new spatial perspective was introduced to the wider public, who could now better imagine how big the Russian empire was at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Detailed descriptions of former Tenyūkyō and later Kokuryūkai members' journeys were published by the society's publishing house, especially in the years after the war, so that this effect became also responsible for Russia's public image after the end of her conflict with Japan. Thus the society and its members worked as mediators of predominantly geographical information about a mostly unknown spatial sphere, that as a result was acknowledged by at least a part of the Japanese public.

## CONCLUSION

Russia was a threat to Japanese ambitions, especially since the Triple-Intervention in 1895. Many Japanese people felt this to be true even if most people in Japan had no concrete image of Russia. This was a natural consequence of the lack of interest in the Czarist Empire since the forced opening of Japan in 1853. Since then majority of Japanese intellectuals, politicians and militaries were rather interested in Western countries. Due to that, almost no Japanese individual spoke Russian and almost no one had a spatial consciousness of the Russian Empire. This gap was closed by the activities of the Kokuryūkai. Despite the fact that this society was founded to prepare for war against Russia, the society's work and actions had a positive side effect. Maps were published along with detailed descriptions of the several journeys that Uchida Ryōhei and some of his fellow members had taken. These men wanted to depict the coming enemy in detail, but through their endeavors, they provided more general information to an increasingly interested public. Some of the first Japanese people who were trained in Russian were the members of the Amur Society, who worked as translators during the war but were able to provide their services even after the battles had ended.

So all in all, it can be concluded that the role of the Kokuryūkai with regard to the propagation of a Russian image is traceable, and the first maps and descriptions provided to the greater public were produced by Uchida and his men, who made Russia visible for an interested Japan at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Consequently, one can conclude that without the work of the Kokuryūkai at the beginning of this century, the Japanese public would have not known that much about the future enemy, especially before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904/05. Finally, however small the advantage of having some specialists on Russia in their own rows might have been, the Japanese at least had them, while the Russian army lacked highly needed translators and specialists on Japan. For sure, a handful of men could not have been able to decide the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War, but one definitely should not underestimate the effect the small group could have on the public image of Russia in general, and on the Japanese military in particular.

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