

## Vladimir Putin faces a 1905-style national humiliation

The sinking of the flag ship of Russia's Black Sea fleet provoked a sense of déjà vu among military historians. Prior to the demise of the Moskva, the last time the Russian Navy suffered a comparable blow was the battle of Tsushima, in the final stages of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. Across the two days of the battle, two thirds of the Russian fleet was sunk and a number of surviving ships captured. It was a disastrous defeat, and the parallels between then and now ought to give Vladimir Putin pause for thought.

The Russo-Japanese war was the first time in the modern era that a European power was defeated by an Asian nation, and not just any Asian nation but one that had been an isolationist feudal state just a few decades earlier. The sense of national humiliation was acute for Russia, as it is again today, as the world witnesses the supposed cream of the Russian military being ground to a halt by a nation that, so Putin's logic goes, is not even a real country.

In 1904-5, the Russian navy was revealed as hopelessly outdated against the far more effective Japanese ships that were both technologically more advanced and better led, drawing on British naval models that allowed them to operate with a flexibility that eluded the Russians.

The Russian military in 2022 has, again, been vulnerable to new forms of warfare deployed by the Ukrainians. President Putin's frequent boasts about his military and the large amount of money he has devoted to its modernisation have been exposed as Ukrainian units armed with Western hardware have successfully routed the invading forces and weapons systems worth millions of dollars have been towed from the battlefield by farmers in tractors.

While successful at sea, the Japanese found it difficult to deliver results on land. Ultimately, neither Japan nor Russia were adequately prepared for the unpredictability of conflict and the logistical and financial strains this imposed became increasingly serious for both.

However, the crucial contrast that opened up was between the early arrogant and in part racist assumptions of the Russian leadership and the reality of an intractable conflict. So also today. Instead of facing up to the difficulties his military faces, President Putin is instead renewing his assault, shifting the focus to the Donbas presumably in the conviction that this time he will be more successful. The Russo-Japanese War ought to teach him the dangers of a wartime leader digging in his heels.

Tsar Nicholas II had an early opportunity to negotiate peace but chose not to, believing that the Russian weight of arms would deliver victory. It was a disastrous decision – militarily, politically and personally. In 1905, the Russian empire broke into open revolt against him. It took more than a year for the government to regain control, by which time the Tsar had been forced into a number of democratic concessions and the stage had been set for the revolution that eventually toppled him in 1917.

The parallels between Ukraine and the Russo-Japanese war are not perfect. Russia was not the aggressor in the latter, for instance. But if I were Vladimir Putin, I would find enough in the story to worry me. His forces face a similar humiliation and, though it could again be years in the making, defeat may yet mark the beginning of the end for this modern Tsar's hideous reign.

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