

CONSEQUENCES OF INADEQUACY: RUSSIAN OPERATIONAL FAILURE AT THE BATTLE OF LIAOYANG IN THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

BY DREW POLCZYNSKI

As negotiations between the Russian Empire and Japan foundered at the turn of the twentieth century, the two countries inched toward war. The Russian and Japanese governments had been locked in a power struggle over Manchuria and Korea, with the Russian Empire seeking to establish a warm-water base of operations in Korea. Japan interpreted the Russian effort to establish the port as an act of encroachment into their sphere of influence. War broke out when the Japanese attacked an anchored Russian fleet at Port Arthur. Generally, Russia was ill-prepared to fight a war in the Far East. The deployment of Russian troops to the front was anything but easy; there was only one rail line into Manchuria, meaning that all supplies and troops carried by rail could only be transported on the single-track railway, costing precious time. The opening battles of the war did not prove favorable to Russia either – they suffered a defeat in the first major land battle of the war, Liaoyang.

Just as in any war, the Russo-Japanese War can be divided into three levels: strategic, operational, and tactical. Many historians and students of military history look to the naval-tactical domain as the most decisive domain during the war between the Russians and the Japanese. While they may not be necessarily wrong in arguing that the naval war was critical to the Japanese victory, the operational level of war is often underappreciated, and sometimes completely overlooked. Usually, this is because there is only a nuanced difference between the operational level and the other two levels of war. Military historians have struggled for years to define the operational level of war, leading definitions to be skewed, and sometimes causing the domain to be ignored because it is too difficult to understand. However, the operational level of war generally encapsulates “maneuver” and “C3I” (Command and Control, Communications, and Intelligence). Although this paper is limited in scope to only the Battle of Liaoyang, it will highlight the systemic issues of Russian C3I. These issues had a major impact on the outcome of the battle, which ended in the general Russian retreat from a stronghold and base of supply. The Russians encountered problems in all aspects of C3I – commanders failed to

maintain command and control during key points of the battle and the intelligence-gathering system suffered from systemic issues, with the practically non-existent communications network compounding the command and control and intelligence problems. In all, the Russian C3I problems prompted commanders to make decisions on little or no information, resulting in uncoordinated attacks and retreats and this denied Russian commanders the ability to communicate with one another.

The Russians faced systemic military intelligence issues. Ultimately, the military intelligence network of the Russians was completely lacking. Officers that were chosen to be intelligence officers often did not have any experience not only in the challenging terrain of Manchuria but also in the ascertaining of enemy troop positions during reconnaissance.¹ In addition, cavalry reconnaissance was poorly executed. The Don Cossacks, the main cavalry arm of the army, was unable to infiltrate through the advance guard of the Japanese and thus failed to reconnoiter the positions of the Japanese.² Even when Cossack reconnaissance parties did not come into contact with the Japanese advance guard, they could not locate the Japanese.³ The Russians also made a poor attempt at employing scouts other than the Cossacks. The mounted scouts taken from the main body of the infantry, though they were the most intelligent of the soldiers, were not numerous enough to gather intelligence even for a small unit.⁴ Thirdly, the Russians lacked trained intelligence interpreters within the general staff.⁵ The inadequate military intelligence network led Russian commanders to make poor or uninformed decisions on the battlefield. In a conference at Mukden at the beginning of the war Russian leaders met to discuss the Russian course of action. The conference ended with plans drawn up, “but with scarce an item of sure information on which to build, [it ended] in confusion of thought and uncertainty of

¹ Evgeny Sergeev, *Russian Military Intelligence in the War with Japan, 1904-1905* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 102.

² *Ibid.*, 107.

³ War Office, Great Britain, *The Russo-Japanese War: reports from British officers attached to the Japanese and Russian forces in the field* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1908), 156. The British officer remarked that the reconnaissance parties “had found out where the enemy was not, but not where he was.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

⁵ Sergeev, *Russian Military Intelligence*, 109.

purpose.”⁶ Russian decision making in the war, especially during the Battle of Liaoyang, followed this example. The Russians proved to be completely unprepared with regard to their intelligence network, and the failure of the Russians to have adequate, timely intelligence most certainly helped establish their defeat in the Battle of Liaoyang.

Furthermore, the intelligence gathered sometimes did not reach commanders or was conflicting. Intelligence was issued from the central intelligence staff but did not reach the lower echelons of the army.⁷ So, corps and division commanders, not only the commander-in-chief, made decisions based on no intelligence. Likewise, intelligence was gathered at the lower echelons too.⁸ Commanders were thus receiving two channels of intelligence: top to bottom intel, and intel gathered by lower-level units and passed up to commanders. Certainly, this system *could* work; however, it was more likely that the commanders received conflicting information. Commanders who received conflicting information either had to bet on one report being right or disregard both reports altogether. In one instance, Lieutenant General Georg von Stackelberg, commander of the I Siberian Corps, disregarded a report concerning the location and numbers of the Japanese on the right.⁹ Stackelberg chose not to act when he received the report that a twenty-thousand man Japanese force was moving northward, threatening his corps.¹⁰ This was not an isolated occurrence – confounding reports were common and subordinate commanders received confusing reports derived from bad intelligence.¹¹ The Russian army could not have possibly hoped to be successful if they did not have the proper intelligence network to gather information about the disposition, composition, and capabilities of their enemy.

⁶ Robinson H. Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang* (Constable, 1914), 36.

⁷ Alex Marshall, “Russian Intelligence During the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905,” in *Intelligence & National Security* 22 (2007): 686.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 686.

⁹ War Office, Great Britain, *The Russo-Japanese War: reports from British officers attached to the Japanese and Russian forces in the field*, 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* As the British officer noted, Stackelberg paid little or no attention to reports of his cavalry patrols. The officer also noted that his distrust of the cavalry’s reports stems from an earlier occurrence when the cavalry gave him bad intelligence.

¹¹ John Steinberg, *All the Tsar’s Men: Russia’s General Staff and the Fate of the Empire* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010), 138.

Without those three factors, the Russians could not have properly prepared for battle, and since they were in a defensively arrayed position, they were starting at a disadvantage.

General Alexei Kuropatkin, the commander-in-chief of Russian forces at Liaoyang, made the majority of his decisions with weak or no intelligence. The Japanese offensives proved to be costly at the beginning of the battle; almost all Russian forces still held their positions after the first Japanese attacks while the Japanese themselves suffered many casualties, after many assaults on the Russian defenses. Kuropatkin was indeed ready to seize the initiative, so he drew up a plan for a counterattack. However, his plans, called Disposition No. 4, were drawn up without proper intelligence. The X Corps in the center was to serve as the main effort of the counterattack to push the Japanese back.¹² Yet, he made this plan without the knowledge that Manju Yama, a hill to the east of the city of Liaoyang, was taken by the Japanese, threatening the left flank of any would-be attacker from the X Corps.¹³ Even Kuropatkin's defensive tactical abilities suffered from the poor intelligence system. Since Kuropatkin did not know the size of the enemy and only knew the general disposition of the Japanese forces, he chose to have a large reserve force (sixty-six percent of frontline troops) in the center whom he could deploy to where they were needed on the line.¹⁴ However, the large, center reserve force resulted in the inability of Kuropatkin to concentrate his forces in any one area because he and his commanders were unwilling to release the reserves to one specific area of the line.¹⁵ The resulting deadlock crippled the Russian ability to hold off wave after wave of Japanese attacks.

Kuropatkin's order to retire, however, is the most stunning example of the appalling Russian intelligence system. On the left flank, Kuropatkin's forces were threatened by those of General Kuroki Tamemoto, commander of the Japanese First Army. However, even though in reality he outnumbered Kuroki, Kuropatkin was informed that the Japanese forces had four divisions when they, in fact, had only two.¹⁶ Fearful that his left flank would be overrun by superior forces,

¹² Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang*, 226.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men*, 136.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Lord Brooke, *An Eye-witness in Manchuria* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1905), 119.

he ordered Stackelberg to shift some of his corps, who were under constant contact, to the left flank of the defenses and aid the European divisions who were retreating to inner lines.¹⁷ On the left flank, the Japanese did not succeed in breaking through the lines and were driven back two miles.¹⁸ Kuropatkin overestimated the Japanese threat to his left, weakening Stackelberg's position on his right. The order of general retreat from Liaoyang was also given under the circumstance of having insufficient or wrong intelligence information. First, he underestimated his supplies – he thought that the army had exhausted its ammunition when in fact, a train carrying more than enough ammunition had arrived.¹⁹ Secondly, he estimated that his numbers were not superior to those of the Japanese.²⁰ Both of these factors convinced Kuropatkin that he and his forces were in a dire situation, when in fact, they were not. He was fearful throughout the entire battle that the Japanese had superior numbers, which led him to fear a Japanese envelopment of his forces, specifically on his left flank.²¹ Kuropatkin was operating under either false information or no information. The inability of the Russian intelligence system to gather information about the numbers of the Japanese force, and then Kuropatkin's decision to act on misinformation or no information reflects poorly on the Russian military intelligence system. Overestimating the Japanese force led Kuropatkin to recall troops to the center, and while it shortened his lines which made them easier to defend, it also presented the Japanese with the opportunity to surround the Russians. The general retreat that Kuropatkin ordered based on insufficient intelligence ultimately cost the Russians the first major battle of the war. The Russian forces retreated from one of the most fortified bases of supply that they occupied.

The Russians also suffered from immense, deep-rooted command and control problems. Kuropatkin proved indecisive during the battle, and his general passivity proved to be fatal for the Russian effort. His indecisiveness was clear in one example of his leadership at

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (London: Methuen & Co., 1905), 131.

¹⁹ Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang*, 239.

²⁰ Ibid., 240.

²¹ Bruce Menning, "Miscalculating One's Enemies: Russian Military Intelligence before the Russo-Japanese War," in *War in History* 13 (2006): 155.

the onset of the battle; he ordered that the corps commanders may make offensives at their own discretion.²² However, Kuropatkin later backtracked, ordering his commanders to back down after one, Lieutenant General Sluchevski, commander of X Corps, asked for Kuropatkin to clarify the specifics of the “offensive.”²³ In addition, he made questionable decisions with regard to the retiring of troops. After the first two days of the battle, Kuropatkin lost six thousand men.²⁴ Under the pretext of losing six thousand men, he decided to withdraw to a more concentrated position since he was concerned about his communications being cut off in a turning movement executed by Kuroki.²⁵ He underestimated the ability of his forces. After all, he had twenty-six battalions, eighteen squadrons, and one hundred seventy-four guns guarding the left flank alone.²⁶ The six thousand men that he lost were divided between the center and two flanks. He had more than enough troops to stay in their positions, who could prevent the Japanese from inching forward to Liaoyang, and thus, being able to break off to the north, threatening the single-track supply line. His decision also decreased the Russian defense-in-depth ability to absorb Japanese attacks. Indecisiveness and overly cautious decision-making hallmarked Kuropatkin’s command and control during the Battle of Liaoyang.

However, Kuropatkin was not the only culprit of bad command and control; competition between generals and a lack of general control over the situation stifled Russian success. Especially during the counterstroke (Disposition No. 4), there was significant friction between the generals. During it, “the troops receive direct orders from Kuropatkin, Sakharov, Bilderling, Dobrjinski, Ekk – in fact, from anyone, apparently, who feels inclined to interfere. In the evening it is equally difficult to discover the real commander.”²⁷ While overt insubordination was certainly not the case, many commanders attempting to make the situation better actually made the situation much worse. The different corps commanders, thinking they had a better idea than the other and imparting their knowledge to shape the

²² Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang*, 213.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang*, 215 .

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 217 .

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

operational plan, made the situation more confusing than it already was. The poor intelligence gathering only compounded the command and control issue, making it much worse. Certainly, a single commanding general is needed in every battle to direct the efforts of the army. With the breakdown of command and control, and all generals putting forth their outlook on the operation, command and control was effectively taken away from Kuropatkin. The Russian counterstroke thus became uncoordinated and ineffective.

Kuropatkin, although it may not have been his fault, also had no general command or control over the situation. In an instance during the counterattack, “the right flank and left flank started to close in on the center, retreating.”²⁸ Although Kuropatkin issued no order for retreat, the commanders took it upon themselves to fall back to defensible positions. However, two decisions by Kuropatkin directly allowed command and control to unravel. First, he had a tendency to give in to his subordinates’ reports that they were “bested,” freely accepting the dismal reports of subordinates.²⁹ Secondly, Kuropatkin left his post of command to view his plan unfold, paying homage to old and outdated Napoleonic tradition.³⁰ Unfortunately, both of these factors contributed to Kuropatkin’s lack of control over the counterattack. It devolved into a series of uncoordinated attacks by exhausted Russian units, ending in a retreat to the inner lines of defense.

The Russian communications system was also weak and inefficient, which only worsened the issues of command and control and intelligence. No communication occurred between Kuropatkin and General of Cavalry Alexander von Bilderling, commander of XVII corps, regarding Disposition No. 4. In fact, Bilderling ordered Major General G. Orlov, the commander of the 54th infantry (whose entire division would later be routed and Orlov himself injured), to support a XVII Corps attack to secure Manju Yama even though Orlov’s division played a key role in the counterattack by serving as the flank guard of the attack.³¹ Bilderling was completely unaware of Kuropatkin’s plans. Worse, Orlov was unaware of the important role that he and his unit were supposed to have in the counterattack. He received a message

²⁸ Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang*, 237.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Steinberg, *All the Tsar’s Men*, 138.

³¹ Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang*, 227.

from General Kharkevitch, the quartermaster general, stating, “if XVII Corps is not attacked, to act in the manner that has been indicated.”³² Of course, Kharkevitch is referring Disposition No. 4, but Orlov did not receive the counterattack order in the first place. Orlov sent a message to Bilderling to clear up the confusion, but upon a lack of response from Bilderling, he assumed nothing had changed and subsequently prepared for the attack on Manju Yama.³³ The counterstroke was worsened because communications between generals broke down during the fighting, leading to uncoordinated attacks and retreats. In the attack, someone in the 35th division ordered a ceasefire, to which the entire front adopted and then started to retreat.³⁴ The retreat of the 35th division caused the flank of XVII Corps to be left open, unguarded, causing XVII Corps the retreat.³⁵ The ensuing chaos was a snowball effect in which Kuropatkin was powerless. Men retreated without order, and Kuropatkin had no way to turn them around.³⁶ Contingencies for communications were also quite lacking. Although the Russians were “amply provided with telegraph and telephone apparatus, they had no flag signalers nor do they seem to establish an efficient communication system of any sort.”³⁷ A British observer also remarked, “the Russians took no care to build good roads for communications networks.”³⁸ The lack of proper communications systems paralyzed Russian commanders in Liaoyang. Kuropatkin, unable to communicate with his subordinate officers, failed to maintain control of the counterattack, dashing any Russian hopes of victory.

The Russians failed in all aspects of C3I – command and control, communication, and intelligence all proved to be limiting factors for the Russian effort at Liaoyang. However, these issues are not exclusive to one another. The different aspects of C3I all affected the others in some way or another. Poor communication led to poor

³² *Ibid.*, 228.

³³ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 235

³⁶ Perhaps messengers could have delivered orders to continue the counterattack, but since Kuropatkin was observing the attack, he was in no position to send orders to his subordinate commanders.

³⁷ Rowan, *The campaign of Liao-yang*, 235.

³⁸ War Office, Great Britain, *The Russo-Japanese War: reports from British officers attached to the Japanese and Russian forces in the field*, 138.

intelligence, and poor intelligence led to poor command and control, and vice versa. Whether or not Alexei Kuropatkin was a tactical genius, he could not have hoped to be successful if he could not master C3I and the operational domain. Although Liaoyang is only one example of the war, it is an important one. It proved the backwardness and insufficiency of the Russian military intelligence and communications systems. Liaoyang highlighted systemic issues within the Imperial Russian Army that contributed to its ultimate defeat in the Russo- Japanese War, the major factor being the inability of the Russian General Staff to conceive the operational domain, the ever-important domain in 19th-century industrial warfare. Both the intelligence and communications systems contributed to the ineffectiveness of the Russian army's command and control structure. Although it was the first major land battle between Russia and Japan, it set the stage for the rest of the war. It served as a large blow to the Russian war effort from which Kuropatkin and his army could not recover.