

1900-5: PREPARING THE WEST FOR A NEW POWER IN THE EAST

Two years before the war with Russia, in 1902, Japan had signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, a 20-year agreement between Britain and Japan that brought considerable benefits to both sides but was eventually dropped, partly due to American pressure, in 1921-22. In 1904-5, Japan was seen in positive terms in London and Washington, and Japanese propaganda was conducted on an informal, personal basis with two individual goodwill missions to the West, and in books, pamphlets and newspaper articles.

This week we will look at the work of two early propagandists for the war with Russia: Suematsu Kenchō () and Kaneko Kentarō (1853-1942). When Japan began planning the war, the statesman Itō Hirobumi wished to prepare Western opinion to support Japan's case for war, welcome a Japanese victory, and in agreeing peace terms, see Japan's changed position in East Asia in positive terms. Itō chose Suematsu, his son-in-law, and the Harvard graduate, Kaneko, to spearhead the campaign. Suematsu went to Europe, Kaneko to America.

Above all, the aim was to present Japan as an unthreatening power, no danger to Britain's position in the world. By pushing back Russian power in Manchuria and Korea, and by providing an oasis of Western style democracy and civilisation in the 'Far East', a Japan victory against Russia could only benefit Western interests, especially Britain's.

As we can see from this illustration in *Punch* magazine, Japan succeeded in presenting this unthreatening image. Here Japan is presented as a woman, in *kimono*, with Britain represented by the tall, well-built 'John Bull', a man, a mentor, in control, listening thoughtfully as his young female pupil explains the principles of Japanese military success.

In these honeymoon years of the wars with China of 1895 and Russia, Japan was seen in highly positive terms. 'Bushido' was equated with European chivalry. Later on, Japan would be seen, first, as a masculine threat, and its people as apes or vermin, and ultimately as a sub-human species to be annihilated. Thus, the 'Yellow Peril' would come full circle between the 1900s and 1945.



SUEMATSU KENCHŌ'S CAMPAIGN IN BRITAIN AND EUROPE

Suematsu Kenchō had an acute grasp of the importance to Japan of gaining a positive international profile, especially in wartime. In a letter to Itō Hirobumi written only a few months before the war with Russia, Suematsu offered his services as a propagandist out of concern that Russia would play the 'Yellow Peril' card against Japan in the coming war, just as the international alliance sent to quell the Boxer Rebellion had done four years earlier. In 1900-01, 'Peril' had been Chinese, but Suematsu feared that Russia's propagandists might try to shift the label onto Japan.

Itō recommended Suematsu to the Prime Minister, Katsura Tarō, who urged Suematsu to go to London, and 'stress as clearly as possible that Japan's aim in the conflict with Russia was simply to defend itself. He was to create sympathy for Japan, prevent use of the 'Yellow Peril' argument and strengthen the Anglo-Japanese alliance.' In February 1904, days after the outbreak of war with Russia, Suematsu traveled to London and became Japan's spokesman for the war with Russia: giving speeches and publishing articles about Japan in British, French, German and Russian newspapers. In 1905, in the wake of Japan's stunning victory over Russia, the first by an Eastern power over a Western or Caucasian power, Suematsu published an unusually honest assessment of his nation in a postscript to his book, *The Risen Sun* (1905):

Now that peace is assured, the time seems to have arrived for the world to reflect more calmly than ever before upon the origin of one of the greatest wars ever recorded in history; and upon the ideals and notions, as well as training and aspirations, of the Japanese, that one of the belligerent parties which had not, perhaps, been sufficiently known to the world before the war. And above all the time has come to observe how faithfully Japan has maintained her ambition of deserving the name of a civilised nation, and to reflect how securely we may take her steady progress of the past, and especially during the last ten years, as a guarantee of her continued advance in the future. Time was when she was looked down upon by many as a petty, facile, infantile, imitative, shallow, bellicose, and aggressive nation. Our sincere hope is that misconceptions of that kind may now be totally dispelled, and that the world may look upon Japan as a country deserving friendship. (pp.x-xi).

This may have been an effective appeal at the time, but it would be hard to find any later text that advances Japan's cause and presents her case with such disarming honesty. For example, in early Shōwa, the propagandist Karl Kyoshi Kawakami often made 'frank admissions' of Japan's faults, but he never used terms as negative as Suematsu's.

The Risen Sun should have become a souvenir of Japan's time in the sun. However, at the Portsmouth Conference of August 1905, far from building on the efforts of Suematsu and Kaneko Kentarō, Komura Jūtarō and his conference delegates threw away their psychological advantage and retreated into *mokusatsu* (killing with silence) in their dealings with the press. Unlike the Japanese delegates, the Russians befriended the journalists and the American brokers of the Treaty to win far easier terms for their country. When the terms of the Treaty of Portsmouth were published, many Japanese felt they did not recognize the quality of Japan's victory or the depths of Russia's humiliation. Public disappointment was especially keenly over the division of Sakhalin between Russia and Japan, but Japan did gain important benefits in Manchuria and Korea.

KANEKO KENTARŌ'S CAMPAIGN IN THE UNITED STATES

Itō charged Kaneko, who held a doctorate in law from Harvard, with getting US public opinion behind Japan in the coming conflict. Like Suematsu, Kaneko had a complicated hand to play. He needed to pre-empt any Russian attempt to play the race card against Japan, in particular the Western fear of a new 'Yellow Peril', and he was required to emphasize the pacific benefits of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.

This was a tall order, but Kaneko met it well in his speech, given over two hours to the Japan Club at Harvard University on 28 April 1904 and published the following month by the Japan Club as *The Situation in the Far East*.

When Kaneko delivered his speech, Japan's war with Russia had been underway for nearly two months. Japan had initiated hostilities on 8 February, declaring war two days later. Japan's successful naval victory at Port Arthur had already been noted around the world and had excited admiration in the United States. By late April, Japan commanded the straits between Japan and Russia and was preparing to lay siege to Port Arthur. The first defeat of a European power by an Asiatic country looked more and more likely with each day that passed, and Kaneko's reception by the Japan Club reflected the rising status of his nation.

In his speech, Kaneko dwelt on Japan's links with the West, her grasp of religious liberty and her tolerance of Catholic and Protestant missions and principles, the depth and strength of her constitutionalism and the efficacy of her government departments 'all these reorganized anew, that is to say, according to the principles of western civilization' (p.27). The war being waged was 'neither racial nor religious in character', but 'a battle for Japan's national existence; a struggle for the advancement of Anglo-American civilization in the East; a war undertaken to ensure the peace of Asia' (p.32).

