

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 33

“The Mountain Where Your Souls Lie”

Transcript

[music: fanfare]

In the opening months of the Russo-Japanese war, the Japanese have succeeded in neutralizing the Russian Pacific Fleet—mostly—and have landed large numbers of Japanese soldiers on the Asian mainland. By August 1904, the Third Army is besieging Port Arthur, while the First, Second, and now the newly arrived Fourth Army are all marching straight for the town of Liaoyang, headquarters of the Russian forces in Manchuria.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: opening theme]

Episode 33. The Mountain Where Your Souls Lie.

We are now three episodes into the Russo-Japanese war. So I'd like to start today by recapping where we stand, because I don't want to lose anyone along the way.

It is now August 1904. The war has been going on for six months. The most important actions of the land war so far have been on the Liaodong Peninsula. At the tip of the Liaodong Peninsula is Port Arthur, home to the Russian Pacific Squadron and now under siege by the Japanese Third Army. Running north from Port Arthur along the length of the peninsula is the Chinese Southern Railway, which despite its name was built by Russians. The Chinese Southern Railway runs north into Manchuria all the way to the city of Harbin, where it joins the Chinese Eastern Railway, also Russian constructed, which is a shortcut between Vladivostok and points west.

The Japanese have landed troops part way up the peninsula. And if captured, the port city that the Chinese called Dalian and the Russians called Dalny, which they are now using to supply their forces. The Japanese Third Army has landed at Dalny and as far as way south to where it is now laying siege to Port Arthur. The Japanese Second and Fourth Armies, which have also landed at Dalny are moving north along the rail line where they have linked up with the Japanese first army which fought its way north from Korea. And these three Japanese armies

are headed for the Chinese city of Liaoyang, which the Russian commander in the Far East Alexei Nikolayevich Kuropatkin is using as his headquarters.

By now, Kuropatkin is feeling a little bit unnerved. A combination of bad luck and incompetence has meant that the Russians have pretty much lost every battle so far. Kuropatkin believes that the smart thing to do is hunker down in Liaoyang where reinforcements, equipment, and supplies are pouring in every day via the Trans-Siberian railroad. But the emperor and his viceroy on the scene, Yevgeny Ivanovich Alexeyev, are losing patience with him. They've already ordered one attack south which ended badly.

You may also recall that control of the sea lanes is crucial to the Japanese who have to supply their forces in Manchuria from the Home Islands. The Russian Pacific Squadron based in Port Arthur has been more or less trapped there by the Japanese Combined Fleet since the war began. The most recent attempt to escape the blockade cost the Russian Pacific Squadron several ships. It is no longer a match for the Combined Fleet, and it will not sortie again for the rest of the war. The Russians also had a small cruiser squadron in Vladivostok which has been punching well above its weight, and causing the Japanese serious losses of men and equipment at sea. But that squadron, too, has now taken heavy losses and it will not be a factor again.

So the naval situation doesn't look so good for the Russians. But the one bright spot in this picture is the Russian Baltic Fleet. You may recall from last week's episode that the Russian admiral Zinovy Petrovich Rozhdestvensky has been tasked with assembling a fleet, to be called the Second Pacific Squadron, and taking it 18,000 miles to reinforce the squadron at Port Arthur. His projected departure date was July 15th, and it's mid-August now so he must be well under way. Morocco, perhaps. Maybe Spain. Britain. Denmark? No, the Second Pacific Squadron is still in Saint Petersburg.

In fairness to Rozhdestvensky, this is a complicated assignment. The Russians need to do a lot of planning. Besides combat ships, there are going to have to bring repair ships, supply ships, hospital ships, and other kinds of support vessels. And Rozhdestvensky is going to have to decide which ships to bring. The good news is the Baltic Fleet has four shiny new battleships. The bad news is, those four battleships are so new they haven't even had their shakedown cruises yet. Okay, guys, guess what? The voyage to Port Arthur has just become your shakedown cruise. The other bad news is, once you get past those four shiny new battleships, the Baltic fleet is not looking so hot. There were ships that Rozhdestvensky himself derided as "self-sinking." And others he dismissed as museum pieces. So, not going so well so far. But don't worry. Rozhdestvensky and his fleet should be getting underway any month now.

So enough recap. Let's move on and see what happens next, beginning at Port Arthur. General Nogi, the Japanese general commanding the Third Army that is now besieging Port Arthur, as

you may recall, is a hero of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894. In that war General Nogi was in command of an infantry brigade that attacked Port Arthur by land along this same route taking the town in one day at a cost of sixteen casualties. Now, ten years later, Nogi has been brought back to active duty and asked to repeat his miracle. Kind of like a good luck charm. But there's two things wrong with using generals as good luck charms. One is that Nogi is now 54 years old and his military training and experience are out of date. We've already seen the Japanese marveling at how different this war is from the one they fought ten years ago. Generals, famously, are always fighting the last war. And so it was with Nogi. The other problem is that Port Arthur was only lightly defended by the Chinese in 1894. Since the Russian set up shop here and stationed the pride of their Pacific Fleet here, they've also been working hard at upgrading the land defenses. They have not finished this project when the war broke out, but they have had enough time to put in lots and lots of bunkers and gun emplacements and other fortifications that had not been there the last time General Nogi was.

The Japanese started shelling the Russian defenses in early August using smaller artillery pieces after their wonderful eleven-inch Krupp artillery were sent to the bottom of the Tsushima Strait back in June. Still, the Japanese made some early advances, taking some of Port Arthur's more lightly defended outer lines which worried Emperor Nikolai enough to order the Pacific Squadron to make a break for it, as I described in the previous episode. The advances the Japanese were making, however, were coming at a cost of heavy casualties. This is at least partly because General Nogi is pretty old school, as I said. Unfortunately for the Japanese, the thousand casualties they've suffered so far are just a small taste of what is to come.

On August 11th, the Japanese Emperor made an offer of free passage for all women, children, and other non combatants out of Port Arthur. General Stessel refused the offer and probably set to work at once drafting a cable to the Emperor blaming this bad decision on General Smirnov since, you know, the food and clothing and other supplies being consumed by the besieged port would last a lot longer if the combatants didn't have to share them with noncombatants. For the rest of the siege, in fact, General Stessel's contributions will consist mostly of saying "no" to good ideas, and then blaming the bad consequences on General Smirnov, while General Smirnov's contributions will consist mostly of coming up with good ideas, and then watching General Stessel shoot them down.

I'd like to take a detour for a moment, before General Nogi launches his offensive, to mention a completely different event from August of 1904 that is equally momentous in Russian history: the birth of the crown prince.

The Emperor Nikolai and the Empress Alexandra had four children by 1901 and they were all girls. Once the Empress passed the age of thirty, it was looking increasingly unlikely the couple would ever have a son. And since only boys can inherit the Empire, Nikolai began to make

arrangements to prepare his younger brother, Mikhail, to take the mantle of emperor. But early in 1904 about the same time the war began, the now 3-year old Alexandra discovered that she was pregnant once again. In those days, it was not possible to know the sex of the child until it was born. This already unlikely pregnancy was surely Alexandra's last, and the devoutly religious couple spent much of early 1904 praying for a son. On August 12th, it seemed their prayers had been answered. The Empress gave birth to a son. Alexei Nikolaevich, Tsesarevich and heir apparent to the Russian Empire. Nikolai and Alexandra could be forgiven for seeing in this improbable birth the very hand of God in action.

But fate had a cruel twist in store for the Romanovs. By the end of September, after repeated bruising and profuse bleeding, it became apparent that the infant Alexei had hemophilia, a genetic disorder that impairs the blood's ability to clot. The gene is carried on the X chromosome, meaning almost everyone with hemophilia is male and inherited the gene from their mothers. Queen Victoria herself carried the gene and in her role as the grandmother of Europe had spread the gene to royal families across the continent, most famously in the case of poor Alexei. And in 1904, there was no known treatment for the disorder.

For people with hemophilia, the most minor of cuts and scrapes can bleed profusely. A nose bleed can be fatal. And more than that, internal bleeding is frequent and can lead to extended episodes of painful swellings. Bleeding in the joints can be incapacitating and cause permanent loss of motion. Hemophilia varies in severity from patient to patient. Even in the absence of treatment, some can live a normal lifespan. For others, even minor injuries turn out to be fatal. What was the prognosis for Alexei? So early in his life, there was no way to tell. The Imperial family treated Alexei's condition as a state secret. If the news got out, it could undermine the legitimacy of Alexei's succession. And so, only the family and a handful of trusted doctors and servants knew the truth. But as the boy grew older, his frequent illnesses and incapacity made it obvious that something was wrong. As for Nikolai and Alexandra, the imperial couple was already living in a bubble. As the family closed ranks around young Alexei, they became virtual hermits. They doted over him as the most loving of parents, in stark contrast to the way they regarded the rest of Russia.

[music: *Night on Bald Mountain*]

On August 20th, General Nogi began a five-day frontal assault on the Russian defenses. This is because he did not get the memo about frontal assaults on an entrenched position defended by an enemy with modern weapons. The result was one modest victory, the capture of a 174-meter high hill, called 174 Meter Hill, and an appalling number of Japanese casualties. About 16,000. Compared to a couple thousand Russians. Even 174 Meter Hill might have held if General Smirnov had been allowed to send in reinforcements when he wanted to. But of course, he was overruled by General Stessel. In fairness to General Nogi, I should point out that his superiors

were impressing upon him all this time the importance of taking Port Arthur as quickly as possible. Recall that Port Arthur is the home to the Russian Pacific Squadron. The Russian Pacific Squadron is currently tying up the whole Japanese Combined Fleet at sea. And the land defenses of Port Arthur are currently tying up the whole Japanese Third Army on land. The Japanese command would naturally like to take Port Arthur, eliminate the Pacific Squadron, and then redeploy the Combined Fleet and the Third Army someplace else. So the urge to get this done quickly is understandable. Because, you know where would be a good place to deploy the Third Army? How about alongside the First Army, the Second Army, and the Fourth Army, as they march north into Manchuria? And you know where would be a really great place to redeploy the Combined Fleet? Somewhere where it might be able to deal with Rozhdestvensky's ships when they come in from the Baltic. Because by this time, although Rozhdestvensky's Second Pacific Squadron hasn't left Saint Petersburg yet, the Japanese are well aware that it's coming. The Russians, of course, would have loved for this to have been a surprise, but this project of sending a fleet of ships all the way from the Baltic to the Sea of Japan has captured the popular imagination throughout the world. Reporters of many nations have descended on Saint Petersburg to cover every step of the preparations. So the Japanese are fully informed of Rozhdestvensky's every move.

But by August 24th, when Nogi called off his assault, it became clear that Port Arthur was not going to fall quickly, not even with Nogi in command. So the Japanese settled down for a long siege. And since not much is going to happen around Port Arthur for a while, let's turn our attention north to those other three Japanese armies. Overall command of the Japanese armies in Manchuria was in the hands of the 62-year old Field Marshal Lord Ōyama. Like most of the Japanese general officers at this time, Ōyama had studied in France. But Lord Ōyama's resume is particularly impressive. He studied at the French military academy of Saint-Cyr, the French equivalent of West Point, and was the Japanese military attaché in France during the Franco-Prussian War. So I'm sure that was quite the learning experience.

While he was in Europe, he also learned to speak Russian fluently. So the overall Japanese commander during the Russo-Japanese War spoke fluent Russian. How many of the Russian general officers fighting in the Russo-Japanese War do you suppose spoke fluent Japanese? I'm going to estimate that number at ... approximately zero.

Among the Russian general officers who I'm pretty sure don't speak fluent Japanese is the overall Russian commander, Alexei Kuropatkin, who, as I said earlier, is hunkered down in Liaoyang waiting for reinforcements. In fact, you may recall that Kropotkin is by this time five months into his strategy of hunkering down and waiting for reinforcements. And indeed, trains have been bringing new soldiers, new supplies, new weapons, ammunition, and equipment into Liaoyang daily all this time. He is also five months into being badgered by the Viceroy and the Emperor to do something, anything, with the large and ever growing army under his command.

So by the end of August, Kuropatkin is commanding a force of some 160,000 Russian soldiers, while Oyama is marching north with about 125,000. So, a significant numerical edge for the Russians. The only thing is, Kuropatkin doesn't know that he has a significant numerical edge. Actually, he believes he is outnumbered. Why does he think that? Well, the short answer is that Russian intelligence is really bad, and Japanese intelligence is really good. I haven't said much about the intelligence situation so far. But as the flow of the war might suggest, the Japanese have most of the advantages.

Let us pause here for a moment to remind ourselves that the country that this war between Japan and Russia is being fought in, is China. The imperial Chinese government is formally neutral. But they're rooting for the Japanese, as are most Chinese civilians in the theater of war. There are a couple of reasons for this. The Chinese see the Russians as an occupying force. Remember that they've been here in Manchuria for years, in large numbers, building railroads and fortifications and basically showing no sign of leaving, ever. And the Japanese arrived and started pushing them out. If you were a Chinese civilian living in Manchuria, who would you be rooting for?

And then you can add to this the fact that Russian soldiers have been treating Chinese civilians brutally, as Russian soldiers have had a habit of doing to civilians everywhere. The Japanese weren't exactly saints, but they were much more scrupulous about observing the laws of war. Japanese soldiers who committed crimes against Chinese civilians were prosecuted by the Japanese army. Chinese civilians who committed crimes against the Japanese were handed over to Chinese civilian authorities. The Japanese even compensated civilians for property damage or requisitioned by the army, while the Russians were knocking down Chinese homes and collecting the timber to use as firewood. So Chinese civilians are far more likely to rat out the Russians to the Japanese than vice versa.

Now add into the mix the fact that Japanese intelligence officers were having a great deal of success dressing up as Chinese civilians and then infiltrating behind Russian lines and snooping around. Russian soldiers couldn't tell Japanese spies from Chinese civilians. And they began to see anyone with an Asian face as an enemy, and treating them accordingly, which of course had the effect of further alienating Chinese civilians, and building more support for the Japanese. And then there was the question of bandits. Rural Manchuria tended to be a lawless place, and banditry was rampant. You may recall that the reason there were 100,000 Russian soldiers in Manchuria to begin with was that they were needed to protect the Russian rail lines. Now that there was a war on, the need to supply an army to face the Japanese make the rail line more important than ever. The Japanese had their own problems with bandits but to a much lower degree. And there were two reasons for that. First of all, the bandits are Chinese and like other

Chinese civilians, they are more sympathetic to the Japanese than the Russians. Second, the Japanese are paying the bandits to go after the Russians and leave them alone.

Another intelligence problem that Kuropatkin is having is the poor quality of Russian military maps. Because although the Russians have occupied Manchuria for years now, they concentrated their surveying and mapping in the southern portion of the Liaodong Peninsula, because those are their most valuable holdings, and that's where they figured most of their army would be deployed, and in the event of war, where they'd be doing most of the fighting. By now, the Russian army is already well north of the region where they expected to be doing their fighting, and in terrain that no one has bothered to map in detail. Don't you hate it when that happens?

And so Kuropatkin believes he is outnumbered, and so he is continuing his policy of hunkering down. I should also probably mention that in August, we are well into Manchuria's rainy season, meaning that the ground was muddy and the rivers are swollen. Kuropatkin has this in mind as well, and he has quite correctly decided that rainy muddy weather favors defense over offense. Oyama, meanwhile, was well aware of the fact the Russian forces outnumber his own and they are getting larger every day. And he has quite correctly decided that the time to act is, Right now!

Kuropatkin has arranged the defense of Liaoyang pretty much the way you should defend Liaoyang if you think you're about to be attacked by a superior force. Kuropatkin has had his army built three defensive lines. The farthest line some seventeen miles from the city, but thinly defended. The idea is to hold each line as long as possible, and then fall back to the line behind it, where there are fresh soldiers waiting to help, and thus wear out the Japanese over a prolonged battle. Oyama was hoping to out flank the Russian defenses, circle around to the north, and cut off Liaoyang's rail connection to Mukden and back to Russia. That might have ended the war right then and there. But he wouldn't be that lucky.

The Japanese began their attack on August 25th, the day after Nogi called off *his* attacks on Port Arthur. The first day, the Japanese concentrated their attack at their left flank, which was along the railroad line, hoping to force the Russians to commit heavily to this sector. They did, and they had a lot more artillery than the Japanese did. So the Japanese suffered one thousand casualties and accomplished very little. That night, however, over on the right flank, the Japanese captured a strategic hilltop position and threatened to outflank the Russian defenses. Kuropatkin reacted to this news by ordering a complete withdrawal from the first defensive line and into the next line in, which may have been an overreaction. The withdrawal took place in fog and pouring rain, which meant that it took awhile before the Japanese realized what was happening. By August 29th, the two armies were facing off at the second defensive line. The Russians attacked in the center and the Japanese worked the flanks. Both sides suffered heavy

casualties and unfortunately for the Russians, Kuropatkin would not commit the reinforcements which might broken Japanese line, because he still believed he was outnumbered. Kuropatkin was also worried about his left flank. That was where the Japanese advance had collapsed on the outer line. He sent reinforcements that way. But a combination of bad intelligence and bad maps resulted in a confused and disordered force stumbling into the main Japanese offensive. The Russians broke and fled and on September first, Kuropatkin ordered his troops to abandon the second defensive line.

By September third, the Japanese First Army was threatening the rail line north to Mukden, and the Russian commanders in the inner defense line were reporting shortages of ammunition, and morale at the point of breaking. Kuropatkin ordered a withdrawal to Mukden. Again, bad weather covered the withdrawal, and the Russians got a head start before the Japanese realized what was happening. And even when they found out, the pouring rain made it all but impossible to pursue, not to mention that the Japanese themselves were exhausted from the heavy fighting and in no shape to give chase. Kuropatkin reported to Saint Petersburg that Liaoyang was a great victory. And there was much snickering in Saint Petersburg.

It was true that Japanese casualties were heavier than Russian casualties. And the Russians managed to retreat intact and avoid the decisive defeat that Oyama was looking for. But the fact remained that it was the Russians, and not the Japanese, who were retreating. And the battle help Japan further with her credit rating, allowing her to borrow enough new money to keep the war going.

However you want to spin the battle, there's no denying that one of the losers was the town of Liaoyang itself. The retreating Russians had looted the town's shops before they left, searching for food and drink—and especially drink. After the Russians left, local Chinese militia helped themselves to whatever the Russians missed. And then the Japanese arrived, exhausted and starving after five days of heavy fighting. When they saw there was nothing left to steal in the shops, they turn to looting private homes. And so Liaoyang was looted three times in three days, which must be some kind of record.

But overall, things are going pretty much according to plan for the Japanese. Russian naval forces in the Pacific have been all but neutralized. Large Japanese forces are advancing northward into Manchuria. And while Oyama was unable to destroy Russia's armies, he proved he was able to push them back.

All this is good because Japanese strategy relies on a quick victory. Japan cannot afford a drawn out, grinding war. The Japanese were hoping to win this thing and get it done before winter set in. But the one sour note in the symphony of Japanese successes is the siege of Port Arthur. After the failure of his August assault, General Nogi had his troops digging trenches,

and sappers were set to work digging toward the Russian positions. All this is time consuming, of course, and it was looking increasingly unlikely that Port Arthur would fall before winter. This was not good. If the war lasted into the spring of 1905, there would be that many more Russian soldiers in Manchuria, and it would be enough time for those ships from the Baltic fleet to arrive and reinforce the Pacific Squadron at Port Arthur, which might be enough to undo all the Japanese gains of 1904.

In mid-September, after things had settled down a bit in Liaoyang, Oyama sent his chief of staff, general Kodama Gentaro down to Port Arthur so he could get a first hand report on what was going on down there. It seems Oyama was at the point of relieving Nogi and giving command of the Third Army to someone else. But when his chief of staff returned, he reported that Nogi was doing his best and was open to suggestions, so he was kept on. One suggestion in particular that was made to Nogi during this meeting regarded a certain hill at the west end of their front line. This 203 meter hill, which came to be known as 203 Meter Hill, or just Two Oh Three Hill, was tall enough and close enough to the harbor that if the Japanese could manage to take it and set up their nifty Krupp artillery up there, they would be in a position to shell the town, the port, and the ships of the Pacific Squadron themselves, which might be enough to end the siege. Nogi ordered an assault toward 203 Hill in September, but it failed and the Japanese were driven back with heavy casualties, although they did manage to capture another hill where they could place artillery that could reach the Russian positions on 203 Hill.

Nogi ordered a second frontal assault on 203 Hill in October, which was intended to capture it in time for the Emperor's birthday. But that attack also failed. Instead of an artillery placement, the emperor got a birthday card with another long casualty list tucked inside. In late November, with even more Krupp artillery now in place, and after miners were able to set off explosives under some of the Russian fortifications, Nogi ordered another bloody frontal assault on the Russian positions. These assaults mostly failed. But on November 30th, a Japanese force reached the top of 203 Hill. They were driven off and the hill changed hands several times over the next few days, but by December 5th, 203 Hill was under Japanese control. 8,000 Japanese died to take that one hill, including General Nogi's other son. 5,000 Russians died defending it.

The Japanese began moving their heaviest artillery to the top of two oh three hill at once. Before the day was out they had destroyed the Russian battleship *Poltava* with artillery fire. Within a week *Retvizan*, *Pobeda* and *Peresvet* were also destroyed. The only Russian battleship left at Port Arthur was *Sevastopol*, which had been relocated out of range of the Japanese guns. But by this point with the Pacific Squadron reduced to almost nothing, General Stessel decided to surrender, over the vehement objections of general Smirnov who would be overruled one final time. Port Arthur surrendered on January 2nd, 1905. 14,000 Japanese and 6,000 Russians were killed over the course of the siege.

Nogi took the death of his second son and heavy casualties to heart. I mentioned last week that Nogi was noted as a poet of *kanshi*, a form of poetry using Chinese characters. As it happens, the Chinese characters that spell out the numbers 2-0-3 as in Two Oh Three Hill, *erh, ling, san*, are homonyms for three other Chinese words they could be understood to mean, “the mountain where your souls lie.” After the fall of Port Arthur, Nogi wrote a *kanshi* poem with that title:

*Can we say it was easy to climb 203 Hill?
Was it not difficult, because men sought their honor?
The mountain has changed shape. It covered in iron and blood.
We now look up in awe at the mountain where your souls lie.*

We’ll have to stop there for today. Next weekend is Memorial Day weekend in the United States, a holiday time, and so I’m going to take the weekend off, but I hope you’ll join me in two weeks’ time on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of the Russo-Japanese war. What will happen to Admiral Rozhdestvensky and his Baltic Fleet now that Port Arthur has fallen? And how long are the Russian people going to put up with this string of bad luck and incompetence? What’s that? You say you want a revolution? That’s next time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh and one more thing. After the war, General Nogi reported directly to the Emperor on the siege of Port Arthur. During that audience, he broke down and wept. He apologized to the Emperor for the heavy casualties, and asked permission to kill himself. The Emperor told Nogi that he, the Emperor, had ordered the war and therefore the casualties were his responsibility, and he ordered Nogi to remain alive. The Meiji Emperor himself would pass away on July 30th, 1912. On the day of the emperor’s funeral, General Nogi and his wife, now relieved from the Emperor’s command to remain alive, killed themselves.

[music: closing theme]

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