

Racism, Stereotypes, and War

Jonathan Mercer

Racists believe that they have unlocked a secret to human behavior. Knowing another's race provides insight into why someone behaves as they do, and how they are likely to behave in the future. If racial types and their imagined characteristics were real, racial stereotypes would be invaluable to policymakers.¹ Although racism seems tailor-made for influencing how policymakers assess one another's capabilities, interests, and resolve, international security experts have neglected its potential effect.² This incuriosity extends more generally to racism in international politics.³ Presumably this uninterest stems from a belief that racism will not influence rational policymakers. This conclusion precedes evidence, and I argue that it is wrong. This article demonstrates that when policymakers

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1. A race is "an ethnic group, regarded as showing a common origin and descent." *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, definition I.1.b., accessed July 31, 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/race_n6?tab=meaning_and_use#27228477. Racism is a belief that races "are inherently different from one another and that people's characteristics and capacities are determined largely by race, usually accompanied by a belief in the intrinsic superiority of one particular race over another." Andrew M. Colman, *A Dictionary of Psychology*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, published online 2015), accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199657681.001.0001/acref-9780199657681>.

2. For exceptions, see Philip Streich and Jack S. Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 489–511, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12058>; Zoltán I. Búzás, "The Color of Threat: Race, Threat Perception, and the Demise of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902–1923)," *Security Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013): 573–606, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.844514>.

3. Gurminder K. Bhambra et al., "Why Is Mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism?," *Foreign Policy*, July 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/why-is-mainstream-international-relations-ir-blind-to-racism-colonialism/>; Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, "Why Race Matters in International Relations," *Foreign Policy*, June 19, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/why-race-matters-international-relations-ir/>; Bianca Freeman, D. G. Kim, and David A. Lake, "Race in International Relations: Beyond the 'Norm against Noticing,'" *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 175–196, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051820-120746>. Also see Kelebogile Zvobgo et al., "Race and Racial Exclusion in Security Studies: A Survey of Scholars," *Security Studies* (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2230880>.

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hold racist beliefs, this racism systematically influences how they explain and predict their allies' and adversaries' behavior.

The content of racist beliefs is so varied that creating a general argument about its influence is challenging. Instead, my theoretical discussion focuses on two characteristics of racism to capture its influence on policymakers' explanations and predictions. I then consider a competing explanation and detail why I selected the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) as my case study. I use this case study to examine how Russia assessed Japan, and how Germany and Great Britain assessed Japan and Russia. The conclusion expands the discussion to other types of intolerance and prejudice (or bigotry) and considers how easily reputations become stereotypes.

Theoretical Expectations

Credibility depends on how policymakers evaluate one another's capabilities, interests, and resolve in a particular conflict or issue. To keep a specific commitment, does a state have the necessary capability (which might concern the size of its economy and strength of its military), interest (which might concern the specific issue at stake), and resolve (which might include risking war)? Racism has characteristics that consistently influence the assessment of each part of credibility. I use these characteristics to create two expectations for how policymakers' racism influences their explanations for and predictions of their allies' and adversaries' behavior.

1st expectation: Racist policymakers rely on disposition (or character or type) over situation (or the environment) to explain another's behavior.

Did a country retreat because it is irresolute (a dispositional explanation) or because it is outnumbered (a situational explanation)? In the sixteenth century, it was common to use geography to explain physical characteristics like skin tone. If people in hotter regions moved to cooler ones, then their skin would automatically lighten.⁴ This situational explanation made skin tone irrelevant. Once anthropologists created distinct racial types, it was possible to attribute distinct characteristics (or dispositions) to group members. The crude biological racism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is less frequent today, but a belief remains that people in certain categories (or types) are

4. Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (London: 4th Estate, 2019), 47.

fundamentally different.⁵ Not all dispositional explanations are racist, but all racist explanations are dispositional. When an actor behaves contrary to racist expectations, racists are likely to use situation to explain away this behavior. Racists turn first to disposition or character to explain behavior.

Contained within every dispositional explanation is an implicit generalization. A character-based explanation becomes a characteristic. A racist policymaker might reduce military capabilities to the character of soldiers and officers, or to culture, or they might include physical characteristics that undermine (or enhance) the abilities of a race. Before Pearl Harbor, Westerners thought that the Japanese could not shoot straight because their eyes were slanted.⁶ In the 1930s, the British naval attaché in Tokyo reported that the Japanese had “slow brains,” and Britain’s commander in chief in China thought that the Japanese and the Chinese were “inferior yellow races.”⁷ British naval officers believed that Japan’s various racial weaknesses meant that the Japanese lacked enterprise and initiative.⁸ Viewing a state’s leaders and people as racially inferior can also lead to discounting another’s interests as unimportant or illegitimate. Thomas Borstelmann notes that the U.S. diplomat George Kennan viewed entire continents of people (in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America) as “impulsive, fanatical, ignorant, lazy, unhappy, and prone to mental disorders and other biological deficiencies.”⁹ Kennan believed that South Africans of color were incapable of self-government.¹⁰ In an unfinished manuscript, Kennan reflected on African Americans as being unable to properly assess their interests (“like our children”), and for that reason argued that they should be denied the right to vote.¹¹

5. W. Carson Byrd and Victor E. Ray, “Ultimate Attribution in the Genetic Era: White Support for Genetic Explanations of Racial Difference and Policies,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 661, no. 1 (2015): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716215587887>.

6. John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 335.

7. Quoted in Zoltán I. Búzás, “Race and International Politics: How Racial Prejudice Can Shape Discord and Cooperation among Great Powers” (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 2012), 71.

8. Philip Charrier, “The Evolution of a Stereotype: The Royal Navy and the Japanese ‘Martial Type,’ 1900–1945,” *War & Society* 19, no. 1 (2001): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1179/072924701791201602>.

9. Thomas Borstelmann, “Jim Crow’s Coming Out: Race Relations and American Foreign Policy in the Truman Years,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1999): 552, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0268-2141.2003.00049.x>.

10. Clayton R. Koppes, “Solving for X: Kennan, Containment, and the Color Line,” *Pacific Historical Studies* 82, no. 1 (2013): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2013.82.1.95>.

11. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 115.

2nd expectation: Racist policymakers use stereotypes to predict behavior and to drive explanations.

Whereas a dispositional explanation contains an implicit generalization, a stereotype is a prediction. A stereotype presupposes a type. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a stereotype as “a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person” and as “a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type.”¹² Racial types are seductive because of their imagined predictive and explanatory power. When a policymaker believes that they know another’s type, they will have more confidence in their explanations and predictions. An irresolute type will be irresolute. An incompetent, childish, uncivilized type will reliably exhibit such characteristics in the future just as they have in the past. The more confidence one has in a belief the greater its influence. Robert Jervis identified this tendency to use one’s beliefs, images, hypotheses, expectations, or stereotypes to explain behavior as “assimilation,” which he considered “the most pervasive and significant cognitive process.”¹³ Stereotypes depend on this assimilation mechanism, which explains how they can be both enduring and inaccurate. To paraphrase Jervis, sometimes believing is seeing.¹⁴ When one believes in the validity of a stereotype, one will often “see” behavior corresponding to it.

Racism distorts analysis. It leads to an overemphasis on disposition to explain behavior, which generates stereotypes that policymakers use to predict and explain behavior. These processes are mutually reinforcing, and they create misguided confidence in one’s analysis. According to Jervis, assimilation leads policymakers to “see evidence as less ambiguous than it is, think that their views are steadily being confirmed, and so feel justified in holding to them ever more firmly.”¹⁵ Relying on a stereotype to explain behavior generates its own supporting evidence and shields the stereotype from disconfirming evidence, which increases confidence in the validity and utility of that stereotype. This vicious circle of ignorance is one reason that racist stereotypes have an enduring influence on credibility assessments.

12. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, definition 3b, accessed July 31, 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stereotype_n?tab=meaning_and_use#20628569.

13. Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 207; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 68, 143–172.

14. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 170.

15. Jervis, *How Statesmen Think*, 206.

A Competing Explanation and Case Selection

Security experts have not studied racism's influences on credibility assessments. This uninterest extends to historical cases. Although history is replete with racist policymakers, their racism, apparently, did not systematically influence assessments. Instead, policymakers—racist or not—determine credibility on the basis of an objective assessment of another's capability, interests, and resolve. In other words, even racists assess credibility as if they are not racists. Although this argument seems improbable, it is the best theoretical explanation for discounting racism's influence. A second explanation for not studying racism's influence on credibility is fanciful: that racist policymakers have never existed, do not exist, or will never exist.

According to normative (or rationalist) models of decision-making common among economists, statisticians, and rational choice scholars, individuals *should* examine another's behavior without preconceptions, which permits an objective interpretation. This is called "updating." Instead of using beliefs to interpret data (assimilation), one should use data to inform beliefs (updating). For example, unlike stereotypes, reputations depend on updating.¹⁶ Policymakers give one another reputations on the basis of behavior and then use new information to update that reputation. Updating is powerful because, over time, the divergent reputations that policymakers hold of other actors will converge and become more accurate.¹⁷ Whereas inaccurate stereotypes can last for centuries, reputations change as policymakers update their beliefs.

Evidence that disconfirms my argument will confirm the rationalist view of credibility, which is also the conventional view (because it implies that both racists and non-racists assess credibility the same way). This conventional approach leads to two expectations: First, racists, like everyone else, rely on both disposition and situation to explain another's behavior. Second, because both racist and non-racist policymakers update (rather than assimilate), stereotypes will not drive their explanations or predictions. In this view, racism is more like a hobby than a belief. It is easy to put aside when the stakes are high. Morris Fiorina suggests that "rational choice arguments are more useful where the stakes are relatively high and the number of players relatively low. Making

16. Michael Tomz, *Reputation and International Cooperation: Sovereign Debt across Three Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 18.

17. Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 18–19.

a reasoned decision is not worth the effort if the consequences are trivial or if your decision makes no difference to the outcome or both.”¹⁸ For these reasons, rationalists expect racist and non-racist policymakers to assess credibility or questions concerning war and peace similarly and objectively.

To test my theoretical expectations, I selected the Russo-Japanese War for three reasons. First, assessing the influence of racism depends on identifying racist policymakers. European and U.S. policymakers considered racism common sense in the early 1900s. Second, confidence in the analysis requires multiple policymakers from different states explaining and predicting the behavior of allies and adversaries. The Russo-Japanese War allows me to study how Russian policymakers assessed Japan, and how German and British policymakers assessed Japan and Russia. Third, novel or controversial arguments require more evidence than conventional or well-documented ones. Establishing the influence of racism requires the existence of extensive historical research. Historians have studied virtually every aspect of this important and fascinating war.

Selecting the Russo-Japanese War is subject to three critiques. First, it is an easy case to show the influence of racism. I agree, and that is one reason for selecting it. If racism did not influence policy in this war, its influence is unlikely in other wars. Note that racism does not present a unique challenge to conventional arguments about how people assess credibility. If policymakers “update” as they should, then racist stereotypes are unimportant.

A second critique is that the Russo-Japanese War is only of historical interest: racism is so uncommon today that it will not influence policymakers’ evaluations of other states. Jervis recognized racism’s historical influence but doubted its contemporary significance: “Because nationalism has become less virulent and racial generalizations are discredited, distorting prejudice . . . no longer plays a major role.”¹⁹ Even if racism’s influence on policymakers’ explanations is a thing of the past, international relations scholars rarely consider racism as important even in the past.²⁰ In many countries racism (and other

18. Morris P. Fiorina, “When Stakes Are High, Rationality Kicks In,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2000. See also Tomz, *Reputation and International Cooperation*, 29.

19. Robert Jervis, “Intelligence and Foreign Policy: A Review Essay,” *International Security* 11, no. 3 (Winter 1987): 158, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538887>.

20. Exceptions include: Audie Klotz, “Norms Reconstituting Interests: Global Racial Equality and U.S. Sanctions against South Africa,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 451–478, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818300033348>; Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge:

kinds of bigotry) is less potent today than before, but not all policymakers are so enlightened and there is no guarantee against racism's return in even the most progressive nation. A belief's influence over an individual depends on how strongly it is held, not on *when* it is held. If racist beliefs influenced how individuals assessed credibility in the past, they will likely do so in the future.

A third critique is that this study only confirms common sense: racism was a strongly held belief, so of course it influenced assessments. The scholarly neglect of racism's influence on credibility belies this critique. More important, strong beliefs among policymakers and analysts are hardly an exception. An insight gained from studying racism is how some strongly held beliefs—racist or otherwise—can become stereotypes. That racism was a strongly held belief is a reason to study the Russo-Japanese War, not a reason to avoid doing so.

The Russo-Japanese War

The outcome of the Russo-Japanese War shocked the West: little Japan defeated mighty Russia. The Ethiopians had beaten the Italians at Adowa (1896), and the Boers had won significant battles against the British in the South African Wars (1880–1881, 1899–1902), but this war was different. Disparaged in innumerable ways as part of an “inferior yellow race,” Japan defeated the white and powerful Russian army and navy. In nineteen months, Japan took Korea from Russia, captured Port Arthur (in Manchuria), and destroyed Russia's Baltic Fleet in the Tsushima Strait—the most significant naval engagement since the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.²¹ Half a million soldiers participated in the Battle of Mukden, at the time the largest number in military history.²² Japan defeated the nation with the third-largest navy in the world.

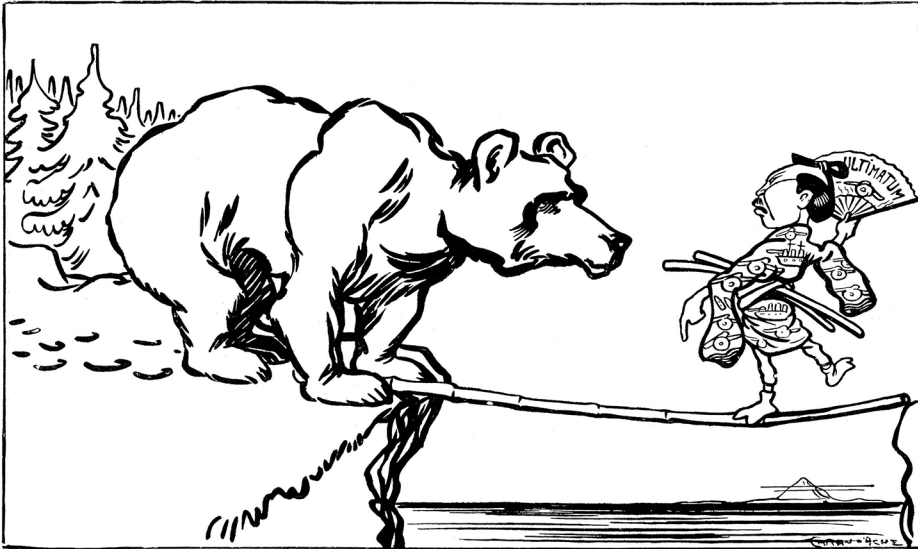
The Europeans expected Russia to easily defeat Japan (see figure 1). This expectation is puzzling. Japan had spent decades modernizing its military. In a short war, the balance of military power in the Far East favored Tokyo, or it

Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Zoltán I. Búzás, “Racism and Antiracism in the Liberal International Order,” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 440–463, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000521>; Brian Rathbun and Nina Srinivasan Rathbun, “Volk Theory: Prejudice, Racism, and German Foreign Policy before and under Hitler,” *Security Studies* (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2230891>.

21. Rotem Kowner, “Between a Colonial Clash and World War Zero: The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War in a Global Perspective,” in Rotem Kowner, ed., *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War* (London: Routledge, 2007), 13.

22. *Ibid.*, 12.

Figure 1. Japan's Challenge to Russia Is Depicted as Audacious and Doomed



SOURCE: *Le Figaro*, "La Perche Terrible: Périlleux Exercice Japonais" [A perilous position: Japan's dangerous venture], by Caran d'Ache, February 8, 1904. Image source credit: Granger.

NOTE: Published days after Japan broke diplomatic relations with Russia, this cartoon captures the near-universal expectation that Russia would defeat Japan in the Russo-Japanese War.

would have at least been a draw. The path to Japan's triumph over Russia in 1905 began in 1853 when the U.S. Navy entered Tokyo Bay and forced Japan to open its ports to U.S. merchant ships. Fearing a future that would resemble the fates of India, China, and much of Africa, Japan undertook radical political, economic, and military reforms during the Meiji restoration (1868–1889).²³ By the mid-1880s, Japan was a modern state with a modern military.²⁴ After Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), China recognized

23. Richard Dunley, "The Warrior Has Always Shewed Himself Greater Than His Weapons': The Royal Navy's Interpretation of the Russo-Japanese War 1904–5," *War & Society* 34, no. 4 (2015): 250, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2015.1128655>; Gerald Horne, *Race War: White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 32.

24. Ikura Akira, "Japan under Paternalism: The Changing Image of Japan during the Russo-Japanese War," in John W. M. Chapman and Inaba Chiharu, eds., *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–05*, vol. 2, *The Nichinan Papers* (Folkstone, UK: Global Oriental, 2007), 269.

the independence of Korea and ceded to Japan Formosa, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaotung Peninsula (where the warm-water Port Arthur is located).²⁵ In the Triple Intervention of 1895, Russia, Germany, and France diplomatically intervened to force Japan to surrender most of its territorial gains from its victory over China. Japan's concessions confirmed that it remained a minor power.²⁶ It also led to demands within Japan for revenge against Russia.²⁷ Japan invested China's £5 million indemnity into building modern battleships.²⁸

When the Russo-Japanese War began in 1904, not only did Japan have a powerful military, but its military also had recent combat experience and logistic advantages over Russia. Japan had decisively defeated China in 1895, whereas Russia had not been at war since the Russo-Turkish War in 1877. Japan would be fighting Russia in the Far East, where it had a similar number of ships as Russia and probably a qualitative advantage.²⁹ Japan had 850,000 in-theater trained troops and 4.25 million untrained reserves and others available for conscription. Although the Russian army had about 4.5 million soldiers, it deployed only 60,000–150,000 infantry in the Far East, a tactical mistake that Ian Nish attributes to overconfidence and surprise.³⁰ Russia also lacked the capability to rapidly deploy fresh troops to the theater. When the Vladivostok Port was icebound, it would take fifteen to forty days (compared with six days for Japan) to supply troops and ammunition to the Far East from European Russia via the still incomplete 5,000-mile single-track Trans-Siberian Railway.³¹ Finally, Russia would be fighting a distant war of uncertain purpose, whereas Japan would be fighting in its backyard over vital interests.

25. R. M. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun and the Tumbling Bear: A Military History of the Russo-Japanese War 1904–5* (London: Routledge, 1988), 4.

26. Akira, "Japan under Paternalism," 269–270.

27. Peter Duus, "If Japan Had Lost the War . . .," in Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, 48.

28. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun*, 5–6.

29. Part of Russia's Pacific fleet (at Vladivostok) was icebound three months of the year, whereas the Japanese trained year-round. Russia had a ragbag fleet consisting of numerous ships from different countries with different speeds and armaments, whereas Japan relied mostly on British ships. Russia's naval officers generally did not command the respect of their sailors, who were conscripted for seven years. Japan's naval officers generally had the respect of their sailors, who were conscripted for eight years or were volunteers. *Ibid.*, 20–21; Ian Nish, "The Clash of Two Continental Powers: The Land War Reconsidered," in Rotem Kowner, ed., *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–05*, vol. 1, *Centennial Perspectives* (Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2007), 71.

30. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun*, 13–15; Nish, "The Clash of Two Continental Powers," 68; Streich and Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War," 498.

31. Eva-Maria Stolberg, "'The Unknown Enemy': The Siberian Frontier and the Russo-Japanese War," in Kowner, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 1:47, 52–55; Connaughton, *The War of the Rising*

Hindsight can make a war's outcome seem overdetermined, but well before the war broke out several Russian military attachés accurately assessed Japan's capabilities. Their warnings that Japan might defeat Russia were ignored.

Japan was expanding westward, Russia was expanding southeastward, and their imperial ambitions collided in 1904 in what a historian refers to as "the killing fields" of Manchuria and Korea.³² Japan severed diplomatic relations with Russia on February 6, 1904, and two days later attacked Russian warships anchored in Port Arthur. For nineteen months Japan and Russia fought on land and sea. Japan repeatedly stormed Port Arthur, losing fifty thousand men before capturing it.³³ The war officially ended in September 1905. Everywhere in the world people of color—including "Sukarno" Koesno Sosrodihardjo, Sun Yat-sen, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mohandas Gandhi—celebrated Japan's victory over white supremacy.³⁴

The European view of the Japanese as an inferior race was relatively recent. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, European travelers referred to the Chinese and Japanese as "white"; it never occurred to them that they were part of a "yellow race." Immanuel Kant was first to refer to a "yellow race."³⁵ By 1900, using race to categorize, rank, and assign specific traits to people was common practice in Germany, Britain, and Russia. German racism toward Japan and Russia explains both why the Germans expected Japan to lose, and why they were confident that Russia posed no threat to Germany after the war. British racism explains why Britain underestimated Japan's chances in the war, and how it briefly came to trust and admire Japan during the war. Russian racism is one reason that Russia lost the war. Whereas Japan had prepared for war against what it expected would be a tough adversary, Russia took comfort in racist stereotypes. These stereotypes gave Russians confidence in their inaccurate assessments of Japanese capabilities, interests, and resolve. Bad theories have bad consequences, and racism is a spectacularly bad theory.

Sun, 16, 276; Christian Wolmar, *Blood, Iron, and Gold: How the Railway Transformed the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 170.

32. Kowner, "Between a Colonial Clash and World War Zero," 1.

33. Yigal Sheffy, "A Model Not to Follow: The European Armies and the Lessons of the War," in Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, 264.

34. Kowner, "Between a Colonial Clash and World War Zero," 2, 15, 19; Horne, *Race War*, 187; T. R. Sareen, "India and the War," in Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, 241–243.

35. Sven Saaler, "The Russo-Japanese War and the Emergence of the Notion of the 'Clash of Races' in Japanese Foreign Policy," in Chapman and Chiharu, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 2:286.

Racism and Russian Explanations of Japan

Racism explains why Russia blundered into a war it did not want, expect, or win. Russian policymakers relied on dispositional (rather than situational) explanations and stereotypes to account for and predict Japan's behavior. These mutually reinforcing mechanisms gave Russia unwarranted confidence in its analysis of Japan. Several Russian attachés in Japan initially provided St. Petersburg with accurate assessments of Japan's military capabilities. These accurate assessments, which provide the best disconfirming evidence in this study, gave way to racist evaluations that Russian policymakers enthusiastically accepted.

RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE ON JAPAN'S MILITARY CAPABILITY

I use disconfirming evidence to begin this study in part to show that my expectations are specific enough to be falsified, and in part to demonstrate that accurate assessments of Japan were possible. Three Russian attachés stationed in Japan either during or after the Sino-Japanese War but before the Russo-Japanese War objectively assessed Japan's military potential. They focused on the size, training, logistic skills, and combat performance of Japan's military forces. They did not rely on racist stereotypes. I suspect (but do not know) that these Russian attachés shared the racism toward Asians that was common at the time in Russian society and in the military. On the one hand, if they held racist beliefs but were able to put them aside, then this disconfirms my argument and supports the competing explanation: when the stakes are high, people can ignore their racism. On the other hand, their accurate and racism-free assessments provide a contrast that shows how other policymakers' racism undermines explanations and predictions.

A Russian attaché stationed in Japan before the war, Lt. Ivan Ivanovich Chagin, reported that Russia would have to fight Japan on equal terms.³⁶ Chagin concluded his 1899 report to the Russian naval main staff as follows: "It is very, very difficult and rather impossible to fight with Japan in her waters. For such a war the attacking side should have very large naval and ground forces. For the time being, there is no country in the East with such

36. Bruce W. Menning, "Miscalculating One's Enemies: Russian Military Intelligence before the Russo-Japanese War," *War in History* 13, no. 2 (2006): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1191/0968344506wh334oa>.

forces.³⁷ Equally astute were two of three Russian army officers appointed as military attachés in Tokyo before the Russo-Japanese War. Military attaché Maj. Gen. K. I. Vogak was attached to Japanese field troops. He witnessed the growth of Japan's military power. After watching ground combat in the Sino-Japanese War, Vogak reported (in July 1894) his admiration of Japan's army: "We should very, very seriously take the Japanese army into account. I think it my duty to report in a military respect that Japan is positively the strongest state in the Far East, including Russia." He emphasized the quality of Japan's 60,000-personnel army and its "very good navy."³⁸ A few months later, Vogak praised their logistics: "The railroads work splendidly. . . . Embarkations are done with a perfection I have never seen." He concluded, "I think that we have a dangerous neighbor in Japan."³⁹ A later report (February 1895) was full of superlatives: "Impressive force, organized wonderfully and composed of excellent soldiers, very well trained and educated and very well led by officers who are devoted totally to their own cause."⁴⁰

Maj. Gen. Vogak explained Japanese soldiers' sense of duty and patriotism as "characteristics [that] are inherent in Japanese from birth." The explanation reflects a belief that race explains behavior. Yet it appears that he observed what he considered to be examples of Japanese duty and patriotism and then gave the Japanese a reputation for having them. Far from discounting the army's performance because it was fighting China, he detailed his "sincere respect and great admiration" for its performance under heavy fire, for its nearly perfect organization in "difficult conditions," even at "great distance from main bases." And finally, Vogak thought that no European army could rival Japan's medical support on the battlefield.⁴¹ Vogak's successor in Japan was Col. Nikolai Ivanovich Ianzhul. The Japanese army "must justly be placed on a level with any European troops,"⁴² he reported in 1896. Ianzhul noted the lack of formal military education among senior officers, but Bruce Menning points to his unstinting praise for the quality of the junior officers and the army's training.⁴³ Ianzhul's reports confirmed Vogak's assessments that Japan's army

37. Wada Haruki, "Study Your Enemy: Russian Military and Naval Attachés in Japan," in David Wolff et al., eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, vol. 2 (Boston: Brill, 2007), 33.

38. *Ibid.*, 17.

39. *Ibid.*, 18.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

42. Menning, "Miscalculating One's Enemies," 150.

43. *Ibid.*

posed a potent military threat to Russia. Chagin, Vogak, and Ianzhul objectively assessed Japan's capabilities—they updated. Their evaluations contradict my expectations. They emphasized the quality, quantity, and other advantages of Japan's military.

Col. Gleb Mikhailovich Vannovskii succeeded Ianzhul. Vannovskii was the most important source of bad intelligence on Japan before the war. According to the official Russian history of the war, even though Vannovskii's reports were insulting to the Japanese, his disparaging of Japan's military capabilities served Japan's interests.⁴⁴ Vannovskii relied on stereotypes (that were common in contemporary Russian books about Japan) to explain and predict Japanese behavior.⁴⁵ Before his posting to Japan, Vannovskii wrote, "The Japanese Army has not yet emerged from internal confusion which all armies organized on completely alien cultural foundations inevitably experience. They were appropriated with typically Japanese blind accuracy and almost only in form, but never in essence, as is the case also in all other aspects of contemporary Japanese life. . . . Decades, perhaps hundreds of years will pass before the Japanese army might attain the moral foundations on which all European armies are based."⁴⁶ Vannovskii viewed the Japanese military as neither an "Oriental horde" nor a European-style army, but an uneasy mix of the two.⁴⁷

After his arrival in Japan, Vannovskii wrote dismissive reports on Japan's army. He concluded that Japan had made no progress over three years and that its cavalry would be decisively beaten.⁴⁸ Vannovskii used disposition to put the worst spin on Japanese performance.⁴⁹ His reports became even more disparaging over time because he accumulated more "evidence" to support his views.⁵⁰

Vannovskii's extremely negative assessments of the Japanese reinforced stereotypes that were then repeated nearly verbatim in the reports of other Russian observers and commentators. A special correspondent for a Russian military newspaper, Cossack Capt. Petr Nikolaevich Krasnov, relied on generalizations about Japanese soldiers to conclude, "The military deed did not suit the Japanese." Krasnov believed that the Japanese government spent its re-

44. *Ibid.*, 152.

45. Haruki, "Study Your Enemy," 20–21.

46. *Ibid.*, 20.

47. Menning, "Miscalculating One's Enemies," 150.

48. Haruki, "Study Your Enemy," 21.

49. Menning, "Miscalculating One's Enemies," 152.

50. *Ibid.*, 151–152.

sources in vain, “like throwing peas against a stone wall.” These explanations generated predictions: Despite all the money spent, “to destroy all 13 regiments of Japanese cavalry would be a very easy task . . . a deaf and blind Japanese army would become a plaything for an enterprising partisan commander.”⁵¹ Another Russian analyst called the Japanese “an army of children.”⁵² The Russian military press dismissed Japan as having no indigenous military tradition, only that which it copied from the Germans.⁵³

Russian Minister of War Aleksey Kuropatkin asserted before the war that “the Japanese Army does not constitute a serious threat for us.”⁵⁴ He was pleased to finally get from Vannovskii the kind of analysis that he wanted. In the margin of one of Vannovskii’s early reports he penciled, “The enthusiasm of our former military attachés has already vanished. A sober view.”⁵⁵ The Russian military and Russian leaders were confident that Japan was not a military threat. The military press was full of scorn and ridicule of the Japanese.⁵⁶ Reports from Russian spies of “Japanese cavalry going into the trot and riders being discarded over the whole line of advance” generated much laughter.⁵⁷ With the exception of Chagin, Vogak, and Ianzhul, Russian attachés and policymakers relied on racist stereotypes to explain Japanese behavior, and this reliance supported inaccurate predictions about Japan’s certain defeat in war.

RUSSIAN RACISM AND JAPANESE CREDIBILITY

Racism distorted Russian policymakers’ assessments of Japan’s capabilities, interests, and resolve. Russians disliked and discounted the Japanese because they were Japanese. A historian concludes that “overconfidence born of complacency and racism” explains Russia’s defeat, and another historian writes that “Russian society and officer corps were obsessed with illusions of an easy, quick colonial expedition . . . to punish ‘yellow dwarfs,’ ‘ugly pigmies’ or simply ‘macaques.’”⁵⁸ So confident were the Russians in a quick and easy victory that they issued their frontline troops postcards to be sent home with images of the Japanese as “dogs” and “monkeys” (see figure 2).⁵⁹ According to

51. *Ibid.*, 159.

52. *Ibid.*, 156.

53. *Ibid.*, 162.

54. *Ibid.*, 164.

55. Haruki, “Study Your Enemy,” 21.

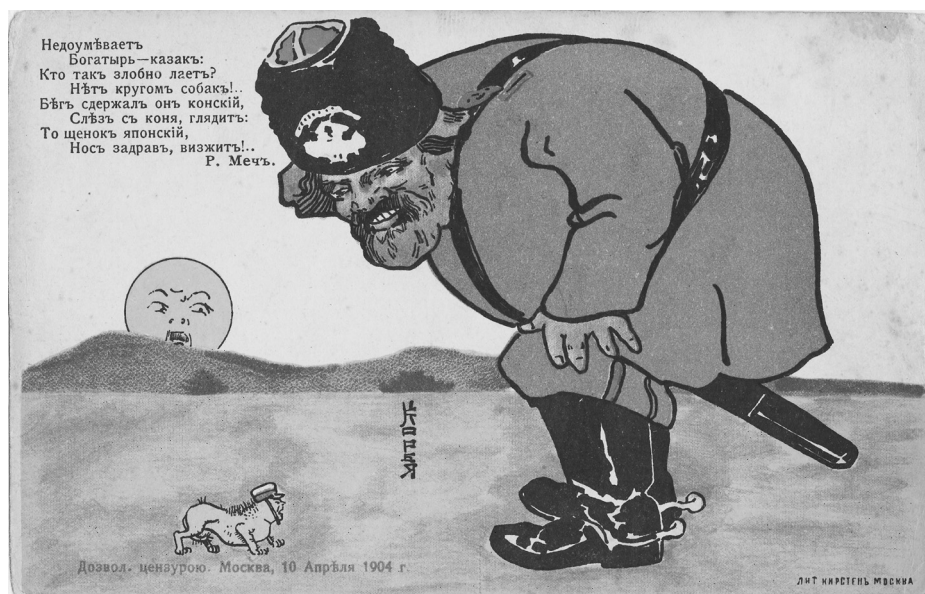
56. Menning, “Miscalculating One’s Enemies,” 162.

57. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun*, 13.

58. Quoted in Streich and Levy, “Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War,” 505.

59. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun*, vii.

Figure 2. Russian View of Japan at the Beginning of the Russo-Japanese War



SOURCE: Artist Unknown. *Giant Russian Soldier and Tiny Japanese Soldier as Dog*. Russian postcard, 1904. Place of Creation: Europe. Lithograph with hand coloring; ink on card stock. Overall: 8.8 x 13.8 cm (3 7/16 x 5 7/16 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards 2002.3845. Photograph ©2023 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

NOTE: The notation at the bottom shows that the postcard passed censorship in Moscow on April 10, 1904. The word between the warrior and dog reads “Korea.” Translation: “The Cossack warrior is perplexed: Who is barking so angrily? There aren’t any dogs around! He reined in his horse, got down, and looks around. It’s a Japanese puppy holding his nose in the air and yelping!”

Evgeny Sergeev, the Russian officer corps viewed Japan as “a toy mini-state, capable only of imitating some superficial features of Western civilization.”⁶⁰ Another historian concludes that Czar Nicholas II was “undoubtedly influenced in his thinking by the conviction, typical of the era, that ‘yellow’ soldiers could never be a match for a ‘white’ army.”⁶¹ Although the czar hardly needed persuading that Japan would be easily defeated, Kaiser Wilhelm II stressed their mutual “racist prejudice against the yellow Japanese upstarts” and “con-

60. Streich and Levy, “Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War,” 503.

61. Jonathan Frankel, “The War and the Fate of the Tsarist Autocracy,” in Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, 59.

vinced” the czar of Japan’s weakness.⁶² Russians viewed the Japanese as irresolute despite Japan’s military victory over China in 1895. When Japan objected to Russia seizing Port Arthur, the Russian foreign minister responded, “One flag and one sentry, the prestige of Russia will do the rest.”⁶³ From Russia’s perspective, Japan’s protests and threats were bluffs.⁶⁴ A British diplomat reported that the head of the Russian legation in Tokyo, Baron Roman Romanovich Rosen, “was convinced the Japanese were bluffing and would not fight.”⁶⁵ Ten days before the war began, Rosen declared, “We had only to mobilize one Division and the Japanese will climb down.”⁶⁶ After Japan recalled its ambassador from St. Petersburg, and the Japanese foreign minister confirmed that Japan had lost patience with negotiations, Russian Far East Viceroy Adm. Yevgeni Ivanovich Alekseyev reported that Japan was bluffing.⁶⁷

Why Russia viewed Japan as irresolute is unclear. One can view resolve as a function of interests, of capabilities, or of both. That is, policymakers tend to be resolute when vital interests are at stake, and when they have the military might to protect those interests. Racists tend to explain resolve as a function of race. Russians may have considered the Japanese to be an irresolute type. It was common for Russian intelligence to conclude that “the Japanese lacked initiative and imagination, had copied European methods but not its spirit, that its infantry was indifferent and afraid of bayonet and night operations.”⁶⁸ It is a small step from viewing an enemy as racially inferior, or as “monkeys” and children, to viewing them as irresolute or cowardly. Russia’s belief in its overwhelming military superiority could also explain Russian confidence in Japan’s irresolution, though racism explains why it believed that it had military superiority.

A final reason the Russians thought that Japan was irresolute stems from Russia dismissing Japan’s concerns and discounting its interests. Russian policymakers viewed Japan as a small, weak, unimportant country. Russia forced Japan out of southern Sakhalin Island in 1875, and it humiliated Japan

62. Bernd Martin, “Participant Observation: Germany, the War, and the Road to a European Clash,” in Kowner, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 1:333.

63. Streich and Levy, “Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War,” 502.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 249.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun*, 11.

68. Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 94.

after the Sino-Japanese War: the Triple Intervention compelled Japan to surrender significant territorial and financial gains. Russia sided with China in negotiations with Japan and then obtained concessions from China for the rights to build a railroad line through northern Manchuria, to secure a twenty-year lease on the Port Arthur naval base, and to link the naval base to Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway. The ice-free Port Arthur was especially important to Russia, which occupied all three of China's Manchurian provinces by 1900.⁶⁹ The Russian occupation of Manchuria (during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900), control of Port Arthur, and growing influence in Korea alarmed the Japanese. For Japanese Foreign Minister Jutarō Komura, "Korea was like a dagger pointing at Japan's heart."⁷⁰ For Japanese leaders, Korea was essential to Japan's national interest and promised economic benefits. The Japanese (with British and U.S. backing) vehemently objected to Russian imperialism, which interfered with Japanese imperialism.

The Russians responded to Japanese protests with delays and broken promises. Russia's obstinance in its negotiations persuaded Japanese policymakers that Russia wanted war.⁷¹ Russian leaders were confident that cooperation, let alone concessions, was unnecessary. The czar referred to the Japanese as "monkeys" and Japan's army as "little brown monkeys."⁷² After the war, Kuropatkin acknowledged a failure to understand Japan's interests: "We attached no importance to the intense feeling of resentment that we aroused when we deprived the Japanese of the fruits of their victories in China. We never recognized how vital the Korean question was to them. . . . We always thought . . . that the question whether there should be war or peace depended upon us, and we wholly overlooked Japan's stubborn determination to enforce demands that had for her such vital importance."⁷³ Russian policymakers' racism undermined their explanations and predictions of Japanese behavior.

RACISM AND ANTI-RACISM

Russian policymakers expected a short, victorious war. A Russian military attaché in Washington commented to a U.S. military officer soon to depart to

69. Cees Heere, *Empire Ascendant: The British World, Race, and the Rise of Japan, 1894–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 51; Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun*, 1–11.

70. Streich and Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War," 497.

71. Itō Yukio, "The Emperor Meiji and the Russo-Japanese War," in Chapman and Chiharu, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 2:8.

72. Ben-Ami Shillony, "The Jewish Response to the War," in Kowner, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 1:393; Streich and Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War," 502.

73. Streich and Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War," 502, 505.

observe the war in Manchuria, "The only question in my mind is whether you will be able to get out there in time. . . . It will be only a local affair."⁷⁴ Instead, the Russian military lost nearly every battle. Japan forced it into never-ending retreats and destroyed its naval fleet.

Russian policymakers' confidence in victory is striking given how badly Russia lost. Immediately after Japan's surprise attack, Kuropatkin assured the czar that Russian forces would invade Japan and annihilate the Japanese army.⁷⁵ Kuropatkin's stereotype of Asians helps explain his confidence. Owing to his combat experience in central Asia in the 1870s and 1880s, he believed that initial success unduly emboldened Asians.⁷⁶ After the Japanese attack on Port Arthur, the czar's confidence was unshaken. He waited two months before ordering his Baltic Fleet to Japan, and then another six months before they set sail.⁷⁷ When the Russian navy first experienced heavy losses, Russian leaders viewed it as a temporary setback.⁷⁸ The czar referred to "the impudence of the Japanese."⁷⁹ The czar, his aides, his military officers, and (with exceptions) his military attachés held racist beliefs that distorted their assessments and contributed to Russia's defeat.

The claim that racism undermines assessments implies that analysis without racism would be more accurate. The Japanese military thought that it had a fifty-fifty chance of victory. The navy anticipated losing half its ships, but nonetheless believed that it could defeat the Russian Pacific Fleet. Japan's economy had grown rapidly since the Meiji restoration, and its investments in its military had kept apace. Japan's leaders believed that they could win a short war.⁸⁰ When Russian attachés (e.g., Chagin, Vogak, and Ianzhul) did not rely on racist stereotypes, they recognized Japan as an excellent fighting force and a formidable adversary.

Finding someone who was involved in the war and not racist, and whose opinion had financial or military implications, is difficult. I found only one such person. Jacob Schiff was a New York banker, one of the wealthiest men in the world at the time, and an anti-racist. His anti-racism allowed him to predict what others could not—a Japanese victory over Russia. Whereas Russia

74. Charles T. Payne, "The Russo-Japanese War: Impact on Western Military Thought Prior to 1914," master's thesis, University of Georgia, 1990, 10.

75. Streich and Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War," 502.

76. Menning, "Miscalculating One's Enemies," 154–155.

77. Streich and Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War," 502.

78. Frankel, "The War and the Fate of the Tsarist Autocracy," 59.

79. *Ibid.*

80. Streich and Levy, "Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War," 492–493, 500.

obtained loans from Germany and France to support its war against Japan (despite repeated military defeats), no such support was available to Japan. Financiers in Britain and the United States were certain that Japan would lose.⁸¹ Schiff disagreed. He staked his own (and his firm's) reputation and financial success on Japan's victory—what to others seemed like a risky bet. Without Schiff's leadership in securing loans for Japan, Russia would probably have won the war. Foreign capital paid for about half of Japan's war effort, and of that, Schiff's firm underwrote 60 percent.⁸² The Russian finance minister said he would never forget, or forgive, what "that Jew Schiff" had done.⁸³

Jacob Schiff began exploring a loan to Japan shortly before the war started. He finalized the loan before Japan won its first battle. Japan charged Koreikiyo Takahashi with securing loans from Britain and the United States: "[Schiff] must also have had reason to be satisfied that he was not putting his hand in a losing game, for after all, business is business with a banker. We Japanese had confidence in our future. . . . But, judging from the appearances of the moment, the risks he incurred were no small ones."⁸⁴ Yet Schiff did not view the loan to Japan as unduly risky.⁸⁵ He expected to make money and he did. Several days before the bonds went to market, Japan defeated Russia at the Battle of the Yalu River—investors stood in lines stretching two or three blocks to place orders.⁸⁶

What distinguished Schiff from other New York or London bankers (and policymakers) was his anti-racism. He financially and publicly supported African American education and civil rights. He became an early member of the governing committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), spoke at NAACP conferences, participated in the NAACP's campaign against lynching, opposed segregation, and financially supported Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.⁸⁷ Schiff also opposed

81. Boris V. Ananich, "Russian Military Expenditures in the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–5," in John Steinberg et al., eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, vol. 1 (Boston: Brill, 2005), 451–454; Richard J. Smethurst, "American Capital and Japan's Victory in the Russo-Japanese War," in Chapman and Chiharu, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 2:64, 68; Adam Gower, *Jacob Schiff and the Art of Risk: American Financing of Japan's War with Russia (1904–1905)* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 11; Edward S. Miller, "Japan's Other Victory: Overseas Financing of the Russo-Japanese War," in Steinberg et al., *The Russo-Japanese War*, 471.

82. Smethurst, "American Capital and Japan's Victory," 64.

83. Shillony, "The Jewish Response to the War," 398.

84. Cyrus Adler, *Jacob H. Schiff: His Life and Letters*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), 217.

85. Gower, *Jacob Schiff and the Art of Risk*, 11.

86. Smethurst, "American Capital and Japan's Victory," 70.

87. Bernice Heilbrunn, "Jacob H. Schiff (1847–1920)," *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-*

discrimination against Jews. Russian pogroms against Jews in the 1880s led Schiff to focus his philanthropic efforts toward helping Jews in Russia and immigrants (including many Russian Jews).⁸⁸ Russian and Polish Jews were called “Orientals,” according to one historian, and they were considered “unassimilable,” “stagnant,” “medieval,” “foreign,” “intrusive,” and “disruptive.”⁸⁹ Another historian notes that Jewish and Japanese immigrant communities were “accused of having brought crime and an economic drain to America. Schiff could not abide these stereotypes.”⁹⁰

Schiff did not view the Russians as a superior race or the Japanese as an inferior one. He did not view Christians as superior to non-Christians. Racial stereotypes did not influence his assessments of either Japan or Russia. Schiff’s rejection of racism explains why he assessed Japan differently than did policymakers in Russia, Germany, and Britain, as well as bankers in New York and London. Racism influences credibility assessments and, necessarily, so does its absence.

Racism and German Explanations of Japan and Russia

German policymakers discounted situational explanations in favor of dispositional ones in their assessments of Japan and Russia. These explanations reflected or created stereotypes that led to a relentless focus on the Russian and Japanese “types.” Japan’s victory over the Russians surprised the Germans. It led them to revise (but not update) their racist view of Japan and to double down on their racist view of Russia. Germany’s confidence that it understood Russia’s type explains why Germany created a military strategy that endured and became as detached from reality as German racism.

GERMAN RACISM BEFORE THE WAR

To train its army, Japan relied on Prussian military standards, and the two states had excellent relations until German participation in the 1895 Triple Intervention.⁹¹ Encouraging a war between Japan and Russia became German

American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, August 22, 2018, <https://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entries/jacob-h-schiff/>; Adler, *Jacob H. Schiff*, 1:314–318.

88. Gower, *Jacob Schiff and the Art of Risk*, 7–9.

89. Susie J. Pak, *Gentlemen Bankers: The World of J. P. Morgan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 90–91.

90. Gower, *Jacob Schiff and the Art of Risk*, 89–90.

91. Responding to Japanese requests, the chief of the Prussian General Staff sent talented German

policy in 1900.⁹² German policymakers reasoned that a war between Japan and Russia would help Germany in three ways. First, since the era of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in the early 1880s, German policymakers had hoped that Russia would become more involved in Asia and less involved in Europe.⁹³ The Franco-Russian Alliance (1894) led the Germans to worry about a two-front war. German policymakers expected that war with Japan would make the Russians more dependent on having amicable relations with Germany. War would not only distract Russia, but it would also divide its military between East and West. Even in certain victory, it would also be costly.⁹⁴ Second, and especially after the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902), a Russian war with Japan would undermine chances of an Anglo-Russian alliance. Third, Japan's defeat would make Japan a worthless ally, which would weaken Britain.⁹⁵ The German policymakers' impeccable logic depended on an assumption: Russia would defeat Japan.

Racism made the Germans explain behavior in dispositional terms that reflected or created stereotypes, which they then used to confidently explain and predict Japanese and Russian behaviors. Kaiser Wilhelm II first described Japan as the "yellow peril" after the Sino-Japanese War.⁹⁶ Japan's victory revealed its potential military and economic dominance in Asia. The kaiser feared that Japan might unite all of Asia and challenge the supremacy of Western civilization.⁹⁷ The kaiser's racism was central to his dislike and fear of Japan. The kaiser foresaw a cultural and religious crusade against Japan and the image of the "yellow peril" captured "all his fears and prejudices."⁹⁸ Since Germany's participation in the military intervention to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China, the kaiser had seen his role as defending Western Christendom.⁹⁹ A historian emphasizes that the kaiser pressed the czar for sev-

staff-officer Maj. Jacob Meckel to Japan in 1885 to train senior Japanese officers in tactics, strategy, and Prussian military history. The next year, "Meckel was given the additional task of reforming the military along Prussian lines." Uniforms switched to Prussian from French. Bernd Martin and Peter Wetzler, "The German Role in the Modernization of Japan—The Pitfall of Blind Acculturation," *Oriens Extremus* 33, no. 1 (1990): 82; Martin, "Participant Observation," 334.

92. Martin, "Participant Observation," 333.

93. Gerhard Krebs, "German Policy and the Russo-Japanese War," in Chapman and Chiharu, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 2:89.

94. *Ibid.*; Matthew S. Seligmann, "Germany, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Road to the Great War," in Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, 110.

95. Krebs, "German Policy and the Russo-Japanese War," 91–92.

96. Saaler, "The Russo-Japanese War and the Emergence," 275–277.

97. *Ibid.*

98. Seligmann, "Germany, the Russo-Japanese War," 110.

99. Martin, "Participant Observation," 333.

eral years to “defend Europe, the Christian faith, and the predominance of the white race against Asian barbarism.”¹⁰⁰

Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s influential book, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899), reinforced the kaiser’s racism. The two met in 1901, and the kaiser became the British-German philosopher’s most important student (although Chamberlain’s relationship with future German Chancellor Adolf Hitler was also important).¹⁰¹ Correspondence between Chamberlain and the kaiser is full of the threat posed by the “yellow peril” and “Tartarized Slavdom.”¹⁰² Chamberlain’s book was popular among officer cadets.¹⁰³ Radical German nationalists emerged in this period; they believed that internal and external foes were a threat to “Germanness” that would result, as a historian characterizes it, in “an apocalyptic struggle pitting Slav and Latin against Teuton.”¹⁰⁴ Historian Fritz Fischer characterized German nationalists as having contempt for Russians’ “semi-Asiatic barbarism” and their cultural, economic, and military inferiority.¹⁰⁵ Prussian officers held similar views.¹⁰⁶

One measure of the German policymakers’ racist views of Japan is how confident they were that *even the Russians* would beat it. Oliver Griffin’s analysis of the German military press from 1891 to 1904 captures Germans’ negative stereotypes of Russians. According to Griffin, Russians were brave, tough on the defensive, and lacking tactical flexibility and initiative. Compared with Germans, Russians did not ascribe as much value to human life, they remained culturally less developed, and, for this reason, they had a “raw animalistic nature.” Russian soldiers were “barbaric” and had little notion of honor.¹⁰⁷ Yet a historian notes that “it was quite unthinkable in Berlin that Japan might win the war.”¹⁰⁸ German officers also discounted Japanese capabilities: During the Boxer Rebellion, they referred to Japanese soldiers as “small yellow monkeys”; before the Russo-Japanese War, they ridiculed

100. Krebs, “German Policy and the Russo-Japanese War,” 89.

101. Leading Nazis (including Hitler, Rudolf Hess, Joseph Goebbels, and Heinrich Himmler) claimed to be influenced by Chamberlain. The extent of that influence is unclear. Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 240, 436, 445, 452.

102. *Ibid.*, 252.

103. *Ibid.*, 232.

104. Oliver L. Griffin, “The German Army Looks East: Perceptions of Russia in German Military Leadership, 1871–1914” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, May 1998), 96–97.

105. *Ibid.*, 104. Griffin’s paraphrase.

106. *Ibid.*, 105.

107. *Ibid.*, 106–109.

108. Martin, “Participant Observation,” 334.

Japanese military endeavors and, again, despised them as “yellow monkeys.”¹⁰⁹ The first Russian defeats did not diminish German confidence that Russia would win the Russo-Japanese War.¹¹⁰

GERMAN EXPLANATIONS OF RUSSIA’S DEFEAT

Consistent with the first theoretical expectation, German observers did not emphasize situational factors such as troop strength, quality and quantity of arms, or the logistical challenges to explain Russia’s defeat. Had the Germans made situational explanations, then they would have had to acknowledge that the causes of Russia’s defeat were transient. For example, if Russia’s defeat was caused by its reliance on battleships so ancient that Russian sailors called them “self-sinkers,” or by its dependence on the single-track Trans-Siberian Railway for supplies, or even by its difficulty mustering enthusiasm to fight a distant war of uncertain importance against an enemy fighting a total war, then these problems either could have been addressed by Russia, or they were unique to this war.¹¹¹ R. M. Connaughton comments that Russia’s ability to concentrate an army in Manchuria—5,000 miles from Moscow—to fight against what he calls a “fanatical” enemy that was close to its own base “was a military achievement of mammoth proportions.”¹¹² Connaughton notes that like Napoleon Bonaparte (1812) and Hitler (1941–1945), the Japanese would have lost the Russo-Japanese War had they confronted such logistical and communications challenges. Connaughton praises the Russians for being as brave as the Japanese and, in retreat, demonstrating military expertise. But racism drove German policymakers’ explanations. Because Russian character explained the defeat, the future would be like the past.

The Germans relied primarily on race, as well as training, to explain Japanese and Russian behavior.¹¹³ At the heart of German explanations was morale. The Japanese demonstrated national zeal, élan, and martial spirit—material factors and doctrine were secondary.¹¹⁴ German officers criticized what they viewed as Russian passivity and inferior resolve. The official German history of the war concluded, “The will to conquer, con-

109. Cord Eberspaecher, “The Road to Jutland? The War and the Imperial German Navy,” in Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, 290; Martin, “Participant Observation,” 338.

110. Eberspaecher, “The Road to Jutland?,” 290–291.

111. Martin, “Participant Observation,” 343.

112. Connaughton, *The War of the Rising Sun*, 276.

113. Oliver Griffin, “Perceptions of Russia in German Military Leadership during the War,” in Kowner, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 1:352.

114. *Ibid.*, 364.

quered."¹¹⁵ Russia's defeat was proof of the inherent weaknesses of Russians and the Russian military.

Consistent with the second theoretical expectation, stereotypes drove German assessments of Russia. For example, Lt. Col. Otto von Lauenstein accompanied the Russian army in the war. Russian stereotypes propelled his unrelentingly dispositional explanations. Everything was reducible to character. Gen. Kuropatkin was lethargic and had a flaccid disposition, as did his subordinates, who also demonstrated passivity and rigidity. According to Griffin, "This dearth of initiative and resolve appeared as a stock phrase in German reports and articles from the period."¹¹⁶ When he was a military attaché to St. Petersburg before 1904, Lauenstein viewed "apathy, foolishness, and negligence" as characteristics of Russian officers that would give way to positive attributes in wartime.¹¹⁷ But in his view such a metamorphosis did not happen: "Their willpower was not firm; they did not understand how to be hard with themselves. Everywhere the inclination to indolence made itself felt, in the excessive baggage, the need for service, especially in the late rising [waking up]. Early risers were indeed a great rarity."¹¹⁸ German officers portrayed Russian officers as "uncouth, rigid, old-fashioned pretenders. . . . Sloth, drunkenness, and licentiousness also appeared in descriptions of officers."¹¹⁹

German officers also reported on the attributes of Russian soldiers. They commonly referred to "hardiness, sloth, and intellectual torpor," and "Again and again," reports Griffin, "German officers contended that passivity extended from Kuropatkin all the way down to the lowliest private and accounted for Russian defeat."¹²⁰ Russian soldiers were peasants who by nature were peaceful, passive, and pliant, lacked willpower, and avoided responsibility. Griffin found that "military periodicals contained numerous identical descriptions of the alleged attributes of the Russian soldier, both in articles written by contributors to the journals and in book reviews."¹²¹ As one German officer put it, "The Russian character tends . . . to respond more to the moods of the natural disposition than to reflections of the mind."¹²² Germans

115. Sheffy, "A Model Not to Follow," 266.

116. Griffin, "Perceptions of Russia," 353.

117. *Ibid.*, 356. Griffin's paraphrase.

118. *Ibid.*

119. *Ibid.*

120. *Ibid.*, 358.

121. *Ibid.*

122. Griffin, "The German Army Looks East," 145.

used Russian character to explain Russian behavior, which reinforced or created stereotypes and gave them confidence in their predictions.

German observers did not detail the quality or size of the Japanese army or navy, its short supply lines, that Japan was fighting a total war, or the higher stakes for Japan compared with Russia. The Japanese simply had superior resolve. They showed initiative, tactical flexibility, and fanatical bravery.¹²³ German observers also reported that the Russians had expected a swift and easy victory and that they “tended to make fun of the ‘Japs,’”¹²⁴ as had the Germans. After Japan’s string of victories, German observers no longer referred to the Japanese as “monkeys” and instead attributed to them what they viewed as German characteristics, such as punctuality, organization, and courage.¹²⁵ Gen. Helmuth von Moltke was ashamed that Japan beat Russia because it meant that he now had to view “these little yellow people” with respect.¹²⁶

Japanese behavior contradicted German beliefs, and only part of Japan’s victory could be attributed to weaknesses of the Slavic race. Germans revised (but did not update) their beliefs about Japan. Germans used their racism to make sense of Japan’s victory: they recategorized the Japanese as more Prussian than “Oriental.” They ignored situational explanations and retained their belief in racial types.

GERMAN RACISM AND MILITARY STRATEGY BEFORE WORLD WAR I

Germans used Russian stereotypes to explain Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, and they then used this explanation to confidently predict future Russian capabilities. For German officers, Russia was not and would not become a threat. The destruction of the Russian Pacific and Baltic fleets, the loss of equipment, and the extensive casualties made Russia materially weaker after the war. But in the Germans’ view, these factors were less important than Russian incompetence. Matthew Seligmann details the damage to what he calls Russia’s reputation with Germany: the “debacles suffered by Russia . . . proved beyond doubt that neither the Russian army nor navy were competent practitioners of the arts of modern warfare.”¹²⁷ With Russia’s reputation in

123. Griffin, “Perceptions of Russia,” 359–360.

124. Griffin, “The German Army Looks East,” 149.

125. Eberspacher, “The Road to Jutland?,” 295–296.

126. Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II: 1888–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 241.

127. Seligmann, “Germany, the Russo-Japanese War,” 116–117. See also Frank Jacob, “The Russo-Japanese War and the Perception of the Japanese Army in Imperial Germany,” in Frank Jacob and

mind, German observers used Russian character to explain the defeat. The German general staff concluded that Russian leaders were passive, irresolute, paralyzed, and did not have “the strength of mind to fight the battle to the bitter end.”¹²⁸ German policymaker Friedrich von Holstein was confident that Russia posed no threat for the “foreseeable future.”¹²⁹

Alfred von Schlieffen, the chief of the Great General Staff (1891–1906), was a racist and social Darwinist. Schlieffen supported the annihilation and enslavement of Africans, whom he viewed as a “dying race.”¹³⁰ He also made overwhelmingly dispositional explanations for Russia’s defeat. He agreed with Holstein’s view that Russia was not a threat. Schlieffen recounted to German Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow Russia’s reputation before the war: “For a long time, it was known that the Russian army possessed no significant leaders, that the majority of its officers were of limited value, and that the training of the troops could only be seen as insufficient.”¹³¹ But the war had shown that the Russians behaved even worse than their reputation would have predicted. Officers and soldiers alike revealed an unexpected incompetence: “The war has shown that the famous Russian obedience was based less on attention to duty and a feeling of honor than on dullness and a fatalistic resignation. Further, it has shown also that the inherited characteristics of the Slavic race last only so long, but then they degenerate into brutality.”¹³²

Schlieffen’s emphasis on Russian character explains why he believed that Russia would pose little threat in the future. He thought it was “very questionable” that the Russians would improve. The Russians, in contrast, explained their defeat in situational terms, such as Japan’s superiority in numbers or Russia’s ineffective commanders. To Schlieffen, these explanations indicated a “lack of self-awareness” necessary to carry out significant reforms: “The Russian army lacks the men capable of carrying out the required reforms and who possess the necessary moral fortitude. Therefore, recent history would suggest that the Russian army will not improve, but instead will grow more ineffective.”¹³³ Racists rely on stereotypes because they believe that races have

Sepp Linhart, eds., *War and Stereotypes: The Image of Japan’s Military Abroad* (Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 101–117, <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657702930>.

128. Seligmann, “Germany, the Russo-Japanese War,” 118.

129. *Ibid.*, 119.

130. Dominik J. Schaller, “The Genocide of the Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa, 1904–1907,” in Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons, eds., *Centuries of Genocide: Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 98.

131. Seligmann, “Germany, the Russo-Japanese War,” 119.

132. *Ibid.*

133. *Ibid.*, 119–120. See also Jacob, “The Russo-Japanese War,” in Jacob and Linhart, *War and Stereotypes*, 109–113.

types that explain and predict behavior. The more certain a person is that a stereotype is correct, the more influence that conviction has over a person's explanations for and confidence in their predictions. For Schlieffen, Russian character explained the deficiencies that led to Japan's defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and that would lead to Germany's defeat of Russia in a future war.

Schlieffen and his military observers reached the same conclusion because of a shared racist view of Russia and Japan.¹³⁴ Germany's confidence that Russia posed no future threat explains the German battle plan now known as the Schlieffen Plan. That Russia lost the war to Japan was not the important outcome. Instead, the reasons the Germans gave for that loss gave them confidence in the next war to initially shift most of Germany's forces to fight the French, leaving its border with Russia lightly defended. Completed in December 1905 (and after Russia's defeat at the Battle of Mukden), Schlieffen's plan directed seventy divisions against France and six against Russia.¹³⁵ The goal was to first defeat France and then turn to Russia. German policymakers had a "sense of superiority," writes Seligmann, which "inspired them to be bold and to adopt, without any major concerns or reservations, a plan that involved leaving the Reich's eastern border largely undefended for the first two months of a future European war. So confident were German planners that Russia was militarily abject that no thought was given to what would happen if circumstances changed."¹³⁶ Russia had just suffered a humiliating defeat that revealed its vulnerability to a future war with Germany. Yet Schlieffen and his colleagues were so certain of inherent Slavic deficiencies that it was unimaginable that Russians would do what they in fact did: significantly reform the Russian military.¹³⁷

German military strategy remained stuck in 1905 when Germany was confident in Russia's weakness.¹³⁸ As late as 1914, most German officials continued to view Russian power with disdain.¹³⁹ Despite minor adjustments in response to growing Russian power, the Schlieffen Plan was the basis for German war planning in 1914.¹⁴⁰ Germans believed that they knew Russia's type. They used this knowledge to explain Russian behavior, which reinforced

134. Jacob, "The Russo-Japanese War," 114.

135. Griffin, "The German Army Looks East," 117.

136. Seligmann, "Germany, the Russo-Japanese War," 120.

137. *Ibid.*, 121–122.

138. *Ibid.*, 122.

139. William C. Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance," *World Politics* 39, no. 3 (1987): 362, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010224>.

140. Seligmann, "Germany, the Russo-Japanese War," 120.

their beliefs, increased their confidence, and led them to create the disastrous Schlieffen Plan.

Racism and British Explanations of Japan and Russia

British assessments of their Japanese ally support both of my theoretical expectations. First, British policymakers relied on disposition over situation to explain Japanese behavior. Second, British policymakers relied on racist stereotypes to predict Japan's and Russia's behaviors and to drive their explanations. A historian notes that when those predictions proved wrong, British observers "grasped for stereotypes like drowning men" to explain Japan's victory.¹⁴¹ British policymakers radically revised their image of Japan, but always within the confines of their racism.

BRITISH RACISM BEFORE THE WAR

By the late 1800s, Japanese racial inferiority was accepted as common knowledge in Britain. It was the basis of both British policymakers' explanations for Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War, and their expectation that Russia would defeat Japan if war between them were to occur. British policymakers were confident in their explanations and predictions, which stemmed from their stereotypes of "Orientals."

British policymakers used stereotypes to explain China's defeat in 1895. Japan was the rising power in Asia, but defeating China was unimpressive (see figure 3). The British plenipotentiary in Tokyo, Ernest Satow, doubted that Japan possessed "sufficient stock of physical strength" to elevate it "beyond a third or fourth rate position." A war fought between two "Asiatic races" was not revealing; Satow said that defeating China was like "cutting through a moldy cheese."¹⁴² Future Prime Minister David Lloyd George recalled that policymakers regarded Japan "merely as an Oriental power."¹⁴³ Using race to discount Japan's victory over China was common. According to a French military attaché, "Of course their campaign against China must be looked upon as a game of chess without an adversary."¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Britain allied with

141. John Ferris, "Turning Japanese: British Observation of the Russo-Japanese War," in Chapman and Chiharu, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 2:122.

142. Heere, *Empire Ascendant*, 14.

143. Chika Tonooka, "Reverse Emulation and the Cult of Japanese Efficiency in Edwardian Britain," *Historical Journal* 60, no. 1 (2017): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x15000539>.

144. Ferris, "Turning Japanese," 128.

Figure 3. The British Belittle Japan's Victory in the Sino-Japanese War



A TOUCHING APPEAL.

JOHNNY CHINAMAN. "BOO-HOO! HE HURTEE ME WELLY MUCH! NO PEACEY MAN COME STOPPY HIM!"

SOURCE: John Tenniel, "A Touching Appeal. Johnny Chinaman. 'Boo-hoo! He hurtee me welly much! No peacey man come stoppy him!'" *Punch* (Britain: November 17, 1894, pp. 233–234). Image credit: Punch Cartoon Library/TopFoto.

NOTE: The Sino-Japanese War is depicted as a schoolyard fight, in which "child-like" China is dubbed "Yellow Younghy-Bung-Boo-Hoo." Great Powers contemplate intervention in the background. For the image and accompanying verse, see <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/46806/pg46806-images.html>.

Japan in 1902 in response to growing German and Russian naval power.¹⁴⁵ As First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Selborne explained, “We cannot be stronger than every Power on every coast simultaneously.”¹⁴⁶ Britain viewed Japan as a minor power, but formidable enough to complicate Russian expansion and free up the Royal Navy to focus on core British interests, including India.¹⁴⁷

By September 1903, British policymakers believed that a war between Russia and Japan was likely and Japan’s defeat inevitable. Despite Japan’s victory over China, and despite the significant Japanese military buildup and economic reforms, the British mostly viewed their Japanese ally as an “Oriental” power and thus incapable of defeating Russia. It was the interpretation of evidence rather than the lack of it that led to this inaccurate assessment. Britain played a “vital advisory role” in creating the Japanese navy.¹⁴⁸ Britain provided Japan with training manuals, and Japanese officers received training in Britain. Japan imported many British practices, and British firms provided most of Japan’s warships and naval arms.¹⁴⁹ British influence is also evident in the Meiji restoration, when Japan’s constitution was partially based on Britain’s bicameral system.¹⁵⁰ The British had detailed information on Japan’s navy, and British access before the war to Japan’s army was at least as good as Russian access.

Policymakers cannot easily exclude their racism from their realpolitik. A historian notes, “Power political realities, notions of civilization and progress, and racial concepts thus infused each other and shaped official perceptions of East Asian countries.”¹⁵¹ Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice (also known as Lansdowne), and Selborne were all convinced that Russia would “smash” Japan.¹⁵² Selborne’s concern led him to suggest a joint representation with

145. Ian T. M. Gow, “The Royal Navy and Japan, 1900–1920: Strategic Re-evaluation of the IJN,” in Ian Gow, Yoichi Hiramata, and John Chapman, eds., *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1600–2000*, vol. 3, *The Military Dimension* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 38.

146. Antony Best, “Race, Monarchy, and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1902–1922,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 9, no. 2 (2006): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyl027>.

147. Yukio, “The Emperor Meiji,” 5–6.

148. Charrier, “The Evolution of a Stereotype,” 26.

149. Dunley, “The Warrior Has Always Shewed Himself,” 250–251.

150. Tonooka, “Reverse Emulation and the Cult,” 98.

151. T. G. Otte, “‘A Very Great Gulf’: Late Victorian British Diplomacy and Race in East Asia,” in Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel, eds., *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 129.

152. Keith Neilson, “‘A Dangerous Game of American Poker’: The Russo-Japanese War and British Policy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 12, no. 1 (1989): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398908437362>.

France to deter war.¹⁵³ Lansdowne, who was equally worried that Russia might “crush” Japan, endorsed Selborne’s idea.¹⁵⁴ Because Prime Minister Arthur James Balfour worried about Britain’s diplomatic isolation after Japan’s certain defeat, he resolved disputes with France, which led to the 1904 Entente Cordiale.¹⁵⁵ Balfour hoped that a prolonged stalemate would be costly to Russia and would keep it occupied in the Far East.¹⁵⁶ Satow believed that a Russian victory would make Britain “powerless in the Far East.”¹⁵⁷ As with counterparts in Russia and Germany, racism explains why British policy-makers were so certain, and so wrong, about the outcome of the war.

The British viewed the Japanese as uncivilized and unreliable. For example, Satow believed that the Japanese race made them an untrustworthy type: they “are not to be trusted to rule over other races. . . . I am afraid they are too ambitious, and there is an element of sanguinary ferocity at the bottom of their character which is very unattractive.” Viceroy of India George Curzon took a similar view.¹⁵⁸ Foreign Secretary Salisbury derided Japan as a “mushroom civilization” that was likely to “decay as rapidly as it has grown.” Salisbury thought that this lack of civilizational progress made Japan politically unreliable: Russia “could always find some bribe in those seas for Japan.”¹⁵⁹ In July 1901, a British diplomat expressed concern that Japan might ally with Russia because “it is difficult to say what a country and especially an oriental state may do when it finds itself without funds or reliable friends.”¹⁶⁰ The First Sea Lord, Adm. Walter Kerr, was uncomfortable having British interests in East Asia rely on “so uncertain a basis as the continued goodwill of an Oriental nation.”¹⁶¹ After concluding the alliance, a British military attaché in Tokyo believed that Japan might find war with Russia “irresistible” because Japan is only “partially civilized.”¹⁶²

Early in the war between Japan and Russia, Capt. Ernest C. T. Troubridge (the British naval attaché in Tokyo) reported, “One of the most prominent [characteristics of the Japanese] is a dislike for sustained effort . . . in other

153. Keith Neilson, “The War and British Strategic Foreign Policy,” in Kowner, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 1:310–311.

154. *Ibid.*, 311–312.

155. Heere, *Empire Ascendant*, 62.

156. Neilson, “The War and British Strategic Foreign Policy,” 311–312.

157. *Ibid.*, 310.

158. Otte, “‘A Very Great Gulf,’” 142.

159. *Ibid.*, 130.

160. Best, “Race, Monarchy, and the Anglo-Japanese,” 173.

161. *Ibid.*

162. *Ibid.*

words they never seem able to do what our own race is generally supposed to be most successful in doing, that is 'to keep pegging away.'¹⁶³ British condescension was palpable. Col. Aylmer Haldane, Gen. Sir William Nicholson's chief of staff, recounted his first meeting (April 1904) with Emperor Meiji: he "stood with his toes turned in and is a flabby looking fellow, ugly like most of his race."¹⁶⁴

British military attachés agreed that Japan was no match for Russia. Capt. Troubridge relied on stereotypes to explain the past and predict the future:

The Japanese army would be unequal to the task of coping with the Russian army. It is an unpleasant fact that among Europeans out here it is the practically unanimous opinion that the value of the Japanese army as a fighting force is much overrated, in short that they have won their reputation very cheap, and that at the first shock with European troops they would "crumple up." I cannot speak of that of my own knowledge, but it is the opinion of our military attaché, and according to him, of all the foreign attachés.¹⁶⁵

At the outbreak of war, and before Japan's victory over Russia at Liaoyang, another British observer reported that foreign officers generally believed that "the campaign [in Liaoyang] would be a mere promenade for Russia." The French agreed.¹⁶⁶

Some military observers were more optimistic about Japan's prospects, but racism also influenced these expectations. Gen. Ian Hamilton was the most influential British military attaché in Japan.¹⁶⁷ Two months into the Russo-Japanese War, he predicted that Japan would defeat Russia: "The last poor shreds of my military reputation have been staked upon a forecast that the Japanese army will beat the Russian army wherever they meet them on terms even approaching equality. Further . . . the Japanese army, battalion for battalion, surpasses any European army, excepting only the British army at its best."¹⁶⁸

Hamilton's prediction was accurate, but his analysis was fanciful. He made

163. Charrier, "The Evolution of a Stereotype," 30.

164. John W. M. Chapman, "Introduction," in Chapman and Chiharu, *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War*, 2:xxiii.

165. Ferris, "Turning Japanese," 128–129.

166. David Jones, "Military Observers, Eurocentrism, and World War Zero," in Wolff et al., *The Russo-Japanese War*, 2:142–143.

167. Ferris, "Turning Japanese," 128.

168. Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book during Russo-Japanese War*, vol. 1 (London: Edward Arnold, 1905), 4.

one passing reference to logistics, noting that Japan was close to its base and Russia depended on “a single line of railway thousands of miles long.”¹⁶⁹ The rest of his analysis was racist nonsense. Hamilton believed that “primitive people” or “primitive nations” (his examples included the Japanese, Afghans, tribes in India, Abyssinians, Basutos, Zulus, and Hereros) would defeat “civilized nations,” a belief he gained by fighting (and losing to) the Boers in South Africa. The Boers were “primitive” but had reached “a stage” where they could use modern weapons: “City-bred dollar-hunters are becoming less and less capable of coping with such adversaries as Deer-slayer and his clan.”¹⁷⁰ Whereas the British were “advanced types,” the Boers were “backward types.” “Primitive people” were more in touch with nature than “townsmen.” They were natural fighters, like the Gurkhas and, thought Hamilton, like the Japanese. Western civilization had allowed the “warrior spirit” to “degenerate.” Russian soldiers were peasants, too, which was a strength, but unlike the Japanese, they did not “possess that inborn vital spark of martial ardor which will compensate in battle for many defects in character or physique.”¹⁷¹

People often see what they want or see whatever they have in mind. British military observers viewed Japan “through the prism of preconception,” and most commonly with the South African War (formerly known as the Boer War) in mind.¹⁷² British conscripts disgusted Hamilton; they had failed him in the South African War. He viewed Japan’s conscripts as everything he had wished to see in Britain: “In the whole of Tokio I have not seen a single soldier who is flat-footed, narrow-chested or slouching. . . . The army is the cream of the nation. ‘How different from us, Miss Beale and Miss Buss!’”¹⁷³ Britain suffered from too much civilization, too much interest in peace, an education system that was “anti-military,” and an army that was “organised on a basis of wages.”¹⁷⁴ Japanese stereotypes did not drive Hamilton’s explanations; his explanations for Britain’s poor performance against the Boers generated stereotypes that he then applied to Japan.

British naval assessments were more complicated than I expected. Assessments of the Japanese navy included its techniques and equipment (which

169. *Ibid.*, 11.

170. *Ibid.*, 5. James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Deerslayer* (1841) was part of a series that included *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826).

171. *Ibid.*, 6–10.

172. Ferris, “Turning Japanese,” 128.

173. Hamilton, *A Staff Officer’s Scrap-Book*, 10. “Miss Beale and Miss Buss” refers to a popular rhyme.

174. *Ibid.*, 14.

contradicts my first theoretical expectation) but also relied on British stereotypes of Japanese sailors and officers. As Philip Charrier put it, the Royal Navy relied on “a basic and misleading stereotype of the Japanese fighting man as a tough and courageous ‘martial type,’ who was nevertheless ‘less-evolved’ than his British counterpart, and as such lacked imagination, flexibility and grit.”¹⁷⁵ Charrier finds that from 1900 to 1941, stereotypes of “the physical and mental qualities of the Japanese ‘race’” usually influenced the assessments that naval attachés sent to the naval staff.¹⁷⁶ Over time, the stereotype drew on scientific racism and the view that Japanese were biologically inferior.¹⁷⁷ British stereotypes of the Japanese—both positive ones and negative ones— influenced their explanations and predictions.

BRITISH EXPLANATIONS OF JAPAN’S “STUNNING” VICTORY

Japan’s victory was “stunning” and elicited “transformative” changes in perceptions because British policymakers had viewed the Japanese as an inferior race (see figure 4).¹⁷⁸ Lloyd George recalled that Japan’s dominance of Russia was “a great revelation of its power to the world.”¹⁷⁹ A year into the war, a journalist commented on the change in perceptions of Japan: “Last New Year’s Day the Japanese were ‘yellow monkeys.’”¹⁸⁰ Now, the British press called them the “the Englishman of the Orient,” and Japanese soldiers were “little Jappy Atkins” (derived from a nickname for British soldiers, Tommy Atkins).¹⁸¹ The British characterized the Japanese as being “human bullets” who followed orders and were aggressive.¹⁸²

British policymakers could not use their prewar stereotypes of Japan to explain Japan’s victory, so they created new ones. In their view, Japan shifted from an untrustworthy uncivilized type to a trustworthy civilized type. After the alliance but before the war, the British assumed that they would have overall command of any joint military action. Four months into the war, the British accepted that the Japanese might take command of British ships. In the words of Richard Dunley, this was an “extraordinary shift in views in a very short space of time.”¹⁸³ In a May 1904 memo, Troubridge explained to the admiralty

175. Charrier, “The Evolution of a Stereotype,” 28.

176. *Ibid.*, 29.

177. *Ibid.*, 28.

178. Tonooka, “Reverse Emulation and the Cult,” 99.

179. *Ibid.*

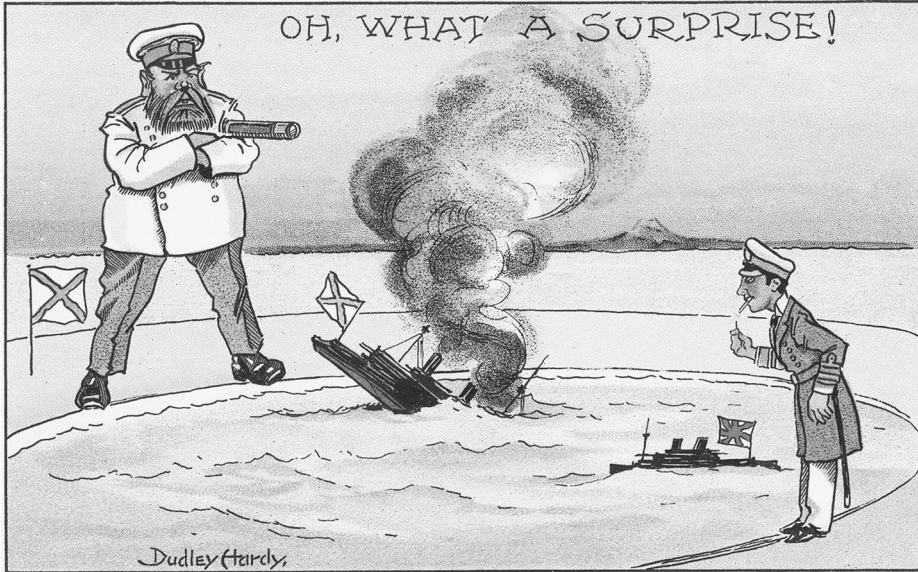
180. *Ibid.*

181. Akira, “Japan under Paternalism,” 260.

182. Porter, *Military Orientalism*, 91.

183. Dunley, “The Warrior Has Always Shewed Himself,” 256.

Figure 4. British Surprise at Japanese Victories over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War



SOURCE: *Oh, What A Surprise!* from the series 3015. English, 1904–05. By: Dudley Hardy, English, 1862–1922. Publisher: Davidson Bros., London and New York, 1901–1911. Color lithograph; ink on card stock. Overall: 8.8 x 13.8 cm (3 7/16 x 5 7/16 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards 2002.3751. Photograph ©2023 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

NOTE: A “bestly” Russian and a “civilized” Japanese officer watch as a Japanese ship steams to victory after sinking a Russian battleship.

that his view of the Japanese had changed. Previously, “all sentiment and tradition compelled us to eliminate” any possibility of surrendering control of any British ships to the Japanese. “I am very certain now,” wrote Troubridge, “that the time has come when we may, with the utmost confidence, entrust our ships to the control of a Japanese Admiral, when we would sacrifice sentiment and tradition for the sake of the increased efficiency of concerted action.” Adm. Kerr minuted in the memorandum that he shared “to a great extent Captain Troubridge’s views.”¹⁸⁴ No other ally would have hoped to be given command of British ships.

British elites revised their beliefs in part because of racist interpretations of

184. *Ibid.*

new evidence. Success revealed that the Japanese were “white,” and Russia’s failure revealed its “semi-Asiatic nature,” which meant that the Japanese were “the whiter of the two.”¹⁸⁵ Another journalist found in the Japanese “Anglo-Saxon virility.”¹⁸⁶ Downgrading Russia’s race made it easier to explain Japan’s victory. A British diplomat in St. Petersburg believed that intermixing between “Slavs” and “Mongols” made Russia “Asiatic.”¹⁸⁷ The London *Times* asked how “a nation of unmixed Asiatic blood” could beat Russia. Apparently, being “white” was not a precondition for civilization. According to the *Times*, the Japanese had “mastered the ways of Western civilization with extraordinary completeness.”¹⁸⁸ That the Japanese were not Christians was problematic, but the spirit of Buddhism served as a good enough substitute.¹⁸⁹ And the Russians provided a useful counterpoint. The Japanese were more civilized and even more Christian than the Russians: “If Christianity has any connexion with the teachings of its Founder,” wrote the *Times*, “the Japanese might well claim to be the best Christians of us all.”¹⁹⁰ Japanese soldiers were now seen as exemplars of civilization: tall, strong, well-nourished, agile, thick-set, and well-built. “To see a Japanese jump is a revelation,” wrote one journalist, and another wrote that “the Japanese are undoubtedly the finest race physically that exists.”¹⁹¹

The more positive were British assessments of Japan, the more disparaging they became toward Russia.¹⁹² Although during the war British naval attachés generally ignored race when commenting on Japan—which Dunley finds “remarkable”—they increased their racist assessments of Russia.¹⁹³ It was the Russians who were uncivilized. Naval attaché Capt. William Pakenham reported that “the Russian military services contain many who are little better than savages,” and the officers were “below the standards of twentieth century civilization.”¹⁹⁴ Another official contrasted a Japanese decision to rescue six hundred men from a sinking Russian ship with Russian barbarity.¹⁹⁵

185. Journalist quoted in Heere, *Empire Ascendant*, 55.

186. *Ibid.*

187. *Ibid.*, 56.

188. Tonooka, “Reverse Emulation and the Cult,” 109.

189. *Ibid.*, 112–113.

190. Heere, *Empire Ascendant*, 54–55.

191. *Ibid.*, 55.

192. *Ibid.*, 55–56.

193. Dunley, “The Warrior Has Always Shewed Himself,” 256.

194. *Ibid.*

195. *Ibid.*, 256–257.

Japan's victory seemed to validate Gen. Hamilton's stereotypes of Japan. He judged the Japanese soldier to be "the fighting man of the future."¹⁹⁶ Hamilton thought that what explained Japan's success was "not strategy or tactics, or armaments or information," but "the souls of the Japanese troops which triumphed over the less developed, less awakened, less stimulated, spiritual qualities of the Russians."¹⁹⁷ From the frontline in Manchuria, Hamilton witnessed the martial spirit that allowed Japan to prevail: "The Japs worship the sword. There is nothing they long for so much as to cut off a lot of legs and arms."¹⁹⁸ Lord Curzon believed that Britain needed to emulate Japan's civic patriotism: "We could not have done what the Japs have done."¹⁹⁹ Joseph Chamberlain, a Unionist member of parliament, believed that Japanese "unparalleled patriotism" was "the greatest object-lesson ever presented to the world" and that "something of the same spirit" was now necessary in Britain.²⁰⁰ Instilling in British soldiers a Japanese willingness and even enthusiasm for self-sacrifice was essential. Owing to the Russo-Japanese War, the British Army expected that an expeditionary force sent to Europe would lose 75 percent of its soldiers in the first six months.²⁰¹

Among British observers, Gen. Hamilton was alone in predicting Japan's victory, but not in allowing beliefs unrelated to Japan to influence assessments. Although racism drives dispositional explanations, other factors do too. Keith Neilson emphasizes the importance of social class regarding British officers' explanations of Japan's military success. The cavalry was the most prestigious service and the one for which modern technology was most threatening. Although the less renowned engineering and artillery branches of the British Army recognized the importance of firepower, senior officers found this idea to be career-threatening and heretical because it implied that the British military should be professionalized.²⁰² According to Neilson, professionalization "would have resulted in the concept of promotion on merit alone, a concept

196. Heere, *Empire Ascendant*, 55.

197. Hamilton quoted in S. P. Mackenzie, "Willpower or Firepower? The Unlearned Military Lessons of the Russo-Japanese War," in David Wells and Sandra Wilson, eds., *The Russo-Japanese War in Cultural Perspective, 1904–1905* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 33.

198. Chapman, "Introduction," 2:xxv.

199. Heere, *Empire Ascendant*, 49.

200. Tonooka, "Reverse Emulation and the Cult," 100.

201. Sheffy, "A Model Not to Follow," 264.

202. Keith Neilson, "'That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise': British Military Thinking and the Russo-Japanese War," *War & Society* 9, no. 2 (1991): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1179/072924791791202323>.

socially unacceptable in the British army.”²⁰³ British officers attributed Japan’s success to morale and will, not tactics and techniques.

The British debated the sources of Japanese resolve. A favorite explanation was that the spirit of Bushidō and Shintoism embodied Japanese national character and gave Japanese nearly supernatural qualities, a will to win, and an ability to prevail over otherwise devastating gunfire.²⁰⁴ Bushidō also provided a way to combat Britain’s decadence that military officers and some journalists believed the South African War had revealed. Bushidō became a cultural touchstone in Britain. H. G. Wells called the ruling elite of his novel *A Modern Utopia* (1905) the “Samurai.” Robert Baden-Powell believed that his Boy Scout movement would do for Britain what “Bushido . . . has done, and is still doing, for Japan.”²⁰⁵ Getting English schoolboys to embody a samurai code of conduct was a stretch, but militarizing the British school system to emphasize patriotic duty was possible.²⁰⁶

For a variety of reasons, and for a short period, the Japanese became white, Christian, civilized, trustworthy, brave, resolute, and tall. Racism was part of British assessments of Japan’s victory, but so were the unexpected defeats in the South African War, the career-threatening implications of modern firepower, the heretical idea of promotion on merit, and the desire to see an ally defeat a mutual enemy. Capt. Pakenham privately described Japan’s offensives against Port Arthur as “our attacks.”²⁰⁷ The influence that these racist and non-racist beliefs had on explanations reinforces the importance that assimilation has on credibility assessments.

Whereas Russia’s defeat made the Germans certain that Russia posed no future threat, British policymakers believed the opposite. They failed to update their belief about Russia’s threat to Afghanistan and India, which a historian finds “astonishing.”²⁰⁸ Before the war, keeping Russia out of India was a reason to ally with Japan. During the war, British policymakers worried that Russia would choose that moment to attack British interests. After the war, British policymakers and military officers thought that Russia was even more likely to invade Afghanistan or India to regain its lost prestige and avenge it-

203. Ibid., 29–30; Sheffy, “A Model Not to Follow,” 266.

204. Neilson, “That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise,” 24; Sheffy, “A Model Not to Follow,” 266.

205. Tonooka, “Reverse Emulation and the Cult,” 101–102.

206. Ibid., 103–104.

207. Dunley, “The Warrior Has Always Shewed Himself,” 258.

208. Philip Towle, “The Russo-Japanese War and the Defence of India,” *Military Affairs* 44, no. 3 (1980): 111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1987434>.

self against Britain.²⁰⁹ Britain did not yet realize that the greatest threat to its empire came not from Russia, but from the overthrow of white supremacy. After Japan's victory, W. E. B. Du Bois declared, "The magic of the word 'white' is already broken. . . . The awakening of the yellow races is certain. That the awakening of the brown and black races will follow in time, no unprejudiced student of history can doubt."²¹⁰

Conclusion

Assimilation makes stereotypes pernicious: when policymakers use strongly held beliefs to explain behavior, they are likely to see what they already believe and then use that "evidence" to reinforce the stereotype. This focus on stereotypes also makes two points about reputations. First, it explains why stereotypes are problematic in a way that reputations are not. Second, it explains why reputations are likely to become stereotypes. The ease with which reputations become stereotypes should be discomfiting to anyone who bases policy on another's reputation or encourages policymakers to do so.

Reputations and stereotypes are similar in two ways. First, both concepts include "type" in their definition. Robert Jervis, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler define reputations as "judgments about character, or 'type,' with the implication that this character is baked into an actor's disposition and will affect the actor's behavior in predictable ways."²¹¹ The reputation literature relies on "types" but never refers to stereotypes. Second, policymakers use reputations and stereotypes in the same way to solve the same problems: they rely on generalizations about another's character, personality, or type to help with explanations and predictions.

"Assimilation" and "updating" represent the key conceptual differences between stereotypes and reputations. Stereotypes depend on assimilation: when policymakers use stereotypes to explain behavior, they use their beliefs to interpret evidence. This reliance on assimilation is one reason why stereotypes are both inaccurate and enduring. Stereotypes are self-reinforcing because preexisting beliefs drive explanations. In contrast, reputations depend on updating: policymakers objectively assess another's behavior without the

209. *Ibid.*, 111–117.

210. Horne, *Race War*, 45.

211. Robert Jervis, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler, "Redefining the Debate over Reputation and Credibility in International Security: Promises and Limits of New Scholarship," *World Politics* 73, no. 1 (2021): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887120000246>.

influence of prior beliefs and then use that evidence to update a reputation and to predict behavior. Michael Tomz suggests that high stakes make people's interpretations rational so that "reputations emerge from the impartial analysis of history."²¹² Reputations are useful for predictions but not for explanations.

When policymakers use a reputation to *explain* behavior, they have switched from updating to assimilating. They are using their belief about another's type to explain rather than objectively assess its behavior. This reliance on assimilation is how reputations become stereotypes. Psychologists and political psychologists find that assimilation is more common than updating.²¹³ This tendency is especially true for policymakers. Telling policymakers not to use their view of an actor's reputation to explain that actor's behavior is likely to be met with disbelief. Because they believe that the reputations of their allies and adversaries are valid, of course they will use them to explain behavior. Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler note that it is difficult to apply "standard Bayesian updating when the prior beliefs strongly color the perceived diagnosticity of the new information."²¹⁴ If assimilation (unlike updating) is an enduring feature of the mind, then reputations are likely to become stereotypes.

While this article concerns racist stereotypes, the well of bigotry is deep and varied. Do gender and religious stereotypes also have a systematic influence on credibility assessments? Scholars have begun to examine how stereotypes influence policymakers' assessments of female leaders' threats,²¹⁵ and women's willingness to initiate conflict.²¹⁶ When Argentine general Leopoldo Galtieri was told during the Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas crisis that Britain

212. Tomz, *Reputation and International Cooperation*, 29.

213. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Belief in the Law of Small Numbers," *Psychological Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (1971): 105–110, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0031322>; Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 124–143; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, xlvii–lii.

214. Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler, "Redefining the Debate," 186.

215. Abigail S. Post and Paromita Sen, "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man? Female Leaders in Crisis Bargaining," *International Interactions* 46, no. 1 (2020): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2019.1683008>; Joshua A. Schwartz and Christopher W. Blair, "Do Women Make More Credible Threats? Gender Stereotypes, Audience Costs, and Crisis Bargaining," *International Organization* 74, no. 4 (2020): 872–895, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818320000223>.

216. Madison Schramm and Alexandra Stark, "Peacemakers or Iron Ladies? A Cross-National Study of Gender and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 29, no. 3 (2020): 515–548, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1763450>. Also see Meredith Loken, "Non-Combat Participation in Rebellion: A Gendered Typology," *International Security* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2022): 139–170, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00440.

would fight and win, he said of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “That woman wouldn’t dare.”²¹⁷ British colonial officials viewed their Hindu subjects as “effeminate,” as one said: “The Bengalis are a low-lying people in a low-lying land with the intellect of a Greek and the grit of a rabbit.”²¹⁸ India’s ambassador to the United States (and sister of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru), Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, said that Secretary of State Dean Acheson “found it difficult to accept me as my country’s official representative.” Acheson asked her, “Why do pretty women want to be like men?”²¹⁹ In the context of negotiating with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, President Richard Nixon said of Indian women: “They turn me off. They are repulsive and it’s just easy to be tough with them.”²²⁰ Nixon hated Gandhi, whom he called “the old bitch,” and his affection for Pakistan’s military leader Gen. Yahya Khan helps to explain why he ignored West Pakistan’s atrocities against Bengalis.²²¹

Stereotypes—racist, sexist, religious, or otherwise—are problems without a solution, other than the one suggested by Daniel Kahneman, to “question the diagnosticity of your evidence.”²²² One way to nudge policymakers to heed Kahneman’s suggestion is to encourage them to refer to stereotypes rather than to reputations. This switch to stereotype from reputation might bring racism and bigotry to mind and lead policymakers to scrutinize their reliance on an actor’s “type” to justify their explanations and expectations, and to encourage debate over the accuracy of a stereotype. If stereotypes are more common than reputations, then dignifying a stereotype by calling it a reputation is a greater risk than discounting a reputation as a stereotype.

It is likely that where racism and bigotry exist, so too will their influence on the causes, conduct, and consequences of war. Racism systematically distorted policymakers’ analyses of the Russo-Japanese War in two ways. First, policymakers relied on disposition (rather than situation) to explain immediate behavior. Second, they relied on racist stereotypes to predict behavior. These reinforcing mechanisms led policymakers to have unwarranted confidence in

217. Post and Sen, “Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Man?,” 7–8.

218. Judith M. Brown, “The Anglo-Boer War: An Indian Perspective,” *Kunapipi* 21, no. 3 (1999): 31.

219. Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, 114.

220. Gary J. Bass, “The Terrible Cost of Presidential Racism,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2020.

221. Dexter Filkins, “Collateral Damage: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Bangladesh Genocide,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2013.

222. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 154.

their explanations for and predictions of other states' behaviors. Yet drawing big inferences from a small sample is a mistake, which is why a larger sample from an array of international relations scholars is vital. The sociologist Gunnar Myrdal studied "racial beliefs" seventy-nine years ago and concluded that "a set of most fascinating research problems of great theoretical and practical importance is waiting for investigation."²²³ In international security, that conclusion is still true.

223. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 112.