

# The Treaty of Portsmouth and the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905

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Image 1. Delegates for the Treaty of Portsmouth, taken in 1905. Photo from: Wikipedia.

The Treaty of Portsmouth formally ended the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, with negotiations taking place in August in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Brokered in part by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, the final agreement was signed in September of 1905, and it affirmed the Japanese presence in south Manchuria and Korea and ceded the southern half of the island of Sakhalin to Japan.

By 1904, Russia and Japan had endured several years of disputes over control of Manchuria. Manchuria is a name for the Northeast region of China. The Russians had entered the region during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Along with Germany and France, Russia was a part of the "Triple Intervention" that forced Japan to give up its demands for ports in South Manchuria and the Liaodong Peninsula in the wake of its victory in China. In addition, Russia proceeded into the area and took control of Port Arthur, a warm-water port with strategic and commercial significance. A Japanese attempt to stage a coup in nearby Korea was thwarted in part by the Russian presence in the region. The two nations' competing interests appeared more and more likely to clash.

## Japan Attacks Before Formally Declaring War Against Russia

In 1904, the Japanese attacked the Russian fleet at Port Arthur before the formal declaration of war was received in Moscow, surprising the Russian Navy and earning an early victory. Over the course of the next year, the two forces clashed in Korea and on the Sea of Japan, with the Japanese scoring significant, but costly, victories. War casualties were high on both sides. At the Battle of Mukden, for example, the Russians lost 60,000 soldiers while the Japanese lost 41,000. The military costs were high as well. A Russian fleet made the long trip from the Baltic Sea around Africa and India, only to have the Japanese destroy half of it upon its arrival in Northeast Asia. By 1905, the combination of these losses and the economic cost of financing the war led both countries to seek an end to the conflict.

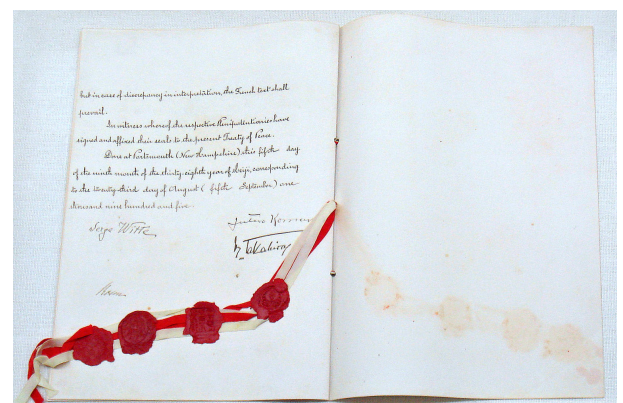
The Japanese asked U.S. President Roosevelt to negotiate a peace agreement, and representatives of the two nations met in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1905. For the sake of maintaining the balance of power and equal economic opportunity in the region, Roosevelt preferred that the war end on terms that left both Russia and Japan a role to play in Northeast China. Though impressed by Japan's military victories, Roosevelt worried about the consequences to American interests if Japan managed to drive out Russia entirely.

### Roosevelt Negotiates Peace Agreement

The negotiations addressed access to ports and territories in Manchuria and Korea, control of the island of Sakhalin and the question of who was responsible for paying war costs, or indemnity — a form of financial penalty on the losing side. The chief aims of the Japanese negotiator included first control in Korea and South Manchuria, then the negotiation of an indemnity and control of Sakhalin. The Russians wanted to maintain Sakhalin Island and refused to pay a war-costs indemnity to the Japanese. They also hoped to maintain their fleet in the Pacific. The indemnity issue, along with the control of Sakhalin Island, were the major sticking points in the negotiation. However, given its financial straits in 1905, Russia was likely unable to pay an indemnity even if required by a treaty to do so.

When negotiations reached an impasse, Roosevelt stepped in with the proposal that Russia "buy back" the northern part of Sakhalin from Japanese control. The Russians were adamant that they would not pay any amount of money, which would act as a disguised indemnity, when the territory ought to be theirs. After long internal debate, Japan eventually agreed to take only the southern half of the island, without any kind of payment. Their victory had not been decisive enough to force the point.

The treaty ultimately gave Japan control of Korea and much of South Manchuria, including Port Arthur and the railway that connected it with the rest of the region. They also gained the southern half of Sakhalin Island and saw Russian power curtailed in the region. Because neither nation was in a strong financial position to continue the war easily, both were forced to compromise on the terms of the peace. Still, the Japanese public felt they had won the war, and they considered the lack of an indemnity to be an affront. There was a brief outbreak of protests and rioting in



Tokyo when the terms of the agreement were made public. Similarly, the Russian people were also dissatisfied, angry about giving up half of Sakhalin.

Throughout the war and the peace talks, American public opinion largely sided with Japan. Most Americans believed the Japanese were fighting a "just war" against Russian aggression. They also thought the island nation was equally committed to the Open Door policy and the territorial integrity of China. This sense did not really change over the course of the negotiations, in spite of the best efforts of the Russian negotiator to improve the press coverage of his nation's position. The final decision of the Japanese to forgo an indemnity only served to strengthen U.S. approval of Japan's actions throughout the conflict. The anti-treaty and, at times, anti-American demonstrations in Tokyo that followed the treaty's ratification caught many Americans off-guard.

### **Treaty Marks End Of Cooperative Era**

The Treaty of Portsmouth marked the last real event in an era of U.S.-Japanese cooperation that began with the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Instead, competition between the two nations in the Pacific grew over the years that followed. Conversely, Japanese relations with Russia improved in the wake of the treaty. Although the actual importance of Roosevelt's participation in the negotiations is unclear, he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions in moderating the talks and pushing the two warring nations toward peace.