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Sergei Witte, Roman Rosen, Komura Jutaro, Takahira Kogoro

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The Russo-Japanese Treaty of Portsmouth, signed in 1905, brought an end to the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The agreement was signed by Russian and Japanese diplomats at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, near the boundary of Maine and New Hampshire, in the United States. The treaty was signed in September, after negotiations that lasted throughout most of August.

The Russo-Japanese War was caused by a Russian and Japanese dispute for dominance in Manchuria and Korea. Manchuria had been controlled by the Manchu Qing dynasty of China (the dynasty had, in fact, originated in Manchuria), and Korea had been a vassal state or dependency of China. But as the power of imperial China declined, foreign powers began to encroach on its tributary states and empire. Great Britain took control of Hong Kong after the First Opium War in the 1840s. France seized Vietnam and Southeast Asia (Indochina) between the 1850s and 1880s.

The First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) ended in the defeat of imperial China by the modernized Japanese army and navy. As a result of this victory, Korea, a former vassal of Qing China, won its independence. Once Korea was removed from Chinese control, the Russians and Japanese began to compete for influence there and in neighboring Manchuria. In 1898 the Russians leased the Liaodong (Liaotung) Peninsula from China, and established a naval base called Port Arthur there. Liaodong is located in southeastern Manchuris, right next to the northern Korean peninsula. The Japanese saw the establishment of the Russian base right next to Korea, which they saw as part of their sphere of influence, as a serious threat.

Relations between the Japanese and Russians deteriorated, resulting in the outbreak of war in early 1904. Russia had the largest army in Europe, but the Russian heartland was far from the area where the fighting took place, and the Japanese navy was able to the destroy the Russian Pacific fleet based at Port Arthur. The Japanese were supported by Great Britain during the war because the British saw Russian expansion as a threat. After Japanese naval victories and land victories at Port Arthur and Mukden, the Russians decided to negotiate peace. The Russian decision was heavily influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1905. The revolution, in turn, had been partly inspired by the military defeats Russia was suffering at the hands of Japan.

Negotiations between Russian and Japanese diplomats took place in Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Kittery, Maine, in the United States. The talks were mediated by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who was seen by both sides as impartial. Roosevelt would win the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the negotiations. On the Russian side, the chief negotiators were Russian Prime Minister Sergei Witte (1849-1915), and the former Russian ambassador to Japan, Roman Romanovich Rosen (1847-1921). The main Japanese negotiators were Jutaro Komaru (or Marquis Komaru Jutaro, 1855-1911), the Japanese Foreign Minister, and Takahira Kogoro (or Kogoro Takahira, 1854-1926), the Japanese ambassador to the United States from 1900 to 1909.

Under the terms of the treaty, the Russians agreed to withdraw from Manchuria and recognize Japanese suzerainty over Korea. The treaty set the stage for Korea’s formal annexation by the Japanese Empire in 1910, and cleared the way for the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s. Manchuria (the puppet state of Manchukuo under former Manchu Qing Emperor Puyi) served as a base for Japanese invasions of

China during the Second World War.

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