Chapter 1
Tsushima Strait

On the night of May 26th, 1905, a convoy of thirty-eight Russian warships of the *Second Pacific Squadron* entered the Tsushima Strait. The ships were on transit from the Baltic Sea to the Russian city of Vladivostok, and their passage through the strait—the wide stretch of open water between Japan and the Korean Peninsula—was the last leg of an arduous journey across half the globe.

The trip that originated from the city of St. Petersburg had not started well: the paranoia amongst the Russians over the vastly overestimated reach of the opposing Japanese Navy during the ongoing Russo-Japanese War was so rampant that it had caused an inexplicable clash between the fleet and a set of unarmed British fishing trawlers that were mistaken as Japanese torpedo boats.

As a result of this bizarre shootout at Dogger Bank in the North Sea, Great Britain, which controlled the Suez Canal at the time, had revoked the right for the fleet to pass through the Canal. Therefore, the fleet had been on the move for eight months and had traveled a distance of 33,000 kilometers, going all the way around the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of the African continent. The ships were in dire need of comprehensive maintenance after such a long time at sea: their crews were exhausted and in low morale, and the hulls of the boats were heavily fouled by all the tiny sea creatures and plants that had attached themselves below the waterline, severely reducing their speed.

But the fleet had to keep pushing forward because the completion of this trip was of utmost importance—it offered the final chance for Russia to turn the tables in the ongoing war that had been going badly for them from almost the very first day.

Japan had started the war against Russia in February 1904 with a surprise attack against Port Arthur, Russia's naval outpost in China. Port Arthur, which is currently known as Dalian, had been the base for the naval forces of the *First Pacific Squadron*, and even though the actual damage suffered in the initial two days of the attack was relatively small, the situation soon started to deteriorate for the Russians.

In order to protect the bay of Port Arthur from further approaches by the Japanese naval forces, the minelayer *Yenisei* was sent to block the entrance of the harbor. Unfortunately, *Yenisei* hit one of its own mines in the process and sank,

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losing 120 of its crew of 200, along with the map of the newly laid minefield. When another ship, *Boyarin*, was sent to investigate the situation, it also hit one of the newly laid mines. Despite frantic efforts to keep *Boyarin* afloat, it had to be abandoned, and while it was left drifting, it hit yet another of the mines laid by *Yenisei* and sank.

During the following months, several naval clashes occurred in the Yellow Sea as the Russians attempted to break out of the siege of the bay, and they did manage to cause considerable damage to the Japanese Fleet. But as the Russian losses continued to pile up through the summer months, the Japanese Navy eventually decimated the *First Pacific Squadron*, thanks to the effective command of Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō Saneyoshi.

The Japanese Navy was very lucky to have someone like Tōgō at the helm: he was a highly disciplined and skillful officer who, after having studied naval science in England, had a comprehensive international background—something that was quite unusual for a commander in the Orient at the beginning of the 20th century.

The new, supporting fleet of Russian ships that was entering the Tsushima Strait had initially been sent with the intention of joining the existing forces at Port Arthur and then pushing out the Japanese Navy. This maneuver would have kept access to Port Arthur open, allowing additional ground troops to be sent to the area, but, as Port Arthur was overrun while the fleet was still en route, the plan had to be readjusted accordingly: on new orders from St. Petersburg, the *Second Pacific Squadron* was directed to continue all the way to Vladivostok, resupply the ships there and then return to Port Arthur, engaging the Japanese Navy with fresh, hopefully definitive, force.

In order to reach Vladivostok as soon as possible, the fleet had chosen the shortest route that went past southwestern Japan along the Tsushima Strait, which even at its narrowest point was still about 60 kilometers wide, and therefore was expected to have plenty of room even for the large number of ships of the fleet to slip through.

The conditions at sea on that night in May were very promising—the weather was foggy and the Moon was in its last quarter, meaning that it would only rise after midnight.

The fleet pushed on, keeping a fair distance from normal shipping routes, trying to avoid any traffic in the area, including the Japanese scout ships that Admiral Tōgō had positioned around the strait. Tōgō was well aware of the approaching fleet and had assumed correctly that due to the rapidly deteriorating condition of the ships, the Russians would choose to take the shortest route towards Vladivostok via Tsushima Strait.

Despite almost optimal weather conditions, luck was not on the Russian side: in the early hours of the morning of the 27th of May, the Japanese cruiser *Shinano Maru* detected the navigation lights of the hospital ship *Oryol*, and after moving closer to investigate, noticed the shapes of multiple other ships in the convoy.

Although the position of the enemy was exposed relatively far from the land, the fate of the Russian fleet was sealed by the fact that *Shinano Maru* was equipped

with an on-board radio transmitter—a Japanese copy of the newly introduced *Marconi* marine radio.

Thanks to this novel device, a short message stating "*enemy is in square 203*" was sent to the headquarters, informing admiral Tōgō about the exact location of the Russian convoy. Tōgō immediately ordered the Japanese Navy to intercept with all available vessels, sending a total of eighty-nine ships steaming towards the now exposed location of the Russian fleet. As a result, after almost two days of intensive fighting, the *Second Pacific Squadron* was utterly decimated: twenty-one Russian ships were sunk, eleven others were taken out of action, and over 4,000 Russian sailors were killed, while the Japanese side lost only about 100 sailors and three small torpedo boats.

Out of the original fleet, only one cruiser and two destroyers managed to break through the Japanese lines and eventually made their way to Vladivostok.

Thanks to this massive victory, the Russo-Japanese War was effectively over, giving Japan free rein as the undisputed military power in the region.

Russia, on the other hand, had lost its capability for any naval operations in the Far East and had only a handful of ships left in the Baltic Sea, barely able to protect St. Petersburg, as the ships of the *Second Pacific Squadron* were all originally part of the Russian *Baltic Fleet*.

The definitive result of this naval battle that ensued after that foggy night made headlines around the world and ended up having enormous geopolitical consequences: it tarnished Russia's reputation as a formidable international power, severely weakening the political clout of Emperor Nicholas II. This provided one more cause of disillusionment to the people of Russia, which in turn strengthened the forces pushing for a revolution. The sudden loss of Russian prestige also upset the existing balance of powers in Europe, which was one of the seeds that led to the First World War.

On the Japanese side, this undisputed and overwhelming victory provided the Japanese military command with a new sense of superiority, propelling Japan into an era of strong militarism. Tōgō became a legend, and is still highly appreciated, although he probably would not want the admiration of the hardline right-wing Japanese, who up to this day refuse to accept the facts of the atrocities that followed from the emboldened national sense of military and racial superiority that followed the Russo-Japanese War. The most notable of these disputed calamities is the *Nanking Massacre* of 1937–1938, which occurred during the Japanese-initiated Second Sino-Japanese War, and for which the casualty count is estimated to be between 50,000 and 300,000 civilians.

What further led to the deterioration of the overall political situation in Japan was the fact that the top ranks of the Japanese Military were lulled into a sense of invincibility after the many successful operations that followed the Battle of Tsushima. As a result, the commanders often acted without or against direct orders from the weak political leadership in Tokyo.

Eventually this kind of mindset would lead to an overreach, and it finally happened on December 7th, 1941: the Japanese performed a Port Arthur-style

surprise attack again, this time against Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, thus dragging the formerly passive United States into the Second World War.

Although the Japanese were initially able to invade large parts of South-East Asia and the Pacific, the resources of the island nation soon became strained. This grave miscalculation over long-term sustainability of military actions eventually led to the unconditional Japanese surrender in 1945, days after the atomic bombs had decimated the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As a side effect of forcing the United States into the war, the American troops also joined the Allied forces in Europe, providing massive material support for the Soviet Union as part of the fundamental shift in American war policy. This aid was essential in turning the tables against Germany on the Eastern Front.

It is fair to say that without the Japanese-induced American entry to the Second World War, an eventual German invasion of the British Isles, *Operation Sea Lion*, would have been a more probable endgame than *Operation Overlord* which eventually happened on the beaches of Normandy.

After the war, the Soviet Union quickly became a superpower with its own nuclear weapons and, in a few short years, polarized the world by turning into a wholesale exporter of Communism. The resulting Cold War isolated half of formerly united Europe behind the Iron Curtain and together with the developments in China, created several global conflicts that remain unsolved to this day, like the stark division of the Korean Peninsula.

On the Chinese side, the inability of the Chinese forces to stop the atrocities performed by the Japanese during the Manchurian Occupation weakened the position of the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, giving rise to the communist movement led by Mao Zedong. Mao eventually took control over mainland China in 1949 and proceeded with his bold but misguided vision of Cultural Revolution, which ended up killing at least 30 million Chinese. Remarkably, the Chinese civilian casualties resulting from this internal political purge ended up being twice as numerous as those who had been killed by the Japanese between 1937 and 1945 in the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Many of these tremendous geopolitical events that completely altered the history of so many nations can be seen as direct or indirect consequences of that one fatal night at the Tsushima Strait.

Naturally it is impossible to predict what might have happened if the Russian fleet had made it safely to Vladivostok and successfully fought against Japan, but we can speculate:

Would the United States have remained true to their policy of impartiality during the Second World War, and as a result, would Japan have been spared the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

And if Japan hadn't dragged the United States into war, would Nazi Germany have managed to overtake all of Europe, and eventually declared war against the United States?

Would this in turn have led to a nuclear war in Europe, as the *Manhattan Project* that created the nuclear weapons was principally a race against the competing developments in Nazi Germany, not Japan?

And locally in the Asia region, could China have developed peacefully under Chiang Kai-shek, preventing the rise of Mao Zedong and the formation of Communist China?

Would 50 million Chinese lives have been saved as a result? But without Deng Xiaoping as the successor for Mao, would China have remained the rural backwater it was at the beginning of the 20th century, and would we now have just one, unified Korea as a major global business power?

There are many alternative outcomes of history that may have panned out very differently if *Shinano Maru* had not had a radio transmitter on board.

That short message, sent via a technology that was barely five years old, had a profound effect on the history of the world.

One notable aspect to consider is the fact that wars have a strong tendency to speed up technological development, which eventually benefits the surviving post-war societies. Therefore, without *Shinano Maru's* short radio message and the events that it put in motion, we might only now be taking the first steps in computing or spaceflight.

The potential alternative ramifications are naturally quite impossible to conclude, but it is very clear that without these invisible waves and the numerous direct and indirect effects of their application on the course of history, the world would be a very different place.

So how did all this begin?