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BETWEEN JAPAN AND RUSSIA:

The Balkans in Meiji-Japan's Newspapers

INTRODUCTION

How ordinary people imagine other countries? What factors affect their views on other peoples? In Japan in the Meiji period (1868-1912), newspapers as well as school textbooks had a great impact on the world view of the Japanese people. This article focuses on the Japanese views of the Balkans reflected in newspapers of the Meiji period.[1]

Modern Japanese newspapers, which had been established near the end of the Tokugawa period[2] in the middle of the 19th century, reported on the contemporary

1 This paper is mostly based on the following article written by the author: Riko Shiba, "Images of the Balkans in the Japanese Media of the Meiji Period," *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju* XVIII, sv. 3, 2011 (Belgrade, 2012), pp. 7-16.

2 Tokugawa is the family name of Japan's military rulers (*shogun*) between 1600 and 1868. This era is called the Tokugawa period or the Edo period.

situation in the Balkan Peninsula to the Japanese public throughout the Meiji period. This new media played a very important role at that point, because foreign news had now become readily available to the Japanese people who until then had had no means of finding out such news under a seclusion policy of the Tokugawa rulers for more than 200 years from the 17th century to the middle of 19th. The Tokugawa Shogunate maintained very limited contacts with the neighboring countries of China, Korea, and the Kingdom of Ryukyu, but broke off relations with Europeans except the Dutch. Besides, since 1635 the Japanese people were prohibited from going abroad. The Dutch brought annual reports to the Tokugawa government on the contemporary situation overseas. However, those secret reports, monopolized by the Tokugawa officials, were not available to the Japanese commoners.

This paper seeks to explore the cause for reporting on the Balkans which had quite limited contact with Japan throughout the Meiji period. It mainly deals with the *Tokyo Nichinichi* (『東京日日』), the *Yomiuri* (『読売』), and the *Asahi* (『朝日』) circulated in Tokyo, the capital of Japan, and its neighboring area.[3] In the 1890s, newspapers became more and more popular. I would like to present how the Japanese commoners could imagine the Balkans on the basis of the *Niroku Shinpo* (『二六新報』), one of the most popular "Yellow papers" established in this period.

JAPANESE NEWSPAPERS IN THE EARLY MEIJI PERIOD

The Meiji Restoration in 1868 was not only a restoration of power from the Tokugawa Shogunate to the Imperial Court, but also the start of a series of reforms which transformed Japan into a modern centralized nation-state. At the beginning of the 1870s, the new government moved rapidly to implement centralizing reforms. In August 1871, feudal domains were abolished and new prefectures were created. In the next month, a national Office of Education was established and within a year the National School System Law was promulgated. The law obliged every child, male and female, to go to primary school for 4 years. Following the establishment of an Office of the Army and an Office of the Navy in February 1872, the government took steps to conscript young men for military service, with the issuance of the Conscription Law in January 1873.

Together with the major political, military and social reforms, the government adopted a policy of "civilization and enlightenment" which encouraged the stu-

3 The *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* was founded in 1872, the *Yomiuri* in 1874. *The Tokyo Asahi* began as *Jiyu no Tomoshibi* in 1884 and purchased by the *Osaka Asahi* in 1888. These newspapers are precursors of current major papers: *Mainichi, Yomiuri* and *Asahi*.

dy of Western civilization and culture. Particularly government officials took strong interest in newspapers as a tool for educating and enlightening Japanese commoners. As early as the 1870s a number of newspapers were published through the encouragement and support of the government. Even reading places were established in many parts of the country.

At the dawn of the modern Japanese press, there were two types of papers, the *oshimbun* and *koshimbun*. They were quite different both in style and in content. The o*shimbun*, which literally means "big paper", were elitist and political. The greater part of their pages was dedicated to editorials on political issues or news reports about governmental and foreign affairs. On the other hand, the *koshimbun*, which means "small paper", were rather vulgar and entertainment-oriented. Both the *oshimbun* and *koshimbun* were written in three scripts, *kanji* (Chinese character), *hiragana* and *katakana*, but the *koshimbun* included *furigana* written on the right side of the *kanji* content, which showed the less-educated people how to pronounce the *kanji*. From the late 1880s and throughout the 1890s, the *oshimbun* and *koshimbun* came to be close and ultimately had no differences.

In spite of those endeavors of the government and press companies to popularize newspapers, the number of subscribers was not so large at the beginning. According to Reiko Tsuchiya, in 1876, it could be estimated that 11 percent of the literate in Tokyo Prefecture consisted of readers of the *oshimbun* and 23 percent of *the koshimubun*.[4]

IMAGES OF THE BALKANS IN JAPANESE NEWSPAPERS IN THE 1870S AND THE 1880S

How did these newspapers in the early Meiji describe the contemporary situation in the Balkan Peninsula? In fact, Japan hardly had any diplomatic relations with the Balkans throughout the Meiji period, because the Balkan Peninsula still remained under the rule of the empires surrounding it. In 1829 the Serbs gained autonomy from the Ottoman Empire; however, they had no close relations with Japan throughout the nineteenth century. In 1878, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania were recognized as independent states, but these political changes hardly encouraged their contacts with Japan.[5] Nevertheless, the lack of contacts

4 Tsuchiya, Reiko, *The Origin of Popular Newspapers: A Study of Koshimbun in Meiji-Japan*. Kyoto: Sekaishisosha (土屋礼子『大衆紙の源流——明治期小新聞の研究』世界思想社), 2002, p. 56.

5 In March 1882, just after Serbia was recognized as an independent state by the treaty of Berlin in 1878, the first king of Serbia, Milan I. Obrenović, sent a letter informing the Emperor of Japan of the independence of Serbia and of his coronation. On September in the same year, the Emperor of Japan sent a note of congratulation to Milan I. Serbia regards this exchange of letters as the establishment of diplomatic relations between Serbia and Japan. See: The Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Japan,

did not mean a lack of interest in contemporary Balkan affairs. We can find in Meiji-Japan's newspapers more articles concerning the Balkan nations than on the Czechs, Slovaks or Hungarians under the rule of the Habsburg Empire which had established formal diplomatic relations with Japan in 1869.

The first newspaper which reported on the situation in the Balkan Peninsula may be the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*,[6] a pro-governmental prestigious newspaper circulated in Tokyo and its surrounding area. An article about the uprisings in Bosnia-Herzegovina appeared in the paper on October 3, 1875, about two months after the outbreak of the Bosnian uprising. After the outbreak of the Bulgarian uprising of April 1876, the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* carried follow-up reports almost every day from October to December 1876. From the second half of 1876 through 1877, we can find a lot of articles about these incidents. It is very interesting that "Eastern Europe" and "the East" were used as a synonym for "the Balkans" in these articles.[7]

Why did the Japanese journalists notice the Balkan situation? Just before the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War, the editor in chief, Kan'ichi Kubota wrote: "Japan, threatened by Western Powers, is quite similar to the Ottoman Empire, so Japan should carefully observe this Eastern Question."[8] According to Kubota, the Ottoman Empire resembled China, because both of them were "seriously ill patients." In his eyes, the Balkan nations, which often troubled the Ottomans by uprisings and revolutions, might be "a bother" to the Empire. From this point of view, he even argued in favor of maintaining the status quo in the Balkan Peninsula.[9] We should remember that early circulations were not very large in this period. As James Huffman pointed out, Japan's leading papers were minuscule in contrast to the New York and London papers, whose circulations ranged above 150 thousand.[10] In 1875 only *Yomiuri* had a circulation of more than ten thousand, so the images of the Balkans presented through the newspapers were shared only by a limited number of readers.

In many cases, Kubota saw the Balkan situation "from above", but an article on May 7, 1877 described the Serbs as brave soldiers fighting against the Turks

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Serbia and Japan: An Outline of the History of Serbo-Japanese Relations（『セルビアと日本——両国関係史概観』）, 2011, pp. 4-10. (Hereafter: The Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Japan, *Serbia and Japan*…)

6 The *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*, founded in 1872, had readers mainly among the well-educated people such as government and local officials, teachers and wealthy merchants. It is the precursor of one of the current major papers: the Mainichi.

7 Different from the present day, this "Eastern Europe" or "the East" did not include Polish, Czech, Slovak or Hungarian regions.

8 *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*, January 11, 1877.

9 Ibid.

10 Huffman, James L., *Creating a Public: People and Press in Meiji Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997, p. 64.

in order to support their neighbors, the Montenegrins, and compared them with the ex-Samurai's opposition against the modernization policy of the Meiji Government. It may reflect the contemporary situation in Japan that the new force had replaced the old one.

In the 1880s, as well as in the 1870s, the greater part of the articles described the situation in this region known as the Eastern Question from a similar viewpoint as the Western powers. In 1885, when Eastern Rumelia merged with Bulgaria despite the objections of the European powers, the Japanese press bitterly criticized it as a stupid move.[11] This was mainly because the Japanese journalists had no information sources of their own and had to depend on Western newspapers.[12] It should be added that since 1870 the British Reuters agency exclusively provided foreign news to newspapers all over Asia including Japan, because in 1859 it had signed agreements with the French Havas and the German Wolff, forming a cartel designating exclusive reporting zone. As a result, Japanese newspapers had to "buy" foreign news from Reuters. On the other hand, the Balkan Peninsula was incorporated in the exclusive reporting zone of Wolff. It was inevitable that Japanese newspapers came to view the situation in the Balkan Peninsula from the similar viewpoint of European Powers. In 1892 the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* began to send its own correspondents to Berlin and in 1904 to such major European cities as London, Paris, and Vienna, but never to the Balkan Peninsula.

RUSSO-JAPANESE RELATIONS AND JAPANESE VIEWS ON THE BALKANS

Another factor which influenced the Japanese perception of the Balkans was Russia and its relation with Japan. Russia is the only country which bordered on Japan, but the two countries had no official relations until the mid-19th century except sporadic and fortuitous contacts. In 1855 Japan established diplomatic relations with Russia by concluding a treaty of amity and commerce. However, the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875) which forced Japan to give up its claims to Sakhalin strongly disappointed the Japanese people.[13] Ironically, by the establishment of an official relationship, the Japanese came to regard their neighbor as the most dangerous enemy who threatened the independence of

11 For example see *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* on November 17, 1885.

12 The main information sources for the Japanese journalists in this period were several newspapers in English which were published in foreign settlements in Japan, namely the Japan Mail, the Japan Herald, the Japan Gazette, and so on. Their main information sources were European and American newspapers.

13 The treaty of 1855 had defined the border between Japan and Russia, but had left the status of Sakhalin open. This island had been inhabited both by Japanese and Russians.

their country and as the most powerful rival who could be an obstacle for Japan's expansion as a great power in East Asia.

This image of Russia turned Japanese eyes on the Balkans which were situated on the opposite side of the Russian Empire. During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, the Japanese Army sent an officer to the battlefield on the riverside of the Danube to observe the battle. Maybe this officer, Lieutenant Colonel Seigo Yamazawa, was one of the Japanese who visited the Balkan Peninsula in the early Meiji Period. The *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* on August 2, 1877, which reported this trip by Yamazawa, also referred to the fact that a secretary of the Japanese Embassy in Russia had gone to see the battle between the Serbs and the Ottomans in the previous year.[14]

In the last decade of the 19th century, Japan shifted from a marginal position to a dominant place in East Asia. Japan won colonial control over Taiwan by the victory in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), and also sought hegemony in Korea, which was recognized as an independent state by the Shimonoseki Treaty of 1895. As the Koreans turned to Russia for help, Russia came to rival Japan over Korea. Besides, the Russians challenged the Japanese position in Manchuria as well by seizing the Liaodong Peninsula in 1898. In 1900 both Japan and Russia sent troops to China to join the multinational force that put down the Boxer Rebellion. After the suppression of the rebellion, however, the Russians left behind thousands of troops in Manchuria. In 1902 Japan concluded an alliance with Britain to secure its special interests in Korea.

Under such circumstances, the Japanese press came to see the Balkans from a more geopolitical point of view. We can find many articles which compared the situation of the Korean Peninsula to that of the Balkan Peninsula. The leading article in the *Yomiuri* on February 12, 1894 says, "Britain and Russia are the two greatest world powers, having antagonized each other over Central Asia, the Balkan Peninsula and now over the Korean Peninsula, so it should not be put off as no concern of ours." Such a geopolitical viewpoint became dominant in the Japanese press in the first decade of the 20th century.[15]

It is worthy of note that the Japanese Army paid special attention to Montenegro in this period. In February 1890, Lieutenant Colonel Yasumasa Fukushima, who had been staying in Berlin as a military attaché of the Japanese Embassy, visited Kotor and Cetinje in Montenegro.[16] On May 2, 1894, one of the popular

14 A year later, the *Yomiuri* also carried an article that Yamazawa had reported to the Emperor about his participation in the Russo-Turkish War. See Yomiuri on 3 December 1878. The *Yomiuri* was one of the oldest koshimbun read mainly among wealthy merchants in the beginning, but gradually gained popularity among intellectuals such as teachers and students.

15 See "Situation in the Balkan Peninsula," *Asahi* on January 14, 1904.

16 Fukushima might also have visited Serbia in the same year. See: The Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Japan, *Serbia and Japan*..., p. 13.

newspapers, the *Niroku Shinpo*,[17] reported a lecture given by Fukushima on April 29 about this trip. Fukushima described Montenegro as "the strongest state in Europe" and presented the reasons why this small country could survive surrounded by the European powers. This article may have exerted an influence on the readers to some extent, because Fukushima was well-known all over the country for his seventeen-month, Berlin-to-Vladivostok horseback ride between February 1892 and June 1893. However, it should be said that such a favorable view was an exception.

IMAGES OF THE BALKANS IN POPULAR NEWSPAPERS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE MEIJI PERIOD: IN THE CASE OF THE *NIROKU SHINPO*

In the 1890s, newspapers became increasingly popular among the ordinary Japanese people. One of the reasons for this could have been the growing popular literacy in Meiji Japan. In the Tokugawa period, literacy had spread beyond the limited circles of the political and clerical elite to a broader population - partially because of the vast expansion of small local and private schools called *tenaraisho* or *terakoya*. Therefore, it is supposed that at the beginning of Meiji a good part of the Japanese had obtained basic literacy. Richard Rubinger showed the persistence of total illiteracy among male conscripts well into the twentieth century in Japan, based on Ministry of Education and Ministry of Army data.[18] He also pointed out that there were wide regional differences and significant gaps between males and females. Nevertheless, around 1904 the rate of illiteracy had decreased dramatically.[19] The rapidly increasing rate of the children who received schooling obviously contributed to it. Just after the promulgation of the National School System Law in 1873, the rate was very low, but 10 years later it exceeded 50% and in 1907 reached 98%.

As mentioned above, in the early Meiji period, the government often initiated the establishment of newspapers, but in the 1890s it was very characteristic that ambitious individuals would create a group of independent newspapers. These papers attempted to provide news for commoners at a low price. The *Niroku Shinpo*, established by Teisuke Akiyama in June 1893, was a so-called yellow paper and had its main readers among workers and the lower class of city inhabitants.

17 The *Niroku Shinpo* was one of the yellow papers established in 1893. It became the most popular paper in 1903, with a circulation of more than 140 thousand. See chapter 4.

18 Rubinger, Richard, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007, p. 194.

19 Ibid., p. 182.

Generally in the Japanese public in this period, Russia was considered as the most dangerous enemy or the most serious threat to Japan, although Russian culture had gained a high popularity among the Japanese people, particularly literary works by Lev Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev, Certainly, views on the Balkans in the *Niroku Shinpo* was similar to other newspapers to some extent. The Korean Peninsula was often compared to the Balkan Peninsula. A review of the contemporary international relations on January 5, 1902 described the Pan-Slavic movement by Russia in favorable terms to justify the annexation of Korea to Japan. In a review on January 8, Austria was also compared to "China in the West" and the Ottoman Empire including the Balkans called as "Korea in the West". But the article described the Austrian Emperor in a positive sense and mentioned that the vast multi-ethnic empire could survive thanks to the Emperor Franz Joseph.

The *Niroku Shinpo,* like many other newspapers, also depended mainly on news and reports provided by Western newspapers and news agencies. What distinguished it from other papers was its attitude toward Russia. Most of other newspapers asserted the conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance Treaty in 1902, but as Yoshitaka Katayama points out, the Niroku Shinpo criticized the alliance against Russia and even advocated adopting a pro-Russian policy.[20] From 1902 through 1903 Balkan affairs were often featured on leading articles in this newspaper. The leading article on 27 November 1902 pointed out the reason why Japan should not antagonize Russia. Namely, Russia was devoted to the Macedonian Question and more interested in the Near East[21] than the Far East.

It may be noteworthy that the *Niroku Shinpo* clearly distinguished the Russian state from the Russian people. In other words, it strongly criticized the Czar and czarism, but sympathized with the Russian commoners. In addition, it paid special attention to such non-Russian nationalities as the Poles, the Finns, the Jews, and their revolutionary movement against the Empire. Particularly, during the Russo-Japanese War, the *Niroku Shinpo* very often reported on the situation in Poland at this point. We can find the similar logic in the leading article on January 6, 1903; It would be favorable that Balkan nations struggled against the Ottoman Empire for independence, because disturbances in the Balkan Peninsula meant peace in the Far East.

Such an editorial policy of the *Niroku Shinpo* was considered as too much pro-Russian and used as a pretense to drive Akiyama out of public life, because Akiyama served as a member of the Diet and bitterly criticized the government

20 Katayama, Yoshitaka, *The Russo-Japanese War and Newspapers: How They Reported on Japan in the World.* Tokyo: Kodansha（片山慶隆『日露戦争と新聞―「世界の中の日本」をどう論じたか』講談社）, pp. 34-36.

21 In this article "the Near East" was in the same meaning as "the Balkans".

policy. In 1903, just before the Russo-Japanese War, he was even suspected of being a Russian spy. This spy affair had a very bad influence on his newspaper. Before the affair, the *Niroku Shinpo* had had a circulation of more than 140 thousand, which was the largest circulation of any of the daily newspapers in that year, but after that, its circulation went down to 60 thousand and it could never recover all its lost readership again.

CONCLUSION

In the Meiji period, Japan hardly had any diplomatic relations with the Balkan countries. It was the very limited number of people who visited there. For the ordinary Japanese people, the Balkan Peninsula was just an imagined world.

Modern Japanese newspapers, which had been established in the middle of the 19th century, reported on the contemporary situation in the Balkan Peninsula to the Japanese public throughout the Meiji period. We can find surprisingly large number of articles about this "imagined world". However, this new media had a serious problem; Japanese newspapers had no information sources of their own and had to depend on Western newspapers or news agencies, especially the British Reuters. In 1890s Japanese newspaper companies began to send its own correspondents to such major European cities as London, Paris, Berlin or Vienna, but never to the Balkan Peninsula.

This fact gave special features to Japanese views on the Balkans. Articles from Meiji Japan's newspapers often described the Balkans in negative terms. This is mainly because Japanese journalists came to see the Balkans through the eyes of Europeans. Japan's relations with its neighboring countries, especially with Russia, also deeply affected Japanese perception on the Balkans. The empire was the biggest object of interest for Japan throughout the Meiji period. This image of Russia turned Japanese eyes on the Balkans which were situated on the opposite side of the Russian Empire. The Korean Peninsula was often compared with the Balkan Peninsula. Such viewpoints which had deeply taken root among the Japanese people in the Meiji period still remain today.