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Images of the Balkans in the Japanese Media of the Meiji Period

Abstract: 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. This new media played a very important role on that point, because foreign news became readily available to the Japanese people who had had no means under a seclusion policy by the Tokugawa rulers for more than two hundred years. Articles from this period often described the Balkans in negative terms. This is mainly because they had no information sources of their own and had to depend on Western newspapers or news agencies. Japanese readers came to see the Balkans with the eyes of Europeans.

Key words: Meiji period, Japanese newspapers, Balkan Peninsula, Western Powers, Eastern Question

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to talk about images of the Balkans through several Japanese newspapers published in the Meiji period (1868–1912), when Japan was transformed into a modern nation-state.

In November 1867, Yoshinobu, the last shogun from the Tokugawa family,¹ announced his intention to resign from his position. At the beginning of the following year the restoration of power to the Imperial Court was formally proclaimed and in October Mutsuhito succeeded to the throne as the Emperor Meiji. Following this so-called Meiji Restoration, the new government took steps to abolish the decentralized structure of the Tokugawa polity and construct a centrally controlled state. Within

¹ 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.

a couple of months a national Office of Education was created. In September 1871, the national school system law was promulgated. At the beginning of 1873, the government took steps to conscript young men for military service, with the issuance of the Conscription Law. An Office of Education was established and within a year the national school system law was promulgated.

Newspapers were just newborn media then, but could be much more influential than today with Japanese views on other countries, because the other news-oriented media did not exist. Radio broadcasts started after World War I and TV only after World War II. Main sources of this article are three daily newspapers which circulated around Tokyo, the capital of Japan since 1868: *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*, *Yomiuri* and *Tokyo Asahi*.²

1. Emergence of Modern Newspaper in Japan and Images of the Balkans

It could be said that the history of modern newspapers in Japan had begun in the 1850s, in the late Tokugawa period.

Under Tokugawa rule, Japan had few contacts with foreign countries because of its national seclusion policy called *sakoku* for over two hundred years from the 17th century to the middle of the 19th. The Tokugawa Shogunate maintained quite limited contacts with the neighboring countries of China, Korea, and the Kingdom of Ryukyu (today's Okinawa), but pursued a more exclusionary policy with the European countries which persisted with Christian missionary activities in Japan.³ Among Europeans only the Dutch were allowed to remain in Japan, because they were content to focus only on trade.

Japan had practically no contacts with the Balkans in this period. By the middle of the 16th century, the entire Balkan Peninsula had come under control of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman rule began to decline and they ceded the northern Balkans by the late 17th century, but other European powers, especially the Austrian Habsburgs, added these territories to their states.

Under these circumstances, the Tokugawa government monopolized the communications network, especially in the field of Western knowledge. They requested reports on foreign affairs from the Dutch who took up residence on a tiny landfill island called *Dejima* in Nagasaki harbor. The annual reports brought by the Dutch,

² *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* was founded in 1872, *Yomiuri* in 1874. *Tokyo Asahi* began as *Jiyu no Tomoshihi* in 1884 and purchased by *Osaka Asahi* in 1888. They were precursors of current major papers: *Mainichi*, *Yomiuri* and *Asahi*.

³ Early in 1613, the Tokugawa strictly prohibited the teaching and practice of Christianity all over the country as a heretical faith destructive to the Japanese social order.

Oranda fusetsugaki, became a valuable source of information for the Tokugawa rulers to know what was happening overseas.

A turning point came in the 1850s. The Western powers, having completed the industrial revolution and trying to find markets for their products, urged Japan to open the country. Faced with overwhelming Western military force, the Tokugawa rulers finally entered into negotiations and opened several ports.⁴

The new atmosphere prompted the Bakufu to revise its own policies regarding foreign news. In 1857, soon after the conclusion of a commercial treaty with Japan, the Dutch stopped sending their regular reports from Nagasaki and offered instead to send a Dutch newspaper, the *Javasche Courant*, which had been published in the Dutch colony of Batavia (present day Jakarta) as the organ of the local government. In 1855, Bakufu officials had reinforced their activities of gathering and translating foreign news into Japanese by reorganizing their translation bureau established in 1811.

The *Kanban Batabia Shimbun* (the governmental newspaper of Batavia) in 23 volumes might be the first modern newspaper in the Japanese language that carried news regarding the Balkans to the Japanese public. It was a translation of selected articles of the *Javasche Courant* published between August and November 1861 and translated by the *Bansho Shirabesho*, or the Office for Studying Barbarian Writings⁵, in January and February the next year. Although the publications lasted only two months, the series had great importance for the Japanese public, because it was the first newspaper full of foreign news for public consumption in Japan. It means that the Japanese could know about contemporary Balkan affairs at the dawn of modern Japanese newspapers.

We can find several articles which reported insurrections in Herzegovina (vol.12) and Montenegro (vols.16, 21, 23) against the local Turkish oppressors and attempts to repress them by Ottoman military force under the command of General Omar Pasha.⁶ Another article of the Vol. 12 referred to such regions as Croatia-Slavonia and Transylvania under Hungarian rule and described how brutally the inhabitants were oppressed.⁷ It would be quite difficult, however, for Japanese readers to imagine the Balkans, not only because actual articles about them were few, but also because the

⁴ Japan established diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States, Holland, Russia and France by concluding treaties of amity and commerce in 1858. For example see: Mitani, Hiroshi, translated by David Noble, *Escape from Impasse: The Decision to Open Japan*, International House of Japan, 2006.

⁵ In 1856, the Bakufu renamed again their translation bureau from *Yogakujo* to *Bansho shirabesho*.

⁶ Meiji Bunka Kenkyukai ed., *Meiji bunka zenshu* (Collected works on Meiji culture), reprinted edition, Nihonhyoronsha, Volume 18, *Shimbun* (Newspapers), 1992, crp. 120,131,144,147,151–152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, crp.119.

Balkan affairs were reported as domestic news of their rulers: Turkey, Austria and Russia. We can hardly see the term „the Balkans“.

The Bakufu translators continued to work on the *Javasche Courant* and in March and September of 1862 published its partial translation as the *Kanban Kaigai Shimbun* (the governmental newspaper on foreign affairs). The Vol.5, a translation of selected articles of the original Dutch paper dated January 15, reported as Russian affairs that in 1861–1862 quite a few Crimean Tatars moved from their homeland to the Ottoman Empire and, to take their place, a large number of people were brought in from Bulgaria, Bessarabia, Moldavia and Wallachia.⁸

It should be added that the *Kanban Gyokuseki Shirin* published around 1863 also contained a passing reference to the Balkans. It was a translation of selected articles from the Dutch magazine *the Hollandische Magazien*. The partial translation of the original magazine no.178, which had been published in 1839, introduced „a riot in Serbia in 1804“ and „the Greek attempt to gain independence in 1821“.⁹ It was probably the first Japanese publication which referred to Serbia.

2. Newspapers in the Early Meiji Period and Their Readers

In order to be clear to what extent images of the Balkans were shared by the contemporary Japanese, it might be necessary to consider who read newspapers in Meiji-Japan.

Officials of the Meiji government took strong interest in newspapers as a tool for enlightening Japanese commoners. In 1870, Japan actually had no single daily newspaper, but sponsored and supported by the authorities, newspapers had begun to grow rapidly. By 1877 Japan had 225 newspapers and a decade later, as many as 470 papers were published.¹⁰ However, early circulations were not very large. 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.¹¹ In 1875 only *Yomiuri* had more than ten thousand circulation. It should be said that newspapers in the early Meiji Period had very limited numbers of readers.

This might be related with popular literacy in Japan. The written language in modern Japan was a version of classical Chinese. It was not Chinese itself, but was

⁸ Ibid., crp.185–186.

⁹ Meiji Bunka Kenkyukai ed., *Meiji bunka zenshu*, reprinted edition, Volume 17, *Gaikokubunka* (Foreign Culture), 1992.

¹⁰ Kawabe, Kisaburo, *The Press and Politics in Japan: A Study of the Relation between the Political Development of Modern Japan*, The University of Chicago Press, reprinted edition, crp. 47, 80.

¹¹ Huffman, James L., *Creating a Public: People and Press in Meiji Japan*, University of Hawai'i Press 1997, crp. 64.

changed to enable contemporary Japanese to understand it. Classical Chinese was very difficult to learn and demanded a long time to master, so only the well-educated people from the upper classes could learn it. But adding to the Chinese characters, the Japanese had developed phonetic scripts, *hiragana* and *katakana*. The *kana* script was easy to learn and became a big aid for the not-well-educated people to achieve basic literacy. In the Tokugawa period, literacy spread beyond the limited circles of the political and clerical elite to a broader population mainly because of the vast expansion of small local and private schools called *terakoya* or *tenraisho*.¹² These schools provided Japanese commoners with basic literacy, consisting of learning to write one's own name, the *kana* script and some Chinese characters. As Charles Rubinger points out, when the modern Meiji state imposed a compulsory education system on the populace in 1872, the Japanese were differentially prepared by region, by gender, and by occupation to take advantage of it.¹³

At the dawn of the modern Japanese press, there were two types of papers, *oshimbun* and *koshimbun*. They were quite different from each other both in style and in content. *Oshimbun*, which literally means „big paper“, was elitist and political. It gave greater part of the pages to editorials on political issues or news reports about governmental and foreign affairs. On the other hand, *koshimbun*, which means „small paper“, was rather vulgar and entertainment-oriented. Both the *oshimbun* and *koshimbun* were written in three scripts, but the *koshimbun* included *furigana* written on the right side of Chinese characters to show how to pronounce them. In Tokyo, the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* was one of the oldest prestige papers and had readers mainly among the well-educated people such as government and local officials, teachers and wealthy merchants. On the other hand, the *Yomiuri* was a *koshimbun* read mainly among wealthy merchants in the beginning, but gradually gained readers among intellectuals such as teachers and students. According to Reiko Tsuchiya, in 1876, it could be estimated that 11 percent of the literates in Tokyo Prefecture consisted of readers of *oshimbun* and 23 percent of *koshimubun*.¹⁴

From the late 1880s through the 1890s, the gap between the *oshimbun* and *koshimbun* was narrowed, and new popular papers were created.

¹² Rubinger, Richard, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan*, University of Hawai'i Press, стр. 163. (у даљем тексту: Rubinger, Richard, *Popular Literacy...*)

¹³ Rubinger, Richard, *Popular Literacy...*, стр. 4.

¹⁴ Tsuchiya, Reiko, *Taisyushi no genryu: Meijiki koshimbun no kenkyu* (The Origin of Popular Newspapers: A Study of Koshimbun in Meiji-Japan), Sekaishisoshu 2002, стр. 56.

3. Images of the Balkans in Japanese Newspapers in the First Half of the Meiji Period

Throughout the Meiji period, the Balkans hardly had any diplomatic relations with Japan, because the Balkan Peninsula still remained under the rule of the empires surrounding them. 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 the political changes hardly encouraged their contacts with Japan.¹⁵

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

The first article about the uprisings in Bosnia-Herzegovina appeared in *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* on 3 October 1875, about two months after the outbreak of the Bosnian uprising. After the outbreak of the Bulgarian uprising of April 1876, *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 numerous articles about these incidents. Why were the Japanese journalists so interested in 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.“¹⁶ According to Kubota, the Ottoman Empire resembled China, because both of them were „seriously ill patients.“ He seemed to regard Japan as an empire. In his eyes, Balkan nations, which often troubled the Ottomans by uprisings and revolutions, might be „a bother“ to the Empire. From this point of view, he asserted even to maintain the status quo in the Balkan Peninsula.¹⁷ On the other hand, an article on 7 May 1877 described the Serbs as brave soldiers fighting against the Turks in order to support their neighbors, the Montenegrins, and compared with the ex-Samurai's opposition against the modernization policy of the Meiji Government. It might be said that in the 1870s Japanese views on the Balkans had dual characteristics.

¹⁵ On 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 Obrenovic, sent a letter which informed the independence of Serbia and the coronation of his own. On September in the same year, the Emperor of Japan sent a message 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 Republic of Serbia in Japan, *Serubia to Nihon. Ryokoku kankeishi gaikan (Serbia and Japan: An Outline of History of Serbo-Japanese Relations)*, 2011, стр. 4–10.

¹⁶ *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*, January 11, 1877.

¹⁷ *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*, January 11, 1877.

In the 1880s as well as in the 1870s, the most part of the articles concerning the Balkans were written from a viewpoint of the Eastern Question, namely, from the similar point of view as Western powers. This is because their main source of information was newspapers in English which were published for foreign residents in Japan i.e., the Japan Mail, the Japan Herald, the Japan Gazette, and so on.¹⁸ These papers were based on European or American newspapers. It would be noteworthy that „Eastern Europe“ and „the East“ were used as almost a synonym for „the Balkans“. In 1885, when Eastern Rumelia merged with Bulgaria despite the objections of the Europeans, the Japanese press bitterly criticized it as a stupid trial.¹⁹

4. Russo-Japanese Relations and Japanese Views on the Balkans

Russia is the only country which bordered on Japan, yet 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. But the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875) which forced Japan to give up its claims to Sakhalin strongly disappointed the Japanese people.²⁰ 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 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 Shingo Yamazawa, was one of the Japanese who visited the Balkan Peninsula in the early Meiji Period. *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* on 2 August 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.²¹

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 vic-

¹⁸ It should be added that since 1870 Reuters exclusively provided foreign news to newspapers all over Asia including Japan. In 1892 *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* began to send its own correspondents to Berlin, and in 1904 to major cities in Europe such as London, Paris, Vienna, but never to cities of the Balkan Peninsula.

¹⁹ For example see *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* on 17 November 1885.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ A year later, *Yomiuri* also carried an article that Yamazawa reported to the Emperor about his participation to the Russo-Turkish War. See *Yomiuri* on December 3, 1878.

tory 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 with Britain an alliance 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 12 February 1894 says, „Britain and Russia are the two greatest world powers, having been antagonizing 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 was dominant in the Japanese press in the first decade of the 20th century as well.²²

It would be noteworthy 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.²³ On May 2, 1894, one of the popular newspapers, *Niroku Shinpo*,²⁴ 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 could be influential 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.

Conclusion

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. Indeed, this new media played a very important role on that point, because foreign news became readily available to the

²² See „Situation in the Balkan Peninsula“, *Asahi* on January 14, 1904.

²³ Fukushima might also visit Serbia in the same year. See The Embassy of Republic of Serbia in Japan, op.cit., стр.13.

²⁴ *Niroku Shinpo* was one of yellow papers established in 1893. It became the most popular paper in 1903, having more than 140 thousand of circulation.

Japanese people who had had no means under a seclusion policy by the Tokugawa rulers for more than two hundred years.

Governmental officials and journalists took a strong interest in Balkan affairs comparing them with Japan's relations with its neighboring countries, especially with Russia and China, or Japan's changing international position. However, articles from Meiji Japan's newspapers often described the Balkans in negative terms. This is mainly because they had no information sources of their own and had to depend on Western newspapers or news agencies. Japanese readers came to see the Balkans with the eyes of Europeans.

Near the end of the Meiji period, Japanese newspapers came to call the Balkans as „the Near East“.²⁵ It might be related with two facts. First, from the end of the 1880s and through the 1890s, Japan achieved its main goals to transform the country into a modern nation-state, namely, the establishment of the constitution and the amendment of unequal treaties with the Western Powers. Second, Japan's international position was dramatically changed. From the end of the 19th century through the beginning of the 20th, Japan won two international wars with its rivals in East Asia, China and Russia. As one of the well-known scholars Yukichi Fukuzawa wrote in his article „Cast off Asia“, Japan stopped seeing itself as an „Asian“ state. In the eye of Japan, which assumed imperial powers, the Balkans were no longer „Europe“.

²⁵ See „The Great Powers and the Near East“ in *Asahi* on March 3, 1905, „Peace in the Near East“ in *Yomiuri* on October 9, 1908, „The Near East and the Far East“ in *Yomiuri* on October 13.

Резиме

Др Рико Шиба

Представа Балкана у јапанским медијима у Меиђи периоду

Чланак говори о слици Балкана која је била креирана у јапанској штампи у 19. веку за време Мејџи периода током којег је Јапан био трансформисан у модерну националну државу (1868–1912). Штампа је, као нови медиј који се половином 19. века појавио у Јапану, тада имала далеко већи утицај него данас, па је одиграла и значајну улогу у креирању слике о Балкану. Мада Јапан током 19. века није имао директан контакт са Балканом, јапански новинари и званичници су били заинтересовани за балканску политику поредећи је са јапанским односима са суседним земљама – Русијом и Кином. Простор Балкана је у јапанској штампи био опсервиран у контексту Источног питања а представа о Балканцима је обично била негативна што је било условљено информацијама које су добијали из западне штампе и новинских агенција, па су Јапанци Балканце видели очима Европљана. Крајем Меиџи периода Балкан је био описан као „Блиски Исток“. Са променом положаја Јапана у међународној политици почетком 20. века, када је та држава дошла у сукоб са Русијом и Кином, у очима Јапана, који је постајао империјална сила, Балканци више нису били „Европљани“.