

MEIJI WOODBLOCK PRINTS  
BY UTAGAWA KOKUNIMASA  
in the collection of the National Maritime  
Museum in Gdańsk

The Western world discovered the Japanese art of woodblock printing at the end of the 19th century. Europeans were fascinated by melancholic views of Mount Fuji or expressive and immensely decorative depictions of kabuki actors and geishas from the Edo period. Only in recent decades did prints from the Meiji era win the recognition and appreciation of researchers as well as the general public.

The focus of this article is on chosen aspects of the iconography of a group of woodblock prints by Utagawa Kokunimasa from the Russo-Japanese War 1904–1905 in the collection of the National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk (NMM).

The art of woodblock printing in Japan has a long tradition. Initially, it served to create images of Buddhist deities. The dynamic development of woodblock printing as an independent art form took place during the Edo period (1603–1868), and peaked in the 18th century. Artists developed and refined the technology used to produce multi-coloured prints. Additional decorative techniques were also used – for instance, in order to obtain deep black and a glossy lacquer effect, or to give coloured prints an iridescent sheen with the help of mica crumbs. These intricate solutions, as well as the beauty of the prints themselves, made them hugely popular among buyers. They were called *ukiyo-e* or “pictures of the flowing world”. The word *ukiyo* has a Buddhist origin and refers to the transience of life in this world. In the Edo period the term was used to describe hedonistic pleasures associated

with the theatre or the company of courtesans. Portraits of popular kabuki actors or “stars” of the Yoshiwara district were created; travel attractions and picturesque landscapes were documented. These woodblock prints also had a social and political context. Under the shoguns, all areas of life were controlled. Throughout the 18th century during the Kyōhō (1716–36) and Kansei (1789–1801) eras, specific provisions were made to limit the dissemination of undesired content, such as unorthodox philosophies, any mention of high ranking families, especially the Tokugawa family, satirical pictures mocking the contemporary government using historical settings, reporting current events. Before a print could be published, its drawing had to be approved by a censor, examining the conformity of its content and form to the current directions of government policy and the Confucian social order. Furthermore, the form of prints was subject to restrictions – their excessive ostentation was criticized as fuelling buyers’ love for luxury.<sup>1)</sup> Fighting these constraints, artists invented new ways of transmitting the intended content using allegories or symbols.

The Meiji era brought a gradual decline for *ukiyo-e* prints.<sup>2)</sup> By the end of the 19th century they were no longer objects of quiet contemplation. In order to maintain some sort of market standing, print-makers had to shift the focus of their work. Prints became a tool for the journalism of a nation that was reinventing itself and looking for imagery capable of reflecting that. Nostalgia for the distant feudal past and thrills derived from admiring Yoshiwara beauties were not emotions that Meiji governments wished to be spread among the public, whereas the latter developed an interest in new subject matter. Censorial constraints were gradually loosened in the last quarter of the 19th century. Contrary to previous regulations, reporting current events became an important genre – the Promulgation of the Constitution, the Emperor’s state visits, the meetings of statesmen and diplomats were all illustrated and widely distributed. A part of this national metamorphosis was the creation of *sensō-e*, propagandistic prints relating current military conflicts to the public.<sup>3)</sup> They were not intended as objects of appreciation for the sake of their intrinsic beauty. Their main purpose was to convey information and – even

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<sup>1)</sup> King, Iwakiri (2007: 25).

<sup>2)</sup> The influx of cheap synthetic dyes was quoted as one of the reasons. However some researchers question that argument. See: Cesaratto, Luo, Smith II, Leona (2018) – <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-018-0187-0>, access: 2019.02.10.

<sup>3)</sup> King, Iwakiri (2007: 381).

more importantly – evoke emotions related to depicted events. The most prolific production took place during the Sino-Japanese war – it is estimated that around 3000 prints were produced<sup>4)</sup> – but it was not the first conflict that *sensō-e* prints described.<sup>5)</sup>

At the dawn of the Meiji era, fascination with everything Western – from philosophy, to military, to costumes – consumed the minds of the Japanese. Old mores, garments and traditions were deemed backward and were to be eliminated from public life.<sup>6)</sup> After a while, however, the inevitable reaction came. The main force behind it were the samurais. The Meiji reforms stripped them of their position, dignity and sources of income. In 1873, a Western-style conscription army replaced the samurai class as the defenders of the Empire. The proverbial last straw was the 1876 ban on carrying swords by anyone except military and police officers on duty. The Satsuma rebellion that broke out the next year was the last uprising of the samurai class in defence of the social and political position that was being taken away from them. It was also the first big test of the new Japanese army's efficiency, which it passed by completely defeating the rebellious forces. Although they suffered a total defeat, the samurais – representing not only feudal order and military strategy but also, or primarily, the traditional values of honour, personal courage and self-sacrifice – were surrounded by such great social sympathy and admiration that their leader Saigō Takamori was posthumously rehabilitated.

In the following decades, military confrontations were an important component of creating the new, modern self-perception of the Japanese society. Firstly, there was the Sino-Japanese war fought in the years 1894–1895 over the control of Korea,<sup>7)</sup> which China considered as a tributary. The main point of contention was Port Arthur – the naval base that ensured control over

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<sup>4)</sup> Keene (1983: 7).

<sup>5)</sup> It has been argued by some researchers that *sensō-e* is a departure from the tradition of *musha-e* – depictions of heroes of the olden days. Some maintain, however, that in certain respects it continues that tradition. The figure of a hero is the strong point in common despite many differences; most notably, *musha-e* represent the distant past and nostalgia for it, whereas *sensō-e* aspire to relating current events and glorifying modernization. *Musha-e* also deal with domestic wars and, therefore, hardly ever present the Japanese fighting foreigners while *sensō-e* show fights against foreign enemies. See: King, Iwakiri (2007: 25).

<sup>6)</sup> Dower (2008) – <http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>, access: 12.01.2019, part 2, pp. 1–8.

<sup>7)</sup> Occasionally referred to as “a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan”.

the Yellow Sea. The wider goal was Japan's bid for leadership against what was seen as Western intrusion in Asia.<sup>8)</sup> A small island country fighting the ancient giant seemed to be an impossible feat.<sup>9)</sup> However, the new, Western-style Japanese army proved to be as efficient against this formidable enemy as it had been against the Satsuma rebellion. Japan won the war but was robbed of the fruits of victory by Russia, France and Germany who forced it to give up the Liaodong Peninsula with Port Arthur – act that was seen in Japan as humiliation and grave injustice considering the amount of effort and sacrifices that Japan had to make in order to win the war.<sup>10)</sup>

The conflict was widely illustrated in woodblock prints. They presented the war as a clash between backward, conservative China and modern, resilient Japan. That dichotomy was reinforced in the moral dimension: the Chinese were represented as weak, cowardly, often confused, whereas the Japanese as brave, honourable and chivalrous and their army as strong and disciplined.

Ten years later the enemy was not another Asian country but one of the leading world powers – Russia. Once again, the disproportion of forces seemed enormous and yet the apparently weaker Japan emerged from the war victorious. And once again in the majority of *sensō-e* prints, opposition between the belligerents was put into moral categories – the Japanese were valiant and noble, the Russians fearful, weak and deceitful.

It ought to be pointed out that, compared to the Sino-Japanese war, the popularity of woodblock prints was significantly diminished. Some authors consider the prints of that period the swan song of traditional woodblock printing. The competition of lithographic prints and photography was undoubtedly a crucial factor. They were cheaper to mass produce. They were also faster and, therefore, better suited for the purpose of providing the latest news from the battlefield.

Woodblock print creators were not war correspondents – they relied on press information and photographs for their facts; therefore, the prints cannot be treated as a first-hand source of information about the war.<sup>11)</sup> On the other hand, they did provide images of war that appealed to the emotions; they evoked feelings of national pride and loyalty to the Emperor, they moved

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<sup>8)</sup> Dower (2008) – <http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>, access: 12.01.2019, part 3, pp. 2–4.

<sup>9)</sup> Meech-Pekarik (1986: 200).

<sup>10)</sup> Koda (2005: 15) – <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol58/iss2/3>, access 2019.02.10.

<sup>11)</sup> King, Iwakiri (2007: 25); Flash (2017).

viewers by showing examples of bravery and self-sacrifice, and also strived to boost morale. These characteristics make them a source of information about the way in which the new Japanese society saw – or wanted to see – its army in comparison with the enemy, in this case – the Russians. This aspect of *sensō-e* prints is the focus of this study and the examples in question are by one particular author – Utagawa Kokunimasa.

In 2004 NMM acquired a private collection of *sensō-e* prints. The collection was assembled by Peter von Busch from the Swedish Naval Museum in Karlskrona, an enthusiast of marine subjects, a long-time friend of the Museum in Gdańsk, as well as many of its employees personally. He had created the collection over the period of many years with no preconceived theoretical ideas, but merely as a result of the personal preferences and interests of its creator. It consists of 32 woodblock prints, mostly illustrating the Russo-Japanese war.<sup>12)</sup> Apart from 11 works by Utagawa Kokunimasa it contains prints by Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847–1915), Watanabe Nobukazu (1872–1944) and others.

*Sensō-e* prints were produced with the use of the same technology as all *ukiyo-e* prints. The blocks used for printing were usually carved in cherry wood. In order to obtain a multi-colour print, a separate block was carved for each colour. Traditionally, the paper format called *ōban* was used, with approximate dimensions of 39 x 26 cm. If necessary, several sheets of this size were joined together horizontally or, less frequently, vertically. The prints that are discussed here are triptychs, with the exception of one that is made up of six panels.<sup>13)</sup>

The author, Utagawa Kokunimasa (1874–1944) was the eldest son and student of Utagawa Kunimasa IV (1848–1920).<sup>14)</sup> As is obvious from their names, both were members of the Utagawa school that dominated Japanese woodblock printing for over two centuries. The name “Kokunimasa” can be translated as “Kunimasa Junior”. According to the common Japanese practice, Kokunimasa used several *gō* or “artistic names”, which were: Baidō, Ryūa and Ryūkei. He also used several seals. One of them was a plum blossom. Another was a frog,

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<sup>12)</sup> The collection includes one print from the Sino-Japanese war and one from the Satsuma rebellion.

<sup>13)</sup> See below, CMM/SM/3572.

<sup>14)</sup> Born as Takenouchi Hidehisa, he also used following names: Kunisada III, Kōchōrō, Baidō Hōsai. Information based on: Wanczura (2013–2018), <https://www.artelino.com/articles/kokunimasa-utagawa.asp> – access: 2019.01.23.

and the one which appears in majority of prints discussed below is named “Edokko” – which means “child of Edo”, i.e. someone born and raised in Edo or, given Kokunimasa’s date of birth, Tokyo. Kokunimasa’s earliest work, “Illustration of the Ceremony for the Promulgation of the Constitution of Great Japan”, comes from 1889.<sup>15)</sup> He chose his subjects according to current market demand. He made portraits of actors, prints with motifs from theatre plays, genre scenes from the life of upper class families, caricatures and war prints from the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. He is known for his use of colour, varying from bright, to pale, to dark, and almost black in some cases.

Kokunimasa’s prints from the NMM collection all depict events from the Russo-Japanese war. A significant number of military operations during that war were aimed at securing Japanese control over Port Arthur. As mentioned above, Japan captured Port Arthur as a result of the war with China in 1894–1895, but under pressure from Russia, France and Germany it had to give it up. This was a major blow to the national pride of the Japanese, who felt they had bought the victory with their blood. Strong resentment towards Russia developed in the country.<sup>16)</sup> The Russo-Japanese war began on 8 February 1904, with a surprise Japanese torpedo attack on the Russian naval squadron at Port Arthur. Two Russian battleships, the “Tsarevich” and the “Retvizan”, and the cruiser “Pallada” were hit. The ensuing conflict involved combat on land and sea. The Japanese dispatched an army to Korea and overran the country. The Japanese Third Army under general Nogi Maresuke laid siege to Port Arthur. In October, the Russian Baltic Fleet set sail on a journey half way round the globe to the rescue of the besieged base, but Port Arthur surrendered on 2 January 1905, before it could arrive. The Baltic Fleet reached the China Sea in May, and it ran into admiral Togo, who was waiting for it in the Tsushima Straits and destroyed it. The peace treaty negotiated with the participation of the US was signed on 5 September 1905. According to its stipulations, Japan secured possession of Port Arthur, southern Manchuria and southern Sakhalin.

In the light of the above, it is hardly surprising that among the discussed objects there is a number of prints depicting naval battles at the Port Arthur

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<sup>15)</sup> On the website of the Lavenberg Collection of Japanese Prints the print in question is catalogued under the number IHL Cat.#1104. See: Lavenberg – [www.myjapanesehanga.com](http://www.myjapanesehanga.com), access: 2019.01.22.

<sup>16)</sup> Koda (2005: 16) – <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol58/iss2/3>, access 2019.02.10.

roadstead. The first one is dated 8–9 February 1904<sup>17)</sup> and consists of six panels (fig. 1). It depicts a wide panorama of the open sea at night with battleships wreathed in smoke and blazing with fire visible in the distance, along the horizon. The copy belonging to the National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk bears descriptions both in English and in Japanese. The English description is worded as follows: “The great victory of the Japanese navy in Port Arthur engagement”. The Japanese one is longer and more emotional: “Hurray! A great victory for the Imperial fleet in the naval encounter between the Japanese and Russians at the Lushun straits”.

Since the print in question is composed of six panels, it seems worthwhile to compare it to the similar six-panel depiction of a naval battle from the Sino-Japanese war by the same author in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The print illustrates the battle of Takushan.<sup>18)</sup> It also depicts a wide panorama of the open sea with battle ships in smoke along the horizon, but there are some significant differences. Firstly, in this case the events depicted took place during the day. Secondly, in the foreground there is a small group of shipwrecked sailors fighting for their lives and grasping at the masts of a sunken ship.

The print from 1904, when compared to the one from the Sino-Japanese war, appears to be more coherent in terms of overall artistic intent, and uses different means to achieve an expressive result. The Boston print is full of dramatic details, such as a burning ship on the far left and shipwrecked sailors in the two central panels. Each of the panels is equally busy with equally detailed representations. This echoes the old tradition of woodblock print triptychs that were supposed to be composed in such a way that each panel could be read and admired separately. The 1904 print is more concise, more concerned with its overall pictorial effect rather than specific details. There are still numerous clouds of vermilion and black smoke belching from burning ships. There are round flashes of explosions against the greyish black sky placed almost symmetrically to the sides of the composition. However, the author no longer attempts to fill every one of 6 panels evenly with decorative sea-waves as a backdrop to practically separate representations of burning

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<sup>17)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, “The Great Victory of the Japanese Navy in Port Arthur Engagement”, Feb. 8–9, 1904, signed: “Ryūa”, seal: “Edokko”, inv. no: CMM/SM/3572.

<sup>18)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, “Sino-Japanese Naval Battles: Illustration of the Great Victory of the Imperial Navy at the Great Pitched Battle off Takushan”, Oct. 1894, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, inv. no: 2000.380.10a-f.

ships. Instead he treats the composition as a whole and differentiates the appearance of the sea in order to reinforce the dramatic effect of the entire composition. Its surface varies from completely calm and smooth along the borders of the composition to areas of undulating waves. Expressiveness is also achieved by strong contrasts between areas of light and darkness with a simultaneous reduction in the number of colours used. The waves are underlined with black lines and topped with white fringes of foam. The sky, black towards the edges of the composition, lightens to grey around the burning ships and turns almost white in the distance along the horizon. This palette is rounded up by tones of vermilion in the fires. The overall effect is that of the depiction of an event of epic proportions.

Within a week from 8 February, several attacks against the Russians had been launched by the Japanese navy. Another sea battle illustration from the collection described here is dated 13 February. It is entitled: "Naval Engagement outside Port Arthur during the 1904 Russo-Japan War".<sup>19)</sup> It is a triptych depicting a naval battle scene at night during heavy rain and a storm (fig. 2). The composition is based on the juxtaposition of the diagonal line descending from upper left to lower right and the line of horizon risen to 2/3 of the height of the composition. The whole image is executed solely with shades of grey, black and white with vermilion in the flash of the explosion in the background. The diagonal line is marked by the silhouette of a Japanese warship on the left and a strongly pronounced wave ahead of it on its course, both in dark grey, several shades darker than the colour used in the background. The wave is accentuated by black underlining, as is the smoke coming from the ship's funnel. The diagonal directionality of this fragment gives a viewer impression of the speed and force with which the ship is moving. In the considerably lighter background, on the right, a sinking Russian man-of-war is depicted, consumed by vermilion flames and the blast visible in the air above it. Further back in the light grey centre there is a column of water probably from another explosion. The grey used in the sky is lighter than the foreground but significantly darker than the sea in the background, thus visually enclosing the composition. Diagonal lines of heavy rain suggestive of a strong wind, coming from the direction opposite to the Japanese battleship in the foreground, reinforce the dynamic effect of the scene. The strong colour contrasts and directional

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<sup>19)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, "Naval Engagement outside Port Arthur during the 1904 Russo-Japan War", Feb.13, 1904, signed: "Ryūa", seal: "Edokko", inv. no: CMM/SM/3558.



graphic motives evoke notions of speed, might and intrepidity in the face of hardship, which are obviously attributed to the Japanese.

The next print illustrating naval battles around Port Arthur is a triptych dated 15 February. The copy in the NMM collection has both a Japanese and an English description.<sup>20)</sup> The English one is: “The Japanese Russian War no 2. Naval fight before the harbour of Port Arthur. The Russian men-of-war torpedoed by the Japanese aquadron”<sup>21)</sup>. The Japanese description is slightly different: “The Russo-Japanese War, No 2: The Imperial Japanese Fleet Sinks Russian Battleships outside Port Arthur harbour” (fig. 3). As in previous examples, the colour scheme is limited to shades of grey, occasionally bluish, black and white with strong accents of vermilion. The composition is again based on a diagonal from the lower right towards the middle left in the depth of the composition. Along that line the clash between the two fleets is presented and the manner of this presentation is very particular. The Japanese squadron is represented on the right, closer to the viewer. White hulls of ships are set on stormy waves underlined with black and occasionally white. Above them smoke whirls up towards the dark sky. Japanese ships occupy almost two thirds of the composition, their prows pointing towards the Russian men-of-war visible on the left. Compared to the Japanese they are pushed into the background, set upon much less tumultuous waters with less dramatic clouds of smoke. Their dark hulls make them even less visible within entire composition. At the same time they are easily distinguishable by the white flags with blue cross carried by the Russian navy. Quite predictably the main scene of a Russian ship being blown up by an explosion is depicted in the central panel of the triptych, albeit not in its centre but to the left. That simple device underlines the overall impression that the Russian fleet is literally withdrawing from the picture, being pushed back by the Japanese.

Yet another depiction of a sea battle repeats several of the devices described above<sup>22)</sup> (fig. 4). The composition is based on a diagonal line from upper right

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<sup>20)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Hasegawa Sumi, block cutter Sugiyama Hori Ei, “The Japanese Russian War no 2. Naval fight before the harbour of Port Arthur. The Russian men-of-war torpedoed by the Japanese aquadron”, the Japanese inscription in translation: “The Russo-Japanese War, No 2: The Imperial Japanese Fleet Sinks Russian Battleships outside port Arthur harbor”, Feb. 15, 1904, signed: “Ryūa”, seal: “Edokko”, mark of the block cutter: “Hori Toku” (?), inv. no: CMM/SM/3582.

<sup>21)</sup> The exact wording of the description.

<sup>22)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, “The Russo-Japanese War. Sea Battle”, 1904–1905, seal: “Baidō”, inv. no: CMM/SM/3569.

to lower left along which the Japanese squadron sails, bombarding the Russian men-of-war visible in the background on the left, along another diagonal that runs parallel to the first one. Japanese ships occupy two-thirds of the composition with Russian ships pushed to the back left, including the one that is on fire. The colour scheme previously consisting of greys, vermilion, black and white is widened by the addition of greyish blue of the sea and brown in clouds of smoke. The hulls of the Japanese ships are light grey, almost white, while the Russian ones are dark grey, as in the previously discussed prints. This difference is not visible in photographs from the period. Presumably, it is an echo of the Sino-Japanese war prints where Chinese ships were black and Japanese white. Some researchers interpret that difference as a way of suggesting Japanese moral superiority over the Chinese. The same principle seems to be implemented in the discussed prints. The lighter colour of the Japanese ships also makes them easier to discern and adds to their size, which in turn reinforces the notion of prevailing strength. The print discussed here bears the artist's seal "Baidō", which is rather uncommon, because at the time of the Russo-Japanese war, Kokunimasa mostly used the "Edokko" seal.

Depictions of land battles offered more ample opportunity to provide the characteristics of both sides of the conflict. During the Sino-Japanese war, Japanese propaganda created the picture of the Chinese enemy as not only backward in terms of civilization but also morally inferior compared with the Japanese. Prints from that period offer numerous demeaning representations of the Chinese. Their men-of-war are black, made of wood, clearly old-fashioned in comparison with the white, modern, steel Japanese ships. Some representations also depict shipwrecked Chinese sailors fighting for their lives in the water, just as in the print from the battle of Takushan<sup>23)</sup> mentioned earlier. Their small figures are shown as anonymous, helpless and grotesque. On land they are depicted in their traditional garments, wearing long braids and being defeated in many a cruel way, very often positioned below the Japanese in the same scene, sometimes even trampled under foot, chaotically scrambling to safety. Even when they prevail, they are still represented as fearful and confused. The print by Kokunimasa, dated February 1895, depicting the death of Major General Ōdera at the battle of Weihaiwei<sup>24)</sup>

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<sup>23)</sup> See footnote 18.

<sup>24)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Katada Chōjirō (Hori Chō) "A Great Attack in the Snow on the Battery of the Hundred Foot Cliff at Weihaiwei" subtitle: "The Valiant and Ferocious Fighting of Major General Ōdera, Commander of the 11th Brigade and Former

is an excellent example (fig. 5). It shows the General at the centre of the composition, on horseback, valiantly fighting off numerous enemies surrounding him, with his sword raised in a true kabuki gesture. Despite their numbers, the body language of the Chinese suggests fear escalating to panic. They lie sprawled on the ground or fall with their arms raised in an effort to shield themselves from the general's strokes, their faces twisted in terror and hatred, their weapons scattered around, discarded. The effect of chaotic scramble is reinforced by the crumpled appearance of their loose garments.

The same principle applied during the Russo-Japanese war, although some authors point out that the Russians were treated with more respect as a nation representing Western modernity and, consequently, the civilizational standards shared with the Japanese.<sup>25)</sup> On the other hand, we can find prints like Utagawa Kokunimasa's "Great Japan Red Cross Battlefield Hospital Treating Injured", dated March 1904, published by Fukuda Kumajirō.<sup>26)</sup> The print shows a Japanese battlefield hospital, where Russian casualties are treated by Japanese staff. Inset at the upper centre shows two Russian soldiers mistreating Japanese civilians. The conclusion regarding the moral standing of both sides is obvious. There are also satirical prints by Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847–1915), who had gained popularity during the Sino-Japanese war and continued his work with considerable success during the Russo-Japanese war as well. Some of his prints from that period are obvious caricatures, rather ruthless and even denigrating. One is entitled "Trembling Army of Russia"<sup>27)</sup> and shows a Russian officer fearfully trembling with four soldiers hiding behind his back (fig. 6). Another, "Farce of the Death at stone bridge",<sup>28)</sup> from the series "Hurrah for Japan! One Hundred Victories, One Hundred Laughs", shows a Russian soldier on a bridge staring ahead with eyes literally the size of saucers and with his mouth twisted in fear (fig. 7). Utagawa Kokunimasa

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Samurai of Kagoshima Domain", February 1895, signed: "Kokunimasa", Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, acc. no: 2000.102a-c.

<sup>25)</sup> Dower (2008) – <http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>, access: 12.01.2019, part 4, p. 2.

<sup>26)</sup> Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, accession no: 1963.30.5716abc; Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, inv. no: 2000.367a-c.

<sup>27)</sup> Kobayashi Kiyochika, "The Trembling Army of Russia", September 1904, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no: JP3209.

<sup>28)</sup> Kobayashi Kiyochika, "Farce of the Death at stone bridge" from the series "Hurrah for Japan! One Hundred Victories, One Hundred Laughs", October 1904, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accession no: JP3211.

himself also produced a satirical series entitled “The Expeditionary War Against Russia: Tales of Laughter”. The texts for the illustrations in these series were provided by a satirical writer Honekawa Dojin (pseudonym of Nishimori Takeki, 1862–1913).<sup>29)</sup> In the series, the Russians were presented as incompetent in their military actions, cowardly and at the same time conceited. The illustrations show them with elongated noses, gesticulating excessively, in exaggerated, grotesque poses.

The depictions of Russians in the NMM collection are less obvious although they do suggest a certain derogatory intention. The first print worth considering in this respect is: “The Great Victory of the Japanese Army in Seoul Engagement” from February 1904<sup>30)</sup> (fig. 8). It shows the Japanese artillery post on a cliff that begins at the foot of the two tree trunks in the foreground, which form a dramatic “V” shape at the centre of the composition. The cliff then curves to the right where there is an officer on horseback, attended by three foot soldiers, presumably observing the battle through binoculars. The cliff moves up and into the central panel where the actual cannon with six soldiers is depicted visually framed by the two tree trunks mentioned above. On the left, in the distance and below the blast of an explosion can be seen and small figures of soldiers running away from it. The flag above them identifies them as Russians. The elegant beauty of this composition with its purposeful variation in colour intensity could be a matter for another study. However, it is not merely an aesthetic question. There is a similarity between the way the Russians are shown here and in the prints illustrating the naval battles. In both cases they occupy less space than the Japanese and are set further away from the observer, which makes them seem more anonymous and less powerful. In this case, the Japanese occupy 2/3 of the entire scene. They represent several different categories – officers, sergeants and foot soldiers. What they have in common is their resolute, calm demeanour, suggesting discipline, purpose and courage. The Russians, on the other hand, are practically dehumanized. They are shown at a distance, as greyish silhouettes with no differentiation among them. They seem to be thrown

<sup>29)</sup> World Digital Library, item description – <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/6608/> – access 27.03.2019.

<sup>30)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Fukuda Hatsujirō, “The Great Victory of the Japanese Army in Seoul Engagement”, February 1904, signed: “Ryūa”, seal: “Edokko”, mark of the block cutter: “Sansei Hori Ei”, inv. no: CMM/SM/3564. The Japanese inscription translates as: “Battle between Japan and Russia at Seoul: Hurrah for the Great Victory of the Great Japanese Empire”.

about by the explosion like rag-dolls – weak, helpless and grotesque, trying to run in different directions, some of them falling or fallen, with their limbs outstretched and their flag tumbling down. They are a picture of panic.

Another print, “Battle in Koshu Province”<sup>31)</sup>, presents a battle of horsemen (fig. 9). Along the diagonal from the upper right to the lower left Japanese soldiers led by one officer charge on withdrawing Russian officers and soldiers. The right and central panels feature two pairs of combatants. In both fights, the Japanese prevail. Portraying the Japanese officer on the far right, Utagawa Kokunimasa repeated a certain pose that he had elaborated in prints from the Sino-Japanese war. The officer raises his sword with a gesture resembling the one depicted in the print (mentioned above) showing Major General Ōdera at the battle of Weihaiwei<sup>32)</sup> (fig. 10). The entire silhouette of the officer and the horse also appears in another print: “A Japanese Soldier Taking the Enemy Flag at Asan”.<sup>33)</sup> This quotation notwithstanding, all the Japanese in the print appear brave, resolute and dominating. The Russians, on the other hand, personify defeat, which is even more humiliating due to the fact that three of them are officers. The first one on the right is shown with his back to the viewer, leaning down over his horse’s neck, trying to fight off a Japanese officer. The one in the middle is already defeated by a Japanese soldier charging at him – he is leaning back on his horse, his upcast arms no longer grasping the reins of his horse, his face turned upwards with eyes shut and mouth open in an expression of helpless resignation and despair. On the ground, under the hoofs of his horse lies a Russian flag, torn and trampled. Further to the left, along the diagonal line, yet another Russian officer is depicted, running away from the fight. Even his horse has a frightened expression – its ears drawn back and down, its eyes glancing sideways at the fighting behind it. The downward line is closed by figures of four Russian

<sup>31)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, “The Battle in Koshu Province”, 1904, signed: “Ryūa”, seal: “Edokko”, inv. no: CMM/SM/3559.

<sup>32)</sup> See footnote 24.

<sup>33)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Katada Chōjirō (Hori Chō) “A Japanese Soldier Taking the Enemy Flag at Asan”, August 3, 1894, signed: “Baidō Kokunimasa”, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, acc. no: 2000.153a-c. These are minor quotations when compared to the “recycling” practices quite common during the Russo-Japanese war, when artists reused woodblocks produced during the Sino-Japanese war, changing written parts and sometimes minor details of depictions, for example flags, and selling the prints as illustrations of the Russo-Japanese war events. The practice was perhaps facilitated by the fact that both wars were fought basically in the same area and therefore with similar methods.

foot soldiers. Only one of them tries to take part in the battle. Another one is shown with his back turned, obviously fleeing, while two others watch the entire scene with expressions of fear and resignation. The print does not simply relate the defeat of the Russians – it shows their humiliation that is presented as a result of weakness and cowardice.

The National Maritime Museum collection includes another battle scene composed by Utagawa Kokunimasa along almost exactly the same lines<sup>34</sup>: the diagonal from the upper right to the lower left along which one Japanese rider charges at no less than three Russian horsemen (fig. 11). Another Russian is already on the ground, apparently dead. Next to the fighting riders there is a cannon with one Russian soldier. On the left, two Russian foot soldiers are depicted. One of them dead on the ground, another falling and covering his eyes with one hand.

One of key issues that contributed to Russia's defeat in the war against Japan were the extremely long supply lines running across very difficult terrain. Russia sent supplies and reinforcements to the war zone via the Trans-Siberian Railway. It was an extremely long line with just a single track.<sup>35</sup> To shorten its route Russia built a railway line across the frozen Lake Baikal. That was a dangerous solution and the danger is illustrated in one of Utagawa Kokunimasa's prints. It shows a Russian military train sinking in the Lake Baikal as ice breaks underneath it.<sup>36</sup> The print shows a locomotive falling backwards into a hole in the broken ice, dragging derailed carriages down with it (fig. 12). The sharp angle under which the locomotive is shown, broken rails sticking out from under the sinking train and sharp chunks of ice create dramatic – although admittedly decorative – scenery. In the foreground several Russian soldiers are swimming in or falling into a pool of presumably ice-cold water. Their faces express fear and agony. Two engine drivers inside the locomotive look at each other, helpless and fearful. One of them, with his arms upcast and with his mouth wide open, seems to be screaming. Further along the train's length, soldiers can be seen chaotically

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<sup>34</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, "Fight over a Flag", 1904–1905, signed: "Ryūa", seal: "Edokko", inv. no: CMM/SM/3557.

<sup>35</sup> Koda (2005: 22).

<sup>36</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Fukuda Hatsujirō, "Telegraphic Record of the Russo-Japanese War: On the Ice of Lake Baikal in Russia, a steam Locomotive and Its Cars Sank, Killing Tens of Officers and Soldiers. Russia's Transport Capacity Was Greatly Damaged", March 1904, signed: "Ryūa", seal: "Edokko", inv. no: CMM/SM/3571.

falling and jumping onto the breaking ice or crawling out of the windows. In the background another train is shown apparently approaching the site of the catastrophe along the same rails. There is something of a voyeuristic pleasure in the way the artist depicts all the suffering and confusion with no effort to humanize the victims. Their poses are dramatic, very well executed from an artistic point of view, but often grotesque. The purpose of the print seems to be not so much to relate a certain event but to enable viewers back in Japan to savour and enjoy the defeat and humiliation of the Russians.

This assumption can be corroborated by analysis of another print by Kokunimasa, also depicting a Russian military train sinking under broken ice (fig. 13). It is a part of the satirical series “The Expeditionary War Against Russia: Tales of Laughter” mentioned earlier. The print in question shows a military train sinking amidst broken ice, this time viewed from the back carriages towards the locomotive. The general concept is very similar to the print described above – the locomotive is shown falling in a cloud of black smoke, with carriages collapsing and soldiers jumping out of the windows onto the breaking ice. In the foreground, once again there is a pool of water into which the Russians fall – their faces and poses are a mockery of despair and fear. In the accompanying text by Honekawa Dojin, two Japanese discuss the recklessness of the Russians who had built a railway on ice. The Japanese consider rescuing the soldiers but they note that Russians are “too fearful of Japan to raise their heads, and too helpless to reach out their arms”.<sup>37)</sup>

After the lost war against Japan in 1894–95, China fell into chaos. Russia took advantage of this by gaining control of the Liaodong Peninsula and Port Arthur which was the main objective of the Triple intervention.<sup>38)</sup> To facilitate communication with the port, Russia built a railway in Manchuria named the “East Qing Railway”.<sup>39)</sup> When the Russo-Japanese war broke out, Japan engaged Manchurian bandits to sabotage the railway in Manchuria. “Japanese adventurers backed by the Imperial Army contacted such gangs and led them on harassing missions behind the Russian lines, blowing up

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<sup>37)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, Nashimori Takeki, “Russian Railroad Troop Transport and Soldiers Crashing through Ice”, from the series “The Expeditionary War Against Russia: Tales of Laughter”, May 7, 1904, Library of Congress, call no: FP 2 – JPD, no 858, World Digital Library, item description: <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/6608/> – access 27.03.2019.

<sup>38)</sup> The intervention of Russia, France and Germany after the Shimonoseki peace treaty in 1895.

<sup>39)</sup> Koda (2005: 16).

bridges and destroying railway lines”.<sup>40)</sup> One print by Utagawa Kokunimasa from the NMM collection depicts these saboteurs<sup>41)</sup> (fig. 14). Upon a rock ledge with a broken railway track running along it, a hooded horseman is shown apparently giving orders to a man with a pickaxe, while another man next to him is vigorously cutting down a tree on the left with a hatchet. In the background on the right, a group of similarly hooded men carrying guns work with wooden trunks, supervised by two more horsemen. In the distance, the scene is enclosed by a mountain chain with a single railway track being further demolished around the pass on the horizon. The propagandistic message here is about the fearless determination of fighters loyal to Japan working behind the enemy lines. Their criminal background is ignored. The man on horseback as well as the two on foot are presented in the manner typical of samurai representations: in heroic poses, with stern, resolute facial expressions. However, the most striking feature of this particular print is its unquestionable beauty. The visual contrast between elegantly posed figures in the foreground executed in saturated, dark colours and the surrounding landscape depicted in pale grey, with a single vermillion accent of fire on the right make the print a worthy successor of the best tradition of *ukiyo-e* landscapes. The figure of the horse in the centre is modelled after traditional representations of horses in *musha-e* prints. The overall effect is predominantly decorative.

Among all the prints that aim to glorify the Japanese at the expense of the Russians there are examples that convey some degree of compassion or respect for the enemy. Probably the most popular is one by Ogata Gessan depicting lieutenant Shibakawa Matasaburō in the battle of Nanshan.<sup>42)</sup> It shows a Japanese officer dealing a deadly stroke to a young Russian soldier. The Japanese officer is portrayed as fierce looking, angry and dangerous, resembling the images of samurais in full combat gear by Utagawa Kuniyoshi. He charges ahead stepping on the body of a dead Russian soldier in order to strike another – a young man, whose handsome profile bears an expression

<sup>40)</sup> Billingsley (1988: 216).

<sup>41)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Fukuda Hatsujirō, “Eye-witness Account by Telegraph of the Russo-Japanese War: Bandits on Horseback Destroy the Manchuria Railway”, February 1904, signed: “Ryūa”, seal: “Edokko”, inv. no: CMM/SM/3566.

<sup>42)</sup> Ogata Gessan (1887–1967), “In the Battle of Nanshan Lieutenant Shibakawa Matasaburō Led His Men, Holding up a Rising Sun War Fan”, 1904, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, inv. no: 2000.448a-c.



of sadness and final resignation, very different from the confusion and panic ascribed to the Russians in the prints mentioned earlier. He – rather than the charging lieutenant – is the one that the viewer connects with emotionally; he is the one who evokes sympathy.

Similar features can be found in a print by Utagawa Kokunimasa from the collection of the National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk. It shows a battle for the occupation of Chongju<sup>43</sup> (fig. 15). The print shows an encounter between units of Russian cavalry and Japanese infantry on a small hill. The infantry is charging upwards from the right and Russians are seen coming from the left. In the centre, three Russian riders are depicted under attack by a mounted Japanese officer and infantry men shooting at them from a short distance. This time the Russians have facial expressions of stern determination, just as the Japanese – they are shown as worthy and valiant opponents. However the figure crucial to the interpretation of the whole print is a Russian soldier in the foreground sitting on the ground beside his fallen horse (fig. 16). The particular way in which these two are positioned against each other underlines the bond between the human and the animal. The soldier's body language is dignified, although it suggests profound grief over the loss of his companion. His central position against a plain background, away from the fighting, makes his personal tragedy the focus of attention much more than the military proceedings surrounding him.

In some instances, the Russian soldiers were represented as brave, even heroic. The most publicised example is the print by Ikeda Terukata (1883–1921) depicting the death of admiral Makarov<sup>44</sup> (fig. 17). Admiral Stepan Osipovich Makarov, a decorated Russian navy commander, died on 13 April 1904 when the ship under his command “Petropavlovsk” detonated a Japanese mine at the entrance to the Port Arthur harbour. In the print illustrating his death the admiral is depicted in a manner closely resembling fighting samurais by Utagawa Kuniyoshi or kabuki actors in heroic poses – legs far apart firmly support the body while the hero bravely stares into the sea that is about to swallow him together with his ship and crew. Although both Japanese and English writings in the print celebrate Japanese victory, the image itself

<sup>43</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, “Russo-Japanese War: Illustration of Our Army Taking Occupation of Chongju”, 1904, signed: “Ryūa”, seal: “Edokko”, inv. no: CMM/SM/3554.

<sup>44</sup> Ikeda Terukata, editor Fukuda Hatsujirō, block cutter Watanabe Takisaburō, “A Great Victory for the Great Japanese Imperial Navy, Banzai!”, April 1904, signed “Terukata”, seal: “Toshiide”, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, acc. no: 2000.466a-c.

speaks of respect and even admiration for the fallen enemy who proved his valour in the face of certain death.

Similar observations can be made with respect to the last print to be discussed here. It also depicts the episode of the siege of Port Arthur so crucial to the Russo-Japanese war. The port was located in a bay surrounded by mountains and it could be successfully defended by artillery positioned there. Taking control of these mountains was an important element of military strategy during that war. The print in question depicts a Russian artillery post at the top of a bulwark overlooking a vast area of calm sea in the roadstead of Port Arthur<sup>45)</sup> (fig. 18). The Japanese are barely visible. Only along the horizon can vague silhouettes of presumably Japanese men-of-war be observed. Distant and withdrawn, they are obviously not the focus of attention this time. The bulwark occupies slightly less than a half of the composition. Upon it, Russian soldiers are shown and they are all crowded in 1/3 of the entire composition. That device conveys the feeling of entrapment of Port Arthur's defenders, which is further intensified by the contrast with the vast area of open sea on the right. However, the Russians in the print do not seem intimidated by the situation. Ten of them operate two cannons bombarding warships in the roadstead. The soldiers are depicted as disciplined and focused, every one efficiently performing his individual task – the absolute opposite of the grotesque, fearful, chaotic figures present in other prints. Closer to the viewer, two officers are discussing a particular issue. Despite the cannons being fired next to them, their postures are firm and collected, their facial expressions serious but calm. Still closer to the viewer, an officer is accompanied by two soldiers. He looks down onto the bay on the right, raising his sword. The soldier next to him holds the Russian flag high up. It is difficult to point out a practical meaning of this group and it is very probable that they serve the purpose of summing up the attitudes of the soldiers and officers in this print and demonstrate their fighting spirit, courage and determination. Russians are portrayed here as worthy adversaries, whom it is an honour to defeat. Consequently, the Japanese army is indirectly characterized as even more valourous and worthy if it manages to subdue such a valiant enemy.

In conclusion, it can be said that prints by Utagawa Kokunimasa from the collection of the National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk cover a vast range

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<sup>45)</sup> Utagawa Kokunimasa, "Illustrated News from the Japanese Russian War: From the Battery at Mount Ogon, Port Arthur, the Russian Forces Bombard our Warship", 1904, signed: "Ryūa", seal: "Edokko", inv. no: CMM/SM/3565.

of subjects connected to the Russo-Japanese war: land battles, naval engagements, including several at Port Arthur, fought during the day or at night, and even accidents or sabotage activities behind enemy lines. The implied characteristics of the enemy in separate prints vary significantly, exhibiting a gamut of emotions from derision and disregard, all the way to respect and compassion, although it must be emphasized that negative images of the Russians are in the vast majority, be it outright mockery or mere illustration of their defeats.

The means used by the author include line, colour, composition and perspective. Line and colour are perhaps the most obvious. They represent particular gestures or facial expressions that suggest certain feelings and behaviour. The contrast of dark and light colours is also one of the means for differentiation that allow the author to convey the respective moral standing of both protagonists. Composition is a tool used very efficiently by Kokunimasa. Juxtaposition of elements or the amount of space occupied by groups of people or objects, like battleships, help create the impression that one side of the conflict – in this case, the Japanese – prevails. The same result is achieved by arranging the composition along a diagonal line where the upper side is the one depicting the winner. The skill with which Kokunimasa applies all these devices, at the same time discreetly drawing from the *ukiyo-e* tradition, proves that the recent interest in Meiji prints is fully deserved. The purely decorative quality of the discussed prints – perhaps not emphasized enough in this study – makes them worthy successors of a long and venerable tradition and calls for a revision of the traditional opinion that the Meiji era heralded the downfall of the art of woodblock prints in Japan.

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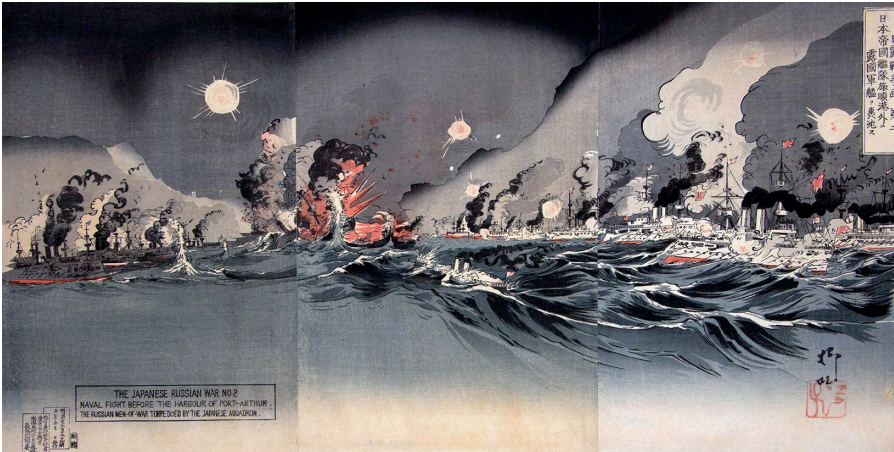
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1. Utagawa Kokunimasa, "The Great Victory of the Japanese Navy in Port Arthur Engagement", Feb. 8-9, 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3572, photo: B. Galus.



2. Utagawa Kokunimasa, "Naval Engagement outside Port Arthur during the 1904 Russo-Japan War", Feb.13, 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3558, photo: B. Galus.



3. Utagawa Kokunimasa, “The Japanese Russian War no 2. Naval fight before the harbour of Port Arthur”, Feb. 15, 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3582, photo: B. Galus.



4. Utagawa Kokunimasa, “The Russo-Japanese War. Sea Battle”, 1904-1905, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3569, photo: B. Galus.



5. Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Katada Chōjirō (Hori Chō), “A Great Attack in the Snow on the Battery of the Hundred Foot Cliff at Weihaiwei”, February 1895, photo: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.



6. Kobayashi Kiyochika, “The Trembling Army of Russia”, September 1904, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no: JP3209, photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



7. Kobayashi Kiyochika, “Farce of the Death at stone bridge” from the series “Hurrah for Japan! One Hundred Victories, One Hundred Laughs”, October 1904, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no: JP3211, photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



8. Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Fukuda Hatsujirō, “The Great Victory of the Japanese Army in Seoul Engagement”, February 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3564, photo: B. Galus.



9. Utagawa Kokunimasa, “The Battle in Koshu Province”, 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3559, photo: B. Galus.



10. ▶ Central panel of “A Great Attack in the Snow on the Battery of the Hundred Foot Cliff at Weihaiwei” by Utagawa Kokunimasa, February 1895, photo: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.



11. ▼ Utagawa Kokunimasa, “Fight over a Flag”, 1904-1905”, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3557, photo: B. Galus.





日露戦争電報實況之記  
 俄國海軍鐵道士米爾のイハノ國俄  
 兵死傷八十餘名主於統帥シシ流死中ハ制  
 射ノ力ニ及ラズ露隊大ハ力送 輸 國 隊



露國戰勝笑話  
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露國戰勝笑話

12. ▲ Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Fukuda Hatsujirō, “Telegraphic Record of the Russo-Japanese War: On the Ice of Lake Baikal in Russia, a steam Locomotive and Its Cars Sank, Killing Tens of Officers and Soldiers. Russia’s Transport Capacity Was Greatly Damaged”, March 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3571, photo: B. Galus.

13. ◀ Utagawa Kokunimasa, Nashimori Takeki, “Russian Railroad Troop Transport and Soldiers Crashing through Ice”, from the series “The Expeditionary War Against Russia: Tales of Laughter”, May 7, 1904, Library of Congress, photo: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.



14. Utagawa Kokunimasa, editor Fukuda Hatsujirō, “Eye-witness Account by Telegraph of the Russo-Japanese War: Bandits on Horseback Destroy the Manchuria Railway”, February 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3566, photo: B. Galus.



15. Utagawa Kokunimasa, “Russo-Japanese War: Illustration of Our Army Taking Occupation of Chongju”, 1904, National Maritime Museum in Gdansk, inv. no: CMM/SM/3554, photo: B. Galus.



16. Detail of fig. 15.

