



**SOURCE 2.2** A cartoon drawn during the Russo-Japanese war. The sailor is saying: 'Oh you funny Japs, always making mistakes. Thank you for the badly aimed shells which help me light my pipe!'

### ACTIVITY

- 1 What does Source 2.2 reveal about the Russian attitude towards the Japanese?
- 2 How might this help explain why the war started?

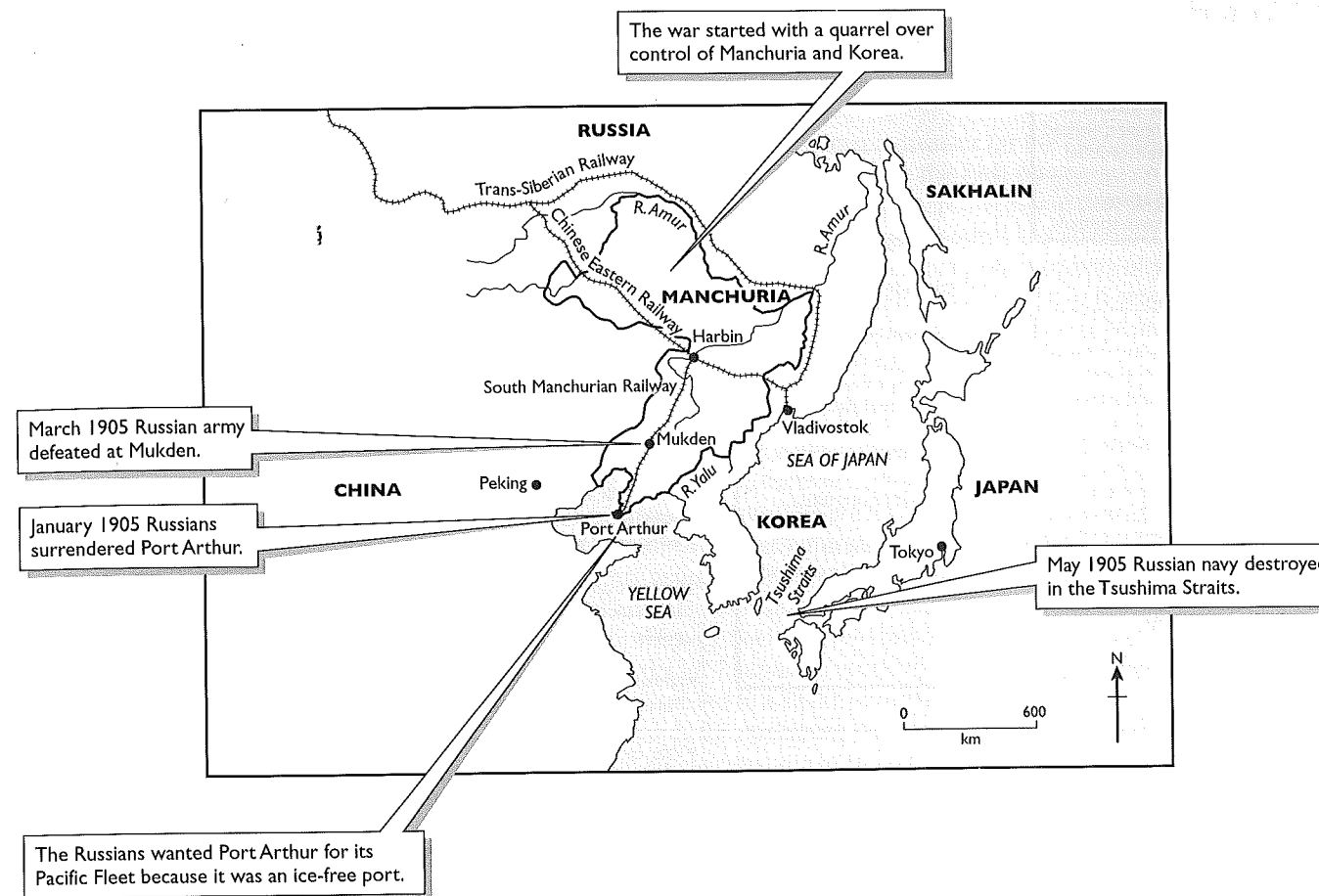
### The Russo-Japanese War 1904–5

By the end of 1903, the situation in Russia was volatile and potentially explosive. And then war was added to the mix.

The war with Japan arose out of Russia's expansionist policy in the Far East. Russia wanted to exploit the area because it was rich in resources and markets. It also wanted control of the ice-free port of Port Arthur in Manchuria. It came into conflict with Japan over Korea, which the Japanese had already marked out for themselves for economic expansion. When Japan proposed a compromise whereby Russia would be ceded predominance in Manchuria if it agreed that Japan could control Korea, the Russians treated the Japanese with disdain. Not long afterwards, Japan launched a surprise attack on Russian ships at Port Arthur on 26 January 1904, and the war was on.

It has been claimed that the Tsar and his Minister of Internal Affairs, Plehve, had sought the war as a convenient way of diverting attention from the problems at home – a successful war would rally the people behind the Tsar. However, recent evidence suggests that the Tsar and his chief ministers did not want a war. It is more likely that they saw Japan as a third-rate power that could be bullied easily and it was this that led to their high-handed manner in refusing to negotiate a settlement.

### 2A The war with Japan



What is clear is that the Russians completely underestimated Japan and overestimated their own superiority. Japan had a better trained army and navy and more effective intelligence. They were also much closer to the action. The Russians were operating a very long way from European Russia and had not completed the Trans-Siberian Railway which made it difficult to send reinforcements and supplies. The Russians suffered several defeats in early 1904 and had to retreat. Public support for the war quickly turned to dismay. In January 1905, Port Arthur fell to the Japanese and the following March, the Russian army was defeated at Mukden. The final humiliation was the naval defeat of the Russian Baltic fleet in May. It had sailed almost half way around the world to join the battle, a journey which took over six months, and on the way firing on British fishing trawlers thinking they were Japanese warships. When they finally met the Japanese navy in the Tsushima Straits, most of the ships were destroyed or put out of action in under an hour. These disastrous defeats on land and sea led to Witte being sent off to negotiate the Treaty of Portsmouth under the auspices of the USA. The Russians agreed to withdraw from Manchuria and ceded control of Korea and Port Arthur.

Abraham Ascher suggests that Russia might have avoided revolution in 1905 if it had not provoked a war with Japan – the catastrophic defeats, he says, justified the opposition claims that the autocratic government was 'irresponsible, incompetent and reckless'. The war acted as a catalyst for meltdown in 1905.