

An Example of a Historical Natural Disaster and its Influence on the Japanese-Russian Relations

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A series of powerful Ansei Great Earthquakes hit Japan at the end of 1854 ? beginning of 1855. They started on 23 December, 1854 with the Ansei-Tōkai Quake, which had a magnitude of 8.4; its epicenter ranged from the centre of Suruga Bay to the south-east into the ocean. It was followed by the Ansei-Nankai Quake on 24 December. The consequences of these earthquakes and the following tsunami were terrible for Japan: more than 20,000 buildings were destroyed, many people (about 30,000) died in several Japanese regions. But this horrible natural disaster also had some different consequences. At that time frigate Diana, the flagship of the Russian diplomatic mission, stayed in Shimoda: the leader of the mission admiral Yevfimiy Putyatyn was conducting long and difficult negotiations trying to start the official relations between Russia and Japan, when Shimoda was hit by the tsunami. Several members of the mission described their impressions in their memoirs. For example, the chaplain Vasily Makhov wrote: "Water from the bottom of the sea drilled and boiled as in cauldron, its waves swirled, rised and spilled into the splashes; billows came from the sea one after another, one stronger than another with unusual noise and furious roar pressed water, captured the coasts, instantly flooded the place father and father ? bigger and bigger..." Shimoda was almost completely destroyed (only 16 houses survived the disaster). Diana was also seriously damaged and soon sank in a storm while sailing to Heda village for repairs. The crew had to move to the shore, and was quartered in Heda. Putiatyn asked to provide his expedition with materials and workers for building a new ship so as Russian sailors could return to their homeland, and Japan agreed. Works were carried out in Heda with the help of plans salvaged from the Diana, and required a cooperation of Russian sailors and Japanese carpenters. In about two months a two-masted schooner was built, which was christened Heda in honor of the city that helped with its construction. The Heda was the first western-style ship built in Japan, and thus can be called a "grandfather" of a Japanese oceanic navy. On 26 January, 1855 the Russian-Japanese negotiations were successfully concluded, and the Treaty of Shimoda was signed, marking the start of official relations between Russia and Japan. Thus a terrible natural disaster framed one of the most vivid pages in history of the Japanese-Russian relationship.

Keywords: natural disasters, earthquake, japanese-russian relations, tsunami, Shimoda