

Mandarin View on Cherry Blossom: Japan and the Japanese seen by Imperial Russian Diplomats with “Chinese Experience”

Petr Podalko
(Aoyama Gakuin University)

Introduction

The success or failure of a nation’s diplomacy depends to a large extent on the skill and experience of its representatives abroad. Impressed by Russian expansion in East Asia with relatively little or almost no use of direct force, Western observers often attributed the Russian ability to get along with East Asians to a so-called “Muscovite shiftiness” and even to a common cultural and/or racial heritage. However, a more acceptable explanation of Russia’s “know-how” in the Orient can rather be found in language proficiency as well as first-hand acquaintance with Asian ways. For example, the history of Russian contacts with China date back to the Middle Ages. The first treaty between these two countries was concluded about 150 years earlier than any treaty with other Western powers. It is the well-known *Treaty of Nerchinsk* (1689) .

Russian relations with Japan also have a long history. The first known contacts between Russians and Japanese occurred at the beginning of the 17th century, even before the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty, but only a few evidences relate that story.

1. Russia stepping East

Russia’s really documented encounters with Japan could be traced back to 1702 when the first introduction of a Japanese sailor, named Dembei, to the Tsar, Peter the Great, was recorded. Since then, until 1855, the Russo-Japanese encounters were limited mostly to a few Russian expeditions trying to establish diplomatic and trade relations with the secluded at that time Japan, or to explore the Japanese shores for geographical purposes or for ethnographic descriptions of the Pacific region. Most famous of them were two captains, I. F. Kruzenshtern and V. M. Golovnin, who gave the first eye-witness accounts of Japan. Their official reports, as well as some travelogue books, published later (the most famous one was probably *The Frigate Pallada* by I. A. Goncharov) , were mostly responsible for the perceptions and illusions about Japan that spread not only among state officials but also in the wider circles of the Russian society.

However, commercial dealings or diplomatic intercourse did not occur at that time, as was the case with China and neighboring Korea. The real exchange of diplomatic and other representatives began only in the second half of the 19th century. By signing the Treaty of Shimoda in February 1855 about borders and trade relations, Russia and Japan established their first formal relations. This, however, did not immediately lead to extensive Russian contacts with Japan. Records show that until 1868 there were rare Russian individual encounters with Japan, mostly made by a few single Russian explorers, merchants and diplomats visiting or studying Japan during that period.

Because of its long seclusion from the world, Japan was perceived by Europeans, including Russians, at that time as weak and less civilized according to Western standards of civilization and

state power. The image of Japan in Europe was that of a “distant outsider—mysterious and beautiful but weak and backward”, needing guidance along the path of civilization.

The first bilateral treaties concluded between Japan and Western powers including Imperial Russia proclaimed the opening of some Japanese ports for foreign trade accompanied by the establishment of foreign consulates. While other Western countries preferred to settle their representatives closer to Edo (now Tokyo), the first Russian Consulate in Japan was established in Hakodate, placed on the edge of Hokkaido – the northern island, undeveloped and unexplored at that time even by the Japanese themselves. In hind sight, it seems to have been a big mistake of Russian diplomacy at that time to bring its only official representative so close to Russian borders and yet so far from the local government and other decision-making centers. Contrary to that, the first Russian permanent representative office in China (aka *Peking Orthodox Mission*) was established in the capital city of Peking, making it possible to obtain all necessary information straight first-hand.

2. Diplomats and Diplomacy - the Personnel Factor.

For a long time, the Russian way of personnel selection in diplomacy and aspects of the professional training of diplomats were not clearly settled. After Peter the Great's death in 1725, for the better part of the eighteenth century, Imperial Russia was governed by women, often relying too much upon the diplomatic experience of their ministers. Contrary to that, some emperors had personal interests in controlling international relations, so they liked to act as their own Foreign Affairs Ministers and very often appointed people to official posts relying primarily on their dedication to the emperor, ignoring their real suitability to the job. Such a situation lasted for more than half a century, until Alexander II began his reforms.

From 1859, appointment staff required every new candidate to demonstrate ability in at least two foreign languages and hold a certificate of higher education. Also, the regulations issued in 1859 and 1899 both stated that the mastery of Asian languages would facilitate appointment to the Foreign Service, and those who had completed the course of instruction in oriental languages, were excused from taking the other examinations.

All that led to a majority of long-time Russian diplomatic and consular representatives in East Asia knowing the language of the country where they served. Unfortunately, it mostly applied to those who served in China, and less to Japan, especially when we turn to the lower ranks of staff, such as military agents, or attaches and their naval colleagues. While many future diplomats and other servicemen who then worked on different posts in China first came there as language students, the vast majority of Russians appointed as official representatives to Japan had little or no previous experience of that country.

For example, compared with China, where most of the Russian ministers or ambassadors had prior experience of living and working in East Asia, only two (one-fifth in total) of their colleagues in Japan had the same. Their names are Baron R. R. Rosen and V. N. Krupenskii. Both served in China prior to Japan and are considered among the most efficient representatives of Tsarist Russia in East Asia. Among those two, Baron Rosen was serving in Japan in different posts before the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, and played a sort of Cassandra role, vainly trying to persuade the Russian government to change its attitude towards the threat of the coming war. The other,

Krupenskii, contributed a lot to improve Russo-Chinese relations in early 1910s, before he became the last Russian Imperial Ambassador in Japan from 1916 to 1921.

3. China or Japan?

Surprisingly enough, while dismissing Japan as an equal rival or partner in the Far East, some top Russian officials at the same time wanted to use her as an informer and subordinate with respect to Chinese foreign policy, especially Sino-Korean relations. When the Minister in Tokyo, D. E. Shevich, wrote to the emperor about the Japanese proposal to share secret information with Russia that Japan had about Chinese penetration in Korea, Alexander III's reaction showed his interest in such collaboration: 'Very interesting and useful for us'.

At that time (1880-90s) China, not Japan, was regarded as the most likely rival, if not future enemy, for Russia in the Far East. The construction of Trans-Siberian Railroad that started in 1891 was not primarily aimed at economic development, but to making it possible to bring Russian military forces closer to the Chinese border if necessary. Even on the eve of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, when the Chinese government asked Russia to persuade Japan not to break the peace, Russia preferred to refrain from taking an active role in the conflict, being absolutely sure that China would defeat Japan very easily. For example, the new Russian Minister in Tokyo at that time, M. A. Khitrovo, wrote in his dispatch that the Japanese are 'exhilarated with self-conceit, and only the lesson they will inevitably get from China can bring them back down to earth'.

The Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901 changed many previous perceptions and led both sides, Russia and Japan, to become allies. Prior to the march to Peking, Russia had had no real wars since she had won her last "imperial" victory over the Turks in 1878, and the generation of glorious heroes from the 19th century had already lost their physical vigor or just become too old to match the needs of the modern army's tactics and weapons. Almost forgotten in modern Russia, this so-called Chinese Campaign was also the first active experience of the Imperial Russian Army having military operations in the Far East, as it also was so for the newly organized Pacific Squadron of the Russian Navy.

This time Russian and Japanese soldiers were fighting together against the Chinese, being the two most populous units among the eight foreign forces of the joint military contingent that, in addition to 8,000 Japanese and 5,000 Russians, also included 3,000 British, mostly from India, 2,000 Americans, 800 French, mostly from Annam (now Vietnam); and small groups of soldiers from Austria-Hungary and Italy (50 people each), for around 19,000 in total. German troops came too late and were not numerous enough to take an active part in battles.

As a matter of fact, according to Russian sources, while the other nations' troops were more earning political benefit from their being there, the Russians took the lead in liberating the Chinese capital from the "boxers" with the Japanese being their loyal deputy. It is interesting to read now the old records of Russian war correspondents and other servicemen from that time, who pathetically wrote about the 'glorious and very valuable Japanese comrades' while also emphasizing their deficiency of experience, shortage of physical strength (especially on the field march), 'brave spirit contradictory to lack of consideration' (comparing to the Russians, of course) and so on. On the other hand, the writers remarked that Japanese troops were better equipped than the Russians. For

example, Russians had no proper maps and because of that they were always dependant on their Japanese neighbors.

Unfortunately, the lessons from the Chinese Campaign were not properly studied in Russia, probably because there were no big losses. All Russian casualties for the entire campaign in the main theatres of war, including Manchuria and Pechihli province in North-Eastern part of China, consisted of less than 250 killed and 1300 wounded. However, even worse, Russia continued in her blindness towards the rising danger – the real danger near her borders – Japan. Just five years before that Japan was almost half-robbed of the results of her victory over China by the Western super-powers (including Russia) who insisted on revising the Sino-Japanese Shimonoseki Treaty of 1895. The short period of cooperation during the Chinese Campaign did not change the general Russian attitude towards Japan – “Oriental country pretending to be European”. This resulted in a poor knowledge of the Japanese armed forces and the future theater of warfare, the absence of a prepared draft for the conducting strategic and tactical intelligence, and inexperience in organizing the intelligence sections of the Russian troops in Manchuria.

4. *Pro et Contra* of Russian Evaluations about Japanese Military Power

All the circumstances described above led Russia to underestimate the Japanese army during the next three years after the Chinese Campaign, though the outbreak of war between the two nations was no surprise. Since the peace had been restored on Chinese soil after the “storm of Peking”, almost everybody had been expecting the Russians to cross their swords with the Japanese very soon, but the outcome of that war was definitely unforeseen. As one can say now, the seeds of Russian defeat in 1905 were laid in her victory in 1900.

The overconfidence of Russia was mostly based on her victorious preponderance over the Chinese Empire, a huge country that appeared at that time to be little more than a sort of modern Asian “Colossus with Feet of Clay”. Very soon after its outbreak, the Russo-Japanese War itself changed that attitude and moreover turned it into a sort of “a-next-war-to-be-hysteria” among the Russian officials who served in Japan immediately after the peace treaty of Portsmouth was signed.

Investigating the reports by Russian military agents and diplomats from that time, one can see that despite being their government’s only eyes watching East Asia, sometimes those eyes were blinded by the recent losses and by the previous experience of the Japanese. One big reason for such an attitude was the fact that many Russian diplomats and military agents had been serving in the Far East long-term, primarily in continental China, and for some of them the new shift of Japan from “weak ally” to “strong enemy” status in just two or three years happened too swiftly, leading them to overestimate this new peril on Russia’s eastern borders. Another problem was still the language. Thus, special attention was paid to the task of educating a new generation of Asia specialists able to work in different fields. In 1899, the so-called Oriental Institute was established in Vladivostok. Those students who achieved good results were later sent abroad for practical studies. Special interest was paid to the fact that the period of training Japanese linguists in Tokyo was two or three times as long as that of training Chinese linguists in Peking. However, the first three graduates from the Oriental Institute in 1903 included only one specialist in Japanese language, who later served as personal interpreter of the Russian Commander-in-Chief in Manchuria.

5. Conclusion

For a long time, the perception of the Russian government towards Japan was as if Japan was a minor partner and/or exclusively a naval power. The result of such a perception was that Russia had only one naval agent permanently attached to its mission in Tokyo, while the military agent served in both the Japanese and Chinese missions. Another problem was the language barrier which caused a lot of trouble for Russian diplomats and military agents in their intelligence service.

Fortunately, as it often happens with Russia and Russians, sometimes the personality of a certain man helps solve a problem when almost nobody expects any smart decision, but one could say that despite their professional attitude and eagerness to work effectively, Russian diplomats as well as military and naval agents of that period (with a few exceptions) all too often ended up being examples of the right men in the right place under the wrong circumstances and/or supervision. In order to lead to mostly desired results, our expectations should be based on some real, informative knowledge, that also has to be based on certain investigation instead of uncertain perceptions or personal feelings. In general, this report has aimed to contribute to research on the history of Russian diplomacy in the Far East.

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