



Shimoda 1854: Historical Consequences of a Natural Disaster

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At the end of 1854 – beginning of 1855 Japan was struck by a series of powerful earthquakes known as the Ansei Great Earthquakes. The first one, Ansei-Tōkai Quake, occurred on 23 December, 1854. It had a magnitude of 8.4; the 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 earthquakes with the following tsunami caused a huge damage in several regions of Japan: more than 20,000 buildings were destroyed, about 30,000 casualties caused. This natural disaster was witnessed by a Russian diplomatic mission led by admiral Yevfimiy Putyatin. His flagship, frigate Diana, stayed at Shimoda, and Putyatin was conducting long and difficult negotiations trying to convince Japan of signing a commercial treaty with Russia, when Shimoda was hit by the tsunami. Several members of the mission described their impressions in their memoirs. The city was almost completely destroyed (only 16 houses survived the disaster). Diana was also badly damaged and sank in a storm while sailing to Heda for repairs. It was decided to build a new ship for the Russian mission. 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 honour 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.