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Bakumatsu Japan Through Russian Eyes: the letters of Kapitan-leitenant Voin Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov

William W. MCOMIE

It is the unfortunate fate of Voin Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov to have been eclipsed historically by two other Russians, one younger, and sharing the same name, and one older and sharing the same historical experience as participant on a distant sea voyage to exotic far eastern shores. The former is his much younger, and much more famous brother, the composer Nikolai Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov. The latter is the famous writer Ivan Alexandrovich Goncharov, author of Oblomov and The Frigate Pallada, among other lesser known works. This historical neglect of Voin Andreevich, at least in the English-speaking world, seems to me unjustified, and in need of correction. It will be the primary purpose of this article to introduce him and his accomplishments as a naval officer and his talents as a writer to that community of scholars and others interested in the history of the Russian Far East and Russian relations with Asia, in particular Japan.

Although his name has been mentioned in some works of Russo-Japanese or American-Japanese history in English, and Japanese, and omitted in others, it is only in Russian sources that one may find a more complete picture of the man and his achievements and have access to his writings. To my knowledge, none of his writings have been translated into English, Japanese, or other languages. During his lifetime only the few articles he wrote for the nautical journal of the Russian Ministry of the Navy were published, but these did not directly concern his visits to Japan. Some 25 years after his death some of his diaries from the Japan expedition were also published in that same nautical journal. But it has only been comparatively recently that perhaps the most interesting of his writings for students of Russian-Asian relations have emerged into print. This is the book entitled Baltika-Amur, which consists primarily of letters written by Voin Andreevich to his parents and younger brother at home in Russia during his voyage to the far east as commander of the schooner “Vostok“ and his return to European Russia as commander of the corvet “Olivutsa” in the years 1852–1857. These letters were doubtlessly not intended for publication at the time, and, indeed, were not published until more than a hundred years after his death. Nevertheless, we should feel very grateful that they have finally found their way into print, both

1 Goncharov, Frigate Pallada; Lensen, Russia’s Japan Expedition of 1852–55; Statler, Shimoda Story; Wada., Kaikoku-nichiro Kokkyo Kosho.

2 Lensen, The Russian Push Toward Japan
for their literary quality and the additional, and often complementary, information and insights they provide into that historical era of the Crimean War in the far east and the opening of feudal Japan to intercourse with Western nations, other than Holland.

In a previous article, I gave a capsule history of Japanese and European, including Russian, mutual discovery and interaction over some three centuries from 1542 to 1852. My narrative ended with the departure late that latter year of two rival naval expeditions, American and Russian, whose destination was the far east of Asia and whose purpose was, among others, to open Japan to intercourse with America and Russia, respectively. After more than 200 years of enforced isolation from the rest of the world, the possibility of such continued isolation for bakufu Japan had nearly run its course. Although it was the American expedition led by Commodore M.C. Perry which was primarily responsible for opening Japan, the Russian expedition led by Vice-Admiral E.V. Putiatin should also be given some credit for that achievement. It is the latter expedition, as seen and described by one of Putiatin’s junior officers, the commander of the schooner “Vostok”——V.A. Rimsky-Korsakov, which will be our focus. Because of limitations of length, we will confine this article to a description of the long sea voyage to Japan, and the first phase of the Russians’ presence in Japan, as delineated by Lensen, in Nagasaki, from August to November 1853.

However, before launching into a detailed account of his role in this expedition, it would be useful to provide some background information about him and his family. Voin Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov was born on July 14, 1822 on the estate of his mother’s relatives in Maloarkhangelsk district of Orlov province in southern Russia. His father was a government official, who ended his career as the civil governor of Volynsky province. His mother was the daughter of an Orlov province landowner. She received a good domestic education, spoke French fluently, was well-read and loved poetry. It is probable that his parents and his family upbringing had a considerable influence on the formation of his character. He inherited his traits of honesty, directness, independence of views and repugnance for unprincipled careerism from his father. By the time that Voin Andreevich left on his far eastern voyage, his father was already out of favor with his superiors for these same traits of character. During his absence, his parents and his younger brother, Nika, (Nikolai Andreevich) lived in Tikhvin, some 160 kilometers east of St. Petersburg. During his absence he was concerned about his younger brother’s future. Because of the great difference in age between them (22 years) it was almost like the relationship of father to son. Voin Andreevich wished him to follow in his footsteps and become a naval officer. Nika did in fact enter naval cadet school, graduating into the ‘marine guards’. He even completed an overseas voyage on a clipper, and served for several years, reaching the rank of ‘leitenant’. But after the death of his father, and older brother, he gave up a

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3 All dates are given in the Old Style calendar then in use, or (New Style).
naval career to devote himself to his first love—music. His naval training had some effect on his music as he was the first Russian composer in whose works themes of the sea found their proper place.

The Rimsky-Korsakov family produced several career military officers. Voin, which means 'warrior', was named for his great-grandfather, Vice-Admiral Voin Yakovlevich Rimsky-Korsakov, and followed in his naval tradition. At eight years of age he began his nautical education at the naval division of Aleksandrovsky Corps school in Tsarskoe Selo. After three years, he entered the Naval Cadet Corps school in St. Petersburg. At that time, the Director of the school was the famous Russian admiral J.F. Kruzenshtern, who had made an around-the-world sea voyage and visited Nagasaki with Ambassador Rezanov in 1804-05.

In 1837, Voin Andreevich was inducted into the marine guards and served on the fregate “Prozerpina” travelling to various ports of call in the Baltic Sea. After a year he was commissioned as a 'michman' (midshipman) in the Baltic fleet. Michman Voin Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov served on various ships in the Baltic fleet and was promoted to ‘leitenant’ (lieutenant) in 1843. Then he served on various other ships, including service in foreign seas. In 1850 he again served in foreign waters on board the frigate “Pallada”, and in Baltic waters on the frigate “Tsesarevich”. In 1851, he was appointed commander of the tender ship “Lyebed” and showed brilliance in that capacity, which was noticed by the highest officer corps.

His brilliant performance as a commander was in turn brought to the attention of Vice-Admiral Putiatin, who designated him commander of the schooner he was to purchase in England for the purpose of accompanying the frigate “Pallada” on its diplomatic mission to the far east. And thus begins our story. . .

It was on the 26th of August 1852, while stationed at the port of Kronstadt, an island in the Finnish Gulf, west of St. Petersburg, that Voin Andreevich first learned of his assignment to the naval expedition led by Putiatin to Japan and the Amur river basin in far eastern Siberia. As he explains in a letter to his parents dated that day: “today is one of the most decisive days of my life. Until now I have not had to decide anything so quickly, and at the same time so thoughtfully and carefully as today.” He then describes his feelings at the moment when he was first informed of this new assignment by a fellow officer:

I was at first indignant. I thought that I was one of the complement of officers assigned to the Pallada under the command of Unkovsky, but then [he] said that I had been made commander of a sailing schooner which was to be purchased expressly for [the expedition] in England in order to accompany the frigate wherever it went and serve Putiatin as a despatch vessel. Putiatin himself chose me according to the recommendations of several officers known to him, for he himself does not know me.

Voin Andreevich then confirmed what he had been told with his superior officer,
Kapitan leitenant Unkovsky, the commander of the Pallada. The latter told him that he was to travel on the frigate as far as England, and there take possession of the schooner, outfit and prepare it to follow the frigate. As it happened, it was the frigate that followed the schooner most of the way to Japan, but we shall have more to say about that later.

In another letter to his parents three days later, V.A. wrote that “all is decided, . . . I am going on a voyage as commander of the schooner and will be confirmed in that capacity by the highest authority as soon as the ship is christened, that is, given a [new] name”. But in another letter written several days later he reports how he had ‘chased after Putiatin’ intending to refuse the assignment to the expedition but then had agreed and had been so confirmed by Emperor Nicholas I an hour later.

Presumably, one source of his reluctance was the dissatisfaction he had alluded to concerning the length and conditions of his service with the expedition. Thus, he was promised by Putiatin that he would be able to return to Russia within three years, and not compelled to stay in the far east against his will. He does not state the exact reason for his change of heart but we may surmise that it had to do with the above promise.

His participation in the expedition thus determined, Voin Andreevich’s ‘greatest desire at the moment was to go on leave’ and go to Tikhvin to visit his parents and younger brother, Nika. He had been given permission to leave whenever he wanted. Indeed, Putiatin had already left for England at the end of August on a private steamer. But Voin Andreevich was delayed for a few days because of his inability to find a mechanic for the schooner. There were no volunteers and he thought it might be necessary to simply appoint someone.

Delay was a constant accompaniment to the expedition in the beginning. The Pallada was due to leave Kronstadt on September 15 or 20, but was delayed until October 1 and then again until October 5 because of bad weather.

Voin Andreevich was assigned a spacious cabin with Kapitan-leitenant Konstantin Nikolaevich Posyet, who was specially commisioned to serve on the expedition with Putiatin because of his knowledge of Dutch. This was a very suitable and auspicious room assignment as these officers became friends and also served (and roomed) together on a later, smaller expedition to Japan, albeit on a different ship.

As for Voin Andreevich’s relations with Unkovsky, who was together with Posyet, the highest ranking officer next to Putiatin himself, he writes: “[Unkovsky] is very affable and correct towards me, so my position on the frigate is very, very tolerable.” It should be mentioned that although Posyet was three years older than Voin Andreevich, Unkovsky was born the same year. Perhaps for that reason he had at first chafed at the thought of serving under him. Judging by his letters, age seemed to be a very important factor for him and other officers in the Russian navy in considering who would serve under whom. Even as a temporary passenger on the frigate during
the voyage to England, he may have thought their relations might be tense, but his letters confirm that they were the opposite.

Unkovsky's relations with his superior officer, Admiral Putiatin, were in contrast tense and difficult, and deteriorated as the voyage progressed. Lensen quotes V.K. Ietomin that it was "hard to imagine two more different personalities" than theirs. Unkovsky was "idealistic, energetic, devoted to his duties to the extent of self-neglect, and high-strung", whereas Putiatin was "good-natured, religious to the extreme, inclined to monastic discipline, honest, but stubborn and small-minded". Lensen states that Goncharov throws "little light on the character of Putiatin" and relates how the editor of the abridged edition of Frigate Pallada commented that Goncharov said almost nothing about Putiatin's "conceited stupidity" (samodurstvo) and his continued clashes with Unkovsky that nearly ended in a duel. Lensen further reports that they eventually made peace and concluded an agreement whereby Unkovsky remained commander of the Pallada, and Putiatin promised not to interfere in affairs directly within the jurisdiction of the commander.¹

Voin Andreevich also had a serious misunderstanding with Putiatin in connection with the schooner's outfitting in Portsmouth, in England, which caused him to lose respect for and trust in him temporarily. Fortunately, he wrote later that after a private meeting with him he was completely reconciled with him and came to recognize his essential goodness and nobility of character. This did not blind him to his shortcomings as a leader and diplomat in his eyes, however, which he continued to comment upon in his letters. In this sense, Rimsky-Korsakov throws much more light on the character of Putiatin, than does Goncharov.

The Pallada finally sailed from Kronstadt on October 7 (19), 1852. Due to the illness of the senior officer, Voin Andreevich was asked by Unkovsky to replace him, to which he agreed. Thus, he ended up not just being just a passenger after all. This was to the good, he thought, as it kept him "physically and mentally occupied and so kept him from depressing thoughts about all the friends and relatives he was leaving behind, who he loved and felt attached to."

His relations with Unkovsky continued on a good footing. He found him to be a person with many good qualities and an interesting and engaging conversationalist. He had been the favorite adjutant of the late, revered Admiral M.P. Lazarev, and Voin Andreevich thought that he deserved attention and respect for that reason alone.

As for his impressions of Collegiate Assessor I.A. Goncharov, secretary to Admiral Putiatin, he notes:

I also have a pleasant companion, Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov, a man already 40 years old {V.A. was ten years younger}, well-known in our literature for his very interesting novel "An Ordinary Story" . . . which I have read

¹ Lensen, Russia's Japan Expedition, pp. 132-3, 189
with great satisfaction. This Goncharov—an official of the department of foreign trade taken along by Putiatin as his secretary, but undoubtedly, his real role will be to write a history of the expedition. I really wanted to snatch him away to keep me company on the schooner. He would be very pleasant company for me.

However, not too much later, after he had had more contact with him, Voin Andreevich changed his mind about Goncharov and admitted that he had been “somewhat mistaken about him.” He then describes him in rather uncomplimentary terms:

[He] is simply the laziest of epicures, grown fat from full meals and long naps afterwards, a pleasant enough person to converse with, but often hard to bear in company because of his weak-nerved, womanish temperament, which torments him with various fears, causing him to groan and everyone [else] to grieve.

In his book, Goncharov mentions how Voin Andreevich had given him a book to read while still in the Baltic Sea about the history of shipwrecks. “To still your fears”, he had told him. Of course, it had just the opposite effect, which seems to imply that Voin Andreevich was not averse to having a little fun with the navally-inexperienced, and sea-fearing Goncharov.

The voyage to England was not without incident. Near Copenhagen the frigate ran aground on a sandbank. Although it was not damaged, it required a full day of exhausting labor on the part of the crew, according to Voin Andreevich. Then, as they approached England, contrary winds kept them from landing for a few days. Finally, on October 30 at 2 a.m., the frigate was moored in Portsmouth port, on the southern coast of England. Putiatin did not come to meet them. He was expected to arrive from London the next day. Without waiting for him, Voin Andreevich went to have a look at his schooner that very evening. Christened “Fearless” and only eleven months old, she had until then served as a merchant ship transporting fruit in the Mediterranean Sea. Despite the twilight hour, he was able to pronounce her “a beauty” because of her “lovely appearance and graceful lines” and was moved to name her “Coquette”. However, it was Putiatin’s privilege to do so and he rechristened her “Vostok”, meaning ‘east’ in honor of her new mission to the far east of Asia.

Voin Andreevich devoted himself to the outfitting and preparation of the schooner with his characteristic energy and thoroughness. However, mixed with his professional satisfaction was a deep dissatisfaction with his perceived treatment by Putiatin. He thought that the latter showed extreme distrust toward his subordinates, which in the case of a superior is a “grievous fault”. Henceforth, he resolved to have only formal, written dealings with him. However, several weeks later, after the aforementioned private, unofficial meeting with Putiatin, Voin Andreevich learned

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5 Goncharov, Frigate Pallada, p. 24
that his seeming distrust of him was not from deliberate malice, but only the result of an unseemly, disorderly haste. Apparently, Putiatin was in a hurry, and as a recognized Anglocophile, he should have known the English proverb that “Haste makes waste”. But he was seemingly unable by nature to follow its wisdom. Even so, Voin Andreevich recognized him as a “kind, sensitive, noble man, and capable officer”. He thought that he could not wish for a better superior officer. This was a remarkable change in opinion, and a necessary one if he was to perform his role as Putiatin’s trusted chief scout and explorer.

The schooner Vostok and frigate Pallada left Portsmouth January 6, 1853 but the schooner soon parted company with the frigate. They made a rendezvous at Madeira and then not again until Capetown, in South Africa. It was there that Voin Andreevich felt that Putiatin began to have trust in him. As evidence of this trust, from there Putiatian sent the faster schooner ahead, designating another rendezvous in distant Hong Kong. The schooner arrived more or less without mishap, and Voin Andreevich had time to muse about the loss of his engaged, a Russian woman not willing to wait for him to return, and consoles himself (and his parents) by wondering about the chances of his being captivated by some Japanese beauty. Of course, he must have known that such a chance was practically nil.

In contrast, the frigate ran into a severe storm only some 200 miles from Africa. This showed the weakness and unreliability of the frigate for such a long sea voyage and prompted Putiatin to send a courier to Petersburg from Singapore to arrange for the exchange of the Pallada for the newly built frigate “Diana”. On June 13 the Pallada arrived in Hong Kong and met up with the schooner again. After a brief visit to Canton, they made a course for the Bonin islands. The old frigate ran into a typhoon on the way and was seriously damaged. Nevertheless, it managed to make it to the Bonins and anchored at Port Lloyd where it was repaired. At the Bonins the frigate and schooner were joined by the corvet “Olivutsa” from the Kamchatka flotilla, and the transport “Kniaz Menshikov”, belonging to the Russian-American company, to make up the full complement of four ships for the expedition to Japan. It was the first time that so many Russian ships had assembled together in the Pacific Ocean. It was also here that Putatian found two couriers waiting for him with further instructions from Petersburg about how to conduct the negotiations with the Japanese government. These instructions told the admiral to proceed to Nagasaki to open negotiations and to avoid going to Edo, if at all possible, to avoid antagonizing the Japanese.6 In Hong Kong, Voin Andreevich was under the impression that the Russian squadron would go directly to Edo after the Bonins, and supposed that the American expedition under Commodore Perry was already there. Thus, Putiatin may have been planning to go there as well at that time. But the Russian squadron never went there; Nagasaki was

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6 Lensen, Russia’s Japan Expedition, p. 167
its destination and would be the first location for its mission to open Japan.

The full squadron of four ships left the Bonins on August 4 and was blessed with incomparable weather for the voyage: the most favorable winds and an exceedingly calm sea. The schooner was taken in tow by the frigate and in this way all four ships could stay together and covered the 600 miles to Nagasaki in 6 days. They arrived at the entrance to Nagasaki harbor on the evening of August 9 (21), 1853 and spent the night under sail. The following morning was clear and sunny and, forming a line, the four ships moved toward the harbor entrance. All four ships displayed a sign on their masts in Japanese meaning 'Russian ship'. What happened after that is described in vivid detail by Voin Andreevich:

At the very entrance [to the harbor] the wind died down completely and we came to a standstill. At this time from out of the depths of the bay appeared several large rowboats and from afar we heard the monotonous, timed chants of the oarsmen similar to the Javanese Malaysians.

From Javanese to Japanese! Voin Andreevich had spent some time on the island of Java on the way to Hong Kong. He continues:

...there were four boats each with eight oarsmen, who were completely naked except for a piece of cloth wrapped around their waist and between their legs and with shaven heads, except for a small bundle of long hair tied together at the crown of their heads. Their swarthy and light-brown complexions, expressive faces and rather correct features without flattened noses, swollen lips, or prominent cheekbones together with their powerful rowing which showed off their muscular limbs, all gave the boatmen an energetic and even somewhat wild appearance. A poet might imagine that he saw before him one of those Algerian or Tunisian galleys that at times spread terror on the Mediterranean Sea.

From Java to the Mediterranean! Voin Andreevich seems to have something like a poet’s imagination himself. He must have known that Japan was a highly civilized country, but he was struck by the wild and pirate-like appearance of the first Japanese boatmen that he sees. This description agrees with that of Goncharov’s in respect to the appearance of such boats to meet them and the ‘nakedness’ of the oarsmen, but differs in other respects, which gives rise to the question of whose is more accurate. Such an analysis lies beyond the scope of this article however. The truth may be that both were simply seeing and focusing on different aspects of the same event, and interpreting (and imagining) it differently.

Voin Andreevich goes on to describe how in the prow of each boat stood a man, as ‘naked’ as the oarsmen, who held something like a broom and waved it back and forth to the beat of the oars. In the stern of each boat was a small cabin decorated with different colored cloths. Each one of the boats secured itself to one of the Russian ships. Each boat carried officials and interpreters sent by the governor of Nagasaki.
They brought a paper to each boat with questions written in Dutch, with English and French translations. According to Voin Andreevich, only two of the questions were different from the standard series of questions asked visiting ships in Chinese or even colonial European ports. This is an observation that only an experienced naval officer like himself would be likely to make. The first one was a warning that any ship from Holland or another nation that has business in Japan has a right to enter only one port —Nagasaki. The second asked: Are there any Japanese rescued from wrecked ships? Voin Andreevich surmised that these two questions had been inserted only recently because of the fact that European ships had more than once used such pretexts to enter Edo and other Japanese ports. He does not give any examples, however.

Then Voin Andreevich describes further how at first the paper was passed up to the ship on a long pole, but afterwards when they agreed to enter [the harbor] the interpreter got out of the boat himself. Each interpreter was accompanied by three or four officials. He wasn't sure whether they were the same age or rank as the interpreter, but he was sure that they were officials because of the fact that they each wore a long sword and a knife. This was information that he had got from reading the narrative of Captain Golovnin.

Almost all the officials were addressed exactly alike in their haori-hakama, which seemed to him to look like women's clothing. He also thought that the officials wore their weapons very clumsily, without a military bearing, although the weapons themselves were very stylish. The officials all had a proper, tidy appearance, were all clean shaven, and relaxed in their manners, and had almost European-type faces, much less swarthy and expressive than those of the oarsmen.

It is interesting that Voin Adreevich sees such a contrast in the appearance of the oarsmen and the officials and chooses to write about it in such detail. As an aristocrat himself, perhaps he was used to making such a distinction between Russian aristocrats and the commoners and serfs.

He related further how while the answers to the questions were being drafted, the officials were treated to wine, which they drank very eagerly, and shown around the ship. They looked at everything with the greatest attention, but without any signs of especial surprise. Voin Andreevich had no one that he could speak Dutch with so he had to communicate by using signs, presumably by using the hands and fingers and other parts of the body. When the Japanese talked to each other, he thought their language sounded very pleasant and rich with vowels. In this latter respect, he was surely not mistaken.

When the answers had all been written, the officials went back on deck and respectfully bowed and then returned to the city in the same boats. Meanwhile, the Russian ships were still at a standstill from lack of wind. About three hours later another, larger boat came, bringing many more, higher-ranking officials. He calls these 'baniosi'. They were sent to Admiral Putiation from the Nagasaki governor with
an invitation to enter the middle, or second, Nagasaki roadstead, as it was the widest and safest.

A quiet breeze soon blew in to fill the sails of the four Russian ships and move them toward Nagasaki. Long before the reaching the middle roadstead they were met by a mass of little boats festooned with curious, decorative, colorful flags and and signs hung by pieces of paper. From all sides resounded the merry refrains of the oarsmen. He describes how the environs of Nagasaki were developed and cultivated to the last scrap of land, and in bloom. Picturesque to the highest degree, they gleamed in the reddish rays of the setting sun. Everything breathed a welcome and a seemingly good omen. In the narrowest passage through the little islands, clothed in the most luxurious emerald green, the frigate struck up a hymn, and slowly, solemnly, as if in a ceremonial march, the squadron entered into the roadstead and within a few minutes dropped anchor. He then describes the Russians' feelings at that moment:

Our patriotic feelings were aroused, and I am sure all, as I was, were suffused with a pleasant awareness of the dignity of the Russian flag, under whose protection four ships had fearlessly appeared to open an empire of thirty million souls.

Voin Andreevich was sent by the admiral on a special reconnaissance mission to Sakhalin only a week after the above-described arrival. However, just before he left he had time to write in another letter to his parents that the Japanese had received them very tolerably, that is, they constrain them less than they had all previous expeditions, but still do not allow them to take one step onto shore. Moreover, only communication with the police-like officials is allowed. However, it seemed to him that their mission could have a successful outcome.

After this letter, Voin Andreevich sails the schooner northward to Sakhalin and the Tartar Strait. He does not return to Nagasaki for more than two months, on Nov. 4. Yet while he is away from Nagasaki he writes to his parents more than once about his impressions of Nagasaki and the Japanese and describes in great detail the events in which he participated during that first week.

Arriving back in Nagasaki on Nov. 4, Voin Andreevich made a full report of his activities and discoveries in the Sakhalin and Amur areas and was thanked by Putiatin. The latter then asked whether he preferred a promotion in rank or a medal in reward for his services. He chose the promotion and so wrote to his parents that he would soon be promoted to the rank of ‘kapitan-leitenant’, the same rank as Unkovsky, and Posyet. A few days later, Putiatin asked him whether he would like to return to Russia as a courier with the information that he had collected on Sakhalin and the Amur. After thinking about it, he chose to stay with the expedition in the far east, and explained the reasoning behind his decision to his parents, asking for their blessing.

Putiatin and all the officers and men of the Pallada stayed in Nagasaki for three
months. Voin Andreevich and the Vostok, however, spent only two weeks in Nagasaki during that first visit—one week at the beginning and one week at the end. Therefore, by his own admission, he was more acquainted with the Japanese from what he read and heard, rather than his own observations. However, he rightly points out that the officers of the Pallada-Putiatin, Unkovsky, Posyet, Goncharov, Goshkevich et.al. were not so much more knowledgeable than him despite their three-month uninterrupted stay. For, after all, they could not find out very much themselves about the lives of the Japanese when they were not allowed to go ashore and had to resort to looking through telescopes. They could have contact only with Japanese officials during their official visits to the Russian ships and from whom they could find out nothing about Japan. He finds the reason for this to be their “system of mutual surveillance developed among Japanese of all classes to such an extreme degree that none of them dare to be alone with any of us even for a minute, much less to engage in conversation”.

This is an interesting, and ironic, observation when one considers that it is the Russians themselves, particularly under the former 20th Century Soviet totalitarian Communist regime, who were famous for exactly that sort of mutual spying upon among themselves. Yet here is a kind of 19th century totalitarianism, actually in existence since the early 17th century. Could it be that the Japanese Tokugawa regime the Edo bakufu, perfected the totalitarian system before Russia? Of course, in Russia the tsars beginning with Ivan the Terrible, at least, had their secret police and their spies among the people. Even the Russian government at that time was very authoritarian and repressive of dissent, under the autocratic Nicholas I. Yet one may assume that the Russians did not suffer under a such a system of mutual espionage, or else it would not have so impressed Voin Andreevich. One also may wonder how he can say that such mutual spying upon is prevalent among all classes of Japanese, when he only met the official, samurai class, and a few oarsmen.

On this topic Voin Andreevich himself relates how very limited were the Russians’ contacts with the Japanese:

Not one trading boat ventured to approach our ships. No unofficial visitors were allowed. Only once during his three-month stay was Putiatin with all his staff allowed to go ashore for an official visit with the governor. Even then, all the streets from the quay to the audience hall were decked on both sides by enormous paper curtains. How zealously do the Japanese hide themselves from the inquisitive glances of foreigners!

However, there was nothing that the Russians could do about it. They could not demand that the curtains be removed without breaking the rules for their interaction with the Japanese, without the use of force.

Voin Andreevich analyzed in incisive, imaginative fashion the delicate intercultural situation that the Russians faced during those first visits to Nagasaki:
They have one weapon—politeness, before which everyone yields. Imagine that you have to enter the house of a person who doesn't understand your language and doesn't want you to enter. [Yet] he stands at the doorway and replies to all your requests only with respectful bows and courteous smiles. What will you order to be done with him! Our particular relationship to the Japanese is on that sort of footing...

How similar this sounds to other much more recent, and even contemporary, descriptions of Japanese behavior toward foreigners, especially Europeans or North Americans. All politeness on the surface, but underneath... what feelings are lurking? Of course, all cultures, including western cultures, practice this sort of dissembling to some extent, human social interaction would probably not be possible without it. Yet to western eyes it has generally seemed more developed and perfected among non-westerners and led to stereotypes of the 'devious, duplicitous, dishonest Oriental'.

When the Russians needed fresh provisions, they had to ask the Nagasaki governor for them, and then the latter would send all that they requested as a gift. The Russians would accept it, and then Putiatin would offer to present them with a few items in return. But the governor would refuse, saying that he cannot accept any presents from the Russians without permission from Edo. But in many instances, the Russians could threaten to go directly to Edo to obtain what was not available in Nagasaki. This threat was very effective, and enabled them to begin receiving provisions for payment. But even here the Nagasaki authorities, according to Voin Andreevich, found a means to avoid direct monetary dealings with Japanese officials or non-officials. Provisions were sent via the Dutch factory and it would then receive payment from its own government, which in turn would be paid by the Russian government, thus forcing the Russians to pay their own government for necessary provisions. Such was the roundabout process that the Japanese invented to prevent any direct trade or monetary dealing between Russians and Japanese. It is also reminiscent of modern totalitarian systems.

Although the Russians were not allowed on shore, except for the few ceremonial, official visits to the governor, or afterwards, to the plenipotentiaries, they were able to explore the different coves and inlets of Nagasaki Bay despite the efforts of the Japanese to prevent them. Voin Andreevich relates how the Russian cutters were able to break through the rings of Japanese guard boats surrounding their ships and consistently outmaneuver them. It was this latter activity which provided the greatest amusement for the frustrated Russian sailors.

We are fed up with sitting on our ships, and so since they positively won't allow us to go ashore, we want to ride around on our launches in order to at least see from the water what we cannot see through our telescopes, or is hidden by the bends in the shoreline. The Japanese quickly surround our ships with a chain of boats, connected with each other by a rope. We tell them they
don’t have a right to surround us like that, but they answer that they are not
doing it to enchain us but only to prevent their private boats with trade goods
or visitors from approaching us, because their law forbids any private individ-
uals from trading or having any dealings with foreigners.
Then he goes on to describe how the Russians dealt with this situation:
In the beginning we went out only in a fresh wind, when the Japanese boats
could not defend their positions, but later we began to knock against their
boats as if by accident, and ultimately, as soon as the first boat appeared to
set up the chain, we sent out our launch to pull out its anchor and pull it to one
side under the pretext that there might be an accident, and we cannot get by
without communication between [our] ships. This tactic worked very well,
and the Japanese soldiers did not once resist, and they soon stoped chaining
their boats together.

It seemed to Voin Andreevich that in this sense the Japanese were more concerned
with a formal show rather than a real attempt to prevent the Russian’s freedom of
movement. He noted how a guard boat would be posted at some point, but make no
effort to defend it against Russian boats that encroached upon it. Because this would
have led to a clash of armed boats and general hostilities. In order to avoid such an
outcome, he reasoned, the Japanese were willing to make all concessions, “because
they are not militaristic, and very weak militarily—which weaker than a whole crowd of
unarmed children against a strong armed man”.

And the vaunted Japanese samurai that he encountered faired hardly better in his
estimation: “The Japanese soldier in all the majesty of his vestments and weaponry
does not frighten the most timid old woman.” He reveals that some of the Japanese
officials’ short swords were wooden, as were many of the cannon in the Japanese
fortifications. As for those fortifications, he adds: “Nothing is more laughable than
the Nagasaki fortifications, and they undoubtedly are the strongest in the whole
Japanese empire.”

These were the kinds of images of Japan and the Japanese that prevailed and
persisted in Russia and the West until their shocking victory in the Russo-Japanese
war some fifty years later. Both Goncharov and Rimsky-Korsakov were describing
the non-militaristic, non-threatening samurai officials that they met and the sorry
state of Japanese fortifications and general military backwardness at the time of their
visit. Many of those who later read Goncharov’s descriptions, and those of others,
made the mistake of generalizing to all of Japan and to the future military potential
of Japanese armed forces. Captain Golovnin’s account of his two-year captivity
among the Japanese seems to have been less widely read in Russia than Goncharov’s
Frigate Pallada. Therefore, such damaging stereotypes of Japanese military weakness
had taken firm root, and led to disastrous consequences for Russia only 50 years later.

Naturally with such insignificant armaments and unthreatening warriors the
Japanese could not be too aggressive in their demands toward the Russians. And, Voin Andreevich concludes, "if [policy] did not force us to be compliant, we could have long ago landed [our boats] on the shore and gone for a stroll. However, after all, why tread on the customs of a people only because they cannot punish you for it?"

The Japanese officials and interpreters came to the frigate almost every day. Each time they were given tea and sweet wine. But Putiatin never talked to them about trifles, but delegated that duty to his two secretaries—Posyet and Goncharov. Posyet was also the interpreter for Dutch. Since V. A. was not in Nagasaki during this time, he must have heard about these visits and the detailed negotiations that went on during them from them or from Putiatin himself.

Nevertheless, he himself had enough experience with the Japanese later to write that they were “formalistic to the point of pedantry, for whom there was no detail which they would not listen to with strict attention and grave faces.” As for the negotiations themselves, “they generally display both thoughtfulness, deliberation, resourcefulness, tact, and above all, a devilish patience.” He notes with an air of incredulity how the negotiations about the ceremony of the admiral’s meeting with the Nagasaki governor (at which he was not present) had gone on all week, and how one entire day had been devoted to the questions of where and how the governor would greet the admiral.

Voin Andreevich was struck by the neatness and tidiness of the Japanese at first glance. He was also very impressed by the quality of workmanship of the Japanese boats. He describes the clothing and appearance of the Japanese he saw and met in detail, and also their physiognomy. He saw ‘not a few women’ on boats passing by the Russian ships and had a chance to notice among them ‘some rather attractive faces’. He did not have a chance to become captivated by any of them, however, as he had mused earlier. He noted that the women dressed very simply, in grey or blue colors, as generally preferred in Japan. He liked their hair styles, and thought that “even fashionable European ladies, especially brunettes, would not be averse to having their hair done ‘a la Japonaise’”.

Returning to Nagasaki from his mission to Sakhalin and the Amur basin on November 4, Voin Andreevich was a week and half later than Putiatin had told him to return and so he half expected that the latter had already left Nagasaki. About 2 miles from the entrance to the harbor the schooner was met by some Japanese guard boats who passed him up a document on a pole. He asked in broken German with a Dutch accent if the frigate was still there, and received a positive answer. The document was written in French with an English translation. It ordered all foreign ships to anchor west of the entrance to the first roadstead, and warned of serious consequences for any ship which disobeyed this order. However, the Vostok had previously anchored far east of this line, together with the other Russian ships, by invitation of the Nagasaki governor, and Voin Andreevich caught sight of the frigate
still calmly anchored in the middle roadstead. He wrote in answer that he could only take orders from Admiral Putiatin and would therefore proceed directly to him, wherever he was. Judging by such a document, he expected that matters had taken an unfavorable turn in his absence and anxiously hastened toward the frigate. But the admiral came to meet him halfway and boarded the schooner. The news that Voin Andreevich brought concerning the presence of coal on Sakhalin and the navigability of the Amur river was very good and Putiatin was very pleased. When he mentioned the 'insolent note' he had been given, Putiatin advised him to pay no attention to it. He said that they had already been given many such notes and had calmly done the opposite, and the Japanese had stopped making such threats. Apparently, it was the first time for Voin Andreevich to receive one.

This incident shows once again the obsession on the part of the Nagasaki authorities of making a formal show of prohibition, but stopping short of a real effort to enforce prohibition. It also shows the contradictoriness of orders. The Russian ships had already advanced into the second roadstead in August by the governor's order, but now they were trying to prevent the returning Vostok from rejoining them. Did they really expect the Vostok to remain apart from the other Russian ships? It is more likely that they were simply acting to protect themselves from their own government by attempting to enforce its unenforceable, and increasingly senseless prohibitions. Voin Andreevich thought that this incident was 'truly characteristic of all the insignificance of Japanese might'. One might add as well that it was representative of all the futility and contradictions of a feudal, totalitarian regime dedicated to 'repulsing the barbarians' and deriving its authority therefrom, when confronting a mid-19th century industrial military power. It is no wonder that its officials from the bottom up should be thus scrambling to take a formalistic route to self-preservation.

Voin Andreevich reported that nothing special happened that last week in Nagasaki after his return, except that Putiatin declared that he could no longer wait for the plenipotentiaries to arrive from Edo, and that he was leaving for Shanghai. At this point, the Japanese officials began to make a fuss, and tried to persuade Putiatin to stay. According to Voin Andreevich, the reason for their concern was the letter that Putiatin had given to be forwarded to Edo. The Nagasaki governor was afraid that the letter contained complaints about him. Putiatin had also written a letter to the Nagasaki governor that was rather critical and severe in tone, but which the latter had not been at all offended by. However, he could not be so indifferent to the letter to Edo. Thus, he ordered his subordinates to try and ascertain the contents of the letter to Edo. They came to the frigate and tried to persuade Putiatin to stay longer, but he refused. On the morning of their planned departure, they came again and announced that the plenipotentiaries were on their way to Nagasaki. But Voin Andreevich was convinced it was merely a ruse to detain the admiral in Nagasaki. Up to that time the governor had been insisting that they had not yet left Edo. In light of this news, they
asked the admiral whether he didn't want to change anything in his letter to Edo. But the latter replied that he saw no need to do that. Voin Andreevich was a witness to these discussions along with Unkovsky and Goncharov (Posyet?) and reports that it was at this moment that they realized that the Japanese were afraid that there was some complaint in the letter. Oddly enough, Goncharov does not mention this discussion or this fear on the part of the Japanese. Voin Andreevich thought it would have been good to make use of this fear to squeeze some information from them as to the exact whereabouts of the plenipotentiaries. But he laments that Putiatin failed to do this. He was surprised by the tact, patience and attention to detail shown by these Japanese diplomats of lower rank as they devoted themselves to the difficult task of discovering what there was no need and desire to tell them. He concludes:

It was apparent that in the course of three months they had very well discerned the admiral’s character. By various questions and propositions put with extreme skillfulness, they achieved their aim. The admiral informed them that we were going to Shanghai and that we would return in 6 weeks time. He hoped to find the plenipotentiaries in Nagasaki at that time and in the contrary situation he would go directly to Edo. As soon as the impatient admiral had blurted out this information the officials’ faces brightened and the boat sent to the governor, certainly by some Masonic signal, returned with the news that nothing was known about the plenipotentiaries whereabouts. On this note we left Nagasaki.

This passage reveals the respect in which, if only grudgingly, the Japanese officials’ diplomatic skills were held by Voin Andreevich, and the disappointment in the negotiating skills of his own admiral. He also discloses his deep suspicions of the Japanese officials’ duplicity, and ‘Masonic-like’ secrecy.

He laments how, in contrast, the Russians could have scarcely succeeded in extracting such information from the Japanese, much less any trivial details of private life.

Their politics is in the highest degree suspicious, and supported by a system of mutual espionage, resembling the Jesuit [system], such that scarcely any Japanese of lower rank would agree to say anything without prior permission, about even the most insignificant details of private life of someone of higher rank, especially to a foreigner... This mutual espionage hangs like a sword of Damocles over every Japanese.

Under this system, if someone does not report about the suspicious activity of someone else, then that person himself runs the risk of being reported as an accomplice by others, and so on. Voin Andreevich found it hard to understand how such a ‘reprehensible system’ could have evolved to such a state of perfection. But he recalls that “after all, even we [Russia] at some time had the [system of] ‘word and deed’. This was a system of denunciation and searches for governmental crimes that emerged
in 16th century Russia. If his comparison with the Jesuits is accurate, given their history of contact with Japan in the 16th and 17th centuries one might wonder if the Japanese borrowed it from them, or vice versa?

He also was sufficiently impressed by one of the interpreters, Moriyama Einosuke by name, to describe him and his predicament in his letters. He thought that he was a ‘presentable gentleman’ who could speak a little English and wrote Dutch well, and had “tasted of European enlightenment to such an extent that it was painful for him to submit to the ludicrous conditions of Japanese ceremonialism.” He reports how Einosuke asked them with curiosity about Europe, but how he had little freedom in this regard because of the system of mutual spying upon. One of his colleagues was likely to denounce him for talking to the Russians too much in an unfamiliar language. He thus decided not to go into any Russian’s cabin for more than half a minute without an accompanying witness.

This marks the end of [V.A.’s] description of the expedition’s first visit to Nagasaki. His description of the expedition’s return visit to Nagasaki beginning on December 23, 1853 (January 5, 1854), and the later expedition to Hakodate and Shimoda (Nov.-Dec. 1856) in which he participated will be the topic of the next article in this series on the history of Japanese and Russian mutual discovery and interaction. Then I will finish the story of Voin Andreevich’s five-year voyage to the far east of Asia and back to Kronstadt and Petersburg.

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