Russian Japanology Review, 2022, 2, pp. 85–94
DOI: 10.55105/2658-6444-2022-2-85-94

The Meiji Revolution: 100 and 150 Years Later (Nikolai Konrad and the Paradoxes of His "Progress")

A. N. Meshcheryakov

Abstract. Using the example of the article "The Centenary of the Japanese Revolution" (1968) by the outstanding Japanologist Nikolai Konrad, the author examines his understanding of the "Meiji Revolution". Holding on, by and large, to the Marxist views on history, Nikolai Konrad turned out to be surprisingly close to "bourgeois" historians in understanding the Meiji Revolution. The "bourgeois" and Soviet historians (including Konrad himself), who were in conflict relations, consistently qualified the Meiji Revolution as a "progressive" (positive) event that introduced Japan to the "world" (i.e., Western and the only one possible) civilization. Marxist and "bourgeois" thinkers differed in their assessment of the future (whether or not communism was the highest stage of progress), but their view of the Japanese past showed amazing unanimity. The keenness on the theory of progress was so all-embracing that Nikolai Konrad's assessments of specific historical phenomena of the Tokugawa period demonstrate outright error and bias. None of the "advanced" European countries could boast of such a long-lasting social peace as that which we observe in the Tokugawa period, which, however, did not prevent Konrad (as well as other Western historians) from branding the Tokugawa rule as "reactionary" and "stagnant".

Keywords: Meiji Revolution, N. I. Konrad, progress, soviet historiography, marxism, concept of "progress"

The year 1968 saw the centenary of the Meiji Revolution. In Japan, it was celebrated on an unprecedented scale. Since then, as many as 50 years have passed. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the revolution, such magnificent celebrations do not seem to be expected. However, this does not mean that the historical significance of the revolution has decreased. This event took place once and for all, and it cannot be changed. However, the people who reflect on it continue to change, with their attitudes and perspectives transforming. Generations change, and the distance from which they look at the Japan of 1868 is increasing. Something can be seen better, something worse. But no one has yet questioned the fact that, as a result of the revolution, the fate and fortune of Japan changed in the most decisive way.

Fifty years ago, Nikolai Konrad published the article "The Centenary of the Japanese Revolution", in which he presented his view of this event. Konrad was not only an academician; he was a subtle and knowledgeable person. It is to him that the now forgotten primacy belongs: he was the first in the world to translate *Ise Monogatari*, one of the fundamental texts of the Japanese Middle Ages. He translated it subtly, inventively, and in a peculiar way, creating an example of translation that was consulted by all subsequent researchers and translators of Japanese literature. The language for translations of old Japanese literature had not yet been developed; he had to be a pioneer who, under the influence of the hungry, bloody, and free air of the first years of the Bolshevik revolution, did not hesitate to experiment with his native language. In the preface to *Ise Monogatari*, Nikolai Konrad explained the ideas of his translation in the following way: "There are very few principles on which translation is based, and they are very simple: loyalty to the original in its images, in the sequence of these images, and in their emotional content. Therefore, I sometimes consciously sacrifice the correct course of a Russian phrase to create that specific emotional contour that I thought existed in the Japanese text." [Konrad 1921, p. 34].

Later, Nikolai Konrad had to adapt to the changing tastes of the communist regime for the rest of his life, dry his style, and twist his

thought. The Communists put him in jail, they squeezed him dry, but Konrad also squeezed everything possible out of the situation at every opportunity. He literally "dragged" Japanese classical (aristocratic!) literature through the workers'-and-peasants' censorship, attributing to this literature a variety of meanings that met the current Soviet requirements. In his works of the 1920s, he honestly talks about the aestheticism, sophistication, and hedonism of his favorite Heian literature. In the 1930s, he turned *Genji Monogatari* into a "full-fledged realistic novel" [The Orient 1935, p. 11]. After the war, when Soviet ideology began to praise everything folk, he began to assert that Japanese aristocratic poetry was a continuation of folk poetry. "Folk culture was a source of literary poetry not only in historical terms, but also in the sense that the latter, even after becoming an independent branch of poetry writing, continued to use a variety of images and techniques created in folk poetry." [Gluskina & Markova 1954, p. 4].

Today we can only smile understandingly and condescendingly at such maneuverability, but the work was being done: despite the repression, executions, and censorship, Nikolai Konrad himself, his colleagues, students, and followers did a lot to ensure that Japanese aristocratic literature brightened up the Soviet cultural landscape.

Nikolai Konrad was a man with a broad outlook, contemplating not only on literature and culture – history was also part of his range of interests. And the centenary of the Meiji Revolution did not leave him indifferent. In the article "The Centenary of the Japanese Revolution" he summarized his thoughts [Konrad 1974]. Half a century has passed since then; scholarship has moved presumably forward. It makes sense to see where it was going from and where it has managed to arrive. Konrad was not a fiery communist, but the general intellectual atmosphere forced him – both voluntarily and involuntarily – to adhere to the basic Marxist views on history. One of the main axioms of this discourse is the fatalistic doctrine of socio-economic formations, according to which all societies are "doomed" to go through the same stages – from savagery to communism. This understanding of the historical process was one of the sources of the

most powerful discourse that took hold of Europe in modern times. This discourse is called "progress". Despite the objections of some skeptics and retrogrades, it is absolutely prevailing today. At one time, which was especially clearly revealed in the 18th century, "progress" made a real revolution in European minds. Traditional society (including European society) considered the past to be a lost ideal, while progressives believed that the present was better than the past, and the future would be better than the present. All progressive theories are Eurocentric because they recognize Europe as the norm. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Soviet and "bourgeois" historians, who were in conflict relations, consistently qualified the Meiji Revolution as a "progressive" (positive) event that introduced Japan to the "world" (i.e., Western and the only one possible) civilization. Marxist and "bourgeois" thinkers differed in their assessment of the future (whether or not communism was the highest stage of progress), but their view of the Japanese past demonstrates an amazing unanimity: Tokugawa-era Japan was a stagnant state and – glory to Progress! It is a good thing it does not exist anymore.

With this approach, the irrevocable fact completely falls out of sight that, after the suppression of the Shimabara Rebellion of 1637 (in which Konrad, for mystical reasons, sees the prologue of the bourgeois revolution), Japan entered a period of stability and peace. Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the shogun dynasty, and his descendants managed to form a system that proved to be strong for two and a half centuries: the country did not know either external or internal wars, and there were no rebellions. The peasant "uprisings", about which Marxist historians spoke with great fervor, took the form of a petition movement. At the same time, peasant petitions did not demand the impossible. For the most part, the "rebels" asked to be freed from the arbitrariness of a local official. At times, such petitions were filed with insubordination, over the head of the immediate superior, which was strictly prohibited. In this case, the typical outcome was the execution of the instigators and the satisfaction of their demands. Nikolai Konrad's reference to the uprising of Ōshio Heihachirō (1837), accompanied by the destruction

of rice shops, in which the scholar sees evidence of the revolutionary potential of the "masses of the people", lasted for two days and was impressive not so much with its scope (about 300 people participated in it) as with its exclusivity. In any case, the legitimacy of the power of the shogun or daimyo was never questioned. This was also facilitated by the fact that the elite made sufficiently high demands on themselves, which helped to significantly minimize corruption and lawlessness. None of the "advanced" European countries could boast of such a long social peace, which did not prevent Western historians from branding the Tokugawa regime as "reactionary" and "stagnant".

Konrad's main task was to show the uniformity of the historical process in Europe and in Japan. The passionate desire to see Japan as a Western analogue prompted Konrad to claim that the Tokugawa shogunate was an absolutist regime. This, of course, is a far-fetched argument. Under absolutism, someone (usually a monarch) has unlimited power. The Japanese emperor clearly did not have such power. Did the shogun possess it? It is hardly possible to answer this question in the affirmative. Can the government be considered absolutist if there are no national taxes in the country? There were no such taxes in Japan. Under absolutist government, a nationwide army and a unified judicial system are established, and a unified economic policy is carried out. All institutions and rules tend to be unified and centralized. However, under the Tokugawa rule, we do not observe anything like this. The essence of absolutism is "unite and rule", the essence of the Tokugawa rule is "divide and rule", the fragmentation of society into estates, domains, and territories with different customs and status. The Tokugawa shoguns did not try to achieve excessive centralization and unification. The general course in relation to the domains was not their integration, but the fixation of the type of relations that had existed under Ieyasu. It was not only a political, but also a worldview conviction: Ieyasu bequeathed it to his descendants to leave the customs and manners of the provinces that were part of Japan unchanged, stating: what is good for some is not suitable for others.

Nikolai Konrad implemented his idea of the uniformity of the historical process in the West and the East wherever he could, including the theory of the "Oriental Renaissance" that he intensively promoted, which is curious only for its memorable originality. Being in voluntary captivity to his Marxist holism, Konrad had to justify the thesis that the Meiji Revolution was not so much a result of foreign intervention as a consequence of the internal development of the country during the Tokugawa period. "What helped Japan a hundred years ago to make this revolution, so necessary for further economic and social development?" asks the author [Konrad 1974, p. 189]. And he answers that, despite a favorable international situation, which distracted the forces of the Western powers from Japan, the main factor is the internal one: "Of course, first of all, the conditions inside the country, the presence in Japanese society of forces ripe for revolutionary action." With this approach, the provocative role of the West, whose direct intervention provoked the civil war, recedes into the background. This approach – willingly or unwittingly – justifies the "advanced" Western expansionism, which brought so much grief to the "backward" Orient.

Konrad believes that "the bourgeois revolution in Japan was neither an accident nor a historical paradox. The country approached it being quite prepared: it had a developed economy, a national market for many types of goods, good communication routes, and a developed banking system; it had a large, highly educated, and very active intelligentsia; there were various currents of social thought, which formed the ideological ground for revolutionary transformations. Finally, by that time, Japanese society had already formed into the whole that historians call a nation at this stage of social development." [Konrad 1974, p. 195].

In the above assessment, too many provisions look extremely controversial. Japanese peasants really had a fairly high productivity, which allowed them to feed about 30 million people. However, this was achieved primarily through the intensification of the labor process, and there was no scientific and technological progress or industrial revolution. The institution of science did not exist; the Dutch scholars (*rangakusha*), about whom Donald Keene first wrote with such biased

love in 1952 ("The Japanese Discovery of Europe"), were so few that it would be at least short-sighted to talk about their influence on the overall situation. However, Konrad, being a representative of a seemingly competing historical school, fully agreed with Keene – both of them stood for progress. And this despite the fact that, in Japan, no concept of "progress" was developed (it was believed that the "golden age" remained in the distant past; it was necessary to try to somehow match it, but this was recognized as an impossible task). A "national market", of course, did not exist and could not exist: the country was divided into two and a half hundred domains, and many of them had their own monetary system. The market is based on the free movement of goods and people. However, the Japanese were assigned to their place of residence; the roads were narrow; there was no wheeled and horse-drawn transport; the construction of large ships was prohibited. Indeed, there was a rice exchange in Osaka, and coastal transportation was in evidence, but, of course, this could not ensure the existence of a "national market". The statement about the existence of the "Japanese nation" does not correspond to the facts. A person's identity was determined not through a "nation", but through a clan, family, village, province, or domain. Even the word "Japanese" appears very rarely in Tokugawa texts. This is not surprising: the country was closed to entry and exit, therefore, the situation of a meeting (and hence the opposition) of a "Japanese" and a "foreigner" happened extremely rarely. The school of "national doctrine" (*kokugaku*), from which Japanese nationalism stemmed during the Meiji period, was a peripheral trend which did not enjoy state support.

Generally speaking, there were no internal prerequisites for the bourgeois revolution, and it could not have taken place without the influence of an external factor. However, within the samurai class, there were forces that made a political coup. These were the domains that opposed Tokugawa and had been defeated two and a half centuries ago. The shogunate discriminated them by assigning the insulting status of "outsiders" (*tozama*). Their thirst for revenge did not go away, but it was in a latent state for a long time. Representatives of these domains

(first of all, Satsuma and Choshu), with the support of Great Britain, overthrew the Tokugawa dynasty. It was them who came to power and ruled the country for the next 50 years. These samurai carried out revolutionary reforms that transformed the country from feudal to capitalist. The role of the townspeople ("bourgeoisie") and peasants in the implementation of the bourgeois revolution is approaching zero. The "numerous highly educated and very active intelligentsia" that Konrad speaks about are, first of all, samurai from the southwestern domains. It is extremely curious that, having spoken about the prerequisites of the Meiji Revolution, Konrad did not say a word about what it was. Nothing is said about the really large-scale transformations that were carried out after the political coup. Nothing is said, perhaps because it was so difficult to reconcile the positive poetic image of the concept of "revolution" peculiar to communists with what happened afterwards.

To put it in a nutshell, the following happened: Japan really made an amazing leap from feudalism to capitalism, carried out industrialization, created a more or less modern economy, introduced educational (universal compulsory primary education) and military service, built the Japanese nation at an accelerated pace, became competitive in the world imperialist scene, turned into a "normal" imperialist militarized state, began a series of victorious wars, and acquired colonies. All these "acquisitions" entailed ruthless destruction of local cultures and of the former social environment, growing nationalist sentiments, and an increase in the number of mental disorders and suicides.

Having integrated into the Western paradigm of "progress", Japan became a participant in the globalist project with all the resulting gains, losses, and problems. There is no doubt: if Japan had not embarked on the path of modernization (Westernization), it would inevitably have become someone's colony. But the price of independence also proved to be exceptionally high. Should we forget about this when talking about the "progressive" meaning of the Meiji Revolution? But somehow it was not that common to talk about it. Let us face the truth; it is not customary now. There are dissidents, of course, but dissidents are expected to have their voices drowned in the enthusiastic information noise.

And the point is not at all Marxism, which does not enjoy its former popularity today, but the very concept of "progress", which hardly takes in facts that do not fit into the coherent theory. The arrangement of the country's historical development prevailing in modern Japan in recent times was suggested not by the Soviet (Marxist) historiography, but by the American one, with its reverence for "democracy". According to this arrangement, Japan has been developing in a progressive and desirable way since 1868. The logical continuation of the Meiji rule is the *Taishō democracy*. This concept appeared after the war, in the 1950s. The pinnacle of this democracy is universal suffrage (for men), the law on which was adopted in 1925. Everything would have gone just as well and progressively, supporters of the theory of *Taishō democracy* maintain, but a bunch of militarists deceived the good Japanese people who were on the right path, and they became the militarists' victim. The result was the transformation of nationalism into the basis of state ideology; the successful construction of a totalitarian society, in which unanimity far exceeded the unanimity achieved under other totalitarian regimes; a war against half the world that ended in a brutal defeat. Like in Nazi Germany, totalitarianism in Japan came into force in a completely democratic way, enjoying a very broad popular support. But it is not too common to talk about this either.

Like any revolution, the Meiji Revolution was an extremely complex and multidimensional phenomenon. In the arguments of its unconditional praisers (as well as a few execrators), there is non-recognition of the diversity of the world and a desire to simplify it. Dreaming of the future, Sholokhov's character Makar Nagulnov said: "When we break all the boundaries, I'll be the first to make noise: Go ahead! Marry those who are of different race! All people will intermingle, and there will be no such shame in the world that one body is white, another is yellow, and still another is black, and the whites reproach others with their skin color and consider them inferior. All will have pleasantly swarthy faces and all will be the same." This approach makes it impossible to get intellectual and aesthetic pleasure from contemplating the diversity of the world. The ideal situation is when

every theory is subject to refutation, because there are no absolutely correct theories in the field of human relations. And revolutions are part of human relations. The theory of progress, most certainly, has solid grounds. But, carried to the point of absurdist indiscriminateness, it turns into an absurdity, and then its explanatory possibilities leave much to be desired.

References

Gluskina, A. E. & Markova, V. N. (Compiled and transl.). (1954). *Japanese Poetry*. Moscow: Gospolitizdat. (In Russian).

Konrad, N. (Transl. and preface). (1921). *Ise Monogatari*. Vsemirnaya literatura. (In Russian).

Konrad, N. (1974). The Centenary of the Japanese Revolution. In Konrad, N. *Selected Works* (pp. 188–199). Moscow: Nauka. (In Russian).

The Orient. (1935). The first collection. Literature of China and Japan. Academia. (In Russian).

MESHCHERYAKOV Alexander Nikolaevich – Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, Senior researcher, Institute of Classic East and Antiquity of Higher School of Economics of the HSE University

21/4, building 3, Staraya Basmannaya street, Moscow, 105066.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6004-5743
E-mail: anmesheryakov@hse.ru

This article was originally published in Russian. The reference for primary publication is: *Issues of Japanology № 9. (Japan: 150 Years of the Meiji Revolution)*. – Saint-Petersburg University, Art-xpress, 2018, pp. 13–23.