

Russia's Pacific

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2 Russia's Pacific: The End and the Beginning of Russia

Paul B. Richardson 

From the hills of Vladivostok, the sun both rises and falls over the sea. The city is located on a peninsula, with the Amur Bay (Amurskii Zaliv) to the west and the Ussuriy Bay (Ussuriskii Zaliv) to the east. In summer, the sun lingers long in the evening sky over the Amur Bay. My first night in the city coincided with the city readying itself for the Day of the Russian Navy. The city was the headquarters of Russia's Pacific Fleet, and it embraces the holiday with gusto every year. On that first evening, a row of vessels—from submarine to destroyer—were lined up for the public displays and manoeuvres on the big day, which takes place on the last Sunday of July. It was a dramatic scene, with the late evening sun silhouetting these vessels. Over the pride of the Pacific Fleet, and over the hills across the bay, the sun slowly set. It changed from an ever-deeper shade of orange to red before forming a halo over a distant hill, and then disappeared into refracted and radiant shafts of light.

Over many summer and autumn evenings, I would watch the sun set over these hills, each night bringing with it a subtle change in colour and atmosphere. It was a moment of evening calm that could take your breath away. And so, too, was the immensity of Russia that was captured in this scene, as just beyond these hills, where the sun was setting, was China. On Russia's Pacific coast, the whole of China stretched out to the west. Ten time zones from London and seven from Moscow, Vladivostok is an East beyond the Orient. As the sun went down over China each night, the points of the compass and the imagined geographies of East and West, Orient and Occident, and Europe and Asia would flicker and shimmer in the evening light.

Russia's Pacific and its distant Far Eastern territories have long generated vivid imaginaries and illusions on the other side of Eurasia. The character and possibilities of this region—and of Russia itself—have been predicated by an immense and diverse geography but also by the hopes and fears for this region in the capitals of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, thousands of miles to the west. It is a region that has always been held in relation to this centre by innovations in technology and communication, which, alongside physical

and imagined geographies, have shaped “the political possibilities it was thought to contain”.¹ No technology was more dramatic in reshaping these possibilities than the completion in 1904 of the Trans-Siberian railway, which cut across Manchuria to Vladivostok. The completion of this railway not only revolutionised the potential of the Russian Far East—and of Russia—but also stirred geopolitical anxieties as far away as London.

The railway’s completion compressed distances and time between metropole and periphery. With it came the idea of a resurgent Eurasian heartland that could be controlled and exploited by Russia and that was presented in certain quarters as a rival to the pre-eminent imperial power of the day, the British Empire. The politician, imperialist, geographer, and founding father of geopolitics, Sir Halford Mackinder (1861–1947), delivered his thesis on the Trans-Siberian railway, and its transformation of the territory of Eurasia into a geopolitical pivot of history, in a lecture at the Royal Geographical Society in January 1904. While Mackinder’s lecture was revealing of a geopolitical vision shaped by anxiety over the possibilities for Russian control over Eurasia,² Tsar Nicolas II quickly became preoccupied with other challenges to the Russian Empire.

Barely a year after the completion of the railway, rather than mastering Eurasian space, Russia suffered a catastrophic and devastating defeat at the hands of Japan in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). The next phase of imperial mega-projects oscillated from connectivity towards fortification and the commitment of vast resources to upgrade Vladivostok’s defences. “Utopian in their grandiosity”, these fortifications were constructed between 1910 and 1916 and included eleven forts, which were estimated at the outset to cost around ninety-eight million imperial rubles in 1910. Even after the onset of the First World War, an additional amount of almost fourteen million rubles was allocated for their continued construction in 1915.³

The chapters that follow play out against just such extreme oscillations between the poles of opening and closure, resource and burden, anxiety and opportunity, hope and fear. Each oscillation brings with it dramatic reconfigurations of geographical space, both material and imagined. It is a story full of tensions and contradictions, with innovations of technology and communication cutting through time and space to render possible a panoptic gaze of the centre on this region. However, at the same time, it is also a

1 Bell, “Cyborg Imperium,” 4–5.

2 Mackinder, “Geographical Pivot,” 298–321.

3 Kasyanov, “European Fortifications,” 20.

story revealing the limits and distortions of this gaze. While new systems of colonial exploitation and influence could be opened up,⁴ these new forms of connectivity and flows of people also brought ideas, means of resistance, and revolution. The chapters in this volume demonstrate how the territory of the Russian Far East expanded and contracted, how modernisation effaced the spatial logics and knowledges of indigenous communities, and how the region's location can be understood by the centre to be simultaneously its greatest asset and liability. Today, administrative and technological innovations continue to both empower and disenfranchise the local population while starkly revealing the memories of a violent and turbulent past that cling to this region.

In this sense, space is the medium and the message. As Keller Easterling has observed: "Like an operating system managing activities in the background [...] space is a technology, a carrier of information, and a medium of polity."⁵ However, like all such operating systems, it also carries an abundance of bugs, glitches, and viruses that distort this space, continually subverting the inputs of the user. The chapters in this volume capture some of the frustrations of imperial rule and its social designs for the region. They trace how the dynamism and disruptions of this space shatter the illusions, ambitions, and longings of central planners, bureaucrats, and political elites in the centre. Each contribution offers a fragment that makes up part of a larger and intricate mosaic, which is intimately bound to technological change, to inter- and intra-state relations, and to a space that exists—in different ways—in the minds of state elites in distant Moscow as much as it does in the quotidian realities of the Russian Far East and its inhabitants.

In the complex patterns and shades of this mosaic, there are multiple themes and contrasts. However, across all these chapters, three cast a prevailing shadow. The first relates to the perennial yearning of an imperial centre to maintain territorial integrity, authority, and control over its most distant periphery. The second—often antagonistic to the first—relates to Russia's Pacific and its Far Eastern territory as a space of experimentation, entrepreneurship, and encounter. It is a set of conditions that can fuel anxiety and consternation in the centre, which in turn stimulates a reactionary response. The third involves tracing how memories have become absorbed in the landscapes and urban fabric of the region, revealing a past that is complex and full of contradictions. These three themes are not mutually exclusive but co-constituted, and they are held

4 Bell, "Cyborg Imperium," 3.

5 Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 239, cited in Bell, "Cyborg Imperium," 4.

in relation to each other through tensions, conflicts, and subtleties. These are neither exhaustive nor closed themes but, rather, geographical lenses that can help expand and refract our field of vision on this region. They can help us to capture the fluidity and dynamism of the spatio-time configurations that make up this highly complex and contested region.

2.1 Conquering, Consolidating, and Controlling Space

The first of these three themes is engaged with in the opening chapter by **Robert Kindler**, who presents an insightful introduction to a territory that is at one moment an El Dorado—a place of fantastical material and geopolitical riches ripe for exploitation—but also a place over which the centre’s grip is always tenuous and insecure. Drawing on rivalries with Japan, Kindler charts a persistent anxiety over Russian control of a far-away margin that is acutely exacerbated by the proximity of a rising power. It is a distance from Moscow and Saint Petersburg that cultivates a “cartographic anxiety”,⁶ which frames virtually all representations of the region produced in the imperial and state centre. Such an anxiety belies a host of preoccupations and obsessions with control over the periphery and the iconography of the frontier.⁷ However, in the Russian Far East, rather than being an anxiety that is always projected onto the Other, it is one also directed at the Self, with the centre represented as its own threat to the region. This was a trajectory heightened by the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, an anxiety briefly made real by the short-lived Far Eastern Republic (1920–22), and one that endures up to the present in claims by Japan on the Southern Kuril Islands and a proposal in 2004 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to transfer some of these islands.⁸ For many on Russia’s Pacific seaboard, much of this preoccupation is reflective not of an anxiety about Russia’s neighbours but over the vagaries and vicissitudes of the centre.

These cartographic anxieties are also not restricted to land. **Eisuke Kaminaga’s** contribution reveals how the seas of the north Pacific could also become a stage on which relations between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Japan played out in the late 1920s and 1930s. As the technological capabilities of fishing fleets developed, testy standoffs between vessels and

6 Krishna, “Cartographic Anxiety,” 508.

7 See also Richardson, *Edge of the Nation*, 94, 119.

8 Richardson, “Geopolitical Cultures,” 7–27.

interests in these waters assumed an increasing regularity and significance. Kaminaga demonstrates how actions on the high seas became proxies in a struggle between rising powers and their efforts to assert influence on regional geopolitics. In this competition, Japan was prepared to antagonise the United States by expanding its fishing activities in 1936 and 1937. However, for Kaminaga, these activities in Alaska were primarily designed to bolster Japan's position in its negotiations on a new fishing treaty with the USSR. It is a convoluted tale of distant and isolated fishing grounds being transposed by new technologies into the centre of debates on geopolitical control over land and sea. As empires of radically different content and contexts collided, access to fisheries became injected with the heat and fire of assertive nationalism fused with a highly combustible great-power geopolitics.

Just a decade and half before the mettle of these rising powers was being tested in the North Pacific, **Rachel Lin** brings to life a different dilemma in the contingency and relativity of the sovereignty of competing powers in the Russia–China borderlands. After the onset of revolution, the legitimacy and destiny of the powers vying to control Siberia and the Russian Far East was determined by the exchange of currencies as much as it was on the battlefield. Lin explores how competing imperial rivalries, nascent nationalist projects, and geopolitics were bound up with the everyday collection of wages and exchange of labour. Her chapter on the “currency conflict” in the Far Eastern ruble zone reveals a frontier wracked by confusion and uncertainty. In those testing times, local and migrant workers were finely attuned to the fluctuating fortunes of White Russia in determining the ruble variant into which they should place their faith. It was a ruble zone of competing currencies backed by different factions and interests that also co-existed alongside the Japanese yen and a wide array of Chinese currencies. In this environment, the amount of confidence in each currency became a proxy of power, and when the ruble zone lost its pre-eminence in northern Manchuria by the end of 1920, it was a critical blow to any lingering hopes of White Russia prevailing.

2.2 Experimentation, Entrepreneurship, and Encounter

The fluctuations in the ruble zone highlight a region that has long been finely and pragmatically attuned to wider trends and movements. **Benjamin Beuerle's** chapter also charts a remarkable and prescient awareness of a climate and health emergency in the late Soviet period. This movement was focused on remedying air pollution in Primor'e, centred on Vladivostok, with local

environmental activists playing an effective and prominent role in the coordination and implementation of environmental regulation. Initially, the local enthusiasm for environmental campaigns towards reducing car emissions was high. However, as economic crisis took hold in the last years of the Soviet Union and in the early days of the new Russian Federation, these initiatives slipped down the agenda in a region that was hit particularly hard by this crisis.

Public transport in Vladivostok was also decimated—most symbolically with the pulling up of tramlines in the city—just as the port was being opened to foreign trade in 1992. This opening to Asia was followed by a surge in the importing of second-hand cars from Japan. By 2008, it had reached more than half a million a year, with many of them passing through Vladivostok on the way to other parts of Russia. The import, repair, and maintenance of these vehicles was one of the few success stories of a regional economy shattered by de-industrialisation, depopulation, the end of subsidies and incentives, and the drawing down of the military-industrial complex in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹

However, this nascent economic success story was abruptly snuffed out. This was not the result of a clean air campaign but of Moscow's imposition in 2008 of prohibitive import tariffs on foreign second-hand cars over five years old. Within a year, imported foreign cars, mainly from Japan, had dropped from half a million to merely 80,000. (79) In response to the new measures, Vladivostok was gripped by a wave of social protests and street demonstrations in the winter of 2008. It was a movement swiftly put down by an OMON special police force corps flown in from outside the region to deal with the trouble. Moscow had proved ignorant of the local economy and then fearful about the implications of its policies. As for Vladivostok, a city once at the vanguard of addressing an emerging environmental crisis became a portent of the violence and repression of an increasingly authoritarian state.

Tobias Holzlehner also offers a take on the disasters wrought on local populations by the centre, though this time far beyond the region's major towns and cities. Holzlehner follows the rebuilding of a community in the aftermath of the failed Soviet experiment to re-order society and economies on the Chukchi Peninsula. This is the furthest point in Russia from Moscow, and also a terrain where the fantasies of a utopian discourse of Soviet modernisation could play out across every last inch of the USSR. It was a programme that ended with a tragic reality and the local destruction of a native settlement. However, in the post-Soviet era, the region has witnessed

9 On the significance of this trade, see Tabata, "Economic Relations," 422–441.

the shoots of a revival of traditional knowledge and indigenous logics with the reestablishment of hunting camps that involve the passing on to a new generation of “the intricacies of maritime hunting” as well as providing an “escape” from the shattered utopia of Soviet modernisation. (128, 126)

Such camps are reappearing along the Chukchi coast and are positioned according to local stories, knowledge, and encounters, which are forever missing from the imagined geographies and cartographies of Moscow. The absence of such knowledge in the centre is what ultimately dooms to failure many of the centre's perennial experiments in trying to order this periphery in its own image. Holzlehner reveals a landscape that is not immune to the whims of the centre, but where “local sentiments and subsistence strategies” (129) co-exist and co-create a world that is shaped by centralised development strategies and technological and economic change as well as by the incompleteness and absences of the state. It is a landscape reflective of an ebb and flow of lofty ideals, cynical exploitation, and myopic misreadings of local conditions.

Russia's engagement with its Asia-Pacific neighbours has also been characterised by a cyclical opening and closing, from the free-port status that was established in Vladivostok in the early 1860s (then abolished in 1900 and restored in 1904) to the autarchy and authoritarianism of Stalinism. It was a cycle reset under Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who twice visited the region and who heralded Soviet engagement with the Pacific, as well as overseeing blossoming trade relations with Japan and even short-lived efforts at decentralisation.¹⁰ However, it was not until decades later that the winds of change fully blew open Russia's window on Asia, and in the final years of the Soviet Union, under Mikhail Gorbachev, the modernised port of Nakhodka became a free-trade port in 1989.

One of the most recent iterations in this cycle has been Russia's programme of Territories of Advanced Social and Economic Development (Territorii operezhaiushchego sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia; TOR) in the Far East and Siberia, which operate alongside the reinstatement of Vladivostok as a free port. However, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's isolation by the West has been mirrored by South Korea and Japan imposing sanctions.¹¹ Well before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a fraught relationship with the West had already resulted in certain absurdities for the regional economy whereby no European states, nor Canada or the United States, were eligible for expedited e-visas, whereas North Koreans, Mexicans, and

10 Stephan, *Russian Far East*, 90, 262–263.

11 Al Jazeera, “In Rare Stand”; Park and Lies, “Japan Announces.”

Moroccans were. It is indicative of a wider contradiction whereby geopolitical rivalries and securitisation agendas continue to stymie the opening of borders to foreign investment, competition, trade, and tourists.

Natalia Ryzhova critically engages with recent experiments in regional administration. Ryzhova reviews the centre's long-standing desire to control and "master" space—an imperative that has often contravened all economic logic. The latest act in this drama is the eye-catching development of the TORs, within which "a special legal regime for carrying out entrepreneurial activities" has been established.¹² However, Ryzhova's interviews and encounters outline how these TORs are skewed in favour of big business rather than local entrepreneurs at the same time as vested security interests work to thwart certain developments. For Ryzhova, it is not a keen understanding of the complexities of local conditions or development needs that have driven the centre's creation of TORs. Rather, for the centre, a permanent context behind the regional development agenda is a logic of insecurity around "emptiness"—an imagined geography of vast, undeveloped spaces. It is a factor behind the introduction in 2016 of the Far Eastern hectare initiative, whereby every citizen of the Russian Federation was granted the right to receive a free plot of up to one hectare of land in the Far East. Aimed at attracting Russian citizens to move to the region, these small plots have proved difficult to convert into profitable agricultural enterprises, while many lack connections to utilities, let alone road access.¹³

The centre's desire to flood this supposed "emptiness" with new strategies, actors, and infrastructures—which arrive with inherent "corruption, non-transparency, and all that is known by the term 'bad governance'"—ends up countering the teeming activity of local entrepreneurs. Rather than expanding the space for development, it brings closure to the "grey, invisible, informal niches" carved by locals, who were forced to become entrepreneurial by the absences of the state in the 1990s. During this period, the region's inhabitants "mastered not only natural resources (gold, fish, coal, forest [...]) but also closeness to Asian countries". (202–203) Ryzhova laments that, until the appearance of these new development agents, locals were able to thrive and prosper. As this chapter vividly illustrates, the entrepreneurial spaces of the people of the Russian Far East have been closed by the arrival of new state actors and instruments, capturing the resources that were once theirs.

12 Russian Far East and Arctic Development Corporation, "Advanced Special Economic Zone."

13 Luxmoore, "Russia's Far Eastern Frontier"; Zuenko, "Russia's Far East."

2.3 Nation, Memory, and Migration

The TORs are but the latest innovation in developing a territory that was once a zone of exile and internment for both the Soviet and Russian states. However, as well as exporting what the centre regarded as undesirable, the Russian Pacific could also be a route to escape and freedom. In the summer of 1940, with the world descending into ever-darkening spirals of repression, murder, and destruction, **David Wolff's** chapter charts the region's role in a tale of life hanging by the most delicate threads of fortune and fate. This story begins in the summer of that year in Kaunas, Lithuania, where Japan's acting Consul, Sugihara Chiune, is working around the clock to grant transit visas. It was to become a "deportation to life" that "brought thousands of Jews from the valley of the shadow of death to the North Pacific". (97) It is also a story with an unlikely cast of saviours, including figures from the depths of the Soviet totalitarian state. Wolff traces how the fate of hundreds of these lives rested on the stroke of the pens of bureaucrats, both in Tokyo and Moscow, before and even after they made it to Vladivostok. On their journey of escape, these refugees would also have passed through Vtoraia Rechka on the edge of Vladivostok—the site of a transit camp where, just two winters earlier, another Polish Jewish émigré, the Silver Age poet Osip Mendelstam, had passed through, only to die of cold and hunger on the way to the Gulag. Mendelstam was one of the countless victims of a murderous regime whose bureaucrats had just permitted these Baltic refugees to escape from the clutches of another.

The Russian Far East also serves as an intriguing footnote in the history of World War II, as it was here that the tide of violence unleashed in Europe finally abated, with the region playing host to some of the last battles of this total war. **Joonseo Song's** chapter recounts how, within days of the Soviet Union entering the Pacific Theatre, Japan signed an unconditional surrender on September 2, 1945. When news reached Moscow, the Soviet government immediately issued a decree that a Holiday of Victory over Japan would be observed on the following day, September 3.¹⁴ However, the holiday did not take hold as a permanent fixture in the Soviet calendar, and, despite some isolated regional memorialisation, the Soviet Union's war against Japan largely became a "forgotten victory". (137)

In the post-Soviet period, the memory of the Second World War began to assume a renewed significance in the search for unifying symbols and ideas

14 Pravda, "Ukaz."

for a multinational federation. While much emphasis has been placed on remembering this conflict by Russia's current President, Vladimir Putin, it was his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who signed a decree in March 1995 establishing the Russian Federation's Days of Military Glory. However, the date of September 3 was omitted from this list, and it was not until the Presidency of Dmitri Medvedev (2008–2012) that a decree was issued in July 2010 designating September 2 as a memorial day. This Day of the Ending of World War II was initiated with an inaugural ceremony celebrating its sixty-fifth anniversary in Victory Park in Moscow. (146)

However, the belated commemoration was not sufficient for some local campaigners on Sakhalin, who wanted the date of commemoration returned to the Soviet tradition of September 3 and to include in the name of the commemoration a specific acknowledgement of victory over "militarist Japan".¹⁵ It is a movement that strives to connect an inviolable memory of the Great Patriotic War (1941–45) with the immutability of Russia's borders in the Far East. In this, it connects to Japan's claims over the disputed Southern Kuril Islands and a more recent memory of Putin and his Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, offering to concede some of these islands in 2004.¹⁶

Sergey Glebov's final chapter draws attention to another largely forgotten memory, this time on the Russo-Chinese border. Glebov's paper demonstrates how ideas and ideologies from the centre could play out with devastating consequences on this distant periphery. This chapter recalls the massacre of Chinese migrants living and working in this borderland at the turn of the twentieth century. It is a story of violence and discrimination that also has a troubling resonance with contemporary debates on migrant labour. In his chapter, Glebov notes that, on the Russo-Chinese border in this period, "a complex, diverse society [...] emerged in the context of settler colonialism and imperial borderland". (212) It was a borderland—with crossings of the "border in multiple ways"—that also presented an awkward challenge to the agenda of Nicholas II's nationalising empire and moves to Russify the colonial borderland.

The shift in atmosphere that accompanied this Russification set in motion the conditions for the Blagoveshchensk massacre of July 1900, in which thousands of Chinese dwellers of the city perished, many of whom drowned after being forced to cross the Amur River to the Qing side of the border. However, this mass violence was not committed in the name of many

15 Ponomarev, "Den' Pobedy nad Iaponiei," cited in Song, this volume, 141, 144.

16 Richardson, *Edge of the Nation*; Richardson, "Geopolitical Cultures."

local representatives of officialdom, merchants, industrialists, landowners, or even Cossacks. Members drawn from these communities had formed a commission and, on the eve of the violence, they were at work reporting on various aspects of Chinese trade and labour in Blagoveshchensk. Their report concluded that the Chinese presence was “useful and necessary”, even arguing that the fees for the right to live and work on the Russian side of the border should not be raised and that some of the money raised from these fees should be spent on organising hospitals that could treat Chinese workers. (224–225)

As Glebov explains, the commission and its members was made up of the interests of particular stakeholders who were largely dependent on the Chinese labour, while the perpetrators of the violence were town dwellers, peasant settlers, new arrivals, reservists, and some Cossacks, who “likely saw Chinese workers and traders as direct competitors for jobs and markets”. (226) A combination of the inadequacies of effective regional government, a swelling ethno-nationalist superiority, and the inherent inequalities and hierarchies of empire contributed to the appalling massacre at Blagoveshchensk. The level of violence was a harbinger of the brutality that would characterise the later revolutionary transformations of 1917 and the Civil War. However, neither the excesses of revolution nor the ethno-nationalist pogrom at Blagoveshchensk could rupture for long the dynamics of a mutual dependency with China on this colonial frontier, which remains intact to this day.¹⁷

2.4 The End and the Beginning


The chapters in this collection reflect a rich diversity of material, approaches, and findings, yet they also combine to reveal something special about Russia. For a Russia without its Pacific is no longer Russia as we know it. So much is bound to the destiny of the territories furthest from Moscow that the parameters of Russia's economy, modes of governance, sense of identity, geopolitical status, and national destiny are profoundly shaped by this region. Despite such significance, it is also a region that continues to be limited by the centre's tendency to override local particularities, needs, and knowledges. In doing so, the more that the centre seeks to exert and consolidate its control, the more its ambitions for the region move further out of reach. For all the region's economic, geopolitical, and ideational potential, it can never quite

17 Pulford, *Mirrorlands*.

be realised in the centre's image. This central paradox was rendered strikingly visible to all who were able to log on to the official Far Eastern hectare website, where Russian citizens could peruse the high-definition satellite imagery and choose their very own piece of the Far East to own and to cherish. However, in this vision, for all its pixels and sharp resolution, each distant sweep of the satellite offered little more than a crude digital composite that was missing the essence of this region and its richness of local, indigenous, and non-human knowledge and ways of seeing.

The chapters in this collection offer corrective lenses to the pixelated, static, and illusory images of this region that can proliferate in Moscow and elsewhere. Each lens brings the ever-finer grain of this region into focus, and, by combining them, new fields of vision are revealed in which the sinews of power binding centre to periphery are seen to strain and stretch. It is a multi-dimension view that is forever absent from the panoptic gaze of the centre, whose vision penetrates but does not see. These chapters tell a story of imagined geographies colliding with messy realities, of technologies of communication and connection creating and annihilating space, and of a regional memory that reveals constant cycles of opening and closure, opportunity and violence, and control and resistance. Each phase of these cycles has proved ephemeral and reversible – part of a tidal motion of contradictions and multi-dimensional forces that are always hinting at new possibilities. It is in these possibilities that we uncover the essence of a region that is both at the end and the beginning of Russia.

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