

Pacific Russia: Transnational and Transimperial Perspectives on Modern Northeast Asia (from 18th Century until the 1930s)

Veranstalter: Sergey Glebov, Amherst; Frank Grüner, Bielefeld; Andreas Renner, Munich; Ivan Sablin, Heidelberg; German Historical Institute (DHI) Moscow and its collaborative research project „Russia’s North Pacific“

Datum, Ort: 26.10.2018–27.10.2018, Bielefeld

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Russia’s expansion into the Pacific area and its penetration into Northeast Asia from the seventeenth century onwards created a transnational and transregional space that was shaped by a large array of different peoples and powers. This geographically huge area with its maritime orientation was an unusual exception to the presumed role of Russia as a continental empire. Evolving from extractive colonies in an earlier period (fur trade) to a settler society in the early twentieth century, „Pacific Russia“ significantly contributed to the transformation of the empire as a whole as well as turning itself into a dynamically developing region undergoing imperial rivalries, processes of globalization and numerous entanglements with its neighbors and its diverse inhabitants. Analogous to the area’s vastness, the conference addressed a large array of questions and approaches. Topics were encounters and exchange processes, colonial expansion and conflict, transnational and transimperial entanglements, the role of individual and collective agency, transfer of knowledge and local practices, infrastructure and institutions as well as „Russia’s Asia Pacific“ as a space of transit, mobility, migration and as an object of historiography.

The first panel under the title „The Northern Pacific as an Economic Resource and Contested Space“ was opened by KRISTINA KÜNTZEL-WITT (Hamburg). She analyzed the role of the port and city of Okhotsk as an obstacle for the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Northern Pacific during the eighteenth century. Although the harbor city was difficult to reach by land and had an unwelcoming climate, it was the main port of depar-

ture for Russian expeditions into the Pacific area at the time. The comparatively successful role that Okhotsk played as a maritime port in the Russian Empire, argued Küntzel-Witt, was due to the lack of other competitors in the area.

In his paper about whaling enterprises in eighteenth century Russia, ALEXEI V. KRAIKOVSKI (St. Petersburg) argued that whale hunting was only pursued by the government in the Arctic Sea after the reform agenda of Peter the Great in imitation of Western European forms of exploitation of natural resources. In the Pacific area on the other hand, the state never directly supported or organized the nevertheless existing whale hunting. By calling this a „Pacific Paradox“, Kraikovski stated the need for understanding trade and economy in the Far Eastern and Pacific areas in the greater context of Imperial Russian economics and politics.

The last paper of the first panel was presented by ROBERT KINDLER (Berlin) on the creation of a transnational economic space in the Russian North Pacific between 1867 (Alaska Purchase) and 1890. In a case study of fur seal hunting in the Pribilof and Commander Islands in the Bering Sea, he showcased the change from a Russian dominated space to a transnational economic and conflict zone between Canadian and US-American merchant companies and the Russian Empire. The exploitation of the local inhabitants and resources, the saleschains of pelts from the Arctic Sea into European Salons as well as the difficult negotiation of multilateral trade agreements were addressed by Kindler.

In his comment on the first panel ANDREAS RENNEN (Munich) summarized that a common ground of the presented three papers was on describing resources to build infrastructure, mainly ships in the context of the „Russian Pacific“. He argued that infrastructure in the sense of ordering nature according to human interest seems like a very fitting entry point for the history of the discussed area in premodern times.

ILYA VINKOVETSKY (Burnaby BC) opened the second panel (titled „Cross Border Trading and Transimperial Entanglements in Russia’s Asia Pacific“) with a paper on the Kiakhta tea trade from 1732 to

1840. The city of Kiakhta, situated at the then Russo-Chinese border south of Lake Baikal, was the sole officially commissioned entry point for goods from Qing China to Tsarist Russia and vice versa. In a comparative study of imperialistic competition in the area of tea trade between the British and the Russian Empire, Vinkovetsky showed the importance of the beverage in terms of economic factors and cultural impact. He argues that especially the tea trade was a stabilizing factor for the border between the Chinese and the Russian Empire.

Another form of cross-border trade was elaborated by NICCOLÒ PIANCIOLA (Hong Kong): the opium cultivation and trade in the Turkestan/Xinjiang borderlands between the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. He painted a picture of a multilayered commodity frontier, where poppy-cultivators and traders made use of the border for their purposes (for example by planting poppy in less controlled Turkestan by Xinjiang farmers) and where governmental control was often shaped by informality until the whole borderland society imploded during Stalinism.

LIAO ZHANG (East Lansing MI) in his paper thematized the development of the Soviet customs service in Priamurye in the 1920s and 1930s. Developing the history of Russian customs service since the Petrine period, Liao pointed out the uneven development in the center St. Petersburg and the Amur-Ussuri region, claiming that no real border service existed until after the Russian Revolution. The transformation and professionalization of the Soviet customs service in the Priamurye region as well as informal practices were basically the result of two conflicting developments: the interests and processes on a regional level and the implementation of overarching Soviet regulations.

The comment on the second panel by FRANK GRÜNER (Bielefeld) identified the focus of the three presented papers in the border as a contested space. This comprised the translocal and transimperial level of trade as well as the flow of information, knowledge and skills, the force of policy making, often in a far away imperial center, and the forced or hindered entanglements.

The third panel, titled „Translocal Connections, Imperial Rivalry and National Discourses in the Asia-Pacific Region“, was opened by SÖREN URBANSKY (Washington D.C.). In his study he compared sinophobic discourses in the three port cities of Vladivostok, San Francisco and Singapore in the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. By taking a look at these three Pacific metropolises, where large Chinese communities existed alongside European residents and other groups, Urbansky detected similar discourses on (un-)hygiene: Among others the Chinese were discursively linked to filthy housing and considered as dangerous distributors of diseases.

ROMAN TSIRULEV (Heidelberg) presented his paper on the topic of the early period of settler colonization and nation building in the Russian Far East from the 1860s to the 1890s. He portrayed the governmental campaign of settling a broad diversity of ethnicities, like Finns, Czechs, and Cossacks, separately from each other via the maritime link from Odessa to Vladivostok. Despite the separation, Tsirulev described the Russian Far East as a melting pot, where not only the migrants but also the Chinese and Korean population formed a part of the matrix.

In his paper, SHERZOD MUMINOV (Norwich) detected the Soviet Union as the „Unlikely Underdog“ in the border disputes with Japan over Northeast Asia in the time from 1928 to 1938. Muminov described two phases in the Soviet-Japanese diplomatic relationship: a calmer first period followed by an aggressive second one in the 1930s. Among others the failed attempt to sign a non-aggression treaty between Japan and Russia as well as disputes over North Sachalin were stations in this history of escalation and violence.

BENJAMIN BEUERLE (Moscow) commented on the panel by using the concept of „othering“ as a common frame, before he and his colleagues SANDRA DAHLKE (Moscow) and ANDREAS RENNEN (Munich) presented the Project and Network „Russia’s North Pacific“ of the Deutsches Historisches Institut (DHI) in Moscow. Starting in 2017, the aim of the project is to link scholars with a focus on the history of the Russian Far East and Rus-

sia's North Pacific through a communication platform and international network of researchers. The already existing scholarship programme is going to be extended by the establishment of an online platform, a newsletter, a bookseries as well as upcoming conferences.

The fourth and last panel on the second day of the conference titled „Cultural Encounters and Processes of (Dis-)Entanglement in a Transimperial and -national Contact Zone“ was opened by LUISE FAST (Bielefeld). She presented a paper on indigenous interpreters as cultural brokers in the Yukon-Area in the 1840s. As a case study she chose the travel journal of Lavrentij Zagoskin on which she exemplified imperial encounters in the contact zone. The challenge of making indigenous voices hearable through a Russian source as well as the seemingly unconcernedness of the Russian „men of empire“ about the otherness of indigenous people were problematized.

MICHAEL J. CORSI (Columbus, OH) dealt with another kind of ego-documents in his presentation: the diaries of tsarist doctors during the third plague pandemic in the Russian Far East in the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, namely in Harbin. These diaries are an interesting lens to perceive discourses of tsarist officials about other ethnicities, especially with regard to both sinophilism and sinophobia. With a look at the emotions of the doctors expressed in their journals, Corsi detected semantic othering as well as identification, compassion as well as professional distance.

In her study of wartime and revolutionary Blagoveshchensk-Heihe at the Sino-Russian Amur-border, YUEXIN RACHEL LIN (Exeter) exemplified a process of disentanglement. The strong links between the two communities on both sides of the Amur were broken during the „five cataclysmic years“ from 1918 to 1922. The river Amur as a border shows itself to be a defining actor in this history of violence, for example as an escape route for white troops or as a place of contraband trade.

The final paper was presented by IVAN SABLIN (Heidelberg) on the topic of parliaments in the Revolutionary Far East from 1905 to 1922. With a focus on the political development and encompassing a time of big tur-

moil, Sablin analyzed change in a vast array of structures, events, places and personnel. The role of the Russian Far East as an autonomous region as well as the entanglement between regional and national developments were a focus of his presentation.

The comment on this section was delivered by SERGEY GLEBOV (Amherst). He first focused on the Alaskan exceptionalism in the Imperial Russian context, stressing the weakness of colonial power in that region. Moving to the Russian-Chinese borderlands and the Russian Far East, he stated that it was the economy – and not ethnicity – which formed a pivotal role in defining the region.

The final discussion first problematized the geographical and political term „Pacific Russia“. As a term used in that region itself, it is a welcome step away from the widely used but Eurocentric „Russian Far East“. At the same time it recenters littoral East Russia towards the Pacific region. Today, „Pacific Russia“ is an integral part of the imagined and real Russia. This is especially noteworthy when perceiving that it was the last addendum to the Russian Empire and has not fallen away from it as so many other acquisitions like Turkestan, the Ukraine or Manchuria have. The discussants saw the perspective of seeing „Pacific Russia“ as a transpacific region, to develop the ocean as a space of Russian history and to see it as a connecting space as fruitful and desirable. Other topics which were mentioned worth focusing on were environmental history, the history of infrastructure and the Russian Far East as a laboratory of Stalinism (for example ethnicity policy or deportation).

The conference focused on a vast region which not only has been seen in the collective memory as periphery, but has been treated in the same way by the overall majority of the scientific community which occupied themselves with the history of Russia or the Pacific. Geographically the conference focused on two separable entities: on the one hand the continental Russian Far East with its borderlands to China and on the other hand the maritime Russia Pacific with its sold colony of Russian America. Kamchatka as well as the Arctic regions of continental Siberia (for example Chukotka) seemed to be a blind spot at least at this conference. Thematically the con-

ference focused on empires and nation states with its institutions and emissaries as well as the economy as a push factor of development and expansion. It is noteworthy, that an absence of indigenous and gender perspectives could be detected. The focus on the „Russian Pacific“ in this conference has nevertheless proven to be a very promising field for further research in Russian, Far Eastern and Pacific history and gives hope for interesting publications in an extending field.

Conference Overview:

Frank Grüner (Bielefeld): Welcome and Introduction

Section I: The Northern Pacific as an Economic Resource and Contested Space

Chair: Benjamin Beuerle (Moscow)

Discussant: Andreas Renner (Munich)

Kristina Küntzel-Witt (Hamburg): The Port of Ochotsk as an Obstacle of the Russian Expansion into the Pacific in the 18th Century

Alexei V. Kraikovski (St. Petersburg): Russian Exploitation of Pacific Natural Resources and the 18th Century Projects of Whaling Development

Robert Kindler (Berlin): American Russia. Fur Seals and the Creation of a Transnational Economic Space in the Northern Pacific, 1867–1890

Section II: Cross border trading and transimperial entanglements in Russia's Asia-Pacific
Chair: Sören Urbansky (Washington D.C.)

Discussant: Frank Grüner (Bielefeld)

Ilya Vinkovetsky (Burnaby BC): The Kiakhta Tea Trade as a Stabilizing Factor for the Russian-Chinese Frontier, 1732–1840s

Niccolò Pianciola (Hong Kong): Poppy Colonization: Opium Trade, Migrations, and Imperial Policies in the Manchuria / Russian Far East Borderlands, 1908–1930

Liao Zhang (East Lansing MI): The Late Arrival of a Border Institution: Soviet Customs Service in Priamurye, 1920s–1930s

Section III: Translocal Connections, Imperial Rivalry and National Discourses in the Asia-Pacific Region

Chair: Ivan Sablin (Heidelberg)

Discussant: Benjamin Beuerle (Moscow)

Sören Urbansky (Washington D.C.): A Chinese Plague: Sinophobic Discourse in Vladivostok, San Francisco and Singapore

Roman Tsirulev (Heidelberg): Settler Colonialism and Nation Building in the Russian Far East: Early Stage of Colonization, 1860–1890s

Sherzod Muminov (Norwich): The Unlikely Underdog: The Soviet-Japanese Rivalry in Northeast Asia, 1929–1938

Benjamin Beuerle / Sandra Dahlke (both Moscow) / Andreas Renner (Munich): Short Presentation of the Project and Network „Russia's North Pacific“ Established at the German Historical Institute Moscow

Section IV: Cultural Encounters and Processes of (Dis-)Entanglement in a Transimperial and -national Contact Zone

Chair: Helena Holzberger (Munich)

Discussant: Sergey Glebov (Amherst)

Luise Fast (Bielefeld): Meeting and Talking in the North Pacific Contact Zone. Indigenous Interpreters as Cultural Brokers in the 19th Century

Michael J. Corsi (Columbus OH): The Circle of Eternity: Narratives of Life and Death during the Plague in the Russian Far East

Yuexin Rachel Lin (Exeter): „We are on the brink of disaster“: Revolution, War and Sino-Russian Disentanglement in Blagoveshchensk-Heihe

Ivan Sablin (Heidelberg): Parliaments in the Revolutionary Russian Far East, 1905–1922

Sergey Glebov (Amherst) / Andreas Renner (Munich): Final Discussion

Tagungsbericht *Pacific Russia: Transnational and Transimperial Perspectives on Modern Northeast Asia (from 18th Century until the 1930s)*. 26.10.2018–27.10.2018, Bielefeld, in: H-Soz-Kult 02.02.2019.