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A land divided: Sakhalin and the Amur Expedition of G.I. Nevel'skoi, 1848–1855

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Abstract

In histories and geographies of Russia, Sakhalin Island, off the east coast of Siberia, is often treated as separate from the mainland, an isolated island sharing little with its neighbor across the strait. Yet this has not always been the case. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Amur River and its delta were viewed as a unit centered on waterways, and included the mainland to the north of the river and Sakhalin across the delta to its east. To Russians, it was an unknown wilderness, unmapped, uninhabited, and of little interest to the state. Yet this was changing, as an increase in Pacific shipping rendered the region economically and geo-politically strategic. This article examines the negotiation of Russia's eastern border, a conflict not between nations, but between liberal Russians, who sought to locate 'natural,' scientific borders, and the Tsar's conservative statesmen, intent on preserving the status quo. To the state, the land was Chinese based on a seventeenth-century treaty, although the exact border was unknown and unimportant. Naval officer Gennadii Nevel'skoi disagreed, arguing that the land was naturally Russian, and vital to Russia's interests. After four years of exploration, Nevel'skoi and his supporters finally convinced the Tsar of the region's Russianness and importance, and the Tsar ordered in troops and a Russian administration. In the process, however, the region was divided, the mainland becoming Russian both administratively and in the Russian imagination, while Sakhalin became the 'other,' imagined as separate from Russia and governed as such.

Keywords: Sakhalin; Amur; Russian empire; Russian Far East; Borders

As Admiral Gennadii Nevel'skoi told the story more than two decades later, he had been a hero—a valiant explorer who relinquished the comforts of civilization and risked his career to rescue savages from oppression and restore lost lands to their rightful ruler. On 12 July 1850, two years after his departure from St. Petersburg, the young Lieutenant Commander Nevel'skoi and a crew of eight were exploring the barren Amur River delta in eastern Siberia by rowboat. One hundred kilometers upstream, they happened upon a crowd of Nivkhs and Ul'chas gathered around a Manchu chieftain, who sat importantly on a stump.[1] When he saw the unexpected visitors, the Manchu elder questioned their presence in those parts, but Nevel'skoi insisted they had a 'complete and exclusive right to be here' and that not the Russians, but the Manchus must immediately depart. The chieftain summoned his men to attack, but soon acquiesced when Nevel'skoi pulled a pistol from his pocket. The indigenous onlookers, Nevel'skoi reported, burst into laughter, while the elder grew pale, jumped from his stump, swore that he desired only friendship, and invited Nevel'skoi to dinner.[2]

While it seems to belong more to an adventure film than to the annals of diplomatic history,[3] in Nevel'skoi's account, it was this comical and seemingly chance encounter that prompted his declaration of the territory to be Russian, an unauthorized assertion contentious at the time and a source of tension for years to come. The interactions that followed allegedly convinced Nevel'skoi of not only his right, but his *duty* to assert Russia's claim to the Amur Liman—the narrow, muddy lagoon near the mouth of the river—along with Sakhalin to its east and the mainland Amur basin to its west. While authorities in St. Petersburg considered the territory Chinese, Nevel'skoi allegedly learned at this meeting that the Qing

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[1] Manchus are the indigenous inhabitants of Manchuria. They conquered China in 1644, establishing the Qing dynasty. Nivkhs—known to Russians at the time as Giliaks—inhabited northern Sakhalin and the lower Amur basin. Ul'chas—or Mangun—lived primarily in the lower Amur.

[2] G.I. Nevel'skoi, *Podvigi Russkikh Morskikh Ofitserov na Krainem Vostoke Rossii 1849–55 g. Pri-amurskii i Pri-ussuriiskii Krai*, St. Petersburg, 1878, 109.

[3] An adventure film was in fact made about Nevel'skoi's exploits. *Zaliv Schast'ia*, dir. Vladimir Laptev, Sverdlovsk, 1987.

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had no military posts on the lower Amur River,[4] and that local peoples paid no tribute to the emperor. He reported that the Nivkhs distrusted the Manchus, who were breaking Qing law by trading in foreign lands. He also learned—so we are told—that foreign ships pillaged their villages each spring, likely from among the numerous American whaling vessels in the Sea of Okhotsk. Nevel'skoi explained in his memoir that for all of these reasons, he proclaimed to aboriginals and Manchus alike that while Russians had not set foot there in many years, they had *always* considered the region their own. Henceforth, both the land and people would be protected by the Tsar. He allegedly confirmed his pronouncement with a written declaration: 'In the name of the Russian state, I hereby declare to all foreign ships sailing in the Gulf of Tatary that… the shores of the Gulf and the Pri-amur region … along with Sakhalin Island are Russian domains [*rossiiskiia vladeniia*].'[5]

While the details are likely apocryphal, Nevel'skoi's declaration and the responses it evoked illuminate conflicting views within Russia of its border in the east. Narratives of Russian history tend to treat Russia's eastward expansion as either conquest—an aggressive Russian state conquering foreign lands—or as a natural process of expansion that took place over centuries. In the 1840s, as growing nationalism plagued the empires of Europe, Russians faced a crisis of identity. Russia was simultaneously a nation and an empire, *russkii* and *rossiiskii*, with no clear distinction between the two. While the term *rossiiskii* refers generally to the empire, and *russkii* to the nation, at the time, the terms were often used interchangeably, failing to distinguish between its empire and Russia itself. Indeed, such a distinction was difficult to make. Russia had been founded through expansion and the assimilation of indigenous peoples, a fact emphasized fifty years later with historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii's famous assertion that 'the history of Russia is the history of a country colonizing itself.'[6]

In the context of European nationalism, defining Russia became a matter of particular significance. Avoiding the question of Russia's physical geography, Tsar Nicholas I defined Russia by the triad of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and *Narodnost'*—the last an ambiguous term referring to purportedly recognizable characteristics of Russians themselves. This was insufficient, however, to the European-educated liberals of the 1840s, who were afraid for their motherland and pushed for reform. Influenced by romantic nationalism in Europe and its resulting quests for national histories and homelands, these young nationalists strove to discover their fatherland's heritage and natural borders.[7] The resulting tension was felt more than 6000 km from St. Petersburg, as Nevel'skoi's exploration incited re-mapping of Russia itself.

While the mid-nineteenth century was an age of nationalism, it was likewise an era of imperialism, albeit no longer the annexation of nearby land and peoples characteristic of the Ottomans, Austrians, and Russians themselves. As the industrial revolution eased travel across oceans and around the world, European powers competed for colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Having a colonial empire implied power and prestige, and those who failed to defend their land risked losing it to the colonialism of others. To compete, Russia had to not only establish its borders as a nation, but to join the race for colonial acquisitions. In the Caucasus, Russia confronted Persia, Britain, and France, while it competed with Persia and later Britain for Turkestan. While contiguous, both Turkestan and the Caucasus were unapologetically colonies, considered non-Russian land with non-Russian peoples whom Russia sought to 'civilize' and exploit for their resources. Alaska—or Russian America—was the nation's only overseas colony, albeit of waning value with the decline of the fur trade.[8] Sakhalin was soon to become its second.

A number of questions plagued Russians concerning their country's boundary in the East. Where was Russia's 'real' border, and how was it determined? According to folklore, Russia was unbounded and unmeasurable. For a land inhabited by subjects of neither, what did it mean to be labeled Russian or Chinese? If the Amur basin did belong to Russia—as Nevel'skoi and others claimed—was it part of Russia itself, which had expanded naturally over the centuries? Or was it a colony, a land strategic and prestigious to Russia, but separate from the Russian homeland? In the context of both nationalism and imperialism, these questions could no longer be ignored.

The Amur basin

The Amur River basin [Fig. 1] had long maintained an ambiguous relationship with Russia. Explorers and traders reached the lower Amur in the 1640s, and for the next four decades, Russian Cossacks collected tribute from the indigenous peoples of the region. Nineteenth-century Russians were familiar with the territory through the life of Protopope Avvakum, exiled there in 1653. Yet when the powerful Qing dynasty turned its attention to the north, Russia agreed to the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), which declared the border ambiguously 'from the top of the cliffs or rocky mountains in which is the source … of the Gorbitsa River and along the peaks of those mountains to the sea.'[9] By the mid-nineteenth century, no one knew which river was once the Gorbitsa or which mountains constituted its source. For the next 150 years—as a Russian exile recalled in his memoirs—'the two neighbouring empires did not know accurately what distance separated them, and what was in the interior.'[10]

Events during the 1840s granted the region new significance not only to Russia, but to the world. In 1842, Britain defeated China in the first Opium War, leading to the opening of ports and new shipping in the region. To its north, the Sea of Okhotsk was a hotbed of the whaling industry, while to the south, the United States hoped to open Japan to trade. Russian statesmen knew that if the Amur proved navigable, a natural highway would not only connect Siberian resources with emerging markets, but it would grant enemies access to Russia's interior. Nicholas I seemed eager to acquire

[4] 'Lower Amur' refers to the section of the river between the Ussuri River and the Liman.

[5] Nevel'skoi, *Podvigi* (note 2), 110–111.

[6] V.O. Kliuchevskii, *Sochineniia v Deviati Tomakh*, Vol. 1, *Kurs Russkoi Istorii*, Moscow, 1987, 50.

[7] See, for example, V. Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation*, London, 2001; A. Martin, The invention of 'Russianness' in the late eighteenth – early nineteenth century, *Ab Imperio* 2003, no. 3, 119–134; J. Bradley, *Voluntary Associations in Tsarist Russia: Science, Patriotism, and Civil Society*, Cambridge, 2009, 86–127; O. Maiorova, *From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Russian Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855–1870*, Madison, 2010.

[8] D. Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire*, London, 2003; J. Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923*, Bloomington, 2007; A. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand, 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India*, Oxford, 2008; B. Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus*. Ithaca, 2009; I. Vinkovetsky, *Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867*, Oxford, 2011.

[9] *Russko-kitaiskie Otnosheniia v XVII Veke: Materialy i Dokumenty*, Vol. 2, *1686–1691*, Moscow, 1972, 645. See discussion in T. Morris-Suzuki, Lines in the snow: imagining the Russo-Japanese frontier, *Pacific Affairs* 72 (1999) 67.

[10] Ludwik Niemojowski, *Siberian Pictures*, Vol. 1, London, 1883, 39–40.