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ESSAY:

**“How did Tsarist Russia transform the Far East
from imperial periphery into national territory
in the years 1884-1914?”**

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How did Tsarist Russia transform the Far East from imperial periphery into national territory in the years 1884-1914?

A section of a forest is being cleared by workers. An army officer approaches a peasant and enquires upon the whereabouts of a grave. Thus starts "Dersu Uzala", Akira Kurosawa's only film shot in Russian, based on the memoirs of Vladimir Klavdievich Arsenyev, famous military explorer and ethnographer of the Far East. Kurosawa's beautiful shots of the Ussuri Taiga, with its splendid autumn, harsh winters, monsoon season and tropical summer, sets the backdrop for the friendship that emerges between Arsenyev and Derzu Uzala, a native Nanai hunter. In itself the story is simple and moving, yet masks the historical context to the character's environments. Arsenyev was a military officer engaged in numerous military expeditions aimed at combatting Chinese banditry; he was a settler and nationalist. Even the expedition within the film, in which he laboriously goes through the Taiga for his map-making mission, as a form of imperial cartography, enabled Russia to appropriate and make the Far East its own. This essay thus situates itself within the ongoing debate on the nature of Russian identity, whose entangled relationship to both nation and empire I wish to uncover.

The Far East was acquired by the Russian Empire after it had pledged military and political help in exchange for territorial concessions from Qing China. Significantly weakened by the second opium war waged by the French and the British, the Chinese could but agree. Having thus acquired the Far East in the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860), Russia suddenly found itself in possession of an enormous albeit sparsely populated piece of land, and henceforward access to locations ideal for the establishment of warm-water ports for a future Pacific fleet.¹ For the next sixty years, the Maritime and Amur provinces, collectively known as the Russian Far East, would never relinquish its informal status as a contested borderland. It was initially taken as a defensive measure after the Crimean War, a war that saw the arrival of a Franco-British fleet to the Pacific, where it had proceeded to bombard Petropavlovsk in Kamchatka.² Under the personal initiative of General Nikolai Muraviev, fearing the British and Americans would take the Far East, made the first step in engineering a land grab and preemptively claim a piece of the pie. Largely underdeveloped until the mid-1880s, the Far East was viewed as a "terra nullius" ready for Russian settlement at the expense of indigenous people. It was with the establishment of the Priamur General Governorship in 1884 that the concept of the Russian Far East emerged, hence the timeline in this essay starts from 1884 and finishes with the eruption of the First World War.²

¹ Anan'ev, Denis. "The History of the Russian Far East during the Late Imperial Period in the Works of English and German-language Researchers." *Bulletin of Kemerovo State University*, no. 4, 889, 2021. ² Stone, I. R., and R. J. Crampton. "'A Disastrous Affair': the Franco-British Attack on Petropavlovsk, 1854." *Polar Record* 22, no. 141 (1985): 629-41.

² Matsuzato, Kimitaka. "The Creation of the Priamur Governor-Generalship in 1884 and the Reconfiguration of Asiatic Russia." *Russian Review* 71, no. 3, 2012.

This essay examines the efforts made by the Russian Empire into nationalising its periphery and transforming it into an integrated region inhabited by ethnic Russians. Three methods have been identified: peasant resettlement, railways infrastructure and the subsequent anti-foreigner laws enacted to tackle what was then called the "yellow question." Empire is defined as a "large, composite, multi-ethnic or multinational political unit, usually created by conquest, and divided between a dominant centre and subordinate, sometimes far distant, peripheries."³ whereas nations are defined as socio-cultural relations that develop into a collective self-consciousness over time; "a community of kinship, where individuals recognise themselves to be continuously related to each other."⁴ Ernst Gellner's famous definition that the national and political unit must be congruent fails to accommodate the concept of what Mark Bassin calls a "national empire". The term "nation-building imperialism" as defined by Pål Kolstø will be used instead, to define the process in which "nationalists strive for cultural homogenisation throughout the state".⁶

Peasant Resettlement and Ethnic Colonisation

In "Nationalizing Empires" it is argued that "nation-building and empire were very much entangled processes – nation-building in the core of empires was in fact one of the key instruments of empires to enhance and improve their competitiveness".⁵ Alexander Titov goes further, arguing that by virtue of being a land-based empire, there was lack of definable distinction in boundary between national core and periphery, enabling the Russian Empire to embark upon one of history's most successful settler colonial projects, which saw peasants agriculturally colonize southern Russia, the Caucasus, Steppe, Siberia and the Far East, enabling the boundaries of Russian national territory to expand drastically within the empire.

Peasants had been moving away from the imperial centre south and eastwards for the past few centuries, often illegally, in their quest to escape serfdom, poverty and find themselves a better life on the imperial frontier.⁶ This remained restricted to European frontiers. Whilst migration rates increased with the emancipation of the serfs, in which peasants were no longer bound to their native soil yet still retained ties to their communes, Siberia by and large remained underdeveloped, largely due to a lack of state support, as resettlement was viewed as potentially draining the source of cheap labour made available to landowners.⁷ In his travel book on Siberia, noble laureate explorer Fridtjof Nansen states that the primary reason as to why Siberia, despite its "inexhaustible wealth and its boundless extent of fertile land" remained sparsely populated because as a "convict colony" it meant "people disinclined to resort of their own free will."⁸ Serfdom, lack of railways, bad roads and minimal governmental support are other reasons stated to explain low rates of initial settlement prior to the years 1896–1914.

³ Howe, Stephen. *Empire: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁴ Grosby, Steven Elliott. *Nationalism: A very short introduction*. Vol. 134. Oxford University Press, 2005. ⁶ Kolstø, Pål. "Is Imperialist Nationalism an oxymoron?"

⁵ Miller Nationalizing Empire

⁶ Moon, David. "Peasant Migration and the Settlement of Russia's frontiers, 1550-1897." *The Historical Journal*, Volume 40, Issue 4, December 1997, pp. 859 - 865

⁷ Sunderland, Willard. "The 'Colonization Question': Visions of Colonization in Late Imperial Russia." *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 48, no. 2 (2000): 214.

⁸ Nansen, Fridtjof. *Through Siberia: Land of the Future*. Translated by Arthur G. Chater. London: William Heinemann, 1914, pp. 282-84.

Whilst the Far East was never a convict colony per se, unlike its neighbour Sakhalin, the aforementioned causes are equally applicable to the Far East, partially explaining as to why, throughout the 1860s and 1870s, little progress had been made in populating the regions; its even further geographic remoteness did not help either.

Nikolai Muraviev's initial vision of the Amur province as a new Mississippi attracting a plethora of hardworking, skilled settlers, notably free peasants, had failed to materialise.⁹ However, arguably the biggest reason for the initial failure in settlement lies in the fact that Russia was preoccupied with its conquest of Central Asia. The 1878 Berlin Congress saw Russia reorient itself towards the Far East, yet efforts to actively populate the region made little headway throughout the 1880s. The region's population in 1883 was 79,000, composed mostly of Cossacks and stationed troops.¹⁰ The same year saw the establishment of a maritime connection between Odessa and Vladivostok that transported approximately 20,000 settlers. 1896 saw the establishment of the "Resettlement Administration" within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which entailed the creation of state-sponsored programmes for helping peasants resettle and showed the state's willingness for this process to happen.¹¹

As stated in the introduction, one of the primary methods by which the Far East was incorporated into Russia and subsequently nationalised in the late imperial period was through peasant resettlement and subsequent russification. Throughout the 1880s, Russia became concerned of its demographic vulnerability in the Far East, aggravated when Han Chinese settlers started populating neighbouring Manchuria and Chinese seasonal workers remained present in the Russian Far East.¹² For A.V Krivoshein, future Minister of Agriculture, ethnic colonisation as the answer, arguing that settlement in the underpopulated "East" would benefit "national interest."¹³ Important to note that ambiguities remain over whether peasants were active, conscious proponents of settler colonialism. Arguably they were not: their worldview was non-nationalistic and they resettled not to bring European civilization but often to escape economic hardships. That did not stop them from being used as instruments of Empire.¹⁴ The best means by which Tsarist authorities consolidated long-term political control over newly acquired territories happened first by establishing military outposts and cossack settlements on the frontier, followed by the arrival of peasants. As noted by the Moscow historian Fyodor Mikhailovich Umanets, after "military occupation... there should be cultural and ethnographic occupation. Russian plough and harrow must necessarily follow banners and just as the mountains of the Caucasus and the sands of Central Asia did not stop the Russian soldier,

⁹ Bassin, Mark. *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 81.

¹⁰ Bassin, *Imperial Visions*, 241

¹¹ Morrison, Alexander. "Russian Settler Colonialism." In *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, edited by Lorenzo Veracini and Edward Cavanagh, 313-326. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

¹² Titov, Alexander. "National Appropriation of Imperial Lands in Northeast Asia." In *Competing Imperialisms in Northeast Asia*, Routledge, 1st ed., 2023, 208.

¹³ Sunderland, *The 'Colonization Question'*, 214

¹⁴ Sunderland, Willard. "Empire without Imperialism? Ambiguities of Colonization in Tsarist Russia." *Ab Imperio*, no. 2, (2003): 101-114.

they should not stop the Russian settler."¹⁵ In contested borderlands, peasant resettlement took on the forms of settler colonialism.

Due to the fact that Russian claims to sovereignty in the Far East were extremely dubious, resting on poor historical claims, ethnic Russification remained the most effective method for establishing long term control and consolidating Russia's access to the Pacific. Hence peasant resettlement to Maritime and Amur provinces was encouraged from the very start by the state. In directing flows of migration for strategic and political purposes, notably in areas where it wished to solidify the "Russian element", Tsarist authorities was able to integrate far-flung peripheries into the Empire. Remnev called this "internal imperialism". The fact that most peasants were ethnically Russian later helped nationalise the area.¹⁶ After all, in the Romanov empire the formation of the imperial nation remained deeply tied to the spatial extension of national territory within its borders.¹⁷ Therefore, between the years 1884-1906, peasant resettlement in the Far East happened primarily for the purposes of rudimentary state-building and for the empire to reinforce its borderland to ensure its access to the Pacific remained available, facilitated through settler colonialism, which increasingly became associated with the national idea as visions of a national empire emerged under the rule of Alexander III. Having failed to implement their vision, the authorities took increasing steps to realise their ambitions, mainly through the efforts to establish modern transport infrastructure.

Trans-Siberian Railroad: imperialism, colonialism and nationalism

In 1835, Austrian entrepreneur Franz Anton von Gerstner, in trying to convince Tsar Nicholas I to start building railways, argued that for Russia they could be an "iron and a golden chain binding together the parts of the truly immense empire." In 1883, Mikhail Katkov reiterated in the newspaper *Moskovskie Vedomosti* the belief that "after the bayonet, it is the railways that consummate national cohesion."¹⁸ Therefore, from the very start, the Russian Empire established railway routes to develop the political and strategic interests of the state; economic factors were of secondary importance. Even those that were planned and created for economic reasons may also be viewed as "instruments of imperial rule."¹⁹ The Trans-Siberian Railways, which includes both the Amur and Chinese Eastern Railways, was created for the strategic purpose of consolidating imperial space. In the case of the Amur railways, an additional nationalist factor will be explored below in more detail. Most importantly, for the Far East, the railways' imperial nature also facilitated nation-building imperialism.

¹⁵ Remnev, Anatolii. "Making Siberia and the Far East Russian: On the Political Motivation of Colonization Processes in the 19th-Early 20th Centuries." *Sibirskaya Zaimka*, July 1, 2002.

¹⁶ Remnev, Anatolii. "Making Siberia and the Far East Russian: On the Political Motivation of Colonization Processes in the 19th-Early 20th Centuries." *Sibirskaya Zaimka*, July 1, 2002.

¹⁷ Miller, Alexei. "The Romanov Empire and the Russian Nation" in *Nationalizing Empires*, edited by Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller, 26. Budapest: Central European Press, 2015.

¹⁸ Schenk, Frithjof Benjamin. "Mastering Imperial Space? The Ambivalent Impact of Railway-Building in Tsarist Russia." In *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2011).

¹⁹ Schenk, *Mastering Imperial Space*, 312.

One of the key factors that convinced Tsar Alexander III to order the state-funded construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad (1894-1903) was above all the perceived vulnerability of Siberia and the Far East, due, as aforementioned, to its economic lack of development and low population. In 1888, the Amur province had 61,000 Russian residents and the Maritime province fewer than 20,000. To make matters first, in the cities Chinese and Korean settlers made up a quarter of the urban population in both provinces by 1900, and most Russians viewed the Chinese as disloyal.²⁰ Already in 1874, future minister of transport K.N Posyet wrote about how the “semidesert” borderlands of Siberia and the Far East was sharply contrasted with China and Japan, with their “million-strong, compact population”, foreshadowing later public discourse around the “Yellow Peril.”²¹ The need to build railways to facilitate increased transportation of European settlers was therefore of paramount importance. In fact, it was precisely the fear of a potential demographic invasion by the neighbouring Asian powers that convinced the Tsar to give the go-ahead for the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway route. A report by the governor of the Amur oblast dated 1886 warning Alexander III of increasing Chinese presence in the Russian Far East further testifies this hypothesis. Strategic concerns were more important to the emperor who was willing for the state to bear immense economic burden for the sake of lifting his concerns over the perceived vulnerability of Russia’s possessions in the Far East.²² In 1892, Russia’s then minister of Finance Sergei Witte, arguing in favour of the Great Siberian Route, as the Trans-Siberian Railways was then known, wrote in his report to the emperor that Siberia remained underdeveloped and not benefitted from the prosperity of the Russian heartland; the transcontinental railway would help merge [sblizheniie] both places and in the process make the latter more acquainted with “Russian life.” It was viewed as a vehicle that would “bring Christian love and enlightenment into dark Asia”.²³

Railways enabled a large number of settlers to migrate and enabled the periphery to be linked to the imperial core, thereby reducing its remoteness and previous inaccessibility. It also caused the rates of peasant migration to increase by a significant amount. After 1893 statistics retrieved from the Russian Ministry of Communications showed that more and more railway passengers travelling eastwards were in fact peasant colonists.²⁶ By 1914, the Far East had a population of 875,000 people, a vast improvement from the 81,000 Russians in 1888.²⁴ Furthermore, the Siberian Railroad Administration made it its priority to construct schools and churches.²⁸ This ensured that the settler population would not detach itself from the Russian core in terms of culture and political outlook; churches and schools ensured national cohesion took place. All that the Russians had to follow was exemplified in the army motto: For Faith, Tsar and Fatherland.

Making the Far East and the Russian heartland closer also carried huge symbolic weight. This was of particular importance to the imperial authorities, who systematically refused to call the Far East a colony, from an administrative point of view to everyday discourse, for such

²⁰ Marks, Steven G. *Road to Power: The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia, 1850-1917*, 65-71. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

²¹ Marks, *Road to Power*, 123.

²² Schenk, *Mastering Imperial Space*, 131.

²³ Stolberg, Eva-Maria. "The Siberian frontier between “White Mission” and “Yellow Peril,” 1890s-1920s." *Nationalities Papers* 32, no. 1 (2004): 166-68 ²⁶ Schenk, *Mastering Imperial Space*, 148.

²⁴ Stephan, John J. *The Russian Far East: A History*. Stanford University Press, 1994. ²⁸ Miller, *Nationalizing Empires*, 358-359.

admittance could potentially stoke separatist feelings. Imperial geographer Piotr Semenov-Tianshanskii, tasked as other geographers were in defining through cartography the national and imperial Russian space, envisioned one “cultural-economic entity” that was “Russian Eurasia”, a space stretching from the Arctic to the Caspian and from the Baltic to the Pacific, that must not be talked of as a borderland, but should be seen as a “native and fully equal Russian land.”²⁵ The railway facilitated that process. Imperial geographers, of which Semenov-Tianchanskii, saw the expansion of the empire as the primary means through which boundaries of the nation could expand itself. Arguably, the extension of Russia’s borders in Asia happened to enable its subsequent colonization by Russians.²⁶ Russian historian Vladimir Lamanskii fits into this worldview. He envisioned, like naturalist Nikolai Danilevskii, a “political and cultural unity” between European and Asian Russia, as both regions were to be fused together through peasant resettlement, whose culture would create “one faith, one language, and one nationality. Asia was reconceptualised as part of Russia proper, with colonization argued to be a completely natural and organic process that differed itself from European maritime colonization. For the Russians, every bit of Siberia and the Far East was a proper part of the “homeland and fatherland” thereby confirming that the Far East was never viewed as a colony, but rather as a space reserved for the Russian nation.²⁷ The Trans-Siberian railroad was the means by which to consolidate imperial space and integrate Asia into the Russian ethnocultural sphere. The nationalisation of the Far East operated and functioned within that imperial framework. Railways was the modern means by which the empire could bring remote peripheries closer to the centre by symbolically linking distant geography into an all-encompassing, interlinked national-imperial space.

Chinese Eastern Railways vs Nationalists

The Russo-Japanese war was the pivotal moment which forced Russia to adopt a clear policy vis-à-vis the Far East.²⁸ It was a conflict which saw my great-great-grandfather, Nikolai Ostroverhy, captain and photographer, being deployed with the 17th Chernigov Hussars Regiment to fight in Manchuria. Prior to the war, Russia had embarked upon what David Schimmelpenninck called “conquistador imperialism” in which endless expansion was encouraged. War forced Russia to re-evaluate its capabilities and adopt clear-cut, realistic policies. The Chinese Eastern Railways, constructed between the years 1896-1903, fits into the label of “conquistador imperialism”. Envisioned by Sergei Witte as a means by which to conduct a “pénétration pacifique” into the heart of Chinese-held Manchuria, the Chinese Eastern Railways was from the start imperialistic, colonialist and financially exploitative.²⁹ Once more we are presented with the contradictions of Russian imperial rule, for before the war the CER was monopolising the trade at the expense of Vladivostok and Priamur’s regional development. There was an incoherent vision of the Far East, although what was certain was that “imperialism and colonialism [was] at its height and nationalist concerns [were] dismissed

²⁵ Miller, Alexei. “The Romanov Empire and the Russian Nation” in *Nationalizing Empires*, edited by Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller, 25-26. Budapest: Central European Press, 2015.

²⁶ Wortman, Richard. “Russian Noble Officers and the Ethos of Exploration.” *Russian History* 35, no. 1/2 (2008): 181-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24661679>.

²⁷ Bassin, Mark. “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space.” *Slavic Review* 50, no. 1 (1991): 1–17.

²⁸ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, David. *Toward the Rising Sun: Russian Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan*, Northern Illinois University Press, 2006.

²⁹ Hsu, Chia Yin. *A Tale of Two Railroads: ‘Yellow Labor,’ Agrarian Colonization, and the Making of Russianness at the Far Eastern Frontier, 1890s-1910s*. *Ab Imperio*, no. 3, 2006.

in favour of financial profits.”³⁰ The company dismissed concerns raised by local leaders in the Russian Far East, thereby demonstrating the contradictions within a “nationalizing empire”, in which a still pre-modern, archaic and dynastic conception of the Romanov empire, as demonstrated by many elitist institutions such as the Ministry of Finance, coupled with Witte-inspired financial colonial ventures were clashing with emerging Russian nationalist interests. Russian nationalist Spiridon Dionisievich Merkulov accused the CER of being responsible for the economic decline of Vladivostok, claiming tea imports had fallen, as all Russian goods destined for Manchuria were now imported via Dal’nii, not Vladivostok. Dean Ivanovitch Subotic, ex-military governor of the Far East, wrote to Army Minister Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin, putting forward the proposal to exploit Vladivostok instead of Dal’nii.

Pre-1905 multiple visions still clashed, in which imperial and financial interests, represented by Sergei Witte, clashed with local national interests that would later be championed by Piotr Stolypin. Post-1905 the CER acquiesced to the demands as Dal’nii had been lost. Pavel Feodorovich Unterberger, governor of the Far East between 1906-1910, was appreciative of the newfound partnership, reporting to Tsar Nicholas II that the CER was now playing an “important and central role” for the Russian Far East.³¹ The nationalisation of the Far East accelerated after the war, as the Tsarist state reimagined its policies in the region, opting for an abandonment of the now discredited policy of “conquistador imperialism” in favour of a more defensive position aimed at consolidating the Far East. A coherent vision vis-à-vis established after the war, the Tsarist authorities became convinced of the necessity to ramp up the resettlement of ethnic Russian peasants, and to finally confront the “Yellow peril” once and for all.³²

Finally, the construction of the Amur Railway was deemed a necessity following the defeat in the war with Japan. In a speech to the State Duma dated 31st March 1908, Piotr Stolypin cites strategic concerns to argue in favour of constructing the financially expensive Amur railway (1907-1916), voices fears of a foreign “infiltration” by “aliens”.³³ The need for a railway on Russian soil ending in Vladivostok was deemed vital to national interests. The Amur Railways was envisioned to aid in nationalising the Far East. To quote Stolypin: “These Russian pioneers will build the road, they will settle around this road, they will move into the region and at the same time move Russia there.” He thereby envisioned not only peasants but workers as nation-builders in the Far East. Stolypin finishes reaffirming that “Our eagle, the legacy of Byzantium, is a two-headed eagle.” Therefore by cutting one head you will not make it a “single-headed eagle” but “only make it bleed to death” thereby reaffirming Russia’s ideological belief in the indivisible unity between Asia and Europe, or rather Russian Eurasia.³⁴

³⁰ Asada, Masafumi. “Making a Vancouver in the Far East: ‘The Trinity Transportation System’ of the Chinese Eastern Railway, 1896-1917.” In *Russia and Its Northeast Asian Neighbors: China, Japan, and Korea 1945-1858*, edited by Kimitaka Matsuzato, 2017.

³¹ Asada, *Russia and Its Northeast Neighbours*,

³² Hsu, *A Tale of Two Railroads*,

³³ Hsu, *A Tale of Two Railroads*,

³⁴ Stolypin P.A. Complete Collection of Speeches in the State Duma and the State Council 1906-1911.

Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 160-168, 1991.

Racialisation of the Frontier

By 1907, violence from the first Russian Revolution in the Far East had subsided, allowing Piotr Arkadievich Stolypin's government to embark upon his famous reforms, notably through the encouragement of mass peasant resettlement to Siberia and the Far East. In the years 1906-1910, 200,000 settlers came to the Far Eastern provinces, which led to renewed conflicts over land and increased tensions around the "yellow question."³⁵ For the Tsarist authorities, the most significant challenge that Russia faced in terms of nationalising the Far East was the large presence of Chinese labourers and Korean farmers in the Priamur. Due to shortage of labour, Chinese seasonal workers had been present in the Far East since 1858, whilst Koreans brought their families and settled down as farmers, adopting Orthodox Christianity and learning Russian.³⁶ In 1895, the population of the Amur region reached 121,516 inhabitants: 80,165 was made up of rural peasants and mining labourers, out of which 13-15% were Chinese and Korean. In the years 1894-1917 the foreign population of the Russian Far East is estimated to have stayed around 10-15%.³⁷ The total population of Chinese in the Russian Far East was estimated at 200,000-250,000 people. Inadequate colonization meant that the Russian Empire was continuously dependent on both Chinese labour and trade, triggering renewed efforts to shake off this liability. In 1910, 41% of workers employed in state enterprises and 82% in the gold mining industry were Chinese.³⁸

The "yellow peril" was an ideological construct that voiced the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the Far East. The Chinese were blamed for monopolizing fur trade and spreading the illegal opium and vodka trade that made Russian frontier towns known for its opium addiction and rampant alcoholism. The towns' backwardness was blamed on the increasing presence of an "inferior race", i.e. the Chinese. The Russians became economically interdependent with the Chinese and Koreans. Peasants relied on the Chinese for millet, tea, tobacco, trading fur, silver, crafts, and it is known that they even provided military outposts with fresh produce from their gardens. To complicate matters even further, evidence suggests most Russian and Ukrainian settlers were unable to adapt to the distinct climate in the Far East, to which Korean and Chinese farming techniques were better suited. Indeed, this inability to adapt led one agronomist to speak of "Russian peasant's complete inability for colonization." in the region.³⁹ In seeking to solve the "yellow question", the region's last military governor, Nikolai Gondatti, Stolypin's disciple and fervent Russian nationalist, passed a series of anti-Chinese legislation that affected the Koreans as well. 1. only naturalised Russian citizens could settle permanently in Russian towns 2. no person could rent their property to foreigners 3. no company or individual could hire foreigners and 4. passport checks were to be introduced at the border with China. In 1914, the Priamur provincial legislature passed the most radical measure yet

³⁵ Glebov, Sergey. *The Political Ecology of Vladimir Arsen'ev*. Sibirica 19, no. 3, 2020

³⁶ Zatspeine, Victor. *Beyond the Amur: Frontier Encounters between China and Russia, 1850-1930*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017.

³⁷ Yanchenko, Denis G. "Government of Nicholas II and the Economy of the Far East in Russian Archival Materials." In *Competing Imperialisms in Northeast Asia*, Routledge, 2023.

³⁸ Kovrigin, Nikita. "Shaping Chinese Communities in Japan and Russia: The Role of Political Factors." In *Competing Imperialisms in Northeast Asia*, 206-222. Routledge, 2023.

³⁹ Sokolsky, Mark. "Making the Land Russian: Migration, settlement, and environment in the Russian Far East, 1860-1914." In *Environmental History of Modern Migrations*, 81. Routledge, 2017. ⁴⁴ Glebov, Sergey. *Exceptional Subjects: Koreans*, ⁴⁵ Asada, *Northeast Asia and Its Neighbours*.

seen: all Asian citizens were to be removed from Russian towns, revealing the extent to which Gondatti opposed the presence of Chinese minorities. However, such laws were often relaxed, due to personnel shortage in law enforcement agencies and the fact that Russian police was often corrupt and inefficient. With the eruption of the First World War, all attempts at restricting Chinese migration to the frontier was dropped, as Russian labour forces depleted even further, rendering Chinese labour vital to sustain the war effort.⁴⁴ Economic and political interests took precedence over patriotism and racism.⁴⁵

To conclude, in the reign of the last two Tsars, Alexander III and Nicholas II, the imperial authorities transformed the Far East from a nascent, imperial borderland perceived as a financially underdeveloped wasteland associated with exile into an integrated part of Russian national territory. This was achieved through three important, identified methods: the resettlement of peasants, construction of railways and the exclusion and discrimination against Asian ethnic minorities. Whilst this vulnerable frontier was consolidated as ethnically Russian, inconsistent policies, incoherent visions and conflicting administrative rule meant that the process was volatile and unpredictable throughout. So much so that it took the brutal and ruthless Stalinist régime to deport all Koreans and Chinese in 1935-37, showing the extent to which the Far East was still perceived as a vulnerable frontier. Despite these setbacks, the nation-building strategies employed by the imperial authorities more than a century ago were ultimately successful; the Russian Far East has remained Russia to the present day. The construction of the largest transcontinental railway route in the world, coupled with the resettlement of millions of peasants, two monumental enterprises in scope of both logistics, vision and realisation, shows proof to the extent to which the state was willing to go to achieve its goal in unifying the empire's peripheries and integrating them into what Peter Struve, rather oxymoronicly called the "nation-state empire."

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PAUL OSTROVERHY

TIMELINE



Defense of Petropavlovsk. Painting by A.P. Bogolyubov, 1896

BASED ON THE ESSAY:

**“How did Tsarist Russia transform the Far East
from imperial periphery into national territory
in the years 1884-1914?”**

Detailed Timeline (AI): Tsarist Russia's Transformation of the Far East (1854-1914)

1850s

- **1854:** Franco-British fleet arrives in the Pacific during the Crimean War and bombards Petropavlovsk in Kamchatka, sparking Russian fears of British and American territorial ambitions in the Far East.
- **1858:** Russia acquires the Far East from Qing China in the Treaty of Aigun, gaining access to warm-water ports for a future Pacific fleet. This acquisition is partly due to Qing China being weakened by the Second Opium War.
- **Late 1850s onwards:** Chinese seasonal workers begin to be present in the Russian Far East due to labor shortages.

1860s

- **1860:** Russia secures additional territorial concessions from Qing China in the Treaty of Beijing, further solidifying its hold on the Far East.
- **1860s-1870s:** Little progress is made in populating the Far East due to its geographic remoteness, lack of state support for settlement, and Russia's preoccupation with conquering Central Asia.

1870s

- **1874:** K.N. Posyet, future minister of transport, expresses concern about the "semidesert" borderlands of Siberia and the Far East contrasting sharply with the "million-strong, compact population" of China and Japan, foreshadowing the "Yellow Peril" discourse.
- **1878:** The Berlin Congress sees Russia reorient its focus towards the Far East.

1880s

- **1883:** The population of the Far East is approximately 79,000, primarily composed of Cossacks and stationed troops.
- **1883:** A maritime connection is established between Odessa and Vladivostok, transporting approximately 20,000 settlers.
- **1884:** The Priamur General Governorship is established, marking the emergence of the concept of the Russian Far East and the starting point for the essay's timeline.
- **Mid-1880s onwards:** The Far East, previously underdeveloped, begins to be viewed as "terra nullius" ripe for Russian settlement.
- **1886:** The governor of the Amur oblast reports to Tsar Alexander III, warning of increasing Chinese presence in the Russian Far East, further solidifying strategic concerns about demographic vulnerability.
- **1888:** The Amur province has 61,000 Russian residents, and the Maritime province has fewer than 20,000.

1890s

- **1892:** Sergei Witte, Russia's Minister of Finance, advocates for the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (then known as the Great Siberian Route) to integrate Siberia and the Far East with the Russian heartland.
- **After 1893:** Statistics from the Russian Ministry of Communications show a significant increase in peasant colonists traveling eastward by railway.
- **1894-1903:** Construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, a state-funded project ordered by Tsar Alexander III primarily for strategic reasons (perceived vulnerability of Siberia and the Far East).

- **1894-1917:** The foreign population (Chinese and Korean) of the Russian Far East is estimated to remain around 10-15%.
- **1895:** The population of the Amur region reaches 121,516 inhabitants, with 13-15% of rural peasants and mining laborers being Chinese and Korean.
- **1896:** The "Resettlement Administration" is established within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, creating state-sponsored programs to aid peasant resettlement.
- **1896-1903:** Construction of the Chinese Eastern Railways (CER) begins, envisioned by Sergei Witte as a "pénétration pacifique" into Manchuria, driven by imperialistic, colonialist, and financially exploitative motives.
- **By 1900:** Chinese and Korean settlers constitute a quarter of the urban population in both Amur and Maritime provinces.

1900s

- **Pre-1905:** Multiple visions for the Far East clash, with imperial and financial interests (represented by Witte and the CER) conflicting with local national interests.
- **1904-1905:** The Russo-Japanese War takes place, forcing Russia to re-evaluate its policies in the Far East and abandon "conquistador imperialism" for a more defensive stance. Nikolai Ostroverhy, the author's great-great-grandfather, serves as a captain and photographer with the 17th Chernigov Hussars Regiment in Manchuria during this war.
- **Post-1905:** The CER acquiesces to demands as Dal'nii is lost. The nationalization of the Far East accelerates.
- **1906-1910:** Piotr Stolypin's government encourages mass peasant resettlement to Siberia and the Far East, with 200,000 settlers arriving in the Far Eastern provinces. This leads to renewed conflicts over land and increased tensions regarding the "yellow question."
- **1906-1910:** Pavel Feodorovich Unterberger serves as governor of the Far East.
- **By 1907:** Violence from the first Russian Revolution in the Far East subsides.
- **1907-1916:** Construction of the Amur Railway is deemed a necessity after the Russo-Japanese War to ensure a railway on Russian soil ending in Vladivostok, vital for national interests.
- **March 31, 1908:** Piotr Stolypin gives a speech to the State Duma advocating for the financially expensive Amur Railway, citing strategic concerns and fears of foreign "infiltration."

1910s

- **1910:** 41% of workers in state enterprises and 82% in the gold mining industry in the Russian Far East are Chinese, highlighting Russian economic dependence on Chinese labor.
- **Early 1910s:** Nikolai Gondatti, military governor of the Priamur and a fervent Russian nationalist, passes a series of anti-Chinese legislation, including restricting permanent settlement to naturalized citizens, prohibiting property rental to foreigners, banning the hiring of foreigners, and introducing passport checks at the Chinese border. These laws also affect Koreans.
- **1914:** The Priamur provincial legislature passes the most radical anti-Asian measure yet, mandating the removal of all Asian citizens from Russian towns.
- **1914:** The total population of the Far East reaches 875,000 people, a significant increase from 81,000 Russians in 1888.
- **1914:** With the eruption of the First World War, attempts to restrict Chinese migration are largely dropped due to depleted Russian labor forces, making Chinese labor vital for the war effort. Economic and political interests temporarily supersede patriotic and racist sentiments.

Later (Beyond the primary scope of 1884-1914 but mentioned for context)

- **1935-1937:** The Stalinist regime deports all Koreans and Chinese from the Far East, indicating that the region was still perceived as a vulnerable frontier decades later.

CAST OF CHARACTERS



Vladimir Arsenyev, Dersu Uzala, soldier Fokin and Zhang Bao (from left to right) on a hike along the Takema River basin. Photo from the 1907 expedition.

BASED ON THE ESSAY:

“How did Tsarist Russia transform the Far East from imperial periphery into national territory in the years 1884-1914?”

Cast of Characters (AI):

- **Alexander III (Tsar):** Russian Emperor (reigned 1881-1894). He ordered the state-funded construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad primarily due to perceived strategic vulnerabilities in Siberia and the Far East, demonstrating a willingness to bear immense economic burden for national security. His rule saw the emergence of visions of a "national empire" linked to settler colonialism.
- **Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin:** Russian Army Minister. He received a proposal from Dean Ivanovitch Subotic to exploit Vladivostok instead of Dal'nii.
- **Dersu Uzala:** A native Nanai hunter, featured in Akira Kurosawa's film "Dersu Uzala," based on the memoirs of Vladimir Klavdievich Arsenyev. He represents the indigenous population of the Ussuri Taiga.
- **Dean Ivanovitch Subotic:** Former military governor of the Far East. He advocated for the exploitation of Vladivostok over Dal'nii to Army Minister Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin.
- **Franz Anton von Gerstner:** Austrian entrepreneur. In 1835, he tried to convince Tsar Nicholas I to build railways, arguing they could be "iron and a golden chain binding together the parts of the truly immense empire."
- **Fridtjof Nansen:** Noble laureate explorer and author of a travel book on Siberia. He identified the primary reasons for Siberia's sparse population before 1896-1914 as its status as a "convict colony," lack of railways, bad roads, and minimal government support.
- **Fyodor Mikhailovich Umanets:** Moscow historian. He emphasized the necessity of "cultural and ethnographic occupation" following military occupation in newly acquired territories, stating that "Russian plough and harrow must necessarily follow banners."
- **K.N. Posyet:** Future Russian Minister of Transport. In 1874, he expressed concerns about the demographic contrast between Siberia/Far East and neighboring China/Japan, foreshadowing the "Yellow Peril" discourse.
- **Mikhail Katkov:** Editor of the newspaper *Moskovskie Vedomosti*. In 1883, he reiterated the belief that "after the bayonet, it is the railways that consummate national cohesion."
- **Nikolai Danilevskii:** Naturalist and philosopher. He envisioned a "political and cultural unity" between European and Asian Russia, believing both regions could be fused through peasant resettlement to create "one faith, one language, and one nationality."
- **Nikolai Gondatti:** The last military governor of the Priamur region and a fervent Russian nationalist, described as Piotr Stolypin's disciple. He enacted a series of anti-Chinese and anti-Korean laws aimed at solving the "yellow question."
- **Nikolai Muraviev (General):** Russian general. Under his personal initiative, Russia made the first step in a "land grab" in the Far East after the Crimean War, fearing British and American expansion. His initial vision for the Amur province as a new Mississippi for free peasants failed to materialize.
- **Nikolai Ostroverhy:** Paul Ostroverhy's great-great-grandfather. He served as a captain and photographer with the 17th Chernigov Hussars Regiment, deployed to Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).
- **Nicholas I (Tsar):** Russian Emperor (reigned 1825-1855). Franz Anton von Gerstner attempted to convince him to start building railways.
- **Nicholas II (Tsar):** Russian Emperor (reigned 1894-1917). He received reports on the importance of the Chinese Eastern Railway for the Russian Far East. His reign saw the implementation of major nation-building strategies in the Far East.

- **Paul Ostroverhy:** Author of the essay "How did Tsarist Russia transform the Far East from imperial periphery into national territory in the years 1884-1914?" A 17-year-old student from Stowe School, UK (born 2007), who submitted his essay to St. Hugh's College, Oxford. His work analyzes the methods of Russian nationalization and transformation of the Far East.
- **Pavel Feodorovich Unterberger:** Governor of the Far East between 1906 and 1910. He reported to Tsar Nicholas II about the "important and central role" of the Chinese Eastern Railway for the Russian Far East post-Russo-Japanese War.
- **Piotr Arkadievich Stolypin:** Russian Prime Minister and influential statesman (served 1906-1911). His government encouraged mass peasant resettlement to Siberia and the Far East. He championed local national interests that clashed with Witte's financial interests pre-1905. In a 1908 speech, he argued for the construction of the Amur Railway citing strategic concerns and envisioned peasants and workers as "nation-builders" in the Far East, reaffirming Russia's "Eurasian" identity.
- **Piotr Semenov-Tianshanskii:** Imperial geographer. He envisioned "one cultural-economic entity" of "Russian Eurasia" stretching from the Arctic to the Pacific, which should be seen as "native and fully equal Russian land," not a borderland.
- **Peter Struve:** Russian political economist and philosopher. He coined the term "nation-state empire" in reference to Russia.
- **Sergei Witte:** Russian Minister of Finance (1892-1903) and later Prime Minister. He advocated for the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway to "merge" Siberia with "Russian life" and envisioned the Chinese Eastern Railways as a means of "pénétration pacifique" into Manchuria, representing imperial and financial interests that sometimes clashed with emerging Russian nationalist concerns.
- **Spiridon Dionisievich Merkulov:** Russian nationalist. He accused the Chinese Eastern Railways of causing economic decline in Vladivostok.
- **Vladimir Klavdievich Arsenyev:** Famous military explorer and ethnographer of the Far East. His memoirs are the basis for Akira Kurosawa's film "Dersu Uzala." Arsenyev is characterized as a military officer engaged in combating Chinese banditry, a settler, and a nationalist whose expeditions facilitated imperial cartography and Russian appropriation of the Far East.

PAUL OSTROVERHY

AI GENERATED PODCASTS



Photo by Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky

BASED ON THE ESSAY

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