

"PACIFIC HISTORY"

By KLAUS MEHNERT

In the world's political vocabulary, "The Pacific" has become one of the most frequently used terms. From year to year the connection between Atlantic and Pacific affairs has grown closer. With the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis reaching from Bordeaux to the Marshall Islands, and with the Anglo-American bloc circling the globe, events in one hemisphere most intimately affect those in the other. To supplement the huge amount of literature on the modern political problems of the Pacific, we here present some ideas on the history of that area.

In 1936 the author was invited to join the faculty of the University of Hawaii. Before that he had been connected with the Universities of Berlin and California. The history of the White powers, particularly of Russia, in the Pacific has been his chief interest, and he has taught courses in "History of Russia in Asia and on the Pacific" and "History of the Western Nations in the Pacific." An article by him entitled "Marco Polo and the Pacific" and closely related to the present essay has just been published by the magazine "Il Marco Polo" in Shanghai.

The following is a chapter from a book on the history of the Pacific which the author has been working on for the past three years at the University of Hawaii.

THE NEGLECTED PACIFIC

The biggest thing on the surface of the earth—the Pacific Ocean—has been neglected by historians. Up to the Age of Discovery, man was unaware of the Pacific's existence. Then he became increasingly conscious of this ocean, and in the last hundred years he studied the Pacific area with mounting interest and from an increasing number of angles. But, while much research and writing have been devoted to the histories of individual regions of this area (such as Japan, China, California, and Hawaii) and some to individual aspects of Pan-Pacific history (such as discoveries, trade, and naval strategy), there has been no comprehensive history of the Pacific as a whole. The time has come to write such a history; world interest in this area and the amount of preparatory research justify it.

The author's desire to make this study resulted from six years of life, study,

and teaching in and on the Pacific, particularly in the Hawaiian Islands. For this enormous ocean cannot fail to impress anyone who has lived in its midst; who has stood in a long line at the Honolulu Post Office on boat or Clipper day waiting to send a letter over thousands of miles of water to the nearest mainland; who from a plane or mountain top has seen the verdant archipelago enclosed by the white breakers of waves traveling over seventy million square miles; or who has contemplated on a globe against the background of blue the specks of dust that mark the Hawaiian group. Nowhere in the world do people think and talk as much in Pacific terms as in Hawaii, where the "Institute of Pacific Relations" was founded, where people assert they live at the "cross-roads of the Pacific," and where the telephone directory includes a long list of Pacific enterprises—down to the "Pacific Fertilizer," "Pacific Plumbing," and "Pacific Junk" companies.

"PACIFIC HISTORY"?

Originally, as a European and a German, I was skeptical of so sweeping a term as "Pacific History." The maps and atlases amid which I grew up had Europe in the center and hardly ever showed the Pacific as a unit. Indeed, what was there to show except a lot of water, currents and winds, and some islands? For all practical purposes Japan seemed to be the end of the world in the east and California in the west.

Furthermore, can eastern Asia and western America have a history in common—lands with the oldest and youngest civilizations, Confucius and Hollywood, Peking and New York, two races, two cultures, two ways of life, as different and incongruous as these? Do they not have more in common with Europe than among themselves? Can a common denominator be found for the snowy wastes of Alaska, the warm charm of Polynesia, the deserts of Australia?

Yes, Pacific History exists, it is worthy of careful analysis, and knowledge of it is necessary for the understanding of the future. Some writers have predicted that the political center of gravity will shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The future we do not know; but even if the next phase of human history should be called Pacific, it will not be "pacific," and many decisive events are certain to happen in the vast expanse of this sea, events grounded in facts and ideas of the past.

DEFINITION

"Pacific History" is a new and unfamiliar child in the old established family of histories and requires a definition both as to area and period covered. A globe shows, better than a Mercator map, that the Pacific is almost a closed lake. In the north, Asia and America all but touch each other; in the southwest a dense mass of islands links Asia to Australia and New Zealand. This leaves only two larger gaps, separating the Antarctic—on one side

from New Zealand, and on the other from Tierra del Fuego. Thus the area of Pacific History should embrace the Pacific coasts of:

- a. Asia—from the Bering Strait to the Malay Peninsula;
- b. The Americas between the straits of Bering and Magellan;
- c. The Antarctic continent,

all with their approaches and hinterlands. Everything between these coasts should also be included: Japan, the Netherland East Indies, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands.

It is less easy to establish the limits of Pacific History in regard to time, but it seems reasonable to suggest that Pacific History began when man became aware of the Pacific and/or the continents that surround it. One cannot speak of Pacific History before the existence of the Pacific was known. The term therefore would not include the self-satisfied life led on the edges of the Pacific by the ancient Japanese or Chinese, Aztecs or Incas. They were unaware that the ocean which washed their shores—far from being the end of the world—was a body of water surrounded by land. For this period, when not even an idea, let alone knowledge, of the Pacific Ocean had yet emerged, we have only a Japanese or Aztec history, perhaps a Far Eastern and American, but certainly not a Pacific History.

EARLY MIGRATIONS

The Asio-American migrations which preceded the coming of the white man are unrecorded and thus prehistoric. Scientists are still debating on how they took place, whether by way of the Bering Strait, the Aleutian Islands, Polynesia, or the Antarctic, for the inhabitants of Asia and America encountered by the intruding white man had no memory of these movements.

Suppose early man in America—the "American Indian"—arrived over the circum-Pacific route across the Bering Strait. His contemporary in Asia, not

knowing of a huge continent across the sea, could have no idea that it was inhabited by his own kin. And the American Indian was probably just as unaware that his ancestral home lay somewhere on the other side of the Pacific. Even if he had believed that his forefathers had come over the Bering Sea, he would not necessarily have realized that the land they had left was on the other side of a vast ocean. For he would not have thought of them as having traveled by a circuitous route. In a way, they had not: the shortest route from North China to America—even to so distant a part as Peru—runs directly through the narrowest point of the Bering Strait.

Or let us assume that early Americans had traveled, as some prefer to believe, the trans-Pacific route by way of the islands of the South Seas. Such a migration would likewise not be Pacific History. True, the Polynesians performed magnificent and courageous voyages. But, if they reached America, the fact remained unknown, not only to the outside world, but apparently to the Polynesians themselves. In recent years their feats of navigation are being reconstructed by archeologists, anthropologists, and linguists after lengthy research, with an ingenuity which must use imagination, rather than knowledge, to fill the huge gaps between the known facts—facts as few and far between as the islands of the eastern Pacific.

One of the reasons why the early Americans seem not to have remembered their migrations can perhaps be found in the fact that none of the possible avenues was likely to have invited frequent use. The only easy and close access from Asia to America, across the Bering Strait, lay within the Arctic Circle, in an inhospitable latitude. Of the others, both the Aleutian chain and the Antarctic suffered not only from the same inconvenience of high latitude, but from the additional difficulty of wider distances of open water to be crossed. The only climatically favorable approach, through the

islands of the South Pacific, necessitated the navigation of the ocean at its widest part where the southeastern end of Asia and the westernmost part of South America are almost exactly 180° apart.

Nor are there any memories of subsequent movements between the two continents, though such intercourse almost certainly took place. Thus the Pacific Ocean separated the Asiatic from the American branches of humanity to a point of complete unawareness of each other and of itself.

THE WHITE MAN

It was a newcomer, the white man, who first saw the Pacific as something to be crossed. In 1520-21, only seven years after Balboa had gazed upon it at Darien, Magellan was sailing across it for the first known time. Thereafter the Pacific became for almost 400 years a white man's sea, the indigenous races not participating actively in the destiny of the area as a whole.

This suggests that, up to the recent rise of modern Japan which began with the ending of her self-imposed seclusion, Pacific History is the story of the white man's exploration, struggle, conquest, rivalry, colonization, and exploitation in the Pacific area.

However, merely adding up the histories of the peoples in the Pacific area since the coming of the Europeans does not constitute Pacific History. The term should rather include only developments or problems concerning the Pacific as a whole. Therefore a Pacific History must deal with events, not because they happened in the Pacific, but because they influenced the development in this area. In many cases the drawing of the dividing line must be arbitrary, and the reader may not always accept the author's opinion. But all should agree, for instance, that since 1513 the events along the short and narrow Isthmus of Panama are of greatest Pacific significance, while those along the thousand miles of coast both to the north and south of the isthmus

rarely played more than a local role; and that the conquest of Mexico by Cortez left an incomparably stronger imprint on the destiny of the Pacific than the establishing of the Manchus in Peking. More than that: events in far away Europe, such as the defeat of the Armada or the incorporation of Portugal into Spain or the wars between Spain and the Netherlands, affected the Pacific more than many simultaneous events on the very shores of this ocean. Hence its history can be understood only in close connection with the development of Europe.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

At which particular moment of European intrusion into this area should Pacific History begin? The voyages of Columbus and Vasco da Gama are convenient landmarks, but Marco Polo can claim to be the first known white man to travel over the waves of this ocean and to bequeath his experiences to posterity. Marco's account of his travels has influenced the future of the Pacific more than any other book.

It also seems symbolic that Marco Polo, the individual, should stand at the dawn of Pacific History. The history of the white man in the Pacific is—if one excepts Polar explorations—more than any other the story of individuals. The Balboas and Pizarros, the Magellans and Xaviers, the Khabarovs and Berings, the Cooks and Vancouvers, the explorers, conquistadores, merchants, missionaries, and adventurers who penetrated the largest ocean, the widest open spaces of America and Siberia, the most populous empires of Asia, did this with incredibly small bands of followers. The lives and deaths of these few men, their successes and failures, have shaped the destiny of the Pacific.

LINKS

Pacific History since Marco Polo's time can be regarded as an entity; it is more than just the sum of otherwise unrelated histories of the shore countries. There are links which hold

it together and make it a unit. Some of these may be enumerated.

First of all there was *Marco Polo* himself, largely responsible for the desire of subsequent Europeans to reach the fabulous lands of the East and to acquire the extraordinary treasures which he described. It is surprising how little his influence on history has as yet been studied. Much has been brought to light about him and his voyages, every inch of his routes has been re-traveled and checked, but that is about all.

Then there was that fragrant magnet which drew adventurers, merchants, and nations to the Pacific—*spices*. There exists no single adequate book on the history of spices and their role in world affairs. Even that distinguished arbiter over things important and unimportant, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, has no entry between SPHINX and SPIDER. Yet it was in quest of spices that new worlds were discovered, that Vasco da Gama, Columbus, and Magellan sailed.

That dangerous phantom, the non-existent *Terra Australis Incognita*, conceived and born in the minds of philosophers, lured countless navigators, from Mendaña to Cook, into the South Seas. By their courageous and unceasing efforts the one-time "continent," which was believed to cover the better part of the southern hemisphere, gradually resolved itself into Australia, New Zealand, hundreds of small islands, the ice-covered Antarctic, and, most of all, water. Privation, death, and disappointment cover this path, yet at its end emerged the map and the political shape of the modern South Seas.

What the search for *Terra Australis* meant for the discovery of the South Pacific, the desire to obtain *furs* meant for the North Pacific. Quest for furs drove the Russians from Novgorod to the Pacific and beyond, along the coasts of Alaska and northwest America; quest for furs led Canadians and Americans overland and around the Horn to the Oregon country. Furkingdoms arose and clashed, increasing numbers of ships carried their produce

across the North Pacific to the markets of China, connecting southeastern China with northwestern America by way of Hawaii.

As soon as the continental character of the Americas had been recognized, nations, finding their entry into the Pacific blocked around Africa by the Portuguese, and around South America by the Spaniards, went in search of new approaches. The struggle to discover *northern sea passages* around America and Asia had begun. But while these, as was soon found, led hopelessly into arctic ice and polar night, northern overland passages to the Pacific were achieved by men in quest of fur. In 1639 the first Russian Cossacks, after crossing Siberia, reached the Okhotsk Sea, and in 1793 on the northwest coast of America these proud words were written on a rock: "Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land."

In addition to the Terra Australis fantasy a number of other *myths* or misunderstandings called men into the

Pacific, such as the fabulous islands Rica de Oro and Rica de Plata, the Strait of Anian—in search of which such prizes as California and Hawaii were found—and the Company Land.

And one of the strongest of the bonds holding Pacific History together is the area's close dependence on the affairs of *Europe*. The rise or fall of Spain and Portugal, of the Netherlands and Great Britain, of Russia and France, had obvious repercussions in the Pacific.

Then, with the coming of the nineteenth century, the Pacific area became an arena of intense rivalry among *modern European imperialisms*. This rivalry was expressed in many forms—in whaling and sealing, in trade and colonization, in missionary and military activities, in establishment of protectorates and convict colonies, in discoveries of gold and oil. Steamship lines, cables, airways, and radio—all helped to shorten the distances and introduced the word "Pacific" into the everyday vocabulary of the world.