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Centre-Periphery: Russia and its Far East

Paul Richardson, University of Birmingham

The revolutions of 1917, and the end of the Soviet experiment in 1991, reorganized space and society in the most profound ways. Yet, these seismic political events never quite overcame geography, and the Russian Far East has offered a special vantage point from which to observe the struggle to conquer, consolidate, and control space. The experience of the Russian Far East underscores the “tyranny of distance” faced by Russia’s leaders.¹ It is a region that has continually brought into sharp focus a tension between balancing economic expediency, dematerialising borders, expanding ties with neighbouring states, and an imperative to maintain geopolitical integrity and central authority. This short piece will trace some of the still unresolved legacies of revolution, charting the changes and continuities in the geographical visions and geopolitical possibilities that have shaped this country and its Far Eastern periphery.

The Tyranny of Distance

When the Bolsheviks swept to power in 1917, news of the October Revolution did not reach remote areas of the Far East for weeks, and in some cases, even months. This did not prevent the Bolsheviks declaring the entire Far East under Soviet rule by the end of the year. However, the Party’s organisation in the region was fractious and fragile, and by September 1918 Soviet rule east of Lake Baikal had collapsed, largely thanks to the intervention of expeditionary forces from Japan, Britain, the United States, Canada, France, Italy, and a Czechoslovak Legion.² With allied intervention on the side of the Whites during the Russian Civil War, the city of Vladivostok became “a world unto itself, a unique blend of provincial Russia, treaty-port Shanghai, and the American Wild West.”³ However, this cosmopolitan moment did not last, and, by 1920, most of the allied forces, except the Japanese, had departed. It was this enduring presence of Japanese troops and interests that contributed to the establishment of the Far Eastern Republic (FER) in April 1920, which was designed by Lenin to serve as a buffer state in order to buy time for the nascent Soviet state.

Yet, this independence charade “infected some players with a regionalist virus”⁴ – a virus that proved to be a resistant and contagious one. Even ninety-five years after its inception, the FER found itself valorised and reanimated in some quarters as a model for *Novorossiia*, a confederation of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's

Republic in Eastern Ukraine. An article on *Nakanune* in late 2014 breathlessly recounted the brilliance of Lenin's buffer strategy, and how "the legendary FER can be used as an ideal guide for the construction of the young Novorossiia."⁵ However, on closer inspection, the FER was far from the model the separatists of Luhansk and Donetsk desired, as even when it expired in November 1922, any kind of authority over its vast territory was weak, with locals and foreigners able to move freely across its frontiers.⁶

It was a scenario repeated in the early 1990s when Vladivostok reverberated with the echoes of the past. In 1993, a visiting correspondent from the *New York Times* described the city as "Russia's Wild Far East" with its "heady mix of sudden freedom," "army of Japanese businessmen," and "anything-goes spirit."⁷ Yet, alongside porous borders, and the legal and illegal flow of people, goods, and ideas, there also existed a residual cult of the border. In the same year as the *New York Times*' visit, one journalist from the local newspaper, *Vladivostok*, made his own revelatory visit to the Russian-Chinese border and a Soviet-era memorial to Ivan Moshlyak, a hero of a military confrontation with Japan near Lake Khasan in 1938. As he recounted: "You begin to understand something when you climb this hill [to Moshlyak's statue], you see Russia as a contiguous state with its own border, where so much blood has been spilt."⁸

Yet, in the 1990s, neither laments for the sacrifices of the past, nor the exhilaration of the opening of a once closed space, could compensate locals for the collapse of state-backed industries, the degradation of military capabilities, soaring unemployment, collapsing law enforcement, exploitation of resources, and a flourishing of corruption and criminality. Between 1991 and 2012 the Russian Far East lost about one fifth of its population as birth rates collapsed and out-migration surged.⁹ It was not the first exodus from the region, as after four years of civil war and foreign intervention, the Russian Far East in the early 1920s was in a similar shambles. Nearly half the land under cultivation was abandoned, gold production had plummeted to a tenth of pre-war levels, railways were left inoperable and the region's population had fallen by 200,000 between 1913 and 1926.¹⁰ Both demanded a radical response from the centre.

Return of the Centre?

In 1926, the onetime head of the Provisional Siberian Autonomous Government, Pyotr Derber, and his assistants, came up with a strategy for Far Eastern economic development, which stressed forging links with Pacific neighbours, constructing new rail lines, and using the export of natural resources to pay for imports of technology and equipment. In the same year, the economist, Nikolai Arkhipov, also argued that: "the pull toward Pacific markets is the main

economic force of the Far Eastern region.”¹¹ However, it was a direction decidedly incompatible with the autarchy and authoritarianism of Stalin. In 1932, his solution was Soviet largesse, and the Second Five Year Plan (1933-38) allocated over seven billion rubles to the Far Eastern Region – 10 per cent of total national investment – and included a metallurgical base at Komosomolsk, plans for a Baikal-Amur railway, and sea and air routes to the Centre.¹² As *Pravda* ominously reminded its readers in November 1936, “Comrade Stalin does not take his eyes off the Far East.”¹³

Russia’s current President, Vladimir Putin, also gazes towards the Pacific with a vision that evokes Derber’s desire to develop the region through trade and foreign investment. The most symbolic moment in this strategic turn to the East took place in September 2012 when Vladivostok hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit. In the run up to the summit, the city was to be transformed from a city of neglect, criminality, and obscurity into a modernized portal to Asia, with Putin declaring that: “We view this dynamic region as the most important factor for the successful future of the whole country.”¹⁴ Yet, it appeared that the modernization of Vladivostok still required direct supervision from the highest levels of government. Even in an age of instantaneous information flows, sophisticated surveillance, and advanced communications, the then President, Dmitri Medvedev, found it necessary to make a number of high-profile visits prior to the summit in order to personally oversee construction and ensure projects were completed on time, all the while hoping to deter the misappropriation of resources by local elites.

Making the city ready for APEC 2012 cost around \$21 billion, however, in its wake, the Vladivostok-based newspaper, *Zolotoi Rog*, gloomily lamented that: “We don’t even talk anymore about bribes, kickbacks, and corporate raiders, as they are chronic and incurable problems [...The majority of] questions in our country are as always to be resolved exclusively in the capital [...which...] so totally interferes in the affairs of almost every village or even individual companies.”¹⁵ While one anonymous administrator of a regional district stated that: “To beg for money out of [the regional and federal] budgets has become easier and more profitable than to stimulate the growth of the economy on the ground.”¹⁶

This is but the latest instalment in a rich history of the elites of the Russian Far East subverting the will of the centre. John Stephan recounts that for most of the 1920s, “Central Committee decrees that impinged upon the interests of provincial cliques were imaginatively emasculated amid gestures of sedulous compliance.” While with few ties to the Far East, even Stalin and his “henchmen made little headway suborning, let alone dislodging regional elites during the 1920s.”¹⁷ Only the oppressions and mass executions of the late 1930s saw one kind of tyranny overcome another.

After the disorder of the 1990s, from the beginning of the 2000s, a different kind of reassertion of central control emerged. The series of “Faustian bargains” made with the various republics and regional entities under Yeltsin, were quickly unmade as Putin sought to “re-establish Moscow's supremacy and to humble the regional barons.” It was highly symbolic that this process began in the Far East with the recall of Primorskii region’s “gangster of a governor,” Evgenii Nazdratenko, in 2001.¹⁸ Yet, despite such flourishes from the centre, distance has customarily emboldened the temptation to evade the eyes and ears of the centre. When Aleksandr Khoroshavin, Governor of Sakhalin, was arrested in March 2015 for taking a \$5.6 million bribe, Mikhail Delyagin suggested that it was no coincidence that it involved such a distant corner of Russia: “Sakhalin’s geographic location was one of the reasons why Khoroshavin had the illusion of impunity. The island is 10,000 kilometers (an eight-hour flight) away from Moscow [...] Khoroshavin’s arrest is a clear signal to civil servants they should begin to toe the line at last.”¹⁹

Concluding Remarks

This collection of vignettes on the Russian Far East in the wake of the historical junctures of 1917 and 1991 has suggested that rather than alleviating centre-periphery strains, such dramatic transformations often exacerbated them.²⁰ Cut off from Moscow by Civil War and intervention until the early 1920s, and then by economic crisis and unaffordable and broken transportation networks in the 1990s, Far Easterners have learned to fend for themselves.²¹ In response, each generation of leaders in Moscow has thrown themselves with the same fervour and profligacy of resources into trying to transform this region’s relationship with the rest of the country. It is a region seemingly always on the precipice of a revolutionary “pivot to Asia,” which could change Russia and the world.

However, the euphoria of revolution and the evocative and exhilarating images of the self and their associated representations of space have periodically been dashed on the rocks of local resistance. The various projects and attempts to conquer and transform Russia’s Far East have usually ended the same, with the centre thwarted and wily local officials taking their tribute. Disconnection and dislocation from the centre, and an endless cycle of repetitions, have been an enduring feature of the tyranny of distance that has continued to rule Russia. In the aching chasm between the centre’s ambitions and the realities of the periphery has emerged a fertile ground – one where the privileges and power of local elites have habitually, but ephemerally, blossomed.

- ¹ The term was first coined in Geoffrey Blainey's The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966).
- ² On these opening sentences, see: John J. Stephan, The Russian Far East: A History (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) pp.114-5, p.117 and p.131.
- ³ Ibid, p.132.
- ⁴ Ibid, p.155, p.200
- ⁵ Viktor Kurochkin, 'Dal'nevostochnaya Respublika – Proobraz Novorossii', Nakanune Nov 11 (2014). <http://www.nakanune.ru/articles/19731/> Accessed Dec 6, 2016.
- ⁶ Stephan (note 2) p.162.
- ⁷ Serge Schmemmann, 'Vladivostok, Russia's Wild Far East', New York Times Sep 12 (1993). <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/12/magazine/vladivostok-russia-s-wild-far-east.html?pagewanted=all> Accessed Dec 6, 2016
- ⁸ Vasilii Abchenko, 'V Etu Noch' Reshili Samurai...', Vladivostok 1399, July 29 (2003). http://old.vladnews.ru/magazin.php?id=13&idnews=14027¤t_magazin=1399 Accessed Nov 21, 2009.
- ⁹ 'Programma Razvitiya Dal'nego Vostoka Otolana Na Dorabotku - Raskhody Okazalis' "Neadekvatnymi"', newsru.com Feb 20 (2013). <http://newsru.com/finance/20feb2013/foreast.html> Accessed Dec 6, 2016.
- ¹⁰ Elizar Raikhman, The Economic Development of the Soviet Far East (New York: American Russian Institute, 1936) p.31; N.I. Riabov, Dal'revkom: Pervyi etap mirnogo sovetskogo stroitel'stva na Dal'nem Vostoke, 1922-1926 gg.: Sbornik dokumentov (Khabarovsk: KKI, 1957) p.13; and Vitalii G. Udovenko, Dal'nii Vostok (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1957) p.71, cited in Stephan (note 2) p.163.
- ¹¹ N.B. Arkhipov, SSSR po raionam: Dal'nevostochnaia oblast' (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1926) p.167, cited in Stephan (note 2) p.164.
- ¹² Voprosy ekonomiki Dal'nego Vostoka (Blagoveshchensk: Amur. knizh. Izdat., 1958) p.73, cited in Stephan (note 2) p.190.
- ¹³ Pravda, Nov 11 (1936), cited in Stephan (note 2), p.200.
- ¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, 'Putin: Asia-Pacific Key for Russia's Future Development', Russia Today Sep 6 (2012). <http://rt.com/politics/official-word/putin-apec-article-summit-493/> Accessed Jan 17, 2015.
- ¹⁵ Andrei Pushkarev, 'Andrei Pushkarev: Mne Malo Slyshat' Frazy-Lozungi: Dal'nii Vostok Nam Nuzhen! Ya Eshche Khochu Uslyshat' - Zachem?', Dal'nevostochnyi Kapital, Dec 25 (2012). http://www.zrpress.ru/society/primorje_25.12.12_58605_andrej-pushkarev-mne-malo-slyshat-frazy-lozungi-dalni-j-vostok-nam-nuzhen-ja-esche-khochu-uslyshat--zachem.html Accessed Dec 6, 2016.
- ¹⁶ Ivan Korotaev, 'Vo Skol'ko Oboidutsia Bydzhetu Ob"ekty Sammita', Konkurent, Dec 5 (2012). <http://www.konkurent.ru/print.php?id=3684> Accessed June 9, 2013.
- ¹⁷ Stephan (note 2) pp.174-5, p.198.
- ¹⁸ Steven Fish, 'Putin's Path', Journal of Democracy 12/4 (2001) p.72.
- ¹⁹ Tamara Zamyatina, 'Sakhalin Governor's Arrest Sends Anti-Corruption Message to Regional Elites', TASS May 14 (2015). <http://tass.ru/en/opinions/781342> Accessed Dec 6, 2016.

²⁰ See Stephan (note 1) p.200.

²¹ See *ibid*, p.200.

