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journal or publication title	Journal of Inquiry and Research
volume	109
page range	1-10
year	2019-03
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1443/00007854/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1443/00007854/</a>

# Russian Early Geographic Exploration and Encounters in the North Pacific\*

Scott C.M. Bailey

## Abstract

This article examines the earliest Russian geographic and nautical exploration of the North Pacific and Japan's Northern Territories and their importance within the context of global history, and also in comparison to similar research which Russians conducted in Central Asia. The author identifies some historically significant explorative expeditions and travelers from the Russian Empire to the region, and includes descriptions of their initial findings. It is argued that Russian early efforts to explore the area were somewhat haphazard and did not follow a clearly-orchestrated pattern or objective, which made explorations both infrequent and somewhat sporadic. There is also discussions of some of the outcomes of these explorations, which included cross-cultural encounters with both Japanese people and other peoples of the North Pacific, including the Kamchadals and the Ainu.

**Keywords:** Geographic Exploration, North Pacific, Sakhalin, Kuril Islands, Hokkaido

## Introduction

Russia's initial interest in exploring the islands in the North Pacific and the Northern Japanese territories, including Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands, happened relatively recently in world history, in comparison to other naval "discoveries" in world history. This region was one of the last on earth to become a known entity for geographical exploration and possible settlement, and has become in more recent times an area of diplomatic contention between Russia and Japan, in which the southern Kuril Islands are under Russian administration, but are claimed by Japan (Richardson 2018, 1). In many ways, the North Pacific region has since early modern times been an area of diplomatic negotiation and overlapping colonial contention between the two powers, as well as a cultural "middle ground" in which both colonial powers attempted to exert their influence upon the region. This also involved colonial decisions which greatly impacted the lives of the indigenous

peoples of this region (White 2010), while also irreparably altering the ecological balance (Jones 2014).

To the Russians, they now perceive Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands as “the edge of the nation” (Richardson 2018, 7), and at the same time a frontier space. Eventually, Russia extended their control over the North Pacific to claim control over territories in North America, albeit temporarily, through the rule of the Russian-American Company (Vinkovetsky 2011). Conversely, the Japanese have since the Tokugawa Shogunate seen Hokkaido as firmly Japanese historical space. This followed a long process of increasing Japanese presence in the island during the Tokugawa era and a combination of geographical mapping and expanding influence of the Edo state (Walker 2001, 6) followed by a more formal colonial apparatus in the Meiji period, as Hokkaido was incorporated as a prefecture in 1869. This was in turn followed by a planned settlement project involving both former samurai and prison labor during the Meiji period (Gordon 2014, 74) (Irish 2009, 115-42). According to Stephan, the Japanese first attained knowledge about the Kuril Islands from Ainu traders in eastern Hokkaido during the sixteenth century. This led over time to the fostering of the basho trade system of Japanese trade with the Ainu. By 1754, Japanese traders, following the basho trade that had been going on for many decades in Hokkaido, first established a trading outpost in the the southern Kurils. The island of Kunashir became an important location for Japanese trade because of its rich supply of fish and sea otters (Stephan 1974, 54).

## The North Pacific and Historiography

To date, there has been relatively little published in western languages on the Russian-Japanese relations and the overlapping colonial concerns of the states during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the North Pacific region. This is in part because Russian historians largely ignored this information in their Russian history surveys. This is compounded by the fact that other western nations largely ignored the area during the time, in part because of a lack of information and also because there was very little in the way of exploration or travel through the area at the time by those not Russian nor Japanese. There was also an early perception that the area held little in the way of strategic or economic importance to European or American powers.

The dearth of studies on this topic may also be because of the absence of a major conflict between Tsarist Russia and Tokugawa Japan during the period, which might have

drawn more attention to the topic. Although both sides in effect competed for control over the area, the history of their relations during the period was relatively peaceful and even amicable, which defies common assumptions that Russian-Japanese relations have always been antagonistic, historiographically shaded by the later conflicts of the Russo-Japanese War and the Second World War. Both Russia and Japan did not prioritize exploration and colonization of this zone to a high degree during this early period, which meant that contact was often sporadic and infrequent. In general, Russia pursued its interests in the area during this period in order to the possibility of better trade opportunities with Japan, while Japan generally resisted Russian overtures towards cooperation, preferring to maintain relative isolation from the Aka Ainu ( "Red Ainu" ), as the Japanese initially referred to the Russians (Lensen 1955, 151-52). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the region became a zone of intense competition between Russia, Japan, the United States and other nations in the global pursuit of empire (McDougall 1993).

## First Explorations and the Global Context

The first actual sea exploration of the North Pacific islands by westerners was done by Dutch navigators. Maerten Garritsen Vries (or de Vries) and Henrick Cornelisz Schaep were the first to travel to the region in 1643, but the report of their expedition, as later learned about by the Russians and further confused by Cossack travelers, was muddled at best. For example, Sakhalin was thought by the Dutch to be a part of Hokkaido. The island of Etorofu in the Kuril Islands was also mistaken to be a part of Hokkaido. And another Kuril Island, Uruppu, was believed to be part of North American land. The Dutch mistakingly believed that Hokkaido was a massively larger island than it actually is, and that America was much closer to Japan than the reality (Lensen 1971, 23). This led to a lot of misperceptions on the part of Russians in the geography of the space, which persisted for many decades after.

The Russian Empire's approach to exploration and colonization of the North Pacific was much less systematically approached than the efforts that they made towards exploration and conquest of Central Asia during the nineteenth century, which involved a combination of geographical and scientific research with military expeditions of conquest. The Russian Geographical Society played a major role in the geographic and scientific exploration of Central Asia, which facilitated Russian settlement and colonization in the region (Bailey 2008). In the case of Central Asian exploration, the Russians effectively combined scientific,

ethnographic, and geographic research on the region in order to gain a firm hegemonic control (14). The Russian Geographical Society's efforts were enhanced by the work of professional scientists and geographers like Petr Semenov-Tian'-Shanskii (79-134) and local indigenous people, like the Kazakh scholar-traveler, Chokan Valikhanov (Bailey 2009, 165-90). The early explorations of the scholar-travelers of the Russian Geographical Society was followed up by military conquests and settlements of Russian-speaking peoples in the region, which further facilitated a full-scale sense of accession of this region to the Russian Empire.

In the case of the Russian exploration of the North Pacific, periods of intense exploratory activities, such as during the early eighteenth century, were interspersed with periods of relative inactivity, in part because Russian geopolitical concerns were shifting quickly during the turbulent years of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and frequent conflicts during the period served to distract their attention from eastward expansion. This was compounded by the difficulties Russians encountered in attempting to negotiate for a trading relationship with the Tokugawa Shogunate, whose administration was resistant or cold to Russian attempts at contact and potential trade relationships. Communication issues and many "lost in translation" historical encounters between Russians and Japanese were a problem in creating more cooperation between the two states throughout these centuries as well. This in turn compounded further misunderstandings of geographical mapping of the spaces and determination of starting and ending points of relative political influence. The fragmented history of Russian and Japanese interactions and exploratory activities in the North Pacific region offers a contrast to the more unidirectional colonial enterprise of the Russians in Central Asia, who carried out their colonial expansion largely in the absence of a major power in the region to contend with. But analyzing the Russian experience in the North Pacific with that in Central Asia together can create a fuller sense of how colonial exploration of lands worked in a comparative and global sense.

## Early Explorations in the North Pacific and the Kuril Islands

The first known explorer to reach the Kuril Islands was the aforementioned Dutch East India Company's Maerten Gerritsz Vries, who wanted to search for a northeast passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and possibly to locate islands that contained gold, which had been first reportedly mentioned by Marco Polo (Stephan 1974, 32-33). Vries was unsuccessful at either of these initiatives in his 1643 journey, but did stumble upon the Kuril

Islands on the journey. His report of the expedition contained many incorrect assumptions, including that the island of Kunashir was part of Hokkaido and that the island of Urup was part of North America. He also claimed Urup as “company’s land” for the Dutch VOC. The incorrect reports that he made informed Russian and European understanding of the Kurils for many decades thereafter (34). There was also a widespread misunderstanding that the islands were indeed abundant with gold, when they were not. This misunderstanding was a result of a misinterpretation, in which a Cossack explorer misinterpreted an Ainu man, who told him that the Japanese had taken valuable metals from the island of Kunashir, when in fact the Japanese had actually brought ores to the island to sell to Ainu (36). This simple misunderstanding led to years of further misguided assumptions that the North Pacific area was a source of great potential in precious metals.

Russian and Japanese interactions and the Russian exploration of Japanese territories escalated during the eighteenth century, as Russians began to settle in the Kamchatka peninsula as an extension of their Siberian settlement, and started their advance into the Kuril Islands. Much of their early travels to the Kuril Islands, which initiated in the seventeenth century, were to hunt sea mammals for furs (which the Russians referred to as “soft gold”) and to attempt to chart the territory. The Russian hunting of sea mammals eventually led to a massive operation in the hunting and killing of the North Pacific’s sea mammals, including the eventual extinction of Steller’s Sea Cow (Jones 2014).

This process of ecological change brought about by “a global conjecture between declining colonial ecological diversity and an intensification of natural history study” places the Russian experience in the North Pacific in a comparative context with similar patterns of ecological colonialism in the Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese empires in the Atlantic (234). The scientific exploration and description of the North Pacific, with its emphasis on identifying and categorizing flora and fauna was comparable to the Russian scientific documentation of Central Asian space (Bailey 2008), and many of the scientists who made the journey to the North Pacific used Linnaean description while in travel to the region in a way not untypical among European scholar-travelers at the time (Pratt 2007).

During the eighteenth century, the Russians became increasingly interested in establishing trade relations with Japan, and they saw the Kuril Islands as possible “stepping stones” to this relationship (Stephan 1974, 37-38). Peter the Great began to see the North Pacific as a potential source of increased Russian strength and wealth, and his initiatives helped to spur a generation of expeditions to the region in the first half of the eighteenth

century which led to Russia establishing a strategic foothold in the North Pacific ahead of European rivals (Stephan 1994, 34-35).

The increased Russian settlement in Kamchatka played a key role in the Russian move into the North Pacific as well, as Kamchatka's position within Russia was more representative of the oceanic world than a continuation of Siberia, in terms of its environmental and ecological characteristics (Jones 2014, 31). As the Russian interest in Japanese contact increased during the 1730s and 1740s, Martin Spanberg, a Dane who sailed for the Russians in 1738 in the same fleet as fellow Dane Vitus Bering, came into contact with the Kuril Islands. Spanberg returned to the area in 1739, went south from Kamchatka and made it to Sendai bay on Honshu, leading to a meeting with Japanese there. When he arrived, the local Japanese people showed an eagerness to trade, and came out in small boats to meet the Spanberg's ships. But Spanberg left after only a few hours in contact with the people, whom he described as "very friendly" (Golownin 1973, vi). Spanberg also stopped briefly at Kunashir Island. His initial encounters with Japanese people, while not wholly successful in terms of establishing potential relations with the Tokugawa Shogunate, spurred a later period of increased Russian-Japanese contact in the region, particularly between 1770 and 1813 (Irish 2009, 58).

Decades later, diplomatic relations were renewed during the final years of the Tokugawa period, when Russia and Japan agreed to the Shimoda treaty in 1855, which delineated the borders between a northern and southern portion of the Kuril Islands. Japan controlled Uruppu southward, and Russia controlled all islands to the north of Uruppu. This was followed in 1875 by a second treaty in St. Petersburg, which gave Meiji Japan all of the Kurils, in exchange for recognition that Russia would control all of Sakhalin Island. But Japan would continue to have the right to fish in waters around Sakhalin (Dallin 1950, 26-28).

## **Cross-Cultural Encounters as a Bridge to Increased Colonial Efforts**

One of the earliest cross-cultural encounters in the region between Russians and Japanese happened as a result of Vladimir Atlasov's 1697 expedition to Kamchatka, which earned him the nickname "the Kamchatkan Ermak" (Stephan 1974, 40). Atlasov's travels and stay in Kamchatka were extremely significant in the history of Russian cross-cultural encounters in the region. For one, Atlasov established extended contacts with the indigenous peoples, the Kamchadals, and took note of their sophisticated ceramics and metal goods.

While in Kamchatka, Atlasov also met a Japanese shipwrecked merchant clerk from Osaka, named Denbei, who had been in Kamchatka for some time prior and who met Atlasov in 1701 or 1702. Denbei later moved to St. Petersburg, where he lived for the rest of life, as an advisor and cultural interpreter of sorts for Peter the Great (Bell 2014). Denbei was used by the Russian administration as a source on Japanese geography, history, culture, and language, and his descriptions further intrigued the Russians to want to explore the Japanese islands and establish diplomatic relations, in part because of the belief that the country was very wealthy (Lensen 1954, 6).

Atlasov's encounters with both the Kamchadals and the Japanese also spurred immediate action from the Russian tsar Peter I, who in 1702 ordered that Russia should subject Kamchatka to colonization and that more information should be collected about Japan in order to spur future trade relations. This led to a fresh round of Kuril Island expeditions during the early eighteenth century. Each expedition provided a fuller picture of the Kuril Islands for the Russians, in terms of geography, ethnography, demography, and potential for economic activity (Stephan 1974, 41). Peter the Great proved to be an important supporter of Russian exploration in hopes of establishing greater contact and relations with Japan.

The Ainu who inhabited the Kuril Islands were in contact with both Japanese and Russians during the eighteenth century. Accounts referred to them as "hairy barbarians" (by the Japanese) and "shaggy" (by the Russians). Neither side established a firm upper hand in controlling the Kuril Island Ainu. Japanese traded tools, swords, knives, silk and cotton with them for animal skins, dried fish, blubber, and eagle feathers. The southern Kuril Island Ainu traded directly with the Japanese, and some Japanese goods were in turn traded by southern Kuril Ainu with northern inhabitants. The Russians gained access to the northern Kuril Islands, so the two sides jockeyed for position and for control of the local indigenous peoples from both ends of the islands. The Russians pursued fur tribute collection from the Kuril Ainu with ruthless intensity, and found greater and greater resistance from them the further south in the islands they moved. However, since the Kuril Ainu were not united politically into any sort of confederation of nations, it was relatively easy for both Russians and Japanese to extend control over the Kuril Ainu (Lensen 1971, 63).

Russian-Japanese relations during the period were in part facilitated by the frequent Russian encounters with Japanese castaways like Dembei, who were utilized by the Russians as sources of information on Japan throughout the Tokugawa period. In 1783, the Japanese ship the *Shinsho Maru* was lost at sea for eight months, before finally landing on one of



the Aleutian Islands, Amchitka, where they encountered both locals and Russian hunters. Somehow they managed to leave the island in 1787 and make their way to Kamchatka, along with the Russian hunters, who turned them in to the local Russian governor. The three surviving castaways were taken overland to Irkutsk between the summer of 1788 and the winter of 1789. While there, they met Eric Laxman, a Finnish-born professor from St. Petersburg who took a major interest in the castaways and in researching about Japanese territories. Laxman began to take care of the captives and also used their status as a way to try to convince Catherine the Great of the benefit of a new expedition to renew efforts at exploring the North Pacific following a mid-century lull in activity, in order to establish commercial relations with Japan. Laxman wrote that, “no one can benefit from it (trade with Japan) more, than our merchants who for a long time already have been thinking of this acquaintance (Lensen 1971, 98).”

Laxman reasoned that the return of the castaways would serve as further reason for the mission. In September 1791 Catherine agreed to Laxman’s proposal. The expedition made its way to Hokkaido in October 1792, the first landing of a Russian ship on its shores. The Japanese had established trade contacts as early as the seventeenth century in Hokkaido, and increased their control over the island through the Tokugawa Matsumae clan’s increasing domination of Ezo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rumors spread to the West of the island’s potential for gold and riches, leading to Hokkaido’s exaggerated or incorrect appearance on some western maps by the middle of the seventeenth century (Irish 2009, 56).

During their stay in Hokkaido, Laxman’s crew collected a great deal of information about the geography and natural scientific characteristics of Hokkaido in the area around Nemuro (Lensen 1971, 116). This visit also led to direct contact between Laxman and the Matsumae administration, and a series of communications between the two sides, in which Laxman tried to convince the Japanese to begin a commercial relationship with Russia. By the following summer, the Tokugawa officials had direct meetings with Laxman, in which they conveyed in no uncertain terms that the Russians should leave Hokkaido immediately, and that they were lucky to not be detained for their visit, which was only avoided because of the Russians’ delivering of the Japanese castaways. The Laxman visit was successful in extending Russian knowledge of Hokkaido, and at establishing some initial diplomatic contact with the Tokugawa Shogunate, but the commercial relationship that the Russians had hoped to initiate did not come into being, in part because the Russians did not pursue the matter further for many years after (119).

## Conclusion

Russian encounters with Japan in the North Pacific region were sporadic and infrequent during the early modern era. Russian efforts at gaining knowledge of the area accelerated during the eighteenth century, but due to the lack of a sustained effort on the part of the Tsarist administration, as well as general resistance from the Tokugawa towards Russian efforts at establishing commercial ties in the area, the actual Russian territorial gains and colonial conquests were limited. The somewhat chaotic nature of the Russian-Japanese interactions was also compounded by the complex and often antagonistic relations with the region's indigenous peoples. A major obstacle to Russian colonial conquest in the area was the simple fact that geographical knowledge of the region came piecemeal and was often limited and distorted, which hindered efforts at gaining colonial control over the area until much later in history.

This often-overlooked region deserves greater attention in part for what it reveals about the overall colonial strategies of both Tsarist Russia and Tokugawa Japan. In the case of the Russians, the lack of a coherent overall strategy of colonial takeover contrasted sharply with the Russian efforts at colonizing Central Asia during the nineteenth century. This research also will be of benefit to world history studies on the comparative nature of colonization, as the Russian and Japanese approach to the area was vastly different, with the Russians exhibiting a scattershot approach towards exploration and navigation of the space that was at times ambitious and at times reticent, while the Japanese preferred to take a more measured approach in their exploration and interactions with peoples and lands north of Hokkaido, while also strengthening their rule of Hokkaido and the Ainu. The fact that the two powers eventually clashed, and that some of the region is still an object of diplomatic contention makes a reexamination of this earlier historical epoch worthwhile.

\* This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 18K00919

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