

VIEWS OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE ON THE  
PROBLEM OF ASSIMILATION OF THE CHINESE  
AND KOREAN POPULATIONS IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

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**Abstract:** *Gli emigranti cinesi e coreani nel territorio dell'Estremo Oriente russo nella seconda metà del XIX e all'inizio del XX secolo rappresentarono una sfida per le autorità imperiali russe. Con l'inizio della colonizzazione attiva della Siberia e dell'Estremo Oriente russo dopo la guerra russo-giapponese, il governo imperiale russo vide in queste comunità di stranieri una minaccia all'intero progetto d'insediamento e alla posizione strategica della Russia in Asia. Difatti, le autorità locali russe fino alla guerra russo-giapponese ebbero uno scarso potere di controllo sulle comunità cinesi e coreane, pertanto la loro assimilazione e acculturazione nei territori russi doveva essere realizzata in modo graduale. Poiché i vincoli naturali al libero mercato del lavoro resero le nascenti città dell'Estremo Oriente russo dipendenti dalla rete ferroviaria e dalle idrovie che la collegavano con la Russia centrale, le autorità russe non potevano rifiutarsi completamente di assumere lavoratori migranti cinesi e coreani. Questo articolo esaminerà l'evoluzione della politica ufficiale in materia alla vigilia e durante la Prima guerra mondiale.*

Russia systematically broadened its expansion into the Far East despite many difficulties and, from the second half of the 1890s, implemented a policy of active economic penetration into the North-East of China. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Manchuria and the Russian Far East were both spectacular examples of the success of imperial Russian colonisation policy. With few exceptions (e.g., Gatrell 2014), the role of the government in financing and managing economic modernization is insufficiently explored, and the role of periodicals and pre-revolutionary survey works, which allegedly shaped public opinion, is exaggerated. The ethnic problem is artificially inflated although it was of limited significance in the period of the study, which this article aims to present.

The actual situation is due to a divergence on approaches used in Russian and English works. Historiographic study of publications by English-speaking researchers, who covered the process of ‘economic modernization’ on the Russian periphery during the reign of Nicholas II (Gatrell 2014; Hartley 2014; Hoch 2015), gives us grounds to assert that foreign authors employ approaches that have not been widely used in Russian historiography. An exception to this is *Toward the rising Sun* (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2009) recognized also in Russia as an authoritative work. Although English-speaking authors do make significant use of archival sources and documentary books, including those from regional archives, and analyse works by pre-revolutionary Russian authors, they tend to ignore the traditions, methods, approaches, and opinions of Soviet and contemporary Russian-language historiography.

Methodologically, the vision presented here of the complex process of colonisation of the Eastern regions of the Russian Empire from 1894 to 1917 proceeds from a focus on the direct activities of innovative administrators. This approach is valid in relation to the Far East (intended as Amur region, Manchuria, Kamchatka, Sakhalin, and parts of Siberia), is confirmed by archival sources and has been used by Russian historians. Today, most researchers have concluded that from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the settlement of the Far East, as one of the key elements of imperial policy, was predominantly voluntary, with the exception of the Sakhalin penal colony. The authorities sought to divide the population into Russians and foreigners through taxation and supporting documentation. Ideologists of Russia’s empowerment in the Far East including experienced military bureau-



crats wrote works about the ‘yellow peril’ as a real threat to the European order and suggested changing the contours of the Russian borders in Asia (Unterberger 1900; Denikin 1908; Kuropatkin 1913).


During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a steady increase in the number of Chinese immigrants, primarily from the north-eastern regions of China. According to official data, in 1895 the population of the Amur Region reached 121,516 inhabitants: 80,165 were part of the rural population or mining labourers (RGIA, f. 391, op. 2, d. 213, 1896-1898: 6), out of which approximately 13-15% were Chinese and Korean. Traditionally “Cossacks, peasants, soldiers, and Chinese and Koreans entered into interactions of their own, not quite along the lines suggested by imperial borders and legislation” (Glebov 2017: 91). In 1895, the privileged position of foreigners who owned “land and all farming and hunting acreage in the vicinity of their settlements without having to pay for the right of use” (RGIA, f. 391, op. 2, d. 80, 1897-1905: 1-1 revers) was noted in an official report. The percentage of foreigners in the population of the Russian Far East from 1894-1917 ranged between 10-15%.

Both before and after the Russo-Japanese War, there was considerable support for an aggressive Far Eastern policy among Russian elites. As the military-political situation became aggravated, voices calling for the active settlement of the region by ‘Russian people’— colonists from the European part of the empire and Siberia – sounded increasingly insistently. In addition to the ‘warhawks’ from the Military Ministry and the General Staff, former governors-general, travellers, members of the Russian Geographical Society, all of whom knew the Far East and Manchuria first-hand, put forward their proposals for the future of the region. The *leitmotif* of their speeches can be expressed with a line from an archival doc-

ument: “In view of the unfavourable conditions which developed for Russia in the Far East after the war with Japan, increase in population and strengthening of the Russian nation in the lands of the region seems to be an issue of state concern” (RGIA, f. 21, op. 1, d. 637, 1909-1910: 16). The residence of Chinese and Korean workers and immigrants was perceived by the authorities in St. Petersburg as a threat (Khodjakov 2019b: 78-83). They were conditioned by an underlying anxiety regarding threats to Russia’s Far Eastern borders from other Great Powers and from China. Nevertheless, the economic development of uninhabited lands prevailed over political issues. Although the discourses used by the Russian authorities were similar to those adopted in British or French colonial rule, they had various objectives. In addition, they differed fundamentally to U.S. attitudes to native Americans. Eva-Maria Stolberg (2004: 165) observes that:

There existed, however, a decisive difference to the American frontier: Siberia became a meeting ground for Russian and Asian cultures. Whereas the American frontier – except in the encounter with Mexico – remained isolated, Russians early came in contact with Asian nations. From the early emergence of a modern state in Russia during the era of Enlightenment, Russia came into manifold contacts with ‘civilised’ Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Koreans) and with ‘uncivilised’ Asians, i.e. the tribes of Siberia.

Ivan Sablin and Alexander Kuchinsky (2017: 798) write about the formation of the Korean nation: “The first vision implied unity between the Koreans living in the Russian Far East with those who stayed in Korea, moved to Japan, or emigrated elsewhere and corresponded to the agenda of building a Korean nation. The second vision implied that the bilingual or Russified Koreans aspired to stay in the Russian Far East perma-




nently, ensuring their own livelihood in the new regional frontier”. Consequently, the fears of Piotr A. Stolypin’s government regarding the trustworthiness of Korean and Chinese immigrants who had not learned the Russian language during their 20 years in Russia could hardly be called unfounded.

The discussion of long-term development strategy in the Far East and Manchuria evidently lingered on despite the urgency of the matters of colonisation. The debates in the commissions of the Third Duma (1907-1912) demonstrated a low degree of cooperation between different departments and poor coordination of administrative and political decisions between central and regional authorities after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The authorities not only had to wrestle with the settlement of Manchuria, but were also concerned to prevent foreign influence spreading from Manchuria into Russian territories. Lukoyanov (2008: 161-162) cites the following words from the Finance commission of the State Duma in 1909: “The circumstances in the Far East have lately taken such a turn that Russia should, in as short time as possible, take decisive customs actions to secure itself economically in the Far Eastern regions”.

Despite the various measures aimed at attraction of settlers from the European part of the Empire, the influx of Russian workers into the region was limited, mainly due to the lack of transportation. Foreigners present in the region did not receive imperial citizenship. Under Piotr A. Stolypin, the ruling circles became convinced of the futility of such a strategy, primarily because of the failure to assimilate Koreans and Chinese. “Of course, in the Central Asian Russian colonies, such as Bukhara, local populations were not considered imperial subjects but unlike these Central Asian colonies, the Far East was deemed a Russian territory proper” (Glebov 2017: 98). Already during World War I, the government had attempted to

mitigate the economic crisis resulting from labour shortages by initiating Chinese labour immigration. The lack of a Russian labour force is further evidenced by telegrams from Priamursk’s Governor-General, Nikolai L. Gondatti, sent to the Council of Ministers in 1911. In one of them he, referring to a report by the chief of resettlement in the Amur region, complained that contractors were demanding an increase in financing by 30 to 50% (RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 5, d. 726, 1906: 192) if road works were carried out by Russian workers. According to the archival documents, the cost of Russian and Chinese labour was significantly different. Chinese workers cost 14 to 20 roubles during the summer season (from May to October) and 12 to 15 roubles in the winter, while Russian workers demanded 35 to 40 roubles a month in summer and 40 to 45 roubles in the winter (RGIA, f. 37, op. 67, d. 966, 1895-1917: 127). The development of various construction, fishery, and timber industries in the Amur Region may also have provided an impetus for a significant growth in need for labour (Khodjakov 2019a: 995-1006). The outbreak of World War I disrupted but did not completely stop Russian workers’ colonisation of the region.

In recent years, thanks to the works of Russian historians Alexander I. Petrov (2003); Vladimir G. Datsyshen (2008); and Mikhail V. Khodjakov (2019), the problems associated with Chinese immigration into Russia and the influence of the Chinese workforce on the development and operation of Russian industries prior to and during World War I have been added to Russian historiography. Problems of workers’ colonisation of the Eastern borderlands of Russia have been less studied than peasant settlement of the region, which was associated with the successes of mass agricultural development of the Far East on the eve of World War I. It was in the period from 1906 to 1914 that the Russian-speaking pop-




ulation became predominant in the region. According to the information at the Russian State Historical Archive in Saint Petersburg (RGIA), while at the beginning of the colonisation program, the General Department of Agriculture and Land Use (equal to Ministry of Agriculture) allowed families to resettle in the Far East without having seen the agricultural plots they were expected to develop, as time went on, “the department feared an excessive influx of immigrants into the region because there was only a relatively limited stock of land plots suitable for settlement” (RGIA, f. 394, op. 1, d. 3, 1909-1910: 52).

Along with the materials from Resettlement Administration and the Committee for Settlement of the Far East, documents found in the Russian State Historical Archive of the Far East (RGIA DV) in Vladivostok have significant value for researchers, specifically documents of the following departments: Clerical Office of the Primorskiy Governor-general (Fund 702), the Chief of Resettlement in Primorskiy Region (Fund 19) and the Chief of Resettlement in Amurskiy Region (fund 810: Maritime and Amur provinces). An analysis of these materials allows the need for labour resources to be assessed, enabling us to view these regional problems not only through the eyes of St. Petersburg officials, but also through the eyes of Far Eastern administrators. Of particular interest is an analysis of the documents of RGIA DV on the plans of the Council of the Manchurian Agricultural Society (Khodjakov 2020), the Committee of the Russian Export Chamber for the colonisation of Manchuria and documents concerning the annexation of the border territories of the Far Eastern territories into Russia with the help of the Colonisation Society and a bank specially created for these purposes, which were studied in detail by Khodjakov (Yanchenko et al. 2020: 175-187).

The absence of competition for land

from the indigenous population, the scale of the resettlement, the methods of organisation that were not previously used in imperial practice, all facilitated the process of settling the region with Russians. “For the Russian administrators, the inhabitants of the area could be settled agriculturalists, roaming nomads, or urban dwellers. The presence of settled agriculturalists indicated a degree of civilization and cultivation of the area. The reality of Northern Manchuria defied these expectations and presented bewildering, sometimes undecipherable multitudes of ethnicities, political loyalties, and socioeconomic practices” (Glebov 2017: 98). In Harbin, the dominant Chinese population perceived immigrants from European Russia, Siberia, and the Caucasus as Russians regardless of their ethnicity. Compared to other imperial ‘colonies’, the situation in the Far East was favourable for government initiatives largely due to the emergence of the Committee for the Settlement of the Far East, a special administrative body under the Council of Ministers. It was created to “unite and communicate general direction to government measures for colonisation of the Maritime region” (RGIA, f. 394, op. 1, d. 3, 1909-1910: 1) and in 1909 to 1911 it was chaired by Stolypin. In local bureaucratic circles, the settlement of the Far East was viewed in the context of the agrarian reform carried out in central Russia: “People like American farmers in the Far West are needed in the Amur Valley” (RGIA, f. 394, op. 1, d. 11, 1909-1914: 364). It was expected that Stolypin’s agrarian reform (*Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossijskoj imperii*, 1906: 970-974) would increase the economic prospects of the migrant peasant: “The introduction of private land ownership, the complete destruction of the community would be the greatest blessing for the dormant region, which, despite its harsh climate and unfortunate geographical position, offers endless opportunities for application of labour and wealth” (RGIA, f. 394, op. 1, d. 11, 1909-1914: 367).



Regional officials noted the motley mix of immigrants: “The greatest percentages of backsliders are natives of Bessarabia and Romanian subjects. The named category of settlers, as has been noted more than once, as a colonising element, is the least suitable for the Amur region. Last year, Bessarabians and Romanians accounted for 51% of the returnees, while in the reporting year they account for 27%” (RGIA DV, f. 810, op. 1, d. 213, 1912: 337 revers).


Whereas colonisation of Manchuria remained primarily the prerogative of the Minister of Finance (Samoylov et al. 2016), the Russian Maritime ‘coastland’ was becoming a place of interest to the Chief of Agriculture and Land Use, Alexander V. Krivoshein. On one hand, this somewhat weakened the influence of the Minister of Finance on Far Eastern affairs and strengthened the position of Piotr A. Stolypin in the government. Stolypin viewed the Korean and Chinese settlement of the Russian Far East in uncompromisingly negative terms. On the other hand, Vladimir N. Kokovtsov favoured a balanced, cautious policy in the region, and generally supported the activities of the Committee for Settlement of the Far East until 1911. Kokovtsov needed the support of the Council of Ministers for his actions and did not turn against the Korean and Chinese diaspora directly.

Decisions of the Committee for Settlement of the Far East were connected with one of the largest research campaigns at the end of the imperial era – the Amur Expedition of 1909-1912, the dates of which overlap with the construction of the Amurskaya railway (1907-1916), built as an alternative to the Chinese Eastern Railway (1897-1903). The data gathered during the expedition served as an immediate plan of action for the local administration in the course of implementing colonisation of the region. These materials, which shed light upon features of farming in the studied territories, soil structure, forestry and mining, trade,

and ethnographic situations, were published in large towns of Siberia and in Saint-Petersburg under the general supervision of Nikolai L. Gondatti.

A feature of Russian colonisation in the Far East was the emphasis on well-prepared, financially secure settlers. In the government project Regulations “On Resettlement and Land Use in the Maritime Region” it was stated that families of the settlers are to have “their own funds to be used on transport and obtaining and furnishing a home” (RGIA, f. 394, op. 1, d. 66, 1906-1910: 3). Alexander V. Krivoshein became the pivotal figure who developed government colonisation plans for the Committee for Settlement of the Far East. Both officials in St. Petersburg and representatives of the regional bureaucracy were unanimous that quality (high level of work ethic, agricultural skills, welfare) should prevail over quantity, in all categories of settlers, including Chinese and Korean labourers. With the permission of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, families that did not fully meet the conditions of financial independence were allowed to relocate, being given cash benefits and tax incentives were introduced to encourage further settlement. The advantage of peasant colonisation was recognized to a greater extent than that of Cossacks and workers (Yanchenko et al. 2020: 145-146). The increase in the Cossack population was slow, although the lease of state land to foreigners was prohibited by an order of the governor-general, the land was leased to the Chinese and Koreans (RGIA, f. 394, op. 1, d. 11, 1909-1914: 17 revers).

The miscalculations of the resettlement policy soon became obvious. For example, the requirement to run a household outside the traditional community remained largely declarative. After the abolition of *katorga* (forced labour camps) in 1906, the settlement at Sakhalin declined. The island was not included in Stolypin’s colonisation



program: there were no rural communities on it. Only in 1909 was the northern part of Sakhalin surveyed to determine areas suitable for colonisation. In Khabarovsk, there was a special Colonisation Commission which processed materials received from Sakhalin, but the main problem – the status of the exiled population – remained. During almost five decades of the existence of the *katorga*, the island had acquired a bad reputation and the local population did not have the legal rights of rural inhabitants. Officials were alarmed by depopulation and the unwillingness of peasants arriving from European Russia to settle on the island: the “nearest neighbours – the exiled – will always find a way to do serious harm” (RGIA DV. F. 702, op. 5, d. 663: 112 revers-113). The scale of resettlement in Sakhalin remained insignificant even at the height of agrarian reform. In 1910, “only 15 families (120 persons of both sexes)” were expected to settle there (RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 5, d. 687: 1 revers). It is evident that the issue of potential Chinese and Korean labour migration to Sakhalin and Kamchatka was not seriously considered by the authorities. These regions were considered strategically important and closed to foreigners. Despite this, the Far East was viewed in documents and departmental correspondence as a promising resource base for the country (RGIA, f. 394, op. 1, d. 11, 1909-1914: 24). The authorities were especially alarmed by the openly illegal economic activities of Chinese, Japanese, American, Canadian, and British intruders on Russian territories (Yanchenko et al. 2020: 232-246).

The Amur region also suffered from the actions of Chinese poachers. In January 1911, Governor-general, Nikolai L. Gondatti, issued an order which prohibited foreign subjects from hunting in the *taiga* of Ussuriysk. In the summer of 1911, an international conference was convened in Washington at the initiative of Russia and the United States, with the participation of Japan and

Great Britain. Following the conference, hunting for fur seals and sea otters north of 30° north latitude in the Bering, Okhotsk and Japanese seas was completely banned for 15 years (Grigortsevich 1965: 455). On the eve of World War I, the discussed measures against the extermination of fur-bearing animals, which included a temporary ban on hunting sable and high fines for offenders, met with the approbation of the State Duma, State Council and Nicholas II (Ivanov 2019: 231).

In 1909-1910, diplomatic proposals to restrict free crossing of the border by Russian and Chinese nationals were being considered (Datsyshen 2000). It was not possible to ensure complete control of the border of the Russian Empire in Siberia and the Far East. In April 1910, the Ministry of Finance acknowledged this fact. In the instructions to military units dispatched to act as border guards, the units were granted open permission not to pursue subjects of either country in cases where they did not carry out trade activities and did not violate police and administrative requirements (Chapygin 2014: 326).

### *Conclusion*

Before the Russo-Japanese War few of the capital's officials had a clear understanding of what the Far East should look like in the future. Disunity among the departments in St. Petersburg resulted in a superficial approach to regional problems. The lack of population made it difficult to supply local industry, agriculture, and fishing with Russian labour, forcing them to turn to cheaper and more affordable Chinese and Korean labour. The politics directed towards non-Russian migrants at both official and grassroots levels was underlain by perceived threats to Russian borders in the Far East from Britain, Japan, the United States, and even China.

The success of the regional colonisa-

tion of the Duma monarchy era was largely associated with the vast amount of free land in Siberia and the Far East. This availability ensured that administrative mistakes were ‘forgiven’ and led to a bloodless conquest important for the future of Russia. At the same time, the interaction between the administration on the borderlands, the Council of Ministers, the public (as represented by the Duma) and local economic elites until 1917 was complicated by different understandings of domestic and foreign policy prospects. The growing mistrust between China and Russia by 1911 effectively led to the cessation of long-term Chinese migration to Russian territory. Under conditions of growing revolutionary tension and economic competition with other Great Powers and China, alongside Russia’s preparations for a major European war, the search for an optimum control system was conducted while maintaining the existing administrative resource.

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