

## Introduction

The North Pacific region, stretching from California to China, encompasses all or parts of seven nations: the United States, Canada, the Soviet Union, China, Japan, North and South Korea. Here all the major powers, except Europe, meet; and increasingly here the world's primary trading, manufacturing, and generating of wealth take place.

Because the economic presence of the Soviet Union in the North Pacific world remains slight, that nation is often overlooked in discussions of the Pacific Basin. Yet the Soviet Union has a longer Pacific coastline than any other country and Russia is the only nation to have spun together a trans-oceanic Pacific state of any duration. The Russians were, after all, in Alaska longer than Americans have been.

The magnetism of recent North Pacific success is stirring new Soviet interest in the region. Hence it seemed appropriate to us at Fletcher invite Professor John J. Stephan to share with us his great knowledge of the history of Russia on the Pacific.

Professor Stephan was Sanwa Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the Fletcher School for one week during February 1989 and the three lectures he delivered during that visit are to be found in the following pages. We are doubly grateful: to Professor Stephan for being with us and to the Sanwa Bank whose generosity makes possible these annual programs in North Pacific affairs.

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## Russia on the Pacific

John J. Stephan

John J. Stephan was trained in Russian and East Asian studies at Harvard and the University of London. Since 1959, he has made two dozen trips to the USSR, spending considerable time in the Soviet Far East. Fluent in Russian and Japanese, he has lectured on Soviet-East Asian relations at the University of Hokkaido, Tokyo University, the University of Washington, and at various institutes of the USSR Academy of Sciences. His books include *Sakhalin: A History* (a Choice magazine selection for Outstanding Academic Book in 1971), *The Kuril Islands: Russo-Japanese Frontier in the Pacific* (1974), *The Russian Fascists: Tragedy and Farce in Exile* (1978), *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun* (1984), and *Soviet-American Horizons on the Pacific* (1986) with V.P. Chichkanov. A Professor of History at the University of Hawaii, he is currently completing a general history of the Soviet Far East.

### I. Myths

The USSR and the Pacific enjoy a robust topicality. *Perestroika* is generating what some observers see as fundamental changes in Soviet political culture. The Pacific Basin has emerged as a new center of the world economy, a forum for multinational cooperation, a metaphor for new regional identities.

Such topicality has promoted a rudimentary awareness that the Soviet Union is a part of the Pacific. A glance at the map reveals physical contiguity. Gorbachevian rhetoric promises greater Soviet participation in Pacific trade, investment, science, and culture.

Our knowledge about Soviet-Pacific ties is at once sumptuous and scanty. We are well stocked with data, but what we think we know is fraught with misconceptions. Statistics on military hardware and operations abound: the numbers of ships in the Pacific fleet, the numbers of missiles deployed on Kamchatka and of MIGs on Japan's Northern Territories, the numbers of divisions along the Sino-Soviet frontier. We have statistics about population, production, trade, and even crime. Academic treatises tell us about 17th century Siberian administration, the fur trade, Decembrist exiles, and the Siberian intervention. Economists and geographers have given us encyclopedic studies of Siberian development, transportation, investment, technology transfer, and permafrost. We have powerful testimony about Kolyma, GULAG-on-the-Pacific.

Yet these disparate strands of information and testimony have yet to be woven into a tapestry revealing the full amplitude of Russian-Pacific relationships. Our awareness remains compartmentalized. As E.M. Forster remarked, we know so much but connect so little. We need to move from accumulations to connections: between disciplines, between contradictory views, between inference and intuition, between written sources and the

wellsprings of memory.

### 1. Political Myths

The Soviet Far East (henceforth "Far East") offers a neglected key to understanding Russian ties with the Pacific. The Far East is Russia on the Pacific. Yet one would not think so, reading the bulk of Western commentary about Russian and Soviet policies toward East Asia and the Pacific. Geographers excepted, many commentators divorce foreign affairs from their physical milieu. Moscow's policies toward China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, and Oceania are too often treated in abstraction from the USSR's physical presence in Northeast Asia. When the Far East figures in analyses, it is often assigned the role of a passive actor: a repository of natural wealth, an arena for military deployments, a receptacle for human detritus.

Contrary to popular impressions, the Far East is not part of Siberia. The Far East has a distinct geography, history, economy, and society. Embracing 2.4 million square miles between the Arctic Ocean and China, between the Lena Basin and the Pacific, the Far East accounts for 28% of the USSR. The Far East is equivalent to 60% of China, 70% of the United States, two Indias, or 16 Japans. The Far East encompasses five time zones and several climates, ranging from arctic to subtropical. Lying on roughly the same latitude as Venice, Vladivostok defies popular stereotypes about "Siberian" inclemency. Washed by the *kuroshio* current, the southern Kurile Islands constitute a "Riviera" of warm beaches, bamboo, and magnolia trees.

Historically, the Far East has played a role in Russian relations with Pacific neighbors akin to that of Texas in American relations with Mexico. More than just a distant province, the Far East has participated in Russian and Soviet policies toward China, Japan, Korea, North America, and Oceania. Until about a half-century ago, Far Eastern officials enjoyed a status approaching that of satraps. One governor-general took unauthorized initiatives on Chinese territory and negotiated a treaty with Manchu officials altering the Russian Empire's eastern frontiers.

After the October Revolution, Far Easterners were slow in recognizing Soviet power. Even local communists did not always follow orders from central party organs. Between 1920 and 1922, the Far East assumed the form of an independent state with diplomatic missions in China, Japan, and the United States. During the 1930s, Far Eastern leaders wielded military and economic power unparalleled in any part of the USSR. If Siberian regionalism troubled tsarist authorities in the 19th century, the spectre of Far Eastern secession haunted Stalin in the 20th century.

Ignorance about the Far East poses no obstacle to those now embarking on the fast track toward expertise about Soviet-East Asian, Soviet-Pacific relations. The current conjunction of two "hot" topics - the USSR and the Pacific - creates a powerful magnetic field for entrepreneurship

Mikhail Gorbachev's speech at Vladivostok on 28 July 1986 catalyzed a festival of commentary, some of it portentous, most of it rhapsodic. Suddenly, people started to write that the USSR had

become an Asia-Pacific presence, that Soviet policies were undergoing epochal new departures. "Vladivostok initiative" became a catchword for what many believed to be a shift from military intimidation to economic engagement, from Brezhnevian rigidity and heavyhandedness to Gorbachevian flexibility and sophistication. Solemn words were written about historic watersheds on the basis of six months' hindsight.

According to a 19th century *senryu*:\*

He travelled abroad and saw everything that he understood.

Many of us see in Soviet-Pacific relations what we think we understand.

\*A short, satirical verse popular in Japan during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868).