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0521391741 - Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865

Mark Bassin

Excerpt

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Introduction

The work that follows is about three things: a geographical region, an historical episode involving this region, and an underlying enigma. The region in question is a massive chunk of territory at the southeastern-most extremity of the Russian landmass, where the Siberian frontier presses eastward to the Pacific ocean and south into Manchuria. The dominating natural feature of this area is the mighty Amur river. The Amur has its origins at the confluence of the Shilka and Argun rivers east of Lake Baikal and flows on for some 1,800 miles to empty into the Tatar straits opposite the northern tip of Sakhalin. With numerous tributaries feeding it from the north and south, the river commands a drainage basin of nearly three-quarters of a million square miles. It was not however this vast natural-geographical zone in its entirety that the Russians in the nineteenth century had in mind when they spoke variously about the *amurskii krai*, *amurskaia oblast'*, or *priamur'e*, and nor is it the scene of this study. The specifics varied considerably, as we will see, but for the most part they were referring to the river itself and the lands immediately along its northern bank. At a relatively late point, the Ussuri river – a major tributary which feeds into the Amur from the south – was included in this designation as well, along with all of the territory from the Ussuri east to the coast of the Tatar straits. It is this more restricted geographical zone that I will refer to in this study as the “Amur region.”

The historical episode in question, played out over two decades in the middle of the nineteenth century, was Russia's acquisition of this territory from the Chinese empire. The Russians had originally entered and occupied the river valley in the mid-seventeenth century, but in a treaty signed with the Chinese in 1689, they acknowledged the river region to be the lawful patrimony of the Manchu dynasty. They duly disbanded their settlements and withdrew from the area, and over the next century-and-a-half the Amur remained largely forgotten. Beginning in the 1840s, however, signs of vigorous new Russian interest in the river and the region became apparent, both in the imperial capital and in Siberia itself. At first, this interest was articulated

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outside of the centers of official Russian policy, and indeed in rather fervid opposition to it, but by the middle of the 1850s the government had been won over as well. The grand culmination was the annexation of the Amur region by the Russians, secured through a number of treaties concluded with China in 1858 and 1860. The Amur and Ussuri rivers were established thereby as the international boundary between the two countries in the Far East, and they have remained as such down to the present day.

It is, however, the underlying enigma which is really at the center of this investigation. To speak of a new Russian “interest” in the river in the middle of the nineteenth century is something of an understatement, for what happened at the time was in fact a major redirection of the nation’s attention to these remote territories in the Far East. For one brief historical moment, an obscure region which had not only been a virtual *terra incognita* for the Russians but moreover did not even figure as a part of their imperial dominions was able to attract the interest of the entire society, excite widespread enthusiasm, and even nourish the dreams of the country’s most outstanding social and political visionaries. In the region itself, thinly populated up to that point by scattered indigenous groups and yet more scattered Manchurian officials, there was a flurry of activity as Russian military outposts were erected, commercial development initiated, and agricultural settlement on an ambitious scale undertaken. All of this gave rise to grandiose speculation and epochal plans regarding the brilliant and progressive future that appeared certain to occur. It was a shimmering prospect, the scope of which included not only the new Russian territories on the Pacific, but Siberia and more broadly Russia west of the Urals as well. Indeed, the remarkable significance which the Russians at the mid-century were prepared to attribute to the faraway and little-known Amur region transcended even the boundaries of the Russian empire, and a world-historical dimension was identified for it as well. An explorer who spent five long years on the Amur in the 1850s lectured a St. Petersburg audience at the end of the decade about how the region was attracting the attention of a Europe awestruck by its “incalculable importance and significance” for “politics and culture, for commerce and civilization.” No less a figure than Alexander Herzen confirmed these sentiments from his London exile, declaring with characteristic grandiloquence in a letter to Giuseppe Mazzini that the Russian acquisition of the Amur represented “one of civilization’s most important steps forward.”¹ Then, abruptly, in the space of only a few years, all of this heady excitement came to a sudden end. The enthrallment was gone, the optimism evaporated, and the grand plans thwarted. The visionaries either gave up their dreams or found other regions upon which to project them, and the Amur – in spite of its new status as a formal part of the Russian empire – sank back into essentially the same obscurity and neglect

¹ [Radde], “Gustav Raddes Vorlesungen,” p. 257; Gertsen, “Pis’mo k Dzhuzeppe Matstsin,” p. 350.

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that had surrounded it for the preceding century-and-a-half. To try and unravel this paradox, to determine just where what I will call the “Amur euphoria” came from, what it meant, and where it went – this is the principal task of the present work.

The first place we might think of turning for some insight into these questions is previous examinations of the topic. The secondary literature on the annexation of the Amur is small, but appreciable nonetheless. Most of it is the product of Russian scholarship (pre-revolutionary as well as Soviet²) but there are a few very good studies by Western scholars as well.³ Yet while this literature taken as a whole gives us quite a full picture of the broad historical background, the main players involved, and the stream of events which culminated in the Russian acquisition of the region, nowhere is the enigmatic dimension of this process addressed – or indeed even recognized. There is, I believe, an entirely logical reason for this. Virtually all of the Russian works on the subject down to the present – with the notable but for our purposes insignificant exception of the revisionist historiography of Russian imperialism in the 1920s⁴ – have been guided by an overriding interest in depicting the annexation of the Amur in the triple light of practical necessity, social progress, and historical justice. Toward this end, a teleology is set up, implicitly or explicitly, and the course of events it describes leads inexorably to a grand and effectively preordained conclusion, namely the incorporation of the Amur region as part of the Russian empire and Russia’s achievement therewith of its “natural” boundaries on the Pacific.⁵ In the historiography of the nineteenth century the reasons for this bias came from the exigencies of Russian nationalism and from the attempt to enhance the aura of glory around the figure of the main

² Nevel’skoi, *Podvigi*; Barsukov, *Graf . . . Amurskii*; Butsinskii, *Graf . . . Amurskii*; Efimov, *Gr. N. N. Murav’ev-Amurskii*; Sgibnev, “Vidy;” Shchukin, “Podvigi;” Romanov, “Prisoedinenie;” Zaborinskii, “Graf . . . Amurskii;” Shtein, *N. N. Murav’ev-Amurskii*; Kabanov, *Amurskii vopros*; Alekseev, *Amurskaia ekspeditsiia*; Sychevskii, “Russko-Kitaiskaia trgovliia.”

³ See especially Lin, “Amur Frontier Question;” Quested, *Expansion*; Mancall, “Major-General Ignatiev’s Mission.” John Stephan’s panoramic survey of the history of Russian in the Far East offers an excellent if brief account of the background and events leading up to the Amur annexation. *Russian Far East*, pp. 26–33, 40–50.

⁴ Writing in 1927, Kharnskii gave voice to this revisionism with the characterization of the Russian expulsion from the Amur after 1689 as a “well-deserved lesson” for its “pogroms” (pogromnye deianiia) against the indigenous peoples. The Russian advance on the Amur in the mid-nineteenth century was described as an imperialist “annexation” (anneksirovat’). *Kitai*, pp. 274, 322. For a similarly narrow view of the Russian presence, see Bakhrushin, *Kazaki, passim*.

⁵ See, for example, Shtein, *N. N. Murav’ev-Amurskii*, p. 5; Kabanov, *Amurskii vopros*, pp. 15, 29–30. Russian historians have continued to assert this teleology down to the present day. In 1993, for example, A. V. Ignat’ev maintained that Russia’s territorial expansion in the Far East was “fundamentally completed” when it “reached the natural maritime boundaries of the Pacific Ocean” (i.e. the Amur–Ussuri border) at the mid-century. Because the main subject of his essay is Russian activity in the Far East at the end of the nineteenth century, however, he is compelled to contradict himself in the very next line and extend the geographical scope of his teleology even further, to encompass the Russian move against Korea. It turns out that the Amur annexation left certain “assignments” unfulfilled, as he put it, one of which was the “establishment of ice-free ports”! “Foreign Policy,” p. 251.

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actor in the drama, Governor-General N. N. Murav'ev. In the Soviet period, the reasons relate again to the nationalist impulse but more immediately to the political problem that the legitimacy of the annexation and Russian domination in the region was seriously challenged by post-revolutionary China. Scholars in the West have been unfettered by such cumbersome agendas, it is true, but their accounts are nonetheless strongly influenced by the Russian work and in the final analysis they have not gone very far beyond it, at least in their treatment of the Russian side.⁶ Needless to say, if an analysis singlemindedly takes the legitimacy and historical necessity of the annexation as both its point of departure and its conclusion, there is not going to be much room in between for reflective appreciation of the ambivalences, ironies, or enigmas of the process.

There is, however, another factor which is perhaps even more important than an *a priori* political bias in explaining why aspects of the Amur annexation that seem to me so striking should have been overlooked. This relates to the manner in which the issue has been problematized. Specifically, most histories see the annexation exclusively in terms of its local origins and local implications. The relevant geographical context, accordingly, is restricted to adjoining areas of the Russian Far East and neighboring regions of East Asia; at most, it may be expanded to include Eastern Siberia. It is essentially within this arena that they seek the background for the Russian advance at the mid-century, and it is here that real significance of this advance is identified. There is, I would suggest, a rather considerable problem with this approach, which we can appreciate immediately in the fact that no accumulation of purely local considerations, however weighty, could possibly have motivated Herzen in London to make such a sweeping pronouncement about the importance of the Amur to the advance of world civilization. While not in the slightest dismissing the relevance of the far-eastern and Siberian dimensions in the present study – indeed, they will be emphasized throughout – it is not limited to them, and it will place the Amur squarely in much broader national context as well. My argument is that we can understand why the Amur was annexed, why this annexation occasioned such euphoria, and why this euphoria proved to be so ephemeral only if we appreciate the extent to which the thoroughly minor issue of a distant river on the Siberian–Manchurian frontier became intertwined with and, so to speak, energized by the truly major social and political issues of the day. One of the principal ambitions of this work is accordingly to demonstrate that an examination of Russian thinking about the Amur region not only informs us about Siberia and the Russian Far East but at the same time

⁶ The most grievous example is that of Robert Kerner. See in particular “Russian Expansion,” pp. 111–114. Two dissertations on the annexation of the Amur completed under his supervision, although far better informed than his own work, also repeat this interpretative bias: Stanton, “Foundations;” Sullivan, “Count N. N. Muraviev-Amurskii.” On Kerner, see Rieber, “Historiography,” pp. 27–31; Satsuma, “‘Scholarly Entrepreneur,’” *passim*. The more recent work of Quesed and Mancall is particularly valuable in its careful incorporation of Chinese sources.

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offers considerable insight into some of the most powerful impulses and pre-occupations driving Russian society as a whole in the nineteenth century, chief among them nationalism, social reform, and imperial expansion.

To say merely that the problem of the Amur region “became intertwined” with other issues of the day, however, risks oversimplifying what was in fact an extraordinarily complex process. The Amur, after all, *was* a local Siberian issue, at least to begin with, and an extremely obscure one at that. Prior to its becoming a *cause célèbre* in the 1850s, very few people in Russia’s European capitals had as much as heard of it, let alone possessed an even approximate sense of where it was and what its practical significance might be. In order for the educated Russian public to embrace the cause of annexation, therefore, representations of the Amur had to be made available which would enable this public in some manner to envision and evaluate it. It was these representations or images which then served to give the region meaning and galvanize popular opinion around it, and it is through them that we can begin to make some sense of the enigma which was to characterize the entire experience. From this standpoint, therefore, this book is not so much a history *per se* of the Amur annexation as an interrogation of the images or geographical visions that accompanied this process and to a significant extent impelled it. The fact that so little was known about the area in no way impeded the formation and proliferation of these visions; indeed, as I will repeatedly be emphasizing, it was largely by virtue of the Amur region’s remoteness and its obscurity that it could provide such rich and yielding material for the Russians’ imagination in the first place.

The study of geographical visions may seem an exotic pursuit, but there is a large literature devoted to it, some of which at least has been extremely influential. This includes numerous studies of images of Asia – the reader is likely to be familiar with Edward Said’s bestselling *Orientalism*⁷ – of Africa,⁸ Australia,⁹ the Americas,¹⁰ and recently even the eastern half of Europe itself.¹¹ Closer to the subject of the present work is a small but vigorous literature specifically on Russian views of its own Orient.¹² Taken as a whole this is a diverse collection, but there are certain basic elements which all of these works have in common. They are all concerned with Western views of the

⁷ Said, *Orientalism*; Honour, *Chinoiserie*; Steadman, *Myth*; Parry, *Delusions*; Greenberger, *British Image*; Winks and Rush, *Asia*; March, *Idea*; Smith, *European Vision*; Bishop, *Myth*.

⁸ Curtin, *Image*. ⁹ Carter, *Road*.

¹⁰ Henry Nash Smith’s marvellous *Virgin Land* has been a steady source of inspiration for my own study from the outset. Also see O’Gorman, *Invention*; Echeverria, *Mirage*; Chinard, *L’Amérique*; Billington, *Land*; Honour, *New Golden Land*; Madsen, *Visions*; Greene, *Intellectual Construction*; Gerbi, *Dispute*. ¹¹ Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

¹² Layton, *Russian Literature*; *idem*, “Creation;” Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*; Diment and Slezkine, *Between Heaven and Hell*; Brower and Lazzarini, *Russia’s Orient*; Schimmelpennick van der Oye, *Ex Oriente Lux*; Riasanovsky, “Russia and Asia;” *idem*, “Asia through Russian Eyes;” Becker, “Muslim East;” Hokanson, “Literary Imperialism;” Popkin, “Chekhov;” Bassin, “Expansion;” *idem*, “Russia between Europe and Asia;” *idem*, “Inventing Siberia;” *idem*, “Russia and Asia.”

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regions in question, and beyond this they share an emphasis on the fact that there is at best only a very partial correspondence between these views and the actual material qualities of the regions depicted. Much more importantly, the former are to be seen instead as the product or creation of processes internal to the society which produces them. Although it usually arises out of some sort of knowledge about and contact with the regions they depict, a geographical vision is a cultural construct, and it is only by understanding it in this manner that we can appreciate its most basic analytical significance, namely that a society's picture of foreign peoples and places is above all an expression of its own domestic mentality. It informs us accordingly not so much about the object of representation as about the beliefs, hopes, prejudices, and frustrations of the group that authors it. This in turn suggests a corollary which is quite central to the theme of this book, namely that geographical regions are perceived and signified ideologically, in much the same way that social institutions and processes are signified – for example (in the case of Russia) serfdom or industrialization.

Historical geography has made a special contribution of its own to the study of regional images. The stimulus came largely from the seminal work of John Kirkland Wright, whose abiding interest in *terrae incognitae* was animated by an underlying concern with anthropological perception and signification of uncharted lands. To characterize what he had in mind Wright introduced the novel term “geosophy” or the study of the history of geographical knowledge.¹³ Although the full scope of the term includes more or less the totality of subjective–psychological perceptions of the environment – on the individual as well as group level – the specific preoccupation of the present study with the attitudes of an educated social elite taken as a whole figures prominently. Wright is commonly celebrated as a harbinger of both the so-called behavioral geography of the 1960s as well as the humanistic geography which followed in the 1970s,¹⁴ and while these unquestionably are important aspects of his influence, the degree to which his work and teachings on geosophy and regional perception fostered an important field of research in historical geography in their own right is perhaps rather underappreciated.¹⁵ Hugh Prince has framed the orientation of this field of “historical geosophy” quite well, describing it as the concern with “past worlds, seen through the eyes of contemporaries, perceived according to their culturally acquired preferences, shaped in the images of their assumed worlds.”¹⁶ Despite its own par-

¹³ Wright, “Introduction,” pp. 6–7; *idem*, “*Terrae Incognitae*,” pp. 82–88 and *passim*; [Billinge], “Geosophy,” p. 138.

¹⁴ Johnston, *Geography*, pp. 140, 142; Livingstone, *Geographical Tradition*, p. 336; Ley and Samuels, “Introduction,” p. 8.

¹⁵ See however Wright's impressive *Festschrift*: Lowenthal and Bowden, *Geographies*.

¹⁶ Cited in Johnston, *Geography*, p. 143. For an indication of how significant this perspective has been in influencing decades of work in historical geography, see the numerous entries for “historical geosophy” in Conzen *et al.*, *Scholar's Guide*.

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ticular emphases and nuances, the present work is conceived very much as a part of this legacy.

Beyond the methodological and conceptual common ground of all this work the study of regional images diverges widely, and the examples considered in the present work have their special aspects as well. In particular, there are two characteristic qualities of Russian images of the Amur which are important to note at the outset. The first is that the specific object of the image varied in subtle but significant ways; indeed, it is possible to discern a range of more or less discrete objects. The “Amur” was understood variously to indicate the river by itself, the river and its valley, or the greater Amur–Ussuri region as already described. Moreover, in a manner that will become clear later in this work, the term could also be used in a much more general and amorphous sense, to refer to a location on the Pacific which was distinguished not by any contours or qualities internal to it but merely by its particular proximity to other Russian and non-Russian areas in the Far East. The second quality of these images relates to how they were formulated, and here again there was considerable variation. Some of the most colorful and clearly articulated representations of the Amur were the deliberate creation of Russian “promoters,” enthusiasts who resembled in certain ways the prototype from the United States that played such a prominent role in the advance of the frontier across the North American continent. Indeed, one particularly enterprising American even made his way to the Amur, where he tirelessly preached a millenarian message of imminent commercial glory to a startled but appreciative Russian audience. His Russian counterparts sought to disseminate positive pictures of the region, often with the obvious ulterior motive of securing government support, encouraging migrants, attracting investment, and so on. These sorts of promotional images are the easiest to recognize and analyze, but their overall significance is limited. There were not very many of these individuals in the Far East, they made their appearance relatively late in the day, and their contribution was thus not an extended one. Much more important for this study was the protracted and – in contrast to the promoters – one might say sincere process of semantic accretion around the Amur, beginning in the 1830s, in the course of which a variety of significations and meanings were attached to the region as part of a much broader engagement of Russia’s educated public with the social and political challenges of their day.

The specific themes and images associated with the Amur fall into two categories. The first of these includes what we might call place-specific images, in the sense that they highlighted a quality or group of qualities which were, if not always entirely unique to the region, then at least clearly characteristic of it. The region’s Siberian, and more specifically its far-eastern Pacific location, was one such quality, as was the physical–geographical feature of the river itself, the agricultural lands which adjoined it, the region’s natural resource

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endowment, and so on. Understandably, these images emphasized the local dimension of the Amur region's significance quite strongly – for example, its potential to serve as a base of agricultural production for food-hungry parts of Siberia and (in particular) for Russia's fur colonies of the North Pacific and Alaska. The view of the river as a navigable conduit connecting the oceanic coast with the continental recesses of the Transbaikal region was also an enduring prospect. This latter function could be intended as a solution of the local provisionment problem in the North Pacific, but it was usually framed rather more grandly, in the proposition that for a Siberia which as a whole was isolated and cut off from outside contact, the Amur represented a vital artery insuring a *vykhod k moriu*, or outlet to the sea.

At the same time, however, these place-specific images did not necessarily restrict the importance of the Amur to territories east of the Urals. The notion that the large-scale economic, industrial, and demographic development of Siberia possessed a special significance for Russian national development overall – a conviction which was to become extremely important in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries – had its origins in the period and events examined in this study. This view grew out of older mercantilist attitudes from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries toward Siberia as Russia's *zolotoe dno* (or gold mine), but was more immediately founded in the mood of future-oriented activism and the urge for national reconstruction that accompanied the emergence of an ideology of Russian nationalism in the early nineteenth century. To develop Siberia became a sort of imperative for the nationalists, for it would be an important means of developing and enhancing Russia as a whole. In a very different connection, Russia's ensconcement on the Pacific brought to light a fundamental tension between two differing geopolitical perspectives on the most appropriate course of Russia's future development. Should Russia consider itself first and foremost as a continental land power and focus its attention and energies on the landmass of northern Euro-Asia, or was it rather the world's oceans which offered the truly important arena for the country to enhance its stature among the other imperial powers and make good its international pretensions? The mutual incompatibility of these "continental" and "maritime" perspectives emerged gradually as the implications of Russia's new *vykhod k moriu* were worked through, and in the debates around the Amur in the 1850s we will see the incipient traces of a geopolitical discourse that was to become ever more articulated and emphatic as the century wore on.

More diverse and ultimately more revealing than these place-specific images were those for which the details of the Amur region's various natural-geographical qualities were not particularly significant. The degree of abstraction in these cases was far greater, and in them the region was converted into a geographical vision in a much more literal sense. The Amur became a sort of quasi-myth, the palpable realities of which were not only largely irrelevant but

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indeed positively obstructive, insofar as they could potentially restrict the extent to which it could be imbued with the desired kaleidoscope of meanings and significations. Rather than a material geographical place, the Amur essentially represented a concept, or better yet the shell of a concept which could be loaded with those preoccupations that happened to be uppermost in the mind at the moment. To be sure, the process of mythologizing was never complete, for at least one connection with the real world always remained, namely the fact that the Amur was a “foreign” region by virtue of its physical location outside of Russia’s traditional historic space. As we will see, however, even this circumstance was nuanced and subject to rather different interpretations. Beyond this, the designation “Amur” could be used essentially as a metaphor, that is to say an ostensibly geographical zone which in fact was nothing more than an exotic name for those values, hopes, and expectations that had been invested in it. It was above all because the concept of the Amur could for a brief period in the mid-nineteenth century be semantically emptied and refilled with relative ease that it became such a useful and popular referent for the Russians at this time. Moreover, because whatever signification this might involve was not tied intrinsically to the region, it could be easily transferred elsewhere the moment that the image of the Amur was no longer realistically able to accommodate it. We will be able to follow this latter process at the conclusion of this study.

The most important of the preoccupations which shaped perceptions of the Amur region was the emergence and dynamic growth of Russian nationalism in the first half of the nineteenth century, with a climax of sorts in the aftermath of the Crimean War. The ideology of nationalism set out a comprehensive and multifaceted agenda, and as I will seek to demonstrate it was in terms of the objectives and priorities of this agenda that the Amur was “ideologized” and assigned a meaning at the time. For this reason, and only for this reason, the attention of Russia’s educated public west of the Urals was directed to the Far East on a broad scale. Russian nationalism demanded a break with the stultifying conservatism of Nicholas I’s regime, and the annexation of the Amur – a daring move on the international arena which the old tsar’s government trenchantly resisted – seemed at long last to provide precisely that break. Russian nationalism demanded an activist program of national reform and reconstruction, which would demonstrate that the country’s dynamism and its capacity for creative accomplishment were undiminished despite a protracted period of stagnation, and once again the Russian colonization of the Amur region appeared to provide a brilliant demonstration of precisely these qualities. Rather more ambitiously, Russian nationalism sought to provide a picture of what the reformed and regenerated Russia that compatriots ought to be striving for would look like, and as it happened this picture could in many respects be sketched out most satisfactorily on the unfamiliar and hence pliable canvas of remotest Siberia. In this con-

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nection, the geographical location outside of the traditional Russian pale was important, for this quality of absolute novelty was precisely what made it possible to project the vision of a revitalized Russian future upon it. At the height of the nation's excitement and anticipation, this vision led to the identification of the Amur region as Russia's very own New World or "America," and of the Amur river as Russia's very own Mississippi.

There was yet another way in which the advance in the Far East was accorded a significance in terms of the agenda of Russian nationalism. One of the most important aspects of the nationalist ideology articulated at the time was a powerful sense of universal mission, of having been selected to serve as an agent for bringing salvation and improving the welfare of other parts of the world. Stimulated by this confident conviction, the nationalists cast their eyes to the East. Rejecting the teachings of the Enlightenment and early Romanticism about the wisdom, sublimity, and perfection of the Orient, they instead discovered there just the opposite: a rich assortment of benighted peoples sorely in need of precisely the enlightenment and the multifarious benefits of Western Christian civilization that they were now rapidly realizing they wanted to provide. This attitude on the part of the Russians represented a significant link with the imperial mentality of other European states, where the ponderous notion of a "white man's burden" implied an essentially similar mission of salvation and enlightenment. The mere affirmation of a universal mission on Russia's part, however, was not enough. What was needed above all was the opportunity to realize it, by furnishing the restless and impatient energies of the nationalist activists with an arena upon which they could actually begin to demonstrate that they were indeed capable of fulfilling their newly-found responsibilities. Here again, the Amur region was the right place at the right time. For this particular purpose, the geographical identity of the region as a New World or a latter-day "America" was inappropriate, and its character as "Asiatic" was emphasized instead. Unsurprisingly, the Russians discovered there what they were looking for, namely a collection of indigenous peoples appearing for all the world to be in dire need of those blessings of civilization which they sought anxiously to bestow.

The importance of nationalist messianism may serve as a reminder that – *pace* the Russian and Soviet historiography noted above – the acquisition of the Amur was an act of political–territorial expansionism on the part of the Russian state. Rather than representing a dramatic *dénouement* which after centuries of thwarted effort finally secured or re-secured for Russia its natural and legitimate boundaries on the Pacific, it should rather be seen very differently as the beginning of the spectacular final phase of pre-revolutionary Russian imperialism. This period was subsequently to witness the incorporation of Russian Turkestan and, at the turn of the century, renewed expansionist activity in the Far East. Thus among other things the Amur epoch forms a chapter in the history of modern Russian – and, indeed,