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

Mark Bassin

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IMPERIAL VISIONS

Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Russian empire made a dramatic advance on the Pacific by annexing the vast regions of the Amur and Ussuri rivers. Although this remote realm was a virtual *terra incognita* for the Russian educated public, the acquisition of an “Asian Mississippi” attracted great attention nonetheless and, indeed, even stirred the dreams of Russia’s most outstanding visionaries – among them Alexander Herzen, who confidently proclaimed the annexation on Siberia’s Manchurian frontier to be “civilization’s most important step forward.” Within a decade of its acquisition, however, the dreams were gone and the Amur region largely abandoned and forgotten. In an innovative examination of Russia’s perceptions of the new territories in the Far East, Mark Bassin sets the Amur enigma squarely in the context of the *Zeitgeist* in Russia at the time. His argument is that the grand vision of Russia on the shores of the Pacific was intimately related to a number of major pre-occupations of the day, including social reform, the search of *samopoznanie* or national self-understanding, Russia’s relationship to the West, and the belief in a mission of universal salvation.

Written with an equally firm footing in the disciplines of historical geography and intellectual history, *Imperial Visions* demonstrates the fundamental importance of geographical imagination for the *mentalité* of imperial Russia. The work offers a truly novel perspective on the complex and ambivalent ideological relationship between Russian nationalism, geographical identity, and imperial expansion.

MARK BASSIN is Reader in Geography at University College London

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To my mother, a survivor, and the memory of my father

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Foreword

I came to know Dr. Mark Bassin well during his graduate studies at the University of California in Berkeley. I remember how shortly after we met he asked me to speak Russian with him as much as possible. To be sure, he already read fluently and could use a variety of Russian sources. But he also wanted to speak the language correctly and to be as close to the Russian tongue and Russian culture as possible. So we spoke Russian, and still do when we meet. Bassin's request made it easier for me to follow over the years his progress in Russian to a very high degree of proficiency. I think that the translations from Russian in the present book, including poetry, are excellent. Apparently Bassin learned German in the same fundamental manner. The larger point is that Bassin as a scholar is the opposite of parochial. A young American who has already lived, studied, taught, conducted research, or engaged in some combination of these activities in England, Canada, Russia, and Germany, he is naturally part of the entire Western intellectual world, without fear or favor. In reference to the present work and to his treatment of Russia in general, Bassin is entirely free of the sense of unfathomable difference, mystery, or strangeness which continues to spoil so much Western scholarship on Russia.

Mark Bassin is both a geographer and an intellectual historian, and he is very well aware of his special position and allegiance to both disciplines. Without presuming to judge Bassin as a geographer, except to state that I have no criticisms to offer in that connection, I do think that he, and the present volume in particular, have much to contribute to intellectual history. One asset is the richness of detail and an apposite discussion of many individuals very little known in scholarly literature, figures who are smoothly integrated with Peter the Great or Dostoevskii. It can be argued that the book is most valuable for its fragments. Yet these fragments also form a connected and clear narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Especially praiseworthy is the author's focus on the nature and structure of ideas, which keeps the surging flow of disparate details together and constitutes the skeleton, so to speak, of the book. (That focus, characteristic of effective intellectual historians, is

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present in all of Bassin's writings – for example in his treatment of Eurasianism, which in other hands has recently become a hopelessly vague and even self-contradictory term.)

Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865 can be read, and read correctly, as a story of a romantic vision destroyed by a better acquaintance with reality. The Amur river and area, which for ages had been outside the bounds of Russian history, rather suddenly began to attract Russian attention in the nineteenth century – in the 1830s, 1840s, and culminating in the 1850s. The “Siberian Mississippi” seemed to offer enormous possibilities of development, and even to promise a new epoch for Russia. The Russian version of such romantic visions was shared, interestingly enough, by certain non-Russians, including some overwhelming American enthusiasm. Yet before long the vision lost its luster and in fact disappeared. Even the Trans-Siberian railroad, when it was finally built before the end of the century, cut across Chinese territory rather than follow the Amur river: dream could not be turned into reality. Besides, I might add, a more pragmatic and positivistic intellectual orientation largely replaced romanticism.

Still, this blunt and essentially correct estimate of what happened is not complete. The dream of the Amur was destroyed not only by such “objective” factors as the shallowness of the river, the frighteningly adverse climate, the small number of inhabitants, and the almost total lack of any kind of infrastructure in the entire enormous area, but also, as the book indicates, by competing visions – whether that of the Pan-Slavs, pointing to Europe, or other visions pointing to Asia, but to Central Asia rather than the Far East. Reality could defeat dreams, but not stop people dreaming. And even destroyed visions could reappear in a mutated form. In a few fascinating pages in his “Conclusion” Bassin writes of the great communist project of the 1970s and 1980s, that of the BAM or the Baikal–Amur Mainline railway, which was built to run some 125–185 miles north of the Trans-Siberian and was, again, to open up an enormous territory for development and progress. “In precisely that same way that visions of the mid-nineteenth century proved to be so empty and misleading, so the great promise of the BAM railway gave way eventually to utter failure” (p. 281). What next?

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky
University of California, Berkeley

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Acknowledgments

The interest in nationalism and ideology which underlies this study was initially stimulated by a series of brilliant undergraduate courses I took with George Mosse. It was a singular bit of good fortune to end up many years later as Professor Mosse's colleague at the University of Wisconsin, where I could continue to benefit from his intellectual insight and the very special pleasure of his company. The study itself originated out of my doctoral research at the University of California, and I would like to thank the individuals who helped and supported me at that time, most notably David Hooson, Nicholas Riasanovsky, Clarence Glacken, and James Parsons. Additionally, I should note my debt to Martin Malia, with whom I also studied and without whose magisterial work on Alexander Herzen I could not have conceived the present book. Professors Hooson and Riasanovsky have continued to provide valuable and much-appreciated advice and support down to the present, and I am particularly grateful to Professor Riasanovsky for agreeing to contribute a Foreword to the work in its final form. A very special note of thanks is due to James Gibson and John Stephan – both far more formidable experts on the Russian Far East than myself – for taking an early interest in my studies and encouraging me to present my research as a book. I might note that Jim Gibson bears the responsibility of directing my attention – over a heady cigar and a bottle of Portuguese rosé in a Toronto suburb – to the Amur in the first place. I am happy to say that he has now lived to regret it. My post-doctoral research on this project has been supported by the generous advice and assistance of numerous colleagues. In particular, I would like to thank Marc Raeff, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Abbott Gleason. Terry Martin helped with material on the Mennonites. Steven Marks and David Saunders both took the trouble to read the finished manuscript in its entirety and share their extensive knowledge of nineteenth-century Russian history with me. Their effort is enormously appreciated, and is (I hope) positively reflected through the many corrections and improvements they suggested.

Much of the material for this study was collected in the course of two

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extended sojourns in the USSR as a Fulbright Fellow on the IREX exchange. Of the many Soviet scholars with whom I have worked on these occasions and others, I would like to acknowledge in particular the assistance of the following: S. A. Kovalev, A. I. Alekseev, V. P. Esakov, B. P. Polevoi, A. P. Okladnikov, V. V. Vorob'ev, V. I. Bykov, and A. V. Postnikov and S. B. Lavrov. Intervening fellowships from the Institut für europäische Geschichte (Mainz), the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, and the Remarque Institute for European Studies at New York University all provided an opportunity for me to develop my thinking, as did an extended affiliation as Research Associate with the (then) West German *Arbeitsgruppe* of the Commission for the History of Geography, International Geographical Union. I would also like to thank the staff of the following libraries: Doe Library, University of California; Lehman Library, Columbia University; Bobst Library, New York University; Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin; University Library, University of Illinois; Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; Library of Congress; Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; Hauptbibliothek, Freie-Universität-Berlin; Slavic Collection of the University Library, Helsinki University; British Library; Gosudarstvennaia Biblioteka im. Lenina, Moscow; Gosudarstvennaia Biblioteka Akademii Nauk, St. Petersburg; Russkoe Geograficheskoe Obshchestvo, St. Petersburg; Gosudarstvennyi Kraevedcheskii Muzei, Irkutsk; University Library, Irkutskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet.

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Harley. I am grateful to Alan Baker for his patience in seeing the project through.

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Mark Bassin
North London
May 1998



The Russian Far East (c. 1860)