

## **Environment and Resources**



# 3 Troubled Waters: Russo-Japanese Resource Conflicts as a Challenge for Imperial Rule in the Northern Pacific, 1900–1945

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**Abstract** The article deals with Russo-Japanese conflicts over maritime resources at Russia's Northern Pacific periphery. It argues that this particular history should be understood in the larger context of the Russian Empire's fragmented authority in the region. The chapter explores how, in the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese fishermen played a dominant role along the coasts of Kamchatka. Neither Russian Imperial elites nor their Soviet successors were able to match their economic superiority in the region. Conflicts over maritime resources influenced local affairs and constituted an important continuity between Tsarist and Bolshevik rule.

## 3.1 Introduction

The American businessman Washington B. Vanderlip was playing for high stakes. In the autumn of 1920, he travelled to Moscow to propose a gigantic business idea to the Bolsheviks: he wanted to lease a territory in the Far East of around 400,000 square kilometers for sixty years and to obtain the exclusive rights to all resources and raw materials of the region. The peninsula Kamchatka was to be the heart of his imagined empire. In return, the Soviets were to receive a certain percentage of his profits, and Soviet Russia was to be diplomatically recognised by the US. Even compared to the highflying plans that the Bolsheviks were used to, this was an extravagant project. Nonetheless—or perhaps precisely because of that—Vanderlip (who had in Moscow at first been mistaken for the billionaire Frank A. Vanderlip) received a warm welcome in the Kremlin. Lenin gave him ample reason to hope that the deal would come to fruition. However, beside the fact that Vanderlip did not have the necessary financial means, there was one grave problem: the Bolsheviks

did not control Kamchatka. Lenin was well aware of this. In December 1920, he stated: “I don’t know whom Kamchatka belongs to. Actually, the Japanese are in possession [...]”<sup>1</sup> However, what one did not own, one could lease without having anything to lose: “We are willingly giving away what we do not need ourselves, and we shall be no worse off for the loss of it neither economically nor politically.”<sup>2</sup> For Lenin, however, Kamchatka was only a token in his strategic deliberations. He believed that the revolutionary cause would benefit from a potential clash between the US and Japan over the peninsula.<sup>3</sup> The Bolsheviks were hoping for such a conflict, as Japanese companies dominated Kamchatka’s economy and controlled the local fishing industry, by far the most important industry in the region.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Japan had an incredible amount to lose should American companies try to gain a foothold in the region.

Lenin’s statement marked, in many ways, the peak of a longstanding development. Imperial elites and their Soviet successors had always conceptualised the empire’s borderlands as contested spaces that had to be defended against “foreign threats,” but what had always been a difficult endeavour at the imperial land borders was next to impossible on the shores of the Northern Pacific. Established strategies to secure both lands and people from foreign influence were of little use in this maritime environment.

The region’s “littoral societies”<sup>5</sup> were well integrated into transnational trading networks and relied on them, whereas connections to the imperial “motherland” were fragile and contested. This had been the case since the eighteenth century, when British and American fur traders operated along the coasts of Kamchatka and the Sea of Okhotsk, and the situation had changed only gradually after the Alaska purchase of 1867, when the Russian Empire sold its North Pacific colonies to the United States.<sup>6</sup> In the late nineteenth

1 Lenin, “Speech to the R.C.P.(b) Group at the eighth Congress of Soviets during the debate on the report of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars concerning home and foreign policies, December 22”, in *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 256.

2 Lenin, “Reply to the Debate on Concessions at a meeting of activists of the Moscow organization of the R.C.P.(b), December 6, 1920,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 234.

3 Koshkareva, “Peregovory sovetskogo, pravitel’stva,” 15–25; Parry, “Washington B. Vanderlip,” 311–330; Siegel, *Loans and Legitimacy*, 118.

4 Arov, “Inostrannoe brakon’erstvo.”

5 For the concept of “littoral societies,” see Pearson, “Littoral Society.”

6 There is a vast literature on trans-Pacific connections. See, for example, Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*; Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 99–126.

century, American companies dominated along the coast of Kamchatka.<sup>7</sup> With few Russian officials in the region and almost no coast guards, foreign traders, hunters, and fishermen could interact with local populations as they pleased and freely extract resources such as fish and furs. A few decades later, large parts of Kamchatka's coasts were basically controlled by Japanese fishing companies, which thereby threatened the very existence of Russian statehood in the region. That Russian territory could turn into a space of (colonial) exploitation from outside did not really feature in the self-image of imperial or Soviet elites.

This article deals with this history of entanglement and conflict at Russia's Northern Pacific periphery. It argues that Japanese dominance on Kamchatka represented the normality of the empire's fragmented military and political authority in the region.<sup>8</sup> It will show how conflicts over maritime resources influenced local affairs and that they constituted an important continuity from the tsarist empire to its Soviet successors. The Japanese dominance of Kamchatka resulted from the decades of expansion of Japanese fishermen to the north. This process had gained momentum after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and was even further reinforced after Russia's governmental structures collapsed completely in the aftermath of 1917. Neither the Russian nor the Soviet state was able to match the economic superiority of the Japanese on Kamchatka. Japanese companies were able to do what Russian officials and experts had only ever dreamed of: they effectively exploited the enormous maritime resources of the region, they possessed the means to process their catches immediately, and year after year, they brought a large working population to the only sparsely populated peninsula. The success of the Japanese and the simultaneous failure of Russian or Soviet attempts to create competitive structures repeatedly sparked massive conflicts between the Japanese, the Russians, and Kamchatka's indigenous population.

This article is divided into three parts. The first explores the historical context and the origins of transnational resource conflicts in the North Pacific in the late nineteenth century. The second chapter analyses a period of fragile stability in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. The third section is devoted to the discussion of Japanese influence on Kamchatka in the early Soviet Union.

7 Kindler, "American Russia."

8 For a detailed treatment of this argument, see Kindler, *Robbenreich*.

### 3.2 Rising Conflicts

In 1867, the Russian Empire sold its North American colony to the United States. This deal has sparked heated debates among historians that last to this day. Among the main reasons for Tsar Alexander II to seal the deal were economic considerations: the maintenance of the colony had incurred higher costs for the empire than the exploitation of maritime resources and the fur trade could generate.<sup>9</sup> However, the end of Russian America also precipitated the collapse of large parts of Russian infrastructure on Kamchatka and along the coasts of the Sea of Okhotsk because the Russian American Company (RAC) had not only governed the empire's colonies overseas but also the lands and islands on the "Russian" side of the ocean. When the RAC quit its operations after 1867, Kamchatka, the Commander islands, and the Okhotsk region were largely left to fend for themselves.<sup>10</sup> The governor general of Eastern Siberia stated emphatically in 1868 that these areas were "deserts" without a future.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the Amur region, which had only been conquered by Russian forces a couple of years previously, seemed like a land of unlimited possibilities.<sup>12</sup>

It was in this situation that Japanese fishermen in the last third of the nineteenth century started to open up new fishing grounds as the seas around Japan began to show signs of overfishing. From the northern island Hokkaido, they worked their small ships along the Kuril Islands towards Sakhalin (in Japanese, Karafuto) and eventually further up to the north.<sup>13</sup> In the process, they repeatedly clashed with Russian fishermen and, subsequently, with Russian officials.

In several treaties, Russia and Japan tried to delineate their spheres of influence and to resolve the emerging resource conflicts. Above all, the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875), which granted Russia the island Sakhalin and conceded the Kuril Islands to Japan, was of outmost importance, as it allegedly provided clarity about the territorial possessions.<sup>14</sup> The question of the region's resources was, however, an entirely different matter. All intergovernmental treaties and agreements turned out to be useless when there was no one who

9 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 181–188.

10 On the consequences of 1867 for Russian regions, see Remnev, *Rossia Dal'nego Vostoka*, 399–438.

11 Kindler, *Robbenreich*, 9.

12 Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Rising Sun*.

13 Kaminaga, "Maritime History," 259–273; Howell, *Capitalism from Within*, 150–170.

14 Yamamoto, "Dual Possession."

could enforce them. The Russian state had neither the means nor the personnel to prevent Japanese fishermen from fishing in those coastal regions that were officially off limits to them, and as long as Japanese subjects were encountered outside national territorial waters, there was no legal way to take action against them.<sup>15</sup>

The relative absence of Russian statehood and the gigantic abundance of fish just off the coasts of Kamchatka meant that Japanese fishermen became increasingly active in the region after the turn of the twentieth century. The risks that they had to take seemed low compared to the expected gains. At first, Russian authorities ignored this trend; one official still stated in 1901: “We do not expect that a (commercial) fishing industry will develop on Kamchatka.” However, while the Russians still did not want to believe in it, Japanese companies were already creating a *fait accompli*.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, they received financial support and tax reductions from the Japanese state if they were active “in the North,” since the Japanese had a major interest in having many small businessmen involved in this area and, therefore, refrained from leasing entire regions (such as the Kuril Islands) to just one company, as the Americans and Russians were doing.<sup>17</sup> Not only fishermen but also Japanese sealers, who hunted for fur seals on the high seas, benefited from this situation. What the Russians saw as “piracy” or “poaching” they believed to be their right.

The disputes about this question between the Japanese and the Russians were part of a larger conflict, in which the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada were also heavily involved: the transnational conflict over the Northern fur seal. At the end of the nineteenth century, sealskins were among the most coveted furs in the world and guaranteed large profits. Therefore, the states concerned fought bitterly over the question of who could kill the animals under which conditions. This was not a trivial problem, as the fur seals spent most of the year on the high seas but stayed several months on shore in the summer in order to procreate and rear their young. By far the most important seal colonies were on the Pribilof Islands (part of the US since 1867) and on the Commander Islands, which had remained Russian territory after 1867. Both states, therefore, insisted that only they had the right to hunt the animals.

15 See, for example, Egorov, “Ekspluatatsiia.”

16 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv Dal’nego Vostoka (hereafter, RGIA DV), f. 1005, op. 1, d. 8, ll. 34–43.

17 Japanese authorities had an interest in promoting small companies from the northern island of Hokkaido that faced severe problems in the late nineteenth century due to overfishing. Howell, *Capitalism from Within*, 150; Yamamoto, “Balance of Favor,” 157–165.

Both Russia and the US had given away exclusive leases for the killing of the seals (until 1890, even to the very same American company, the Alaska Commercial Company (ACC)). By contrast, Great Britain and Japan cited the “freedom of the seas,” which allowed everyone to hunt and fish on the high seas.<sup>18</sup> Each animal that did not arrive on the islands but was killed at sea decreased the profit of the concessionaire. In the case of the “seal islands,” the fur seals were not just any source of income but the sole livelihood of the local population and that the animal population was threatened with extinction due to hunting at sea and on land. Whenever the Russian or American coast guards got their hands on a “poacher,” the consequences were, therefore, severe: ships and catch were usually confiscated by the authorities. However, in most cases, the officers had to let the poachers go because they were unable to prove that they had killed the seals in territorial waters.<sup>19</sup>

The conflict over fishing off the coast of Kamchatka intensified as more and more Japanese moved to the north. The political tensions between Russia and Japan and the ensuing war between the two countries (1904/5) further escalated the conflicts. One event, which caused a stir in both countries and even attracted the attention of the tsar, was indicative of the extreme readiness to use violence. In the summer of 1906, in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war, Japanese fishers shot the Russian fishing inspector Sotnikov and several of his aides (two Russians and at least six Kamchadals). Sotnikov had caught the Japanese fishing illegally in an estuary and had allegedly already received a large bribe from them. When he then also wanted to confiscate their vessel, they took up arms. The issue turned into a political affair not just because of the unusually large number of fatalities but also because Sotnikov had been a Russian “hero” who had distinguished himself during the defence of Kamchatka against the Japanese in 1904.<sup>20</sup> In addition, in the aftermath of Russia’s military defeat in the war against Japan, the northern Pacific periphery had increasingly garnered the attention of the Russian elites, after hardly anyone had taken any interest in the region for more than four decades.<sup>21</sup>

18 For disputes on the pelagic fur seal hunt, see, for instance, Busch, *Seals*, 123–160; Gay, *Fur Seal Diplomacy*; Dorsey, *Conservation Diplomacy*, 105–164; Mirovitskaya, Clark, and Purver, “Fur Seals.”

19 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (hereafter, RGIA), f. 1287, op. 7, d. 1101, ll. 19–20. For a general discussion of the problem, see, among others, Liapustin, *Kreiserstvo*; Busch, *Seals*, 123–160.

20 RGIA, f. 398, op. 68, d. 21798, ll. 84–85, 86–87; Vasil’ev, “U podnozhii sopok,” 33–38.

21 The years after 1905 saw an increasing interest in the Empire’s “forgotten” regions at the Northern Pacific shores. See Remnev, *Rossia Dal’nego Vostoka*, 439–469.



This incident, however, also revealed what officials and experts had long criticised: the resource-rich region was completely and utterly at the mercy of Japanese fishermen. After Sotnikov's death, even Tsar Nicholas II demanded that similar events should not be allowed to happen again and that the protection of the Russian coast should be intensified.<sup>22</sup> However, the conditions for that were more than unfavourable. In a report from December 1906, the governor general of the Priamur region had to admit that, until 1895, there had been no ships available to control the fishing grounds off the coasts of Kamchatka, and, therefore, no one had monitored the situation. Ever since, local authorities had repeatedly asked for cutters and small cruisers to better control the gigantic region. Now, the governor had finally heard that ships were being sent to the Far East. But all this was no more than a drop in the ocean. The only thing that would really help, according to him, was the consistent use of warships. In the meantime, the Japanese fishermen were arriving with "entire fleets."<sup>23</sup> By contrast, off the coasts of Kamchatka and the Commander Islands, located approximately 175 kilometres east of Kamchatka, one lonely Russian naval vessel was tasked with controlling the entire region.

### 3.3 Fragile Stability

The Sotnikov incident attracted attention all the more because it happened in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, when the resource conflicts were still not settled. In the Peace Treaty of Portsmouth (1905), both sides had agreed to handle these questions separately. This created the preconditions for several agreements and treaties that would have sweeping consequences for the relations between the two states.<sup>24</sup> Among them was an agreement that has received relatively little attention in the literature, although some contemporaries had hailed it as the biggest success of the Japanese: The Russo-Japanese Fisheries Convention from 1907. This treaty detailed the more generalised principles of the Treaty of Portsmouth, which had provided equal rights to Japanese and Russian subjects fishing off the Russian Pacific

22 RGIA, f. 398, op. 68, d. 21798, l. 84.

23 RGIA, f. 398, op. 68, d. 21798, ll. 89–91.

24 Shulatov, "Economic Relations," 100–111.

coast. The diplomats fought for months about the details, exceptions, and special provisions.<sup>25</sup>

Once the negotiations had come to an end, the Russians at first believed that they had achieved a tremendous success.<sup>26</sup> But the reality looked very different: an onslaught of Japanese fishermen towards the north ensued that dwarfed everything that had happened previously. Now, the Japanese were, after all, able to legally lease coastal sections and fish there. Because Russian companies had neither the material nor the human resources to compete with the numerically and financially superior Japanese, the latter were able to secure most sections of the coastal waters leased out by Russian authorities. By 1910, 127 sections of the Okhotsk-Kamchatka region were leased to Japanese companies, and only twenty-two to their Russian competitors. However, one report claimed that most of the latter were either not exploited or had been re-let to Japanese fishermen. The Japanese not only caught large amounts of fish but also built the necessary infrastructure for the processing and conservation of their catch on “their” coastal sections. By contrast, Russian companies were far from such dynamic developments. A report from 1910 stated that most of them were still in the process of “adapting” to local conditions, whereby the “lack of sophistication” (*nekul'turnost*) of the region was seen as the biggest obstacle to entrepreneurial success.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the Japanese navy patrolled Russia's coasts in order to protect their subjects—usually outside the empire's territorial waters but, nevertheless, providing a strong symbol of Japanese power. Russia was unable to match these efforts. By 1912, only thirty-five Russian fishing inspectors were stationed on Kamchatka to oversee more than 4,000 kilometres of coastal region and to document treaty violations.<sup>28</sup> A futile endeavour.

The Treaty of 1907 had explicitly left fur seals aside because this problem could not be solved bilaterally. Therefore, the situation around the Commander Islands did not ease up. Japanese sealers' ships lay on roadstead off the islands and encircled them for months in a sort of siege. They not only killed the seals at sea but also attacked them on the beaches and engaged in skirmishes with the guards stationed there.<sup>29</sup> In some ways, the war continued

25 Arkhiv Vneshnoi Politiki Rossiiskoi Imperii (hereafter, AVPRI), f. 148 Tikhookeanskii stol, op. 487, d. 1256.

26 AVPRI, f. 148 Tikhookeanskii stol, op. 487, d. 1256, ll. 108–109. Leading Russian newspapers were equally satisfied with the results: Mikhailova, “Representations,” 52–53.

27 Geineman, *Rybnyi promysel*.

28 Pushkov, *Rybnye promysly*, 3–6.

29 See for example: AVPRI, f. 148 Tikhookeanskii stol, op. 487, d. 1129, ll. 12–17.

here for some time;<sup>30</sup> but the Commander Islands were also the only place where the disputes could be laid at rest, at least for some time. In 1911, the U.S., Canada, Japan, and Russia signed a convention that banned the hunt for fur seals and sea otters on the high seas.<sup>31</sup> This suddenly put an end to the siege of the islands.<sup>32</sup> However, the agreement changed nothing about the general situation in Russia's northeast.

From a Russian perspective, the Japanese dominance was far more than simply an economic problem. In fact, it was a threat to Russia's territorial integrity and an attack on the loyalty of the indigenous population. Already in 1903, the commander of the gunboat "Mandzhur" had warned about the unhindered expansion of the Japanese; as a result, he claimed, rumours would spread among the population that Kamchatka had been sold to the Japanese just as Alaska had been sold to the United States.<sup>33</sup> After the conclusion of the Fisheries Convention of 1907, many Russian observers became even more convinced that Japan might plan not a military but an economic detachment of Kamchatka from Russia. In his book about Russia's "forgotten regions," the journalist and explorer Boris Gorovskii claimed that maps were already circulating in Japan that marked Kamchatka not as Russian but as Japanese territory; and, he warned, the "mistakes of 1867" should not be repeated.<sup>34</sup> Equally threatening to the Russians was the fact that the Japanese were not only seasonally in the majority in the region but many of them attempted to stay there indefinitely, as Russian authorities feared.<sup>35</sup>

What impact would their economic and military superiority have on the indigenous inhabitants of Kamchatka? Some observers warned that the loyalty of the Kamchadals could, under these circumstances, not be taken for granted. One report by the physician Vladimir Tiushov, who had spent several years on Kamchatka, noted that the local population "does not know, if it has real friends and who they are, Russians or Japanese? To whom shall they go with their needs? During our 200 years of reign over Kamchatka, we, the Russians, have taught the *aborigenov* of this land to fear us *kul'turtregerov* like poachers. Indeed, what we have done to Kamchatka during this period is enough to judge our rule of this country. We have emptied it, brought

30 RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 1, d. 651, ll. 2–12.

31 Dorsey, *Conservation Diplomacy*, 154–159.

32 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Voenno-Morskogo Flota (hereafter, RGAVMF), f. 418, op. 1, d. 4942, l. 32.

33 RGAVMF, f. 417, op. 1, d. 2627, l. 34.

34 Gorovskii, *Zabytiia Russkiiia Zemli*, 129.

35 Pushkov, *Rybnye promysly*, 80.

diseases to the region, destroyed [...] the fur bearing animals.”<sup>36</sup> Other sources supported such depressing observations and warned that more and more locals were actively turning towards the Japanese.<sup>37</sup> When Japanese soldiers arrived on the Commander Islands during the Russo-Japanese war, these concerns seemed to be validated. Some inhabitants openly expressed that they considered themselves from now on Japanese subjects.<sup>38</sup>

These and many more disturbing events and observations translated into several energetic and vocal demands for a stronger Russian presence in the region. Kamchatka’s belonging to Russia should be made visible with imperial flags and guns and, if need be, would also be defended. However, in the face of the enormous costs and the seemingly infinite obstacles connected to an effective control over the fishing industry, nothing much came of these demands. The example of the Russian navy illustrates this clearly. Its representatives, on the one hand, repeatedly warned about the imminent “dishonouring of the Russian flag”; on the other hand, they were simultaneously shooting down all calls for additional ships and patrols that were being made by other ministries and agencies, arguing that naval vessels were not built for “police work” and that patrols along the coast contradicted the fleet’s “strategic goals” in the Pacific.<sup>39</sup> Until the collapse of the empire, nothing much changed about this conflict between the state’s desire to defend its borders and the lack of means to improve this situation.

Despite all these problems, the situation somewhat improved after 1910. A relatively functional fishing inspection was created, which—although still chronically underfunded and badly equipped—was increasingly better able to fulfil its tasks.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, Japanese companies expanded their influence constantly, and those companies that had, at the beginning of the century, operated in the Amur Region now also shifted their business to Kamchatka, while a Japanese consulate opened in Petropavlovsk.<sup>41</sup> Only few Russian companies were able to share in the wealth of the region and only on a modest level. In the shadow of the First World War, a balance developed, not least because a reliable income mattered more to the Russian state than the fears about a “yellow peril.” However, as the Russian Empire

36 RGIA DV, f. 1005, op. 1, d. 8, l. 42.

37 For similar observations on other parts along the Russian North Pacific coast: Demuth, *Floating Coast*, 85–92; Sokolsky, “Fishing, Settlement, and Conservation.”

38 RGIA DV, f. 1046, op. 1, d. 2, l. 139.

39 RGAVME, f. 417, op. 1, d. 3919, ll. 9–10; *ibid.* ll. 11–12; *ibid.* ll. 21–210b; *ibid.* ll. 51–510b.

40 Pushkov, *Rybnye promysly*, 64–93.

41 Howell, *Capitalism from Within*, 169; RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 7, d. 85, l. 4.

collapsed after the revolutions of 1917, the Japanese businessmen were in a better position than ever.

### 3.4 Japanese Dominance

During the Civil War and the first years of Soviet rule, Kamchatka was de facto a Japanese colony. During the fishing season, Japanese citizens far outnumbered Kamchatka's Russian and indigenous population and dominated in almost every coastal region.<sup>42</sup> Japanese companies could do as they pleased, and they made the most of this opportunity. The alternating governments in the Far East were unable (or unwilling) to do anything against it, as were the enemy camps fighting each other on Kamchatka. Here, civil war was fought primarily to control the centre of the peninsula, the city of Petropavlovsk.

Hardly anyone here took note of what happened in the faraway regions of Kamchatka. Only occasionally would splinters of information reach the different authorities in Petropavlovsk and Vladivostok<sup>43</sup> or the still-existing imperial diplomatic representations in Tokyo and Hakodate, which were powerless for different reasons. If at all, the Russian resistance was communicated through protest notes and declarations that were just as wordy as they were helpless.<sup>44</sup> The Russian embassy in Tokyo shied away even from those measures, allegedly from a fear of attracting even more Japanese fishermen to the region.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the Japanese navy increased its presence in the region; sure enough, without attempting a full-scale military invasion of Kamchatka (which had been feared by many and was accepted as a fact by some others), "Japan deals with Russia's Far Eastern territories as with occupied territories," declared the Chamber of Commerce of the Far East in May 1922.<sup>46</sup> In any case, the presence of a Japanese man-of-war in the harbour of Petropavlovsk was the only guarantee of victory for Kamchatka's White authorities.<sup>47</sup>

On the Commander Islands could be observed the consequences of maritime resources being exploited without limits and even international

42 Arov, "Inostrannoe brakonerstvo."

43 On the history of Kamchatka during the Civil War, see Pustovit, "Protivostoianie." For the Far East in general, see Sablin, *Far Eastern Republic, 1905–1922*.

44 RGIA DV, f. R-44II, op. 1, d. 2, l. 200ob.

45 RGIA DV, f. R-44II, op. 1, d. 52, l. 23.

46 RGIA DV, f. R-44II, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 200–201ob.

47 Protokol sekret'nogo soveshchaniia, 31 March 1922. Boris Aleksandrovich Kriukov Papers, 1917–1923, Box 1, Kamchatka 1921–1922, Hoover Institution Archives.

agreements being ignored. In many ways, this was a return to a “normality” that had simply been suspended for a couple of years after the Fur Seal Convention of 1911, when the killing of the seals had been severely restricted. Japanese seal hunters repeatedly killed seals and sea otters on the beaches. The inhabitants of the islands, who knew exactly how fatally such practices would affect the already severely decimated animal populations, were torn. Sometimes, they attacked the sealers; more often, they cooperated with them. They did not really have any other choice, since the regular supply of the islands with foodstuffs and coal from Russia had been suspended after 1917, and the locals were often left to fend for themselves.<sup>48</sup> Under these conditions, the Aleuts ignored all restrictions regarding the fur seal killings and offered their support to any party interested in taking furs from the islands. Many Japanese sealers used the opportunity and, with support from the indigenous population, literally slaughtered the herds on the islands.<sup>49</sup>

Sometimes, even Japanese naval officers took part in these formally illegal dealings. A report about the arrival of two Japanese warships on the islands stated: “The crew and the officers from the men of war have never asked the permission to land and have been engaged in purchasing furs from the Aleuts who have been hunting unlawfully. In exchange for the furs the Japanese offer cheap chintz and alcohol. [...] It was impossible to confiscate the furs because the Japanese exceeded in number the Russian guards. After the departure of the transport “Kanto” from the Island Bering there died suddenly three persons from the use of alcohol in the village.”<sup>50</sup> The administrators of the islands, who could expect support neither from Vladivostok nor from Petropavlovsk, took hold of every straw in order to protect themselves from the Japanese. When the American zoologist Leonhard Stejneger came to work on the islands in the summer of 1922, they at first hoped that “his presence, as a scientist who has a thorough knowledge of the fur seal industry, will be of great use as well as his being a member of the American nation with which the Japanese reckon very much. In his presence the crews of the Japanese men of war will refrain from the impudent purchase of furs.”<sup>51</sup>

48 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter, GARF), f. 946, op. 1, d. 9, l. 5. See also Stejneger, “Fur-Seal Industry.”

49 Khabarov, *Kotikovoie khoziaistvo*, 45.

50 Smithsonian Institution Archives Record Unit 7074, Leonhard Stejneger Papers, Box 14, folder 14, Report from Khranoff, 1 August 1922 (translation).

51 Smithsonian Institution Archives Record Unit 7074, Leonhard Stejneger Papers, Box 14, folder 14, Letter from Koltanovsky, 24 August 1922 (translation).

For the entire population of the region, the Civil War was a time of great challenges. After more than four years of fighting and violence, neither the Whites nor the Reds could hope to find enthusiastic supporters among the inhabitants of Kamchatka and the Commander Islands. Now, many people preferred to live under foreign occupation. The Aleuts from Bering Island asked Stejneger to support their claim to become American citizens,<sup>52</sup> whereas some Kamchadals voted for a future under Japanese rule. A report from August 1922 stated: “The inhabitants [of Kamchatka, RK] openly explained to me that they wanted neither the Whites nor the Reds. Nobody had brought order but all of them had only marauded and looted. Under these circumstances the *inorodtsy* are prepared to call for an intervention by the Japanese, who strongly support this and spend millions of yen on presents and travel through the villages and agitate for the autonomy of Kamchatka under a Japanese protectorate.”<sup>53</sup> Since the Japanese intervention troops retreated from the Russian Far East in 1922, this never came to pass. At the same time, the days of the Whites in Petropavlovsk were numbered. Isolated and detached from the rest of Kamchatka, they had hoped for a miracle but gave up in November 1922.<sup>54</sup>

Now it was the Bolsheviks’ turn to reassert order and to obtain control over the region. In the first years of Soviet “rule,” they were unable to assert control over the majority of the region apart from some bigger localities and the isolated Commander Islands. By contrast, Soviet officials had to overcome the individual interests of a population that was, in many cases, fighting for economic survival. Among the indigenous population, Soviet institutions in general and the Bolshevik party in particular were highly unpopular and had only very few followers. An internal report from the Kamchatka branch of the Communist party from 1924 stated, for instance, that the party had only seventy-eight members on the whole peninsula, among them not a single native. According to the report, many Soviet officials had a “dark” past, and the Japanese were seen by many locals as agreeable trading-partners.<sup>55</sup> The badly organised Soviet administration was as unable as its predecessor to control the exploitation of resources and to monitor foreign fishermen and traders.<sup>56</sup>

52 Smithsonian Institution Archives Record Unit 7074, Leonhard Stejneger Papers, Box 14, folder, Special Report by Stejneger, n.d.

53 GARE, f. 944, op. 1, d. 229, l. 40b.

54 GARE, f. 3756, op. 1, d. 7, ll. 1–2.

55 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Kamchatskogo Kraia (hereafter, GAKK), f. P-19, op. 1, d. 30, ll. 1–73.

56 Ibid.

Matters were made worse by the fact that many Soviet officials liked to hold out their hands and close their eyes: bribery and corruption were ubiquitous.<sup>57</sup>

Responsible authorities had to admit that the cooperation between the Japanese fishermen and the Japanese navy “resembled a well-organised enterprise.”<sup>58</sup> The Soviet fishing inspection was powerless in the face of this alliance. Authorities were unable to force the Japanese “poachers” to act in accordance with legal procedures. Rather than paying for concessions, fishermen relied on the protection of Japanese navy vessels that intervened on their behalf with armed violence. Sometimes, Japanese soldiers even tried to arrest Soviet officials working on Kamchatka. In one instance, a military detachment spent several days in a coastal village, searching for a fisheries inspector whom they thought to be hostile to Japanese fishing practices.<sup>59</sup>

There could be no quick way out of this situation for the Soviet Union. The passing of the “Soviet–Japanese Basic Convention” in January 1925 was a first step towards stabilising the situation. In the following years, both states agreed on a new fisheries convention (1928), and the Soviet Union again granted concessions to Japanese companies. Now, one corporation secured almost ninety percent of the sections and became the undisputed monopolist of the region.<sup>60</sup> For some Japanese observers, this dominance of Japanese fishermen on Kamchatka was justified by history. For example, an op-ed in the newspaper “Hakodate Simbun” from January 1929 stated: “The coast of Kamchatka belongs to Japan and it is strange that Russia [...] has the possibility to allow or to forbid Japanese to fish at those coasts that have been cultivated for fishing for the first time by Japanese fishermen.”<sup>61</sup> Over the course of the 1930s, tensions between the Soviet authorities and the Japanese companies remained high, and armed clashes ensued regularly. Despite all these conflicts, both sides prolonged their agreement again and again. A last deal was signed as late as 1944.<sup>62</sup> It was only after World War II that the presence of Japanese fishing companies along the Soviet Far Eastern coast came to an end.

57 “Dokumenty i materialy,” 236–7.

58 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki (hereafter, RGAE), f. 478, op. 1, d. 1876, ll. 2–2ob.

59 RGAE, f. 478, op. 1, d. 1876, ll. 91–95.

60 Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti*, 124–135.

61 Quoted after: Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti*, 131.

62 Sokolsky, “Fishing for Empire”; Sudzuki, “Otnosheniia.” On the situation during the Second World War, see “Otchet diplomaticheskogo agenta.”



### 3.5 Continuities

When the first Japanese fishermen reached Kamchatka in the late nineteenth century, they seemed to be just another group of foreigners who tried to exploit the region and its people. But within a few years, it became clear that the Japanese presence had a different quality than the regular visits of American traders. First, the number of Japanese fishermen operating annually off Kamchatka far exceeded that of the local population. Second, they built bases along the coasts to process the fish. Finally, until the 1930s, there were significant voices in Japan calling for Kamchatka's incorporation into the Empire of Japan. In the logic of the advocates of the Japanese "pelagic empire," the conquest of Kamchatka seemed to be a logical step.<sup>63</sup> What was more, in the eyes of the indigenous population and Russian officials alike, Japanese economic superiority was often equalled with political dominance. However, whereas most Russian observers perceived this situation as a threat to the empire's integrity, some locals reacted far more positively to the presence of foreigners, which, in turn, heightened officials' anxieties. Even if the Russians never accepted it, they needed to find ways to rationalise Japan's economic—and sometimes political and military—dominance and to deal with it.

Therefore, the history of Russo- / Soviet-Japanese conflicts over maritime resources is a history with various continuities. Over the course of more than four decades, narratives in Russian and Soviet sources remain basically the same: we are weak. We cannot compete. We are being overrun. Finally: we will lose Kamchatka. Imperial and Soviet views of reality regarding these issues differed, at most, only gradually. In this context, the Revolution and the ensuing Civil War primarily mark an escalation of a development that had begun much earlier and lasted much longer. By no means do they represent a discontinuity but, rather, the pinnacle of Japanese domination in the region.

No later than the agreement of 1907 had Japanese companies taken on such a dominant role in Kamchatka that many Russians believed that Kamchatka was *de facto* a Japanese colony. All attempts by the empire to prevent the appropriation of the peninsula had turned out to be futile. With the collapse of state order in Russia after 1917, this extensive Japanese presence turned into total dominance. Now, there was no one left who could stop Japanese companies acting in the coastal regions. At first, this did not really change after the Bolsheviks won the Civil War. Eventually, the Soviets were able to regulate the exploitation of resources, albeit only with difficulty. The


63 Tsutsui, "Pelagic Empire," 21–38.

conflictual relation between Soviet authorities and Japanese fishing companies lasted well into World War II.

Another continuity becomes apparent when looking at the Russian and Soviet reactions to the perceived threat: both Russia and the Soviet Union operated from a defensive position of imperial weakness. They had only scarce means to counter the many extralegal methods of the Japanese fishermen (which were partly legitimised by the Japanese state). Large parts of the resource-rich regions were de facto under Japanese control. More importantly, the officials of the Russian Empire, but also Soviet officials, insisted—understandably—that the sanctions that had been agreed by contract or that were accepted by international law be applied. But since there was no one to enforce these laws, this insistence on legal norms turned out to be a blunt instrument.

With Japanese companies becoming stronger and stronger, the status of the peninsula as “Russian” or “Soviet” was considered doubtful for decades and was repeatedly challenged. This had also been the case in the immediate aftermath of the Alaska purchase of 1867, when Russian voiced concerns that the “Americanisation” of the region was imminent.<sup>64</sup> However, the Japanese threat was much more dramatic because it was not “only” limited to the economic exploitation of the region: political control seemed to be also at stake. Taken together, these continuities made the Russo-Japanese conflicts over maritime resources in the Northern Pacific a remarkable case of empire building at the periphery—a case that illustrates the fragmentation of authority of Imperial Russian/early Soviet statehood in the region.<sup>65</sup>

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64 Voloshinov, *Otchet po komandirovke*, 85; see also: Kindler, “American Russia”.

65 Kindler, *Robbenreich*, 14–16.

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