

12 Afterword: Of Squids, Truffle-Hunting, and Complicated Relationships

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Rossia pacifica, also known as the stubby squid, is a humble creature. Just fifteen centimetres long, with eight pudgy tentacles, it spends most of its short life buried up to its googly eyeballs on the ocean floor waiting patiently for passing prey, mostly shrimps of one kind or another. When threatened, it emits an inky blast from a small funnel at the back of its mantle. The male and female mate just once and die soon thereafter.

In contrast to its physical tininess, however, *Rossia pacifica*'s distribution is vast, extending across much of the North Pacific, from the edges of the Sea of Japan in the east to the Bering Sea in the north and down the North American coast in the west all the way to northern California. In this sense, the squid's name is apt, for this is, indeed, the great expanse that one could describe as the "Russian Pacific," that is, that share of the greater Pacific Ocean that Russia has most influenced and that has most influenced Russia in turn.

During my time working on a Soviet fishing trawler off the coast of the northwestern US in the late 1980s, it was precisely this watery range that the fishermen and -women around me referred to as "their" Pacific, or as they put it, "*nash Tikhii okean*." (The fishing ship hailed from Nakhodka, some fifty miles north of Vladivostok.) The Russians appropriately call the squid the *Tikhookeanskaia Rossiia*, though with a stress on the "o" in *Róssiia*, pronouncing it as Ross-ee-ya to differentiate it from Rah-see-ya, the name of the state.¹

1 The genus *Rossia* that appears in the first part of the squid's Latin name, despite sounding like "Russia," refers in fact to the British naval officers John Ross and his nephew James Clark Ross. Naturalist Richard Owen sailed with the Rosses on their Arctic expedition of 1832 and named the genus in their honour two years later. For a peek at the squid, which enjoyed a moment of social media fame in 2016, click here: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/08/20/490738084/googly-eyed-stubby-squid-captures-internets-attention>.

We rarely compare the ranges of squids and humans, but they aren't unrelated. Every animal has a territory. People have many; yet, like squids, we too gravitate to the spaces we know best. Following this logic, one way of thinking about the North Pacific is as Russia's easternmost continuance, a kind of eastern maritime addition, maybe even a maritime home.² The Pacific overall is not Russian, but this part of it is, or at least, Russian observers tend to imagine it as such. Beyond its territorial waters, the Russian state has no proprietary claim to this segment of the great ocean, of course; and most Russians, unlike the long-distance sailors I worked with, will never experience its awesome scale or power. Most will never even see it with their own eyes. But if they feel a connection, it's because they know that their country has a huge Pacific edge, a giant eastern littoral facing the sea. Indeed, the two domains go together. Pacific Russia—the Russia that sits along the ocean—creates the Russian Pacific—the Russia of the ocean—and vice versa. Each exists because of the other.

The origins of the relationship go back to the 1630s, when Russian Cossacks, along with their indigenous Siberian partners, reached the mouth of the Ul'ia River on the Sea of Okhotsk and established what became the first recorded Russian settlement on the Pacific—the humble outpost of Ust'-Ul'inskoe *zimov'e*. Further eastward ventures led, in time, to Kamchatka, the Kurils, the Commander and Aleutian Islands, and, by the late 1700s, to Kodiak and the Alaskan coast. Between 1804 and 1835, twenty-five Russian voyages crisscrossed the larger Pacific. In the 1810s, the Russian-American Company built forts in the Hawaiian Islands. By the 1850s, Russian navigators had charted the coasts of Sakhalin and the Tartar Strait, and over the next decade, even as Tsar Alexander II and his ministers let go of Alaska and the Aleutians with one hand, they grabbed hold of the Amur and the Ussuri with the other.³

Over subsequent decades, the Russians would gain and lose Pacific coastline (southern Manchuria, lost for good after the Russo-Japanese War; Sakhalin and the Kurils, lost then regained after 1945), but by the early twentieth century, the basic contours of the Pacific Russia of today were set: an

2 Though familiar in Russian-language literature, the term “North Pacific” remains less common in Western-language scholarship. On the complexities of the term, see Jones, “Running into Whales,” 352; Winkler, *Seeotter*, 165–185.

3 For a selection of relevant histories, including a few “classics,” see Kerner, *Urge to the Sea*; Pierce, *Eastward to Empire*; Barratt, *South Pacific*; Stepan, *Russian Far East*; Akimov, *Severnaia Amerika*; Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*; Winkler, “From Ruling People”; Douglas and Govor, “Russian Place Naming”; Bolkhovitinov (ed.), *Istoriia Russkoi Ameriki*; and Miller, *Masters*. For a survey of Pacific history during the period of active Russian exploration in the early nineteenth century, see Igler, *The Great Ocean*.

enormous northeast bending arc stretching some 4,500 kilometres along the Pacific rim, split between three seas (the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Bering Sea) and pressed up against two states (China and Korea (now North Korea)), with two more—Japan and the US—located just beyond the horizon.

This Pacific Russia is not a clearly delineated territory. Instead, it is a conceptual–physical space, a subset of the lands of Russia’s vast Far Eastern Federal District, whose most obvious geographical limit is their frontage along the sea. In everyday parlance, the more common name for Pacific Russia is the Russian Far East (RFE). The latter term evokes East Asia; the former, the ocean. In truth, however, three elements—Russia, East Asia (more specifically, Northeast Asia), and the Pacific—mingle within both terms together.⁴

This ocean-hugging, Northeast Asian Russia that takes shape in the second half of the 1800s will be a bundle of contradictions. It will be a land of promise for migrants and a forbidding zone of punishment for criminals and exiles. It will be a *porto franco* open to the world and a “fortress Russia” wary of foreigners. It will drive Russia’s emergence as a Pacific power and expose the country to new dangers and vulnerabilities. It will enrich some while losing millions for others (including the central treasury). It will unlock access to a stunning bounty of natural resources only to ravage this abundance in turn. As a territory of diverse peoples wedged within a competitive international neighbourhood, it will be fraught with recurrent ethnic and geopolitical tensions. As a coastal region, it will be deeply marked by the sea. Finally, for better and for worse, it will always be very far (over 6,000 kilometres) from either Moscow or Saint Petersburg, so far that when locals refer to “Russia,” they will always mean that other Russia, the one on the opposite side of the map.

If the history of the region over the last century or so were a feature film, a pithy summary of the plot might go something like this: huge, undeveloped multicultural maritime frontier undergoes rapid and uneven change, at enormous cost, through alternating periods of war and domestic turmoil, with far-reaching consequences for every life form in the vicinity, including humans, tigers, pine trees, and squids. On the one hand, this dramatic transformation is a story of the absence of state power. Pacific Russia / the RFE is so

4 On the term “Northeast Asia” in academic discourse, see Narangoa and Cribb, *Northeast Asia*; and Diener, Grant, and Bennett, “Northeast Asia.” Though less common than “Russian Far East,” the practice of describing the region as “Pacific Russia” appears to be on the rise among Russian scholars, especially political scientists and geographers. For examples of recent titles, see Larin, “Tikhookeanskaia Rossiia;” Garusova, “Tikhookeanskaia Rossiia;” Baklanov, “Tikhookeanskaia Rossiia;” and Larin et al., *Tikhookeanskaia Rossiia*.

far from “Russia proper” and so enormous that the government never quite catches up. It regulates but can’t control, promises but can’t deliver. At the same time, it’s also a tale of profound state intrusion, since, for all its obvious limitations, the state is more than powerful enough to wreak enormous damage. The Stalin-era gulag empire of Dal’stoi is proof of this, as is the near destruction by Soviet whalers of sperm, humpback, right, blue, and fin whale populations in the North Pacific during the 1960s and 1970s.⁵

Much of the story is also general, even universal, in its implications. At bottom, almost nothing about the historical arc of Pacific Russia is unique. The patterns that shape the region during the roughly 160 years since the founding of Vladivostok are the same ones that have left their mark on coastal zones across the world in the modern age—patterns of state-building and outsider colonisation; of the displacement, diminishment, and adaptation of indigenous cultures; of interstate competition over ports and sea lanes; of rapid technological change; of national and imperial imagining; and of environmental degradation and plunder.

That said, the essays in this book are valuable precisely because they are not general. If Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie is right and historians are either parachutists, who float high above the landscape to take in a larger view, or truffle-hunters (*truffiers*), who dig into a single patch of ground in search of special meanings, then this is a truffle-hunting collection.⁶ The emphasis here is on the particular, with each essay offering a snapshot of a discrete moment or dimension of regional history. The result, upon reading the volume as a whole, is something unexpected—a view of Pacific Russia so varied and granular as to make one wonder whether, in fact, it even amounts to a coherent region. After all, what does the Anadyr district have in common with the Amur, or what do commuters in Vladivostok share with fisher folk in Kamchatka? Yet there is, indeed, a region in these pages; it’s simply a complicated one, built, like all regions everywhere, out of a mesh of ambivalent yet persistent relationships with the various spaces and cultures that define and surround it, three of which stand out especially here.⁷

The first and most formative is the relationship to Russia, understood in this case as the Russia on the western side of the Ural Mountains, that

5 Shirokov, *Dal’stoi*; and Jones, *Red Leviathan*.

6 For an interview in which Le Roy Ladurie describes his famous categories, see “Grands entretiens. Paroles d’historiens: Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie; Montaillou, la source de l’ouvrage.”

7 On the complexities of regions in the Russian imperial context, see Sunderland [Sunderland], “Vvedenie,” 7–27.

is, European or Central Russia, or, in some contexts, simply “the mainland” (*materik*). Pacific Russia as we know it today is the product of centuries of outsider colonisation, starting most intensely in the late 1800s and then following through to the early twentieth century. European Russia is the homeland of the vast majority of the colonists, most of whom relocate via Siberia, sometimes by sea. It is only logical, then, that the connection to “Russia” would play a critical role in defining the region.

As the colonists come in, however, they never arrive alone. They bring ideas, goods, technologies, diseases, political structures, economic practices, fauna, flora; they import revolution, war, understandings of the past, visions of the future. They build, they destroy, they impose. Russia, in this sense, is the ever-influential, off-stage demiurge, the powerful hand directing and moulding the region from afar. At the same time, events that unfold in Pacific Russia, such as the fall of Port Arthur in January 1905, trigger momentous developments in the West that then return to reverberate in the Far East, and just as Ivanovo cloth, Tula gingerbread, and trainloads of soldiers from the European side of the country reach the Pacific, Chinese tea, Alaskan furs, and military convoys from the Far East leave their mark on the Volga and the Dnepr. The two sides of the state thus intertwine, and yet, at the same time, one of the abiding realities of the RFE is its palpable apparent disconnectedness from the rest of the country, its “island syndrome,” the feeling one gets of it as a region apart.

The reason for this impression of separateness is distance, or more specifically, the complex “spatio-time configuration” (to quote Paul Richardson) that at once connects and separates “Russia” from the RFE and whose paradoxical effects appear in several essays here. On the one hand, distance helps define the RFE as a land of possibility, giving rise to a regional culture of innovation and relative independence from the norms of the metropole. On the other, it’s a factor that also encourages less appealing practices, such as massive corruption and environmental depredation. Distance allows Jewish refugees to escape to safety from wartime Lithuania while, at the same time, exposing native societies in Chukotka to misconceived policies of social engineering imported from afar. It shapes separate histories of World War II and, flowing from this, disparate, sometimes conflicting collective memories. Finally, the huge remove and remoteness of the region stretches the writ of state authority, leading to ambiguous sovereignties. Kamchatka, for example, is so distant that the tsarist government grants Tokyo a de facto concession in 1907 that allows Japanese fishing companies to dominate the local economy. The central government will not regain exclusive control over the region until some twenty years later, during the era of the First Five-Year Plan.

The RFE's relationship to the ocean is also ambivalent, and these effects, too, run through many chapters. On the one hand, the sea resonates as a field of economic opportunity and national prowess. The alluring regional "mega-corporation" imagined by the technocrats of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic rests on visions of a rosy future of ever-waxing shipbuilding, offshore drilling, commercial fishing, and seaborne trade, while commemorations of the Great Patriotic War in the region evoke a glorious past of island "liberations," from South Sakhalin to the Kurils; yet the ocean is also a source of threats and challenges. Long after the close of the Siberian Expedition of 1918–1922, Japanese nationalists continue to imagine Kamchatka as part of their "pelagic empire," and even as the Soviets displace Japanese fishing companies from the Bering Sea littoral in the 1930s, they have a harder time driving them off the sea itself. The ocean can also bear entirely unwanted gifts. During the early 1990s, for example, post-Soviet Vladivostok throws its doors open to world trade only to find its streets quickly clogged with tens of thousands of exhaust-belching, second-hand Toyotas and Mitsubishis. Vladivostokers want the *inomarki*, not the smog and the traffic, but they get all three.

The ocean, in other words, both giveth and taketh away, but more than anything, it abides. Always present, it ever forces responses and adaptations. The same is true of the third and arguably most recurring theme of the volume: the region's enduring reality as a borderland of diverse peoples located within a contentious international environment. The effects of this basic condition are also ambiguous. On the one hand, outsider colonisation profoundly reordered native societies, destroying the varied indigenous worlds that existed prior to the outsiders' arrival. On the other, colonisation itself gave rise to diverse "new worlds" of settlement, including concentrations, in cities such as early-twentieth-century Vladivostok and Harbin, of tens of different nationalities. Meanwhile, the proximity of foreign states and the ebb and flow of trans-border relations generates both accommodation and confrontation, rivalries and partnerships, interconnectedness and separation. In fact, the rhythms of regional life often shuttle between these opposing poles. Diversity is a constant, but its mark on the territory is multivalent and shifting.

Much as in other modern colonisation zones, racial and national violence and prejudice, as well as the destructive imposition of state power, are deeply implicated in the history of the region. It is, therefore, no surprise that their traces appear across the essays here, most obviously in the case of Russian settlers, who massacred Chinese migrant workers on the Amur in 1900; Chinese merchants in Manchuria, who denounced the Russians for both their

colonialism and their “toxic rubles” in 1919; and Soviet state planners, who forcibly displaced Chukchi and Yupik villagers in the name of collectivisation and industrialisation in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet members of different groups, including all the groups above, also cooperate, collaborate, intermingle, and intermarry, and their many interactions, even the occasionally unforgiving violence and prejudice between them, are proof of a changing yet continuous entanglement.

In fact, one of the revelations of the volume is not so much that the entanglements vary from the benign to the horrific—since this is to be expected—but that their history is so particular, defined by the changing politics of identity and, perhaps even more, by the shifting circumstances of time and place. In Kamchatka in the early 1900s, for example, Kamchadal fishers and seal-hunters seem to agree that they prefer working for the Japanese rather than the Russians and adjust their practices accordingly, alarming tsarist authorities. Similarly, Chinese merchants in Manchuria during the upheaval of the Russian Revolution watch the volatility of the ruble eat away at their profits and actively lobby the Republic of China’s government to replace Russian money with the Chinese dayang. In each case, cross-cultural entanglements are part of the normalcy of everyday life, and as such, they are uncontroversial, unremarkable, to be expected. Yet the unspoken rules that structure these entanglements are conditional, subject to the pressures of *force majeure* developments such as the Russian Revolution or the Boxer Rebellion as well as smaller-scale and less momentous shifts in individual and communal attitudes and practices.

What, then, are we to take away from these varied perspectives on the past and present of Russia’s far eastern extremity? The editors tellingly describe “Russia’s North Pacific” as a “moving target.” As they note, given its amorphous boundaries and changing meanings over time, the region is hard to pin down as a well-defined space and inevitably looks different when approached from different points of view. In his thoughtful introduction to the volume, Paul Richardson seems to agree, describing the region evocatively—and somewhat beguilingly—as “the end and the beginning of Russia.”

Of course, one might assume that a volume like this would deliver a more precise characterisation of the region and its meanings, something more fixed, more cut-and-dried. Yet to my mind, the hard-to-define-ness is entirely to be expected. Most regions have something untidy about them because, like nations and other real-yet-imagined geospatial and cultural categories, they are the product of a complex combination of physical and imagined characteristics and relationships that can’t help but tug in different directions. And this is very much the case here. Distant in the eyes of many outsiders, huge, diverse,

and contested, Pacific Russia/the RFE is both of Russia and a place apart, at once of Northeast Asia and not quite Asian, and simultaneously bound to the immensity of the North Pacific before it as well as to the vastness of Eurasia behind. The deeply researched essays in this book fill the gap between these seemingly contradictory postulates, offering a detailed view of finite historical moments and the varied, discrete relationships of politics, society, culture, and economics that lend the region its meaning and coherence.

The Russian equivalent of “Rome wasn’t built in a day” is “Moscow wasn’t built in an instant” (*Moskva ne srazu stroilas*). The same can be said of Pacific Russia. The complexity of the region, its regionality, by which I mean the distinctive qualities that eventually coalesce to make it into a region, accrue over time through the layering and re-layering of relationships between outsiders and native peoples, first migrants and later ones, Russians and foreigners, old states and new political forms, and between human societies and their physical environments, including the watery realm of the humble stubby squid.

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