From the Baltic to the Pacific: Trade, Shipping and Exploration on the Shores of the Russian Empire

Michael North

Introduction

For a long time, imperial and Soviet historians painted the Russian Empire as a homogenous unified nation state. They overlooked the fact that Russia was a complex conglomeration of peoples, religions, languages and ethnicities. Moreover, this Empire was made up of many heterogeneous peripheries, which pointed in different geographical directions. Its history exemplifies how asymmetrical encounters create imperial space. Within the process of negotiating these relations, a frequently shifting imperial core was not always identical with its political capital.¹

This chapter examines how the Russian Empire created economic peripheries in outposts on the Baltic and the Pacific. Behind this attempt was the idea to build a Russian commercial network across the Northern Pacific to provide its settlements in the Far East and in Alaska with provisions, and to link them with Spanish California and Manila, as well as with the Chinese port of Canton (Guangzhou). For this purpose, Russia used ships such as the Nadezhda (‘Hope’) and the Rurik to send Baltic German naval officers from the Baltic to the Pacific. Although their hopes of establishing a Russian trading empire and creating a ‘Russian Pacific’ failed, these explorations, and especially the travel journals by Adam Johann von Krusenstern and Otto von Kotzebue, had a long-lasting impact on public debates at home and on the European imagination. In the case of the Baltic provinces, the chapter demonstrates how
a European periphery was transformed into a core region of the Russian Empire. Taken together these two case studies show that peripheries do not simply emerge, but that they are the result of sophisticated economic strategies and imperial policies, and that they rarely stay the same over longer periods of time. Furthermore, the example of Russian economic expansion in the East forces us to rethink our Eurocentric map of the world: the focus on Russia’s imperial periphery places the Pacific at the centre of its system of trade.

**Russian expansion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries**

A brief outline of Russian expansion in the early modern period will set the scene for the subsequent analysis of the Empire’s new configuration of its various centres and peripheries. Following the consolidation of the Muscovite state in the fifteenth century, by the sixteenth century Russia stretched from the White Sea in the north and Pskov in the west, to the river Volga in the east. In 1552–6 Ivan IV invaded and defeated the Volga khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, expanding the Muscovite state south to the Caspian Sea. This provided the way for further expansion into Siberia, which followed, on behalf of the rich merchant family of Stroganov, over the following decades. The leading motive behind this expansion was the race for furs, which were demanded as tribute (yasak) from the various local peoples. Cities such as Tobolsk (1587), Tomsk (1604) and Okhotsk (1648) were founded as centres of the fur trade, in order to satisfy Russian and Chinese demand. The attempt, however, to get a stable foothold in Livonia and on the Baltic Sea failed as a result of Danish, Swedish and Polish resistance, which excluded Russia from expanding its influence into the Baltic area until 1710.

Russia’s maritime ambition started with Peter the Great (1682–1725), who in 1695–6 led a campaign to conquer the Ottoman fortress of Azov to gain access to the Black Sea. Even more important to him was access to the Baltic Sea, however. After taking Ingria from the Swedes, he founded a new capital at the mouth of the Neva River in 1703. His intention was to create an ‘imperial Amsterdam’, which was to be better suited to international trade than Archangelsk on the White Sea, which was frequently blocked by ice. Although back in the early 1600s, on the land that was to become St Petersburg, the Swedes had built a small settlement called Nyen, Peter planned a new city, which, like Novgorod before it,
would become the centre of all Western trade with Russia. By the end of the eighteenth century, St Petersburg, with a population of 220,000, had developed into the largest city on the Baltic Sea, outgrowing all other trading centres, including Copenhagen (101,000), Stockholm (76,000), Königsberg (55,000), Danzig (40,000) and Riga (30,000).

Thanks to Russia’s success in the Great Northern War, Sweden, in 1721, signed the Treaty of Nystad and ceded the provinces of Livonia, Estonia and Ingria to Russia, along with a portion of Karelia. These territories included the cities and fortresses of Riga, Dünamünde, Pernau, Reval, Dorpat, Narva, Viborg and Kexholm, along with the islands of Ösel and Dagö. In return, Russia ceded Finland to Sweden, and paid war reparations of two million riksdaler. In addition, Swedish merchants were permitted to continue buying grain in Baltic ports up to a value of 50,000 rubles, without paying duty. 2

Having gained a stable foothold in the former Swedish provinces of the Baltic, Russia transformed these into its western provinces. This in turn led to the ‘Europeanization of Russia’s imperial image’, modelled after the European colonial empires. 3 Russia also expanded its maritime interest in the south and the Far East. Although Peter’s campaign against Azov had been successful, the Turks prevented Russian ships from sailing out of Azov, and Russian goods from being shipped across the Black Sea to Constantinople. Only Catherine II, the Great (1762–96), was able to conquer the northern Black Sea coast. To achieve this, she sent the Russian Baltic fleet around Gibraltar in 1770. It blocked the Dardanelles, and reached Constantinople from the west. Although the Russian campaign was only partially successful, it ended the Turkish monopoly on shipping in the Straits and in the Black Sea. The Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardji between Turkey and Russia (1774) declared ‘free and unimpeded navigation for the merchant ships belonging to the two Contracting Powers’. 4 Furthermore, this sparsely populated territory (the so-called ‘New Russia’) attracted settlers from Russia and the Holy Roman Empire; and in 1794 the city of Odessa was founded as a further major Russian harbour in the Black Sea.

**Russian ambitions in the Far East**

In the Far East, where Russian trade with China had been carried out over land and via the great rivers Ob (via Tobolsk) and Yenisei (Irkutsk), the Russian expansion into the Pacific provided new opportunities. It
had occurred in several steps. After the initial foundation of a settlement for the fur trade at Okhotsk, several further expeditions led by the Danish captain Vitus Bering followed. During these expeditions, the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Russian Pacific coast were explored, and the Aleutian Islands and Alaska were discovered. From the 1750s onwards, Russian merchants sent fur hunters into these areas to catch seals and sea otters. In Kodiak and Sitka (Alaska) further settlements were founded, and in 1799 Emperor Paul chartered a Russian-American Company to develop trade. The idea behind these initiatives was that the North Pacific’s endless supplies of fur would lead to new trade with China and Japan. Russian economic interests, as well as concerns about a growing British presence in the North Pacific after Captain Cook’s third voyage, stimulated further expeditions. These were led by the Baltic German officers Adam Johann von Krusenstern and Otto von Kotzebue, who had served in the Russian navy – and in the case of Krusenstern also in the Royal Navy.

The first Russian circumnavigation was launched from St Petersburg in 1803 and aimed at establishing a trade contact with Japan. Behind this attempt was the idea to build a Russian commercial network across the North Pacific in order to provide the settlements in the Far East and Alaska with provisions, and to link them with Spanish California and Manila as well as with the Chinese port of Canton (Guangzhou).

On 7 August 1803 the Nadezhda and Neva, under the command of Krusenstern and Yuri F. Lisiansky, left Kronstadt and sailed across the Baltic Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, calling at the Canary Islands and Santa Catarina in Brazil. After passing Cape Horn the ships crossed the Pacific with stops at the Marquesas and Hawaiian islands. From there the Neva headed to Alaska, the Nadezhda to Kamchatka. The Nadezhda left Kamchatka for Japan on 7 September 1804. Besides Krusenstern, the delegation included Count Nikolay Rezanov, who was supposed to become the first Russian ambassador in Japan and was going to ask for an opening of trade relations between Japan and Russia. Although the Russians brought gifts, and returned Japanese sailors who had been shipwrecked on Russian Pacific shores, the mission proved to be a disaster. During their stay in Nagasaki, the Russians provoked serious tensions over ritual and etiquette, refusing to stand up in front of Japanese officials or to store their hand weapons, as shogunal regulations required. Therefore they were denied what they sought: the opening of trade with Japan. In G. H. von Langdorff’s Journey Around the World, Captain Krusenstern describes his own and Rezanov’s frustrations. Moreover, they expressed
their disdain for the culturally more attuned Dutchmen, who were bowing and scraping for the Japanese in local fashion.⁶

While the mission itself was a failure, when Krusenstern and Rezanov returned to the Kuril Islands and met Japanese ships, the Japanese sold them provisions in exchange for ‘old clothes and buttons’. Captain Krusenstern found these transactions perplexing, as either the buttons must have been ‘of particular value to them, or herrings none at all, for they exchanged from fifty to a hundred of them dried, finer than I ever met them, for an old brass button’. Furthermore, ‘the Japanese bartered pipes, lacquered dishes, and particularly books of obscene pictures’.⁷

For these reasons Krusenstern and Rezanov continued to believe that trade with Japan remained an option, leading Rezanov to draft a plan for a Russian-Pacific presence in Sitka. The major aim was to solve the problems of food supplies for the Russian-American colonies. Several options were discussed: one was to establish trade with Spanish California; another to force Japan to trade, especially to provide rice for Russian settlers. Further options discussed were trade with Manila or the establishment of a Russian colony in Northern California, based on the agriculture of indigenous people. A last option was to make contact with Boston traders, who frequently called on the Pacific coast. Having returned, via the Indian Ocean, to Russia on 22 July 1806, only one option of Rezanov’s ambitious plan proved viable: the establishment of a colony in Northern California, where in 1811 the Russian-American Company founded Fort Ross, located north of the bay.

Despite the various difficulties outlined above, the scientific outcome of the Nadezdha expedition was remarkable. Krusenstern published a travel report in German (Reise um die Welt) and later in English (Voyage Round the World), as well as an atlas with 104 maps and engraved paintings of the Pacific.⁸ The public interest in the first Russian circumnavigation triggered further Russian explorations into the Pacific, of which the expedition of the Rurik, led by Otto von Kotzebue, stands out. Kotzebue had been a member of the Nadezhda crew, and in 1814 received his own command from Count Nikolay Rumyantsev, a St Petersburg statesman and philanthropist, who financed the construction and voyages of the Rurik. Their aim was to discover for Russia the Northwest Passage, to acquire new knowledge of the Pacific and its inhabitants, and to assemble objects of natural history for his private collection. This explains why the botanist Adelbert von Chamisso and the artist Louis Choris were recruited with the specific aim of bringing back objects, descriptions and paintings. The expedition of the Rurik (1815–18) resulted in the collection of rich materials and ample new knowledge. More than 400 islands
were recorded and put on the Pacific map. Furthermore, Chamisso produced two reports: Remarks and Opinions of the Naturalist of the Expedition and A Voyage around the World with the Romanzov Exploring Expedition, the latter including descriptions of his encounters with native peoples. Especially his encounter with Kadu from the Ratak Island in the South Sea, who for nine months travelled on board of the Rurik, strongly impressed Chamisso and his fellow crew members:

He was not unteachable, not without intellectual curiosity. He seemed to understand well what we endeavoured to make him understand about the shape of the earth and our nautical arts, but he had no tenacity, became exhausted through the effort, and returned to his songs to avoid it. He took some pains to learn writing, the secret of which he had comprehended, but he as without talent for this difficult attempt. What he was told with the intention of encouraging him might have completely deprived him of courage. He suspended his study, took it up again, and finally put it aside entirely.

He seemed to grasp with an open mind everything that we told him about the social order in Europe, of our customs, morals, arts. But he was most receptive for the peaceful adventure purpose of our journey, with which he connected the intention of telling newly discovered peoples what was good and useful for them, and by this he understood chiefly what goes toward sustenance; but he also recognised that our superiority rested on our greater knowledge, and he honoured and served our research efforts as much as possible, even when it would have seemed very idle to many a more educated person among us.

Although the quest for political and economic domination in the Pacific failed, via the fur trade Russia and its settlements were closely linked to Spanish California and China, and thus to the emerging Pacific economy, in which British and American ships carried the lion’s share of commodity exchanges. Initially, the fur trade was centred on Okhotsk, from where Russian traders took the pelts inland to Kiakhta, thus satisfying Chinese luxury demand. Since Chinese consumers preferred fine sea otter pelts, their hunting, carried out by indigenous Aleut and Kodiak hunters, assumed a global dimension. When the sea otter population in the North Pacific declined, sea otters in California became the target of the Russian-American Company. Since Native Americans lacked the relevant skills, the company used American ships to bring Aleut and Kodiak hunters, together with their weapons and families, to California.
the men hunted, Aleut women and children skinned and cooked the
otters. American ships then took the pelts to Canton. On occasions also
the labour force was shipped back to Kodiak and Sitka.

Despite these efforts, it remained difficult to sustain Russian interests in the area, and in 1823 Kotzebue was sent once again on an expedition into the North Pacific:

In the month of March of the year 1823, I was appointed by his Imperial Majesty Alexander the First, of glorious memory, to
the command of a ship, at that time unfinished, but named the Predpriatie (the Enterprise). She had been at first destined for a voyage purely scientific, but circumstances having occurred which rendered it necessary to change the object of the expedition, I was ordered to take in at Kronstadt a cargo to Kamschatka, and to sail from the latter place to the northwest coast of America, in order to protect the Russian-American Company from the smuggling carried on there by foreign traders. On this situation my ship was to remain for one year, and then, being relieved by another, to return to Kronstadt.¹²

Russia’s Pacific provinces in the nineteenth century

The nineteenth-century Russian presence in the Pacific was still characterized by the problem of long distances between the settlements on the western and the eastern shores, and the difficulty in providing them with provisions. Furthermore, competition from British and North American ships, from whalers, traders and fur hunters also proved difficult. By the 1830s, only 800 Russians had settled in Alaska and the population subsequently declined, due to the difficulties with provisions and the exhaustion of the fur supplies on which the Russian-American Company’s survival depended. After the near-extinction of sea otters, the fur hunt moved further south, concentrating on seals, which were available all over the Pacific. British, French, Spanish and American ships dominated the seal hunt, especially on the Juan Fernández Islands off the coast of Chile.¹³ Finally, in 1841 the Russian-American Company sold Fort Ross to the Swiss landowner and entrepreneur John Sutter.

The western coast of the Pacific, i.e. the Russian Pacific Coast, moved into the Empire’s focus when, in 1849, a Russian ship rediscovered the mouth of the river Amur. Although in the Treaty of Nerchinsk
(1689) Russia had ceded this region to China, the Russians reoccupied it in 1854, and two years later declared it a free trade zone. They founded the fortress Khabarovsk and after the emancipation of serfs in 1861 promoted migration to the area. In the unequal treaties of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860), China had to accept first the transfer of 600,000 km² from the Stanovoy Mountains to the Amur River, and two years later the Russian occupation of the coastal territory south of the Amur down to the Korean border. Here, in 1860, Russia established a new military and naval base, giving it the name Vladivostok (Ruler of the East). Russian settlement in the area remained slow, and only increased after the opening of the Trans-Siberian railway at the end of the century. Nevertheless, peasants, small traders and seasonal workers migrated from Korea and China into the new Russian territories. Vladivostok became the basis for Russian expansion into Manchuria, where Russia claimed a protectorate over its northern part and established two new ice-free harbours at Port Arthur and Dairen.14

This successful expansion on the Pacific Coast changed the vantage point with respect to the American possessions.15 While Russia consolidated its transcontinental European-Asian Empire, the maritime American periphery became finally obsolete, especially since the driving motive of the eighteenth-century expansion, the fur hunt, no longer yielded sufficient profits. As a consequence, in 1867, after ten years of negotiations, Russia sold Alaska for $7.2 million to the United States. The sale to the United States, rather than Britain, also fulfilled Russia’s aim to undermine British power in the Pacific.

Ethnic nationalism and Russification in the Baltic provinces

In the Baltic provinces an intensified integration into the Russian Empire and the emergence of national movements among Estonians and Latvians took place. Administrative ties were strengthened under Catherine I (r. 1725–7). A law commission was set up to advance legal unification and the administrative reach of the tsarist Empire. Representatives of the nobility and the cities took part in this effort, and together with the Finnish representatives and those of the former Polish-Lithuanian territories in Ukraine, they defended the rights of the provinces against those of the Russian Empire. After Russia’s successes in the wars against the Ottoman Empire, Catherine II, the Great (r. 1762–96), intensified her reform efforts, and in 1775 she introduced a new provincial ordinance. Initially
this came into force in Russia alone, but in 1783 it was extended into the Baltic provinces and, similar to the effects of introducing the Russian head tax, bound these provinces closer to St Petersburg. Stuck in provincial narrow-mindedness, the nobility was initially pleased that it continued to be exempt from taxation, and that taxes were largely borne by the Estonian and Latvian population. Also, the allodification of the manorial farms (which became actual property) was welcomed by the nobility. The cities, however, resisted the elimination of their privileges that followed the Russian municipal ordinances of 1785. Meanwhile, the ordinances led to freedom of trade and, for example in Riga, laid the ground for the industrialization of the following century. Although Paul I (r. 1796–1801) restored the old city and provincial constitutions when he was enthroned in 1796, he introduced the Russian military recruitment law in the provinces, which meant long-term service in the Russian army for any young man caught up in its net.16

Over the following century the position of the Baltic-German ruling class was increasingly challenged by rising Latvian and Estonian nationalism. Already around 1800, pastors and physicians promoted a new image of the Estonians and demanded improvements to their economic and social situation, especially in the form of agrarian reforms. ‘Estophiles’ – culturally engaged Baltic Germans and Estonians who had risen into the middle class – joined them. Their writings would culminate in the national movement of the second half of the century, while also serving as a cultural mediator between the urban middle class and the Estonian peasantry. A Latvian literary society (Latviešu Literāriskā Biedrība) was formed in 1824, largely by Couronian pastors, while in Dorpat the Estonian physician Friedrich Robert Faehlmann (1798–1850) founded the Learned Estonian Society (Õpetatud Eesti Selts).

The main political concern of Estonians and Latvians was to secure equality with Baltic Germans, both in education and before the law. The liberalized pass ordinance of 1863, which granted the peasantry freedom of movement, brought about greater mobility, especially in southern Estonia. The effect of political publications such as Perno Postimees (Perno Postman), the first Estonian newspaper, published in Pernau in 1857, or the Latvian Mājas Viesis (House Visitor) in 1856, should not be underestimated.17 Song festivals became a regular fixture celebrating national sentiment in Estonia from 1869 and in Livonia from 1873 onwards.18 Estonian and Latvian developed into modern cultural languages by precisely this literary process. Voluntary associations also reflected these developing national cultures. Farmers, volunteer fire
brigades, mutual aid organizations, teetotallers and choristers formed societies at the local level, which soon developed into larger associations with regional and even national members.

In the Baltic provinces, pastors influenced by Enlightenment ideas, along with Estophiles, prepared the groundwork for agrarian reforms. Although the peasant ordinances of 1802–4 had validated the laws tying the peasantry to the soil, new laws promulgated in 1816, in Estonia, and in 1819, in Livonia, freed the serfs. The manorial landowners, however, continued to own the land, which forced the now independent peasants to sign rental agreements to farm that land. As elsewhere in Europe, crop failures, starvation and revolts led to new agrarian laws in Livonia (1849) and Estonia (1856), which allowed the peasants to acquire land and regulate its acquisition with the help of public credits. Moreover, land they used to farm was transferred into their property in exchange for ceding one-sixth to the landowners. The previously dominant form of natural rent or labour eventually gave way to financial operations. This resulted in economically viable and productive units that could compete on the open market with the manorial farms. This was especially successful with crops such as linseed and for cattle and horse breeding. Vodka distilling, to meet demand in Russia, also proved extremely profitable.

In the Russian Baltic provinces, the expansion of the railway network served as a powerful impetus to trade and transport because port cities could now be connected both with each other and with the hinterland. A direct connection between Riga and Mitau was opened in 1868. In 1870, this was followed by the line from Baltischport (Paldinski) to St Petersburg by way of Reval and Narva. The construction of railway lines worked in favour of the port cities through which they ran. Once Riga was connected with the hinterlands of Ukraine and southern Russia, it suddenly became a major player in grain exports. The population almost tripled between 1871 (103,000) and 1897 (282,000), reaching 520,000 in 1913. Riga recruited its population primarily from the countryside. Libau (Liepāja) was also able to improve its position by exploiting its railroad connection, while Reval grew into the second most important Russian port for imports after St Petersburg. Industrialization kept up with urbanization.

With the population increase, the ethnic composition of these cities also changed fundamentally. In Riga Latvians replaced Germans as the dominant nationality during this period, while the Russian element remained approximately stable. A glance at the structure of the labour force demonstrates another transformation. While Germans, despite their general decrease in the population as a whole, continued to be represented in the bureaucracy and in the free professions, the proportion
of Germans working as artisans, merchants and in the service sector decreased. Latvians became more prominent in these sectors and in industry generally. Russians were equally active in administration, trade, industry, the manual trades and other services. The Jewish population became more prominent in the free professions and as merchants.

Out in the countryside, by contrast, the changes were less significant, because during the nineteenth century Estonia was already 90 per cent Estonian, while Latvians were the predominant population group in Livonia (about 80 per cent). The transformation was much more dramatic in the cities, especially in Riga, where Germans felt caught in a pincer by the progressive Russification of the region, by the Latvian nationalist movement, and as a consequence of the industrial labour movement (social democracy). For Latvians social mobility in the industrial society fostered the emergence of a Latvian national movement. Latvian agitation was directed first against the Germans and then the Russians. Both Latvians and Russians cultivated anti-Semitic stereotypes, which in turn found ready acceptance among the Germans.21

Thus, the intensification of Russian rule strengthened the connections between the Baltic provinces and St Petersburg, as well as the role of Russian culture in the area. This meant at the same time a redefinition of the region’s sense of belonging, from forming the periphery of a European Empire to becoming a core area of a (new) Russian Empire, alienating at the same time many of its (non-Russian) people from tsarist rule.22 This process would culminate in the anti-German revolts during the Revolution of 1905, as well as (in 1918) the success of the Baltic independence movement.23

**Conclusion**

This chapter elucidated different economic and political developments in two distant peripheries of the Russian Empire. Their role and economic function changed over time. Fuelled by the fur hunt and respective Chinese demand, around 1800 the Russian Pacific area formed part of a global Pacific economy; but its role shifted during the nineteenth century, due to the exhaustion of fur supplies and growing international commercial and naval competition. This led to the Russian retreat from the American continent and the concentration of imperial policies on the Russian land Empire, although even then its eastern outposts were expanded and militarily consolidated.
While the Russian Far East remained an imperial periphery, the Baltic provinces lost their peripheral status. Through the railway network, integration of the administration and Russification, they were economically, institutionally and culturally linked to St Petersburg and came to constitute the core region of the modern Russian Empire. Furthermore, since the Baltic Sea was crucial for Russian shipping to all parts of the world, the Empire’s western fringe came to play the role of a middleman and mediator for Russia’s relationship with Western Europe and the wider world.

Despite the consolidation of its imperial policies, however, the Empire remained vulnerable. The Russian navy continued to operate in three different arenas, which were characterized by enormous distances between them. Since its Black Sea fleet was more or less geographically isolated, when Russia wanted to increase its naval presence in the Mediterranean it had to dispatch ships from its Baltic fleet. Furthermore, Russia had no naval bases between Libau on the Baltic and Port Arthur on the Pacific. This became obvious when Japan, as the newly emerging Pacific power, tried to stop the Russian expansion on the Russian Pacific coast and besieged Port Arthur. Russia sent its Baltic fleet, which had been based at Libau, the long way around the Cape of Good Hope to the Pacific, only to be defeated by Japan in the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905.24 The effects threw Russia into deep turmoil and marked the rise of a new empire in a different region of the world.

The two case studies show how imperial peripheries are formed, and how their function changes due to global economic processes, but also how a European periphery became the core of an empire that over the centuries had changed its outlook on the world. Within the context of this collection of essays, the chapter demonstrates that core and periphery, and the spatial hierarchies that regulate the relationship between them, in no way represent absolute categories.

Notes


22. Bassin, Geographies of Imperial Identity, 45–63.
