

Imperial Transformations – Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet History

THE RISE AND FALL OF RUSSIA'S FAR EASTERN REPUBLIC, 1905–1922

**NATIONALISMS, IMPERIALISMS, AND REGIONALISMS
IN AND AFTER THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE**

Ivan Sablin



The Rise and Fall of Russia's Far Eastern Republic, 1905–1922

The Russian Far East was a remarkably fluid region in the period leading up to, during, and after the Russian Revolution. The different contenders in play in the region, imagining and working toward alternative futures, comprised different national groups, including Russians, Buryat-Mongols, Koreans, and Ukrainians; different imperialist projects, including Japanese and American attempts to integrate the region into their political and economic spheres of influence as well as the legacies of Russian expansionism and Bolshevik efforts to export the revolution to Mongolia, Korea, China, and Japan; and various local regionalists, who aimed for independence or strong regional autonomy for distinct Siberian and Far Eastern communities and whose efforts culminated in the short-lived Far Eastern Republic of 1920–1922. *The Rise and Fall of Russia's Far Eastern Republic, 1905–1922* charts developments in the region, examines the interplay of the various forces, and explains how a Bolshevik version of state-centered nationalism prevailed.

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Imperial Transformations – Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet History

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1 The Rise and Fall of Russia's Far Eastern Republic, 1905–1922

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Introduction to the series

Imperial Transformations – Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet History

Alexander Semyonov and Ronald Grigor Suny

The history of empires as a form of great power politics and politics of diversity has recently been expanded to include non-European experiences with empire formation, transformation, and post-imperial trajectories. The field of Russian-Soviet history may be said to be the most ignored in the historiography of empire and colonialism, which has focused primarily on western European overseas empires. The research on the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union has grown dramatically in the past two decades and suggests new perspectives on global histories of empire, colonialism, and nationalism. This imperial experience of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union was situated both in Europe and Asia in historical geographic terms and combined European and extra-European historical features in politics and ideologies of empire. Yet it has often been treated in isolation, without sufficiently considering comparisons with other empires or episodes of entanglement between different imperial formations.

The series reflects the current and continuously expanding research on the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as imperial formations and instruments of governing diversity on the Eurasian continent. It prioritizes the work of scholars who explore the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union from a comparative and entangled history perspective and with the help of methodologies of global and transnational histories. By extending the focus from Russia and the USSR to the broader European, Asian, even global context, the historical experience of Russia and the Soviet Union can be seen to reflect the global trends in the history of imperial regimes and ideologies. At some moments, when threatened with crisis and collapse, Russia borrowed imperial practices and blueprints from other empires; at other times, Russia and the USSR pioneered new approaches to the problem of diversity, for example, the Leninist program of national self-determination and the formation of a federal union of national republics, which directly or indirectly influenced politics in other regions. The series provides a venue for much-needed scholarly publications addressing questions of comparison and connections between Russia and the USSR and other empires.

The title of the series stresses both empire and the dynamism in the history of empires. Unlike nation, until recently, historians have viewed empire as given rather than constructed. The often-repeated statement on the longevity of empires

in history (counting millennia and centuries) conjures up the sense of a point of departure and a bedrock structure. The antiquity and persistence of empire make it more real in historical thinking than a denaturalized, imagined, and constructed nation. The series suggests critically revisiting the teleology of modern historical transition from empire to nation and focusing on ruptures, crises, reforms, and revolutions that have marked the modern history of empires. Multiple imperial transformations were an intrinsic part of Russian and Soviet history. Russia's empires counted Byzantium and the Chingizid rule, Muscovy, and Peter the Great's empire, Catherine the Great's confessional state and the nationalizing empire of the last Romanovs, and, finally, the Bolsheviks' World Revolution and Soviet empire. Acknowledging ruptures and crises in the history of the empire and putting them at the center of thinking about empire allow the question about persistence of imperial sovereignty and diversity to be posed in a new light.

The series encompasses different streams of current historical research and welcomes authors who employ different methodologies (social, cultural, and political history) to understand the imperial past within the broad framework of "new imperial history." This framework departs from earlier structuralist understandings of empire in Russian history and expands the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to include the multiplicity of voices beyond the political center, including the non-Russian national movements, regionalist political forces, non-Orthodox and non-Christian confessions, non-elite subaltern social groups of imperial society; the complex character of religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity in Russia and the USSR, including the lived experience of diversity and of crossing boundaries in imperial society; imperial visions and ideologies of imperial politics; the production of knowledge about imperial space and diversity; the multifaceted nature of transition from empire to post-imperial order and nation-state, including the inheritance of institutional and legal frameworks from the imperial past and historical memory about empire.

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Note on the text

The simplified Library of Congress System was used for the transliteration of Cyrillic into Latin characters. Conventional spellings in other transliterations were used for geographic names only. The Gregorian calendar was used for dates after February 14, 1918, and the Julian calendar for earlier events related to the Russian Empire, however, in some sources the relevant calendar could not be determined. The equidistant conic projection was used for the maps.

Abbreviations

ASSR	Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic
Bund or Bundists	Jewish Labor Bund
Burnatskom	Buryat National Committee
CER	Chinese Eastern Railway
Comintern	Communist International
Dal'biuro	Far Eastern Bureau (Bolsheviks) of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks); later of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
Dal'istpart	Far Eastern Historical Party Commission
Dal'kom	Far Eastern Territorial Committee of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies and Self-Government Bodies
Dal'kraizemgor	Far Eastern Territorial Union of Zemstvos and Municipalities
Dal'soiuz	Far Eastern Union [of Consumer Societies]
Dal'sovnarkom	Far Eastern Council of People's Commissars
Dal'ta	Far Eastern Telegraph Agency
Dal'tsentrosoiuz	Far Eastern Union of Consumer Societies
FER	Far Eastern Republic
GAKhK	State Archive of the Khabarovsk Krai
GARB	State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation
Gospolitokhrana	State Political Guard
IKKI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
JACAR	Japan Center for Asian Historical Records
KCP	Korean Communist Party
KDs	Constitutional Democratic Party
KhKM	Grodekov Khabarovsk Krai Museum
MPP	Mongolian People's Party
Narkomindel	People's Commissariat of International Affairs
Narkomnats	People's Commissariat of Nationalities
NEP	New Economic Policy
Orgbiuro	Organizational Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)

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OS	Old Style
PGOM	Arsen'ev Maritime State Museum
Politbiuro	Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
POW	prisoner-of-war
PRA	People's Revolutionary Army
PSR or SRs	Party of Socialist Revolutionaries
PSs	People's Socialist Party
RCP or RCP(b)	Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
rev.	reverse
Revvoensovet	Revolutionary Military Council
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History
RGIA DV	Russian State Historical Archive of the Far East
RSDLP or SDs	Russian Social Democratic Labor Party
RSFSR	Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic
Sekvostnar	Section of the Peoples of the East
Sibbiuro	Siberian Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
Sibrevkom	Siberian Revolutionary Committee
Sibzemgor	All-Siberian Union of Zemstvos and Municipalities
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars
SSR	Socialist Soviet Republic
TseKa	Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
Tsentrosibir'	Central Executive Committee of Siberian Soviets
Tsentrosoiuz	All-Russian Union of Consumer Societies
UPR	Ukrainian People's Republic
USA	United States of America
USNA	United States National Archives
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VTsIK	All-Russian Central Executive Committee
Zemgor	Committee of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Municipal Unions

Introduction

In March and April 1920, two Bolshevik-sponsored organizations in Vladivostok and Chita proclaimed themselves independent governments of the Russian Far East, and on April 27, 1921, a universally elected Constituent Assembly of the Far East formally established the ostensibly democratic and capitalist Far Eastern Republic (FER), with the center in Chita (Figures I.1 and I.2). The proclamation of the Russian Far East between Lake Baikal and the Pacific as a sovereign state was hardly an act fostering the integrity of post-imperial Russia. For some contemporary observers, the creation of an independent settler state epitomized the development of Siberian Regionalism (*Oblastnichestvo*) – the movement which aspired for North Asia’s legal and economic autonomy (Norton 1923). For those who viewed the FER as only nominally independent, given the Bolshevik control over its government, it was an outpost of the Communist International (Comintern), an organization which rejected nation-states as a form of political self-organization and therefore was anti-nationalist.¹

The FER, however, proved neither a manifestation of regional self-determination nor a facilitator of Bolshevik internationalism. Indeed, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Krasnoshchekov, a native of Ukraine and a returnee from the United States of America (USA), who was the FER’s main Bolshevik architect, favored regional autonomy, while Boris Zakharovich Shumiatskii, a prominent Siberian Bolshevik, who competed with Krasnoshchekov for regional leadership, held national sovereignty in low regard, aspiring to start a chain of revolutions in East Asia. Yet most regional Bolsheviks relied on Russian nationalism when mobilizing support for the republic, both within their own ranks and among regional populations. Although the fragmentation of the former Russian Empire during the Civil War and the experience of political independence contributed to the consolidation of the Russian Far East as a separate region in the Soviet imperial formation, Far Eastern regionalism never matched the scale of its Siberian counterpart and remained firmly rooted in Russian nationalism.²

Although the notion of the Bolsheviks as Russian nationalists may seem paradoxical, they succeeded in turning it into an important rhetorical instrument. Nationalism was not, however, a mere policy device. The Bolsheviks used the discourse but they also made their foreign and domestic policies dependent on it, which contributed to their departure from radical inter- and transnationalism and

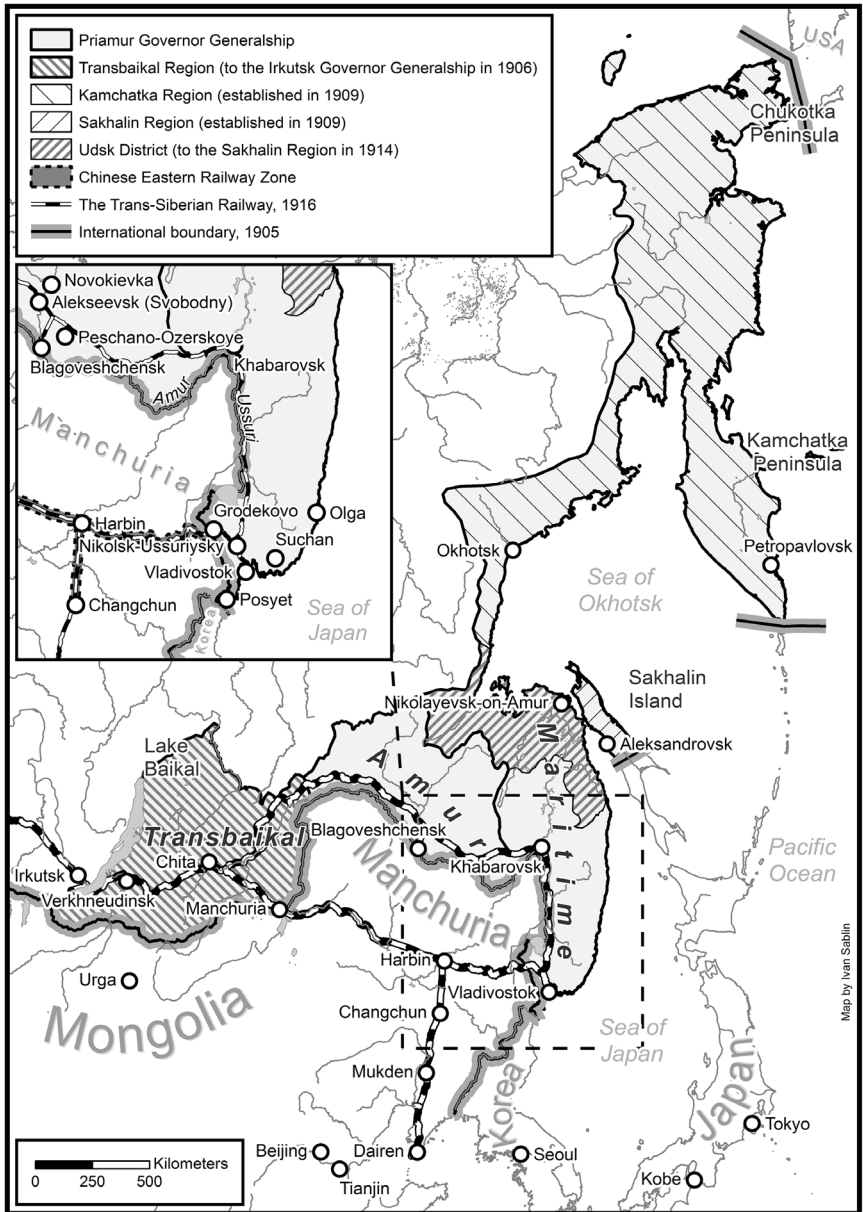


Figure I.1 Map of the Russian Far East, 1905–1917.

Source: Glinka 1914; Natural Earth n.d.

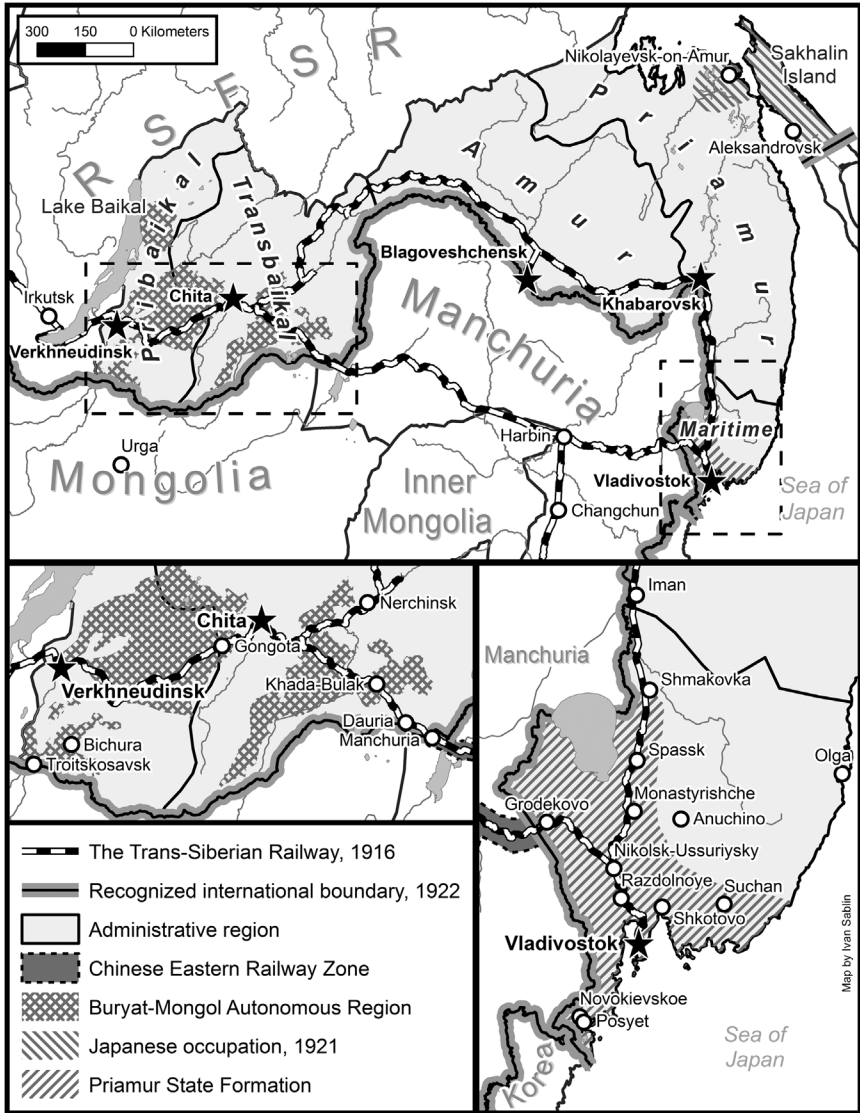


Figure 1.2 Map of the Far Eastern Republic, 1922.

Source: Levkin 2013.

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the development of a new version of Russian imperial nationalism. The latter's state-centered defensive meanings, which were internalized by the majority of the empire's population during World War I (1914–1918), proved especially strong.³ The need to keep the Russian Far East within a Russian state, Soviet or not, and to protect it from Japanese imperialism became the main slogan during the formation of the FER in 1920–1921 and its absorption into the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) after the Japanese evacuated from the region's continental part in 1922. Many regional Bolsheviks sincerely supported the Russian national cause, with some becoming outwardly chauvinistic toward the region's largest minorities – the Buryat-Mongols (Buryats), the Ukrainians, the Koreans, and the Chinese.

The Bolsheviks were not the only ones who claimed to represent the Russian nation in the region. Their opponents – the Transbaikalian Cossack warlord Grigorii Mikhailovich Semenov, the regional businessman and lawyer Spiridon Dionis'evich Merkulov, and others – also appealed to the good of the Russian nation when trying to rally popular support. Yet their suggestion that being dependent on Japan was preferable to being part of an anti-national Soviet state found little understanding among the people of the Russian Far East, many of whom had little experience with Soviet Russia during its early radical period and became strong opponents of a foreign military presence during the Allied Intervention of 1918–1922.

Ironically, the slogan of Russian national independence from a foreign state rather than from the Bolsheviks also ensured sympathy among the members of the Japanese, American, and broader international publics which used the global language of nationalism. At the time of the FER's absorption into the RSFSR, the Bolsheviks were largely viewed as a Russian government and a center of a new imperial formation. Analyzing the republic's brief existence, Harold S. Quigley (1924, 134), for instance, noted that the Soviet leaders did not see the creation of such formally independent states as the FER or Soviet Ukraine on the territory of the former Russian Empire “as drawing a political boundary line and creating a sovereign enclave within the whole body of Russians.”

The Bolsheviks succeeded in minimizing domestic and international opposition in the region by appealing to a left-liberal version of Russian imperial nationalism which made its way into regional public circles during the First Russian Revolution of 1905–1907 and loomed large during the February Revolution of 1917. As a synthetic and ambivalent discourse (Brubaker 1998, 55), which imagined the community of ethnic Russians and non-Russians of the former empire, and a set of policies, which aimed at empowering disadvantaged classes, minority nationalities, and other social groups, left-liberal imperial nationalism allowed the Bolsheviks to appeal to both those who aspired for the unity of the Russian state and those who advocated particularistic interests of their groups.⁴ Even though some Buryat-Mongols and Koreans supported Semenov and S. D. Merkulov, the promises of national autonomy, which were partly fulfilled in the FER, and the Comintern's backing of the Mongol and Korean national movements minimized the opposition among the region's

largest organized minorities. For many regional peasants and some businessmen, the Bolsheviks' moderate economic policies, which the FER declared in 1920 and which the RSFSR introduced as the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, seemed a better alternative to complete economic dependency on Japan. After all, "left" and "liberal" related to the economy rather than to a form of government for many in the region.

Social and economic compromises proved short-lived if not illusory in the first place – the Koreans gained no autonomy and were forcibly resettled from the region in 1937; the Buryat Buddhists faced religious persecution already in the 1920s; private business was limited and almost completely eliminated after the revocation of the NEP in 1928; prosperous peasants of all ethnic backgrounds were dispossessed during the Collectivization as happened elsewhere after 1929. Yet the Bolsheviks followed their state-centered nationalist slogans. The focus on the imperial state rather than class interests in foreign policy manifested itself in the Russian Far East before "Socialism in One Country" became the guiding principle of the Soviet state in 1925–1926, while the region itself gained a fortification-like status over the 1930s mirroring thereby its official perception in the Russian Empire as a national outpost in a hostile international environment.⁵

Historical context

Parts of the vast territory between Baikal and the Pacific had been claimed by the Xiongnu, Korean Goguryeo, Tungusic-Korean Bohai (Balhae), Khitan Liao, Tungusic Jurchen (Jin), Mongol and its successor Yuan, and Han Chinese Min polities since the third century BCE. Since the seventeenth century, this area had been a dynamic borderland between the peripheries of the Qing and Russian Empires. Transbaikalia, between the lake and the upper Amur, historically had large Buryat, Daur, and other Mongolic, Tungusic, and Turkic populations. The indigenous population downstream along the Amur and along the Pacific littoral between the Chukchi Peninsula and Korea was sparse yet extremely diverse, featuring the speakers of Tungusic (Evenki, Even, Udege, Nanai, Solon, Negidal, Oroch, Orok, Ulch, and other), Chukotko-Kamchatkan (Chukchi, Koryak, and Itelmen), Yukaghir, Eskimo-Aleut, and isolated (Nivkh) languages in the early twentieth century (Bazarov 2011a; Forsyth 1992; Kradin 2007; Krushanov 1989).

The indigenous population mainly engaged in subsistence hunting, fishing, and herding, while the newcomers – Koreans, Chinese, and since the seventeenth century also Russians – were attracted by marketable resources, such as ginseng, velvet antlers, and trepang, in the case of East Asians, and furs. Some newcomers also settled for agriculture. The competition for resources, including the "taxation" of the natives, turned into an imperial rivalry between the Romanovs and the Qing in the second half of the seventeenth century. The Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) recognized Transbaikalia and the northern part of the Pacific littoral as Russian and the areas along the Amur and the Ussuri Rivers as Qing. After this

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and further treaties, the Russian expansion effort shifted northeast to Kamchatka, Chukotka, and Alaska in the eighteenth century, while Transbaikalia developed into an inter-imperial trade zone. Yet in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Amur and Ussuri regions again turned into a site of Russian-Qing and later Russian-Japanese rivalry (Forsyth 1992; Stephan 1994, 14–39).

The Qing Empire conceded vast territories north of the Amur and east of the Ussuri, as well as the coastal areas further to the south, to Russia in the Treaties of Aigun and Tianjin (1858) and the Convention of Beijing (1860). The Amur Acquisition was a result of the Qing imperial crisis, embodied in the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and the Second Opium War (1856–1860), and Russia's reorientation from the Black Sea to the Pacific after its defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1856). It continued the continental expansion of Russia to North Asia (Siberia) along river courses but also owed much to the efforts of Governor General of Eastern Siberia Nikolai Nikolaevich Murav'ev (soon to be known as Murv'ev-Amurskii) and other so-called Amurians (*amurtsy*) who aspired to integrate Russia into the Pacific macro-region through the river. The formation of the Transbaikal (1851), Amur (1859), and Ussuri (1860) Cossack Hosts and the establishment of outposts turned towns Nikolayevsk-on-Amur (1850), Blagoveshchensk (1856), Khabarovka (1858, Khabarovsk since 1893), and Vladivostok (1860) accompanied the expansion. The newly acquired lands became known as the Amur or Priamur territory (*krai*) or *Priamur'e*. In 1884, the administrative Transbaikal, Amur, and Maritime Regions (*oblast'*) were united into the Priamur General Governorship with the center in Khabarovka (see Figure I.1) (Bassin 2006; A. V. Remnev 2004).

Russia's arrival at the Pacific had important consequences for decision-making in the Japanese and Qing Empires. The fears of its further expansion to Manchuria and Korea nurtured early Pan-Asian discourse, formulated as the need for Japan, the Qing Empire, and Korea to cooperate against the West (Russia, in this case), and “reactive” Japanese expansionism since 1874–1875 (Fumoto 2017, 2, 4). Besides, the Qing cession of territories to Russia contributed to the abolition of restrictions on Han Chinese settlement in Manchuria in 1878, as well as the abrogation of the Eight Banner System and the establishment of three provinces there in 1907 (Tsukase 2017, 15, 24, 26–27).

The Treaties of Shimoda (1855) and Saint Petersburg (1875) with Japan, which granted Russia possession of Sakhalin, and the cession of Alaska to the USA (1867), established the maritime boundary of the Priamur territory. With the Russian expansion effort shifting to Central Asia and the Balkans in the 1860s–1870s, *Priamur'e* remained somewhat neglected. Yet official attention soon returned, with the establishment of the Navy-run Vladivostok Military Governorship in 1880, after the Congress of Berlin (1878) once again thwarted Russia's ambition in the “Eastern Question.” The region's remoteness from European Russia, its sparse population, and the small number of troops challenged, however, further expansion, with Vladivostok being reintegrated into the Maritime Region in 1888. Yet the first uses of the term “Far East,” which since the middle of the nineteenth century referred to Asia-Pacific, in relation to

*Priamur'e*⁶ and *Primor'e* (the Maritime territory) during the 1880s demonstrated the interest of the Russian elites in the “Far Eastern Question” – the increasing competition with Japan, the USA, and European powers in Asia-Pacific in general and the Qing Empire in particular (Davidson 1846; A. V. Remnev 2004, 142, 281, 290–91; Stephan 1994, 54–58).

The Triple Intervention (1895) by Russia, Germany, and France after the Qing-Japanese War (1894–1895) launched a new wave of imperialism in the Qing territory, and, like other powers involved in the Far Eastern Question, Russia acquired extraterritorial possessions and received railway concessions. Russia was granted the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) Zone Concession (1896) and the Guandong (Kwantung) Leasehold (1898) in Manchuria, as well as smaller concessions in Hankou (1896) and Tianjin (1900). Yet, unlike the French-built Kunming–Haiphong Railway (1904–1910) and other foreign infrastructure projects, the CER (1898–1903) had tremendous importance for the inner topology of the Russian Empire, becoming part of the Trans-Siberian Railway (1891–1916) – the main line connecting European Russia and the Pacific (Marks 1991).

The lease of the southern part of the Liaodong Peninsula marked a new stage of Russian expansion. The Guandong Leasehold was to become the empire's new gateway to the Pacific, in both a military and a commercial sense. Official attention shifted from *Priamur'e* and *Primor'e* to the new ports of Port Arthur and Dalny (Dalian or Dairen) and the new railway hub of Harbin (1898). Denouncing the perceived disregard for the Priamur General Governorship, regional officials opposed the construction of the railway through Manchuria. Yet Saint Petersburg not only went on with the plan but also reaffirmed the change of priorities by locating the center of the Viceroyalty of the Far East, which united the Priamur General Governorship, the CER Zone, and the Guandong Leasehold in 1903, in Port Arthur. With Viceroy Evgenii Ivanovich Alekseev having full military and civil authority in the region and being in charge of relations with Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul, the Far East received a special status within the empire. The establishment of the Viceroyalty also reaffirmed Russia's involvement in the Far Eastern Question, which soon led to the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) (Milezhik 2007; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2001; Stephan 1994, 57–61).

Russian expansion to the Pacific was accompanied by settler colonization like elsewhere in the empire (Morrison 2017), yet Transbaikalia and the Priamur territory were different in this respect both from each other and the rest of North Asia. Unlike west of Baikal where unsanctioned settlement was a major phenomenon, the colonization of Transbaikalia was more dependent on the effort of the state. Most of the peasants, who in 1897 made up 36 percent of some 672,037 people living in Transbaikalia, were descended from religious (mainly Old Believer), penal, and political exiles. The second largest social estate group, the Cossacks (29 percent), was also initially settled here by the state. The estate of the so-called aliens or *inorodtsy* (predominantly the indigenous Buryats and Evenkis)⁷ made up 27 percent of the population. Even after the state started sponsoring

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voluntary mass settlement, which since the 1890s had accompanied railway construction, few peasants had moved to Transbaikalia by the early 1900s. Still, the relative scarcity of arable land triggered conflicts between the inhabitants of the region and the newcomers (Bazarov 2011b; Golovachev 1914, 15, 17–18; Institut demografii Natsional'nogo issledovatel'skogo universiteta Vysshaia shkola ekonomiki n.d.; Kir'iakov 1902, 25–36, 52–53, 76, 140–44, 243).

Unlike in the rest of North Asia, the state had stimulated settlement in the Priamur territory long before the 1890s. After three years of Cossack and soldier colonization, Murv'ev-Amurskii sponsored the adoption of special settlement regulations for the Amur and Maritime Regions in 1861. Both Russians and foreigners could farm out 100 *desyatins* (109 hectares) of public land pro family and get exemption from per capita taxes (lifelong), conscription (10 years), and rent (20 years). These benefits and duty-free trade, which was also introduced in the 1860s, attracted settlers from European Russia and Korea. The region's remoteness and harsh environment, however, made the settlement slow to grow, destroying hopes for a quick integration into the Pacific region and prompting the government to renew most benefits in 1882. Together with the establishment of a maritime route from Odessa, this brought many new settlers from the European part of the empire, especially Ukraine. Between 1883 and 1899, some 42,253 people settled in the South Ussuri territory in the very south of the Maritime Region alone. Although foreigners were not subject to the benefits since 1882, the estimated Korean population in the Priamur territory also increased from some 9,000 in 1870 to 32,298 in 1901. Furthermore, those Koreans who settled before the Russian-Korean Treaty (1884) could apply for Russian subjecthood and 15 *desyatins* of land. Albeit small in absolute figures, the Korean settlement simulated both border security concerns in Russia and the Russian scare in Japan, where it was seen as a Russian policy of obscuring the border with Korea ahead of expansion there (Fumoto 2017, 8–9; Kir'iakov 1902, 65, 169–77, 180, 300–301; Sablin and Kuchinsky 2017; Troitskaia and Toropov 2004, 1:6).

Gold mining in the Amur Region, railway construction, and growing towns attracted further newcomers, including many Chinese who preferred temporary wage work to resettlement. By 1900, the Chinese had considerable shares of labor in trade, mining, transportation, construction, agriculture, domestic service, and other spheres. Gustav Kunst and Gustav Albers of Hamburg, Ivan Iakovlevich Churin of Irkutsk, and Julius Bryner (Iulii Ivanovich Briner) from the vicinity of Geneva founded major retail companies in the 1860s–1880s. Japanese businesses also established a foothold in all regional towns. State and private investment, duty-free trade, settlement, and the stationing of armed forces contributed to the development of Blagoveshchensk (32,834 people in 1897), Vladivostok (28,900) and Khabarovsk (14,971) into sizable towns. The total population reached 120,306 in the Amur Region and 223,336 in the Maritime Region (with an additional 28,113, mainly exiles, on Sakhalin) in 1897. Despite the abolition of duty-free trade in 1900, smaller land allotments, and the shift of public investment to Manchuria, the population of the Russian Far East

continued to grow. Since 1901, after the CER had been in partial operation, the railway brought many more newcomers from across the European part of the empire and other regions of Siberia to the Priamur territory (Institut demografii Natsional'nogo issledovatel'skogo universiteta Vysshiaia shkola ekonomiki n.d.; Stephan 1994, 67–68).

The population of the Priamur Governor Generalship was extremely diverse. According to the 1897 Census of the Russian Empire, the native speakers of Russian were a majority (59 percent) in the combined population of the Transbaikal, Amur, and Maritime Region (1,043,792). The speakers of Buryat (17 percent), Ukrainian (6 percent), “Tungusic” (5 percent), Chinese (4 percent), Korean (2 percent), and Chukchi (1 percent) made up the largest minorities. Russian Orthodox Christians were a religious majority in the late nineteenth century, yet there were other Christian (Old Believer, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Adventist, and other), Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim, Jewish, and Shamanist communities. The population spread unevenly across the region, with some areas remaining predominantly indigenous (parts of Transbaikalia, Chukotka, and Kamchatka), and others becoming Ukrainian (parts of the Amur and Maritime Regions) or Korean (the southernmost part of the Maritime Region).⁸

The Amur Acquisition contributed to the discussions of decentralization and regionalization of the Russian Empire. The idea of Siberia from the Urals to the Pacific as a special region of the empire originated in the decentralization suggestions of both the Decembrists, the participants of the revolt against Nicholas I in 1825, and the first generation of Russian socialists. Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, who was exiled to Siberia in 1857–1861, Alexander Ivanovich Herzen (Gertsen), and other critics of the regime hoped that the Amur would facilitate the spread of democracy from North America to North Asia. Siberia was then expected to serve as a vehicle for democratizing the whole of Russia. Although the special role of the Amur had been reconsidered by the late 1860s, the mass exile of oppositional intellectuals – from Polish nationalists to *Narodniki* (Populists) and other socialists – to Transbaikalia, the Yakutsk Region, Sakhalin, and elsewhere stimulated further discussions. Thanks to an inadequate infrastructure and administration, the state was inefficient in hushing the opposition in Siberia (Bassin 2006, 168–73).

In the early 1860s, Afanasii Prokop'evich Shchapov, born in the Irkutsk Province (*guberniia*) to a Russian father and a Buryat mother, put forward his project of decentralizing Russia. Each region (*oblast'*) was to be self-governed through *zemstvo* (meaning rural or local) councils, with a *Zemskii Sobor* becoming the supreme body of the democratic Russian federation. Around the same time, the idea of a Russian federation was also being developed by Ukrainian intellectuals. Inspired by these ideas, Serafim Serfaimovich Shashkov (Shchapov's former student), Nikolai Mikhailovich Iadrintsev, Grigorii Nikolaevich Potanin, and other Siberians attending Saint Petersburg University formulated their concept of Siberia as a colony of European Russia, calling for its broad autonomy or even independence. The exclusion of Siberia from *zemstvo* self-government, which was introduced in parts of European Russia in 1864, consolidated their

views. Just like the Ukrainian movement, Siberian “separatism” experienced a swift crackdown, and in 1868 both Iadrintsev and Potanin were sentenced to prison and hard labor respectively. Yet Siberian Regionalism survived, developing into a loose program of introducing *zemstvo* to Siberia, establishing higher education in the region, ending penal exile, and granting Siberia regional economic and legal autonomy. Siberian Regionalists also called for attention to the problems of indigenous Siberians, while Vladimir Il’ich Iokhel’son, Vladimir Germanovich Bogoraz, Lev Iakovlevich Shternberg, Bronisław Piłsudski, and other exiles created the field of Siberian ethnography (Dameshek et al. 2007, 302–35; Iadrintsev 1892; Miller 2003, 130; Potanin 2014; Von Hagen 2007, 502).

Whereas the establishment of the Tomsk University (1878) may be seen as a concession to Siberian intellectuals, it was Saint Petersburg’s expansionism which brought higher education east of Baikal. The Vladivostok Oriental Institute (1899), which was to strengthen Russia’s influence in East Asia through language instruction and research, soon became a major center of Oriental studies attracting prominent specialists in Chinese (Apollinariĭ Vasil’evich Rudakov), Japanese (Evgenii Genrikhovich Spal’vin), Tibetan and Mongolian (Aleksii Matveevich Pozdnev), and Korean (Grigoriĭ Vladimirovich Podstavin) studies, most of them from Saint Petersburg University. Favoring immersion in foreign languages and attracting native speakers as instructors, informants, and collaborators, many of them were also part of the progressive turn in imperial academia. Holding the Chair of Mongolian Philology in Vladivostok, the Buryat Gombozhav Tsybikov became one of the first aliens to occupy such a position. However, hierarchies persisted. Despite their engagement in field research and teaching, Tsyben Zhamtsarano, Bazar Baradin, and other prominent Buryat scholars never reached comparable positions before 1917. Besides, even the progressives retained a Eurocentric view of the world. In 1900, Spal’vin applauded the progress of Japan but mentioned the lack of creativity there, claiming that the Japanese mimicked Europe, just like they had mimicked China previously (Ermakova et al. 2004, 139–48; Tolz 2011).

By analogy with Siberian Regionalists, John J. Stephan discussed the Priamur educated stratum as the Trans-Amurians (*zaamurtsy*) or proto-regionalists of the Russian Far East. Indeed, many of them criticized official policies as detrimental to the region but they hardly made up a coherent group. Still, the establishment of regional research organizations contributed to the conceptualization of Transbaikalia and the Priamur territory. The Society for the Study of the Amur Territory (in Vladivostok, in 1884) and the Priamur Branch of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (in Khabarovsk, in 1894), museums, and libraries in urban centers helped incorporate the region into the imperial academic discourse by sponsoring expeditions, publishing research, and hosting discussions. Many scholars engaged in both natural and social sciences. Doctor Nikolai Vasil’evich Kirilov, one of the founders of the Chita sub-branch of the Khabarovsk organization, for instance, wrote on health issues among the Buryats. Vladimir Klavdievich Arsen’ev studied regional geography but also produced ethnographic studies criticizing Russian official policies toward the indigenous population and

pointing to the cases of debt slavery, ruinous trade, and other ways the Chinese exploited the aliens in the South Ussuri territory (Arsen'ev 1914, 35, 49, 83–91; Stephan 1994, 93–98).

The Chinese, however, also occupied a disadvantaged position within the region. Regional hierarchies were a product of both larger intra-imperial inequalities in ethnic, religious, and social terms and the inter-imperial discourse pertaining to the Far Eastern Question, which foregrounded inter-racial competition. Whereas “yellow labor” was seen as having much potential in the global economy, the “yellow peril” to the European civilization had to be averted through Europeanization (Hsu 2006; Lewis 1903). The increasing nationalization (the transition from a dynastic to a national polity) tendencies in the Russian Empire since the second half of the nineteenth century and global imperialism stimulated official policies of Russification and Christianization. Still, despite their ascription to the “yellow race,” Russian officials treated Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese differently. With the exception of explicitly anti-Korean Pavel Fedorovich Unterberger, the Governor of the Maritime Region in 1888–1897 and the Priamur Governor General in 1905–1910, most officials viewed the Koreans more favorably than the Chinese, pointing to their better integration into the empire and allowing their mass naturalization in the 1890s. At the same time, security concerns related to Korean settlement along the border and the suggestions to limit their immigration and to relocate them away from the border persisted (Sablin and Kuchinsky 2017).

The Chinese were occasionally deemed representatives of a hostile state. The Qing subjecthood of the Chinese living in the Maritime Region (in line with the Treaty of Aigun) contributed to the so-called “Manza War” of 1867–1868, which began with attempts to control the economic activities of Chinese prospectors and developed into a Chinese insurgency against Russia. The conflict stimulated administrative efforts to control the Chinese, leading *inter alia* to their mass registration in the 1880s. In 1900, while Russia participated in suppressing the anti-imperialist Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), thousands of Chinese were murdered in the Amur Region. Following the Qing bombardment of Blagoveshchensk and the Russian occupation of the Amur's opposite bank, Military Governor of the Amur Region Konstantin Nikolaevich Gribskii ordered all Chinese to be expelled across the river. Russian troops and Cossack settlers (including children) forced some 4,000 Chinese into the Amur, shooting, whipping, and slashing all those who were too slow or tried to escape certain drowning; no more than 100 people made it to the other bank. Over the following days, several hundred more Chinese were murdered in a similar way. Although some rebuked the officials, there was no wider public condemnation of the massacre (Diatlov 2012; Glebov 2017; Stephan 1994, 71–75, 79).

The discourse of “yellow peril” in both the Russian and the international media also accompanied the Russo-Japanese War. At the same time, there was acceptance of and admiration for Japan's swift emergence as a modern state in the European media, whereas Russia was at times not considered a part of Europe. Although Japan was belittled in Russian propaganda, the war became

Saint Petersburg's largest foreign policy disaster since the Crimean War. The Viceroyalty of the Far East did not survive the conflict. Alekseev, who was in charge of all Russian forces when the war began, was released from his position in 1905. The war contributed to the First Russian Revolution and marked the beginning of the imperial crisis, ultimately leading to the empire's collapse. Although on May 1, 1904, duty-free trade was resumed because of the war, the war and the revolution increased the state presence in the region. The Maritime Region was declared under martial law in 1904, and the Amur Region followed in 1905. Yet the state's zone of influence still barely extended beyond the urban centers and the railway line (Dower n.d.; Gorchakov et al. 1999, 186; Millard 1906, 1–2; Steinberg et al. 2005; D. Wolff et al. 2007; L. Wolff 1994).

In 1905, the Priamur General Governorship was a settler colony and the main outpost of further Russian imperial expansion. Population distribution remained uneven, with the southern areas along the Trans-Siberian Railway and the border being most densely populated. The relative lack of state control across the region, especially in rural areas, coexisted with pockets of official presence in Vladivostok and other towns. Intergroup competition for resources made the region comparable to other multiethnic parts of the empire. The newcomer/native tensions in Transbaikalia were increasingly similar to those in Turkestan, while the Blagoveshchensk massacre demonstrated that the Chinese population was in an especially precarious situation similar to that of the Jews in the empire's Western borderlands.

Historiography and argument

Focusing on the intellectual background and the history of the FER, this book explores the development of left-liberal imperial nationalism in the Russian Empire and its appropriation by the Bolsheviks during the imperial transformation. Since it was a heterogeneous discourse and a set of policies rather than a readymade ideology, “left,” “liberal,” and “imperial” served as markers connecting diverse particularistic and overarching ideas which circulated in the imperial and post-imperial space and beyond. The “left” in the discourse united all those who were dissatisfied with the social and economic inequalities and viewed socialism (or a socially-oriented economic system in a broader sense) as the solution to the empire's problems. The “liberal” attracted the advocates of civil rights and the many vocal if not sincere supporters of a democratic political system (for many socialists, democracy was a medium for achieving socialism rather than an end goal). Finally, the “imperial” was used analytically to denote the inclusiveness of this heterogeneous discourse and the respective policies of diversity management, such as the distribution of special group rights and reconfiguration of the empire's hierarchies. It also referred to the loyalty to the Russian imperial state as a form of political organization and as the concrete polity, which had to be restructured but still defended from external actors – most notably Germany during World War I and later Japan and other participants of the Allied Intervention.

As Ilya Gerasimov has pointed out, the dissatisfaction with the condition of the imperial polity in the early twentieth century, namely with the distribution of special rights and political representation, among the empire's diverse interest groups contributed to what he called the Great Imperial Revolution of 1917 (Gerasimov 2017). The history of the Russian Far East between 1905 and 1922 helped explain not only how this revolution unfolded in the imperial periphery, but also how the Bolsheviks managed to hijack it and convince minorities and the lower social classes to support or at least to tolerate them. Furthermore, the entangled imperialisms in Asia-Pacific and the status of the Russian Far East as the outpost of Russian expansion allowed the Bolsheviks to extend the logic of the Imperial Revolution to the neighboring Chinese Republic and the Japanese Empire and prompted their attempts to include new diverse groups in what became the Soviet imperial project – global in its scope yet limited by the experience of the Russian imperial crisis. In this respect, the FER (and its 1918 predecessor called the Soviet Republic of the Far East) was part of the formal and informal Soviet empires, which were being assembled in 1918–1922 (see Figure I.2). The FER can be seen as a possible constituent of the formal Soviet empire – nominally, the federative Soviet Union – and as the first people's democracy, that is, a unit in the informal Soviet empire, similar to the nominally independent People's Soviet Republics of Khorezm and Bukhara (Buxoro) (Kimura and Ealey 2008, 36; Pipes 1997, 254–55), and a herald of the Soviet “new imperialism” in Asia-Pacific.⁹

There is neither a comprehensive history of the Russian Far East during the imperial crisis and transformation nor an academic history of the FER in English, even though almost every history of the Russian Civil War (1918–1923) and most histories of the Russian Revolution (1917) mentioned the republic.¹⁰ As stated above, the American educator and journalist Henry Kittredge Norton, who visited Chita in the spring of 1921, was among those who treated the formation of the FER as a manifestation of the free spirit of the Siberians, a new settler nation. In his *The Far Eastern Republic of Siberia*, Norton told the story of Siberia as a country which had descended from Russia but had its own peculiar traditions and interests (Norton 1923, 86). It rejected autocracy on the way to global civilization, and found its political form in the FER. This was the story which appealed to Siberian Regionalism and which Krasnoshchekov wanted Norton to tell. According to Krasnoshchekov, the American public and business, convinced of the new republic's democratic character and its distinction from Soviet Russia, were expected to facilitate the evacuation of the Japanese troops, which had been occupying parts of the region since 1918, and help break the diplomatic and trade isolation of the Bolshevik government in Moscow. Yet the FER was never recognized by any country other than Soviet Russia and was soon attacked by the anti-Bolshevik Provisional Priamur Government, which emerged after a coup in Vladivostok in May 1921. Furthermore, the creation of the FER did not lead to the Japanese evacuation from Northern Sakhalin. A direct conflict between Soviet Russia and Japan, however, was avoided, and on November 14–15, 1922, after the Japanese withdrew from the Russian mainland,

the Moscow government absorbed the FER into Soviet Russia, following an appeal from the Chita parliament.

Given that Krasnoshchekov had by then been recalled from the region, the initial Bolshevik plan for the FER – if the party had a coherent one in the first place – was not fully implemented. Furthermore, even the official history writing of the FER, which commenced in the republic itself, did not seem to feature a single opinion on what the republic was – a carefully organized Bolshevik hoax, Krasnoshchekov’s ill-thought attempt at regional autonomy, or a confluence of different discourses, policies, and historical contingencies.

The initiative to write a history of the FER belonged to the Bolshevik guerrilla commander Dmitrii Samoilovich Shilov, who aspired to collect relevant materials on the revolutionary period. Party bureaucracy, however, soon took over. In October 1922, Minei Izrailevich Gubel’man (Emel’ian Mikhailovich Iaroslavskii), one of the chief Bolshevik propagandists, headed the newly formed Far Eastern Historical Party Commission (Dal’istpart) in Chita (Shel’dshev 1995). Dal’istpart’s version of the FER’s history, supported by a three-volume collection of memoirs and documents, and Petr Semenovich Parfenov’s early monograph (which featured his own reminiscences as a Bolshevik functionary on site) were heavily influenced by the Bolshevik ideology yet presented a chaotic image of regional political conjunctures which did not imply the existence of any coherent Bolshevik blueprint for the republic. The narratives of the 1920s foregrounded the role of the FER’s toilers in defending the region against Japanese imperialism. In the 1930s, the emerging conflict with Japan triggered the publication of documents with a strongly anti-imperialist introduction by Isaak Izraelivich Mints. Even though the text quoted Vladimir Il’ich Lenin’s opinion on the need for the FER, it did not mention any specific makers of the republic, while it still was the agency of the regional proletariat and toilers which mattered the most (Dal’istpart 1923, 1924, 1925; Mints 1934, 11–13; Parfenov 1928).

Following the Great Purge of the 1930s, which ended the lives of Krasnoshchekov, Parfenov, and other Bolshevik leaders of the FER, Soviet historiography continued stressing the anti-imperialist aspects of the FER’s history, introducing *inter alia* a critique of “American aggression” in the Soviet Far East in the 1950s. Following the exoneration of Krasnoshchekov, Parfenov, and others in 1956, a new corpus of histories written in the 1950s and 1960s returned to the discussions of previously omitted Bolsheviks actors and the FER as a state formation. A new take on the official narrative, which occurred in the 1970s and can be seen in the differences between the first and second editions of the FER Prime Minister Petr Mikhailovich Nikiforov’s memoirs, reinforced the emphasis on the role of the party leadership and Lenin personally in the making of the FER. In the first edition of the book, Nikiforov mentioned that the policy of building a formally democratic government was “planned and implemented gropingly” by the Maritime Communists and was only later formulated by Lenin in detail. In the second edition, published posthumously, it was already Lenin who put forward the plan of creating a buffer state in the Far East (Nikiforov

1963, 176, 1974, 115; for a brief discussion of Soviet historiography, see Tsipkin and Ornatskaia 2008, 8–10).

The official interpretation, which foregrounded Lenin as the maker of the FER, had dominated Soviet historiography since the 1970s and affected contemporary Russian and international scholarship (Smele 2015, 221, 347–48). Since the 1990s, V. V. Sonin, Iu. N. Tsipkin, T. A. Ornatskaia, V. G. Kokoulin, as well as B. I. Mukhachev, M. I. Svetachev, and other authors of *History of the Russian Far East's* volume on the Revolution and the Civil War have made significant contributions to the reconstruction of the historical context and the main events pertaining to the making and unmaking of the FER. Yet they tended to support the late Soviet official interpretation of the FER and treated the republic as a brilliantly executed geopolitical fraud, a puppet “buffer state” which was designed in Moscow to keep the region for Russia and stressed the attention of the Bolsheviks to Russian national interests. Most of the late Soviet and much of the post-Soviet historiography implied the ability of the Bolshevik leadership to plan the “correct” course of action, which was in fact reconstructed retrospectively and backed by the Marxist-Leninist claim that the October Revolution of 1917 was inevitable (Kokoulin 2002, 118–19; Mukhachev 2003, 363–67; Sonin 1990, 4–6; Tsipkin and Ornatskaia 2008, 5–6; Tsipkin 2012, 240–41).

Despite the availability of Nikiforov’s memoirs (1963) and numerous documents which were accessible to Soviet scholars, Sonin dismissed the lack of Moscow’s control and the splits between different groups of Bolsheviks. He argued that in the first half of 1920, “V. I. Lenin and TseKa of the RCP(b) [the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)] drafted the new plan of constructing the buffer,” featuring its simultaneous formation from the two opposite sides of the Russian Far East – Vladivostok in the east and Verkhneudinsk in the west (Sonin 1990, 15). This claim, which first appeared in a 1974 textbook (Sonin and Isaeva 1974, 4, 7) and reproduced by a different author in a 1985 edited volume (Shchagin 1985, 22), was not supported by historical sources made available after the collapse of the Soviet Union either.

A. A. Azarenkov refuted such a view of the FER’s formation, demonstrating that there was almost no coordination between the Moscow leadership and Vladivostok Bolsheviks, and that no coherent project of the FER existed until August 1920 (2001a, 46–47). In this and a further monograph (2001b), Azarenkov reassessed the history of the formation and liquidation of the FER without taking the Bolshevik leadership and the party’s unity in the region for granted. He provided a balanced analysis of the FER’s making, bringing also non-Bolshevik actors into the discussion not as antagonists in the “inevitable” course of events but as co-makers of the republic which turned out to be a product of the political crisis and a compromise rather than a Bolshevik plan.

Indeed, historical sources proved that although Lenin did sanction the creation of the republic on Krasnoshchekov’s suggestions in 1920, the Moscow leadership was very ill-informed about the state of affairs there at least until the spring of 1922. The formation of the FER was a product of both Krasnoshchekov’s

regionalism and the result of direct clashes with the Japanese rather than a coherent plan designed in Moscow. Krasnoshchekov had a very specific vision of the region's future, which he first tried to implement in 1917–1918, and he carried out independent policies until the summer of 1921, even though he was in contact with the Soviet People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs Grigorii Vasil'evich Chicherin. His plan went far beyond the Japanese withdrawal and featured the creation of a Far Eastern polity, which would be affiliated with the Soviets yet autonomous in internal and foreign affairs, serving as a center for revolutionary activities in East Asia (Malysheva and Poznanskii 1996, 265, 337).

The Soviet Bolshevik-centered interpretation of the FER nevertheless made it into international studies as well (Debo 1992, 374–99; S. B. Smith 2011, 213–14). The obvious problem with such an interpretation lies not only in the fact that the FER did not function as planned, which was, for instance, demonstrated by Paul Dukes in relation to the FER's performance at the Washington Naval Conference (1921–1922) (2004, 93–99), but also in the theoretical gap in the history of the Russian Empire–Soviet Union transformation in 1905–1922, a major topic in today's Russian, East European, and Eurasian history marked by the “imperial turn” of the 1990s and a series of centenaries – World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the Russian Civil War. The decentralization aspect of the transformation is well researched in relation to minority nationalisms (Barkey and Von Hagen 1997; Burbank, Von Hagen, and Remnev 2007; Khalid 2015; Martin 2001; Steinwedel 2016; Suny 1993; for a comprehensive summary of the “imperial turn,” see Sunderland 2016), but the formation of the FER followed a different logic in which a region defined through its peculiar economic and ethnographic conditions rather than a national group was to be recognized as autonomous or independent. The formation of the FER and the broader revolutionary developments in the Russian Far East hence presented an alternative scenario in the history of the demise of the Russian Empire and the making of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the successful nationalist mobilization carried out by the Bolsheviks in the Russian Far East – that is the utilization of Russian majority nationalism in the building of the Soviet Union – made for a case of “psychological synthesis of communism and Russian nationalism” which Richard Pipes acknowledged in the preface to the 1997 edition of his famous monograph (1997, vii).

Although Far Eastern regionalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attracted some scholarly attention, it remained far less researched than Siberian Regionalism, from which it derived. With the exception of two edited collections which highlighted the issues pertaining to settlers (Breyfogle, Schrader, and Sunderland 2007; Kotkin and Wolff 1995) and Jon K. Chang's monograph on the Korean population (2016), previous works on the Russian Far East tended to foreground state rather than local actors or did not address Far Eastern regionalist projects in detail.

The first period of imperial transformation, between the revolutions of 1905–1907 and 1917, in the region and beyond also remained under-represented in the literature (Bassin 2006; Dameshek et al. 2007; A. V. Remnev 2004;

A. Remnev 2007; Stephan 1994; Von Hagen 2007). The second period of imperial transformation, between the February Revolution of 1917 and the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922, is better researched, with a growing number of nuanced regional studies exploring non-elite perspectives on social and political change (e.g., Badcock 2010; Badcock, Novikova, and Retish 2015; Holquist 2002; Penter 2000). Yet most works on the Civil War (e.g., Bisher 2005; Pereira 1996; Smele 1996) and the Allied Intervention in North Asia (e.g., Moffat 2015; for the most comprehensive history of Japanese involvement to date, see Hara 1989) either end with the events of 1920–1921 or do not include the Russian Far East in the discussion. The only exception here is Canfield F. Smith’s contribution (1975), a local history of Vladivostok, based on published sources.

The discourses of nationalism and regionalism contributed not only to the projects of independent or autonomous polities in the Russian Far East but also to the very making of the imperial and post-imperial region between 1905 and 1922. Yet, contrary to Stephan’s take on regional history, which traces the formation of a “coherent regional identity” to the administrative unification of the Priamur General Governorship in 1884 and the 1896 penetration to China triggering the divergence between imperial and regional interests (Stephan 1994, 2, 93–98), this book argues that it was not Far Eastern regionalism – the idea of a distinct regional political community implied by regional intellectual and business elites – but rather a regional version of Russian nationalism, which included the region in the larger Russian community, which served as the dominant collective action frame (Levinger and Lytle 2001).

Defining nationalism as a heterogeneous and ambivalent discourse, used for imagining, consolidating, and mobilizing heterogeneous populations (Anderson 1991; Brubaker 1998, 55), the book explores how political action was framed and how particular ideas provided for discursive closure (Deetz 1992, 187) of domestic and international debates about the future of the Russian Far East. In other words, the book aspires to demonstrate that although there was a discourse of regionalism, regional intellectuals and political actors used nationalism to eliminate, hijack, or abuse it while enforcing their vision of the region’s past, present, and future, its political and economic systems, and belonging.

Furthermore, after the Russo-Japanese War, Siberian Regionalism itself became especially deeply connected to defensive imperial nationalism. Potanin himself tied the very idea of autonomy for Siberia and especially the “Far East of Siberia” to the danger of Japan in 1908, for Siberia was “destined to play the role of a buffer between European Russia and Japan” and needed reform for self-defense and therefore the defense of European Russia (Potanin 2014, 116–17). In 1914, Elbek-Dorzhi Rinchino, a prominent spokesman for Siberian Regionalism and Buryat nationalism, claimed that Siberia could not survive without European Russia and vice versa – the former would be inevitably devoured by Japan or China, while the latter would be separated from the Pacific Ocean, which was vital for its future (Rinchino 1994, 32, 34).

Analysis of newspapers, proclamations, public speeches, parliamentary debates, and closed party discussions between 1905 and the middle of the 1920s

helped explain why it was nationalism and not regionalism which served as a political and discursive assemblage point (Gerasimov et al. 2014) for the region and the Soviet post-imperial polity. Nationalism not only allowed the mobilization of diverse elites and other social strata for the formation and dissolution of the FER but also proved determinative for regional consolidation. Furthermore, it was the common language of nationalism which allowed Soviet Russia to annex the FER without any international consequences rather than the success of the democratic hoax.

The imperial transformation in the Russian Far East can be positioned within the larger context of the global diffusion of nationalism and its rise to dominance in discussions of modernity in the twentieth century, as well as that of the tensions between the transnational circulation of capital, labor, and information and the sovereign state as a form of political organization and the principal medium of this circulation (Duara 1997, 1080; for the discussion of the circulation of forms, see Appadurai 2010). At the same time, the case of the Russian Far East highlighted the shifts in global imperialisms which accompanied the rise of nationalisms and then appropriated them for new forms of imperialism. In the global imperial crisis of the 1900s–1920s, two visions of the post-imperial world order proved especially challenging to conventional international relations. The liberal project advertised by Woodrow Wilson made the very formation of the FER acceptable for the global progressively-minded public, as it fostered the creation of new polities and their integration into transnational economic and political networks (Manela 2007). The global socialist project backed and elaborated by Lenin imagined a world of classes rather than nations but also stimulated anti-colonial nationalisms (Davis and Trani 2002). Despite the slogans of international egalitarianism, both projects brought about new dependencies in line with the new imperialism (Duara 2007). The three imperial formations which mastered it in the twentieth century – the USA, Japan, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) – came into contact in Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, the FER was easily one of the first “free nations” which Soviet Russia, Japan, and the USA intended to include into their informal empires through political and economic mechanisms in 1918–1922. Besides, in 1920, the FER was still being considered a channel for exporting the World Revolution to East Asia – a revolution which explicitly demanded subordination of the newly liberated Mongolian and Korean people to the Bolsheviks (Malysheva and Poznan-skii 1996, 174–78, 204–5, 208–12; Vada et al. 2007, 132–33) as the center of the new imperial formation in both formal (the Soviet Union) and informal (the Comintern) sense (Suny and Martin 2001).

The FER itself nevertheless proved radically different from Manchukuo or the Mongolian People’s Republic, the two illustrative examples of the new imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s, for there was no ethno-national category which any of the imperial contenders could build on.¹¹ This lack of a separate Far Eastern nation made the FER and other regional polities a peculiar case in the Soviet confederative and federative designs in 1918–1922. Among the eight republics which laid the foundation of the Soviet Union signing a protocol ahead

of the Genoa Conference (1922), the FER was among the three which had a regional rather than ethno-national name – with the People’s Soviet Republics of Khorezm and Bukhara being the other two – and the only one with a Russian majority. Furthermore, the FER was not a federation but rather a unitary state which its leaders openly called Russian despite the articulate Korean, Buryat-Mongol, Ukrainian, and other minority nationalist discourses. The FER was in this respect also different from the Autonomous Crimean Socialist Soviet Republic, which was founded in 1921 as a unit within the RSFSR. The Crimean polity also had a Russian majority yet it was created for the Crimean Tatar population in the first place (Marple and Duke 1995, 264–65).

The fragmentation of the Bolsheviks, coupled with the indecisiveness of their leadership in regional matters, as well as its reliance on local informants, challenges the interpretation of the FER as a unilateral policy instrument. Even though the FER played an important role in the relations between the Bolshevik leaders in Moscow and foreign governments, the former were not the ones who envisioned the republic and brought it to life, and they allowed their policy to be framed by regional Bolsheviks and external political actors – the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), Mensheviks, and liberals.

Continuing Liliana Riga’s discussion of the diversity among the Bolsheviks (2012), the study of the Russian Far East allowed for singling out further important divisions which contributed to inner splits and ambiguities in the party’s policies. Unlike the numerous returnees from Europe in the Moscow party leadership, the most influential groups in the region included both local (or formerly exiled) activists and, after the February Revolution, the remigrants from the USA. The shared exile experience with other socialists and the more moderate legacies of American politics made many Far Eastern Bolsheviks more inclined to compromise with their political opponents. The split into the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks did not happen until the fall of 1917; Krasnoshchekov continuously attempted to cooperate with the Mensheviks and the SRs in 1917–1921; Nikiforov was open to negotiations (albeit temporarily) with the Vladivostok business elite and White Guard officers in 1920.¹² With the tremendous mobility of the population during the Russian Civil War and the intentional policy of diluting regional groups with leaders coming from the center, the party elite in the Russian Far East consisted predominantly of newcomers by the end of 1922.

Most of the regional Bolsheviks, both before and after the infusion of new leaders, also did not fit into Terry Martin’s division into “internationalists” and “nation-builders” (2001, 2). As suggested elsewhere (Sablin 2016, 4), people like Shumiatskii, a native of Transbaikalia, who briefly headed the FER in the summer of 1920 and was the mastermind of the Comintern policies in Inner and East Asia in 1921, can be called a “transnationalist,” for whom nationalism was not just a way of restructuring the Russian Empire and ensuring minority submission to the Bolsheviks but also a tactical instrument which could be used arbitrarily. Not only did Shumiatskii simultaneously support Mongolian and reject Tuvan independence, favoring the inclusion of Tuva in a larger Mongolian