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Articles

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**RUSSO-CHINESE MYTHS AND THEIR IMPACT ON JAPANESE  
FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 1930s**

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The Far Eastern geopolitical environment of the 1930s was characterized by systemic Chinese instability from an interminable civil war, growing Soviet missionary activities to promote communism, and a collapse of Asian trade brought on by the Great Depression. While Western attention remained riveted on the more local problems of German compliance with the settlement terms of World War I and a depression that seemed to defy all conventional remedies, Japan focused with increasing horror on events in China. Japanese policymakers had great difficulty communicating to their Western counterparts their sense of urgency concerning the dangers presented by the unfolding events in Asia. Their task was greatly complicated by the many myths obscuring the true nature of Russo-Chinese relations. These myths then distorted foreign understanding of Sino-Japanese relations.

Russia is not usually considered in the context of the Far East. Both of its modern capitals – St. Petersburg and Moscow – are in Europe, its primary cultural ties are also with Europe, and yet much of its territory lies beyond the Ural Mountains in the Far East. While a general Western awareness of Russia's important role in Asia arose only during the Cold War, the Japanese awareness came much earlier, in the late nineteenth century, when Japan and Russia became engaged in a long struggle to dominate the northeastern Asian mainland.<sup>1</sup>

Russia's Far Eastern influence has been long-standing, continuous, and profound. The modern histories of China and Japan cannot be understood without an examination of Russian activities. Russia has been involved in all major Far Eastern wars from the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) onward. In that conflict it spearheaded the Triple Intervention in combination with Germany and France to alter the peace settlement in China's favor. Russia sent one of the largest contingents of troops to relieve the besieged foreign legations in Beijing during the Boxer Uprising (1900).<sup>2</sup> Russia was one of the two belligerents in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), which was fought almost exclusively on Chinese territory. During World War I, Russian infiltration of Outer Mon-

- 1 See the many books by George Alexander Lensen whose life's work was devoted to the study of Russo-Japanese relations. See also S.C.M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 2 Andrew Malozemoff, *Russian Far Eastern Policy 1881-1904: With Special Emphasis on the Causes of the Russo-Japanese War* (1958; reprint; New York: Octagon Books, 1977), pp. 124-126; Chester C. Tan, *The Boxer Catastrophe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 112; Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (London: Longman, 1985), pp. 71-72, 76.

golia speeded its detachment from the Chinese sphere of influence. In the Russian Civil War (1918-22), not only did the Japanese intervene, but it was in the Far East that the Bolsheviks defeated the armies of such key White Russian officers as Admiral Aleksandr Vasilievich Kolchak (1874-1920) and Lieutenant-General Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Sternberg (1886-1921).

Soviet Russia then completed the Tsarist task of drawing Outer Mongolia into the Russian sphere of influence. In the 1929 Sino-Soviet War, the Guomindang (國民黨, the Kuomintang or the Chinese Nationalist Party) failed to regain control over the Chinese Eastern Railway in Manchuria. In World War II, the Red Army finished off the Japanese Kwantung Army (關東軍, Kanto Army) in Manchuria (1945), took the southernmost Kurile Islands from Japan, and extended Soviet influence into North Korea. Thereafter, the Soviet Union became intimately involved in aiding both the North Koreans and the North Vietnamese in the Korean War (1950-53) and the Vietnam War (1954-75) respectively. Japanese proximity to the theaters of these conflicts gave them both a special interest in the outcomes and an acute awareness of the deep Russian involvement in them.

In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a growing communication gap between Japan and the West concerning the dangers presented by the increasing Soviet infiltration of China. This gap resulted, in part, from a whole web of myths concerning Russo-Chinese relations that distorted not only Western understandings of events in Asia, but also the Russian, Chinese, and Japanese understanding of them as well. These myths ranged from slight exaggerations to deliberate falsifications, which, through repetition, grew to become accepted truths regardless of the evidence to the contrary. These false beliefs became the prism through which Russians and Chinese viewed each other and through which others viewed them. They underlay assumptions concerning the nature of Russo-Chinese and Sino-Japanese relations, and predisposed certain policy choices. The myths ultimately hamstrung Japanese policymakers who proved incapable of breaking through them so that the Chinese public would recognize Japan's positive contributions to Chinese economic development and Westerners would recognize its role in containing Soviet expansion. When the Japanese Foreign Ministry's many attempts to do so by peaceful means failed, this exhausted the limited patience of the Japanese army stationed in Manchuria. It took the irrevocable step of invasion. Distortions of the historical record can have terrible consequences. The Japanese Foreign Ministry attempted to explain this situation to an incredulous international community: "Communism has already invaded China, and the alarming extent and success of the invasion is far too seldom realized. A communized China would constitute a problem for Europe and America beside which other questions would pale into insignificance."<sup>3</sup> The United States would not reach this conclusion until the onset of the Korean War in 1950.

3 外交史料館 [Diplomatic Record Office], 外務省 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan], A.1.1.0-21-35, vol. 2, statement of the Japanese government to the League of Nations, 26

This article focuses on the distortions. It will examine in turn five myths that distorted people's understanding, then and now, of Far Eastern relations in the 1930s. (1) The first is the myth concerning the discontinuity of Soviet and Tsarist foreign policy in the Far Asia. This article will show that the Soviet Far Eastern agenda constituted a direct continuation of the Tsarist agenda. (2) A second widespread myth still infecting current scholarship presents Russo-Chinese relations as more friendly than China's relations with the other powers. This was true neither in the Tsarist nor in the Soviet period although many Chinese citizens fervently believed the myth. (3) The third myth of Chinese victimization is really an exaggeration. The Chinese have long exaggerated their mistreatment by the great powers. They have ignored entirely their own victimization of others and have made short shrift of the responsibility borne by their countrymen for China's tragic modern history. (4) The fourth myth concerns borders. According to the Chinese variant of this myth, much of the vast Russo-Chinese frontier area was Chinese until the Russian stole it. In the Russian variant of the myth, their countrymen simply stumbled into a no-man's land and did what was natural: they took it. In reality, Russia and China have long dominated the native peoples populating their frontier. The native peoples, for their part, have done their best to grasp at any opportunity to rid themselves of both Russian and Chinese colonialism. (5) The fifth myth, like the third myth, is an exaggeration. Chinese and Russians have presented the Japanese involvement in China as exclusively negative. The Chinese, in particular, have focused on the Japanese invasion and the accompanying atrocities. However, there is another equally important side to the Japanese involvement in China. It was the attempt, however misguided or heavy-handed, at nation building, a process with the constructive goal of creating a modern infrastructure in China and the modern institutions to run it.

This article will attempt to disabuse the myths and also to discuss some of their consequences.

#### THE MYTH OF THE SOVIET AND TSARIST RUSSIAN DISCONTINUITY

Immediately upon taking power, the Bolsheviks emphasized the discontinuity between Soviet and Imperial Russian foreign policy:<sup>4</sup> Whereas Tsarist Russia had been imperialistic, expansionistic, and inherently evil, Soviet Russia embodied the hopes of the downtrodden and the promise of a just society, not only for Russia but for working men and women everywhere. The Russian

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February 1932, p. 238. See also 防衛研究所図書館 [National Institute for Defense Studies], 史料閲覧室 [Archives], 満州：満州事変40関東軍司令官カ連盟調査委員トノ最後会见ニテ説明セラレタル事項、関東軍参謀部 [Matters concerning explanations made by the Kwantung Army to the Lytton Commission during the final meeting], Top Secret, 2 June 1932.

4 See for instance, *Ефимов Г. В., Дубинский А. М.* Международные отношения Дальнем Востоке. Т. 2. М., 1973. С. 61-64ъ *Жуков Е. М. (ред.)* Международные отношения на Дальнем Востоке (1870-1945 гг.). М., 1951. С. 365.

Revolution and ensuing Russian Civil War had been so brutal and the communist victory so complete that many outsiders assumed that Soviet foreign policy did indeed constitute a sharp break with Tsarist foreign policy,<sup>5</sup> which had been characterized by a continuous push for territorial expansion.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the Bolsheviks remained faithful to the Tsarist agenda in Asia.<sup>7</sup> The goal remained the maximization of Russian political influence. The means remained insulating Russia's extended frontiers by creating weak buffer states ever deeper into the traditional Chinese sphere of interest. The Soviet Union retained control over the extensive Tsarist railway concessions, which cut through the heart of Manchuria, from Lake Baikal straight to Vladivostok via Harbin. Although the Soviet Union sold these concessions to the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in 1935, it recovered most of them upon Japan's defeat in World War II. Despite consistent Chinese demands for their return, the Soviet Union retained them until after Stalin's death and the end of the Korean War (both in 1953); in other words, the Soviet Union retained the Tsarist concessions until several years after the communists came to power in China. These concessions were not trivial; they were the most extensive of any imperial power in China ever.<sup>8</sup>

Even at the very beginning of the Soviet period, the Bolsheviks faithfully pursued the Tsarist agenda in Asia. Only while the Russian Civil War raged in Siberia did they make conciliatory overtures: In 1919 in the original version of the Karakhan Declaration, they offered to annul all unequal treaties and immediately to return without compensation the Chinese Eastern Railway.<sup>9</sup> Just a year later in 1920, Soviet diplomats denied ever having made the original offer and issued a revised version of the declaration.<sup>10</sup>

5 See for instance: Morris Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia: From 1368 to the Present* (New York: Pica Press, 1975), pp. 253-254; O. Edmund Clubb, *China and Russia: The "Great Game"* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 210; Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, 4th ed. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 515; Jean Chesneaux, Françoise Le Barbier, and Marie-Claire Bergère, *China from the 1911 Revolution to Liberation*, trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977), p. 124; Anatole G. Mazour, *Russia: Tsarist and Communist* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1962), p. 651; John W. Garver, *Chinese-Soviet Relations 1937-1945: The Diplomacy of Chinese Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 8.

6 John P. LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire: 1650-1831* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), passim; John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700-1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), passim.

7 Bruce A. Elleman, *Diplomacy and Deception: The Secret History of Sino-Soviet Diplomatic Relations, 1917-1927* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), passim.

8 S.C.M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and Their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 187; Hsu, *Rise of Modern China*, pp. 466-468, 567; Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 67, 95, 119.

9 "Declaration of 1919," in H.G.W. Woodhead, ed., *China Year Book 1924-5* (Tientsin: Simplin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1926), pp. 868-869.

10 "Declaration of 1920," in *China Year Book 1924-5*, pp. 871-872; Bruce A. Elleman, "The Soviet

In 1921, the Bolsheviks completed the long process of detaching Outer Mongolia from the Chinese sphere of influence. During the Russian Civil War, the Red Army pursued White Russian troops into Outer Mongolia. After the end of the civil war Red Army troops remained, precluding a Chinese reoccupation. These Bolshevik troop deployments made possible the establishment of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1921, despite Chinese insistence that Outer Mongolia remained an integral part of China.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the late-Tsarist de facto annexation of Tannu Tuva (Uriankhai), formerly the northwestern part of Outer Mongolia, was made de jure by Stalin in 1944 and public only in 1946.<sup>12</sup> The territory involved was not trivial - 65,000 square miles or approximately the size of Great Britain.<sup>13</sup>

Like the Tsarist government, the Soviet government vied with Japan for dominance over a greater share of the Asian mainland. This entailed funding a kaleidoscope of competing factions including the frontier warlords: Sheng Shicai (盛世才) in Xinjiang, who hoped to keep Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek, 蔣介石) at bay;<sup>14</sup> Feng Yuxiang (馮玉祥) in north China, who also hoped to maintain independence from Jiang,<sup>15</sup> and such political parties as Jiang Jieshi's Guomindang and its arch-rival, the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>16</sup> Soviet universities

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Union's Secret Diplomacy Concerning the Chinese Eastern Railway, 1924-1925," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52:2 (May 1994), pp. 459-486; Allen S. Whiting, "The Soviet Offer to China of 1919," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 10:4 (August 1951), pp. 355-364.

11 Paine, *Imperial Rivals*, pp. 287-332.

12 Peter S.H. T'ang, *Russian and Soviet Policy in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia 1911-1930* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1959), pp. 399-400, 417, 428; David J. Dallin, *Soviet Russia and the Far East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 82-91.

13 Tsien-hua Tsui, *The Sino-Soviet Dispute in the 1970s* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1983), p. 29; T'ang, *Russian and Soviet Policy*, p.428; Alastair Lamb, *Asian Frontiers: Studies in a Continuing Problem* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 202. Tsui gives the figure of 65,000 sq. mi. while Lamb provides the figure of 80,000 sq. mil. Either way the amount of territory is considerable.

14 Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg, *China's Last Nomads: The History and Culture of China's Kazaks* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 65-78; Linda Benson, *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944-1949* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), pp. 7, 27-28, 36, 39; Andrew D.W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1911-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 144-148, 166, 232; A. Doak Barnett, *China on the Eve of the Communist Takeover* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), p. 247.

15 J.E. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-Hsiang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

16 Richard C. Thornton, *China: A Political History, 1917-1980* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1973), pp. 50-58, 206-207; C. Martin Wilbur and Julie Lien-ying How, *Documents on Communism, Nationalism, and Soviet Advisers in China 1918-1927* (1956; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1972); Tony Saich, *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. xxxix-lxiv; Steven I. Levine, *Anvil of Victory: The Communist Revolution in Manchuria, 1945-1948* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 31-36, 96, 128, 237-241.

educated the top leadership of both the Guomindang and the Communist Party.<sup>17</sup> Tsarist and Soviet Russia were pursuing the typical strategy of a large continental empire, whose border defense required weak and pliable neighbors. In China during the 1920s and 1930s, this entailed funding all sides in the raging multilateral civil war in the hopes of preventing a strong united China from emerging along the vulnerable Siberian frontier.

Despite all outraged claims to the contrary, both China and Russia in the twentieth century remained vast continental empires whose frontier areas were glued to the empire, not by affinity but by force. This helps explain the rapid collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991. When effective military force no longer could be projected from the center, influence over the periphery evaporated and local populations stampeded toward independence. In China, control over Tibet and Xinjiang remains, but at a price of military occupation challenged by intermittent rebellion.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many Western policymakers were only vaguely aware of the events unfolding in Asia. Beyond various diplomats stationed in China, most Western policymakers were not overly concerned about the spreading Soviet influence there. It seemed hard to believe in the 1920s that the war-torn Soviet Russia could be in any position to realize an imperial agenda in the Far East. Moreover, its propaganda was so thoroughly anti-imperial. Events had yet to put a lie to the propaganda. The key issue for many Western governments vis-à-vis Soviet Russia was its renunciation of all Tsarist debts. The containment of German revanchism was an even greater concern. Then the Great Depression trumped all. Western concerns remained fixated on the West.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry and military, in contrast to much of the West, immediately understood the basic continuity of Tsarist and Soviet objectives in China. They considered the fusion of imperial Russian territorial expansion with Soviet ideological expansion to be a particularly dangerous mix.<sup>18</sup> Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke (松岡洋右) warned the League of Nations that the Soviet Union was intent upon "revolutionizing the world" and "Sovietizing China, taking advantage of the chaos prevailing in that country." If Japan withdrew from Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, he argued that "Russia would instantly step in, invading these regions as far as South Manchuria" a region key to Japanese national security.<sup>19</sup> Although the Japanese Foreign Ministry and military rejected the myth of Soviet and Tsarist discontinuity, the Foreign Ministry was unable effectively to communicate these concerns to Western governments, which, from the Japanese point of view, seemed foolishly oblivious

17 Miinling Yu, "Sun Yat-sen University in Moscow, 1925-1930," Ph.D. diss, New York University, 1995.

18 Alvin D. Coox, "The Kwantung Army Dimension," in Peter Duus et al., eds., *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895-1937* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 407-408, 421-424.

19 外交史料館, 外務省, A.1.1.0-21-12-2, vol. 2, "Mr. Matsuoka's Conversations with the Members of the League Commission," 24 March 1932, pp. 124-125; 131.