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Mark Bassin. *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865.* New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xvi + 329 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-39174-0.

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River of Dreams: Fleeting Visions of a Siberian Mississippi

Mark Bassin's *Imperial Visions* is a work that will be appreciated by specialists in a wide array of disciplines. This is a masterful, groundbreaking book that combines intellectual history and geography in a way that has not been done before, shining a new light on the issues of Russian identity and the interrelationship between exploration, conquest and nationalism.

At the center of Bassin's work is the region around the Amur River. The Amur, closed to the Russians since the late seventeenth century, attracted intense interest in Russia throughout the later part of Nicholas I's regime, but especially in the aftermath of the country's defeat in the Crimean War. Wild, unsubstantiated exaggerations fueled this "Amur euphoria." The conquest and settlement of the Amur came to be seen as a national imperative, compensation for humiliation elsewhere. Amidst this frenzy, eager promoters who had never set their eyes on the Amur tagged the river as the "Siberian Mississippi," hoping that it would do for Siberia – and indeed for Russia as a whole – what the Mississippi did for the United States. They attached great hopes to this river. The waters of the Amur were to cleanse Russia's wounds, and redeem her in her newly-asserted eastern destiny. Yet the euphoria proved fleeting. Not long after the Russians reconquered the Amur, the realities confounded the hopes.

Although the Amur region is at the center of Bassin's book, its real subject, as the title indicates, are the "visions" of that object-region. These visions are the reflections of the visionaries, and become in certain ways "self-portraits" (p. 274), to use the author's own apt metaphor that indicates a methodological affinity to other recent works, most notably Yuri Slezkine's *Arctic Mirrors.* [1] Whether as "mirrors" or as "self-portraits," these visions reveal far more about the visionaries than the envisioned. The "Amur euphoria" of the 1850s reflected the desperate desire of the Russian visionaries, in the wake of the Crimean War debacle, to both turn away from a Europe that "spurned" them and wounded their national pride and, at the same time, reaffirm their own Europeanness as effective "civilizers" of the east. These are complicated, sometimes conflicting visions of an "imagined" region, but Bassin skillfully steers us through them one at a time with the exuberance of a Huck Finn sailing on his raft down the Mississippi. In the process, he produces a work that will be indispensable for anyone grappling with the issues of Russia's imperial visions.

The book is divided into two roughly equal parts: Part I deals with the building expectations surrounding the Amur before the Russians reconquered it. The bulk of this part examines the lure of the Amur in the context of the growing nationalist-reformist dissatisfaction with the stifling ultra-conservative Official Nationality policies of Nicholas I's regime. Part II begins with the initiation of an era of new possibilities for action in the Far East after Alexander II ascended the throne, and Russians were finally given a chance to test their visions of the Amur. Each part has four chapters. The first two chapters of the book provide the setting for the story that is about to unfold. The first chapter traces Russia's early involvement and interest in the Amur region. The second ("National Identity and World Mission") analyzes the relationship between emerging Russian nationalism and changing attitudes toward the East. This chapter effectively articulates the development of a peculiarly Russian version of Manifest Destiny.

Chapter Three ("The Rediscovery of the Amur") traces the growing popularity of the visions of the Amur from the 1830s to the early 1850s. The next chapter ("The Push to the Pacific") documents the activity of Count Nikolai Murav'ev-Amurskii, governor-general of Eastern Siberia from 1847 to 1861, and his supporters in promoting the Russian annexation of the Amur. Chapter Five ("Dreams of a Siberian Mississippi") opens up Part II of

the book with the most inflated visions at the height of the "Amur euphoria." Chapter Six ("Civilizing a Savage Realm") documents the Russian visions of the Amur's indigenous peoples and the various settlement projects intended to colonize the region. Bassin emphasizes especially how Russians sought to see themselves as civilizers and enlighteners of this new land. The urgency underlying this vision of civilizing activity highlighted their desperate desire to be seen as "civilized" by the rest of Europe.

The final two chapters tell the story of the waning of the "Amur euphoria." The title of chapter seven ("Poised on the Manchurian Frontier") indicates that the Amur was no longer seen as an end in itself. "The Amur and Its Discontents," the last chapter, documents the final shattering of the image of the Amur. Dmitrii Zavalishin, an old nemesis of Murav'ev-Amurskii, played a role in deflating the Amur myth with his exposes in *Morskoi Sbornik* (p. 236). One gets the feeling, however, that the "Amur euphoria" was destined to be short-lived, regardless of Zavalishin's involvement. The inflated hopes of the Russian visionaries were simply unsustainable. Changing circumstances demanded new visions.

The scope of Bassin's work is impressive. This book offers far more than what the author refers to as "an excavation of a geographical vision" (p. 274). The intricate interplay between geography, nationalism, messianism and the frontier highlight the author's unique training (in both geography and history) and talent for synthesis. With this innovative and complex treatment of a geographical vision as a cultural construct, Bassin opens up a new theoretical landscape.[2] Scholars who work on regions and borderlands far beyond the Russian Far East will benefit from a close reading of *Imperial Visions*.

The book is superbly organized and executed, but it is not without problems. To begin with, the text unfortunately contains numerous minor and easily correctable but nonetheless persistent typographical errors. Also, Fort Ross was founded not in 1821, as stated on page 25, but in 1812. Only one of the two inspectors dispatched from St. Petersburg to the North Pacific in 1860 (and not in 1861) was from the Naval Ministry; the second one was from the Ministry of Finance (p. 207).

In several places in the text, Bassin indicates that the existence of Russian-Chinese trade at the Siberian outpost of Kiakhta made the Russians largely unconcerned about access to China's oceanic ports, at least until the conclusion of the Opium Wars in the 1840s (pp. 32-33, 103-104, 229). This is not entirely true. Despite the Kiakhta trade, the Russians had a long-standing interest in gaining direct access to China's ports at least since the 1770s. James Cook's voyage from North America's Northwest Coast to Canton, and the subsequent mutiny that nearly broke out when his sailors demanded to turn the ship back to the American shore upon finding out how highly the Chinese valued the fur of the sea otter, opened the eyes of British and American merchants to the huge profits to be made in this trade.

Much to the dismay of the Russian traders who had to transport the sea otter furs from Alaska to Okhotsk, and then lug them overland halfway across Siberia to Kiakhta at great expense, British and American merchants made fabulous profits, beginning in 1785, by shipping the furs directly to Canton.[3] This British and American activity was a major irritant not only to Russia's merchants, but also to the state treasury. Ivan Kruzenshtern, who captained Russia's first round-the-world voyage in 1803-1806, was but the most prominent of several Russians who actively sought the opening of China's ports to Russian trading ships.[4] He made a point to stop at Canton to plead his case. Directors of the Russian-American Company, which was devised in 1799 largely to counter the Americans and the British, consistently dreamed about the profits they envisioned if Russia should succeed in gaining access to China's ports. The Chinese remained firm in their resolve to refuse the Russians that maritime access, but it was not because the Russians did not seek it. >From 1825 on, the timidity of the foreign policy of Nicholas I, which Bassin notes prominently in this book, also frustrated the hopes of those Russians who sought the opening of Chinese ports.

These are trifling criticisms. Bassin's "history of a geographical vision" which sheds light both on "the fate of a region and on the society which envisioned it" (p. 15) gives us a novel approach to examine Russia's borderlands. "Visualizing the Far East requires a tolerance for ambiguity," wrote another scholar researching the same region. [5] Bassin's book meets this challenge and will no doubt re-orient other scholars to produce yet other visions of other regions.

Notes

[1]. Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[2] A different approach, but one that is in many ways complementary to Bassin's is embodied in Nathaniel Knight's recent work on the contemporaneous origins of Russian ethnography and the formation of the Russian Geographical Society. See Nathaniel Knight, Science, Empire and Nationality: Ethnography in the Rus-

sian Geographical Society, 1845-1955," in Jane Burbank and David L. Ransel, eds. *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 108-141.

[3]. James R. Gibson, *Imperial Russia in Frontier America: The Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America, 1784-1867* (New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 9.

[4]. A. J. Krusenstern, *Voyage round the world, in the years 1803, 1804, 1805, & 1806...* (London: C. Roworth for J. Murray, 1813), vol. I, pp. xx-xxix.

[5]. John J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 4.

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