The Chimera of Russian Society in Manchuria

The study of the Russian presence in Manchuria is a complex endeavour. It requires the charting of an often infuriatingly opaque history, an understanding of tortuously-fashioned political equations, a feel for the pathos of a culture-in-exile and, in important respects, a sense of perspective on the economic facets of the question. Was the Russian push into Manchuria in the late nineteenth century the result of politically more benign motives on the part of the Russian court, or the spearhead of a cruder Russian imperialism? Did the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern Railways that were constructed in that period represent a 'bridge of steel' drawing together a European Russia, its underdeveloped Eastern Siberian and Far Eastern regions with the markets of East Asia, or were these the shaft of that spear of imperialism? And what was the part played in this extraordinary adventure by Harbin, a quintessentially Russian city springing up like a mushroom in the relatively desolate heart of Manchuria?

A few scholars who have written in English stand out in this area of study. Andrew Malozemoff and his teacher George A. Lensen, John J. Stephan, Peter S.H. Tang and Rosemary K.I. Quested. As Wolff (whose book draws quite heavily on their scholarship) modestly indicates in his generally quite useful book on the subject, he "...aim[s] to complement the North Manchurian aspects of Quested’s work by making use of newly released documents from Russian and mainland Chinese archives, both central and local" (p.197). This he does in some ways, but as his only research visit to China for the book appears to have been in 1989 (presumably for his doctoral research), and the work itself was published a decade later, one might ask how "newly released" are the Chinese documents? Moreover, the foreword to the book (by Professor Nicholas Riasanovsky, himself a Kharbinnets [Harbinnite]) indicates that the author’s task was aided by his polyglot scholarship, employing as he does Russian, Chinese and Japanese archival material. Yet it must be said that it is not at all clear from the images fashioned in the text itself, or from his referencing, how much the Chinese- and Japanese-language sources actually contributed to Wolff’s work..

The book is divided, as the author handily points out, into five chapters and an appendix. The first deals with the construction of the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern Railways, and how this "altered Russia’s image abroad" (p.9). The second chapter examines the inter-ministerial rivalry surrounding the development of the city of Harbin. Chapter Three looks at the results of this inter-ministerial rivalry, which the author suggests gave rise to “trailblazing policies” that made Harbin “the freest city in the Russian Empire”, and uses census data to examine the resulting make-up of the city’s population (pp.10-11). Chapter Four analyses Harbin’s development during the Russo-Japanese War and the 1905 Revolution. The last chapter moves to a discussion of the place of young “orientologists” (Wolff, influenced by Edward Said’s work, refuses to use the term “orientalist” because
of the negative ideological connotations of that word, and yet confusingly writes "vostokoved=orientalist" on p.156) graduating from Vladivostok’s Eastern Institute, and their contribution to the "specialness" of Harbin. Finally, there is a short appendix which examines the "prehistory" of the Eastern Institute. Despite the fact that the title of the book indicates 1914 as the cut-off date for the study, only Chapter Three contains any sustained reference to the post 1905 period, and even here, it would appear, largely to accommodate census data that runs beyond the Revolution of 1905.

These early qualifications aside, Wolff does provide us with a vivid, and novel, depiction of the nascence of Harbin. He also offers an intriguing glimpse into the court and inter-ministerial politics that surrounded the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway and formed the uncertain foundations for a "Russian Harbin". The infighting between the ministries, a frequently recurring theme, is an important dimension of the study (indeed, in many ways its main thesis), often, however, appearing as a depiction of the triangular relationship between ministers and the tsar (as for example on pp.50-58). Similarly, discussions of Russian colonization policies (pp.86-100), Yellow Russia versus Yellow Peril (pp.43-44) and the excursus on the cost-effectiveness of Chinese labour versus its Russian counterpart are all enlightening.

The value of these individual components is nonetheless marred by the book’s awkwardly fashioned structure. The inclusion of the last chapter and appendix, which hang by little more than the proverbial whisker from the central themes of the book, offers little illumination regarding the "specialness" of Harbin, as promised by Wolff at the start of the book (p.12). These appear to have been based on valuable material unearthed by the author, but which probably would have been better suited to appear as scholarly articles in their own right rather than being attached to a formal history of early Harbin. The author also appears to find difficulty in deciding whether the book should be chronological or thematic in its form. This often leads to an unfortunate looseness in the structure of the historical narrative. Discussion of Harbin’s "birthday" appears, for example, after that of its "adolescence" (p.27).

There are also lapses and gaps which are quite surprising for a study that represents itself so strongly as being comprehensive in its scope, and thorough in its method. "Manchuria" is depicted as Russia’s only colony (p.9); a point difficult to support either in spirit or in fact. The leasehold of a relatively narrow strip of land along which a railway runs, together with some larger areas where a few station-settlements, villages and towns are built up hardly constitutes the entire sphere of the Three Northeastern Provinces, which remain Chinese territory until such time as the puppet state of Manchukuo is established in 1932. This appears to be less an oversight than a potentially serious misconceptualization. Earlier, the author refers to "...Russian Manchuria’s central commonality ..."). (p.3), which, aside from the painful expression, appears to blur the distinction between the control of a narrow corridor of railway land with Manchuria as a whole. Indeed, unless the reviewer has missed the reference to it, there is no mention of the railway itself being in the Russian sphere of influence for only a limited period (the Sino-Russian agreement on the building of the railway specifying that the latter would revert to China after 99 years).

Wolff’s book is playfully named, clearly deriving some inspiration from Edmund Wilson’s classic To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History. This is, however, in some respects a most unfortunate allusion. Wilson’s work takes us on an epic journey through the development of socialism and its culmination in Lenin’s arrival at the Finland Station in Petrograd (now St Petersburg). It traces the European roots of Bolshevism, providing the latter with intellectual pedigree and, through Wilson’s great skills as a writer, a degree of drama and perhaps even inspiration. Wolff’s nod to Wilson for his own study of the “liberal alternative” that he sees emerging in “Russian” Manchuria perfecor ends up as a description of something of a fete on a provincial Russian railway siding by comparison. This comment is not intended to slight the author’s scholarship, but to warn of the potential hazards of reading too much into the historical and political portents of the “interlude” that was Russian Harbin.

A professor of Russian literature at the University of Oxford once told me that he had an instinct that some of the finer examples of modern poetry in the Russian language came from Russians in Harbin, although, he added, he had not been able to find firm evidence to justify this feeling. Aspiration to find something transcendent in the allure and exotic nature of Harbin was probably as much responsible as cool observation in his case. In my own research, I, like him, have been unable to demonstrate the existence of that treasure trove of letters there, having been exposed more often than not to syrupy-sweet, naïve literary excursions, fashioned by a culture-in-exile looking wistfully at a lost world. The output is often charming, quirky and elegant in its use of the Russian language,
but rarely if ever the stuff of lasting greatness.

Wolff himself hints at this when in Footnote 35 he observes that his "... researches were simplified by the paucity of secondary literature on pre-1917 Harbin" (p.196), while in Footnote 34 he states that "...there is no overall analytical work on post-1917 Harbin" (p.196). If, as Wolff’s study tantalisingly suggests (but never convincingly demonstrates), “Russian Manchuria” was the representation of a different Russia, why has this not found its way to us? In part, I would argue, because it wasn’t markedly different. Where the Russians built urban centres in Manchuria, they were Russian centres; where they founded villages they were Russian villages. These centres remained true to "old Russia" throughout their existence, as did the diaspora from Manchuria after it resettled in the Americas, Australia and, to a lesser extent, Europe. They drew from the core (European) Russian culture, and single-mindedly preserved the purity of the (European) Russian language of the pre-revolutionary period.

Wolff, using another work that he has jointly edited [1], indicates that Harbin may be instructive in the study of Hong Kong, and vice versa. From someone who has studied both, and at some depth [2], it is difficult to see how a link between the two cities could be justified, aside from a certain loose coincidence of dates, 1997 being the year Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty and 1998 "... the hundredth anniversary of Russian involvement at Harbin..." (p.4). Hong Kong was, and remains, ethnically a Chinese city, while Wolff stresses that his purpose is not to write a monograph about “Chinese Harbin” (see below). The novelty of the Hong Kong’s history is that it is predominantly Chinese city and culture mutated and developed under British colonialism for some one hundred and fifty years, and will continue to do so under mainland Chinese authority (but in a way that is quite different to mainland China itself). The Russians styled and built a portion of Harbin in Russia’s own image, and, in effect, held sway there for just over half a century. Their part in the shaping of modern “Haerbin”, aside from the curiosity of the architecture and a few wizened Russian faces still present there (see photograph on p.145), is quite patent not a great one.

What Wolff may be implying by invoking the notion of a "liberal alternative" in the context of Harbin (and implicitly Hong Kong too), of course, is that it constituted something of a ‘melting pot’, in which nationalities and creeds lived together in relative harmony. This may be the case, but the analysis required to fathom the implications of such a manifestation has to be both deeper and more subtle than that present in Wolff’s book. While the Russian Kharbintsy (Harbinnites) may have lived comfortably and peacefully with Poles, Jews and Chinese, this cohabitation was based on a profound sense of ethnocentrism.

The difference between a former British Hong Kong and a former Russian Harbin is that a great number of Western influences have become infused into Hong Kong’s character, creating a distinctive culture that is neither entirely Chinese nor Western. By contrast, very little of the Russian world-view seems to have become ingrained in Harbin after the departure of the Russians, and very little of China appears to have found its way into the outlook of the Harbinnites themselves. The answer here may lie in nothing more remarkable than the notion of “insularity”. Wolff himself, although perhaps not entirely consciously, brushes past this important point when he writes in his introduction that Chinese Harupin "... is a very different place ... [and] deserves its own archive-based monograph" (p.8), and in a note observes the same thing of Japanese Harupin (Endnote 32, p.196).

These stories of Harbin, instead of being interlaced, are, frustratingly, often parallel histories. This point can be expanded further: Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Greeks, Turks, Armenians and members of other minorities also figured in Harbin’s history, and, as the author points out with the first two categories particularly, these people were allowed freedoms which they might not have enjoyed in Russia itself. But the freedoms came at a considerable cost: most of these people became part of the Russian story of Harbin; a fact that is clear if one meets members of these groups even today. Despite the existence of clubs and societies that gave these people a surface national/ethnic identity, the melting pot that was Harbin was a Russian cast iron one. The reviewer has met and interviewed many Kharbintsy in the course of his own work on Manchuria. Whether these be Russified Turks, Poles, Greeks or even Chinese, their stories and images of the society they lived in are remarkably uniform, quintessentially Russian ones. What makes the telling of the Harbin story so fiendishly difficult, therefore, is not so much the absence of materials, but how to find a common thread other than a Russian one. To borrow from Fernand Braudel’s description of the interaction between the French and other nations: ‘Il y a un melange, non pas fusion’ (there may be some intermingling but there is no fusion) [2].

In other words, the pressure is there with Russian
Harbin to simplify its history, and there is a temptation present to idealise the image of its Russians, and their achievements. Granted, the building of the physical edifice of Harbin, together with the successes of Russian railway construction in Manchuria, were considerable. But what of the cultural “edifice” that Wolff and others have implicitly or explicitly marvelled at? In fact, a more appropriate depiction here may be a far less attractive one. Liberal-minded intellectuals such as I. I. Serebrennikov, who arrived in Harbin as political refugees not very long after Wolff’s story formally ends, found an environment which was often not to their taste at all [4]. They saw a narrow-minded, rumour-ridden unhealthy city, and couldn’t wait to move on to less oppressive social environments in other Russian colonies such as that at Beijing. In part, this might have been the result of human flotsam and jetsam present in Harbin, swept there by the storm of revolution in Russia. But a city’s character is not formed in three years, and for the most part reflection such as Serebrennikov’s is addressing the Harbin’s origins as much as it is the less seemly elements blown in by revolutionary upheaval.

A number of lesser scholars in the English and Russian languages have gone a long way in making a myth out of Harbin; representing it as anything from fairy-tale gorodok (small town) of Russianness, to a Paris of the East that held all the mysteries and charm of a centre of cosmopolitanism. Commentary such as Serebrennikov’s tends to undermine the former, while the social and economic environment of Shanghai makes Harbin appear quite parochial by comparison (and in any event, there are far too many Parises of the East in Asian history!).

Harbin’s other-worldliness and eccentricities had, of course, their own quirky, tragi-comic features; characteristics drawn out in splendid measure by an historian such as John J. Stephan in his work.[5] Unfortunately, Wolff’s book is a shade too earnest to achieve that measure of healthy skepticism, appearing to take instead the idealisation as his starting point (“At the beginning of the journey was the idea, and the idea came from Andy Wachtel, himself the grandson of Kharbinitsy” [p.vii]), and, as suggested earlier, possibly too grand a place for it in Russia’s history: “As our story begins, Harbin teeters at the brink of Russian history” (p.13). And, as the last quotation suggests, a touch too melodramatic to equal the cool, detached analysis and narrative of an historian such as Rosemary Quested, whose work, wisely, shies away from making sweeping generalisations about Harbin’s significance in the broader scheme of things.

What is missing from Wolff’s work too is the pathos of Harbin. Created as a Russian commercial nerve-centre in the heart of Manchuria, early in its existence it had already become something of a Russian outpost after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 made the South Manchurian Railway and Dairen Japanese-funded competitors to it and the Chinese Eastern Railway. The city was chronically short of necessary finances and support to make it a powerful economic centre in the region and, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, it became a pawn in an ideological struggle which would further incapacitate it. Wolff’s study, despite its readiness to dip into periods after 1914 for historical and political insights, largely side-steps this important question. The inter-ministerial rivalry over the control of Russia’s outpost is one facet. Another is the fact that, aside from the limited economic boom periods that Wolff sketches, “Russian Harbin” was economically vulnerable for much of its troubled existence, through a combination of the absence of central Russian support, and, to a degree, the commercial ineptitude on the part of the Kharbinnites themselves.[6]

Stylistically, the study is peppered with infelicities and the occasional inelegance of prose. Use of such expressions such as “railroading boom” (p.30), “lipside” (rather than “reverse side”, on p.44), or “sharpest political infighter”, “his ability to win out over …” (p.61), “anti-regime liberalism” (p.139), and the odd “betes noires” grates, while those of “Glasnost also delivered to me the great naval fortress of Vladivostok” (p. viii) simply crash and clatter as they fall. Suspect translation too frequently crops up in the book. An opening quotation from Nesmelov (on p.14) is translated with quite remarkable license. Equally, the translation of “shchastlivaiia Khorvatia” (p.139) as “Happy Croatia” misses altogether the barbed humour intended by those who dubbed the “kingdom” presided over by General Khorvat as this – it should have been translated as “Happy Khorvatica”. And, bewilderingly, “[I]n one piece” is represented as s tseloiu shkukoi (p.125). The pidgin-Chinese of the plural “fanzy” becomes “fanz”. All of these may well be typographical errors and “slips of the pen”, but their frequency and nature is nonetheless something of a concern (and especially so given that the bulk of the book’s foreign language references are to Russian sources). Presumably Wolff’s reading of original texts and archival sources inspires greater confidence.

Similar carelessness seems to creep into Wolff’s scholarship too from time to time. On page 121, for example, he indicates that Rosemary Quested “… cites oral informants” as stating that the control of Harbin author-
ities over the civilian population had lapsed badly during the Russo-Japanese. Elsewhere, however, Wolff himself writes of Harbin being a nest of violations and crimes of greed, but without providing a trace of supporting evidence (oral or otherwise). On page 42, Wolff refers to journals in Europe, Asia and America publishing a number of Russo-Chinese secret agreements, none of which, according to him, existed. There is no indication provided as to whether this conclusion comes from Wolff himself, and if so, what investigation or evidence evinces such a conclusion.

Perhaps a more serious instance still in this vein is Wolff’s wholehearted support of B.A. Romanov’s view that Witte’s policy of “peaceful penetration” was “...just as aggressive as the plans of the military and Bezobrazov factions ...” (p.51), but basing this on little more than a bald assertion that a “...close examination ...” of the seizure and lease of the Liaodong peninsula in 1897 and 1898 respectively would result in such a conclusion. The appropriateness of such a reading was hidden, Wolff suggests, by the “...web of lies and half-truths with which Witte and his publicists endeavored to fend off blame for the Russo-Japanese War” (p.51). Aside from the fact that the author provides little documentary evidence for this assertion, he also ignores some sophisticated histories supporting a more subtle reading, and perhaps a more sympathetic interpretation of Witte’s role and vision [7], while providing no recent archival material to suggest why, in fact, we should accept Wolff’s own emphatic judgement on the subject.

Sources listed in Wolff’s bibliography are provided in an admirable spread, but there are lacunae here too. The author is somewhat parsimonious in his view that the Hoover Institution archives possess only two collections that are “invaluable” to a study of the period (being the E. Kh. Nilus and D.L. Khorvat Collections). There are, in fact, many others that might have been usefully included. Of the two that have been used, the Khorvat “Collection” is, from memory, just one proof-read/edited manuscript, but even from this, little of the richness it contains seems to filter through to Wolff’s book. Contemporaries of Khorvat (some of whose memoirs/writings are also to be found at the Hoover Institution) provide novel and valuable insights into this man, who at one time had pretensions of taking over from Admiral Kolchak as the supreme leader of “White” Russia, and later became the self-styled leader of the Russians emigres in China. Little of this detail is present in Wolff’s surprisingly one-dimensional depiction of Khorvat. Moreover, to this reviewer’s eye, Wolff makes insufficient use of the journal Vestnik Azii and ignores altogether the important Vestnik Manchzhurii in his work. The latter, together with its companion economic bulletin, provides significant insights into the economic foundations of Russian presence in Harbin and throughout Manchuria.

And it is here that Wolff’s work shows its greatest weakness. By concentrating on the bureaucratic/internal Russian political story of Harbin, the author largely misses the important early commercial and exploratory contacts between Russians and the area. This gap is represented most vividly by his choice of secondary material, where the selection process is somewhat skewed away from explaining why it was that Witte might have represented a more balanced, far-seeing perspective than Wolff’s representation of him as nothing more than a crude imperialist. Having acknowledged Rosemary Quested’s contributions to the study of Russians in Manchuria, for example, the author makes no mention of her first major work on the subject of Russians in Asia.[8] And while he does cite Mark Mancall’s important work on China and its concept of power, he allows little of the spirit of the latter’s work (notably on Mancall’s views on early commercial contacts between Russians and Chinese to provide chiaroscuro to his own study.[9]

This is a pity. Wolff etches an image of how the Russians found themselves at Manchuria, but does little to embellish this in the full economic and historical context of Russian activity in northern Asia, except in terms of “railway imperialism”. Such an approach supports the author’s thesis, but doesn’t give sufficient scope to the notion that the origin of Russians’ presence there may have had been more faceted than simply the expression of a rough-hewn imperialism. In addition, there are some other omissions. Wolff mentions R.E. Glatfelter in connection with his work on the CER, but the latter’s significant contributions to the study of Khorvat are not indicated.

In conclusion, it must be said that this is a somewhat flawed history of the Russian presence in Manchuria. Without doubt, it contributes to our knowledge of certain important facets of the story of early Harbin. But in attempting to do too much, Wolff’s book skews, and in some measure confuses, its history too, preserving as it does the shibboleth of the city’s role as a “special corner” of Russia in Manchuria, and imposing this on the nature of the three Northeastern Provinces as a whole.

Notes

[1]. Stephen Kotkin & David Wolff (eds) Rediscovering

[2]. See, for example, Felix Patrikeef, Mouldering Pearl: Hong Kong at the Crossroads, London, 1989 and 1990.


[7]. See, for example, B.H. Sumner’s excellent works Tsardom and Imperialism in the Far East and Middle East, 1880-1914 (Oxford: 1940) and Survey of Russian History (London: 1944).


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