

Essay 1: The first half of the 20th century on the eastern and western frontiers - by Malcolm B. Roberts

Throughout the first half of the 20th Century, the frontiersmen in both the Russian Far East (RFE) and the Territory of Alaska built large scale rail projects, found and developed minerals and harvested wildlife for food, hides and fur. The newcomers mostly ignored or marginalized the indigenous tribes while Christian and Communist “missionaries” set out to replace traditional shamanism with other belief systems. (See Essay 3 – “Indigenous peoples on the 20th century frontiers”). Both the Alaska Territory and the RFE were thousands of miles from their national capitals and yet were funded and dominated by their respective federal bureaucracies. Gold played a major role on the frontiers, sparking a world renowned stampede to Alaska and providing substantial funding for the Soviet regime. The Russian Revolution led to a clash of ideologies between the so-called East and West that cut off communications. Many of the coastal cities and villages became military ports and outposts. The tension diminished when the Soviet Union and America joined forces in World War II, but the separation widened again as a result of the “Ice Curtain” that kept these next door neighbors isolated from one another for nearly 40 years.

Excitement and tension

At the dawn of the 20th century, as the sun crossed the zigzagging international dateline where the Eastern and Western frontiers meet, excitement and tension were in the air on both sides of the Bering Sea. An enormous workforce continued to slog its way across the great, mostly flat midsection of the virtually unpopulated Russian continent as they built the Trans Siberian Railroad, the longest in history (construction: 1881–1917). Tsar Nicholas II and a group of visionary advisors were determined to link Vladivostok, founded in 1860 and an outlet to the Pacific Ocean, to Moscow 4000 miles to the west. (1) Historically, Russians traveled to their Far East by horseback, a dangerous, arduous trip that took from 2 to 4 years. Transport by steamer from Odessa via the Cape of Good Hope began in the mid-19th century and required a month at sea. Today, a one-way passage on the Trans Siberian takes seven days and six nights.

During the early years of the century, the United States government was focused on its own mega projects including the Panama Canal (construction:

1904–1914), the expansion of the network of coast-to-coast rail systems, and the building of the Alaska Railroad (1914 – 1923). In literature and politics, both countries honored and romanticized their visionaries, their pioneers, and their builders.

Gold and literature

Alaska was a long way off to most Americans and largely ignored until gold grabbed their attention. Not only did a rush to the Yukon in Canada and then Alaska attract thousands to the northern frontier, it inspired literature that intrigued the world. Jack London's novels were raw and real, spinning stories from the frontier that became classics in both the U.S. and Russia. Robert Service's poetry, written in Canada but adopted by Alaska, captured the grandeur of the North and the grit and gallantry of those who challenged it.

*Gold! We leapt from our benches. Gold! We sprang from our stools.
Gold! We wheeled in the furrow, fired with faith of fools.
Fearless, unfound, unfitted, far from the night and the cold,
Heard we the clarion summons, followed the master-lure -- Gold!*

*Men from the sand of the Sunland; men from the woods of the West;
Men from the farms and the cities, into the Northland we pressed.
Graybeards and striplings and women, good men and bad men and bold,
Leaving our homes and our loved ones, crying exultantly -- "Gold!" (2)*

The frenzy in the Canadian Klondike started it all. The fearless and the lucky took home \$100 million in gold in just eight years from 1896 to 1904. In 1898, the rush for riches attracted thousands further west and north to the nearest point on the U.S. mainland to Russia, near Cape Nome, on the Seward Peninsula. Fortune seekers found their way to that small village on the Bering Strait, camped in makeshift shelters on the beach, and sifted gold from sand. Commerce followed gold, and by the spring of 1900 Nome was chaotic. By August 1, 162 steamships and 70 sailing vessels had landed 18,000 people in that remote outpost. (3)

Two Nome newspapers championed the benefits of the boom town. But in spite of their efforts to promote respectability, Nome was overwhelmed by violence, vice, claim jumping, and crooks, including Soapy Smith's notorious gang who moved up from Skagway.

Few Russians ventured across the Bering Strait to join the rush to Nome, but Alaska prospectors crossed to Chukotka, their next door neighbor to the west, as early as 1890 and began extracting gold in 1904. This was a hint of things to come, as the Russians would discover that their Far East and Siberia contained the world's greatest reserves of precious stones, strategic minerals and energy, most of which are still untapped in the early 21st century.

Geopolitics on the frontier

By the latter part of the 19th century, western economic and military might had weakened China, which until then was known as the Middle Kingdom or center of the universe. With China sidelined, Russia and Japan competed for dominance in the Far East. Russia founded the Port of Vladivostok in 1860 and eight years later the Meiji Restoration reestablished the Japanese emperor to pre-eminence and launched the first industrialization of an Asian nation. Japan humbled China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 while Russia established a hub for the Trans-Siberia Railroad in the city of Harbin, making Manchuria a tsarist colony. But Russia, along with most western nations, underestimated the new Japan. As they jostled for control, Japan decisively won the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. (4)

Civilization

“Alaska is now open to civilization,” announced Lt. Billy Mitchell, a US Army officer in 1903 who, as an aviator 30 years later would influence the role of aircraft in modern warfare. Mitchell made the announcement when he and his crew completed the 1500 mile Alaska telegraph link from Nome to Eagle, and thus to the rest of the country. (5)

The Alaska frontier seemed a world away from Washington, DC. The U.S. Congress, following the purchase from Russia in 1867, basically ignored the Territory. Finally, in 1912, Congress passed the Second Organic Act, a rudimentary criminal and civil code.

Prior to that legislation, the rule of law depended on those who wore a badge or held a gavel. One of the best was Judge James Wickersham, who was sent to Nome in 1901 by President Teddy Roosevelt. The judge would have

a major impact on the territory. In 1906, he was elected Alaska's only Territorial Delegate to Congress giving him a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. He had no vote, but his personality prevailed. In a famous speech in 1914, Wickersham convinced Congress to build the Alaska Railroad "to open the country" and provide much-needed competition to the resource monopolies. He would later help found the University of Alaska and advocate for Alaska statehood. (6)

Tall mountains, great distances

As the 20th century lumbered through its first two decades, a persistent, ever-growing swarm of prospectors blanketed the Alaskan Territory on foot or on horseback. Though small in size compared to its Russian neighbor, Alaska's topography is rugged and provides spectacular landscapes and great beauty. It is home for 17 of the 20 highest mountains in the U.S. and is one-fifth as large as the continental U.S. It stretches 2,400 miles from the western tip of the Aleutian island chain to the Canadian border and is over 1200 miles north to south from Point Barrow on the North Slope to Ketchikan. (7)

Across the water, the Russian Far East boasts a parade of striking volcanic peaks on the Kamchatka Peninsula, the western half of the horseshoe-shaped "rim of fire" that, but for the Bering Strait, links the frontiers of east and west. Further west, over 75 percent of the RFE is high country; its plateaus, mountain ranges and peaks range from 1000 to 3000 meters. The rest of the RFE embraces sweeping, seemingly endless plains covered with tundra and taiga forests traversed by the great Lena and Kolyma rivers. Further south, more fertile lands and the majority of the human population border the Amur River and its tributaries near China. (8)

Capitalism at its worst

Backed by strong allies in the U.S. Congress, corporate interests controlled the Territory of Alaska by monopolizing its rich natural resources, not unlike the "robber barons" who dominated the national economy. In Alaska, these "Outside" industries ravaged the environment and exploited Alaskans, especially those who worked in the mines and canneries. The Treadwell Mine on Douglas Island opposite Juneau worked its rich gold deposits 24-hours a day. The miners received two days off a year –July 4th and Christmas.

Up the coast, the Alaska Syndicate, owned by the Guggenheim Trust, built a private railroad inland from tidewater in Cordova. An engineering marvel, this railroad was immortalized in Rex Beach's romantic novel "*The Iron Trail*" and includes the famous "million dollar bridge" that spanned the ever-changing Copper River to reach the rich ore deposits near McCarthy. From 1905 to 1923, the Guggenheims extracted copper worth \$135 million from the Kennecott Mine. When prices fell and the workers demanded better wages, the Syndicate closed the mine and tore up the tracks. (9)

Meanwhile, the Alaska Steamship Company monopolized the movement of people and goods to and from Alaska, while interests in Seattle and San Francisco controlled Alaska's vast salmon resource. The annual runs of tens of millions of salmon were "rivers of life" to many Indian, Aleut and Eskimo communities. The Outside interests saw them strictly as a business opportunity, placing fish traps in the mouths of rivers so efficient they systematically destroyed some of the richest Alaska salmon streams one by one. These hated traps, manned by armed guards, would later become the symbol of Outside exploitation that helped mobilize Alaskan citizens behind the statehood campaign.

Communism at its worst

Germans Karl Marx and Frederick Engels studied the industrial revolution in England in the mid-1800s and were appalled by many inequities and abuses. As a result, they developed a theory of a "classless society" based on the overthrow of the wealthy, freeing the masses from religion, and calling for commonly-owned goods and property. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," became the rallying cry of communists around the world.

Russia was the first nation to adopt the tenets of communism through the fiery leadership of Vladimir Lenin. The Russian revolution began in 1917 at the height of World War I when the German government commissioned a sealed train to transport Lenin from self-imposed exile in Switzerland to St. Petersburg. Once home on Russian soil, Lenin announced the establishment of a Soviet Republic designed to create the first communist nation and to abolish centuries-old tsarist rule. Civil war followed.

Expediting Lenin's return to Russia was an astute move by the Germans. The new Soviet government he created abandoned the allies who were at war with Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II just as hundreds of thousands of American soldiers joined the British, French and their other allies.

Meanwhile bloodshed swept across Russia and Siberia as workers and peasants inspired by the Marxist vision clashed with tsarist loyalists. The tsar and his family were placed in house arrest in Siberia and then assassinated in 1918. Shortly thereafter his loyalists were overwhelmed, although armed struggle continued in Siberia and the Far East for years.

Lenin distrusted his lieutenant, Josef Stalin, but succumbed to a series of strokes and was unable to curb Stalin's climb to power in 1924. A former seminary student from Georgia, Stalin substituted his religious inclinations with a ruthless instinct for power. His brutal purges in the 1930's of his fellow Russians, including many of his communist and Red Army comrades, were among the most extensive in recorded history.

The Soviet government claimed ownership of the entire nation's land and resources, and Stalin recognized the potential for Siberian precious metals to help fund the Soviet regime. Upwards of five million Russians, Eastern Europeans, Japanese, Koreans and other nationalities were sent to slave labor camps or *gulags* to work in gold and platinum mines in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East, from the Lena River in Yakutsk to Magadan on the Sea of Okhotsk. Working in appalling conditions and unimaginable cold, these human beings tried to cling to life as they poured rivers of gold from the frontier into the Soviet coffers.

Later, governmental motivation for selecting the work force for the mines became mixed with political coercion. Millions of Ukrainian farmers who refused to cooperate with Stalin's collectivized farm program and nearly anyone else who disagreed with the state's policies and tactics were literally "sent to Siberia." Few returned. (10)

The city of Magadan, on the Sea of Okhotsk, was the headquarters for Dalstroi, the largest penal agency of the Soviet labor camp system. The city was built by prison labor in 1933 as a port for prisoners arriving to work in the Kolyma gold fields and became known as the capital of the "gulag archipelago." By the end of the century, when slave labor had been

replaced with paid personnel, the region still maintained its position as one of the largest gold producers in the country and a major source of other metals. (11)

A few adventurers worked both sides

Until World War II, a handful of adventurers sailed up and down the Russian Far Eastern coast prospecting, trapping and trading. In 1902 Olaf Swenson was one 50 American prospectors hired by a Seattle firm to stake claims for themselves and the company in the Chukotka region, opposite Alaska. When prospecting proved unsuccessful, Swenson shifted to trading US goods for Russian furs, including white fox and the highly prized sable.

In the off-season, Swenson hunted walrus and polar bear. In 1922 he nearly became a casualty in a skirmish between the Red and White Armies when the Russian Civil War reached the frontier at Okhotsk. Dodging the war and the authorities, Swenson somehow managed to conduct business along the edge of the frontiers for years thereafter. (12)

Some indigenous people negotiated the rough waters of the Bering Sea in their traditional kayaks, and hunted and traded on the US side in this time period, but few Russians came across to the American side. The authorities both under the Tsar and the Soviets forbade their people to leave the country.

As World War I came to an end, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson sent a US expeditionary force to Vladivostok after considerable pressure from the Allies. He was reluctant to involve the US in Russia's civil war, but Japan appeared intent on occupying Siberia, threatening American business interests in the East. The purpose of the mission was masked and the orders to the troops were vague. After nearly two years, much confusion and 353 US soldiers dead, the contingent was withdrawn. (13)

Federal control of Alaska

Life was quieter in post-World War I Alaska, but the residents of what had become known as “the last frontier” had little input or influence on public affairs. The federal government governed the Territory of Alaska with a heavy hand. When Alaskans wanted to develop natural resources, they had

to obtain permission from the federal bureaucracy or Congress, and decisions made in Washington, DC, thousands of miles from Alaska, were often influenced by lobbyists and Congressmen who had their own designs on Alaska.

Private companies in the South 48, most notably those owned by John D. Rockefeller and other “robber barons,” monopolized publicly-owned oil, gas, and coal. The federal government and the general public benefited little. In 1920, Congress passed the Mineral Leasing Act (MLA) that assigned perpetual ownership of publicly-owned energy resources to the federal government.

In practice, this law caused little stir in the South 48, as homesteading had already transferred millions of acres of public lands into private ownership. But it had a major impact on natural resource development in Alaska where over 99 percent of the land was federally owned. Homesteading continued, but subsurface resources beneath a homestead remained the property of the federal government. And although leasing of federal lands with oil potential was allowed, the ultimate “owner” was not a private citizen, it was the government.

Japan attacks Alaska

Imperial Japan, the island nation, needed raw materials and scrap metal for its rapidly expanding industries. This economic pressure was a major motivation for their clashes with China and Russia at the turn of the century and, in the process, their armed forces demonstrated great talent for military strategy, tactics and a readiness to sacrifice one’s life upon command. America faced that power when the Japanese Air Force attacked Pearl Harbor in Honolulu with devastating results on December 7, 1941. Within months, dozens of Japanese incursions swept through East Asia and the Pacific Islands, and on June 3, 1942 the Japanese bombed Alaska’s Dutch Harbor and occupied the Kiska and Attu islands in the Aleutians.

Later that year the first convoy of U.S. military vehicles drove the new 1,420 mile Alaska Highway that had been carved through rugged, virgin Canadian territory in just nine months. Shortly thereafter, 50,000 U.S. troops arrived in Anchorage (population 3,000). In May 1943, American soldiers re-

claimed Attu in the Pacific theatre's second costliest battle of World War II. Nearly 3,000 Americans and Japanese lost their lives on that small, rocky island. (14)

Most Alaskans prior to World War II were oblivious of the atrocities going on in the forced labor camps just across the divided frontier. Some of those who knew simply chose to accept them as the Russian way. (15) Indeed, the USSR's human rights transgressions were largely forgiven in 1942 when Russia joined the allies in the worldwide, life-and-death struggle with Adolph Hitler.

For three years thereafter, the main contacts between Alaskans and their neighbors were Russian pilots who flew to Fairbanks and Anchorage to ferry Lend Lease airplanes across the Bering Strait. (16) After an all-too-hurried briefing, many young aviators took off in the unfamiliar aircraft and lost their way and their lives in the Alaska wilderness. Those who made it safely to Yakutsk and other cities in the Far East were sent on to the Eastern Front to confront 3 million German soldiers and 3,300 German tanks that had crossed the Russian border.

The Cold War puts the frontiers into a deep freeze

When World War II ended, fear of Communism in the U.S. escalated, and the Cold War separated the east and west frontiers for another 40 years. In fact, the lesser-known Ice Curtain proved more impervious than the Iron Curtain on the European side.

On the Russian coast, many Native communities were uprooted, forcibly if necessary, from their sea hunting, subsistence lifestyles and re-located inland in reindeer herding cooperatives. A similar relocation of the Aleut people by the US government during the war had taken place in the Aleutians Islands with often sad, even tragic, results.

The remaining settlements on the Russian frontier were used for mining and military purposes, including border posts, bases that supported jet fighters and Bear Bombers, and Navy ports. Chukotka communities provided support for the ships that plied the Northern Sea Route along the northern Russian coast, where ice breakers and ice-armored freighters moved goods and resources between Murmansk and Vladivostok.

Since the completion of the Trans Siberian Railroad, Russia had made little progress expanding its rail and road system into the northern regions of their Far East. Finally in 1974, the Soviet Union launched a massive 2000 mile rail extension reaching north towards some of the great mineralized areas in Eastern Siberia. At the same time, inland coastal cities and towns were expanded to support the major naval and submarine port at Vladivostok, heavy industry in Khabarovsk, mining in Magadan, and the Billibino nuclear power plant, one of the USSR's first (1974). The remaining coastline was dotted with small Native settlements that had escaped relocation.

To this observer, the “meeting of frontiers” in the first half of the 20th century in a positive, idealistic sense was a dream overwhelmed by the clash of world military powers and competing ideologies. Near the end of the century, however, hope began to emerge. Barriers between the frontiers were gradually removed and the meshing of traditional and pioneer ideas and systems offered the possibility of a better future for both the indigenous people and recent immigrants. (*See essays 2 and 3*).

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Guiding Questions:

- In what ways were the Russian (Siberia) and American (Alaska) frontiers similar in the first half of the 20th century?
- How did the rise of Imperial Japan affect the geopolitical landscape of the north Pacific region in the first half of the 20th century?
- Who controlled the land and key economic resources in Siberia and Alaska up to the 1950's? How did these ownership patterns lead to destructive resource exploitation?
- How similar are the physical environments of Alaska and the Siberian Far East?
- How did World War II change the US view of Alaska's strategic location?
- Based on the examples of Jack London and Robert Service, why do you think the Yukon and Alaskan gold rushes inspired such powerful writing?

Class Projects

- Develop a set of maps that show the similarities and differences in environment between Alaska and the Russian Far East.
- Using your own maps, draw the Lend-Lease route from Montana through Canada and Alaska to its end points in Russia. How extensive is the route? What different environments does the route traverse? How much longer/shorter would a polar route have been if there would have been planes with sufficient fuel for the flight? Research some of the stories related to the Lend-Lease program on the Internet.
- Write short essays portraying the life of a miner in Alaska working for the Treadwell Mine and the life of a miner in a Soviet gulag in the 1930s.

Malcolm B. Roberts, the author of this essay, earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in the History of the U.S. and the Far East at Princeton University in 1958. A resident of Alaska since 1971, he has visited Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Anadyr, Yakutsk and Tiksi, in the Russian Far East as well as St. Petersburg and Moscow numerous times. Since 1999, he has served as a Senior Fellow at the Institute of the North in Anchorage. **Dr. Roger Pearson**, senior fellow at the Institute of the North and professor of geography emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, edited the project and contributed the educational components. The late **Maria Polyskaya**, an associate of the Institute, assisted with the research for these essays and provided a Russian translation. She was a graduate of the University of St. Petersburg and former assistant to First President of the Sakha Republic Mikhail Nikolayev. She passed away in September 2006 at her family home in Yakutsk. To contact the author, please email mbroberts@institutenorth.org.