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The Launch of the Volunteer Fleet: Late Imperial Russia and “Empire Route”

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In recent decades, historians have discussed the structure of the Russian Empire, focusing on religious and ethnic issues, while little attention has been given to the economic sphere. The recent results of the study of Russian history “have had trouble gaining recognition among historians outside Russianist circles” when they “ – unlike specialists on China, India, and Africa – have shown little interest in participating in global history debates.” (Stanziani 2016, 161)

To bridge the divide between Russian and global history, we examine the Russian Empire’s economic policy. The history of shipping trade in late Imperial Russia gives us hints on the scarcely examined relations between Russia and the global economy. Using documents from the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg, we reveal what Russia’s ruling politicians expected from maritime transportation.

First, we discuss government support for Russian ships’ passage through the Suez Canal, triggered by the opening of the Chinese and Indian routes of the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company in 1871. The number of Russian ships passing through the Suez Canal increased about tenfold from 1880 to 1913.

Then we focus on the first decade of the Russian Volunteer Fleet connecting Odessa with the Russian Far East after 1879, established due to the patriotic upsurge after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. We can understand its early groping by comparing the temporary regulation of 1886 with the articles of incorporation of 1879. As the latter noted, in the beginning, the Fleet’s main aim was to be an armed force to fight against Great Britain, even if a society independent from the government managed the ships that carried people, including soldiers, exiles, and immigrants and goods to the Russian Far East in peacetime. In 1882, due to financial difficulties, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, a president of the Main Board of the Society, petitioned the emperor, Alexander III, to request financial aid for the Society. This led discussions on reforming the Volunteer Fleet. Because of fierce disputes between the Minister of Finance and the administrator of the Ministry of the Navy, a new temporary regulation was established in 1886, which outlined the activities exclusively during peacetime, abolishment of the Society, and transferring the jurisdiction of the Volunteer Fleet to the administrator of the Ministry of the Navy. In 1885, the government began providing a subsidy of approximately 600,000 rubles annually. Thus, the reform carried out in the second half of the 1880s determined the direction of the Volunteer Fleet.

We argue that Russia's shipping network with Asia, overlapped with the British "Empire Route," developed to promote the consolidation and development of domestic maritime trade. Some involved in Russia's shipping trade thought that entering international trade was contrary to national interest. The exclusion of Shanghai from the list of ports of call after the 1886 regulation shows that Russian rulers were not interested in rapidly developing intra-Asian trade.

Reference

Stanziani, Alessandro. 2016. "Russian Economic Growth in Global Perspective." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 17, no. 1: 151-162.