International Journal of Central Asian Studies Volume 18. 2014

Russia's Alternative to the Great Silk Road: Reasons for Construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (Views in Historiography)

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Abstract: The paper considers main works on the history of Trans-Siberian Railway construction written by the Russian and Western authors. Main attention is paid to historiographical discussions on the main reasons for the railroad construction. In the Pre-revolutionary most of such debates were initiated by the Siberian regionalists who opposed the railroad's proponents. Soviet historians at first neglected modernization effects of the railway construction, but after the Great Patriotic War and the construction of BAM in 1970s they paid more attention to the history of Trans-Siberian Railway. Western studies were usually based on the "modernization approach". Some researchers analyzed mostly economic reasons for the railroad's construction, while others demonstrated the role of strategic, military and political factors. Such controversies were greatly determined by the multi-functional nature of the Trans-Siberian Railway serving at the same time strategic, military and economic interests of Russia. At the same time such debates proved that the more objective and unbiased analysis of Siberia's social and economic development in the pre-revolutionary period is needed.

Keywords: historiography, Trans-Siberian Railway, modernization, economic development, Russian Empire, Siberia.

In the late XIX century Russia set about constructing a great transcontinental railway which later stretched for 5,776 miles between Moscow and Vladivostok. The idea underlying the project was to connect Europe with Asia by the modern means of transportation. It certainly could be a real alternative to the ancient Great Silk Road in terms of facilitating trade and economic development in various regions of Eurasia. However there has been much speculation and discussion in historiography about the actual plans and aims of the Russian government for which it decided to build the Trans-Siberian Railway.

In the pre-revolutionary Russia the official historiography was based on the work edited by A.N. Kulomzin, the head of the Siberian Railroad Committee, and dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the Transsib's construction. Its authors praised wisdom and "far-sightedness" of the Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II and explained his decision to build the railroad by the mere desire to take care of his subjects living behind the Ural mountains. (Sabler, Sosnovskiy, 1903).

This view was opposed by the Siberian regionalists ("oblastniki") P.M. Golovachev, G.M. Potanin, N.M. Yadrintsev (Golovachev, 1902; Gr. P-n, 1910; Yadrintsev. 1919), who considered the railroad as an instrument of enslavement and subjugation of Siberia by the central government. As D.N.Collins observed, N.M. Iadrintsev might at first have had some positive feelings about the concept, but he soon came to realize that talk about trade, progress, and civilization for

the east often masked a complete indifference to the real needs of Siberia's inhabitants, whether indigenous peoples or Russian settlers. He feared that each railroad town would become a slum like London's Whitechapel: cosmopolitan, bustling, and competitive. Economically Siberia would face ruin as competition from more developed regions bit into the traditional markets.

In the Soviet historiography the colonial and geopolitical aims of the Tsarist government were given primary attention. At the same time many historians neglected the modernization aspects of the Trans-Siberian project (Kann, 2011). However scholars who worked in the 1920s-1930s lacked historical sources and based their conclusions on the works published in the pre-revolutionary period. The new political course of industrialization made them pay close attention to the experience of the Tsarist government connected with the Siberian periphery's economic development. Such researchers as M.S. Bodnarskiy, N.N. Kolosovskiy, N.P. Oganovskiy studied the history of Trans-Siberian Railway in regard to the problems of further development of mineral and resource base and expansion of transportation network in Siberia.

Transsib's role during the Great Patriotic War along with introduction of new historical sources led to publication in the 1940s-1950s of various studies devoted to the demographic, historical and geographic, financial and economic, scientific and technical aspects of the railroad's construction (M.M. Voronin, B.M. Gumenskiy, A.P. Pogrebinskiy, V.V. Pokshishevskiy, B.a. Romanov and others).

When the construction of BAM (Baikal-Amur Mainline) started in the 1970s, the role of Siberian railways in economic and social

development of the region was studied more thoroughly. V.F. Borzunov, V.A. Lamin, L.M. Goryushkin made a considerable contribution into studying the history of the Trans- Siberian railroad. (Borzunov, 1960; 1965; Lamin, 1987; Sigalov, Lamin, 1988; Goryushkin, 1986).

The post-Soviet historiography was enriched with new methodological approaches. A.V. Remnyov, L.B. Uss, S.K. Kann (Remnyov, 1987; 1994; Uss, 2005; Kann, 2011) stressed both the geopolitical character of the Trans-Siberian project and its "modernizing" implications for the social, economic and scientific development of the region.

The majority of English- and German-language works on the history of Siberian transportation system deal with the topic of Trans-Siberian Railway's construction (D. Treadgold, V. Mote, H. Tupper, B. Sumner, A. Hedenstroem, R.North, H. Hookham). These works are usually based on the "modernization approach" Despite some critical judgments, many Western historians positively evaluated the role of Trans-Siberian Railway (V. Conolly, P. Dibb, B. Anderson, R. Mellor, G. Vernadsky, B. Dmytryshyn). In particular, R. North mentioned both socioeconomic and military strategic role of the railroad since it facilitated strengthening of Russia's political and military position in the Far East. British historian J. Westwood underlined the fact that when the railroad was built the scope of wheat and meat delivered to the European part of Russia increased significantly. Besides, medical posts, food storages and reception centers established along the railway provided the decrease of death rate among the colonists.

These scholarly discussions reflected the polemics started by the railroad's proponents and opponents long before it was actually built.

According to the British historian D.N. Collins (Collins, 1990), given the closed nature of tsarist officialdom it is not easy to estimate which motivations were uppermost in the minds of nineteenth-century Russian proponents of expansion. However, between 1857 and 1874 alone more than a hundred articles and brochures about rail routes across the Urals into Western Siberia were published in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and the provinces. It was widely known that transport in Siberia was unspeakably bad, roads were "unbearable in summer and impossible in winter".

M.R. Sigalov and V.A. Lamin (1988, p.7) noted that projects of railway construction in Siberia proposed before the 1870s were not of primary importance[1]. Successful railway construction and exploitation in European Russia in the turn of 1860s-1870s prepared the ground for further discussion of the Siberian railway problem. Improved communication lines led to a considerable time saving which quickened public interest among Siberian merchants and entrepreneurs.

In the turn of 1870s-1880s the problem was viewed from a different perspective. The majority of experts abandoned themselves to an idea that a main line crossing the whole region was to be built. General V. Rashet envisaged a rail-water route linking Europe and Asia. Russia, he argued, had fallen behind Europe because the latter had rapidly developed its "mining craft and mechanical art". In 1869 a delegation of merchants from Nizhnii Novgorod, an entrepot on the Volga and the center of a major annual trade fair, informed the Minister

[1] The first generation of such projects were related to the horse-drawn railways connected with the portages in the watershed areas. The same can be said about the projects dealing with bypass railways near the Angara rapids and in other areas with non-navigable waterways. The second group included projects of railways connecting major Siberian cities or providing access to the new development areas.

of Finance that a Moscow-Siberia rail link was “of the utmost importance” for trade with China and Central Asia (Collins, 1990).

The role of transportation networks in the economic development of sparsely populated areas for the first time was discussed in the debate between the adherents of railway projects and their opponents who advocated the use of inner river routes. In 1870 the Statistical Section of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (IRGO) held a lengthy debate about railroads in Siberia during which the economic implications were clarified. According to D.N. Collins, proponents of the railroad frequently exaggerated the likely returns on capital outlay. At the same time political matters became more and more explicit, certain writers stated that Siberia should be incorporated more firmly into Russia. For instance, V.P. Bezobrazov, speaking to the IRGO Statistical Section, expressed disquiet at the separation of the Russian state into two halves when railroads were constructed in European Russia, binding that half of the country firmly together, but effectively separating Siberia and the whole of Asiatic Russia from the centers of commerce and administration. Moreover, defeat in the Crimean War had led Russians to an awareness of the links between industrial production and military capability, so the strategic arguments concerned Russia's need to develop its defense capabilities to confront the European powers in the west and east. (Collins, 1990).

Stephen Marks analyzed projects of railway's construction, proposed by the minister of communications K.N. Possiet (Posyet) in 1875 and 1884; evaluated discussions that took place in the government circles on that question and came to conclusion that various groups of

Russian top-level officials could not join their efforts in order to work out solutions for the most important economic problems. (Marks, 1991)

In the 1880s the government made a preliminary decision to build the Siberian railroad which was a mere publicity event aimed at checking the public opinion on that matter. During the next seven years all groups of Siberian population took place in the so-called “Siberian railway referendum”.

According to M. Sigalov and V. Lamin, proponents of railway construction in Siberia (who were guided mostly by their intuition) just like their counterparts in the capitals (Moscow and Saint-Petersburg) described the grandiose plans of economic development owing to the new transportation lines. Their opponents stressed the unprecedentedly high costs of this undertaking and obvious unprofitability of railroads in the region. This confrontation continued until the first years of the Trans-Siberian Railway's exploitation.

In fact, the railroad's ultimate aim was to strengthen Far Eastern borders and Russia's prestige worldwide. It also could stir up the commercial trade ties with Far Eastern countries and help Russia increase her gold and currency reserves due to the transit traffic through Siberia. However the task of economic development of the areas adjacent to the railroad was not fully realized at that time which can be explained by the lack of scientific knowledge about the region.

Historians bring evidence that competing interests within the Russian government had similar disagreements about the primary motive for the project. Some of the official authorities believed that military loadings would be the only type of cargo carried by rail in Siberia. In 1886 the Committee of Ministers came to conclusion that the Great

Siberian Railroad should be built only for strategic purposes. As S.Yu. Witte stated later, “Siberian, Transbaikalian and Ussuri railroads were built mainly for military and political reasons”. (Sigalov, Lamin, 1988)

However at a special conference in 1890 the ministries of communication and finance expressed the opinion that the most important factor was the economic development of European and Siberian Russia. State Secretary together with the Ministries of War and Foreign Affairs placed more emphasis on the strategic side and asked for the line to be begun in the east to link Vladivostok with the interior. (Collins, 1990)

All proposed variants of the main line's route despite any possible advantages stressed by their authors suffered from the same grave shortcomings. None of them was provided with economic impacts analysis. The first reconnaissance investigations of the route Zlatoust – Omsk – Tomsk were conducted only in 1884. No practical steps were taken in regard to any other possible routes despite the growing number of petitions with arguments in support of the idea of the Siberian railroad's construction.

However, by the end of 1880s the total stretch of railroads in the advanced countries of Europe and America equaled almost 500, 000 km, while in Russia it was about only 30, 000 km. In European Russia the railway construction was again on the upgrade, however in Siberia the question of railroad's public benefits remained a moot question.

The observers from the United States and other countries paid careful attention to the economic situation in Russia and long discussions on the railway construction in Siberia. Pointing out major economic benefits of the American and Canadian experience of railway

construction and economic development of the sparsely populated areas, foreign investors made numerous proposals to build railroads in Siberia on the basis of concessional agreements. The number of such proposals was growing from year to year.

Such proposals were regarded with especial suspicion; it was said that an Englishman would approach Russia "slyly sneaking up with a smile on his face and a glittering gift under which is hidden a lasso with a death knot". (Borzunov, 1960; Collins, 1990).[2] The eventual decision to commence was made in Alexander III's rescript to the heir Nicholas, which expressed the emperor's "extreme anxiety to secure the peaceful prosperity of the country". The construction works started in 1893. By 1903 the real cost of the whole project amounted to 1 billion roubles, which exceeded the initially planned expenses almost by 3 times. Excess costs can be explained not only by the project deficiencies but also by the radically changed economic, demographic and transportation situation in Siberia caused by the Trans-Siberian Railway's construction.

Compared to the previous system of animal-drawn transport and seasonal waterways the railroad became a powerful factor of economic development in this vast Russian periphery. Despite the continuous discussion about the efficiency of investments in the railway construction in Siberia, it was obvious that the Trans-Siberian Railway played a transformative role in the region's development. However, initiators and propagandists of the project were not fully satisfied with its results. First of all, the discouraging outcome of the railway's operation during the war with Japan demonstrated that it was the wrong decision to

[2] Russia was afraid of possible economic and then political seizure of concessional territories, so the government either left such offers without any response or made counteroffers knowingly unacceptable for the probable partner.

build a shorter way over the territory of a foreign country. In 1906 participants of the meeting held in Irkutsk unanimously concluded that the Chinese Eastern Railway with its protectionist fares and security system favored the development of another country's economy without giving anything to Russia in return. They declared : “We need the shortest way to the Pacific ocean”.

Second, the project's implementation could not help solve the whole set of problems connected with transportation support of economic development of Siberia and Far East. Among the most serious points of criticism was the fact the mainline was built across the southern parts of Siberia. As a result, vast territories located to the North of Tomsk remained outside the area provided with railway traffic. A famous scientist Dmitri Mendeleev wrote in this regard: “Western Siberia rich in grain already needs more than just two railway outlets (The Great Siberian Railroad and the Tymen railway)”. He believed that in the future the most precious asset for Russia would be Siberia's mineral resources based on which the country stretching between Europe and Asia will develop its industry”. (Lamin, Sigalov, 1988)

Stephen Marks in his famous work on Trans-Siberian Railway was skeptical about its modernization effect and pointed out the dominating geopolitical aims of the Russian Empire in the whole project. Special attention in his book is paid to analyzing activities of S.Yu. Witte who played the key role in organizing the Transsib's construction.

Marks supported V.S. Lavrov's idea that Witte rested upon the "personal rule regime", rising over the government and the society. He excluded any possibility of discussions and expression of disagreement with his policy; he appointed weak persons with compliant characters to

all significant posts in the government. He also established a special administrative body - Siberian Railroad Committee that considered all issues connected with the railroad's construction. All measures undertaken by Witte perfectly fit into the system of Russian autocracy and, according to S. Marks, were to a large degree discredited by the economic recession of the early XX century. At the same time Witte's "model" of industrilization anticipated the projects of the later Soviet era.

He also negatively evaluated the effects of the whole Transsiberian railroad project, which, from the American historian's viewpoint, didn't pay for itself in terms of achieving its economic or strategic goals. Unsatisfactory results of the railroad operation and controversial outcomes of economic "reconstruction" of Siberia, carried out under the state's leadership, were due to the fact that they were determined by the political motives. Economic benefits were of much less importance in the government's eyes. In its zeal to reduce construction costs and speed up the builder's working pace the state often closed its eyes to the problem of overall inefficiency of the whole project and general corruption.

All this allowed him coming to conclusions different from those drawn by other Western specialists in economic history of Russia. Generally speaking the American researcher tried to disprove the widespread idea of successful Russian "modernization" in the pre-revolutionary period supported by many Western historians who believed that Russia only slightly deviated from the general course of European countries' economic development. Stephen Marks admitted that the government was the driving force behind this modernization, but

Russian economy's dependency on the autocratic state was also the main reason of its weakness.

Ideas expressed by Stephen Marks were supported by the British researcher Alan Wood. He agreed that railroad's construction forwarded modernization of the Russian economy, but still this process had its peculiarities: concentration of industrial enterprises in several major cities; dominating role of the government, when realization of various "modernization" projects was determined mostly by political and not economic factors (in historiography such economic system was called "Witte's system"); continuous exploitation and excessive tax burden of peasantry; heavy dependence on foreign investments and management personnel. The sovereign's personality also had its impact on the process of Russian "modernization". Nicholas II was far from the reformist ideas and ignored the growing social and national contradictions. (Wood, 2011)

Evaluating the economic effect of Trans-Siberian Railway, Alan Wood referred only to the works of Western researchers (D. Collins, V. Mote, S. Marks). However, the role of the railroad in further industrial development of Siberia (as well as its military and strategic significance during the Great Patriotic War) was in every possible detail described by the Soviet and Russian authors whose works deserve to be thoroughly studied and used by their Western counterparts.

Judgments of Stephen Marks and Alan Wood about the specifics of Russian modernization in the late XIX – early XIX centuries stand in stark contrast with conclusions made by other Western scholars (A.Baikalov, V.Conolly, V.Mote, J.Stewart et al.). Even though the above-mentioned historians admitted the semi-colonial status of Siberian

periphery (the concept of Siberia as a "Russian dominion" dates back to the works by A.Lethbridge and R. Jefferson published at the beginning of the XX century) they also pointed at the high level of capitalist development in Siberia, the widespread usage of agricultural machines in the Siberian village, the substantial role of foreign capital in the regional economy. Even such a discriminating measure as establishment of the Chelyabinsk tariff break in 1896 exercised a salutary influence over the oil-producing enterprises (see works by V. Mote). At the same time Western scholars (e.g., S. and E. Dunn, Ye. Vinogradov) denied any serious social contradictions in the Siberian village in the turn of the XIX – XX centuries.

It would seem that conclusions and evaluations made by S. Marks and A. Wood were much closer to the ideas of Soviet historians who believed that despite "the rapid development of capitalism in Siberia, the structure of its economy didn't change significantly". The region preserved its role of a mere supplier of agricultural and raw materials to the industrial centers of the country. Apparently, such role of Siberia quite satisfied the political and economic elite of the Russian autocratic state. Despite some disputable theses formulated by foreign researchers we should agree that the more objective and unbiased analysis of Siberia's social and economic development in the pre-revolutionary period is needed.

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Received 31 Dec 2013, Screened 10 Oct 2014, Accepted 4 Nov 2014