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Sharyl Corrado

Pepperdine University, sharyl.corrado@pepperdine.edu

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THE MONSTER IN THE CORNER OF THE MAP: RUSSIAN VISITORS DESCRIBE NATURE ON SAKHALIN ISLAND (1850–1905)

Sharyl Corrado

Pepperdine University

Email: sharyl.corrado@pepperdine.edu

ABSTRACT

This article examines evolving constructions of nature on Sakhalin Island in late imperial Russia, emphasising changing Russian views of not only the island, but of science, modernisation, mankind's power over nature and the borders of the empire. From a European land of plenty in the 1850s, welcoming to its Russian visitors, after a quarter-century of penal colonisation, the island had become a monster devouring its prey. This article argues that contradictory and evolving descriptions of Sakhalin's nature reflect tensions Russians faced in a modernising world, as they questioned the relationship between mankind and nature; the reliability of science; and the correct borders of their state. In the 1850s, Sakhalin seemed normal and bountiful, a gift to Russia, while two decades later, it was wealthy but hostile, although, with science, Russians could prevail. By the 1890s, that was called into question, and the island was portrayed as not only hostile, but foreign, desolate and unsubmitive to science; while activists of the early twentieth century reimagined it as abundant, comprehensible and vital to the empire. The image of Sakhalin as hostile and unintelligible prevailed, reflecting a widespread disillusionment with Western modernity. In 1905, Russia surrendered half of the island to Japan.

KEYWORDS

Russia; Sakhalin; orientalism; environmental orientalism; nature; colonisation

In late 1897, after spending several months observing for himself the Russian penal colony on Sakhalin Island, newspaperman Vlas Doroshevich fantasised about the island's natural history:

If you look at a map of Asia, you'll see in the right-hand corner, extended along the shore, something that looks like a monster opening its jaws, as if ready to swallow the nearby island of the Matusmae [Hokkaido]. The sharp declines of the coal beds, the zigzagged, broken lines of bare slate – they all indicate that some kind of great revolution took place here. The spine of the 'monster' twisted. The land shook in gigantic waves... It's not by chance that Sakhalin mountains look like huge frozen waves, and the valleys – or 'falls' [*padi*] as they are called here in Siberian [*po-sibirski*] – are reminiscent of the precipices that open wide between waves in a hurricane.¹

While fantastical, Doroshevich's vision of Sakhalin's geology aptly conveys his attitudes toward not the island's human population – the exiled convicts who were the primary focus of his tales – but its natural environment, to which he attributed much of the involuntary colonists' misfortune. The place itself, he established, was savage and frightening; its mountains were threatening to humans and its rock formations signified violence and unrest. The land had revolted against its creator, forming not peaceful plains and forests deemed suitable for Russian habitation – as Sakhalin had been described a half-century earlier – but a hurricane-like landscape in the form of a hungry monster. While many Europeans of the late nineteenth century celebrated mankind's mastery over nature, Doroshevich emphasised that on Sakhalin, nature was in control.

Such imagery is familiar to scholars of colonialism, who study European encounters with non-European peoples and places around the world. For centuries, in European travel

¹ Vlas Doroshevich, *Sakhalin (katorga)* (Moscow: Tipografiia I.D. Sytina, 1903), pt. 1, p. 4. Doroshevich's feuilletons from Sakhalin were originally published serially in *Odesskii listok*, August 1897–March 1898.

writing, foreign lands had been unknown and often *other*, when compared to the British and other Western European landscapes from which the travellers hailed. The nature of Western Europe was often idealised as temperate and ‘normal’, while non-European natures were abnormal, fantastical and defective. In some cases, natures once seen as bountiful and aesthetically pleasing were later reimagined as sinister and degenerate.² Russian descriptions of Sakhalin nature reveal similar patterns, as an island perceived in the 1850s as welcoming – ‘normal’ in the European sense – forty years later was described as desolate and even malevolent. While 1870s travellers demonstrated confidence that mankind could conquer the harsh Sakhalin environment, visitors in the 1890s portrayed nature as stronger than mankind, an image that some early twentieth-century writers sought in vain to counter. These evolving and contradictory portrayals of Sakhalin’s natural environment illuminate tensions within late imperial Russia, as both state and people sought to adapt to a modernising world. In their descriptions of Sakhalin’s nature, Russian explorers, scientists, officials and popular writers reveal changing views not only of the island, but of Western modernity, Russian identity and the relationship between nature and humankind.³

² See Derek Gregory, ‘(Post)Colonialism and the Production of Nature’, in *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics*, ed. Noel Castree and Bruce Braun (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2001); Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Diana K. Davis, ‘Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment in the Middle East: History, Policy, Power, and Practice’, in *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 1–22.

³ On conceptualisation of the natural environment of contemporary Russian Sakhalin, see Emma Wilson, ‘Local and Global Concepts of Nature in Local Environmental Consciousness, Sakhalin Island, the Russian Far East’, in *Understanding Russian Nature: Representations, Values and Concepts*, ed. Arja Rosenholm and Sari Autio-Saraso (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri Institute, 2005), pp. 253–276; Jessica K. Graybill, ‘Mapping an Emotional Topography of an Ecological Homeland: The Case of Sakhalin Island, Russia’, *Emotion, Space and Society* 8 (Aug. 2013): 39–50; and Jessica Kathryn Graybill, ‘Contested Space in the Periphery: Perceptions of Environment and Resources on Sakhalin Island’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2006). I know of no historical research on this topic, with the exception of occasional discussion of Sakhalin nature in works on Anton Chekhov’s book *Ostrov Sakhalin*. See for example Cathy Popkin, ‘Chekhov as Ethnographer: Epistemological Crisis on Sakhalin Island’, *Slavic Review* 51 (1) (1992): 36–51.

For both Russian and European travellers of the mid-nineteenth century, ‘normal’ nature was that of Western Europe, seen as temperate and mild, without extremes or excesses, against which foreign ecologies could be juxtaposed.⁴ Normal nature could be controlled, shaped to do the will of mankind, such as an English landscape garden or a field of wheat. Uncontrolled landscapes like the tropics, in contrast, were considered alternately sublime and paradisiacal or diseased and dangerous, while the deserts of the Middle East were deemed desolate and degraded, unfit for human habitation. This environmental orientalism reinforced the perceived distinction between the normalised European forests and fields and unfamiliar and therefore feared non-European natures, constructing a Western identity deemed superior to the rest of the earth. Some colonising powers sought to correct nature’s perceived failings, to create order out of disorder and transform seemingly alien and depraved natures into productive forests and fields – an environmental corollary of the *mission civilisatrice*. Some natures, however, were granted agency of their own, endowed with ‘gigantesque or monstrous powers that threaten to overwhelm colonial cultures.’⁵ While mastery over nature was a hallmark of modern Western civilisation, some natures refused to submit to Western control.

Russian nature, to many of its nineteenth-century inhabitants, fell outside the Western dichotomy of normal versus abnormal or moderate versus excessive, mirroring popular perceptions of Russia as neither European nor Asian, neither West nor East. Romantic poets celebrated Russia’s cold, snowy winters, especially after the retreat of Napoleon in 1812 – replacing the European east-west dichotomy with that of north vs. south. The vast forests of the heartland, to nineteenth-century writers, signified simultaneously provisions and oppression. To poets and writers, Russia’s open steppe was not scenic, but

⁴ Throughout this paper, I use the word ‘Russian’ to refer to the Russian Empire and its subjects (*rossiiskie*), rather than the Russian nationality or ethnicity (*russkie*).

⁵ Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*. See also David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture, and European Expansion* (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 141–168; Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the ‘Improvement’ of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 50–81, 221–268; Davis, ‘Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment’, pp. 1, 3–4; Gregory, ‘(Post)Colonialism’, p. 87.

monotonous, yet implied a sense of freedom that defined the Russian soul. The banks of the Volga River – the embodiment of Mother Russia herself – were viewed as dreary and unspectacular until the late nineteenth century.⁶ If ‘normal’ nature consisted of mild and temperate climates, lacking extremes, Russia’s boundless, barren plains were a source of pride in their vast emptiness. Nonetheless, Russians emphasised the relative mildness of European Russia by contrasting it with Siberia, which was clearly distinguished from the European heartland. In contrast to Russia’s never-ending forests and fields, Siberia was a land of excesses, both inexhaustible riches and inhospitable climes. Russians happily claimed Siberia, but it was a colony, against which European Russia seemed welcoming and mild.⁷

Russians themselves maintained that the constant struggle to master their vast nature played a key role in forging Russian culture, not only moulding character, but justifying Russian backwardness. As expressed by historian Sergei Solov’ev in the early 1850s, nature had been an evil ‘stepmother’ [*machekha*] to Russia, preventing healthy national development, in contrast to the fertile plains that drove Western European progress. Never-ending colonisation [*kolonizatsiia*], he argued – referring to the domestication of

⁶ Otto Boele, *The North in Russian Romantic Literature* (Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996); Jane T. Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013). Imperial Russian forests also figure prominently in Stephen Brain, *Song of the Forest: Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905–1953* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); and David Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia’s Grasslands, 1700–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), pp. 93, 211–212; Tricia Cusack, *Riverscapes and National Identities: Space, Place and Society* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), pp. 127–157, esp. 140–142; Christopher Ely, ‘The Origins of Russian Scenery: Volga River Tourism and Russian Landscape Aesthetics’, *Slavic Review* **62** (4) (2003): 666–682; Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted, ‘The Aesthetics of the Volga and National Narratives in Russia’, *Environment and History* **20** (1) (2014): 93–122; Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted, *Rivers, Memory, and Nation-Building: A History of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers* (New York: Berghahn, 2015), pp. 59–71.

⁷ See for example Mark Bassin, ‘Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century’, *The American Historical Review* **96** (3) (1991): 763–794; Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine (eds), *Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

Russia's own forests and fields – was the defining factor in Russian history.⁸ Colonisation continued into the modern era, extending across Siberia to the Pacific (and beyond), as the state employed science to implement 'correct colonisation', pairing colonists with resources. Yet educated Russians were ambiguous about this process. The Russian peasant, hailed by some as the ideal pioneer, could be incompetent and unreliable; and the Russian 'east' seldom conformed to its settlers' demands. While colonisation implied advancement, some argued that it retarded economic progress, hindered agricultural development and damaged Russian character.⁹

Russian attitudes toward the Far Eastern island of Sakhalin, initially claimed by Russia in the mid nineteenth century, are conflicted even today, as the land is rich in resources, yet, to many, unpleasant to call home. A 600-mile-long island off the coast of Siberia now known for its oil reserves, Sakhalin's climate ranges from subarctic to humid continental. Dense forests and swamps abound with wildlife, but render travel difficult. Reindeer inhabit the stunted birch and willow forests of the north, while huge burdock and even bamboo grow in the more temperate, moist south. Despite its relatively southern latitude – aligned with northern Italy, Ukraine, or Washington state – Sakhalin has a short growing season and, on the north of the island, farming is all but impossible. Sakhalin winters are harsh, although more temperate than East Siberia, and snow blankets much of the island for nearly half the year. Summers are short and rainy. Were it not for its natural resources – including oil, natural gas, coal, limestone, minerals and marine resources – few Russians would live there. Despite sixteen decades of colonisation, many Russians today disparage Sakhalin and even longtime residents seek opportunities to leave.

⁸ Mark Bassin, 'Turner, Solov'ev, and the "Frontier Hypothesis": The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces', *The Journal of Modern History* **65** (3) (1993): 497; Sergei Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Mysl', 1988), p. 631; cited in Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 62; Sergei Solov'ev, 'O vliianii prirody russkoi gosudarstvennoi oblasti na ee istoriiu', *Otechestvennye zapiski* **69** (2) (1850): 229–244.

⁹ Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 177–185; Willard Sunderland, 'The "Colonization" Question: Visions of Colonization in Late Imperial Russia', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* **48** (2) (2000): 226–231, 222.

While Russians had maintained forts in the North Pacific since the mid-seventeenth century, they paid little attention to Sakhalin until the early 1800s. The island was home to an estimated 4,000 indigenous inhabitants – primarily semi-nomadic Nivkh in the north, who historically paid tribute to the Qing, and Ainu in the south, with ties to Japan. Driven by the fur trade, Russian settlements were founded throughout the North Pacific, including Russian America, in the eighteenth century, but no traders settled on Sakhalin. On most Russian maps, the island – or peninsula, as many assumed it to be – was depicted as Chinese. In 1805, explorer Ivan Kruzenshtern drew Russian attention to Sakhalin, and in response, the Japanese shogunate declared Sakhalin to be under its direct rule. Two years later, Tsar Aleksandr I authorised the Russian-American Company to establish trading posts there. Both Russia and Japan lost interest, however, before permanent settlements were established. For the next four decades, the Nivkh, Ainu and small number of reindeer-herding Uil'ta were left primarily alone.

Active Russian colonisation of Sakhalin Island began in the early 1850s with the discovery of coal on its shores and consequent dispatch of military personnel to harvest the mineral resource. While Japanese fisherman resided seasonally on the southern end of the island, Russians established themselves further north, near immense coal deposits, the tiny Russian settlement regarded by its founders as both economically and geopolitically strategic. As neither Russia nor Japan was strong enough to occupy the island, Sakhalin was declared 'unpartitioned between Russia and Japan' in 1855, and for the next two decades, Russian soldiers and a few convicts harvested coal for the Pacific fleet, while a few adventurous entrepreneurs sought in vain to profit from the resource.¹⁰ Russian attention to the island increased in the late 1860s, as the empire strove to strengthen its position on the Pacific. Occupation alone seemed insufficient; consolidation of power required a permanent Russian population. Meanwhile, ongoing efforts to modernise the Siberian exile system included a proposed penal colony and, as an experiment, 800 convicts were

¹⁰ For the full text of the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda, see George Alexander Lensen, *The Russian Push Toward Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 475–476.

dispatched to Sakhalin in 1869.¹¹ Although attempts that year to establish free agricultural colonies failed, scientists reported the island's climate to be healthy and its resources sufficient to support a Russian population. After 1875, when Russia gained sole possession of the island, the state sent an ever-growing number of convicts. With establishment of regular sea transit from Odessa in 1879, hundreds of inmates began arriving each year, putting to the test both the productive capacity of Sakhalin nature and Russians' ability to subdue it. After completing their sentences, these convicts became 'exile settlers' [*ssyl'noposelentsy*], which granted them freedom on the island itself, but prevented their repatriation. By the end of the century, Sakhalin had 130 Russian settlements and a Russian population of nearly 35,000. Yet life was gruelling for these convicts-turned-settlers, forced to fend for themselves in unfamiliar and taxing terrain. When Sakhalin fell to the Japanese in 1905, most fled to the mainland. When the Treaty of Portsmouth divided the island between Russia and Japan, few Russians chose to remain. In the struggle of mankind vs. nature, nature had clearly prevailed.

This essay is based on firsthand accounts by Russian visitors to the island, including sea captains, scientists and writers, whose impressions both reflected and created the image of Sakhalin held by Russian readers. While contradictory pictures co-existed, based in part on the time of year, length of the traveller's stay and locations described, patterns emerge among the more prominent accounts, which are considered here. These descriptions not only reflect the experiences of individuals, but illuminate changing values and attitudes in an era of rapid political and social change. Repeated 1850s depictions of Sakhalin as hospitable and rich in resources reveal the expectations of liberal nationalists that Russia was destined to stretch to the Pacific. Facing state opposition, these writers argued that nature itself was inviting Russians to settle, establishing Russia as an Asian power. By the early 1870s, this picture had changed. Although the new tsar supported colonisation, the land seemed no longer welcoming, but resistant. Nonetheless, in an era of science and modernisation, specialists were confident that Russians could subdue the environment and make the island a source of profit and strength. Not naturally or inevitably Russian, it could

¹¹ Due to inadequate accommodation on the island, only 250 of them were assigned to Sakhalin, with the rest sent to labour elsewhere in the Russian Far East.

be Russianised and placed in service to the state. By the 1890s, modernisation campaigns had ended, and Sakhalin became to many Russians a distant colony, an *other* functioning discursively not unlike Africa or Asia in western travel writing. Descriptions of Sakhalin's nature as more powerful than mankind both reinforced the normalcy of European Russia and justified Russia's failure to domesticate the island. Finally, attempts in 1904–05 to render Sakhalin's nature knowable and therefore controllable reveal that not all Russians rejected modern thought. Once more advocating 'correct' colonisation based on science and empirical observation, in contrast to the unsystematic and contradictory practices of the past three decades, a few writers insisted that it was still possible to harness the island's resources and establish Russia's position in the East. In a time of economic, political and military turmoil, Sakhalin's rich nature, they argued, would boost Russia on the path of progress. Descriptions of Sakhalin nature, therefore, reflect changing perspectives on modernisation, Russianness, science and the role of the environment in the formation of national borders and national character.

THE HARBOUR OF PROSPERITY (1850S)

In Russian writing of the early 1850s – reports of seafarers who had circumnavigated the globe – Sakhalin emerged as a pleasant land, rich in resources and not unlike Western Europe, calling into question the vision of Russia nature as universally oppressive, barren and non-European. Attention was drawn to the island by Russian naval officer Gennadii Nevel'skoi, who explored and claimed for Russia the lower Amur River basin, including Sakhalin, in the late 1840s and early 1850s. The son of a naval officer and himself a Naval Academy graduate with thirteen years of experience at sea, Nevel'skoi was also a member of the Russian Geographic Society, which promoted geographic exploration in service to the nation. To Nevel'skoi, the territory was not a colony, but belonged naturally to Russia, and the explorer portrayed the land as normal and safe. Russian colonisation was preordained by nature, insisted Nikolai Murav'ev, Governor General of East Siberia and Nevel'skoi's

biggest supporter.¹² Nevel'skoi's reports suggested that colonisation would not be difficult. He neither romanticised nor demonised the island, but reported realistically that northern Sakhalin was rocky and appeared uninhabitable, while eastern Sakhalin was flat and hospitable. Although the indigenous population did not practice agriculture or gardening, he wrote in 1849, they did raise herds of sheep, his imagined geography of the island coinciding with that of the mild, domesticated environment of the British Isles, whose wealth was rapidly increasing due to its booming textile industry. Only later did he realise that these were not sheep, but reindeer. The northern and northwestern shores of Sakhalin were safe for sailing, Nevel'skoi insisted, with no reefs or sandbars blocking a ship's approach. Himself raised in the in cold, rainy Kostroma region, with experience as a naval officer in the Baltic and North Seas, he saw no reasons that Russians would not thrive there. He dubbed the small natural harbour on the island's northeastern shore the Harbour of Prosperity [*Gavan' Blagopoluchiia*] and the coastal lagoon across the strait the Bay of Good Fortune [*Zaliv Shchast'ia*].¹³

While geopolitical concerns served as the original motivation for Nevel'skoi's exploration, the island was also valuable for its coal, a resource abundant in Britain that had spurred the industrial revolution. When Nevel'skoi dispatched Lieutenant Nikolai Boshniak to explore Sakhalin by dogsled in 1852, the latter reported heaps of coal lying out in the open, ready for the taking. Tongue-in-cheek, however, he granted agency to Sakhalin nature, remarking that 'nature had so generously scattered coal [on Sakhalin], that it seemed she [nature] wished to balance the difficulty of its transport with the ease of its gathering', a hint of the hostility ascribed to the island's natural environment in decades to come.¹⁴ While

¹² B.V. Struve, *Vospominaniia o Sibiri: 1848–1854* (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1889), p. 155; Sharyl Corrado, 'A Land Divided: Sakhalin and the Amur Expedition of G.I. Nevel'skoi, 1848–1855', *Journal of Historical Geography* 45 (July 2014): 70–81.

¹³ Report of G.I. Nevel'skoi to A.S. Menshikov, 2 Sept. 1849, in A.I. Alekseev, *Amurskaia ekspeditsiia 1849–1855 gg.* (Moscow: Mysl', 1974), p. 180; B.P. Polevoi, 'Podrobnyi otchet G.I. Nevel'skogo o ego istoricheskoi ekspeditsii 1849 g. k o-mu Sakhalin i ust'iu Amura', in *Strany i naroda vostoka*, no. 13, *Strany i narody basseina Tikhogo okeana* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), pp. 120–122, 145.

¹⁴ N.K. Boshniak, 'Ekspeditsiia v Pri-amurskom krae', *Morskoi sbornik* 38 (12) (1858), sec. 3: 185. In Russian, *priroda* (nature) is a feminine noun.

Nevel'skoi knew the Sakhalin shoreline, Boshniak had experienced a Sakhalin winter firsthand. Lieutenant Commander Voin Rimskii-Korsakov, who visited Sakhalin in 1853 while on a diplomatic mission to Japan, also focused on Sakhalin's 'inexhaustible' coal deposits, of particular importance to him as commander of the first (and only) steamship in the Russian fleet. Sakhalin coal, he predicted, would serve Russia well in the colonisation of the nearby Amur River basin, a *cause célèbre* in the homeland deemed significant to politics, culture, commerce and civilisation as a whole. Once domesticated, Sakhalin's natural resources and strategic location would boost not only Russia's flailing economy, but its international prestige.¹⁶

Sakhalin was also beautiful, wrote Russian seafarers of the 1850s, who frequently described the island as temperate and picturesque, evoking imagery of European landscapes in which nature served mankind. Rimskii-Korsakov wrote upon his arrival that 'the weather was warm, the sun bright, the sea smooth, and – under such circumstances – Sakhalin made a very pleasant impression on me.' Approaching from the south in the height of summer, he emphasised the proportional topography and the harmony of the colours and shapes.

The whole southern part of the island ... consists of low, sloping hills of various shapes – sharp, round, and flat-topped, arranged in rows, ranges, or any which way, alongside proportionately-sized hollows and valleys. Everywhere is green: forest, bushes, grass; there is no single shade or predominant characteristic, but everything is arranged proportionately, harmoniously.¹⁷

¹⁶ V.A. Rimskii-Korsakov, *Baltika-Amur: Povestvovanie v pis'makh o plavaniiaxh, priklucheniiaxh i razmyshleniiaxh komandira shkhuny 'Vostok'* (Khabarovsk: Khabarovskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1980), pp. 122, 124; V. R-K. [V.A. Rimskii-Korsakov], 'Sluchai i zametki na vintovoi shkhune "Vostok"', *Morskoi sbornik* **35** (May 1858), sec. 3: 45. See also Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ [Rimskii-Korsakov], 'Sluchai i zametki': 2.

Sakhalin, it seemed, mirrored a European landscape painting of picturesque hills and valleys in carefully chosen hues. Russia, it seemed, was more than just the flat steppe, from which the officer hailed, and the marshy forests near St. Petersburg.

Like Nevel'skoi, Rimskii-Korsakov found Sakhalin to be welcoming, gifting the potential settler with plentiful resources. If nature was assumed to have hindered development in the Russian heartland, on Sakhalin, it was not an adversary, but a friend. 'While there was no trace of homes or of cultivation, the locality didn't look like a wilderness', the officer reported, 'and if someone were to be shipwrecked on the shore like Robinson Crusoe (of course, in the summer), at least the appearance of the surroundings would not arouse despair'. He waxed eloquent in a letter to his parents, 'What forests, and in what abundance! How many fish in the rivers, and salmon! Is there anything Sakhalin does *not* have?'¹⁸ His impressions were confirmed by fellow naval officer and explorer Nikolai Rudanovskii, stationed in southern Sakhalin to defend the Amur region against American attack. After weeks of exploration, Rudanovskii reported enthusiastically about the 'quality of the soil (the majority of which is black earth), abundant forests, superior meadows and an abundance of every kind of fish'.¹⁹ If in European Russia, nature had been an evil stepmother to its children, on Sakhalin, Mother Nature provided nourishment in abundance.

Rimskii-Korsakov's impressions of Sakhalin were confirmed five years later by medic Aleksei Vysheslavtsev, who visited Sakhalin in 1858 as part of a three-year naval expedition. Arriving in the region after nearly ten months at sea, through climates and cultures unfamiliar and often unpleasant to him, Vysheslavtsev felt at home on Sakhalin. He emphasised the island's potential for cultivation, describing a place that naturally provided for mankind. He described enthusiastically the colony of forty Russian soldiers stationed in northern Sakhalin to mine coal: 'What glorious gardens surround their clean, cosy cabins! Vegetables ripen twice each summer. Winters on Sakhalin are not harsh, and scurvy is

¹⁸ [Rimskii-Korsakov], 'Sluchai i zametki': 2; Rimskii-Korsakov, *Baltika-Amur*, p. 124.

¹⁹ Cited in M.S. Vyskov et al., *Istoriia Sakhalina i Kuril'skikh ostrovov s drevneishikh vremen do nachala XXI stoletiiia* (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Sakhalinskoe knizhnoe izdatel'skvo, 2008), p. 352.

unheard of.' The region was picturesque. Near the Russian post, the doctor wrote, 'in the shade of ash trees, a small mountain creek gurgles noisily'. Even the coal deposits, to Vysheslavitsev, looked like a fountain in a well-maintained park. 'The location was poetic – the branches of broken or fallen trees created steps down which skipped a playful cascade of water.'²⁰

While Nevel'skoi had initially described the island and nearby mainland as a single unit with shared traits, others reinforced the island's attractiveness by othering the east Siberian shore. In a report of December 1853, Rimskii-Korsakov contrasted the picturesque and aromatic shores of Sakhalin to the rocky cliffs of East Siberia. Nevel'skoi's 'Harbour of Good Fortune', he claimed, would be better named the 'Harbour of Despair'. In contrast to Sakhalin, he reported that

the shore of Tatar, covered hill and vale with the same mixed fir and broadleaf forests as the Sakhalin shore, enters the sea by means of sharp, vertical cliffs of gray granite and basalt, which seem to be looking down at you harshly, unwelcomingly, the never-ending surf clattering at your feet as if its goal were to taunt you upon arrival: 'Just try to butt your way in!' The dark woods at the top look like a bristling beard in need of a shave, which scratches your face during a kiss.²¹

Vysheslavitsev had a similar impression. In contrast to Sakhalin's wealth of resources, DeKastri Bay across the strait had only fish and timber, and even its trees were small. Of Imperatorskaia Gavan' [Imperial Harbour] further south, he remarked dolefully: 'I know of few places that make such a sad impression on a visitor.... The forest looks like prison walls; nature is silent; the waters are locked down by never-ending winds or ice.' Discounting the indigenous population – whom he saw in their long, narrow kayaks and described as looking 'more like seals swimming in the water than rational beings' – Vysheslavitsev doubted that the region was inhabitable. 'It seems impossible that people would ever be able to settle here, that villages and cities would ever appear', he wrote,

²⁰ Aleksei Vysheslavitsov, *Ocherki perom i karandashem iz krugosvetnago plavaniia v 1857, 1858, 1859, i 1869 godakh* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Morskago Ministerstva, 1862), pp. 264, 265.

²¹ Rimskii-Korsakov, *Baltika-Amur*, pp. 141, 146, 148.

revealing scepticism about mankind's mastery over nature, that hallmark of European Enlightenment thought. Sakhalin, fortunately, did not need to be mastered.²²

Although Sakhalin was not yet settled by Russians, Russian writing about Sakhalin from the 1850s portrays a land that was familiar, similar to Europe and ready and waiting for the arrival of settlers. By claiming Sakhalin as naturally Russian, these men challenged the predominant image of Russian nature as barren and ugly and Russia, consequently, as incapable of advancement. If the nature of European Russia had hindered the state's development, Russian Sakhalin's nature would reverse this trend. 'Thank God that someone is finally paying attention to this land', wrote Rimskii-Korsakov to his parents, reflecting the widespread Russian enthusiasm about the broader Amur River basin. 'It alone can bring life to our Siberia by providing everything it [Siberia] needs.'²³ If European Russian nature was a stepmother that neglected her children, on Sakhalin, Mother Nature was nourishing. To patriotic nationalists concerned about the empire's decline, Sakhalin was poised to restore Russia's place in the world.

'A NEW ERA WILL ARISE' (1870S)

Perceptions of Sakhalin changed dramatically over the next two decades, due in part to the experiences of peasants, soldiers and entrepreneurs who tried to colonise the island in the 1850s and 1860s; and in part to the country's rapid modernisation under Tsar Alexander II.²⁴ By the early 1860s, Russian hopes in not only Sakhalin, but the Amur River basin had been dashed, the river proving too shallow for navigation, while poor administration led to poverty among settlers.²⁵ By the early 1870s, travellers no longer described Sakhalin as hospitable. Nonetheless, while settlement of the Amur region had been botched, reformers

²² Vysheslavtsov, *Ocherki perom i karandashem*, pp. 268, 263.

²³ Rimskii-Korsakov, *Baltika-Amur*, p. 122. This mirrors concurrent discourse about the nearby Amur River basin. Located directly across the straight from the mouth of the Amur, Sakhalin was considered crucial for the region's defense. See Bassin, *Imperial Visions*, pp. 70–72, 89–90.

²⁴ On colonisation efforts of the late 1850s–60s, see A.I. Kostanov, *Osvoenie Sakhalina russkimi liud'mi* (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Dal'nevostochnoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1991).

²⁵ Bassin, *Imperial Visions*, pp. 237–255.

remained hopeful that Sakhalin would contribute to Russia's rebirth. If colonisation proceeded correctly, based on modern principles of experience and science, Russians should be able to subdue even a harsh natural environment. An 1869 exploratory expedition returned home optimistic, although they suggested that mining would prove more efficacious than agriculture.²⁶ That same year, the tsar declared Sakhalin a provisional site of penal servitude [*katorga*], where convicts would mine coal, build roads and clear land for settlement. Penal colonisation, it seemed, would both relieve the overcrowded Siberian exile system and protect the island from foreign encroachment, while coal would cover the expenses of the operation. Two years later, a second expedition reached the island to evaluate the status of the experimental penal colony and make recommendations for its future. Sakhalin was no longer considered part of an organic Russian state, nor was its natural environment described as European. It was a distant colony, dangerous and unknown. This was an era of colonialism, however, as European powers raced to establish colonies around the globe. Conquering Sakhalin through systematic application of scientific knowledge would reinforce Russia's identity as a modern world power.

In reports from explorers in the early 1870s, including experienced prison administrator V.I. Vlasov, agronomist Mikhail Mitsul', medical doctor Foma Avgustinovich and mining engineer Aleksei Keppen, Sakhalin's nature appeared hostile, yet not insurmountable, well suited for the punishment of criminals. While they confirmed their predecessors' assessments of the island's rich resources, traces of orientalism emerged in their writing, as Sakhalin became a wild and dangerous colony, against which Russia seemed civilised and controlled. If the Russian countryside was bleak, Sakhalin nature was foreboding, insisted Vlasov, who described the storm they encountered upon arrival as only 'the first menacing sign of the perils [to come]'. While little is known about Vlasov – including even his given name – he likely had little experience exploring remote lands. He highlighted the island's

²⁶ See O.A. Deikhman, 'Ostrov Sakhalin v gornopromyshlennom otnoshenii', *Gornyi zhurnal* 1871, no. 3: 556; Kostanov, *Osvoenie Sakhalina*, p. 60. Due to the unavailability of sources from this expedition, my analysis is based primarily on reports from a follow-up expedition two years later.

lack of cultivation, with no roads, but only ‘footpaths, which are dirty, intersected by streams and bogs, and get lost in the taiga’. While Russian forests were oppressive, Sakhalin forests were deadly, Vlasov asserted, noting that his colleague Mitsul’ spent two days lost in the taiga, forced to eat a dog that had followed him from the post. Travel on Sakhalin was dangerous, he reported, describing wild animals, treacherous ice floes and below-freezing temperatures. Vlasov’s Sakhalin was a land of extremes – extreme distances, extreme cold, extreme danger, and extreme isolation.²⁷ As a civil servant advocating for transportation of convicts to the island, he needed Sakhalin to seem foreign and its nature to appear hostile to mankind. Nature would punish the criminals, while conquering the environment would demonstrate that Russia was a modern colonising power. Meanwhile, it was hoped, the model penal colony would push Russia to the forefront of modern prison reform.

Avgustinovich, too, portrayed Sakhalin nature as hostile, his otherwise objective-sounding report attributing to nature displeasure at the Russians’ arrival. In contrast to some of his colleagues, and despite his background in science and medicine, Avgustinovich’s observations betrayed a lack of confidence that Russians could overcome the environment. He had spent thirty years in the military, not only practising medicine, but also studying plant life he encountered on his travels. In 1870, sixty years old, he participated in a Russian Geographical Society expedition to the Ural region. He was familiar with the diversity of Russian lands and the ability of the Russian people to adapt. Yet Sakhalin challenged his faith in science and in Russians themselves. He wrote of the island’s ‘harsh and unwelcoming exterior, whose forest-covered mountains had the menacing appearance of an uninhabited wilderness’. He wondered whether habitation was even possible. Portraying the land as antagonistic, Avgustinovich described an ‘environment which nature herself had prepared for those tossed by fate onto this piece of rocky earth, surrounded on all sides by the sea, cut off from communion with men.’²⁸ Even more damning were his

²⁷ V.I. Vlasov, *Kratkii ocherk neustroistv, sushchestvuiushchikh na katorge* ([n.p.]: [n.p.], 1873), pp. 21, 24.

²⁸ F.M. Avgustinovich, *Zhizn’ russkikh i inorodtsev na ostrove Sakhaline* [1874] (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Sakhalinskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 2007), pp. 21, 38.

descriptions of Post Due, the Russian mining settlement that served as the island's administrative centre. To Avgustinovich, Due did not represent the conquest of nature, that indicator of modern progress so celebrated in Europe. Nor did he emphasise its rich coal beds, a symbol of profit and industry. Rather, to Avgustinovich, the post was noteworthy for its scenery, which he found melancholy and oppressive.

Wherever your eyes turn, they rest upon gloomy mountains, which look back at you grimly, or glide along the surface of the sea, which seems constantly dissatisfied, irritated, occasionally frothing as if in fury... [The pier] is doused with the spatter of churning waves, as if showing their dissatisfaction with the presence of man! Yet most depressing is the view of the mountain [*sopka*] rising from the centre of the post, its slopes dotted with graves. Extending her cone-shaped head far above the ridges surrounding her, she peers constantly into the distant sea, as if awaiting her chosen victims, whom sooner or later, she will cover with her rigid veil in their eternal sleep!²⁹

Personifying the mountain, Avgustinovich attributed to it an almost godlike essence: not that of a benevolent god, but of one placated only by human sacrifice. The water, too, was at enmity with mankind, expressing its wrath in the waves on the pier. In this passage, Russian settlement of Post Due represented not victory over nature, but defeat.

This was no argument against penal colonisation, however, Avgustinovich was quick to emphasise. His younger fellow explorers were convinced that Russians, through science, could overcome the enmity of nature, correct its defects and turn the once desolate island into an attractive and productive colony. While Avgustinovich described Post Due as gloomy and oppressive, Mitsul' expressed pride that 'out of wild, impenetrable terrain emerged a meadow and a field, the first traces of civilisation, making the Due valley even more picturesque than the nature surrounding it.' A quarter-century younger than the doctor, Mitsul' was a scientist with a university degree in agronomy. By age 35, he had already published three books on agriculture, and expressed no doubts that science would unlock the agricultural potential of the Far Eastern island. Perhaps under pressure from his

²⁹ Avgustinovich, *Zhizn' russkikh i inorodtsev*, p. 40.

colleagues, Avgustinovich clarified his position: 'My impression of the physiognomy of Post Due has nothing to do with my view of this location in relation to colonisation.' He reassured his readers that mankind can adapt to any environment that provides water, food, clothing, and a healthy climate, criteria met not only at Due, but throughout most of the island. Acknowledging the poor results of past attempts at agriculture, Mitsul' expressed modern confidence that 'a new era will arise, with new demands – and new people will learn from these mistakes to create more favourable conditions for peasant life, supporting colonisation where it was once unthinkable'. Mining engineer Keppen hoped to one day find on Sakhalin, like Australia, a flourishing coal industry and prosperous 'deportation colonies', which he felt was likely, given the demand for coal to sustain sea traffic in the Pacific.³⁰

Not coal alone, but Sakhalin's climate and geography rendered it especially suitable for penal colonisation, a matter of urgency given the condition of the Siberian exile system. The island's gloom would be a source of oppression, argued Avgustinovich, making criminals 'feel the gravity of their punishment and the odiousness of their evil deeds'.³¹ Its insularity would deter escape. Supporting his conclusion with data collected by Mitsul' and Avgustinovich and comparing the island to sites of Siberian exile, Vlasov connected Sakhalin to the modernisation of the penal system as a whole. Western European penal practices, he reminded his readers, had demonstrated the positive effects of island exile in terms of both punishment and rehabilitation. He proposed that over time and with good behaviour, convicts on Sakhalin could be paid for their labour in agricultural and building materials, and eventually live in their own cottages outside prison walls. By serving part of their sentences at model farms, they would learn agricultural techniques suited to the unique Sakhalin climate. Nikolai Sinel'nikov, Governor General of East Siberia, found

³⁰ M.S. Mitsul', *Ocherk ostrova Sakhalina v sel'skokhoziaistvennom otnoshenii* (St. Petersburg: [n.p.], 1873), pp. 52, 95–96; Avgustinovich, *Zhizn' russkikh i inorodtsev*, pp. 28–29; Aleksei Keppen, *Ostrov Sakhalin: Ego kamennougol'nye mestorozhdeniia i razvivaiushchiasia na nem kamennougol'naiia promyshlennost'* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia A. Transhelia, 1875), pp. 90, 125.

³¹ Avgustinovich, *Zhizn' russkikh i inorodtsev*, p. 30.

Vlasov's proposal 'satisfactory both in terms of punishment and its humanity, giving convicts hope to improve their future.'³²

The 1870s reports clearly distinguished between the unsuccessful colonisation efforts of the previous two decades and the proposed penal colonisation based on science and twenty years of experience. Sakhalin itself was not at fault for Russians' unsuccessful efforts to profit from its riches. The 1869 attempts to settle peasants in the temperate south, Mitsul' reported, failed not due to natural barriers, but to Russian incompetence. The land was not to blame for the poor-quality seeds that settlers received, nor for the unbuilt road that delayed their arrival. Mitsul' expressed confidence that Sakhalin's resources 'provide absolutely everything needed to sustain a future population'. Keppen, likewise, who had graduated with honours from the St. Petersburg Institute of Mining, did not blame the island for the inability of past entrepreneurs to profit from its coal. Having identified the mistakes of the past, he asserted that, under new, competent leadership, the industry would not only support settlement of the island – which was crucial for geopolitical reasons – but would enrich the Amur region as a whole.³³

Mitsul' and his colleagues reinforced their view of mankind as master over nature by describing past settlers as damaging the island, highlighting not the power of nature, but its fragility. In the Middle East, Diana K. Davis demonstrates, orientalist European narratives often blamed indigenous peoples for desecrating the natural environment, thereby justifying Western intervention.³⁴ On Sakhalin, a parallel narrative emerged, although the villains were Russians who had acted hastily without the benefit of science. New settlers were needed to correct the mistakes of their predecessors. 'The region [near Post Due] looks like a dreary gorge', wrote Avgustinovich, describing the most developed part of the island. 'The mountainside [is] speckled with stumps of chopped-down trees and covered in

³² 'Kopiiia s soobrazhenii, predstavlenykh kollezhskim sovetnikom Vlasovym general-gubernatoru Vostochnoi Sibiri', Biblioteka Irkutskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, ruk. 345, ll. 34–34ob, 45–46, 86ob, 76–76ob, 81.

³³ Mitsul', *Ocherk ostrova Sakhalina*, pp. 79–81, 139; Keppen, *Ostrov Sakhalin*, pp. 124–125.

³⁴ Diana K. Davis, 'Restoring Roman Nature: French Identity and North African Environmental History', in *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, pp. 60–86.

places with clumps of taiga... half-dried and half-burnt from the frequent fires'. Keppen reported that Sakhalin coal mines had been damaged due to poor management, which would hinder their productivity for years to come. Mankind indeed had dominion over nature, but that power must be exercised by people with modern knowledge and expertise.³⁵

If, in the 1850s, Sakhalin nature had seemed to welcome its visitors, explorers of the 1870s described it as antagonistic, as if consciously opposed to the presence of Russians. This did not discourage the explorers, however, as they shared Enlightenment faith in mankind's mastery over nature and trusted science to reveal correct methods of colonisation. Moreover, the modernisation campaign of Tsar Alexander II had drawn attention to flaws in the Siberian exile system, and Sakhalin's climate, insularity and resources seemed well-suited for both punishment and rehabilitation of criminals. No longer perceived as essentially Russian, the island's nature seemed both superior and inferior to that of Russia – better because of its resources, but inferior because of the difficulty and danger of its colonisation. While unsystematic colonisation had been possible in the Russian heartland, it had damaged nature on Sakhalin; but correct colonisation in this new era would render nature obedient and productive, reforming penal servitude and strengthening Russia's position in the East.³⁶

THE HUNGRY MONSTER (MID-1880S TO 1905)

The modern confidence of the early 1870s was called into question over the next few decades, as hundreds of convicts arrived on Sakhalin annually by sea, turning the remote wilderness into an enormous open-air prison. Their task was the conquest of Sakhalin nature, building a productive colony in what was once wilderness. Convicts cleared fields, built roads, hauled logs and constructed barracks. Mikhail Mitsul' returned in 1880 to oversee agriculture, and soon assumed the role of colony director. He focused his energy on

³⁵ Avgustinovich, *Zhizn' russkikh i inorodtsev*, pp. 27–28; Keppen, *Ostrov Sakhalin*, pp. 25–28.

³⁶ On the unscientific 'bureaucratic' colonisation of the Russian steppe in the early nineteenth century, see Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 97–134

systematic agricultural reform, infrastructure and development of the island's eastern shore. Despite his leadership, however, coal mining remained unprofitable, crops failed and convicts seldom became self-sufficient. The situation only worsened after Mitsul's premature death in 1883. Under subsequent leadership, released convicts received uncultivable land and coal mining was characterised by inefficiency and waste. As the population grew, the young, progressive administrative personnel were soon outnumbered by hardened prison officials from Siberia, who scorned modern ways.

The conflict between old ways and new was not limited to Sakhalin. After the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II, his son, Alexander III, strove to reverse the liberal policies of his father and restore an imagined authentic Russia with its own destiny, devoid of Western influence. A new picture of Russian nature was revealed in tourist guidebooks of the 1890s, which portrayed the Volga River banks as picturesque, rather than monotonous, and in the art of the *Peredvizhniki* ['Wanderers', Russian realist artists] who painted Russian forests as life-giving, with mythical or even religious significance.³⁷ Western science was no longer trusted. This ideological shift gradually became evident in descriptions of Sakhalin, as the experiences of settlers and visitors reinforced the tsar's disillusionment with Western modernity. Unlike the visions of the 1850s, the island was no longer seen as naturally Russian, but was often Orientalised as Russia's other, its harsh extremes reinforcing the new vision of Russia as mild, alive and beautiful, perfectly suited to Russian habitation. Lacking the confidence of the 1870s, these visitors to Sakhalin portrayed an island on which mankind failed to subdue nature and science posed no solutions. To Russian readers of the 1890s, to whom the borders of the empire and the nature within were sacred, impervious to human intervention, Sakhalin was outside Russian domain, hostile and impossible to understand. It was not Russia's fault that colonisation had failed.

Zoologists Aleksandr Nikol'skii and Ivan Poliakov had visited Sakhalin in the early 1880s, participating initially in the modern Western project of identifying and classifying the

³⁷ See Ely, 'The Origins of Russian Scenery', 675–682; Ely, *This Meager Nature*, pp. 192–222; Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia*, pp. 147–181.

island's wildlife. Unlike their predecessors, who were commissioned by the state, Poliakov and Nikol'skii were there to obtain knowledge, rather than to support an agenda. Nikol'skii was working on a dissertation on Sakhalin vertebrates, while Poliakov studied the island's physical geography. At the time, they shared the confidence of Western-leaning Russians who believed that scientific advances would facilitate human progress, and that current hardships colonists faced would indeed be overcome.³⁸ Their 1890s publications for popular audiences, however, described a land that failed to conform to scientific classification.

Nicol'skii began his 1895 article with a poem by Nikolai Nekrasov about the Russian countryside: 'The forest begins – aspen and pine; an unhappy picture, dear country of mine.'³⁹ This could also describe southern Sakhalin, Nicol'skii emphasised, expressing mock indignation:

Having travelled nearly 20,000 versts, do we not have the right to expect that on Sakhalin we would encounter nature that is new to us, landscapes foreign to the Russian eye?! So what [do we find]! ... There is fir, and the same kind of aspen [as at home]. You see here our common ashberries, elderberries, whortleberries, lilies-of-the-valley, and much more, what any Russian is used to. In the woods, the same bullfinches whistle, the same pipits flutter before your eyes, the same swallows dart into the air with a cry, and even crows, sitting on tall firs, caw their greetings in Russian [*po-russki*].

It felt 'like you're walking in the woods near Petersburg or some other northern gubernia'.⁴⁰

³⁸ I.S. Poliakov, 'Puteshestvie na Ostrov Sakhalin v 1881–1882 gg.', prilozenie k XIX t. (1883) *Izvestiia imperatorskogo geograficheskogo obshchestva* (St. Petersburg, 1884). See esp. p. 110. A.M. Nikol'skii, *Ostrov Sakhalin i ego pozvonochnykh zhivotnykh*, prilozenie k *Zapiskam imperatskoi akademii nauk* 60, no. 5 (St. Petersburg, 1889). Mitsul' took an active interest in Poliakov and Nikol'skii's exploration in 1881.

³⁹ A.M. Nikol'skii, 'Na Sakhaline. Putevye ocherki', *Priroda i liudi* 1895/96, no. 1: 7. He is quoting a poem by Nikolai Nekrasov entitled 'Sasha', written in 1854–55.

⁴⁰ Nikol'skii, 'Na Sakhaline', no. 1: 7.

That was only his first impression, however. 'Upon closer acquaintance', Nikol'skii found 'Japanese plants mixed in with Sakhalin's northern flora, giving the landscape the soft character of the nature of southern lands, but in other places, it is the opposite: you see undeviating polar tundra with its moss, cloudberry and white partridges.' Elsewhere, he found North American birds, rendering the land not only non-Russian, but impervious to categorisation. He likened it to Siberia – long established in the Russian imagination as wild and dangerous – although Sakhalin, he maintained, was even more extreme. 'If Siberia has a harsh climate', Nikol'skii asserted, 'then Sakhalin is twice as harsh'. 'If in Siberia the taiga is difficult to penetrate, on Sakhalin it's impenetrable; if the [Siberian] forest consists of large trees, here on Sakhalin, they are gigantic.'⁴¹

Some nature on Sakhalin was unrecognisable altogether. Plants and trees along the riverbanks seemed at first like normal aspens, elder, currants and honeysuckle – but they were too big. 'Nowhere have I seen such gigantic willows, aspen and poplars as on Sakhalin. Birds are everywhere, perching somewhere mid-way up the trees, but still too far to shoot, so tall are the trees.' Nikol'skii found grasses that grew higher than a person. Elsewhere on the island were 'strange plants' with leaves four feet long, wild grapes too bitter even for animals, and exotic birds with yellow and red plumage.⁴²

In other places, the island felt lifeless, Nikol'skii maintained. The 'deathly silence' of the taiga 'made an absolutely painful impression on me', he wrote. 'You can wander through it all day, even all week or longer, and before you everywhere are gigantic trunks of ancient firs, through which not a single ray of sunlight penetrates. There are no flowers here, no bushes, not even weeds...' Even the bears flee the taiga, he reported. 'Occasionally you hear the peck of a woodpecker or the shrill peep of a titmouse, but so sad, so plaintive, as if the never-ending melancholy of taiga life penetrated even its tiny heart.'⁴³ The tundra was no better, the riverbanks in eastern Sakhalin 'naked and dead', with the exception of a few stunted larches, 'caricatures of trees, [whose] gnarled, knotty branches stretched not

⁴¹ Nikol'skii, 'Na Sakhaline', no. 1: 7,12.

⁴² Nikol'skii, 'Na Sakhaline. Putevye ocherki', *Priroda i liudi* 1895/96, no. 2: 30.

⁴³ Nikol'skii, 'Na Sakhaline', no. 1: 12.

upward, but sideways, or spread themselves along the ground in the direction of the dominant northeasterly wind.’⁴⁴ He explained this as a sign of the struggle between nature and climate.

Anton Chekhov, who spent three months on the island in 1890, confirmed Nikol’skii’s assessment of Sakhalin as incompatible with science. Chekhov was both a medical doctor and a writer, and while he claimed to be investigating Sakhalin objectively for a dissertation, his book emphasised the alienness of Sakhalin, which he sensationally described as not only non-Russian, but outside the pale of civilisation altogether. His impressions are somewhat understandable, as he had never travelled before, even to Western Europe. He emphasised the tremendous size and ‘original physiognomy’ of plant life near Post Due, such as burdocks [*lopukh*] that appeared ‘fantastical’ and purplish-red plants ten feet high, which had no Russian name. Near Post Aleksandrovsk, in contrast, just a few kilometres away, he found nature to be ‘truly pitiful’, reporting ‘no pines, no oaks, no maples – only sad, emaciated larches ... signs of the foul, marshy soil and harsh climate’. Northern Sakhalin he described as even more alien, citing past explorers who documented the ‘pitiful’ state of its tundra, where larches grew only one foot tall, and trunks of cedars spread horizontally along the ground. His readers learned of dark shores and treacherous seas, and vast forest fires ‘spewing crimson flames ... everything in smoke, as if in hell’. The island’s coastline was so darkened by coal that even criminals were said to weep at the sight.⁴⁵ Sakhalin appeared even more underworldly when compared to the tropical islands Chekhov visited on his return journey. ‘I was in hell, represented by Sakhalin, and in heaven, that is on the island of Ceylon’, he wrote to a friend.⁴⁶

To writers at the end of the century, Russians were no longer all-powerful engineers, capable of transforming a dark wilderness into a productive colony. Nature was in control, although Russian nature was seen as benevolent, while Sakhalin nature was not. ‘Sakhalin

⁴⁴ A.M. Nikol’skii, ‘Na Sakhaline. Putevye ocherki’, *Priroda i liudi* 1895/96, no. 4: 60.

⁴⁵ A.P. Chekhov, *Ostrov Sakhalin (iz putevykh zametok)* (Moscow: ‘Russkaia mysl’, 1895), pp. 125, 27, 137, 23–24.

⁴⁶ Cited in Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 156. Fink discusses the hell motif throughout Chekhov’s works on pp. 155–169.

nature is more of a stepmother than a mother to man', wrote Poliakov, echoing Solov'ev's description of the homeland Russia four decades earlier. The lush plant life and abundance of birds and beasts failed to provide sustenance for even the island's indigenous population, who resorted to fish for nourishment. While its rich soil seemed to indicate great potential for colonisation, he no longer shared Mitsul's optimism.⁴⁷ His colleague Nikol'skii reported that wheat did not ripen quickly enough for harvest and that, without meadows, the island was unsuited for cattle. This was indeed the experience of exile-settlers. Even the governor-general observed that '[true] penal servitude begins not with penal servitude, but with settlement', referring to the plight of criminals left to fend for themselves. 'When nature created Sakhalin', wrote Chekhov, 'she paid little attention to mankind and his needs.'⁴⁸

The island was unable to sustain a Russian population, asserted Chekhov, a medical doctor. He disagreed with Avgustinovich's prior assessment of the island as healthy for habitation. Acknowledging 'the wealth of the water, the variety of timber, grasses taller than a human, the fabulous abundance of fish and coal beds, all [of which] suggest a prosperous and contented existence for an entire million people', he reported that a weather-related lack of vitamins caused lethargy in the local population. He described 'clouds of mosquitoes, literally clouds – blocking the sun ... I suspect that, if you spend the night here in the open air ... you could die from them, or at the very least, go mad'. If you survived the mosquitoes, you could be attacked by bears. Most famously, Chekhov diagnosed what he called *febris sachaliniensis* – Sakhalin fever – the symptoms of which included a headache and pain throughout the body, 'caused not by infection, but by climatic influences'. It was not until a century later, in 1987, that this was identified as a rare form of scarlet fever.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ivan Poliakov, 'Sakhalin', in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, vol. 12, pt. 2, *Vostochnoe okrainy Rossii: Primorskaia i amurskaia oblasti*, ed. P.P. Semenov (St. Petersburg: Vol'f, 1895), pp. 260, 235, 252.

⁴⁸ Nikol'skii, 'Na Sakhaline', no. 2: 30; Chekhov, *Ostrov Sakhalin*, pp. 305, 163. See also Petr Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia (Sakhalin)* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo O.N. Popovoi, 1905), p. 94.

⁴⁹ Chekhov, *Ostrov Sakhalin*, pp. 163, 16, 306; E. Meve, *Medsina v tvorchestve i zhizni A. P. Chekhova* (Kiev: Zdorov'ie, 1989), p. 119.

For anyone who questioned these writers' conclusions about Russian powerlessness against Sakhalin nature, the authors demonstrated that even the seemingly successful settlements were misleading. Convicts with families, Nikol'skii reported, lived in typical Russian villages, with 'Russian peasant cottages, barefoot blond-haired children, grandmothers in sarafans, and real Russian peasants in kaftans or half-kaftans, most of whom have good-natured expressions on their faces'. Yet they were not self-sufficient, but depended on the state for provisions. Poliakov encountered an excellent meadow on level terrain – 'the best [he] had seen on Sakhalin'. This was not natural beauty, however – Sakhalin's nature was not beautiful to Poliakov – but evidence of Russian enhancement. Nearby was a line of 'well-built Russian peasant cottages, with an adorable chapel at the front'. When he approached, he found them empty, without glass in the windows, with collapsed ceilings and stoves. This was nature's fault, he asserted, after observing the floods during a deluge.⁵⁰ A.P. Salomon, head of Russia's Main Prison Administration, reported similar experiences during his 1898 visit.

Behind the beautiful window-dressing of prominent and at first glance well-established villages are hidden disorder and need, and the rotting shell of [an abandoned village], standing miserably on the barren tundra, bears witness to squandered strength and money spent in vain on experiments in colonisation, doomed in their very essence to inevitable failure.⁵¹

He reported to the island's administration: 'Colonisation of the island corresponds in no ways to the intentions and plans of the state'.⁵² He declined to speculate whether nature was to blame, or the colonisers themselves.

⁵⁰ Nikol'skii, 'Na Sakhaline', no. 2: 32, 34; Poliakov, 'Sakhalin', p. 270. As Poliakov died in 1887, it is unclear who prepared this manuscript for publication in 1895. While Poliakov wrote these words prior to the 1890s, it is worth noting that they were only published after predominant associations with Sakhalin shifted from abundance and potential to pain and despair. This attitude was not evident in his prior scientific publications.

⁵¹ A.P. Salomon, 'Rech' nachal'nika glavnogo tiuremnogo upravleniia na o. Sakhaline', *Tiuremnyi vestnik* 1899, no. 1 (Jan.): 10.

⁵² Salomon, 'Rech' nachal'nika', 10.

If Poliakov, Nikol'skii, and Chekhov – despite their scientific training – had described Sakhalin's natural environment as confusing and unwelcoming to Russians, to Vlas Doroshevich, Sakhalin was downright hostile. A sensationalist journalist who capitalised on Chekhov's success by following in the writer's footsteps, Doroshevich described an island that actively impeded the arrival of Russians. He described the 'harsh, inhospitable cliffs', covered with snow in mid-April, which he observed from the ship. He identified the spot where the steamship 'Kostroma' had wrecked just five years earlier. 'Here the sea is a traitor; but the shore is no friend [to mankind]', he asserted. 'Sakhalin doesn't like it when [ships] stop along its steep, precipitous cliffs'. Doroshevich fantasised about the prehistory of the island, comparing its shape on a map to a hungry monster. In five pages, without a single reference to criminals or penal servitude, Doroshevich established the island as savage, even monstrous, a place to avoid. Even Russian officials were known to turn into beasts, he later reported, a phenomenon he called 'sakhalinisation' [*osakhalinovanie*], implying that Sakhalin was at fault.⁵³

Like previous explorers, Doroshevich acknowledged the rich natural resources of Sakhalin, but, in his view, not human limitations, but nature itself was hindering their harvest. 'Deep within Sakhalin many riches are hidden', he wrote.

Mighty beds of coal. Oil. There is supposed to be iron. It is said that there's gold. But Sakhalin jealously guards its many riches, clutching them tightly and not letting go. Sakhalin blocks your path jealously with its impenetrable taiga; it drowns you in the bogs of its tundra. With iron and fire does one make his way, flavoring the soil with blood and tears.⁵⁴

Anyone who remained unconvinced of Sakhalin's natural depravity after reading Chekhov was almost certainly persuaded by Doroshevich, who made little pretence of objectivity, but wrote what would sell newspapers and advance his career.

By the end of the century, Sakhalin was no longer a land of promise, nor were Russians its capable colonisers. Even its natural environment had been Orientalised, creating a distant

⁵³ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, pt. 1, pp. 3–7, 12, 207–208.

⁵⁴ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, pt. 1, pp. 11–12.

colonial other, an untamed *terra incognita* whose hostile wildernesses defied Russian efforts to tame them. As penal colonisation expanded throughout the island, depictions of Sakhalin nature reflected not only the experiences of convict settlers, but a broader Russian disillusionment with science, resistance to change, and belief in a unique Russian destiny. The island's nature did not conform to scientific principles. It did not submit to mankind. While Russians cherished their own homeland, which only decades earlier had seemed dreary and infertile, they feared Sakhalin's lush forests and abundant shores. The inescapable conclusion was that the island was not Russian and had no role in Russia's future. It would best be left alone.

'GREAT IS MANKIND'S POWER OVER NATURE' (1904–05)

While the image of Sakhalin as savage and predatory dominated the Russian press, attempts in 1904–05 to resignify the island as bountiful and essential reveal that not all Russians had rejected science and Western modernisation. Penal colonisation had conclusively failed, declared Admiral Evgenii Alekseev, Viceroy of the Far East, in August 1904. After the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in January of that year, exile to Sakhalin had been halted and most Russians evacuated to the mainland. A new, contrasting image of Sakhalin emerged as the island was threatened with Japanese occupation. Facing not only war in the east, but political and social turmoil at home, Russians posed new questions about Russia itself and Sakhalin's place within it. What significance did Sakhalin have to Russia in these changing times? Was colonisation of Sakhalin even possible? Did the island have a future within the empire?⁵⁵ Impassioned activists argued against surrender of the island, which they described as abundant, fertile and geopolitically vital. Downplaying past failures, these writers reassured a hesitant public that Russians could indeed conquer the harshest of nature and that Sakhalin, in turn, would revitalise their homeland. Ultimately, their efforts were in vain.

⁵⁵ These specific questions were noted in Petr Shmidt, 'Ostrov Sakhalin', *Russkoe bogatstvo* 1905, no. 4: 149.

Tax inspector Aleksandr Panov, who spent fourteen months on Sakhalin in the early 1900s, demonstrated faith in science and human dominion over nature, arguing that a free population could accomplish what convicts could not. While little is known about his background, his political and ideological views are evident in his two books on Sakhalin published in 1904 and 1905. Panov was not a scientist, but he believed in the power of science and technology. He also believed in a unique Russian identity and destiny, which he strove to protect. Sakhalin, he felt, was part of Russia. While he acknowledged the island's reputation as savage and alien, he insisted that it was inaccurate, and that the island was neither foreign nor impenetrable. Rather, he asserted, nature 'intended' [*prednaznachila*] Sakhalin to be 'one of the most valuable jewels among the treasures of the Russian people [*narod*]'.⁵⁶ Nature's intention, however, required human effort to be fulfilled. 'Great is mankind's power over nature', Panov insisted, 'and with correct effort, even bare rock and sea bottoms can be transformed into flourishing corners'. Without that effort, he warned, 'without desire to subdue nature and force it into service', its population was doomed to poverty and savagery. By 'correct efforts', he meant reform of the island's administration and arrival of new 'colonisational personnel' [*kolonizatsionnye kadry*] with the necessary skills and experience to accomplish these tasks.⁵⁷

Panov was joined in his crusade by the young zoologist and ichthyologist Petr Shmidt, an academic from St. Petersburg who had conducted research on Sakhalin in the summer of 1901. Beyond his area of scholarly expertise, Shmidt introduced his own vision of Sakhalin's future and its place in the empire. He had experienced firsthand Sakhalin's harsh nature: the difficulty of travel through its mountains and forests; the coexistence of diverse forms of wildlife; the harsh climate inconsistent with the island's latitude; rivers blocked by log jams due to frequent floods. He acknowledged the misery of the island's exiled settlers, but felt colonisation was still possible. To Shmidt, Sakhalin's nature – 'as if compensating

⁵⁶ A.A. Panov, *Sakhalin, kak koloniia: ocherki kolonizatsii i sovremennogo polozheniia Sakhalina* (Moscow: Tipografiia I.D. Sytina, 1905), p. 3; A.A. Panov, *Chto takoe Sakhalin i nuzhen-li on nam?* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia G.K. Skachkova, 1905), p. 32. *Sakhalin, kak koloniia* was initially published serially in 1904 under a pseudonym.

⁵⁷ Panov, *Sakhalin, kak koloniia*, p. 180.

for [the island's] difficult weather conditions' – had granted riches in abundance, 'which man needs only to know how to use'.⁵⁸ Shmidt rejected prevailing notions of Sakhalin as incomprehensible or unsubmitive to classification, insisting that to understand a land's ecology required recognising the causes and interrelationships of various natural phenomena. He demystified the island by laying out for readers its geology, history, climate, fauna and flora, explaining their impacts on each other and on the local population. He proposed rational solutions to the problems settlers faced. The island was neither hostile nor alien, he insisted. With free and 'rationally-directed' labour, rather than penal servitude, the island would become an 'exceptionally valuable' Russian colony.⁵⁹

Both Panov and Shmidt described Sakhalin not as desolate, but detailed the island's natural and mineral wealth, which, if properly harvested, would make the island a centre of mining and trade. Panov noted that the island's shores were dark due to the abundance of coal, associating the colour not with hostility, but with bounty. Yet coal was not Sakhalin's only resource, he explained. The island had iron, copper, silver and lead. Moreover, gold had been found on Sakhalin, he claimed, and high-quality oil had been discovered on the island's northeastern shores.⁶⁰ Shmidt likewise noted that the island's 'grandiose mineral riches' had been barely touched by industrialists. He emphasised the importance of coal to modern industry, transportation and mining. The Russian navy was spending large sums of money on coal from England and Japan, he reported. The timber industry would also flourish on Sakhalin, Shmidt predicted, as half of Sakhalin was covered with centuries-old firs and larches, along with birch, ash, maple, oak, and poplar. He lamented that no one seemed to care that frequent fires were turning the virgin forests into 'naked wilderness'. Meanwhile, the Far Eastern port of Vladivostok was being built with lumber from California and Oregon.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia*, pp. 8, 13, 19, 21, 33; Shmidt, 'Ostrov Sakhalin': 161, 162.

⁵⁹ Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia*, pp. 5, 94–100.

⁶⁰ Panov, *Chto takoe Sakhalin*, pp. 12, 15. There was no gold on Sakhalin.

⁶¹ Shmidt, 'Ostrov Sakhalin': 159–161; Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia*, p. 36.

While past colonists had proven unable to sustain themselves on Sakhalin, Shmidt and Panov painted the island as providing nourishment in abundance, especially its marine wildlife. '[Sakhalin's] waters teem with diverse species of fish', Panov noted, focusing on the herring, salmon and tuna. He reported that during herring runs – which happened four times each summer – storms would wash 'hills of caviar' onto the shores, and dense schools of fish hindered travel by rowboat. 'You can imagine what colossal riches are contained in Sakhalin waters!' he enthused, referring also to the whales, walruses, seals, sea cabbage, and even sea cucumbers [*trepang*], which were a delicacy in China. Ichthyologist Shmidt described his own experiences walking several versts on a thick 'carpeting of caviar' spawned by millions of fish. After a storm, he reported, residents gathered entire wheelbarrows of herring from the shores. Salmon could be easily caught as they swam upriver to spawn, and the bays were full of 'excellent oysters', 'huge crabs' and 'excellent, incredibly delicious prawns, almost the size of crayfish.' Explaining that primitive fishing techniques had prevented Russians in the past from profiting from the industry, he attributed this to inexperience and unfamiliarity with the sea, but asserted that, with 'sensible exploitation' [*razumnaia ekspluatatsiia*], Sakhalin could provide inexpensive, quality seafood not only for itself, but for its neighbours. With 'rational organisation of export' [*ratsional'naia organizatsiia vyvoza*], it could feed even European Russia.⁶²

Both Shmidt and Panov were more ambivalent about Sakhalin agriculture, but they were optimistic that it could succeed. Although administrative reports often blamed poor harvests on the alleged laziness of convicts, Panov marvelled that settlers produced anything at all under the conditions of the penal regime. Noting that some farms were more productive than others, he attributed their success to correct farming techniques, including timely ploughing, sowing and harvest, and above all, quality seeds. Neither the climate nor the soil conditions presented insurmountable obstacles, he wrote. Rather, the primary hindrances were the inadequacy of agricultural equipment and lack of roads, conditions that a competent administration could easily address. When implemented correctly, Panov maintained, agriculture could feed a much larger population than currently lived on the

⁶² Panov, *Chto takoe Sakhalin*, pp. 16–18; Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia*, p. 55; Shmidt, 'Ostrov Sakhalin': 156–157, 159, 185.

island. Shmidt was less optimistic but, like Panov, felt that with hard work and the application of 'scientific and practical knowledge', the island could indeed support a Russian population.⁶³

Facing the threat of Japanese occupation, Shmidt and Panov sought to re-envision Sakhalin as abundant and worth defending against invaders and to restore faith in Russians' ability to subdue it and profit from its riches. Nature was indeed antagonistic, Shmidt admitted, but settlers must 'take back from nature the right to exist'. The 'pioneer colonist', he wrote, 'needs energy of iron for the fight against the hostile elements of nature'. Russia's own harsh climate was not a hindrance to Russian advancement, noted Panov, but when combined with science and technology, provided the experience necessary to achieve greatness. 'We are at the dawn of a new life', he enthused, 'and who knows what mighty developments [we] will achieve!'⁶⁴

According to Panov and Shmidt, cultivation of Sakhalin would benefit much more than the region alone. With correct planning and implementation, Panov predicted, within two decades, the island would provide wealth for the Russian people. Its seafood would feed the Amur region, Siberia and even European Russia. Its resources would turn it into a centre of international trade. The economic benefits of abolishing penal servitude would outweigh the costs. With its diverse mineral resources and proximity to international markets, it would become a centre of the mining industry whether or not it was in Russian hands. If it did remain Russian, the island would become a 'bulwark of our economic and political interests in the East', Panov maintained and, by protecting the Amur River from foreign invasion, it would guarantee lasting peace for years to come. More than 300,000 Russian settlers, he noted, by 'sweat and tears', had created Russian culture in the Amur region. It was connected by 'unbreakable threads' to the Russian homeland, and deserved the protection that only Sakhalin could provide. Beyond Russia alone, it served the interests of 'all of white humanity' [*vsego belogo chelovechestva*] to prevent Japanese hegemony in Asia.

⁶³ Panov, *Sakhalin, kak koloniia*, pp. 152–154, 157, 4–5; Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia*, pp. 99–100; Shmidt, 'Ostrov Sakhalin': 185, 183.

⁶⁴ Shmidt, 'Ostrov Sakhalin': 180–181; Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia*, p. 100; Panov, *Chto takoe Sakhalin*, pp. 26–27, 32.

This could only be accomplished through large-scale colonisation.⁶⁵ Panov's and Shmidt's arguments were widely repeated in the Russian press, but their efforts ultimately failed. In September 1905 the Treaty of Portsmouth surrendered southern Sakhalin to Japan.

CONCLUSION

Once described as a land of plenty, welcoming its Russian guests, by the end of the century, Sakhalin had become an alien monster preying on its human inhabitants. To Russian visitors of the 1850s, Sakhalin had seemed a mild, picturesque island, patiently awaiting civilisation. That view changed by the early 1870s, when scientists described Sakhalin's natural environment as harsh and foreboding, a land that would punish the convicted criminals exiled there to mine coal. Expedition members were confident, however, that Russians could subdue it, and that the island would soon yield a profit. Over the next two decades, that view shifted, as penal colonisation failed and modernisation campaigns throughout the empire were suspended by the new tsar. Sakhalin's nature, it was repeatedly asserted, was unknowable, and therefore unconquerable, even antagonistic toward the settler. Russians were not to blame for their inability to tame it. Yet, in the early twentieth century, threatened with Japanese occupation, efforts were made resignify Sakhalin as rich and abundant, granted to Russia by nature as a source of wealth. To these writers, the land was neither mysterious nor hostile but, if colonised correctly, would become one of the richest colonies in the world. To a country struggling politically and economically, Sakhalin was presented as the solution to many of the empire's woes. These descriptions reflect not only the changing experiences of the island, whose Russian population grew from zero to 40,000 in under fifty years, but reveal diverse and shifting attitudes toward nature, modernity and Russia itself.

Portrayals of Sakhalin's natural environment reveal dramatic variation in Russian conceptions of the relationships between nature and humankind. A hallmark of Western modernity was belief that humans could control the natural environment by draining

⁶⁵ Panov, *Chto takoe Sakhalin*, pp. 29–32; Shmidt, 'Ostrov Sakhalin': 185; Shmidt, *Ostrov izgnaniia*, pp. 99–100; Panov, *Sakhalin, kak koloniia*, pp. 46–49.

swamps, improving crop yield, planting forests and directing the flow of water. Many Russians, however, emphasised the role of nature in moulding Russian character and shaping Russia as a whole. Descriptions from both the 1850s and 1890s suggest that their writers rejected this aspect of modern Western thought. In the 1850s, Sakhalin was attractive precisely because there was no need to subdue it. It was ready and waiting for Russians to settle, just as Russians had been destined to colonise the entire European Russian plateau. Toward the end of the century, the opposite was the case. Sakhalin nature seemed much stronger than mankind, and Russians were not meant to overcome it. In contrast, expedition members of the 1870s, along with activists of 1904–05, shared Western ideas of humans as superior, capable of shaping even the harshest environment to serve their needs. These changes correspond to shifting views in the empire, as tsars and people deliberated the relevance of European thought in a Russian context.

Belief in mankind's authority over the natural world was part of a broader modern ideology according to which, through science, mankind could not only understand the world, but improve it, a view that undergirded the Great Reforms of Tsar Alexander II in the 1860s–70s. The scientists who reported on Sakhalin in the 1870s were experts in their fields – an agronomist, a medical doctor, a mining engineer and a trained prison administrator. Their optimism about Sakhalin's future sprang from modern confidence that systematic exploration would render the island legible and therefore manageable. Indeed, the purpose of the 1871 expedition was to collect data upon which to build state policies. By the 1890s, however, popular descriptions of Sakhalin revealed scepticism toward this project. The scientifically-informed practices of the 1870s had failed, they noted, describing the poor condition of settlements and the dismal state of agriculture. With temperatures too cold, plants too large, forests too dense and fields too wet, the Sakhalin they portrayed was not only difficult to tame, but defied the natural law. Modern science did not apply there, and Russians would best leave the island alone. A few years later, however, Shmidt and Panov claimed the opposite. Sakhalin's environment seemed inconsistent, they maintained, not because science was wrong, but because science was correct. The unusual climate and wildlife were rational consequences of the interactions between water

currents, wind patterns, latitude and Sakhalin's insularity. Once properly understood, the island's nature could be manipulated to meet Russian needs.

Many Russians of the mid-nineteenth century viewed Russia as having its own unique destiny, its borders and its national character established by nature. For better or for worse, nature, often personified as Mother – or Stepmother – Nature, determined where Russians would settle and how they would live. This view informed attitudes toward Sakhalin's natural environment as well. Although visitors disagreed on nature's intentions toward its Russian guests, they frequently granted it agency to either welcome or discourage settlement. To many Russians, nature served as a synonym for destiny or even God. To Nevel'skoi and his associates in the 1850s, nature intended Russians to colonise Sakhalin, and therefore created conditions that would make settlement not only possible, but easy. In his view, Russians had been wrong to ignore nature's summons. Shmidt and Panov, who wrote after four decades of failed colonisation attempts, acknowledged that settlement was not easy but they, too, argued that it was nature's will that Sakhalin provide for Russia. Both the scientists of the 1870s and popular writers of the 1890s granted nature agency also, although they viewed Sakhalin nature as hostile, deliberately hindering Russian settlement. To them, Sakhalin was not intended by nature to belong to Russia, although 1870s writers assumed that settlers could make it Russian, calling into question the idea that nature determined national boundaries. 1890s accounts, in contrast, assumed that Russians were helpless against Sakhalin's hostility and should stay home, where they belonged.

Descriptions of Sakhalin reveal not only changing attitudes toward science and mankind's alleged power over nature, but shifting views of what nature was supposed to be and do. 'Normal' nature was not hostile, all writers agreed, but served – rather than harmed – its human inhabitants. As noted above, normal nature to Nevel'skoi and his associates meant an environment that was moderate, safe and required no subjugation, such as the imagined nature of Western Europe – which provided for its people – and Sakhalin itself, which they described in similar terms. 1870s visitors shared this view of what normal nature entailed. To them, Sakhalin was abnormal, but science could correct its defects. This confidence was missing in accounts of the 1890s, in which Sakhalin was again abnormal, at a time when

Russians viewed their own nature with pride. These descriptions do not presume a single normative climate or landscape, in Western Europe or elsewhere. Rather, 'normal' nature was that which could be explained by factors such as latitude, climate and precipitation. Sakhalin was abnormal, however, because it seemed unexplainable. Temperatures were too cold for the island's latitude; plants were too large for its climate; and the wrong wildlife inhabited its terrain. Normal nature followed rules and could be classified and categorised, but science, it seemed, did not apply on Sakhalin. Shmidt and Panov disagreed, arguing that Sakhalin's nature was perfectly normal, exactly what would be expected given its location and surroundings. Russians, therefore, could and should subdue it and profit from its resources. The tsar and his ministers did not share their confidence.

In July 1905, Japanese troops occupied southern Sakhalin in the final battle of the Russo-Japanese war, and the next month, the Treaty of Portsmouth divided Sakhalin in the middle, the more temperate and fertile southern half united with its neighbour to the south. While Tsar Nicholas II refused to give up any 'primordial Russian land', he agreed to surrender southern Sakhalin, disregarding the 1850s arguments of Nevel'skoi and Murav'ev, as well as recent claims by Panov and Shmidt, that the island had been assigned by nature to serve the empire.⁶⁶ Russian efforts to re-signify the northern portion of the island continued – including an unheeded proposal to rename the region – yet the Russian population on Sakhalin dropped to under 5,000. In the turbulent years of the early twentieth century, Sakhalin received little attention from the state or the press.

Yet not all Russians gave up hope in mankind's mastery over Sakhalin nature, or the island's destiny in service to the homeland. Emphasising that technology was still young, Vlas Doroshevich placed the future in the hands of 'god-people' [*liudiam-bogam*], made all-powerful by science, able to subdue the 'monster' island once and for all. There would come a time, he predicted in 1908, that a dam would connect Sakhalin to the East Siberian mainland, redirecting the cold northern currents from the Sea of Okhotsk. 'We have already corrected some of creation's mistakes', the newspaperman wrote, referring to the construction of the Suez and Panama Canals. 'Our children will realise that the world is

⁶⁶ S.Iu. Vitte, *Vospominaniia*, vol. II (Tallinn: Skif Aleks, 1994), p. 380.

poorly created! All-powerful, they will rebuild it for themselves.' With breakwaters in place, he predicted that not only Sakhalin, but all of Siberia would 'break out in colour and flowers to become the richest land in the world'.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ V. Doroshevich, 'Dal'nii Vostok (okonchanie)', *Russkoe slovo* 10 (23) April 1908, 2.