

**Japanese in the Russian Far East (1900s – early 1930s):  
Manpower problem on Kamchatka and Northern Sakhalin\***

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the problem of manpower in the Russian Far East in the 1900s – early 1930s. The authors examine the total number of workers and employees at the concession enterprises, a percentage ratio of the Russian and foreign workers in the Far East fishery, coal and oil industries, their living and working conditions, salaries etc. The authors especially emphasized the role of Japanese fishery managers in the development of the Kamchatka fishery in pre-revolutionary Russia and in the USSR.

**Keywords:** workers and employees; Japanese tenants and concessionaries; the Russian Far East; the Russian Empire; the Far East Republic; the USSR; Japan; Kamchatka; Northern Sakhalin; fishery; oil industry; coal industry; timber industry.

**Introduction.** The problem of manpower in the Russian Far East is not new and the problem of providing the Far East region of Russia with labor remains unresolved. Legal and illegal labor migrants flow to the region from China, North Korea and the former republics of the USSR. Thus, this vast richest region of Russia has the same problems with national personnel which existed during the former periods of the Russian history.

**Materials and methods.** The main sources of this article were the published documents of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GA RF), the Russian State Archive of Economy (RGAE), etc. The article uses important historiographical data, unpublished documents. The research used mainly the problem and chronological methods, enabling to arrange the events in chronological and problem order. The methodological principle of historicism also enables to study the problem of manpower in the Russian Far East.

**Discussion.** The Russian historical science has arranged a range of researches in the analysis of state concession and labor policy in the Russian Far East in the 1920s -1940s. For example, N.V. Marjasova studied the Soviet concession practice in the region in the 1920s -1930s [1]. In particular, S.V. Koshkareva traced the existence of the Japanese fishing concession on Kamchatka up to August 1945 [2]. A comprehensive theoretical and concrete historical analysis of the problems of using the Soviet and foreign workers and employees on the Far East oil and coal concessions was reflected in T.V. Yudina's monograph [3]. For their part, M.M. Zagorulko and V.V. Bulatov investigated the activities of Japanese fishery managers in the 1900s – early 1930s [4].

**Results.** For October 1, 1925 there were about 7 million workers in the Soviet Union [5]. Approximately, during the same period concessions in the sphere of production occupied slightly more than 26 thousand foreign and Soviet workers. In 1927/1928 economic year their quantity decreased to 21.5 thousand [6]. For October 1, 1928 there were 19.9 thousand concession workers and employees in the USSR [7]. It was obvious that the Soviet concession practice entered the fading period. Really, since 1929 the Soviet government did not sign any new concession contract and limited itself to renewal of separate old contracts. Only the concession relations with Japan showed both stability and progress. It is characteristic that any sort of the economic relations between the USSR and Japan since the beginning of the 1920s and up to August 1945 had deep political implication.

The foreign policy of the USSR fully could use the fact of existence of Japanese concessions in the region. The Soviet Union managed «to calculate» the closest links which existed between Japanese

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\* Работа выполнена при поддержке Российского гуманитарного научного фонда (РГНФ); проект № 13-01-00111 «Рабочие на концессионных предприятиях в Российской империи и СССР (1900-1940-е годы)».

bureaucracy, military and business elites before and during World War II. In this regard, one document of the Soviet foreign policy department is remarkable. In 1925, the Soviet ambassador in Tokyo V.L. Kopp especially emphasized that “any large concession given to this or that considerable Japanese firm, will have the most direct and immediately being realized political value. At the closest texture of ruling bureaucracy with major industrial and financial companies of Japan, successful maneuvering in the field of our concession policy is the most paramount political task” [8].

In other words, the economic interests of a Japanese business elites seriously influenced the political and military leaders of “the rising sun country”. In turn, the Japanese leaders tried to observe those interests. It is enough to remember that in 1925 granting concessions to Japanese businesspersons on the Soviet territory was one of conditions of a diplomatic recognition of the USSR from the Japanese government. On January 20, 1925 the Soviet-Japanese Convention on the principles of relationship between two states was signed in Beijing. It concerned the spheres of economic cooperation either. The Soviet government agreed to provide concessions on operation of mineral, timber and natural resources of the USSR to Japanese citizens, companies and associations. The Japanese capital directed to the Soviet Far East. During 1925-1927, twelve concession contracts were concluded with Japanese legal entities and individuals. The Soviet government granted concessions to 7 Japanese firms in the fields of the oil and coal industry, gold mining and operation of timber areas [9]. Four concessions were concluded with fishing firms in 1928.

For January 1, 1937, there were only five concession enterprises in the Soviet Union. Four of them were Japanese: three acted in the oil and coal industry of Northern Sakhalin, and one concession operated water biological resources in the Kamchatka waters [10]. Even in March 30, 1944, Japanese concessions “Kita Karafuto Sekio Kabushiki Kaisha” (oil), “Kita Karafuto Koogio Kabushiki Kaisha” (coal) and “Nichiro Giogio Kabushiki Kaisha” (fishing) continued to appear in confidential Soviet statistics [11]. It is not casual. The powerful concern “Mitsubishi” which represented influential Japanese capital stood behind all those concessions. The concession “Nichiro Giogio Kabushiki Kaisha” on Kamchatka ended the USSR concession policy and practice. That concession was liquidated in August 1945 [12].

As a whole, it is obvious that during the period of the 1920s – the 1930s the Japanese capital focused its main interest on two branches of the Soviet Far East economy: a) fishery, catching of a crab and canning production on Kamchatka and b) oil and coal industry on Northern Sakhalin. From the economic point of view, cooperation with Japanese businesspersons was very productive for the USSR. In 1929 the total amount of the Japanese investments attracted in the Far Eastern region through concessions made 17.7 million rubles at once [13]. Investments of fishing concessionaires increased the general share of the state participation in financing of the Soviet Far East industry by 14.29 %. At the same time fiscal receipts from all Far East concessionaires made 9.52 % of the state capital investments in the regional industry. Thus, in 1929 the Soviet government got an opportunity to increase its program of investments into industrial development of the region by 25 % [14].

Other fact is also remarkable. Despite the course taken in the USSR on elimination of concessions, the total of concession workers in the country had to increase sharply. It is obvious that from the beginning of 1929 Japanese concessions concentrated the majority of concession workers in the USSR. According to the Japanese newspaper “Hakodate-simbun”, in 1929 the total of Japanese labor in economy of the Soviet Far East made 34.7 thousand people [15]. However, this number included not only persons who worked on Japanese fishing, mining and timber concessions. Japanese labor was used on sea and river fishing sites rented by Japanese on Kamchatka. The Soviet fishing organizations also used Japanese labor (7.4 thousand). Almost 1.1 thousand Japanese worked at the Soviet “crab catchers” (vessels) and 40 people worked in the Soviet timber industry. However, the vast majority of Japanese (25 thousand) worked on the Kamchatka fishing sites (concession or rented by Japanese fishery managers). Japanese workers in the Kamchatka fishery appeared long before the conclusion of concession contracts with Japanese firms in the fall of 1928. Simply since 1929 Japanese fishery managers began to combine rent and concession forms of operation of the Kamchatka water biological resources. Before, they annually rented there river and sea sites for fishing and crab catching. Japanese worked according to conditions of Russian-Japanese Fishing Convention signed in 1907. More than 70 % of all production of seafood in “conventional” Far East waters of pre-revolutionary Russia fell to the share of Japan. In 1923, Japan’s share even exceeded 90 % [16].

The 1907 Convention balanced the rights of Russian and Japanese anglers in questions of the taxation and fishing rules. Nevertheless, before and after the October revolution of 1917 weakness of technical equipment of Russian fishery managers was aggravated with absence of necessary quantity of national qualified fishing personnel in the Far East. Thus, the labor problem in the Soviet Far East fishery was not new. Before revolution, about 15 thousand anglers worked in the Kamchatka waters. Only 3 thousand (or 20 %) of them were Russians, and other 12 thousand (or 80 %) were Japanese. After revolution situation did not change. Fishing industry on the Kamchatka peninsula for 80 % was in hands of Japanese tenants. In 1925, 21.5 thousand anglers left to Kamchatka from Japan, and only 1.5 thousand ones left from Vladivostok (Russia). Thus, the share of Japanese workers made 93.5 %, and Russians – only 6.5 % [17].

Japanese and Russian fishery managers rented the Kamchatka river sites in mouths of the rivers flowing into the Sea of Okhotsk and the Bering Sea, and sea sites along the Kamchatka coast. The pre-revolutionary legislation of Russia allowed the Russian “river” tenants to employ Japanese workers. However, their quantity should not have exceeded one third of the total number of workers. That rule

continued to work in the mid-twenties but Soviet fishery managers broke it. The reason was simple. Employment of Japanese anglers was cheaper, and their share on the Kamchatka river fisheries reached 40, and sometimes 50 % of the total number of workers. Unlike river sites, on sea ones the Russian workers were not used at all. Moreover, they were used neither by Japanese tenants, nor by the Soviet joint - stock companies. By way of exception, Japanese involved the qualified Russian workers for processing red caviar in “the Russian way”, expecting to deliver the product on the Soviet market. However, their share did not exceed 5 %. On other sea sites, the Russian workers were absent. There were no Russian workers at all canneries of Japanese tenants [18].

In 1925 Soviet labor unions suggested increasing a share of the Russian workers on the Japanese tenants' sites: on sea sites -to 50 % and more, on river sites -to 75 %, at canneries -over 75 %. However, working conditions at Japanese tenants couldn't involve the Russian anglers. The working day proceeded 16–18 hours per day: from about 4 o'clock in the morning till 11 o'clock in the evening without days off and holydays. Canneries adhered to the same schedule also. The intensification of work was quite explainable. The sites and canneries were operated not all the year round but only during a season of a course of fish and crabs on Kamchatka (from June to September or from May to September). But on the Soviet fishing sites work did not stop and continued without week-ends and holidays either. At legislatively established 8-hour working day, overtime work was allowed. People worked for 14 hours a day. However, the lunch break made 3 hours, instead of 1.5 hours at Japanese [19].

Nevertheless, Japanese workers earned less, than the Russian workers though Japanese had higher qualification and worked more time. For a season of 1924 on the Soviet fishing sites a Russian worker earned near 240 rubles, and Japanese – 190 rubles. On fishing sites of Japanese tenants the salary was lower. Japanese employers didn't give out to the hired personnel any overalls, even when people had to work in ice water. Their living conditions were extremely wretched. Hired men usually huddled in the barracks constructed of straw. Premises at canneries were not better. They were constructed from thin and narrow boards, and the roofs were made of the same straw. For lodging for the night, there were rows of plank beds in barracks. At each Japanese cannery there was a doctor, and on fishing site there was a paramedic. Japanese physicians obviously used small number or absence of the Soviet medical personnel and took a payment from patients: frequently not money but “a fur equivalent” (skins of a fur animal). Those “fees” significantly supplemented their high monetary compensation [20].

Standards of the Soviet labor legislation in conventional waters of the USSR did not extend on Japanese tenants. For this reason, the Soviet labor unions offered at negotiations on the conclusion of the new Fishing Convention to bring up a question of application of standards of the Soviet Labor Code to Japanese workers and employees. Reaction of Japanese was sharply negative. As a result, the 1925 Moscow negotiations were interrupted and resumed only in 1928 [21]. Japanese coal concessionaires also opposed the standards of the Soviet labor legislation. In 1925, one of the Japanese coal managers declared difficulty of implementation of Soviet requirements to foreign and Russian workers on coal concessions on Northern Sakhalin [22].

Economic interests were behind protests of Japanese. They did not accept “overestimated”, in their opinion, requirements of the Soviet authorities and labor unions. They were afraid that execution of standards of the Soviet labor legislation concerning a salary, social payments, safety arrangements and financing of social infrastructure would cause increase of prime cost of their production and that would make it less competitive. The problem of a percentage ratio of the Russian and foreign workers on concessions continued to remain an important problem. All concession contracts in the USSR fixed the right for concessionaires to invite workers and employees from abroad. Thus, almost all contracts specified that the concessionaire could invite only skilled workers and employees. The number of foreigners often was defined as 15 % from each category of skilled workers. However, there were branch features. Concessions in the mining industry had the raised percentage indicator of the attracted foreign workers. For example, in 1927/1928 economic year the average percent of foreigners among workers and employees on all mining concessions in the USSR made 19.4 %. Regional features also had an effect. Any concession enterprise in the East of the USSR attracted more foreign labor. For example, Japanese concessionaires officially could have to 50 % of foreign workers. So, in 1927/1928 economic year among 1093 workers and employees of coal concession “Kita Karafuto Koogio Kabushiki Kaisha” the specific weight of foreigners made 39.9 %, and among 1484 workers and employees of oil concession “Kita Karafuto Sekio Kabushiki Kaisha” the corresponding indicator was expressed already in 56.5 % [23].

Under foreigners here meant not only Japanese, but also Chinese and Koreans. Large-scale attraction of labor in the Soviet Far East resulted from an acute shortage of Russian labor in the region and from a surplus of foreign manpower in the adjacent states with the USSR [24]. Another reason is important too. Qualification and quality of being available Russian labor left much to be desired. Concessionaires submitted applications to the Soviet bodies of labor which were engaged in recruitment. As a result, on coal and oil concessions of Japanese on Northern Sakhalin there were persons with the criminal past, alcoholics and hooligans. About 15-20 % of the hired Russian workers never worked earlier [25].

It is necessary to notice that regional authorities repeatedly attempted to limit penetration of foreign labor into the Far East economy. For example, during the Far East Republic existence in 1920-1922 the local timber concessionaires had the obligation to construct settlements with schools and hospitals “for the

Russian workers". Besides that, businesspersons had to involve not less than 50 % of Russians within the first 6 years of concession, and within the next years of contractual term – not less than 75 %. Such requirement for labor pursued the double aim. First, the high percent of the Russian workers gave the chance to the authorities to carry out colonization of the remote and undeveloped areas. Secondly, the high percent of the Russian workers could liquidate "dominations of yellow work" [26].

Nevertheless, in the mid-thirties it was impossible to observe the Russian workers on Japanese fishing concessions. The personnel problem in the Far East of the USSR remained sharp. In the conditions of chronic shortage of Russian population, the attraction of Japanese labor was the important factor of the regional economic development. Moreover, the Soviet tenants also proved broad attraction of Japanese labor and used the same arguments as earlier: shortage of national labor and absence of the qualified Russian workers. The authorities urged the Soviet fishing managers to organize resettlement of anglers ("instead of old men or hairdressers") from Astrakhan, from the Black Sea and from the Azov Sea. There was one positive experience of migration already. In 1928, groups of anglers from the Stalingrad province and Astrakhan were moved to the Far East as experiment. However, the vast majority of the Russian seasonal workers continued to be hired in the European part of the USSR among peasants, navies or carpenters. As a rule, those persons worked one season. Only several Russian workers had two years' fishing experience on the Soviet fishing sites on Kamchatka. Therefore, there was a constant growth of Japanese labor: 1928 – more than 4.9 thousand people; 1929 – about 8.5 thousand people; 1930 – more than 9.5 thousand people [27].

Japanese willingly worked on the Soviet fishing sites because the compensation there was higher than at Japanese fishing concessionaires or tenants. It was atypical for the Soviet concession practice. As a rule, the average monthly salary almost at all concession enterprises in the USSR was higher than at the one-branch Soviet state enterprises [28]. In 1928, at peak of the Soviet concession practice, that difference fluctuated from one to 60 % and tended to increase. However, Far East concessions showed the return. In 1931 on "Nichiro Gogio Kabushiki Kaisha" concession Japanese workers earned from 150 to 200 yens for 100 days. Their compatriots on the Soviet fishing sites received on the average for a season: 1928 – 347 yens; 1929 – 307 yens; 1930 – 470 yens [29]. The similar took place on North Sakhalin mining concessions. For example, in 1928 on "Kita Karafuto Sekio Kabushiki Kaisha" oil concession the rate of the 1st category made 1 ruble 29 kopeks. At the uniform Soviet enterprise ("Sakhalinest"), the same rate was equal to 1 ruble 70 kopeks [30].

There was an essential difference between Japanese fishing concessions and Japanese mining ones in a question of hiring of labor: the Russian personnel worked on Japanese oil and coal fields, but Japanese fishery concessionaires did not employ Russians. On the contrary, the Soviet state fishing organizations widely used work of Japanese.

However, working and living conditions of workers both at Japanese, and at the Soviet employers differed a little. For example, in 1932 the Soviet executives in the Far East fishery often could not provide a food for Japanese properly. On one of the Soviet enterprises, the Japanese workers remained without rice that was equivalent to deprivation of Russians of bread. There existed difficulties with granting separate housing to foreigners. Sometimes Japanese lodged together with families of the Russian workers. Sometimes there were intense relations between the Russian and Japanese workers. Japanese aggravated mutual misunderstanding at joint activity with ignorance of the Russian language, "except for the Russian foul language which Japanese used very widely". There were cases when Japanese worked more time than Russians did. Those careless national "workers" forgot that not only Japanese but also the Soviet labor legislation allowed overtime work during fishing seasons. The Soviet administration obviously could use a conscientious attitude of Japanese to work and gave them unskilled full-time job. "Misunderstanding" with Japanese were usual at calculations or at delivery of goods. The Soviet executives justified all those "defects". They said, "At capitalists, at Nichiro, people work in the worst conditions" [31].

"At capitalists" on the Sakhalin concessions situation was not iridescent. In the late twenties living conditions on Northern Sakhalin remained unsatisfactory in many respects. For example, there were absence of light, closeness and dirt in premises on the "Due" mine of a coal concession "Kita Karafuto Kogio Kabushiki Kaisha". The other enterprises had the worst conditions. Barracks on concessions were heated badly; there were no toilets, baths, laundries and a water supply system. However, the qualified Russian workers, the Japan administration and technicians lived in separate well-planned houses. However, on coal concession the "real" Japanese workers lived in quite comfortable conditions too. Poor quality of life surrounded Chinese employed by the concessionaire. The Soviet labor unions and bodies of labor fairly "declared war" to that. The Sakhalin concessionaires, in aspiration to derive the maximum profit, had to care about health of the workers. It was necessary to pay attention to women and teenagers occupied with hard physical work, and also to the persons performing overtime works. It was necessary to observe rules of labor protection and to warn traumas and mutilations. It was necessary to conduct scheduled maintenance and to allocate hospitals and out-patient clinics on concessions. At that time in the USSR deficiency of medical personnel was felt. For this reason employees of the "Due" mine of concession "Kita Karafuto Kogio Kabushiki Kaisha" used local physicians and local hospital. The concessionaire paid to the Soviet medical staff a salary, covered their expenses on utilities, organized a free food to them etc. [32].

**Conclusion.** History showed that difficulties with labor often directly resulted from absence of care of workers, from absence of the correct organization of work, from rejection of measures for improvement of

material living conditions of workers, from inability to organize training of skilled workers. Without care of personnel it is impossible to raise labor productivity and secure any success of implementation of various social and economic programs.

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УДК 94

**Японцы на российском Дальнем Востоке (1900-е – начало 1930-х гг.):  
Проблема рабочей силы на Камчатке и Северном Сахалине**

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена проблеме рабочей силы на Дальнем Востоке России в период 1900-х – начала 1930-х гг. Авторы приводят данные по общему количеству рабочих и служащих на концессионных предприятиях в СССР. Раскрывается процентное соотношение советских и иностранных рабочих в рыбном хозяйстве, угольной и нефтяной промышленности Дальнего Востока. Показаны жилищные условия рабочих, условия и оплата их труда и т.д. Особо авторы подчеркивают роль японских рыбопромышленников в развитии камчатского рыболовства в дореволюционной России и СССР.

**Ключевые слова:** рабочие и служащие; японские арендаторы и концессионеры; Дальний Восток России; Российская империя; Дальневосточная республика; Япония; Камчатка; Северный Сахалин; рыболовство; нефтяная промышленность; угольная промышленность; лесное хозяйство.