

The Northern Routeing in the Arctic Sea and Russian History

Leonid M. Mitnik

V.I. Il'ichev Pacific Oceanological Institute FEB RAS
690041 Vladivostok, Russia, e-mail: mitnik@poi.dvo.ru

*"History is a lantern to the future,
which shines to us from the past"*
(V.O. Klyuchevskiy, 1841-1911)

"The history of the exploration of the North is full of heroic spirit and tragedy, voyages and expeditions that were accompanied with the geographical discoveries, the history of scientific studies, organization of a system of stationary and non-stationary observations, and creation of the scientific-technical support service for the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is a history of a fierce battle against the incredibly severe conditions of the Arctic".

The motivation to navigate the Northeast Passage was initially economic. In Russia the idea of a possible seaway connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific was first put forward by the diplomat Gerasimov in 1525. However, Russian settlers and traders on the coasts of the White Sea, the Pomors, had been exploring parts of the route as early as the 11th century. By the 17th century they established a continuous sea route from Arkhangelsk as far east as the mouth of Yenisey. This route, known as *Mangazeya seaway*, after its eastern terminus, the trade depot of Mangazeya, was an early precursor to the Northern Sea Route. Western parts of the passage were simultaneously being explored by Northern European countries, looking for an alternative seaway to China and India. Although these expeditions failed, new coasts and islands were discovered. Most notable is the 1596 expedition led by Dutch navigator Willem Barentz who discovered Spitsbergen and Bear Island and rounded the north of Novaya Zemlya.

The bulk of exploration in the 17th century was carried out by Siberian Cossacks, sailing from one river mouth to another in their Arctic-worthy kochs. In 1648 the most famous of these expeditions, led by Fedot Alekseev and Semyon Dezhnev, sailed east from the mouth of Kolyma to the Pacific and doubled the Chukchi Peninsula. In 1725, another Russian explorer, Danish-born Vitus Bering on *Sviatoy Gavriil* made a similar voyage in reverse, starting in Kamchatka and going north to the passage (now Bering Strait). Bering's explorations in 1725–30 were part of a larger scheme initially devised by Peter the Great and known as *The Kamchatka (Great Northern) expedition*. The *Second Kamchatka expedition* took place in 1735–42. Russian Imperial Navy party led by Semion Chelyuskin, in May 1742 reached the northernmost point of both the Northeast Passage and the Eurasian continent (Cape Chelyuskin).

Later expeditions to explore the Northeast Passage took place in the 1760s (Vasili Chichagov), 1785–95 (Joseph Billings and Gavriil Sarychev), the 1820s (Ferdinand Petrovich, Piotr Fyodorovich Anjou, Count Fyodor Litke and others), and the 1830s. Possibility of navigation the whole length of the passage was proven by mid-19th century. However, it was only in 1878 that Finland-Swedish explorer Nordenskiöld made the first successful attempt to completely navigate the Northeast Passage from west to east during the Vega expedition. The ship's captain on this expedition was Lieutenant Louis Palander of the Swedish Royal Navy. In 1915 a Russian expedition led by Boris Vilkitzky made the passage from east to west.

One year before Nordenskiöld's voyage, commercial exploitation of the route started with the so-called *Kara expeditions*, exporting Siberian agricultural produce via the Kara Sea. Of 122 convoys between 1877 and 1919 only 75 succeeded, transporting as little as 55 tons of cargo. From 1911 steamboats ran from Vladivostok to Kolyma once a year.

Nordenskiöld, Nansen, Amundsen, DeLong, Makarov and others ran expeditions mainly for scientific and cartographic reasons.

Introduction of radio, steamboats and icebreakers made running the Northern Sea Route viable. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Soviet Union was isolated from the western powers, which made it imperative to use this route. Besides being the shortest seaway between the West and the Far East of the USSR it was the only one which lay inside Soviet internal waters and did not impinge upon that which belonged to nearby opposing countries. In 1932 a Soviet expedition led by Professor Otto Schmidt was the first to sail all the way from Arkhangelsk to the Bering Strait in the same summer without wintering en route. A special governing body Glavsevmorput', the Administration of the NSR, was set up in 1932 and Otto Schmidt became its first director. It supervised navigation and built Arctic ports. After a couple more trial runs in 1933 and 1934, the NSR was officially open and commercial exploitation began in 1935. Next year, part of the Baltic Fleet made the passage to the Pacific where an armed conflict with Japan was looming.

After the Second World War, marine cargo transportation along the NSR increased from 500 tons in 1950 to 6579 tons in 1987. After the breakup of the Soviet Union commercial navigation in the Siberian Arctic went into decline in the 1990s. More or less regular shipping is to be found only from Murmansk to Dudinka in the west and between Vladivostok and Pevek in the east. Cargo transportation along the NSR dropped to 1587 in 2000. At that period, the largest cargo transportation (65%) was associated with "Noril'sk Nickel". Recently, situation began to change. Now "Noril'sk Nickel", "Gasprom", "Lookoil", "Rosneft", Krasnoyarsky Krai, Yakutiya and Chukotka are the main NSR users. Russia intends to increase significantly volume of cargo transportation along the NSR. Presently available Russian icebreakers can maintain the reliable ship pilotage. Anticipating cargo transportation along the NSR may reach 5-7 million tons in 2010 and 13-15 million tons in 2015. Additional opportunities for the active usage of the NSR will be created as a result of construction of six powerful icebreakers with new power-generating plants till 2020.