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Image and Reality of the Penal Colony in Sakhalin: Prejudice and Adaptation

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Sakhalin in the czarist era was the island of exiles. They laid the foundations of Sakhalin as a colony. In those days many Russians viewed Sakhalin Island as a non-Russian territory, because of their low regard of the exiles. In this paper I will address the following four questions. First, how was such a negative image created and stereotyped? Second, how did the exiles live in the penal colony, and how different were the realities of their life from the image? Third, how did the image operate on the realities in Sakhalin? Fourth, why could the reality not change the image? From these points of views I will analyze Sakhalin's history from the 1850s to the eve of the Russo-Japanese war.

In 1871, Vasilii Vlasov, the head of a branch of the Department of Executive Police, visited Sakhalin to investigate hard-labor institutions. After returning to St. Petersburg, he submitted a report to the Ministry of Interior. His report was extremely influential in creating the negative image of the penal colony in Sakhalin. He described the corrupt life of the exiles and of the officials living on the island. According to him, the island's chaos was caused by a lack of policy.

In the 1870s, various newspapers and journals reported on the situation in Sakhalin. Many of them negatively depicted life in the penal colony, expressing prejudice toward the exiles. The discourses of government officials projected a negative image of the exiles. Russian citizens imagined the exiles as vicious, and the island akin to hell. This was the common stereotype of the island at the end of the 1870s when the Russian government began to accelerate the settlement of Sakhalin.

One of the major goals in the penal colony was to develop agriculture. However, the officials abandoned this dream as early as the 1880s. An authority on geography argued against the possibility of developing agriculture because of the severe climate. The inspectors of agriculture on the island repeated the same opinion. Moreover, the officials regarded the exiles as corrupt and incompetent.

It was Anton Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* (1895) that popularized this negative

image among Russian citizens. Before and after visiting Sakhalin in 1890, Chekhov exhaustively read materials on the island, and was influenced by the stereotype. He did not change the image. Indeed, his description of miserable scenes made it more influential.

However, Chekhov also illustrated the positive side of life on the island. He described the germ of agricultural development, though not much. From the middle of the 1890s, the realities of the penal colony began to change. That is, Sakhalin was becoming an agricultural colony.

There were three categories of exiles in the Russian system. The convicts-in-exile were put in prison and forced into servitude. The settled-exiles were released from prison, lived in designated settlements, and worked on the land unguarded. The peasants-in-exile were treated as free populations, although with some restrictions. They were free to select their settlements, and had the right to return to the continent. The last two categories were de facto free peasants. The number of peasants-in-exiles exceeded convicts in the 1890s. In 1900 the number of de facto peasants was three times as large as the convicts. When the Russo-Japanese war broke out, the majority of them stood on their own feet without aid from the Sakhalin administration.

The Sakhalin administration neither controlled nor supported them. This means that they adapted to the land on their own. However, the officials did not see reality on the ground. Their prejudice blinded them. They did not view the settled-exiles and the peasants-in-exile as able peasants, but as corrupt exiles. They lived in a different world from the de facto peasants. They were indifferent to the exiles' land. The realities did not change the image.

Before the Russo-Japanese war reached as far as the island, Sakhalin already had been abandoned. The Russian government discussed the abolition of the penal system and even the sale of the hopeless colony to the U. S. The outcome of the war had been decided before the fight.