Today, the Russian city of Vladivostok has a population of approximately 750,000 and is at a new crossroads. Founded in 1860 on a gulf of the Sea of Japan as the Tsar’s Eastern outpost, it became the headquarters of the Siberian Flotilla in 1873, and was designated a “city” in 1880, a “fortress” in 1889. Among non-residents, this latter definition has come to overwhelm all others, not only emphasizing the military importance of the location, but also suggesting massive restrictions and a lack of ordinary life within its boundaries. The Soviet habit of sharply regulating Vladivostok’s flow of visitors--Soviets as well as foreigners--confirmed the fortress image and effectively closed the city to outsiders. When in 1988 and 1992 most visitors’ prohibitions were officially removed, news headlines around the world announced that the fortress had finally opened.1 But Vladivostok has never been just a fortress, and the bias of this image distorts its portrait. A more inclusive sobriquet might be that Vladivostok was--and is--a “frontier town”: a city on an exciting border that makes it, and has always made it, a crossroads of vibrant life.

Any serious study of Vladivostok’s life and history will confirm its dualistic nature, but the city’s generally dark reputation has managed to circumvent this fact. Seen from myopic Moscow, Vladivostok has always been considered a desolate spot far away from “the center,” and, because the Siberian conquest was directed eastward from the capital, the image of a monolithic fortress looming at the “end” of the continent has prevailed. Such a narrow view of the city requires an unquestioning belief in stereotypes, as well as the geographic, informational, and emotional distance that feed them. A Missouri man visiting ice-bound Vladivostok just before the Russo-Japanese War came away with a completely negative impression: “A more desolate aspect than those circling hills presented I want never to see [again].”2 This is but a shorter version of the testimony of Emil Lengyel, a reporter for Life magazine, who felt equally unhinged in the mid-1940s. He grasped little in the city short of its being at “the end of the world,” adding, “[Vladivostok] is shrouded in even greater mystery than the rest of the Soviet Far East. ... We can only guess at the secrets which the Soviets preserve so well--secrets hidden in the slopes of the hills rising in concentric semi-circles from the Gulf of Peter the Great. There

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are several rings of those hills and each of them probably conceals great power.”

Even Soviet citizens moving to the city from the western part of the country might be haunted by a feeling of desperate Far Eastern isolation and gloom. When David Lerman, a newly graduated Kiev electrician, found work in Vladivostok in the 1930s, his relatives’ first reaction was typical: “Where are you going?! To the end of the world?!” And a Dutch children’s book published in the 1980s persists: “[You] can’t get any farther away. ... [Vladivostok is] a symbol of the end of the earth, a place where nobody knows [you].” Thus, Vladivostok’s location and the related defense concerns have painted a portrait in non-residents’ minds of an impregnable, threatening, and distant citadel; nothing else.

The ring of forts around (and under) Vladivostok is indeed impressive, and it offers ample material for continuing studies. But places, however notorious, are more than one thing. By their very nature, frontiers are dualistic (there is this side of the border line, and the other side), and frontier towns are meeting-places of diverse opportunities and choices. For some of its inhabitants, the frontier represents “the end of the road,” where life may be irresponsible and wild, while for others it is “a new beginning,” where hard work and ingenuity can solve impossible tasks. The isolation of a frontier town may as easily result in rough manners and an erosion of social norms, as in the inquisitiveness and order of civilization. In other words, it is a crossroads of influences, an intersection of conflicting cultures. But while the frontier’s informality out in the “wilderness” may overpower or clash with the formality of the “civilization” that is brought there, the two may also blend in a sort of yin-and-yang accord where they are less contentious than complementary, and where a simple shift of our attention will soon reveal this essential coexistence. Rather than a one-dimensional photo in black and white, Vladivostok is actually a multifaceted picture of polychromatic nuance.

By cultural as well as natural circumstances, the city of Vladivostok on the Pacific edge of Siberia (now known as the Russian Far East) is a frontier town--vital, controversial, and replete with contrasting characteristics. As people from all walks of life and numerous nations first settled in Vladivostok during the half-century before World War I, the city came to reflect both the bane and the blessings of a lively frontier, and it certainly exhibited many of the rough

3 Emil Lengyel, *Siberia* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1943), 270, 300. The Gulf of Peter the Great is not strictly in the center of Vladivostok. The waters by the city are the Golden Horn (the central harbor), and the Amur and Ussuri Bays (on the west and east sides of the Murav’yev-Amurskii peninsula where Vladivostok is situated). They are part of the larger configuration of the Gulf of Peter the Great, which in turn is part of the Sea of Japan.


7 The idea of the frontier as a place where the wilderness meets civilization comes from Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893).
qualities of the frontier towns in the United States. The city’s isolation from mainstream society, the adventurous streak of people going there, and their rugged frontier spirit fostered a free-for-all of boisterous adventure and lawlessness not unlike that of American Westerns. Vladivostok attracted “people seeking a fast buck,” as well as “romantics.” While a City Park was supposed to give the downtown area some class, numerous writers commented on its appalling appearance (“an abomination of neglect”). However, the muddy streets, the gaming rooms and brothels, and the high spirits of reckless fun were distinctly Eastern. Turn-of-the-century photos show street scenes brimming with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean residents, many of whom lived in the Millionka, the Oriental Quarter. Here the drug trade and opium dens flourished, creating lives of crime and despair. The entertainment in the young city was unnerving in its straightforward simplicity: one could go “tiger-hunting,” that is, play a kind of Russian roulette with daredevils in tigers’ dress taking their desperate chances—and hoping to earn a few rubles or yen (if they survived). A specifically Chinese game consisted of ascertaining who of several contestants could endure hanging the longest; those who died lost. At the Pacific Ocean, a variety theater on Svetlanskaia, Vladivostok’s main street, the famed gypsy performances of music and dance started only after midnight. An American traveler, who was leaving by train the next morning and worried about his sleep “on the eve of a trans-continental run,” later regretted his decision to forgo the show of “stupendous achievements, vocal and gymnastic, of a bright-eyed tsyganka [gypsy girl].” Not for him the excitement of unfettered freedom; but among numerous visitors and residents, the available attractions rendered manners and morals inconsequential, the human cost high. An unsigned newspaper article gives the following sad tableau from 1907: “A really bright moment. Wine, women and merriment. Groans, tears and blood. Never before, it seems, has there been so much of this. Theaters, circuses, cafés chantants, restaurants, cinemas and simply gambling dens, gambling dens and gambling dens. ... You just don’t know where the money is coming from to support such a complex of diverse ‘amusements.’ ... All that ennobles human nature, all that embellishes our life has been chased away, torn out with the root.”

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9 For example, D. Bogdanov, Putevoditel’ po Vladivostoku i Promysly Primorskoi oblasti, Kamchatki i Sakhalina (Vladivostok: Izd. Bogdanova i Drobinskogo, 1909), 23.


12 E. J. Harrison, Peace or War East of Baikal? (Yokohama: Kelly & Walsh, [1910]), 147.

13 N.a., “Vladivostokskoe ‘segodnia’,” Dalekaia okraina [Vladivostok], 22 Mar 1907, 4.
Yet, along with being unkempt and wild, everyday life in Vladivostok before World War I was also becoming increasingly cultured. This frontier represented not only the end of the road but also a new beginning, with new hopes and a strong determination to build life. The city’s location near China and Japan, enhanced by the regular shipping and telegraphic connections with Shanghai, Nagasaki, Yokohama, and all points east and west, attracted entrepreneurs from western Russia, Europe, the United States, and China, all eager to test Vladivostok’s business potential. The merchants of the First Guild included prominent citizens such as Jules Bryner from Switzerland (shipping, ores, timber), Otto Lindholm from Finland (mills, coal, naval contracts), and Adolf Dattan from Germany (trade, philanthropy). Virtually all Vladivostokians at one time or another shopped at the German powerhouse of Kunst & Albers, the city’s main department store, where, it was said, one could procure everything “from a needle to a live tiger.” The city’s merchant and military families brightened the Vladivostok frontier with the kind of culture that they had known before coming east. A boys’ school was established in 1875, and one for girls followed before the decade was over. The newspapers Vladivostok and Dal’ni Vostok published their first issues in 1883 and 1892 respectively, and the famous research center of the Society for Amur Studies was founded in 1884, its museum in 1890. The Oriental Institute, proud predecessor of several of Vladivostok’s institutions of higher education, including Far Eastern National University and Far Eastern Technical University, was opened with splendid flourish in 1899. By the early 1900s, the city center was being transformed in an intense construction program. Within a few blocks east and south of the overcrowded Millionka rose the impressively renovated, Gothic headquarters of Kunst & Albers, the crenellated railroad station, and hotels such as the Golden Horn and the Versailles, where service was claimed to be of the highest European class.

The multifarious qualities of the Vladivostok frontier have intrigued some unlikely visitors. For example, retired Lutheran minister Henry Lansdell, who was in the city in September 1879, later declared this time “the pleasantest of my tour.” Lansdell was well aware of the vicissitudes of Siberian life, and chose to explore more than the comforts of famous drawing-rooms. Kindly and well educated, he was the perfect guest, interested in everything: the views of the hills and the sea, the colorful street crowds, the military barracks, the telegraph companies. But he also learned about Vladivostok’s crime statistics and even investigated the experimental penal colony at First River, just north of the city center. E. J. Harrison, who decided against the gypsy performance at the Pacific Ocean, eventually adjusted his first impression of Vladivostok (“an abomination of desolation”) to include its handsome buildings and “smart equipages.”

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16 Harrison, 146, 144.
A remarkable collection of letters, written between June 1894 and December 1930, gives detailed, personal testimony of both the bane and the blessings of life in Vladivostok during this period. The author of the letters was a member of an American merchant family, Eleanor Lord Pray, whose brother-in-law Charles Smith owned the city’s “American Store.” Mrs. Pray and her Russian, German, Scandinavian, and English friends--wives of merchants, naval officers, and diplomats--were Victorian ladies who because of their husbands’ careers found themselves in East Siberia instead of St. Petersburg, Riga, Helsinki, or Boston. Initially ill prepared for the chaos of this corner of the world, they held on to their own cultural traditions, yet also, somehow, managed to adapt to Vladivostok’s explosion of raucous modernity. No shrinking violets, these women were well aware of both the wild and the wonderful aspects of their adopted city: newspaper articles of the gambling, prostitution, and murders alarmed them daily, whereas the concerts at the Gesangverein (the German Singing Club), the lectures at the Museum, and the performances at the Pushkin Theater offered solace. They were Kulturträger who in their private sphere discussed books, made clothes for their families, and enjoyed good conversation, and in their public sphere organized charity bazaars, Sunday teas and picnics, and sewing circles for the war refugees regularly descending upon the region. Not as something abhorrent, but as an exhilarating panorama of human life, they would show visitors the colorful blocks of the Millionka. Fine Baccarat crystal might be advertised at Waldecker & Peppel, or Löwenbräu beer and Roquefort cheese at Kunst & Albers, but the Chinese and Japanese stores on the back alleys--the taverns, repair shops, and bakeries, their delightful goods and ebullient crowds--were equally if not more intriguing. As a widow in the late 1920s, Mrs. Pray reflected on her life in East Siberia, full of happiness and grief, warm friendships and calamitous history, and she knew that it was the city itself with all its conflicting qualities that had kept her there for so long: she could not imagine living without its “unkempt” charms, nor without “the two bays” (the Amur and the Golden Horn).

Although Vladivostok’s many-sided character is obvious in the literature and is far more interesting than the one-sided stereotypes, it is not widely known or accepted. Seeing two sides

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17 The Eleanor L. Pray Collection is owned by Patricia D. Silver, Sarasota, Florida. I am grateful for her permission to read, write about, and quote from the letters and photo albums in the collection. I have chosen to refer to Mrs. Pray by the married title that she and her friends preferred.

18 A prominent photo in one of Mrs. Pray’s albums shows “The Sewing Circle at the Admiral’s - 1914-1917,” presided over by Admiral Mikhail F. Schultz’s sister, Ida F. Borisova, and including about 12 women, at least eight Singer sewing-machines, and heaps of materials waiting to be cut up and sewn into pants, shirts, and jackets. The album is in the Eleanor L. Pray Collection. -- In addition to World War I, other armed conflicts for whose refugees Mrs. Pray and her friends sewed included the Boxer Rebellion (1900), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), and the Russian Civil War (1918-21).

19 Eleanor L. Pray, letters, passim. These advertisements are in the Dalekaia Okraina [Vladivostok] for Waldecker and Peppel, 3 May 1909, 5, and Kunst & Albers, 22 Mar 1907, 6. See also I. P. Voronchalin, Dal’nevostochnyi karmannyi kalendar’-spravochnik (Khabarovsk: Tikhookeanskaia zvezda, 1928), 100.

20 Eleanor L. Pray, Vladivostok, to her sister Clara McCuen, South Berwick, Maine, 6 Sep 1927.
of controversial issues, people, and places is particularly difficult when cultural and political idées fixes are at hand; recognizing that the opposites may form a functioning whole is near impossible. Siberia, too, suffers from the kind of ignorant misjudgment—cleverly captured in the 1993 book title Between Heaven and Hell—that characterizes it exclusively: it is snow, cold, and penal camps, or vast resources and wilderness adventure, rather than a more realistic amalgam of many diverse factors.\footnote{Bruce T. Holl, “Avvakum and the Genesis of Siberian Literature,” in Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture, ed. Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 33 and passim; Robert Charles, “Vladivostok: Krepost’ ili okno?,” paper presented in Vladivostok, June 1990, reported in Krasnoe znamia [Vladivostok], 17 June 1990; A. Dinov, “Vladivostok: Okno ili krepost’?” K 130-letiu Vladivostoka, Krasnoe znamia, 1 July 1990, 12-13; Khisamutdinov, 132, 136.} Attempts at replacing generally black-and-white notions with more variegated views tend to make people uneasy, as a popular thriller puts it: “You’re of two minds,” probes detective Arkady Renko with his assistant Fet in Gorky Park, and notices that this “concept of ambiguity” unsettles the strictly programmed Fet. Seeking to overcome the difficulty, Renko then suggests that one can, perhaps, be simultaneously “in [one] mind of two different approaches.”\footnote{Martin Cruz Smith, Gorky Park (New York: Random House, 1981), 79.} The key is to shift our bearings, so that we can be at home in—and fathom—realities other than our own. A Professor of Anthropology has devised a novel way of achieving this. In order to expand his students’ reference points, John H. Bodley of Washington State University requested and received official permission to cut a large U.S. map of the world in two, and to reconstruct it differently. Rather than leaving the United States on its usual left side of the map, with half of the Pacific Ocean suspended there, the Atlantic Ocean, Europe, and Africa in the middle, and Asia and the rest of the Pacific Ocean dangling on the right side, Bodley rearranged the look so that the Pacific would be complete in the middle. With this example of seeing things fresh, the professor shook his students not only into a new realization of the sheer relativity of any “center,” but also into a new view of the world around them. A Soviet journalist experienced a similar jolt when he traveled eastward to Vladivostok in the early 1920s on a fact-finding mission. While in the mid-Siberian city of Chita, his center suddenly shifts to the East: he realizes that a girl he meets may have grown up on a Pacific Island, and that a boy may be equally at home in Shanghai where a shopping trip to Canton would be as natural as one to Finland from Petrograd. He is struck by the realization that Tokyo and Hawai are not far away from Vladivostok, but Moscow is. “After all, between us and you, there is a whole ocean of land.”\footnote{Dal’nevostochnik, “V Dal’nevostochnoi respublike,” Izvestiia [Moscow], 13 Nov 1921, 1.} Vladivostok may seem off the beaten track to Muscovites or Parisians, but its location in East Siberia is a central vantage point there; it is at the end of the world only if one considers the Pacific Ocean to be so.

A Russian city in Asia, Vladivostok’s nature as a frontier town is to act within its own center and combine contrasting concepts in new ways successfully. The city’s best known symbols, the fortress and the railroad station, do in fact embody a seemingly irreconcilable
conflict, but they also enjoy a curious symbiosis. On the face of it, they stand in opposition, exclusive of each other. The primary role of the fortress was to defend the Russian people and to keep others out (like a shlagbaum or barrier), whereas that of the famous Trans-Siberian Railroad and its terminal was to promote ties between Vladivostok and the western part of Russia (like a vast bridge). Thus powerfully juxtaposed in both nature and intent, these two symbols flaunt the inaccessibility and static force of the fortress against what might be called the mobile hospitality and gregariousness of the railroad. But in a tour de force consistent with the dual properties of the frontier, Vladivostok’s very mission as a fortress, geared toward conflict, and its location, out of touch with the capital, in effect brought about the construction of the railroad which offers vital east-west communication. Vladivostok’s distance from Moscow is an enormous 9,288 kilometers (more than 5,500 miles), the seven hours’ time difference real and palpable. Before the Trans-Sib began to function in the late 1890s, travel to the western part of Russia from East Siberia was inordinately time-consuming and complicated. In contrast to writer Anton Chekhov who—on his way to Moscow from Sakhalin—went by ship via Hong Kong, Singapore, and Suez to Odessa and from there by train, most travelers before the Trans-Siberian existed would paradoxically cross North America and Europe to reach Russia. Instead of traveling logically westward, the “ordinary travele[r] ... could more quickly reach St. Petersburg from the Pacific by sailing eastward from Vladivostok to the American West coast, crossing to New York by rail, embarking for Germany, and entraining there for the Russian capital.” Just as the cityscape of Vladivostok merges sea and hills into an urban vista of spectacular opposites, so the railroad, part of the national-defense plan, united the two ends of Russia—and opened up the East Siberian gates.

Vladivostok’s natural surroundings are also fraught with contradictions, yet they somehow cooperate to create an auspicious balance of disparate parts. Neither the weather nor the environmental features of the region correspond to the seasonal and geographic expectations of similar areas in other parts of Russia, Asia, or Europe. Vladivostokians are fond of emphasizing that they live “on the latitude of the Crimea and the longitude of Kolyma,” that is,


25 The Ussuri Railway between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok was opened in 1897, but the Baikal-to-Khabarovsk distance was finished only in connection with the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, and the trek around Lake Baikal in 1916. See Steven G. Marks, Road to Power: The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia 1850-1917 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

26 Harmon Tupper, To the Great Ocean: Siberia and the Trans-Siberian Railway (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown & Company, 1965), 8; Elizabeth Pond, From the Yaroslavsky Station: Russia Perceived, rev. ed. (New York: Universe Books, 1984), 149; and Lengyel, 137.

27 One example of many is in A. Blinov, “Na shirote krymskoi ... na dolgote kolymskoi: Vladivostokskie vidy,” Turistskie novosti, 3-16 Sep 1991, 4.
on an extraordinary climatic crossroads that combines the sunshine and warmth of the Black Sea with the icy reality of the Kolyma River in Russia’s northeast. This unusual mixture of southern and northern climes is caused partly by the area’s location on the edge of the largest continent and on the largest sea, partly by the absence of an Ice Age in the region, and it creates some baffling atmospheric conditions. Arctic storms and the heavy rains of the monsoon season may strike almost consecutively; the winters are as cold as those of Moscow; and there is more sunshine against a sparkling blue sky in January than in July. Springs and summers are not customarily pleasant (too much rain and fog), but autumn, the “velvet season,” is luxurious and sweet. An Australian who lived and worked in Vladivostok from 1908 to 1920 gave a telling description of his weather-related despondency (plus a backhanded compliment to his Russian hosts) in a late-July 1913 letter to his father:

We are now past mid-Summer and have had no Summer yet. We have only seen the sun about five days at the most during the last two months or more, we have had rain rain rain fog fog fog fog and damn it all rain rain rain fog fog fog fog fog ... One very seldom hears the Russian people growl about the weather, I don’t think that they ever say the Russian equivalent for the good old English word in the hour of vexation DAMN. Wonderfull [sic] people are the Russkies.29

The Russians of Vladivostok may not have complained to Forsyth, but they do growl about their topsy-turvy weather. The Mayor of Vladivostok, for one, exclaimed in mock despair to Chekhov that Russia’s eastern seaboard had no climate whatsoever (“net nikakogo klimata”), and this was not only an absurd joke.30

The very lopsidedness of the climate, however, has shaped the extraordinary flora and fauna of the thickly forested Ussuri taiga. Reaching almost into the city, it is home to a tantalizing range of northern and southern animals and plants not normally found together—from tundra to sub-alpine to tropical species. The sable, brown bear, wolf, mountain ash, and elderberry, for example, thrive alongside exotic snakes, tigers, leopards, lotus flowers, and

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29 John Forsyth, Vladivostok, to his father, Sydney, Australia, 30 July 1913, in J. Oswald Forsyth’s archive, File # 9, “Private Correspondence 1913-1920,” Riksarkivet [National Archives], Stockholm.

30 A. P. Chekhov, Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh. Tom desiatyi (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1963), 117.
grapes.\footnote{In addition to the sources mentioned above, see also Khisamutdinov, 62.} Climbing vines are supported by the Korean cedar, orchids blossom by its fallen cones. The contradictory characteristics of the taiga inhabitants have thus found ways to coexist and even benefit from each other; they offer a “weaving together” of dissimilar parts.\footnote{G. I. Ponomarchuk, “Rastitel’nost’ i zhivotnyi mir,” in Fizicheskaia geografiia Primorskogo kraia: Uchebnoe posobie, ed. L. V. Kholenko (Vladivostok: Izdatel’stvo Dal’nevostochnogo universiteta, 1990), 4, 156.} As in Chinese thought, where the contrasting qualities of yin and yang form a complementary whole, the blend of environmental opposites on the Vladivostok frontier works a pragmatic balance, confirming, as it were, the meeting of contrasts that is also manifest on the human crossroads.

Vladivostok has had its large share of political tragedies, yet the image of “the fortress,” whether this is understood as a piece of architecture, government policies, or behavioral control, does not represent its whole life. It is only one side. Notwithstanding Russia’s inordinate strictures, power abuse, and catastrophes organized by her leaders, Soviet writer Lidiia Ginzburg has pointed, with defiant conviction, to the danger of evaluating life exclusively by the stark contrasts of either-or. Instead, she emphasizes that life is both-and: “People are wrong to imagine the calamitous epochs of the past as totally taken up by calamity. They also consist of a great deal else--the sort of things which life in general consists of, although against a particular background.”\footnote{Julian Graffy, “Unshelving Stalin: After the Period of Stagnation,” MS 1990, quoted in Richard Stites, Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 96.} Ginzburg’s words suggest that ordinary life continues even within extraordinary circumstances; that all complex events and phenomena contain both normalcy and hardship; and that we can be cognizant of this formula, if we simply choose to. Most Soviet Vladivostokians did welcome the atmosphere of strictly guarded safety, regarding the presence of the fortress a foundation for--not a deterrent from--their everyday life. The city’s location so near various international hotbeds, and far from any plausible back-up assistance, caused a deep-rooted preoccupation with its defense, especially in connection with the Russo-Japanese War. Such concerns have changed little over the past century. For example, during Stalin’s extended campaign of military-cum-political fortification in the 1930s, a poem with the following verses--marching along in anapestic cadence in the original--was published in the Krasnoe znamia, then the main Soviet Far Eastern newspaper: “City, city! We’ll grow strong with you, [and] neither ax nor crossfire can knock us off the map of the [Soviet] Republics.”\footnote{S. Kholodnyi, “Vladivostok,” Krasnoe znamia [Vladivostok], 21 Mar 1934, 4. The Russian lines read “Gorod, gorod! / My krépnem s tobói / ... / Nikakim topóróm, / Perekřestnym ogněm / Ne sshibít’ nas / S landkárty / Respúblik.”} It is easy to see a political gesture behind such lines, but Vladivostokians tend to speak of their home with clear-sighted if romantic love. One woman who grew up there during the 1960s and 70s represents many when insisting that the Western notion of her city as insufficiently liberal is not shared by its residents: “The presence of the military ... instilled calm, and certainty of our safety. Our citizens’ attitude
to them was almost loving.”35 A local historian lamented soon after the break-up of the Soviet Union that the new leaders did not understand the crucial importance of the city’s defense and “the geographic factor.”36 In her view, such awareness is a prerequisite for the “life in general” held dear by Ginzburg.

As a frontier town on a human and natural crossroads, early Vladivostok saw both ordinary life and extraordinary circumstances. The Soviet palette, too, includes everyday glimpses right next to the fortress, universal in their humanity. In the early 1930s, for example, the Cathedral of the Assumption still reigns large at the beginning of Pushkin Street, but is abandoned in its garden and will be razed in 1938. Now a little girl from the day-care center at the corner sneaks into the empty building, touching the chilly walls in the darkness to find her way. She knows she should not be there, but she is drawn to the mystery of this brooding mass of a building and is touched by awe such as she will never forget. In the late 1940s, another little girl is also out and about, playing in the grass on the central square with her friends. Against the bustling backdrop of kiosks, food booths, and slightly worn park benches, this little gang of girls is deliciously conscious of forbidden adventure. They have just skipped away from their yard several blocks up Ocean Avenue, although Mama and Grandma have said a thousand times that they must NEVER cross the street alone. It is not hard to imagine their new-found joy of picking dandelions in the grass, nor their terror when Grandma’s shadow is suddenly over them. In the 1950s, teenagers and twenty-somethings congregate for the Saturday dances at the Railmen’s Club, the pride of the city. Seen from above, the building is shaped like a hammer and sickle; the dance decorations are famous. To a young man in love, the early-summer dances are intoxicatingly romantic amidst the lilacs.37 The 1980s popular hit by Alla Pugacheva, “Vladivostok,” confirms the similarly simple fun of “running along Ocean Avenue down toward the sea.”

Today, this city of the crossroads must choose direction. It faces the diverse possibilities connected with being both an entrance gate and an end unto itself. Just as Vladivostok is now reversing geography and reaching the West from the East--building business and other connections with Sister Cities in the United States and Australia--it must also reverse chronology and face its own past. The chaos in post-perestroika Russia has created some of the same dangers and fears as at the beginning of the century. There is increased crime and suffering; there are also exciting opportunities and great expectations. A visitor’s line from a century ago rings true today, too: “Vladivostok looks out of the world on a map, but it is going to be a great place for


trade in a year or two.”38 The city is closer than one might think; it is in the very center of the Pacific future. In his celebrated speech to the United States Congress, President Havel of Czechoslovakia outlined a “pan-European structure” of nations which would stretch “westward from Vladivostok all the way to Alaska” [my italics], thus encompassing any country in the world that would like to participate.39 In such a union of nations, this frontier town has the knowledge to play a prominent role: the pluck of the frontier and the wisdom of culture. Vladivostok may be a distant cousin to some, but on the Pacific Rim it is the neighbor right next-door.


The construction of Vladivostok was the culmination of Russia’s long drive to establish a major naval presence in the Pacific Ocean and help solidify its hold on the eastern portion of its empire. The land it the city is built on was previously claimed (but, many say, never effectively ruled) by China. It was sparsely populated by Chinese and indigenous peoples when the region was transferred to Russia via the Treaty of Aigun from the Chinese Qing Empire in 1858 at Russia’s request. Russia had already moved troops and settlers into the region and the Qing Empire, then relatively weak, felt it Vladivostok is the final point on the Trans-Siberian Railway, the point where Russia ends, on the brink of the Pacific Ocean. But it is also a beginning, a potential springboard for Russia’s contemporary engagement with Asia and beyond, with countries on the Pacific Rim. For a city whose name means “rule the east,” such possibilities were envisioned from its earliest years. The fact that this engagement has lagged is in part a legacy of the Cold War, when the city was an important military enclave, but closed to foreigners (particularly from the West) and hobbled in normal economic progress. T Vladivostok is a city and the administrative centre of the Far Eastern Federal District and Primorsky Krai, Russia, located around the Golden Horn Bay, not far from Russia’s borders with China and North Korea. The population of the city as of 2019 was 605,049, up from 592,034 recorded in the 2010 Russian census. Harbin in China is about 515 kilometres (320 mi) away, while Sapporo in Japan is about 775 kilometres (482 mi) east across the Sea of Japan.