

# The Far Eastern Republic's Diplomatic Strategy toward Japan

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## Introduction

The 1917 Revolution and the ensuing civil war put Russia's revolutionaries in a position to take over most of the territory of the former Russian Empire. By early 1920 they had reached as far eastward as Verkhneudinsk in Siberia. The Politburo of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in Moscow, which at that time faced tension over Poland in the West, sought to establish a buffer state to avoid a conflict with Japan in the East. Although there was a struggle for leadership in the process, by the end of 1920, a country named the Far Eastern Republic (FER) was established in eastern Siberia and maritime eastern Russia. Its capital was Verkhneudinsk (currently Ulan-Ude), later Chita. Moscow recognized this country as a buffer state against Japan, which militarily occupied the eastern part of the FER, and claimed it to be under the "instruction" of the Politburo on "every diplomatic problem and almost all of the internal affairs."

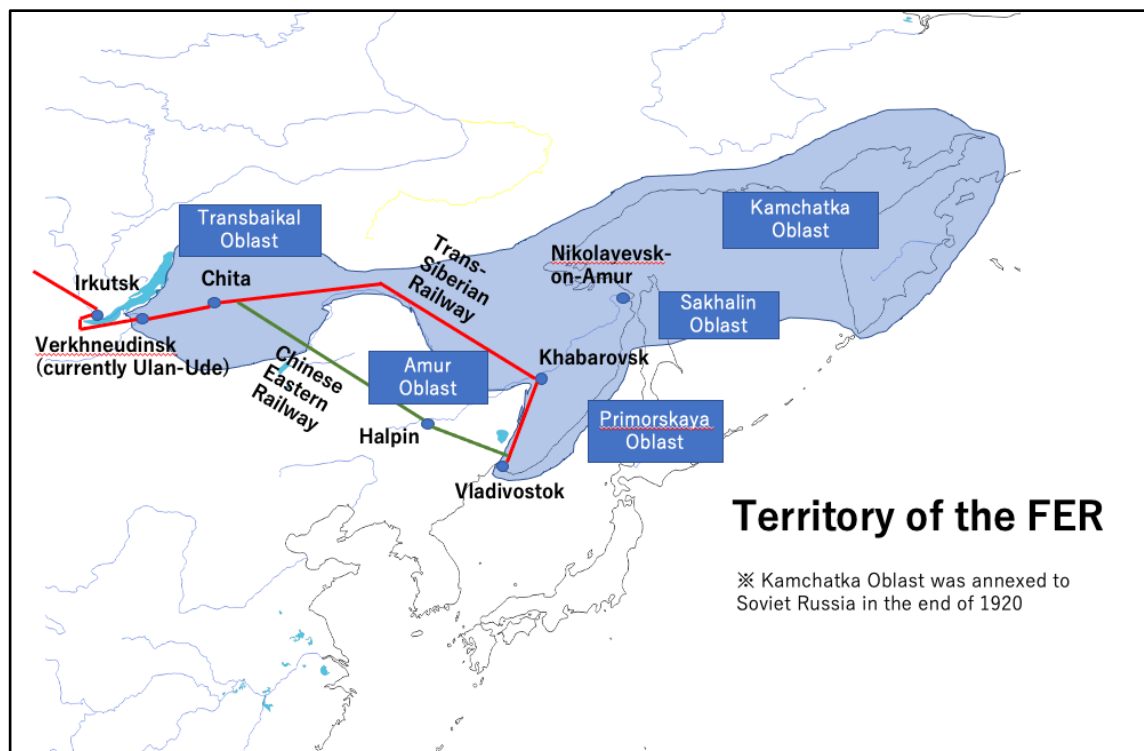


Fig.1 Territory of the FER (drawn by the author)

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This paper is unpublished, so please contact the author if you would like to cite all the contents in it.

Previous studies have understood the diplomacy of the FER to be nominally conducted under the leadership of Soviet Russia, but recent studies have cast doubt on the view that the policies of Soviet Russia and the Far Eastern Republic toward Japan were identical. I. Sublin indicates that neither Chita nor Moscow had a consistent strategy for the foreign policy of that “buffer state.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, Y. Shulatov states that the two actors had diverging views on how to approach diplomacy vis-à-vis Japan during this period.<sup>3</sup>

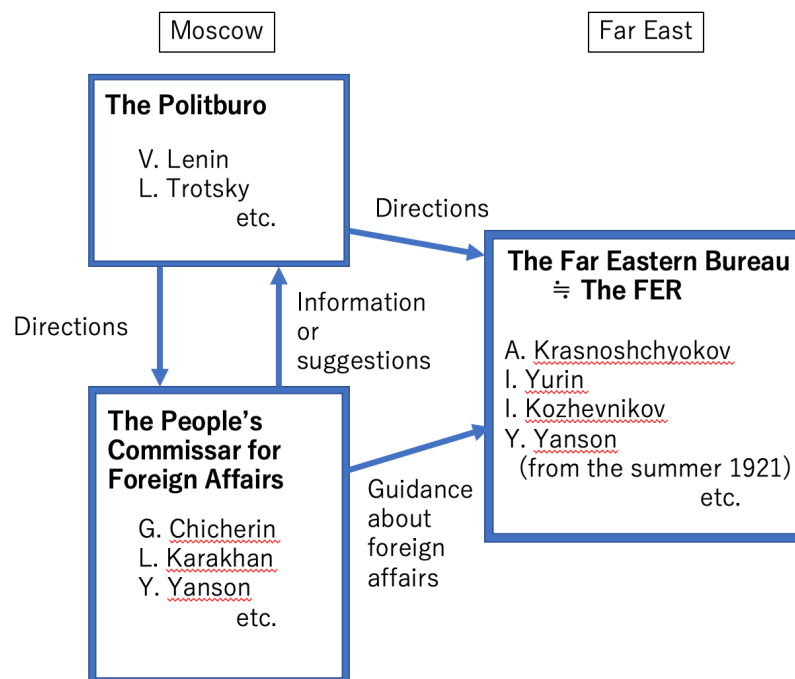


Fig. 2 Organizations and people concerned

This study looks at how the leaders in both Moscow and Chita perceived the role of the Far Eastern Republic as the “buffer state.” Fujimoto shows that during the negotiations between the Far Eastern Republic and Japan from August 1921 to April 1922 (the “Dalian Conference”), Georgiy Chicherin (Георгий Васильевич Чичерин), the people’s commissar for foreign affairs who oversaw diplomacy in Moscow, developed a policy aimed to induce Japan to conclude a diplomatic agreement with Soviet Russia, not the FER. He ordered the FER leaders to take a very hard line in demanding the withdrawal of Japanese troops so that the negotiations would break down. At the same time, he sent Lev Karakhan

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Sablin, *The Rise and Fall of Russia’s Far Eastern Republic, 1905-1922*, Routledge, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Yaroslav Shulatov, "The Russian Revolution and the International Politics of the Far East: from Russo-Japanese Relations to Russo-Japanese Relations," in *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet Century 1: From World War to Revolution*, ed. by Kiyohiro Matsudo et al, Iwanami Shoten, 2017.

(Лев Михайлович Карахан), the deputy of the people's commissar for foreign affairs, to Europe to contact with Japanese diplomats and suggest concessions from Moscow as the terms of Japanese agreement with Soviet Russia.<sup>4</sup>

In this connection, Shulatov points out that the Republic's policy to conclude a treaty with Japan differed from Chicherin's, as mentioned above. Innokentiy Kozhevnikov (Иннокентий Серафимович Кожевников), the Far Eastern Republic's assistant secretary of state for foreign affairs, who was to be sent as the head of the FER delegation to the Dalian Conference, was dismissed as head on the pretext of his "insistence on concluding a treaty."

This difference between Moscow and Chita in terms of their Japan policy could reflect their difference in perception regarding the role of the buffer state in Soviet Russia's diplomacy with Japan. Based on this hypothesis, this paper examines Moscow and Chita's respective perceptions of the role of the FER as the buffer state. The paper examines how their negotiation strategies developed by the summer of 1921, when the personnel changes in the FER were made and the FER's diplomacy came under the control of Moscow. Furthermore, this paper will analyze the negotiations between Japan and Russia prior to the Dalian Conference, which are often regarded as the "first" negotiations between Japan and Russia after the revolution, and clarify some aspects of the actual situation of the Far Eastern Republic as the "buffer state."

## **1. Establishment of the buffer state**

The idea of the buffer state in the East was born in Irkutsk. On November 14, 1919, Aleksandr Kolchak (Александр Васильевич Колчак), the leader of the counterrevolutionary regime in Siberia, retreated to Irkutsk and tried to regroup. Before Kolchak arrived, however, representatives of leftist local organizations, such as the SRs, formed a pseudo-regime called the Political Center in Irkutsk. They tried to create a post-Kolchak regime that would be a democratic buffer state between the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary regimes.

In early 1920, after the soldiers' revolt in Irkutsk and the arrest of Kolchak, the Political Center handed over power to the Bolsheviks and the Irkutsk Revolutionary Military Committee, and the idea of the democratic buffer state was enshrined in the Tomsk Agreement signed between the two sides. On January 20, Ivan Smirnov (Иван Никитич Смирнов), chairman of the Siberian Revolutionary

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<sup>4</sup> Kentaro Fujimoto, "The Far Eastern Republic and Soviet Russia's Policy toward Japan: The Washington Conference, the Dalian Conference, and the Warsaw Conference," *Journal of Twentieth Century Studies* 18, 2017, pp. 59-79.

Committee, introduced the idea to Vladimir Lenin (Владимир Ильич Ленин) and Lev Trotsky (Лев Давидович Троцкий) in Moscow. They welcomed the idea of establishing a buffer state. On January 5, 1920, the U.S. decided to withdraw its troops from Siberia, leaving Japan as the only country that had not announced its withdrawal from Siberia. The idea of the buffer state was favorably received as a way to buy time to avoid a direct military conflict between Japan and Soviet Russia, whose control was steadily expanding eastward, and meanwhile to achieve the removal of Japanese troops mainly through diplomatic negotiations.

The Far Eastern Republic was proclaimed on April 6, 1920. Aleksandr Krasnoshchyokov (А л е к с а н д р Михайлович Краснощёков), a member of the Bureau who had been present at the Tomsk Agreement as an observer, was named prime minister.<sup>5</sup> The Republic advocated a democratic system in which not only the Bolsheviks but also the SRs and others would participate. Moscow hoped that it would give foreign countries, especially Japan, a good reason to engage in diplomatic negotiations with the Soviet regime.

The idea of the buffer state was still controversial at that time, and in the Far East there were many forces opposing Krasnoshchyokov's efforts to unify the Far East. To deal with this problem, on August 13, 1920, the Politburo adopted the "Short Theses on the Far Eastern Republic" drafted by Chicherin. The Theses stipulated that the Far Eastern Republic should exist "until the complete withdrawal of Japan from the continent." It also stated that "all basic questions of internal affairs and all questions of foreign policy without exception, especially those relating to concessions, economic agreements, and mutual relations with foreign capitals, shall be decided with the consent of the center."<sup>6</sup> With the support of the Politburo, the Far Eastern Republic achieved the unification of the Far East in December 1920, as the Provisional Government of the Primorsky Territory in Vladivostok, which had resisted to the last, was dissolved and consolidated as the Primorsky Territory Department under the Far Eastern Republic.

However, this buffer state posed two main problems for Moscow in the implementation of its policy toward Japan. First, there were many diplomats, not only in Siberia but also in Moscow, who opposed the idea of the buffer state and argued that the Far East should be "Sovietized" immediately instead of adopting a democratic system. The representatives of these diplomats were Karakhan and Yakov Yanson (Яков Давидович Янсон), a member of the Department of the People's Commissar for

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<sup>5</sup> Teruyuki Hara, "Regional Integration in the Russian Far East at the End of the Civil War," *Journal of Russian History*, 56, 1995, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Hara, "Regional Integration in the Russian Far East at the End of the Civil War," p. 36.

Foreign Affairs of Soviet Russia in Irkutsk. Krasnoshchyokov complained to Moscow that these two men were not sympathetic to the Far Eastern Republic's foreign policy, and as a result, Soviet Russia and the Far Eastern Republic were conducting their foreign policies separately.<sup>7</sup>

The other problem was the difficulty of providing leadership to Siberia. The distance from Moscow to Chita, as well as the poor transportation and telegraph systems, made it difficult to communicate. On October 19, 1920, Chicherin expressed his concern that Krasnoshchyokov was developing policy on the Far East without any consultations due to inadequate communication and stated that it was necessary to send a reliable person from Moscow to the Far East.<sup>8</sup>

## **2. FER diplomacy toward Japan in the early days**

On January 18, 1921, Krasnoshchyokov sent a letter to Japanese foreign minister Yasuya Uchida (内田康哉) asking the Japanese government not to interfere in the internal affairs of the Far Eastern Republic and to withdraw its troops from the territory of the Republic as soon as possible. In addition, he asked for a delegation to be sent to Tokyo to conclude a treaty of commerce and peace.<sup>9</sup>

He also sent Kozhevnikov to Vladivostok in February. On March 7, Kozhevnikov told Yoshiro Kikuchi (菊池義郎), the head of the Political Department of the consulate in Vladivostok, that the Republic was ready to consider any specific conditions that the Japanese government might offer in exchange for the withdrawal of troops.<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, even before Kozhevnikov came to Vladivostok, Kikuchi had reported to Uchida that the Far Eastern Republic was establishing a base for economic negotiations with Japan in Vladivostok and had proposed that the trade negotiations be held there.<sup>11</sup> Receiving this proposal under these circumstances, Kikuchi told Kozhevnikov that the withdrawal of troops would be possible as soon as the safety of the residents was secured but that the trade relationship could be established without the withdrawal.<sup>12</sup>

On April 13, Ignat'y Yurin (Игнатий Леонович Юрин), minister of foreign affairs of the FER, told

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<sup>7</sup> Дальневосточная политика Советской России (1920-1922 г.), Сборник документов. Новосибирск, 1996. С. 65-66.

<sup>8</sup> Shulатов, "The Russian Revolution and International Politics in the Far East," p. 213.

<sup>9</sup> 『日本外交文書』 (Japanese Diplomatic Documents), Taisho 10, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 817-820.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 783.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 821-822.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 783.

the Japanese government that it had no reason to station troops in Siberia now that it was no longer seeking to rescue the Czechoslovak army. He continued by saying that the stationing of troops was an obstacle to Japanese-Russian friendship. He declared that if Japan withdrew its troops and established peaceful relations with the Far Eastern Republic, the two sides would receive all kinds of benefits, such as sharing economic zones and natural resources.<sup>13</sup>

These efforts convinced the Japanese government to negotiate on the withdrawal of troops. The Japanese government decided to negotiate with the FER. The cabinet of Prime Minister Takashi Hara (原敬) decided on May 13 that, given that the Far Eastern Republic was a “productive democracy,” informal negotiations for the establishment of commercial relations should be conducted, and if the negotiations were successfully concluded, the troops would be withdrawn from Primorsky Territory and northern Manchuria. The terms for the withdrawal included the establishment of a non-communist and democratic system in the FER, a guarantee of the rights of Japan under previous treaties, freedom for the economical act of foreigners in the Republic, the right of navigation on the Heilong River, the destruction of military installations, and the opening of the port of Vladivostok.<sup>14</sup> The negotiations were to be conducted between Kikuchi and Kozhevnikov.<sup>15</sup>

The FER was required to draw up a practical diplomatic policy toward Japan. Krasnoshchyokov entrusted Kozhevnikov with this task. On May 31, he sent a report on the current situation in Vladivostok and the Primorsky Territory and a proposal for the future course of negotiations to Chita. Analyzing the situation, he stated that the FER had already brought the whole territory under its control and the Japanese army was no longer contemplating further invasions or supporting the remnants of the Kolchak regime.<sup>16</sup>

He concluded that to achieve the withdrawal of Japanese troops, strong pressure on the Japanese government from powers other than Japan was necessary, because the FER did not have sufficient military power. It was necessary to dispel the great powers’ mistrust of the FER, which he defined as the mistrust of the FER’s (1) democratic system, (2) independence from Soviet Russia, and (3) national power. He then proposed a solution for each: (1) develop the laws concerning relations with the local regions and the rights of foreigners, (2) conclude formal agreements with Soviet Russia, and (3) immediately achieve political and economic development.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 824-829.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp. 830-831.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 833-834.

<sup>16</sup> ГАРФ Ф. 6761. оп.1. д.555. л.46-47. On May 26

<sup>17</sup> Там, же.

Most importantly, he believed that the withdrawal of Japanese troops could only be achieved after the FER had developed to a certain level both politically and economically. The pressure for Japan to withdraw from Russia depended on the great powers' recognition of the FER as an independent country. Above all, it was the concessions in Primorsky that he found important. Based on his own research in Vladivostok, he explored the possibility of granting forest and mining concessions to the German company Kunst and Albers and the Japanese company Mitsui Goshi.<sup>18</sup>

### **3. Conflict with Moscow**

At the same time, in Moscow, Chicherin began to seek diplomatic channels that did not involve the Far Eastern Republic. The diplomatic strategy he devised for Japan was not one in which the buffer state would negotiate on behalf of Soviet Russia but one in which the buffer state and the Soviet Russia would share roles.

If Soviet Russia directly were to take a hard-line stance against Japan, a military conflict might ensue. Then again, if Soviet Russia were to make unilateral concessions, it could be forced to sign an unfavorable treaty. The solution to this dilemma was to use the FER as a buffer state. The FER would get Japan to the negotiating table and then take a hard-line stance. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia would offer Japan concessions, which would prompt Japanese leaders to see negotiations with Soviet Russia as more significant than those with the FER.

On May 11, just before the Japanese government decided to negotiate with the FER, Chicherin sent Leonid Stark (Леонид Николаевич Старк), the Soviet plenipotentiary to Estonia, to the Japanese legation in Sweden to request that Karakhan exchange opinions with Japanese Minister to Poland Toshitsune Kawakami (川上俊彦) in Warsaw. Since this information was conveyed to Tokyo on May 17, after the Japanese government had made a cabinet decision to begin negotiations with the Far Eastern Republic, Foreign Minister Uchida sent instructions to Kawakami that it was acceptable to listen to Karakhan informally but not to convey anything definite about the Japanese position.<sup>19</sup>

In the meeting with Kawakami, Karakhan stated that he was authorized by Soviet Russia to negotiate with the Japanese government through Kawakami and that he wanted to conclude a tentative agreement at this negotiation. He then stated that if Japan accepted the withdrawal of the troops, he would not only guarantee the safety of the Japanese residents but would also offer various concessions.

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<sup>18</sup> Там, же. л.32-37

<sup>19</sup> Japanese Diplomatic Papers, Taisho 10, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 701-702.

He also stated that the Chita government, although nominally independent from Soviet Russia, was not qualified to represent the position of Russia, and therefore all the important issues would need to be approved or instructed by Moscow.<sup>20</sup>

Chicherin did not expect the FER to conclude agreements or treaties with Japan. He urged the FER to maintain a hard-line stance and not to allow concession contracts. He instructed the FER delegation not to create a situation in which Japan would find negotiations with the FER a suitable substitute for an agreement with Soviet Russia.<sup>21</sup> On June 10, 1921, when the Far Eastern Bureau asked him about the possibility of granting concessions to Japan, he objected to the idea because he thought it could lead to further Japanese expansion into the Far East. His opinion was approved by the Politburo on June 20, and the government of the FER was told on June 21.<sup>22</sup>

However, when the preliminary meeting began in Harbin on June 21 with Japanese representative Masayasu Shimada (島田正靖), who was the consul in Vladivostok, Kozhevnikov promised to grant Japan privileges regarding forest and mining resources in the Far East, as he had planned. Either the Politburo's notice did not arrive in time for the negotiations to progress, or the FER leaders ignored the notice from Moscow, but in any case, Moscow's concerns about the leadership to the Far East were exposed here.

Moscow attempted to solve this problem with personnel changes. At the end of June, the Politburo appointed Yanson, who had been reluctant to support the idea of the buffer state, as undersecretary of state for foreign affairs (later foreign minister) of the Far Eastern Republic. Furthermore, on July 7, it decided to summon Krasnoshchyokov to Moscow. Krasnoshchyokov opposed the change in personnel and argued that priority should be given to making economic concessions to Japan and developing the FER economically. However, Moscow did not agree.<sup>23</sup>

In response to Yanson's new assignment to Chita, Chicherin reiterated to him that appeasing the Japanese government with concessions would embolden them, saying, "We cannot even talk about our interests while the Japanese are in Primorsky."<sup>24</sup>

Kozhevnikov and Chicherin agreed that the Japanese army would not invade any further. Based on this understanding, Kozhevnikov devised a policy of openness toward Japan, giving priority to the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 706-708.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Москва-Токио. Т.1. С.2-7.

<sup>23</sup> Shulatov, "The Russian Revolution and International Politics in the Far East," pp. 218-219.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



economic growth of the Republic, while Chicherin demanded that the Republic take a hard-line stance toward Japan at this stage.

#### **4. “Success” in the negotiations**

While Moscow and Chita clashed over the personnel changes, the negotiations proceeded as Kozhevnikov had planned. By July 7, he suggested various tradeoffs for Japanese withdrawal to Shimada, such as a lease of northern Sakhalin and forest concessions. On July 8 the Japanese government chose the FER as its first negotiating partner out of the various Russian regimes and sent Hajime Matsushima (松島肇), the incoming parliamentary secretary in Vladivostok, to Halpin to talk with Kozhevnikov. On July 11, Kozhevnikov and Shimada unofficially confirmed the tradeoffs that Kozhevnikov had offered and decided to hold the official closed meeting at Dalian on August 15.

At that time Karakhan continued to contact Kawakami, but the Japanese government had already decided it would be difficult to have Soviet Russia as a negotiating partner. On September 3, Foreign Minister Uchida told Kawakami that since the government of the Far Eastern Republic actually existed, it made sense to negotiate with it. Furthermore, said Uchida, the Japanese government intended to negotiate with Soviet Russia after the agreement with the Far Eastern Republic was concluded.<sup>25</sup>

After receiving this reply, Karakhan came to believe that the existence of the Far Eastern Republic was obstructing the negotiations in Soviet Russia. On October 18, Callahan sent a letter to Chicherin questioning the need for a buffer state. Callahan stated that the existence of the Far Eastern Republic as a buffer state would lead Japan to believe that it could achieve its demands without Russia and that this “illusion” had to be destroyed.<sup>26</sup>

Chicherin tried to use the Dalian and Washington conferences to pursue his planned strategy again. Moscow assumed that the Washington Conference would hold Japan responsible for the stationing of troops in Siberia. Under such circumstances, the FER would stall the Dalian Conference until the Washington Conference ended, and the FER would continue to refuse Japan’s demands. In this way, the Japanese side would be made aware that it would receive no concessions in negotiations with the FER. This strategy was submitted to the Politburo on November 23 and approved on November 24.

In the Washington Conference, at the General Committee on Far Eastern Affairs on January 23, 1922, Kijuro Shidehara (幣原喜重郎), the Japanese plenipotentiary, declared that the Japanese troops

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<sup>25</sup> Japanese Diplomatic Papers, Taisho 10, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 709-710, 714.

<sup>26</sup> РГАСПИ Ф.159. оп.2. д.12. л.33.

would be withdrawn as soon as appropriate negotiations with the Russian side were concluded. In addition, the Dalian Conference broke down at the end of April, just as Chicherin's policy had intended.

The Japanese government, however, continued to give precedence to the FER. Immediately after the Dalian Conference, the FER continued to hold a series of meetings with Tsuneo Matsudaira (松平 恆雄), director general of the European and American Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In these meetings, held in Tokyo, Matsudaira and Vladimir Antonov (Владимир Александрович Антонов-Овсеенко), the FER correspondent in Tokyo, confirmed that the Japanese side was willing to withdraw their troops and that the FER was ready to respond sincerely to trade overtures and concessions. Finally, at the meeting on June 19, Matsudaira expressed his opinion that Japan could withdraw its troops in October if a treaty could be concluded in July, subject to the discussions at the Dalian Conference, and Antonov agreed.<sup>27</sup> In response to this, the cabinet of Tomosaburo Kato (加藤友三郎) decided to withdraw the troops from all areas except northern Sakhalin by October and enter into negotiations with the FER before then. It was also decided to have Soviet Russia participate in the conference as an observer so that Soviet Russia could give its immediate approval to the agreement between Japan and the Far Eastern Republic.<sup>28</sup>

However, on June 13, the Politburo accused Antonov, who had managed to get Japanese troops removed from the continent, of trying to arrange negotiations with Japan without waiting for instructions from Moscow. The Politburo confirmed that negotiations with Japan would be conducted under the direction of Moscow's people's commissar for foreign affairs, specifically, Adolf Ioffe (Адо́льф Абра́мович Ио́ффе), a diplomat sent to the Far East by Moscow.

Although Antonov and Matsudaira had promised to conclude negotiations by August 15 at the latest, the start of the conference, which took place in Changchun, was delayed until September due to the delay of Ioffe's arrival. After the conference started, as Ioffe tried to impose different conditions from those of the Dalian Conference and the preliminary talks in Tokyo, Matsudaira considered negotiating the stance of Soviet Russia to be insincere, and the Japanese hardened their attitude.<sup>29</sup> At the end of the negotiations, the Politburo hastily instructed Ioffe to propose granting concessions to the Japanese side in order to reach an agreement, but it was unable to change the majority of the conference, and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp. 530-534, 537-541.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 541.

<sup>29</sup> 『日本外交年表並主要文書 1840-1945』(Japanese Diplomatic Chronology and Key Documents 1840-1945), Vol. 2, Documents, pp. 26-27.

the Changchun Conference eventually broke down.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Kozhevnikov in the Far Eastern Republic had different perceptions of the role of the buffer state from Chicherin in Soviet Russia, who chiefly set foreign policy. This led to a difference in policy toward Japan in the two countries at that time.

Kozhevnikov believed that the role of the buffer state was to stand between Japan and Soviet Russia and establish good relations with both countries. To do so, it was important that the Republic maintain its appearance as an independent country, and the establishment of trade relations with Japan was a priority for its political and economic development. The removal of Japanese troops would be achieved when the Republic, which, at the time, lacked the strength to make such a claim, developed domestically and gained recognition from the great powers.

Chicherin tried to use the buffer state for literal “buffering”. He assumed that the Republic would not aim to conclude a treaty or negotiations in the first place but would simply hold a hard line so that Soviet Russia could conclude the negotiations with only a few concessions to Japan. It is not clear when he began to pursue this strategy, but on January 12, 1921, the Politburo approved a “minor thesis” discussed by a committee under his leadership. It stated that all the policies of the Republic should contribute to promoting the establishment of Soviet Russia’s relations with foreign countries. Here we can already see a part of the above-mentioned strategy.<sup>31</sup>

Kozhevnikov’s policy was rejected by Moscow in the summer of 1921. The personnel change in the FER in the summer of 1921 was an issue not just of whether the local government followed the central policy, but of how the FER functioned for Soviet Russia and Japan as the “buffer state.”

At the same time in the Far East, however, negotiations between Japan and the FER had already begun. They progressed as Kozhevnikov planned, and Moscow had trouble entering the negotiations between Japan and the FER. Thereafter, in the negotiations with Japan to the conclusion of the Soviet-Japanese Basic Convention in 1925, Moscow always suffered from the problem of the appropriate guidance to the Far East, as well as trying to reconcile the subsequent negotiations with what had already been offered by the FER.

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<sup>30</sup> Takeshi Tomita, *Soviet-Japanese Relations in the Interwar Period*, Iwanami Shoten, 2010, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Norio Horie, *The Dream of the Far Eastern Republic: The Life of Krasnoshchykov*, Miraisha, 1999, p. 111.