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“Giant Leech on the State Chest”: The Chinese Eastern Railway in Assessments of the Russian
Press of the Early 20th Century

Abstract

The article examines the attitude of the Russian press of the early 20th century to the

large-scale project of construction and operation of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), which began in the 1890s. Despite the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, state interests did not allow the Russian government to abandon expansion in Manchuria. However, the new domestic political conditions forced it to redefine its goals and objectives in the colonization of the Far East. The Chinese Eastern Railway, built on desolate Chinese lands, over a short time turned into a kind of “state within a state” with its own head (manager), ministries (Land Department, Traction Service, etc.), police and army (Border Guard of the Zaamursky District), court, system of municipal government, education, and healthcare. Since the operation of the road required significant financial costs, this circumstance could not go unnoticed by journalists and the public. The problems of financing railway construction were the subject of consideration at the State Duma meetings. The data of the Budget Commission of the Duma became public. This resulted in appearance of a number of publications in the press. The state of the CER affairs was widely discussed in various circles. Of greatest interest were the publications of people who knew the situation from the inside. They sharply criticized the Manchurian project of penetration into the East, considering it erroneous. Since it was impossible to liquidate the unsuccessful commercial project in foreseeable future, a number of measures were proposed to streamline the operation of the road. These were to include introduction of state control over the CER, reduction in funds allocated for the maintenance of the Road Administration and the Board of the CER Society, as well as reduction of official transportation. It seemed to minimize the losses in the road operation.

Keywords

Historical sources, Chinese Eastern Railway, colonization, Russian press, operating costs

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