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Northern Sea Route: Past, Present, and Future. Results of the International Scientific Megaproject

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Abstract. The author characterizes the idea, concept, implementation process and results of the international scientific project devoted to the history, modernity and prospects of the Northern Sea Route development, which resulted in a collective monograph published in 2022. The content and structure of this publication are presented, its participants, scientists from four European countries, are indicated. The author examines how this book reveals the most significant milestones of the historical past of this maritime communication, starting with the development of navigation in the European part of the Arctic and the emergence of the idea of the possibility of passage between Europe and Asia, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean along the Eurasian northern coast of Russia, which was called the Northeast Passage. The research compares the results of scientific investigations and search for a through passage from Europe to Asia by this waterway, as well as exploration of its parts and organization of navigation. The author characterizes the transformation of the Northeast Passage into the Northern Sea Route and the organization of its permanent operation and through navigation in the 20th century. The article analyzes the contradictory trends in the development of the Northern Sea Route in the beginning of the 21st century, as well as possible scenarios for its future. The article also reveals the process of studying the history of the Northeast Passage/Northern Sea Route over several centuries and identifies the most significant studies published in Russia and abroad.

Keywords: *Northeast Passage, Northern Sea Route, historical experience of exploration and development, modernity and prospects, challenges and risks, international scientific megaproject*

Introduction

The end of the 20th — the beginning of the 21st centuries were characterized by a sharply increased interest in the Arctic, which has become a new region of international relations. The progressive development of this region presupposes the solution of a wide range of its problems, among which communications play a special role, primarily the leading one — the Northern Sea Route. The high dynamics of the modern development of this maritime communication is based on the understanding of its historical experience and lessons of its development; the government program for the development of the Northern Sea Route until 2035 is in force. The history, modernity and future of the Northern Sea Route are of great scientific interest, as evidenced by the

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implementation of a number of international research programs since the 1990s. The purpose of this article is to analyze the results of an international scientific megaproject, which was launched in the late 20th century and resulted in a collective monograph by researchers from European countries and Russia, published in 2022.

Degree of study

By the end of the 16th century, the first publications of collections of documents describing British attempts to find and explore the Northeast Passage [1; 2] were published, and somewhat later, unpublished manuscripts of the compiler of these collections, the English clergyman R. Haklitt, were issued. They also contained evidence from the Englishmen about the active use of Arctic sea routes by Russian sailors [3].

In the 18th century, the works, documents and instructions of the outstanding scientist and encyclopedist M.V. Lomonosov were published, proving the possibility of passage through the Siberian/Northern Siberian Ocean to East India [4, pp. 417–506, 519–535]. He prophetically wrote in his work “A brief description of various trips to the North Seas and an indication of a possible passage of the Siberian Ocean to Eastern India”: “Thus, the path and hope of outsiders will be suppressed, Russian power will grow through Siberia and the Northern Ocean and will reach the main European settlements in Asia and America” [4, p. 498].

The book by the English historian W. Cox, published in 1780, told about Russian and foreign voyages, the goals of which were to explore the western and eastern parts of the Northeast Passage [5].

In the 19th century, numerous descriptions of travelers, reports on expeditions related to the history of the development of the Northeast Passage were published. Among them, it is necessary to especially note the book of the Swedish navigator A.E. Nordenskiöld with a report on the journey in 1878–1880 on the steamship Vega around Europe and Asia, when he managed to overcome the Northeast Passage for the first time in two navigations, proving the feasibility of this sea route [6].

The book by F.D. Studitskiy, published in 1883, dedicated to the history of search, development and discovery by Russian and foreign expeditions of the sea route from Europe to the Siberian rivers and to the Bering Strait, beginning with the Great Northern Expedition (1733–1743) and ending with the travels of A.E. Nordenskiöld [7], should be noted. The book by the famous Norwegian navigator and Arctic explorer F. Nansen, published in Russia in 1915, devoted to the Great Northern Route from Europe to Siberia, deserves mentioning [8].

In the 20th century, the Northern Sea Route was intensively developed, exploited and studied, which resulted in a wide range of publications, including book format, devoted to the history of its development. Here, first of all, it is necessary to mention the four-volume work prepared and published in the USSR, devoted to the history of the Northern Sea Route [9], as well as books by M.I. Belov [10], V.N. Bulatov [11], M.Yu. Vize [12] and others.

In the 21st century, due to the active development of the Northern Sea Route, various aspects and problems of its activities in the past and present are being intensively studied, which is embodied in a series of publications in book format [13; 14; 15].

The history of the Northern Sea Route development in English- and German-language studies was covered in the article by Novosibirsk historian D. A. Ananyev [16]. Foreign researchers address the problems of navigation in the Arctic, including along the Northern Sea Route [17].

Looking ahead and referring to the collective monograph published in 2022, we note that its bibliography contains approximately 900 titles of works on the Northeast Passage/Northern Sea Route in different languages, published in European countries, on the American continent and in Japan.

Origin and realization of the European scientific publishing project on the history of the Northern Sea Route

This project and the resulting collective monograph had, if it may be said so, three starts. According to the review of this research and publishing project, the beginning was the Murmansk speech of M.S. Gorbachev, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, on 1 October 1987, which proposed a large-scale program for transforming the Arctic from a region of rivalry and confrontation into a region of cooperation, including the opening of the Northern Sea Route to international shipping. In the 1990s, within the framework of the International Northern Sea Route Programme (INSROP), one of the projects was the preparation and publication of four working reports on the history of the Northern Sea Route, prepared by four scientists from different countries — J.P. Nielsen (Norway), E. Okhuizen (Netherlands), V.N. Bulatov (Russia) and T.E. Armstrong (Great Britain), which covered the period from the 16th century to 1991, the dissolution of the USSR.

In 2013, an international scientific expedition along the Northern Sea Route took place as part of the Floating University program of the Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov, dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the expedition along this route by the famous Norwegian polar explorer F. Nansen. Within the framework of this scientific expedition in 2013, a wide range of problems of the Northern Sea Route, its past, present and development prospects were discussed on board the research vessel Professor Molchanov, and after its completion, a decision was made to form an international scientific team to prepare a collective monograph dedicated to the history of the Northern Sea Route.

In 2013–2014, a team of authors was formed, which included the previously mentioned professors J.P. Nielsen (The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø) and E. Okhuizen, as well as professor, former director of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Oslo W. Østreng (Norway), doctor of historical sciences, professor of the Arctic University of Norway V.V. Tevlina, who was also a professor at NArFU, candidate of historical sciences A.E. Goncharov from the Siberian State University of Science and Technology named after Academician M.F. Reshetnev (Krasnoyarsk), head of the car-

tography section of the Library of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg O.A. Krasnikova and the author of the article.

After the formation of the team of authors, the work on the project, its concept, collection of materials in archives and libraries of different countries started. It should be noted that V.N. Bulatov and T.E. Armstrong had passed away by that time, but their published materials were used in the preparation of the collective monograph, and they were included in the team of authors as its full participants with their names indicated in the relevant sections of the publication. Thus, this project and the book published as a result of it were the outcome of the work of a scientific team consisting of representatives from Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway and Russia.

During the work on this project, scientific seminars of the members of the authors' team were held in Russia and Norway. The last of them took place in autumn 2017 in Oslo. Subsequently, the book was submitted for publication to the well-known international publishing house "Brill". The main work on preparing the book for publication was carried out by its editors — J.P. Nielsen and E. Okhuizen. In preparing the publication, a lot of work was done to find illustrations, and the organizational and editorial work in this direction was carried out, along with the already mentioned editors, by V.V. Tevlina and O.A. Krasnikova. It should be noted that this book is beautifully illustrated. The scientific coordinator of the project was V.V. Tevlina. The collective monograph was published in English in autumn 2022 [18].

This publication starts with an introduction by the Chairman of the St. Petersburg branch of the Polar Commission of the Russian Geographical Society, Honorary Polar Explorer of Russia V.I. Boyarskiy. He described the features and significance of this international scientific publishing project and highly praised the content of this collective monograph.

The foreword by Professor W. Østreg, who was Director of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Oslo for a quarter of a century (1978–1993), as well as Head of the Joint Scientific Committee and Secretariat of the International Northern Sea Route Research Program in 1993–1999, describes the initiation and implementation of this program, which involved 468 researchers and experts from more than 100 institutions in 14 countries and 3 continents. Within the framework of this program, 104 projects were implemented, 167 working documents were prepared and a large number of books and articles were published. One of the results of the implementation of this program was the planned project on the history of the Northern Sea Route.

The introduction, written by the editors of the book E. Okhuizen and J.P. Nielsen, provides a general description of the history of the development of the Northeast Passage/Northern Sea Route and the process of transformation of the Northeast Passage into the Northern Sea Route, introduces the main concepts and terms used in the book, contains a brief review of the literature on the topic, names and reveals the natural and climatic factors that have influenced and are influencing this sea communication today.

The structure of the main part of the publication includes 7 parts and 34 chapters. The book covers more than a thousand years of history of exploration and development of the North-

east Passage/Northern Sea Route to the present day, and also presents a look at the future of this Arctic sea route. Unlike the original plan, which was mentioned earlier, this monograph covers the period not from the 16th century, but from the 9th century. It begins with the legendary sea voyage of the Norwegian Viking Ottar (Ottar, Ohthere) around 870–880 along the coast of Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula to the White Sea with a possible entry into the Northern Dvina River. In general, this part of the book, entitled “Out of the Northern Mist”, reveals the period of early navigation in the western or European sector of the future Northern Sea Route until the middle of the 16th century.

The second and more voluminous part of this monograph is called “The West-European Search for a Northeast Passage and the Russian Navigation of the Eurasian Maritime Arctic”. It covers the period from the middle of the 16th to the middle of the 18th century. The term “Northeast Passage”, as the Northern Sea Route was officially called for several centuries, was associated with the assumption of the possibility of passage from Europe, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, by the northern route along the Arctic shores of Russian Eurasia to China and India. This was due to the fact that the agreements of Spain and Portugal seized and divided the traditional ocean routes from Europe through the Atlantic Ocean to the countries named.

The four chapters of this second part of the publication are devoted respectively to the Western European search for an alternative trade route to the East; the Russian exploration and commercial use of the Eurasian maritime Arctic; the First Kamchatka Expedition of 1725–1730 and the Great Northern (Second Kamchatka) Expedition of 1733–1743. This period was characterized by outstanding achievements, which are examined in detail in the book. The third part of the book includes five chapters and is titled, paradoxically, “The ‘Non-heroic Exploration’ of the Eurasian Maritime Arctic (mid-18th – mid-19th centuries)”. This is explained in the text of the book by the fact that the exploration during this period was quite evolutionary and progressive in comparison with the outstanding results of the Kamchatka expeditions of the previous period and with the unprecedented navigation of A.E. Nordenskiöld, who later passed through the entire Northeast Passage. At the same time, it is noted that the period under consideration seems less impressive and unheroic only at first glance, while in reality important and large-scale events took place, although there were also perplexing ones. Tense geopolitical relations between Russia and the Western countries at the extreme eastern end of the developed Northeast Passage were also developing, which are characterized in the publication.

The fourth part of the monograph, which includes six chapters, covers the period from the mid-19th century to 1917 and is called “The Opening Up of the Northern Sea Route to Siberia”. The proof of the possibility of a through passage from Europe to Asia via the seas of the Arctic Ocean along the Eurasian Arctic coast of Russia by the expedition of A.E. Nordenskiöld in 1878–1879, as well as commercial voyages and hydrographic survey of this sea route contributed to the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century the term “Northeast Passage” was replaced by the term “Northern Sea Route”.

This part of the book examines a wide range of different issues: early exploration and navigation to the mouths of the Ob and Yenisei; Russian-Norwegian relations from the Crimean War to the Russian Revolution of 1917; navigation along the Northeast Passage; protection of the Northern Sea Route until 1905; the Russo-Japanese War and the realization of the potential military and strategic significance of the NSR; the Northern Sea Route on the eve of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The fifth part of the monograph, consisting of ten chapters, is devoted to the Soviet era of the Northern Sea Route development, when profound changes took place in the management system, research, further exploration and development of this Arctic sea route, and the deployment and arrangement of its infrastructure. The book specifically highlights and characterizes such periods in the development of the Northern Sea Route as 1917 — early 1920s; subsequent decades of the interwar period; the years of the Great Patriotic War; the post-war period, within which 1945 — mid-50s, mid-50s — 60s are distinguished, and the time from the 1970s to 1991 is called the “return to the glory days”.

All these complex and multifaceted processes of development of the Northern Sea Route with the peculiarities of development and exploitation of the western and eastern sectors of the Northern Sea Route were closely connected with the large-scale and complex processes of development of the Soviet Arctic as a whole. We are talking about the formation of economic infrastructure and social transformations, about the development of Soviet polar science, as well as about strengthening the defense capability of this huge, complex and extended region of Russia and the protection of its sea communications taking into account the experience and historical lessons of the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War period, etc.

The sixth part of the monograph covers the extremely contradictory post-Soviet period of the history of the Northern Sea Route. On the one hand, in the 1990s, it became possible to use it as an international transport route, and access for foreign ships was opened, provided they met the requirements set by the Northern Sea Route Administration. However, on the other hand, the collapse of the USSR and the breakdown of the former system of management and economic relations led to a sharp reduction in cargo traffic, destruction of infrastructure, and jeopardized the functioning of the Northern Sea Route.

Within the framework of three highlighted stages: 1) the 1990s — early 2000s; 2) 2008/2009 — 2013; and 3) 2014 — early 2020s, the processes of development of the Northern Sea Route and its legal regulation, the formation of its new management system are characterized, the dynamics of growth in cargo transportation and transit problems, hopes and growing difficulties and challenges that had to be overcome are considered. They were associated with a wide range of issues: international relations and geopolitics; search for an optimal management system; economics; infrastructure; logistics, etc.

The final seventh part of the monograph, entitled “The Past and Present in Shaping the Future of the Northern Sea Route and the Northeast Passage”, summarizes and comprehends the accumulated historical experience, characterizes, on the one hand, the problems and obstacles to

the development of this sea route, and on the other hand, the constant and changing drivers that affect its use; and on this basis, attempts to predict the future of the Northern Sea Route are made. In this regard, it should be noted that this publication, objectively speaking, goes beyond purely historical narrative, but characterizes the main problems of the present and analyses the prospects for the development of the Northern Sea Route.

In this regard, already going beyond the chronological framework of this book, which ends with the events of the very beginning of the 20s, it should be noted that if already since 2014, Western sanctions had a retarding effect on the development of the Northern Sea Route, international transit along this highway, then the implementation of a special military operation by Russia and a series of new Western sanctions that fell on Russia, including enterprises operating in the Russian Arctic and on this sea communication itself, required fundamental changes in the functioning of the Northern Sea Route, in particular, the redirection of the flow of goods from the European to the Asian direction and the solution of a new and wide range of complex problems.

Returning to the content and structure of the book being characterized, we should note that its final part contains information about the history of this scientific-publishing project, as well as 26 pages of bibliography, lists of used geographical names and personalities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this was a successful international research and publishing project, and the publication will be useful not only for historians, but also for specialists working in a wide range of disciplines, doctoral students, postgraduates, undergraduates and people interested in the past, present and future of the Arctic. In addition, we would like to express a wish that the scientific contacts that have been developed should not be interrupted, and that the accumulated experience of joint international research activities of scientists from different countries should be used in the future, despite the current political confrontation. In this case, joint scientific creativity and scientific diplomacy could contribute to the détente in international relations.

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