Sakhalin’s Oil: Historical Episodes

In 2009, it is 130 years since oil was discovered on Sakhalin. The first information about its availability on the island goes back to 1879, when Filipp Pavlov, a clerk of the merchant A.E. Ivanov from the city of Nikolaevsk, “directed by the indigenous dwellers,” found natural oil seepages—many holes filled with a black oily liquid—on the island, nine versts from the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk. He brought samples to the merchant, who applied for oil exploration and extraction in the northern part of the island. This is how a bottle of “kerosene water,” taken to Ivanov in Nikolaevsk, started the history of one of the oldest industries in Sakhalin’s economy.

The next decades saw numerous attempts to find and develop Sakhalin’s oil fields. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, expeditions led by L.F. Batsevich, S.V. Maslennikov, F.F. Kleie, K.N. Tul’chinskii, E.E. Anert, N.N. Tikhonovich, P.I. Polevoi, and other researchers worked on the island, discovering several fields and describing them in detail. The periodical press of that time largely contributed to attracting attention to Sakhalin’s oil, but its role was undeservingly forgotten. The pages of Russian newspapers (both central and provincial) and then magazines and periodical journals of scientific societies started to be filled with early data about Sakhalin’s oil and essays on its discovery and research on it from the late 1880s.

These periodical publications gave firsthand information to the Russian authorities, business circles, and public on geological results and the plans of individual entrepreneurs. The stakeholders could freely voice their opinions, criticize (often very sharply) their opponents, and discuss prospects for the island’s oil fields.

Among the first to pay attention to Sakhalin’s oil was St. Petersburg’s Novoe vremya, which belonged to the well-known Russian journalist and publisher A.S. Suvorin. At that time, it was a very popular and influential newspaper. On December 20, 1887, it published a report with a reference to a telegram of the Imperial Russian Technical Society, which regularly published original articles, reviews of various technical inventions and improvements, and the lists of privileges that Russia granted for the use of domestic and foreign inventions.

Damskii wrote that in March 1886 a group of Sakhalin administrative officials visited the northern end of the island. They were able to observe oil fields in a location to the northeast of Baikal Bay. The eyewitnesses said that oil “covered the tundra for large distances, saturating peat swamps and forming puddles on the surface” [2, p. 1]. The Head of the Alexandrovsk district F.P. Lindenbaum took an oil sample from a puddle like that. After some time, Amur Governor General A.N. Korf sent this sample for study to the Imperial Russian Technical Society.

Damskii was among those assigned to study the sample. After a chemical—engineering test, he concluded that “the sample of Sakhalin oil sent is, probably, a product that has changed its properties: after a long stay in the open air, this oil lost its volatile compounds and became thicker” [2, p. 2]. In view of great interest that oil deposits discovered on Sakhalin could represent in the future, the Russian Technical Society prepared special instructions for the Sakhalin officials how to properly collect oil “in the least changed form” for investigation.¹

After receiving these instructions, Lindenbaum gathered new samples in the north of the island. In the fall of 1887, the boxes with them were sent from the island with the ship Rossiya, and Novoe vremya considered it necessary to inform its readers of this important news. The boxes were accompanied by Lindenbaum’s “account,” which was quoted practically unchanged in Damskii’s article. We may consider this the first detailed description of Sakhalin oil fields in

¹ “(1) Oil should be collected from the bottom of a well specially dug in the location of an oil deposit at a depth of two to three fathoms; (2) for investigation, oil must be sent thoroughly sealed with a wooden cork in several bottles; in addition, the corks must be waxed; and (3) the amount of oil necessary for thorough investigation must be at least 15–20 pounds” [2, p. 2].
the Russian press; therefore, we give it here in full [2, p. 3].

Oil is abundant on the northern end of the island, in its narrowest isthmus, at a direct distance of about 25 versts northeast of the Gilyak village of Pomor; the oil springs are lowlands, like lakes, with a hard surface of a very dense fossil resin; these reservoirs are filled by subsoil oil seeping from south to north horizontally and superficially, which allows us to assume a great amount of oil closer to the south .... I took the attached samples from a superficially dug hole; it was immediately filled with oil, which I poured into a tin vessel and corked tightly on the spot and which I am sending as is. The thick oil (smaller box) is a sample of the surface layer that covered the reservoir lake and is a product that has been exposed to the air for many years; therefore, on site it is a crust so hard that my companions and I went over on it to the other side of the lake. In places more heated by the sun, we noticed many organic remains of birds: eagles, geese, ducks, snipes, and others.

In the fall of 1889, Sakhalin oil attracted the attention of the newspaper Vladivostok, a well-known public literary and maritime organ, founded by N.V. Sologub in 1883 and published by him until his death in 1893. On October 15, the newspaper said that M.G. Shevelev and Co., a large Far Eastern company, had sent a prospecting team to Sakhalin to look for oil. As the newspaper reported [3],

... the team prospected off the northeastern shore of Sakhalin, where it hit the right signs of the presence of oil. The location of the assumed oil springs is between Pronge and Urkt bays. The team members drilled at a depth of 13 fathoms and obtained soil samples saturated with oil. Unfortunately, the team had no tools long enough to drill deeper; therefore, more substantial results were not obtained.

This publication was followed by a series of articles prepared by the editorial staff of the newspaper Vladivostok in January—February 1890. Of special interest is a large article called Oil Springs of Sakhalin, which appeared in two January issues of the newspaper [4]. The reason for it was a paper read by V.P. Margaritov, a prominent public figure of the Russian Far East and chairman of the Council of the Society for the Study of Amur Krai, at the Marine Assembly on January 17, 1890. In the summer of 1889, he and Batsevich, a special commissioner of the Amur governor general, took part in an expedition that prospected Sakhalin oil springs. However, Margaritov’s presentation, “limited to the story of oil chemical composition,” somewhat disappointed the Vladivostok public but heated curiosity about Sakhalin deposits.

Therefore, Vladivostok’s editorial board decided to give a more detailed account of “this issue of burning scientific, as well as economic, interest” [4]. Batsevich prepared the material for the newspaper and included into it a short historical essay about Sakhalin oil and the story of the 1889 expedition. These publications were based on Batsevich’s detailed report for the Amur governor general after his return from the Sakhalin expedition.

After the article “Oil Springs of Sakhalin,” Vladivostok published the article “Mineral Riches of Sakhalin,” dedicated to the explorations of G.I. Zotov, a Far Eastern merchant of the top guild and retired lieutenant [5]. According to the newspaper, in the early winter of 1889, this entrepreneur “was able to discover, describe, and mark out claims for five new oil sites along the eastern coast of Sakhalin Island close to the Sea of Okhotsk.” The last publication of this series was Batsevich’s letter about the quality of Sakhalin oil [6].

Batsevich’s report on the 1889 expedition underlay a number of works published by him later. For example, the article “Description of Sakhalin’s Oil Deposits” was published in the seventh issue of Gornyi zhurnal (Mining Journal) for 1890 [7]. Published in an authoritative and popular science periodical, the article could not pass unnoticed. In 1891, the yearbook Russian Geological Library published a short review about it, stressing that the publication contained “very little specific geological data. The description of the oil-bearing area or drilling and trenching results is too perfunctory for definite answers to practical questions. The author is in favor of the Miocene age of the oil-bearing formations; however, he gives no valid evidence to prove it” [8].

Other periodicals continued the critical review of Batsevich’s works on Sakhalin oil. For example, in 1894, the fifth and sixth issues of the Proceedings of the Society of Mining Engineers published M.P. Gerasimov’s review of Batsevich’s book Materials for the Study of Amur Krai with Regard to Its Geology and Mining Industry [9], one fourth of which was dedicated to Sakhalin’s oil deposits.

The review, in particular, said [10],

[The book] gives us nothing new compared to Batsevich’s materials published in the newspaper Vladivostok and in issue seven of Gornyi zhurnal for 1890 .... These materials give no

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2 Gornyi zhurnal was Russia’s oldest monthly science-and-engineering mining journal (founded in 1825). It was published in St. Petersburg by the Mining Learned Committee.

3 Russian Geological Library was an annual appendix to the Proceedings of the Geological Committee, published in St. Petersburg from 1885.

4 Proceedings of the Society of Mining Engineers was published from 1892 in separate issues, whose number varied from 6 to 12 in different years. Proceedings published the journals of the society’s meetings, the journals of the advisory board, and the journals of the science-and-engineering commission; articles on papers delivered at the society’s meetings; queries and answers to them; and literary news.