

Chinese Eastern line: history of construction and operation

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Chinese Eastern line:
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Brief information:

Chinese Eastern and South Manchurian lines. 2377 versts (2536 km). Route: Manchuria - Harbin - Pogradichny; Harbin - Changchun - Port-Arthur. The beginning of works - August 28 (September 9), 1897. Opening of working traffic - October 21 (November 3), 1901. Putting into operation and beginning of regular communication - July 1 (14), 1903. The chief of construction: [Yugovich A. I.](#)
[see [Stages of Transsib construction](#) and cost of CEL construction on the page [Transsib cost](#)]

1. Prehistory (1892 - 1897)

By the construction plan of the Great Siberian way approved in 1892, it was planned extension of Transbaikalian line parallel Amur from Sretensk to Khabarovsk. Later a new idea arised, to connect Siberian railway with Ussurian one by shorter way - via Manchuria. Chinese Eastern line (CEL) as this section was named straightened the Siberian railway and reduced its length by 514 versts.

Idea about construction of CEL arised first after surveys of direction along Amur. The surveys showed that the projected extension of Transsib from Sretensk along Amur valley to Khabarovsk intailed great technical difficulties. Connection Siberian way with Vladivostock by straight railway via Manchuria is considered more advantageous economically and exploitingly.

What kind of international condition of China was in years which preceded building of CEL? In the second half of the 19th century foreign penetration into China increased. Imperialists of England, France, Germany, Japan, America and other countries considered crisis of dynasty Zin as suitable situation to profit by fantastic wealth of China (England fixed well in Hong Kong, France did in Indian-China). Japan became to show the

most aggressive intentions towards China. In 1895 after a number of predatory wars Japan imposed one-sided Simonoseckskiy agreement on Chinese government. On the agreement China gave up its domineering position in Korea, ceded to Formosa (Taiwan) and Peskador islands, consented to granting on “leas”. Lyaodun peninsula with Dairen and Port-Arthur towns which Soviet government gave all its rights to common management of Chinese Changchun (former CEL) railway along with all int belongings without compensation to China.

In 1895 after conclusion of Simonoseckskiy treaty Russia forced Japan to give up the main trophy of Japanese Chines war – Lyaodyn peninsrela by having laid allied (England-France-Russia) ultimatum. Soon after it Russia granted a loan of 400 million francs to China and organized Russian-Chinese bank. In 1896 Russia and China concluded a military alliance and contract of the Chinese Eastern line construction. After receiving consent of China to building railway they formed private joint-stock company the board of administration of CEL (sins 1910 – the Russian-Asian bank) in Khabarovsk. Chinese government allowed the bank (that is the Company of CEL) to construct and exploit railway.

Company shares could be purchased by chines citizens as well as Russian ones. Chinese government refused interference in financial activity of the company, that is profit from exploitation of a built railway is released from any debts. But mutual agreement envisaged possibility of redemption the railway by China in 36 years after construction finishing and free transmission CEL to China in 80 years after the beginning of exploitation. According to special agreement on conditions of railways construction Russia wasn’t allowed to having own troops in territory of Northern Manchuria where one intended to build the way and after fishing works only transit transportation between stations in Russian territory without any stop was assumed.

The Company of CEL undertook obligation to maintain future main line in working order, kept nonstop straight communication with Russian railway net and the same movement speed as it was in Siberian railway. Guidance of Company’s activity belonged to the board of administration, its chairman was appointed by Chinese government so that he exercised control of precise observance of obligations before Chinese party by the Company and Chinese authority. Chief deputy was elected by shareholders and confirmed by finances minister of Russian Empire.

The first sitting of the board took place in Petersburg in December of 1896. The chief deputy was S.I. Kerbedge from 1896 to 1903, A.N. Ventsel – from 1903 to 1920. The chief of the building board of CEL was A. I. Yugovich, civil engineer, well-known specialist in constructing of railways in desert and highlands. [\(note 1\)](#)

2. Construction of the railway (1897 - 1903)

The first groups of Russian engineers led by the main builder and prospector A. I. Udovich arrived Manchuria in July of 1897 and started to conduct detailed survey in two direction: the north one – towards Sisicar and the south one – towards Bodune and Ningutu, and they gave preference to the north direction for technical and economical reasons.

Simultaneously they took measures for ensuring of transport of building materials. Conditions of transporting were very hard because it was no from west no from east: Transbaikalian line had yet to exploit and in Ussurian one the hardest in technical respect a part of a line over Kecksirskiy pass had not been built. That’s why they decided to start construction from Kharbin with supply of building materials along the Syngary, the

Amur and the Ussuri rivers for that it had to establish special river steamship line of CEL. When they laid 1300 km of continuous railway track by summer of 1900, in China the Boxer uprising broke out. Railway guards and employees of the way defended heroically objects of the building site but couldn't suppress rebellious element: about 80% of the railway was captured and subjected to complete defeat. Less than a third of laid railway – 400 versts came off unhurt, nearly all station buildings and places fit to line in were burnt and wiped out, store-houses were plundered, considerable part of rolling-stock turned out broken and plundered, telegraph was out of work, coal mines of the way were wrecked. However after liquidation of disturbances they led laying so a quick pace that closed all the way in October 1901. Straight away transportation of passengers and mail started by CEL.

Construction of the line was led by the most progressive methods. Minimum radius of curves made up 440 m (only in mounting conditions – 250 m), maximum lifting was 0,015, thickness of ballast layer was 45 centimeters, 24-pound rails. On the railway they constructed 1464 bridges including the biggest one over the Syngary river, drove 9 tunnels from which 2 ones with extend of more 3 km. Besides two-way Khinganskiy tunnel built under the head of engineer N.N. Bocharov was unique at that time.

Nearly 200 thousands of Chinese workers worked at CEL. The board of administration of the Company rendered free medical service to builders, paid temporary disability allowance as well as grant for a family in case of death of a worker. The Company had to built hundreds of subsidiary enterprises – coal mines, timber and stone-processing factories, the main railway workshops and other many things.

On the first of July 1903 regular passenger and commodity railway traffic was opened in CER. Construction of CER in the shortest period did credit to skill and courage of Russian engineers and Chinese workers.

Later on the Company of CER took part in equipping of a port in Vladivostok, organized voyages to port of Japan, Korea and China through the mediation of Russian East-Asian steamships line. In 1903 the Company owned flotilla of 20 steamships. It had telegraph, prospected minerals in Manchuria. In the towns grown quickly along the railway they opened hospitals, school, shops, libraries. 20 railway schools were opened. [\(Note 2\)](#)

3. Operation of CEL before revolution (1903 - 1917)

In November 1902 one appointed [D. L. Khorvat](#), a manager of CEL. He got rank of lieutenant-general on the 6th of December 1911 with salary 25000 rubles plus 10000 rubles per a year.

D.L. Khorvat put a big contribution in development of CEL, its technical rigging, reaction of station buildings, dwelling for railway men, organization of local production and new branches of industry plants. While management of Khorvat glass, brick, tanning arose as well as macaroni factories. Agriculture gave development. In 1915 the Company owned some sugar factories and butter-dairy, gold-fields, 16 mills, 30 sea and river steamships, 26 apiaries, 11 country property, 13 timber enterprises in particular production of ties. Investments of the board of administration of the railway in coal mining near Chzalainor (now Dzalay-Noor) in 1914 were estimated more than 10 million rubles. Great means were put in town and dwelling construction as well as in merchant and banking.

In November of 1917 SPC dismissed Khorvat having passed management of CEL to Kharbin Soviet. But Khorvat threw down authority of the Soviet in December 1917 with the aid of Chinese troops and White Guards. He declared himself “Provisional Government of Russia” having converted CEL into white stronghold against Soviet power in the Far East. “The Supreme ruler of Russia” admiral Kolchack at the end of 1918 appointed general Khvat a governor-general of the Far East and the line of alienation of CEL. However in August 1919 the same “Supreme ruler” dismissed Khorvat for his refusing to subdue the strike of Far-Eastern railwaymen. Since this period active play of Kharvat in White movement ceased. In 1922 Khorvat retired the position of a manager and left for Peking. There he started work for Chinese government, become a counselor of construction and exploitation of railways.

In period of Chinese democratic revolutionary 1924-1925 V. K. Blucher suggested that Council of People’s Commissars and NKPS use D.L. Khorvat in position of a manager of CEL as a big railway specialist moreover enjoying authority with Chinese power. D.L. Khorvat died in Peking in May of 1937 a month before his 78 years.

Exploitation of CEL in the first years of its opening went off in hard conditions: 1904-1905 was the period of Russian-Japanese war (due to Portsmouthski peace the southern part of the line from Kuanchanze (now Changchun) to the station Dalni (Dalyan) was ceded to the Japanese’s); in 1906 evacuation of troops out of Manchuria went off. Since 1907 the railway started to work in normal conditions.

The dynamics of transportation of goods by CER from 1907 d’i 1911 y. (mln pud.)					
	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
Bread goods	11,8	17,0	25,6	33,3	45,6
Wooden materials	4,7	4,1	3,0	4,9	4,3
Tea	3,1	3,0	2,7	3,4	2,9
Solt	0,5	1,9	3,4	2,9	3,3
Other goods	7,0	7,4	10,0	13,3	18,8
Total	27,1	33,4	44,7	57,8	74,9

Transportation profit of that period was (according to years) 7,7; 8,2; 8,4; 10,5 and 12,4 mln. rubles.

On the 1st of August 1906 Ussurian line was granted on long-term leas for 25 years till the 1st of January 1931 to CEL. What were the reasons of it? First, as a result of defeat in Russian-Japanese war CER lost its southern ports: Port-Arthur and Dalni. The railway had to have outlet to the ocean and Vladivostok was chosen.

All-powerful then the financial minister Count S.U. Vitte who controlled CEL convinced a tsar of that they hadn’t to keep the railway in the former condition because its employees were self-willed and administration came ground CEL differed considerably, it accomplished mighty work during Russian-Japanese war, after the war didn’t interrupt for an hour its activity while there were disturbances in all railways. That’s why Vitte considered it’s necessary to grant on lease Ussyrian line to the company of CEL which could put in exemplary order like it was in CEL. On the bases of report of financial minister in March of 1906 they decreed to grand on lease Ussyrisckay rail road to the Company of CEL. Actual transmission happened on the 1st of August 1906.

Tsar's government wanted working class came down under the aegis of CEL. The former chief of CEL, court counselor D.L. Khorvat obtained trans looked upon the railway as his own private domain probably on the basis of that soldiers of his Ussyriski battalion built it.

So, administration of the Ussurian line was broken up and Ussyrisk department of CEL was formed.

A representative of the Concil and a manager of the department established in MPS and the same time a manager of the railway line department was Stepan Zezarevich for Offenbergl. He was born in 1864, Graduated from the Railway Institute. In 1897 he placed himself at the head of the track and construction maintenance of the Ussurian line, railway engineer of the 4th class. He was awarded three orders and four medals for working diligence. In 1915 he was given the rank of major-general.

Condition of our railway by the time of transfer it to CEL did not meet completely economic requirements, especially necessities of developing export. Set while construction of the line maximum carrying capacity (seven pares of military trains) became obstade in increasing movement. Certainly such a situation did not suit the Company of CEL, in as much as according to the article 15 of agreement of parts deficit in exploitation of the Ussyriskay railway had to be compensated by Russian government to leaseholder so the administration of CER did not stint creation all improvements that promoted to increasing of carrying capacity. For this purpose they laid the second ways in the section Vladivostok - Nikolskoe along which export goods moved, built a tunnel in the span Kiparisovo-Nadezdinskoe having softened the Kiparisovski pass, built three viaducts in Vladivostok having softened profile of the way Vladivostok - Pervaya Rechka, equipped moorage's and store house in Egersheld for trans-shipment of goods during a period of subordinated status (1913-1916).

CEL made all expenses from its own means, which future a government paid off. During the 1st World War and following period paying off become to delay, monetary assignation for Ussurian line was brought to nothing and the latter did not receive anything from CER besides instructions. [\(note 3\)](#)

4. CEL during period of Soviet power (1918 - 1950)

In August of 1918 a common meeting of employees of the station Nikolskoe decided to demand separation the Ussyriskaya line from CEL. Kredits for maintenance of the railway decreased more and more and since January of 1920 issue of means was ceased finally.

On the 20th of March 1920 a provincial zemstvo board of Primorje issued a resolution "About conciliation of the Company of CEL". At the same time they formed an executive bureau of a ways of communication board under the head of Bolshevik I. Y. Kyshnarev and three participants including a manager of Ussuriisk department of train service engineer N.E. Spengler. He was charged with concluding separation a department of the Ussurian line from CEL and forming management of a self-dependent railway.

On the 12th of May 1920 the first decree about finding independence railway issued. Final separation occurred on the 1st of July 1920 with forming of a self-dependent management under the head of engineer Nikolay Eduardovich Spengler.

Such way lease the Ussurian line by CEL finished prematurely.

For a long period of time the Chinese Eastern line was a bone of contention between Russia and Japan. Great importance of the railways for industry of Manchuria was estimated soon by railway magnates of America in the first place Harriman. That's way it was not accidentally that America shouldered mediation in accepting of a peace treaty between Japan and Russia after the war of 1905. This treaty was signed on the 5th of September 1905 in an American town Portsmouth. It restricted substantially interest of both Russia and Japan in China, though Japan found itself in more advantageous position: it received the peninsula Layaodun with the Uzno-Manchurskaya railway (a part of CEL).

In 1909 USA declared a doctrine of "opened doors" in China that was implied overt robbery of China. On the basis of this doctrine America made England, Germany, France and Japan an offer about neutralization of railways in Manchuria. Naturally, neither Russia nor Japan could agree with it. The northern part of CEL from the station Otpor to Pogranichnaya Kept in the property of Russia as before.

Since 1924 CER was a tidbit for Japan for a long time was captured by Japanese militarists in 1931. Initial point and basis of annexation of Manchuria was the South Manchurian line.

Japanese having occupied Manchuria started to prevent from regular working of CEL which was in the property of USSR. Occurrences of sabotages and crashes became more frequent, Japanese secret and crashes became more frequent, Japanese secret service blackmailed Soviet railwaymans working in the road, spread agents among them.

Taking into account strained situation in this region Soviet government consented to selling CEL to Japan in 1935 in order to keeping of peace in the Far East.

Japan made a large profit out of exploitation of railways in Manchuria. Only for 1938 net profit made up 142 million yen. At the same time Japanese militarists used intensively the line for military transportation: million Kvantunskaya army was formed which had to play as shock troops in future large war with Soviet Union. Manchuria and CEL were assigned a part of springboard for attack.

But praised army had to capitulate in August of 1945 before power Soviet army which went to Manchuzyria with great liberation mission.

With victory Soviet people under military Japan our rights to CEL were restored. True to the principle of respect of Chinese sovereignty, Soviet government had already refused in 1917 exterritorial right in China and ruled CEL with China in common on a par.

With proclamation People's Republic in China CER became the road of true friendship and brotherhood between Soviet and Chinese peoples.

On 14th of February 1950 in Moscow a historical treaty about friendship, unit and mutual assistance was signed between government of USSR and Chinese People's Republic. At the same time they accepted agreement according to which Soviet government gave all its rights to common management of Chinese Changchun (former CEL) line along with all in to belongings without compensation to China.

Burkova Valentina Fedorovna

Source: "[Far Eastern line](#)", Khabarovsk, publishing house Chastnaya Kolleksiya, 1997. The chapter from the

book is given completely without abridgements. Division into subsections is made by S. G. Sigachyov.

Notes by S. G. Sigachyov:

(1) If to reject excessive politician assertions such as "...Japan became to show the most aggressive intentions towards China..." or "apan imposed one-sided Simonoseckskyi agreement on Chinese government", than one can reveal next situation: there were two grave rivals in Northern China: Russian Empire and Japan. They fought for control under this strategic and economic important area because China of those days was weak and split up into semi-autonomous parts. At first Russia gained the upper hand by using itself influence in the world and cooperation with other great Powers. It actively began to use opened opportunities to exploit Manchuria and also tried to attach for itself strategic acuirements (Port-Arthur, Dairen). But unfortunately Russian leaders of those days ("Bezobrazov clique") overrated their possibilities and at the same time underestimated increasing power of Japan specially war and economic. Moreover also general factors such as social tension in society and problems of army and fleet fighting efficiently negatively influenced Russian positions in Manchuria. So, independently concession for construction of CEL finally set Japan against Russia and particularly the right to construction of SML (Sout Manchurian line - branch from CEL to Port Arthur). Japaneses saw in these actions of Russian Empire undermining of itself efforts to colonize China and the main is that they lost possibility to exploits in its aims such attractive part of territory which before it was considered practically "no man's land". In those times such "trifle" as sovereignty of territory of weak states to which then China was related wasn't receive into attention...

(2) Such fast temps of spread into Manchuria and consolidation there not only embittered Japan but also put leading western Powers on its guard. They saw in strengthening of Russian nofluence a danger of Russian Empire leading position in this region. As one can see from the above big financial and material resources were turned to Manchuria and the construction was conducted with great range and rate. If there wasn't "boxers uprising" be than intensive CEL operation began a year and a half earlier. Unfortunately here didn't say anything about construction and putting SML (Sout Manchurian line - from Changchun to Port-Arthur) into service which then was considered the main of two exits to Pacific ocean because lead to Dairen and Port-Arthur - according the main commercial port and the main Russian naval base at Pacific ocean. During some time direction to Vladivostok wasn't considered as key one, this direction began to be such only after Russian-Japanese war in 1904 - 1905.

(3) On August 24, 1999 on the site owing to the help from Far Eastern line museum photo of legendary general [D. L. Khorvat](#) was found and published. He was a general manager of CEL in the most grim and changeable years - 1902-1922 and practically create in those years "state in state" having unofficial name "happy Khorvatia".

More [about CEL history and Russian colony in Manchuria](#) - article by *Nadezhda Ablova* on page of Belorussian journal of international relations (though, access is slow)

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