When Russia’s Consul Modest Modestovich Bakunin, arrived in the Dutch Indies in May 1894 he was somewhat dismayed by the nature of the place in which he would have to spend the next few years. He described Batavia as a “god-forsaken place,” unhealthy and “spiritually boring”¹ and remote and provincial,² compared to Singapore which he described as “a center and hub of the East.” Bakunin’s initial dismay eventually gave way to a more positive appreciation of the Dutch colony and Javanese life as he resided in the more pleasant country-side locale of Buitenzorg (1 1/2 hour by train from Batavia), locale of the famous Botanic gardens and the residence of the Governor-General of the colony (1893-1899), C. H.van der Wyck. By the time of his departure five years later the consul, a nephew of the anarchist Michael Bakunin, had become an enthusiastic and energetic advocate of Russia’s expanded presence in the region. After his return to Russia he published a book entitled Tropicheskaia Gollandiia. Piat’ let na ostrove Java.³ A detailed account of the Dutch colony, based both on his official reports⁴ and personal observation, it was designed to acquaint the Russian public with the region and its relevance to the empire. Along with chapters on the political, social and economic nature of the colonial regime, the book also included descriptions of the customs, traditions and life of the Javanese people in this tropical region so unknown to most Russians.

2. Ibid., 97.
3. See fn. 1.
4. Most of those reports, with the exception of some of the more detailed ones on such specialised topics as the Dutch Colonial army and navy, were published in full in vol. 1 of the Politika kapitalistskichh derzhav i natsional’no-osvoboditel’noe dvizhenie v lugo-Vostochnoi Azii [hereafter Pkd.], vol. I (Moscow: Nauka, 1965). The detail of these reports also indicate the free access that Bakunin had to published Dutch government editions of statistics on trade, industry and culture in the colony. On occasion reference will be made in this article to other relevant unpublished reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive in Moscow which the author consulted in 1997.
The context of Bakunin’s appointment in Batavia, along with his official reports and book on the Dutch colony, provide a unique vantage point from which to explore the practical and ideological dimensions of the Russian imperial interest in Southeast Asia, its relationship to Russia’s Asiatic Mission in the Far East in the 1890s, and the Russian response to European imperialism in the region. Consular officials had to be the eyes and ears of their superiors in the Foreign Affairs, Finance and Naval Ministries by focusing on matters and issues of importance to the empire, promoting Russia’s interests in the region and seeking opportunities to expand those interests. They also had to observe closely the colonial regimes of other European powers, record and analyze the success or failures of their regimes, interact with colonial officials and gather factual information on colonial administrations for their reports. However, Bakunin’s interest in the region went beyond his official role and, because of his personal enthusiasm for his task and his efforts to arouse the Russian public interest in Southeast Asia, he stands out as the most dynamic and ambitious of the Russian consular officials in the region. His book also broadens the scope of his analysis of colonialism from the official accounts of his reports and allows us to explore his personal experience of the Dutch colonial regime and the Javanese people and culture.

While some of the consul’s imperial outlook will sound familiar to analysts of other forms of European imperialism, Bakunin also expressed views which were shaped by the “distinctive cultural mode” of Russia’s Asiatic Mission in the 1890s as well as his own ideological perspective as a Russian citizen. This article will examine “the attitudes and references” of his imperial outlook from two angles: first, the official motivations that shaped his appointment and secondly, the imperial criteria he utilized in assessing the success of European colonies in Asia. As a Russian consul official, Bakunin had imbibed, as had much of the Russian public, the integral relationship between Russia’s prestige as a nation and its skills in empire-building at the turn of the century, but the failure of the consul’s goals in external imperialism.

5. Edward W. Said, the prominent specialist on the “the structure of attitude and reference” in European imperialism and culture, suggested in his book on Culture and Imperialism (London: Vintage, 1994) that Russia had no real need for a “systematic” cultural expression of its imperialism like the French and British Empires because it had “acquired its territories almost exclusively by adjacence” rather than overseas. Nevertheless the vast geographical expanse of the Russian empire with its absorption of numerous non-Slavic cultures including the peoples of the Caucasus, Central Asia, and eastern Siberia eventually required its own more defined “cultural forms and structures” to explain and support this development outside of state imperatives of defensive borders or access to the sea. See Geoffrey Hosking, Russia: People and Empire 1552-1917 (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997) on Russia’s expansion as an empire and the impact on its political, social, and cultural outlook. See also Dominic Lieven, Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals (London: John Murray, 2000).