An Introduction to Vladimir Arsen'ev's Life Work, Colleagues, and Family

AMIR KHISAMUTDINOV

Abstract: The article is devoted to the famous explorer and writer Vladimir Klavdievich Arsen'ev (1872–1930). He arrived in the Russian Far East in 1900, where he conducted numerous research expeditions and engaged in a comprehensive study of the Far East. Arsen'ev studied the lives of the region's indigenous peoples and published several books, *Dersu Uzala* being the most famous one. This article is based on Arsen'ev's personal archives, which are stored in Vladivostok. The article chronicles his life in the Soviet period. It also discusses the punishment of his wives and children.

Keywords: *Dersu Uzala*, ethnography, indigenous people, purges, Soviet era, Vladimir K. Arsen'ev

Beginnings

Vladimir Klavdievich Arsen'ev, the most famous Russian explorer of the Far East, said on the eve of his death, "I look to the past and see that for myself I did follow a lucky star."¹ Through the Bolshevik Revolution and through the purges, his fate and that of his relatives were typical for that period.

Arsen'ev was born in St. Petersburg on August 29, 1872. A little-known fact is that "Arsen'ev" was not his real last name; rather it was Goppmeier, a Dutch name. Arsen'ev's grandfather was Fedor (Teodor) Ivanovich Goppmeier, who died in 1866. He was the manager of an estate, who had a son, Klavdii Fedorovich, born on March 11, 1848. Goppmeier did not succeed in having Klavdii legalized, so he was given the surname of a man called Arsenii, who was present at his christening, hence the name "Arsen'ev." In retrospect, this was a fortunate turn

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of events. As Russian sailors say, you give a name to a new ship, so it will float. Who could imagine today in the Russian Far East a city called Goppmeier, or in Vladivostok a street named Goppmeier, or a Primorye State Museum named after Goppmeier?

During the Russian Civil War, the Arsen'ev family moved to the small village of Baturino near Moscow. Some of the local peasants thought they had money and on November 24, 1918, robbed them, killing six family members, including Arsen'ev's father.² However, another fortunate event that occurred for Arsen'ev was that he succeeded in getting transferred from Poland to the Russian Far East during his military service. He arrived in the Far East in 1900. Had he remained in Poland, the chances are that he would have been killed during World War I or the bloody Civil War in the European part of Russia. Officer Arsen'ev's participation from July 8 to July 25, 1900, in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in China turned into another fortunate event, especially since he received a war medal. During the Soviet regime, this rebellion was referred to as "the struggle of the Chinese people to be free." Arsen'ev's service in putting down what actually was a peasant uprising was removed from several of his biographies.³ It appears that the Soviet security organs either forgot or overlooked this event.

Dersu Uzala

Arsen'ev was among the first Russian researchers who conducted a comprehensive study of the Far East, paying particular attention to the lives of indigenous peoples. He believed that it was important to pursue the development of this region while considering the area's original inhabitants. Starting with research on military targets, he moved on to ethnography, anthropology, and the identification of environmental problems.⁴ Perhaps the luckiest moment in Arsen'ev's life was when he met the famous Nanai (Gol'd) guide, Dersu Uzala, and immortalized this man; it was this literary hero who helped Arsen'ev become a famous writer.

The real Dersu Uzala, as reflected in Arsen'ev's diary, was not the type of person that he appears to be in the book. He was not a great philosopher, nor was he a great man communing with nature. In his popular book on Dersu Uzala, which is translated into many languages, Arsen'ev wrote that "he was the last of his people," which is not true. Dersu Uzala had a brother, Stepan, who also took part in expeditions

roughly between 1906 and 1907 in the Ussuri region. From Arsen'ev's diary we get a different portrait of Dersu Uzala and his brother, which was not as idealistic as described in the novel.

Stepan had been a guide for Pavel Vasil'evich Shkurkin (1868–1945). After graduating from the Oriental Institute in Vladivostok in 1903, Shkurkin published many books on the history and ethnography of China and Manchuria. He wrote the introduction to the first edition of Arsen'ev's *Dersu Uzala* on March 20, 1917.⁵ Later introductions were written by Maxim Gorky and were of a much more political nature.⁶ Shkurkin lived and worked in Harbin from the early days of the Chinese Eastern Railway, and he invited Arsen'ev to Harbin where the latter presented series of lectures ("Our Americanoids," "Shamanism in Siberian peoples and their animistic views of nature," "Ethnological problems in the East of Russia") for the Society of Russian Orientalists (Obschestvo russkikh orientalistov).⁷ Arsen'ev was elected an honorable member of this society. By the end of 1928, Shkurkin had emigrated to America, where he later died in Seattle.⁸

Another example of Arsen'ev's imagination that appears in his book is the meeting with Dersu in 1902 on the shores of Lake Khanka in the southern part of the Primorye region. In reality, this meeting did not take place. In particular, the description of Dersu saving Arsen'ev during a storm, which was one of the dramatic high points in Akira Kurosawa's film, was invented by Arsen'ev.⁹ The tragicomic outcome of believing what Arsen'ev wrote in his book has led to the construction of a monument at the spot where Arsen'ev allegedly met Dersu Uzala.

Arsen'ev kept a detailed diary through all the years he was accompanied by Dersu Uzala. One can compare the reality of the diary with the later popular book, which was heavily novelized. Arsen'ev's diary mentions only five or six facts and incidents about Dersu Uzala. Of these, two are when Arsen'ev notes that Dersu was drunk and lazy at the particular moment he was writing. Thus *Dersu Uzala*, which is internationally known and has had such an enormous influence on our perceptions, is an artistic work rather than a piece of history.

Arsen'ev had a romantic side to his character. When he first arrived in the Far East, he put on an opera with his army officers in Vladivostok. With this in mind, it is easy to see how Dersu was, to Arsen'ev, just a symbol of the Ussuri taiga—a pure-hearted aboriginal man who helped the Russians, who understood the wild, who could understand the animals. Several local people accompanied Arsen'ev in the Ussuri taiga over the course of several years. Some of these men were killed, some survived. The Dersu Uzala that we read about is really a composite

picture of any number of these different guides. Arsen'ev loved Dersu and expressed his respect for all indigenous groups, but other explorers in the taiga were not as respectful.

Friends and Colleagues

Soviet and Russian historians and biographers often omit the fact that Arsen'ev served as an officer in the Russian Imperial Army. He came out to the Russian Far East as a young officer who had been promoted from within. Because of this, Arsen'ev was kept on a special registration list by Soviet security organs until 1924. He had to appear every week at their headquarters to report his whereabouts so that they could "keep tabs" on him. One may wonder why a Tsarist officer did not emigrate during the Civil War. After all, Vladivostok was under the White or semi-White rule from 1918 to 1922, and he had every opportunity to leave. In fact, his closest friend, the ethnographer Ivan Alekseevich Lopatin (1888–1970), immigrated to the United States, where he defended PhD dissertation and worked as a professor at the University of Southern California.

During the Civil War, Arsen'ev helped the American officer David Prescott Barrows (1873–1954), who was in charge of American intelligence. Barrows wrote to his colleague, Colonel C.H. Mason, that he had just received as a gift the book *Dersu Uzala*, the author of which "was in the employ of our Military Intelligence Service in the Siberian Expedition."¹⁰ On April 6, 1921, Arsen'ev commented: "I always remember with much pleasure the time when I worked in the American Headquarters with you and I should like for this time to return again."¹¹ Barrows later became president of the University of California. Why, then, did Arsen'ev stay and live under Soviet rule, despite having several strong foreign connections? As a former officer of the Russian Imperial Army, Arsen'ev should have participated in the Civil War, but he did not; his dislike of the Communist ideals and his focus on exploration led him to refrain from taking part. In an introduction to one his books, he wrote, "I decided to share the fate of my people."¹²

Based on Arsen'ev diaries, we see that he was critical of Soviet rule. On the expedition to Kamchatka in 1918, he noted that while he was on a boat cruising in the Sea of Okhotsk, revolution leaders had the best passenger cabin while everyone else lived like the crew. He also wrote that the trade union committee aboard the ship decided what and how much cargo to load on board. They were heavily involved in

the speculation of contraband, and the boat at one point was so loaded with goods that it could barely stay afloat.

There were several incidents that could have proved unlucky for Arsen'ev but went unnoticed by the communists. During the foreign intervention of 1918 in Siberia, Arsen'ev collected and helped transport ethnographic artifacts to the United States from Vladivostok. These artifacts were from the expeditions undertaken by the Polish explorer Stanislav Poniatovski (1884–1945) and Vladimir A. Kotov on behalf of the Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. The Hungarian ethnographer and traveler Barathosi Balogh Benedek (1870–1945) also made an expedition to the lower Amur (1908–1909, 1914) and to Sakhalin (1914). He published several popular scientific works on his travels. His collection (household objects, hunting tools and fishing, folk ornaments, and cult objects) are stored in the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest.¹³ Some years later, Arsen'ev was accused of having sold these objects to the Americans in return for the honorary status in the National Geographical Society. After the establishment of the Soviet regime in the Far East in 1923, Arsen'ev collected documents about his relationship with the American anthropologists to prove that he did not sell the material. During 1924 Arsen'ev helped the famous Russian poet and former tsarist officer Arsenii Ivanovich Mitropl'skii (Nesmelov) flee to Harbin. Nesmelov, who was born in Moscow in 1899, lived in Vladivostok from 1920, where he published two books. Later, on August 20, 1945, he was arrested in Harbin and deported to Primorye, where he died in the station of Grodekovo in September 1945.

It is remarkable Arsen'ev managed to get away with the things he did. The Ob'edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie, or OGPU (the Joint State Political Directorate of NKVD) was constantly checking on Arsen'ev—what he was doing and what he was talking about and with whom. Still, Arsen'ev remained critical. For example, in September 1926, the explorer offered an explanation of what he did and talked about during his last expedition:

I recall that one time we spoke about the fact that all Russians are extremely disorganized people, anarchists by nature, anarchists in matters both serious and trifling. They are the kind of people who always feel burdened by order and plans and have no concept of time. In a word, they cannot stand any kind of restraint, and to make a Russian fit into organized framework, coercion has to be used. The disorganization which we are witnessing since 1917 is not the fault of the government. It is the nature of the Russian people; it is a constant phenomenon under any flag or any government, be it monarchy or

Communism. Another time we talked about that same sort of apathy, weariness, bordering on abstraction, and loss of energy are observed among government workers in all the institutions, establishments, and offices, and even private individuals—phenomenon brought on by the prolonged war and the revolution. The background of this indifference is reminiscent of the weariness that set in after the thirty-year war in Europe. This is a common phenomenon and does not depend on the color of flag.

I recall another conversation on the subject of peevishness of the Slavic character. It is not difficult to start a quarrel among Russian people. Without verifying gossip, they at once begin to hate each other. Not only individuals became enemies for the rest of their lives, but even families, clans, entire provinces, and even nationalities—for instance, the Poles and the Great Russians, the Serbs and the Bulgarians. During floods, earthquakes, and revolutions hostilities burst out like wildfire both among common people and the intelligentsia. To slander one's neighbor, push him out, size his place, to get even with him—these are all characteristics of the Slavs, whose lives are governed by feelings and impressions rather than by mind. All of this can be observed in the Russian Revolution.

During his life, Arsen'ev tried to steer clear of political activities. In 1905–1906, he refused to participate in an ideological discussion in the Obshchestvo izucheniia Amurskogo kraya (OIAK). As he wrote:

I may say: so long as a conversation on the subject of anthropogeography can be given an exclusively political coloration, I see that even such conversations should be avoided, and therefore I will not carry on conversations on general philosophical subjects anywhere or with anybody, in order to avoid all contact with the local intelligentsia. For the rest of my days I will work exclusively on materials that are of importance to humanity. I am fifty-four years old, the years rush by and my strength is weakening. I may only have a few more years left to live. Therefore I want to direct all my energy to that goal.

Several scholars who accompanied Arsen'ev on his expeditions denounced him for not participating but at that time he was not punished.

One of Arsen'ev's closest friends in Vladivostok was the Japanese consul general Watanabe Rie (Riye). Watanabe served as a foreign office student in the Vladivostok Consulate General in 1896 and studied the Russian language with the family of OIAK chairman Nikolai Matveevich Solov'ev. He served as chancellor of the Vladivostok Consulate General in 1903 and again from April 1908 to 1911; as consul, 1920–1924; and as acting consul general, July–October 1921 and Febru-

ary 1923–April 1925. He was appointed to serve as consul general from October 1925 to 1929, and again from November 1933 to March 1936. When Watanabe was returning to Japan in 1929, having served out his appointment, Arsen'ev took part in the farewell activities. The Soviet security organs were closely watching every citizen who had contact with Japanese nationals. Watanabe, who was a diplomatic official and incidentally fluent in Russian, was the subject of many security *otchety* (reports). Eyewitnesses and informers reported the consul's every contact with Soviet citizens. In the photograph of Consul Watanabe's departure from Vladivostok, it is notable that within a period of just two years, every person connected with the Japanese consulate was under criminal investigation by the OGPU as a possible Japanese spy. After Arsen'ev's death, the original picture in the OGPU file was annotated on the back, saying that he was a suspected Japanese agent. From this account, we can see how close Arsen'ev was to being swept away in the fervor of the Soviet purges. Due to the fact that he maintained friendly relations with communist powers, worked for the local government, and strove to fulfill all the requests of the Communist Party, he may have been spared.

Arsen'ev's Death and the Fate of His Family

Two years before his death, Arsen'ev wrote in his diary, "My time is already past, and it's time for me now to leave the scene, to follow Dersu Uzala."¹⁴ Some speculations remain connected to Arsen'ev's death on September 4, 1930, that were not publicized during the Soviet period. From July 19 to August 26 of that year he participated in an expedition to the lower Amur, where he caught a cold. When the OIAK vice chairman wanted to send a doctor to check on Arsen'ev, he refused to go. After all, it was only a cold. Another story goes that the Soviet security forces had issued a death warrant for Arsen'ev and had it on file, which implies that perhaps they were planning something. One former KGB officer recalled how as a young OGPU officer in 1930, he smothered Arsen'ev in a train between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok. However, that story is untrue. In fact, Arsen'ev died in his bed, which rather disappointed the security organs. And this was the final fortunate circumstance in Arsen'ev life. He died opportunely in 1930, before being caught up in the subsequent purges.

After his death, Arsen'ev's family paid the price to the communist regime for his life. Several months after his death in 1930, a criminal

investigation was opened on Arsen'ev's second wife, Margarita Nikolaevna Arsen'eva, who was born in 1891 in Switzerland of a French mother. Her father was Solov'ev, the chairman of OIAK. On December 1, 1930, the Dal'nevostochnyi Kraevoi Komitet Vserossiiskoi Partii (bol'shevikov), or the Far Eastern Regional Committee of All Russia Communist Party of Bolsheviks, issued a resolution on the struggle against strong chauvinism and support for the international education of all people. It began when an attack on Arsen'ev was published in the Vladivostok newspaper in an article by Gerontii Valentinovich Efimov.¹⁵ Arsen'ev was posthumously identified by the security organs as the "leader of a spy-terroristic organization" in the Russian Far East on behalf of Japan. To prove this was a criminal case, among the many that were arrested, two of Arsen'ev colleagues were executed. Margarita Arsen'eva was arrested on March 31, 1934, together with a number of professors and researchers from the State Far Eastern University and other institutes in the Russian Far East. The cause for her first arrest was "spying on behalf of Japan and Germany." The evidence was the already-mentioned photograph, where those pictured were identified as being Japanese agents because they socialized with Consul General Watanabe. The German connection was due to Arsen'ev's work having been published in that country.¹⁶

According to the available information, Margarita Arsen'eva was able to get out of the NKVD cellars that same year because among the members of the secret police there were some enthusiasts of Arsen'ev's books. In particular, *Dersu Uzala* has been read and appreciated by members of the security forces. After her release from prison, she returned to Vladivostok. Despite her friends' advice to leave the Russian Far East for Moscow, presumably to extend her life, she refused. She said, "this is where my husband lived, his grave is here, his work is here. I'm going to stay here."¹⁷

Margarita Nikolaevna's second arrest took place on July 2, 1937. She was one of several staff members at the Far Eastern Branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences who were picked up in a new criminal case initiated that year by the state security organs. She spent one year in prison with no interrogation and without having the faintest idea of what was going to happen to her. No charges were made because in her file there were no papers—or NKVD had tried to push her to confess to being a Japanese spy, though Margarita refused to agree with any allegations against her. However, when the interrogations did begin, the investigators broke her will within three days. The charges were the same as the first time. She signed the necessary protocol admitting that she was

"working on behalf of Japan as member of a spy-terrorist organization" in the Far East that was led by her late husband. To this they added the additional charge that she also was "spying for Germany" because Arsen'ev's *Dersu Uzala* had been published in Berlin.¹⁸

The trial that took place on August 23, 1938, for the widow of Arsen'ev lasted ten minutes, from 1:40 p.m. to 1:50 p.m. Six minutes after the trial she was shot in the cellar of the NKVD headquarters in Vladivostok.¹⁹ In 1939 one prisoner remembered the conditions for women in Vladivostok's prisons: "In the prison the guards did as they pleased. When I sat in incarceration, I saw Zheltonogov and Gorlov rape a woman prisoner and strangle her. Zheltonogov today is free. For the woman in prison everything was so unbelievable that many went crazy and hung themselves. In one cell measuring seven meters were thirty-five women and some even gave birth there."²⁰

One member of Arsen'ev's immediate family remained alive: Natalya (Natasha), his eighteen-year old-daughter with Margarita Nikolaevna. She also had the opportunity, like her mother, to leave Vladivostok and go to Moscow, but she had also decided to remain. It was a fortunate turn of events that on the eve of her arrest, Natasha sold her father's archives to the present-day OIAK. This independent society fared better during the years of terror than many state organizations, which were forcibly disbanded and had their libraries destroyed. In the archives of the society are many of Arsen'ev's unpublished writings. They deal primarily with ethnographical and anthropological subjects but also include notes on international relations such as the relations of the Russian Far East with its neighboring countries.

Natasha was picked up in 1940 and spent fifteen years in the GULAG system. During this time she experienced the worst events of life. Natasha never really understood that all of her sufferings was because of her father. It was the security forces' way to get back at Arsen'ev, who died before they could get to him. After Natasha was released from prison, she developed a severe drinking problem and was a heavy user of drugs. She moved many times: from Khabarovsk to Vladivostok, then to Blagoveshchensk.

Arsen'ev's first wife and his son were luckier. Arsen'ev had married his childhood sweetheart Anna Konstantinovna Kadashevich, and their son Vladimir was born in 1900. During the Kamchatka expedition of 1918, Arsen'ev had a dream recorded in his diary, "I see my wife and am holding her hand so that we can cross the river together, but she let go of my hand and stayed on the other shore." It is hard to know what happened, but immediately after returning from the expedition

Arsen'ev divorced his wife. One may speculate that he found her with another man because she immediately remarried.

When Arsen'ev left his family, he took nothing with him, though he paid money to support his family until 1924. During the 1930s, Anna and her son were punished by the NKVD by being sent away from the Russian Far East. In the 1950s, Anna returned to Nakhodka, and she and her son began to collect royalties from Arsen'ev's publications. The Nakhodka gorispolkom (city executive committee) gave her a private house and special pension, and many newspapers wrote articles about her as if she was Arsen'ev wife.

He was buried in a rather inconspicuous former military cemetery on Cape Egershel'd in Vladivostok. However, after 1945 Arsen'ev underwent a modest revival, partly connected with Stalin's tendency to look more sympathetically at Russian achievements in connection with the end of World War II. Arsen'ev fell conveniently into this category of previously deceased people raised up as Russian heroes. In the 1950s, Arsen'ev's remains were removed from the Cape to a prominent place in the old Naval cemetery in Vladivostok. This was because new apartment buildings and the cinema "Vympel" were to be built on top of the Egershel'd cemetery. A document exists that states that when Arsen'ev's grave was opened, a white butterfly fluttered out of the tomb. This document was signed by members of Soviet organizations, who testified to seeing that little butterfly fly out of his grave.

In the Naval cemetery his body was not laid on an east-west axis as mandated by the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox cross that was on the original grave was vandalized and destroyed but, fortunately for Arsen'ev's beliefs, it was not replaced with a star. During perestroika, OIAK members returned the Russian Orthodox cross to Arsen'ev's monument. Interestingly, after Arsen'ev's scholarly rehabilitation in the 1960s, many Soviet officials wanted to be buried next to him. The whole area is now rather crowded with graves; as time went by Arsen'ev's grave became invisible in this concrete wall of memorials, many of them much larger than his.

Conclusion

In a 1985 biography of Arsen'ev, Anna Ivanovna Tarasova says that, unfortunately, Vladimir Klavdiievich did not master the Marxist-Leninist mythology in his ethnographic studies. That is why it is important to use contemporary circumstances to begin to understand the real Arsen'ev.

It is also important to note that previously unknown information can now be brought to light regarding Arsen'ev's manuscript, *Strana Udege* (Country of the Udegei), a study of one of the local minority peoples of the Far East. He worked on this book over a period of about twenty-five years, but the manuscript was lost. There are a number of hypotheses on its whereabouts. One theory is that it was taken abroad, possibly by Watanabe Rie. Another theory is that it was taken to Germany by Frydrych Albert Darbeck (Fridrikh Al'bertovich Derbeck [1871–1947?]), the former director of the OIAK Museum, who published a book in German about the Udegei people.²¹

In 1907, when Arsen'ev visited the village of Sanchkheza, more than 100 Udegei lived there. Now, in the former kolkhoz named after Arsen'ev, only four remain. The Soviets prevented them from living as they wished; the Udegei communities were forced to abandon hunting and live on kolkhozes and learn agriculture. During World War II about 90 percent of the Udegei men alive at the time were killed in service. In the 1950s and 1960s, most kolkhozes were closed because they were not financially successful. The remaining Udegei went to live in the cities or work in the forestry industry, having lost many elements of their traditional culture.

Acknowledgments

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Amir Khisamutdinov, a doctor of historical sciences, is a professor at the Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok and head of the science department of the Far Eastern branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is the author of 25 books and more than 100 articles. Email: khisamut@yahoo.com.

Appendix: Chronology of V. K. Arsen'ev's Life

August 29, 1872: Arsen'ev born in St. Petersburg

November 22, 1891–October 10, 1917: entered the Russian Imperial Army as a volunteer

September 1, 1893–August 12, 1895: Studied in St. Petersburg Military School

January 18, 1896–May 19, 1900: Served in Poland

1900: Son Vladimir was born (d. 1987)

1900–1905: served in Vladivostok's Fortress

May 16, 1903: Became a member of OIAK

1906–1919: Lived in Khabarovsk

May 15–November 20, 1906: First expedition to Sikhote-Alin Mountains.

August 3, 1906: First expedition with Dersu Uzala on Tadoshi River

June 11, 1907–January 5, 1908: Second expedition to Sikhote-Alin

March 13, 1908: Dersu Uzala was killed by a robber

June 24, 1908–January 1910: Third expedition to Sikhote-Alin

1910–1919 and 1924–1926: Director of Grodekov's Regional Museum in Khabarovsk

1911–1915: Fighting hong-huzi (Chinese bandits) in Primorye region

1913: Became lieutenant-colonel; met with Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930) in Khabarovsk

June 29, 1917–1918: Commissar for the provisional government on native peoples in the Far East

November 20, 1917–February 1918: Olgon Gorin expedition (near Amur River)

July 7–October 11, 1918: Expedition to Kamchatka

1918–1925: Served as Far Eastern Fisher department inspector

June 1919: Married to Margarita Nikolaevna Solov'eva (1892–1938)

1920: Daughter Natasha born (d. November 21, 1970)

June 23–September 28, 1922: Expedition to Gizhiga (Okhotsk Sea)

June 18–September 1, 1923: Expedition to the Commander Islands and Kamchatka

February 20, 1927: Elected as an honorable member of OIAK

Summer 1926: Expedition to Amur

June 1–October 1927: Expedition from Sovetskaya Gavan' to Khabarovsk

September 4, 1930: Died in Vladivostok

Notes

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8. Pavel Vasil'evich Shkurkin papers, Box 4, Hoover Institution Archives.
9. *Dersu Uzala*, a 1975 film directed by Akira Kurosawa, Toho-Mosfilm, was made in the Soviet Union near the town Arsen'ev. It received the 1976 Foreign Language Film Award from the Academy of Motion Pictures.
10. David P. Barrows Papers, the Bancroft Library, C-b 1005, Box 3, Folder August 1921–June 1922.
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