The conference “Siberian Society in the Context of Russian History from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century” was held at Irkutsk State University in October 2009, and commemorated the second centenary of Eastern Siberia governor general Nikolay Nikolayevich Muravyov-Amursky’s birth. Muravyov-Amursky (1809–1881) was a count and Russian statesman, serving as governor general of Eastern Siberia from 1847 to 1861. He is famous for playing a crucial role in expansion of the Russian empire to the Pacific Ocean. However, the significance of his activity goes beyond that. He managed to demonstrate outstanding governance, while achieving the state interests of the Russian empire by converting general state interests into specific goals and solutions. His ideas and activities were considered at the conference as a political heritage of plans and results, methods to reach posed goals and his unfulfilled intentions.

Muravyov-Amursky played a prominent role in the expansion of Russian territory to Siberia, making every effort to regain the Amur territory ceded to China in 1689. Between 1851 and 1853 several expeditions were sent to the Amur estuary and Sakhalin Island to establish Russian settlements there. In 1854 Czar Nicholas I granted Muravyov-Amursky the right to negotiate a border along the Amur River with the Chinese, and to transport troops to the Amur’s estuary. In 1858 Muravyov-Amursky concluded the Treaty of Aigun with the government of China, which recognized the Amur River as the boundary between Russia and China. For this Muravyov was granted the title of Count Amursky. As governor general of Eastern Siberia, Muravyov-Amursky made numerous attempts to settle the shores of the Amur River. These projects were largely unsuccessful. He retired from his post in 1861 after his proposal to divide Eastern Siberia into two separate governorships was declined. He was then appointed a member of the state council.
At the 2009 conference in Irkutsk, sixty-nine presentations were devoted to Muravyov-Amursky and his time by historians from Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Ulan-Ude, Saint Petersburg, Vladivostok, and Yakutsk. Of these, twelve were directly devoted to Muravyov-Amursky’s activities. The conference was divided into four groups to discuss authority and community, their confrontation and interaction in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres, as well as the issues of source study and Siberian community historiography.

The plenary consisted of four lectures. Lev Dameshek (Irkutsk State University) talked about the “History of Governorship in Siberia.” He developed the concept of the close coupling of power and political process through the scheme of central regions. Over the past few years, Dameshek, with his students and colleagues, has been developing the idea that the problem of governing Siberia and solving economic issues came after territorial expansion. Most policy decisions were determined subjective factors such as the personal traits of a governor general: competence, political will, and the ability to take independent and optimal decisions while being remote from the center. Dameshek also discussed the details of governors’ day-to-day lives—such details being of great importance given the enormous power of the regional governors.

“The Political Heritage of N. Muravyov-Amursky” was the title N. Matkhanova’s (Novosibirsk) presentation. The speaker mentioned that the governor was controlling a huge territory for more than ten years, a period that saw two different czars and radical transformations in Russian society, and the governor even managed to expand the territory. A Baikal Cossacks detachment was set up and a second one was prepared in the Amur region. The structure and personnel of the administrative apparatus were reformed, and a local press developed along with the center of intellectuals coalescing through the Eastern Siberian Department of Russian Geographical Community. Such outcomes resulted from political prudence and efficiency, energy, and talent of Muravyov-Amursky.

A. Remnev’s (Omsk) presentation, “The Regional Governing System: Colonial Context of Imperial Power along the Eastern Borders at the Turn of the Twentieth Century” considered the possibility to implement a new model of higher regional governing in Siberia as an alternative to the territorial structure of the Russian empire. Remnev argued that the relegation of provincial administrative powers to the central authorities, even though the responsibilities of the General Governor remained, was considered an important achievement on the way to
consolidating the state. The major purpose of regional governing bodies, central and peripheral, should be to prepare the border territories to be suitable for entering the unified state power, which was thought to be the critical political task of forming “one and stable Russia.”

The plenary lecture, “Problems of Optimizing Administrative and Territorial Structure of Siberia, 1991–2008” by M. Shilovsky (Novosibirsk), was of great interest to the conference participants. Taking into account the current authorities’ approach to developing administrative and territorial structure of the Russian Federation, Shilovsky categorized the stages of relationship between the central power and subjects of the federation. From August 1991 until December 1993 was the period of initial federalization and continuation of contract federalism increased administrative asymmetry. And from 2000 until now, the period of forming more effective administrative and territorial system (a model of centralized federalism) under the process of centralization and concentration of powers in the hands of federal center through the realization of Vladimir Putin’s initiatives. The researcher denoted the mechanism of empowering regional governors, characterized several representatives of Russian managers belonged to a new generation of perestroika and consecutive development of the Russian Federation. Shilovsky concluded that the current period of law-based state development, real features of territorial and administrative units of the Russian Far East pose the task not only to consolidate subjects of the federation but to form new ones within the territory of intensive economic exploration. That results from a greater need for correlating territorial management structures and regions exposed to exploration.

Under the section “Source Study and Historiography of Siberian Community Problems” E. Il’ina reviewed documents of the Irkutsk Region State Archive that refer to the activity of general governor Muravyev-Amursky. A. Gaponov (Surgut) presented reports about Muravyev-Amursky’s activity through the evaluations of his contemporaries. E. Senina (Irkutsk) presented on the authorities’ image by analyzing the Vostochnoe Obozrenie articles. A. Kostrov devoted his report to the troubled relationship between the Soviet authorities and Baikal Siberia’s Old Believers in 1920s. The reports of Y. Petrushin, I. Bedulina (Irkutsk), and S.Bildueva (Ulan-Ude) considered personal contributions of M. Gudoshnikov, V. Ogorodnikov, F. Kudryavtsev to historical science. Source study and historiography aspects raised by the section participants point to the high theoretical and methodological level of Siberian historians.
In additions to presentations and discussion, conference participants place a memorial plaque of Nikolay Muravyev-Amursky at the Irkutsk State University Science Library.

Sergey I. Kuznetsov is Chair of the Department of General History and International Relations at Irkutsk State University. Yury A. Petrushin is Chair of the Department of Modern Russian History at Irkutsk State University.