Today geopolitics and international relations have become high school subjects, with the higher grades often consciously studying world politics, using such terminology as security system, geopolitics, geostrategy, and multipolarity. Every newswire is filled with phrases about strategic stability and unconventional challenges and threats. International relations departments have appeared in practically every respected institution of higher learning. Understanding subtleties of international relations is now considered in good form. At the same time, the majority of Russians, even those interested in this subject, think of political science as a new science, developed in the West and existing in Russia only for the past 10-15 years. Works by Karl von Clausewitz, Helmuth von Moltke, and Alfred Thayer Mahan are considered the foundations of the science of “geopolitics,” which abroad took its first steps in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We have, on the other hand, blissfully forgotten those who during the same time period tried to form a basis for the formulation of this future science in Russia. These people did exist and, moreover, their works did not pale in any way in comparison with that of their more illustrious Western counterparts.

One of these forgotten authors was Aleksey Vandam. Behind a strange European surname hides an officer of the General Staff of the Russian Army, a war general, a war-time intelligence operative, a hero of the Anglo-Boer War, traveler, and researcher Aleksey Efimovich Edrikhin. His life in and of itself is fascinating and could be an exemplary plot for a historical action film.

Aleksey Edrikhin was born into the large family of a retired private soldier in the Minsk region on March 17, 1867. At 17 years of age, Edrikhin volunteered to join the 120th Serpukhov Army Regiment. Curiously, when he joined the army he demonstrated the lowest acceptable level of education, equivalent to less than four years of education, and could literally only read and count. Nevertheless, only two years later Edrikhin entered the Vilno Infantry School for the Nobility, from which he graduated in 1888. We have very little information about the early stage of his service, but it is evident that he was constantly educating himself, striving to overcome the limits of a low social background, poverty, and the hopeless drudgery of garrison life.

In spite of all this, in 1897 Lieutenant Edrikhin (in 11 years he moved up just two ranks!) successfully passed all his exams (two of which were in foreign language) and entered the Nikolaevsky Academy of the General Staff. After two years of study, however, Lieutenant Edrikhin requested a transfer to the front of the Anglo-Boer war as a volunteer. The request was approved by Minister of War Kuropatkin himself.

It is precisely at this point in time that the career of General Staff company officer Edrikhin began to take off. It appears by all accounts that the trip to Africa was his first mission as a wartime spy. During this journey his talent for research manifested itself. He published his “Letters on Transvaal” under the alias A.E. Vandam in the newspaper Novoye vremya. Igor Obraztsov, in researching his biography of Edrikhin, believes that the strange surname was...
chosen either in honor of a general of the Napoleonic wars, named Vandam, or one of the heroes of the Anglo-Boer war, Commandant of the Johannesburg mounted police Van Damm. Whatever the case may be, Edrikhin published all of his future works under this surname.³

Later in his career, Edrikhin worked at the Intendant Office of the General Staff, which served as a cover for Russian military intelligence, and then was sent to China as a military agent, on the eve of the Russo-Japanese war (the posting required fluency in Chinese). Edrikhin greeted World War I in the rank of a colonel of the General Staff in the Kiev military region and served throughout the war, from day one until its end, earning the rank of major general in 1917. He did not accept the revolution. However, his participation in the White movement was brief. Edrikhin emigrated in 1919. He died in 1933 in Tallinn, in a foreign country, and was laid to rest at the Russian cemetery of the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral.

Edrikhin may be called, without exaggeration, one of the first Russian researchers in the field of geopolitics and international military security theory. He wrote and published relatively few works: in 1912 the Suvorin publishing house in St. Petersburg printed his first book, Our Situation, and a year later, another one, The Highest Form of Art: A Review of the Current International Situation in Light of Grand Strategy. Both of these ouvrages have been recently reprinted and we would like to turn the readers’ attention to them. In 2002, as part of the “Geopolitical Angle”⁴ series, a collection of Vandam’s works was published under the general title Geopolitics and Geostrategy and in 2004 the same works were reprinted in the collection entitled Unheard Prophets of Future Wars. To our great regret, possibly due to the limited edition of these publications, General Edrikhin’s works again failed to reach the broad reading public.

In both works, the author reveals the logic and the systematic character of state action in the international arena, dictated by their basic and constant national interests. Relying primarily on the method of the international survey, Edrikhin attempts to define the main goals and tasks for the Russian state, as well as identify the forces that try to prevent us from fulfilling our national interests. What makes his works particularly significant and thorough is the author’s drive to identify the highest geopolitical laws governing international relations. Edrikhin strives to explain interdependence and confrontations between states via an evolutionary law of survival of the fittest and extinction of the weakest in the historical process:

“...just as a battle is but a fleeting single act within a war that may last for years, war itself is nothing but a brief act within a never ending struggle for survival. It follows, logically, that in order to wage this struggle for survival, a special art form is required: grand strategy and politics.”⁵⁶

As a starting point, the author takes the geographic location of a state on the world map, availability of all necessary resources, climate conditions, etc. One may essentially say that Vandam was the first among Russian authors to use geostrategic analysis in international relations.

“The people of Russia, due to their geographic location, are doomed to an isolated, poor, and consequently unsatisfactory existence. This dissatisfaction has manifested itself in the ever unflagging instinctive popular striving ‘toward the sun and temperate waters,’ and the latter, in its turn, has clearly determined Russia’s position in the theater of life struggle [...] the Great Northern Power has [...] but one front line that faces the south and stretches all the way from the Danube estuary to Kamchatka.”⁵⁶

On this “front of the struggle for survival” Russia encountered forces whose interests stood in contradiction to the further progress of the Russian people. Edrikhin offers an analysis in Our Situation of the history of the Russian southern and eastern expansion over the course of four centuries. In great detail, he tells the story of the Siberian advance, of Russian settlers reaching the Pacific coast, contacts with the local population, the Russian development of Alaska, as well as about the slow and inevitable process by which we gradually lost the vital space that had been earned through great effort and sacrifice. The author arrives at a troubling conclusion:

“For a people endowed with practical sense, creative energy, and quick wit, there is something abnormal in this still continuing wandering and indecisiveness. Clearly, we have lost our way somewhere, at some point in time and have wandered so far astray that now we cannot even see the direction toward the purpose which had been destined to us by Providence.”⁵⁷
Based on the geographic and historical instinctive striving of the Russian people over 400 years, Edrikhin defines this "purpose":

"Destiny itself started directing us toward the East. [...] Providence lit up such a powerful lighthouse on Amur that its light was visible to all of Russia, and it clearly said to us, ‘This is your path’!”

Edrikhin spares no colors in describing the feats and failures of the Russian public figures who consciously or unconsciously recognized the historic direction for the Russian state: Obukhov, Poyarkov, Khabarov, Stepanov, Zinoviev, Golovin, Purtatyn, Nevelsky, Baranov, and many others. Edrikhin asserts that precisely “our situation” pushed us eastward, but the opportunity was not grasped and appreciated at the “important historic moment when the arena was yet unoccupied.”

"Having completed our Siberian advance to the coast of the Yellow Sea, Russia could have become a seafaring power on the Pacific equal to England on the Atlantic, and turned Russians into patrons of Asia, just like the Anglo-Saxons of the United States became patrons to the American continent.”

After defining the range of Russia’s national interests and making a maximally objective estimate of our state’s actions in the struggle of the theater of life, the author next goes on to describe those states whose geographic and historical situations predestined them to become our opponents. Edrikhin not only describes the motives behind the actions of those powers that oppose Russia, but also analyzes the reasons behind their victories and our defeats. Notably, the author does not try to hide his patriotic bias, but tries as best he can, at the same time, to be completely objective when characterizing historical events. General Edrikhin also realizes as a scholar that while geostrategic factors predetermined the perpetual opposition, the understandable desire to gain victories, known to any state and nation, turned Anglo-Saxons into enemies of Russian interests.

"Development of a Pacific fleet with a requisite excellent naval base in the islands of Hawaii, as Shelekhov and Baranov intently demanded, was deemed unnecessary, since the prevailing wisdom of the time was that the Great Ocean was to remain for ever a barren emptiness of no interest to anybody. After Anglo-Saxons arrived and took away our grazing pastures in the Pacific, we retreated to Kamchatka. Later, the same Anglo-Saxons arrived in China and started braking our neighbors’ doors and windows. Hearing this noise, we descended to the Amur and settling down our knapsack, seated ourselves comfortably while waiting for new events.”

Nevertheless, in Edrikhin’s opinion, Anglo-Saxons have no more dangerous opponent than the Russian people. It is Russia who can and must prevent them from spreading their absolute domination over the globe:

“During the battle of Manila, Anglo-Saxons moving in from Southern Asia aimed their cannons over the heads of the already defeated Spaniards at the great Slavic power, thereby opening a struggle that by the mid-20th century would have to end in a triumph of the Anglo-Saxon race around the globe […] the Anglo-Saxons’ chief opponent on their path toward world domination is the people of Russia.”

As the main conditions for the complete fulfillment of a state’s national interests in the international arena, Edrikhin points toward:

- a state’s geographic location;
- availability of strategic resources;
- a clearly defined direction of geostrategic development;
- maintaining the same political course, even when changing rulers and governments.

In the struggle for survival, which is more difficult and demanding of higher skill than war, a people are like an army whose members fight according to their own individual strategies and tactics. But the government, like a supreme commander of the people, must, first of all, carefully watch the direction taken by the people’s entrepreneurial spirit; second, having done an exhaustive and in-depth study of the war theater, define accurately which direction would best serve the interests of the state as a whole; and third, by using available resources, skillfully remove the obstacles that the people encounter on their way.

Such qualities as political and strategic foresight, consistency in maintaining a political course, which Anglo-Saxon governments possess, explain, according to Edrikhin, our opponent’s
superiority over us in the struggle of the theater of life. Curiously, long before Zbigniew Brzezinski did it, Edrikhin was the first to draw parallels between drawing action plans for state actors in the international arena and a chess game.

“If only for fairness’ sake, we must admit that the global conquerors and our life-long rivals, Anglo-Saxons, possess one incontestable quality: at no point in time and not in any matter has our vaunted instinct played for them the role of a virtuous Antigone. Carefully observing the life of humanity overall and appraising each event according to its affect on their own affairs, they develop in themselves, through a tireless work of the intellect, an ability to see and almost to feel across large distances and links of time. [...] in an art of life struggle, i.e. in politics, this ability offers them all the advantages possessed by a brilliant chess player over a mediocre opponent. The surface of the globe dotted with oceans, continents, and islands appears to them as a chess board, while the peoples with their thoroughly explored basic features and the spiritual qualities of their rulers – appear as live pieces and pawns that the player may then move with such calculation that the opponents, who see an independent enemy in every pawn, are lost in confusion, trying to recognize when exactly they faced a fatal move that eventually led to their loss of the game.”

Touching on the matter of Russia’s relations with other states, Edrikhin comes to the conclusion that the strongest foundation for a partnership is, again, opposition to the expansion of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Therefore, he recognizes as our allies Germany in the West and China in the East, pointing out that, first, all three states are forced to constantly defend their right to expand their vital space; and second, that they are all three countries of “one continent” and are fated, by their geographic location, to oppose the “insular” Anglo-Saxons.

“After various experimentations with Anglo-Saxons and Americans, China may boldly state, ‘it is bad to have an Anglo-Saxon as an enemy, but God forbid having him as a friend.”

One may dispute general Vandam’s (Edrikhin’s) political views and conclusions. However, what remains beyond argument is the fact that his works deserve to have been made the foundation of Russia’s own understanding of geopolitical science as early as the beginning of the 20th century. It seems incredible that the author was able to predict, with such depth and precision, major historical events and processes, among them the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Cold War. Edrikhin’s works have been unjustly forgotten and no longer anticipate historical events, but their methodological basis, broad spectrum, and multifaceted approach call for close scrutiny by Russian and international experts.

Notes

1 The author would like to thank Gennady Evstafiev and Alexander Klimenko for their provision of materials for and assistance with this review.
2 The “Vilenkoye yunkerskoye pekhotnoye uchilishche” in present-day Vilnius, Lithuania.
4 In Russian, “Geopolitichesky rakurs.”
6 Ibid, p. 31.
7 Ibid, p. 51.
8 Ibid, p. 75.
9 Ibid, p. 76.
12 Ibid, p. 68.
13 Ibid, p. 44.
14 Ibid, p. 104.