

*Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A History of the Sino-Russian Border*. Sören Urbansky. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. xiii + 367 pp. \$42. Hardcover ISBN-13: 9780691181684.

One of the more puzzling aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship is that regional ties between the border regions in the two countries have remained anemic despite their lengthy border (2,615 miles/4,209 kilometers) and their establishment of a strategic partnership in 1996. Today, state-owned companies, especially in the energy sector, are largely behind whatever dynamism exists in regional economic relations between China and Russia. Sören Urbansky's *Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A History of the Sino-Russian Border* provides a richly detailed backstory that explains why state-led regionalism has come to characterize their regional interactions. Urbansky focuses specifically on the upper part of the Argun River Basin where the borders of Russia, China, and Mongolia meet. His book is organized chronologically, beginning in the seventeenth century and concluding in the 1980s, and he relies on a wealth of (mostly Russian) archival material as well as secondary sources, including some Chinese materials.

Urbansky explains how state imperatives, such as border demarcation and defense, institutionalized separateness between China and Russia while encouraging greater connection between the people at the center and in the peripheries of each state. Railroads facilitated the settlement of the Chinese and Russian frontier regions while replacing the traditional trade and travel routes by barge, camel, and horse, and supporting the state-building efforts of the central authorities, which Urbansky calls "metropolises." However, Urbansky cautions that the metropole had an imperfect hold over its subjects, who, after all, were several time zones away from central authorities and were often living in corrupt environments that encouraged self-interest and survival over cooperation with national ideas.

For Urbansky, this is above all a story of people—some colorfully introduced—who have populated the Russian and Chinese border regions, and their efforts to go about their everyday lives in a transnational space, despite the borders and related restrictions that state authorities would impose. The reader is introduced to Zorigt Baatar E. Tokhtogo, a Mongol nobleman and fierce opponent of Chinese colonization in the early twentieth century, as well as Chinese and Russian smugglers, customs agents, Old Believers, Cossacks, railroad workers, and other fascinating inhabitants of the Argun region, who were rooted in that place and resistant to outside efforts to control their activities and alter their ways of life.

Urbansky effectively demonstrates how state authorities were quick to demonize the neighboring population in the interest of reinforcing state power and national identity. In one example, that speaks presciently to current dilemmas over pandemic control, he describes how Russian authorities blamed Chinese workers for a pneumonic plague epidemic in 1910 that more likely had started in Russia. More than a century later, when the COVID-19 pandemic, originating in Wuhan, China, struck Russia and other countries, it was Chinese authorities who refused to accept deliveries of fish from the Russian Far East (which they claimed inaccurately could carry the virus) nearly leading to the collapse of the Russian fishing industry that depended on the Chinese market as a destination for a large share of its exports.

As Urbansky observes, the effort to assert state control in the face of translational threats such as pandemics or contested boundaries “intensified an emerging consciousness of the national border” (87). Some state-building policies, such as transportation infrastructure, facilitated cross-border interactions in China’s *dongbei* (northeast) and *Tikookeanskaya Rossiya* (Pacific Russia); prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Russians would regularly cross the border for dental visits and real Chinese tourists (not the “shuttle traders” who falsely claimed tourist status in the 1990s) flocked to newly established fish markets in Vladivostok. Despite these signs of cross-border mobility, Urbansky sees indifference and alienation persisting on both sides of the border (270).

*Beyond the Steppe Frontier* sheds new light on the history of the Sino-Russian border by its effort to consider the varied perspectives of its inhabitants. Thanks to the clearly written introduction, chapter summaries, and conclusions the work will appeal to those interested in the “big picture” of the evolution Sino-Russian regional relations as well as enthusiasts for micro-level history. The book was written as a history and perhaps for that reason it largely concludes with the end of the Soviet era, with just a few words about current developments, though it would be interesting to hear from this author in greater detail on how the past informs the present period of Sino-Russian regional relations.

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