

On the Edge of Empires

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We understand a very small portion of the ways in which the great land empires of the early modern world shaped the present. As of, say, 1800, the Romanov, Qing, Mughal, and Ottoman conquest empires still controlled virtually all of Eurasia (where the world's wealth and population were concentrated) and nearly 70 percent of global wealth. By far the largest of these empires in space was Romanov Russia (1613–1917), which claimed over half of all Eurasian surface area. The second-largest empire, Qing China (1636–1912), covered slightly more than a third of the Russian area. But it encompassed the world's most populous society and its largest and most influential economy—larger, in relation to global gross domestic product at the time, than China's share today.

Both empires were, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the process of rapid expansion—the Romanov primarily eastward toward the Pacific, the Qing primarily westward toward Central Asia. The border between them ran for approximately 7,500 miles, the longest border between land empires in history. For most of its length, it was sparsely populated and poorly fortified. This was an example of the striking differences between the strategic and economic structures of the great land empires and the rising sea empires: While the latter selected fairly contained targets of resource acquisition or commercial profit, on virtually any continent, the former were obliged to occupy and periodically defend continuous expanses that were often unprofitable. In this case, the tea and wool routes of Mongolia, the mineral and timber resources of Siberia, and access to Asia's northern Pacific coast were the targets, with long reaches of mountains, steppe, and tundra in between.

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Beyond the Steppe Frontier
by Sören Urbansky
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Strategically sensitive locations saw repeated conflict. Cossacks exploring, warring, and negotiating for Russia established forts, or *ostrog*, at critical points. Qing imperial troops, the Bannermen, set up their own establishments facing them (usually across the Argun or Amur rivers), in order to protect not only Mongolia but the Qing homeland in Manchuria. Over time, fortification and counter-fortification defined a porous but discernible boundary. The treaties of Nerchinsk (1689) and Kyakhta (1727) were footings for a remarkable diplomatic relationship on equal terms between the two empires. The Qing's greater relative military and economic strength drew Mongolia, the eastern Argun and Amur river system, and the Pacific coast north of Korea inside its borders.

This coexistence was rewritten rather abruptly in the mid-nineteenth century, as Russia abandoned its relationship with China and joined forces with the Europeans and America in the “unequal” treaties that were initiated after Britain's Opium War with the Qing (1839–41). By shrewd maneuvering in two separate treaties following the British defeat of the Qing in the “Second” Opium War of 1856–58, Russia finally took the Pacific coast, leading to the creation of the Primorskii Krai—the Maritime Province—and the founding of a new port, Vladivostok, which despite its connections to Siberia remains the most southerly of Russia's large cities. Southern Siberia and the Pacific coast became an international magnet for land developers and brokers drawn by its natural bounty of timber and precious metals. American engineers and entrepreneurs moved from Russia's new Pacific coast inland, laying telegraph cables and prospecting for gold, as George Kennan the elder related in his best seller of 1876, *Tent Life in Siberia*.

Sören Urbansky, a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, in previous publications has established himself as an expert on the history of the Argun region and

railway development in Northeast Asia. In *Beyond the Steppe Frontier*, he uses the story of the development of this region under the Romanov empire and the Soviet Union to demonstrate the impact that the world's longest border had on Eurasia.

The strands of the story are complex. They lay partly in the drift of Mongolia from a Qing territory into Russian dominance after 1917, and finally to the establishment of its own independent state in 1989; partly in the history of Russia's administration of the traditional populations of Argun after its acquisition of these territories in the late nineteenth century; partly in the development of railroads, anchored by the great Trans-Siberian, and related industries of mining, financing, building, and travel; and partly in the fraught relationships between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union, which impeded the advancement of industry and sporadically raised the threat of prolonged military conflict. Russian fears, dating back to Romanov times, dwelled on the possibility that China's huge population would inevitably lead to some undermining of Russian control through migration, economic infiltration, or even outright military assault.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Instead of stopping with an examination of the large-scale strategic, economic, or environmental dynamics, Urbansky looks at the region's history from the vantage point of the border communities themselves, particularly those in the inland region where railroads, mining, timber, and local trade shaped life under the constraints of imperial occupation and governance. Many of them were linked by the Trans-Siberian Railroad (TSR) and its eastward extension, the Chinese Eastern Railway.

Manzhouli, the town that dominates the narrative, started out at the turn of the twentieth century as a railway stop at the border of Russia and China. Its name came from a Russian reference to its being the first eastward TSR stop in Manchuria, and the Russians had authority over its administration under the terms of an 1896 treaty. Siberian natives frequented the stop, bringing lead, furs, and other goods; Mongols brought their herds and camped outside the station in their yurts; Chinese merchants bought and sold in the open-air markets; and Russians ran the trains, the station, and customs inspections.

But Manzhouli, as it transformed into a place distinct from the railroad itself, came ostensibly under the governance of Qing China, while the TSR sidings and warehouses to the north became the Russian village of Otpor, modern Zabaikalsk. This tiny area served as a laboratory in border-building as the Romanov and Qing empires came to an end and tentative republics took their place. In the earliest years of Manzhouli and Otpor, the only authority on the ground was the TSR (which had one of its usual palatial stations at Manzhouli), with its administrators and security forces. This reflected the ambiguous and largely unanswered questions of border administration in the larger region of Hulunbeir (Hulunbuir), the northeastmost extension of Inner Mongolia. Both were claimed by Qing China and subsequently by the Republic of China, but in practice were left to Russian administration.

In its first decade, Manzhouli was buffeted by waves of Mongolian and Buryat nationalism, as Mongolia moved toward formal independence. In 1910–11, as revolution broke out in central China

and Mongolia declared independence, a plague was left completely unmanaged by the Qing government, and Russian transport officials imposed a quarantine on Chinese residents and travelers.

As the Nationalist Republic of China (ROC) began to take shape in the north, it established some epidemic monitoring, strengthening the previously weak Chinese administration of the Manzhouli environs.

A brief incursion by Mongol nationalists in 1914 led the ROC to clarify and to some extent fortify its position in Manzhouli and Hulunbeir generally. The Chinese military and administrative presence in the region was slightly augmented in response to a resumption of the conflict in 1920. The ROC, with increasing firmness, demanded that its jurisdiction over Manzhouli be acknowledged and that the Russian railway services move north to what was more clearly Russian territory at Zabaikalsk.

On the Russian side, after the revolutions of 1917 (and the creation in 1921 of the Mongolian People's Republic), struggles between Bolsheviks and those resisting the revolution pervaded Mongolia and Siberia—and drove Russian resisters into Manchuria. Manzhouli was stuck in the middle, newly fortified and monitored, as were Chita, Vladivostok, and other towns of the east.

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occupation. Overall, the book is a wonderful study of border development around Manzhouli in the twentieth century, and less of a comprehensive history of the border, either by period or by theme.

In contemporary historiography, “frontiers” have become a preoccupation, with a sense that they were not merely the peripheries of some central economic and cultural wellspring but were actually in a mutually transformative interaction with the center. *Beyond the Steppe Frontier* shows something else. The dispute between China and Russia over the Argun border was not resolved until 1995; even now, the area remains under

careful surveillance by both countries, each of which is also wary of American interference.

Despite its location at the nexus of Russia and China, of Mongolia and Manchuria, and of the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern railways, the prevailing historical forces have made Manzhouli’s story one of alienation, isolation, and limitation. Today it is a small city of 150,000 people, and Zabaikalsk has 11,000 at most. As Urbansky says in a chapter title, this is “an open steppe under lock and key.” In the long run, the magnificent border between two unsettled empires produced a history of wariness and diminution. ■