

## Review – Beyond the Steppe Frontier

Written by Giulia Sciorati

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GIULIA SCIORATI, SEP 25 2022

### ***Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A History of the Sino-Russian Border***

**By Sören Urbansky**

**Princeton University Press, 2020**

Sören Urbansky's *Beyond the Steppe Frontier* is a timely addition to scholarly discussions in the discipline of Border Studies. The author understands border formation as much the bottom-up exercise of borderlanders as the result of central elites' top-down directives. In so doing, Urbansky contributes to studies aiming to give agency back to states' peripheries, arguing that "the local population ... played a more significant role in the story of territorialisation of the state than has been previously acknowledged" (p.6).

Using the terms "Russia" and "China" to encompass the two entities' numerous historical regime changes (such as the Soviet Union and Manchukuo, respectively), the author grounds his argument in an ambitious historical investigation on a segment of the Sino-Russian border, one of the longest in the world. Urbansky specifically focusses his analysis on the Argun river basin (a land triangle between modern-day China, Russia, and Mongolia), investigating social interactions between the transborder twin railway cities of Manzhouli (China) and Zabaikalsk (Russia). The study spans over three hundred years, drawing from the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk and discussing border formation up to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, with Manzhouli and Zabaikalsk grounding the reader during this extensive voyage through history.

Urbansky's rationale for the historical case selection is convincing. As the author notices, the Argun basin developed an incredible resilience to changes, making it more akin to a state border than a periphery. Moreover, the natural and artificial geographical frontiers – the river and the railway – make the region a critical case to achieve the research objective – i.e., to study the impact of across-the-river interactions between borderlanders on borders.

Empirical work enhances the volume's contribution to the literature, rightfully placing *Beyond the Steppe Frontier* among the must-read volumes on Sino-Russian relations. The author's archival evidence and biographical accounts are particularly inspiring, and Chapter 7 should enter the reading lists of Cold War history modules internationally. In particular, the evidence Urbansky uncovers advances our understanding of the border and borderlanders' diplomatic role during the Sino-Soviet split. For instance, details on the consecutive official visits by Chinese and Soviet representatives of railway workers across the Argun border in the early 1960s opens space for future research on the impact of railroad diplomacy – or, more generally, people-to-people exchanges – in the process of rapprochement between China and the Soviet Union.

Data collection is also a critical aspect of the book. In his introduction, Urbansky recognises the difficulty of accessing Chinese archival sources. As he puts it, this struggle was mainly due to the political sensitivity of issues like borders and minorities in contemporary China and the country's unique archival culture (p.13). The author's efforts to balance Russian and Chinese sources (mainly by relying on shared historical evidence) should be noted, yet Russian perspectives remain prominent throughout the book. The imbalance in biographical accounts is especially noticeable, as the most telling historical figures belong to the Russian camp. This limitation does not undermine the volume's argument for bottom-up border formation. Still, it affects the extent to which the analysis assesses borderlanders from both banks of the Argun river, as it develops a persistent Russo-centric narrative that sometimes dominates the

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reader's view.

Another issue that emerges from *Beyond the Steppe Frontier* relates to the conclusions drawn by the author. When reading Urbansky's work, the fundamental idea presented in his reasoning is the impact of local communities on borders at specific historical moments vis-à-vis central elites. As the author argues, before the Sino-Soviet split, borderlanders had *de facto* constructed an informal border through unofficial routes and exchanges that superseded the geographical limits imposed by central elites. However, with bilateral interactions and communications collapsing between China and the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the Argun basin's subsequent militarisation, Urbansky argues that the local society-constructed informal border also ceased to exist. Discussing these changes more in-depth, assessing their long-term effects, and offering a precise periodisation might have been worth pursuing. Such an analysis would have helped readers to better contextualise the central-local nexus and the consequences of central elites' decisions on bottom-up border construction. After the Sino-Russian rapprochement, Urbansky offers evidence of the adverse effects of broken transborder generational linkages, showing that informal interactions between Chinese and Russian borderlanders never fully recuperated. This ambiguity on the impact of central over local does not undermine the volume's original contribution. However, future works must address this question to strengthen the author's overall argument on borderlanders as agents of border formation.

These issues notwithstanding, Sören Urbansky's *Beyond the Steppe Frontier* gives life to the Sino-Russian border. With this work, the author has brilliantly served students, scholars and history enthusiasts by presenting a compelling, innovative, and well-researched book on the recent Sino-Russian past that reminds us that human interactions make history. This human dimension, which is so central to the volume, is also responsible for making Urbansky's thought-provoking work such an enjoyable read.

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### About the author:

Giulia Sciorati is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Trento, a Temporary Lecturer at the University of Pavia and the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, and an Associate Research Fellow at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). Her research focuses on China's foreign and security policies, relations between China and Central Asia and the country's peripheries. She was awarded a PhD by the School of International Studies of the University of Trento in September 2020. Giulia was a visiting researcher at the University of Nottingham (spring 2018) and the University of Oxford (autumn 2021).