

border triangle. It comprises about seventy thousand square kilometers—approximately the size of the Republic of Georgia. The edges of this region roughly represent the outer limits of the free trade zone introduced in 1862 and the separate administrative structure of the border districts that were established from the late 1920s onward. They can be roughly demarcated as follows: The gently sloping plain of the Aga Steppe where the Borzia River flows into the Onon defines its limits in the West. Olochi, a Cossack village on the middle reaches of the Argun, marks the northern fringe. The foothills of the forested slopes of the Great Xingan, separating the Hulunbeir Plateau from the Manchurian Plain, signal its limits in the east. The Hailar River, a tributary of the Argun and by some considered as simply its upper course, and the shallow Lake Hulun (or Dalai) represent its southern edge.

The Argun constitutes a number of wandering channels running through swamps in a wide valley that gave the river its name.²¹ Often separating into two or more distinct arms, the waterway runs relatively slowly north-northeastward through to its joining with the Amur. Because of its winding nature it often covers three times its linear distance. Its main stream has frequently changed in the past, sparking conflicts over the sovereignty of its hundreds of islands, some of them mere sand bars while others are very large pristine pastures. Along its upper reaches the Argun meanders through a slightly rolling and grass-covered steppe that is linked to the Mongolian plains. A boreal taiga forest belt blankets the riverbanks along its middle and lower reaches. Today the Russian territory on the left bank belongs to the Chita region in Transbaikalia.²² The Chinese bank to the right is part of Hulunbeir,²³ the northeastern tip of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region in China, named after the two lakes that are located in the south of this region (Hulun and Buir). Russians call this region “Barga,” a term adopted from an old Mongol tribal name.²⁴

Extreme continental climate was pivotal in the formation of this frontier region, perhaps more so than the impact of colonists, soldiers, and railroad men. The climate ranges from humid taiga forest in the north to semiarid steppe in the south. Weather patterns are harsh everywhere, with extremely cold but clear and windless winters and short but hot summers. Temperatures can fall as low as fifty degrees Celsius below zero in January. Rivers and lakes usually freeze in late October, and their ice cover melts before May. In July the thermometer goes up to thirty-five degrees Celsius, though absolute maximum temperatures are often higher. Heavy summer rains regularly cause the Argun and its tributaries to flood.

A great diversity of ecosystems characterizes the region. While rivers and lakes abound with sturgeon, Manchurian trout, Amur grayling, pike, and catfish, the stony and poor-quality soils of the floodplains, wetlands, steppes, and

mountains are rarely suitable for farming. The broad valleys of the Trekhreche (Three Rivers) triangle on the Chinese bank of the Argun, drained by the Derbul, the Gan, and the Khaul, represent the most fertile areas in the region. But even in this delta plowing and harvesting are possible only during the short four- to five-month vegetation period. The temperate grassland steppes are home to Mongolian gazelles, roe deer, red foxes, gray wolves, and Siberian marmots. The grasslands are used as pastures and hayfields. While the rolling foothills rising gently above its shores are often barren, the slopes of the Great Xingan to the east are thickly forested with larch, birch, and pine. The mountains, with peaks between one thousand and fifteen hundred meters, are home to fur-bearing animals such as reindeer, sable, and squirrels.

Climate and topography posed challenges to overland travel and communication between sparsely populated areas of the indigenous people and early Russian and Chinese settlers. Rivers were often the preferred means of transportation as dirt roads and random tracks were easily passable only during the cold and dry season. People navigated the waterways in barges, dugout canoes, or rafts to transport people, livestock, and goods. When winters turned the Argun into a frozen road for sledges or carts pulled by horses, the scattered outposts came within easier reach of each other, thereby refuting the geodeterminist idea of a river as a natural border.

Until the late nineteenth century there were no significant settlements in this vast and thinly populated territory on the Argun. The only nearby town was Hailar, founded as a garrisoned outpost of Manchu banner troops in the eighteenth century. Established around the same time, Abagaitui was one of the few Cossack villages to dot the Russian bank of the Argun. In 1903 the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railroad, the last leg of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, finally linked Chita and Vladivostok through Manchuria, stimulating the establishment of new settlements and replacing rivers as the main means of communication. Of these, the border town of Manzhouli at the very center of the region under study became the most important. The railroad transformed the frontier from a remote no-man's-land into a center of cross-border economic exchange, with Manzhouli emerging as the major economic hub for Sino-Russian commerce. On Russian territory, just across the international boundary, Railroad Siding 86 developed into a small border station called Otpor, later renamed Zabaikalsk when it was upgraded to an urban-type village during the 1950s.

These bustling twin communities and the yurts dotting the steppe and sleepy villages nestled on the river surrounding them make for an excellent prism through which to view the different kinds of borders and to study the various phenomena of border making and border breaking in the numerous waxing and waning zones of contact between diverse groups of borderlanders.

As a territorial unit, the Argun borderland was (and is) a space in which many different kinds of interactions between Russians, Chinese, and autochthonous borderlanders were possible—some fostered by the states, others by geographic position. The lush grasslands, sparkling rivers and forested hills on the Argun were places where people ventured inside and out and traveled on foot or by animal carts, barges, and trains, bringing along different things and ideas. People went into this space partly because they wanted to pass from China into Russia and vice versa. Others lived on the Argun because they wanted to trade things with each other or because they needed access to the pastures for their animals or proximity to the river to fish. It was this complex setting of interactions that the states wanted to control and ultimately shut down, making such movements impossible.

Looking beyond the big politics that formed this border to focus instead on the everyday life of the locals, practices in the borderland, and entanglements of local communities with the wider world is a difficult endeavor. Nomads with mobile lifestyles and contrabandists with secret trade networks were illiterate or had no interest in writing proprietary documents. The same holds true for train conductors and border guards. This limitation must be kept in mind while tackling the project of narrating everyday encounters in remote contact zones. Yet writing about this border has proven to be more challenging than penetrating the subaltern spheres of the local people, as we also have to deal with a range of archival cultures. In China more than in Russia, borderlands and minority issues remain sensitive topics in national historiography and the politics of history. Many collections of primary sources for the region and period under study are incomplete or classified at present. The Russo-centric imbalance of the archival sources was reduced in our case for two reasons: Archival records bearing on shared state borders are of course based in at least two countries and, luckily, some Chinese correspondence ended up in foreign archives.²⁵ In addition, newspapers, ethnographic surveys, local gazetteers, and the field notes of travelers located in libraries and private collections offer a bottom-up perspective for writing borderlanders back into history. Finally, oral history has been a valuable source of information. The interviewees featured in this book, locals from both sides of the steppe hills, worked as train engineers, clerks, farmers, and teachers. Their commonplace professions and other facets of their life stories make their narratives indispensable to the task of deepening our insight into everyday social practices characterizing the Argun basin.

A few final words on the structure of the book: the chapters progress from the seventeenth century to the late twentieth century, privileging thematic coherence over strict chronology. Chapter 1 reviews the affairs of frontier people from the first direct but sporadic encounters between Russians and

Chinese, as they took place during the seventeenth century—when both empires first attempted to demarcate a common frontier—to the end of the nineteenth century, when railroads and other elements of modernity began to alter life on the Argun, intensifying and regulating exchanges across the border. Chapter 2 covers the introduction of more assertive policies to govern the international border at the turn of the twentieth century that were replacing long-pursued *laissez-faire* practices. It examines the framing of local disputes over territorial boundaries in national terms as well as the reorganization of customs and sanitary borders as part of a general evolution toward a territorial boundary. By focusing on the distinct social and ethnic fabrics of Manzhouli and its pastoral surroundings, chapter 3 studies the revolutionary political struggles and indigenous secessionist movements following the collapse of imperial rule in China and Russia in 1911 and 1917, respectively. Chapter 4 introduces collectivization and other radical early Soviet programs of domestication that prohibited rather than regulated cross-border contacts and shows how they altered the political, ethnic, economic, and social landscapes in the upper Argun basin. Chapter 5 explores impacts of the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1929 and the 1931 Japanese occupation of Manchuria that affected the Argun borderland, compelling the regimes to considerably increase their peripheral power. Chapter 6 examines the period between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. Despite being marked by an increasingly ubiquitous rhetoric of friendship and bilateral cooperation, the period's border connections were no longer established informally but overseen by Moscow and Beijing. The Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s and 1970s, discussed in chapter 7, had a lasting influence on the situation along their border, with dire consequences for the economy and demography of the Argun borderland. While the Beijing-Moscow trains were filled no longer with Soviet or Chinese citizens but with passengers from North Korea and Vietnam, propaganda campaigns resuscitated old motifs of infiltration, sabotage, espionage, and disinformation, imbuing the border with new legitimacy as a space of enmity. Chapter 8 traces developments during the 1980s. It explores how the border between the two communist states became permeable again, through both policies adopted by the central governments and local populations' strategies.

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