

Diplomacy of Shunters: The Sino-Soviet Split Seen from a Provincial Archive in Russia

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Crossing the border between Russia and China by train, *marshrutka*, or hovercraft had already become relatively simple by the time I began conducting preliminary research on what would later evolve into my doctoral dissertation on the history of the Sino-Russian border during the twentieth century. Though I had heard all kinds of rumors on the various difficulties of archival research in both countries I was naïve enough to believe that drawing equally upon sources from Russian and Chinese archives would not just be the most natural thing to do but also be just as easy as obtaining visas and smiling at border guards. From the very beginning of my research, I wanted to look beyond the “big politics” that formed this border and focus instead on the everyday life of the locals, practices in the borderland, and entanglements of the local communities with the wider world. It therefore seemed appropriate to begin research not in Beijing or Moscow, but in remote places with exotic names like Chita, Haila’er or Abagaitui.

Quite soon, however, I realized that writing about this border would be more challenging than explaining to a Russian immigration officer why my Russian and Chinese visas were in two different German passports which, yes, were both still valid and not fake. Mastering the relevant languages was not sufficient, as one also had to deal with different “archival cultures.” How different my archival experience was in Russia and China can be illustrated in bare numbers: over the years, I consulted fifteen archives in four countries. I have researched documents in eleven Russian versus two Chinese archives,¹ as well as in one archive in the United States and one in Germany.

Despite such imbalances, conducting research on the Sino-Russian border was possible and fun. In what follows I shall first discuss the different research environments in both countries, followed by an overview of sources and archives that are relevant for historical research on the Russo-Chinese border. In the second part I offer two examples of sources drawn from a Russian provincial level archive that shed new light on the Sino-Soviet split, perhaps the most delicate period of this sacred and sensitive border.

In Russia, the years after 1991 have been a particularly opportune moment to study Russian and Soviet history in general, and the history of the Russia-China border in particular.² Numerous sources of information about central and regional policies regarding the borderlands, relationships with China, and the workings of the borderland society have been declassified. Despite some setbacks in recent years,³

compared to China archival research in Russia (particularly in the provinces) still seems like a cake-walk.⁴

In China more than in Russia, borderlands and minority issues remain highly sensitive topics in national historiography and the politics of history. Archival staff are often suspicious of foreign researchers nosing around contested borders. Because virtually all the primary sources for the region and period under study are classified at present, it seems almost impossible to write a solid regional history of China’s border with Russia based solely on Chinese sources.

My list of research planned but never conducted is therefore quite long. Of all relevant Chinese archives, records in the Heilongjiang Provincial Archives in Harbin, the Hulunbei’er League Archives in Haila’er, and the Manzhouli Municipal Archives would have been the most important for my research. Research in those institutions would have been essential even though records there are far from complete. In Manzhouli, for instance, pre-war collections were confiscated by the Soviets in 1945; post-war collections were burned during the Cultural Revolution or got lost, amid fears of a Soviet attack, during a temporary evacuation to Zhalaينو’er in 1976.⁵

Bearing the permission of the respective municipal Foreign Affairs Offices, recommendation letters from my home institutions as well as from scholars in Beijing and Harbin, I tried to access the archives, but failed on specious grounds. In Harbin I was even denied the chance to check the finding aids. In Haila’er the head of the archive at first doubted the authenticity of my documents, verifying them by making phone calls. In the end, although deemed furnished with proper certificates, I could only check one single inventory. The files I ordered were “not found” when my order was pulled the next day. In Manzhouli, procedures were different. Over lamb hot pot lunch, one staff member admitted that “political barriers” would limit the access to sources. Despite such obstacles, extremely friendly staff tried to do their best and set up meetings with old residents for oral history interviews. Even if my own experience was particularly negative, the Northeast seems to be a particularly difficult region for archival research in China, for Chinese and foreign scholars alike.⁶

I was able to reduce the Russo-centric imbalance of my archival sources to some degree by virtue of the fact that archival records on state borders are based in at least two countries and, in my case, some Chinese correspondence

ended up in foreign archives. In addition to such gleanings from Russian archives,⁷ I also found Chinese materials in diplomatic records in U.S. and German archives.⁸

In contrast to China, numerous Russian archives hold large and accessible collections relevant for the history of this border. At the central level, in the Moscow and St. Petersburg archives, my main references were the collections of the Tsarist and Soviet state bureaucracies associated with the central government and with the quasi-colonial administration of the Chinese Eastern Railroad. Yet many documents with bearing on the Soviet era remain classified, since inventories in the central archives, especially for the post 1953 period, are still withheld. But to a certain extent the impact of these restrictions was mitigated by piecing together information culled from the provinces.⁹

On the regional level, the collections consulted for this project were those of the personal offices and administrations of tsarist provincial and military governors, and those of regional party chiefs and executive committees during the Soviet period. The collections of customs and railroad authorities also served as a valuable means of tracing processes of everyday border-making and border-breaking. The holdings of state bodies at the district and village level, too, offer glimpses into everyday encounters, often challenging the views from the very top.¹⁰

In addition to archival records, newspapers, ethnographic surveys, field notes of travelers and other materials located in libraries and private collections offer a bottom-up perspective, which writes borderlanders back into history. On the Chinese side, such materials in addition to local gazetteers (地方志) and historical materials on regional history (文史资料) are an important and often the sole source of information on the borderland. Last but not least, oral history is a valuable source of information: My interviewees, locals from both sides of the fence, had worked as railroad shunters, clerks, farmers, and teachers. Their commonplace professions, and their otherwise typical biographies, make their stories indispensable to the task of deepening our insight into everyday social practices in the borderland.

Let us now turn to two examples drawn from the State Archive of Chita Region that illustrate in what ways materials located in Russian provincial archives can be used for the study of Sino-Soviet relations of the 1960s and 1970s. Although this period is well researched in its broad military, diplomatic, and ideological outlines,¹¹ few things are known about the fallout of the split in the shared borderlands, about the state border's porousness and contacts across the state divide during the time of conflict.

Using records from a Soviet railroad administration might seem odd at first to gain new insights about the conflict. But annual reports on the operation of a railway station at the border during the height of conflict provide valuable information of what contacts existed during a time when the state border had allegedly been closed.

Though small and dusty, the Soviet railroad station at Zabaikal'sk is noteworthy. Together with Manzhouli across the border the twin communities became a major hub for Sino-Russian commerce and passengers over the course of the twentieth century. Located at today's Sino-Russian-Mongolian border triangle, this border crossing was the only open place for direct railroad travel between the PRC and the USSR during the Sino-Soviet rift. Train service operated normally for the most part and even during the Cultural Revolution. The small number of incidents and delays in fact demonstrates how smoothly the railroads worked on the technical level, despite the confrontations. But a closer look into the compartments of the international express no. 17/18, running weekly between the two capital cities, forces another interpretation of the conflict's impact on the border. Passenger statistics, it turns out, can sometimes be more revealing than secret intelligence dossiers.

During the split, with only a few hundred passengers crossing the border every week, the overall number of travelers had been very low, even at this very last point of passage. The most striking finding to be gleaned from passenger statistics is the decline in Chinese and Soviet nationals on the trains. In 1966, Chinese travelers still constituted the majority (18,461 passengers or 54 percent). In 1969, however, only two Chinese crossed the border by train; that is, one Chinese national out of nearly 3,500 passengers. Though the data on Soviet travelers are incomplete, it can be assumed that the number of Soviet passengers was subject to similar fluctuation over the years. During those years, the majority of passengers originated from the socialist sister states Vietnam and North Korea. Both countries sent many exchange students to the Soviet Union. The low number of Soviet and Chinese commuters thus became a mirror of the Sino-Soviet rift, which meant that the twin border settlements in that era were most consistently a point of transfer for people from third countries.¹²

The second example is a delegation report, a frequently used source genre for Beijing's contacts with the world, and, in this case, a telling insight into to the last group of local border residents who were allowed to cross the border in times of conflict – a highly limited number employees of the Soviet and Chinese railways. Engine drivers and shunters of the two border railroad stations did far more than clear goods and passenger trains. Sometimes they assumed delicate tasks made necessary by relations between Moscow and Beijing. Chita's regional party committee received instructions from, and regularly reported to, the CPSU Central Committee in Moscow on meetings between Soviet and Chinese railroad men.

On 1 May 1972, for instance, 12 Manzhouli railroad employees visited Zabaikal'sk. The program included a reception at the station's hotel, the screening of a movie on the Great Patriotic War (as World War II is called in Russia), and lunch in the railroad club. The Chinese delegates proposed toasts for May Day, for solidarity, and for the friendship between the Chinese and the Soviet peoples. Together they

sang the “Internationale.” During their brief visit “not a single time did the Chinese guests bring up ‘ideas of Maoism and the Mao Zedong thought’.” To the Central Committee in Moscow, this was probably the most important passage in the report. Following a similar format, Soviet delegates paid a return visit to Manzhouli the next day to find a “welcoming and friendly reception.” With the permission of the Chinese authorities, the guests also got the chance to visit Manzhouli’s Soviet war memorial.¹³ Though more sporadic and smaller in scale, in form and content these resembled the exchanges of delegations that had taken place during better bilateral relations back in the 1950s. In times of conflict, however, those meetings fulfilled Moscow’s and Beijing’s desire to exercise goodwill diplomacy at the lowest level.

Passenger statistics and delegation reports from Zabaikal’sk are just two of the numerous sources that slumber in Russian provincial archives. Sometimes Chinese language correspondence is attached to these documents, often not. When combined with oral history interviews, such sources offer a novel perspective on what was going on along the border, beyond the military clashes on Damanskii (Zhenbao) island in March 1969 and the crude propaganda war between Beijing and Moscow. They provide insight into the scale and function of cross-border contacts and reflect some Chinese decision-making processes and Chinese attitudes towards the Soviet Union during the Sino-Soviet split.

NOTES

¹ The two local archives where I was allowed entry (the E’erguna Right Banner Archives in Labudalin and the Haila’er Municipal Archives) yielded little valuable information for the post-1949 period.

² On the history of Soviet archival policies and practices in the USSR’s central archives since 1917, see Hermann Schreyer, *Die zentralen Archive Russlands und der Sowjetunion von 1917 bis zur Gegenwart [The central archives of Russia and the Soviet Union from 1917 up to the present time]* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2003). How much things had changed can be seen from a memoir about research in the Soviet archives in 1966. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia* (London: Tauris, 2014).

³ Cf. footnote 12 in the introduction of this issue.

⁴ A general rule seems to be that the further one has to travel from Moscow, the better the working conditions become. In the State Archive of Chita Region I was allowed take pictures free of charge and after some time had passed the archivist even allowed me to pull the files myself. This would be impossible in Moscow, Berlin, or College Park. Cf. Sören Urbansky, “Auf in die Provinz! Recherchen in Russlands Regionalarchiven [Off to the provinces! Research in Russia’s regional archives],” in: *Osteuropa* 59/11 (2009): 121–30.

⁵ Information on those archives and relevant records can be found in: Ye Wa, Joseph W. Esherick, *Chinese Archives: An Introductory Guide* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1996): 129–30, 194; Heilongjiang sheng dang’anguan 黑龙江省档案馆 (ed.), *Heilongjiang sheng dang’anguan zhinan* 黑龙江省档案馆指南 [Guide to Heilongjiang Provincial Archives] (中国档案馆指南丛书) (北京: 中国档案出版社, 1994): 23–4, 63–4, 82; Heilongjiang sheng difang bianzuan weiyuanhui 黑龙江省地方编纂委员会 (ed.), *Heilongjiang sheng zhi (dang’an zhi)* 黑龙江省志 (档案志) [Annals of Heilongjiang Province (Archives)], vol. 54 (哈尔滨: 黑龙江人民出版社, 1996): 19–29; Neimenggu zizhiqu dang’anguan 内蒙古自治区档案局 (ed.), *Neimenggu zizhiqu zhi (dang’an zhi)* 内蒙古自治区志 (档案志) [Annals of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (Archives)] (呼和浩特: 内蒙古人民出版社, 2006): 157–8; Manzhouli shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 满州里市志编纂委员会 (ed.), *Manzhouli shizhi* 满州里市志 [Annals of Manzhouli] (呼和浩特: 内蒙古人民出版社, 1998): 939–45.

⁶ Conversations with Olga Bakich (Toronto), Frank Grüner (Heidelberg), Shen Zhihua (Beijing), David Wolff (Sapporo), and others.

⁷ For instance, the records on Russian emigrants in Manchukuo, which are held by the State Archive of Khabarovsk Region (GAKhK) in Khabarovsk (Russia), fond R-830 (*Glavnoe Biuro po delam Rossiiskikh Emigrantov v Man’chzhurii [Bureau for the Affairs of Russian Emigrants in Manchuria]*).

⁸ In particular, the files from German and American consulates in Harbin during the late Qing and early Republican periods in the Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office (PAAA) in Berlin (Germany) and National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in College Park, MD (United States).

⁹ Most important are the following four archives, of which the first is located in St. Petersburg and the latter three in Moscow: The Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) preserves the bulk of central Russian state records prior to 1917. The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) holds some official and personal documents on the history of tsarist Russia as well as the records of the supreme national executive and legislative institutions of Soviet Russia, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) and the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) are keeping the records of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the former up to 1952 and the latter for the post 1953 period. In Moscow there are several other national archives potentially of interest for the historical study of China and its bilateral relations with Russia and the Soviet Union: Diplomatic records of the Russian Empire are held in the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI) whereas the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVPRF) preserves the diplomatic collections of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Military records are also preserved in two separate institutions: the Russian State Military-Historical Archive (RGVIA) and the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), the latter consisting of post-1917 materials.

¹⁰ Provincial archives and branches of national archives in Russia, such as the Russian State Historical Archive for the Far East (RGIA DV) in Vladivostok, usually hold all the state and party records below the national level (i.e. provinces, districts, and municipalities). Since the administrative affiliation of Eastern Transbaikalia – the territory under study – inside the Russian Empire and the USSR changed over time, documents pertaining to this region are stored in several provincial level archives.

¹¹ Cf. e.g., Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split. Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹² State Archive of Chita Region (GACHO), f. R-604, op. 25, d. 88, ll. 1-3 (1966); GACHO, f. R-604, op. 25, d. 112, l. 1 (1969).

¹³ GACHO, f. P-3, op. 23, d. 8, ll. 8-10, quotations on ll. 9-10.