Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A History of the Sino-Russian Border with Sören Urbansky
September 22, 2020

Arunabh Ghosh: Okay, I think we'll get started, it's about five minutes past the hour and we have a fairly large number of participants here already. So welcome to the first meeting of the Fairbank Center's Modern China Lecture Series. My name is Arunabh Ghosh I teach modern Chinese history here in history department at Harvard. Before I introduce our speaker today, I thought I'd give you a quick heads up on some of the talks and speakers we have forth coming. So you can mark your calendars, and sort of make sure you can join us. Three weeks from now on October 13th, also Tuesday at 4:00 p.m, we'll welcome Gina and Tam from Trinity University. A couple of weeks after that, on October 27th, we'll have Fei-Hsien Wang from Indiana University Bloomington. On November 10th, we will welcome Covell Meyskens from the Naval Postgraduate School. So if you're interested in any of our future events please mark your calendars, and please do join us then too. Formal announcements will follow in the coming weeks, including instructions on how to register and so on. So that's just a heads up about future talks.

Arunabh Ghosh: Today, I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Sören Urbansky, who will be talking about his work on the history of the Sino-Russian border. Sören is a historian of Russia and China in the modern era, specializing in imperial and racial entanglements, emigration, and the history of borders. He is currently a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. Prior to that, he taught Chinese and Russian history at the University of Munich and Freiburg. And he has also been a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Cambridge. Sören received his PhD from the University of Konstanz in 2014. And he has also studied at the European University, Viadrina, and at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Among his publications are- [Dr. Ghosh speaking foreign Language], which is on the history of the railroads in Sino-Russian border. And much more recently at first, "Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A history of the Sino-Russian Border." Sören is currently embarking on a new project that examines anti-Chinese sentiments in a global perspective. A topic that has taken on increasing importance, as you can well imagine. Before I hand things over to him, just a quick word on format, in light of being completely online we figured that maybe regular 45-50 minute talk is perhaps pushing the limits of people's attention spans. So I've requested Sören, to speak for a slightly shorter duration about 30 to 35 minutes. And then we follow that with a Q & A for roughly the same duration. So we'll plan to be done by about 5:15, 5:20 thereabouts. If you have questions please type them up in the Q & A using the Q & A function. And before you type up your question, please identify yourself because I will be reading them out. So it'll be nice to be able to identify who's asking them. That being said, this is being recorded, and we understand that there might be people who won't be comfortable in identifying themselves. If that's the case you're of course welcome to stay anonymous, there is not a problem at all. Okay, so without further ado over to Dr.Urbansky.

Sören Urbansky: Thank you so much Professor Ghosh for this kind introduction and thank you for being invited to speak at the Modern China Lecture series at Harvard University. Let me just start share my screen with you, all right. In my book, the "Beyond the Steppe Frontier," I examined the formation of what was once the longest land border in the world. In addition to its vastness, the Sino-Russian border was special in many ways. It not only divided the two
largest Eurasian empires, it was also the place where European and Asian civilizations met. Where nomads and sedentary people mingled, where the imperial interests of Russia and that of the Soviet Union clashed with those of Qing and Republic of China and Japan. And when the world's two largest communist regimes held the friendship and staged their enmity. During its existence, the Sino-Russian border has taken fundamentally different forms, which make it at one point comparable to colonial borders in Africa, and just decades later to the borders between NATO states in Cold War Europe.

Sören Urbansky: I studied this remarkable transformation of the Sino-Russian border, with a regional focus on the rolling step of the Argun River region near today's Eastern Sino-Russian Mongolian border triangle. The grassy ferry on both riverbanks is perhaps the most suitable border section on which to focus. It constitutes the oldest border segment between the powers to survive subsequent territorial changes. More over, the area represents two different sorts of borders. As a water body, the Argun was generally open. People easily navigated the river and boats to transport people, livestock and goods. Only a short ride away, however, the railroad town of Manzhouli, housing customs, inspectors and migrant workers represented a very different social fabric and along with it, a new form of border. Before we discuss the details of the formation of this border during the next half hour, allow me to introduce to you [indistinct] Akari was from Borsa a small Soviet town, less than two hours by train from the Chinese border. Secret police investigators raided Akari's house on June the 17th in 1931. Neither then 46 year old Akari nor his wife or their children were at home. Instead offices encountered four Chinese men at the kitchen table. During the search of the house, inspectors found various gold articles, dresses, white silk, and plenty of tea. The inspectors accused Akari of illicitly importing foreign fabrics and tea from the Chinese border city of Manzhouli destined for Russian consumers.

Sören Urbansky: It was also alleged that he would purchase gold items in the Soviet Union to sell them illegally abroad, that is in China. The border citizen of [indistinct] acted as prosecution witness. Late Lee Chen, a Chinese national married to a Russian woman had recently observed how some Chinese took clothes stored at Akari's house in Bosnia to transport them to a nearby mine, where they exchanged the fabrics for gold and silver. Akari had many Chinese friends because he was no ordinary Soviet citizen. Born in 1885, in the region he had worked from 1907 to 1928 with a Russian, and later with the Soviet Customs at different places, and in various positions. His longest post was at the customs office in Mongoli, where you had served for nine years. This was plenty of time to make friends with the Chinese residents in town, as Akari admitted. He spoke Chinese well and was acquainted with Chinese culture. His job, as duties inspector, exposed him to Chinese people everyday. Bestowing upon them a strategic competence that he could use for the benefit of this illicit business. The case of Akari reveals close contacts between the Chinese and the Russians. One could almost forget that in 1929, that is one year before the police raided Akari's house, China and the Soviet Union were at war with Manzhouli as the main battlefield. The social fabric of the sleepy railroad town of Borsa, about 17 miles off the border with China reveals that around 1930 the border had by no means been hermetically sealed. Numerous Chinese nationals like [indistinct] still lived and worked in the Soviet border region.
Sören Urbansky: Russians likewise continued to live in the Chinese borderland. Through the autobiographical lens of Russian, Chinese and indigenous people and visiting foreigners, and the stories they had to tell. I challenged the great picture of diplomatic mysteries and talk down interpretations of the Chinese Russian frontier and the Chinese Soviet borderland. Listening to the voices of the nomadic herdsmen, merchants and border guards, acknowledging them as historical actors and just [indistinct] their narratives with the stories of the metropolitan elites, makes evident that the fate of the Imperial frontiers and borderlands was never solely decided in the metropoles. The networks, strategies and social identities of these border people met complicated patterns that stretched across the border. Cossacks for instance, self-determination became outlaws or emigrated. Akari and other customs officials, be they Russian or Soviet, Russian or Chinese, worked as part-time traders, selling commodities confiscated from smugglers in contraband bazaars Native nomadic herdsmen represented to metropolitan incursions responded, excuse me. Native nomadic herdsmen responded to metropolitan incursions by practicing cross-border migration or strategic naturalization. Although China and Russia sketched the oldest section of the boundary over 300 years ago, the execute of boarders did not efficiently control flows of people and commodities on their shared frontier. In many ways, their border remained an open and imperial frontier, where social and cultural identities of peoples of different ethnic and linguistic roots merged and shifted.

Sören Urbansky: Most parts of this Imperial frontier space thus remained porous with people and commodities continuing to flow freely. Abilities to construct, strengthen, and maintain international boundaries grew over time. Partly because of advancement in technology and organization, but also because growing investments allowed resources to control even the remotest peripheries. By introducing modern infrastructure, states authorized a particular form of border crossing, and in doing so accelerated formal border making. Such infrastructure projects were built to facilitate the flow of goods, people and ideas through the borderland corridor in a manner suited to their political creators. The metropoles would succeed in tightening their control over the entire borderland significantly in the 1930s. Roughly by the time Akari operated his sophisticated contraband network from his kitchen table. The metropoles did so by applying more severe penalties to border transgression and by installing much stronger military presence on state parameters.

Sören Urbansky: No longer was just the external state boundary monitored, the borderland had become isolated from the inside and the outside, with border zones in which communities and their members were subject to special supervision and individuals movement into them restricted. With the international border firmly sealed the Soviet party State and the Manchukuo, and later PRC governments deported or killed locals holding ties across the parameter. Reliable citizens gradually replaced allegedly disloyal people. Even if definitions of the category, "reliable" constantly shifted. Traditional life patterns, if they continue to exist became encapsuled in the new national cultures. Military hostilities also reshaped the border as a metaphorical sphere now displayed as a bulwark against the enemy neighbors in the propaganda on both sides of the river.

Sören Urbansky: During the postwar years, despite being marked by increasingly omnipresent, friendship rhetoric and bilateral cooperation, border connections evolved as policies no longer established informally but strictly overseen by Moscow and Beijing. Thus
the international cross border economy and the organized friendship in location visits to accompany no longer resembled historically unregulated exchange within the traditional borderlands society. Stricter control of flows of people whatsoever, just one reason for this shift into formality, many of the new settlers had never crossed the border in their lives. Their lack of language skills and the ignorance of the other culture generated indifference towards their new neighbors. The Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s and the 1970s resulted in an arms, or a new arms race at the border, supplemented by more weaponry and soldiers than had even been assembled during the Manchukuo-Soviet confrontation of the 1930s and 1940's. Trains and cargo declined sharply as a result and Beijing Moscow trains were no longer filled with Soviet or Chinese citizens.

Sören Urbansky: The Manzhoulis of [indistinct] checkpoint was in fact for some time, the only railroad crossing open to travel between China and the Soviet Union. 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 passengers statistics of that period is the decline in Chinese and Soviet nationals from the trains. In 1966, Chinese travelers to constituted the absolute majority. In 1969 however, only two Chinese passengers crossed the border by train out of nearly 7,000 passengers in total. Figures for Soviet passengers are similar. During the 1970s, the overwhelming majority of passengers originated from the socialist sister states Vietnam and North Korea. Being close allies of Moscow, both countries send students and business delegations to the Soviet Union, as long as Beijing allowed their transit through Chinese territory. The traffic statistics does reflect political relations in East Asia and beyond. They give an account of a highly regulated border that could not be crossed easily by ordinary tourists, world travelers, or even locals. The rift had a lasting influence on more than just the passengers on the international trains.

Sören Urbansky: It had dire consequences for the economy and demography of the borderland. In addition, propaganda campaigns revived old motives of infiltration, sabotage, espionage and disinformation, in buying the border with new legitimacy as a space of enmity. Yet with a border now closed for decades and the population no longer familiar with its neighbor such messages were arguably more effective than ever before. To get a better idea of how isolated the Soviet citizens had become over time from the Chinese neighbors. We can take a look at local newspapers. From 1970 on, China was to appear in the Soviet local press only sporadically, when Moscow anticipated new acts of aggression along the border emanating from Beijing, or became aware of new anti-Soviet sentiment in China. Apart from reports on Chinese politics in the state media, Soviet border dwellers learned surprisingly little about China during the period of conflict. Until the late 1950s however, when official relations between Beijing and Moscow had still been cordial, the case had been quite different. Local papers would, for instance, discuss seemingly amicable joint working life of Soviet and Chinese duty officers at the border stations of [indistinct] and Manzhouli. The wording even then would have sounded stereotypical and crude, yet the descriptions in this story, were astonishingly specific and worth it.

Sören Urbansky: The people in it had names as did the places on both sides of the border. The reader might not know, that the reader might actually know the places and perhaps even some
of the people. But an article from 1959 was to be the last such report to make explicit mention of dealings between Soviet and Chinese, and the borderland, and in fact would be the final article to name Manzhouli for a long time. Though [indistinct] and Manzhouli, later six miles apart and one could gaze at the other across the border from the peaks of the Steppe hills the Soviet regional press refrained from mentioning Manzhouli, and other places in the Chinese border region for the next 26 years. At the beginning of my talk, we've already met Akari and his Chinese friends. Allow me now to introduce yet another local border resident the [indistinct] Vera was born in 1938 in [indistinct] region, near the Ural mountains. Thousands of miles away from the border with China. In 1955, right after her graduation from the Railroad College, Vera arrived in [indistinct] to work at the train station. Like most of the new residents, she was still an unmarried teenager.

Sören Urbansky: In contrast to the majority of her coworkers, Vera are belonged to a limited circle of people allowed to travel to China on duty, even during the zenith of it's split. Vera cleared goods and passenger trains to Monguli. Her passages were tightly overseen and confined to her professional duties. Though, she recalled having many other workmates among the Chinese rail road men she never questioned the border regime imposed by the state. Recalling one such a situation in 1967, she testified quote, 'Of course, there was still a few contacts, I was friends with one Chinese colleague but for him it was dangerous to express such friendship because they mutual respect on each other during the cultural revolution," end of quote. Vera's encounters with her Chinese workmates stand in stark contrast to Akari's closely knit cross-border networks. Also the mobility of people like Vera, marked a striking departure from the experience of earlier generations of border land pioneers who could cross the border relatively freely or at least still remembered those merry times when the border had not been an obstacle but an opportunity.

Sören Urbansky: The experience of Vera and her peers of the 1950s and 60s was different. Vera had spent her childhood and teenage years in the Soviet heartland provinces, far away from the Chinese border. So did most Chinese residents who moved in great numbers to the borderland beginning in the 1950s, because of tight border regulations in place, unlike Vera, most had never set foot in the neighboring country as the border remained essentially closed for locals, as did the border zones for ordinary citizens. Engine drivers and chanters like Vera did far more than clear goods and passenger trains. Sometimes they assumed delicate tasks made necessary by relations between Moscow and Beijing, [indistinct] municipal party committee received instructions from and regularly reported to the central committee of the communist party of the Soviet Union in Moscow on meetings between Soviet and Chinese railroad men. Let me conclude with two of these encounters. On May 1st, 1972, 12 Monguli railroad men visited [indistinct] The program included a reception at the station [indistinct] channel the screening of a movie on the great patriotic war and a lunch in the railroad club. The Chinese delegates proposed toasts for Mayday, for solidarity, for the friendship between the Chinese and Soviet people and for the railroad men of Manzhoulians and [indistinct]. Together they sang [speaks in a foreign language].

Sören Urbansky: During their brief visit quote, "Not a single time, did the Chinese guests bring up ideas of Maoism and Mao Zedong thought," end of quote. To the central committee in Moscow, this was probably the most important message of their report. Following a similar
format, Soviet delegates paid the return visit to Manzhouli in the next day to find quote, "A welcoming and friendly reception," end of quote. With the permission of the Chinese authorities the guests also got the chance to visit Manzhouli Soviet War Memorial. Though, more sporadic and smaller in scale, in form, and in content, these meetings resembled the exchanges of delegations that had taken place under the Alliance regime of the 1950s. In times of conflict however, those meetings fulfilled government's desire to exercise goodwill diplomacy at the lowest level.

**Sören Urbansky:** Moreover depending on those changing state of diplomatic relations, both sides occasionally rejected proposals for such visits. In 1975, the communist party leadership in Manzhouli declined a request place by [indistinct] district party committee for a ceremonial laying of rest for the forums of its soldiers at Manzhouli's Memorial, to mark the 30th anniversary of the so-called liberation of Manchuria from the Japanese. The decision was made in consultation with the central government in Beijing, [indistinct] station masker was then informed by the Chinese that the Chinese people did in fact honor Soviet men who had given their lives. With annual [indistinct] ceremonies at memorials and cemeteries. Yet with the developments of large Soviet military forces or yet with the deployments of large Soviet military forces on the Chinese border joint commemorations would be inappropriate. Vera and other railroad workers in Manzhouli and [indistinct] composed almost the sum of all legal border-crossers in the period of conflict. Sometimes these last border-crossers were exposed to the risks of political turmoil. Sometimes too they assumed the roles of weather balloons. As these metaphorical balloons rose through the atmosphere, they gather important data on behalf of the political leadership in Moscow and Beijing. Their visits were quite accurate ways of measuring conditions on the ground. Given the difficult relationship between the two communist regimes.

**Sören Urbansky:** In most cases however, chanters and engine drivers simply did their jobs. And in allowing them to do so, both governments acknowledged that the border would never be hermetically sealed. Beginning in the 1980s, the border between China and the Soviet Union gradually became permeable again. Both through policies adopted by the central governments and local populations strategies. A gradual rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow permitted cross border contracts, at first formally, but soon afterwards informally as well. As the consequence of these changes elicit border trade, cross border migration and many other transport activities were reborn. Yet although there is no evidence of numerous new sign of Russian networks active in the present, the border has not fully weathered away. It continues to exist as an economic political cultural and as you can see in this photograph, even as a symbolic line of division between China and Russia, with many barriers still visible on the ground and engraved in the minds of the [indistinct] Thank you for your attention.

**Arunabh Ghosh:** Great. Thank you so much. That was really fascinating and gave a really nice snapshot of the research you've been doing these past several years and of the book as well. So the floor is basically open. I'm going to try and sort of represent people as they type in their questions. Please use the Q and A function. We have one question already, but before we get to that, I thought I'd maybe abuse my privilege and ask a question itself. I was wondering as I was reading the introduction to your book and I've read some of the chapters earlier, it's sort of especially for the early modern era, the way in which you evoke the border and the not just how
porous it is, but how the idea itself is kind of strange in as much as the community there has a certain kind of cohesion that is different from both the metropoles. In this case, the Russian empire and the Ching empire metropoles. You know, it was very evocative of thinking about sort of the mountain regions that [indistinct] talks about in [indistinct] As these spaces of essentially alternative kinds of economic and political action that is consciously trying to stay away from sort of these more sedentary, central, agrarian powers [indistinct] powers. And I was wondering, do you see that kind of resonance or is that too much of a stretch, or can we think of these because they're geographically somewhat different. I mean, they're not, these are not Upland areas like [indistinct] typically is. But I was wondering if you have reflections on that or not and then we move on to the next question.

Sören Urbansky: Well, thank you. That's a great question. And I think there's certain similarities in the sense that this is really like a place isolate from or different from the surrounding areas. And what is most striking in this early period of the Sino-Russian frontier, which actually lasted well into the first decades of the 20th century in some areas. Is that internal borders that is, let's say border between different Kazakh hosts or between different battle lands on the Chinese side often mattered more to those people on the ground than the actual state border. You can see this by herding patterns of nomads that is they would graze their cattle on both sides of the border, not being interrupted by state authorities or by Cossacks, for instance, doing their hay on the Chinese bank and being allowed so by local Mongo authorities. Who then only gradually had been replaced by the Chinese authorities. So it really starts to become a matter of fact when both sides decide to actually place the customs border on the actual state border.

Sören Urbansky: I mean, obviously this was just a snapshot and I focused mostly on the latter half of the 20th century, but the book is more, it's also about the early 20th century going further back to the 19 and so on. And what is really changing is in the year or around 1900, when Russia decides to open its customs border, along the state border, before that actually everything east of Lake Baikal had been a free trade zone. So actually things produced in Russia and Russian Far East had to go to customs to go actually to the European part or to Siberia as the Chinese commodities. So once they decided to set up this customs border, they started to man the border they started to impose quarantine restrictions like of when there was a plague, for instance and with this economic establishment of the border, more and more, it became a matter of fact, even to the local people, I don't know.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great. Thank you. So we have a bunch of questions that are now coming in so, let's just dive in and take the first one. Which is from Kenneth Lyndon who is a PhD candidate at Indiana University. He says, thank you very much for your talk. I studied the history of Mongolia and North Asian herding history. And I'm curious if you could elaborate a bit more on the role of local herders in the negotiation of the border that you found in your research?

Sören Urbansky: Well, I somewhat touched upon this in our last question already but what really, well, actually they like local nomadic people that is mostly [indistinct] but also other, other Mongol tribes living in that area that I'm concerned with, began to fight for their independence in the early 20th century. And you know when the Ching dynasty collapsed and
Republican China was established. Outer Mongolia became an independent and then a Soviet dependent state but also like other areas of Inner Mongolia present day Inner Mongolia tried to achieve this independence. And they were actually helped by Russian authorities. So there is this one case I discussed in my book by a Mongol nobleman from Inner Mongolia who is actually fighting against Chinese farmers and also Japanese typographers who actually mapped this area for the Chinese authorities and claiming this land and taking that away from the herders and Russian authorities, thinking of making use of that person, whose name is [indistinct] And he's being basically invited to Russia and he's seeking as asylum he's being granted asylum. And he's basically being parked by the Russians there in case an eruption or a a people rise- like the local's rise

Sören Urbansky: An uprising sorry, couldn't find the word. As an local uprising, so they can actually bring him in and use him as a political figure. In the end he's not being used because there's other people becoming more influential in that region. But for instance, even the Chinese side of the Argun river is independent and recognized by Russia for a couple of years before it's being integrated into China or Republican China again. So there's definitely play role in that story.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great. Great. Thanks. So the next question is from a [indistinct] and they're looking at a different geographical direction I guess they want to know how would you compare this border crossing with the one at Suifenhe that goes to Vladivostok?

Sören Urbansky: Yeah yeah. Actually when I started looking at choosing a region because I mean I also thought you could actually write a book about the entire border but then it becomes very complicated if you really want to go if you do want to do like a micro history and look at individuals who lived at this point, and especially [indistinct] people who usually didn't leave any traces in the archives. So I decided to just look for one section and another suitable section obviously would be, Suifenhe and Grodekovo the other side is called on the Russian side. The other end point of this railroad that was constructed by Russia, through Manchuria in the early 20th century. But it's different in the sense that this the Russian territory became Russian only the mid 19th century when basically the Governor General of Eastern Siberia conquered this territory and in the treaties of Aigun and Beijing it was ceded to the Russian empire. And apart from that, so the story would be shorter there, but apart from that it's also a different ethnic pattern. You won't have nomads there you would still have indigenous people there but you would also have many more Chinese on the Russian side living there for quite a long period long before this actually became Russian. So it would be a slightly different story. And it would essentially mean that other than the region I'm looking at where actually the ethnically dominant groups of both empires that is Great Russians and the Han Chinese come in really late. I mean, some Russian Cossacks come in by the 18th century but still it's heavily dominated by indigenous people. This was a different story there. I would argue.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great. Actually before we go to the next question, I was wondering maybe if you could tell us a little bit more also badly motivated by your answer, you know, by the question, and then you answered the question. Provide a sense of what the research process was like and what kinds of sources were you able to draw upon? I presume some of the photographs you showed us, you took yourself. So maybe sort of give us a sense of, did you travel these
areas to get a sense of the border itself today? I think that will be very interesting to try and understand especially because you are doing sort of both sides. You're tryna give life to both sides.

Sören Urbansky: Yes, yeah. Great question. And yes, I spent quite some time on both sides of the border. I studied Chinese and Harbin for instance which is not right on the border there, but it's Dongbei so to speak. And I spent more than a year in the Russian Far East in the archives. I wish I could have spent the same time in Chinese archives as I was able to spend in Russian archives. I mean, even Russian archives are challenging but they're compared to Chinese archives, much more open. And also it's not just the policy of open archives or closed archives or whatever the current policy of access to archives is in China. It's also about the preservation of documents and the level of bureaucratization at that border. So I would argue that even the documents I was able to see bureaucracy on the Chinese side was at least until the 1950s, which was much thinner than on the Russian side. But the good thing about borders when you do a border research is even if you just have a little limited access to archives on one side, you get a lot of correspondence ending up in Russian archives from China. Or I went to national archives here in College Park near D.C where you have U.S consulate files United States had a consulate in Harbin. Germany had a consulate in Harbin for some time. So you can also use these kinds of archival documents. And as it came up, maybe a bit in my talk I used various other sources, including oral history. I did interviews with locals. I used newspapers, visual sources ethnographic accounts, and so on and so forth. So it's actually, it's very tricky because there's even not many local histories like written by local Chinese historians or Russian historians but there's lots of materials to actually dig deep. You just need to find time and-

Arunabh Ghosh: So [indistinct] has a followup comment to this question on sources and materials, so I'll jump to that and then follow the sequence as we have it is. [indistinct] is asking with regard to the Russian primary sources in the late 1990s, the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences was publishing year by year accounts of [indistinct] relations during the 17th century. How is that project going? Is it still ongoing? Do you know?

Sören Urbansky: Can you, something was interrupted. Can you just repeat the last-

Arunabh Ghosh: I'll read it again. So the question is with regard to Russian primary sources in the late 1990s the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences was publishing year by year accounts of Russo-Chinese relations during the 17th century. How is that project going?

Sören Urbansky: I'm not aware that this is continuing this project but there's being constantly published kind of digests of archival materials from Russian archives and from the Russian front used by the Academy of Science, the branch in Vladivostok. For instance, on customs, different customs posts. And there is this a huge collection of the history or edited like a series of edited volumes on the history of the Russian Far East from its beginnings. That is the mid 19th century until the post Soviet time. But not that I'm aware of this archival documents collection that it has been continued, but I'm not sure.
Arunabh Ghosh: Good. Thanks. So next question, and you got a nice pat on the back. It starts by saying this from Lyle Goldstein a fascinating presentation, well done. To my understanding two bridges have been completed over the Amur during 2019, which is an important milestone. Do you believe that economic development of frontier regions is accelerating dramatically? Do you have additional evidence?

Sören Urbansky: Yes. I've also heard about those bridges. And they have been called half bridges for quite a long time because the Chinese started to build them quite a long time ago but Russia was reluctant to finish them. And I mean, there has been since the 1990s since the border was almost overnight, became open again, various strong economic exchange. And you might even argue that to some degree, Chinese merchants saved the Russian, then already Russian Far East from starvation and from economic hardship, when the Soviet economic system broke down overnight that is subsidies to transport, cargo transport stopped to exist and products like food and everything else, it became very expensive all of a sudden. So since then you had this period of wild inter exchange where nothing much was regulated. You had wild [indistinct] again, Siberian and far eastern cities with Chinese traders.

Sören Urbansky: Then you had also Russians engaging in the shuttle trade. But these things became more regulated over time. And until 2014, and we are just talking now on local or regional border trade not about the big economic projects like let's say the oil and gas deals between Beijing and Moscow or timber lumber production and export to China. Until 2014, China was really a place to go for local Russians or for Russians at Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and other cities along the border. But this really changed in 2014 with the war in Ukraine and the collapse of the [indistinct] and in comparison to other currencies, including the renminbi. So China became much more expensive as a market to buy from or to use services like hairdresser or repair your car. This was really very common at the time that you would repair your car going to China for instance. But nowadays it's actually the other way around. It's not that Chinese using Russian services so much as Chinese tourism to Russia has become very common these days. I was luckily in 2019 when before COVID I was in [indistinct] and other places and it was March and it was quite full of Chinese tourists. So not a major travel season. And you can also see it when you take a plane from Beijing to let's say to Vladivostok it's usually 80, 90% Chinese in the plane and just 20 or 10% Russians.

Sören Urbansky: So I'm not sure about the bridges because bridges can also be, you know you have a [Indistinct] you have a [speaks foreign Language] I don't know how to, in Russian word, you can close this border as much as you can stop a hovercraft or a ferry from crossing a river. So I don't think that this will significantly increase local border traffic but it's a good symbol that finally these bridges become open again or the dispatchers are being finished and travel is becoming more easy. Yeah.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great. Well then, obviously we don't have to talk about that now but I think what is implicit in what you're saying I guess is to ask then how has COVID-19 affected a lot of this tourism right. Much in the way in which we talk about it in Europe and other places, but hold off, I have a lot of other questions, so I think we should do that.

Sören Urbansky: Okay.
Arunabh Ghosh: So the next question is from [indistinct] Smith who asks, who says, thank you for your talk and your research Dr. Urbanski. Can you tell us anything about the Chinese and Russians or Russian-Soviet notions of borders? Did these notions overlap? If so, what origins do they share? And if they didn't overlap, how were differences smoothed out?

Sören Urbansky: Okay. Yep. My understanding is that Chinese notions of borders have much longer been the notion of the zone rather than the next act or precise line. You can see this actually also with the [indistinct] or the Chinese border posts that they were not necessarily placed on the border, but you had some different layers to them. This was different with on the Russian side, from very early on. When the Russians started to erect Kazakh settlements that is mostly, it's not like nowadays that you have a guard tower like a tower with soldiers would just look across with their binoculars. But it was more villages where people were living and having like cattle and doing agriculture for life, they were part-time guarders so to speak or were guarding the border part-time. Those are really placed along the border from the very first moment. And I would say that during the 20th century Russia or the Soviet union had quite a number of inventions that were later adapted at first by Manchukuo and then to some degree also by the People's Republic of China, for instance, as I mentioned in my talk briefly, the Soviet Union introduced in the late 1920s so-called border zones. That is a second like a zone running along the border to which access is restricted to ordinary citizens. So you need to either live in there or have a special permit.

Sören Urbansky: Even you have a Soviet citizen doesn't mean you can go there. I actually grew up on the iron curtain between Germany and Germany. And there was a [indistinct] 30 kilometers or maybe 20 miles of no excess and actually where villages had been demolished people were moved out not everybody [indistinct] it was thinned out to some degree. And this also existed in the Soviet Union, starting from the late 1920s. And then a similar thing was adopted in Manchukuo in the mid 1930s. And to some degree you also have a border zone in China, even in the present time that you when you go to these, I didn't talk about them, but you still have Russian Cossacks living on the Chinese side. When you visit these areas you have to register with the local police.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great. Great. Thank you. The next question is from a grad student in the history department here at Harvard, Dong Yuting. She's asking, I wonder whether it is possible to know more about the residents of this border in the 1920s and 1930s. Are the Russian diaspora? How do the local residents influence the perception of the border on the Soviet side? And then she thanks you for a wonderful presentation.

Sören Urbansky: Thank you. Yes. I mean, talking about diaspora obviously after the Russian revolution, there was a quite a significant exodus of Russians emigrating, mostly to Europe, but also to China and Harbin the city the provincial capital of Heilongjiang province which had been founded by Russian, by this railroad company, really became a huge, like a significant city for those people emigrating to the East. But there were also rural communities like the Cossacks who already before the Russian revolution had kind of crossed the border regularly for their economic, for the agriculture enterprises. They would emigrate in significant numbers, especially during the collectivization of the land in 1920s when basically the Soviet government
took the livestock from them. So they emigrated in great numbers and these people, some of them, I mean, they are now mixed because they have the married with Chinese, but the descendants of these people still live in those areas and have become actually a major tourist attraction for Chinese who are interested in to see a Russian without having to cross the border. But how did they influence the perception of the border on the Soviet side?

**Sören Urbansky:** Well, the Russian emigres were seen as the enemies. Actually if you look at the Russian propaganda or Soviet propaganda from the 1920s, and also from the 1930s, the main enemy in the booklets in the newspapers are not the Chinese or are not the Japanese they become major enemy as of the mid early 1930s, but are the white Russians who crossed in their terminology the reactionaries. They had to be fired they needed to be destroyed to make the boarder safe again.

**Arunabh Ghosh:** That's very interesting. Yeah. The next question we have, which takes us in a different but very interesting direction is from Concepcion Lagos, who says, hello, I'm asking from the Philippines. Can you talk a bit about gender and religious conversion during intermarriages? Would you say religious conversions are equally distributed among brides and grooms across nationalities or are some data astute towards a certain gender converting to their partner's religion?

**Sören Urbansky:** Very interesting question as well. A very short answer almost when there was an intermarriage it was all mostly Russian woman, marrying a Chinese man. And the Chinese men becoming Russian Orthodox. That's, really 90% of the cases I would say.

**Arunabh Ghosh:** Okay thanks. Another question that we have is from Martin Fromm, who asks, did the hardening of the border have an impact on the environment in the region that did evolving political relations shape ecological conditions in the area?

**Sören Urbansky:** That's a very good question. I would say yes to some degree as again with the German German border, which is now like a national, not really a national park, but it has become an ecological zone because it had been preserved when there was no agriculture, no industry. So, and nowadays you can cycle along it you can cycle along the, what had been China and Russia nowadays. But I would say it has not been, it has not been as developed as it would have been developed if it were not the border, the state border. And there were actually problems with that because since many parts had not been developed to intensively, so to speak, there were a lot of forest fires, for instance in more Northern parts. And there were attempts by Chinese and Soviet authorities still during the period of friendship to fight those fires with common kind of cooperation like a fire planes. Soviet fire planes would help extinguish Chinese forest fires so to speak. Yeah.

**Arunabh Ghosh:** Just listening to your answer. I was also wondering, and then again, in the book you talk about how extreme the climatic conditions are, and partly the terrain is interesting, you have some hills and then you have the rivers at such an important conduit. But you talk about the extreme temperatures where in the summer that can go up to 35 degrees something that I think you said and then the winter that can be minus 30 40 or even colder. So the river freezes and the river then becomes a different kind of, it's not sort of you flow along
the river, but you can just cross wherever you want in some ways. I was wondering, so in light of more recent sort of climate related concerns that we all have, what we're seeing in California now with the forest fires do you sort of, do you see that these kinds of things having a major impact on the sort of economic, cultural and life in the region?

Sören Urbansky: You mean the climate change? Whether it has-

Arunabh Ghosh: Yeah climate change broadly speaking because it's gonna, affect these areas that have extreme weather patterns perhaps more.

Sören Urbansky: Well, you have increasingly, I mean, you always had floods in that region, but you increasingly have floods over there. I think there was a big flood in 2013, and then again in 2019, and, you know, before that it was maybe every 20 years and now it seems the intervals becoming shorter and shorter. And of course floods create problems with that border. But what I would say, I mean, it's not a permafrost region like the North of Siberia, which is struggling a lot now. Or it's not densely forested like it has no thick forest at least that part of the region I'm talking about. Because you have lots of forest fires as well in Siberia. So these areas are more effected by that. What I would say is the big problem, or was a big concern even now that the relationship between China and Russia the Russian Federation is a form of partnership. And in some degrees even an alliance one may argue is the ecological impact or environmental impact of industrialization in China. There was a huge spill of a chemical plant in Jilin province that affected [indistinct] and then also the Amur river. And this was a major issue for the local or regional population and the Russian Far East since obviously also for the Chinese people living along those rivers, but it became an international problem once this dirty water basically entered the Western territory.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great thanks. The next question is from Tatiana [indistinct] who says congratulations Sören from me and Navarro. My question in your understanding, what was the role of the Japanese empire's expansion into Northern Manchuria in the changing nature of the Sino-Soviet border?

Sören Urbansky: Well, that's a very good question. And I would say the major, the most decisive factor was really this militarization. The Soviet Union, although they had this conflict or even war in 1929 with the warlord Zhang about the control over this colonial railway. It was the Soviet Union was never really concerned or afraid of an attack of this warlord on its borders. This changed with Japan occupying the Chinese Northeast. There was really this fear of a two front war that is, that the Germans might attack in Europe and the Japanese might attack on it's Asiatic borders. And this led really to an investment into military infrastructure and to sending troops to that region and this in turn helped to actually establish border control. So this was the first time the government was willing to spend so much money. I mean, we're talking about several thousand miles of sparsely inhabited territory. It takes, I mean, we all know the U.S Mexican border and how hard this is to patrol, even with modern technical equipment. You need a lot of money and you need a lot of resources to do that. And this was the first time actually that the Soviet Union really put an effort in staffing this border efficiently to control it. And this in turn had an impact on the networks across the border. And of course the Japanese side would, again employ those Russian emigres, the white washes, so to speak as
their own kind of; they were enlisted in their army, they were sent as spies there. So there was really this Russian rivalry in this Soviet-Manchukuo or Soviet-Japanese rivalry as well.

Arunabh Ghosh: I'm gonna try and curate a little bit, because we have some questions I think that link up directly to sort of this more international history and sort of power politics and so on. So Professor Lyle Goldstein has a follow up question that I think is again about sort of international relations. So I'll jump to that. And then come back to an earlier question. So Professor Goldstein says whose from Naval War College. He says you have a very unique perspective on the Sino-Soviet conflict. And I found your anecdote regarding railway workers from the early 1970s, really fascinating and insightful. In general, what is your opinion on the primary cause of the Sino-Soviet conflict? And in your opinion, does the legacy of the conflict of the split weigh heavily on the relationship today?

Sören Urbansky: Well, that's an excellent question again. I mean if you talk about the Zhenbao or Damansky incident in March, 1969, I think I didn't do any research on that but I think it's agreed upon among the Russian Chinese and Western historians that it was China attacking the Soviet Union in that case. I mean, we could go into details, see why that was, but let's put this aside but I mean, I would say the legacy talking about the legacy. It's very interesting. I mean, we had recently the anniversary in 2019, 50 years of Zhenbao or Damansky incident and it was very different from the 40th anniversary 2009 and in 2009, it would be still publicly commemorated in the Russian Federation you know, with reports in the press, with museums, preparing special exhibitions, TV doing special reports on that, but it was really muted this time. So it was really, I don't know whether it was an official directive coming from somewhere, but it was really the goal to, you could really see the message that we don't want to commemorate this incident, because it could complicate the relations. If you talk about locals or speak to locals obviously they remember that very strongly. You will have lots of jokes, savage jokes still running through Russian cities about Chinese invasion that are related to that incident or to earlier times when many several hundred thousand Chinese lived in the Russian Far East until until the mid 1920s. So this is still there but not on the official political discourse so to speak on this level. Yeah.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great. Great. Thank you. The next question we have is from Liu Qunhao who says from the University of Chicago, who says, first of all thank you for your speech on the Sino-Russian border. I wonder what the purpose of the railroad was in shaping the life experience of the border residents on both sides and the recognition of Soviet and ROC on the border definition in 1930s? So as I guess, the Nanjing government is formed.

Sören Urbansky: Yes. Well, I talked a bit about infrastructure and how the infrastructure changed the nature of the border. In a way this railroad made this border much more accessible for the political centers in the sense that you could travel there easily you could write customs posts but you also could channel the transport of people and commodities more easily. And by the channeling also controlling it better. I mean, if you think about customs and quarantine but at the same time this railroad also brought in many new people, that I would argue the governments on both sides, didn't like very much coming in. Like a lot of migrant workers, trappers like hunters. There was this Siberian Marmot it's an animal, which skin sells expensively or sold expensively in the world market. And it was hunted down by local people
before that. But it really, with the opening of this railroad it became a world market commodity. It was sold in Leipzig and Paris for fashion. But this, again in turn created all kinds of problems. There was this great Manchurian in plague in 1910, 1911. There always had been cases of plague every year in some villages, but it never spread. I mean, talking about COVID, it never spread so fast and had so devastating consequences. And it was precisely this floating population from both sides that was carrying this disease all along the railroad causing most deaths actually in Harbin. I think in Harbin alone, more than 20,000 people died during that winter and in total 60,000 people. So yeah, it created things that the government who decided to build a railroad didn't intend by building it basically. Yeah.

Arunabh Ghosh: Okay. Great. Sort of shifting focus in some ways to the region, the place of Mongolia and the history itself. There's an anonymous attendee who's asked, "Did the independence of Mongolia in 1920s change the dynamics of the Sino-Russian border in the Mongoli region?" So exactly narrowly where you're working I guess.

Sören Urbansky: Yes. That's a great question. And I would say yes definitely. Because before that, as I said, it was like mostly an open border and there was a huge market or a fair every fall near a monastery on present day the Chinese side, where, herders from all three different states as they exist today that is Mongolia, China and Russia would come and exchange or sell their horses, their cattle, livestock and buy all kinds of produced fabricated items from the Russians and the Chinese. And with Mongolia becoming an independent and then a state and then a Soviet satellite there was also a boarder created between Outer Mongolia and China. And this interaction kind of didn't stop immediately but decreased over time. And again, for doing as I mentioned many Cossacks emigrated to China, but also many nomadic people from the Russian empire who lived in that region immigrated to China. But often they emigrated actually to outer Mongolia first and then to China. And this became no longer possible at some point in time. So it had had a huge impact on the economy and also on people's lives in that region.

Arunabh Ghosh: Okay great. I think we have one other sort of, it's a comment again. Someone who asked a question earlier [indistinct] who has a comment slash question that ties into sort of more contemporary politics. So I'll just read it out very quickly and then maybe that'll be you know, we are approaching 5:15 so maybe this can be the last question, unless maybe I'll invite if there's anyone who wants to ask the final question then they're more than welcome to type it up. Otherwise we'll consider this to be the the final point. Sort of dragging you back into contemporary politics as it were. So the question have there been prolonged and massive demonstrations in Khabarovsk over the imprisonment of the governor by Putin's government? To what extent is the fact that the governor belonged to [indistinct] nationalists party that has made sort of anti-Chineseness as a central platform, I guess. And how is that linked to perhaps increasing Chinese economic dominance in the region? So how do sort of regional and then central politics play into this and then connect with China's growing dominance economically? Do you have any thoughts?

Sören Urbansky: Well, it's an interesting question. I actually, I'm obviously aware of those protests in Khabarovsk and through friends and also obviously through the media, but I've never seen them as anti-Chinese protest. And you're right, that the LPR, the Liberal Democratic Party of the Russian Federation as it's called Zhirinovsky party. Is ultra national, an in ultra
nationalist party. But I think the reason why they decided to elect this person was more about not electing a United Russia [speaking Russian language] often it's you either choose the communists or the nationalists as an alternative to Putin's official government party. So I wouldn't say even if he got elected by the majority of voters that these people are necessarily more nationalistic than they are in other regions of the Russian Federation. It's more about local politics. And I mean, there's anti-Chinese sentiment, but it's not, I wouldn't say it's stronger in Khabarovsk especially because Khabarovsk as compared to other cities along the border especially Blagoveshchens which is another big city right at the border is much less exposed to Chinese, like as workers, as tourists, as entrepreneurs because there is simply no city across on the Chinese side. And for long, there was no border crossing. I mean there's now a possibility to cross the border, but it's not like in Blagoveshchens where you have basically two cities of the same size and people going back and forth very often. It's actually much less than, Chinese are much less visible in Khabarovsk.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great. So we've received two more questions. I guess, maybe what we can do is we can take them, I'll just read them out together so you can ask them together. And then we can wrap up over the next four or five minutes. So the first question is from Sergei who asks, Sören historically Russia borders countries that vary significantly in terms of culture and economy. Since Russian governance is very centralized. Did you explore how Russian and the earlier Soviet governments tried to localize unified rules to control cross-border activity with China? For example, as I know in the last 20 years Russian customs uses European prices to detect if the transport of commodities is under priced. This practice invoked a lot of court cases between traders and Siberian Far Eastern Customs Offices as the commodity prices of Chinese products are lower than European prices. It's a fairly technical question.

Sören Urbansky: Hi, Sergei. Thanks for the question. Actually, I have no answer to that. I must pass it, honestly, I'm not so much concerned with the contemporary period and I would have to make wild guesses which I don't want to. [both laugh] Okay. Fair enough, okay. So then the last question I think it's from the same anonymous questioner who's following up on their question about Mongolia. So we'll conclude with that. They ask on a macro scale, did the creation of Soviet satellite States like Mongolia for a while and enhance the shortening of the direct Russia-China borderline. I guess because you have a third country now in the middle. Did that impact or complicate a broader Russia-China approaches to the border?

Sören Urbansky: I would say it makes actually things quite much easier because there's now less possibility for conflict or less. I mean, Mongolia is kind of stuck in the middle, Tannu Tuva is now part of Russia, obviously. But it's more like I would say Mongolia is in this unfortunate role of being a double buffer state between China and between the Russian Federation and obviously politically and economically fortunes have shifted I think until the 1990s, early 1990s 80% of foreign trade was with the Soviet Union. And now it's, I think 90% is going to China. So it's a very different story today but precisely because there is something, a third country in the middle of that kind of helps to ease tensions. And I would actually say there is an attempt on both sides of the border that is by both governments that is by Putin and Xi Jinping to kind of diminish the role of the border regions in their bilateral affairs, since they may, kind of create more possibility for conflict and for kind of for harmony. I mean, and there at least at the moment in time, I mean there's as we all know, there's a lot of overlap economically speaking,
politically speaking geopolitically speaking in both countries and they don't want to let those regions play too heavy role and thereby [indistinct]. And if you look at the sheer numbers of the economic significance of these regions I would argue that until the early 20th century the border regions and by those, I mean the provinces directly on the border took the lion's share in an economic significance of their bilateral trade balance. But now it's not the case anymore. So it's more between regions lying further inland that is oil being rigged in other provinces of the Russian Federation. Or things being produced not necessarily in Heilongjiang province, but let's say in Jilin province or in Liaoning or in Xiangdong. So it's more significant, obviously these direct provinces have more interaction and as compared to other provinces maybe, or some more turnover but it's not this significant role anymore as they did play in the past.

Arunabh Ghosh: Great, thank you. It's interesting listening to your talk. It's sort of, there's an interesting parallel perhaps that can be explored for potentially productively about sort of Nepal's positioned between China and India and the ways in which it has promoted at times, bilateral relations. And these days is quite the opposite. It's increased tensions and Nepal is stuck, but it's also doing, I think a fairly aggressive job of playing one side or the other. So I think there's an interesting sort of parallel there in terms of a buffer state that then gets caught up in too much larger-

Sören Urbansky: Well, yeah but like Mongolia tried long time to actually bring in third countries. I think Japan is still until today the biggest donor of aid like development policy. Then you have the Canadians in the mining, the Americans have also like a strategic interest in that region, but that didn't really work out. I mean, they tried it kind of to neutralize, in a way to neutralize China and Russia to bring in third countries. And, but I would say it's, it's still very much dominated by China there at the present day situation. Yeah.

Arunabh Ghosh: Thank you so much-

Sören Urbansky: Of course.

Arunabh Ghosh: Right, right. As you can see I mean, you had so many questions, this talk was fantastic, and so generative of you know, questions that take us in so many different directions. So thank you again and on behalf of all the people attending. Thank you, thank you from them and thank you to all of them for joining us. I hope you'll join us again in three weeks when we host the Gina and Tam, I think I'm now blanking on the date, but it's three weeks from now. And once again, thank you so much for joining us.

Sören Urbansky: Thank you for having me and thank you for the great questions.

Arunabh Ghosh: Yeah. Thank you.