Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River Between Russia and China

Dominic Ziegler
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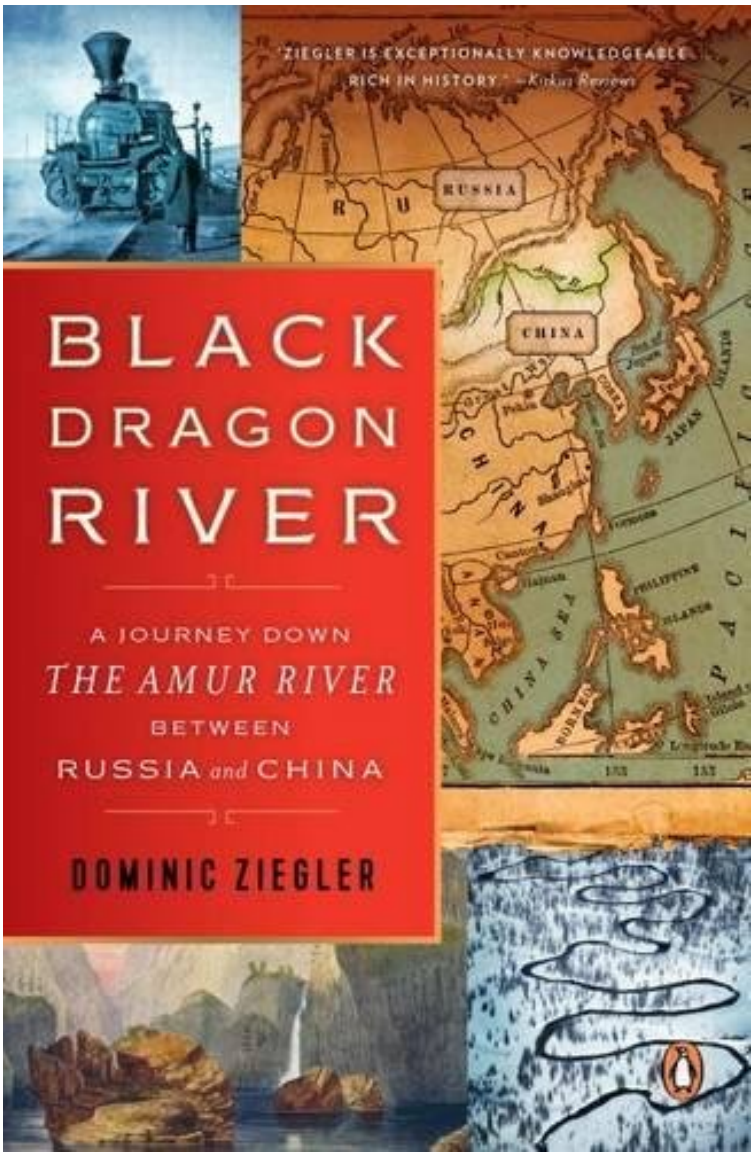

#377390 in Books Ziegler Dominic 2016-11-08 2016-11-08Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.40 x .80 x 5.50l, .69 #File Name: 0143109898368 pagesBlack Dragon River A Journey Down the Amur River Between Russia and China | File size: 29.Mb

Dominic Ziegler : Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River Between Russia and China before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River Between Russia and China:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Very good read!By Jerome FarnsworthThe Amur River is is the 8th or 9th longest river in the world; it borders Mongolia,China, and Russia. This river presents an interesting vantage point to view the historic rise of Gengis Kahn, Russian and Chinese expansion in the far East; all centered around the Amur basin. If you are a history buff, don't miss this one.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Four StarsBy jhburk1very good writing and story line. needs better maps to follow the down river journey.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Dramatic History of a Little Known RegionBy Charles MaplesThis book is a product of comprehensive scholarship covering multiple fields of research, yet it is a fascinating read. Having on hand a detailed atlas featuring the geography of the remote region covered- the shared border of far eastern Russia, northern China, and Mongolia- will be very helpful to the reader.

Black Dragon River is a personal journey down one of Asias great rivers that reveals the regions essential history and culture. The worlds ninth largest river, the Amur serves as a large part of the border between Russia and China. As a crossroads for the great empires of Asia, this area offers journalist Dominic Ziegler a lens with which to examine the societies at Europe's only borderland with east Asia. He follows a journey from the river's top to bottom, and weaves the history, ecology and peoples to show a region obsessed with the pastand to show how this region holds a key to the complex and critical relationship between Russia and China today. One of Asias mightiest rivers, the Amur is also the most elusive. The terrain it crosses is legendarily difficult to traverse. Near the rivers source, Ziegler travels on horseback from the Mongolian steppe into the taiga, and later he is forced by the rivers impassability to take the Trans-Siberian Railway through the four-hundred-mile valley of water meadows inland. As he voyages deeper into the Amur wilderness, Ziegler also journeys into the history of the peoples and cultures the rivers path has transformed. The known history of the river begins with Genghis Khan and the rise of the Mongolian empire a millennium ago, and the story of the region has been one of aggression and conquest ever since. The modern history of the river is the story of Russia's push across the Eurasian landmass to China. For China, the Amur is a symbol of national humiliation and Western imperial land seizure; to Russia it is a symbol of national regeneration, its New World dreams and eastern prospects. The quest to take the Amur was to be Russias route to greatness, replacing an oppressive European identity with a vibrant one that faced the Pacific. Russia launched a grab in 1854 and took from China a chunk of territory equal in size nearly to France and Germany combined. Later, the region was the site for atrocities meted out on the Russian far east in the twentieth century during the Russian civil war and under Stalin. The long shared history on the Amur has conditioned the way China and Russia behave toward each otherand toward the outside world. To understand Putins imperial dreams, we must comprehend Russias relationship to its far east and how it still shapes the Russian mind. Not only is the Amur a key to Putinism, its history is also embedded in an ongoing clash of empires with the West.

In his ambitious Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River at the Borderland of Empires,Dominic Zieglermakes the powerful case that this Asian Russia has been wrongly overshadowed by the countrys much smaller European component... As the books subtitle indicates, Mr. Ziegler uses one of the worlds great rivers as a vehicle to pursue this storyand what a vehicle it is. ...[He] writes beautifully, and with the fervor of a naturalist. - The Wall Street Journal [Black Dragon River] is almost as sprawling as its title [It]presents Ziegler as both an amiable traveling companion and formidably erudite professor, serving up well-spiced anthropologyIn this overexamined world, it's nice to know there are outer reaches that we can discover afresh. NPR.org Strong in terms of background, authority and seamlessness of prose The New York Times Book The writing is superba true labour of love,Black Dragon Riveris a triumph. The Spectator Highly rewarding for those with a sense of adventureZieglers writing [leaps] and sparkles in all directions like the salmon, fireflies and other Siberian fauna he delights in describing. As he travels, Ziegler stirs up an enthralling mix oftravelogue, history and anthropology. The Telegraph In this absorbing travelogue and history,Economisteditor Ziegler ranges along the 2,826-mile Amur river from its Mongolian headwaters to its Pacific mouth on what proves to be a grand adventure Ziegler happily loses himself in the twisting tributaries of the river and its lore and weaves in gorgeous evocations of the landscape and piquant reportage on the odd and vibrant characters who people it. This is a fascinating portrait of the Amur and its enduring appeal as a symbol of Russias tarnished present. Publishers Weekly [Ziegler] weaves the colorful history of the region into his travel narrative along the Amur an area that is particularly fascinating because of its location between the empires of Russia and China and its development and history being shaped by tsars, Soviets, and the Ming and Qing dynasties, to name but a few. Readers curious about the history of Sino-Russian relations and Russias Eastward expansion will find this account of particular interest.Library Journal [Zieglers] journey, which he made by horse, Jeep, and train, took him through difficult yet unforgettable landscapes and brought him into contact with a host of intriguing individuals. [He] is exceptionally knowledgeable about the Amur region and its relationship to the current tensions that define the China-Russia relationshipRich in history Kirkus s A superb book that marvellously melds high-class travel writing on one of the worlds least known regions with fascinating history of explorers, emperors, freebooters, revolutionaries and larger-than-life characters - all in a landscape that begs to be explored by traveller as intrepid and determined as

Ziegler.Jonathan Fenby, author ofThe Penguin History of Modern China If you think you understand the modern world, think again. Dominic Ziegler takes us on a magical journey to an extraordinary part of the globe - a river that snakes through history and possibly all our futures. It is a story of cruelty, mystery, beauty and wilderness that leaves you smiling at your previous ignorance.John Micklethwait, co-author ofThe Fourth Revolution"A superb book that marvellously melds high-class travel writing on one of the world's least known regions with fascinating history of explorers, emperors, freebooters, revolutionaries and larger-than-life characters - all in a landscape that begs to be explored by traveller as intrepid and determined as Ziegler."Jonathan Fenby, author of The Penguin History of Modern China "If you think you understand the modern world, think again. Dominic Ziegler takes us on a magical journey to an extraordinary part of the globe - a river that snakes through history and possibly all our futures. It is a story of cruelty, mystery, beauty and wilderness that leaves you smiling at your previous ignorance."John Micklethwait, co-author of The Fourth RevolutionFrom the Hardcover edition.About the AuthorDominic Ziegler isThe Economist's Asia editor. He was the founding author of Banyan,The Economists weekly column on Asian affairs. He has previously served as the magazines Tokyo bureau chief and as its Greater China correspondent. In that role, he openedThe Economists first mainland bureau in Beijing in 1994. He has been with the magazine since 1986.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof***Copyright 2015 Dominic ZieglerPROLOGUEThrow yourself with confidence upon this f lowing tide, for upon this generous river shall float navies, richer and more powerful than those of Tarshish . . . and at its mouth . . . shall congregate the merchant princes of the earth.Perry McDonough Collins,A Voyage Down the Amoor,1860As the long reel of the rivers story turns, many peoples flicker in and out of view as they move along the Amurs banks or float upon its waters: Mongols, Evenki, Nivkh, Manchus, Daurians, Nanai, Solons, and Ulchi, to name a few; and then there were the Russians, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Koreans. In many ways the Amur is the meeting ground for Asias great empires and peoples.For much of my life the Amur was the longest river I had never heard of. The Amur approached me slantwise. When I was a foreign correspondent living in Beijing, I made a trip to what used to be called Manchuria and is now Chinas northeast. I flew to Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province. It was February, and minus 24 degrees. On the main square men with chain saws and ice picks were turning blocks of ice into artistic forms: swans, missile launchers, Chairman Mao, Father Christmas. The ice came from the Songhua River, chief tributary of the Heilongjiang itselfthe Black Dragon River, which is what the Chinese call the Amur, and they gave the name to the province. The main stream was still some way to the north, marking not just the provinces northern border, but the countrys. On the other side of the Amur, Russia began. But in Harbin you could still feel only just, because the city was undergoing an orgy of redevelopmentthat this had once been a chiefly Russian place.It had indeed been the largest city of European residents outside Europe, a Russian railway town at the turn of the last century that later, during the Russian civil war, was refuge to fifty thousand White Russians. Redbrick Russian buildings still lined the main street. Some city officials, spurning overcoats to go out into the punchy cold, took me to sing karaoke as the sun set. We sang Edelweiss (in Chinese) and a Mao Zedong verse about the Long March. But they all spoke Russian, and we also sang the Song of the Volga Boatmen in as doleful a bass as the vodka enabled.The officials then took me to a surviving Russian restaurant. No Russians, it is true, were serving there, only Chinese. But the food came as a shock after Chinas usual fabulous fare. I was served a bowl in which a gray piece of Amur salmon swam in a greasy slop. This wasukha,I was told (there was no choice), Russias traditional fish soup. Later in the Russian Far East I discovered that there, too, this wonderful reviving soup could on occasion be prepared by unloving hands. The Chinese-madeukhain front of me looked inedible. But my waitress would not set it on the table until I had paid up front for it. That also happened to me in Russia, later. But only in Harbin did it ever happen to me in China.On that visit, the Amur was just a presence, felt but not seen. A few years later, on a winter f light from London to Tokyo, where by now I was living, I pulled up the blind after a fitful night, a couple of hours before we were to land. The sun was low, and the clouds had cleared. Below, all was a wilder- ness picked out by brilliant shafts of light. The taiga was cut through by a broad white ribbon that snaked north and then, on the far fringe of the curving earth, turned purposefully east before debouching, stillborn, into a frozen sea. Along the length of this forceful river I struggled to find human signs. I was smitten.I resolved to find out more about the Amur. I learned that the modern history of the river is the story of Russias push across the Eurasian land- mass, and the story of its unanticipated meeting with China. It was in the Amur watershed that China signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia in 1689, its first treaty with a European power and one that regulated the two countries relations for nearly two centuries. To this day China views Russia differently from other Europeans. At Nerchinsk, the terms very much suited China, for they held Russians at bay. Nerchinsk was a treaty negotiated on the basis of strict equality. Later, in the nineteenth century, a stricken China was forced into a series of unequal treaties with Western powers. Today the Chinese state nourishes its schoolchildren on a diet of victimhood at the hands of Western imperialists. Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was every bit the imperialist, joining Britain, France, Germany, the United States andlatermilitarist Japan, in carving China up. But today Russias part has been forgiven or forgotten, or considered somehow different.This has very little to do with a shared history of Communism in the twentieth century. Indeed, Sino-Soviet fraternity crumbled following the death of Stalin in 1953, not long after the founding of the Peoples Republic ofChina. Mao Zedong ensured that

antagonisms grew, and in 1969 a skirmish broke out on the ice of the Amur River that threatened to spark a more general conflagration along the whole 2,700-mile frontier. But in China, all that goes largely unmentioned.Above all, apparently forgiven and forgotten (for now) in a country that cherishes its humiliations is a gargantuan Russian grab of territory from China the scale of which dwarfs all the better remembered Western depredations in the Victorian periodHong Kong, Shanghai, and the other Treaty Ports. This imperialist grab was very different from the others, driven as they were by hardheaded and well-informed calculations of power and profit. Rather, for a couple of decades around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Amur River was at the heart of an extravagant delusion that gripped the people of a stagnant autocratic Russia under Czar Nicholas I who were all too ready to share in an episode of mad escapism. Russians rediscovered a river that for centuries had hung forgotten on the eastern edge of their realm, f lowing through empty Chinese lands. They knew almost nothing of this river and its watershedneither its physical aspects nor, really, who dwelled there. All the better: onto this river they first projected dreams of mineral and agricultural wealth, and then dreams of national renewal. This river-road was to be Russians route to greatness. Above all, it seemed to offer a golden chance for Russia to replace an oppressive European identity with a vibrant one facing the Pacific. Thanks to the Amur, Russiaground down by czarist absolutism, its peasantry enserfed, and even its aristocrats admitting the country to be at a dead endcould contemplate a hopeful future.Today it is clear that this delusion was fed far more by awareness of the unrolling of the American frontier than by any knowledge Russians had about their own Far East. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russians consumed the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, chronicler of the American frontier. The newspapers were full of tales of the California gold rush that was then under way. When seizing upon the Amur River as a wellspring of national renewal, Russians were fed by New World dreams. The river would be Russias Mississippi. The supposedly lush region the Amur River drained was to be a new America. The natives there were crying out for Russias civilizing hand. Russians just had to have the Amur. Led by Eastern Siberias governor-general, Nikolay Muraviev, they launched a grab in 1854 and took from China a chunk of territory equal nearly to France and Germany combined. They took it without firing a shot. Then, almost instantly, they regret- ted their folly.The Amur is one Asias mightiest rivers but I was soon to learn that it is also the most elusive. Over the centuries, the names for it have shifted like the sands at its mysterious mouth. The Manchus once had dominion. They revered the river as the Sahaliyan Ula, or the Black River. They were in awe of its magic powers, but the Manchus are now gone. Among the Russians who now live along what they call the Amure, few recall that they took the nameAmur, or good peacefrom the greeting extended by local Dauri- ans, most of whom the early Russian incomers then exterminated.Scarcely the least of the altercations between Russia and China over the great stream that runs between them is quite where the headwaters of the Amur River may be said to lie. The matter has been laid to rest only recentlyand perhaps only for now.Russia long ago took to insisting that the source was the Ingoda River, just east of Lake Baikal, Earths biggest lake, with a fifth of all the worlds fresh water. Russians have long been intimate with this particular river, though at more than four hundred miles long and never deep, by Siberian standards it is a rivulet. When setting out from Irkutsk or the southern end of Lake Baikal, the Ingoda formed the natural route to the silver mines of Nerchinsk, first exploited by Greek mining experts whom Czar Peter the Great brought to Siberia in the late 1600s. Then, very soon after, the mines were dug by the first of many, many men from European Russia who were banished to Siberia under a sentence ofkatorga,that is, exile and hard labor.On the Ingoda is Chita, the settlement Czar Nicholas I approved as the place of exile for a very particular group of men condemned tokatorga,the Decembrists, so named after the month in which they made their futile gesture. These young, hopelessly romantic noblemen had returned from the wars against Napoleon and were infected with a European passion for liberalism and constitutional government. They had changed, in other words, while autocratic Russia had not. Their aspirations were quite out of keeping with the absolutism of the czars. In St. Petersburgs Senate Square on December 14, 1825, a day when his troops were to swear loyalty to the new czar, the noblemen launched a coup of stunning ineptitude as they mislaid their revolutionary ardor. One strode purposefully onto the square only to complain of a headache. The man chosen as the coup leader, Prince Sergey Trubetskoy, failed to show up; instead, his face muff led, he wandered despondently about the city. Now that they were leaderless, the rebel troops lined up against Czar Nicholass ranks in Senate Square were defenseless, and hundreds were mowed down.Till the end of his life Nicholas was obsessed with that day in the square. His response to it set the tone for three decades of rule during which ideas and imagination were given no truck. The proto-revolutionaries became Russias first prisoners of conscience. The scale of their bungling in St. Petersburg was notable. But in the popular mind it came to be outweighed by the purity of their ideals. Above all, the Decembrists wanted an end to the serfdom that oppressed the Russian state nearly as much as it did the mil- lions of peasants who lived and died as slaves. In Chita the old log Church of Archangel Michael with its Decembrist memorabilia remains a shrine to these men and their remarkable wives. Their example serves as a reminder and at times an inspiration, even today, of other possibilities for Russia than an autocratic state.Later, when the Amur seemed to open up new eastern vistas, the Ingoda became the natural route to them. First adventurers, then soldiers, governors, natural philosophers, tradesmen, runaway serfs, projectors, dreamers, vagabonds, hard men, revolutionaries, and eventually, by the late nineteenth century, whole peasant villages from European Russia all traveled down the Ingoda in the search for a different future. Sometimes much farther: oneJune day in 1861 the irrepressible bulk of the

anarchist Mikhail Bakunin escaped down the Amur and traveled eastward three-quarters of the way around the world until, four months later, he stood with beard, huge smile, and rotting teeth on the London doorstep of his exiled friend and fellow radical Alexander Herzen.The Great Siberian Railroad, now known as the Trans-Siberian Railway, put this f low of people, cargo, and war matriel on a sounder footing. Completed in 1905, in haste because war had broken out with Japan, the railroad runs through the Ingodas water meadows for much of the long valley, the view from the dining car little changed. The Ingoda, then, became Russias route to the ocean and window, it seemed only a century ago, to a grander Pacific destiny, one that seemed to promise all too briefly the rebirth of Russia herself.As for the Chinese, they championed their Songhua River as the Amurs pure original source. Westerners know the river as the Sungari, from the old Manchu name meaning White River (perhaps on account of its limpid water). The Sungari is the Amurs longest and most powerful tributary, 650,000 gallons sluicing every second into the main Amur stream at a point far downriver from the Ingoda. The Sungaris source lies high up in the Changbai range in Chinas northeast, on the border today with North Korea. These are potent mountains. They are the mythical birthplace of the ancestors of the tribesmen who founded the Manchu state and then conquered China, ruling until a century ago as the Qing dynasty, Chinas last, if you do not count the Communists.Meanwhile another country also piggybacks off the magic mountains power. North Korea is the worlds last totalitarian state. State mythology claims that in 1942 Kim Jong Il, North Koreans late Dear Leader, was born on the slopes of Mount Changbai (Eternally White, Mount Baektu to Koreans), at a time when his father was leading Korean freedom fighters against the aggression of imperial Japan. It also claims that a swallow fore- told the birth, and a double rainbow attended it. In truth, though you would go to the gulag for saying it, Kim was born on the grimy outskirts of Khabarovsk, Russias chief city on the Amur, where his father commanded a Soviet battalion of Korean and Chinese guerrillas. It is one of those strange things that also in a compound in Khabarovsk, in 1945, was the Last Manchu, Pu Yi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty. He spent five years in Soviet captivity after his Japanese-backed pocket empire of Manchukuo collapsed with Japans surrender. The fallen emperor whiled away the days reading the Diamond Sutra and raising green peppers and tomatoes in the yard, while others among his shrunken entourage held sances in the bed- rooms.Mao Zedong and his Communist followers used to claim they were driving everything foreign out of China, starting with the Manchu legacy. Yet in territorial matters, never was the Chinese empire larger and more secure than in the heyday of the Qing dynasty. As a sense only grows, along with economic clout, of a return to historical greatness, Beijings rulers today cling ever more fervently to the Qings maximalist definition of Chinas empire. Yet inside the current borders, some ethnic groups chafe at repression by the Han Chinese rulers: Tibetans on the roof of the world, Uighurs in Xinjiang in the far west of China, and ethnic Mongols in Inner Mongolia; periodically unhappiness spills over into violence, always met by the authorities with a mailed fist. All the while, Taiwan, first conquered by the Qing dynastys Kangxi emperor in the late 1600s, has slipped from the Communists graspa renegade province, they say. They vow to win Taiwan back, by force if necessary, even with nuclear weapons.In this context the vast lands north of the Amur River and east of its great tributary, the Ussuri, come into focus, lands once known as Outer Manchuria or Outer Tartary. What will become of them? Russia seized these lands at a time when Western imperial powers were carving up a stricken China among themselveslike a melon, as Chinese pointed out at the time. Russians have since had a century and a half to convince themselves that the lands were always rightfully theirs. Yet in the meantime Chinas Communists have spun a narrative of national humiliation around the carve-up, and now destiny seems to be on their side: Hong Kong, ruled by the British, returned to the motherland in 1997, the Portuguese enclave of Macau two years later. Taiwan, Beijing says, is just a matter of time. So where does that leave Outer Tartary and the Russians living there? China has revived no claim since Mao Zedongs time. But Russians in the Far East know their numbers are dwindling. Han Chinese, Russians say, are filtering silently through the forests of the Russian East and settling in the decaying towns. It is only a matter of time, Russians say, before China stakes its claim. Hence it matters where the Amurs source lies. It is why it disturbs Russians when the Chinese say that the Songhua, rising in the Changbai mountains, is the Amurs proper sourcethat the Songhua, indeed, is the great and essential stream, and that the Amur is its mere tributary.Not long ago, Chinese and Russian geographers decided the matter of the Amur simply had to be resolved. Not just truth was at stake, but dignity and perhaps even national destiny. Satellite maps were printed, to expansive scales. Compasses and dividers were applied to them. For days, geographers from the two countries took the measure of every tributary that coursed in animated squiggles or glided away in oxbow meanders on its way to meeting the main stream. In the end the conclusion was unexpected, even shocking. Neither the Russians nor the Chinese could deny it, and in that Beijing room it would be nice to think that someone even laughed. For the Amurs source, that is, the one most distant from the rivers mouth and the ocean beyond it, lay in neither one country nor the other. The Amur tributary farthest from the sea was the Onon River. And for that half of the year in which all the streams of Siberia are not hard-frozen, the Onons headwaters bubble from the side of a mountain not in China or in Russia, but in a wild part of northern Mongolia. I resolved to see the Onons source, source of the Amur, the Amoor, the Black Dragon River, LAmour, one the worlds great rivers, siren stream to dreamers.I resolved not just to find the source but to follow the whole watercourse of the Amur River. The challenges, it quickly became apparent, would be formidable. At home, my collection of aeronautical charts from the United States Defense Mapping Agency that covered the Amur basin piled ever higher. The river is

longer than North America is broad, and the terrain diverse. To reach the Onon headwaters would mean traveling by horse; at the other end of the river, the final run would have to be done by the ancient Soviet hydrofoil that tied the town at the Amurs mouth to the rest of the world, and then only during the summer months, before the river froze.Yet the political challenges appeared to be as daunting as the physical distances. For all the exclamations of brotherly relations between Russia and China, they keep their guard upRussia especiallyalong their border. This is a problem for a riverine explorer, since for nearly two thousand miles the Amur marks that border and is, in effect, out of bounds, the banks marked out by trip wires and watchtowers. Talk of even a bridge across the river tying the two countries together has come to nothing (something which, along with the wild Amurs complete absence of dams, fills me with secret pleasure). Fewer than half a dozen border crossings operate along the river, ferries shunting passengers back and forth for the short ride between the two countries. For a Britonand a suspect journalist to bootsecuring visas in these parts is like hunting for hens teeth. It would mean that for great chunks of my journey I would have to abandon hopes of waterborne travel and take to the Trans-Siberian Railway as it shadows the course of the Amur on the Russian side.No matter how I traveled, I hoped for much. I hoped that the Amur would serve as a lensclear on some occasions, necessarily opaque on othersto understand how it has shaped the empires that have come into contact with it, past and present. Looking back, I do not think I imagined to find in such empty country the degrees of violence and cruelty I encountered in the history of the early Russians moving east. I wondered whether this original sin set the tone for the better known atrocities meted out on the Russian Far East in the twentieth century, notably during the Russian civil war and under Stalin.But I also hoped to find wildernesswild redemptive places that theAmur basin promised thanks both to its scale and to its biological diversity, which is extraordinary. The basin encompasses an amazing range of ecoregions, from tundra to boreal taiga forests, to steppe grasslands, deciduous temperate forests, and wetlands. In some mountains, you will find the ibex; in the broadleaf forests, the Amur leopard (still hanging on) and butterflies the size of handkerchiefs; in the Amur itself, the giant sturgeon; and along the rivers banks, the wild lotus. It is not just that wild places stir me deeplyreason enough to want to make this journey. I was also curious to learn how the scale of the Amur wilderness had shaped and modulated the empires and peoples that stood before it. And to weigh against an inevitable litany today of environmental degradation and destruction (a logging and mining boom is taking place in Russia, while in just three decades the population in the Chinese part of the basin has doubled), I rather hoped to find some good news. In particular, I had heard that a common desire to protect a magnificent family of birds, the cranes, six of whose species breed in the Amur basin, had served to break down political antagonisms across prickly borders.But now the seasons were moving on, with winter not far away. Though mine was a more humdrum journey, like the cranes I had to be off.C H A P T E R 14812.3' N 10829.0' EThe phoenix of prosperity wishes to make the roof of one man its abode, while the owl of misfortune wishes to haunt the threshold of another.Juvaini,The History of the World Conquerorup one side of the wide valley of the south-f lowing Kherlen River, a scattering of log cabins sheltering behind stockades that splay at drunken angles. Jeep tracks count for streets. Stray cows keep down hints of municipal grass, and goats recycle the trash. I had been here once before, in midwinter, during Tsagaan Tsar, the festival of the white moonthe Mongolian New Year. Then, tables strained under mounds of food: curds and sweets and sides of butchered mutton and always the Mongolian sheeps fat and prized tail. A pyramid of cookies stood in for the mountains of Shambhala, that pure, visionary land.The days were spent first greeting elders and then everybody else. Within gentle handclasps, snuff bottles passed from one man to the next were admired and then returned. A monk hungkhadag,Buddhist scarvesof blue silk, around our necks. Neither the steamed mutton dumplings nor the vodka nor the singing of slow, formal airs stopped flowing. Outside, the weaker animals succumbed to the rapier cold, calves deep-frozen where they fell. On the third day, or perhaps it was the fourth, or fifth, the town emerged as one into the crystal air. A motorcycle, spanking new from a China factory, gleamed in the middle of the steppe, first prize for a horse race to mark the new year. Boy and girl jockeys climbed into saddles in felt boots and thick, embroidered jackets. The children sang to their horses, reminding them of their valor. And then they rode out together, one thick press, out of town and over the ridges to the start some two hours ride away. When they returned, this time strung out in a long, irregular, staggering line, fifty mounts with ice-foamed f lanks were urged back into town. By the end, the jockeys were beyond exhaustion, like their horses. They fell out of their saddles and stumbled toward their families, burying frozen tears in mothers coats.In winter, we had come by jeep up the Kherlen River, a slick, white, empty highway. But now, when I return, it is the close of a glorious summer. Mongonmorit is empty, because herders have driven their animals to fatten on far pastures, where the men and women also take hay before winter. The curling ribbon of the Kherlen has taken on the hue of thekhadagsky. Though scarcely out of the tumbling mountains, the river f lows with the strong, smooth gait that will carry it for another six hundred miles over into northeastern China.On the steppe, the brief riot of summer is very nearly over: the grasshoppers and crickets fizz just as they did in high summer, but the khaki grasses rustle underfoot like old parchment. Marsh birds are on the move, green- shank and snipe starting up with a cry. Wildfowl barrel toward the south- west in urgent knots and, high up, a flapping ball of lapwings is harried by a hawk. Above all, the f lies are gone. The bloodsucking torment of the gadflies and mosquitoes is over. Gone, too, are the chief of the tormentors, clouds of flesh-smothering blackflies that swarm in summer like smoke from a prairie fire. Horse weather, at last.Mongonmorit is the last human settlement. Looking upstream, hazy ridges

converge, and the flat valley funnels to a vanishing point. Beyond that is nothing: no dwelling, not even a tent, for countless milesvirgin forest until the Russian border, and probably well beyond it. It is as vast and true a wilderness as it is possible to imagine, and the Onon headwaters promise to lie at the heart of it. The seduction of it sharpens the pleasures: of appetite, naturally, and of the clean scent of autumn; but also of anticipation.Of course, notions of wilderness get rudely qualified in our anthropocene age. The impact of humans is evident in even the remotest parts of land or sea, if only you look for it. I looked hard, in dusty shelves, before coming here, and two things struck home about the wild places ahead of me. It was, first, a more peopled land in past centuries than now, especially in warmer periods: crisscrossed by hunters of game and gatherers of pine nuts and cloudberries; used by herders for summer grazing; borrowed as a refuge by people who, for one reason or another, were on the run; or simply a range to cross on the way back home. It was to some, perhaps many, a familiar region. Probably that is true of most of the places we value for being solitary and wild.Second, but more unusually, the human impact, the more emphatic human impact, came not from outside this remote region pressing in: climate change, airborne pollution, logging, huntingthe usual dismal litanies. Rather, the truly powerful impact came from one single human raised eight hundred years ago near the Onon headwaters. And his impact is not measured on the parochial scale of his home turf, these mountains ahead, but on a scale that encompassed continents. For the boy Temujin was raised in this wild place, and he later came to be Genghis Khan, the supreme khan, khan of all the people living in felt tents.Through a sense of a divine mandate, sheer will, military f lair, and the exhibition of both extraordinary cruelty and, to some, extraordinary devotion, this ruler forged a people. And through a string of stunning conquests, Genghis Khan directed his armies to found a Mongol realm that stretched from China to the Euphrates, Korea to Eastern Europe, the Pacific to the Mediterranean: the biggest contiguous empire the world has known.I think no individual in the past millennium can have impacted the planet more than Genghis Khan, and only Jesus and Muhammad before him. If that seems fanciful, consider a study carried out by a group of geneticists a few years ago into Asian variations in the patterns of DNA. They sampled two thousand men from sixteen Asian population groups stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific. To the geneticists intense surprise, they discovered that 8 percent of the men shared a common lineage of Y chromosomes (possessed by men but not women). They had, in other words, stumbled upon a shared ancestor of these men, a single individual apparently living in Mongolia one thousand years ago, give or take. Such a rapid spread of genes cannot have happened by chance. It points, rather, to an extreme form of social selection. Only a certain kind of man can possibly have scattered his seed so abundantly, a conqueror who has the pick of the breeding-age women, one who slaughters enemy warriors on a vast scale and carries away their widows and daughters: Genghis Khan. Extrapolating from the sample, 8 percent of males in populations from Uzbekistan to northeast China, or the core area of the Mongol empire at the time of Genghis Khans death, share the common lineage. Sixteen million males, one in two hundred of the worlds men, have Genghis Khan in their blood.In other ways it is not fanciful to imagine that Genghis Khan reverberates in the lands through which he and his successor khans passed, and in ways that shape them today. In Mongolia, this is not hard to miss. For seven decades of the twentieth century the country was the second ever Communist state, a satellite of the Soviet Union (whose embrace it preferred over Chinas). During that time, Mongolias Communist rulers suppressed all admiration for Genghis Khan, that feudal, imperialist bandit. They understood his potency. And, sure enough, since Communism fell in 1990 and Mongolia gained true independence, the young impoverished democracy has, with a vengeance, staked its claim to the great khan as the chief identifier for a land cut loose from the old certainties, squeezed between two giants, Russia and China, and now in thrall to a mining boom whose potential will either make a poor country extraordinarily prosperous, or tear it apart in an orgy of corruption and inequity.But the old reverberations, perhaps more dimly sensed, nevertheless seem to shape the impulses of another, still bigger country once under Mongol rule: Russia itself, with a very old Asian dimension. If the Mongols thirteenth-century destruction of European Russia had any lasting influence on the later Russian state, marking it out from the rest of Europe, it was perhaps one of two things. Either Oriental despotism had laid the foundations for czarist despotism, Soviet tyranny, and post-Soviet strongman rulescratch a Russian or you find a Tatar, Napoleon was supposed to have said. Or, more creatively, Russians had learned from the Mongols the imperative of political unity in ruling an expanse of land that soon stretched from the Baltic Sea to the PacificRussians, in other words, took up the Mongols task and completed it. Russians today dispute which view is the more correct, depending on outlook. Either way, I now wanted to explore how Russians had pushed so far east, thousands of miles from their European heartland.The impetus for my search came quite unexpectedly, during my winter under the white moon, on that first visit to Mongonmorit and its surroundings. With Gala, my friend, we called on the family of a herder, a pillar of the community on whose chest were pinned rows of Soviet-era medals. We exchanged snuff bottles and new-year greetings, and then we talked about mutual friends, and about the unusual cold that year, scything down the herds.After a while, the door of theger,the felt tent, sprang open, and a young man in Mongolian dress and leather riding boots like the rest stepped in and sat on the iron bed opposite usthe familys only bedbetween the herders two grandsons. He put an arm around each of them, as if the third brother. But there was a difference. The young man was fair and blue-eyed: wild blue eyes and tousled hair.He looked at me with feigned lack of surprise, as all Mongolians do when foreigners enter theger: in the countryside, hospitality is all, and interrogation an uncouth form of conversation. I

could hardly blurt out the questionsI wanted to ask of this young man, a country Mongolian in all his ways except his European face. A little later, he left as briskly as he had arrived, having uttered not a word, except in whispers to his brothers. The thump of hooves raced away soon after he had shut the door. Only later, sideways, did I ask about him, and then the old herder gave the details matter-of-factly: he was a Russian backwoodsman; he had appeared a few years before out of the forests to the north, gathering mushrooms and pine nuts; he had come to this family and he had never left; he herded with them in the summer, and gathered nuts in the winter; he was now a son, and nobody thought much of it.To me, that afternoons meeting seemed wildly implausible, challenging lazy assumptions about a clear line between West and East, Europeans and Asians, rich countries and poor. I wanted to understand better, and I knew then that I would see Mongonmorit again. It was the way to the Onon, which I felt held a clue to the earliest impulses that drew Russia eastward, taking a small nation out of its forest fastness far away in northwestern Europe until it grew, four hundredodd years ago, into a continental powerone which, unexpectedly, came up against a more sophisticated, a more established, in every way a more puissant empire: China itself. That meeting took place along the Amur River, of which the Onon is the source. I had to start at the beginning.