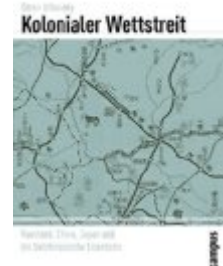


Sören Urbansky. *Kolonialer Wettstreit: Russland, China, Japan und die Ostchinesische Eisenbahn.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2008. 263 pp. ISBN 978-3-593-38771-0.



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Even without the proclamation of a “spacial turn,” the historical dimension of spaces and their transformation and revaluation on socially configured “mental maps” have become an important feature in historical studies.[1] Sören Urbansky sets out to test it in an environment which up to now has been characterized by quite a few blind spots. His German-language monograph *Colonial Competition: Russia, China, Japan and the Chinese Eastern Railway* deals with the unequal power triangle in Manchuria, China’s northeast, from the late nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century, and its aftermath. Japan and Russia were competing to gain ground in China, using the railway as a vehicle to serve their territorial aspirations. The approach belongs to the school started by historian Karl Schlögel, who wrote the 2003 monograph *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit* (In space we read the time) and who contributed the preface to Urbansky’s monograph. Urbansky is a PhD candidate at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder and a member of the Junior Research Group “Transgressing Spaces and Identi-

ties in Urban Arenas--The Case of Harbin” in the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows” at Heidelberg University.

First of all, this is not a history of Manchuria and does not pretend to be. It is the polyphonic and interdisciplinary narrative of the so-called Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), its planners, constructors, and administrators; its passengers, masters, admirers, and enemies; its stations and close surroundings; its cartography and mental maps. CER of course has nothing to do with east China proper. As the journalist and author Egon Erwin Kisch (1885–1948), an early passenger mentioned, the name refers to a rail route running from west to east via Chinese territory, straight to the Russian harbor of Vladivostok.[2] The journalist made the journey in March 1932, coming via Soviet Union and Chita to Manzhouli, and continuing on to Harbin, the T-shaped cross-section of the Chinese Eastern and the South Manchurian Railways. Shortly before (on March 9), the Japanese puppet regime of Manchukuo had been estab-

lished, a republic with the former Chinese emperor Pu Yi (1906–1967) as a formal head of state. He became its new emperor in 1934. The autobiography of Pu Yi and Kisch's reports are but two examples of primary-source accounts representing different eras, walks of life, literary, and documentary genres cited in this study.

The author himself made the trip several times during the last few years. His book is dedicated to "Victor Ignatiev and the other stowaways on the train." Consequently his "railway history" begins with a visit to the Harbin of today, the provincial capital of Heilongjiang, a modern Chinese metropolis, where traces of old Harbin, once a "melting pot" of Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Jewish, and Polish cultures, are on the verge of vanishing and giving way to urban reconstruction. The author has to start from there, as the central concern of his study is the railway's function as a "carrier of civilization" (*Kulturträger*), a means to simultaneously cultivate and colonize an area larger than Italy, France, and Great Britain combined (p. 14). Unlike other railway systems in China, the Chinese Eastern and the South Manchurian were the only railways that were purely colonial and not the result of financial concessions. According to Thomas Kampen, whose book is not cited, in 1896 the Chinese Eastern became the first (and at 1721 km the longest) Chinese railway to be financed by government bonds. [3] Previously, China had turned down foreign investment and cooperation offers. In 1897 the Chinese railway network was about 540 km, whereas in 1895 Japan for instance already had a network of 3,400 km. Vera Schmidt's 1976 book provides a detailed account of German railway concessions in the Shandong province, where the majority of Chinese migrants to the Northeast came from; her profound study could have been used here for different reasons as well.[4]

The monograph is divided into an introduction and four chronological chapters reflecting the railway's development: "Construction and De-

struction"; "Dream and Reality"; "New Masters, New Objectives"; and "Japan's Railway Imperialism." A short conclusion and a slightly longer epilogue follow. Each of the four chapters has five to seven subchapters and carries a programmatic title. The study is supplemented with endnotes, a bibliography (archive material, journals, printed sources, and secondary literature), several maps, photographs, tables, and a timeline.

The first chapter deals with the historical background and the founding of the CER as a direct outcome of the Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895), due to the continued Russian initiative. It was a fragile undertaking, always threatened with sabotage by the Chinese Boxer movement or corrupt and hostile elements on both sides. Chapter 2 covers the first two decades of the last century. Hopes and shattered dreams accompanied early passengers from the very beginning. Colonists to the Far East returned to their homelands as beggars. The accounts illustrate the newfound potential of the new "artery," whether as a convenient conduit for supplies from the Pacific to Russia during World War I, or, in the opposite direction, as an escape route for White Russians fleeing the Bolshevik revolution.. The latter could not anticipate the humanitarian catastrophes and displacement awaiting them in the Far East. Anarchy, violence, and epidemics caused thousands of deaths.

The third chapter looks at the "golden" twenties in Manchuria, a time of splendor and misery, of booming economy and prospering agriculture with the extensive cultivation of soybeans within and outside the "alienated stripe" along the CER. In 1924 the reorganized railway management under managing director Boris Ostroumov was handed over to the Soviets. Despite of a de facto "concubinage" of Russian and Chinese administrations, the overwhelming majority of the staff were Soviet citizens. During this time Harbin, with her newly built European architecture and trisected by the railway lines, became an "Eastern Paris" (one of many).

The last main chapter concentrates on the Japanese occupation through the end of World War II. In 1935 the Soviets had to sell the CER to Japan-dominated “Manchukuo.” The Soviets renewed their control over the railway immediately after the Japanese defeat. The official return of the CER, arranged in a deal between Mao and Stalin in 1950, did not occur until December 1952. The following years experienced an exodus of “white” citizens abroad. Finally, the conclusion briefly summarizes the history of the CER, which turns out to be inseparably intertwined with the history of the whole region, leading to the paradox that most of the time the intended railway functions did not converge with its real functions. The original (tsarist) vision of an “informal empire” collided with the successful expansion of an Asian competitor. Urbansky is not a full-time sinologist and his interests are more in eastern Europe than in China. Actually, we gain more insight into the Western than the Eastern aspects of the railway’s history. Despite this the author considers quite a few important Western and Chinese publications on the topic. The last sentence, however, even if intended ironically, conveys an unnecessary tone when trying to identify winners and losers of the process: “But the ‘white man’ is not the winner” (p. 183). The epilogue, which is longer than the conclusion, sounds less biased and smoothes the underlying fear of a “yellow peril.” It describes the modern Chinese transportation system of the last twenty years and the mutual benefit for the two countries against the background of China’s opening-up and economic reforms. And this despite the historical irony that the Chinese Eastern originally had been designed to benefit only the Western side.

This study envisages a “multidimensional” economic, political, and cultural approach in order to unfold the cultural history of the CER (p. 18). The approach is connected to the thesis, that the building of a new infrastructural system decisively contributed to a sustainable acceleration of economic growth and cultural diversification. Ur-

bansky’s highly complex approach perhaps tries to cover too many different topics at the same time, from colonial and settlement history, to the history of travel communication and its philosophical implications with regard to space and time, to the conveyance of the “Zeitgeist,” and the impact on the environment. All this is presented within a time frame spanning the nineteenth century until today. He uses written materials and other media (including, e.g., movies and songs) in at least five languages (English, French, German, Russian, and Chinese). Occasionally redundancies occur. An analytical summary of important findings at the end of each chapter could have contributed to a scientifically even more elaborated discussion. The dense description compensates for the few minor shortcomings. The book is written in a refreshing lively style often missing in publications of this kind and therefore it is also of interest to readers outside narrow academic circles. This again may stimulate a wider public interest in similar topics.

The history of the CER is an example of how railways (or other means of mass transport) induce deep and usually irreversible changes by connecting different spaces. These intercultural exchanges are never one-sided and ultimately are more complex than a specialized study can suggest. The domination of Chinese merchants in the Sino-Russian border region perhaps hints to a one-sided westward development, a manifestation of the “lingering Sinization” of Siberia. Simultaneously the air travel axis of Harbin–Hainan suggests the opposite. At the very southern periphery of China, the emergence of tourist strongholds, where the Russian language and Russians dominate the scene, indicate that equal and mutually friendly relations produce winners on both sides. To reach such a conclusion we have to broaden our perspective on China proper and conduct further research in Chinese sources and on other means of transportation. But this was not the subject of this generally useful book.

Notes

[1]. Edward E. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso 1989); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* [The transformation of the world: A history of the nineteenth century] (München: C. H. Beck, 2009), 129-180; and Jürgen Osterhammel, "Die Wiederkehr des Raumes. Geopolitik, Geohistorie und historische Geographie [The return of the space: Geopolitics, geohistory and historical geography]," *Neue Politische Literatur*, 43 (1998): 374-397.

[2]. Egon-Erwin Kisch, "Ein Schnellzug wittert Morgenluft [An express becomes hopeful]," in *Zaren, Popen, Bolschewiken. Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben* [Tsars, Orthodox priests, Bolsheviks: Collected works in separate editions], vol. 3, ed. Bodo Uhse and Gisela Koch (Berlin: Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1980), 407-422.

[3]. Thomas Kampen, *Revolutionäre Eisenbahnplanungen. Die Aufstände in der Provinz Sichuan und das Ende des chinesischen Kaiserreiches (1911)* [Revolutionary railways: Revolts in Sichuan Province and the end of the Chinese Empire (1911)] (Berlin: Wissenschaft und Technik Verlag, 2002), 26f.

[4]. Vera Schmidt, *Deutsche Eisenbahnpolitik in Shantung 1898-1949. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Imperialismus in China* [German railway policy in Shandong, 1898-1949: A contribution to the history of German imperialism in China] (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976), 240.

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