

# The “Borderlands Milieu” between Russia and Mongolia : A History of Settlement and Transnational Interactions

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## **The “Borderlands Milieu” between Russia and Mongolia: A History of Settlement and Transnational Interactions**

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### **1. Introduction**

Demarcating the border between Russia and Mongolia was initiated during the difficult political conditions characteristic of the seventeenth century.<sup>1)</sup> The Mongolian Empire had been fragmented, prior to falling under the control of the Manchu dynasty, and the Russian Empire was actively engaged in promoting colonial policies aimed at expanding its frontiers toward the east. The establishment of a formal border led to the lands of indigenous nomadic peoples—who had previously been part of the Mongol Empire—being merged into the Russian Empire. According to historical sources, the newly established border was porous for an extended period of time, and this situation became a matter of concern to the Russian Empire. Two political factors were responsible for this situation. The first was internecine warfare in what remained of the Mongol Empire, and the second was threat of imminent invasion by the Manchu Empire, which led to a situation in which the tribes, clans, and families of Buryats, Mongols, and Tungus preferred to become Russian subjects, since they thought doing so would guarantee them a secure life. Consequently, these nomadic peoples moved from the Mongolian side of the border to the Russian side. At the same time, Buryats and Mongols continued to cross the border from the Russian side, because within the Russian Empire they, as new subjects, came into conflict with local officials of the Russian regional government, who often violated the Tsar’s instructions “to act kindly towards new subjects” (Shastina 1958; Rumyantsev and Okun 1960).

The everyday lives of these tribes and clans were based on a nomadic economy and culture. However, border controls separated the Mongols and Buryats who subsequently developed in different ways. The nomadic culture of the tribes and clans on the Russian side of the border was initially affected by Russian imperial policy, and later, what remained of the nomadic lifestyle was dramatically transformed by the Soviet system.

Changes to the everyday lives and cultural practices of the Buryat were significant, while the lives of Mongols on the other side of the border still retained their nomadic basis. Thus, Soviet power could enjoy the fact that Russia had full control over the border regime, which was one of the major tasks needing to be accomplished at a time when the two empires had just met each other on their peripheries. The Soviet state

should also have been satisfied by the cultural differences between the people on either side of the border, people who had been closely tied several centuries before. The most visible manifestation of Soviet power on its periphery occurred after the border conflict between the USSR and China (1969), and during the period of Soviet-Mongolian economic cooperation (1970–1980), when Soviet state policy impressively demonstrated its perceptions of how the border regime functioned, and its conception of the borderland locals as the “agents” of state power.

This article considers how the subjects of one destroyed imperial society—who shared general cultural features—became the subjects of another “culturally alien” imperial power. After establishing a formal border between the two empires, a small group of Buryat clans and families were physically separated from culturally-related people on the other side of the border, and encountered a different cultural reality on their own side of the border, that is, the political and cultural frontiers of members of the same group diverged. However, centuries later, after the Buryats had experienced dramatic changes under Russia’s national policy, their cultural frontiers coincided with a formal state border. As a result, these people could perceive themselves as “alienated” parts of the Mongolian world, not only as a result of the controlled border between states, but as a result of the convex/visible cultural limits of their identity and sovereignty after crossing the border.

I concur with Donnan and Wilson (1994: 2), who argue that the processes taking place at nation-state borders involve people and institutions in extremely dynamic, dialectical relationships with the people and institutions of other ethnic groups and nations, both within and outside their states. These local border communities are not simply the passive beneficiaries or victims of world statecraft. They are often major agents of change in sociopolitical processes of significance to many people beyond their locality, and even beyond their state. In this paper, I will use the term “major agents” with reference to Buryat locals who lived in the Russian-Mongolian border zone,<sup>2)</sup> and who actively participated in Soviet-Mongolian relations. They fulfilled the role of major agents officially, and sometimes they participated in cross-border relations unofficially, to resolve practical questions, something the state’s institutions could not do. Even during unofficial exchanges with neighboring Mongols, the Buryats assumed the role of “major agents” of the Soviet state. While they continued to be practically helpful, they did not attempt to develop these personal relationships into cultural and ethnic dimensions, but remained culturally and ethnically “alienated,” despite their shared history and culture.

## **2. History of Settlement**

The Tunkinsky district is a part of the Baikal region, which was a place of nomadic settlement for Mongol, Soyot, Tungus, and Buryat clans, before the Sino-Chinese border was established in 1727. According to Galdanova (1992: 8), until the seventeenth century, the migration of nomadic populations through the Tunka Valley had usually occurred on a large scale—from Lake Baikal to Northern Mongolia. The time when this border population submitted to the Russian Cossacks was described by Podgorbunsky (1902:

32–33) as follows: “Buryats of Tunka and Tory and in general all Buryat generations in the middle and upper reaches of the River Irkut fell under Russian control later than all other generations, since they lived away from the waterway on which the Russians moved into Trans-Baikalia, and the latter did not touch them until the very end of the XVII century.”

Tunkinskaya Valley became part of the Russian Empire’s Siberian frontier in the seventeenth century, where two cultures with different politics and power structures met—Mongolia and Russia. One side of the frontier was ruled by Russian imperial policy, and Russian governors carried out orders on behalf of the Tsar, to tighten Russia’s domination over new Siberian lands, and to settle new people there. According to historical records, the Tsar’s policy toward the alien populations living along the boundaries was contradictory. On one hand, the Russian administration officials in the border region were instructed to lead the Buryat population to Russian citizenship, “not through cruelty, but kindness” (Shastina 1958). However, the peaceful tactics intended to increase the population in order to collect tribute payments and develop border areas were used selectively. The Siberian Department of the Russian Empire gave its servicemen broad powers for dealing with local populations on the Russian frontier. According to a decree by the Siberian Department, the Russian Cossacks had to act in a way appropriate to the situation: “Untaxed, the Buryat princes and their populations should be called up by kindness and friendliness under the sovereign high hand of Tsar. However, if the Buryat princes and their people will be strong and sovereign and disobedient to the Tsar and will not give taxes, then according to the sovereign decree of the Tsar and mandate of Governor Peter Petrovich Golovin it is ordered go to war against them in order to force them to obey and accept a sovereign high hand of the Tsar and become in direct bondage forever” (Rumyantsev and Okun 1960: 46).

In the process of implementing these decrees, the Russian governors in the region acted with extreme cruelty. As Siberian lands’ researcher K. Ritter (1894: 468) noted, the emergence of Russian Cossacks in the Tunkinskaya Valley had a colonial character. The Cossack invasion under the command of the ataman Pokhabov was particularly cruel. When they “marched toward Tunkinsky Region the nomads, hoping to get help from their great forefather Bukha Noyon (*Bukha Noyon* is the main deity of the local Buryat shaman cult.—Author), stubbornly resisted these conquerors, but, of course, their discordant crowds were unable to resist Russians. Pokhabov, in 1661–1663 drove out the nomads from the broad valley of the Irkut and built a small fort which grew during 120 years into a large village, which now bears the name Tunka.”

On the other side of the Tunkinsky frontier in the northern part of Mongolia, where the Buryat population usually fled to escape the cruelties of the Russian Cossacks, the political situation was unstable, due to deepening internecine wars between the Mongolian and Dzhungar khans. Historical sources indicate that the Buryat and Mongol nomads suffered during the period of war and anarchy in the Mongolian steppe, and were seeking a better future. For example, a report written by Russian servants reveals that the Russian Cossacks of Tunkinsky fort sent a petition to the Russian empire on behalf of the Buryats of the Khongodorsky clan—who had formerly paid taxes—concerning their

desire to again pay rent-in-kind to the Russian Tsar. These Buryats joined another fifty Mongolian families with their yurts and herds of horses and cattle. They also expressed a desire to take “eternal citizenship and pay tribute.” As the main reasons for their decision to resume their Russian citizenship, they pointed to internecine wars between Kalmyk and Mongol princes, and oppression they were experiencing on their side of the Mongolian territory (Rumyantsev and Okun 1960: 325; Aleksandrov 1969: 104–158). The small detachment of Cossacks that guarded Tunkinsky fort could not protect the local populations against constant attacks from neighboring Mongolian territories. In their reports, the Russian Cossacks wrote the following: “Taxpayers among the Buryat and Tungus people constantly complain to me that due to Mongolian and Soyot people life is impossible for them—the Buryat and Tungus peoples—because there is no possibility to hunt for preparing rent-in-kind, during hunting these Buryat and Tungus peoples were beaten and stripped of their horses.” Therefore, Buryats and Tungus expressed their wish to go war against the Mongols, and recover their stolen property (Rumyantsev and Okun 1960: 294).

According to historical documents, at that time, the border between Russia and Northern Mongolia remained unclear, and was a physically intangible zone for local people living along the boundary. These documents indicated that a military unit of Russian Cossacks guarded the Tunkinsky fort day and night. Russian Cossacks tried to control the border, and prohibited Mongolian people from moving without first providing official notification of the purpose of their visit. The Mongol princes also sought to reclaim their territory and their former taxpayers—the Buryats—using different methods: frequent raids on border communities and cattle-rustling or negotiating with the delegation to have the Buryat population returned to their control. With regard to the question of Mongolian territory, Russian Cossacks usually used a definition such as, “Mungalian people who live on the edge” (*Krainie mungal'skie lyudi*, where *mungal'skie* means “Mongolian” in the old Russian language.—Author) (Rumyantsev and Okun 1960: 305–306).

The 1727 Treaty of Kyakhta between the Qing and Russian Empires officially established the Russian-Chinese borders, but it did not stop the movement of Buryats and Mongols from the Baikal region through Tunkinsky fort to Northern Mongolia. Opening the Trans-Siberian Railway and increasing immigration from Central Russia finally limited the movement of Buryat and Tungus clans from Tunkinsky fort to the shores of Lake Baikal. Russian settlements along the railway forced the Buryat and Tungus families to move inland from the shores of Lake Baikal in the Tunkinsky Valley, and live closer to the Mongolian border.

Thus, the established Russian-Mongolian border considered on the basis of the Tunkinsky border zone was the result of political ambitions on one side, and anarchy on the other. The established formal border was not a natural border, and neither did it coincide with the boundaries of the cultural landscape.

### 3. Borderland Interactions in the 1970s

After more than two centuries, this part of the Russian-Mongolian border was under Soviet control. The Soviet-Chinese border conflict in 1969 led to active fortification of the Soviet-Mongolian and Mongolian-Chinese borders. During this time, the Soviet Union had initiated international economic cooperation along the border, which had become a meeting place for two kindred peoples—Mongols and Buryats—who were “rediscovering” each other by “reading” the cultures’ different symbols.

#### 3.1 Soviet Troops

Following the international conflict between the USSR and China (1969, the Damansky Island), the Soviet-Mongolian borders were tightly controlled and militarized by the Soviet army. Martinez (1994: 7) described this model of interaction as “alienation borderlands,” the main characteristic of which is a prevailing tension between two countries. The border is functionally closed, and cross-border interaction is totally or almost totally absent. In addition, the residents of each country interact as strangers. Following the border conflict with China, the Soviet Union paid a great deal of attention to guarding the borders in Mongolia, including the southern part of the Mongolian-Chinese border, and the northern part of the Russian-Mongolian border. The following narrative, provided by A. S. Tokurenov, a Buryat, who served as a soldier near the Mongolian-Chinese border in the years after the conflict between China and the Soviet Union, helps us imagine how intensive the border protection processes were:<sup>3)</sup>

In 1972, after six months of training in Chita-16 in chemical battalion, I got specialization as a chemical instructor of third class. Then we, soldiers/new recruits, were transported to the Mongolian People Republic, a city called Choibalsan. From there we joined the 51st separate engineering and sanitary battalion, which arrived in Mongolia from the Leningrad oblast. Our military base was located 60 km from the Chinese border and 10 km from the city of Choibalsan. At that time, we understood that Soviet troops were located along the southern borders of Mongolia, 60 to 100 km from the Chinese border. On the territory of our military base were only the barracks, a dining hall and the headquarters. On the base were located three battalions: battalion of motor vehicle (cars, trucks), battalion of repair (where machine repairs were carried out), and an engineering battalion with company of communication. An important objective of our part was the construction of pontoon bridges, which had a strategic importance in case of hostilities with China. Therefore, we had built two bridges on the river Yuroo near the northern part of the Soviet-Mongolian border and 60 km from the city of Darkhan.

This narrative shows how the state’s power and ideology manifested themselves in the borderland zones, when there was certain danger from an external war conflict. The USSR regime did not trust China after the war clash in 1969, and at the same time could use the territory of Soviet Mongolia as a huge frontier zone to protect its own sovereignty. The Soviet state’s main concern became securing borders by training



**Figure 1** Buryat soldiers on the heavily militarized Soviet-Mongolian and Mongolian-Chinese borders. 1972. Photocopy from A. S. Tokurenov's private album.

soldiers, the free movement of them and their equipment along Mongolia's external borders, building a variety of structures to enhance physical evidence of the borders, and encouraging people to see them as sources of aggression and instability (Figure 1).

From the next narrative it becomes obvious that the Soviets used the border regime between the Soviet state and Mongolia freely, to compensate for the long distances, and save time that was needed to build some fortifications in Mongolia. For example, delays due to unsuitable roads and undeveloped transportation systems on the Mongolian steppes could also be minimized by using the borders, and possibility exerting control over the border regime. My informant, A. S. Tokurenov, described his experiences as follows:

Since we could not cross quickly through the territory of Mongolia with all equipment and construction materials, because at that time in Mongolia railway networks were not developed, our battalion of soldiers was transported from the Mongolian side of the border of Choibalsan to the Soviet Union's side in Chita Oblast. All equipment was loaded on railway trains: big machinery, pontoon bridges, and two sawmills and construction materials. Having driven through the Ulan-Ude and through station Dzhida we reached the territory of Mongolia (Figure 2). There, all equipment and machinery and construction materials were unloaded. Then we continued the transportation on lorries towards the cities located near the Soviet-Mongolian borderline—Sukhbaatar and Darkhan. If we had to transport all cargo by lorries through the territory of Mongolia from one edge of the country to the other border line, it would be very long and far, because roads were of poor quality or absent.



**Figure 2** The border crossing during the construction of fortifications by Soviet troops in Mongolia from 1972 to 1973. Source: www. Google. Search. Map of Mongolia. The Russian abbreviation *C.A.* on the map stands for *Sovietskaya armiya* (Soviet army) and shows the locations of Soviet Army troops on Mongolian territory.

In 1970, some Soviet troop battalions located on the Chinese-Mongolian border had to return to the Trans-Baikal military unit near Chita for military training. The battalions crossed the border on different forms of transport such as railway trains or truck columns. Crossing the border was allowed in strictly designated areas in the woods or at the railway stations, where there was complete control over the boundary line. A. S. Tokurenov described his experiences when crossing the border as follows:

During my service in the Soviet battalion, which was located 60 km from the Mongolian-Chinese border, I crossed the Mongolian-Soviet border many times. First our battalion crossed the Soviet-Mongolian border in a village Solov'yovsk in the Chita Oblast. On another side of this border was the village of Bayan Tumen, which is situated near Choibalsan, which is near to the Mongolian-Chinese border. There, our task was to build fortifications for this borderline. Another time, our battalion was transported by train to Mongolia through the railway station at Naushki. When we were crossing the border all soldiers were brought out from the train and disembarked. The border guards with dogs cordoned off the train. Also servants in overalls checked all carriages inside and out for illegal trafficking of people and things. After finishing all the checking of border guards, soldiers were each listed by name and allowed to return to their seats in the carriages.

In May 1973, our battalion crossed the Soviet-Mongolian border again in order to make a quick transition from one part of Mongolia to another part through the territory of



Buryatia, to build bridges near another part of this borderline. Then, after finishing the construction of bridges, we went back to the Soviet Union for military training in the Trans-Baikal military unit. We crossed the border in the forest near the railway station at Naushki in a column of trucks. There was a special border pass for the Soviet troops marked by two watchtowers (about 20 meters in height) on both sides of the borders, a ploughed strip of land and barbed wire along the border. The control of this border was carried out from air by snipers in the two watchtowers and by helicopters. The border guards had a list of soldiers who were crossing the border. They didn't check our column of trucks, but we were under control from the air.

When personal contacts occurred between locals and soviet soldiers during the process of border militarization, they recognized each other as citizens of different states, who, as instruments of state power, had to fulfill state policy.

“When we were building the bridges Mongols occasionally approached and asked us: “You came here to fight with the Chinese?” Mongols were friendly to us, to Buryats” – As told to me by A. S. Tokurenov.

Thus, after the border conflict with China, in the early 1970s, cross-border interactions between the Soviet state and Mongolia increased in the context of militarization and guarding the border areas. During these cross-border activities, the Soviet state mainly transported military equipment and trained soldiers. The appearance of military equipment belonging to one state, on the territory of another state, was the result of these active maneuvers and flexible border operations. These manipulations of the border regime were aimed not only at investing great efforts and resources in constructing military fortifications along the border area with the neighboring state; they also became a manifestation of the Soviet state's military force and national power.

### **3.2 Experience of Soviet Economic Activities on the Border**

After strengthening the borders of both countries in the late 1970s, tensions between China and the USSR diminished. The Soviet Union and Mongolia began to develop active international cooperation in the context of a Soviet program called the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA; in Russian: *Sovet Ekonomicheskoi vzaimopomoshi-SEV*). The “alienated” borderland between these two countries was transformed into a “coexistent borderland.” In the context of this Soviet program for the development of “international production and economic organization and mutual economic activity” between neighboring countries, the Soviet-Mongolian border was “slightly open, allowing for the development of limited binational interaction” (Martinez 1994: 7).

In 1970, the Soviet organization “SkotoImport” (Import of livestock) purchased livestock, hides, and wool in Mongolia, for export to Soviet Bloc countries (Figure 3). In exchange, manufactured goods and fuel, as well as machinery and equipment, were exported from the Soviet Union to Mongolia. The Buryat branches of this agency were located in the Soviet-Mongolian border zone, in the districts of Tunkinsky and



**Figure 3** The route used to transport cattle from the Mongolian border to the Irkutsk meat factory by the SkotoImport Soviet agency. Source: www. Map of the World.ru

Kyakhtinsky. In the Tunkinsky border zone the agency purchased Mongolian cattle for export to the USSR. Cattle were kept at the border in special pens, where sanitary and veterinary assessments were conducted. The cattle were then loaded onto a special lorry, and transported to the nearest railway station, Kultuk. From there, they were transported by rail to a meat factory in Irkutsk. After slaughter, the butchered meat was exported to socialist countries, including Eastern Europe.<sup>4)</sup>

Earlier, in 1960, the cattle had usually been moved from Mongolia to the Irkutsk meat factory on foot, on the old unasphalted Tunkinsky Valley road. A Tunka Buryat named A. S. Tokurenov, who had also worked as a herdsman on the Lenin collective farm, described his memories of this practice as follows<sup>5)</sup>:

Our relative who worked at the meat factory in Irkutsk, Uncle Sergei, drove cattle from the border of Mongolia on foot. Our local Buryats (Tokurenov Volodya and Zandra) were also hired by the SkotoImport agency to drive cattle from the Mongolian border to the Kultuk railway station. They received a good wage from SkotoImport, and bought some goods in Mongolia, which were absent in our stores in Soviet times, such as box-calf boots, woven carpets, chintz, and silk. When cattle were driven from Mongolia, dust rose around old driveways and the locals immediately could understand that cattle were being driven to Irkutsk from the Mongolian border. On the way, overnight cattle were held in special pens that were built in remote areas in the forest (Khere-Gorkhon, Zun-Murino).

During the Soviet period, another organization called “The Soviet-Mongolian Trade”

(SMT-Sovetsko-Mongol'skaya trgovlya, later renamed "Avtovneshttrans") worked in the Tunkinsky borderlands. This organization exported industrial goods, food, and fuel to Mongolia. From Mongolia, the USSR imported meat, leather, and wool, and after crossing the border these goods were delivered to the city of Irkutsk. As told to me by A. S. Tokurenov, the informal movement (smuggling) of some spare parts for machinery, or needed commodities in short supply on the other side of the border, accompanied official exchanges of goods across the border. He also provided details regarding the informal, everyday practices at the border:<sup>6)</sup>

During the Soviet time in Tunkinsky district, some spare parts of motor vehicles and trucks were in short supply, but Buryats could find them in Mongolia. For example, spare parts for a lorry (model ZIL-130) were often brought from Mongolia to Tunka. This became possible unofficially through the Soviet-Mongolian Trade Agency. During its interactions with the Hovsgol district in Mongolia, spare parts were transported through the border for trucks of Buryats of the Tunkinsky district.

Thus, the people along the border fulfilled not only the role of the state's major agents, by participating actively in official economic border interactions, but in parallel with these cross-border relations, people unofficially managed to solve problems of their everyday lives, such as deficiencies of goods and spare parts. Locals had to fulfill state functions that were not directly implemented by state institutions, and they used these official border contacts to personal advantage. Remoteness from the center and bad roads made health care inaccessible for Mongols living in the border villages of the Hovsgol area, where distances to hospitals exceeded 100 km. In addition to the difficulties involved in obtaining essential services, border villages in Mongolia also experienced technical difficulties when performing other types of work. Through mutual cooperation on the Soviet-Mongolian borderlands, many of the problems encountered by the Mongolian population in the border zone were resolved by taking advantage of the presence of their neighbors on the other side of the border. This case was also imprinted into the Tunka Buryats' memory. A. S. Tokurenov recalled the following details:<sup>7)</sup>

In the Soviet time of cooperation in 1970, the organization of agricultural machinery (Sel'khoz tehnika) located in the administrative center of Tunkinsky district, Kiren (about 250 km from the Mongolian border) repaired the trucks for Mongols of the Hovsgol district many times. Also, in case of an emergency in the Mongolian border village Turta, it was possible to bring an ambulance with patients to the central hospital of the Tunkinsky district. The distance from Turta to Muren—the center of Hovsgol aimag—is 240 km, and bad road conditions didn't allow Mongols from the border zone to visit their central hospital located so far away.

Within the framework of international cooperation between the USSR and Mongolia in the sphere of production and economic activities, the Buryats of the Tunkinsky district fulfilled the role of agents for Soviet policy. The state structures for transborder

cooperation created a wide range of jobs for border area residents, at different stages of implementing the state’s plan.

During the period of formal cooperation between the two states, the border communities on both sides of this border also conducted informal practices that were used to fill gaps that had not been addressed by the state institutions of either country. It was especially visible in the most sensitive aspects of everyday life, such as medical care, or the seasonal repair of technical equipment. These cross-border relations exemplify not only the significant national progress and achievements of the two countries, but also reveal specifics of how the state institutions functioned along their peripheries, where their weaknesses became apparent in the everyday lives of the locals on both sides of the border. However, even in their unofficial contacts, the locals did not exceed their roles as “major agents” of the Soviet state, and when they acted as Soviet citizens in the cross-border contacts, they were excluded from the opportunity of developing close personal relations.

### **3.3 Economic Activities of the Lenin Collective Farm of the Tory Village of Tunka on the Borderlands**

In the late 1970s, the Tunkinsky district began to cooperate actively in the borderland area of the Hovsgol aimag (district) in Mongolia. According to Soviet propaganda at the time, the Soviet system of cooperation between the CMEA countries reached “a certain level of maturity” between Mongolia and the USSR, that made a transition possible from Soviet-planned joint activities, to forecasting economic development, the formation of international production and economic organizations, and the unification of economic activities (Gafurov and Shirendib 1981: 229). In this context, the Mongols and Buryats organized friendly exchange delegations in the borderland (Figures 4 and 5).

Usually the Mongols and Buryat delegations visited each other on official national holidays. During these visits, Buryats noticed the preservation of Mongolian traditional lifestyles, as I was told during an interview with A. S. Tokurenov:<sup>8)</sup>

We were invited in Rinchen Sumbe during the Mongolian holiday Sagaalga (Mongolian New Year—Author). They celebrated this day in a traditional way with gifts and wishes. In that Soviet time for Mongols it was natural to keep the traditional holidays, and they wore traditional dresses in everyday life. We, Buryats, celebrated our Sagaalga in a less traditional or short way because officially this Buryat holiday did not exist in the Soviet Union. So, we had to combine its celebration with the usual duties of a working day. Our Mongolian friends visited us on November 7 and on the summer holiday of Surkharban (A Mongolian and Buryat traditional summer holiday—Author) Also during the visit we noticed that Mongols mainly maintained their traditional culture in everyday life activities: they were wearing the national clothes. The Mongolian collective farm was engaged in reindeer breeding, and had herds of yaks and sheep, which were the traditional livestock.

However, in spite of the development of official friendly relations in the two countries’ borderland zones, based on the Soviet cooperation agreement, personal contacts



**Figure 4** The Buryat delegation from the collective farm called 'Lenin' (dressed in western style clothing) in Hovsgol aimag of Mongolia. The members of the Mongolian collective farm "Altan Tala" in traditional Mongolian dress. 1979. Source: photocopy from A. S. Tokurenov's private album.



**Figure 5** The Buryat delegation from the "Lenin" collective farm in Hovsgol aimag of Mongolia in 1979, during their visit to the collective farm "AltanTala." Source: photocopy from A. S. Tokurenov's private album.

remained difficult at the time. With the exception of the official visits of delegations, the local border communities on both sides had not become close—there were no intermarriages, and no attempts to cross the Mongolian or the Buryat border zones to join their relatives. Buryats on the Russian side of the borderland tended to limit their personal interactions with people on another side of the border for two reasons. The first reason was the fear that developing personal contacts would come to the attention of the KGB authorities, who did not allow anybody to develop personal contacts. A. S. Tokurenov’s memories convey the atmosphere prevalent at that time:

Close personal relations with Mongols and even with Buryats living in Mongolia were fraught with suspicions arising from the KGB. For example, we knew that some of the Buryat families in the Mondy village of the Tunkinsky district had relatives, who moved to the Mongolian side of the border after the Russian Revolution. These families could not visit each other on personal visits, they were afraid that they would be checked by the KGB.

Another reason they did not interact was due to difficulties the Buryats and Mongols had understanding each other, as a result of linguistic and cultural differences. One of the interviewees, N. A. Argoeva, who had had several contacts with Mongolian visitors at the time of Soviet-Mongolian cooperation, pointed out that “we couldn’t understand the Mongolian language, and even if in the Buryat language there are some similar words it was difficult to clearly understand each other. Also our norms of behavior and thinking were different, because the lifestyles were totally different.”<sup>99</sup>

It is noteworthy that it is quite difficult to clearly determine the main reasons limiting the development of personal contacts. In the late 1970s, one of the main trends of cooperation between Mongols and Buryats along the border was “friendly economic and productive activities.” The Tunkinsky district had an agreement with the Rinchen Sumbe collective farm of the Hovsgol district. This agreement at the local district level of both sides of the Soviet-Mongolian border was based on mutual beneficial economic interactions. So, the Mongolian group allowed the Buryat collective farmers in the Tunkinsky district to graze their cattle on pastures in the Hovsgol district, in exchange for a fixed payment per head of cattle. In addition to this condition, the collective farms of the Tunkinsky district provided spare parts for Mongolian trucks. Before crossing the border into Mongolia, the personal documents of herdsmen were usually sent to Ulan-Ude, “for checking on moral fitness” by the KGB. Following this assessment, the heads of the collective farms prepared a supplementary sheet with photographs of the herdsmen who had been allowed to cross the border. However, this procedure was conducted far from an official Soviet-Mongolian border checkpoint in Mondy village. It was organized on an old path in the mountain of East Sayany (Figure 6). My informant, A. S. Tokurenov, described his experiences crossing the border at another place:

We drove our herds from Tory village to the Mongolian side through Kharbyati village on the old road in the mountains. When we had reached a specified location on the border,

we kept our herds in pens, and we stayed in the summer house. In a fixed time border guards came to our place to check our passports and supplementary sheets with our photos, while customs officials checked our things. Our border crossings were possible in a specific period of time, and with a certain number of livestock and herders.

Obviously, a frontier crossing over an old path was not controlled in the same way it would be controlled at an official border checkpoint. In the mountains, travellers were usually checked before and after crossing. These conditions offered possibilities for smuggling and other abuses of the law. A. S. Tokurenov, who was one of the herdsmen, confessed that this had indeed occurred:

In spite of prohibition, we always took our guns and knives across the border for hunting on the Mongolian steppe. Before the border guards and customs' staff came we hid all guns and knives in the forest or in the rocks around the borderline. Then, after the border guards left, we crossed the border with guns and knives. Also, we continued to hide all guns during our stay on the Mongolian steppe, because the Hovsgol district was a National park, where hunting was prohibited by law. But we had to have guns, just in case, for the protection of our cattle from wild animals.

Herdsmen felt less emotional about crossing the border over an uncontrolled old path, than crossing the border through official checkpoints. The less formal boundary crossing, and the possibility of smuggling, weakened the sense that they were crossing an



**Figure 6** The frontier crossing on an old road in the mountains, on the Mongolian side of the border. The weather was unpredictable, even with snow during the summer. 1985. Source: photocopy from A. S. Tokurenov's private album.

international border. My informant, A. S. Tokurenov, who had crossed that border several times during the period of Soviet-Mongolian economic cooperation, relayed the following memories:

Along the border opposite each other were installed two poles. On each of them were nailed carved metal emblems of the two countries—Mongolian People’s Republic and the USSR. Some Buryats remember tearing off these metal emblems. It is likely that these poles were delivered to the mountains by helicopter and fixed by cement into the rocks, because digging the land there must be difficult. If there had not been these pillars it would be difficult to understand for us where is the border and on whose side are we at the moment? Especially in the mountains and in fog it is easy to lose a landmark. These pillars gave us an understanding that we had crossed the border. An official border crossing is located in Mondy village and it is very far from the old path that we crossed. We always crossed the border on the old path. Buryats of the Tunka Valley travelled this old way when moving to summer pastures towards Mongolia before the revolution and establishment of a formal borderline. Buryats living in the borderland villages had their old paths in order to go to Mongolia, and, for example, Buryats from Turan village used them sometimes.

The living conditions of the Buryat herdsmen and the atmosphere they encountered during their stay on the Mongolian steppe combined both features of the Soviet era, and preserved traditional perceptions, actualized on the other side of the border. Acting in accordance with their own ideas about the laws of life, the Buryats highlighted their similarities and differences in relation to the habits of the Mongols.

A. S. Tokurenov told me of his personal experiences:

We lived near the river Hugshen Uur, but for washing clothes we used washing bowls, because, according to Buryat and Mongolian customs, it is prohibited to wash any dirty thing in the river. During leisure time we listened to the Soviet radio, prepared firewood, engaged in fishing and hunting. Sometimes we met our acquaintances from other Buryat collective farms. The Mongols didn’t come to us, but very rarely it could happen. The border guards visited us to check our documents. We had to bring food from Tunka district, since on the Mongolian steppe there was not a store around and we did not make contact with Mongols. Hunting was prohibited, but we hunted unofficially, because we knew that Mongols hunted unofficially too. Also we spent time fishing. The rivers there abounded with fish because Mongols do not eat fish.

During their stay on the Mongolian steppes, Buryat herders observed Mongolian breeds of cattle and varieties of livestock species. They pointed to the highly adaptive capabilities of Mongolian cattle in the natural environment, a characteristic that had been lost in features of Buryat livestock during the process of Soviet industrialization. A. S. Tokurenov pointed out the following details:



The breed of our cattle was mainly Simmental, because it was considered by our soviet collective farm that this breed give more meat and milk than the cattle of traditional Buryat breed. Mongols keep their traditional breed of cattle, which were more hardy in the native environment than our cattle of Simmental breeds. Also, the Mongolian breed of sheep is more hardy than the modern breed of Buryat sheep. Because in the Soviet time the Buryat traditional breed of sheep was replaced by another breed with supposedly fine wool. They said that this breed of sheep would be used for the industrial production of wool in Buryatia. Also, Mongols kept their traditional species of domestic animals such as cows, yaks, sheep, and sarliks.

In the late 1970s, the development of friendship and business relationships in the border areas had opened up the possibility for Buryats and Mongols to observe many aspects of each other's lives. Buryats mostly paid attention to aspects of traditional culture (national dress, national holidays, national livestock species and breeds) that had been preserved in the daily lives of the Mongols. The contrast with Mongolian nomadic culture in the Buryat lifestyle served as evidence that, despite their common history and culture, they were currently divided not only by the border, but also by certain cultural distinctions, which became noticeable after crossing the border. Opening the border between Mongolia and Buryatia in the Soviet period was not perceived by residents of border communities as an opportunity to cross freely, and restore contact with relatives on the other side. The border was a tool of the state, and Soviet authorities tightly controlled possibilities the population might use to establish personal contacts.

However, according to the above narrative, despite the state laws and border controls, the border guard authority allowed the Buryats of Tunkinsky district to use "their" traditional path to cross the border, instead of the official international border crossing checkpoints. These conditions allowed the Buryat herdsmen to bypass some formal legal requirements, and to smuggle prohibited goods and equipment. We can consider such acts as a manifestation of their local power over the old path, which supports Wilson's (1994: 108) argument that "the roads do not belong solely to the state." In addition, the physical absence of expressive symbols of power when crossing the border in an unofficial place allowed the Buryat herdsmen to perceive this process as overcoming a certain distance, not related to the crossing of an international border. However, after meeting the locals and discovering the symbols of culture (such as the types of livestock) and everyday practices that did not coincide with their own culture, the Buryat recognized that they were inside another cultural context, and that they really had crossed the border. Thus, the most effective method for alienating one community from a related majority could be achieved through cultural divergence. This sense of cultural divergence, which involves observing the symbols and practices of everyday life, can more powerfully indicate the limits of identity. That is why, without crossing an official border checkpoint, one group of people can recognize their own identity limits on the other side of the border.

#### 4. Conclusion

The people who were divided by the border created during the difficult political conditions of the seventeenth century differed little in their economic and cultural ways of life. The relations of the Buryat families with Mongolian institutions and the Russian Empire were contradictory and different in terms of their history and culture. However, after becoming part of the Russian Empire, Buryats step by step began performing the role of state “agents,” and by the time of the Soviet era, they had become “major agents” of the borderland area, and actively participated in social and political processes that influenced the economic and political interests of other countries and peoples.

Cross-border interactions during the Soviet period reflected the changes taking place in two borderland societies. The transformations of culture on one side of the border were more convex/visible than on the other side. When Buryats crossed the border, they recognized that their ethnic identity had reached its limits, and they were prepared to encounter the “Other” identity and culture. This was not only because they had crossed the border between two countries, and customs’ inspections instilled in them a sense that they were leaving their state’s sovereignty and moving toward another state. When crossing the border, they encountered symbols of a culture that did not coincide with their ethnic culture, but which reminded them of their past. However, even with this echo from the past, Buryats could not recognize the continuation of their current culture and identity, as would have been possible at the time of joining Russia in the eighteenth century, when a newly established border had not yet created any sense of cultural differences. Kavanagh (1994: 76) clarified this notion of identity by saying that “All identities are constructed on a double sense—similarities and differences with respect to ‘Other.’ Yet, it is also just as true that a border may be marked where previously there had been no sense of an ‘Other.’ In this case, a borderline may not cause divergence (at least not when it is first demarcated, though it may very likely appear with time).”

Thus, during the time of war conflicts on the Mongolian steppes, the Russian Empire established a border in an area where the people did not have any sense of “otherness,” and did not have visible cultural differences in lifestyle. However, after centuries, a cultural divergence had appeared, and people on both sides of the border functioned as the “borderland milieu,” having different types of identities and cultures, feeling a sense of “alienation” toward each other. A politically-motivated border that divided Mongolian people with a shared culture, in time became a border of cultural identity and sovereignty.

#### Notes

- 1) According to historical sources (Rumyantsev and Okun 1960: 3–8), the Russian Empire had begun border demarcation on its Eastern frontier in the second half of seventeenth century, when the Mongol Empire was destroyed, and there was a threat of invasion from the Chinese, who were conquering the Mongolian territory. The official border treaty was signed in 1727 in Kyakhta, between the Russian and Qing Empires. The modern boundary was established on

December 29, 1911, when Mongolia gained independence from the Qing Empire. Currently, the length of the Mongolian-Russian border is 3,485 km. Mongolia neighbors four subjects of the Russian Federation: the Altai Republic, the Republic of Tuva, the Republic of Buryatia, and the Trans-Baikal region. This article is based on a case study of the border between the Tunkinsky district in the Republic of Buryatia of Russia, and the Hovsgol aimag in Mongolia.

- 2) This research was conducted in the Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia.
- 3) Andrey Synrapovich Tokurenov was the main informant for this research. He was born in 1953, and was involved in cross-border relations with Mongolia in a variety of roles during the Soviet period. In the 1970s, he was a soldier in the Soviet Army, and was sent to Mongolia as a border guard. After two years' of military service in the Soviet army, he returned to his home and worked as a driver for the head of a Soviet collective farm called "Lenin." At the time, he occasionally participated in official visits by Buryat delegations to the neighboring Hovsgol district in Mongolia. He then started to work as a herdsman on the collective farm, and drove cattle into Mongolia. Olga Shaglanova, fieldnotes, 2010, Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia
- 4) Olga Shaglanova, fieldnotes, 2010, Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia.
- 5) Olga Shaglanova, fieldnotes, 1999–2003, Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia.
- 6) Olga Shaglanova, fieldnotes, 2010, Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia.
- 7) Olga Shaglanova, fieldnotes, 2010, Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia.
- 8) Olga Shaglanova, fieldnotes, 1999–2003, Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia.
- 9) Olga Shaglanova, fieldnotes, 2010, Tory village, Tunkinsky district, Buryatia.

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