



Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River at the Borderlands of Empires

Dominic Ziegler

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Black Dragon River is a personal journey down one of Asia's great rivers that reveals the region's essential history and culture. The world's 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 past—and to show how this region holds a key to the complex and critical relationship between Russia and China today.

One of Asia's mightiest rivers, the Amur is also the most elusive. The terrain it crosses is legendarily difficult to traverse. Near the river's source, Ziegler travels on horseback from the Mongolian steppe into the taiga, and later he is forced by the river's 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 river's 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 Russia's 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 other—and toward the outside world. To understand Putin's imperial dreams, we must comprehend Russia's 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.

Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River at the Borderlands of Empires Details

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From Reader Review Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River at the Borderlands of Empires for online ebook

Larry says

A very interesting mash-up of history, sociology, landscape and environment, and travel memoir, in that order. While I would have strongly preferred the order to have been reversed, I learned a lot about this remote and under-reported region of the world, as well as a new understanding about the centuries-old--sometimes cordial, sometimes bloody--rivalry between China and Russia in this wild and remote region of both empires.

Chris says

3.5

Disclaimer: ARC via Netgalley.

One my favorite books when I was a child was Folktales of the Amur. It was one those children's books that could work as a coffee table book. Nicely illustrated and written. I loved that book. I still love that book. When I re-read it, it always holds its magic. Hence the reason why I read Black Dragon River by Dominic Ziegler.

The Amur is a river in the Russian east. It forms the boundary or border between Russian and China. It's linked with Siberia. It goes into Mongolia. The name Amur is linked with tigers and leopards. That tiger that Putin released last year, it swam across the Amur River into China, causing a bit of a diplomatic crisis.

Personally, I prefer the tale of Zolushka (Cinderella) who lost part of her tail due to frostbite.

Anyway. Tigers and Leopards. What's not to love? (Well, there that story in the brilliant, *The Tiger: A True Story of Vengeance and Survival* by John Valliant; an understandably angry tiger, but still scary)

Ziegler's book doesn't really focus on the wildlife, which was a little disappointing. It does, however, focus on the history and people of the Amur River area. This means you get to hang out with Genesis Khan, learn about Mongolian history and life, and a bit about the Decembrists.

Ziegler's use of history is important because even today one can see the influence of past events. The book isn't just a history; it is also part travelogue. The opening concerns Ziegler's travel to the river's starting point, which he also to undertake by horseback in Monongalia. He travels with game rangers and learns about poaching in the area. More importantly, he relates how life has changed and not changed for the tribesmen in the modern world.

And that's a primary theme of this book. In many ways, while the Amur river functioned as life giver and food provider, it also, as many rivers did, function as a highway that meant a end to a way of life as new groups move in. Ziegler details the Russian journeys down the Amur River, an event that is very similar to the travels down the Amazon and Nile, but an event that gets less press. He details the history of the Mongols, and why Russia in large measure was spared.

While I did know a little about the Russian Decembrists prior to reading this, Ziegler presents more information, connecting the Amur to the group in two ways. The first, and most interesting, in the story of two wives of the Decembrists who traveled to the far reaches of the river to join their husbands. The second is in how the prison, in part, fulfilled what the group wanted.

Perhaps the greatest flaw in this book is that it is more history than travelogue. While Ziegler paints a fascinating and active history, his painting of the present day isn't as descriptive. One knows the river's history more than one knows the river. (Compare this to Turn Right at Machu Picu, where there are both types of description). What does come across extremely well is Ziegler's love for it. If you enjoyed A Voyage Long and Strange by Tony Horwitz, Ziegler's book is almost a Russian version - just with less humor and more drink.

Jamie says

Only a small part of this book fits the description of a standard travel narrative: where the author went, what he saw, who he met. The majority is a history of the discovery and settlement of the Amur river and its surroundings. That's not a bad thing, though, since the travel part has memorable descriptions of people and places, and the history is interesting and informative, illuminating a part of the world that few people know anything about.

The larger geopolitical theme that runs through the modern history of the Amur River is the changing, often tense, occasionally hostile relations between Russia and China. The subtheme is one of conquest and plunder. As seems to happen everywhere when "civilization" encounters native people, it is a tale of subjugation, destruction, and murder. After that came the Civil War, which brought its own horrific depredations, and then the Communists arrived, destroying histories, cultures, and peoples in the name of creating Soviet Man. Today the towns on the Russian side of the river are decrepit and dying, and what activity remains is mostly illegal logging and other resource exploitation for the benefit of Putin's kleptocracy, while the Chinese side bustles with the energy of their expanding economy and influence.

The book is never dull, and some of the scenery is breathtaking. Overall, it wasn't the book I was expecting, but I am glad I had a chance to read it.

Jrobertus says

Ziegler is the Asia correspondent for the Economist and a very knowledgeable chap. He is interested in the Russian expansion into the far East, in particular into the Amur River area and down to Vladivostok. He recounts the history of the region, beginning with the Mongols; Genghis Khan's birthplace is near the headwaters of a major Amur tributary. He goes on to describe the efforts of 17th century Cossacks who tamed the Wild East. This movement got a big boost after the Decembrist Revolt in 1820-ish Russia when the Czar packed off many disgraced nobles to Siberia. A big question Ziegler addresses is why the Chinese but the Russians so much slack? They are always irate about British and other Western colonizations and "unfair" treaties but they let the Russians walk off with a HUGE piece of real estate that arguably used to be theirs (although the locals, like Mongols and Manchus may have been conquerors so who's who is debatable). IN any

case I liked his descriptions of this harsh land and fading people as well as the history. As China gets stronger, and Chinese filter into the area by diffusion, it will be interesting to see what happens between these two powerful nations

Sportyrod says

History-packed travelogue of a journey down the Amur River region.

The writing is around 90% history between the borderlands and 10% about the travel in the present.

I was impressed with how comprehensive the historical accounts were, particularly the tensions between nations and their race for expansion/retention.

Going by the synopsis, I was expecting there to be more time spent on/at/near the actual river. Unfortunately almost the entire river forming the boundary between Russia and China was off limits so the next best thing was to visit the nearest towns and explore their history.

The present-time interaction with the locals was quite minimal. Russia's history is quite red and there is a mention that Russians have a lot to forget so this could be the reason many locals were not open in discussing national issues with a foreign journalist.

Some travel writers spend a lot of the time writing about their own experience, such as loneliness on the journey or various hardships encountered however in this book the author chose to give himself an almost 'third person's' account of the journey by focussing on others or objects he viewed at museums.

I would recommend this to history-buffs and anyone interested in learning about places that are off the beaten track.

Annie says

Between Russia, China, and Mongolia, there is a 4,000 mile long river that marks a contested boundary. In telling the history of the Amur River, Dominic Ziegler also relates the history of this part of the Russian Far East. *Black Dragon River* (the book is the river's Chinese name) also serves as a travelogue. Ziegler began at the source of the river, the Onon River in Mongolia, and followed the river's course down to where it meets the Sea of Okhotsk, in Nikolaevsk. The chapters in the book are named for towns and cities along the river's course, which Ziegler uses as jumping off points to talk about Russian subjugation of the indigenous peoples, Chinese dynastic changes, and the numerous conflicts between the Russian and Chinese empires...

Read the rest of my review at A Bookish Type. I received a free copy of this ebook from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Patricia says

It wasn't until I was ticking off all the Goodreads 'shelves' that I realised how many of my sweet spots this

book hit (travel, North Asia, exploration, steppe and northern Chinese history ++). If I hadn't had to spend hours searching online for maps and going through atlases of the locations Ziegler describes as there are none in the paperback version, and if an editor had eliminated some the annoying repeated information (yes, now we know that the Sandwich islands are known as 'Hawaii'), it would have been a 5.

This is a remarkable book--I spent half of it anxious that the author would get out of some of the meetings he had with some of the most unsavoury characters ever described in a travelogue, but on the other hand, that's how he also met some of the most interesting people, as well. I travelled some of the same terrain Ziegler did in 1983, when I travelled on the Trans-Siberian Express from Oslo to Beijing, but back then the landscape was covered with rows of tightly-planted trees that lined the rail lines, many of the train's windows were painted black, and stops were true 'whistle stops' that gave one just enough time to jump off, buy a few loaves of bread, bottles of beer and apples for those days when the dining car ran out of food, and jump back on again before it took off (average time of stops: 3 minutes). How I envied Ziegler being able to walk from one destination to the next, or hitch a ride, or travel by river boat, local trains and four-wheel drives.

I'm left now with a long list of follow-up reading. I want to know more about those stone Chinese turtles that once held steles covered in Chinese text and what they said, about Laufer's findings, about dragon petroglyphs, and the Nanai, who live in the Amur Basin. I want to check that it was Russian tinkering that changed the Chinese dynasty names from Liao to Khitan, Jin to Jurchen (whose descendants are the Nanai), Yuan to Mongol, and Qing to Manchu, as a way of asserting that the Chinese really didn't have any history in the region (or in Ziegler's words, "that until the nineteenth century no Chinese had ever stepped into the Russian Far East")--a patent untruth.

A very impressive text that combines personal insights with historical and geographical facts and puts Ziegler alongside that relatively small handful of erudite and outstanding author-historian-adventurers. Owen Lattimore is the name that comes first to mind. If you know that name, you're ripe for *Black Dragon Driver*.

Patty says

Travel nonfiction about the Amur River, which – to be completely honest – I had never heard of before this book. Apparently it is the ninth longest river in the world (well, depending on how you measure it), starts in a mountain range in Mongolia, forms the border between Russia and China, and finally flows into the Pacific. It's also known as the Heilongjiang, which translates directly into "Black Dragon River" – thus the title. Ziegler is the type of travel writer that I prefer: very little memoir-like accounts of his personal experiences or background, and lots and lots of interesting research on the area, in his case mostly history with a bit on the environment (descriptions of local plants and animals, accounts of the destruction wrought by humans, you get the jist).

Much like my experience of the river itself, I knew practically nothing about the history Ziegler covers. He starts with Genghis Khan, who was (probably) born in the same mountain range as the Amur, and that wasn't too new. But then Ziegler goes on to cover the Russian exploration and colonization of Siberia in the 1600s, primarily for the fur trade, led by the Cossacks; the movement of Tibetan-derived Buddhism into the local people; the recapture of the Amur by the Qing Dynasty, leading to the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the first major treaty between China and a European power; the Decembrist revolution and their exile; the reconquering of the Amur by Russia as China was being carved up by various imperialist powers in the 1800s; and the 1969 battle over Damasky Island, as Russia and China vied for control of a small island in the river and the rest of the world freaked out about two nuclear powers fighting. A lot of this history was depressing, involving the

usual sort of torture, murder of unarmed innocents, rape, and more that you can always expect from stories of colonization and war. But the history of the Russian Far East was a topic that I had absolutely no awareness of previously, and so I found it fascinating. I can't comment on Ziegler's accuracy or political slant since, again: new to me. I have to leave that to better-informed reviews, though I can say it all seemed well-researched and reasonable.

The book was a bit slow at the beginning, but once I was engaged, I plowed through the rest of it quite quickly. It was very readable, with unobtrusive prose. It's an unusual topic, at least in English, but I'm glad that I know slightly more about it now.

I read this as an ARC via NetGalley.

Hadrian says

Mixture of travel story and historical narrative along the Amur River - one of the world's longest rivers and one that is most obscure to American or Western European audiences.

The river flows from Mongolia to along the Chinese-Russian border for almost 3,000 miles. The historical narrative begins with Genghis Khan, then to the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, signed between emissaries of Peter the Great and the Qing emperor Kangxi, and then the periods of open land grabs and uneasy tension over the next three centuries. Caught between them are the nomadic peoples - Yakuts, Buryats, Ulchi, Solon, Daurian, Dzhungars, and so on.

Ziegler's travels do not always take him to where places have familiar names - chapter sections are labelled with geographic coordinates. The people he finds - mostly Russians and Mongols - are a mixed lot - descendants of missionaries, prisoners, traders, a few Cossacks and babushkas. Some worry about the Chinese to their south, others tend to the vast and forbidding wilderness.

There is only one map and no other pictures, but Ziegler makes up for this with superb landscape descriptions. Here is the Gobi desert, for example: "gnarled and pockmarked with rifts and rocky excrescences, a checkerboard of mineral tones, verdigris and dull purple, salt lakes and cloud shadows."

A story of an arduous journey - both of the author, and the band of historical personages behind him.

Manray9 says

Dominic Ziegler's *Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River Between Russia and China* is uneven. It contains intriguing chapters on his travels down the Amur River from its source in Mongolia to its outlet on the Gulf of Tartary, but these glimpses are interspersed with superficial history lessons on the Russian presence in eastern Siberia. Another shortcoming is the single ridiculously-inadequate small scale map of the region. As a travel book it succeeds. As history it's lacking. I'll give it a weak Three Stars.

Tuck says

Very nice book about the history and geography of amur river region, and the history of east of Russia, the world of mongol(ia too), the north of china, the homelands of lots of indian tribes. Lots of history, but mostly Russian and ussr. This is a history book first and foremost, not travel book, though it is that too, but not travel writing like tayler's super cool (err, frigid) book *River of No Reprieve: Descending Siberia's Waterway of Exile, Death, and Destiny* and not a history like, but still very similar to this rr history *To the Edge of the World: The Story of the Trans-Siberian Express, the World's Greatest Railroad* and this new novel pairs really well with ziegler's history of ussr east *The Big Green Tent*

But enough of what it is, and is not...here is short excerpt as example of writer's style and tone, he is near Blagoveshchensk and speaking how history and now. page 272-273

"A century ago, Chinese works outnumbered Chinese farmers. It is the same today. It used to stick in the craw of Russian imperialists that their newly seized Far Eastern lands depended upon Chinese and to a lesser extent Korean labor to secure and develop them. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese contract workers were brought in to mine, fish, and log. In the Far East the Chinese built the railways, the roads, the military garrisons. They made bricks and lime, and they cut stone. They laid out city streets and threw up municipal buildings. They brewed beer, canned salmon, and stuffed sausages. Chinese workers were well organized and able to put up with hardship. Only for the relatively careful work of plastering, joinery, and oven building were Russians preferred over Chinese in the Russian Far East.

Today, Chinese contract workers are in demand again in gold mines and in the lumberyards stripping out the taiga: no days off, ascetic living conditions, and bound, as a century ago, to a headman with opportunities for exploitation. Some things have changed. There are no massacres of Chinese. Not any longer, is there the frequent mimicking of scragging of Chinese in the street that caused one sardonic editorialist a century ago to say that "beating the manza [the pejorative term for a Chinese] has become a custom with us. Only the lazy don't indulge in it." Still, the interactions with Chinese are kept to a minimum in the Russian Far East and rarely are they friendly. In the face of Russian nationalism, the Chinese workers lie low. To Russian paranoia, invisibility remains proof of dastardliness."

there is one nice map, no pictures whatsoever, super annotated suggested reading, bibliography, and index.

Paul says

The Black Dragon River has a long history, reaching as far back as Genghis Khan and the Mongolian empire around 1000 years ago. This was the beginning of its tumultuous history of conflict and war that has lasted pretty much until the present day. Also called the Amur, it is a river that I had never heard of until I picked this book up. Turns out it is the world's ninth longest and forms part of the border between Russia and China and has been a focal point for each country's expansion plans over the years. It has seen more than its fair share of death and destruction from both sides

Ziegler begins his journey along the river as Khan would have done, on a horse, from the Mongolian steppe into the taiga to what is thought to be the source of the river. His journey along the river is not always easy so he is forced to take the Trans-Siberian Railway through a valley of water meadows. He does return to the river and the people and places along it, but it almost seems to be an aside. I was hoping this was going to be a fascinating travel book about a relatively unknown part of the world, but sadly there was much more history than travel, and this is a place that has had a lot of brutal events happen. Not bad, but not great.

Jessica Painter says

Probably 3.5 Stars, and I feel it would've been 4 if I had only had a map handy the whole time I was listening to it. Fascinating history, not so fascinating travelogue. If you listen to it like I did, make sure you don't have any distractions. While it was great for hearing how things were pronounced, the story gets a bit verbose and I easily got lost in many sentences with the background noise of kids.

Dennis says

Oh, my! I'd love to read a more even-handed treatment of the same journey. What puzzles me too is how on Earth he conducted his multiple in-depth interviews, recording innermost outpourings of the Russians from all walks of life, while not speaking the language? Make no mistake - only a handful of people he talked to commanded some degree of fluency. His profile at The Economist says he speaks English, French and German. No Russian or Chinese whatsoever.

The way he treated the material makes it a valuable anti-Russian propaganda piece. All is filth, greed, hate, decrepitude, drunkenness, etc. Vast majority of warm and compassionate words are addressed to the wildlife of the area and somewhat grudgingly to China, when compared to Russia.

Don't take me wrong, I'm not an apologetic of Russian chauvinism or Putin, but this work could be vividly contrasted with another book I'm reading at the moment, the one that covers another much maligned Russian misdeed - 'Afghan' by Sir Roderic Braithwaite. He deals with a far more controversial topic, yet manages to produce an unbiased narrative, finding bad and good in actions of all sides, even tangentially involved in the conflict. Not that he forcefully balances good with evils, but he tries to be objective: he calls sadists sadists, but he never slaps labels and cliches left and right. Being able not to ride through on a high moral horse is apparently a talent not everyone's born with.

I gave it 3 stars mostly for driving attention to this God forsaken region. It's a unique and beautiful area, rich in wildlife and cultures.

Philipp says

"Black Dragon River" tells the history of Mongolia, Russia and China, using travels from the source of the Amur river to where it flows into the Pacific Ocean. While the idea for the book could make for a great read, the execution left something to be desired.

For me the problem had to do with the sort of history that was covered. I was expecting fairly detailed historical analysis of what happened in the places where Mr Ziegler traveled. However, parts of the chapters dealing with Mongolia deal with the expansion of the Mongolian empire to the borders of Europe. While this is certainly an interesting story, I do not see how it fits into a book about traveling along the Amur river. Instead, I would have preferred a discussion of more recent history that stays firmly within the region.

Another problem for me was the heavy focus on Russia. Again, there are many interesting stories that can be

told about Russian history, especially in relation to the Amur. However at many times I felt that this came at the expense of Chinese history. This came as a surprise to me, since the author was the Asia correspondent for The Economist, rather than the Russia correspondent. In particular I felt that Chinese-Russian relations in the 19th, 20th and early 21st century should have received more attention, given that both countries were briefly involved in a military clash over some island in the Amur river. These relations are also of greater relevance in recent years, given Russia's current isolation from the West and its deal to expand its sales of hydrocarbons to China. There are some references to the economic developments that have taken place, in particular on the Chinese side, but again more could and should have been said about those.

Despite the omissions, the book's part on the Russian Far East and how it was part of a "Pacific destiny" for Russia, similar to that of the US, was enlightening and I enjoyed it thoroughly. The book also succeeded in increasing my interest in the region, which I believe, is always a good sign.

Overall I enjoyed David Eimer's "The Emperor Far Away" a bit more. (While reading Black Dragon River I constantly felt that the book could have put in some photographs of the landscape, as on the book's cover. I thought that I remembered that the pictures in Mr. Eimer's book helped me enjoy it more. However, to my surprise, it turns out there weren't any photographs in Mr. Eimer's book either.)
