MANCHURIAN RAILWAYS and the OPENING OF CHINA
An International History

Edited by
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Preface

Stephen Kotkin

The Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), completed at the dawn of the twentieth century through what was then known as Manchuria, helped link the Far East and Central Europe. The CER did so as a strategic southerly shortcut for Russia’s Trans-Siberian Railroad, which was first opened around the same time across more than 6,000 miles. The 1,700-mile CER connected Chita, in Siberia, to Vladivostok, in the Russian Far East, via Harbin, in Chinese territory. This was a region of China that had never before been accessible by train. A separate 500-mile spur off the CER, eventually known as the South Manchuria Railway (SMR), was built from Harbin southwards to the ice-free deep-water port of Lushun (Port Arthur), envisioned as a northern Hong Kong, as well as to Dalian, on the Liaodong Peninsula. The Russian-owned railways through Chinese territory had been agreed in secret, in the wake of China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), as China sought a possible counterweight to imperialist Japan and Russia sought its own imperialist gains. It turned out to be a fateful step, with consequences well beyond what anyone envisioned at the time. The introduction of Russian-controlled railroads in China helped provoke the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. More broadly, the Manchurian railways helped set the stage for the second Sino-Japanese War, part of World War II in the Pacific (1937–45). Small wonder, then, that the great scholar of Northeast Asia, George Lensen, dubbed these railroads “the damned inheritance.” For China, however, the Manchurian railroads contributed to the process of opening the country up to the world and to itself.

The international as well as national aspects of the CER and the SMR form the subject of the present volume, the latest in the Northeast Asia series that I founded with David Wolff and have continued with Bruce Elleman. The series began with Rediscovering Russia in Asia: Siberia and the Russian Far East (1995), followed by Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan (1999), and Korea at the Center: Dynamics of Regionalism in Northeast Asia (2005). The present compilation differs from the previous three in that it was not based upon a scholarly conference. But it shares the longstanding series aim, which is to engage in analysis that goes beyond exclusively national frameworks, while joining the often separated study of Asia and of Russia.
Global or international history has lately flourished, but in our view it could be
more regionally grounded. Manchuria long occupied a central place at the
intersection of China, the Korean peninsula, Mongolia, and Russia, as well as in
Japan’s forays on the Asian mainland. True, Manchuria’s rail lines may not be as
infamous as the Burma Death Railway, which was built by slave labor during World
War II in Japanese-controlled southeast Asia, but few objects in the world have
been more at the vortex of intense political and military rivalries than these
infrastructure projects in northern China. Luxury and romance were the stuff of the
Orient Express, whose sumptuous coaches originally ran from Paris via Vienna to
Istanbul. The CER was destined to carry troops and materiel.

Back and forth the Manchurian lines went. Russia lost the South Manchuria
Railway (from Changchun to Lüshun) and the Liaodong peninsula to Japan as a
result of the Russo-Japanese War. During a good part of Russia’s civil war in the
Far East theater (1918–24), the Chinese Eastern Railroad was administered by an
American, the former chief engineer of the Panama Canal, as part of an Inter-Allied
Commission meant to stave off a Japanese seizure. By 1923, the Chinese had
assumed de facto control, assisted by many émigré Russians (whom the Soviet
authorities dubbed the “Whites,” or anti-Bolsheviks). From 1924, however, the
Soviet Union and China administered the CER jointly, while Japan maintained sway
over the SMR. In 1929, the Chinese seized the CER outright, but the Soviets
intervened militarily to re-establish joint administration—a forcible re-possession
the Japanese supported, mindful of their own claims to the SMR. That Tokyo could
side with its arch enemy, Moscow, indicated the depth of China’s dilemma.

Sure enough, in 1931, the Japanese army staged a violent incident in Manchuria
that led the following year to the region’s separation from China as Manchukuo, a
Japanese-sponsored puppet state. Three years later, the Soviets sold their rights in
the CER for a fraction of their worth to Manchukuo, in order to deny Japan a pretext
to stage another such incident and provoke war with the USSR. War came anyway,
of course, but in a manner that would prove advantageous to the Soviets. With the
shattering defeat of Japan in World War II, the CER in 1945 again came under the
joint control of the Soviet Union and China; the Soviets also re-occupied the
Liaodong Peninsula and established joint control with China over the SMR. The
CER and SMR were merged into the “Chinese Changchun Railway.” Following the
1949 Communist victory in China’s civil war, the Soviet Union (on 31 December
1952) transferred the Chinese Changchun Railway to the People’s Republic of
China. Part of the price was Mao’s acceptance of Chiang Kai-shek’s reluctant
recognition of Outer Mongolia’s independence back in 1946.2

China’s victorious Communists inherited a railroad network roughly equal to that
of the United States a century earlier, and of Russia back in 1878. Simply put, China
had come late to the great railway age. Still, the latter was not very old when the
first tracks of the Chinese Eastern Railroad were laid in 1898. It had been only in the 1850s, in a mania of construction, that Great Britain was internally connected by a national rail network—more than 6,000 miles of track by mid-century, joining all the country’s major cities and ports. Before the turn of the twentieth century, total British track leapt to more than 21,000 miles, while the number of annual rail passengers grew from 73 million to more than 1 billion. In 1869, America’s Pacific Railroad, subsequently dubbed the First Transcontinental Railroad, completed the linkage between the eastern and western seabords. Construction had been launched in 1862, under President Lincoln, as a way to unite the states during the civil war. U.S. railway mileage, which had been 10,000 in 1850, reached nearly 200,000 in 1900. The Iron Horse was a technological marvel, never mind who was in the way. In China, however, railroad construction was resisted because of its association with foreign imposition.

To be sure, not just the CER but many rail projects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were linked to imperialism. The Cape-to-Cairo Railway was initiated in the late nineteenth century to connect contiguous African possessions of the British Empire from South Africa to Egypt. France developed a rival scheme in the late 1890s to link its African colonies west to east, and the Portuguese toyed with ideas of erecting rail lines to buttress their African claims. Much of the British south-north project, however, was actually built, although the Cape-to-Cairo line remains unfinished, lacking a major section from Sudan to Uganda. Outside Africa, the Baghdad Railway, launched under German auspices in 1903, was designed to connect the Ottoman Empire cities of Konya and Baghdad. Because German companies had already built an Anatolian Railway from Istanbul to Konya, the proposed extension would have joined Berlin and Baghdad, site of oil fields and onward linkages to ports on the Persian Gulf. Following interruption by World War I, construction was completed in 1940, long after the Ottoman Empire and Wilhelmine Germany were gone.

What imperialism started, in short, others could finish. For the Chinese, the Manchurian rails, which had been built under conditions of national humiliation, became drivers of national integration, before emerging as a key to victory in the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. In other words, ours is a story of competing imperialisms, followed by competing Chinese nationalisms.

In the essays contained herein, strategic aspects and diplomatic wrangling predominate, but commercial interests are kept in mind too. Each of the protagonists used the railways to sponsor economic development. Deng Xiaoping’s shift toward market economics and global integration in the 1980s and 90s put Chinese railways at the forefront of the country’s multidecade double-digit economic growth, including China’s recent “Open Up the West” campaign. These days, the old
Manchurian lines continue to carry massive freight, including shipments of Siberian oil to China (in the absence of promised but still unbuilt eastward-flowing oil pipelines). In sum, even as they provide a means to help integrate China, the railways may be opening up to a new era of internationalism, so far, at least, much more peaceful. And yet, given the scope of China’s ongoing rise, as well as Russia’s demographic weakness, Japan’s system gridlock, the Korean peninsula’s division, volatile natural resource considerations, and lingering territorial disputes, Northeast Asia’s geopolitics remain unpredictable.

Notes
