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Demin on Selenginsk--three new publications

by Daniel Waugh

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E[duard] V[iktorovich] Demin. *Selenginskaia doroga—pervyi karavan. (Pervye plavaniia po Selenge i Khilku i predistoriia Kiakhtinskogo torgovogo puti)*. Ulan-Ude, 2013. 68 pp.

-----, *Selenginskie kazaki—tolmachi i diplomaty (vtoraia polovina XVII-pervye desiatiletia XVIII vv.)*. Ulan-Ude, 2013. 100 pp.

_____, *“Zaveshchanie” 1684 g. selenginskogo kazaka Vavily Grigor’eva. (Irkutskie obstoiatel’sтва i motivy)*. Ulan-Ude, 2013, 56 pp.

These three, slim self-published books invite readers to ponder a number of matters. Quite apart from the question of the quality of what they contain, they serve as a sharp reminder of how difficult it can be for those of us outside of Russia to keep up on literature that is published outside of a few major cities and which may be devoted to the subject of local history. I cannot imagine many libraries would have stumbled across these volumes, each published in 150 copies and probably intended in the first instance for sale in Transbaikalia to enthusiasts about its local history. Unless eventually all such regional publications can be made available in digital form on line, it seems likely that many which deserve wider attention (both within and outside Russia) may never reach a broader audience.

This then raises a second question: Should we care? That is, do the works of “amateur” enthusiasts merit our attention? It would not be difficult to document how “professional scholars” have generally tended to look down their noses at “provincial amateurs,” arguably not always without cause, even though we might also suggest that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. My, granted limited, personal experience has led me to have deep respect for efforts and publications of those who have a passionate, direct and personal interest in their regions, however distant those regions may seem from the mainstream of the concerns of scholarship about Russia. Fortunately nowadays, there has been a serious revival of interest in the Russian provinces, *kraevedenie* is flourishing, and dated attitudes are changing along with the blossoming of interesting publications.

Where does Eduard Viktorovich Demin fit in all this? I confess this is my first encounter with his work, though, had I been seriously studying Transbaikalia (apart from my interest in the Xiongnu period there of two millennia ago), I surely should have tried to read his publications, many in a journal *Baikal*, some in the local newspapers, and now many collected in a series of volumes containing his essays, published under the overall title *“Zolotaia rossyp’ Selenginska*. The books under review here are part of the fourth volume of these collected essays (the first three appeared in 2009 and 2010), conveniently made separately available here in nicely printed, illustrated booklets. His subject is the region of the Selenga River, which flows north into Lake

Baikal and along which, starting back in the middle of the 17th century, there was Russian exploration and settlement. Selenginsk was one of the forts the Russians established there, founded in 1665 and occupying an important point in the regional communications and control network. With the establishment of Kiakhta as the main border crossing and trade emporium by the first treaties between Muscovy and the Qing Empire, Selenginsk was a stopping point on the trade route from China.

Many readers will get impatient with Demin, since he loves to explore discursively every little byway that might even remotely connect with his subject, and his style of exposition is largely to quote *in extenso* from both secondary and primary sources. That is not necessarily a bad thing of course, where many of those sources of themselves may be difficult of access for the reader. While he apparently has done some archival work, and has turned up some interesting evidence such as gravestones in abandoned cemeteries, for the most part the primary sources he uses are those published either in standard series (such as *Dopolneniia k aktam istoricheskim* or *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia*) or in anthologies of sources pertaining to the region.

By stringing together such material loosely grouped around a topic of interest for the local history, he encourages readers such as me to consider studying subjects which certainly merit further exploration. His *Selenginskaia doroga* provides a great deal about the early exploration and the beginnings of the trade routes. His *Tolmachi* pulls together every shred of information he has found about those based in or somehow associated with Selenginsk who served as interpreters and often were given full responsibility for diplomatic missions. His “*Zaveshchanie*” builds on a single “testament” which he argues (convincingly) was probably “forged” in the sense that it was composed posthumously to ensure that the not insubstantial property of the deceased Vavila Grigor’ev be inherited by a monastery in Irkutsk rather than by the Church establishment in his hometown of Selenginsk. We learn quite a bit here about the establishment of churches and monasteries, the local clerics, and their connections with the local officials.

The books are illustrated in the first instance with somewhat pixelated details from the maps drawn in the 17th century by Semen Remezov, from 18th century drawings and from some reconstructions of the original appearance of buildings by modern scholars. There are notes carefully documenting the text but no indexes. That he frequently highlights in bold face key passages or names in his long quotations can help when one wishes to focus on that which is most relevant.