

INTRODUCTION

Border towns have their own destiny. Historically, their future has been determined at the moment of their foundation, in many instances caused by the need of the state to provide the defense of state borders and strengthen the state's influence among the inhabitants of remote peripheries. Founded at the edge of statehood, border towns are doomed to an uneasy and troublesome life. They are the first to take the blows of wars and they live many lives, falling in destruction in times of war and raising anew from the ashes when the war is over. Located at the state margin, and therefore easily 'alienable,' border towns, with all their importance for the state, also often become the unavoidable payoff for the establishment of peace—and the source of sore and bitter phantom pains of national identity afterwards. In the sedentarizing world of towns and villages, in the *longue durée* border settlements played on a nomadic side, having experienced a number of reterritorialisations and changes of state belonging and, even more importantly, being eternally perceived as the places which require a special protection exactly because they can be (easily) 'lost.'

The populations of border towns are also aware of the nomadic nature of their lands—the local cultural memory and landscape keep the traces of those who once lived there but happened to be contemporaries of grand political changes and territorial shifts, which forced them to leave, redefining the contours of a new border. The need to deal with a place's heritage, which is connected with another country and another culture predefines a local identity politics and unquestionably sets up a socio-cultural setting different from that in other places.

The Russian town of Sortavala, situated close to the border with Finland, can fully relate to this description. The history of the town directly follows the course of major political events that took place in the region over the last few centuries. The town, founded in 1632 on the territory of Sweden, became a part of Russia in 1721 after Russia's victory over Sweden in the Northern War. Up until Finland gained independence from Russia in 1918, the town belonged to first the Vyborg Province and later to the Grand Duchy of Finland within the Russian Empire. In 1940, in the course of the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland, Finland lost the Northern part of the Karelian Isthmus including the towns of Sortavala and Vyborg, and having spent two decades in an independent Finland, Sortavala became a part of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union. In 1941, Finland returned and held the town until 1944; since then, Sortavala has remained within the Soviet Union and, after its breakdown, the Russian Federation.

Behind this sketchy historical outline, interwoven with the seismic events of European history in the past century, there has been a grand drama lived through by the town, which was depopulated twice. In 1940, when Sortavala changed its citizenship, its residents left and moved to inner Finland, and the new dwellers coming from all over the Soviet Union moved in. In a year's time, when Finland occupied the now Soviet town, its new residents were evacuated, and the old ones returned to their homes. The restored 'good old order,' however, did not last long. In 1944, Finland ended the war, Sortavala returned to Russian Karelia, and so did its new Soviet inhabitants. And this is when the Soviet period of the town's life began to fully unfold.

The book that you are now holding makes a sound contribution to the corpus of works studying the local applications of Soviet identity politics, once omnipresent and universal throughout the entire Soviet space. Drawing on the analysis of newspaper publications, official documents, archival materials, interviews, and other studies of this region, Alexander Izotov reconstructs the processes of place-making and identity construction in Soviet Sortavala. In Sortavala, the Soviet Government was confronted with a difficult task, having to build a Soviet community out of people of various origins (though coming predominantly from Russia and other Slavic republics of the USSR) in the socio-spatial environment seen as alien by both its new residents and the new order of Soviet ideology. And while the first part of this task—casting a New Soviet Man and moulding different people into a community of Soviet men and women—did not seem impracticable, since the work of this kind was going on all over Soviet space performed through an elaborate and universal ideological machinery (see part 1 of the book), interiorizing the alien territories and making them into ‘our own, and Soviet,’ was an additional challenge.

Besides the necessity of dealing with the spirits and memories of the Finnish environment, as well as the severe northern nature which seemed so unfriendly to new comers, there was another factor which differed from many other places and played a key role in the formation of Sortavalans’ identity and sense of place—that of the state border. Today, living-at-the-border still remains Sortavala’s foundational feature that defines its local identity and sense of place, and channels the development of various spheres of town’s life. However, this book invites us to look back, and recall and reconstruct those practical, conceptual and semantic developments that the notion of the border has been through since the 1940s to the 1990s, and continues to the present days. The more open borders of today (although still requiring a visa, so this openness is rather relative), their meanings, perceptions, and practices have little in common with the borders of the 1940s, the borders of the 1960s, or those of the beginning of the 1990s.

Perhaps, the most striking difference of the Soviet period with the present day, in terms of border perceptions, is an ideological load that the border carried in those days, and that is no longer valid. In the Soviet ideological imagery, the state border was more than a political, spatial, or social phenomenon. It was placed in the realm of the sacred being constructed at the boundary between the Good represented by the Soviet state and the Evil, residing on the Western side of this existential divide. In this reading, the main boundary was in fact the conceptual one, while the territorial borders at the margins of the state were only spatialized emanations of a master understanding referring to the principal division between the two worlds. All Soviet citizens were expected to be defenders of the holy Motherland and its borders and boundaries, both territorial and existential. ‘Vigilance’ was named among the main virtues, and main duties, of a ‘Soviet man’ who was expected to have his or her eye watchful all the time and be ready to identify the enemy in any disguise.

Contemporary research on borders argues that borders are everywhere, making the point about the spread of border surveillance technics from the border to the inner territories of states. Researchers in the United Kingdom have noted how the British state wants everyone to become a borderguard and report on illegal migrants (<https://>

vimeo.com/126315982); scholars from other national contexts notice similar shifts in the bordering policies of their states. These practices of everyday bordering bring to mind the Soviet experience of bordering, and its efforts to identify and treat the (ideological) Other. Unlike in other places located within the inner territories of the Soviet Union, in the border town of Sortavala, it was theoretically possible to meet not only a Soviet person taken a wrong ideological path, but also the ‘real capitalist enemy,’ coming from the other side of the sacred divide. So, the motherland defenders living in the borderlands had to be particularly vigilant and watchful. As for Finland, it was not seen so much as a neighbour but rather as a part of the capitalist world, expansionist and militaristic by definition.

The book leads us through time, unveiling the turns and changes in border perceptions and border policies. Having read about the first decades of Soviet Sortavala, which were characterized by the silencing of border issues in public discourse and non-representation of the border in people’s daily life (the sacred could not be seen or even talked about), we arrive in the 1960s which witnessed the public coming out of Sortavala as a border town. The border regime with its heavily guarded 800 meter-wide border strip, 22-km wide borderzone and strict rules for those living within this zone remained in place. However, the existence of the border was unveiled to the public which resulted in mobilization of broader audiences, and not only professional border guards, for the protection of state borders and good order of local community.

This book contains many fascinating analytical reconstructions of the dynamic life of the border and the people living near it, projected upon a broader plane of the Soviet border and identity politics. Some of these reconstructions reinforce our knowledge of the Soviet system, localizing this general knowledge and providing it with new and intricate details, others open up new and unexplored dimensions of the border, its discourses and practices, emanations and effects. In short, it is a book well worth reading for those who are both familiar and unfamiliar with this borderland.

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