

Borders as Thickening Zones

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How can a state expect its borders to be respected and at the same time deny the existence of borders to spread revolution? Historian Sabine Dullin's unique reconstruction of Soviet political imagination gives provocative answers to this apparent paradox. Her new way of looking at frontiers also has tremendous relevance to explain Russia's border politics of today.

Reviewed: Sabine Dullin. *La frontière épaisse: Aux origines des politiques soviétiques (1920-1940)*. [The Thick Frontier. The Origins of Soviet Policies (1920-1940)]. Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2014.

For over two decades, we've been invited to use "Borders" as a topic of study. In the optimistic 1990s, "crossing borders" was a popular theme for conferences promoted by social science organizations and funding agencies; the concept was compatible with scholars' fantasies of "global flows" overwhelming state boundaries. Later, as the romance and shock of a post-Cold war world subsided, "borderlands" came into fashion. Emphasis was placed on areas near state borders as zones of both interaction and contestation. By the 2010s, the tone turned ominous: borderlands morphed into "shatterzones" as in studies edited by Eric Weitz and Omer Bartov, or in Alfred Rieber's recent monograph on competitions for Eurasian territories.¹ What these projects took for granted was a border -- a line on a map, recognized, if contested, by the states on either side, a line along and around which people organized or disorganized their lives and those of others.

A moving and malleable frontier zone

What Sabine Dullin does in her fascinating book is the opposite: she does not take the border for granted, as a reality or even a desirable goal of state leaders. *La frontière épaisse* examines the perspective on borders of a particular polity -- the USSR, the first communist state, as it made its appearance and its way in a world that had been cut up multiple times into states with boundaries. Dullin shows that the Soviet leaders did not want a line -- in the sand, in the dirt, in the water -- at all. For them, the border was a zone. It was a space for the simultaneous exercise of sovereign control and disruptive revolutionary initiatives. Moreover, the frontier zone was not pinned down permanently to a particular place on the map: it could be "thickened" and it could be moved.

Dullin thus conceptualizes the "frontier" in an original way -- as a moveable space with

¹Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Alfred J. Rieber, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

both internal and external significance for the Soviet Union's formation as a new kind of state. Her work oversteps and rejects the conventional divisions between domestic and external historiography, as well as between party and state; it makes us rethink our assumptions about borders, as the concept is used in international relations and in international law. She examines the ways that border zones were created, used and encountered by Soviet leaders, by people living in these areas, and by people attempting to traverse state lines.

For all of these people, the frontier was not just a boundary. It was a region where lives were transformed -- for better or worse -- where smugglers made money, where border guards could decide life and death and much in between, where resettled people were granted land, from which undesirable nationalities were expelled, where even migrating animals were unwelcome. (I refer to one of the more extreme cases that Dullin describes, a good one for the animal history people: the Soviet effort to end reindeer migrations across the Finnish border in the far north.²) One of the great achievements of this book is the weaving together of individual, institutional, legal, and conceptual perspectives on the moving and malleable frontier zone.

Let me say a few words about this book's style and approach. Reading *La frontière épaisse* is not just an intellectual pleasure, it's an exciting experience -- especially as the narrative heads toward its terrifying conclusion. And it's an emotional one, too, for the book never loses sight of the profound consequences of the frontier zone strategies for people on both sides of the moving border and for Soviet people more generally. Dullin has a lively and devastatingly direct way of writing; she draws us into the perspectives of her multiple actors -- be they smugglers, border guards, Soviet diplomats, deported families. These interwoven stories strongly convince us -- or at least me -- of her major theses. These I take to be:

1. That the frontier strategies developed by Soviet leaders in the 1920s and 1930s had an impact on both "internal" and "external" policies. That is, the tactics employed in the frontier region were re-used in domestic affairs and in foreign ones.

2. That there were two decisive periods in the production of the Soviet frontier strategy. The first stage was 1920 to 1923, when the Bolsheviks were figuring out how to lead the first communist polity in a world system that remained resolutely configured into states, most of them hostile to the communist upstart. The second stage is 1934 to 1940, when the frontier techniques worked out earlier were applied in an aggressive and extreme fashion to internal and external political challenges.

3. That the annexations in Eastern Europe, and the Baltic arena in 1930-1940 should be understood as the culmination of a longer term process of imperial recovery, based on the Soviet leaders' experience during two decades of frontier activism.

Each of these points makes a strong intervention in the historiography on the Soviet Union. I will discuss these disruptions below, but first let me comment on two particularly innovative aspects of Dullin's approach to her topic.

Double card playing

First, a perhaps under-emphasized innovation of this book is to show, without fanfare,

² Sabine Dullin, *La frontière épaisse: Aux origines des politiques soviétiques (1920-1940)*, (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2014): 256-7.

that the Soviet leaders could work with completely contradictory accounts of what they were doing in the border zone and that this was a normal, useful and for them not problematic way of conducting their kind of state business. The most dramatic dualism was that of making revolution -- attempting to destroy the foundation of their neighbor states' political being -- while at the same time declaiming the Soviet Union's rights as a state protected by international law.

Time and again, Soviet leaders worked at both kinds of enterprises -- trying to remake the world and simultaneously evoking rules that were supposed to keep the state system unchanged. A Soviet poster from 1921 reproduced in the book declares, "We destroy the boundaries between countries." But at this very moment, Soviet diplomats were trying to get agreements with Poland, Finland, and the new Baltic countries on the creation of a border -- with a zone on both sides -- that would protect the Soviet state from hostile powers.

Dullin provides clear examples of how the Soviet leaders played their double card of insurrection and international law. Eastern Galicia, part of independent Poland after the war, is one case in point. In the early 1920s, the Politburo recruited Ukrainians, including some who earlier had fought against Soviet power, to infiltrate Eastern Galicia. Their goal was the creation of a unified and expanded Ukrainian Soviet Republic. In accord with this revolutionary strategy, in 1924 Soviet-sponsored rebels conducted a full scale attack on a Polish border village. But during the same period, the Soviets used the Treaty of Riga to defend the rights of the Ukrainian minority inside Poland and to denounce the Poles for their mistreatment of Ukrainians and Belorussians under the international law of the period, with its sensitivities on the national question.

Dullin exposes this dualism, but she addresses it in a refreshingly calm and illuminating way. Rather than denouncing the apparent contradictions of the Soviet leaders' policies, or castigating them for hypocrisy, she makes it clear that this two-legged strategy was, for the Soviet leaders, an ordinary practice, a way of carrying out their over-riding goal -- the preservation and if possible extension of Soviet power. For a revolutionary enterprise, this dualistic approach to frontiers made sense. Moreover, the capacity for ambiguity and ongoing revisionism is visible in many aspects of Soviet state-making: overlapping and repeatedly redefined institutions and agencies; personnel who play more than one role; the ongoing revision of policies -- this fluidity was the part of the art of Soviet governance.

War as an opportunity for border revisions

Dullin's ability to describe things as the Bolshevik leaders saw them, rather than fitting them into some kind of judgmental categorization, extends to her provocative treatment of the annexations of 1939-1940. In a second break with conventional method, Dullin refuses to look back in postwar and Cold War hindsight on the Stalin-Hitler pact and to analyze it as an early episode in the history of the Second World War. Instead, she takes the perfectly reasonable, indeed obvious, but up until now neglected, view that we should examine Soviet policy in the light of what the Soviets thought at the time. They did not know what would come next, and they made their calculations based on what they had learned from the past.

The past that led to 1939 could be read, from their perspective, as two decades of efforts to undo the borders that had cut off so much of the territory of the Romanov empire, an effort in which the Soviets had had little success. In addition, though, those two decades had provided

Soviet leaders with a set of strategies for managing their border zones. Their tool kit for the extendable and moveable frontier included no-go areas surrounded by buffering layers of security zones; expulsions and deportations of undesirables; border guards; resettlement of reliable groups into the border zone; the establishment of joint committees to manage the zones on both sides of the border; the creation of useable legal language for dealing with the inevitable, and often exploitable frontier incidents; and effective organization of plebiscites once Soviet troops were in a forward place. The looming war between capitalist powers in the mid-1930s finally gave Soviet leaders a chance to move their frontiers and to gain the territories they had resentfully coveted ever since the defeats of the revolutions and invasions of 1918 to 1921.

Dullin's reconstruction of Soviet political imagination in the 1930s reveals that, for Soviet leaders, the war between the capitalist empires was a stroke of good luck. The Soviets had always worried about war against their young communist state and in particular about the great powers, allied with their client states on Soviet borders, ganging up on them. When the Germans brought on war among capitalist powers, Soviet leaders welcomed the unforeseen chance to move into their "near abroad." In evidence of this Soviet attitude, Dullin cites Stalin's comment in April 1940, after the conclusion of the unexpectedly tough war with Finland. Stalin observed to his companions that the Soviet leaders had chosen the "only possible" moment to attack Finland, adding:

A delay of two months could have meant a delay of twenty years because one can't predict political developments. One couldn't exclude the possibility of a sudden peace.... We could have missed the propitious moment for raising the question of the defense of Leningrad and the security of the State [the arguments they had used to force the Finns to cede territory]. That would have been a huge error.³

Stalin's remark signals his pride in having seized the happy, perhaps fleeting, day, of war to the west. He reminds his associates that peace was conceivable in late 1939, and that it would have deprived the USSR of its rationale for advancing across the Baltic states, fighting for Finnish territory, and negotiating new frontiers in Bessarabia. As Dullin puts it, "the objective thus was to profit from the fact that the 'other countries were occupied elsewhere' to revise the frontiers considered to be untenable."⁴

In my view, Dullin's explanation of the 1939-1940 annexations as revenge for the humiliations of the 1920s and fulfilment of goals pursued since that time, revenge and fulfilment achieved in the promising context of the capitalist powers' own revisionist and expansionist actions, makes perfect sense. One wonders why we historians have remained so fixated on questions that arise from post-war hindsight. We seem to have credited Soviet leaders with clairvoyance, with the ability to adjust their actions to a predictable future. Stalin, on the other hand, calls attention to contingency as he saw it in 1939 and to the fact that he did not know where international relations were headed.

Russian border politics today

One final point: When reading this book, one can't help but think about the borders of the

³ Cited in Dullin, *Frontière épaisse*, 286.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Russian Federation in our times. Can we use the experience of the past to understand what's happening now? Do Russia's leaders today respect state borders, as defined by international convention, the United Nations, their own bargain with Communist leaders in the fall of 1991 when the Soviet Union was dismembered, the 1994 great power deal on Ukraine's nuclear weapons? In the light (or the darkness) of Sabine Dullin's book, international law and treaties signed in the 1990s will be only part of our own unpredictable future.

Both in Ukraine and in Moldova we see phenomena very similar to what happened in the 1920s, when the USSR was trying to recover imperial terrain. The Transdniestrian Republic of recent years is a replay of Soviet efforts in 1924, when Soviet leaders called for a plebiscite in Bessarabia, sponsored a communist insurrection there (put down by the Romanian army) and ended up with a self-declared Autonomous Moldavian Republic. The border politics in this region at present replicate the earlier frontier zone strategies described by Dullin -- a joint control commission, a demilitarized zone, regulation of commerce across borders, the highlighting of national minority rights, and the contested and thoroughly ambiguous political status of the Pridniestrian Moldavian Republic. Here, in Ukraine, and in the "new" republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the frontier has already thickened.

La frontière épaisse shows that it took time for the Soviet leaders to formulate their claim to the conquests of imperial Russia, but that two decades after the Bolshevik revolution, Peter the Great's achievements were explicitly recognized and appealed to. Now, over two decades after 1991, are we seeing yet another revival of empire, based once again on multiple, inconsistent, yet functionally effective claims and practices, nurtured in the frontier zone?

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