Soviet Legacies in Russian (B)order-Making and (B)order-Crossing

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This article explores discourses and practices that have shaped border regimes in different times at Russia's western frontier, focusing on the interplay between state power, border management, and individual lives. Using a "comparative temporalities" approach, it analyses border control processes in the early Soviet period, during the Cold War, and during the Russian war on Ukraine. It assumes that current Russian border policy has visible parallels with systems dating back to 1920s Soviet border policy and to the Cold War (the adoption of police-style management of transborder mobility). It posits that the comparative temporalities approach reveals an alternation between 'fluid', 'semi-transparent' Russian borders and more impenetrable barriers. Stricter exit border controls are usually reintroduced after periods of border liberalization and laxity related to regime change, e.g., after the Russian Revolution and Civil War, and after the demise of the USSR in 1991. Initially, increasingly authoritarian and repressive control of citizens' mobility was accompanied by confusion and an increasingly arbitrary application of new, 'politicized' markers as local border authorities strove to implement new restrictions under increased state pressure. Then, borders were once again hardened and placed under stricter control. This intensified repression and helped create zones of instability at the borders. (This article was completed with the assistance of the Gerda Henkel Scholars at Risk Fellowship, project AZ 04/FI/23.)

Keywords: border controls; (b)order making; Russia; Soviet legacies; human ingenuity.

Introduction

Lucien Febvre was one of the first modern scholars to note that the study of frontiers could be carried out only in reference to the nature of the state which defines the political and military sense of the word (Febvre 1973, 208–218); accordingly, a historical exploration of a frontier can end in unexpected revelations about the legacies of the political regime it was set to protect. Contemporary Russia, whose territory has shrunk to the territory of the former RSFSR—Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Figure 1), an independent federal socialist state from 1917 to 1922, and afterward the largest and most populous socialist republic of the Soviet Union (USSR) from 1922 to 1991—is tormented with obsessive fear of imperial decay and demise. Seeking to reclaim its superpower status, it resorts to a rich tapestry of political and military thinking inherited from the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in the arrangement of its international borders (Toal 2017) but also in creating and in maintaining of a "frontier culture". While Russia's state actors today often cite historical, albeit distorted, parallels with the imperial and Soviet past , the current regime allocates

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an increasing importance to border management and, while doing so, increasingly draws upon the old Soviet agenda of "holding its people in"—resorting to more restrictive and individually repressive measures in controlling outward mobility.

This paper applies a comparative temporalities approach through a historian's lens. Referring to these temporal frameworks, applied in the interpretation of historical sources, the article aims to reveal the cyclicity of border processes—the repetitive patterns of (b) order (ab)uses resulting from political changes within Russia. It allows for the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences in temporal dynamics, achieved through a close look at the sources directly pertaining to a set of "border situations", in particular, situations occurring during border crossings, or "border encounters", during the 1920s, and then in post-Soviet, contemporary times. It aims to determine the clarity, consistency, and regularity of the corresponding border regulations during these periods of transition in the history of Russia's borders.

This article explores the discourses and practices that have shaped and supported a border regime in similar locations, but different temporalities, from the Russian side of the border. It first analyses the processes of border controls during the 1920s, which I consider a major instance of reconstruction of the Russian borders in (contemporary) history. Then it moves on to a brief review of Soviet Cold War borders (particularly focusing on the later period of Joseph Stalin's dictatorship, i.e., 1946–1953), followed by a short discussion of the most important issues related to the transformation of the border regime after the collapse of the USSR, before turning to border controls and traffic in 2022–2023: the first year of the Russian War on Ukraine and Russian mobilization.

Soviet, and later Russian, border controls are mainly explored through the analysis of evolving border-crossing legislation and examples of crossings, principally at the Norwegian, Finnish, Latvian, and Estonian borders. This article mostly considers land borders, and it searches for answers to the following questions: how did the context and specifics of border controls differ in the respective cases? How were they implemented? Were they effective? How did the modern markers of nationality/citizenship/political preferences play out on the ground in the actual implementation of these border controls? What were the possibilities for illegal border-crossing?

In discussing Russian borders at the beginning of the 1920s, this article relies upon sources from the KTK (Karelian Labour Commune, 1920–1923, later the AKSSR, Autonomous Karelian Socialist Soviet Republic, 1923–1936) and the Petrograd Gubernia (known from 1927 as a part of the Leningrad Oblast), referring principally to border controls at the Soviet–Finnish

Figure 1. Schematic administrative map of the RSFSR. Based on data provided by the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR) on December 10, 1920. Image © Andrew Heininen. http://heninen.net/view.htm?F=karjalan tasavalta&P=kommuuni.jpg.

and Soviet–Estonian frontiers. It uses documentary collections from the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia (NARK) and the Leningrad Oblast State Archive (LOGAV) related to border control implementation, Soviet border securitization measures, and local contraband and espionage networks uncovered by the Soviet political police.

The discussion of later periods is based on official documents, press coverage, and social media analysis. I examine border-related regulations through the lens of transformed power relations, but also through border crossers' experiences, considering how border orders were maintained or distorted in practice and thus impacted the people crossing the border (Van Houtum et al. 2005; Sasunkevich 2015). As such, it provides empirical examples of border-crossing experiences by refugees.

My assumption is that the present-day Russian policy of border controls has visible parallels with a matrix—a

set of managerial practices and the geopolitical and ideological assumptions behind them—that dates back to the Soviet border protection policy of the 1920s and to the Cold War border system. Primarily, it is manifested in the increasing adoption of police-style management of the population's transborder mobility. This policy was implemented gradually, by trial and error, through special legislation at a federal level which restricted exit for certain categories of the population by direct instructions to border guards. The leading role in implementing this experiment is delegated not only or primarily to a numerical increase in border guards, but also to modern digital technologies. However, human resourcefulness, supported by the geographical factor (lengthy and remote borders) as well as bureaucratic exigencies, inertia, corruption, and local aberrations allows some of the border crossers to circumvent restrictions even now, when the prohibitive practices of the Cold War are combined with cutting-edge technology. At the same time, the streams of Russians fleeing the country— as happened after the start of the Russian war in Ukraine, and especially after the mobilization draft—as well as other refugee flows, periodically create zones of instability and turbulence at certain sectors of the Russian border, approximating the border-crossing regime of the 1920s.

A number of recent publications have put temporal questions more at centre stage in border research (Scott 2020). Approaches to studying the changing and historically contingent nature of borders vary, but collective memory-based historical contexts seem to prevail (Paasi 2005; von Lewis 2017; Pfoser 2020). Bringing border studies scholarship into a more systematic dialogue with authoritarian (namely, Communist and post-Soviet) regime studies, this article shows how legacies of the authoritarian past transpire in (b)order-making and (b)order-crossing practices. Moreover, warfare, mobilization, and political hostilities are still central to our understanding of how some borders are reproduced in everyday life.

Contemporary historical literature emphasizes that the western and north-western borders of the USSR used to be a space for experimentation in territorial control, with a constant re-drawing of lines and implementation of special forbidden zones; these borders were also a crucible and main testing ground of repressive Soviet operations. It was there that the "Iron Curtain" was invented (Dullin 2019; Chandler 1998). During the first decade of Soviet power, they remained porous, hosting a lively transborder traffic, with an illicit passage of commodities and profit to informal economies (Shlyakhter 2020). Regarding the Cold War Soviet borders, scholarly works have focused intently on the reflection of Stalin's personal visions and policies in these physical and ideological barriers (Wolff 2011, 1–19; Coeuré & Dullin 2007; Oates-Indruchová & Blaive 2015, 656–659). However, they turned out far less stable than the notion of an "iron curtain" suggests (Scott 2023).

Recent studies of mobility patterns and restrictions in contemporary Russian border control focus on closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting impacts on immigration and customs controls (Golunov & Smirnova 2022).

Russian Border Controls in the 1920s: The Birth of the Soviet Frontier

The modern frontier and border service only appeared in Russia in the early 1890s. Its construction in rudimentary form continued for two decades until the First World War, Russian Revolution, and the Civil War, all of which depleted the already scarce human and financial resources needed. By the early 1920s, what little had been created before 1914 lay in ruins. Starting in 1920, a Special Division of the Cheka (originally VCHEKA, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counterrevolution and Sabotage) became the agency responsible for creating a new Soviet border protection system. Later, in September 1922, this institution was renamed the State Political Administration (GPU) and the Border Guards of the USSR (*Pogranichnye voiska* 1975), and placed under the aegis of the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR).

As a result of the early 1920s agreements, the western borderline of the RSFSR acquired the following contours: the Soviet–Norwegian section (according to the terms of the Treaty of Paris of February 9, 1920, recognized by the USSR in 1924), the Soviet–Finnish sector (according to the Treaty of Tartu of October 14, 1920; Figure 2), the Soviet–Estonian sector (according to the Treaty of Yuryev of February 2, 1920; Figure 3), the Soviet–Lithuanian sector (according to the Soviet–Lithuanian Peace Treaty of July 12, 1920), the Soviet–Latvian sector (according to the Treaty of Riga of August 11, 1920), and the Soviet–Polish sector (according to the Treaty of Riga of March 18, 1921). According to the terms of the treaties, Russia suffered territorial losses in the limitrophe zone.

In keeping with the Treaty of Yuryev, the Estonian border went beyond the limits of the former Governorate of Estonia and followed the right bank of the River Narva—ceding to Estonia a part of the Yamburgsky Uyezd (Kingiseppsky District) of the St. Petersburg Gubernia and the Pechorskaya Volost (Nizhny Novgorod Gubernia), as well as the Slobodskaya, Panikovskaya, and part of the Izborskaya Volosts (Pskov Gubernia)—so that it was defined approximately by the line reached by Estonian troops at the time the truce was signed, on December 31, 1919 (Khudoley 2020).

Prior to the 1930s, the demarcation lines remained porous, almost unguarded, and open to frequent violations, and border control regulations remained contradictory and confused. The degree of transparency and the "unsettledness" at the Soviet–Western frontier
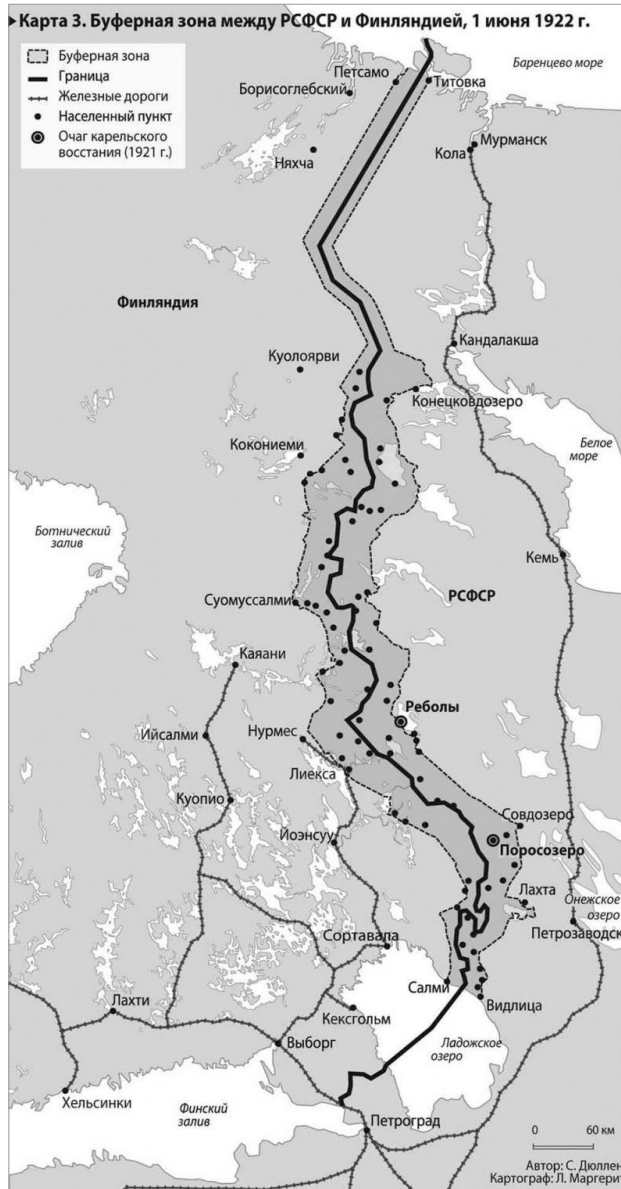
Figure 2. The buffer zone between the RSFSR and Finland, June 1, 1922. Source: DVP (Dokumenty vneshney politiki), SSSR, 1917–1938 (Moscow: Gospolitizdat), 1961. Vol. 5: 426. https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/278559-dokumenty-vneshney-politiki-sssr-t-v-1-yanvarya-1922-g-19-noyabrya-1922-g
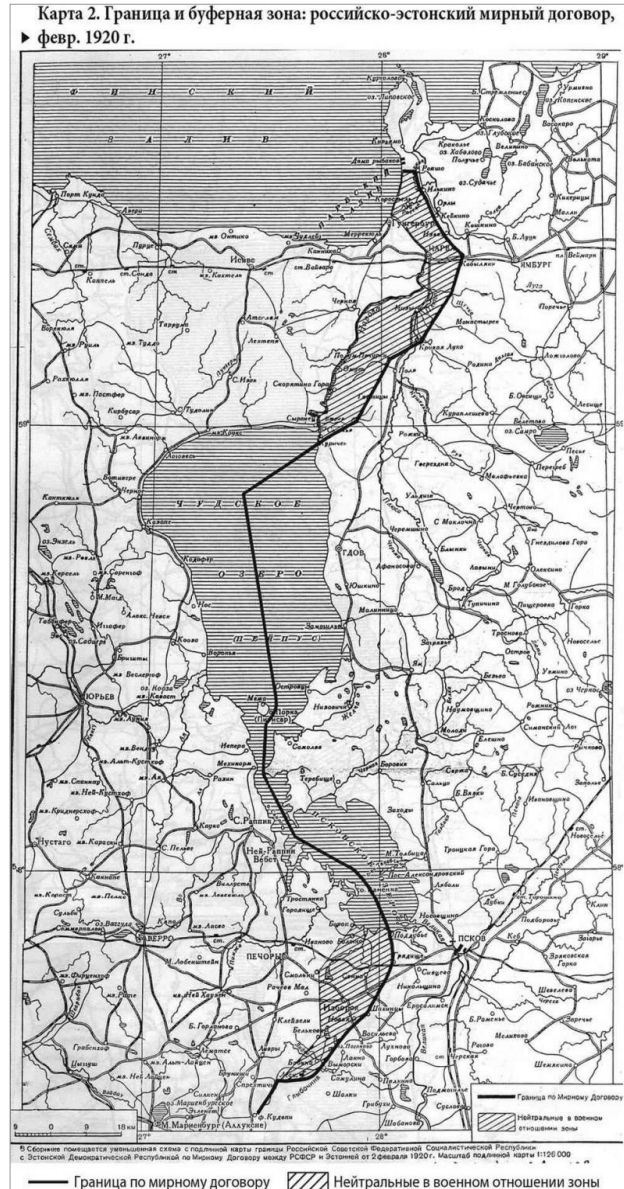

Figure 3. The border and the buffer zone according to the Russian–Estonian treaty of February 1920. Source: DVP, SSSR, 1917–1938 (Moscow: Gospolitizdat), 1958. Vol. 2: 216. https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/278556-dokumenty-vneshney-politiki-sssr-t-ii-1-yanvarya-1919-g-30-iyunya-1920-g

in this period corresponded to broader Russian and international historical practices. The borders of the other countries were no more "settled" or impermeable, whether in Western Europe or the Balkans (Rieber 2022).

Border control in the 1920s was inconsistent since these borders were newly drawn after the imperial collapse and the turmoil of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War. Throughout the 1920s, the principles of Soviet border protection were developed based on the initiatives of, and in the course of collaboration with, various Soviet governmental and Communist party agencies: the

Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID), the Soviet Border Guard Department (*Pogranichnaya Okhrana*) of the OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate) at the LVO (Leningrad military district), the Defence Sector of Gosplan (the state planning committee), the Council of People's Commissars (SNK), and the Politburo. Inter-agency border management authorities, primarily the Council of Labour and Defence (*Soviet Truda i Oborony*) at the SNK, were complemented by multiple inter-ministerial commissions conducting surveys of regional border strips. Consequently, the resulting regulations sometimes openly contradicted each other (NARK. F. R–690. Op. 1. D. 27. L. 6).

Figure 5. The Gulf of Finland, 1908. Source: LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 39 b. L. 119.

Figure 4. Soviet–Finnish border in the Autonomous Karelian Socialist Soviet Republic (AKSSR) (1923–1936). Source: NARK. F. R–690.

Conflicting regulations on border-crossing permissions resulted in conflicts of interest involving the regional Councils of the People's Commissariats, as well as the trade mission of the USSR in Finland. For example, Article 7 of the Helsinki convention, signed by the governments of the RSFSR and the Finnish Republic on October 28, 1922 "on timber rafting through water systems extending from the Russian territory to Finland and vice versa" presumed unimpeded border-crossings for Finnish controllers of rafting activities. Still, even in 1926 and 1927, local GPU border guards, ignoring the telegrams signed by the Karelian SNK members requesting that the Finns should be allowed to pass, were detaining Finnish commissioners (NARK. F. R–690. Op. 1. D. 27. L. 5–10).

In the early 1920s, borderland ethnic communities resisted the newly created Soviet border and effectively erased it from their everyday practices. This conflict between the population and the Soviet state over territorial borders was reflected in simultaneous problems not only in the north-west, but also in the far east and on the Polish border (Urbansky 2020; Shlyakhter 2020).

A multiplicity of new identity markers related to border-crossing appeared in the early 1920s, primarily due to the hastily created and opaque legal regulations that allowed certain categories of people to pass through the Soviet border. "Travellers on business", "coachmen", diplomats, foreign civil servants, and numerous official Soviet representatives of various state institutions were allowed to pass after presenting the required documents and letters of transit. The latter became objects of a brisk trade (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 19b. L. 1–44). Customs officers and GPU agents exploited these categories—as well as the frontier in general—for their own purposes, letting a large stream of people cross the Russian–Finnish and Russian–Estonian borders in exchange for bribes (NARK. F. R–544. Op. 2. D. 3/58. L. 33).

In addition, new categories of refugees and repatriates emerged, with special terms created to denote them. While Soviet repatriation campaigns transformed into a tenuous and stressful endeavour, and, with repatriates waiting for days in queues at the border (NARK. F. R–380. Op. 1. D. 1/1. P. 10–17), human trafficking became a widespread and profitable business after 1918. A sea route through the Gulf of Finland (Figure 5) became very popular in this regard (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 29 a. L. 89; D. 19 b. L. 104).

Illegal border-crossings exhibited a distinct emphasis on gender. The early 1920s saw a large number of crossings by women—singly or in groups—not only for commercial or family visits, but also by single women attempting to escape the hunger and devastation inflicted by the Russian Revolution and the Civil War, fleeing to Latvia (F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 150), Estonia (F. P–2205. Op. 1. D. 140; Op. 1. D. 160), and Finland (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 56. L. 23; 36; NARK. F. R–382. Op. 1. D. 25/572. L. 113). Apart from refugees, the border also swarmed with

counter-intelligence agents, peasants, and professional smugglers.

In an attempt to hamper this illegal trafficking, the Soviet GPU started multiple criminal cases against violators. In these proceedings, the post-imperial social and ethnic identity markers traditionally used by the imperial border control for classification of those accused of border violations became highly politicized. They reflected the emergence of the new Soviet state and increasingly tended to associate smuggling with Estonian and Finnish counter-intelligence services.

The politicization of the border space on the Russian side of the border blurred, distorted, and modified national and ethnic identities previously active in the Russian Empire. Ethnicity, typically designated as Russian/Karelian/Finnish/Estonian, and frequently used as an identity marker—along with social origin, occupation, financial status, and party membership—acquired new meanings, closely tied to espionage. A "Finn" could denote a Karelian or Russian refugee hiding on the Finnish side of the border and ostensibly working for a Finnish counter-intelligence service; an ethnic Russian could be labelled as an "Estonian spy" if he was suspected of working for Estonian counter-intelligence. Later, by the end of the 1920s, Russians, Karelians, Estonians, and Ingrians (sometimes called Ingrian Finns—the Finnish population of Ingria, which is now the central part of Russia's Leningrad Oblast) transgressing the border were classified according to their presumed espionage connections.

Citizenship influenced the outcome of similar criminal cases brought against Soviet border transgressors. Usually, foreign nationals illegally crossing the border were treated much more leniently than Soviet citizens. The early Soviet legal system allowed for a considerable degree of condescension towards foreigners. Moreover, in the class-action espionage cases investigated by the GPU, petitions made by the relevant foreign missions would change the verdict. These petitions in defence of a country's citizens charged with espionage arrived in the form of a note to the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 19 v. L. 21).

Similarly, during the first half of the 1920s, apart from the confiscation of their goods and money, Polish smugglers caught on Soviet territory incurred no other penalty, as the GPU, wary of espionage, had resolved to immediately dispatch them back across the border solely on the grounds of their nationality. Additionally, according to reports, captured Polish smugglers "cannot be held under guard … due to the lack of funds for this purpose". Poles operated with impunity mainly because the overwhelmed local Soviet officials did not know what to do with them (Shlyakhter 2021). Soviet citizens received much harsher punishments for their border regime violations than foreigners apprehended on Soviet territory (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 19; 29a).

For example, in the case reviewed by the Petrograd Gubernia Court of the People's Commissariat of Justice and started by the Petrograd OGPU on March 6, 1922, most of the 15 defendants accused of espionage, smuggling, and illegal border-crossing were Russian (primarily demobilized Red Army soldiers), Finnish, and Estonian citizens. The latter two defendant types, sometimes also registered as "emigrant[s] of Estonia" or "emigrant[s] of Finland", would be treated more leniently than their Russian counterparts, and many of them received milder sentences (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 39. L. 12). That is why many Ingrians, Karelians, and even Russians claimed Finnish territories as their original place of birth and sometimes attempted to claim false national identity to reduce their sentence. GPU officers would then attempt to find information from parish birth certificates, or any other documents proving such claims. In most cases, the investigations came to a halt due to the ineffectiveness of local administrations and problematic mobility infrastructures in the borderland areas (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1, D. 19a. L. 12).

The GPU questionnaires and interrogation forms encompassed the notion of "class" as a new and very important marker. Initially, the investigators had little idea how to interpret this. As a result, in their documentation and their final resolutions they followed the versions provided by the defendants. Under "class", the latter could indicate their family's origins, which rarely coincided with their current occupation. Thus, the GPU documentation included a motley and contradictory collection of denominators, which could apply interchangeably to the same person: "a ploughman" and "from a fisherman's family"; "from the merchant life-style" and "from a peasant family"; or "a worker" "from a burgher family" (F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 39 ob).

Thus, at the beginning of the 1920s, the "situational" Soviet borders did not even come close to resembling a set of filters or barriers. They emerged, at times, as the discursive constructions of newly appointed border controllers and became a resource for survival and resistance. In this unstable and fluid discursive space, new, transitory political and social identity forms and markers were generated for the first time by occasionally activated law enforcement agencies, with the active participation of their victims. The latter, in the main, were refugees fleeing Russia or locals surviving amid the post-imperial ruins with the help of smuggling. It was much later that rigid political and social classifiers for border transgressors became institutionalized.

Some of the testimonies of these refugees and border crossers, dating back to 100 years ago, are still strikingly relevant, since they provide us with a mirror of the humanitarian disaster we are witnessing today. For example, take the testimony of Natalya V., a nurse from Petrograd, during her interrogation by the Soviet GPU border guards after her second failed illegal border-

crossing attempt to Finland, in August 1920: "I have a cousin living there in Russia, I've been working at the sanitary train. I almost died from hunger and fear. People are constantly dying in this war. So I tried to cross the border to Finland. But I failed. I'm afraid, I don't want to go back, I don't want to go back [...]". She was escorted back by Russian border guards and sent to Moscow to go on with her job (LOGAV. F. R–2205. D. 19b). Or consider the confession of another female border crosser, 67-year-old Aksinya (Okseniya) Lezhoyeva, detained and interrogated by the Soviet GPU at the border in Northern Karelia, who had traversed the Finnish frontier several times before her arrest in June 1925: "[f]or the first time I went to get a pair of shoes for my grandson. He had nothing to wear. Then I went for foodstuffs". An illiterate Karelian peasant, she testified, "[l]ater, I was carrying contraband to survive, was selling it through another villager" (NARK. F. R–382. Op. 1. D. 25/ 572. L. 2).

For others, the north-western Russian border crossing meant an adventure and a challenge. For example, on July 7, 1925, two residents of the villages of Prokkoilu and Korbo-Selga in Syamozerskaya Volost—Pavel Yevseyev and Mikhail Fedkin, aged 16 and 17, respectively—were apprehended carrying some goods two kilometers from the River Shuya in Soviet Karelia. Both adolescents were local residents—Karelians from peasant families. The criminal case that was initiated against these schoolboys by the Karelian ASSR (AKSSR) border guard unit, for illegal border-crossing with contraband goods, took a whole year, from July 1925 to August 1926. The "confiscated contraband" consisted of "dried fish, eggs, and 5 gold rubles". The file mentions that both adolescents behaved defiantly during the apprehension,

resisted arrest, and shouted that they "will never be caught again" (NARK. F. R–382. Op.1. D. 24/541. L. 19, 87). Pavel Yevseyev's interrogation transcript stated:

> Once I met Fedkin, and he proposed going to Finland to sell some goods, buy two shirts and return to Russia. On July 7 we decided to go. At home, I took about 80 eggs, 5 kilos of dried fish, 2 silver rings, a 5-ruble gold coin and 51 [Finnish] marks. I took the eggs without my parents' knowledge. The Finnish marks came from a beggar named Moley—now deceased—from the village of Podkuselga. I didn't tell anyone about my going to Finland, nobody knew. We were arrested by border guards. I did not know I would be tried for illegal crossing of the border [...], [cross for signature]. (L. 87).

The multifaceted border-crossing regulations, and formal and informal transborder movements, dwindled to almost zero by the time of the Second World War. For the most part, this was due not to enhanced border control efficiency, but to the ethnic cleansings and deportations that occurred in the 1930s in the Soviet borderland areas. The external Russian border became impenetrable simply for the reason that there was no one to cross it anymore. This is similar to the situation in North Korea, where some citizens break through the 38th parallel to enter South Korea, but the interest in such crossings is negligible.

If the frontier porousness and transborder trade of the 1920s were a norm continuing an older, European imperial trend, the Soviet policy of closing borders from the second half of the 1930s (Figure 6) was, in fact, a completely new, modern phenomenon (Ermolaeva 2023).

Figure 6. Map of the Soviet Union, 1938. Source: Visual Capitalist. https://www.visualcapitalist.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ussr-map-1938-big.html

This closure process lasted until the end of the 1940s, when the multimillion-strong Red Army reached the newly drawn international border with Russia's neighbouring European countries and were able to erect barbed wire fences and create a trace strip (a strip of ploughed soil that shows where a crossing has occurred). The border with the Far East was fortified in a similar way—but not the Afghan border in Central Asia, for instance, where Soviet troops were not so massively deployed until the 1980s.

Early Cold War Border Control

During the early Cold War period, the guarding of the USSR's borders—especially the western and north-western ones—against the exterior became much more effective since these borders were part of the perimeter of the Iron Curtain. From 1945 on, most sections of the border were completely closed to all forms of traffic, including cross-border tourism and transport. In comparison with the previous period, the controls at the external Soviet borders acquired three specific features. First, the state developed a system of border surveillance that began at a great distance from the actual border. A system of so-called exit visas, along with an extensive checking of candidates for these visas, in force from the 1930s, guaranteed that exit was available only to a few highly privileged individuals. The number of border crossing points was minimal, and the Soviet government permitted only escorted trips to select cities; border zones were off-limits to tourists (Laine 2014). The social markers for transborder mobility evolved further: initially, travel was permitted only for selected representatives of the Soviet elite, and the social spectrum of candidates for exit from the USSR broadened significantly.

Second, at the border itself, the Soviet side had developed extensive electronic systems, patrols and other means to prevent escape, including raked sand strips, high barbed wire fences with electronic alarm systems, and border vistas (man-made deforested tracks demarcating parts of an international border). However, the border was not fully protected underground, and tunnelling under it was still possible, as rare cases of escape demonstrated (*Pogranichnye voiska* 1975; Scott 2023). The Finnish border, for example, could be crossed even from the 1950s to 1980s. However, unlike in other Western countries, the government of Finland did not protect illegal border crossers but returned them to the Soviet authorities if captured. Illegal border crossers had, for example, to get through Finland and into Sweden in order to defect to the West (Laine 2014).

The third specific feature of the Cold War borders inherited from the earlier decades was an increasing politicization and a state of tension associated with them. According to Soviet sources, certain incidents of unrest at the borders in the post-war years were related to the activities of armed gangs around the border perimeter, and in later years to an extended espionage network under the auspices of the United States. The documents of the USSR's border service of the late 1940s to 1950s contain records of periodical infiltrations of western borders by foreign agents of "imperialist intelligence services" (*Pogranichnye voiska* 1975). All this allowed the state to create and solidify myths aimed at strengthening the regime and glorifying border troops.

From the start of the 1930s, the Soviet propaganda machine disseminated images of border guards and transgressors, including defectors to the West, nationwide. While the former category entered the pantheon of Soviet heroes (Dullin 2019; Takala 2016), the latter served to impress on society the images of "spies", "counter-intelligence agents", "enemies of the people", and "traitors of the Motherland" fleeing to the West (Scott 2023). For example, the films *Dzulbars* (1935, Figure 7) and *On the Border* (also known as *Soviet Border*) (1938, Figure 8), which dwelled on these themes, were popular across the Union for many years. Nevertheless, in the internal documents of the border service, the north-western external borders of that period were presented as more placid than those of the 1920s (*Pogranichnye voiska* 1975).

Unlike the Finnish and Norwegian borders, the Russian–Estonian and Russian–Latvian borders became internal Soviet borders. The Soviet advance on Estonian territory in 1940 was followed by Estonia's change of status to the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, and its international frontier with the Soviet Union became an administrative line with the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Following the German occupation, the Soviet Union reoccupied Estonia and Latvia. By the end of the 1950s, the borders of the Soviet republics, including the Estonian and Latvian ones, became fully transparent and no border control was enforced. The Estonian and Russian borderland areas were connected by extensive bus, rail, and ferry services. In 1991, the status of Estonia and Latvia's boundaries with Russia changed: after the restoration of these countries' independence, the borders yet again became international ones.

Transition from Cold War Barriers to Post-Soviet Borders

As a result of the 1990s decommunization—the fall of the Communist regimes in Russia, and Eastern and Central Europe—the ideological barriers and borders between the USSR and Western Europe began to crumble. Along with them, almost all previous restrictions for leaving the country, such as exit visas and excruciating checking processes to obtain them, dissipated. Yet again, borderlands turned into zones of contact and interaction, accompanied by a lively

Figure 7. Poster for the film *Dzulbars* (1935, Vladimir Shneiderov). Source: https://ru.kinorium.com/261559/.

Figure 8. Poster for the film *On the Border* (also known as Soviet Border) (1938, Aleksandr Ivanov). Source: https://ru.kinorium.com/261559/.

transfrontier traffic. This was especially true for the newly created Russian international borders with the Baltic states. For example, in the early 1990s, there were stable alcohol and arms smuggling channels from Estonia to Russia across the barely controlled border (Golunov & Smirnova 2022).

From the 2000s to the 2020s, despite impressive resources committed to ensuring the effectiveness of the Russian border regime, its vulnerabilities were still actively exploited by corrupt officials, informal entrepreneurs, and unauthorized border crossers. By 2020, an informal trade in gasoline, tobacco, alcohol, and foodstuffs was still flourishing at most Russian borders with the European Union (Golunov & Smirnova 2022). Before the Covid pandemic, the Gulf of Finland Coast Guard District regularly uncovered organized criminal groups engaged in international human trafficking, as well as liquor smuggling, as had happened in the 1920s.

At the same time, even before the Russian war on Ukraine, Russia's western borders were causing much anxiety in continental Europe. For example, during a hybrid warfare interpretation of the Finnish "Arctic route episode" in 2015–2016, asylum seekers travelling to northern Norway and Finland through the Russian Federation caused the Finnish government to feel its

security was threatened (Piipponen & Virkkinen 2017, 518–533). Confusion created at the border during these incidents, and the resonance of these incidents in international geopolitics and interstate relations, proved once again that the concept of perfect border control was more ephemeral than it seemed to be.

It was the "pandemic fence" of 2020–2021 that yet again turned Russia's western border into an effective barrier. On March 27, 2020, all regular and charter flights were stopped, and on the same day, the government announced that land borders were to be closed for exit by Russian nationals as of March 30 (order no. 763-r).

After the pandemic, crossings were still possible for some in Russia, and then debordering started. Before the reinforced bordering that started in February 2022, those with certain professional skills (e.g., doctors, engineers, long-distance drivers) largely remained welcome to enter or leave (Nossem 2020). The borders with Finland and Estonia were distinguished by particularly intensive cross-border movement. While there were some incidents in which foreign citizens were denied entry and Russian citizens were not allowed to exit (Carroll 2018), until 2022, the Russian entry and exit control regimes remained relatively liberal (Golunov & Smirnova 2022).

Russian Borders during the War on Ukraine and the Russian Mobilization: "Creeping" Border Control

The Russian borders of the 2020s are digitalized, closing barriers of an authoritarian dictatorship-in-the-making. Passports and electronic technologies allow the authorities to limit transit. While Covid restrictions had been introduced worldwide, Russia went on using them to maintain bordering and to close the border for clearly political reasons once the war on Ukraine began on February 24, 2022 (Golunov 2023). For example, in summer 2022, the main official regulation on exiting Russia—introduced during the pandemic and requiring a work contract in order to leave the country—was used politically on the Russian–Finnish and Russian–Estonian borders to limit cultural and professional contacts, and, even, in order to not let professionals with official invitation letters and valid visas leave Russia. Nevertheless, this government order of June 6, 2022 (no. 1511-r), among other things, allowed exit for those who needed medical treatment, thus providing a new loophole for those who were keen to leave but who were not among those with EU residence permits or relatives in the EU.

As a result, between the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the start of October 2022, more than 1,356,000 Russian citizens entered the European Union across its land borders (Figure 9), while more than 1,314,000 Russian citizens crossed Russian land borders with the EU (Frontex 2022). This dichotomy demonstrates that while the major exodus from Russia occurred through its air space, land borders for a while after the start of the war demonstrated a lively dynamics of cross border exchanges.

For a time during summer 2022, the crossing points of the Russian–Finnish border, such as Torfyanovka (Leningrad Region) and Vyartsilya (Republic of Karelia), were host to mass border-crossings supported by forged documents for medical appointments in Finland (personal experience, June 2022). Paradoxically, these faked medical appointments were solicited directly at the border, with the active assistance of—and, frequently, at the expense of—the Finnish inviting agencies, and with the agreement of Russian border authorities. Social networks assisting these border-crossings, such as the Russian Vinsky Forum, thrived (Golunov & Smirnova 2022, 73). But all this border porosity turned out to be short-lived in light of Russia's growing isolation from the West.

On September 21, 2022, the Russian president announced a partial mobilization of military reservists. After this announcement, Russian men started receiving draft notes, and a significant number of Russians streamed out of the country in different directions. At Russia's western borders, however, transborder traffic diminished for a while due to newly introduced restrictions. While 53,000 Russian citizens entered the EU during the week of September 26 to October 2, this marked a 20 percent decrease from the week before. Most of them crossed into Finland (over 29,000), which, for a brief period, remained the EU country bordering Russia with the fewest entry restrictions. But by the end of September 2022, Finland, following Estonia, restricted entry for Russian travellers with tourist visas.

From October 10 to 16, over 24,200 Russian citizens entered the EU. This was 1,400 fewer than the week before and under half the overall figure recorded between September 26 and October 2. Most already had EU residence permits or visas, while others possessed dual citizenship (Operational Data Portal 2023). Not only Russians but also Europeans experienced exit restrictions from Russia. The difficulties of exiting the country via its western border were mounting due to European countries' policy of closing their consulates in Russia and restricting accessibility to Visa Global Services, an online service for visa applications, for Russian citizens. The inability of most Russians to obtain foreign visas made travelling impossible for them.

"Sealing off" Europe's borders to Russians was a long process. Norway had already built a 200-meter-long border fence at the Storskog crossing point on its border with Russia in 2016 (Ledur 2023). With growing concerns over espionage, and border regime tensions, Estonia had already started constructing a permanent steel fence along the border with Russia as early as 2018, and a second barrier was built in 2021 (Ledur 2023). And since February 2023, a

Figure 9. Legal entries of Russian nationals into the EU, February 24–October 2, 2022. Source: Frontex. https://www.frontex.europa.eu/

200-kilometer-long Finland–Russia border barrier has been under construction in Finland.

As a result, the majority of those fleeing ended up seeking refuge in neighbouring countries such as Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Georgia, after many Western countries closed their borders to them. As of the start of November 2022, Georgia's interior ministry had recorded approximately 700,000 Russians who had entered the country (Klochkova 2022). For a while, the situation at the Georgia–Russia border remained chaotic, since service-age men (many of them with their families) remained waiting in the queue to cross for days, often without food or water (Klochkova 2022).

Officially, the two main agencies enforcing Russia's border control are the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Customs Service. Both agencies are very powerful in Russian internal politics, and the FSB is one of the regime's pillars. More than a dozen other agencies—including the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-being (Rospotrebnadzor), responsible for sanitary control among other issues—were sporadically involved in maintaining border control (Golunov & Smirnova 2022).

Despite an official statement from the Russian Ministry of Defence on September 26, 2022, declaring that no travel limitations were currently in force, the reality proved different. After the end of the mobilization campaign, the FSB database reported that 1,025,703 people were banned from leaving Russia. Border guards used a number of official lists when checking citizens departing from the country. Those included on the lists may have received a draft card—an order to appear immediately for service at the local military commissariat—but not necessarily (Enerio 2022). Following these federal level orders, the military commissariats became the most powerful agency for limiting Russian transborder mobility.

Russia's security services established additional internal checkpoints on the roads leading to the country's borders, while mobile military commissariats were rapidly installed directly at the borders (for example, at the Russian–Georgian border) in order to issue draft cards. The flood of orders from different state agencies after September 21, 2022, limiting the transborder mobility of certain categories of Russian nationals, displayed a chaotic dynamic and followed a pattern typical of emergency decision-making. At the north-western Russian borders, the orders even extended to sailors and marine engineering staff engaged in transnational seafaring. Some of them nearly lost their jobs because they were therefore unable to perform their working duties. For example, the local Karelian military commissariat banned exit from the country for at least 60 sailors who were exempt from the military draft and had not received draft calls (Guberniia Daily

2022c). During their repeated refusals to let travellers pass, Russian border guards cited federal law and suggested the travellers file petitions with the State Duma to cancel the bans (Figure 10).

From the end of September to the beginning of November 2022, some travellers from the central and north-western regions leaving through the western border and the Russian–Kazakh and Russian–Georgian borders, and who had received draft cards, were unable to pass. Yet, other male travellers with similar backgrounds and draft cards were able to pass. This could be explained by the inevitable time gap between the federal centre's projects of "temporary" and "partial" border closures for the duration of the mobilization on the one hand and their local realization on the other. A unified federal electronic database did not exist, and the hastily drawn-up FSB database missed some of the conscripts, so no information was available on them at the borders they crossed.

The streams of refugees, the long queues at the borders, preferences in granting transit, and the blurred legal framework of borderline regulations—all these features brought the Russian borders of the time of war and mobilization closer to those of their counterparts of a
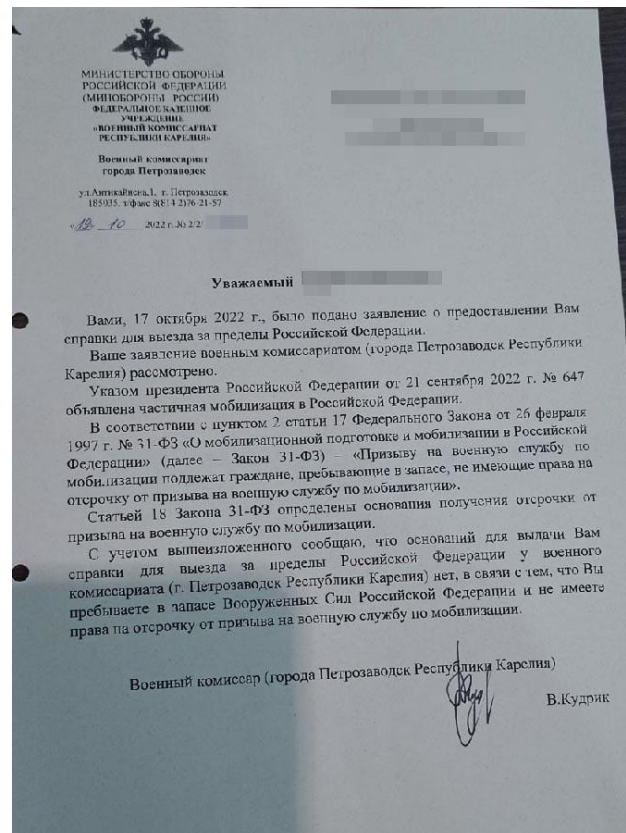

Figure 10. An exit ban, issued by the military commissariat of the Republic of Karelia, October 18, 2022. Source: (Guberniia Daily, 2022c).

century ago. Families leaving Russia through Georgia at the end of September 2022 could expect to spend up to five days in the queue, with some leaving their cars at the border and crossing on foot. Witnesses recalled that a one-year-old child died in the queue for the checkpoint (Interview with an anonymous source, Norwegian national arrivals centre in Rode, Oslo, October 18).

The fulfilment of the mobilization requirements by the local military commissariats was based on the principle of "filling the numerical quotas", widely used during the Soviet times—for example, during the "Great Terror" of 1937–1938. To secure the quotas, internal travel bans appeared in certain regions from September 22, 2022. According to these regulations, male residents of certain areas, aged 18–45, were not allowed to leave their permanent residence or administrative unit. However, most of these orders remained inactive since the population of the areas learned about their existence only when they were officially cancelled after the republics or krais (the types of federal subjects of modern Russia) had filled their draft quotas. For example, an order signed by the governor of the Republic of Karelia dated September 2022 imposed a ban on the outward mobility of the men liable for military service from the region. However, this was cancelled in the October, after the draft quota for the republic was fulfilled (Guberniia Daily 2022a). The introduction of such internal borders was also tested during the pandemic, when multiple restrictions on movement between provinces, and requirements to observe a certain distance from other individuals, appeared (Golunov 2022). However, the travel restrictions after the mobilization draft, unlike the previous pandemic restrictions, were not made public and the actual control measures were rarely implemented.

A lot of men subject to the military draft decided that the easiest way to leave Russia was not by land but by air. But this turned out to be even more problematic. EU airspace was closed to Russian planes, and vice versa, as of late February 2022. Once Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine, direct flights between Russia and the West became almost impossible to find, apart from a few routes, so only flights through third countries were available.

On October 25, 2022, no fewer than six men were removed from a flight from Pulkovo (St. Petersburg) to Istanbul. Evidence of permission from regional district military commissariats for travel was demanded of them, despite the fact that at least some of them were not subject to the current draft. Some of them returned home (to Moscow or St. Petersburg) and attempted to obtain permits, but failed to do so (Guberniia Daily 2022b). The Russian "partial mobilization" ended by mid-November 2022 in some regions, due to inertia in cancelling the travel bans on the part of the local military commissariats. A wave of corruption that arose

as people tried to avoid the bans somewhat mirrored the situation of the 1920s when the OGPU, customs officers, local civil authorities, and the army were all actively profiteering from exploiting loopholes in the border regime for their own means. False certificates issued in Moscow and Moscow Oblast, allowing exit for 400,000 rubles, as well as corruption scandals involving military commissars, also emerged in 2022 (Mobilizatsiia 2023, January).

The Russian state has tested a great variety of new methods to limit outward mobility from the country. Certain unofficial sources connect residence permit refusals for Russians in some countries from the end of 2022 (e.g., in Turkey), and cancellations of the "visa run" practices (briefly leaving the country to "reset the clock" on permitted stay periods) in others (e.g., Kazakhstan), with possible informal agreements initiated by the Russian state (Pogranichnyi kontrol' 2022, December).

Live Voices from the Eurasian Borders

Russia's war on Ukraine, and the resulting exit permit refusals, have triggered transition processes in the transformation of borders. The resulting instability prompted increasingly numerous illegal border-crossing attempts which, along with refugee flows, have put extra pressure on Eurasian borders. These processes, viewed through the lens of the social history—local situations and individual border stories, in a comparative temporalities approach—point to similarities between the border modalities of the 1920s and the 2020s. Transborder guides, escapees, and other physically able men illegally cross Russia's western land border to this day. For example, in winter 2022, a conscript private from the Leningrad Oblast fled his unit, crossed the border to Latvia, and acquired a residence permit there. The 22-year-old Yegor found some "sympathizers" on the internet who helped him work out an escape plan via a particular route, along which he would find caches of food and clothes left by sympathizers and, finally, a car. Having no passport, he simply climbed over a barbed wire fence and surrendered to the Latvian border guards (Mobilizatsiia 2023, January 30).

Some of the illegal border crossers to Europe came from Chechnya and the Karachai-Circassian Republic in autumn 2022, leaving their homes en masse. The September 14 resolution of Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen administration calling for the "autumn mobilization" of the region's male residents resulted in a total mobilization. According to this document, the interior ministry of the region had prepared special units to locate and apprehend any draft dodgers. As a result, entire families were leaving Chechnya illegally, having paid drivers to take them out of the country. The approximate price for such an exit at that time (late September to early October 2022) amounted to €5,000 per person, including children.

Anzor, aged 32, from the Karachai-Circassian Republic, claimed he was a transborder guide who had provided assistance across the Russian–Norwegian border to several male refugees. His own was a long story. He had applied for refugee status in Norway in 2016, was rejected, and left the country facing the threat of deportation. With the announcement of the "partial" mobilization, and against the background of the total mobilization in Chechnya, he crossed the border from Russia to Norway again. For Anzor, the Russian military draft became a blessing in disguise, allowing him to return to the country he had been dreaming of. He commented upon his (most probably illegal) border-crossing:

> Well, this military draft was a possibility I've been waiting for for six years. First I helped three guys to cross the border to raise some money and then I crossed it myself. The crossing was easy, I knew the way. (personal communication)

As had happened in the transitory years of the 1920s, new types of refugees coincided with the emergence of highly politicized markers in border-crossing allowances on the part of the Russian border guards. These politicized markers—in particular, the border crossers' attitudes toward the war in Ukraine and the guards' political and ethnic prejudices—were actively applied to Ukrainians. According to the UN report dated October 2022, Ukrainian refugees across Europe numbered 7.6 million, including 2.85 million in Russia. Many of the latter had been forced to go there by Russian occupiers and had been subjected to a "filtration" process (Karasapan 2022). Some of them later exited Russia to Europe (Operational Data Portal 2023). Those coming from the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine began to be treated as a separate category of border crosser, different from the rest of their displaced compatriots. Passing "through the occupied territories" complicated border-crossing to Europe not only on the Russian, but also on the European side of the border (Karasapan 2022).

The refugees' trajectories and experiences of border-crossing to Europe through Russia's western borders (September–October 2022) are reflected in a variety of impressions of their border-crossing. Some of them got out of the occupied territories at the very end of September and just one or two days prior to the announcement of the total mobilization in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) following the referenda which had resulted in these republics joining the Russian Federation.

In 2022, male Ukrainian nationals were subjected to threats while crossing Russian borders to Europe. Andrey, 26, from Donetsk, travelling with his wife and four-year-old son through the Russian–Norwegian border in October 2022, underwent a four-hour interrogation under pressure, accompanied by threats,

humiliations, and demands to remain in Russia and to enroll in the Russian army for the war on Ukraine (interview with Andrey A. in Kirkenes, Norway, October 10). Ethnicity and citizenship factors again acquired new meanings for border crossers, as in the 1920s. Yulia, 28, a mobile service operator, embarked upon her refugee journey from Mariupol in Ukraine with a Greek husband (an immigrant to Ukraine) and a 12-year-old child in late September 2022. They crossed to Russia and later spent three days in the queue at the Russian–Estonian border as Ukrainian refugees and left their car there. However, during the crossing itself, they did not encounter any problems and later received assistance from volunteers.

At both borders, there were strict exit priorities from the Russian side. European citizens were the first priority, then came Russians with Schengen visas. Their cars were selected from the queue and they were allowed through the checkpoint and customs control. But Ukrainians waited for long hours and sometimes for days. When they finally reached the checkpoint, the men were led away by the Russian border guard and security services and were subjected to long and harsh interrogations. Yulia's husband's interrogation, however, was much shorter, and they were let through faster than the other Ukrainian families. Another Yulia—who left Kherson, Ukraine at the end of September 2022 with two small children and a Cameroonian husband—had a similar experience: the family was allowed to exit Russia unhindered, but they had to wait in a long line of refugees to enter Estonia (interview with Yulia N. at the Norwegian national arrivals centre in Rode, Oslo, October 20, 2022).

Unlike both these families, many Ukrainians heading to Estonia from Russia endured long waits and numerous rejections on both sides of the border. For many Ukrainians in Russia, fleeing to Europe was more than just a gruelling journey that could take weeks to prepare for—it was a quest for survival. According to some Ukrainian refugees, Russian border agents deliberately kept Ukrainians in line and called citizens of other nationalities forward to cross first. In October 2022, the Estonian authorities confirmed that at least 1,091 Ukrainians had been denied entry to the European Union through Estonia since the beginning of the war. In September 2022 alone, 306 Ukrainians were denied entry—three times more than during the first three months of the war (Orbegozo 2022). However, it was not only Ukrainian refugees for whom crossing the EU's eastern borders was difficult. Elina, 26, from Grozny, Chechnya, finally crossed the Russian–Estonian border into the EU after waiting there for many hours. She had started her journey from Chechnya in the following way: "[w]e were hiding in a taxi minibus. Our crossing [the border from Chechnya into Russia] took three hours. A taxi driver took our documents and 15,000 euros for the three of us, including the infant. Just a week later this gap closed, and no taxi driver agreed on such a

crossing anymore, so my brothers couldn't leave the country […] But passing through the Russian–Estonian border was yet another ordeal […] on both sides they had threatened and humiliated us before they let us pass […]".

Those with dual citizenship (Russian and Ukrainian, as is the case with many residents of Crimea) are most often refused passage across the western border to Finland, Poland, or Estonia (Pogranichnyi kontrol' 2023, January 16). As a result, they are forced to look for solutions that avoid demonstrating the fact of their dual citizenship at the borders. As one Ukrainian refugee stated, "I was leaving the Russian Federation through Estonia, I showed them my Ukrainian papers, but I was registered in Russia. They searched me long and hard, looking for the "Red passport", as they said so themselves. It was a long, nerve-wracking procedure, but they let me through [without finding it]" (Pogranichnyi kontrol' 2023, January 16).

The Telegram (instant messaging app) community commented, regarding this practice: "[w]hen it was necessary, the Russian passports were used; while entering the EU without a [Russian] passport, travellers showed their Ukrainian papers: It is not trickery, it is the hopelessness of the situation. Unlike ordinary Russians, the residents of Crimea were denied a Schengen visa. Even if they had changed the place of registration, what was looked at was the date of receiving Russian citizenship, the place of birth, and the place of matrimony. If it was Crimea, in most cases they were refused entry" (Pogranichnyi Control, January 17, 2023). Children born in Crimea after 2014 were automatically barred from entering Europe and America, which is why the presentation of Ukrainian papers, after showing Russian papers, became the only—albeit unreliable—way to overcome the limitations on their travel around the world.

Past and Present Russian Borders

Indeed, the past of borders is plural and contradictory, and can reappear and persevere in the present, shaping the forms and meanings of those borders, as well as their repetitive and predictable aspects (O'Dowd 2010; Green 2009; Green 2012). While legal bases and technical infrastructures advance significantly over time, Russian borders, in their uneven development, vividly reflect not only the country's border protection legacies, but also the broader policies, political hostilities, geopolitical fears, turmoil, and instabilities of the country's successive political regimes.

While for some periods in history Russian elites have oscillated between various options for their border policy, influenced by factors such as competition between pro-Western and imperial geopolitical cultures, security concerns, economic utilitarianism, integrationism, and humanitarian considerations (Golunov 2023), in the end

perceived geopolitical threats—as politically constructed as they may be—repeatedly outweigh all other concerns in structuring the country's border control policies. They result in measures that hit individual lives and freedoms hard and that point towards a certain cyclicity of reintroducing one particular strategy that requires a closer look.

From century to century, the strategy of "keeping people in" via a broad variety of exit bans and filters has been used as a universal practice of border control in modern Russia. Deemed vital for removing potential threats to national security, it has been activated again and again in "times of crisis", transitory periods from "transparent", "leaky" borders to more or less sealed frontiers of once again geopolitically isolated Russian authoritarianism. The comparative temporalities approach reveals a certain cyclicity of their introduction. Augmented border controls, heavily impacting outward mobility, are usually reintroduced after periods of political restructuring of the regime, its chaotic refashioning, and border liberalization, followed by a gradually introduced authoritarian resurgence, as happened after 1917 (the year of the Russian Revolution) and after 1991 (the demise of the USSR). These periods of transition from "fluid", "transparent" borders to more impenetrable barriers were marked by a confusion in border controls and border crossings, the increasingly confusing, arbitrary application of new, "politicized" markers by local border authorities, repressive impacts on individual lives, and chaos at the borders in their hectic attempts to align with the new rules and manage cross-border traffic in conditions of increased pressure from the centre.

The frontiers of the 1920s bore legacies of revolution, war, and crisis; those of the 1940s to 1950s, of militarized isolation. The current Russian borders, yet again at the forefront of the "East–West" divide, reflect the desire to overcome the insecurities and vulnerabilities of a political dictatorship engulfed in a war. Regarding the current set of eclectic border practices, one can, using historical source analysis through comparative temporalities, discern multiple contingencies (coincidences), but also divergences from the previous models of border traffic control.

Russian politics in the digital age continue to pursue aims defined by the Soviet predecessor of the current regime. The state is gradually advancing the "Cold War" border model, backed up by modern technology. It aims for maximum isolation of the country's population from the West. However, while during the first stages of the Cold War the border was physically "sealed from within" along its entire perimeter through the deployment of numerous border guard forces and the use of exit visas (although there are widespread rumours that these will also be reintroduced), the current Russian government outwardly bans exit only for selected categories through federal electronic databases.

"Keeping the people in"—previously the border guard's most salient function—is now the prerogative of the local military commissariats, supported by the agencies managing the electronic databases. Creation of an automated mechanism of filtered border exit bans, against the background of the previously introduced electronic passports, plays a crucial role in the intensification of the traditional system of isolation, mobilization, and coercion of citizenry. The creation of a nationwide digital military register that will ban exit from the country for "draft dodgers" testifies to the emergence of a new stage of state control over the individual. Some Russian political experts regard the law on digital conscription and the bans on exiting the country advanced in summer 2023 as a step toward the "digital gulag" (Stanovaya 2023).

Modern technologies not only serve as a more flexible instrument for implementation of Cold War-era isolationism but are also a more effective means of enforcing the traditional Soviet/Russian state practices of regular military and economic mobilizations, without closing off borders completely, and avoiding a radical increase in political and social tensions in the country. They also allow the regime to mitigate the negative impact of the factors that have, for centuries, prevented the efficient management of Russia: huge distances, regional autonomy, corruption, bureaucratic inertia, and lower-level obstructionism. "The Russian curse" of being lost in a vast space and propelled by imperial ambitions manifests itself time and again nowadays in the context of the new "Stalinization" of the Russian state. Even if the main political impulse in the Russian system—as in the Soviet system before—comes from actors at the centre, the distance from the centre to the peripheral areas and the borders is so great that the local authorities—in this context, regional military commissariats and border services—inevitably distort the orders and instructions that come down from the federal centre.

Yet, as happened during the Cold War period, border-crossings are limited not only from the inside, but also from the outside. Just as the late 20th and early 21st centuries' "wars" on drugs, smuggling, and terrorism led European states to cultivate high-tech border policing capacity, later deployed against refugees and undesirable border crossers, so too did the Russian attempt to neutralize a host of real and imagined threats, and to pursue an aggressive expansionist policy, lead to Russian high-tech border policing—although, unlike in Europe, this was deployed to hamper not so much inward as outward mobility.

While in the 1920s a considerable proportion of emigrants either used the services of transborder guides to illegally exit Soviet Russia or, depending on the border sector, exited on their own (LOGAV. F. R–2205. Op. 1. D. 19b. L. 104), for the vast majority of refugees in 2022–2023, only legal border-crossing channels were available. Still, it is likely that some people will continue to use their own resourcefulness and knowledge to cross borders. It is impossible to completely close the border today, as it was impossible to seal off the Soviet western frontier in the 1920s—and even in the 1950s as Soviet discourse of the border as an uninterrupted physical obstacle and the myth of "the locked-up border" would have it (Takala 2016; Scott 2023). This is true of all past and present Eurasian borders. Before the deportations carried out by the Soviet secret police in 1943–1944, the Meskhetian Turks on both sides of the border between Soviet Georgia and Turkey did not acknowledge any border. The border between Abkhazia and Georgia was for a long time nominal during the Soviet period. In western Ukraine, border-crossing did not stop when the Soviet Ukraine–Poland border was set up, but only when Ukrainians in Poland were resettled from the border zone and there was no more reason for them to cross the border to visit relatives and to engage in trade, or for the Soviet Ukrainians to go further west.

Even now, the border as a clear dividing line remains a pipedream, and its "leaky" character always reappears, sometimes backed by geopolitical interests and conflicting states' manipulative practices. But it is certain that authoritarian states, like Russia today, display greater flexibility—and unpredictability—in their border management. Under modern authoritarian regimes backed up by cutting-edge technology, a border can at times suddenly be "closed" to those who the regime needs for its mobilization experiments. To the contrary, it can also be unexpectedly "opened" by the state, pursuing certain geopolitical interests, for specific groups of migrants or refugees. The latter example is well demonstrated by the November 2023 incidents at the Russian–Finnish border, when large numbers of migrants from Africa and the Middle East were taken directly to the border in an organized manner and granted unimpeded exit from the Russian side. This incident, highly reminiscent of a previous Poland–Belarus experience, prompted the Finnish government to very quickly close the border with Russia almost completely (Guberniia Daily 2023). The unprecedented exit restrictions for Russian citizens during the 2022 mobilization draft still provoke alarmist speculation that an authoritarian state could easily restrict exit from Russia in the future (e.g., by introducing exit visas) (Pogranichnyi kontrol' 2023, February). What is certain is that, in the current geopolitical situation of deep political crisis, international pressures, and war, Russia is on the threshold of yet another transformation of its border spaces. And there is a very strong probability that, unless the vector of Russia's political regime changes, its newly emerging frontier realities will continue to duplicate its distant past.

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