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RUSSIA-NORWAY

PHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIC BORDERS

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The book is a collection of papers presented at the conference “Russia and Norway: Physical and Symbolic Borders” held in St Petersburg in April 2005 in connection with the opening of the exhibition “Norway – Russia. Neighbours through the ages”. In the book different aspects of the history of the Norwegian-Russian border are covered by historians from Moscow, St Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Copenhagen, Cambridge, Bergen and Tromsø. The papers are diverse and refer to different chronological periods. One group of articles deals with problems connected with the medieval border treaties between Norway and Novgorodian Russia, others with the diplomatic history of the border convention of 1826, as well as its effect on ethnic minorities living in the border area. One author addresses the present-day delimitation controversy between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea. Other articles deal with symbolic borders, for example, barriers in translating Russian literature into Norwegian, and borders between the two cultures, experienced by the Russian emigrants in Norway after the Russian Revolution. And finally, there are articles without explicit references to the concept of borders, where the authors investigate in more general terms different aspects of Norwegian-Russian relations.

Illustration on the cover: Border convention between the Russian empire and the Kingdom of Norway (with a map). May 14, 1826. *From The Border Archive, The National Archival Services of Norway, Oslo*

RUSSIA AND NORWAY

Physical and symbolic borders

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Preface

This book arose out of the work involved in preparing the large exhibition “Norway – Russia. Neighbours through the ages”, a Norwegian-Russian cooperative project devoted to the history of Norwegian-Russian relations. The exhibition was produced by the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History and Russia’s Ethnographical Museum, under the auspices of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Russian Ministry of Culture. The exhibition went on display in these museums in 2004 and 2005 respectively. In connection with the opening of the exhibition in St Petersburg in April 2005, a conference devoted to the history of the Norwegian-Russian state border was organized under the heading “Russia and Norway: Physical and Symbolic Borders”. The conference was organized by the History Department of the University of Tromsø, and took place at the Norwegian University Centre in St Petersburg on 4–6 April 2005, with participation by historians from Moscow, St Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Copenhagen, Cambridge, Bergen and Tromsø. The present book consists of the papers presented at this conference.

It goes without saying that in relations between any two neighbour states, the common border is an important factor that can easily affect other bilateral relations. In 1883, D.N. Bukharov, the Russian consul in Finnmark, wrote that in no other place was there a sharper contrast between Russia and a foreign country than in the faraway northwestern corner of the Russian Empire, at the Norwegian-Russian border. Even today authors of travel books, both Norwegian and Russian, express similar views. However, in spite of this contrast, relations between Russia and Norway have been remarkably peaceful. For hundreds of years one great European power has lived in peace with its tiny neighbour, despite the differences in politics and religion, and other cultural barriers. The apparently harmonious neighbourly relations between pre-revolutionary Russia and Norway are often referred to by politicians nowadays, a perfect time for such comments being 2005, the year which

marked the centenary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and independent Norway in 1905.

A national border between Norway and Russia was established only in 1826, and since then it has remained stable if one disregards the fact that, for a short period of time (1920–1944), the Pechenga area to the east of the border belonged to the new, independent Finnish state – thus becoming a Norwegian-Finnish state border. However, towards the end of World War II the border was re-established as a Norwegian-Russian state border with no substantial changes.

But the “Finnish incident” in the history of the Norwegian-Russian border reminds us that the drawing of the border in 1826 affected not only Norway and Russia, but also Finland, which at that time was a part of the Russian Empire. The Finnish authorities were not requested to attend the negotiations, although the talks obviously affected Finnish interests. Even stronger was the impact of the border convention on the Eastern Sámi, the indigenous population of the frontier zone, whose homeland came to be divided among three different states. For the Eastern Sámi, the Norwegian-Russian state border became a threat to their vulnerable form of life and culture.

All these aspects of the history of the Norwegian-Russian border are covered in the book. The papers are diverse and refer to different chronological periods. One group of articles deals with problems connected with the medieval border treaties between Norway and Novgorodian Russia. Interestingly, in this field new sources have recently been drawn into the scholarly debate which allow for new interpretations. There are articles dealing with the diplomatic history of the border convention of 1826, as well as with its effect on ethnic minorities living in the border area. One author addresses the present-day delimitation controversy between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea. Other articles deal with symbolic borders, for example, barriers in translating Russian literature into Norwegian, and borders between the two cultures, experienced for instance by the Russian emigrants in Norway after the Russian Revolution. And finally, there are articles without explicit references to the concept of borders, where the authors investigate in more general terms different aspects of Norwegian-Russian relations, in a historical perspective.

We express our gratitude to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo, and the Barents Secretariat, Kirkenes, for economic support in carrying through the conference and publishing the book; and to the Norwegian University Centre in St Petersburg, on whose premises the conference took place, for all practical help in organizing the conference.

Tatjana Jackson *Moscow /Tromsø.*
Jens Petter Nielsen *October 2005*

Jens Petter Nielsen

Some Reflections on the Norwegian-Russian Border and the Evolution of State Borders in General

The drawing and maintenance of borders has been and presumably still is one of the principal functions of the modern state. The ability and determination to create a line of demarcation between one's own territory and that of other neighbouring states, and to impose regulations governing the movement of people and goods across the borders, is one of the prime acts of sovereignty, and an unceasing and incontestable demonstration of national indivisibility and exclusiveness.

At the same time it is clear that the exact splitting up of territory in political spaces through boundary lines is not a universal feature of all societies at all times. It is above all a characteristic of modern society, the outcome of a gradual, century-long development, in which the meaning of boundaries was altered in step with changing social formations. The Russian-Norwegian state border, to which the present book is devoted, is naturally a part of this general European evolution, which, through the centuries, led to a system of nations separated from each other through permanent, negotiated borders. But in some ways it deviates from the general pattern, one of its distinguishing traits being that it was negotiated very late, only in 1825–1826, another that it remained very stable, once it had been established. In my brief presentation I will deal with both of these peculiarities. I start with focussing on the first: how can we explain the belatedness of this northernmost state border in Europe?

To begin with, in Europe there were no boundary lines, only "frontiers", or large zones of transition between kingdoms. It has been suggested that the Germanic peoples of Northern Europe originally had no concept of the frontier

in a linear sense (and no word for such), instead words such as *mark* and *forst* came to designate divisions between political territories. Likewise the small earldoms and kingdoms of Saxon England usually were surrounded by a broad inhospitable marchland, which made it possible for them to preserve their identity against more powerful neighbours (Mellor 1989: 74–75). Unclear border relations also came to characterise feudal Europe, which never consisted of a clearly demarcated set of political units (See Anderson 1974: 37–38). The main reason for this was that the feudal system of rule was based on a hierarchy of loyalties, and allegiance was often owed, depending on circumstances, to different overlords at the same time.

> "Thus although the limits of the realm were quite well known there was a tendency to obfuscate the boundaries of the kingdom. Nobles made war on their own and had pretentions on domains in other realms, interventions and counter-interventions were the order of the day, preventing the kingdoms from acting like unitary states" (Kratochwil 1986: 33).

Only as group identity began to displace personal loyalty and feudal servitude, the frontier as a line of division took on a new significance. A main characteristic of the emerging absolutist system of rule was the gradual consolidation of all splintered and personalized authority into one public realm. This process brought with it two important spatial demarcations: one between public and the private domains, which was attended by the monopolization of the legitimate use of force by the state, another between internal and external realms, which called for a more careful territorial delimitation from other states and less porous borders (Ruggie 1992: 151).

The old vagueness had to be replaced by exact definition of ownership, a change confirmed when in the treaty of Westphalia (1648) the state was effectively affirmed as the unchallenged guarantor of domestic order and sovereignty, and the cardinal fact in political organization. With this treaty emerged the classical conception of boundaries as lines defining exclusive zones of jurisdiction, and a few years later the Treaty of the Pyrenees reportedly led to the first official boundary in a modern sense being established, viz. that between France and Spain (1659) (Kratochwil 1986: 33). In many cases, however, potentates still lacked exact information about their own country, about the number of subjects, natural resources or the extent of the territory, and this made the establishment of state borders problematic, even when the need for such borders was being acknowledged.

In Europe systematic mapping of natural resources together with extensive usage of maps and statistics became customary only in the 18th century and

delineation of boundary lines as markers of the state's territory was now made easier on a practical level (Häkli 1997: 12–13). The need for territorial control and clear-cut physical borders was further strengthened during the nineteenth century, due to the breakthrough for the idea of popular sovereignty and nationalism. As language and culture became increasingly significant vehicles of national integration, the desire intensified to define territorial limits even more accurately.

In the high north of Fennoscandia, however, several factors counteracted this general trend towards careful delimitation and demarcation of boundary lines, the most important being the culture and economic adaptation of the Sami, the area's indigenous population. Their old hunting culture was based on an extensive use of land areas, with the Sami moving from dwelling sites in the interior to the coast, and further on to the river valleys, to exploit the natural resources at the right time of the year. Later reindeer-breeding Sami followed their herds from winter pastures in the interior to summer pastures on the coast – and back again into the interior.

This may have been a unique phenomenon in Europe in the nineteenth century, but is reminiscent for instance of some Mongol nomadic tribes, described by Owen Lattimore in his *Studies in Frontier History* (1962). For such nomads, no single pasture had much value in itself for their livestock, because it soon would have become exhausted. More important was the control of routes of migration between the different pastures (Lattimore 1962: 534–35). Accordingly, the right to move prevailed over the right to camp, and "ownership means in effect the title to a cycle of migration" (Cited in Kratochwil 1986: 29). Likewise it was crucial for the Sami not to loose their right to move, and border delimitations could deprive them of the control of the routes of migration. Their cycle of resource exploitation no doubt delayed the establishment of permanent state borders on the Northern Cap. Instead, Norway and Russia for centuries accepted the existence of a huge common district (which gradually shrank), where the two states' right to taxation was connected not primarily with territory, but with Sami ethnicity (See Hansen 1996).

Other factors behind the belatedness of the Norwegian-Russian border were conceivably the vastness of the territories of the Northern Cap, its sparse population and peripheral position with regard to the centres of the two states. It may be surmised that there was no particular reason why the two countries should pay much attention to the frontier on the faraway Northern Cap. Norway and Russia were, as Erik Egeberg has put it, "tied to each other by the tail". These two countries' territories met, as back yards, in the north far away from their capitals, which looked, respectively east, west and south but not very often

north. At first glance this allegory of Norway and Russia as two countries being "tied to each other by the tail" may seem convincing, especially if you deliberate the question from a Russian point of view. One still feels that the metaphor is not particularly apt as far as Norway is concerned, given the asymmetry of Norwegian-Russian relations. Where a small state meets a great power, the great power may well ignore the small one, but for the small state this neighbourship will all the same be tremendously important and claim a lot of attention.

To the small state a broad frontier zone or "no man's land" would be a constant source of concern since it too easily could drag it into conflict with the great power. It was all the more important for Norway to negotiate a boundary line that once and for all made clear where Russia ended and Norway started. Only good fences make good neighbours. Russia, however, was not in a hurry and for several reasons could afford to wait. It seems to me that in this respect the situation was not very different from to-day's Norwegian-Russian boundary dispute in the Barents Sea (even if the Norwegian authorities maintain that in this case Norway too can allow itself to wait). One may also argue that, seen in a longer perspective the Norwegians' eagerness to delimitate themselves from Russia has something to do with their claim to Europeanness, which, according to political geographer John Agnew,

> "particularly at the borders of Europe, has involved commitment to and advertisement of the accoutrements of European statehood, as defined by the dominant states, above all the clear demarcation of the state's geographical limits and the associated matching of nation with state" (Agnew 2002: 28).

We know that from the end of the eighteenth century Danish-Norwegian authorities time and again turned to the Russian government with requests to open negotiations about a partition of the so-called common district in the north. But they met with little success. True enough, the Russian government declared its readiness to comply, but had always an excuse for postponing the question (See Johnsen 1923: 231–236). Why was Russia so reluctant?

One possible explanation is that the Russian Empire and Tsarist autocray was out of step with the political evolution in the West, and like other great empires in the past Russia was not obsessed with delimiting precise boundaries. This lack of accord was more perceptible in the far northwest, since this was the only place where Russia met Western Europe directly, without a zone of Eastern and Central European lands in between. It was a place of confluence of two different modes of history and two different concepts of borders, that of a small budding nation-state and that of a vast multiethnic dynastically legitimated state with, believably, a greater tolerance of permeable borders.

This brings to mind one episode from Swift's *Gulliver's travels* (1726), which could hardly have been more apposite than in Russia. As the reader will remember, when Gulliver was washed ashore in the country of Lilliput he was taken into confinement by the Emperor of that country to prevent him from trampling around making harm. Only after long negotiations in the Imperial council it was decided to let him loose, but on certain conditions, one of them being that he should "deliver in an exact survey of the circumference of our dominions by a computation of his own paces round the coast" (Swift 1994: 38). This could serve as an allusion to certain aspects of the cartographical situation in Russia in the early eighteenth century. For example, by the time of Peter the Great's death in 1725 it was still unknown whether Russia was linked to the American continent or not. And in spite of the subsequent efforts of the great Russian polar expeditions of the eighteenth century, it was only through Ferdinand von Wrangel's expedition in the early 1820s to the Arctic coast of Siberia, east of Cape Shelagskiy, that it was possible to establish beyond doubt, that Eurasia was not connected with America by a land bridge (See for instance Belov 1956: 504–509).

The vagueness of Russia's territorial extent has been related to an alleged vague sense of distances, borders and places in Russian culture (See Medvedev 1999: 18). But it should not necessarily be interpreted as weakness – or it was a weakness that could be turned into symbolic strength. Vera Tolz in her book *Russia* (2001) has collected several literary passages substantiating that there was a specific Russian sense of territoriality in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For instance in one of his odes to the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna, Alexander Sumarokov eulogized her because she through her laws governed areas which stretched so far that their boundaries were not clearly discernible. And Sumarokov was not alone: In the eighteenth century poets speaking in praise of the Russian Empresses often mentioned the vastness of Russia's territories as the country's most peculiar feature (Tolz 2001: 159).

This concern with the grandness of the country and its ethnic and cultural variety was particularly strong in the high noon of Russian expansionism towards the end of the eighteenth century. This was in the reign of Catherine the Great, and the Empress herself resorted to such arguments in order to justify Russian autocracy. While Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* served as her chief guide in political theory, in practice she discarded the principle of the separation of powers as inapplicable to the Russian state polity. In her Instruction to the so-called Legislative Commission of 1767, Catherine made clear that autocracy was the only feasible form of government for holding together enormous Russia (See for instance Riasanovsky 1972: 286).

In the first half of the nineteenth century these images of Russia as a country with an enormous extent and ever moving borders continued to be cultivated by Russian writers and by some of them this even began to be seen as an analogy for the "mysterious Russian soul". A particularly interesting example is a far-famed passage from Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842), which purports a connection between bold human endeavours and territorial vastness:

> "What does that unencompassable expanse portend? Is it not here, within thee and of thee, that there is to be born a boundless idea, when thou thyself art without mete or end?" (Gogol 1996: 220–221).

Nikolay Berdyayev later developed this notion into a theory about a correspondence between the Russian soul and the Russian landscape, both being distinguished by unlimited space and boundlessness. In the west things are quite to the reverse according to Berdyayev: here soul and landscape are more predisposed for orderliness and the development of civilisation (Berdyayev 1937). Generalisations like these doubtless belong to the realm of the unverifiable, and it could, in adherence to Elena Hellberg-Hirn, be argued that the Russians, quite to the contrary, are *notoriously concerned with boundaries*. At least this is the impression one gets, when visiting Russian peasant villages, where not only every house or church yard, but even the graves are often encircled by fences (Hellberg-Hirn 1999: 61). People try, according to Hellberg-Hirn, to protect themselves from the *prostory* ('the wide open spaces') with *zabory* ('fences').

And, of course, Russia had to protect herself against the steppe. The Russian princes could not come to terms with extremely porous borders or open frontiers, because the Great Russian plane was so vulnerable due to the absence of natural barriers, like mountains or dense forests. Frequently recurring intrusions by nomads across the steppe prompted concern for solid defensible boundary lines in a southerly and easterly direction (Hellberg-Hirn 1999: 61–62). The defense of the borders was in the reign of Catherine the Great entrusted to the Cossacks, who were exempted from serfdom and taxes. However, the borders were not easy to stabilize, because of Russia's continuous territorial expansion, and the Cossack settlements too quickly found themselves lagging behind.

During the nineteenth century Russia expanded in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, in Central Asia, in the Far East, and the borders continually had to be adjusted. During the reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855) it was indeed difficult to break free from Russia's territories, not only because of their vastness or even a strict regime on travelling abroad. The borders themselves were evasive, due to the continuous growth of the Empire. This point is very well illustrated in

Alexander Pushkin's travelogue *Journey to Arzrum*. Arzrum, an Armenian fortress in North-East Turkey, was conquered by Russia in 1829, and it was in the same year that Pushkin visited the Russian troops there. Pushkin had never been abroad, but now he had the opportunity, and before long he was heading for the border river Arpachai. And finally he reached it:

> "I galloped towards the river with indescribable feelings. I have never yet seen foreign lands [...] I happily rode into the cherished river and my good horse got me onto the Turkish shore. But this shore had already been taken over. I was still in Russia" (Tolz 2001: 163).

In the westerly direction the picture was somewhat different. Nothwithstanding the prevalent Russophobia in Western Europe, in a longer perspective it seems clear that Tsarist Russia was not really obsessed with enlarging her territories in this part of the world. At least this seems to have been the case after 1809, when Finland was incorporated into the Russian Empire. During most of the nineteenth century Russia's western borders were stable, and this was the case also up in the far north-west at the Norwegian-Russian border, which indeed seemed to be a quiet corner of the Russian Empire.

But appearances are deceptive, and many observers in Norway, Sweden, Great Britain and other countries of Western Europe found it hard to believe that Russia had no intentions of overrunning this border too. Why should the Tsar let the Northern Cap alone? Sooner og later the Norwegian-Russian border was destined for being moved towards the west, and there were persistent rumours that Russia had its eye on ice-free harbours in North Norway. Allegedly Russia was not in possession of ice-free fjords along her own northern coasts, and this meant that Russia's prospect of developing its own naval fleet and securing its position as a world power, relied on its ability to acquire such a naval base on Norwegian territory. We may assume that it was the inherent logic of this argument that made it prevail for so long (Nielsen 2002).

It was British observers, concerned with the naval interests of their own country, who first formulated this hypothetical aim of Russian foreign policy in the high north. Considerable credence was given to their accounts both in Stockholm and in London; and towards the end of the Crimean War, in November 1855, England and France signed a treaty with Norway-Sweden in which the Norwegian-Swedish authorities undertook not to cede any part of their territory to Russia (Knaplund 1925). In return, the two great powers guaranteed the inviolability of the Joint Kingdom. In St Petersburg news of the November Treaty was received with dismay, and leading government representatives spoke of it as an expression of insulting and groundless suspicion of Russia.

There is good reason to believe that this mistrust of Russia was indeed unfounded; no material has yet come to light which would confirm that the Russians actually were planning to take possession of ice-free fjords in North Norway in the nineteenth century. The "Russian threat" to Norway can scarcely be said to have existed (Nielsen 2002). To all intents and purposes the Tsarist government did not feel that anything was at stake in the north-western corner of the empire. This does not mean that the Russian government did not have a policy for the high north, but it was basically defensive. Since Russia did not have a naval harbour by the Arctic Ocean, nor any other military fortifications in the north, it was necessary to maintain good relations with Sweden-Norway and avoid measures that could provoke public opinion in Sweden-Norway. Russia was actually defenceless in the north in case Swedish-Norwegian authorities should decide to activate the provisions in the November Treaty and apply for support from England and France.

Russia was certainly preoccupied with strengthening its position as a sea power – but its aspirations went in a southerly direction, aiming at control over the Straits and the Black Sea. Later the focus was moved to the Baltic, and finally, only towards the end of Tsarist Russia – to the north and the Arctic Ocean. The first Russian naval establishment in the north appeared during the First World War, not in North-Norway, but on the adjacent Russian Murman Coast, which proved well suited for this purpose, being, despite all rumours to the contrary, ice-free all the year round. So when the Russian authorities decided to build a naval base in the north, there was no reason why they should undergo the cost of violating a border convention and conquering foreign territory (Nielsen 2002).

So "the Russian menace" towards Northern Norway never materialized and consequently the Norwegian-Russian state border remained unchanged. Seen in a longer historical perspective the stability of this border is indeed a special case also among the long chain of European states bordering Russia – from the Black Sea in the south to the Barents Sea in the north, which otherwise was heavily affected by the convulsions of the twentieth century. All along this chain state borders were dragged back and forth as a result of world wars, the rise and fall of empires, revolutions and civil wars. On this background the tranquillity of the Norwegian-Russian border appears to be unique, even if it too was affected, when in 1920 Finland took over the Pechenga area and the border for a while became a Norwegian-Finnish border. In 1944, as a result of the changing tides of the Second World War, it was returned to the Soviet Union and re-established as a Norwegian-Soviet border. Today it is considered to be Russia's oldest present state border (See Khomutov & Nielsen 1997: 144–145).

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