

CHAPTER EIGHT

“IT WAS SO SACRED”: THE FINNISH-RUSSIAN BORDER IMAGINED AND CONSTRUCTED IN THE STORIES OF BORDER AREA INHABITANTS

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The Zone is a very complicated system of traps.

I don't know what's going on here
in the absence of people,
but the moment someone shows up,
everything comes into motion.

Old traps disappear and new ones emerge.
Safe spots become impassable.

Now your path is easy,
now it's hopelessly involved.

That's the Zone.

It may even seem capricious,
but it is what we've made it.

Everything that's going on here
depends not on the Zone, but on us.¹

The border between Finland and Russia is 1,200 kilometers long. It is not only a border between two nation-states. Whereas during the Soviet era it divided two different ideologies, today it marks the boundary of the European Union and remains one of the greatest economical divides in the world. In fact, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union this border seems

¹ Extract from Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979).

to mark a boundary between two worlds, and its effect on the Finnish people's mental landscape is significant.²

Historically, the idea of clearly marked borders between states is a recent phenomenon; as recent as the idea of the unified nation-state in itself.³ Borders are not self-evident and do not exist naturally. They are continually constructed, imagined and maintained in the practices, ideologies and fantasies of everyday life through which people and communities create their identities.⁴

How do people who have been living in the vicinity of the Finnish-Russian border experience the border? How do these people construct a story of their own lives and create their identities when the geographical distance to the state border might be as short as 400 meters? In this article I will analyze the various meanings given to the Finnish-Russian border in the stories of border inhabitants, and how these meanings simultaneously construct and reinforce the border's significance. How does the border in these stories seem to be something to be afraid of and yet, at the same time, something that brings security to everyday life?

The stories of the border inhabitants which I will be examining at were collected for the video installation *Borderlands*.⁵ The central theme of the installation is the Finnish-Russian border. *Borderlands* was completed in 2004 and had its premiere the same year in the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki. Since then it has been exhibited widely in museums, galleries and festivals in Finland and internationally.

² Pirkkoliisa Ahponen and Pirjo Jukarainen, "Introduction," *Tearing Down the Curtain, Opening the Gates: Northern Boundaries in Change*, ed. Pirkkoliisa Ahponen and Pirjo Jukarainen (Jyväskylä: SoPhi, 2000), 7.

³ Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1993), 10, 16-7; Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-13.

⁴ Anssi Paasi, "The Finnish-Russian Border as a Shifting Discourse: Boundaries in the World of De- and Re-territorialisation," *Tearing Down the Curtain, Opening the Gates: Northern Boundaries in Change*, ed. Pirkkoliisa Ahponen and Pirjo Jukarainen (Jyväskylä: SoPhi, 2000), 1. More on the definitions of the terms border and boundary, see *Frontiers and Identities: Exploring the Research Area*, ed. Luda Klusáková and Steven G. Ellis (Pisa: Edizioni Plus—Pisa University Press, 2006).

⁵ *Borderlands*. DVD installation. Written, directed and edited by Minna Rainio and Mark Roberts, 2004.

Borderlands deals with its subject matter through a combination of fact, fiction and fantasy, and it can therefore be defined as existing somewhere between documentary and media art. In this article I will discuss the interviews primarily through the cross-disciplinary theoretical frameworks of memory studies, cultural geography and cultural history.

Personal and Collective Interpretations of the Border and the Past

During the last few decades there has been a rising interest in collective and cultural memory and remembering in various academic disciplines. Numerous researchers have discussed the implications of personal and collective memories in relation to national and ethnic identities as well as to family histories.⁶ Researchers and artists have been looking at visual representations of the past—films and photographs—and analyzing how they might affect the ways in which individuals and communities remember their pasts.⁷ All these discussions seem to have in common the idea that remembering is a process which primarily takes place in the present and for the purposes of the present. Therefore, what is remembered is as important as what is forgotten or not told.⁸ Folklorist Taina Ukkonen has emphasized

⁶ Concerning nation and memory, see Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Jonathan Boyarin, "Space, Time and the Politics of Memory," *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1-37; Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-25; Ulla-Maija Peltonen, *Muistin paikat: Vuoden 1918 sisällissodan muistamisesta ja unohtamisesta* (Helsinki: SKS, 2003).

⁷ On family photographs and collective memories, see Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995); Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Seija Ulkuniemi, "Kuvitella elämää: Perhevalokuvan lajityypin tarkastelua" unpublished licentiate thesis, University of Lapland, 1998; Päivi Granö, *Taiteilijan lapsuuden kuvat: Lapsuus ja taide samassa hetkessä* (Helsinki: Taideteollinen korkeakoulu, 2000). The photographic artists Shimon Attie and Masumi Hayashi have also dealt with the remembering and forgetting of the Second World War in their artworks.

⁸ See Wood, 1-3.

how remembering is always an *interpretation* of the past. Consequently, when a researcher is using people's recollections as the primary source of her research she too is making interpretations of the material—therefore the end result is a researcher's interpretation of interviewees' interpretations of the past.⁹

In her doctoral dissertation Taina Ukkonen has analyzed memory talk as a process of creating one's own history. She divides the ways in which people reminisce about their lives into two main forms: *experience stories* and *life stories*. According to Ukkonen, experience stories consist of interpretations of past events as well as of talking about oneself to others. In experience stories the actual experience is more important than the personal memory of the event, and therefore the told experience can also be someone else's rather than one's own.¹⁰

With reference to the Finnish experience of the Second World War, Eeva Peltonen has suggested that people who have not experienced the war or who have been born after it can have memories relating to war.¹¹ Marianne Hirsch has coined the term *postmemory* to describe this generationally distanced memory. Postmemory is distinguished from memory precisely because of generational distance: it is this distance that makes it a specific form of remembering. Yet, as Hirsch points out, postmemory differs from history through the deeply felt personal connection to past events. Whereas memory is always mediated through imagination and fantasy, in postmemory the events have never been experienced personally. Instead, they are completely experienced through imaginative creation. According to Hirsch, postmemories are typical to those generations who have lived in the shadow of the traumatic events of previous generations, for example wars and the stories told about the war.¹²

Experience stories are simultaneously personal and collective. The stories recounted are never purely personal as they deal with historical

⁹ Taina Ukkonen, *Menneisyyden tulkinta kertomalla: Muistelupuhe oman historian ja kokemuskertomusten tuottamisprosessina* (Helsinki: SKS, 2000), 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹ Eeva Peltonen, "Muistojen sodat—Muistien sodat," *Aina uusi muisto: Kirjoituksia menneen elämisestä meissä*, ed. Katarina Eskola and Eeva Peltonen (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, 1997), 91. Cf. Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja, "Tuli käsky niin outo ja kumma, tuli lähtö kotoa pois," *Saatiin tämä vapaus pitää: Tutkija kohtaa rovaniemeläisveteraanin*, ed. Heikki Annanpalo, Ritva Tuomaala and Marja Tuominen (Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopisto, 2001), 264-97.

¹² Hirsch, 22. Cf. Hautala-Hirvioja.

events through the viewpoint of the narrator. Through these experience stories life events are organized into categories and chronologies and concomitantly these experiences become part of collective memories and histories.¹³

Ulla-Maija Peltonen has described remembering as *historical experience* and as *historical consciousness*. These are constructed in social and historical contexts in relation to ideologies and deep mental structures. Historical experience is associated mainly with personal memories whereas historical consciousness identifies itself with a nation's collective memories and therefore with the politics of memory. However, both of these processes are closely intertwined with each other, and thus the remembered experience is concurrently a personal memory in a historical situation as well as historical consciousness in personal recollection.¹⁴ The ways in which people talk about their memories are also influenced by the collective narrative traditions of the community.¹⁵

The Finnish-Russian border plays a significant part in Finnish history and the definition of its national identity. Therefore the interviewees locate themselves and the stories they tell as a part of larger, public and official discourses of history and ideology. These public discourses influence the ways in which these people interpret their experiences and lives as inhabitants of this particular border area. In recent decades the Finnish-Russian border has been in the middle of significant historical and political changes which undoubtedly affect the interviewees' interpretations of the past.¹⁶

National, Social and Mental Borders

Borders and boundaries are psychological facts. They exist on many levels and influence people's lives even though they might often seem unnecessary and even artificial. Borders are typically delineated through

¹³ Ukkonen, 40.

¹⁴ Ulla-Maija Peltonen, 20-1.

¹⁵ Ukkonen, 41.

¹⁶ Cf. Eeva Peltonen, 88; Olga Brednikova, "From Soviet 'Iron Curtain' to 'Post-Soviet Window to Europe': Discursive Reproduction of the Russian-Finnish Border," *Tearing Down the Curtain, Opening the Gates: Northern Boundaries in Change*, ed. Pirkkoliisa Ahponen and Pirjo Jukarainen (Jyväskylä: SoPhi, 2000), 26.

negation—they are the points where one thing becomes another, where “this” becomes something else, “not-this.” However, borders are not necessarily only restricting or suffocating: they can also be productive spaces for encounters. Boundaries are necessary, as they create order and help to make sense of the surrounding world.¹⁷

Cultural geographer Anssi Paasi, who has conducted extensive research on borders and especially the Finnish-Russian border, has pointed out that borders are spatial, ideological and social constructions through which individuals and communities construct and maintain their identities.¹⁸ Nation-state-centered ideology has had a significant effect on the ways in which people understand the world and how knowledge of the world is produced. Through the nation-state ideology the idea comes into being that the world consists of rigidly separate areas with precise and exclusive borders which all have their own specific identity.¹⁹ This thought pattern obscures the fact that these borders and the areas that they encompass are created by people themselves. The identities produced through these processes of confinement are not neutral or self-evident but constantly evolving and reproduced through the creation and maintenance of boundaries and differentiations.²⁰

The borders of the nation-state differentiate “us” from “not us.” The principal objective of the nation-state has been to create an illusion of the people of the nation as having a homogenous identity and being a unified category.²¹ The borders that define the nation are powerful tools for social divisions as they produce boundaries between imagined collective

¹⁷ Kari Kurkela, “Rajalla oleminen: Kokemuksen ymmärtämisen mahdollisuudesta,” Rajoilla-seminaari, Lapin yliopisto, September 12-13, 2003. <http://www.urova.fi/?deptid=14293> (accessed November 4, 2004).

¹⁸ Paasi, “The Finnish-Russian Border,” 88.

¹⁹ Anssi Paasi, “The Re-construction of Borders: A Combination of the Social and the Spatial,” Alexander von Humboldt lecture, November 9, 2000, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, <http://www.ru.nl/socgeo/colloquium/Paasi2.pdf> (accessed October 29, 2008). Paasi also points out how the development of cartography and thus also the visualisation of space through maps have contributed to the nation-state ideology. In the early 20th century clear borderlines started to divide states and replace the previous and more unclear border zones.

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

²¹ Paasi, “The Re-Construction of Borders,” 6.

mentalities of “us” and “them.”²² Collective representations define nations in relation to other nations—national identities are typically constructed through these differentiations.²³

These boundaries between identities, mentalities and nationalities are produced and reinforced in the practices of everyday life.²⁴ What then, do the people who have lived and grown up in this peculiarly divided landscape think about the border and its significance for their lives?

The Border Before

The interviews conducted for the video installation *Borderlands* focused mainly on the interviewees’ own experiences, thoughts and stories, but for most people the experience of the border was also influenced by the stories and recollections they had heard from their parents and grandparents. Almost all the people had heard stories of when the border was open before the 1920s and traders from both sides were able to cross the border freely. Many of them recalled stories about time when the border was suddenly closed and the people who happened to be on the wrong side were separated from their families for decades.

[The border was closed] suddenly in 1922-23. My mother told me that her neighbor’s father in Vuokkiniemi was a trader and it happened that he was getting things from the Finnish side when the border was closed. There were many children in that family and he was left on the Finnish side. It was said that he suffered from that so much that he died of that pain, that his heart couldn’t take it. His daughter also told about this, that her father was left on the Finnish side. (Russia 1, woman)

The border was firmly closed up to the 1990s. These stories of the openness of the border and its dramatic closure seem to be a significant part of the understanding of the border for those who have not experienced the situation but only heard of it. These postmemories, mediated through the

²² Seppo Knuutila and Anssi Paasi, “Tila, kulttuuri ja mentaliteetti: Maantieteen ja antropologian yhteyksiä etsimässä,” *Manaajasta maalaisateeliin: Tulkintoja toisesta historian, antropologian ja maantieteen välimaastossa*, ed. Kimmo Katajala (Helsinki: SKS, 1995), 55.

²³ Ibid., 44.

²⁴ Paasi, “The Finnish-Russian Border,” 12.

previous generation's stories, have influenced the way people explain and remember the feeling of living near the border when it was completely closed.

I remember thinking as a child and a schoolboy that it would be nice to go and see what life is like on the other side, because I had heard all the stories from my father of what it was like before. But you couldn't even dream that the border would be open. The borders were tightly closed and you could never even imagine that you could ever visit the Finnish side. (Russia 2, man)

The Imagined Other Side

According to the Russian cultural researcher Olga Brednikova, the Soviet Union was surrounded by a secret: the state border was the border of the world and for the ordinary Soviet citizen there was nothing outside of it. Even the local people near the border had no idea what was on the other side.²⁵ This enforced ignorance is reflected in many stories told by the Russian interviewees:

We didn't know anything about Finland. There was a big military unit in the village and they always talked about spies. If you see a strange man you have to tell [about it]. It was talked about all the time. If we go to the forest and see someone we don't know we have to tell. As a pioneer I always had a dream to catch a spy [laughs]. But we never saw those spies. It was always talked about and we thought that there are lot of them running around in the forests, that if you go further from the village you will find one. But it never happened that someone would've found an unknown person. It never happened.

But we knew nothing about Finland. We only knew that spies come from Finnish side, that was clear, that we knew. But nothing was ever spoken about Finland. Nothing. (Russia 1, woman)

Such stories of spies reoccur in many childhood recollections by the Russian interviewees. In the cultural representations of the Soviet era—films, poetry and literature—the border guards became heroes. The children played at being border guards instead of playing war games. The border

²⁵ Brednikova, 27-30.

guards protected the “motherland” from the anonymous and faceless intruders that not only represented another state but also another political and ideological system.²⁶

We had a veil between states. Like the wall that was in Germany we had between Finland and Russia. For example, there was such an opinion that the spies are in Finland and capitalism. That it is worse there and that we are better. It was like that then. (Russia 3, man)

Border area inhabitants were sometimes recruited to help the border guards, and many people remembered how the border guards had a club called “border guards’ little helpers” for local children. One Russian man told how “fake spies” were sent to border villages. These fake spies were in fact border guards dressed up in civilian clothes, and it was their task to come the villages to test people’s reactions towards strangers. According to this interviewee, the locals were also requested to keep their boats locked so that the spies could not take and use them (Russia 2, man).

On the other hand, the iron curtain was not impenetrable even during the frostiest years of the cold war. Despite the disturbances caused by Soviet officials, many people listened to Finnish news from the radio and watched Saturday evening entertainment from Finnish television.

Aleksi worked at a power station. Those days he was the only one who was listening to the Finnish radio and he always said that in this radio they speak the truth and in Moscow they lie. [...] I always told him “No!” (I was a pioneer)—that the capitalists are there, they don’t speak the truth, they lie. And he told me to shut my mouth. (Russia 1, woman)

Border Creating Fear and Security

Whilst the Russians’ attitudes towards their northwest border seem to be colored by fear and perhaps a discreet curiosity, the central feeling amongst the Finns appears to be fear. One Finnish man who has lived all his life by the border describes the oppressive atmosphere:

It was something to be so scared of that even if you went to the border you had to be as if you didn’t even notice it. There was no one else there but the

²⁶ Ibid., 28.

border guards on the Russian side and on this side. It was forbidden, you couldn't do anything, you could get prosecuted. You were so afraid that you wouldn't even look to the other side. You had to be like that. It was so sacred. (Finland 1, man)

The feeling of fear seems to have decreased since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the border's gradual opening. Border inhabitants from both sides have visited the other side which does not appear to be so unknown and frightening anymore.

Now that you know what it is like on the other side the feeling is really different than it used to be. You don't have to be afraid of it and it's nice to know those people and to know that you are welcome there. And they can experience that too, that it is nice when they visit here.

Maybe it has something to do with the Soviet Union collapsing. It must have something to do with that, so that the border isn't so frightening anymore. It doesn't feel so bad anymore, not so dangerous or anything like that. [...] And now that there is the possibility of going there and the politics are so different and more open, so of course that knowledge gives security. That's how I feel about this. (Finland 2, woman)

However, even though the politics might be more open new threats are looming on the other side. Almost all Finnish interviewees associated Russia and the opening of the border with the prospect of increasing crime levels in Finland. Even though the open border might initially be experienced as liberating, such a view should not become too open. This rhetoric produces and reinforces the Finns' historical attitudes towards their eastern neighbor as a threat. The same Finnish woman later continues:

I feel that today this border with Russia is very necessary. The cultural difference is so strong that it could not be made any easier—at least in the next ten years or so—as for example the borders with Sweden or Norway. I think that these strict border formalities and patrolling are necessary for a long time to come. It is so different there. I'm sure that the respect is not so high there that they could... well how would I put it... hmmm, I wouldn't want to call them all criminals... but there is so much more crime on that side because of the poverty and lack. So it wouldn't be so safe to live here by the border if the border wasn't patrolled. (Finland 2, woman)

Seppo Knuutila and Antti Paasi have pointed out how sovereign states create and reinforce their self-image by drawing on stereotypical collective

notions of the Other. The remains of the past as well as the dominating and growing features of the present and future exist simultaneously in each nation's culture. The Finnish cultural paradigm includes various representations of the Other that circulate throughout the generations regardless of their education or training on multicultural issues.²⁷ According to the studies conducted in the Finnish and Russian border areas, Finnish and Russian border neighbors (still) do not know much about each other, but the Finnish people's attitudes towards Russians are more negative than the Russians' ideas about the Finns.

The same issue can be found in my interview material although that might be influenced by the fact that the Russians were considerate and did not want to seem too critical towards Finland when being interviewed by a Finnish person. However, as Paasi predicts, the violent history of the border areas will cast its shadow on Finnish attitudes for a long time to come.²⁸ A teacher living near the border describes the young people's outlook towards Russians and how the prejudices of the previous generations seem to have carried over to the younger people's viewpoints:

That [the attitudes of children and youth] really shows how common these fears still are but maybe they are such fears that the previous generation can't get rid of. They take them to the grave with them and that's it. But they have experienced this specific peculiar period of history that has been here since the mid-century. (Finland 3, man)

In the end it is the Russians who have to experience the results of these ideas and suspicions through their bodies. This Russian man feels that he is a suspect every time he crosses the border:

It has not become any easier, there is all kinds of nuisance for people. It should be much more free especially for the people who live here, and have lived all their lives. It feels like I'm always under suspicion. When I go there from here and when I come here from there they always think I am someone suspicious. And I have never committed even a smallest crime [...] I haven't brought vodka or cigarettes, nothing. [laughs]. (Russia 4, man)

²⁷ Knuuttila and Paasi, 46.

²⁸ Paasi, "The Finnish-Russian Border," 96.

Despite their partial openings, borders remain borders. In the Russian media the Finnish-Russian border is seen as more open from the Russian side and Finland's strict border regulations are also considered to be offensive. In the media the border has been referred to as a closed gate to Europe.²⁹

Living by the Border

Is living by the border spatially and geographically a special experience? One Finnish man has lived all his life only 400 meters from the Soviet Union/Russia and is able to view the state border from his bedroom window. The forest beyond the border posts might appear the same, yet the trees "there" are not the same as those "here." They belong to another place.³⁰ Only a few kilometers away there emerges a different nation and culture, and only a few decades ago another ideology. A lot of history is condensed onto the landscape of the frontier, but how is this made present in people's everyday lives?

This man who has lived all his lifetime by the border experiences the vicinity of the border as restricting:

Well, the border person's life is a bit different from the someone living in the mainland, the circumstances alone are so different and more difficult from what life is like somewhere else. [M.R: How different?] Well it is restricting in that when you live by the border you can go only one direction. It is like all life ends here. In my case it ends there on the other side of that lake. If you live somewhere else in Finland, further from the border, you can go in any direction from your home. But when you live by the border you can't go anywhere except one direction. (Finland 1, man)

A Finnish woman who moved to the border area as an adult describes the new limitations the zone introduced to her everyday life:

Well you had to learn it at first. [...] It was strange that you couldn't go in one direction at all—like when you went to the forest to pick berries you had to be careful not to cross the border zone. It was strange, and also in some ways a bit scary too. Sometimes you heard all kinds of noises from

²⁹ Brednikova, 36.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 29.

there—shooting and banging I have heard—and you never knew what was happening there. (Finland 2, woman)

In some ways the people in the frontier areas could be seen as “prisoners of space”—they cannot move freely in this space. There are various signs around the border—watch towers, notices and warnings—to alert you to the presence of this specific geographical location.³¹ Nevertheless, some people believe the border to be almost an invisible element of everyday life. One Finnish woman tried to convince me that the geographical vicinity of the border has never really had any effect on her life. She never even thought about it:

It is strange but I was never really interested. The border was so total that I was never really interested at all. That is strange. Even though I’ve lived by the border I have somehow grown so used to it and the fact that the border is there and the Russians live there and that we live on this side. I don’t think the border has ever really affected my life. (Finland 4, woman)

When I continued to ask questions about the border she kept trying to explain her experience to me:

You have been born to understand the fact that the border is just there and you just can’t do anything about it. I never even thought that it could be an opportunity, that idea was never even offered. Not even in school—you couldn’t even study Russian in school.

You accept the fact that you can’t go that way. That’s an amazing thing, but that’s just the way it is. [...] You just somehow accept that the possibilities are on the Finnish side—the opportunity to study and everything is here. And the border has been closed and that’s it, there’s nothing more to it than that. And even now [when the border is open] I am not really enthusiastically rushing there. (Finland 4, woman)

For some people the border’s significance as a total cultural and social divider has become so prevailing that the other side seems to be completely shut out of consciousness. The same woman continues to explain how she only started to realize that she had lived so near the Soviet Union when she moved to Stockholm. Her Swedish friends were frequently wondering how anyone could have the courage to live so near the border. On the other

³¹ Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border* (Chichester: John Wiley, 1995), 270.

hand, all the surveillance connected with living near the border can also bring a sense of security into one's life:

But on the other hand you must think that we are safe here, that we are being looked after and patrolled, that we don't have to worry. (Finland 2, woman)

Do We Need Borders?

Well the whole world could be without borders. What if the whole globe was without borders? But then I don't know what would happen. It would be nice without borders [laughs]. If there could be such a time. At least here we don't need it—so we could go for a coffee or our friends could drop by for a coffee and just call to say “we are coming over.” Maybe that would be easier, nicer. (Russia 5, woman)

Many people experience the border as restricting and yet also necessary. A new situation without a border is hard to even imagine—who would we then be? The Finnish-Russian border is etched very deeply into peoples' mental landscapes. Although borders can be seen to be necessary, allowing people to identify with something and make sense of the world around them, they would not necessarily need to be so total, exclusive and extreme.³²

One Finnish man wishes that in the future the eastern border would be like the border with Sweden or Norway and that it would be easier for people to cross the border and meet each other on the other side:

Of course there have to be borders. There have to be borders between counties and villages and all that [...]. This state border could be like those, so that people could be in contact with each other despite the border. So it wouldn't be so restricting—it wouldn't exclude all the people from the other state. There could be more interaction. Isn't the border with Sweden and Norway much more human? Similar freedoms could also be here and people would have much better lives, not with such a strong division politically and everything else.

I wish that there wouldn't be all this need for invitations, passports and visas. So you could just go there on impulse to visit people and life would be like that. (Finland 1, man)

³² Cf. Paasi, “The Finnish-Russian Border,” 3.

Various postmodern theories imagine a world where nation-states and geographical borders lose their significance. These visions of a world without boundaries are typically tied to economic liberalism, capitalism and new technologies.³³ In these theories nationality and place are not primary identity categories. Rather, it is argued that virtual realities and the internet will revolutionize communication between people, creating new communities and identities that cross traditional geographical borders.³⁴ Even though new digital media and communication technologies have certainly created new global communities, the simultaneous recent rise and popularity of nationalist and populist extreme right-wing political parties in various European countries seems to tell a different story about the importance of belonging to a nation in people's minds.

Ian McLean has pointed out how these postmodern fantasies and visions of mobile, hybrid identities and open multicultural spaces have never been part of reality to the majority of people. Even though the borders might be more open to the streams of capital and knowledge, they remain closed to people, especially if they are refugees, uneducated or otherwise "undesirable" citizens.³⁵ Despite the rhetoric of globalization the lottery of birthplace still has a crucial significance on people's destinies.³⁶ Regardless of the new virtual spaces, the state borders still form a part of people's everyday lives. The reality of borders is multi-faceted: while EU citizens might easily cross their borders, daily thousands of people from outside the EU are prepared to pay enormous sums of money and to risk their lives to be able to cross the border into Europe. This is hardly a shining example of a postmodern world where borders are permeable and insignificant.

In the stories of border residents the restrictions imposed by the nation-state's exterior borders are clearly present in their everyday life. The border can still be crossed but only at certain crossing points. And although it is relatively easy to obtain a visa it still is a time-consuming process. You might be able to see the state border from your bedroom window but you can not walk to the other side. The wishes of many interviewees were fairly

³³ Anssi Paasi, "Rajat ja identiteetti globalisoituvassa maailmassa," *Eletty ja muistettu tila*, ed. Taina Syrjämä and Janne Tunturi (Helsinki: SKS, 2002), 170.

³⁴ Ian McLean, "Back to the Future: Nations, Borders and Cultural Theory," *Third Text* 57 (Winter 2001-02): 23; Paasi, "The Re-construction of Borders," 8.

³⁵ McLean, 24.

³⁶ Paasi "The Finnish-Russian Border," 87.

simple and ordinary: it would be nice to be able to pop to the other side and have a cup of coffee with friends.

In the Borderlands between the Real and the Imagined, Past and Future

How can something as insignificant as a line have such a huge impact on people and how they live? How can a small patch of grass figure so importantly in the everyday lives of individuals? How can an apparently “empty” space be so full of meaning?³⁷

The identities of national communities are constructed in relation to their borders and the mechanics of inclusion and exclusion.³⁸ Borders and national narratives are not self-evident or naturally existing, yet their consequences on the material practices and people’s everyday lives in a society are very real. Therefore boundaries are always political and always encompass a power relation.³⁹

Each border is associated with at least two narratives:

[...] even though the border appears to be the same for groups residing on both sides, its concrete and ideological meanings may radically shift in the processes of history writing and spatialisation of memories on either side of the border. The narrative plots relating to borders are typically selective and presentist, written from the viewpoints of current states.⁴⁰

The border residents’ stories and interpretations of the border and what lies on the other side have been influenced by collective attitudes and representations of the neighboring state. The ideological oppositions of the past are still to be seen even in the interviews that were conducted in the present: some Finns felt that it was necessary to clarify their own political position during the interview. Whether they were politically leaning towards right or left influenced their interpretations of the border and its significance.

³⁷ Minna Rainio and Mark Roberts, “Borderlands,” *Framework—The Finnish Art Review* 1 (2004): 20.

³⁸ Paasi, “Rajat ja identiteetti,” 160.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 161-2; translation MR.

The recurring ideas of crime and poverty reproduce and reinforce the image of Russia as a threat. Finns who had never visited Russia provided information about the dangers and poverty over there. One Finnish woman described her journey to Russia:

When I went to Russia for the first time I was very curious and I didn't experience it in any way as a shock. Of course it was different and amazing that it was so different there. But everything else that replaces that—the friendliness and all. It doesn't need to be so modern, you can make do with much less. [...] So it wasn't for me any kind of shock like it has sometimes been for some other people. (Finland 1, woman)

She does not think that it would even be necessary to explain or clarify to me why the journey should be a “shock,” but assumed that I, as a Finn, would recognize and agree with this culturally coded⁴¹ representation of Russia. The existence of poverty and even crime is undeniable but it seems to be the dominating factor in Finnish people's collective ideas and representations of their eastern neighbor. These views tainted by fear hide many other more or equally important and real facts concerning people's lives in Russia.

As I mentioned earlier, many Russians talked very positively about their Finnish neighbors. However, that might have more to do with the actual interview situation and the fact that most of them had somehow been involved with tourism enterprises in Russia. They might not have wanted to offend potential Finnish tourists.

It could be argued that the significance of the border in people's lives was over-emphasized in the interviews since all the questions concerned the border. I believe that the Finnish people's ideas about Russia are influenced both by historical consciousness as well as historical experience.⁴² What this means is that people's personal memories and experiences of the border are influenced by Finnish history and its collective memories. Yet at the same time these personal memories also contribute to the official discourses and collective memories of the nation.

Cultural and social divisions between the imagined collective identities of “us” and “them” remain intimately bound with the geographical or spatial division between “here” and “there.”⁴³ Even though there is

⁴¹ Knuuttila and Paasi, 46.

⁴² Cf. Ulla-Maija Peltonen, 20.

⁴³ Knuuttila and Paasi, 46.

currently a lot of co-operation and communication across the border, and many interviewees had indeed visited the other side (even many times), the border still appears to divide two worlds. As one of the Russian interviewees concludes:

Of course I think that the border restricts me. When I go to the border, to the customs, I really feel that here ends the life in Russia. And I go to the other side of the border and there begins another life. And I will never forget that I am in Finland. This is not Russia, it is Finland. (Russia 1, woman)

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