

# **Soviet Identity Politics and Local Identity in a Closed Border Town, 1944–1991**

Alexander Izotov

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study will attempt to understand how local identity was constructed in the exceptional historical context of the closed Soviet border town Sortavala and to describe processes of place-making under the socio-economic conditions of the Soviet period. It will illustrate shifts in dominant Soviet discourses at various historical stages through narratives encountered in the local media and official documents. These narratives cover a wide spectrum of social life in Sortavala: political and ideological, social and economic, cultural and religious. Particular emphasis will be put on the construction of a local spatial identity in Soviet times.

Sortavala today is one of the administrative centres of the Republic of Karelia in Northwest Russia. It is located in approximately 60 km from the Finnish-Russian border in the North Ladoga region. Due to its geopolitical position the region has a dramatic history. In course of history it was a part of Swedish and Russian empires, and the Grand Duchy of Finland. As part of the Finnish independent state in the 1920s and 1930s the town experienced dynamic development. After the WWII the territory was annexed to the USSR and was settled by migrant community from different parts of the former Soviet Union. Finnish population moved totally to Finland. In the Soviet era the town was closed for both, internal and external visitors, and knowledge about neighbouring Finland and the Finnish everyday culture was limited. The main question for this study is what the border meant for the local community during the Soviet period (1944–1991). The empirical material for the analysis of the local identity construction is based on the local newspaper of Sortavala (*Krasnoe Znamia*) and on archive documents from The National Archive of Karelian Republic (NA RK f. R-2203, R-1051, R-757 and the other Funds).

The first section will discuss and analyse the political and ideological mechanisms of identity construction. Its starting point will be a study of the institutional agents and frameworks of identity construction with reference to structuration theory i.e. the role of social structures, actors and institutions in processes of territorialisation and de-territorialisation (Giddens 1984). According to Allan Pred, social structures saturated with

power produce place (Pred 1984). The focus will here be on the role of political institutions. This study also takes into account spatial theory in human geography, which emphasises links between place and people and the ways in which people create sense of place through production of images, signs and meanings. Essentialist interpretations (Tuan 1977, Cresswell 2009) emphasise emotional ties of human beings with territory. Anti-essentialist views postulate that a sense of place is the result of socio-economic mechanisms (Harvey 2000: 194). However, these two approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive. Obviously, they are closely interrelated in the study of specific contexts like post-WWII Sortavala. Essentialist vision of the significant role of a particular place for people's sense of place is especially important when we analyse the North Ladoga Karelia's migrant community of the 1940s and 1950s. Emotionally, this community was not rooted in the territory, and the contradictory and complicated process of the newcomers developing their place perceptions will be analysed in detail later in this study. This process demonstrates how people with diverse cultural identities create common senses of place and spatial identity. Place-making is a process in which people are involved. They constitute place, and this is a significant element in the identity formation (Massey 1994; Harvey 1996). At the same time, the role of social and economic factors enhances understanding of how the Soviet socio-economic system impacted local identity formation. Inspired by David Harvey's views on place as a product of social and economic mechanisms (Harvey 1993), territoriality and locality in Soviet Sortavala will be investigated in the context of political and economic conditions. This will be followed by an examination of various discursive fields of identity formation. After the annexation of the North Ladoga territory by the Soviet Union in 1944, the area was settled with culturally and ethnically diverse migrants, mainly from the Belorussian SSR, the Ukrainian SSR and the Vologodskaja Oblast. Soviet authorities created state and socio-economic institutions broadly in line with common practices and the legal framework of the Union. A key task for the political elite was then to socialise this population in the sense of transmitting core Soviet values. The studied sources—both archive documents and newspaper articles—illustrate ways and methods of this project and reveal the political and ideological instruments at work in shaping local identity. It is argued here that these took a peculiar character in the case of Sortavala whose status as a closed border zone provided a local context clearly distinct from that of other regions. The studied documents and media narratives highlight the role of Soviet border symbolism in this process.

Soviet identity concepts changed over time. Thus, Theodore Hopf, in his periodisation of Soviet history, has advanced that the years from 1947 to 1953 were marked by a strong us-versus-them dichotomy (Hopf 2002: 3) and that the predominant official discourse about what it meant to be a New Soviet Man (NSM) was not allowed to be questioned during that period. Then, 'Stalin's death buried the NSM' and inaugurated the Thaw period during which this dichotomy was significantly weakened in favour of a more neutral stance or was simply becoming irrelevant (Hopf 2002: 11–12).

Stalinist discourse had been characterised by ideological dogmatism, orthodoxy and intolerance towards difference. The Thaw period brought the institutionalisation of a new discourse of difference which established new boundaries for what was now

to be permissible or not. The changes brought about by the political liberalisation under Khrushchev had their limits and were often contradictory. The empirical material provides ample illustration of how these attempts to overcome shortcomings in the development of socialism changed communist education and identification. In Karelia the year 1956 represents a major turning point as the region's administrative status changed from that of a Soviet republic to an autonomous republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) (Vihavainen 1998: 38).



The institutionalisation of post-Stalinist discourses also meant new institutional agents for promoting them. Indeed, one of Khrushchev's favourite ideas was to gradually replace institutions of the state with public and voluntary structures. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the official discourse thus abounds with people's voluntary patrols, communist labour brigades, comrades' courts and so on (Kharkhordin 1999: 285). Later on, in the 1960s and 1970s, it became, for example, customary for newspaper readers to send letters to the editors, which offer excellent markers for the boundaries of difference in everyday discussions and in mass publications. Local newspapers thus represented a sense of place, a space where the authors of these letters expressed their feelings and emotions.

Another characteristic of the three decades that followed the de-institutionalisation of Stalinism in the early years of the Thaw (1960s) was the institutionalisation of both a new dominant discourse and rival discourses. Among the latter was a manifest

détente<sup>1</sup> (as a desirable future for Soviet society, a view emerging as an alternative beyond the boundaries of permissible difference in the 1970s and 1980s). After Khrushchev was removed from power in 1964 (see Smith and Ilic eds. 2011), anti-Stalinist rhetoric remained still present, but became more low-key in media narratives. While the boundaries of permissible difference were not narrowed, the media during this period focussed on the technocratic revolution, stressing science and technology, and on efforts to overcome the failures of the command economy.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, the media increasingly came to reflect signs of stagnation in the local context.

Another emerging subdominant discourse of the 1960s and 1970s was promoted by the writers of the ‘village prose’ movement, such as Valentin Rasputin, Vasili Belov and Viktor Astaf’ev, who emphasised an ethnic-national Russian identity in terms of the well-known debate on a specific Russian development, distinct from that observed in Western Europe. The attitude of the national political elite towards these narratives of ethnic Russian traditionalism was contradictory. As Hopf (2002: 18) has shown, this discourse was officially tolerated but also represented a challenge to the dominant discourse of internationalism that defined the relationship between the Soviet Union’s nationalities. In the context of the Karelian Republic, the sources emphasise the rhetoric of friendship between Soviet peoples.

Members of the intelligentsia were among the key social agents to produce alternative discourses on Soviet society, which were often reformist in nature. Scientists and artists had their own institutions in the form of unions, journals, publishing houses, theatres, educational and scientific institutions, and the more famous they were, the more freely they could express their views and opinions. However, in a peripheral region such as North Ladoga in Karelia, the local intelligentsia mostly reproduced the dominant discourse of socialist identity, except during the later years of Gorbachev’s perestroika, when reformist alternative discourses started to appear in local public debates.

The narratives studied in this study open the possibility to trace how an identity of the local community was constructed in official discourses and everyday practices in this border area. In particular, they show how the self-identification of an ethnically and socially diverse community was (re)shaped in accordance with the goals of the Soviet project of national identity that is the construction of a New Soviet Man. Their analysis also allows to describe how this community perceived its habitat and how local media created a new sense of place in Sortavala. The main focus will be on the changing spatial imagination of political agencies, above all the party apparatus, the military, industrial and, finally, cultural institutions and their role with regard to issues of ethnicity and language in the representations of Karelia.

---

1 The general easing of the geo-political tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States which began in 1969.

2 During the Brezhnev period, official repression was aimed at those dissidents who organised public protests, a phenomenon limited to big cities and not at all typical of small towns such as Sortavala. Information about dissident activities was mainly disseminated through Russian-language broadcasting services from Western Europe (Voice of America, BBC, etc.).