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Territorialising the Soviet State 1918-1936

The question of how the territories of the national entities in the Soviet state¹ were established and regulated has become a subject of international discussion, not least since the Crimean crisis in 2014. Moreover, in the Caucasus and Central Asia the borders fixed during Soviet times still serve as pretexts for interstate conflicts. Until the 1990s, Western scholarship had presumed that the creation and regulation of national territories in the Soviet state was intended to divide and conquer its population.² This thesis was also upheld by nationalist historians after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.³ In more recent years, distinguished researchers, including Francine Hirsch, Arne Haugen, Yelena Borisënok, Hennadiy Yefimenko, Adeeb Khalid and Arsène Saparov,⁴ have shown the complexity and diversity of these territorialisation processes. They have pointed to the involvement of different actors from the centre down to the village soviet. However, they have focused on one example or one region.

My research project is based on these results, but I analyse the territorialisation processes from a comparative perspective on the level of the Union Republics (SSR), including different regions of the Soviet state. I am focusing on the following questions: how and under which circumstances were the borders between the republics of the Union established? Who was involved in the processes of territorialisation? Who was able to participate in this discourse? I examine these questions based on case studies of the southwest (Ukraine and Russia), the south Caucasus (Armenia and Azerbaijan) as well as Central Asia (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan/Kirgizstan⁵), i.e. the border regions of the Soviet state. These cases not only include disputed and undisputed territorialisations in the 1920s and 1930s, but also controversial as well as “quiet” borders after 1991. I focus on the period between 1918 and 1936 during which the so-called Stalin constitution was adopted. At that time Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan received SSR status and the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

¹ With the term *Soviet state*, I refer to the territory which was controlled by the Bolshevik party directly or indirectly between 1917 and 1991.

² Robert Conquest: *The Last Empire*, London, Ampersand, 1962, pp. 28-31; Olaf Caroe: *Soviet Empire, The Turks of Central Asia and Stalinism*, London, Macmillan, 1967², pp. 145-149; George Joffé: *Nationalities and Borders in Transcaucasia and the Northern Caucasus*. In: John F. R. Wright et al. (eds.): *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, London, St. Martin's Press, 1996, pp. 15-33; Oliver Roy: *The New Central Asia. Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2000, p. 68.

³ E. g. Rahim Masov: *Tadzhiki. Istoriia natsional'noi tragedii*, Dushanbe, Irfon, 2008; Arslan Koichiev: *Natsional'no-territorial'noe razmezhevanie v ferganskoj doline 1924-1927 gg.*, Bishkek, Uchkun, 2001.

⁴ Francine Hirsch: *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005, pp. 145-185; Arne Haugen: *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 210 and pp. 235-237; Elena Iur'evna Borisënok: *Fenomen sovetskoi ukrainizatsii. 1920-1930-e gody*, Moskva, Evropa, 2006, pp. 99-105; Hennadiy Yefimenko, *Vyznachennia kordonu mizh USSR ta RSFRR*. In: *Problemy istorii Ukrainy* 20 (2011), pp. 135-176; Adeeb Khalid: *Making Uzbekistan. Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the USSR*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2015, pp. 272-280; Arsène Saparov: *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus. The Soviet Union and the Making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh*, London, Routledge, 2015, esp. p. 137.

⁵ Until 1926 the Kirgiz Autonomous Oblast (AO) was part of the Kazakh ASSR. In this paper, I use the current ethno-national designations.

(SFSR) was disbanded and its parts adopted SSR status, too. Thereby, the basic federal configuration which endured until the dissolution in 1991 was established.

My hypothesis is that within the processes of territorialisation the party leadership had to manage the diversity of the newly conquered space because it was obliged to rely on local and regional actors. This was due to its own administrative and military weaknesses, particularly in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. The aim of my research is to enhance the understanding of the current territorial conflicts in these border regions and to contribute to the ongoing debate about the practice of Soviet policy in its border regions.

Methodologically, I rely on concepts and ideas of *spatial history*⁶ as well as *border studies*⁷ and *new imperial history*⁸. The latter is particularly promising, as it relativizes “conventional” analytical categories of *nation* and *empire* and points to concrete contexts and situations which can be described as *imperial*. In other words, it focuses on practical attempts to manage contradictions emerging from social heterogeneity and diversity.⁹ In order to dive into this complexity of establishing the ethno-national entities in the Soviet state, the term *territory* serves as the analytical starting point. Like *space* it is a product of social interaction. Whereas *space* itself is something diffuse and vague (like “Eastern Europe”), *territory* is something clearly defined by borders and possesses authority for the involved actors (like a football field). In line with David Delaney, the latter “cannot be considered apart from two fundamental aspects of human social being: meaning and power and the contingency of their relationship.”¹⁰ *Territorialisation* is therefore a political process that creates territory. Thus, structures of power receive a geographic shape. *Borders* define what or who should be inside and what or who should be outside a certain (defined) territory. Territorialisations in the federal frame of the Soviet state had social, political and economic effects. These were mostly related to issues of official language, taxes and education as well as career opportunities.¹¹

⁶ See e. g. Nick Baron: *New Spatial Histories of 20th Century Russia and the Soviet Union. Exploring the Terrain*. In: *Kritika* 9 (2008), 2, pp. 433-447; Henri Lefebvre: *La production de l'espace*, Paris, Anthropos, 2000, pp. 35-57; Béatrice von Hirschhausen et al. (eds.): *Phantomgrenzen. Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2015; Gabriela B. Christmann (ed.): *Zur kommunikativen Konstruktion von Räumen. Theoretische Konzepte und empirische Analysen*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2016.

⁷ Thomas M. Wilson, Hastings Donnan (eds.): *A Companion to Border Studies*, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell, 2015; Doris Wastl-Walter (ed.): *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011.

⁸ E.g. Ilya Gerasimov/Sergey Glebov/A. Kaplunovski/Marina Mogilner/Alexander Semyonov: *Time, Forward!* In: *Ab imperio* (2015), 1, pp. 16-17; Darius Staliunas: *V poiskakh litovskoi Litvy. Litovskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie i protsess konstruirovaniia natsional'noi territorii do 1914 g.* In: *Ab imperio* (2015), 1, pp. 125-174; Anton Kotenko: *Imagining Modern Ukaïnica*. In: *Ab imperio* (2015) 1, pp. 519-526; Satoshi Mizutani: *Hybridity and History. A Critical Reflection on Homi K. Bhabha's Post-Historical Thoughts*. In: *Ab imperio* (2013), 4, pp. 27-48; Ronald Grigor Suny: *Dialektika imperii. Rossiia i Sovetskii Soiuz*. In: Ili'a Gerasimov et al. (eds.): *Novaia imperskaia istoriia postsovetskogo prostranstva*, Kazan, Tsentr Issledovaniia Natsionalizma i Imperii, 2004, pp. 163-196; Jeremy Smith: *Nation Building and National Conflict in the USSR in the 1920s*. In: *Ab imperio* (2001), 3, pp. 221-265.

⁹ Ilya Gerasimov/Jan Kusber/Alexander Semyonov (eds.): *Empire Speaks out. Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 23-25.

¹⁰ David Delaney: *Territory. A Short Introduction*, Malden, Blackwell, 2005, p. 15.

¹¹ Further reading on the question of territory and territorialisation: Steffi Marung, Katja Naumann (eds.): *Vergessene Vielfalt. Territorialität und Internationalisierung in Ostmitteleuropa seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014; Matthias Middell, Katja Naumann: *Global History and the Spatial Turn. From the Impact of Area Studies to the Studies of Critical Junctures of Globalization*. In: *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010), pp. 149-179; Anssi Paasi: *Territory*. In: John Agnew, Katharyne Mithchell, Gerard Toal (eds.), *A Companion to Political Geography*, Malden, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 109-122; David Newman: *Boundaries*. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 123-137; Karl Schlögel: *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*, München, Hanser,

Documents from state and party archives are the most important sources for my analysis. These sources are well-accessible and show to a great extent the processes of negotiation between the actors on different levels of hierarchy. For instance, the documents of the territorialising commissions related to the Russo-Ukrainian border have been almost completely preserved and are fully accessible in the GARF, Moscow and TsDAVOU, Kiev.¹² Most documents of the Central Asian Bureau concerning the formation of the national territories in Central Asia are stored in the RGASPI, Moscow,¹³ whereas the establishment of the national territories in the South Caucasus is documented in the records of the Transcaucasian SFSR at the Central Archive of Contemporary History in Tbilisi.¹⁴ Statistical materials and ethnographical expertise are held at the RGAE.¹⁵ The processes of territorialisation and regulation (*rayonirovaniye*) have also been discussed in Soviet journals and newspapers, including *Zhizn' natsionalnostey* (1918-1924), *Vestnik zemleustroystva i pereseleniya* (1927-1929), *Sotsialisticheskoye zemleustroystvo* (1927-1935) and *Revolyutsiya i natsional'nosti* (1930-1937). Furthermore, there are contemporary surveys on territorial regulation by *Gosplan*¹⁶ and detailed territorial registers edited annually by the NKVD.¹⁷

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2003, p. 393; Charles S. Maier: Consigning the Twentieth Century to History. Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era. In: *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 3, p. 808.

¹² TsDAVOU (Central State Archives of the Highest Authorities of Ukraine), Kiev. See: State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF), Moscow, Commission of Aleksandr Cherviakov (1924/25): GARF, f. 3316; Commission of Ter-Gabrielian (1925-1928): *fond* 6082.

¹³ Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, Moscow (RGASPI), f. 62, op. 2 d. 101, 104, 109 and 110. In the RGASPI there are also the personal *fondy* of high party members, responsible for the national territorialisations, such as Avel' Enukidze (f. 667, d. 4, 5), Aleksandr Tsiurupa (f. 158, d. 3, 12, 28, 36), Anastas Mikoian (f. 84, op. 2), Grigorii (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze (f. 85 op. 5, 13-15, 18, 24-25) and Sergei Kirov (f. 80, op. 6-9; 23-25).

¹⁴ Central Archive of Contemporary History (Tbilisi), *fondy* 612 and 607. Party documents referring to territorialisations in the South Caucasus can also be found in RGASPI, f. 64 (Kavbiuro) and in the personal *fondy* of Ordzhonikidze (f. 85 op. 5, 13-15, 18, 24-25) and Kirov (f. 80, op. 6-9; 23-25).

¹⁵ Russian State Economic Archive (RGAE), Moscow. E.g. *fond* of Konstantin Egorov, responsible for the territorialisation at *Gosplan* in the 1920s (RGAE, f. 634); *Department for Territorial Planning* (RGAE, f. 4372, op. 15, 25, 29-34); documents on the census of 1920, 1923 and 1926 (RGAE, f. 1562, op. 5-6, 15, 19, 21, 28, 324, 336); demographical statistics (f. 1562, op. 17-20, 27, 31).

¹⁶ Konstantin Egorov (ed.): *Raironirovaniie SSSR. Sbornik materialov po raionirovaniuu s 1917 po 1925 god*, Moskva-Leningrad, Planovoe khoziaistvo, 1926.

¹⁷ E. g. *Spisok gubernii i uezdov R.S.F.S.R., S.S.R.B. i U.S.S.R.*, Moskva, Izdatel'stvo NKVD, 1922.