

## Contested borders and identity revival among Setos and Cossacks in the Russian-Estonian borderland

Elena Nikiforova

In summer 1996 I undertook fieldwork as part of a group project<sup>1</sup> studying Setos, an ethnic group in Pechory district in the Pskov region on the Russian side of the Russian-Estonian border. To our surprise, we discovered another group of people there, who were in conflict with the Setos. These men behaved aggressively, and distinguished themselves by cultural performances and ethnic markers, which they called 'Cossack'.

This claim to 'Cossack' identity immediately drew a response from us. Even people unfamiliar with Russian history and culture have some idea of who the Cossacks were. Until recently Cossacks were the stuff of legends, strongly associated with the Russian monarchy and with the emigrations of the early twentieth century. Cossacks were traditionally linked to the territory in the south of Russia. Thus, one would not expect to meet them on the Russian northwest in the mid-1990s.

This paper is based on ethnographic, sociological and historical work, as well as on newspaper materials and my field notes. The first section considers the history of the contemporary Russian-Estonian borderland through the history of its inhabitants, the marginal ethnic group of Setos. Here we will see how the closure of the frontier region between the former Estonian and Russian Socialist Republics, and the territorial dispute between contemporary Estonia and Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, established a distinct cultural space in the contested territories of the Pechory region on the Russian side of the border, activated the Seto ethnic identity, and resulted in the

appearance of the Cossacks. The second section of the paper addresses the broader question of the modern revival of Cossack identity, focusing, in particular, on the role of the state border in this process. Special attention is paid to state involvement in and attitude towards the manifestation of this identity in practice.

### **The Russian-Estonian frontier and its inhabitants**

In the modern discourse on culturally constructed borders the term 'frontier' is used to define the zone between state borders as well as those boundaries where different peoples are in contact with each other (Boeck 2000). From the state perspective, unlike the boundary, which is a line of inclusion and exclusion and inward-oriented, frontier has been understood as being outward-oriented and as a zone of contact rather than a line of separation (Paasi 1998).

As Kopytoff (1987) and Boeck (2000) have pointed out, the distance from the center of the state and the weakness of state power in peripheral regions have historically provided fruitful ground for the emergence of new communities. As Kopytoff (1987) has shown for Africa, people forced to leave their homelands as a result of social, economic and environmental catastrophes settled in territories beyond the jurisdiction of established political communities. In his words, frontier regions have been the incubators of new societies, which have no opportunity (or desire) to re-

produce the forms of social life found in the center. Kopytoff points out that a frontier does not create a society of a certain type; it rather provides an institutional vacuum which allows the development of specific social processes (Kopytoff 1987).

The description above characterizes the contemporary borderland between Estonia and Russia. Indeed, historically these lands have been a frontier zone, a meeting place of two civilizations, the Eastern-Slavic Orthodoxy and Western Europe. In different historical periods, following political 'shifts', the social-political space of the modern border region changed more than once from its status as an open frontier zone to a closed borderland. While the lakes of Pskovskoe and Chudskoe had been the natural boundaries between the possessions of Russia and the Estonian lands, for a long time the boundaries to the south and the north of the lakes had remained blurred. In Russian ethnological writings, these territories have been referred to as an 'ethno-contact zone' between the Finno-Ugric peoples and the Slavs. The traces of this connection can be found even today. The small ethnic group of Setos is one of the most interesting products of these intensive centuries-old contacts between different peoples.

Before the end of the 1980s, only a few ethnologists knew about the Seto people. The 'borderness' of the area of Seto settlement and some specific features of their culture first generated interest in their ethnic identity. Two important markers of ethnic identity, religion and language, contain the evidence of the Setos' frontier origin and their liminal position; unlike Estonians, who are Lutherans, the Setos profess Orthodoxy, like their Russian neighbors. However, they speak a southern dialect of the Estonian language, which has a number of words borrowed from Russian.

The ethnic history of the Setos remains speculative. Due to the Setos' geographical and cultural marginality, modern Russian researchers are very careful when defining the key characteristics of Seto identity formation

(Gadlo 1998). In addition, nowadays the issue of the Setos' origin has become politically sensitive, as discussed below. However, there is a shared opinion that from the sixteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century, Orthodox religion had been a cornerstone of their identity, which allows some researchers to speak about the Setos of that time as a 'socio-religious community' rather than as an ethnic group (Gadlo 1998: 272). Indeed, the foundation of the Pskov-Pechory Monastery in the fifteenth century was a key event both in the history of the region and in the Seto's ethnic history. *Setomaa* (the land of the Seto people) is still perceived as an outpost of Orthodoxy, with its center in the Pechory Monastery. As to the ethnic identity of the Seto, it is considered to be a relatively new phenomenon, a product perhaps of the twentieth century and nation building.

During the twentieth century, the Setos increasingly began to feel 'Estonian' - 'we are the Seto people, but our children are Estonians' - due to the development of education in the Estonian language, the activities of educational and social organizations, and the Estonian state policy in the 1930s of providing the Setos with Estonian surnames (Rihter 1979: 96, as cited in Gadlo 1998: 272). As a result, even the names of elderly Setos carried a frontier trace, an implicit reference to their frontier origins and their dual identity - having become Estonians by surname, their first names given by the Orthodox Church still looked and sounded Russian.

The history of the Setos is directly connected to the history of political borders in the region. In 1920 the territory of Pechory district - the Setos' homeland - was given over to Estonia and the border moved westwards. In 1944 these lands were partly returned to Russia, with a part of *Setomaa* remaining under Estonian jurisdiction. However, since Estonia was included in the Soviet Union, the solid borders between Russia and Estonia were abolished and the region turned into a frontier once again.

Thus, in Soviet times was ambiguous: on transparency of the in the USSR, it was common political space. On the other hand, it mode of life, being a tion zone, sewing to two socialist republics ferent in terms of social and ethnic culture: socialist republican mental authorities, port connections to tively well-developed neighboring regions lines, facilitated the socio-cultural space tity. This identity v nic boundaries bet as well as across the division between I

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Thus, in Soviet times the territory of *Setomaa* was ambiguous: on the one hand, due to the transparency of the administrative boundaries in the USSR, it was the 'innerland' within the common political space of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it exercised fully a frontier mode of life, being an important communication zone, sewing together the peripheries of two socialist republics, which were very different in terms of socio-economic development and ethnic cultures. The distance from the socialist republican centers and their governmental authorities, combined with bad transport connections to the 'mainland' and a relatively well-developed network of roads with neighboring regions across administrative lines, facilitated the formation of a distinct socio-cultural space with a common local identity. This identity was constructed across ethnic boundaries between Russians and Setos as well as across the line of the administrative division between Estonia and Russia.

In 1992 the establishment of the new political border between Estonia and Russia introduced wide-ranging changes into the lives of the borderland inhabitants. 'Having arrived' (as the locals themselves say) in a 'sleepy' rural society, with its daily life arranged according to the laws of nature and agriculture, the border has brought new rules and regulations structured by the presence of the state. The border also disrupted the symbols and identities of the borderland inhabitants. With all its signs and institutions, the border has formed a new general cultural background; the 'border industries', including visa services and customs and border posts, have become a part of a daily cultural landscape in the towns of Pskov and Pechory and in the villages of the region. The border has appeared as a new center for this periphery, a core, a basis for building new social structures, new relationships and new identities.

In comparison to other parts of the new borderland between Estonia and Russia, some specific conditions resulted in the formation of a distinct cultural space in the administra-

tive area of Pechory district on the Russian side of the border. Three main factors determine this distinctive character: the ethnic composition of the district, the strong influence of the Orthodox Pechory monastery, and the contested political status of these territories. The interplay of these three characteristics, launched by the establishment of the border, changed the cultural landscape of this borderland. One of the most striking aspects of this change was the appearance of the Cossacks on the Russian side of the border.

### **Setos and Cossacks: modern revival of identities**

In Tsarist Russia, the Cossacks were the irregular army forces that lived and operated on peripheries, protecting Russian borders and colonizing new territories. The social and ethnic composition of the Cossacks was complex: any man, a nobleman as well as a peasant, "who could not find himself in the conditions of stable existence or had an adventurous character" could join the Cossacks (Ionin 1996: 225). In Russian society the Cossacks held a distinct position and gained special status as a 'military-service estate'. However, it has to be emphasized that the Cossacks also developed a distinct cultural and ethnic identity. This specificity of Cossack community formation raises the question of how Cossacks should now be defined - as estate or ethnic group? How this question is answered clearly has implications for the modern Cossack revival, as we will see later.

In 1917 the Cossacks numbered 4.5 million, organized in eleven Cossack 'hosts', which were scattered across the territories along the southern borders of Russia from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean. They were very effective in solving economic and political tasks in border regions and also formed the core of the Russian military reserve. In the 1920s the Cossacks were repressed, and their name has been silenced in both academic and non-academic

circles for more than sixty years.

As one of the leaders of the modern Cossack movement recently reminisced: "about ten years ago I thought, I was the only person on the planet who felt himself a Cossack" (author's interview, October 2000, St. Petersburg). It would be no big surprise to hear a similar remark from one of the Seto leaders. Of course, both groups had 'quietly' existed before, as expressed in the exercising of some cultural practices in daily life, but the overwhelming processes of ethnic/national awakening in the USSR following the period of political liberalization at the beginning of the 1990s, brought them from the level of folklore ensembles and ethnographic museums to active public discussion.

The breakdown of the USSR led to the decline of Soviet culture. At the level of individuals, the collapse of the Soviet cultural model had serious effects on people's worldviews, which led to a crisis of individual identification. In this vacuum ethnicity has become the most accessible means of social identification for individuals. Ethnic groups became emergency support groups in the absence of other reliable reference groups. Furthermore, ethnicity in an ethnocratic state becomes a valuable resource, as it supplies a whole spectrum of political rights (Dragunskii 1993).

Neither the Setos nor the Cossacks stayed outside the processes of ethnic mobilization. In both cases there emerged leaders and activists, and the movements' ideologies started to form. Of course, these movements are very different. The striking difference is the scope and the potential arena for the movements' development. There are no reliable estimations of the size of both groups, but even the approximate data that can be found are quite revealing. The estimated number of Setos is about 10-15,000 people, of whom less than 1000 at present live in Russia (Berg 2002). As to the Cossacks, newspapers give the total number of 4.5-5 million people (Nezavisimaja Gazeta-regiony, N2, November 1997), although these figures are unreliable and undoubtedly

overestimated.

Geographically both groups also seem to be very distant from each other. The Seto movement was localized in the territories between the Russian Federation and nationalizing Estonia, while the Cossack movement was developing in a broad area on the southern margins of Russia, from the Black Sea to the Far East. It is especially interesting that Cossack organizations also appeared in many other regions, which are not the regions of traditional Cossack settlements, and this will be discussed below.

The movements also took different ideological paths. The Seto movement focused on cultural revival and began with the restoration of the Seto language and the collection of folklore, creating the ABC book and popularization of Seto folk heroes. In contrast, the Cossack movement began by declaring the restoration of the Cossacks' moral and ideological orders, which had existed since 1917 and are rooted in Christian values and the concept of faithfulness to the State. But by 1991 the declared cultural and social goals of the movement had gradually slipped to secondary importance, being replaced by emerging political goals. The rebirth of the Cossacks was no longer an abstract slogan but real politics aimed at acquiring power (Khoperskaia and Kharchenko 1998: 87).

The developing Cossack movement faced a number of serious obstacles. Of these problems, the justification of this 'archaic' union's restoration appeared as one of the most important. The public did not encourage the Cossack revival because of the unusual presentation of the Cossacks (for example, they often appear in public in a Cossack military uniform from the early twentieth century) and, to a large extent, because of their equivocal, often aggressive behavior and vague ideas. In addition, Russian society did not see (and still doubts) any functional need for the reconstruction of Cossack structures in a modern context.

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ity is its functional component. In the times of the Tsarist monarchy the Cossacks held a special position in the Russian military system and in Russian society in general. Military service and total dedication to the Tsar and the State were seen by the Cossacks as the fundamental bases of their lives; these special functions, including border protection, were their main identity markers (Sagnaeva 1998). Thus, in order to justify the Cossack revival it was deemed necessary to find ideological foundations for the modern Cossack rebirth, to get back to their 'duty' in a state where there is no Tsar and where all the former Cossack niches are distributed to other social institutions, such as the police and the border guards (Donisov 1998). The new state borders provided one of the possible 'duties' for the modern Cossacks. How new borders have influenced the process of Seto and Cossack identity construction is the focus of the next section.

Seto identity, state borders, and state interests

As Donnan and Wilson have pointed out: "Experiences of borders, as in all liminal experiences, simultaneously reinforce and distinguish social and political status and role, and structure and meaning, by putting into sharp relief the full range of our identities. This is especially true of national and ethnic identities, which are configured at borders in ways that often differ from how these same identities are constructed in less peripheral areas of the state" (1999: 64).

In these ways borderlands acquire a special place on the social 'map' of a country, being a periphery in a geographical sense, but forming a center of a distinct social and cultural space, organized around the border and knitted together by the relations of different groups and identities. Looked at from this perspective, how can we describe the changes in a social space when a porous frontier becomes a less permeable border? As evident from the new border areas of Russia, the emergence of new political borders activates power in the formerly 'relaxed' space of a periphery. A changing border restructures the social space of a former frontier region according to its new physical, political and social contours. Moreover, as we shall see below, the border becomes a resource for the acquisition of economic, cultural and other capital by different social groups, as happened with the Setos and the Cossacks.

On the maps published in Estonia in the 1990s one can find two demarcation lines between Estonia and Russia: 'a temporary control line' and 'a border line'. These lines diverge to a significant extent, especially to the south of the lakes that naturally divide Estonia and Russia. 'The temporary control line' reproduced the administrative borders between the Estonian and Russian Socialist Republics and was demarcated by Russia as a state political border. In contrast, according to 'the border line' Estonia stretched a bit further to the southeast. This map is an illustration of the border dispute between Estonia and Russia on the matter of the Pechory district.<sup>2</sup> The 'gap' between the two lines represented the core of the dispute, namely the contested lands that happened to be part of *Setomaa*.

Disputed or not, the border was demarcated and the border regime established. The border divided the area of Seto settlement into two parts. One part was attributed to the Pechory district of Russia, the other to the Varskavaid of Estonia. Of course, the new border was destructive in many respects, not least for those families which were divided by it, and whose stories I heard all along its length. But here I would like to focus on another outcome of the border, namely state involvement in the 'Seto question', and the role of the border in the crystallization of Seto group identity.

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The territorial dispute between Estonia and

Russia over the Pechory district brought the Seto people from the realm of ethnographic museums to top-level political debate. We should recall here that the Setos are marginal, and speak a dialect of Estonian, but are Orthodox like the Russians. Thus, when the border dispute arose, the question of Seto identity became important in Estonian discourse and in scientific and political circles in the Russian northwest. The marginal Seto identity suddenly became a trump card in the hands of the politicians who were arguing for these territories. Estonia presented the Setos as a 'separated part of the Estonian people', whereas the Russian side emphasized the uniqueness of Seto culture and their common Orthodox roots. For instance, in 1994 geographers at St. Petersburg State University concluded that the Setos are an ethnic group with a distinct culture influenced by the Russian ethnoses.

Political debates over the Setos and the new border enhanced the political capital of the Seto movement's ideologists and boosted the movement's development. Seto distinctiveness and its preservation became a cornerstone of the movement's ideology. Since Pechory is seen by the Setos as a sacred cradle, a container and an anchorage of their identity, it is not surprising that the border has become the main driving force of their movement. So although the border divides the Setos in territorial space, it plays an important role in the integration of their group identity, thereby uniting them in discursive and cultural space (Nikiforova 1999).

### **Cossacks, the Russian state, and Russian borders**

Whereas the Setos, facing the closing door of the Russian-Estonian border, are trying to resist these processes from the Estonian side, the modern Cossacks, as we shall see below, are looking for their niche on the other side, in Russia. Historically relations between the Cossacks and the Russian state have been con-

troversial and dramatic. As the Russian researcher Iakovenko (1996) has pointed out, being a specific peripheral phenomenon only partly integrated into the wider society, the Cossacks were the bearers of a pre-state, chaotic culture. Because of their different, unpredictable nature, the state had to localize, suppress and incorporate the Cossacks into its body. This struggle between the center and the Cossacks persisted for centuries, and has been extensively analyzed by historians. Here I will mention only that relations between the state and the Cossack communities in the south were stabilized from the end of the seventeenth century to the first quarter of the nineteenth century. During this period Cossack autonomy was curtailed, and the Cossacks were transformed by the state into 'a military-service estate'. Until 1917 the Cossacks remained under state control (Tikidzh'ian 1994). What had helped to stabilize relations between Cossacks and the state was their agreement over the role the former should play in protecting the state's borders.

Looked at from a border perspective, the role of the Cossacks in Russian history is difficult to overestimate. They are famous for their participation in Russian campaigns of conquest, for instance in the opening up of Siberia and the Far East, and serving as a buffer on the margins of the Russian Empire. From the sixteenth century on, detachments of Cossack pioneers went to Siberia, establishing the loci of power on their way with a system of cordons and fortresses (Korolev 1997: 153). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Russian state introduced a policy of forced migration to Siberia and the Far East, and the Cossacks were among the first settlers. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century Siberia was still relatively unpopulated and the border with China remained loose. To protect the border with China, the Government formed two Cossack hosts. In fact, the whole system of Russian border protection relied on the Cossack hosts. The margins of the state were guarded by the so-called 'fortified lines',

made up of chains of town system of border protection until the First World War.

As Markedonov (2001) 1 years of post-Soviet Russia the 'bright future' that the Soviet period was replaced the 'bright past'. Many some Cossack leaders, because good life it was enough they were before 1917. Not though they still make a difference. There are objective reasons the former Cossack role takes on a new relevance nationalisms in the old states in neighboring countries become blurred by the influence as is happening in the border with China. In short, are far from being 'lock solid', as they were in (1997) has described the an state as a 'drying spot rically highly centralizing impotent in maintaining ripheries. In order to recall insufficiency of power the past (Korolev 1997) the Cossacks. What the offer to the state today do for the Cossacks is

The growth in scale of movement is impressive 464 different Cossack hosts (social, security, and culture) registered in 75 (out of 80) cities of the Russian Federation though, as mentioned cautious when interpreting Cossacks in contemporary less, whatever the reliance is clear that the Cossack large to be ignored to the military performance behavior of the Cossacks threat of conflict between

