OBSERVARE
Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa

e-ISSN: 1647-7251
Vol. 14, Nº. 1 (May-October 2023)

JANUS.NET
e-journal of International Relations

# THE SOVIET-FINNISH BORDER AS A STATE SECURITIZATION PROJECT IN THE EARLY 1920S[1]

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## Abstract

Undertaking a case study of the Soviet-Finnish border in the 1920s, the article explores how problems of Soviet international borders' security and Soviet initial responses to them locally played on the ground. It discusses, how the early Soviet border securitization project, intertwining with the Soviet security threats, entailed the first "cleansing" operations in the border zones. It argues that the Soviets engaged in their first "prophylactic cleansing" experiments in the mid-1920s in the relatively stable borderlands earlier than the actual first "security threats" of the 1920s materialized. Therefore, the heritage of the revolution and the civil war mixed with the tenets of Bolshevik ideology left its imprint not only on Stalin's mentality as a primary trigger of Soviet "cyclical violence," as many scholars argue, but generated a continuum of hibernating but never ceasing state violence which was easily triggered locally by the regional actors.

## Keywords

Soviet western border; 1920s; security threats; border securitization; repressive operations; local responses

## Resumo

Seguindo um estudo de caso sobre a fronteira soviético-finlandesa nos anos 20, o artigo analisa os problemas de segurança das fronteiras internacionais soviéticas e o desempenho das respostas iniciais no terreno. É discutido o projecto de securitização das primeiras fronteiras soviéticas entrelaçado com as ameaças à segurança, e as implicações das primeiras operações de "limpeza" nas zonas fronteiriças. É defendida a ideia que os soviéticos participaram nas suas primeiras experiências de "limpeza profiláctica" em meados da década de 1920 nas zonas fronteiriças relativamente estáveis, mais cedo do que se materializaram as primeiras "ameaças à segurança" dos anos 20. A herança da revolução e da guerra civil, misturada com os princípios da ideologia bolchevique, deixou a sua marca na mentalidade de Estaline como principal desencadeador da "violência cíclica" soviética. Mas, como muitos estudiosos argumentam, gerou um *continuum* de hibernação, nunca cessando a violência estatal que foi facilmente desencadeada localmente pelos actores regionais.

## Palavras-chave

Fronteira ocidental soviética; década de 1920; ameaças à segurança; securitização de fronteiras; operações repressivas; respostas locais

[1] The article developed as an outcome of the paper presented at the 8th Annual Conference on Eurasian Politics and Society, 22-24 September 2021, Lisbon, Portugal and was written under the aegis of the Research Fellowship of the New Europe College, Bucharest, Gerda Henkel track (2020–2021). The author acknowledges the anonymous peer reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

**How to cite this article**
Ermolaeva, Oksana (2023). The soviet-finnish border as a state securitization project in the early 1920s. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*, Vol14 N1, May-October 2023. Consulted [online] in date of last visit, https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.14.1.2

**Article received on November, 19 2021, accepted for publication on February, 13 2023**

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
Vol. 14, Nº. 1 (May-October 2023), pp. 17-40
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# THE SOVIET-FINNISH BORDER AS A STATE SECURITIZATION PROJECT IN THE EARLY 1920S

**OKSANA ERMOLAEVA**

## Background and Introduction

1917 marked the demise of the Russian empire, 1991 the end of its Soviet successor. In both cases border security was an issue of primary concern, with the obsessive fear of imperial decay remaining a driving force of international and internal policy targeted at safeguarding and expanding the borders. This is also the case with contemporary Russia, which, advancing its foreign policy and seeking to reclaim its superpower status, inherited from the former Russian empire and the Soviet Union a rich tapestry of political and military thinking patterns.

The use of the "border insecurity" argument as a powerful mass mobilization device has become a typical ground for Russian domestic, regional, and foreign policy alterations (Newmann, 2015; Roberts, 2017). A scholarly research into the origins of Soviet border securitization experiments goes back to the 1920s–1930s, when the first security dilemmas related to the "foreign threat" were elaborated (Shearer, 2018).

The article employs the concept of securitization advanced by the Copenhagen school of International Relations and redefined by Barry Buzan. It uses the core argument of the securitization theory stating that "it is by labeling something a security issue that it becomes one" (Wæver, 2004: 13). Thus, is considers how a particular border was actually turning into a security issue locally on the ground under a certain (Soviet) political regime. In other words, how in the course of the border securitization the discursive "staged" threat (Huysmans, 1998; Febrica, 2010) and a peculiar Soviet reaction to it – repressive operations in its border zones were (inter-) subjectively constructed and actually implemented as a non-linear reaction to it (Balzacq, 2019; Baele and Thomson, 2017; Stritzel, 2007).

To begin with, the securitization of the Soviet borders entailed military mobilization preparations and propaganda campaigns, but also a peculiar *Soviet* solution coined to protect the longest border in the world, for the Russian frontier, ranging from Arctic tundra through forest to arid steppe, separates it from 12 other countries and traverses some 20,000 kilometers across eight time zones. (Werth, 2021: 623–44). Repressive, or "cleansing," operations in the border zones and borderland areas, aimed not only at military forces, but at wide categories of peaceful population, were deemed as a natural and the most efficient way to control the borders and prepare them for potential warfare.

This was one of the solutions to major problems which arose in attempts to delimit and control the Soviet international borders, which had three dimensions in their entangled relationships. The first was political, reflecting the challenging geopolitical entanglements in the contested Eurasian post-imperial frontiers, shifting political relationships of Russia and its neighbors, and Bolshevik fears of foreign threat. The second was a problem of controlling the movement of people and goods across the borders, aggravated by a severe lack of financial and human resources and new, politicized Soviet contexts after 1917. The third was the active involvement of the borderlands community networks, reflecting mixed ethnic compositions of the population, in drawing the borderlines according to their needs and (non-) observing the official regulations for crossing them. The current article focuses on how these factors intertwined in their entangled relations in the early Soviet border securitization project.

It argues that in addition to regular counter-intelligence operations along its Western border zones, the Soviet GPU (*Glavnoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie*, State Political Directorate) engaged in its first "prophylactic cleansing" experiments in the mid-1920s, with the relatively *stable* borderlands in response, first, to emerging problems in other parts of the "Western border belt," and, secondly, to the local refusal to abide by the existing Soviet border regulations on the part of all actors involved in the (b)order-making process. The first mass-scale "cleansing" operations — occurring in spring 1925 — came *earlier* than the first actual "war threat" of the same year materialized at the end of spring— summer 1925 (Dullen, 2014). This means that the heritage of the revolution and the civil war mixed with the tenets of Bolshevik ideology left its imprint not only on Stalin's mentality as a primary trigger of Soviet "cyclical violence" (Shearer, 2018: 213), but generated a continuum of hibernating but never-ceasing state violence which was extremely easily triggered *locally*, by the regional actors.

To demonstrate this argument, the article undertakes a case study of the Soviet-Finnish border as an illustrative example of politicized, contested frontier (Paasi, 2005), and distinguishes two separate border strips within its framework. As such, it provides special sections on Russian Karelia (from 1923, AKSSR, the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), and at the Karelian isthmus in the Petrograd/Leningrad province (*gubernia*). Historically these territories belonged to different administrative units – Olonets and Archangelsk provinces in Russian Karelia, and Vyborg and Petrograd provinces on the Karelian isthmus. Within the newly created Soviet state, the respective border strips were managed by different administrative structures within the AKSSR and Petrograd (from 1924 Leningrad) province.

The first part of the article explores local Soviet border controls and population responses to them in the two respective border strips, while the second one focuses on examples of anti-espionage, cleansing and repressive operations in the borderland areas which are conceived of as an important aspect in the earliest stage of the Soviet border securitization project. Finally, the article evaluates the rationale behind these operations against the background of broader geopolitical exigencies and evolving international "security alarms."

The work complements the dearth of studies devoted to the first among the above mentioned dimensions of the Soviet international border protection — a political one— as well as the scholarship on the Soviet security threats and securitization policy. Experts on Soviet securitization of the inter-war period tend to approach the situation of the 1920s through the so-called "military alerts," especially the one of 1927, when Great Britain broke off diplomatic relations with the USSR, the Soviet Ambassador to Warsaw Pyotr Voykov was assassinated, and acts of terrorism were committed in Leningrad. All this was used to clobber party opposition and to mobilize the society to change the course (Takala, 2016: 117). This situation is considered as a decisive moment in Soviet history, and a critical year in the shaping of Stalinist rule, partly for the reason that the state's responses to those realities established precedents that would characterize the entire Stalin era: an assault on peasant autonomy and widespread arrests of suspected enemies in so-called mass operations, all fueled by a paranoid sense of vulnerability to foreign attack (Velikanova, 2013).

The "classic" interpretations of the "Soviet war scares" tended to explain it as a manipulative device, and a discursive construct, either to gain political advantage over his opponents, to mobilize the population, to deflect blame for ill-advised and extreme policies, or in some other way to consolidate the dictator's power. (Sontag, 1975). Later works, still accentuating Stalin's personal role, and revealing patterns established during the dictator's experience as a military commander in the Russian revolutionary and civil wars from 1918 to 1920, provided more nuanced interpretations, taking into account the Bolsheviks' fears of imminent invasion (Ken, 2002: 325; Khaustov, Samuelson, 2010: 326; Nezhinsky, 2004: 15; Golubev, 2008: 50; Velikanova, 2013: 47; 80; Shearer, 2018: 188-217).

The link between "external" (diplomatic relations and military alerts) and "internal" (the population's worsening attitude towards the Soviet regime) factors in the Soviet border securitization process, which entailed repressions along the Soviet border zones, has been amply researched in Russian as well as Western literature starting from the end of the 1920s (Cimbala, 2013; Hudson, 2012: 145–156; Velikanova, 2013; Takala, 2015; Shearer, 2018: 188-217; Harris, 2016). The existing scholarly tradition usually tends to start this story with the summer operations of 1927, when around 9,000 arrests among nobility were made, and focuses on the subsequent waves of dekulakization in 1929-1930 and 1931-1932 and the mass roundups – "the conspiracy cases" of 1932-1933 (Danilov, 2002: 311; Takala, 2016; Shearer, 2017). The intricacies of Soviet diplomatic relations with Finland have received ample attention as a local securitization trigger from the beginning of the 1930s (Rupasov, Chistikov, 2007; Kilin, 2012). However, little to nothing is known about the Soviet borders from the early period as a factor in the Soviet securitization. The only exception is the work of Andrei Shlyakhter, who, focusing on the wide contraband flows along the Soviet "Western border belt" in the first half of the 1920s, linked them to the increasing border security concerns (Shlyakhter, 2020).

The imbalance is most probably related to the fact that although the "external threat" in Soviet propaganda was becoming increasingly dominant starting from Stalin's early report at the 15th Congress of the Communist Party in 1926 (Stalin, 1948: 262), the concept of the "endangered border," tightly connecting the internal opposition with external threats, became a key element in this process as well as in the Soviet propaganda discourse only in the late 1930s. The notion of the "border" took a firm root in the Soviet public discourse only at the end of the 1930s against the background of the Great Purge, events in Manchuria, and the real growth of the war threat (Takala, 2015: 119). The current study differs from the existing scholarship mainly by introducing the multiple-factor scholarly analysis of Soviet international border securitization in the first half of the 1920s.

The research draws from a wide array of published and unpublished sources. The discussion makes extensive use of available document collections as well as unpublished archival materials generated by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karelia (*Sovet Ministrov RK*), the local Karelian GPU (State Political Directorate), and the Customs Administration, stored in the National Archives of Karelia.

The section on the 200-kilometer border strip of the Karelian isthmus is based on the archival collections of the Leningrad Oblast State Archive (LOGAV), devoted to the Soviet-Finnish border controls and trafficking – encompassing the bulk of contraband and espionage cases from the 1920s processed by the Petrograd (Leningrad) Gubernia court of the People's Commissariat of Justice (1922-1924) and the Petrograd Gubernia Revolutionary Tribunal of the Petrograd military district (1921-1924) (LOGAV. F. R- 2205. Op. 1.)

Previously, the border strip of the Karelian isthmus has been almost exclusively studied from the point of view of counter-intelligence operations of the second half of the 1920s, such as the famous Trust affair (Mainio, 2019) or the deportations of the 1930s (Martin, 1998). Materials from the Leningrad Oblast state archives (LOGAV) used in the current paper mostly tell the story from the beginning of the 1920s.

The problem of the documentary base is unavoidable in such a study. Multiple archival sources related to the Soviet GPU repressive policies— a distinctive feature of the Soviet border securitization, as well as the data on the espionage in the area, — are still classified. The existing publications based on materials from the archives of the Russian special services bear a certain bias and require a double check, which is not possible. The data on counter-intelligence traffic from Russian and Finnish archives, provided by Russian and Finnish historians, significantly differ, with the only materials on the intelligence activity in Soviet Karelia in an open access being weekly GPU reports from the mid-1920s, stored in the NARK, and these are extremely scarce. An important question is to what extent Soviet numbers on the espionage activity in the borderland areas can be trusted from the period when the country already was taking its first steps towards infiltrating mass consciousness with the "spy mania" but locally the political "border project" did not work? Finally, an extremely blurred distinction between smuggling and espionage in the early Soviet period makes it impossible to assess the number and the role of all those who were to some extent unofficially "subcontracted" by the counter-intelligence services. Despite this limitation, this research nonetheless teaches important lessons about the early Soviet borders securitization patterns that are critical in understanding problems related to border regimes, cross-border practices, and transnational geopolitical entanglements today.

State concern over security in protecting the socialist project from capitalist encirclement led to a number of radical changes in the management of border controls. Felix Dzerzhinsky, the chairman of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (Cheka), proclaimed that "the border is a political divide, and it is a political body that must protect it." Therefore, starting in 1920, a Special Division of the Cheka became the responsible agency for the Soviet border protection. Later, in September 1922, this institution was renamed the State Political Administration (GPU) and the Border Guards of the USSR

(*Pogranichnye voiska SSSR*) were placed under the aegis of the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs).

The securitization of Soviet borders was taking place against the background of a complicated process happening in the USSR in the 1920s-1930s which was known in Soviet and Russian historiography as the "mobilization preparation." It was a complex of measures undertaken by the Soviet state in the borderlands as a reaction to the security threats for the state border – in particular, a potential invasion by the enemy (Kilin, 1999). The spatial-territorial aspect of this process included the creation of special "border regimes" around its perimeter.

The postulates of the Dzerzhinsky commission, supported by the class politics of the Soviet state, already gave a priority to the dividing (barrier) function of the state border. On November 24, 1920, the RSFSR Council for Labor and Defense (STO) reviewed the Dzerzhinsky commission's suggestions on reorganization of border protection and made a decision to "close" the state border throughout its length. Following that, in the first half of the 1920s, a broad range of efforts was taken in order to concentrate border protection in the hands of the state security bodies, to introduce a new structure of border defense, to establish control over the movement of people and goods across the state border and to form a system of border strips on the micro-, middle and macro-levels (Khondozhko, 2002: 84). Each of the levels on every individual border strip was given a specific functional purpose. The range of functions included restrictions of the border-crossing regime.

The Soviet territories adjacent to the Soviet-Finnish border were part of the so-called Western border belt of the RSFSR/USSR. On the Finnish border segment it included the Murmansk Gubernia, the Karelian Labor Commune (KTK, from June 1923 the Autonomus Karelian Soviet Socialist Republic, AKSSR) and the Petrograd Gubernia of the RSFSR. It also included the Pskov Gubernia of the RSFSR, the Vitebsk Gubernia of the RSFSR, the Crimean ASSR, and the Byelorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics. Beginning from 1922, the Western borderland belt in its entirety was included in the enemy-threatened zone (RGVA. F. 32032. Op. 1 D. 14 L. 4; Repukhova, 2021). This decision was fully reflective of the experimental character of the Bolshevik project of border protection and included an apparent inconsistency: in the case of an enemy attack in, say, Crimea, it was necessary to begin mass evacuation in the Aleksandrovsk Uezd of the Murmansk Gubernia.

However, during the military reform, on the OGPU chairman's order no. 122/44 of February 25, 1924, "On reorganization of border protection based on unification of border defense organs and border guard troops," the subjects of the USSR Western border belt were divided between 4 military districts (Tereschenko, 2015: 70). Thus, the territories adjacent to the Soviet-Finnish border were relegated to the Leningrad Military District (LVO). The LVO covered those north-western territories that the Revolutionary-Military Council (RVS) in 1922-1926 defined as "the North-Western sector under enemy attack threat" (RGVA. F. 32032. Op. 1 D. 14 L. 4; Repukhova, 2021). It is important to note that the military command responsible for borderland security was trying to influence the formation of internal administrative-territorial borders in the areas of the Western border belt: the Western and Ukrainian military districts, as well as the Crimean border district, were completely congruent with the macro-level administrative-territorial units of the

Byelorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics and the Crimean ASSR, while the LVO territory in 1924 in fact marked the boundaries of the future Leningrad Oblast.

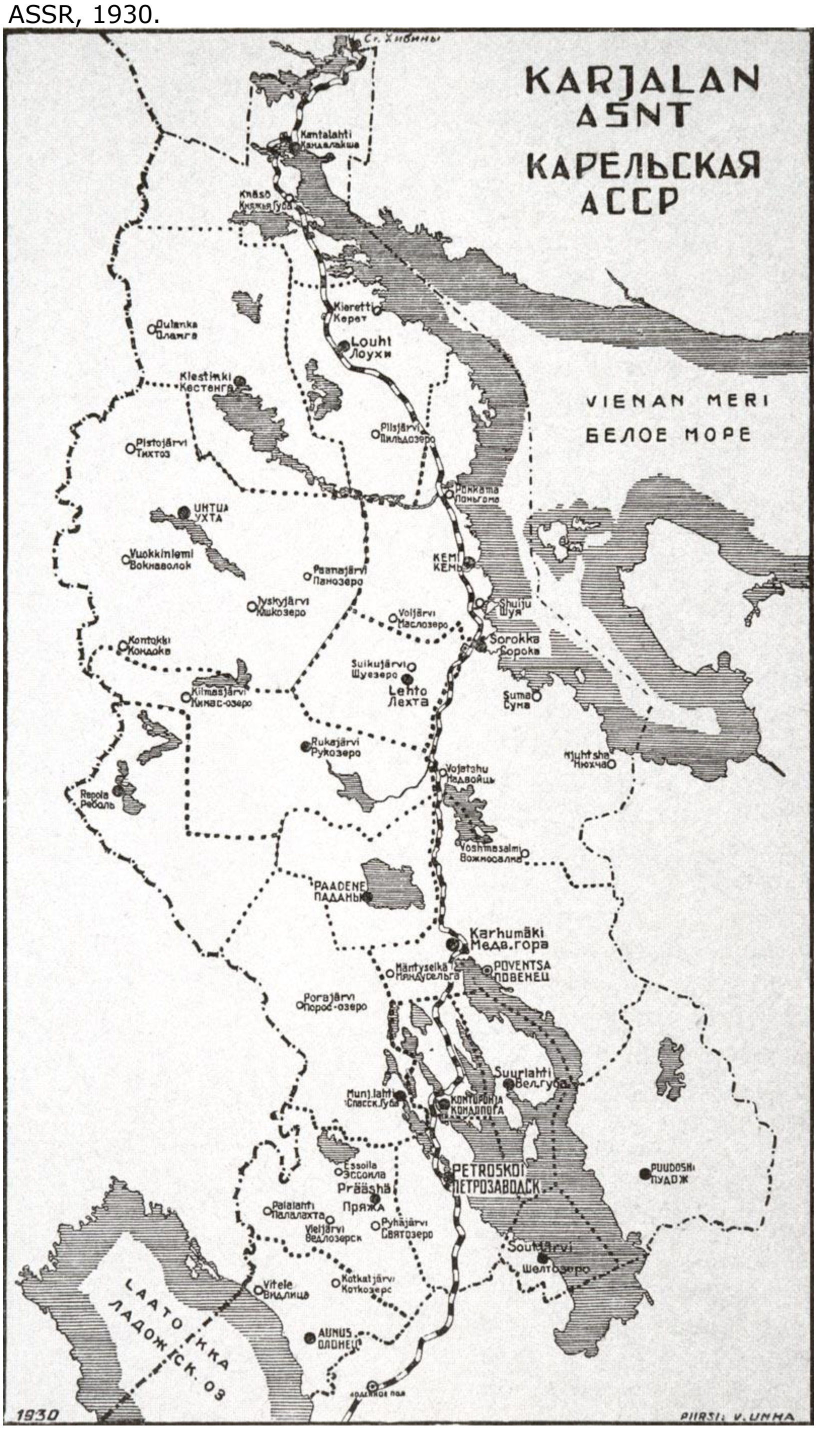
## Local Border Controls and Population Responses: The Case of the Soviet-Finnish Border

With Finland becoming independent in 1917, the 1,245.6 kilometer long border of Russian Karelia was confirmed as a boundary between two sovereign states. (NARK. F. R-690. Op. 1. D. 6/27. L. 74). However, as with all other Soviet borders, the turmoil of the civil war meant that the demarcation line was porous, almost unguarded and open to frequent violations. In the Finnish historiography the conflict was defined as the multiple Wars for Kindred Peoples (*heimosodat*), fought between 1918 and 1922. Inspired by Finnish nationalistic ideology, Finnish right-wing radicals and nationalist activists wanted to unite all the Finno-Ugric peoples in Finland, Russia, and Estonia and expand the borders of Finland to the east. Thousands of Finnish volunteers took part in military expeditions into the Russian regions of Ingria, the Karelian Isthmus, East Karelia, White Sea Karelia, and Pechenga (Mainio 2019, 290). These cataclysmic events resulted in a large-scale population displacement and trans-border migrations. (Repukhova, 2015: 3243-3253). The establishment of the national Soviet republic (Karelian Labor Commune) in 1920, later (Autonomous Karelian Soviet Socialist Republic) neighboring the "bourgeois" Finland opened a new page in the history of the embattled Northern frontier.

In line with the Russian imperial strategic designs elaborated by the beginning of the First World War, in relation to the Western border belt, an "especially protected" strip (*pogranichnaya polosa*) was set up along the newly created state border, encompassing 7.5-km sections from thirteen *volosts* (NARK, F. R-690. Op. 1. D.6/27.74). Unlike the Byelorussian and the Ukrainian SSR, where martial law imposed in connection with the Soviet-Polish war was abolished in 1922, according to the *VTsiK RSFSR* decree, in the Karelian ASSR it was extended. As a result, by the end of 1925, an entire western part of Russian Karelia, adjacent to the state border retained special status. "The exclusion zone" (*zapretnaya zona*) of 7.5 km was followed by 16- and 22-km strips, usually measured from the border outposts, with their locations throughout the 1920s being constantly shifted to the east (NARK, F. R-690. Op. 1. D. 6/27.74). In 1926 the Soviet-Finnish border situation was normalized, and the term of the Soviet-Finnish border area agreement extended (Kilin, 1999: 109). However, the territory of the AKSSR remained in the Western Soviet "endangered zone."

Nevertheless, in the strategic allocation of human and financial resources along the Soviet Western border throughout the 1920-1930s Soviet military structures gave preference to Ukraine and Byelorussia due to their proximity to Poland and Romania (Kilin 1999, 135). As a result, by the end of 1924, the Karelian border with Finland was still only partially blocked by the GPU border detachments (NARK. F. P-690. Op. 1. D. 27. L. 77). An acute shortage of border guard personnel at this border strip manifested itself more poignantly than in other parts of the Soviet Western "border belt."

Fig. 1. Karelian ASSR, 1930.




Source: Vedlozero rural settlement, https://vedlozero.ru/karelia/maps/maR-karelia-1930

The first significant increase in the Soviet border guard force in the West in summer 1925 added to its protection 2,600 more men, with the total Soviet borderguard force increasing to 35,300 by July 1925 (*Pogranichnye voiska SSSR*, 1973). Most of them, however, went to the border with Poland as a response to an increase in number and scale of guerrilla assaults in the mid-1920s at the Polish border (Dullin, 2014;

*Pogranichnye voiska SSSR,* 1973), and to a conference of General Staffs of Romania, Poland, Latvia, and Estonia, with Finland as observer, in Riga in spring 1925.

As a result, the "density" of the border guard, an important OGPU indicator of the border guard effectiveness, was much lower in Karelia than in the rest of the "Western border belt." In 1925, for example, the resulting average of Soviet border guard at the border part from Estonia to Romania (2,875 km) was 3.2 people per 1 km. (Dullin, 2019). From 1927 the average density at the Soviet-Polish border reached 4 people per km, while in AKSSR this indicator was obviously lower, around 1.4, with just 1,805 guards for 1,245 km (NARK. R. 690. Op. 1. D. 27. L. 74). By March 1927, border guards of the GPU of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR) numbered only 1,805 men (90% of them of peasant origin), with 520 horses as their only means of transportation (NARK. F. R-690. Op. 1. D. 27. L. 78). This was almost five times less than estimated as necessary for securing this particular border area several years earlier (RGAE F. 413. Op. 14. D. 7. L. 147, 149-150).

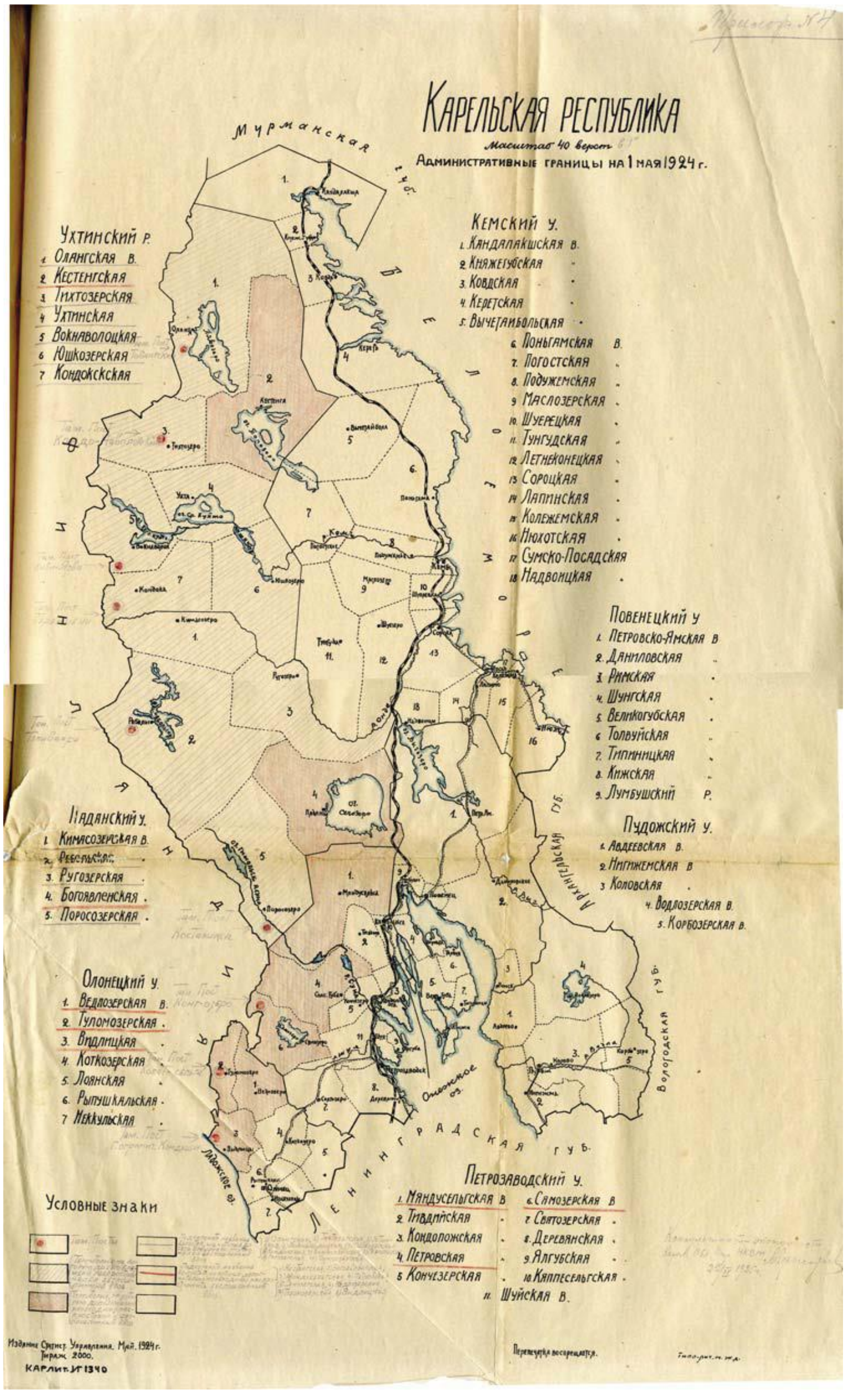
Secondly, regular purges of the border guard personnel on political, national, and social grounds from 1923 onwards – a unique feature of the Soviet politicized "border project" – led to a noticeable cut in numbers and operational capacities of the Karelian GPU staff in the first half of the 1920s (*Organy bezopasnosti Karelii* 2007, 64). The situation with the personnel at the Soviet North-Western border continued to aggravate until 1926-1927, when a steady All-Union increase in political police and state security personnel, including its border guard force, started as a part of the Soviet securitization strategy, which intensified from the beginning of the 1930s (Shearer 2015, 117).

As a result, from the beginning of the 1920s, illegal trafficking swept across the Soviet North-Western border. Initially, it took the form of mass smuggling, stimulated by the famine of 1922 and the gap in prices on different sides of the Soviet border (Egorov 1997, 26), as well as between Soviet inland and borderland regions, with the prices in the latter being 80% higher (NARK. F. R-544. Op. 2. D. 3/58. L. 44). Even in 1927 the Karelian GPU chiefs admitted that in most of the borderland villages all the inhabitants were, one way or another, engaged in illegal trans-border networks, and regularly and effortlessly crossed the border (NARK. F. R-382. Op. 4. D. 25/568. L. 4-19). Wide and well-organized smuggling networks covering several villages were exploited by Soviet counter-intelligence which introduced new features into the complex world of illegal trans-border encounters. Such activities were carried out in all the Soviet borderlands during the decade after the revolution (Dullin, 2014; Shlyachter, 2020). However, specific regional seasonal climatic conditions and the nature of the terrain frequently made roads impassable, as the GPU reports made clear, and contributed to the inactivity of Soviet border guards operating in some sectors of the Karelian borderland (NARK. F. R- 689. Op. 1. D. 8/81. L. 123).

The Finnish counter-intelligence agents and couriers received most active support on the part of their closest relatives and business partners on the Soviet side, who regularly supplied them with provisions and contraband, shelter, information, and denied their connections to them during the interrogations (NARK. R-382. Op. 1, D. 24/539. L. 21-39). Professional agents disguised as professional contrabandists unofficially assisting counter-intelligence services and as "ordinary" Karelian peasants occasionally "going to Finland" to get provisions or commodities they needed, ran minor intelligence missions

(NARK. F. R-382. Op. 4. D. 25/568. L. 220; F. R-689. Op. 1. D. 8/81. L. 123). And to some extent, Finnish espionage in Soviet Karelia, accomplished by native Karelians, became a family business.

Fig. 2. Customs posts along the border with Finland on the 1924 map of the AKSSR marked with an asterisk




Source: National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, map 3.1

In the first half of the 1920s the Karelian GPU struggled in vain to create a working network of informants to counteract illegal trans-border activity. Most of the residents in the borderland settlements were extremely unwilling to volunteer for such a duty (NARK. F. R-275. Op. 1. D. 1/2. L. 65). The situation was typical of other borderland areas, forcing the Soviet GPU to recruit its informants through the local newspaper ads (*Pogranichnye voiska SSSR*, 1973). Professional" smugglers and counter-intelligence agents preferred to be shot either during the escape attempts during the GPU raids and ambushes, or by local inhabitants in search for prey than to get caught alive and expose their networks (NARK. F. R-382. Op. 1. D 22/485. L. 4, 31; F. R-382. Op. 1. D. 24/539. L. 24).

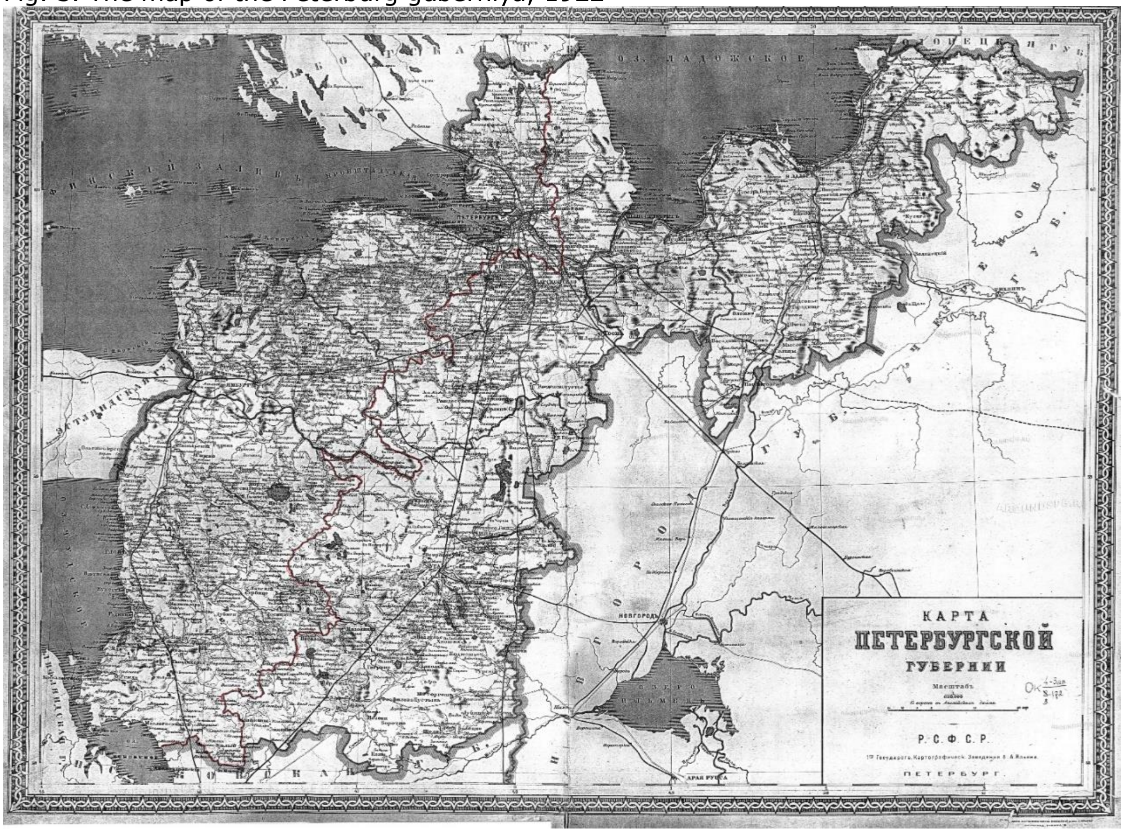
Intelligence intensiveness in the area was much less pronounced than in other Western parts of the Soviet "border belt." Largely, it was the consequence of the remoteness of the border location from the Soviet centers, its length, physical characteristics, and low population density (NARK. F. R-689. Op. 1. D. D. 8/81. L. 123). The intelligence information, gathered in the area and transmitted through the border, was limited to the data on the Soviet military detachments, military mobility infrastructures, and on the Soviet officials in the regional center – Petrozavodsk (NARK. F. R-382. Op. 1. D. 21/469. L. 2; Laidinen, Verigin 2013, 173).

Harsh climatic conditions, isolation, aggravated by delays in regular food and commodities deliveries due to lengthy connecting roads to border, persistent housing shortages, unsuitable living and working conditions, resulted in multiple illnesses and low morale for the border guards, as well as customs officials (NARK. F. R-690. Op. 1. D. 27. L. 55). As a result, the guards, settled in crowded peasant (and sometimes smugglers') houses, engaged in a number of practices that violated and undermined their duties (NARK. F. R-544. Op. 3. D. 1/6. L. 12).

Contrary to the remote, lengthy, and scarcely populated Karelian part of the Russo-Finnish border, the border strip at the Karelian Isthmus (a triangle between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, dividing Finland and Petrograd/Leningrad Gubernia of the RSFSR) was rather short and densely populated. From north to south, the length of the isthmus is 150-180 km, from west to east - 55-110 km. Traditionally, from pre-revolutionary times, it hosted a politically charged, heavy illegal trans-border traffic. Russian revolutionaries (led by Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin) made a major smuggling deal accomplished through this border strip, with the leader of the world proletariat being successfully bargained for Finland's independence in 1917.

The scenario of dramatic events of 1918-1920 and 1921-1922 at the Finnish border in the southern (Russian) part of the Karelian Isthmus (in Finnish academic literature - Northern Ingria) had much in common with Northern Karelia, and the Finnish expeditions had a similar rationale of liberating kindred Ingrian people. Similar to post-revolutionary developments in Northern (White Sea) Karelia, marked by the creation of a short-lived Ukhta republic (1919-1920) as a major outcome of the "Karelian uprising," Ingrian Finns inhabiting the southern part of the Karelian Isthmus seceded from Bolshevist Russia and formed the short-lived, Finland-backed Republic of North Ingria, which was reintegrated with Russia at the end of 1920 according to the provisions of the Treaty of Tartu (Musaev, 2010: 14–15). As it happened in Soviet Karelia, the region continued to enjoy a certain degree of national autonomy.

Fig. 3. The map of the Peterburg guberniya, 1922




Source: https://www.aroundspb.ru/karty/232/sg_1922.html

According to the Tartu peace treaty of 1920, the border was set along the Terijoki (Sestra) river. At the closest point it was just 32 kilometers from Petrograd (renamed Leningrad in 1924), the second largest city of Soviet Russia with the population of 3.19 million as of 1939, and a large industrial center, home to important military production, and a key base for the Baltic Red Banner Fleet. A relatively good road, a railway network (including the railway line St. Petersburg-Vyborg-Helsinki, opened in 1870) and absence of significant natural obstacles endowed this area with strategic significance and significantly alleviated illegal trans-border traffic.

Separate border guard detachments were set at this part of the border in the early 1920s. Establishment of border security at this border strip was completed in 1925, when the OGPU troops formed the Sestroretsky Border Guard, which on April 2, 1926 was renamed as the 5th Sestroretsky Border Guard (5th SPO), subordinated to the Border Guard Management, with the headquarters in Sestroretsk (Balashov, 2018: 19).

Despite the strategic importance of this border strip, control over the border was no less problematic than in Soviet Karelia. Starting from 1919, the reports of the border guard commanding offices on both sides of the border stated that the majority of the borderland population abandoned their previous occupations and actively engaged in the refugees and contraband trafficking. (LOGAV. F. 147. Op. 1. D. 60. L. 1-3). Living and working conditions at the emerging border control institutions were highly "unsatisfactory," as anywhere else (LOGAV. F. R-3441. Op. 7. D. 1. L. 16). Regular raids in the countryside for cutting the numbers of cross-border traffickers in the mid-1920s turned out to be unsuccessful due to the lack of the border guard personnel and mobility infrastructure (LOGAV. F. R-3441. Op. 7. D. 7).

Refugee trafficking became a widespread and profitable business from 1918. A professional cohort of trans-border guides of Russian refugees and of counter-intelligence agents emerged from the ranks of the borderland peasantry, in service of the illegal networks located in Petrograd with commercial agents actively and regularly searching for new clients (LOGAV. F. R-2205. D. 19. Op. 1. L. 10, 51; D. 993).

Against this background, an intense intelligence traffic became a distinctive feature of this short border strip. Throughout the 1920s, instead of "sealing the border" or improving its operational capacities, the Bolsheviks actively engaged in counter-intelligence trans-border games through the border at the Karelian Isthmus, involving the couriers of the Department of International Relations of the Komintern Executive Committee (OMS IKKI), representatives and delegates to the Komintern Congresses (Mainio, 2019: 289–309). Secret operations of Russian anti-Bolshevik combat organizations based in Finland during the interwar period, 1917–1939, in cooperation with the intelligence services of the Finnish General Staff also actively used this "window to Europe." It was a trans-border route for the well-known "Trust" clandestine operations, in the course of which networks of different western countries and émigré organizations targeting Soviet Russia were apprehended by the OGPU in 1922–1927 (Mainio, 2019: 296–300).

Intensive military-ideological training that took place on both sides of the entire length of the Soviet-Finnish border from 1918 (Takala, 2016: 137; Musaev, 2003: 212) prepared not only a militarized support of the newly created states, but also a cohort of armed trans-border nomads. From the times of the Civil War the agents of Finnish and Soviet intelligence services served as headhunters who negotiated the trans-border space in search for displaced and disoriented peasantry (LOGAV. F. R-2205. Op. 1. D. 137. L. 9; 31). Some of the agents recruited among the locals during the Civil War in Karelia and on the Karelian Isthmus in the 1920-1930s headed various units of the Finnish special services. While in Karelia after the end of the civil war the majority of the armed brigades were dismantled and their members searched for labor contracts in Finland (NARK. F. R-690. Op. 1. D. 27. L. 32), at the Karelian Isthmus the "counter-revolutionary" trans-border activities, managed from European centers, actively employed dispossessed mercenaries active in the trans-border space. In general, in both Soviet border areas, the fear of these mercenaries, expressed in the Soviet GPU reports (*Neizvestnaya Karelia* 1998), became a powerful factor in the upcoming repressive operations within the frontier zones. As a result of the latter, these zones transformed from lively contact spaces to a "no man's land," trespassed almost exclusively by professional counterintelligence agents.

## The "Policing" and "Cleansing" in the Border Zones

Despite the intensive illegal cross-border traffic, the weekly reports by GPU KASSR in the mid-1920s presented the situation at the Karelian border and in the borderland as "calm," with the "banditry gradually disappearing" and "the network of Finnish espionage being successfully destroyed"; some documents mentioned "mass intimidation of the borderland population by the GPU" (NARK. F. R-378. Op. 4, D. 6. L. 29, L. 65). By March 1925 just 28 representatives of the Monarchist and other parties of the "ancien regime" were registered in the area - all of them elderly ex-bureaucrats, expelled from Soviet institutions (NARK. F. R-689. Op. 1. D. 8/81*.* L. 123). Despite the rumors of an upcoming war with Finland circulating in the borderland areas (NARK. F. R-689. Op. 1. D. 8/81*.* L. 123), the mood of the "toiling and peasant masses" in 1925-1926 was described as "satisfactory" (NARK. F. R- 689. Op. 1. D. 8/81*.* L. 142; 178).

Against this relatively peaceful background the year 1925 marked a powerful impetus towards securitization in the area adjacent to the Soviet-Finnish border which manifested itself in a three-fold way. First, a stable link between border crossing, smuggling and espionage emerged in the contents of smuggling cases started by the Soviet Karelian GPU. From this moment onwards investigators began to ascribe "spying connections" to the local residents accused not only of smuggling as such, but also of "contraband assistance" (NARK. F. R-382. Op. 4. D. 2/16. L. 11; F. R-689. Op. 1. D. 8/81*.* L. 123). Although such extra charges rarely entailed harsher sentences, they became first occurrences of the instrumentalization of the "Finnish danger" in the mass consciousness of future perpetrators and victims alike (NARK. F. R-382. Op. 4). Stigmatization as "spying accomplices" became a major long-term outcome of the hundreds of smuggling cases initiated by the Karelian GPU in the 1920s. A decade later, in 1937-1938, it transformed into an ample ground for convictions and executions in the borderland settlements, with Finnish goods confiscated in the 1920s becoming "material evidence" even in the cases where smuggling as such was not proved, as well as the presence of relatives who had fled abroad in 1919-1922. With the Karelian NKVD revising the cases, their defendants became almost automatically redefined from "spying accomplices" to "Finnish spies" or "bandits" (Chukhin, 1997: 88-98).

Secondly, starting from 1925, the Karelian GPU initiated the first mass anti-espionage arrests, in reality targeting local peasantry. The usual anti-espionage operations, accomplished prior to them in the area, had been described as "not particularly effective" (NARK. F. R- 689. Op. 1. D. 8/81. L. 123). The first mass scale operation of spring 1925 to "eliminate espionage in the border strip" of the southern Karelian district (Olonets and Petrozavodsk *uezdy*), accomplished at the beginning of spring 1925, was proclaimed as a major success.

Rusty cartridges, found in peasants' houses, and one ammunition belt, kept since the civil war, made the premises for most of the 85 arrests among peasantry in the western part of the Petrozavodsk district[2] (Neizvestnaya Karelia, 77; NARK. F. 4. Op.1. D. 4/41; NARK F. 1. Op. 1. D. 675. L. 13-14; Baron 2007; Takala 2016). The following investigation was complicated by the heated discussions in the Soviet power structures as to what jurisdiction was best suited and to what extent publicity was needed. At the

[2] Weapons and ammunition were a usual currency in a trans-border "black market," regularly kept and sold by the peasantry to the agents and smugglers (NARK. F. R-382. Op. 1. D. 21/466. L. 3).

end, in the Karelian case, it was decided to abstain from show trials and avoid publicity (Baron, 2007). One of the reasons was "lack of material evidence," mentioned as one of the major problems during the investigation (NARK. F. R-689. Op. 1. D. 8/ 81. L. 123).

Thirdly, starting from 1925, the idea of an imminent repetition of an insurgence in the Karelian borderland areas with Finland's assistance – a copy of the Karelian uprising of 1921 – was locally resurrected and propagated in Karelia. Various local administrative agents started to actively manipulate the idea of an "important insurgence." For example, Edward Gyulling, a chief of the Karelian government along with his associates regularly repeated this idea in their petitions to the USSR Revolutionary Military Council (*Revvoensovet* SSSR) and to Grigory Chicherin in support of their idea of creating a Karelian national guard. (Edward Gyulling, 2020).

Local GPU chiefs used this argument in their petitions to the LVO and local SNK while trying to solve multiple financial and housing problems of the Karelian border guards (NARK. F. R-690. Op. 1. D. 27). This tendency found its culmination in the events of August 1928, which became a clear manifestation of the manipulation of the idea of the "imported revolt." An assistant chief of the Karelian GPU and the chief of its counter-intelligence section, on the basis of information provided by a single Soviet GPU agent and a contrabandist who had just returned from Finland, compiled a faked report to the administration of the LVO about the uprising preparation in the Karelian borderland (*Organy bezopasnosti Karelii*, 81; Takala, 2016: 132-159). The constantly fueled memory of the uprising of 1921 at the local level, of which they were witnesses as members of the local branch of the Cheka, and the Soviet propaganda campaigns on the "military threats" of 1927-1928 can be mentioned as possible reasons for this occurrence. It did not result in any immediate actions on the part of the LVO, and the authors of the report were dismissed from their positions. Nevertheless, it marked a start of a new era of the borderland history – of mass scale deportations and repressions in border zones that started from the beginning of the 1930s.

This border securitization drive in Karelia occurred prior to the first wide-scale Soviet security alert of 1925, related to unrest at the Soviet-Polish border.[3] Since Poland was conceived of by the Bolsheviks as a natural bridgehead for any military attack against the Soviet Union (Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR Vol. 8. P. 289, 293), leading Soviet politicians, such as an architect of the Soviet VCheKa-GPU Felix Dzerzhinsky and the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs Grigory Chicherin, expressed high concerns about an "aggressive Polish policy" from the end of spring—summer 1925 (*Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, Vol. 8. P. 289, 293). The increase in the flow of data from the GPU border guards along the Soviet Western border on increasing attacks on the border guards detachments and border zones also occurred from May 1925 (RGASPI. F. 76. Op. 2. D. 364).

In October 1925 the Soviet OGPU uncovered a sprawling network of Estonian spies and agents who employed the traditional techniques of contraband camouflage to facilitate their operations, followed by a show trial, approved by the Politburo, which was held in Leningrad in February 1926 and ended with the executions of 12 defendants and the

[3] Sabin Dullin offered a standard cycle of triggering a "war threat" alert: alarmed reports from the border guards to Moscow, followed by the diplomatic and international political notes and communiqués, and finally, a "war scare" disseminated during large-scale propaganda campaigns against a "foreign threat" (Dullin, 2014).

imprisonment of 34 (RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 3. D. 524. L. 2). Marking a decisive shift towards "preventive violence" as a ruling Soviet strategy, these operations were obviously related to a range of Politburo decisions in 1925, reflecting concern about the threat of a hostile bloc on the Western borders of the USSR and attempts to prepare for it in advance (Ken, 2002: 63). Moreover, they became an important breaking point in the history of the Soviet political police, resulting in the GPU awards and increases in their financing and personnel numbers, which became a regular trend throughout the 1920s–1930s (*Organy bezopasnosti Karelii*, 99).

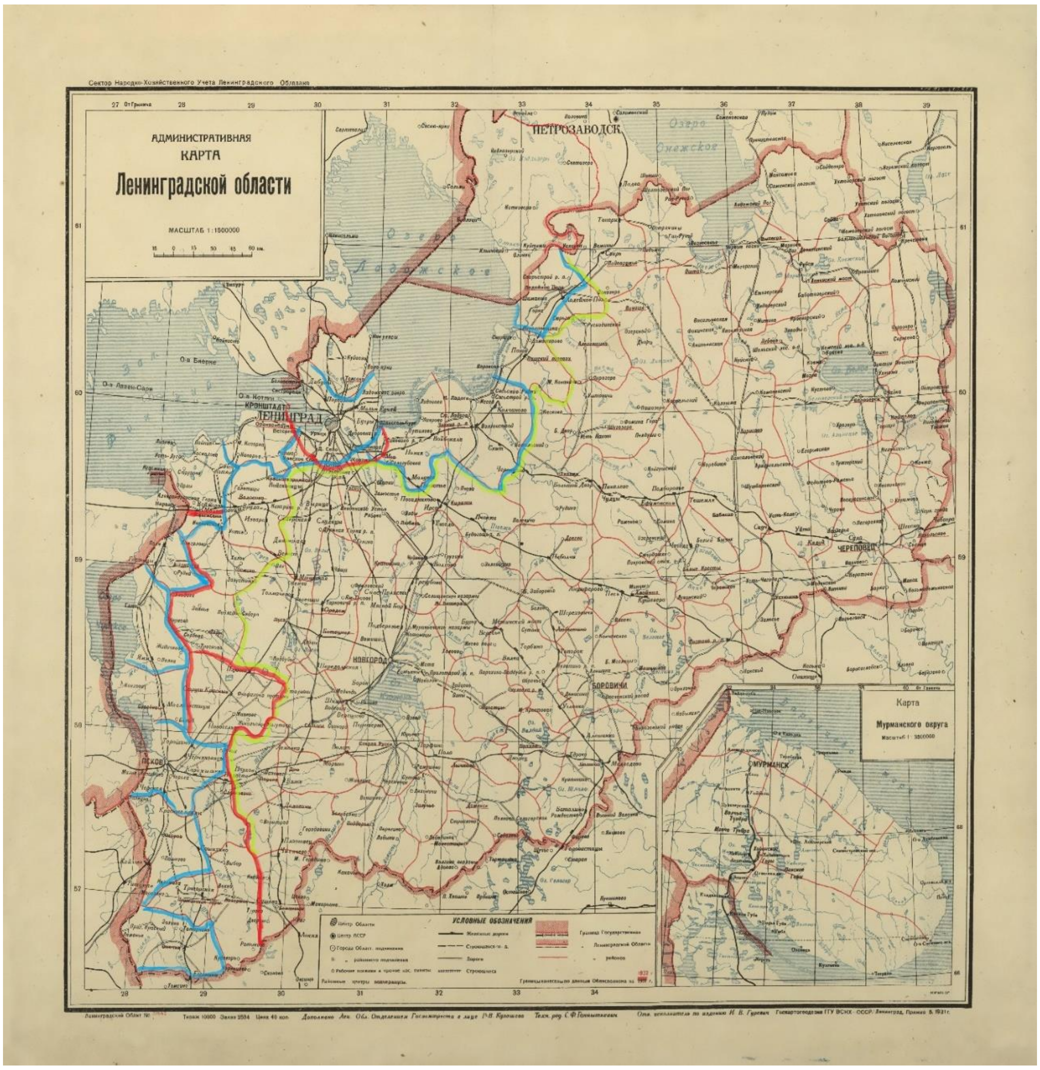
According to the available data, in the borderland areas of the Karelian Isthmus special GPU operations also selectively targeted local peasantry, who allegedly participated in the trans-border networks, such as the Petrograd Combat Organization (PBO). The subject of the infamous Taganstev case (*Taganstevskoe delo*) (Chernyaev, 1999: 391), a resistance group known as the Petrograd Combat Organization, was formed in the city of Petrograd, and headed by Vladimir Tagantsev, a young professor of geography at Petrograd State University with the famous Russian poet Nikolay Gumilev being its most famous victim. In total, 833 people were arrested in the case of the Petrograd Combat Organization of V.N. Tagantsev in 1921; 96 of the accused were executed or shot while being detained (Chernyaev, 1999: 391- 395).

A second wave of mass arrests related to this case, not researched in historiography, swept over a motley category of the "border people" - Ingrian smugglers, some of them employees (or ex-employees) of the Terijoki branch of Finnish secret police; Russian and Ingrian peasants of the borderland areas of the Petrograd Gubernia who served the PBO as couriers, hosts of border stations, owners of safe houses, and intermediaries between the counter-intelligence services and the organization itself; Soviet provincial mid-rank and lower rank administrators (LOGAV. F. R-2205 Op. 1. D. 65. L. 164; D. 19, 19 a, 19 b. 19 v.) As reflected in the materials of the investigation process, started by the Petrograd Gubernia Revolutionary Tribunal that lasted from May 1921 to 1925, most of the victims were of peasant or, rarely, working class background, non-party members, semi-literate, with the occupation indicated as "peasant," "worker," or "fisherman" (LOGAV. F. R-2205 Op. 1. D. 65. L. 164; D. 19, 19 a, 19 b. 19 v.). Giving shelter to trans-border travelers of common ethnic origins, a natural way of providing a daily subsistence in the conditions of economic devastation, became a solid ground for their arrests (LOGAV. F. R-2205 Op. 1. D. 19 a. L. 12-40; D. 19. L. 26; D. 39. L. 110.)

Nevertheless, these arrests did not result in a decrease of the cross-border traffic, which remained rampant in the area throughout the 1920s. Relatives of arrested owners of barter stations, trans-border guides, local couriers, and smugglers uptook their duties and the networks revived (LOGAV. F. R- 2205, Op. 1. D. 19 b. L. 114; D. 19. L. 141). For almost a decade, the most widespread tactics of the Soviet GPU in tackling Finnish espionage was infiltration of the emigrant "counter-revolutionary" organizations (Mainio 2019, 289-309), and most of successful arrests in the 1920s were accomplished during the cross-border transfers of the agents, as a result of the infiltration (LOGAV. F. R-2205. Op. 1. D. 19. L.107, L. 22-26; D. 65. L. 10 – 11). The specific Soviet response to the border insecurity — the mass prophylactic "cleansing" came much later.

The first Soviet plans of on the "cleansing" of the border strip at the Karelian Isthmus in the form of mass deportations were elaborated already in 1919, after the martial law was introduced there by the Soviet defense committee (ardently supported by the Karelian sector). However, the mass eviction of the populace from the 10-km border strip was not accomplished due to the resistance of the Petrograd Gubernia executive committee. In 1923 the Ingrian Council through the Finnish government's note to the Soviet authorities, prevented deportation of inhabitants of 40 borderland villages in the area, removing the question of the "cleansing" of the border zone from the political agenda until the late 1920s – early 1930s, when the Soviet desire to create restricted security zones along the borders with Finland marked a new stage of the "Soviet border project," starting with the October 4, 1929 decree of the Council of the People's Commissars "On the resettlement of the socially dangerous elements of the population of the borderland districts of Leningrad and Western areas" (Musaev, 2003: 255).

Fig. 4. Leningrad oblast, 1932. The borderland regions are marked in blue, "the threatened zones" in red, and the border zone (*pogranichnaya polosa*) in light green




The situation at the Soviet-Finnish border drastically changed from the end of the 1920s, when a shift from the New Economic Policy to Stalinist political economy resulted in the introduction of new security measures and an increased number of OGPU border guards. Systemic and massive centralized repressive operations at the Soviet North-Western borderlands began with the anti-Kulak operations in 1931, and were followed by the 1932-1933 operation against "the Conspiracy of the Finnish General Staff." From the beginning of the 1930s the alleged "contamination" of the Soviet intelligence trans-border connections and corridors became yet another important rationale behind the OGPU repressive operations and deportations in the area. For example, during the operations of 1932-1933, couriers' transfer to connect with the residents of the 4th Section of the LVO staff in Finland was accomplished through a single route, and the individuals responsible for it – the three brothers Kouhja – confessed during the interrogation that starting from 1929 they collaborated with the Finnish counter-intelligence. Two existing PRPs (border intelligence points) displayed repeated failures.

From 1935 deportations of the borderland communities as a major "cleansing" instrument of the Soviet securitization were accomplished in many Soviet regions (Takala, 2016). The repressive Soviet policy reached its apogee in the operations in the Soviet-Finnish border zones during the Great Terror.

The early stages of these operations again featured the factor of "initiative from below." Though there was no official directive on the beginning of the "Finnish operation," the NKVD organs of the Leningrad Oblast and Karelia began to "cleanse" the Finns as early as September-October 1937. In doing so the Chekists were using NKVD Order no. 00485 on the Polish national operation. The Karelian People's Commissar for the Interior K. Ya. Tenisson who understood that it was impossible to make a career by repressing Poles, Germans and Latvians, whose numbers in Karelia were insignificantly small, made numerous requests to Yezhov complaining about absence of directives on Finns. Finally, the central authorities greenlighted such repressions, and in December 1937 the first reports on the Finns accused of espionage and sabotage were sent to Moscow.

The borderland zones of Soviet Karelia in a way became a "cleansed" and alienated space, with just a few counter-intelligence agents well-known to each other operating there. At the Karelian Isthmus, the banks of the River Sestra were tightened with rows of barbed wire, mainly from the side of Soviet Russia. All bridges over the river were blown up except for the only railway bridge near the Beloostrov station which accommodated all rail traffic between Finland and the USSR. The border guard was distributed along the entire border strip. It was one of the first Soviet borders to be actually "sealed," and, being reinforced by the Mannerheim line on the Finnish side, provided a rigid military divide between the states.

## Conclusion

In recent studies, the Bolshevik state violence in the postimperial borderlands of the late 1920s-1930s is usually interpreted as a result of a "dialogue" between the ruling elite and society: spontaneous reactions of citizens living in the border area to the international threats, their growing dissatisfaction with domestic policies, such as collectivization, were treated by the Bolsheviks as a state threat and caused further violence (Takala, 2015: 105; Cimbala, 2013; Shearer, 2018). As the current study has demonstrated, there were other links to this vicious chain, which was formed much *earlier* than is usually suggested: "leaky," uncontrolled and unrecognized borders, stubbornly defied by the local communities, border guards, and customs officials alike, and "contaminated" trans-border corridors. If we consider the frontier force as a barometer of Bolshevik power in the borderlands, during the 1920s it was extremely weak, reflecting acute regime insecurity.

Moreover, already in the mid-1920s local security chiefs and the Karelian republic's administrative actors triggered securitization frenzy by their false alarms and imagined regime threats to attract financing, enhance their authority and influence in the local "power struggles," marking the first occurrences of the *local* impetus towards "prophylactic policing" that later eventuated in Stalinist paroxysms of violence.

In the mid-1920s, however, a steady link between border security and espionage gradually started to penetrate into the mass consciousness of perpetrators and victims alike. A decade later, it evolved into the Soviet "spy mania" of the 1930s, and became a distinguishing feature of the Stalinist political modernity. First mass arrests of 1925 in the borderland areas provided a scenario for later operations, also based on a developed network of insurgent cells, allegedly created by the Finnish General Staff, such as those encompassing Karelia and the Karelian Isthmus in 1932 (Shearer, 2015: 116), as well as various connections of Finnish intelligence to the skirmish-reconnaissance brigades along the Soviet border. In their essence these were the first instances of a *prophylactic* Soviet violence. The materials of the Finnish Central Investigative Police from the 1920s confirm that it was largely just *suspicions* of espionage assistance on the part of the Ingrian and Karelian communities that triggered the repressions of the 1920s in the borderland zones (Rupasov, Chistikov, 2007: 195).

A degree of "failing" Soviet North-Western border of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s corresponded to the Russian historical and world practices – be it Western Europe or the Balkans.  But the Soviet experiment of the total border closure, which started a decade later and was largely supported by the 'cleansing' operations in the borderland, became a new modern phenomenon. The process of closure itself went on until the end of the 1940s, when a multimillion Red Army stepped upon it, and a physical possibility to install a barbed wire and to set up a tracking strip in Europe emerged.

However, before Joseph Stalin's political triumph, which marked the beginning of the new era in the border securitization practices, the Bolshevik state security authorities deemed it more reasonable to create, coordinate, and finance the *Trust* or the *Syndicate* and to selectively arrange these mass "counter-espionage" operations along the border zones than to deploy troops or regular border guards at the Soviet Western borders and to engage in a wholesale "cleansing" of the borderland populations, as it happened later. But it was that time that gave birth to the sinister precursors of the future repressions in the form of discursive constructions that took hidden but, possibly, permanent root in the Russian statehood and contaminated its legal environment.

The Russian foreign policy maintains as permanent the existence of the "Other" as a threat, in order to support and legitimize itself. In the USSR, "enemies of the people" served as a designation for opposition to the regime. As this article has demonstrated, this notion which was actively used during the wave of Stalinist repressions of the 1930s had its origins already in the 1920s and was closely tied to the issue of espionage and, consequently, to the security of the borders. Even though this term is not used in modern-day Russia, the lists of "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations" are constantly growing. The persecution of dissenters including their arrests, interrogations and imprisonment is gaining momentum. And, just as it was happening in the 1920s and especially 1930s, it strikes not only political opponents but ordinary people who dare to express their disagreement with the regime even in a veiled way.

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