Uncertain divides : religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands

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Divided Village

Sarpi is an extraordinary village. It was divided in half in 1921 when a small stream running through the village center was declared the boundary-line between the Soviet Union and Turkey. The border remained porous enough to allow for cross-border contact for the next sixteen years, but in 1937 the Soviet authorities decided to close it completely. After that virtually all forms of communication across the divide were blocked, for the next fifty years. Sarpi is also interesting because it is the easternmost village of an area inhabited by the Laz. Who these Lazi are, or rather what this ethnic category means for the villagers of Sarpi, will be an important subject of the following chapters. Here it suffices to say that in the early twentieth century at least, the Muslim villagers of Sarpi spoke their own language Lazuri and distinguished themselves from other groups living in the area, notably the Georgian-speaking Muslim Ajarians and the Christian Georgians. These relations changed when the imposition of the international border caused the Lazi of Soviet Sarpi to lose contact with their kin and ethnic affiliates in Turkey. When the border reopened in 1988 villagers were finally able to visit their close relatives. Furthermore, the border offered new openings in the economy and transformed the village from a forgotten place that did not exist on any official maps into a central gateway of transnational trade. But while the two sides were physically drawn closer, this softening of the physical border was accompanied by a hardening along social and cultural lines.

Due to the geographical location on the border between two competing ideological worlds, social life in Sarpi shows a unique interplay between power, ideology and identity. The main question addressed in Part II of this dissertation is how the existence of the border and the ensuing restricted ways of life are interwoven with changing ideas about ethnicity and the creation and undoing of ethnic boundaries between the Lazi and their neighbors. The disruption of social and ethnic ties within the confines of a single village has provided an excellent opportunity to examine how notions of belonging and non-belonging changed and were redefined during and after the Soviet period.

Similar issues have been central concerns in recent studies that have aimed to understand the particularities of social life along and across state borders. These studies have focused on the impact of ‘concrete borders’ on patterns of cross-border migration, trade and labor (Driessen 1998; Konstantinov 1996; Beller-Hann 1995b; van Schendel 2001), as well as on the ways social identities and forms of cultural identity relate to physical divides (Flynn 1997; Wilson and Donnan 1998; Stokes 1998). An important message of these works is that the two sides of a given state border need to be understood as complex cultural wholes. In other words, if borders are seen as constructs that divide and connect, the focus
has lately predominantly been on the latter, on how they connect rather than divide. This tendency is also observable in studies about the Iron Curtains that once fenced off the socialist block. These complex borders have only received attention from anthropologists since their demise in the 1990s. But even then little more than lip service was paid to their rigid socialist past. This neglect is understandable as it indicates that Iron Curtains were impermeable not only to people but also to analysis. Borders seem to be only analyzable when they are challenged, that is, when contact across them exists.

Likewise this study only became possible once the divide lost some of its rigidities, when people talked about former silences and could reflect about a divide that for such a long time had been an unquestioned fact of life. The new possibilities for investigating the silenced and unwritten histories of social life along the Iron Curtain provide further insight into how elements of culture formed around existing territorial and national borders and how the political divide influenced changes in cultural expressions and ethnic identification.

A FIRST LOOK AT THE VILLAGE

Sarpi is located in a rugged narrow valley rising up from the Black Sea. Once the village was reachable only over sea and later only when in the possession of multiple permits and documents, but at present the main road connecting Georgia and Turkey runs through the center of the village. Traveling from Georgia to Turkey along this road, one sees in the distance a recently built mosque on a rock that sticks out in the sea. This building symbolizes the entrance to Turkey, especially for villagers living on the Georgian side. They are planning to construct a church on their side of the borderline to counterbalance the mosque and to underline that Sarpi really is part of ‘Christian’ Georgia.

Besides the mosque and the unrealized church, the coastal strip shows the usual national symbols that characterize borders. Flags of both countries demarcate the end and beginning of each country and large billboards in various languages welcome travelers to either Georgia or Turkey. The customhouses are also situated on the coastline, on a terrain enclosed by high fences, guarded by armed soldiers and controlled by officers wearing black uniforms. The entrances to both Georgia and Turkey are marked by squares where taxi- and bus-drivers wait for clients crossing the border and where other villagers sell drinks and cigarettes or wait for the next ‘deal.’ Usually there would be a line of trucks and cars waiting to cross the border and daily several hundred labor-migrants and small-traders passed through the customs. But the number of people who passed the border gate was far smaller than in the early 1990s when the border was just re-opened.

1 Recent studies focus by and large on the patterns of cross-border contact in the 1990s and leave the physical rigidities of socialist times largely unexplored (Konstantinov 1996; Hann and Bellér-Hann 1998; Veenis 1999; Svasek 1999). Berdahl (1999) is an important exception.
As soon as one leaves the main road and follows the steep paths and gravel-tracks that lead into the Georgian side of the village, the hectic life surrounding the border-gate disappears. Mandarin trees and vegetable plots create a lush atmosphere. Sarpi seems almost a regular village like so many others in the area. Large white houses – approximately 130 on the Georgian side and 80 on the Turkish side – lie scattered along the hill slopes between green gardens, bushes and citrus plantations. The villagers greet when passing, or halt for a short exchange of information. Children play on the streets and women are busy in their vegetable gardens or with the never-ending household chores. Especially on rainy days – and there are many – there is a lively exchange of visits between the houses. These visits are always accompanied by a cup of coffee, fruit and nuts, and, depending on the guest, large quantities of wine or vodka.

This almost romantic picture is smashed to pieces when reaching the upper part of the village. Here one clearly sees how merciless history has been to the small community. Fences of barbed wire follow the small stream until it disappears in the green covered hills; watchtowers look out over the valley. It is tempting to conceive of the border, like one villager remarked, as “starting over here at the seashore and running all the way to Vladivostok.” The image of uninterrupted fences shutting off the former Soviet Union from the capitalist world is very impressive. As was written (in Russian) on a large billboard placed in the center of the village: The entire Soviet nation guards the border! The slogan was illustrated by the figures of three serious looking Soviet citizens: a farmer, a child and a soldier. With their united strength they ensured the secure defense of the border. In reality this ‘defense of the border’ was of course as much intended to prevent people from leaving the Soviet Union as it was intended to prevent spies, saboteurs and other ‘evil capitalists’ from entering. Clearly, the ideological dimensions of the border are no longer part of official discourses, but this does not mean that they have altogether disappeared. Ideological as well as economic and cultural differences have become, if not more pronounced, at least more immediate to the people living on the border.

THE DIVISION

After having been located in the Ottoman Empire for about three centuries, Sarpi was incorporated in the Czarist Empire in 1878. The new border was established at Liman, a settlement some ten kilometers west of Sarpi. With the outbreak of World War I, battles between Russia and Turkey flared up again. Most families in Sarpi fled the region and traveled in small boats westward to towns along the Ottoman Black Sea coast. When they returned to their village in 1918 the area was briefly occupied by Turkish troops. Russia and its new Bolshevik government was left without allies and stuck in a severe civil war. To secure peace on the southern border it signed a treaty with Turkey, which included the transfer of Ajaria to the Turks. At the same time though, Georgia had declared independ-
ence and did not accept this loss of territory. But before Georgian troops arrived on the battlefields, World War I was decided in favor of the Allied Forces. The Turkish army was replaced by British troops, who stayed in the area for a year and a half as part of an attempt to secure their oil-interests in the region (see Arslanian 1996). In February 1921, the Red Army invaded Georgia and installed a new government. Both Turkey and the Soviet Union were exhausted by their respective civil wars, and the two powers started peace negotiations that resulted in a decision that had great impact on the lives of people in Sarpi. The paper version of that agreement reads as follows:

The north-eastern boundary of Turkey is defined as follows [...] The village of Sarp (Sarpe) on the Black Sea coast – Qara Shalvar (Kara Shalvar) Dagh (5014) and crossing the Chorokh to the north of the village of Mardidi... (Russo-Turkish Treaty of 16 March 1921, Appendix I (a), reprinted in Cornwall 1923: 446-7).

This is about all that can be found in official documents concerning the border delimitation, signed in Moscow on 16 March 1921 and ratified later that year by the Treaty of Kars on 13 October, between the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and the Socialist Soviet Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia as well as the Russian Soviet government. For the villagers in Sarpi however, the important moments had occurred some months before that. Contemporary Sarpi sources remember the event in multiple ways.

One telling of the event depicts Lenin and Stalin in their office in the Kremlin pacing up and down in front of a large map of the Soviet Union while discussing how to bring peace to the country:

At that moment, when negotiations started on the exact location of the boundary, the area was still occupied by the Turks. Lenin was a friend of Atatürk and eager to end all the wars. ‘The people in Ajaria are Muslims, so let’s give the region to Atatürk,’ he told Stalin. ‘Hey, now what are you doing,’ Stalin interrupted, ‘do you want to give away Batumi? Our oil transport runs through that city, it is a very important harbor for us.’ Lenin stroked his beard and thought, ‘Hmm, Stalin is probably right, but I already promised Atatürk that the border will be along the Choloki river, so what should I do?’ Lenin got a new idea and said to Stalin, ‘Alright, the border will be along the Chorokhi River instead of the Choloki River, Atatürk won’t know the difference.’ But Stalin still disagreed, ‘No, that is too dangerous, that is too close to Batumi, it should be a bit further, across the first mountains. There is a small stream, which we can use as the division line,’ he said. This is where Sarpi happened to be, but they didn’t know about that. So they decided that this stream would be the division line between Turkey and the Soviet Union.

Another account of the episode starts with an English map of the region that was used both by Russia and by Turkey:

2 The Choloki is a small river roughly following the present administrative border between Ajaria and Guria provinces in Georgia, some 40 kilometers north of Batumi.
The English map did not show the stream running through Sarpi, but another one, located two kilometers west of the village. A special commission had decided that this should be the location of the new border, such that Sarpi would be part of the Soviet Union. But when both parties approached the agreed place, the Turkish officer, who was slightly ahead, decided to move on. He phoned to his headquarters and said, ‘the Russians are not in sight yet! Will you allow me to move on and try to deceive them?’ He received permission, so he and his troops went on and finally they met the Russians in Sarpi. The Russians arrived and said that the border should be at the next river. But the Turks told them, ‘there is no river over there, this is the first stream we have come across, so the border must be here.’ The Russians knew that the officer was lying, but they finally agreed to have the border temporarily placed in Sarpi. Perhaps they thought that it could be changed afterwards, but this never took place.

Borders generate stories and legends. They are places onto which secrecy, fear, danger and desire are projected. There is considerable variation in the stories that are told about this ‘accident of history.’ Sometimes the Turks are blamed, at others the Russians. Sometimes it is seen as hapless fate or misunderstanding, at other times the result of evil conspiracy. What bespeaks the variation in the stories is lack of transparency, of a mystification of power and the unpredictability of the mechanisms used by the state. In popular accounts, the delineation of the border in Sarpi was always presented as beyond the power of the villagers. The stories about the unreachable office in the Kremlin and the conspiracy of Turks point to the extraordinary interplay between wider political forces and the villagers. The unpredictability was even more strongly present in the following account given by an old villager who insisted that the divided village was all the fault of the delirium of Russian soldiers.

When the two armies encountered each other, they held a party, and the Turks took care to give the Russians enough vodka. And well, you know the Russians, as soon as they get drunk they become very generous and when they had emptied five bottles of vodka, the [Russian] officer said: ‘Alright, let’s just put the border over here, you can have that side of the village, and we will have this side.’

The stories, I think, also suggest that the Iron Curtain had become a fait accompli, an inescapable and definite presence. They were used to start narrations about separated families and tales of relatives who would never meet each other again. Since the border was reopened in 1988, the implications of these stories have changed but they have not become irrelevant memories that are simply replaced by new realities. The division is still felt as something that cannot be undone. A young Sarpiian cabdriver summarized this notion in a few lines: “You know, they tore down the Berlin Wall and people live happily together now, soon the two Koreas will be re-united, and then there will only be the two Sarpis, forgotten and divided.” Although contact is possible again, the village is still divided, and this not only applies to restrictions on physical movement, but also to social contact.
The next three chapters explore how the unwritten history of the international boundary and the biography of people who lived in its immediate vicinity intertwined and affected each other.

Although the decision to place a border in the center of Sarpi was beyond the villagers’ control, this does not imply that they were passive victims. Their lives became entangled with the borders. They exploited the opportunities created by the divide but, more often than not, they were forced to deal with its harsh realities. Their strategies were not only directed at the divide itself, but also involved strategies in coping with the changed physical and social space on their side of the border. Moreover, the ideological dimensions of the divide between capitalism and socialism profoundly influenced people’s ideas of the ‘other’ and the ‘other side.’ Borders, especially those marked by steel, watch-towers and barbed wire, are complex phenomena. Their physical characteristics have observable effects on social life but the implications of these can only be truly understood when attention is paid to the imaginary qualities of borders and the reality of these imaginations for cross-border contact and contrast.

**OUTLINE OF PART II**

The next three chapters deal with the question of how social life in Sarpi is related to the presence of the physical divide. I will start with investigating the two-sidedness of borders, then move to the organization of culture and ethnicity in this restricted environment, and end with a discussion on the relation between physical borders and ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Chapter Five revolves around the question of how a border regime designed and monitored in distant power centers made an impact on the lives and identities of people living along the international divide. It also explores how border dwellers dealt with the border situation imposed from above. It describes and analyzes the experienced and narrated history of the international border as well as the tragedies that befell Sarpi’s inhabitants. The stories that are told exemplify how the ambiguity of borders, the combination of danger and opportunity, in the context of state terrorism resulted in patterns of action and reaction that further fortified the Iron Curtain. By focusing on the interactions between state and citizens, it will be possible to describe ‘totalitarianism’ from below and as such reveal the tragedies connected to the border without reducing border-dwellers to passive victims.

Although the ‘border of fear’ is still remembered and ‘dis-membered’ in complex ways, it was clearly not the only barrier that mattered. Chapter Six moves away from the international border and focuses on social life within the confines posed by the physical barriers during and after the Soviet period. It discusses how the relation between Lazi, Ajarians, and Georgians changed as a result of their interlocking in Soviet society. In other words, this chapter investigates how ideas about ethnicity and culture changed in relation to the closed border and the
incorporation of the village in Soviet Georgian society. It tries to illustrate how the biographies of the state and individual villagers intertwined and how this changed their social orientations as well as their definitions of culture and ethnicity.

Chapter Seven investigates how the physical borders and cultural boundaries were reconfigured after the demise of the Iron Curtain. It attempts to explain why the border opening was disillusioning, especially with respect to cross-border familial ties. I argue that precisely because physical and social distances across the divide were so small, it were the ‘differences’ that mattered after contacts were re-established. It thus shows the importance of paying attention to the physical and ideological rigidities of socialist borders, because in response to those rigidities cultural and ethnic differences arose that were not easily overcome after the collapse of socialism. Instead, the differences created by seventy years of socialism seem to be magnified in the new ‘capitalist’ era.