Northern border regions on focus

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This special volume of NGP contains papers derived from the *East meets North* conference arranged at the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) in November 2013, the driving ideas were to gather Finnish and Russian researchers with an interest in northern – or Arctic/sub-Arctic/Far North/High North/European North/ Sápmi/Lapland/North Calotte/Barents Euro-Arctic region (which ever name we want to use) – border regions around the same table and to define a set of focal points for joint research into northern border regions to be pursued by the University of Eastern Finland in cooperation with its partners. The University of Eastern Finland is one of the largest universities in Finland. It is a multidisciplinary university, which offers teaching in more than 100 major subjects. The university has approximately 15,000 students about 2,800 staff members, the university has three campuses which are located in Joensuu, Kuopio and Savonlinna. One of the university's key interdisciplinary research area is 'cultural encounters, mobilities and borders'. The UEF is a member of the University of the Arctic (UArctic) which is an international cooperative network based in the circumpolar region.

From the discussions of the *East meets North* conference we can identify *four strong areas* of research connected with the northern and eastern borderlands, their northern way of life and their significance as locations for contacts on various levels: 1) cross-border historical, cultural and economic contacts, 2) welfare, 3) the peoples of the North and their rights, and 4) crises occurring in northern regions and their consequences. The papers published here provide examples of these points of strategic focus that can be expected to gain in emphasis in the future.

It is customary in a research setting to evaluate border regions in a wide variety of contexts, among which particular mention may be made of cartographic representations of their topography and localities, works in which they are taken to serve as communal spaces, i.e. the products of social networks and practises, and thirdly, lines of research that regard them as emotional and mental states. The trend in the last twenty years has indeed been to move away from the study of politically defined administrative regions such as states, provinces or municipalities and towards a broader focus on cultural or economic regions and eventually imaginary and symbolic ones. At the same time multidisciplinary geopolitical perspectives on northern regions, including the military and strategic significance

of these borderlands, have attracted the interest of researchers in recent times. These central lines of thought have also been important in international discussions regarding the northern border regions, as exemplified by the *ICASS VIII Book of Abstracts* (2014) and many of the speeches made at the *East meets North* conference. At the closing session of the latter conference a desire was expressed to have at least some of the papers, speeches and preliminary discussions published. Thus the present volume contains both reviews put forward in the conference's workshops and finalized papers presented at its plenary sessions. This variability is also reflected in the composition of the contributions.

The famous historian Michel Foucault suggested that there exists a significant, perhaps fundamental but at least interesting, difference between the larger and smaller countries in Europe (Foucault 2010, 284), and this may well be so for the most part, but as the extensive and fruitful collaboration that has taken place between Finnish and Russian researchers in the field of study concerned here indicates, borderlands between a large nation and a small one can serve as a major arena in which researchers can meet, work together and increase their respect for one another, a place and space in which they can appreciate that their mutual scientific interests coincide. In this sense the perceived common ground for the *East meets North* conference, the trans-national region of Karelia and the whole area of the 1300 km border between Finland and Russia stretching from the Gulf of Finland to the frontiers of Inari Lake, united the University of Eastern Finland with the universities of Archangelsk, Petrozavodsk and St. Petersburg, so that we can easily concur with the notion of Homi K. Bhabha (1994, 1–5) that a border can serve as a cultural bridge (Figure 1).

Living close to the border has been seen by the people of both East Finland and North-West Russia as a source of opportunities in the cultural, economic and research spheres and by no means as the threat that borderland life is frequently held to be in geopolitical writings and traditional military histories. No border is "natural" in character; they are always the product of a political process that defines what lies beyond the border and treats the people living within the borders of a country as a homogeneous nation and shapes their thinking accordingly (Bigo 1998, 149). In this case the areas on the two sides of the Finnish-Russian border are distinctly similar in terms of their flora, fauna and topography. As Liam O'Dowd (1999) has suggested, a border can be either a barrier to interaction or a promoter of interaction, a resource and a symbol of identity. Looking at the Finnish-Russian borderlands from the viewpoint of 21st-century researchers, we can see that they function as resources and promoters of interaction, but at the same time as symbols of identity for both the inhabitants of the northern communities and the researchers studying them.

Looked at, over a longer historical time span, the Finnish-Russian borderlands have been regarded as dangerous territories from time to time, but this danger has frequently been shown on further examination to have been a product of conscious political and ideological propaganda and agitation. This was the case during the late 19th-century

Figure 1. The main North European partner university cities and communities of researchers at the University of Eastern Finland. Map: Alfred Colpaert 2014.

and early 20th-century Russification period, for instance, while earlier in the 19th century the Pan-Scandinavian, Pan-Slavist and Fennoman movements were all quick to draw attention to the cultural boundary between Finland and Russia. Later, once Finland had gained its independence in 1917, it initiated an entire *Borderland*

programme in the 1920s on account of the threat posed by the border, starting out from the assumption that all the areas of Finland that bordered onto the Soviet Union were politically unreliable and culturally and economically deprived relative to other parts of the country. This meant that the government both committed itself to providing these areas – East and North Finland from Karelian Isthmus to Pechenga – with additional economic and educational support and was also careful to maintain strict control over them. Finally, the talk surrounding the border led to two bitter wars in 1939–40 and 1941–44.

Throughout the Cold War of 1945–91 the Finnish-Russian border constituted a unique unbuffered East-West interface straddling the Iron Curtain, given that elsewhere in Europe the countries of the Eastern Bloc formed a transition zone between East and West. It was only in the North Norway, in fact, that the opposing military alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, actually came face to face. It is important to remember, however, that the Finnish-Russian border only began to open up some ten years after the end of the Second World War, as it was under the *Friendship and Cooperation Agreement* signed between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1955 that major breaches were achieved in the Iron Curtain and tourism, trade and both scientific and cultural cooperation between the two countries increased greatly. By contrast, the first post-war friendship and cooperation treaty, drawn up in 1948, still emphasized the distinction between the victor, the Soviet Union, and the loser, Finland. From the perspective of the scientific community it is nevertheless reassuring to note that scientific cooperation was a conspicuous element in the post-war agreements reached between the two countries.

Once the Cold War came to an end the situation altered again, as the *Treaty on the basis for relations* (63/1992) between Finland and Russia, signed in January 1992, even went so far as to define the fields in which research collaboration was to take place. It was noted in the introduction to the treaty that the parties wished to collaborate *bilaterally and jointly with others in developing conditions in the Arctic, northern Europe and the Baltic region*, and in another connection it was stated that *particular attention should be paid to cooperation between Finland and the parts of Russian Karelia and the St. Petersburg and Murmansk regions bordering onto it* (Article 6). In a third instance reference was made to the fact that *the countries should aim to promote interaction in various fields of science and culture on the basis of their rich traditions of mutual cooperation and common European and general human values* (Article 9), while at yet another point they undertook *to protect each others' languages, cultures and historical monuments* (Article 10). As can be seen from these citations, abundant attention was given to cross-border Finnish-Russian collaboration in matters of research. The regions mentioned in the agreement, St. Petersburg, Karelia and Murmansk, are precisely those where the University of Eastern Finland has done most of its joint work; with the universities of St. Petersburg, Archangelsk and Petrozavodsk, with the *Karelian Institute*, founded in 1971 emerging as a pioneer within Finland in this respect.

In recent years areas located further north, including the Barents Euro-Arctic region, have attracted more interest along with the general renaissance in Arctic affairs. This is not by any means a new development, however, as there has been considerable Finnish and Russian interest in the northern and Arctic border regions ever since the international expeditions to the Arctic in the 19th century. Northern Europe was a fashionable object of investigation in the courts and scientific societies of Europe even in the 18th century, and this was reflected in the geographical orientation of research in Finland. The voyage of Adolf Nordenskiöld, a Finn by birth, through the *North-East Passage* in 1878–79, the first *International Polar Years* in 1882–83 and 1932–33, the avid discussions over the status of Spitsbergen (Svalbard) in the 1910s and 1920s, the development of icebreakers and the bold flights over Arctic areas undertaken by Soviet pilots in the 1930s all tell us of the increased interest in gaining possession over the extreme northern regions.

Cooperation between Finnish and Russian scientists has developed side by side with the political interest shown in these topics, which implies that research into northern areas also has long-standing roots. Finnish 19th-century men of science and letters such as A.J. Sjögren, Matthias Castrén, Johan Palmén, August Ervasti and Väinö Voionmaa mapped the coastal areas of the Arctic Ocean, the Kola Peninsula, Russian Karelia and Siberia in collaboration with Russian scientists, and we are engaged in continuing those traditions nowadays, as witnessed by the papers in the present collection.

Finally, I would like to express my warmest thanks to all those who participated in the conference and wrote papers for this volume for their inspiring contributions, and similarly to the Regional Council of Northern Karelia and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies, University of Eastern Finland, for sponsoring these projects. This gives us something good to build on, for as Laurence Smith (2011) has shown, interest in northern border regions has increased significantly. Research in these topics can also be expected to increase, and this will undoubtedly bind the scientists involved more closely together than ever before.

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