

## THE CROSS-BORDER REGION OF THE TORNIO VALLEY<sup>1</sup>

The Danube and Tornio are rivers that unite and separate different nations, territories, peoples and families. These are rivers that have a great significance both from the national perspective and locally, because they have transported goods, people and even ideas. As frontier markers they have also been the scene of events and encounters that have taken place between different states.

In August 2009 I had the possibility to visit the twin-city of Komárom–Komárno, in an area which both the Danube and the frontier demarcation between Hungary and Slovakia settled at the Treaty of Trianon had split in two.<sup>2</sup> We entered Komárno by crossing the same bridge that the President of Hungary László Sólyom was not permitted to cross on August 20th when he was due to participate in a ceremony to unveil a statue to St Stephen on St Stephen's Day. St Stephen's Day, which symbolises the Hungary state and national unity – as is generally known by Hungarian readers – is one of Hungary's most important national days.<sup>3</sup>

The terms of the Treaty of Trianon came as a shock to Hungary, because it had to surrender 70% of its territory and about 60% of its inhabitants, leaving 3.3 million Hungarians in neighbouring countries. The forfeited territories and population had been economically significant and Hungary's international status suffered a considerable blow, compared to the pre-war situation. The Treaty of Trianon cut considerable Hungarian-speaking minorities off from the former motherland and this has, correspondingly, affected Hungary's relations with its neighbours. Over the course of time all this has brought into existence a so-called Treaty of Trianon trauma, by which is meant the strong common emotional experience of Hungarians, the special nature of which has hidden it in perpetuity, since the trauma has been handed down from one generation to the next.<sup>4</sup>

In many frontier areas as for example in the areas of my own research in the valley of the River Tornio on the borders of Finland and Sweden people have often had to pay a high price for the demarcation of borders. The River Tornio, which continues upstream as the River Muonio, was a uniting factor holding the area together. Exactly 200 years ago a frontier between Sweden and Russia was defined along the

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<sup>2</sup> I thank PhD Lajos Kemecsi, PhD József Liszka and Professor Attila Paládi-Kovács for organising me this excursion.

<sup>3</sup> In this article I shall not get involved in the various interpretations of St Stephen by Hungarians and Slovaks and the events that took place at the frontier, nor the relations between these two countries; rather I wish to use this topic as an opening to my subsequent discussion on border-area dynamics, interaction and different narratives. It was also St Stephen's Day when the armoured vehicles of the Warsaw Treaty nations under the command of the Soviet Union—including Hungarian troops – marched into Czechoslovakia to end the "Prague Spring" uprising in 1968. See e.g. Lampinen 2004. 323–325.

<sup>4</sup> Gráfik 2003. 129.; Savolainen 2005. 71.

River Tornio as the result of peace negotiations engaged in by the rulers, and the Tornio Valley now became a frontier with an entirely different significance compared to what had earlier been a channel for navigation and waters for fishing. The Tornio Valley is a frontier district where the political boundaries do not necessarily coincide with the cultural and linguistic boundaries. The new border split a unified language and cultural area into two. Thus, at an early stage, as state institutions and symbols began to proliferate, this became an area from which two narratives were emanated. On both sides of the border a different narrative was told, of “us” and of “them”.<sup>5</sup> In this article I shall concentrate on the special features of the Tornio Valley border area from a recent historical perspective. The focus of my research is on the transnational everyday life in the twin-city of Tornio-Haparanda.<sup>6</sup>

Frontiers are tools for organising social space and part of a process wherein places and their identities are produced. According to Doreen Massey<sup>7</sup> place should not be understood only in a physical or integrated sense, as separate and stable. Instead, the concept should be combined with ideas of a meeting place, in which connections, relationships, impacts and movements are intertwined.

The multi-ethnic border zone of the Tornio Valley gives evidence of being a vital area for the hybridisation of cultures as well as for studying power relations and everyday activities. A Finnish-speaking population arrived after the Middle Ages to join the indigenous Saami inhabitants. Until the end of the Finnish War in 1809 this area – as the rest of Finland – belonged to Sweden. It was a cultural and ecological entity in which the same languages were spoken, Finnish and Saami, membership was in the same evangelical movement, that of the Laestadians, and a living was earned from the same forms of livelihood; fishing, cattle herding and trade.

Furthermore, many of the features of the material culture gave evidence of a long common history and contacts. These are represented by, for instance, the richly decorated painted peasant furniture and three-storied granaries. In considering this cultural area, according to Ilmar Talve<sup>8</sup> the Tornio Valley clearly formed a unique distinctive territory that could be set apart the rest of northern Finland. Also, later in the second half of the twentieth century many advances were introduced into northern Finland by way of the Tornio Valley.

## INJURY CAUSED BY THE FRONTIERS

The accounts of the events of St Stephen’s Day, ‘the diplomatic crisis inside the borders of the EU or on the border of EU countries’, on the bridge over the Danube as it may have been described were communicated rapidly in the digital world (e.g. Helsingin Sanomat 23.8.2009). Much more slowly and quietly, on the other hand, were the effects of the Treaty of Hamina felt at the time in the daily affairs of the

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<sup>5</sup> Prokkola 2005. 177.

<sup>6</sup> In celebration of the 200th anniversary of Treaty of Hamina several new works have been published and a number of seminars have taken place so far the main emphasis has been on political and administrative issues and Finland’s entry into the international community as an independent state.

<sup>7</sup> Massey 1998. 5–6.

<sup>8</sup> Talve 1989. 407.

inhabitants of those in the Tornio Valley. The events at the close of the war between Sweden and Russia may seem to be absurd to the reader because when the officers who were fighting on the battlefield complained to Stockholm about the futility of the situation – the army was beleaguered by famine, fatigue and infection – the king, Gustav IV Adolf announced with great ostentation that the officers would not thence be expected to use their powdered wigs every day.<sup>9</sup>

After Sweden had lost the Finnish War and Finland had been conceded to Russia, the resulting boundary between the two countries isolated in a dramatic way the area in the Tornio Valley which until now had been Finnish speaking. A new border, proposed by the Russians, was drawn along the River Tornio, not the River Kalix which at that time separated the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations. The Swedes wanted the border to be further east, along the River Kemijoki. Finally, the Tsar of Russia agreed that the frontier should follow the rivers Tornio and Muonio, in such a way that the town of Tornio was on the Russian side.<sup>10</sup> The border is still called the ‘red ribbon drawn up by the Tsar’.

Further, as far as everyday life at the local level is concerned people had to pay a high price for the way in which the frontier question was resolved. The new frontier split villages and farms, fields and forests, land ownership and families in two. The border cut off the bonds between kindred and neighbours, and tore into shreds the old trading areas. Just as with the Hungarian-Slovakian border Komárom-Komárno, both on the Finnish and on the Swedish side of the River Tornio there are villages with the same name such as, for example, Pello-Pello and Karesuvanto-Karesuando. Almost all of the parishes in the Tornio Valley were split in two, thus losing both territory and inhabitants.

## LIFE AFTER THE DEMARCATION OF THE FRONTIER

For people living in border regions, the spatial dimension is always present. How they use this border-area depends on, besides their own interests and skills, the political systems of the border states.<sup>11</sup> In spite of the new national border, life and contacts between the local people on both sides of the Tornio Valley continued, because in the beginning the border was only an administrative measure. The most significant changes in people’s lives began to be seen later in the 1800s, when trade and the border traffic began to be regulated more than ever and it became forbidden to cross the frontier other than at certain customs posts. In 1824, those crossing the border were required to show a passport without which travellers would be forced to return. Even after the introduction of the passport regulation, it was still common for people to travel across the border and inhabitants were threatened with arrest and confiscation of belongings.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the Swedification policy and the various constraints, contacts and dealings with those left on the other side of the frontier continued to take place. The common language, religion and relatives, along with the old contacts, were the key factors that maintained diverse and active connections. The local inhabitants refused to accept

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<sup>9</sup> Hårstedt 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Lähteenmäki 2004. 30–31.

<sup>11</sup> Lundén–Zalamans 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Lähteenmäki 2004. 66–67.

the border as a divisive frontier; rather, they emphasised the common history, language and culture: “*And that goes for these nations, because this wasn't the frontier then. Yes, because you were sister, brother to someone on the other side, to many, the contacts were enormous, it wasn't thought of as a border. [...] But, for us, Finnish is the mother tongue, even though we are proper Swedes, but our mother tongue has been Finnish, yes. But we learn the Swedish in school.*”<sup>13</sup>

All in all, people living on both sides of the border have used different border strategies and have pursued different cross-border activities at different times and there have also been “border migrants”. Cross-border marriages or “cross mating”, both legal and illegal forms of commerce, and employment on the other side of the border have long been customary.

The status of the Tornio Valley as a frontier area played an important role in the life of people in northern Finland during the Second World War. In the autumn of 1944 the so-called Lapland War broke out. According to the terms of the peace treaty with Soviet Union, Finland was obliged to rid Lapland of its former comrades-in-arms, the Germans (over 220,000 soldiers). In retreat, the Germans adopted a so-called scorched-earth policy, that is, they burnt down the buildings in the area and destroyed the roads and bridges. The Finnish civilian population now had to be evacuated in the face of a new enemy and the short and ‘natural’ route was through the Tornio Valley on the other side of the frontier river, where there were relatives and friends, at least of the inhabitants of border villages.

Life in Sweden was materially better than in wartime Finland, because Sweden was not a participant in the war and did not have to suffer to the same extent as did Finland. At the time of the evacuation the close relations that had been formed continued to have great importance during peacetime, when goods were smuggled over the border from Sweden.

After the war Lapland began to be rebuilt, and there was a shortage of almost everything. Foodstuffs were rationed and, for example, coffee was not available at all in Finland. There was a shortage of many construction materials and tools in Finland, but then again these could be bought from the Swedish side, and it was natural for the people of the Tornio Valley to seek the goods they needed from Sweden, a place with which they were familiar and where they could get them at a cheaper price. Some of the goods acquired through *joppaus* were for personal use whereas others were sold on the black market, through a network stretching as far as southern Finland.

*Joppaus* decreased as the rationing of certain goods in Finland began to end and trade restrictions were relaxed. The golden age of *joppaus* ended at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. Even after the rationing goods were bought from Sweden, but on this occasion the reason was the price differences and the habits of taste. The differences in the prices were due to the relative value of money. When the exchange rate for the Swedish crown was low, it paid to buy from Sweden and vice versa. Devaluation either way changed the direction of the border trade overnight. On account of the habits of taste and the difference in the exchange rate between the euro and the Swedish crown purchases continue to be made in the neighbouring country.

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<sup>13</sup> TYKL/kk/ 2113, male born 1943.

## THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE FINNISH LANGUAGE

Despite the fact that those left on western side of the frontier became a linguistic minority (40.000) in the Kingdom of Sweden after the boundary change, the Finnish language had continued to be spoken in Sweden. For their part, those women in Finland who went to the Swedish side of the border to marry to some extent helped the language to survive despite a very unfavourable language politics climate. Nowadays the population of the River Tornio Valley is composed of different linguistic and cultural groups: the Tornio Valley inhabitants, Finland Finns, Sweden Swedes, Sweden Finns<sup>14</sup> and Saamis, who live in countries as well as a small group of immigrants. The town of Tornio now has 22,400 inhabitants and Haparanda a population of 10,200. Haparanda, in which 74.6 per cent of the inhabitants have a Finnish background,<sup>15</sup> is at present Sweden's largest Finnish-speaking municipality, in which 60 per cent are proficient in Finnish, the majority belonging to the older age groups.<sup>16</sup>

From the end of the 1800s the Finnish-speaking inhabitants on the Swedish side became the subject of a fierce policy of Swedification. The speaking of Finnish was viewed as a threat, Finnish-speakers as "a foreign tribe". Finnish was rooted out using ruthless means and this process of Swedification resulted in Finnish speakers switching to Swedish. When children, despite the sanctions, still refused to stop speaking Finnish during the lesson breaks, the whole class was collectively punished, perhaps by detention after school.<sup>17</sup> This has been related recently in many autobiographical writings and, for example, in the film directed by Klaus Härö "Invisible Elina" (2002).

It was only in the 1990s that the Finnish language, which is referred to both Finnish of Tornio Valley and Meän kieli, was recognised as an official minority language on the Swedish part of the Tornio Valley. Since 1.4.2000 citizens have had the right to be heard by the authorities and courts in Finnish and/or Meän kieli (as well as Saami), and have had the right to education and healthcare in these languages, for example, in Haparanda. On the other hand, on the Finnish side of the border practically speaking everyone who has had a basic education has learnt Swedish, although this of course says little about actual proficiency.

### SYMBOLS AND REALMS OF MEMORY ON THE BORDER

Having lost its eastern province of Finland and the eastern frontier having been moved to another place, the state had to start building new symbols to safeguard and manifest its presence and position. Several different monuments of time and place that also signify in different ways this and other events from the past are to be found in the prox-

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<sup>14</sup> Haparanda became a retirement community for Finnish emigrants moving from southern Sweden (where they have moved in 60's and 70's to work in industry) to nearer their former native country in order to benefit from the Swedish retirement plan and Finnish language services.

<sup>15</sup> This group includes those born in Finland, those who have at least one parent born in Finland and those who have at least one grandparent born in Finland.

<sup>16</sup> SCB 2008/ SR Sisuradio

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Bladh–Kuvaja 2006. 32.

imity of the frontier. Traces of the past can be transformed into sites of memory that draw members of the community together to remember and interpret the past as well as to maintain and renew their knowledge of history. According to Pierre Nora<sup>18</sup> communities need sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), because there are no longer communities united by the memory of an event (*milieux de mémoire*), wherein memory of the event is an inextricable part of experience and interaction. The site of memory may be an actual place or building, although it could also be a historical figure, ritual, inscription or old custom. Such sites of memory are the result of the interaction between the memory and history, and are open to multiple interpretations.

Tornio was founded in 1621 by Gustav II Adolf of Sweden at the place at which the Tornio River flows into the Gulf of Bothnia. The Tornio was the location of an old marketplace, where on the trading routes goods from the north were transported and exchanged and where the tax-collectors also gathered. To compensate for the loss of Tornio, Sweden established a new marketplace, Haparanda by the River Tornio in 1821. It received its town charter in 1842. Here at the easternmost point in Sweden's railway system a large station was built in 1918. Nowadays this building is used as a youth centre. A corresponding symbolic building is the Russian Orthodox Church – dedicated to the apostles Peter and Paul – in Tornio for the Russian soldiers in 1884.

During times of war and emergency border areas such as the Tornio Valley play an important part in many ways. At least nine memorials of the Finnish War and the Treaty of Hamina are to be found in the Tornio and Haparanda area. There are signs of the period before Finland gained independence in 1917 in this area, too. Although Russia did fortify its frontier posts more than it had done earlier by sending additional gendarmes and military personnel, there were young Finnish male volunteers who travelled in secret through Sweden to Germany where they were trained as *Jägers*, and whose purpose was to help Finland gain independence. Tornio was an important stop on this journey and this is recalled in memorial plaques on the walls of houses on both sides of the frontier. In 2005 the War Child Monument 'Separation' was unveiled in Haparanda symbolising the common history and tragic experiences of the border area. Sweden accepted more than 70,000 Finnish child evacuees, of which many travelled to Sweden over the border from Tornio to Haparanda.

In my question to those interviewed I asked about the obvious differences between the two countries people mentioned, among others, the difference in flag raising customs in Finland and Sweden.<sup>19</sup> On the Swedish side private houses and summer cottages often have short flagpoles on both sides of the door from which a Swedish flag hangs when the building is occupied. This custom has also been adopted by the Sweden Finns in their summer houses on the Finnish side of the border, where they fly miniature flags of their country of residence, Sweden, and that of their country of origin, Finland.

Pekka Leimu relates in his article in this jubilee book about flag-related conventions in different countries and mentions the tribal flag as one flag type. The Meän [literally our] flag, which was revealed in the Tornio Valley in 2007 and has been designed by Bengt Pohjanen and Herbert Wirlöf, is one example of flags of this kind. The

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<sup>18</sup> Nora 1996. 1–3., 14–15.

<sup>19</sup> Prokkola 2005. 181.

flag is a horizontal tricolour. The colours are yellow, white and blue, and are based on the colours of the Finnish and Swedish flags. According to the creators, these colours symbolise the golden-yellow of the sun, the winter view of the river and the blue sky of the summer and, furthermore, an age-old story related to a Finnic people, the Veps, and the sagas of Iceland.

The dedication of the flag was hoped to unite the Tornio Valley that was severed in two at the time of the founding of the Treaty of Hamina. The flag day of the Meän people is 15th of July on both sides of the river. According to one of the flag designers Bengt Pohjanen, the day chosen has no meaning other than that it is the most convenient time for most of the Tornio Valley people.<sup>20</sup>

## TRANSNATIONAL EVERYDAY LIFE

Professor Gábor Barna has on many occasions written about the role of religion in modern society.<sup>21</sup> The significance of religion can be felt in the daily lives of people more widely than simply by what goes on in church. The importance of the birth of the Laestadian Movement in the Tornio Valley can be discerned as an outstanding additional sustainer of cross-border contact. The Laestadians are members of a charismatic revival movement established in the Tornio Valley in the middle of the 1800s, which is deeply rooted in the North Calotte area. Its adherents are found today in the other Nordic countries, as well as in North America and elsewhere. It is the largest Finnish revivalist sect in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was named after the northern Swedish clergyman Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), whose father was a Swede and mother a Saami.

This religion united people from different nations and the uniting language of the Laestadians was Finnish, whereby religion also aided the survival of the Finnish language. Then again, Finnish was the only language through which contact could be maintained with the believing sisters and brothers on the other side of the border. The international frontier was no deterrent to the spread of the Laestadian Movement in Finland. Most of the preachers in the Tornio Valley were Finnish-speaking, and the Swedish state church was experienced as a foreign institution.<sup>22</sup>

Little by little an end came to the demarcation of boundaries and the differences caused by economic and social losses. The western side of the Tornio Valley became a part of the history of the Swedish state and *Folkhemmet*<sup>23</sup> (literally people's home), whereas the eastern side became part of Finland and its history. The common history, language and religion and copious social relationships and contacts were in a key position in recovering from the tragic and arduous times after the world wars. The border has been kept open with the exception of the periods of war, and the frontier area on the Finnish side especially has enriched the Tornio Valley, and indeed the whole of Finland economically, socially and culturally. This location as a border area both countries use to their advantage in the European Union.

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<sup>20</sup> Kaleva 13.7.2005.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Barna 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Fjällström 2001. 90.

<sup>23</sup> A political concept of the Swedish Social Democratic Party meaning a policy which creates unity and homogeneity over class borders.

The Tornio Valley aims at a profile of openness as a border area, wherein cooperation between the bordering states and municipalities functions smoothly. In the course of cooperation and in different joint projects – and there are many between Tornio and Haparanda – trustworthiness and social capital play an important part. According to Jouni Häkli who has studied the building of transnational space in Haparanda-Tornio, speaks of “*this socio-cultural landscape of (mis)trust, embodied by the River Tornio as a »natural boundary« that various practices of formal cross-border cooperation have sought to accommodate and bridge.*”<sup>24</sup> Despite a long common history, culture and language, extensive cross-border contacts and activities, and as well as having a common Tornio Valley identity, the inhabitants identify now themselves strongly with their own national communities. The two national narratives, Finnish and Swedish, have created an order that those both in Tornio and Haparanda tend to view as natural.

Living on the frontier brings its own flavour to the lives and everyday activities of the local inhabitants, even if this “*is not grasped during the everyday affairs of life*” as one of my interviewees expressed it. Another of those I interviewed who had by now lived in Sweden for over 20 years stated that her fatherland is still nevertheless Finland, although she is from Tornio Valley: “*It extends along both sides of the river and speaks the Meän kieli language. Yes, I’m from Tornio Valley. [...] You can’t get rid of your roots.*”

#### SOURCES

Fieldwork material is archived in the TYKL archive (Archives of the Turku University Ethnological Department): TYKL/kk/2093–2117

Fieldwork material (2008) is still in author’s possession.

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<sup>24</sup> Häkli 2009. 211–212.



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