

INTRODUCTION

The date is 1 August 1996, and I am aboard a ferry as it sets off from the northern Japanese port of Wakkanai on the sea crossing to Korsakov, on the Russian island of Sakhalin. It is a quiet, calm day and the sea is a silver-lead colour, with few waves in the bay, although my cabin companions warn me that it will get rough out in the straits. They remember the crossing 50 years ago, when the cups rolled around on the table, and people went down below decks to escape the storm, only to find that the heaving of the waves was even worse down there. On the quay, the scene is much as I had expected. A number of elderly couples, some with adult children, returning to visit their long-lost birthplaces; a few stray younger travellers, and one small party of Russian teenagers on a school exchange. But look more closely, and matters become more complicated. The young couple in front of me in the boarding queue – a skinny man in a loose black jacket and a girl in a pink trouser suit, whom I had automatically registered as Japanese – were speaking Russian as they said farewell to a very Japanese-looking elderly lady on the docks, and showed their Russian passports as they went through emigration.

My Japanese cabin companions are going back on a nostalgia visit. They have been friends since childhood and meet every year to recall memories of Karafuto (the Japanese colony that occupied the southern half of Sakhalin Island from 1905 to 1945). Their other friends in Japan have no interest in sharing these memories. Until the end of the war, they lived in the ‘old city’ of Toyohara (now the Russian city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk). Their neighbours included a Russian, a Polish family and a German family who ran the local bakery. The children all went to school together, and they say that they had no sense of any of them being ‘foreigners’. Later, sitting on the upper deck, I find myself next to a woman with sadder memories. She went to Karafuto when she was five, and was nine when the war ended. Her family lived in Maoka (now Kholmsk), until the Russians came and burned everything. She remembers playing with her sister among the

burnt ruins, picking up broken cups and plates. They took shelter for a while in her grandmother's house, which was still standing, but then the Russians came with rifles and took her father away.

Sakhalin appears on the port side before I expect it: beautiful and mountainous, with fold upon fold of hills in different shades of blue-grey, and sometimes sharper peaks appearing behind. When I go to the stern of the ferry, I find, sheltering from the wind, three women: one small and elderly, one middle-aged and the third younger and dressed in a smart grey suit. I start talking to them in hesitant Russian. The woman in grey turns out to be Nivkh, and the other two are Uilta (members of the indigenous Sakhalin communities discussed later in this book). They have been on a visit to their relatives in Abashiri, in northern Hokkaido. Only the elderly lady speaks Japanese – though she explains that she can also speak Uilta and Russian, as well as some Nanai and Korean – so we make do with Russian. The Nivkh lady speaks no Nivkh, but mentions that there is a nursery school in their area that teaches the language. They say that few people have any interest in their culture, and the middle-aged Uilta lady laments that it is now too late for her people. Later, they are joined by her son, who is about 20 and works in a fish-processing factory in central Sakhalin. He is dressed in trendy denim and sports dark glasses. He is friendly and polite, and says that he has enjoyed his first visit to his relatives in Japan. He speaks some English and expresses an interest in coming to Australia.

This book brings together thoughts and writings that span a period of 25 years, from the mid-1990s to the end of the 2010s. All journeys, of course, have multiple starting points, and the ideas that I explore here have grown out of hundreds, maybe thousands, of encounters with remarkable people in Japan, other parts of East Asia and beyond. But one crucial starting point for the journey of exploration undertaken in this book was the crossing from Hokkaido to Sakhalin, which I have described in the paragraphs above, using notes that I jotted down in my diary at the time. The people I met on that crossing gave me new insights into the complexities of history.

Like many people who originate from the British Isles, I come from a family of border-crossers, though few of them have crossed frontiers in such traumatic circumstances as the people I met on the ferry to Korsakov. I had Irish relatives who served in the British army in India,

a half-Irish and half-Scottish mother who grew up in Istanbul, and today I have sisters who live in France, Italy and Greece and a son who lives in the United States, while I am an Australian. We are children of empire, and children of the globalisation that followed in the wake of empire, so it was perhaps inevitable that my interest in the history of Japan would turn to an interest in history of the borderlines surrounding Japan. But once I started looking at history from the vantage point of frontiers, I found myself confronting profound questions about the nature of history itself. Why is it that we so readily accept the boundary lines drawn around nations – or around regions like East Asia – as though they were natural, self-evident and eternal, when in fact they are so mutable and often so very arbitrary? What happens to people not only when the borders they seek to cross become heavily guarded, but also when new borders are drawn straight through the middle of their lives? In trying to answer those questions, it soon becomes clear that time and space are woven together in complex ways. Questioning spatial frontiers therefore also forces us to question the frontiers that we draw through time.

All of the essays that I have brought together in this book try to address aspects of these problems. In some of them, I take the stories of small places, and of events that seem minor in ‘global’ terms, and endeavour to look outwards from the small towards the large, asking what these ‘minor pasts’ tell us about the grand narratives of history. The borderline between Japan and Russia on the shores of the Okhotsk Sea is, for me, one small place that offers such a vantage point, and is the geographical focus of several of the chapters that follow. The history of this area is itself fascinating and insufficiently known; but, more importantly, it creates a space for posing broader questions that apply to the problem of frontiers in many times and places.

A number of the chapters published here are based on articles I have published in the past quarter of a century, though some have never been published, and some have never appeared in English before. In revising and updating essays that I had published earlier, I have been surprised and somewhat alarmed to discover how little has altered in those 25 years. Of course, the details of political regimes and current events have changed, and a wealth of new research has offered fresh material and concepts with which to address the questions that lie at the core of this book. But the underlying issues of frontiers and their impact on human lives have changed only in the sense that they have become ever more visible and more urgent. In the mid-1990s, debates and predictions about

the force known as ‘globalisation’ were gathering momentum, but it was already starting to become clear that the popular visions of globalisation as sweeping away national borders and weakening the power of nations and nationalism were wide of the mark. In the decades since, nationalist passions and concerns about border controls have become ever more intense. The more economics and technology unite us (it seems) the more political borders divide.

Making sense of these forces, I think, requires a look at the deep history of boundary-drawing that has shaped our modern world. In this book, I begin by looking back at the history of area studies, and at the hopes expressed by some pioneers of the field that area-focused research would promote global understanding and weaken the divisive forces of narrow nationalism and ethnocentrism. As a researcher working in Japanese and East Asian studies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I found myself asking why those hopes had not been fulfilled, and feeling that part of the answer lay in the nature of the spatial boundaries devised and used by area scholars themselves. These reflections take us, in Chapters 2 and 3, into the history of frontier-drawing – an exploration of the conceptual ways in which the lines between nations, continents and civilisations have been defined, and of the influence that this process of definition has had on understandings of the human past and present. In Chapter 3, I use the wide area surrounding the Russo–Japanese border and extending into Eastern Siberia as a focus for sketching how boundary-drawing was used by Western thinkers to make sense of the bewildering diversity of places and peoples they encountered in the travellers’ tales sent back by merchants, explorers, freebooters and others. Chapters 4 and 5 go on to use the same area as a site for exploring possible alternative ways of writing history from the vantage point of the societies of the frontier, rather than from the vantage point of nation-states or ‘civilisations’.

In Chapter 6, we trace the history of border encounters between Russians and Japanese, and the processes that created a sharply defined but repeatedly shifting frontier line between the two nations, and in Chapter 7 we look at the effects that the drawing and redrawing of this frontier had on the people who lived in the heart of the border zone: in one small village that stood at the point where Japanese-controlled Karafuto confronted Russian-controlled northern Sakhalin. While most of the book moves inwards from the global and general towards a single specific point on the face of the globe, Chapter 8 moves outwards again. There I make use of ideas explored in earlier chapters to re-examine the changing mental

boundaries that have shaped the study of Japanese history as a whole. In all of these chapters, I am interested particularly in linking the political dimensions of border-drawing to their social and cultural dimensions: how do political borderlines affect daily life, and how are they translated into lines within the human mind and imagination?

The questions posed and discussed in this book have no simple answer. The aim is not to offer decisive resolutions to the debates that swirl around these issues, but rather to encourage the processes of debate and imagination themselves. This book therefore is a sometimes offbeat voyage through many times and places, but one that I hope you will enjoy sharing.

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Map 1.1. The Okhotsk region.

Source: CartoGIS, The Australian National University.

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