

Continued. Everyday life in rural Belarus.

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A neighborhood view of Kaliningrad. Investigating close cross-border relations

The Kaliningrad Region. A Specific Enclave in Contemporary Europe

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336 pages

Visiting the Kaliningrad area, I entered a village with small monument dedicated “to the liberation in 1945”. Liberation from what and to what, one might ask. Among the many strange outcomes of the end of World War II, Kaliningrad is probably one of the weirdest. Originally it was just a spoil of war, a Soviet territorial advance, and an end to a problematic exclave situation of the German Nazi Reich, resulting eventually in a new enigmatic situation of exclave location.

This new book is a collection of articles primarily by researchers at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland, located only some 40 kilometers from the Kaliningrad border. Olsztyn, called Allenstein while under German control, became known as one of the areas of plebiscite in 1920, and was allotted to Germany as part of the Ostpreussen exclave. After the Nazi German defeat in 1945 the exclave was “provisionally” divided between Poland and the USSR, the Soviet part becoming a domestic exclave of the Russian SFSR. In both areas the resident population was expelled. But while the Polish part was relatively smoothly integrated into its mainland by ethnic Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians from areas lost to the USSR, the Soviet Union saw its new territory as a military outpost, and an “ethnic Soviet”, i.e. Russified, island different from the Lithuanian, Polish and Belarusian ethnicities in the neighborhood.

THE BOOK IS DIVIDED into four parts covering regional identities, (inter)regional policies, geopolitical perspectives, and research perspectives. Regional identity is a controversial topic, and in an area covering the territory of former German East Prussia, divided between two “Socialist states” of extremely different geopolitical and “geocultural” attitudes, memory was dealt with in very different ways before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the years of a chaotic democracy in Russia and a hesitant rapprochement between Poland and a united Germany, attempts were made to discuss history books, even to produce common statements on events affecting all three countries, but as Krzysztof Gładkowski shows in his paper, some interpretations were simply unacceptable to the Russian side. History, remembrance, and



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The harbor in Kaliningrad, 2009, when local border traffic occurred.

politics are closely connected. East Prussia is a strong example. After a short but fair summary of its history, Gładkowski analyzes the relation between memory and history, especially that of “trans-border historical policy”. Krzysztof Żęgota mentions the differential handling of physical remains, buildings, and place names, while Arkadiusz Żukowski makes a survey of identity studies, finishing with the hope that the currently suspended local border traffic will again create a regional awareness, while pointing at Russian attempts to create a “homo Russicus” identifying with the regime. A short paper on the Tatar and Muslim community highlights the ethnic links with similar groups in neighboring countries.

The section on (inter)regional policies contains eight papers on political and administrative aspects in Kaliningrad, covering structures in both Russia and Polish political actions towards the exclave. Waldemar Tomaczewski analyzes the specificity of the Kaliningrad region within the Russian Federation, followed by Karolina Tybuchowska-Hartlińska’s study of political participation in Kaliningrad. Of particular interest is Tomasz Bojarowicz’s survey of how Polish political parties have reacted towards events and structures in Kaliningrad since 1989,

mirroring extremist irredentist views, risks of military escalation due to Poland’s accession to NATO and even fear of a German re-take of East Prussia. In recent years, the leftist government spoke of regaining better relations with Russia and Kaliningrad, also supported by local borderland politicians, while the rightist Law-and-Order Party took a harsher attitude, in step with increasing Russian isolationism.

LOCAL MEDIA COVERAGE of neighboring Kaliningrad is mostly related to border passage problems. A local radio program that included a few minutes on life in the exclave was ended in 2014, when the general attitude in Poland against Russia deteriorated sharply because of the assault on Ukraine, as shown by Katarzyna Maciejewska-Mieszkowska. Local border traffic between Poland and Russia underwent several regulatory changes due to e.g. Poland’s accession to the EU, leading to visa requirements, but the traffic was greatly enhanced by an agreement in 2011 allowing visa-free border crossings to residents of Kaliningrad oblast and adjacent areas of Poland. The agreement was abandoned by Poland in 2014. Wojciech Kotowicz concludes it is hard to envisage the possibility of a return to an agreement for local border traffic. While the visa-free agreement was handled by the EU and each state, contacts were made between the local governments of the adjacent regions. His question: “Will LBC [local border cooperation] come back?”, now seems tragically outdated, and in a rather similar paper Teresa Astronomicz-Leyk shows that the local cross-border cooperation is, or rather was, driven by common interest.

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The geopolitical section is given a realist historical interpretation by Jacek Więclawski, starting with the original controversy between the pagan Prussians and the Teutonic Order, transformed into an intricate relationship involving territorial, religious and political changes in what was eventually to become Poland and Prussia. While this political geography covered a vast area from Russia to the Netherlands and Denmark, with military influences from Sweden and Russia, the bone of contention was often in the area of Königsberg and the mouth of the Vistula. Benon Gaziński continues this history with a vivid description of the latest developments up to 2021 and the problems a multi-political “West” (EU, NATO, Poland) face in dealing with an increasingly totalitarian Russia. With the local border traffic these contacts were strengthened, and with its discontinuation in 2016, traffic and contacts slumped. Starting with the details behind this break, Łukasz Bielewski evaluates what was accomplished and what the (then) remaining agreement on Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) will accomplish. Foreign activity by local governments, called “paradiplomacy”, presented by Wojciech T. Modzelewski, were already initiated soon after the demise of the USSR, based on agreement between the states. From around 2001 cooperation was intensified, including information exchange, promotion of entrepreneurship from the other side, and mutual participation in fairs, sports etc. Under these agreements, cross-border relations between counties and municipalities in the borderland were established until its discontinuation in 2016.

AN OUTSIDER VIEW is given by Ingmar Oldberg in his analysis of Kaliningrad’s internal and external problems, including a valuable description of the military re-armament of the area and a useful list of references. Marcin Chełminiak focusses on a Baltic perspective on Russia’s role, starting with hopeful cooperation but becoming increasingly spatially and politically contained.

The last section is a presentation of research activities on Kaliningrad performed by Olsztyn University, in some cases in cooperation with Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, which

also presents its own international activities in a short chapter. The authors Anna Barsukova and Igor Zhukovskiy, both from Kaliningrad University, very positively show the importance of international cooperation among universities. One might wonder if this view is still allowed in Kaliningrad today.

There is a plethora of literature on the enclave/exclave of Kaliningrad, but this book represents “a neighborhood view” with an understanding of close cross-border relations. It contains a valuable survey of scholarship in Polish and Russian. Being an anthology, every chapter can be read and understood separately but this also leads to a great deal of overlapping. In some contributions the English translation is a bit “choppy”.

AT THE TIME OF writing this review, Russia is carrying out an unprovoked war against its neighbor while at the same time strengthening domestic unity, with Kaliningrad seemingly returning into its Soviet military confinement. This book is a time document showing the status of Kaliningrad during an openness that was already threatened ✘

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