

ZOOMING IN – ZOOMING OUT: POLITICS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC AESTHETICS ACROSS FINNISH-SOVIET BORDERS IN THE 1930S

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Photography represents one of the most well-known expressions of art and communication in the contemporary world. Visual images also frame the way borders are seen. In this article I am asking how borders and border regions are photographed. Or even what “border photography” is? Can borders and border areas be visually represented only through pictures of walls, barriers, fences, gates, lines cut in the forest, watch towers, spotlights, stop signs, soldiers and strict faces?

My aim is to discuss “visual bordering processes” and the aesthetic strategies used in photographs of a border region. I will take a comparative position on Finnish and Soviet border communities in pre-World-War-II Finland and the Soviet Union in the late 1930s. By drawing a parallel between how photographic publications perceive and discursively construct borders, the main aspiration is to show how the national border divides aesthetic strategies used in photographs. Aesthetic strategy in this context is used as a term that refers to different sorts of practices that were meant to give “the border” a certain style and shape.

Research material is based on two publications: “USSR in Construction” (*SSSR na stroike*), the magazine's special 15-year anniversary of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic issue from 1935, and a Finnish photo-essay called “Pictures from the Eastern Border” from 1938 (*Itärajan kuvia*). These publications were chosen for the analysis because they represent the “official Finnish and Soviet view” of the area¹, covering the Finnish-Soviet border region known as “Karelia” from north to south on their own sides in the pre-World-War-II era of the 1930s.

Karelia on and between the border

Karelia – north, south, Finnish and Russian – has been and still is an area of many historical and political ambitions and emotions. Geographically “Karelia” is located between Eastern Finland and North-Western Russia. Today in Russia “Karelia” contains the Russian Republic of Karelia and in Finland the regions of South Karelia and North Karelia. For many Finns “Karelia” is an absolute part of Finland and a source of much of Finnish national identity. Whereas, for Russians, “Karelia” has been part of the Russian Empire for centuries and has had an important strategic, economic, and political value. Ethnic Karelians themselves are somewhere between these forces and ideologies. “Karelia” is a true “border region” both dividing and connecting Finnish, Russian and Karelian cultures and identities. (For more on the

¹ There is also an interesting photography book called “A dream about new Karelia” (*Unelma uudesta Karjalasta*) edited by Pekka Hakamies and Olga Fishman (SKS, 2007) that reprints archive photographs taken by “ordinary” Soviet Karelians during the 1920s and 1930s. This book was not included in the study because it does not represent the “official” view of the region and was not published at the time.

changing meanings of the Finnish-Russian border and Karelia, see for instance: Paasi 1999 and Austin 2009.)

This article takes a look at the pre World-War-II Karelia region on both sides of the border. After Finland achieved its independence in 1917, the key concern of Finland's governments during the period between the two World Wars was to "nationalize" the peripheries, i.e. to integrate the peripheral borderlands within the state's core area (Paasi 1996, 43-44; Häyrynen 2004, 24-25; Antonsich 2005, 297). At the same time the Soviet government was enacting assimilationist policies on the other side of the border. The slogan "national in form, but socialist in content," symbolizes the process where ethnic institutions were on the one hand strengthened, but at the same time local cultures were "nationalized" to fit into the Soviet model that began in this period. (Slezkine 1994, 415-416.)



Picture 1: Northern Europe in November 1939 (with additions by MR). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File: Northern_europe_november_1939.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Northern_europe_november_1939.png) (Accessed 26 November 2012).

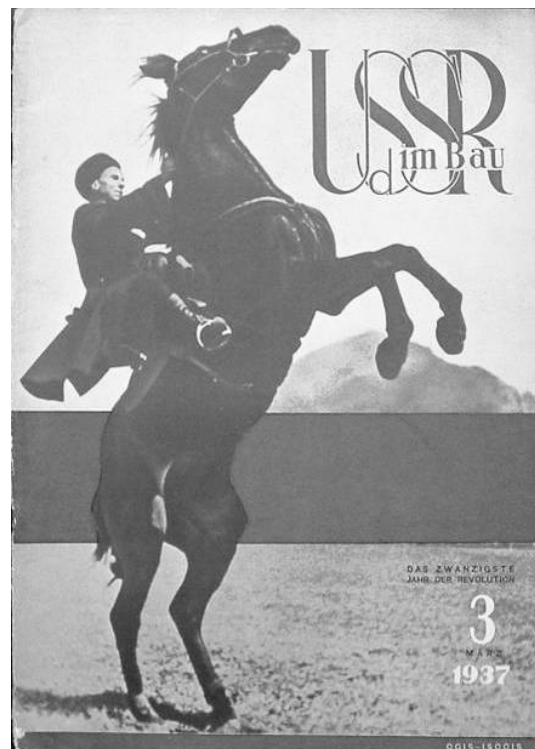
***SSSR na stroike* – Framing the Soviet borders**

SSSR na stroike was a monthly propaganda magazine published under the Stalinist regime from 1930 to 1941. Initially it was published in four languages (Russian, English, French and German), later a fifth edition in Spanish was added. In general, *SSSR na stroike* was created to be an optimistic photo chronicle that illustrated for readers abroad the hyper-construction taking place within the Soviet state by portraying the emergence of the Soviet Union as a leading industrial power. The main people behind *SSSR na stroike* were famous photographers such as, Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Varvara Stepanova. Most of the issues cover state construction projects such as the Baltic-White Sea Canal (“Stalin’s Canal”) (*SSSR na stroike* 12/1933) or special issues on Republics and autonomous regions, i.e. the newly formed Soviet Union’s border regions. (For more on *SSSR na stroike* magazine, see for instance: Wolf 1999 and Romanenko 2005.)

This article takes a closer look at the issue devoted to the 15-year anniversary of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (9/1935), that is very similar to the double issue devoted to the 15th Anniversary of Soviet Georgia (4-5/1936) (Picture 2) and an issue devoted to the North Caucasus (3/1937) (Picture 3).



Picture 2: The German edition’s double issue devoted to the 15th Anniversary of Soviet Georgia (4-5/1936)

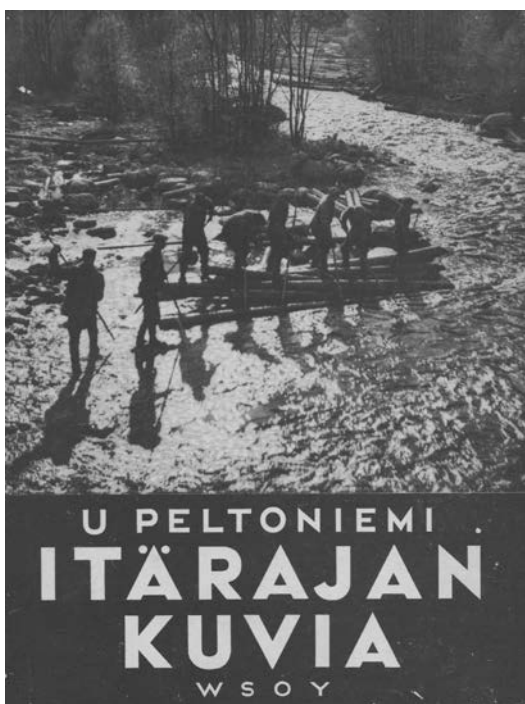


Picture 3: The German edition’s issue devoted to the North Caucasus (3/1937)

In *SSSR na stroike* the text is minimal and the pictures dominate. In the Karelian issue photographs are reproduced in green, blue, purple, black and white. The introductory text informs the reader or viewers what they should be seeing in this issue. The reader is given the basic statistics of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic that is located on the border between Finland and the Soviet Union. 60% of the Karelian territory is covered by forest and there is a list of all the natural resources in the region. The theme emphasizes that it was the October Revolution that saved this forgotten place from the exploitative hands of capitalists, and the conflicts with White Finns are explained in detail. In addition the text praises the *Kalevala* heritage and identifies the Karelian people as the embodiment of this tradition. This issue contains about hundred pictures in total.²

***Itärajan kuvia* – Capturing remote Finnish border areas**

The book *Itärajan kuvia* was published on the initiative of the Finnish Border Association in 1938. In the foreword, the author and photographer Unto Peltoniemi, who was at the time working as an “enlightenment officer” in the border region, informs the reader that this is a book about border areas and the people living in these remote places. The book is clearly targeted at people interested in border issues. In January 1939, the first reviews described it as a unique and beautiful photo essay and a fresh view of the lives of the people living and working hard in the middle of nowhere. In addition, it was thought to be a good history, geography and social studies textbook for schools. Some reviews described it also as “a book for every Finn!” and “a book for every patriotic home in Finland”. (WSOY archive materials 1938-1939.)



Picture 4: Log driving in summer

The book has two different covers: at first it was published with a romantic picture of log driving (Picture 4). Then in October 1939 it was reprinted with a new cover picture: a soldier sitting on a border rock (Picture 5) and sold as a special offer at half price for all the reservists. (WSOY archive materials 1938-1939.)

The Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland began in November 1939 and ended in March 1940 with the Moscow Peace Treaty. After this the book was advertised as “a book of sacred memoirs” of the border region, an area mostly lost in the Moscow Peace Treaty (WSOY archive materials 1938-1939). This book contains about three hundred pictures in total.

² I wish to thank Adjunct Professor Tuulikki Kurki for helping me to digitalize this issue.



Picture 5: Soldier sitting on a border stone

Documenting borders and drawing lines all over the world

In general visual representations of borders can be considered as “documentary photographs”. The term “documentary” applied to photography refers to the mode or genre itself. Documentary photographs aim to describe otherwise unknown, hidden, forbidden, or difficult-to-access places or circumstances, and many of the border areas were all of these. The category “documentary” appeared in the worldwide photographic lexicon in the late 1920s – early 1930s (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 169; Trachtenberg 2004, 3). In the US the trigger was the Great Depression and the “hard times”, whereas in the Soviet Union the construction of the new world demanded documentary images to report the change (Trachtenberg 2004, 3). Surprisingly the images from one country to the other appear similar, nevertheless the photographers worked under radically different systems (Bendavid-Val 1999, 8).

Images of borders around the world are also strikingly similar. Probably the most common way of visualizing borders is to depict border poles, fences, the lines cut in forests etc. A very good example of these types of border photographs is a book entitled *The Lost Border: the Landscape of the Iron Curtain* (2005) that presents the dividing line of East and West in Europe. The photos focus on border poles and fences in photographs taken in the 1980s (Rose 1985).

Another approach to visualizing borders is to document the local history of the border areas. These are often diary-type publications or historical overviews. A Norwegian photographer Ellisif Wessel published a diary from a journey along the Russian-Norwegian border called *Fra vor grændse mod Rusland* [From our borders

towards Russia] (1902), where she used photography to document social injustices in this area (Wessel 1902). In a similar way *Chronicles of the Big Bend: A Photographic Memoir of Life on the Border* (1999) takes a historical overview of the Texas-Mexico border region in the photographs of the 1920s (Smithers 1999).

Contemporary photographers have moved towards “voices on the margins” type of visualization of borders aiming to “speak on those with relative power about those positioned as lacking” power, i.e. one of the basic means of documentary photography (Brothers 1997, 141). As an example of this approach to photography on the border is a photography project documenting the US-Mexico border “through the eyes of the men and women on the line”, where six hundred disposable cameras were handed out to two groups on the opposite sides of the border – undocumented migrants crossing the desert and American Minuteman volunteers trying to stop them. A selection of the images was published in a book called *Border Film Project: Photos by Migrants & Minuteman on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2007). This book represents a modern version of a diary through border pictures: “my borders” – “personal borders”. It puts a human face to the border and guides us to view it through the personal perspective of contemporary “border photography”. So this type of photography also has a “social function” (Adler et al. 2007).

All the mentioned border photography publications are good examples of visual bordering, i.e. a process where visual images are used to construct a certain image of a border and the border region. In this article my aim is to take the analysis of border photography to a different level by looking in parallel at publications containing photographs of both sides of the border. This has proven to be rather challenging. In general, comparisons are complicated; especially when comparing this kind of “cross-border” data that has not been collected or produced for a study before. Therefore, I suggest that we don’t “compare” when we look in parallel at these pictures. This also creates further problems, because when looking at these photographs in parallel, we actually RE- or maybe even DE-contextualise these pictures and create a new space between them. I am arguing that actually, we as “contemporary viewers” become “border crossers” – subjects who emerge from the parallelization of these pictures. In this case, only we can “look across” at both “sides” of the border as across a threshold – the people of 1930s didn’t have this chance.

“USSR in construction” along with “Pictures from the Eastern Border”

Borders divide countries, but interestingly enough the topics of photographs in both publications are very similar: the people and their livelihoods and the nature of this region. Both of the studied publications perform a documentary function. They are also both “documenting” the region for propaganda purposes. They signify “the real” in visual form, creating the politics of a photographic aesthetics for each of the publications. After the October Revolution, in Russia photography became a political tool, since the propaganda potential of photography was quickly recognized by Bolsheviks (Barkhatova 2004, 47). Moreover some of the ideas of the Finnish national romanticism (*Karelianism*) were taken over and used as a motivation for the proposal of a Greater Finland (Kangaspuro 2000, 41-42, 69) – thus art and

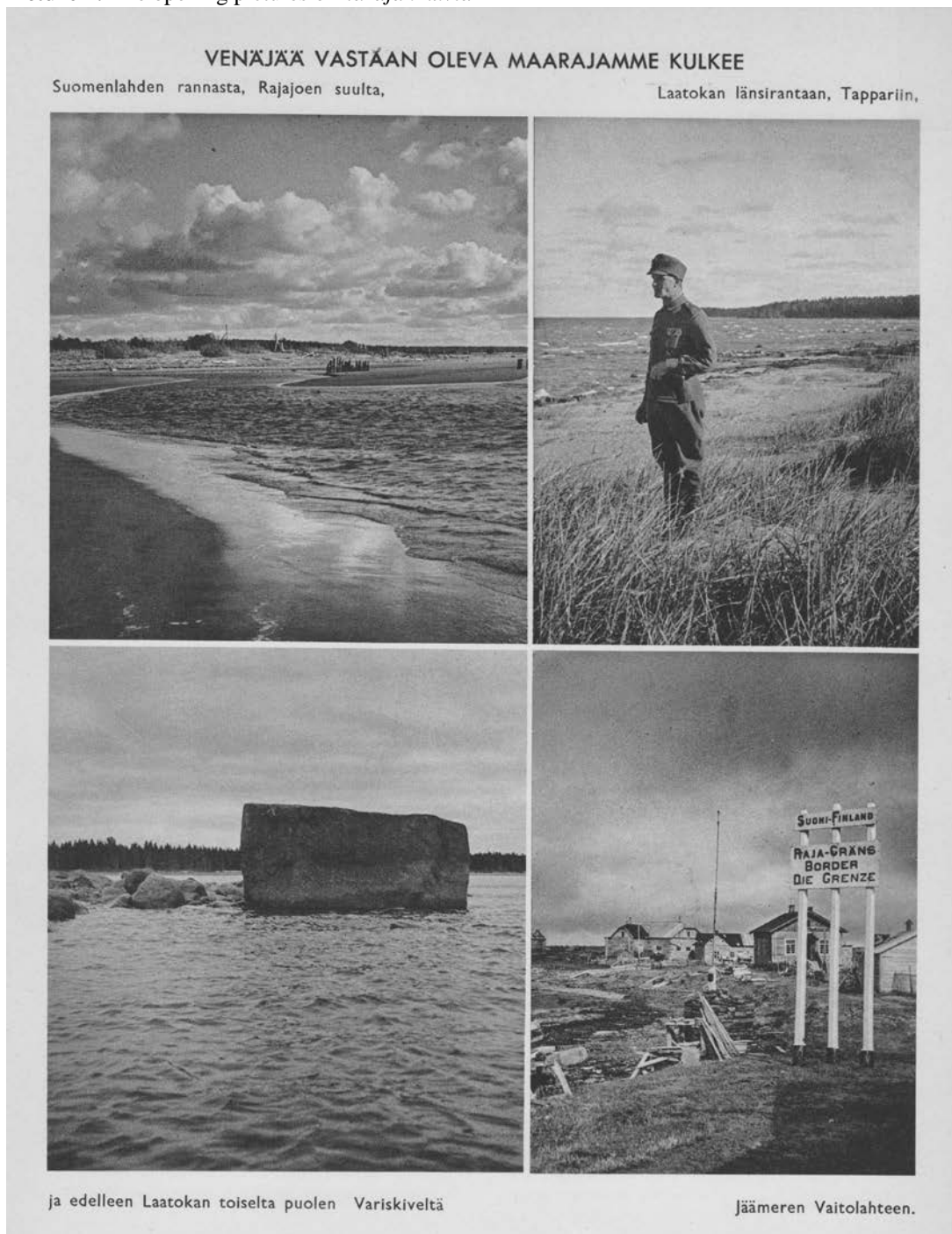
photography were also used as propaganda tools outside of, as well as inside the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic strategies used are rather clearly divided by the national border. One example of this aesthetic division is *photomontage*, i.e. the “photoshopping” of the 1930s. The magazine *SSSR na stroike* is often mentioned as pioneering in using photomontage work as propaganda (Romanenko 2010, 35–36). (See on *photomontage* and Soviet photography see also Tupitsyn 1996, Stiginev 2005 and Radetsky 2007.)

Picture 6: The Soviet-Karelian nature scene



In this nature scene that covers a whole spread of the magazine we can see an example of the Soviet *photomontage*: the spread is full of pieces from different pictures and even rocks and trees are cut separately. This collage also contains a picture of a logging house and gives an impression that the men are reciting the *Kalevala*. The picture includes a caption from the first rhyme of *Kalevala*. In Finland *Kalevala* is regarded as the national epic and is one of the most significant works of Finnish literature. The *Kalevala* played an instrumental role in the development of the Finnish national identity and the growing sense of nationality that ultimately led to Finland’s independence from Russia in 1917 (Vento 1992, 83). Nevertheless, in the Soviet-Karelia (and in the contemporary Russian Karelia) *Kalevala* was regarded as the national epic of the Karelians and basis of the Karelian language and literature (Arinina et al. 2004, 121-122). During the Soviet years *Kalevala* was used in assimilation politics also – the heroic deeds of the *Kalevala* characters moulded well into the model of Soviet working heroes (Arinina et al. 2004, 130-131). In this picture a very clear point is made – *Kalevala* belongs to the Soviet-Karelia.

Picture 7: The opening pictures of *Itärajan kuvia*

The first spread of the *Itärajan kuvia* describes how the national border goes from the Gulf of Finland to the Arctic Ocean. The layout is significantly different from the Soviet version – no *photomontage*. Yet a lonely soldier and a border marker containing the words: *Suomi – Finland / Raja – Gräns / Border / Die Grenze* produce something traumatic and upsetting that needs to be documented further.

The difference in aesthetical strategies chosen continues also in the photographs representing the livelihoods of the region.

Picture 8: Forest work and the Soviet tractor driver



Picture 9: Forest work in the Finnish side



Camera angle as an aesthetic strategy is used differently across the borders. Low-angle shots are very typical for socialist realist art and photographs (Stigneev 2005, 102-103). The viewer is psychologically dominated by the person in the photograph and directed to look up and respect the working heroes. On the other side of the border with a high-angle shot the viewer is looking down on the subject. High angles make the object photographed seem smaller, less significant, vulnerable or powerless. Here aesthetic strategy reflects the ideological and political constraints of both the Finnish and Soviet societies.

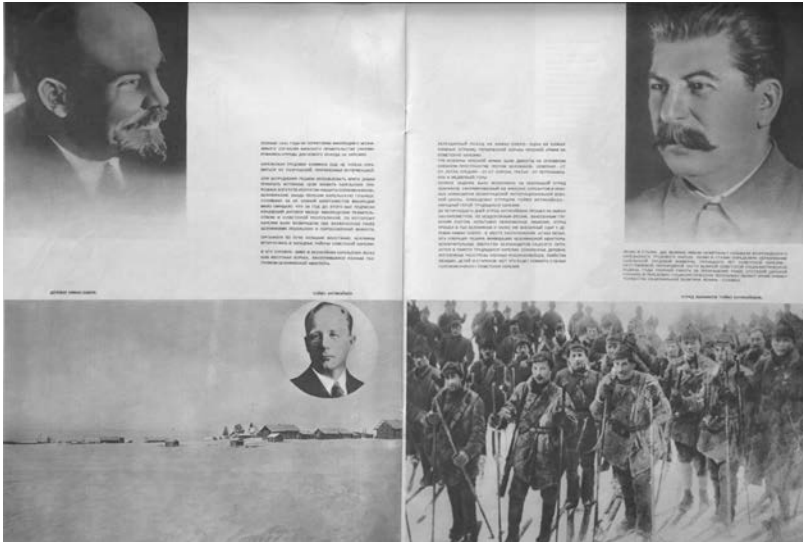


Picture 10: Log driving in Soviet manner



Picture 11: Log driving in Finland

Both *Itärajan kuvia* and *SSSR na stroike* also depict political issues and conflicts across the border. In this case the aesthetic strategy is to take a different viewpoint of a similar theme. One of these types of conflicts was the “Kinship Wars”. “Kinship Wars” took place after the October Revolution in Russia and its border territories inhabited by Baltic-Finns. Some of the conflicts were incursions from Finland and some were local uprisings, where volunteers wanted either to help the people in their fight for independence or to join the areas to Finland. (Holodkovskij 1975, 14-15; Niinistö 2005, 13-16.)



Picture 12: Soviet heroes are represented together with Lenin and Stalin. The national hero of the Soviet Karelia, Toivo Antikainen, was a Finnish communist who escaped to the Soviet Union after the Finnish civil war, and fought against Finnish intruders in Soviet Karelia during the 1920s.



Picture 13: The same events are photographed from the Finnish viewpoint: The last resting place of the Red rebels in Salmi.

Women are also represented in different two different ways across the borders. Soviet modern working women are represented as very strong and determined, looking optimistically to the future; Finnish women are represented in more traditional ways. The “woman question” was a central element in the Communist plan. Female emancipation was a widely portrayed topic both in Soviet film and photography (Navailh 1992, 203-204).



Picture 14: Soviet woman at the board factory



Picture 15: Finnish women are represented in more traditional ways

Women in Finland and in the Soviet Union were also portrayed very differently in the ways they spent their leisure time. Whilst Soviet women had a higher education and took part in high cultural activities (playing music, theatre etc.), Finnish women were part of the *Lotta Svärd* –organization, i.e. a Finnish voluntary auxiliary paramilitary organisation for women.

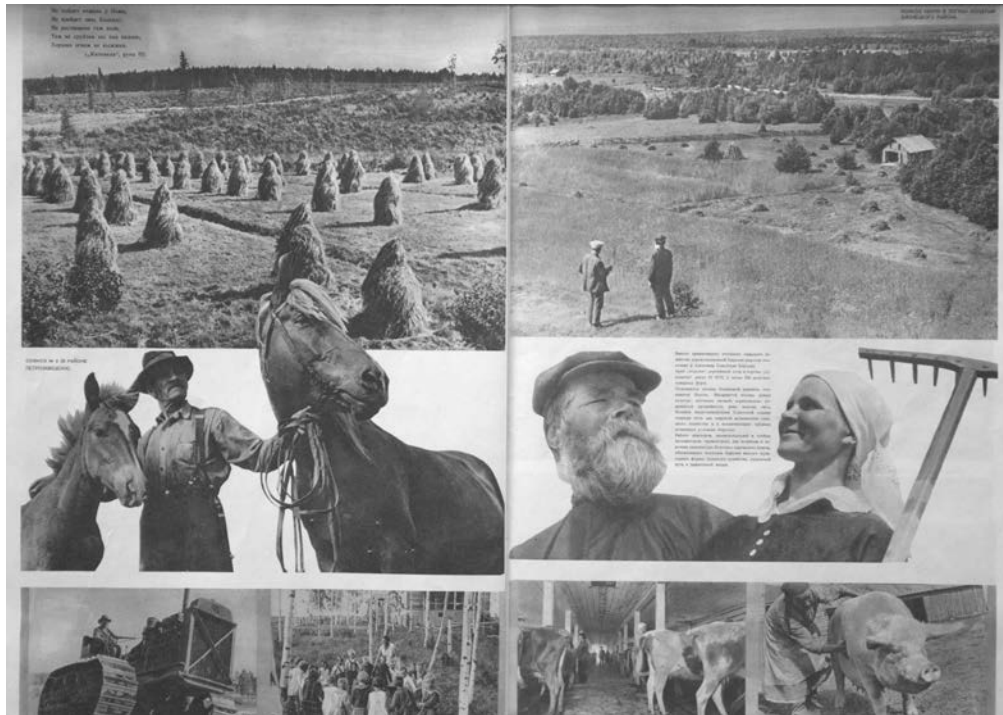


Picture 16: Science activities



Picture 17: Finnish women knitting in *Lotta*-uniforms

Livelihoods on both sides of the border were similar, but the representation of the level of industrialization on the borderlands differs significantly. Soviet agriculture was organized in collective farms in the 1930s. Fields in the Soviet Karelia were blossoming and very productive, whilst the Finnish borderlands are represented as harsh and barren. In picture 19, the photograph shows how impossible it was to grow grass and that it had to be handpicked on the riverbanks and shores.



Picture 18: Soviet kolkhozes



Picture 19: Handpicking grass on the riverside

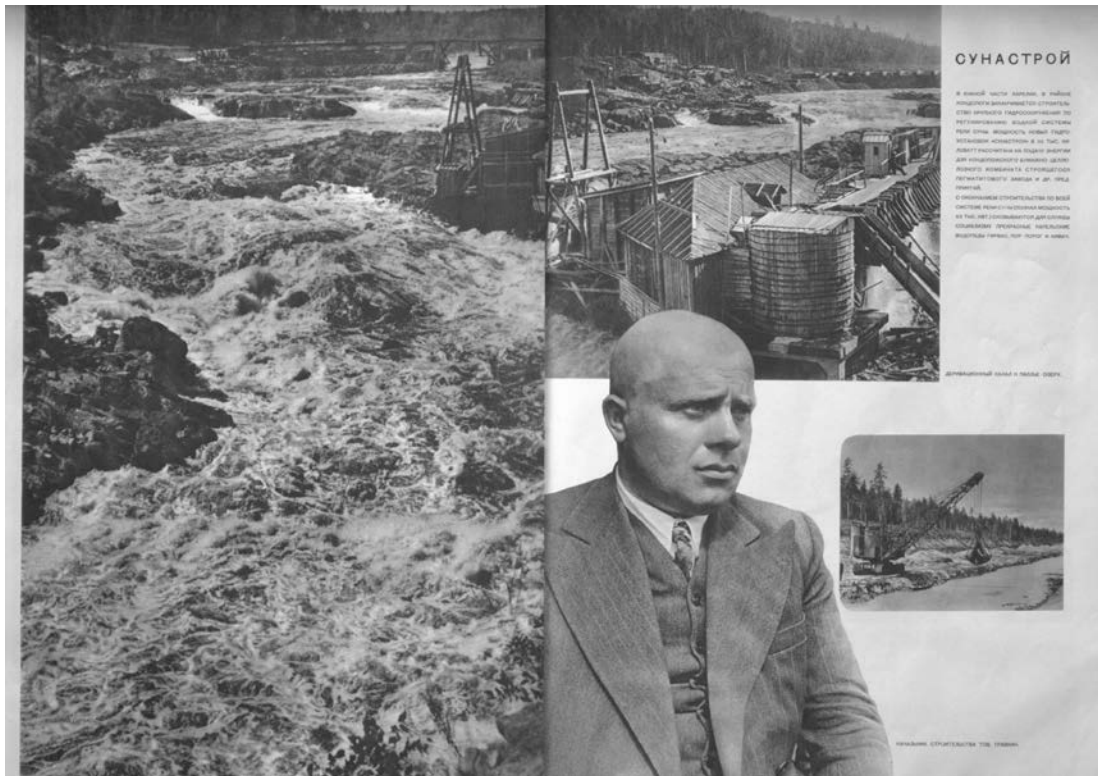
Photographs depicting fishing can be found in both publications. Soviet fishing is organized and part of an industrial process, whilst Finns are depicted in their little boats. Also closeness and fear of the border affects Finnish fishermen's lives. This is documented in a picture representing two fishermen, of whom the one on the left has been imprisoned in the Soviet Union (Picture 21). Moreover, in the Soviet Union nature was harnessed for the benefit of the Soviet people, whereas on the Finnish side nature still commanded people (cf. pictures 22-23).



Picture 20: Soviet fishermen and the can factory



Picture 21: Two Finnish fishermen of whom the one on the left has been imprisoned in the Soviet Union



Picture 22: *Sunastroi*: The major Karelian hydroelectricity construction project and the project leader comrade Travkin



Picture 23: Finnish rapids and the little person standing on the shore is told to be an old border guard

National symbolism in both publications is represented rather remotely. Furthermore, patriotism or aspiring nationalism is represented differently. When the Karelian Soviet Socialistic Republic turned 15 years, the Soviet national symbols were visible. Also tanks and some paramilitary parades are represented in the photographs. In the Finnish photographs soldiers and border patrols are depicted more often. Yet almost every patriotic or nationalistic picture contains trauma and sorrow alongside it, as in the example picture. Nationalism is significant in the process of border creation and/or maintenance. These photographs illustrate diverse “boundary markers” in national identification and in individuals attachment to a nation.



Picture 24: Karelian Soviet Socialistic Republic’s 15-year-celebrations



Picture 25: Finnish border troops at the final resting place of their fellow serviceman.

“USSR in Construction” and “Pictures from the Eastern Border” have rather different impressions about the future of these border regions. The last pictures in both publications are strong and indicate the potential path of the both sides of the border. Photographs describe the Finnish side as a borderland that was born out of violence and restrained under violence (and later re-established by violence), whereas the Soviet nationalistic ideology pursues territorial, cultural and political unity. Soviet borders are established as brotherly and friendly with all neighboring countries and nations.



Picture 26: The happy and round faces of the Karelian people with no worries of the future



Picture 27: A cross at the border fence

Zooming in – Zooming out

Photography is an extremely powerful tool in argumentation, because it appears to reveal objective truth. Both of the studied publications refer to a certain “truthfulness”, because they call themselves documentary and claim to show actual people engaged in their livelihoods within this border region. Nevertheless, the camera is a rather paradoxical instrument. Yes, it records truthfully what is in focus, but it is the photographer who chooses what should be the focus. And quite often the photographer has a larger political agenda and the photographs themselves have a propaganda function. The photographs studied here have similar themes, but show the border of reference codes in two aesthetical systems. In this case, “aesthetical system” is understood as its own application of both the Soviet socialist realist and the Finnish national romantic imageries that consist of repeatable symbols and elements.

Itärajan kuvia aims to draw a clear political boundary between Finland and the Soviet Union by concentrating on this negative space – the border. It uses a “traumatic approach” for its own political agenda. It focuses on the “enemy image” – mutual hostility, distrust and minimal amount of interaction. Its emphasis is on Finland as part of the “western camp”. *Itärajan kuvia* performs Finnish national politics during the period between the two World Wars, aiming to integrate the peripheral borderland regions within the state’s core areas. *Itärajan kuvia* frames a newly independent country and therefore **zooms in on** the border.

On the other side of the border, on the pages of *SSSR na stroike* the Soviet-Karelia is turned into visual epic of industrialization, urbanization and population growth and fitted into the model of “ideal Soviet state”. The photographs frame an empire and show the ideal future that Karelia and its people will have within the Soviet Union. Karelia is presented as an “advanced region” that should command respect from its neighboring nations. It almost denies the existence of the border –

that is it **zooms out** of it. The pictures of heroic accomplishments of the Communist system turn into a metaphor for Soviet independence from the West.

We have seen very similar images across the Finnish-Russian border where it seems that the camera has pointed in the same direction, but the big “detail” – the border – in the images is either magnified or minimized. The border is a space that marks representational limits on both sides. Aesthetic strategies are divided by the national border.

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Biographical note

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Summary

This article discusses ‘visual bordering processes’ and the aesthetic strategies used in border photographs. The two main objectives are, firstly, to discuss the politics of aesthetic strategies in photographic process of border-building and/or border-unbuilding in Soviet and Finnish photographs of the 1930s. Secondly, the aim is to show how the different aesthetics strategies of establishing and disestablishing ‘the other side’ create ambivalences about the border existence in the photographs

studied. This article forms a comparative position on Finnish and Soviet border communities of the pre-II-World-War Finland and Soviet Union in the late 1930s. The aim is to draw a parallel between how photographic publications perceive and discursively construct borders and the aesthetic strategies used in the pictures themselves. I seek to show how the national border divides aesthetic strategies used in photographs. The studied photographs are similar by themes, but show the border of reference codes between two aesthetical systems.

Keywords: border, photography, Soviet Union, Finland, aesthetic strategies