

**Sabine Dullin.** *La frontière épaisse: Aux origines des politiques soviétiques (1920-1940)*. En temps & lieux 55. Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2014. 356 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Bibliography. Index of places. Index of names. Paper.

**S**abine Dullin's book examines one of the Soviet Union's most distinguishing features—its imposing border controls. The book's title (*The Thick Border*) expresses the fact that the Soviet border zone became quite extensive. Over time, security measures expanded across an ever wider belt along the country's international boundary. These security measures included customs controls, entry and exit restrictions, and protections against potential outside incursions. Drawing on exhaustive research in Russian archives, Dullin provides a detailed and nuanced addition to our understanding of Soviet border policy. She shows that while Soviet border policy in the 1920s and 1930s became increasingly strict, Soviet authorities, nonetheless, had to respond to the needs of local populations in border areas and did so using a variety of carrot and stick approaches.

On the one hand, border areas were targeted for investment, sometimes benefiting from amenities and incentives not necessarily available to comparable communities in the Soviet interior. But, on the other hand, political loyalty was expected in these areas, and citizens who were considered to be potentially disloyal to the regime became *personae non gratae*. One of the best sections of the book is Dullin's discussion of the collectivization of agriculture in border areas. Borderland policies mirrored the practices of collectivization undertaken elsewhere in the USSR. However, Dullin suggests that the contrast between the treatments of victims and beneficiaries of collectivization was greater in border areas than in other parts of the country.

Another strength of the work is its rich conceptualization. Previous discussions of the Soviet border have likened it to a wall or fortress—"the Iron Curtain" being the most famous metaphor for a rigid and opaque boundary. Dullin prefers to describe the Soviet border as a window (*vitrine*). A window is, for all intents and purposes, a glass wall. Soviet border institutions offered durable security, but they were also designed to allow the outsider to see some of what was going on within. The borderland became a site of Soviet pageantry, a showpiece intended to demonstrate both the USSR's imposing police powers and the advantages of its socialist society. The border guard (*pogranichnik*) became a classic hero in Soviet popular culture. The border was intended not only as a set of controls, but also as a doorway to an attractive model society for the eyes of citizens on the other side of the Soviet border. Members of ethnic minorities near the Soviet Union, in Poland and Romania, were of particular interest to Soviet authorities.

Later, the regime employed irredentist themes in its 1939-40 annexations of territory. However, Dullin is careful to point out that outside of émigré communities, relatively few citizens of other states immigrated to the Soviet Union voluntarily; the USSR was somewhat less welcoming to the workers of the world than its propaganda seemed to suggest.

To a greater extent than in previous works, Dullin analyzes Soviet border policies in relation to those of neighbouring states. Other European states were also beefing up their border controls, and the relations of the USSR with bordering countries were often tense. Border control was a high priority for the Soviet Union, but the sheer length of its border made it difficult for authorities to achieve a desired level of control.

Some readers might find this book a somewhat challenging read, as the narrative, at times, meanders. While Dullin's work is tied by common themes, each chapter is lengthy and could stand alone as an essay. Dullin's writing shines when she leaves aside institutions and policies and focuses on the everyday lives of people living and working near the border. Toward the end of the book, her discussion of mass deportations in the border zones is groundbreaking. Groups of people, whom the regime considered politically unreliable, were swept from the border areas, making room for those who more directly served the USSR's security goals. Dullin documents the way in which this process altered the ethnic composition of territories that had long been populated by non-Russian nationalities. After reading Dullin's description of the reshaping of the Crimea in the 1930s (232-33), this reader was left with a much better understanding as to why that region became so bitterly contested when Russia ventured to annex it from Ukraine in 2014.

Andrea Chandler  
*Carleton University*