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Beyond the nation and into the state

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Beyond the nation and into the state: identity, belonging, and the 'hyper-border'

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The case of the disputed Southern Kuril Islands/Northern Territories is used to introduce the term 'hyper-border' in order to examine the instrumental and pragmatic nature of identity. It seeks to capture how, on one of Russia's most isolated borders, the quotidian realities and challenges of life 'beyond' the state had profound implications for how discourses around state, nation, sovereignty and identity are conceived. During the 1990s these islands became a site neither fully within, nor without the state. As the functions of the Russian state diminished and the border with Japan dematerialised, it was the Japanese state that came to provide welfare, infrastructure and economic opportunities for the islanders. This paper attempts to capture how the identity of islanders became articulated not on ethnic, religious or linguistic grounds, but on a purely pragmatic desire for a better life. Among some Kuril islanders an alternative vision of belonging was formulated, which sought to take them beyond the nation and into the state. This paper also traces the counter-function of the hyper-border and how an immense material and discursive response to these circumstances by the Russian state led to the recovery of the meaning of these distant islands. On a site between sovereignty regimes, this idea of the hyper-border attempts to capture how the fluctuating political authority of the state can render identity as contingent, malleable and instrumental.

Key words   sovereignty; national identity; Russia; Southern Kurils; Northern Territories

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Introduction

On the remote and beguiling Southern Kuril Islands,[1] a few thousand residents cling to tiny villages, nestled in isolated bays, and sheltered from north Pacific storms by towering headlands and smouldering volcanoes. During the 1990s, after the dramatic and sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian citizens living here came to endure extreme socio-economic hardships, while at the same time the Japanese state began to replace certain functions and services that the Russian state was unable to provide. Under this unusual sovereignty regime, alternative understandings related to the 'border', 'state' and 'nation' emerged. It was on this extreme periphery that a pragmatic desire for a 'normal' life began to take precedence over nationalist exhortations of immutable borders and inviolable national space emanating from elsewhere in Russia.

Through the issues swirling over the Southern Kurils, this paper strives to add new complexities and subtleties to the models and frameworks recently put forward in the border studies literature (see, for example, Brunet-Jailly 2011; Konrad 2015; Payan 2014). Rather than offering a grand theoretical narrative for borders, it presents a detailed empirical study that explores the implications on the border of a state that is no longer able to effectively promote 'ties of loyalty and identity instrumentally, by fulfilling the material needs of its citizens' (Sahlins 1989, 291). This paper examines how such a set of circumstances emerged on the Southern Kurils in the early 1990s, and how the residents of these islands began to depend more on another state for their welfare. We will see the ways in which these islanders employed highly sophisticated and effective strategies to cope with and exploit the dissonances that began to appear between the rhetoric of state elites in Moscow and the reality of the Russian state's presence.

The Southern Kurils are a site where the structures and services of the state are essential for the very existence of the community living here. Without the state's provision of welfare, transportation, healthcare, communications and subsidies, a modern standard of living on these islands would be almost impossible to sustain. It is in such conditions that we find on this periphery an inversion of what James Scott outlined in his understanding of the Zomia[2] that make up the expansive uplands of Southeast Asia. Until the 1950s,

these Zomia lay distant and inaccessible from the main sectors of economic activity, and were essentially beyond the control of either state or imperial governance (Scott 2009, 11). If for Scott, the 'economic, political, and cultural organization' of the peoples of Zomia emerged in large part as 'a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structures' (2009, 39), then, in the post-Soviet era, on the Southern Kurils, we see adaptive strategies designed to achieve precisely the opposite, i.e. concerted efforts to maximise the material benefits of incorporation into the state. On these islands we find residents energised and organised around becoming more fully subsumed into the framework and services of the state, regardless of which state lays claim to their locality.

With Japan contesting Russia's ownership of the Southern Kurils, this paper demonstrates how some islanders began to see greater advantage in Japanese sovereignty, rather than the perceived limitations of Russian statehood. Through this tension emerges the potential and power of a site beyond state-space, where the 'instrumental notion of nationhood seems to dominate' (Sahlins 1989, 292). In Sahlins' study of the making of the French and Spanish states in the Cerdanya valley, he notes how citizens of this borderland 'nationalized their local economic or political interests and their local identities' (1989, 291). In the early 1990s, as the new Russian state took shape, this is precisely what we find on the Southern Kurils as the residents of these distant islands became 'conscientious and unabashed manipulators of identity in the service of their interests, masters of the techniques of shaping identities' (1989, 292). There emerged on these islands a pragmatic sense of loyalty, whereby securing an improvement in the economic prospects of islanders became privileged over emotional appeals to the primacy of the Russian nation and national space. Drawing on contemporary Russian language sources, including material only accessible in the Russian Far East – as well as the author's own interviews and observations from extended stays in the region – this paper seeks to explore these instrumental, performative and discursive features of identity.

The following sections trace how an insecurity and fear about the fraying of sovereignty and identity emerged at the level of official discourse, both locally and centrally. It charts the relationship between centre and periphery, and the nature of islanders' engagement with the Russian state. The pronouncements and texts of elites at the local and national level reveal how these aspirations became framed – in various ways – through a cultural understanding and rhetoric of the nation and national identity (see Calhoun 1997, 6). It is from the dissonance between discourses produced at different geographical scales that the idea of the 'hyper-border'[3] is introduced in order to demonstrate how the quotidian realities and challenges of life beyond state-space can work to subvert, negotiate and remake taken-for-granted notions surrounding ideas of state sovereignty and national identity. It strives to capture what happens when a locale is rendered neither fully within, nor without the state. The hyper-border is in essence a site that has, in certain ways, moved 'over', 'outside' or 'beyond' traditional understandings of the state border and state sovereignty. It is where certain functions of the state – in terms of delivering welfare, infrastructure, healthcare and services – have come to be provided by an alternate state, and, in this case, one with a competing claim on this territory.

We find on the hyper-border a series of denials and rejections of a coherent and cohesive national identity. Yet, we also see how such denials simultaneously serve to rejuvenate and regenerate the very object that they seek to deny (Lane 2009, 88). It is in this aspect that we can perhaps glimpse elements of Baudrillard's hyperreality (1983). For the hyper-border also possesses a counter-function – one that works towards reifying the fiction of a fixed, coherent and stable 'national' identity. Through the concurrent invocation of the hyper-border at sites far removed from these islands, we find a world 'where the hyperreal produces a society of surfaces, performativity and fragmentation' (Lane 2009, 89). It is through this counter-function that the hyper-border can be understood less as a fixed line of division on a map and more like a fibre-optic cable, connecting instantaneously a specific locale with far broader debates that serve to both deny and reconstitute ideas of national space, belonging and identity. Through the hyper-border, we can fleetingly capture the dynamic, ephemeral and contradictory nature of bordering practices, as well as the various forms of power – economic, political and cultural – which are instrumental in both constituting sovereignty and 'persuading' people of their identity.

To explore this counter-function, this paper charts how in recent years a dramatic response from the state manifested itself in the form of an immense ideational and economic effort to mediate the tensions engendered by the 'hyper-border'. This process has been orientated towards recovering the meaning of the Kurils and rendering them symbolic of a strong state and a dynamic leadership, able to exert political authority over every last inch of national space. Therefore, this paper also charts the diminishment of the hyper-border in the 2000s, which came with the re-imposition of imperial imaginings onto the borders and borderlands of the Russian state. Yet, at the same time, it is the voices of those on the extreme political and geographical margins of the state that lie at the heart of this paper. While these islands may be a site where the resurgent state's power is most keenly felt, they are also where discourses of national identity and homeland become inflected, and even remade.

Therefore, the idea of the hyper-border can strikingly reveal 'the messy, contested, and often intensely social business of making territory "integral"' (Reeves 2014, 6). It shares with Madeleine Reeve's *Border Work* a concern with the everyday workings of power at the edge of impoverished, or newly impoverished states (2014, 7), and provides us with an account of the 'intimate relationship between the existence of spatial gaps and the gaps between law and life' (2014, 246). Drawing on the making and remaking of borders in the Ferghana Valley, Reeves highlights precisely how a dissonance between reality and rhetoric, and between closures and openings on the border, above all else

> remind us of the extent to which the 'state' may be constituted and reconstituted by those gaps – and by the sovereign enactment of attempts to close them. (2014, 246)

Just as in rural Central Asia, we can observe the residents of the Southern Kurils conducting their own kind of border work – one that is frequently aligned in opposition to the border work of the state.

It is on these islands that the emergence of the hyper-border came to represent an extraordinary challenge to the political authority of the Russian state. At this locale a form of separatism became articulated that was not based on ethnic, religious or linguistic grounds, but was centred on the practical rationale of securing a better quality of life. This claim is not to deny that more 'traditional' determinants associated with identity remained significant, but rather to emphasise the notion of a 'political imagination' among the residents of these islands, which acknowledges the assemblage of discourses and political expediency that characterise any community. Instead of privileging one discourse or practice over another, the idea of the political imagination

> allows us to write about the ways political life is being thought, without presupposing that all such representations are attached to the hidden motives or economic interests of powerful social groups. (Humphrey 2002, 259)

The political imagination combines 'the diverse wealth of ideas, emotions, and compulsions that face us' (Humphrey 2002, 259), in this case when talking about identity. It is also based on an understanding that certain practices of the political imagination can also '"have their time" ... when they have a currency and are widely popular', while later they may become the subject of derision, only to be replaced by other ideas (2002, 260). The intention here is not to suggest that an instrumental understanding of loyalty and identity usurps other considerations, or that it supersedes discourses related to legitimating local leaders' efforts to remain in power. Rather, it can help us to understand how even the most vulnerable and seemingly marginal in society can contribute ideas of great significance – including contradictory and heretical

ones – which then co-exist with a host of alternative claims on identity and group cohesion.

The co-existence and variation in the weighting of 'factors pushing and pulling' social movements has also been noted by Stuart Kaufman in his work on ethnic mobilisation (2015, 11). In order to explain ethnic mobilisation in conflict situations, Kaufman has suggested a symbolic theory of politics, based on a recognition that

> different people react to similar circumstances based on their biases, prejudices, values, and ideology – their symbolic predispositions. It also considers how preferences shift with emotions. In explaining political conflict, the key emotions are fears – more precisely, feelings of threat either to physical security or to status, identity, or economic prospects. (2015, 12)

The hyper-border highlights a set of economic motives that, for Kuril Islanders, served to stimulate dissatisfaction with the Russian state through fears over socioeconomic insecurity, which at the same time co-existed with emotional appeals towards nationalism and patriotism. It demonstrates that as islanders' economic prospects diminished these material factors became of increasingly critical importance in shaping the political imagination of a community residing beyond the state. As such, on the Southern Kurils, the socio-economic conditions behind the fraying of loyalty to the Russian state saw the development of a separatist claim that was articulated in a somewhat different way from elsewhere in Russia. In Chechnya, for example, separatist tendencies have been based on ethnoreligious grounds and historical grievances. Similarly, in Ukraine, the ongoing conflict is framed by most political elites in Russia as a struggle for autonomy to overcome ethnic and linguistic discrimination against Russians by the new Ukrainian government (Williams 2014). However, if the Ukrainian state is ever able to offer certain incentives and resources to the current residents of Crimea – annexed by Russia in March 2014 – then this territory could become a source of the same challenges and tensions outlined in this paper. It is also perhaps one reason why the Russian state is currently investing extraordinary resources into developing this region (Hanauer 2014).

There is insufficient space here to present a comparative study of other cases, but it is tentatively suggested that the idea of the hyper-border may also have applicability outside post-Soviet space. From a historical perspective, Sahlins' study of the border between France and Spain in the Cerdanya area of the Pyrenees carries many features of a hyper-border in an age of state formation (Sahlins 1989). More recently Reece Jones' study of border enclaves in India and Bangladesh has revealed locales existing in more ways than one 'beyond' state borders. In these enclaves, local

people developed adaptive strategies to negotiate and mediate particular socio-economic and political realities, which in turn led to an inflected sense of loyalty toward their 'own' state (Jones 2009). At the same time, these enclaves have also generated a counter-function that became bound on the Indian side to a wider narrative of Hindu nationalism and the immutable territorial body of India (2009, 379).

The Falkland/Malvinas Islands could also be seen as another distant island community carrying features of the hyper-border, at least before the war of 1982. From the early 1970s, islanders came to increasingly depend on Argentina after an air service was established, and with it the regular supply of fresh food, produce and other goods (Welch 1997, 487). There was even a prevailing sense at the British Foreign Office at the time that the 'economic welfare of the islands depended upon a closer association with Argentina' (1997, 487). David Welch (1997) has outlined the policy implications of these islands shifting in certain ways beyond state-space, and the dramatic reconfiguration of identity discourses and state-engagement before, during and after the war. Within the scope of this paper, it is impossible to apply the lens of the hyper-border to these or other cases, aside from suggesting that possibilities can emerge in such a community's political imagination for a pragmatic and heretical desire to be subsumed into the state that can best promote people's economic and social welfare, rather than the state where ethnic, linguistic or religious loyalties may supposedly lie. At the same time, it is through such tensions that the counter-function of the hyper-border can stimulate the state into suddenly mobilising immense efforts to reconstitute these ties.

The rest of this paper attempts to relate some of the broader issues and theoretical concerns outlined in this introduction to the specifics and challenges of life on the Southern Kurils. What follows is an account of the near collapse of a functioning Russian state on these islands in the 1990s, which left residents impoverished and disconnected from Russia. It examines the rapid dematerialisation of the inter-state border between Japan and Russia as the paraphernalia and structures that enforced it were suddenly reconfigured. The border became open to flows of people, goods and ideas that were previously tightly controlled, curtailed and regulated. At the same time, legal and illegal economic opportunities flourished, and through a special visa-free exchange programme on the islands, as well as humanitarian aid, the Japanese state increasingly came to exert its infrastructural power on these islands through projects such as the provision of health clinics, electricity generators, school buildings and port facilities. As subjects of an increasingly uncertain sovereignty regime, islanders came to deploy

adaptive strategies in order to improve their own lives on this isolated periphery.

Beyond the state

The islands of the Southern Kurils form part of a volcanic chain stretching from the northeast coast of Hokkaido, Japan, to the southern tip of Kamchatka, Russia (see Figures 1 and 2). They are comprised of Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and the rocks and small islands that make up the unpopulated Habomai group.[4] Between 1855 (when the border between Russia and Japan was first formalised by treaty), and 1945, the Southern Kurils had been recognised by both sides as part of Japan (in 1875, the entire Kuril chain was designated as part of Japan under the terms of the Treaty of St Petersburg). However, from September 1945, with Japan's defeat in the Second World War, Soviet soldiers and citizens began to settle on these islands and they came to symbolise one of the most striking cultural and ideological borders of the Cold War. By the end of 1948, the last of the Japanese who had remained on the islands were deported (Sevela 2001, 75). Today the Russian Federation administers these islands, though they are contested by Japan and referred to collectively as the Northern Territories.

Much of the post-war history of these islands has been characterised by Japan and the Soviet Union/Russia tirelessly asserting their arguments by invoking geography, prior discovery and development, as well as international law and treaties in order to justify their claims (see, for example, Call 1992; Hasegawa 1998; Kuhrt 2007; Stephan 1974). The closest the Soviet and

Figure 1   Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands
Source: Thanks to Ann Ankcorn of the Drawing Office at the Department of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham for producing these maps
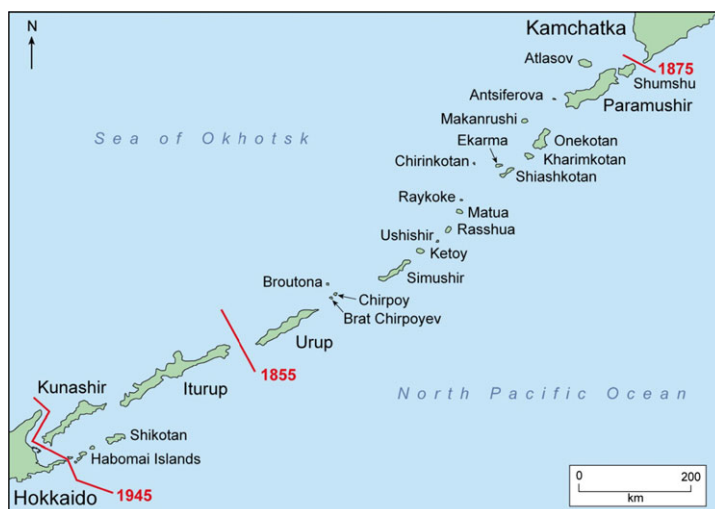
Figure 2   Kuril Island Chain (with dates international boundary was formed)

Japanese sides came to a compromise on the islands' future was when the idea of the transfer of Shikotan and the Habomai Islands was proposed by the Soviet side in return for a Peace Treaty. Although both parliaments ratified a Joint Declaration in 1956, an exchange of the islands was never realised and even today a post-war Peace Treaty between the two countries has yet to be signed. It was not until the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, and the subsequent onset of political and economic reforms, that the destiny of these islands became a topic for public debate in Russia. This paper takes up the issue of the Southern Kurils in the immediate post-Soviet period when, with the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union, these islands assumed a radically new significance, one that propelled them to the centre of a national debate over what and where is Russia.

At precisely the same time as the dispute over the Southern Kurils became more widely known, these islands also became increasingly detached from the structures of the Russian state. Although not unique to Russia at the time, the residents of these islands experienced particularly acutely the change in circumstances brought about by the end of the Soviet Union, with foodstuffs and other materials suddenly reflecting the true costs of importation as state subsidies and privileges fell away (on Magadan region, see Round 2005 2006). The situation deteriorated during the 1990s, and many just gave up on the struggle and returned to the mainland. In 2001, Evgenii Verlin wrote in the magazine *Ekspert* that 50 years after the Japanese were forcibly deported, the Russian residents are now beginning to 'self-deport' themselves back to the mainland. In 1989 there had been a population of 29 500 on the entire Kuril chain, but by 2007 the *Atlas*

Kurilskikh Ostrovov put the figure at 19 000 (Komedchikov 2009, 445).

Those who remained were forced to endure extremely high tariffs for air and sea transport, as well as electricity 2.4 to 3 times higher than regional tariffs, alongside a deficiency of dwellings and unreliable heating and electricity (Belonosov 1999, 61). In 1991 a lack of funds to repair the runway of the airport on Kunashir forced its closure and it was not until September 1995 that it was reopened (Hasegawa 1998, 612). A regular ferry service between Yuzhno-Kuril'sk and Sakhalin also ceased to operate (Vakhnenko 1999, 59), while in winter, ships and boats did not run for weeks (Verlin 2001). The islands became to a large degree disconnected from the Russian mainland, with the price of goods reportedly four times that of Moscow (Hasegawa 1998, 612). As the state scaled back, the withdrawal of the military presence on the islands also removed an important actor for providing 'emergency transportation, communications, supplies, and many other things vital for [islanders'] survival' (Kunadze 2000, 160).

By the end of the 1990s a pointed symbol of islanders' dislocation from the Russian mainland was that residents of Yuzhno-Kuril'sk – the main town on Kunashir – were receiving several Japanese TV channels, but Russian broadcasts from Sakhalin were either jammed by the Japanese broadcasts or were out of range (Vakhnenko 1999, 58–9). As for industry, 'the majority of enterprises on the islands lay idle [and] from 1993 to 1997 the production of fishing and processing enterprises had decreased by a third' (VK 1998). In 1998 it was reported that at the fishing cooperative on Shikotan the staff were paying themselves in fish as wages were not being paid (Elistratov 1998, 14). When the following

year six deputies from the State Duma visited the islands of Shikotan and Kunashir they declared that 'at the moment the state cannot effectively manage social-economic processes on the Far Eastern shores of Russia' (Belonosov 1999, 65).

As recently as 2005, a survey on the islands revealed that islanders were primarily concerned with price increases (86.7% of respondents from a multiple answer questionnaire), followed by a reduction in income (40.3%), a shortage of hospitals and clinics (28%) and arrears of wages and pensions (12%) (Iwashita 2006, 47). In the same year, the Russian Far East's leading business magazine, *Dal'nevostochnyi Kapital*, published an article explaining that attracting labour to the islands in their current state was difficult when 'wages are no greater here than on the mainland' and transport links with Sakhalin still had 'no kind of order' (Nikitin 2005, 15). The article reported that in their wait for cancelled planes and boats, people carry with them the philosophy that 'the Kurils teach patience' (2005, 17). Such patience could also have tragic consequences and, in the first eight months of 2005, two islanders had died while waiting for a medical team from Sakhalin to arrive (Nikitin 2005). At the time, Galiya Kunchenko, editor of the local newspaper *Krasnyi Mayak* stressed how the state of the islands was affecting the islanders' mentality:

> [In the early 1990s,] when everything just collapsed, the people were depressed. Even so, the majority were opposed to an exchange [of the islands to Japan]. Then it seemed to get a little better [but in] the last three years [things] have been again on the decline. It is a very bad swing for mentality […] in everyday life I notice there has begun to appear a kind of spitefulness – towards the authorities, towards life, towards oneself. (Kunchenko 2005, 18)

Such feelings of resentment and disappointment, born out of the catastrophic conditions on the islands and the state's sudden absence, highlighted how this locale was moving in certain ways beyond the state. The loyalty of islanders towards the Russian state, and to its representatives, was being tested to the extreme. However, on the hyper-border of the Southern Kurils, unlike elsewhere in Russia, the incorporation of these islands into the Japanese state presented islanders with a radical alternative to the reality of living under the prevailing conditions. As these islands came to exist almost outside of Russian state-space, they also became increasingly subject to the infrastructural power of Japan, and with it the hyper-border became invested with a salience and resonance that reached far beyond these islands.

The porous border

From the early 1990s, a number of gaps in the state border with Japan appeared on the Southern Kurils. It was a moment of a proliferation of new contacts and connections in a once closed space. With Japan visible from the southernmost islands of the Kuril chain, one journalist recounted in 1998 that 'Today the residents of Kunashir gaze with melancholy and hope across the 15 km South-Kuril channel towards the Japanese coast' (Ostrovskii 1998, 2). In 2005, an article in *Argumenty i Fakty* noted just how important Japan had become for islanders over the years, claiming that every year the town of Nemuro (a small port on Hokkaido's northeast coast) was receiving $10 million from Russian visitors: 'Nemuro is full of Kuril Islanders [. . .] they rush to this city to shop, as Muscovites go to hyper-markets on the Ring-road' (Zotov 2005, 43). It was a remarkable parallel to draw, with the islanders transcending an international, cultural and linguistic boundary as opposed to merely crossing the Moscow ring road. However, it emphasised just how routine a reliance on Japan had become, while an article from the journal *Inzhener* similarly described how islanders were now almost completely dependent on Japan:

> In recent years the [Russian] state practically ceased delivering to the Southern Kurils provisions and consumer goods. However, in the shops there is everything: vegetables and fruit throughout the year. And it is all from Japan [. . .] wages are tiny and paid with great delay, but you could not find a family on Kunashir who do not own one or two cars. What is more, what great cars [. . .] all are in 4×4s! [. . .] Petrol and diesel are not delivered here at all! [Yet] that does not at all hinder the active movement of vehicles. (Ostrovskii 1998, 2)

As the journalist further explained, boats from the Kurils would depart to Hokkaido with holds full of undocumented catches of fish, only to return after a few days 'with cars, petrol in barrels, products and baggage. How much fish goes the other way is only known to the ship's crew' (1998, 3).

A lucrative trade in fish and seafood flourished between Kuril Islanders and Hokkaido, however, as one Russian commentator lamented in the late 1990s, what a pity 'that it is absolutely illegal and of a criminal nature' (Golovnin 1997, cited in Williams 2003a, 711). The head of the administration of the Southern Kuril region, Vladimir Zema, suggested in 1998 that, in recent years, up to 50 per cent of the trade was contraband (VK 1998, 3). Frustration at the state's inability to enforce its own borders and protect its bio-resources from Japanese or Russian poachers was voiced in 1998 by Colonel Anatolii Mil'kin (head of command of the border division on the Southern Kurils), who stated with 'undisguised bitterness' that 'Our patrol boats and helicopters are without fuel. Every exit to the sea and every take off is an event' (Ostrovskii 1998, 3), while the then Chairman of the Sakhalin Regional Duma, Boris Tretyak, made the extraordinary claim that the cost of the fish caught by Japanese vessels around the Southern

Kurils amounted to an estimated \$700–800 million every year (VK 1998, 3). Even as recently as 2008, it was reported that

> the [Russian] 'poachers' boats will often come into the zone of contact with a Russian patrol vessel. The pursuers and the pursued do not chase around but usually the 'patrollers' know without exception all of 'our poachers' and willingly take their 'tribute'. (Zygan'shin 2008, 162–3)

Alongside bribery and poaching, in 1998 an agreement on cooperation in fishing operations between Japan and Russia also granted a legal right for Japanese boats to fish for specified species and quotas in return for a licence fee (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 1998; Zilanov and Plotnikov 2001). In response to these activities, an article in *Ekspert,* in 2001, claimed that Russian border guards 'watch through their fingers the disgraceful activity' of such joint economic ventures (Verlin 2001), while *Obozrevatel* reported that this agreement represented

> A uniquely anti-Russian direction [which] for all practical purposes confirmed the rejection by Russia of its sovereign rights in its own territorial waters […] It is in essence the creeping transfer to Japan of the territorial waters of Russia. (Zilanov and Plotnikov 2001)

It appeared to these authors that the Southern Kurils and their surrounding waters were becoming a site where the Russian state's ability to regulate its borders and exercise its exclusive territorial sovereignty were being critically undermined. The border with Japan seemed to be unravelling, while at the same time the Japanese state was beginning to assume extraordinary new roles and functions on these islands.

Contested sovereignty and dependence on Japan

The visa-free programme

For the Russian residents of the Southern Kurils, as well as for the former Japanese inhabitants, their descendants and connected individuals, there exists a unique visa-free regime for visiting the other country. A programme of visa-free visits, approved by both governments, has run from 1992 until today. By 2009 the programme had allowed almost 9000 Japanese to visit the Southern Kuril Islands, and around 7000 Russian residents of the islands to travel to Japan without a visa (Borisov 2009). Kuril islanders greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet with their neighbours, who they were isolated from in Soviet times, as well the chance it provided to buy much needed consumer goods in Japan. However, these visits also had the side-effect of exposing significant disparities in living standards and, in 1998, the then Governor of Sakhalin, Igor Farkhutdinov, admitted that

> some of the first residents of the Kurils to visit Japan on the visa-free programme were shocked at the difference in social and economic development of the territories, which are only separated by a small channel. There was a lack of comprehension at why over there it is so good but here it is not so good. (1998, np)

These uncomfortable differences, and the unusual sovereignty regime implied by the programme, also resulted in some members of the political elite coming out strongly against it. Sergei Ponomarev, the then leader of a group of deputies in the Sakhalin regional Duma lobbying for the Southern Kurils to remain Russian, railed against what he regarded as the inherently political aspects of Japanese visa-free visits to the islands, which he believes are

> Directed at fixing the dependency of the citizens of the Kurils on Japan, continuing economic stagnation on the islands and neutralising the patriotic feelings of the population, thus creating an atmosphere of uncertainly for the future and, ultimately, the seizure of the islands from Russia and the destruction of its territorial integrity … (2005, np)

Such fears were inflamed in July 2009 when Japan's parliament passed amendments to a bill on the 'Northern Territories' that named the four Southern Kurils 'the historical territory of Japan' (Borisov 2009, np). A resolution was swiftly approved in the Federal Council of the Russian Federation (Russia's upper house), denouncing the Japanese declaration, and appealing to the then Russian President, Dmitri Medvedev, to consider introducing a moratorium on the visa-free programme (Anon 2009).

While at first criticising the announcement by Japan, Igor Koval', Chair of the South Kuril district legislative assembly, stressed that Kuril Islanders also enjoy these travels, emphasising the strong contacts in culture, sports and the conservation of nature that have been established with the Japanese over the duration of the programme (Borisov 2009). He also noted that for people living on the Southern Kurils, this kind of travel offered an opportunity to leave the islands for a holiday, as many people simply could not afford to spend their holidays in Russian cities because the tickets were so expensive (Borisov 2009). On any decisions by the federal authorities towards suspending visa-free travel, Koval' stated that

> We only implement these decisions, but we would like the government to pay heed to the opinion of the local population and not to take extreme and radical decisions that could affect, first of all, ordinary people. (Borisov 2009, np)

In sharp contrast to certain politicians in the regional and national parliaments, Koval' demonstrated that

maintaining the visa-free programme – and remaining in certain ways outside a 'normal' sovereignty regime – was a benefit that Southern Kuril islanders cherished. For them, the improvements and opportunities it offered took precedence over replicating the patriotic exhortations on territorial integrity exhibited elsewhere in Russia (Richardson 2010).

Humanitarian aid

The visa-free programme also served as a means for the delivery of Japanese humanitarian aid to the islanders. This became literally a matter of life or death when, just after midnight on 4 October 1994, a huge earthquake and tsunami hit the islands, killing 11 civilians and injuring 242 (Pararas-Carayannis 2000). In its immediate aftermath, Japan acted fastest, providing emergency help and arranging for the most seriously injured to be airlifted out to receive free hospital treatment on Hokkaido (Elizar'ev 1999, 166). The earthquake and tidal wave flattened buildings and according to local accounts destroyed practically all infrastructure (Koval' 2001, 16). On Shikotan more than 60 per cent of residential buildings were destroyed, while 40 per cent of the buildings of the fishing cooperative *Ostrovnoi* collapsed; all diesel generators on Kunashir and Shikotan ceased functioning; and water, sewage and heating systems were ruined (Hasegawa 1998, 491).

While the Russian state proved incapable of providing resources for rebuilding, between 1993 and 2002, Japan, through its humanitarian programme to the Southern Kurils, rendered

> fuel oil, food stuffs, medical supplies, and built three small diesel generators, warehouses, clinics and piers. In all, Tokyo spent on these aims around Y8.8B ($66.5 million). (Mingazhev 2002, 18)

The Japanese builders and engineers contracted to work on these projects were able to travel without visas and they provided a visible sign of Japanese assistance when it was all but absent from the Russian state (Williams 2003b, 113). Even seven years after the earthquake, Koval' calculated in 2001 that for the preceding three years Russian federal investment to the Southern Kurils stood at around $2.5 million, while Japanese humanitarian help for 1998 and 1999 alone was around $10 million (Koval' 2001, 16). He noted that, 'practically all new structures on Shikotan were built by the humanitarian [help] of our neighbour' (2001, 16).

In 1999, an article in *Kommersant Vlast* claimed that 'most inhabitants of the southern Kurils, because of food shortages and neglect, dream only about unification with the riches of Japan' (Ivanov 1999, np). While in 2001, *Dal'nevostochnyi Kapital* noted that there are a number of islanders,

> who exhausted by the disorder of their own lives and dependence on the humanitarian help of the Japanese, are prepared for any decision, if only their lives would acquire a human appearance. (Karedin 2001, 17)

Partly as a result of concerns over the influence of this aid on the islanders 'patriotic spirit', voiced by politicians on Sakhalin (Ponomarev 2005), and alongside Russia's dramatically improved state finances, in 2009 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) requested that Japan stop the provision of humanitarian aid.

From the start of the new financial year, 1 April 2010, the Japanese side agreed to end its programme. At the local level, this announcement brought with it certain criticism among islanders towards Moscow. Valentin Smorchkov, head of the *The Kuril-Japanese Centre* (the organisation on the Kurils that manages visa-free delegations), declared to *Kommersant* that, it is 'with a pain in my heart that I receive the news about the ceasing of humanitarian assistance' (Il'yushchenko 2009, np). According to Smorchkov, over the last 17 years Japan had rendered to the inhabitants of the islands $23 million of help through the delivery of medical supplies and equipment, and free operations in Japanese hospitals. Smorchkov was convinced that 'thanks to the humanitarian aid and the visa-free exchange the lives of 98 children had been saved' (Il'yushchenko 2009, np). These sentiments were echoed by Anatolii Svetlov, head of the Kuril town-district, who explained that 'the local authorities take no pleasure in the refusal of aid [but] if the MFA have notified the government of Japan, we must accept it' (Il'yushchenko 2009, np).

For Kuril islanders, humanitarian aid and the visa-free programme had become a significant component in a unique set of forces on the hyper-border. It had helped generate among the islanders new ways of thinking about the Russian state, tested their loyalties to it and further demonstrated the socio-economic opportunities offered by their immediate neighbour. Throughout the 1990s, the Russian state's sovereignty over these islands was rendered increasingly ambiguous as Japan began to provide infrastructure, healthcare and education facilities, as well as other amenities and services that would normally have been the exclusive domain of the Russian state. It was Japanese aid that guaranteed welfare and reconstruction, and many islanders greatly appreciated such assistance at a time when they needed it most. With the Russian state conspicuous by its absence, for some of the islanders their loyalties began to fracture. For those enduring the hardships of life on the Southern Kurils, the 'messy, contested, and often intensely social business of making territory "integral"' had become even messier (Reeves 2014, 6).

Divided loyalties on the hyper-border

Against this background, from the early 1990s, public opinion among islanders on the destiny of the Southern Kurils began to waver. On 25 April 1993, a local referendum on the 1956 Joint Declaration (which stipulated the transfer of Habomai and Shikotan in return for a Peace Treaty) was held in Malokuril'sk – the main town on Shikotan. Just over half of the town's residents (913 individuals) participated, with 83 per cent reportedly supporting the recognition of this agreement (Vysokov *et al.* 1995, 352, cited in Kuroiwa 2011, 292; *Hokkaido Shimbun* 26 and 28 April 1993, cited in Williams 2007, 140). An appeal was subsequently dispatched by the residents of Malokuril'sk to both the Japanese and the Russian governments, urging them to resolve the issue of ownership as soon as possible. In a further indication of the desperate situation on Shikotan in summer 1994, more than half of the islands' residents signed another petition to the then Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, and the Japanese Prime Minister, Tomiichi Murayama, this time pleading for aid in order to help them leave the islands (*Hokkaido Shimbun* 17 August 1994, cited in Hasegawa 1998, 612).

By 1997 the head of the administration of the Southern Kurils, Vladimir Zema, announced to *ITAR-TASS* that the economic and social situation on all of the islands had reached such acuteness that 'if we now organised a referendum about their destiny then the result would be unambiguous – to separate them from Russia' (Golovnin and Solntsev 1997, 9). At around the same time, Zema was reported to have sent an appeal to Tokyo pleading for financial help, which he said should go directly to the islands, and not via Moscow (*Izvestiya* 4 October 1997, 1–2, cited in Kuhrt 2007, 96). In 1998, the then Governor of Sakhalin, Igor Farkhutdinov, admitted that 'some of the Kuril Islanders may in secret hope that they will live under the Japanese' (1998, np). However, throughout the 1990s, these hopes did not seem so secret and in the same year a survey of 1000 residents on Kunashir, Iturup and Shikotan revealed that 44 per cent agreed with unconditional or limited conditions to be attached to the transfer of these islands, with 42 per cent against (NHK-japantoday.ru cited in Kataeva 2006).[5]

It is necessary to note that islanders' opinions on the islands' sovereignty have often been skewed towards obtaining concessions from local politicians (Kuhrt 2011, 259). However, whether they were motivated by a genuine appeal to join the Japanese state, or a desire to capture maximal resources from the federal centre, these polls nevertheless came to present a dramatic challenge to the authority of the Russian state. Another poll of the local residents on Iturup and Shikotan conducted in 1998 also demonstrated an intriguing division between opinions on two of the islands: 65 per cent of Shikotan residents reportedly agreed with the transfer to Japan of the islands. However, on Iturup, 87 per cent of the residents came out against it (japantoday.ru cited in Kataeva 2006). In 2001, Koval' explained that 'amongst the Kuril population, especially residents of Shikotan, [there is] a pro-Japanese feeling arising from their poor standard of living' (2001, 16).

One of the most recent polls was carried out in 2005 and commissioned by *Hokkaido Shimbun* in cooperation with the Sakhalin newspaper, *Svoboda Sakhalin,* which included questionnaires distributed and collected by local Russian researchers (Iwashita 2006, 43). It found that across all three of the populated Southern Kuril Islands (Shikotan, Kunashir and Iturup), 28.7 per cent favoured the conditional transfer of the islands, with 61.3 per cent opposed to any transfer. However, significant differences again emerged between the islands: 80 per cent of Iturup residents were against any transfer of the islands, with 63 per cent on Kunashir and 41 per cent on Shikotan (here half of all respondents favoured a conditional transfer of the islands) (2006, 48). For those in favour of a conditional transfer of the islands to Japan, 83.7 per cent of respondents indicated that this condition should be monetary compensation (Iwashita 2006, 49).

Reasons for a difference between the islands could, in part, be due to the fact that on Shikotan residents have been prepared for a transfer of the islands since the stipulations of the 1956 Declaration.[6] In 1957, around 2000 Soviet citizens who had moved to Shikotan and the Habomai were ordered to leave in anticipation of their handover. Citizens returned to Shikotan in 1960, but the Habomai remained uninhabited (Bondarenko 1992, 116; Wada 1999, 267, cited in Kuroiwa 2011, 288). Others have noted that the proximity of Shikotan to Japan has created practically 'no problem in the shadowy transfer of fishing catches' so that 'the serious integration into the Japanese economy and pro-Japanese feeling on Shikotan is more noticeable than on Iturup' (Nikitin 2005, 16). This same article also pointed out that, of those who had left for the mainland in the 1990s, Shikotan received a disproportionately greater number of islanders returning to their former homes a few years later, and among this particular group of migrants there 'exist those who make no secret that they are waiting for their $100 000 compensation promised by the Japanese [in the case of the island's transfer]' (2005, 16).

It has also been suggested that dual-citizenship could be offered to islanders by Japan – together with high-waged employment, a sufficient pension and free medical services for senior citizens – if any transfer of the islands ever took place (Kataeva 2006). However, dual-nationality would likely be temporary as Japanese law does not recognise such status and stipulates that

citizens should choose their nationality before they reach 22 (Japanese Ministry of Justice nd), making it likely that future generations would be forced to renounce their Russian citizenship. Even so, such incentives appear to have had a dramatic effect on local opinion and the surveys of the islanders became pregnant with significance, while their conduct was fiercely opposed in some quarters. Perhaps related to this anxiety, there has recently been a lack of surveys on the islands. In 2006 the Southern Kurils were designated a special border zone, which demanded permissions from the authorities to visit and made the conduct of research and surveys on the islands increasingly difficult. The absence of such polls also corresponds with the words of former Sakhalin Governor (1990–93), Valentin Fedorov, who exclaimed that

> A survey takes place when something is unclear. In relation to the Southern Kurils nothing is unclear. Therefore we don't need to weaken our own position, don't need to create for our partner the impression that we experience confusion or fluctuation. (2004, 324)

For Fedorov, the fact that these surveys are even carried out presents a dangerous challenge to state sovereignty – a challenge with the potential to undermine the great rhetorical efforts employed by him and others to ensure that the Southern Kurils remain an integral part of Russia. These efforts involve a broad coalition of political and intellectual elites in both Moscow and on Sakhalin for whom the islands remaining Russian is a national imperative (see, for example, Arin 2001; Fedorov 2004; Gryzlov 2005; Kolomeitsev 2003; Latyshev 2003; Margelov 2006; Narochnitskaya 2000; Ponomarev 2002; Timanov 2004). As Fedorov put it in regard to the Southern Kurils, 'everything is immaterial in relation to that first rate, irreplaceable treasure – territory' (2004, 326). His sentiments reflect the fact that from the very first days of the new Russian Federation, the Kuril issue was seized upon by a committed group of nationalists. Factions of the political elite proved to be highly adept at 'nationalising' the Kuril issue, and invoking through it their own variant of a patriotic rhetoric that privileged the territorial integrity of the state. The issue had such resonance that was a key factor in the cancellation of Yeltsin's official visit to Japan in 1992, as well as a concession from the government to hold hearings in the State Duma on the islands' future, which took place in July of the same year (see Buszynski 1993).

Similar hearings again took place in the State Duma in 2002 after intensive lobbying by politicians on Sakhalin. Both hearings were dominated by pronouncements and exhortations on the necessity of the islands remaining part of Russia, and in this we see how debates surrounding the islands can be instantaneously communicated and amplified, exploited and exclaimed upon in distant national and regional capitals. The fractures in state-space revealed on the hyper-border run to sites far removed from the islands, where they can be taken up in order to reconstitute and reify a fiction of territorial integrity and inviolable national space. Yet, such a calculating use of the islanders' situation did not go unnoticed on the islands themselves, and as one journalist recounted, 'the naked demands of some deputies of the [Sakhalin] regional Duma towards demonstrating a Greater-Russian consciousness only irritate Kuril Islanders' (Nikitin 2005, 21).[7]

This discussion of the wavering of loyalty towards the Russian state – seen at the level of official discourse at the local and national level, as well as in opinion polls – does not constitute a denial that the lives and identities of islanders remained uninfluenced by ethnicity, religion and language. These endured as important factors. However, the sentiments outlined here also demonstrate how a number of impoverished islanders began to contribute ideas that were contradictory and even heretical to prevailing national identity visions. They helped to define and shape the political imagination of the community living on these islands, as well as provoking a counter-function elsewhere in Russia. Ultimately, their ambiguous endorsement of Russian sovereignty helped to stimulate – from the mid-2000s onwards – the transformation of these islands into a different kind of symbol: one of a resurgent state and strong leadership, finally able to exercise political authority across the entirety of national space.

Return of the centre

This final section explores how the fracturing and rupturing of loyalty to the state on the hyper-border also served to reaffirm discourses surrounding Russian national identity and territorial integrity, which culminated in a significant re-engagement of the Russian state with these islands and their residents. In parallel with the state's dramatically improved fiscal stability, the Russian leadership during the 2000s sought to reinstate on this site a sovereign presence more familiar to Soviet times. The meaning of the hyper-border was reformatted as these islands were recast as a stage on which to project a message about the ambitions of national development goals, resurgent state-power and the effective political authority of the Russian state.

In August 2006 the scale of earlier federal development programmes was eclipsed when a Programme of Social and Economic Development of the Kuril Islands for 2007–2015 was announced (Anon 2006). The then Minister of Economic Development and Trade, German Gref, declared that the ambitious goal of the new

programme was to increase both the island's popula-
tion and industrial output by 50 per cent, with the
government promising 17.9 billion roubles ($668 mil-
lion) across all of the Kuril Islands in order to achieve
this (*Interfax, RIA-Novosti*, 3 August 2006, cited in
Blagov 2006). He emphasised that infrastructure
improvements would be a priority, including new
electricity-generating facilities and an all-weather air-
port, as there was still 'no stable air service there, and
people are unable to get away from the islands for
weeks' (Blagov 2006, np). Reporting on the massive
development plan, the magazine *Itogi* offered a positive
analysis, suggesting that

> On one of the most backward and furthest of Russian
> regions appeared a ray of hope. If the government holds to
> its word [the islands] will be transformed into the most
> budgetary-subsidised part of Russia. For each resident of the
> Kurils it is proposed that there will be spent $1000 a month –
> that is 40 per cent more than Japan spends on each of its
> own nationals. (Chudodeev 2006, np)

The website of Russia's dominant political party,
Edinaya Rossiya, declared with great fanfare that at
long last the Kurils will 'cease to be the islands of bad
luck and a self-sufficient future will emerge there. It
will be possible following this to fearlessly confirm
"They are far from Moscow but [they are] ours!"'
(Bobkov 2006, np). To highlight the state's newfound
ability to develop these territories, just a year after the
programme was announced, Russian Foreign Minister,
Sergei Lavrov, visited Sakhalin and the Kurils in
summer 2007. On his visit he was effusive about the
programme's progress and achievements, and empha-
sised that further improvements would continue to be
implemented (Lavrov 2007).

This new symbolism of the Kurils was not lost on the
political elite, who started coming to the islands in
increasing numbers. In the same year as Lavrov's visit, a
group comprised of members of the regional Duma and
deputies from the Federal Council toured the islands to
observe the reconstruction (Pustovalova 2007). Boris
Borisov, a deputy of the Sakhalin regional Duma, was a
member of this expedition and he was keen to praise
the results of the programme and the change in the
islanders' attitude, stating that

> Two years ago the mood of the people was different [. . .]
> Many residents sharply and openly spoke about the fact that
> if the federal centre does not wish to pay attention to the
> situation on the Kurils then let their neighbours be engaged
> with development and they will create favourable conditions
> for life. Today, as we have seen, this situation has radically
> changed. (Pustovalova 2007, np)

The next senior statesman to visit the islands was the
then Chairman of the Federal Council, Sergei Mironov
(also a Candidate for President in 2004 and 2012),
whose trip in summer 2009 included a photo-call of him
standing on the shoreline, clutching a Russian flag, and
calling for the development of 'patriotic' tourism as
'every citizen of our country will be interested to visit
these places' (Chkanikov 2009, np). However, by far
the most significant indicator of the centre's renewed
interest in these islands came in November 2010, when
then President, Dmitri Medvedev, became the first
serving Russian or Soviet leader to visit the disputed
islands (Samigullina 2010). During his tour he visited a
geothermal power station, kindergarten, newly built
piers and homes – all constructed as part of the Federal
Programme. He emphasised that 'here there will be a
better life, such as that in the centre of Russia [. . .]
and if there are normal conditions for life here, then
people will of course come' (Sergeev 2010, np).

Three months after Medvedev's visit, a reporter from
Japan's *Kyodo News* visited Yuzhno-Kurilsk and noted
that 'While locals once used to hope that their island's
sovereignty would revert back to Japan, their views have
markedly changed' (Anon 2011c, np). In contrast to
earlier polls, one Russian reporter from a local newspa-
per claimed that nowadays 'more than 90 per cent of the
islanders are against it' (2011c, np). In January 2012,
Foreign Minister Lavrov even stated that there could
now be a referendum of local residents in order to
determine the Southern Kuril's future (Artemov 2012).
Such a suggestion would have been unthinkable in
earlier years, and the idea of referendum demonstrated
just how confident the leadership had become in the
influence of the federal development programme. With
a federal presence definitively restated, it represented a
dramatic shift in centre–periphery relations and a
renewed belief among the islanders that the Russian
state could finally help better their socio-economic
conditions and overcome the painful lack of attention
and neglect that they had experienced throughout much
of the post-Soviet period.

After his visit, Medvedev also quickly dispatched to
the Southern Kurils the then Deputy Prime Minister,
Igor Shuvalov; Deputy Defence Minister, Dmitry
Bulgakov; Head of Regional Development, Viktor
Basargin; and Defence Minister, Anatolii Serdyukov.
This stream of high-profile visits was accompanied in
early 2011 by Assistant to the President, Sergei
Prikhod'ko, announcing to journalists that 'the sover-
eignty of the Russian Federation in regard to the Kuril
Islands neither today nor tomorrow will be subject to
any kind of revision' (Anon 2011a). His message was
reinforced in February 2011 when Medvedev confirmed
the deployment of upgraded weaponry on the Kurils 'in
order to ensure the security of the islands as an integral
part of Russia' (Anon 2011b, np),[8] and yet again when
he returned to Kunashir as Prime Minister in summer
2012.

With such dramatic actions and statements, the
symbolism of the Southern Kurils as a hyper-border

became somewhat diminished as it was rendered a site more firmly anchored to Russian state-space. The adaptive strategies of the islanders, and the invocations of their fluctuating loyalties in the press and in polls, had helped generate an immense state-led effort towards overcoming an apparent aberration in local and national identities that had appeared on the hyper-border. As the state reasserted its presence, the allegiances of islanders to the Russian state were seemingly reconstituted. Yet, it was the tensions engendered by the Southern Kurils existing 'beyond' state-space that had initially stimulated such a significant material and discursive investment in reengaging, reenergising and redeveloping this region. This counter-function of the hyper-border precipitated a recovery of the meaning of the Kurils and remade them as a symbol of the territorial integrity of a resurgent state, which was finally able to ensure the welfare of even its most isolated and distant citizens. The programme for developing the islands, and the attendant reconfiguration of the hyper-border, demonstrated that – unlike in other regions of Russia – voices on such an extremity can possess an ephemeral but remarkable quality to echo all the way to the very centre of the state.

Conclusion

Drawing on a literature dealing with borders, peripheries and remote places, this paper has charted the features and implications of a locale that has moved in certain ways beyond state-space. In the 1990s, the Southern Kurils were a site where the Russian state was no longer able to provide essential structures and services to its citizens. While such a situation was not unique to other places in post-Soviet Russia, these islands were also subject to a territorial dispute and were where an inter-state border between Japan and Russia essentially dematerialised. Throughout the 1990s, legal and illegal economic contacts with Japan intensified at the same time as a visa-free programme and humanitarian aid saw Kuril islanders become more dependent on the Japanese state than on the Russian one. From healthcare to heating, Japan was providing infrastructure and services that had previously been the exclusive domain of the Russian/Soviet state. Under such conditions, loyalties on the hyper-border became fractured in the form of a profound challenge to the political authority and territorial integrity of the Russian state. Unlike elsewhere in Russia, this separatist challenge was not articulated by the residents of this territory on ethnic, religious or linguistic grounds, but on a purely instrumental desire for a better life.

Framed through an understanding of how gaps and ruptures on the border work to both unravel and reconstitute the state, this paper has traced dissonances between the rhetoric of state elites and the local reality of the Russian state's political authority. We have seen how these 'gaps' were exploited by those who found themselves on a site neither fully within nor without the state. It is this ambivalence – between and betwixt states – that constitutes the essence of the hyper-border. It is what rendered these islands a polemical site, where the material and psychological impact of everyday hardships led to an extraordinary and heretical desire among some islanders for a future beyond Russia. This idea of the hyper-border serves to expose the contingent, malleable and pragmatic nature of identity under the quotidian realities of fluctuating state-authority. It provides an insight into a local political imagination, which was energised and organised around becoming more fully incorporated into the structures and services of the state, regardless of whether they were deployed by Russia or Japan (cf. Scott 2009). In such circumstances, islanders became manipulators of identity politics in ways that ultimately worked to subvert, negotiate and remake taken-for-granted notions surrounding ideas of state, nation and sovereignty.

It is a set of conditions not confined to the distant periphery of the Southern Kurils. From Crimea to the Cerdanya, the Falkland/Malvinas Islands to the Fergana Valley, and among the scattered enclaves of the Indian–Bangladeshi borderlands, we see these processes reproduced and replicated. These sites also demonstrate the ephemeral nature of the hyper-border, where it possesses a counter-function that can stimulate a sudden reaction and the rapid reincorporation of these locales into the orbit of the state. On the Kurils, as elsewhere, the hyper-border exists simultaneously at the state's extremity and at its core. It is a term that serves to vividly illustrate the various forms of power – economic, political and cultural – that are inherent in both constituting sovereignty and in 'persuading' people of their identity.

An insecurity and vulnerability of existing 'beyond' state-space propelled the voices of Kuril islanders to the centre of a far broader 'national' debate. Whether or not the islanders' were articulating a genuine plea towards becoming part of Japan, or merely a way to capture the resources of the federal centre, it is from an aberration in nationalist discourses – and the Russian state's response to it – that the debates swirling over these last barren islands have helped make, and unmake, Russia. Through the lens of the hyper-border we can glimpse communities on the extreme periphery of the nation striving to be more fully subsumed by the processes and provisions of the state. It is here that the presences and absences of the state can most dramatically shape communities, yet it is also where these communities are empowered, emboldened and adaptive enough to articulate an alternative vision of identity that can take them beyond the nation and into the state.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 The 'Southern Kurils' correspond with Japan's claim on the 'Northern Territories', which represent the islands of Kunashir, Shikotan, Iturup and the Habomai Group. As the sources of this research are primarily in Russian, the Russian terms for these islands are used throughout, though this is not intended to privilege the Russian claim.

2 Although developed by Scott, Zomia was first outlined by Willem von Schendel, and derived from *Zo* (remote) and *Mi* (people) (see Scott 2009, 15–16).

3 The term was first used by Fernando Romero and his emphasis on the 'unprecedented degree of interdependence' between Mexico and the USA (Romero/LAR 2008, 15).

4 Kunashir, Shikotan and the Habomai constitute today's Southern Kuril District, while Iturup is classified as within the separate Kuril District, which includes Urup. However, all the disputed islands (Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and the Habomai) are commonly and collectively referred to as the Southern Kurils, and this is how the term is used in this paper, unless specifically stated otherwise. The Soviet administrative region of Sakhalin Oblast' was created in 1947 (Anon 1947), and consists of Sakhalin Island and all the islands of the Kuril chain.

5 While public opinion polls come with inherent dangers of bias, leading questions and small sample sizes, it is suggested here that the number of polls carried out, and their triangulation with newspaper editorials, reports, academic texts and the statements of prominent local officials, point towards sentiments that were deep-seated and widely held.

6 This proposal was returned to in a public statement by Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, in November 2004.

7 It is also noteworthy that on Sakhalin public opinion has remained consistently and categorically against any hint of territorial concession. For certain political elites in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the disputed islands became a way to bolster their support and further political careers (see Anno 2006; Williams 2007).

8 It is a process that continues to the present day (see Putz 2015).

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