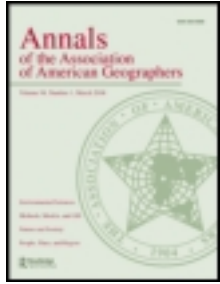


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Annals of the Association of American Geographers

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/raag20>

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Available online: 09 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Nick Megoran (2011): Rethinking the Study of International Boundaries: A Biography of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Boundary, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, DOI:10.1080/00045608.2011.595969

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.595969>



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# Rethinking the Study of International Boundaries: A Biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Boundary

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Over the past century there have been a number of distinct attempts by geographers to generalize about the nature of international boundaries. The most influential contemporary movement is that which considers them as examples of more general processes of “bordering” or “bounding.” This approach is insightful but not without limitations, and can be advanced through writing what are termed “boundary biographies” that explore how specific boundaries materialize, rematerialize, and dematerialize in different ways, in different contexts, at different scales, and at different times. A biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary traces its materialization as a result of the 1924 through 1927 process of national territorial delimitation and its multiple and varied re- and dematerializations throughout the Soviet and particularly the post-Soviet periods. This biography illustrates the importance of geography for understanding processes of nation-state formation and political contestation in Central Asia. *Key Words:* *international boundaries, Kyrgyzstan, political geography, Uzbekistan.*

在过去的一个世纪中，已经出现了地理学家们对概括国际边界性质的不同尝试。最有影响力的当代运动是把它们当作“接壤”或“边界”的更一般的过程。这种做法有见地的，但并不是没有局限性，它可以通过描写什么是所谓的“边界传记”来改进，即探讨具体界限以不同的方式，在不同的语境，不同的尺度，并在不同的时间物化，再物化，和去物质化。吉尔吉斯斯坦 - 乌兹别克斯坦边界的传记追踪了它作为 1924 到 1927 年国家领土划界和整个苏联时期，特别是后苏联时期的多种不同的边界再物化过程的结果。这部传记，说明了地理对理解民族国家的形成和中亚的政治论争的过程的重要性。关键词：国际边界，吉尔吉斯斯坦，政治地理学，乌兹别克斯坦。

Durante el siglo pasado han habido distintos intentos de los geógrafos para generalizar acerca de la naturaleza de las fronteras internacionales. El movimiento contemporáneo más influyente es el que los considera como ejemplos de procesos más generales de “delimitación” o “limitación”. Este enfoque es profundo pero no sin limitaciones, y puede ser mejorado a través de la escritura de lo que se denomina “biografías límite” que exploran cómo específicos límites se materializan, re-materializan y desmaterializan en diferentes formas, en diferentes contextos, a diferentes escalas y en diferentes tiempos. Una biografía de la frontera de Kirguistán –Uzbekistán traza su realización como resultado de un proceso de 1924 a 1927 de delimitación territorial nacional y sus múltiples y variadas desmaterializaciones a lo largo de la Unión Soviética y en particular los períodos post-soviéticos. Esta biografía ilustra la importancia de la geografía para la comprensión de los procesos de formación del Estado-nación y la confrontación política en Asia Central. *Palabras claves:* *fronteras internacionales, Kirguistán, geografía política, Uzbekistán.*

The study of international boundaries has been a mainstay of political geography for over a century. At various times there have been movements to bring intellectual rigor and coherence to the multiplying numbers of case studies; some of the most important interventions in this mold having been published in the pages of the *Annals*. The current manifestation of this phenomenon is the theorization or conceptualization of international boundaries as social processes of bordering and bounding. This article seeks

to advance this project by celebrating the new research avenues and synergies it has opened but also by critically examining its limitations.

The article is structured as follows. The first part considers the study of international boundaries, summarizing how geographers have sought to generalize about their nature. It focuses on the center of gravity in the current debate; that is, boundaries as social processes of bordering and bounding. It seeks to advance this scholarship by addressing some of its limitations and

proposing an approach to studying boundaries described as writing their “biographies.” The second section consists of an outline biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary, showing how the boundary materialized between 1924 and 1927 through the Soviet Union’s process of national territorial delimitation (NTD) and how a particular boundary landscape was produced under subsequent Soviet rule. It finally explores the contradictory and complex processes of de- and re-materialization of the boundary as an international boundary in the post-1991 era of independence. This biographical approach demonstrates the importance of geography to social, political, and economic change in Central Asia. It makes visible aspects of social life that are otherwise generally obscured in accounts that are less sensitive to space. The central aim of this article is to promote the geographical study of international boundaries by questioning and advancing, rather than resisting or dismissing, the current momentum.

### What Are International Boundaries (and Borders)?

International boundaries are “perhaps the most palpable political geographic phenomena” (Minghi 1963, 407). Norris and Haring (1980, 123) usefully described them as invisible lines that surround states with visible effects, but they are best conceived of not as lines, but rather as vertical planes that extend upward into the airspace and downward into the soil and subsoil (Glassner and Fahrner 2004, 73–74). Legally, they are unique spatial entities: outliving the treaties that create them, unable to be annulled by war (Kaikobad 1988), and outside the “clean state rule” that invalidates international treaties on independence (Marston 1994). Politically, they mark the formal territorial extent of particular units of the international state system.

*International boundaries* are thus invisible vertical planes delimiting the horizontal extent of states. As such, they are distinct from *international borders*. The latter are the institutional paraphernalia and practices associated with managing and policing boundaries, such as customs checkpoints and passport controls, and markers like fences, stones, signposts, and barriers. Borders are thus the spaces of division and interchange created or influenced physically and socially by the presence of an international boundary. They are social institutions that mediate exchanges between states (Blanchard 2005).

### Laws, Taxonomies, and Models

The international boundary scholarship tradition within political geography has belied well-worn caricatures of the subdiscipline as being in some way backward or moribund. In spite of periodic claims that international boundary disputes might be fading away as political issues (Kristof 1959, 278), changing global political realities have repeatedly provided new impetuses for scholars to explore their significance. These moments notably include late European imperialism (Holdich 1899), the aftermath of World War I (Bowman 1921; Fleure 1921) and World War II (Horrabin 1943; Moodie 1945), decolonization (Fisher 1968), the end of the Cold War (Laitinen 2003) and the Soviet Union (Forsberg 1995), and the development of supranational blocs such as the European Union (Newman and Paasi 1998; Soguk 2007).

Faced with periodic multiplication of case studies, geographers have frequently sought to generalize about the nature of international boundaries and to organize material into a systematic body of knowledge. At the risk of simplification, it can be said that these efforts have broadly taken four major forms over time: laws, taxonomies, models, and theories or concepts of boundaries as social processes. The first recognizably distinct attempt to generalize about the nature of international boundaries belongs to the late nineteenth century, when geographers such as Ratzel (1896 [1969]) and Semple (1907a, 1907b) sought to uncover the “laws” behind their development. Clearly influenced by the contemporary regard for the biological sciences, these supposed laws were held to be analogous to the behavior of living organisms. Holdich (1916) dismissed this approach as useless for the practical problems of creating boundaries between European empires. The concerns of military officials and politicians involved in actually demarcating boundaries, men like Colonel Holdich and Lord Curzon of Kedleston (1907), informed the second major form of generalization about international boundaries—the production of *taxonomies* or *typologies*. Hartshorne critiqued Curzon’s early division between *natural* and *artificial* boundaries as simplistic. He proposed instead a terminology that examined the temporal relationship between boundaries and human settlement, from *antecedent* boundaries that preceded the cultural landscape, to *subsequent* ones that were “superimposed” on it (Hartshorne 1936). This approach in turn was critiqued by Minghi as “thought restricting” (Minghi 1963, 427–28) and its popularity waned over time. Nonetheless, variants have periodically resurfaced

in new forms such as Martinez's (1994) typology of borderland interaction. The desire in the 1960s and 1970s to turn geography into a rigorous social science able to speak with authority to policy debates inspired the search for models of processes that occur at international boundaries. The key contribution was House's (1981) expansive "operational model" of transaction flows, developed on the basis of fieldwork along the U.S.–Mexico boundary. Methodologically, it was important in advancing academic boundary studies that had hitherto tended to rely on secondary data. His model included discussion of the physical and human landscape, economic disparities, cultural interchange, prostitution and drug smuggling, pollution control, the allocation of water for irrigation, and migration. House's approach influenced Rumley and Minghi (1991) in their important collection on "the geography of border landscapes." Following House, they argued that there is a need in border studies to move away from a fixation with visible function to a consideration of border landscapes as the product of a set of cultural, economic, and political interactions and processes occurring in space (Rumley and Minghi 1991, 4). Although House (1982) argued that "it is premature to outline a general, comprehensive theory for frontier studies" (266), he clearly hoped for such a development. This wish came to fruition more recently in the fourth broad generalization about the nature of international boundaries to dominate the literature—thinking of them as social processes.

### International Boundaries as Social Processes of Bordering and Bounding

House's quest for a general theory of boundaries has been taken up in the 1990s and 2000s by a group of scholars who have sought to theorize or conceptualize international boundaries as social processes of bordering and bounding. This body of thought has been given impetus by both the import of social theory into human geography, and the proliferation of boundary studies within cognate disciplines. The work of a number of scholars is associated with this movement. An important early contribution is Paasi's (1996) magnificent work on the Russo–Finnish boundary. He argued that international boundaries are manifestations of institutional practices at different scales. For Paasi, they are institutions and symbols, "processes that exist in socio-cultural action and discourses" (Paasi 1999, 72). He insisted that international boundaries can be simultaneously historical, natural, cultural, political, economic,

or symbolic phenomena, but that in all these dimensions they contribute to the construction of territoriality (Paasi 1995, 42). Thus, rather than rely on empiricist concepts of boundaries, Newman and Paasi (1998, 188) drew on critical international relations theory to suggest that all boundaries are "socially constructed" and therefore "attention should be paid to boundary-producing practices and questions of identity."

Two scholars in particular have spearheaded the development of this movement: Henk van Houtum and David Newman. For van Houtum (2005) and his collaborators, international boundaries are significant because "they symbolise a social practice of spatial differentiation," a process they describe as "bordering" or "(b)ordering," and elsewhere that van Houtum and Naerssen (2002, 126) call "b/ordering." Van Houtum was anxious to critique what he sees as the traditional view of boundaries as spatial lines. "Borders do not represent a fixed point in space or time," he opined, "rather they symbolize a social practice of spatial differentiation" (Van Houtum and Naerssen 2002, 126).

Likewise for Newman, "bounding" is a dynamic process of drawing lines around spaces and groups. International boundaries are "simply the tangible and visible feature that represents the course and intensity of the bounding process at any particular point in time and space" (Newman 2003, 134). International boundaries are thus not unique phenomena but examples of a more general bordering and bounding process. They are imaginative borders akin to other types of social (e.g., ethnic and religious) and spatial (geopolitical and substate) boundaries at a range of scales. Newman contended that rather than viewing international boundaries merely as static markers of the formal extent of state control, they should be conceived of as part of dynamic processes that socially construct differences between groups of people. Thus, he saw the boundary line as a "tangible and visible feature" representing the more general bounding process (Newman 2003, 134). This process must be theorized as involving not simply international boundaries but a hierarchy of other political geographical divisions down to the municipal level, as well as broader cultural boundaries between groups after the anthropological manner sketched out by Barth (1969). For Newman (2001), such boundaries and borders constitute "both spatial and social constructs at one and the same time" (150).

There are important distinctions between the work of Newman and that of van Houtum. Newman has investigated the possibilities for the development of a general theory of bounding and bordering (a position he

subsequently withdrew from; Newman 2006). Van Houtum, in contrast, has preferred to argue conceptually and would likely eschew the call for general theories. Nonetheless, Jukarainen (2006) was right in discerning a parallel aim behind the two projects, both of which she considers as theories. For both thinkers, boundaries and borders (there is some confusion of terms in their writing) order space by creating difference. Likewise, both scholars identify as vital the search for alternatives to current practices of bordering and bounding (Van Houtum 2005, 675; Newman 2006). They have made these arguments in relation to their main empirical research contexts: migration in Europe (van Houtum) and ethnonationalism in Israel and Palestine (Newman).

The theorization of international boundaries as broader social processes of bordering and bounding has been influential and valuable. It connects the study of international boundaries to wider concerns about territory, identity, sovereignty, and citizenship within political geography (Newman 2002, 14). As the impressive body of scholarship from writers such as van Houtum, Newman, Paasi, and others shows, the geographical study of international boundaries has benefited enormously from their work. The bordering and bounding approach to international boundaries has certainly been productive of numerous valuable insights into the territorial aspects of group formation. It contributes toward an understanding of how geographical problems can lead to seemingly intractable international disputes.

The ways in which the bordering and bounding approach seeks to discipline the study of international boundaries nonetheless has important shortcomings. Consider Newman and Paasi's (1998) call for "the creation of a suitable framework which can bring much of this traditional research into line with the emphasis on social constructs and identities which is central to contemporary social science research" (201). Likewise, Berg and van Houtum (2003) claimed that work in this field means that "the field of border studies has been *re-routed* to other paths" (3), which they identified as including sociology, anthropology, and semiotics. The body of research on international boundaries, however, includes much technical material on aspects of international boundary making, such as their legal formulation through treaties and their physical demarcation. These processes are clearly social but do not readily lend themselves to the sociological, anthropological, or semiotic analysis that Van Houtum and Newman identified as important in their theories of bordering and bounding.

Indeed, references to such studies are generally absent from the bibliographies of these scholars and their collaborators. Largely missing, too, are discussions of the voluminous literature on maritime boundaries, one of the most vibrant areas of contemporary international boundaries research. Because these boundaries generally lie far from human habitation and rarely create physical landscapes, theories concerned with human group identity have less to say about them.

I do not object to the bordering and bounding theorization per se: International boundaries are social processes. Rather, I am concerned at how the general approach articulated by van Houtum and Newman functions to discipline the study of international boundaries by creating a "framework" toward which boundary and border studies can be "rerouted." It is thus a question of scope. Research conducted through the bordering and bounding lens has often been valuable, but the lens is too narrow to view the broad field of boundary studies. Its exponents conceive of it as a "framework" to "bring traditional research into line," but as such a framework it poorly represents and also constricts the breadth of work in the field. In the next section, I trace an alternative way forward that builds on an understanding of boundaries and borders as social processes in general but that addresses the shortcomings of the bordering and bounding approach. I suggest that it is productive to think about international boundaries as having *biographies*.

### **Biographies of Medicine Chests, Rivers, Rockall—and Boundaries**

Geographers have sought to generalize about international boundaries by seeking the laws that govern their genesis and change, classifying them in taxonomies according to development over time, systematizing their social significance through models, and theorizing or conceptualizing them as social processes of bordering and bounding. I locate my own work within the fourth movement but recognize shortcomings with it as a general framework for boundary research. To develop it by stepping outside of these limitations, I draw on recent advances in a range of geographical studies that can be considered as biographies.

In a review of "geographies and historiographies," Naylor remarks insightfully on the growing interest among historical (and other) geographers of doing biographies. These include studies of people (Daniels and Nash 2004; Lambert and Lester 2006) but also what he called "biographies of objects and places"

(Naylor 2008, 265). In this vein, MacDonald's (2006) evocative study of Rockall, a tiny uninhabited North Atlantic islet that in 1955 became the last piece of territory to be formally annexed by the United Kingdom, is a marvelous investigation of the interconnections of geography, science, and British statehood through the periods of empire and Cold War. Cook (2004) used a study of papaya commodity chains to unpack multiple and highly contrasting experiences of work and consumption in different sites in Jamaica and the United Kingdom. McEwen and Werritty (2007) foregrounded the catastrophic 1829 flooding of Scotland's River Findhorn to reconstruct both the physical geography of the floods and the social responses to it. Revill (2007) employed a study of eighteenth-century engineering of England's River Trent to show how the "engineering of transport infrastructures participated in the practices and processes by which landscape functioned as a mode of governance within the context of eighteenth-century improvement" (211).

Hill's detailed work on pharmacist Henry Wellcome's museum collections of medical technologies is particularly useful. He traced the movement of Wellcome's patent "medical chests" with the journeys of explorers, missionaries, and colonial officials. Hill showed how they were bound up with Wellcome's biography, his religious and political and commercial commitments, and his ideological ideas about the evolutionary advancement of medicine from "primitive" to modern European and American practice (Hill 2006a). He also showed how the subsequent relocation of Wellcome's vast museum collection from the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, London, to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) was part of a strategy to reposition UCLA as a global, liberal institution. The movement of the collection entailed an ideological break from Wellcome's evolutionary reading of medicine (Hill 2006b).

Hill argued that such studies of the cultural responses to objects are able to make salient what otherwise might be obscured (Hill 2006a; after Kopytoff 1986). He drew on Gell (1998) to suggest that objects are not simply products but that they acquire "secondary agency" once they become "enmeshed in a texture of social and spatial relationships" (Hill 2006b, 15). This approach reprises a rich vein of thought in human geography that sees geography not simply as a product but also constitutive of social life (Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke 2008). Thus, in his study of how mapping technologies helped create Thailand and Thai nationhood, Winichakul (1994) argued that maps should be understood as having a degree

of agency when their impacts have "gone far beyond [the] control" of their makers (173).

I draw on these diverse studies to propose that the study of international boundaries can be advanced by crafting their biographies. These would explore how specific boundaries (and the borders that they produce) appear, reappear and change, and disappear or become less significant in different ways and in different spatial and discursive sites over time. These processes are termed how boundaries *materialize*, *rematerialize*, and *dematerialize*. Such an approach is sensitive to the subtle ways in which the functions and effects of boundaries change. It illuminates how international boundaries are both produced by and produce social life. International boundaries thus become a powerful geographical lens through which to make visible a range of social processes that might otherwise be overlooked. This approach enables us to maintain the important insight that international boundaries are social processes yet also to overcome the constricting scope of the specific bordering and bounding approach outlined earlier. The second part of this article illustrates these arguments with a biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary.

## A Biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Boundary

The remainder of this article demonstrates what a boundary biography might look like. A sketch of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary, it incorporates secondary literature with the author's primary research (both published and unpublished). It considers various materializations of the boundary over the past century.

Primary research for this article is drawn from three sources. First, through discourse analysis of Kyrgyzstani and Uzbekistani newspapers and BBC Monitoring translations of broadcast media reports, attention is paid to the way in which references to the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary were framed in relation to wider political discourse, an approach like that of McFarlane and Hay's (2003) study of another context. This material focuses on the period from 1998 to 2000, when the boundary became a topic of fierce political contestation.

Second, ethnographic studies (Herbert 2000) were conducted to assess the impact of changing border management regimes for borderland dwellers. Between 1995 and 2000 I spent three years living on either side of the boundary, in Ferghana (Uzbekistan) and Osh



Figure 1. The Ferghana Valley, 1999. (Color figure available online.)

(Kyrgyzstan). From 2004 to 2010 I returned to the area annually for visits ranging in length from one week to three months. In so doing, I sought to participate in, observe, record, and discuss the multiple experiences and reflections of borderland dwellers in living along the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary as it materialized and dematerialized in numerous new ways (Megoran 2006).

Third, I conducted a limited number of interviews with officials working for the Kyrgyzstani government and international organizations. With the exception of one interview conducted in English, I conducted all interviews and ethnographic research in Kyrgyz and Uzbek.

### Before the Boundary

Although it became an international boundary with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary begins in October 1924. Before this date not only was there no

boundary, but there was no Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan: Indeed, there were no Kyrgyz or Uzbeks as they are understood today.

Historically, the Ferghana Valley (Figure 1), through which much of the boundary winds, had been conquered and settled numerous times by different groups. From Greeks and Arabs to Mongols and Turks, all left a greater or lesser imprint on the social and political geography of the valley. By the nineteenth century, it would appear that people identified themselves with, or differentiated themselves from, others in a range of registers and at a variety of scales. As Northrop (2004, 17) contended, “Indigenous identities were complex, multifaceted and changeable.”

Many Uzbekistani (e.g., Sodiqov et al. 2000) and Kyrgyzstani (e.g., Kenensariyev 1999) historians emphasize the supposed key role of their ethnic group in the nineteenth-century Ferghana Valley. Khalid (2005, 2006) contended that such readings are anachronistic. The Valley at that time was not divided into

nation-states but was the seat of the Khanate of Kokand (Qo'qon). This was not an ethnic state but a dynastic and feudal polity, carved out of the Emirate of Bukhara by Shahruk-bey in 1709. Khalid described the Khanate of Kokand as “an agglomeration of chiefs and amirs and warlords who owed allegiance to one of the main rulers, usually through a chain of several intermediaries” (Khalid 2009, 202). Tsarist Russian military incursions culminated with the 1876 annexation of the Khanate of Kokand to Russia's Governate-General of Turkestan as the *oblast* (region) of Ferghana (Soucek 2000).

### National Territorial Delimitation

Effective Bolshevik control of Central Asia was secured by the early 1920s and consolidated through the process of National Territorial Delimitation (NTD). As Smith (1996) has shown, the formally nonethnic Soviet Union was paradoxically constructed on the basis of ethnically constituted union republics. This process was more radical for Central Asia than any other part of the Soviet Union. Whereas people in many other Soviet republics had previously broadly identified with its name (e.g., Russians and Armenians), there was little or no Central Asian tradition of identification with an ethnic polity. Allworth (1990) argued that “the authorities arbitrarily selected dead or dying medieval designations and conferred them on the people of the region by political decree” (206). Regional dialects were codified as languages, national historiographies were created, citizens were obliged to locate themselves in officially sanctioned and sometimes alien ethnic self-designations, and towns or even villages were designated as the capital cities of ethnic union republics with names and boundaries that bore no similarity to any that had ever existed before (Roy 2000).

In 1924, the Central Committee's Central Asian Bureau proposed that the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) be created as a full constitutive member of the USSR and that present-day Kyrgyzstan be incorporated into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic as the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region (it eventually attained full union status in 1936 as the Kyrgyz SSR). This division was created in line with Stalin's concept of the nation as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Stalin 1994, 20). The proposal was formally approved at

a meeting of the General Committee of the Russian Communist Party in October 1924. The nascent Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary thus materialized through a highly ideological political processes originating in the executive spaces of Bolshevik power in Moscow and Tashkent.

The materialization of the boundary on maps and on the ground was performed by party functionaries of the region (Radjapova 2005). The main criteria used in the division of the territories were that the new republics should have geographical unity, an economic rationale, and be ethnically homogenous (Bergne 2007). It was impossible to satisfy these requirements, because ethnicity was indistinct and fluid. Boundary surveyors reported confusion about how to classify people who used ethnonyms in ways that did not match their census categories (Brower 2003, 180).

NTD involved fierce political battles between the leaderships of the nascent states for control of disputed areas. In making submissions to a parity commission established to settle ethno-territorial disputes, leaders of the nascent Uzbek and Kyrgyz polities argued over whether groups in economically important locations be considered Uzbek or Kyrgyz. In the space of a few months in 1927, Isfara and Sokh were originally allocated to the Uzbek SSR, then ceded to the Kyrgyz SSR, and finally returned to the Uzbek SSR due to behind-the-scenes pressure by pro-Uzbek factions (Koichiev 2003). By a process driven by ideological vision and pragmatic accommodation, actualized through political struggles over ethnographic interpretation and local geographies, the highly complex Uzbek–Kyrgyz boundary materialized, dematerialized, and rematerialized in new places.

Hirsch's research on delimitation demonstrates that the process of making submissions to the commission taught people to participate in a new political sphere, learning to articulate linguistic, economic, and ethnic differences as “national” (Hirsch 2005). Thus the boundary itself was not a mere product of the Soviet Union: It helped produce the Soviet Union. It was not a more precise realization of imprecise frontiers between Uzbek and Kyrgyz peoples: It helped create Soviet Uzbek and Kyrgyz peoples. Its materialization in the imaginative and applied cartographies of 1920s Soviet planners, and in numerous local disputes between existing and new elites, was entangled in the production of a whole new political geography in Central Asia, that of territorialized nationalism.



## 1927–1991: The Materialization of a Borderland Mosaic

The period following NTD until the independence of Central Asia from the Soviet Union in 1991 saw multiple and varied rematerializations of the boundary between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek SSRs. This section considers how Soviet planning paradoxically rematerialized and dematerialized the boundary at the same time, creating a boundary landscape that would prove a headache to independent Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Rematerializations of the boundary occurred chiefly through attempts at demarcation. One significant process was the formal attempt to ensure that the nascent and somewhat imprecise boundary that originally materialized through processes occurring in the meeting rooms and discussions of the General Committee of the Russian Communist Party in October 1924 rematerialized in a more orderly way through comprehensive agreements between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek SSRs. The Parity Commission was wound up on Stalin's orders in 1927 without completing its work, and two years after his 1953 death a joint Uzbek–Kyrgyz SSR boundary demarcation commission was established to resolve outstanding interrepublican disputes. The boundary line was readjusted in some places, dematerializing and rematerializing. Some progress was made but “although work was started on demarcation it was never completed.”<sup>1</sup>

This Soviet (re)materialization of the boundary in an attempt to make it more distinct occurred at the same time that the border dematerialized in processes of regional planning overseen by the Soviet authorities. The boundary was never intended by its architects to be an international one, and regional and local authorities did not regard it as such. As the former head of a village that straddles the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary put it to me, “In the Soviet times, we didn't distinguish between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>2</sup> Soviet economic planning therefore designed borderland electricity, gas, irrigation, transport, and economic networks, if not on an integrated basis then at least on an interdependent one. This had numerous specific impacts on cross-boundary dynamics. The more populous Uzbek SSR rented tracts of land from the less densely populated Kyrgyz SSR for use in agricultural and industrial developments. These were intended to be fixed-term contracts, but rents were frequently left uncollected and land unreturned when the period of tenure formally expired. For example, in January 1982 the governments of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek

SSRs concluded an agreement to construct a reservoir at Sokh flooding Kyrgyzstani land. The Uzbek SSR's Ferghana Valley cotton crop was irrigated by this and other such reservoirs constructed in upstream Kyrgyz SSR territory; in turn, some raw cotton was taken for processing to factories in Osh as well as in the Uzbek SSR (Anonymous 2000).

Unsurprisingly, the dynamic borderland created by such planning outcomes throughout the Soviet period produced significant transboundary migratory movements. These were unhindered by obtrusive border controls, and Ferghana Valley cities lacked the passport-propiska system for restricting demographic mobility that existed elsewhere in the Soviet Union (Smith 1989). Daily works buses ferried laborers from the Kyrgyz SSR to factories in the Uzbek SSR. Likewise, the introduction of Soviet power brought full compulsory education to the Valley for the first time in its history. Citizens of one SSR were able to enroll at a higher educational institute in another SSR. This meant, in the Ferghana Valley, that ethnic minorities crossed the republican borders relatively freely for higher education in their mother tongues, and so planners saw no need for the Ferghana Valley SSRs to develop further educational institutions for their minorities. Such exchanges created new social networks as former groupmates maintained contact as friends, or even married, after graduation.<sup>3</sup>

The transport networks designed to support these economic and demographic flows, sometimes (as in the case of railways) inherited from Tsarist Russia, were planned with wanton disregard for republican boundaries. Thus, the Kyrgyz SSR's main rail artery between the southern regional hub of Osh/Jalal-Abad (now Jalal-Abat) and the capital Frunze (now Bishkek) in the north wound through the Uzbek, then Tajik, then Uzbek again, and finally Kazakh SSRs before terminating in Frunze (Clem 1997). Likewise, road links in the Valley crisscrossed the boundary. For example, due to poor surfaces, it was far quicker and safer to get from the Kyrgyz SSR village of Batken to the regional center of Osh via the Uzbek SSR town of Kokand than by traveling directly along the mountainous Kyrgyz SSR route. Likewise, the journey between the Kyrgyz SSR cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad was much quicker over the high-quality road through the Uzbek SSR via Xonabad than by the Kyrgyz SSR's mountainous tracks through Uzgen. Even some internal administrative units were created whose connectedness depended on the transport networks of the neighboring republic. Thus, the two segments of the Kyrgyz SSR's Aravan region were entirely dissected

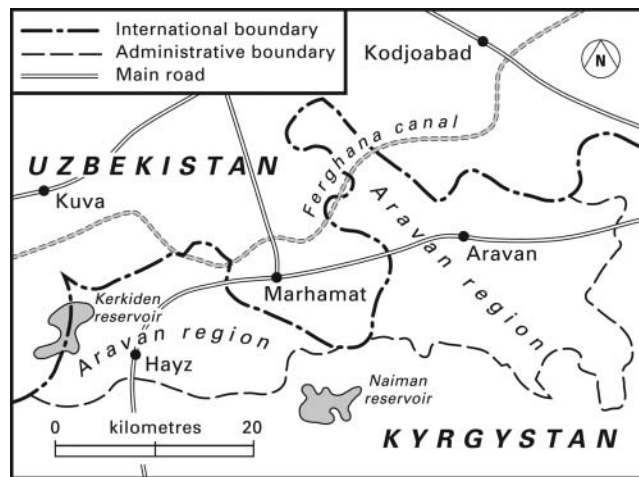


Figure 2. Aravan region, Kyrgyzstan (after Oruzbaeva 1987, 190).

by Uzbekistan's Ferghana oblast around the town of Marhamat (see Figure 2).

The disregard for the boundary exhibited in economic, transport, and education planning policy and the carelessness with which cross-border land exchanges were policed, meant that the industrial, urban, agricultural, and transport planning projects of one state spilled freely over into the territory of its neighbor. The legacy of the 1924 through 1927 delimitation, and subsequent development within the Ferghana Valley, was the materialization of a highly complicated borderland mosaic of land use that paid scant regard to the administrative boundary between the two republics. This legacy bequeathed many difficulties to planners and populations of the independent republics that would emerge in 1991 as the successors of Soviet rule.

### 1991–1998: An International Boundary?

In a referendum on 17 March 1991, the populations of the Uzbek and Kyrgyz SSRs voted overwhelmingly for the “preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics” and thereby implicitly resisted the rematerialization of their mutual boundary as an international one. Nonetheless, following a failed coup attempt in Moscow, on 31 August the Kyrgyz SSR declared itself an independent state, and on the following day the Uzbek SSR followed suit. Recognition of these declarations from United Nations members followed in the subsequent days and weeks, and on 26 December the Soviet Union formally dissolved itself. Thus, the Uzbek–Kyrgyz SSRs' boundary rematerialized

as an international one between the Republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan sometime between August and December.

In the early years of independence, the boundary barely materialized in either the imaginative or tangible geographies of the borderland and its inhabitants. True enough, some border and customs posts were established, but control checks were minimal and easily evaded.<sup>4</sup> Social and familial cross-boundary links were very strong. Weddings continued to bridge the republican boundary, great convoys of decorated cars and buses transporting dowries and guests. Border-area shrines (such as that located only meters from the boundary in Uzbekistan's border town of Rishton, Solomon's Mount in the heart Osh city, and the Sahoba shrine outside the Kyrgyzstani town of Eski-Nookat) continued to precipitate significant flows of pilgrims at set seasons, facilitated by the Soviet-era bus routes plied by the same old vehicles in the same old liveries. In the Osh city region, Uzbek schools often celebrated the “last bell” at the end of the school year by busing their children out to the popular and smart Uzbekistani pleasure park at Xonabad. This was a yearly ritual for the Osh school that I accompanied for this event in 1997 but one that was abandoned in 1999 due to border closures (see next section).

This borderland was still marked by the complicated and uncertain boundary geography that was heir to the Soviet-era patterns of land use that wantonly transgressed the administrative boundaries of the Ferghana Valley republics. Uzbekistan's Marhamat region carried on utilizing 6,885 hectares of land from Osh's Aravan region. Uzbekistan allegedly paid nothing for its oil and gas plants in Kyrgyzstan's Kadamjoy region. In 1994 it made the decision to build a carbide production plant in Kyrgyzstan's territory, reportedly without seeking Kyrgyzstani permission (Anonymous 2000). The January 1982 agreement to construct a reservoir at Sokh (see earlier) stipulated that residents of the flooded Kara-Tokoy village would be properly compensated and relocated; however, compensation was never implemented (Anonymous 2000). Although a new international boundary had materialized on world maps, its presence barely materialized in the practices and imaginations of borderland dwellers.

Nonetheless, between 1991 and late 1998, a gradual divergence of political and macroeconomic trajectories in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan led to the slow emergence of a more differentiated borderland than that which had existed up until 1991. As the two republics slowly

“drifted apart,” they became increasingly differentiated in tangible ways. Macroscale political and economic changes led to a gradual appearance of a new boundary landscape. Uzbekistan maintained Soviet-style production and procurement of cotton and wheat. In contrast, the application of neoliberal economic policies in Kyrgyzstan led to the breaking up of collective farms and greater diversification into cash crops such as tobacco. The appearance of agricultural landscapes thus steadily diverged. In 1993 Uzbekistan formally closed its border with Kyrgyzstan to prevent Russian rubles flooding the Valley, in response to Kyrgyzstan’s exit from the ruble zone as it introduced its own currency (Olcott 1994). This was a brief disruption and this heavily policed border quickly dematerialized, but it nonetheless anticipated the shape of things to come. Uzbekistan also subsequently introduced its own currency, and border landscapes became peppered with exchange booths. The economic crisis precipitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union’s central economic planning created other opportunities. It pushed many professionally skilled people, who experienced a steep decline in real wages, to make use of emerging price differentials by engaging in cross-border shuttle trade.

As well as these macroscale political and economic changes, more symbolic measures illustrated the divergence of the two states. Uzbekistan abandoned the practice of switching to daylight savings time (DST) after independence, whereas Kyrgyzstan continued using DST until 2005. Valley residents thus had to factor this change into bus timetables and working hours. The movement from Cyrillic to a Latin alphabet in Uzbekistan in 1995 meant that highway signs and roadside slogans on either side of the boundary were printed in different scripts. Uzbekistan maintained its stretch of the Osh–Andijan border in a better state of repair than Kyrgyzstan did, a difference that could be felt when driving over the border.

After independence in 1991, the people of the Ferghana Valley experienced a gradual but unmistakable divergence between states that had previously been part of one country. Diverging political and economic processes at the state scale were reflected in materializations of the boundary in new border landscapes. Formally, these were indicative of new citizenships; however, for most people, in the 1990s Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan still did not feel like different countries. In fact, a fuller consciousness of nationality and independence did not impinge on many inhabitants of the Ferghana Valley until the events of 1998 through 2000.

### The 1998–2000 Border Crisis

The gradual change in border landscapes was accelerated dramatically by a number of events from the late winter of 1998 through to the summer of 1999. During the winter Uzbekistan intermittently halted cross-border gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan due to unpaid bills. This resulted in a double hardship. Not only did gas become scarcer and more costly, but as people switched to using electric cookers and heaters instead, electricity supplies regularly failed. On 13 February 1999, Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov confirmed that the major Osh–Andijon cross-border bus service, along with many other routes in the Ferghana Valley, had been suspended. He explained the moves by stating that, “Kyrgyzstan is a poor country, and it is not my job to look after the people. Every day five thousand people come from Osh to Andijon—if each of them buys a loaf of bread, there will not be enough left for my people.”<sup>5</sup>

The suspension, which actually began in January, concluded a process that commenced with a reduction in services the previous summer (Mezon 1999, 1). It was ostensibly designed to protect the more state-run economy of Uzbekistan where it abutted economic spaces such as Kyrgyzstan, whose leaders had adopted more neoliberal economic policies (Megoran 2002). At the same time, Uzbekistan had embarked on other policies designed to secure greater control of flows over its border.

Closure of the border was accelerated three days later when a carefully orchestrated series of bomb blasts rocked the Uzbekistani capital, Tashkent, killing sixteen and plunging the government into crisis. The authorities blamed “religious extremists” and “terrorists” backed by outside powers. This was a reference to Islamists whose intellectual inspiration or practical support was drawn from movements and governments in neighboring states and the wider Islamic world. Their putative heartland was the socially and religiously conservative Ferghana Valley. Uzbekistan immediately sealed its border with Kyrgyzstan. Following a partial reopening later in the week, security was considerably tightened. Many more soldiers, border guards, and customs officers were drafted to the state borders, and special forces units were deployed to sensitive border areas. New control posts were built and existing facilities were upgraded. In many places crossings were closed, roads dug up, and bridges demolished. These measures were widely reported on Uzbekistani television to bolster the project of official nationalism that portrayed Uzbekistan as a united and prosperous historic homeland of

the Uzbek people, wisely governed by a strong president and standing up to the insidious threats posed by its neighbors (Megoran 2004a, 2005).

The effects of these materializations of the boundary were keenly felt by Kyrgyzstanis. Daily life for many citizens was hampered by the interruption in bus services. Conditions were especially difficult for those living in remote areas of Osh and Jalalabat provinces. Here border closures obliged Kyrgyzstani traffic to make often significant detours. Because many major roads in the Ferghana Valley crisscross international boundaries, journey times from Osh to outlying mountainous regions such as Leylek and Batken increased up to threefold.

Uzbekistan's tighter border regime affected national as well as local transport systems in Kyrgyzstan. The country's major rail artery, the Bishkek to Jalalabat rail link, ground to a halt. This occurred because it was rendered uneconomical following Uzbekistan's decision to forbid Kyrgyzstani trains from halting in Uzbekistan to pick up additional passengers en route. Road traffic using sections of the major Osh–Jalalabat highway that passed through Uzbekistan was frequently subject to severe restrictions and delays. The economic effects were felt in the form of higher food prices, as longer journey times and corruption on the part of the increased number of officials ate into the profits of the small traders who depended on access to local markets (Zaman Kyrgyzstan 1999b).

Initially, the government of Kyrgyzstan's president, Askar Akaev, barely reacted to these events. This might have been as much through lack of resources as lack of will to respond to the measures that Uzbekistan was implementing. As one Kyrgyzstani official in a border town put it to me, "When we have enough money, we'll put a border up . . . otherwise there is no symbol of our independence."<sup>6</sup> Whatever the reason for it, the political opposition within Kyrgyzstan was incensed by what they perceived as Akaev's inaction. Parliamentarian deputy Dooronbek Sadirbaev depicted the events as a military invasion of Kyrgyzstan, alleging that Uzbekistani forces were advancing on border posts and seizing huge swathes of Kyrgyzstani territory (Asaba 1999a). By this claim, he apparently referred to nominally Kyrgyzstani territory that Uzbekistan had inherited from the Kyrgyz SSR's unreturned leases. He omitted to mention ongoing Kyrgyzstani use of Uzbekistani and Tajikistani land dating from the same period. Nonetheless, the language of military invasion was stark. Sadirbaev interpreted the border issue as indicative of Uzbekistan's arrogant attitude toward Kyrgyzstan and Akaev's failure to stand

up to his Uzbekistani counterpart. He advocated firm action to reclaim lost territory and suggested that Kyrgyzstan start charging Uzbekistan for water in retaliation for Uzbekistan's halting of gas supplies. Materializing as a key issue in the hard-fought power struggle between President Akaev and nationalist opposition movements (Megoran 2004a), "the border" became one of the most discussed issues in the Kyrgyz press.

In August 1999 an already tense situation was plunged into deeper crisis. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group of dissident Islamist guerrillas headed by Ferghana Valley exiles linked to militant Islamist groups in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, invaded Kyrgyzstan's southern Batken and neighboring regions from Tajikistan. Their avowed intent was the establishment of an Islamic state in the Ferghana Valley. The attackers poured through a virtually undefended border, took hostages, and battled with the ill-prepared Kyrgyzstani military, before melting back into the mountains of Tajikistan by November. Uzbekistani jets mistakenly bombed the Kyrgyz village of Kara-Teyit as claims and counterclaims flew (Erkin Too 1999). Uzbekistan sealed its borders, and numerous temporary internal checkpoints sprang up within Kyrgyzstan.

In the aftermath of the Batken crisis, Uzbekistan took ever greater measures to insulate the state at its borders. The authorities began erecting a two-meter-high barbed wire fence around large sections of the Ferghana Valley boundary. Factories were instructed to shed nonessential Kyrgyzstani laborers. An ethnically Uzbek Kyrgyzstani recounted to me that he was sacked from an industrial plant in Kuvatoi, being told, "You're from Kyrgyzstan, so go and find work in Kyrgyzstan."<sup>7</sup> Minefields were laid along southern stretches of the border, including the Sokh enclave. These were poorly marked. As Aybek, a shepherd boy from Sokh wounded by a landmine in 2002 told me, "There were no warning signs put up before then—afterwards they put them up, but they still didn't give me any compensation."<sup>8</sup> By a decree of 1 March 2000, President Karimov introduced a mandatory visa regime for all noncitizens spending more than three days in the country. The boundary was rematerializing in new and, for borderland inhabitants, dangerous and costly ways.

Kyrgyzstan, too, struggled to respond to the new challenges thrown up by the Batken crisis and the border problems with Uzbekistan. Resources were channeled into road construction and upgrade schemes to bypass Uzbekistan and connect the Kyrgyz regions in the south directly to each other (Kirgiz Tuusu 1999; Reeves 2009). President Akaev detached from Osh oblast four of the

regions most directly threatened during the invasion and merged them into a new oblast, Batken (Zaman Kyrgyzstan 1999a). This was intended to ensure better local supervision of border security and to reduce the inconvenience of crossing multiple Uzbekistani borders to reach the regional capital (Kirgiz Tuusu 2000; for a skeptical view see Asaba 1999a). To facilitate this, Akaev also announced plans to create no fewer than seventy border posts on the hitherto unguarded 470-km Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border (Ibrakhimova 2005).

Both governments repeatedly insisted that there were no border disputes and that relations between them were warm, but local tensions along the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan border belied these claims. The border regime continued to cause great inconvenience and added to the economic hardship of border dwellers. Smugglers sought to breach border controls by evading or bribing Uzbekistani border guards. Tragically, some traders plunged to their deaths from makeshift bridges into the canalized river that marked the boundary at Kara-Suu (Megoran 2004b). An undetermined number of people and livestock died after wandering onto Uzbekistan’s minefields. Occasionally, even agents of state security forces clashed, as on 6 June 2000 when Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani soldiers exchanged fire after an Uzbek soldier allegedly stopped a car on Kyrgyz territory (Sadji 2000).

These dramatic events both reflected and accelerated the bifurcation of the political trajectories of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Their joint border became, as Fumagalli (2002) said in applying Martinez’s phrase, an “alienated border” whose two populations were characterized by reduced interaction and higher tension. The net result of these events and incidents was neatly summed up by Tabysshalieva (2001), who described this “new fragmentation of Central Asia” as “a painful and unpleasant lesson for the local population. The imaginary borders of Soviet times have become real.”

### **The Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Boundary into the Twenty-First Century**

Subsequent to the 1999–2000 Ferghana Valley border crisis, the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary has re-materialized in ways that represent continuity with that period, dematerialized in ways that are breaks with it, and materialized in new ways in new spaces. International imperatives at this period, such as the U.S. “global war on terror,” reinscribed the boundary’s place in “security” discourses of both states. Border control was no longer simply a bilateral Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan

issue: It became embedded in international (especially U.S., North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS], and European Union [EU]) campaigns against putative terrorist networks and narcotics smuggling operations. These issues increasingly became articulated (both by local and foreign actors) as threats to be addressed at the international scale through multilateral bodies. Thus, border security chiefs of the Russian-led CIS met in Tajikistan in January 2008 to review counterterrorism and counternarcotics measures and to bolster border “security” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2008).

The CIS coordinated programs such as the August 2006 “Marzbon” antiterror operation that involved the defense, emergencies, interior ministries, border control troops, security services, drug control agencies, and customs bodies of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (24.kg 2006). The boundary thus materialized in the regionalist politics of Central Asia that have so exercised scholars of the region (Allison 2004).

This new international security agenda coincided with the aftermath of the 1998 through 2000 Ferghana Valley border crisis and built on 1990s concerns about the flow of drugs to Europe through the region. It meant that Central Asian boundaries became the locus of new flows of international aid. The United States and Russia both financed significant transfers of military technology, ostensibly to combat smuggling over the two republics’ boundaries. Substantial support from the United States and EU was also given to upgrade checkpoints on the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary. For example, in April 2007 the Kyrgyz customs committee opened a modernized checkpoint at the Dostuk/Do’stlik crossing with Uzbekistan, financed with \$650,000 provided by the U.S. State Department through its Export Control and Related Border Security Assistance program. This program provides customs officials and border guards with vehicles, communications equipment, computers, and radiation-detection equipment (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2007a). The “modernization” of Dostuk/Do’stlik was also partly financed by the International Organisation for Migration (AKIpress 2006). The EU’s Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) has been a major donor of such aid, seeking to implement an “integrated border management” system of patrolling Central Asian boundaries, providing infrastructure, equipment, and training.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary materialized in new spaces and in new ways due to the regional and international politics of securitization.

In 2007 and early 2008, as world bread prices began to soar, grain exporters such as Kazakhstan introduced emergency temporary export bans. With flour in Uzbekistan costing more than that in Kyrgyzstan, and shortages in Kyrgyzstan forcing President Kurmanbek Bakiev (who replaced Askar Akaev in 2005) to release grain from the strategic reserve, the municipal authorities in Osh imposed a ban on the export of grain to their neighbor (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2007b). The irony of this move, in light of President Karimov's infamous 1999 remark about poor Kyrgyz traveling from Osh to Andijon daily to take "5,000 loaves of bread," was not lost on Kyrgyzstanis. Thus the boundary, or rather the divergent macroeconomic spheres and environmental management regimes that its border differentiated, continued to force its way into the daily lives of citizens dwelling near it and throughout both republics. But it was in the ongoing potential for violence at the boundary that it arguably cast its longest shadow over the valley.

Continuing the ugliest aspect of the 1998 through 2000 crisis, the border rematerialized in the twenty-first century through frequent incidents of violence that were widely reported by media in both countries. Such incidents were generally related to heavy-handed policing of two types of cross-boundary movement. The first was pastoralists herding livestock in long-standing grazing grounds that had lately become policed as border areas (24.kg 2008). The second was poor petty traders trying to eke out a living by taking advantage of the opportunities that economic differentials between the two republics created (Hamidov 2006). The catalog of such incidents also included the injury of Kyrgyzstani citizens on Uzbekistan's unmarked minefields (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2003) and conflicts when guards unilaterally crossed the border in pursuit of criminal suspects (Agym 2008). The Kyrgyz media frequently reported on the deaths of Kyrgyzstani citizens who drowned trying to cross the canalized river that divides the border town of Kara-Suu after Uzbekistan demolished the bridges across it. Far more numerous were reports of intimidation and minor police aggression, an everyday occurrence for border dwellers.

Although the boundary materialized in spaces of conflict, cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan during this period led to multiple dematerializations of the boundary through the reversal of some of the most insidious legacies of the 1999–2000 border crisis. In March 2002, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan concluded an agreement on the joint distribution of water resources and energy. In August 2004 Uzbekistan began clearing

the minefields that had killed and wounded numerous Kyrgyzstani citizens, and the presence of which so irked Bishkek (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2004). At the culmination of an official visit of President Bakiev to Uzbekistan in October 2006, he and his Uzbek counterpart, President Karimov, announced, to much fanfare in the media of both countries, an agreement to reintroduce sixty-day visa-free travel for all citizens of both countries (Kyrgyz Television First Channel 2006; Uzbek Television First Channel 2006). The occasion resulted in a warmer demonstration of fraternal relations than had been seen for some time, with President Bakiev switching into Uzbek to declare, "Our air is one, our water is one, our God is one, our language is one. Therefore, the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz will never be separated. I think that they should live together as well as grow and develop together" (Uzbek Television First Channel 2006). This agreement was later ratified and implemented, although not without glitches (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2007c), the following February (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2007d).

Delimitation and demarcation of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary is one further fruit of the engagement between the two governments. Although political actors in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan sought, from 1998 onward, to use the boundary issue to their advantage in domestic power struggles, a bilateral commission formed in 2000 quietly began to work on resolving ongoing disputes. Enclaves have proved particularly difficult. Bishkek's *Kabar* news agency claims that the Kyrgyzstani side proposes establishing the state border on the basis of the results of the working group of the parity commission between the Kyrgyz SSR and the Uzbek SSR of 1955, whereas the Uzbekistani side prefers the documents of 1924 through 1927 as the basis (*Kabar* 2002). As geography professor Salamat Alamanov, Chief of the Territorial Issues Section of the Apparatus of the Prime Minister, told me in an interview:

We could not agree on the legal basis for the discussions to proceed. . . . The issue is very complicated, as there are many different documents that are often in conflict with each other. So, we produce documents from our side and the Uzbeks don't accept them, and then they introduce different documents that we won't accept.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of spats between the two countries going public from time to time, the commission's work appears to have progressed steadily. Its regular reports detail that sections of the border have been delimited: for example, 7.5 km along the Kadamjoy/Sokh section of the boundary in February 2004 (Reyting 2004) and 2.5 km

in November 2006 (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2006). By 2009, it was reported that around 80 percent of the 1,375-km boundary had been delimited (Central Asian News Service 2009).

Therefore, even as the boundary was materializing through the deaths of petty traders and the politics of nationalism, it was also rematerializing through the work of a boundary commission and dematerializing as visa regimes were relaxed and minefields cleared. The coincidence of these multiple experiences is clearly illustrated by the juxtaposition of two incidents in Uzbekistan's Namangan region in June 2006. The Uzbek media carried disturbing reports about the alleged shooting of twenty-six-year-old Uzbekistani citizen, Kotib Mominiv, by Kyrgyzstani border guards who had "crossed into" Uzbekistan's Namangan region. At the same time, another round of boundary commission talks was opening in the Namangan region (UzReport.com 2006). These two processes—conflict and accommodation—occurred simultaneously. It is not that one was real and the other illusionary or insignificant. Both were demonstrations of how the same boundary can rematerialize and dematerialize in different spaces and different ways at the same time.

The domestic political effect of boundary materializations cannot be underestimated. In May 2002 Kyrgyzstan's parliament ratified an agreement on delimitation of the country's border with China, which would transfer some 95,000 hectares of land to Beijing (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2004); however, the issue did not die with the successful passage of the bill agreeing on delimitation (Plenseev 2002) but instead was seized on by nationalist opposition movements who used the supposed loss of sacred Kyrgyz territory to galvanize the public to their cause. The imprisonment in 2002 of southern Kyrgyzstani MP, Azimbek Beknazarov, a vociferous critic of the boundary deal, led to demonstrations in his home district of Aksy. In a clumsy attempt to dispel the protest, the police shot dead six protestors. A subsequent inquiry led to the resignation of the government, including Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev. Bakiev became an opponent of the regime and used the shootings to galvanize an opposition movement based in the Ferghana Valley part of Kyrgyzstan. This movement would eventually topple Akaev, who fled the country as demonstrators stormed the presidential administration in Bishkek in 2005, installing Bakiev as the new leader (Cummings 2008).

It was not the Uzbekistani but rather the Chinese section of Kyrgyzstan's boundary that raised such passions and played a significant part in the tumultuous

struggle for leadership of the republic and the startling overthrow of the president. Nonetheless, nationalistic discourse in Kyrgyzstan referred commonly to "the border" as a single, organic entity, and the furor over the Chinese boundary built on the fervor excited by politicization of the Uzbekistan boundary during the period from 1998 to 2000 (Megoran 2004a). The boundary was a factor in what had hitherto proved arguably the most tumultuous and dramatic political upheaval in post-Soviet Central Asia. In April 2010, the Kyrgyz government was overthrown by a similar but more violent coup. The implications of this development for the boundary are not yet clear.

## Conclusion: Boundary Biographies

The study of international boundaries has been among the most consistently vibrant fields of modern geographical inquiry. For pedagogical and intellectual reasons, scholars have repeatedly sought to generalize about the nature of these phenomena and to produce frameworks into which such studies can be grouped and thereby advanced. These frameworks reflect the broader intellectual trends of their time, and thus the popularity of laws, taxonomies, and models has waned, to be replaced by the theorization or conceptualization of boundaries as social processes of bordering and bounding. The concern of the scholars in this latest tradition is to advance the geographical study of international boundaries by opening it up to theoretical and interdisciplinary influences. I welcome this development as an approach that can elucidate different aspects of international boundaries and the borders they produce but consider that it is too narrow to be a general framework for boundary studies.

To overcome this limitation and to advance the theorization of boundaries as social processes, I draw on a range of contributions to recent geographical scholarship to propose what I term the production of biographies of international boundaries. These would explore how specific boundaries materialize, rematerialize, and dematerialize in different ways, in different contexts, at different scales, and at different times. This approach addresses some of the shortcomings of the current bordering and bounding process formulation. It recognizes the uniqueness of international boundaries and that they have social contexts that are not unique. It is open to methodological eclecticism, thus making space for wider and more varied empirical studies—from legal, technical, and cartographic histories to ethnographic

and discursive accounts of land, river mouth, and maritime boundaries, above and below the ground. It maintains an intellectual generosity, seeing historical genres such as taxonomic and functional studies as accounts to be augmented and not moved on from and nontheorized studies of single boundaries to be incorporated and learned from, not transcended. My hope is that such a conceptualization of international boundaries will engender greater collaboration between scholars from divergent backgrounds.

I have sought to demonstrate what such a boundary biography might look like. This account of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary no doubt fails to achieve the biographical completeness advocated herein, and I hope its flaws will invite further comment to advance the field. The incompleteness of this biography is partially due to the lack of primary research on the technical and engineering aspects of boundary delimitation and demarcation. This material is not presently readily researchable for political reasons. The article, too, is largely silent on the time between 1927 and the boundary demarcation commission of 1955, and then 1955 until the 1980s, a gap that is due to an absence of original research on this period. Nor, for obvious reasons, is the biography able to engage the important literature on maritime boundaries that I argued earlier has been neglected by the Newman and van Houtum frameworks of boundary studies. Nonetheless, this article has outlined some of the materializations, dematerializations, and rematerializations of this remarkable boundary: in Moscow committee rooms, the maps of surveyors, the imaginations of national statehood, the landscapes of border regions, the politics of nationalism and authoritarianism, domestic power struggles to overthrow entrenched elites, elections and revolutions, and the daily practices of the rural and urban poor who live alongside it. In so doing, this boundary biography makes a distinctly geographical contribution toward a broader understanding of post-Soviet Central Asian political processes. It demonstrates the importance of geography to state-building, international relations, foreign aid, nationalism, economics, and power struggles. It makes visible aspects of social life that might otherwise be obscured in accounts that are less sensitive to space.

“Biography” is an apt description of what boundary scholars do. Good biographies of people illuminate moments of their lives and show how these multiple aspects interrelate or contradict each other. Good “biographies” of international boundaries, whether short (Whittlesey 1933) or long (Paasi 1996), do the same. It is hoped that the suggestions in this article might con-

stitute one further stage in a dialogue that will advance the study of international boundaries.

## Acknowledgments

Research for this article was made possible by the Economic and Social Research Council for funding my doctoral research at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, and the British Academy for providing me with a Small Research Grant to conduct postdoctoral work on “The Impact of the Ferghana Valley Boundary Closures on Border Communities” (SG:38394). I would like to express my gratitude to all three institutions for supporting this research. The argument in this article was originally presented in a seminar to the Exeter Centre for Ethnic-Political Studies, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, in May 2008. I am grateful to the participants for their comments and especially for those of Ewan Anderson and James Sidaway. I would also like to thank Shelagh Furness, Henk van Houtum, Alison Williams, and Rachel Megoran for their comments on earlier drafts. Finally, the guidance of Audrey Kobayashi and two referees, one anonymous and the other David Newman, was extremely helpful in revising the article.

## Notes

1. Interview with Azim Karashev, member of bilateral Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border demarcation committee, Osh, 12 June 2000.
2. Conversation with anonymous pensioner in Chek village, which straddles the Jalalabat (Kyrgyzstan) and Andijon (Uzbekistan) oblasts, April 2004. Longitudinal ethnographic work was conducted at this site between 2000 and 2009.
3. The claims in this paragraph are based on numerous conversations with adults in the Ferghana Valley who were educated during the Soviet period or who were working in Ferghana Valley universities in the post-Soviet period.
4. I crossed the boundary frequently during this period, often passing through inspection points, but was generally waved through without having my passport examined or without guards realizing that I was a foreigner. My experience was that if you were asleep, or had your eyes closed, on a bus when a border guard boarded, he would be too kind to wake you and ask for your passport!
5. News broadcast, Tashkent TV1, 13 March 1999. I watched it at the time and wrote the quotation down the following week, so cannot confirm that these were the exact words used.
6. Interview, Solijon Madanenov, Head of Agriculture, Suzak Region, Jalalabat Oblast, Kyrgyzstan, 4 May 2000.
7. Conversations during ethnographic fieldwork with two anonymous Kyrgyzstanis, 5 May 2000, and with the



- anonymous manager of the Uzbekistani industrial plant who confirmed this order, 30 June 2000.
8. The name of this boy has been changed to protect his identity. Interview, Sai Village, Sokh, 19 April 2004.
  9. Interview, Colonel Tamas Kiss, BOMCA/CADAP Programmes in Central Asia, Project Manager, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, 24 April 2006.
  10. Interview, The White House (Kyrgyz governmental administration building), Bishkek, 4 April 2006.

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