

GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONING OF TWIN CITIES: A CASE STUDY OF NARVA/IVANGOROD, VALGA/ VALKA, AND BLAGOVESHCHENSK/HEIHE

Abstract. This paper assesses the twin cities phenomenon in the categories of critical geopolitics based on cases such as Narva/Ivangorod, Valga/Valka and Blagoveshchensk/Heihe. The findings show that, despite the different locations, these city pairs demonstrate similar patterns in their spatial relations; in particular, the Russian twin in contrast to the non-Russian twin on the Estonian-Latvian border construct its border identity using ideas of “fortress”/“nation outpost”, while its ‘sibling’ sees itself as a friendly, ready-to-cooperate neighbour. The findings apply to both the situation of the closed border between two towns where the ethnic Russian population dominates (Narva/Ivangorod on the Russian-Estonian border) and the contact border between ethnically non-mixed towns (Blagoveshchensk/Heihe on the Russian-Chinese border).

Keywords: critical geopolitics, twin cities, border studies, fortress identity, spatial identity, spatial imagination

Introduction

Spatial relations between objects sometimes resemble those between individuals: while some cases are marked by close cooperation, others are characterised by dramatic competition and envy. Relations between cities are no exception. Just like humans, cities can also be bound by close, family-like ties. This article focuses on twin cities separated by state borders: Ivangorod and Narva on the Russia-Estonia border, Blagoveshchensk and Heihe on the Russia-China border, and Valga and Valka on the Estonia-Latvia border. These three cases offer an example of complicated spatial relations when it comes to identity.

To begin with, we need to define a key concept of this research: twincityhood. It first emerged to describe two cities in the USA, Minneapolis and St. Paul, located on the borders of two counties in Minnesota. However,

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since then the concept has changed and today a number of meanings are attached to it (Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2011: 231–242). In this article, twin cities are understood as adjacent border cities. Helga Schulz provides several criteria to define twin cities, including mutual striving toward institutional cooperation and possessing appropriate experience in this area as the vital ones (Schultz and Katarzyna, 2002).

Yet this research is based on more than positivist methodology. We considered that institutional factors alone do not account for the spatial identity of the twin cities' inhabitants and opted to use critical geopolitics as the methodological basis. Its adherents believe that state geopolitics is not shaped by fundamental natural laws and spatial structures, but by geographical imagination and spatial myths; in other words, it is under the influence of an ideal world (Agnew, 2003: 127–129). One can also assert that the interpretation of space (as revealed in spatial myths, images, imagination and understanding) is one link in the chain of shaping spatial identity (O'Tuathail, 2005: 44–49). This link is key because it allows different, even opposite, identities to be shaped within the same space. In critical geopolitics, which deals with meanings and discourse more than it does with institutions and actual structures, twin cities are understood in a broader context, with significant attention being paid to cities' spatial identities.

Theoretical and methodological underpinning

Our hypothesis is as follows: there is a certain common geopolitical positioning model of twin cities, and the forms and means of expressing geopolitical positioning are different in this model, as testified by the spatial identities found in each city. Our assumption is not only based on the paradigm of critical geopolitics but on Johnson and Coleman's internal orientalism (Johnson and Coleman, 2012). The theory traditionally identifies two leading territorial foundations for shaping statehood: nation-building and security threats (Kuus and Agnew, 2008: 99–100) or, put differently, marking the mental borders of 'Us-hood' versus 'Others'. Nation-building links a cultural and territorial community to burgeoning political institutions, allowing its population to act as a source of legitimacy for the future state (Anderson, 1991: 35). While nation-building provides the internal basis for state-building, the external one is provided by security threats or, rather, the respective discourse that shapes the image of 'Others', an antagonism that lays the groundwork for nation-building. Besides, security threats mobilise the population and significantly speed up internal legitimisation (Cambell, 1998: 308). And yet the two mechanisms do not sufficiently explain the process of state-building. The existence of steady Centre-Periphery relations in every country begs the question of a third state-building mechanism.

According to internal orientalists, interregional differentiation within a single state through the establishment and support of internal mental frontiers between the centre and the periphery is the mechanism that enables the identification of territories in need of support to continue adhering to national norms and upholding statehood (Yiftachel, 1998: 37). The said mechanism has two dimensions: geochronopolitical and constructivist. From the geochronopolitical point of view, centre-periphery relations are the geographical representation of chronopolitical (time-related) differences. Creating and maintaining internal mental borders between the centre and the periphery gives the centre a feeling of superior development and allows the periphery to acknowledge its backwardness, i.e. the need to develop by following the centre's tracks. A periphery as such may be interpreted as an underdeveloped area compared to the centre, which enhances the presence of national identity, or as an opportunity to build individual local histories that add up to the national identity.

We believe the reason for the different patterns of twin cities' spatial positioning does not lie in divergent institutional environments, but in the difference in border periphery patterns in the countries those cities form part of.

To find answers, a research team from the MGIMO Geopolitics Research Club embarked on a series of trips to Blagoveshchensk and Heihe on 21-25 August, followed by Ivangorod and Narva on 16-18 October, and then finally Valga and Valka on 24-26 October 2015. The authors interviewed the cities' residents and examined materials that reflect the standardised geopolitical discourse in various educational, cultural and tourist facilities in Blagoveshchensk (Novikov-Daursky Amur Regional Museum, 6th "Russian-Chinese Culture and Art Fair" International Festival, Blagoveshchensky State Pedagogical University), Heihe (Xinhua office, China-Russian Art Gallery, Russia-China philately centre), Ivangorod (Museum Information Centre, Museum Agency, Ivangorod Fortress Museum, Ivangorod Art Museum), Narva (History and Art Museums, tourist information office), Valga (tourist information office, Valga Museum, Valga Culture Centre) and Valka (tourist information office, Valka Regional Museum). This article's authors were joined on these expeditions by Club interns Ms. Basova and Mr. Savin. The authors would like to thank all the participants for collecting and analysing the information.

The research group employed a range of qualitative methods from participant observation and informal and unstructured interviews with the city residents, to be precise, workers in the fields of tourism and culture, through to discourse analysis. The use of informal and unstructured interviews was determined by the fact that this kind of interviewing allows respondents to feel more at ease and less self-conscious in the informal setting (Kvale, 1996);

for instance, members of the research group introduced themselves as curious students on a tourist trip. While conducting the interviews, we tried to find answers to the following questions: how do their residents see themselves? How do they perceive their twin neighbours? How do they build symbolic relations? Nevertheless, the amount of time spent in the cities limited the number of interviewees to 30 (5 people in each city, 3 women and 2 men aged 18–60) and, consequently, also the adequacy of the interviews, implying that in this article we focus more on the results of the discourse analysis of the linguistic practices and narratives that were collected. Hence, further research is required to confirm the validity of the model.

Why did we select these three pairs of objects? Twin-cityhood is a well-known phenomenon in Northern Europe (Joenniemi, 2008: 29–172): Valga and Valka, as well as Ivangorod and Narva, are well-studied cases of twin-cityhood. The Blagoveshchensk-Heihe case is less familiar since it does not quite accommodate the concept due to the looser historical ties between the cities; yet some scholars still view them as twins (Ryzhova, 2008: 323–351). These cases were of special interest as they provided different examples of twin-cityhood with a dramatic border history. Looking back at the last 100 years, it is easy to see that the operating modes of the Russia-Estonia, Estonia-Latvia and Russia-China borders have undergone sweeping changes. Before 1918, Narva and Ivangorod were part of the Russian Empire. In 1918–1940, Narva was part of Estonia and Ivangorod was part of Soviet Russia. In 1944–1991, both cities were incorporated in the USSR and had close economic and demographic ties, but from 1991 on they have been separated by state borders, and Ivangorod now forms part of a special access border area.

As for Valka, it was a Livonian city in the Russian Empire up until 1920, when it was occupied by Estonian and British troops during the civil war. In exchange for liberating Latvia from the Soviet troops, the city was divided in two. The larger part, with the historical centre and the railway station, was taken by Estonia (Valga) while the smaller one, represented by mostly suburban neighbourhoods, stayed in Latvia. In 1940–1941, the state border between parts of the city became an administrative one, but the city remained divided. In 1991, the state border was restored, although in late 2007 border control was cancelled due to both countries' accession to the Schengen area. In fact, despite all the cataclysms of the 20th century, the border between the Valka neighbourhoods has always been artificial and remained open. The city continued to live as a single organism. As to the Russia-China border, it never moved anywhere during that period, but from the 1940s till the late 1980s Blagoveshchensk was a closed border town without any contacts whatsoever with Heihe. The border was reopened in 1984. After the two cities reconnected, 2004 saw a free Russia-China trade area with relaxed visa regulations for the two cities' inhabitants.

Consequently, Valga and Valka never changed the border operating mode in spite of the altered status. Ivangorod and Narva had initially been developing without a common border at all, then with one that later turned into a more tangible border between the Soviet republics and, finally, became a state border that is becoming increasingly closed. Blagoveshchensk and Heihe first had a closed border between them, but after 1984 it was opened and is now quickly moving towards a contact-border status (Kolosov and Mironenko, 2015: 479). These changes were bound to influence the spatial identity of the population in each of the cities.

Spatial identities in twin cities: similarities and differences

Our research confirmed the existence of a geopolitical positioning model of twin cities created by unique border identities. The main aspect these cases have in common is that twin cities treat each other differently in various circumstances. In particular, they enter into institutional cooperation if that brings prospects of economic benefits, but stand apart whenever it comes to identity and non-substantial matters. From time to time they recall their twinhood, although this mostly happens due to pragmatic considerations. It is worth noting how different the cases appear at first sight: Valga and Valka as well as Ivangorod and Narva are located in Europe, while Blagoveshchensk and Heihe are Asian cities. Whereas Ivangorod's neighbours are Russians, Valka's neighbours are the congenial Estonians, but Blagoveshchensk lies close to China, which is entirely different from a cultural standpoint. It would seem that these characteristics account for the different identity patterns in the twin cities; however, the patterns have a lot in common, and the commonalities may be further subdivided into several categories. We note that these categories are only contingent. The same spatial phenomena may belong to different categories without any contradiction.

For the sake of analysis, let us first see how the system of 'us - the internal other - the external other' works in the twin cities and affects their geopolitical positioning, and then observe how it is reflected in contemporary and historical discourse.

'Us and Them': The External Other

In spite of the significant language difference, the inhabitants of Valka and Valga are not opposed to each other, a phenomenon very prominently revealed after the EU's decision to accommodate Syrian refugees there. On 30 October 2015, torch-wielding residents of both cities rallied against immigration, singing folk songs as they paraded. Andris Orols, one of the

organisers and chair of the Latvian Anti-Globalist Society, stressed that one objective of the protest was to unite the Baltic peoples (Valga and Valka will protest... [webpage]). Potential immigrants from the Middle East became the external Other in this case. It is ironic how they substituted for Russians, their traditional external Other, and how the Russian language was used as a lingua franca for the Latvian and Estonian protesters.

The people living in Ivangorod and Blagoveshchensk draw a very clear distinction between 'Us' and 'Them'. Their spatial identities are dominated by the 'Russia's outpost' narrative. In Ivangorod, it was generated by the Ivangorod Fortress – a symbol of the city, as well as the access restrictions introduced in 1991. The cultural and historical discourse demonstrates the importance of the role played by Ivangorod for the Russians during their centuries-long conflict with Sweden (Valishvili, 2015). It also argues that "history itself predetermined its role of a protector" (Vlasov and Elkin, 2007: 327). One of our respondents, a woman working at the Ivangorod Art Museum, said the following: "Narva residents have a completely different mentality, although they are Russians. Public servants are entirely different there: they don't steal money but try to make the town a better place. Our public servants also try their best, but the town budget is so limited that survival is the most urgent issue". What is peculiar about this quote is that differences are distinguished but simultaneously the people of Narva are considered to be Russians¹. Yet, elder residents remember Ivangorod and Narva as a single urban agglomeration with close economic and social ties even back in the Soviet times, when they belonged to different Soviet republics. The differentiation between 'Us' and 'Them' has also affected the Estonian side: for instance, institutional change, reflected in translating the signboards and plaques into Estonian and using Estonian as a language for business administration, destroyed the feeling of unity between the two cities. But while the Ivangorod residents embraced the Russian identity, the Narva inhabitants have never turned into Estonians. Instead, they have developed an identity of their own that has discarded the Soviet heritage yet retained some Russian traits (like using the Russian language in day-to-day life). Apparently, this is due to the institutional border not having 'solidified' in symbolic terms. This is illustrated by a quote from a respondent in Narva, a truck driver: "We are not Russians any more – Russia is a foreign country for us nowadays, but Estonia is also not very eager to recognise us. In fact, it doesn't matter – we are too preoccupied with our survival; that is why Narva and Ivangorod need each other"².

¹ Based on materials from research diaries.

² Based on materials from research diaries.

The situation with Blagoveshchensk is still more complicated. It seems natural that, given the limited contacts with their Chinese neighbours in the 20th century and the civilisational differences between Russia and China, its residents clearly differentiate themselves from Heihe. The narrative of Blagoveshchensk being Russia's outpost on the Amur River is to be found in the museum-related discourse and in the interpretation of the Amur's role in the city's daily life. It shows that the population of Blagoveshchensk identifies itself as both the Amur people and Russians, too. The biggest body of local ethnographic literature covers the Amur region rather than Blagoveshchensk. It also preserves a memory of the Amur Cossack self-governance. The biggest exhibition and fair is called the Amur Fair. In other words, the Amur River is an object that serves as a launch pad to create meanings: this is more than a river, instead, this is the last line separating 'Us' from 'Them', which should be seen as proof of Blagoveshchensk's so-called "frontier" mentality (Bellacqua, 2010: 61–62).

The case of Heihe is slightly less extreme. Yet its inhabitants remain Chinese on the same grounds as the residents of Blagoveshchensk are Russians by mentality. Besides, we already mentioned the pragmatic approach taken by the twin cities and their populations when it comes to economic ties. In this regard, for most Heihe dwellers the reason the city is Russia-oriented is closely linked to Russian money. Hence, a 'commercialised' idea of Russia has formed, as proven in practice. For instance, all the signboards on shops, boutiques and malls are written in Chinese hieroglyphics and Russian Cyrillic script; in addition, the road signs are also bilingual.

To conclude, no super-identity dominates the national/regional identities in the twin cities on the Russian border.

'Leader vs. Follower' – the Internal Other

Feeling different does not mean rejecting cooperation. But life shows there is always someone who is ready to take the first step, initiate cooperation and take specific action, and another person who is more passive and even inhibiting the development of the relations. In the cases in question, the passive side is the Russian one.

Between Ivangorod and Narva, it is easy to see how the Narvans are ready to cooperate for the sake of mutual benefits. This is most clearly visible in the border cooperation programme involving Estonia, Latvia and Russia (Estonia-Latvia-Russia cross-border cooperation... [webpage]), whose leaflets we found in the Narva tourist information centre. They inform of electronic services provided by the city archives offering assistance to the residents of Estonia's and Russia's border regions. Even though the project is being conducted by both sides, no related information could be found in Ivangorod.

The majority of its coordinators come from Estonia and Latvia. Further, the border cooperation project provides for a transborder route called Via Hanseatica, whose notice boards containing historical information were found in Ivangorod Fortress. However, they made no mention of the Russian contribution to promoting tourism in Narva. The project is mostly being run by Estonian and Latvian coordinators. Some more graphic proof of this idea is a suspended waterpark construction site in the old riverbed of the Narova, launched in the early 2000s. The main reason the project was put on hold was a lack of funding, but the very prospect of a waterpark on the border that would work for both sides (meaning one could access it from both Estonia and Russia without applying for a visa) looked unrealistic in many ways.

Blagoveshchensk has demonstrated a similar reluctance to establish ties. This is illustrated by the situation with a bridge over the Amur that would connect Heihe and Blagoveshchensk: the Chinese have been pushing for a bridge since 1994. They have even gone as far as being prepared to build it at their own expense, but the Russian side has been hampering the idea for 20 years now (Heaney, 2010: 51) since introducing a bridge would change the border function from barrier/filtering to contact. The revival of the Blagoveshchensk Druzhba Park, which stood for the resumption of Russia-China ties in 1980–1990 (Blagoveshchensk Park... [webpage]), was also characterised by a lack of Russian interest in symbolic and cultural ties between Blagoveshchensk as part of Russia on one hand, and China on the other. Again, the Russian side has demonstrated little enthusiasm, even when it comes to lucrative investment in tourism and leisure.

Yet, when it comes to using the neighbours' resources, the approach is more proactive, especially on the Russian side. The residents of Ivangorod openly admitted they often visit Narva to shop for European food and clothes and use the Narva malls for leisure. Those who live in Narva, for their part, go to Ivangorod to buy tobacco and alcohol, as well as petrol. The only pending issue is the visa: ever since the authorities cancelled special passes for the border cities, it costs 3,000 rubbles to apply for a visa, which few in Ivangorod can afford.

As for Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, they appear even more polarised compared to Ivangorod and Narva. Heihe is a favourite leisure venue for Blagoveshchensk's inhabitants, a trip out of town of sorts to a place where one may spend the weekend or holidays, sleep over in a hotel, gamble in a casino or do some shopping. Downtown Heihe is swarming with Russian tourists as the city is oriented toward Russians and their money. As one of our respondents, a woman working in the retail sphere and interviewed at the 6th "Russian-Chinese Culture and Art Fair" International Festival, explained to us: "Twenty-five years ago Heihe was a village looking more like a dump. Then the border was opened and people from both towns

started trading and that saved us in the 1990s, but since then many high-rise buildings and the necessary tourist infrastructure have been built. Now we consider Heihe to be a kind of our dacha area [countryside territory used for leisure]”. Besides, due to their deeply peripheral location vis-à-vis the economic hubs of their respective countries, Blagoveshchensk and Heihe are bound to develop economic cooperation so each country recognises the need for exchange: the Chinese city supplies Blagoveshchensk with consumer goods and food products, while Blagoveshchensk mostly ships raw materials (wood and metal) to Heihe.

While in the Russian case of border cities, the neighbour is treated as a significant external Other which predetermines the patron/client relationship, in the Valga case, the mental frontier between the city residents sets them apart from the internal, rather than the external Other. One town resident described his life on the border as follows: “We chose Estonian [school], in spite of the Latvian citizenship, and work in Estonia – salaries are higher, and medical services are cheaper and better there, and, basically, work exists in contrast to Latvia. On the boundary this difference is not just noticeable – it is flagrant”. In this situation, the patron-client relationship between the Leader and the Follower plays a major role. Estonia’s Valga is the bigger and dominant twin that treats Valka as its suburban area. Valka, for its part, is trying to uphold its local identity, fears it might blend with Valga and therefore markets itself as a distinct town. So the historical and tourist discourse in Valga portrays Valga and Valka as a unity, but Valka only highlights its own unique identity. This phenomenon is also seen on the city maps. The Estonians present Valga and Valka as a single city divided by a thin border line. The Latvian map, however, only contains the Latvian part of the city, while the Estonian part is painted grey and without much detail. And yet the city lives as a single organism: Latvians work in Estonia, but Estonians frequent Latvian shops and restaurants, and in emergencies they target criminals and extinguish fires together. As a result, in the case of Valga, the border creates no tangible mental barrier, nor does it generate any antagonism. We will further explore what such antagonism looks like in the contemporary and historical discourse in Russia.

Symbolic antagonism in contemporary discourse

One of the research conclusions noted above refers to the cultural distinction from the neighbours and selective memories of twinhood, i.e. when it serves the interests of both sides, and that the trend is more characteristic of the Russians. So what is this cultural distinction all about?

The phenomenon in question can be well demonstrated by monuments as cultural artefacts. In Ivangorod, the research group found two

monuments: one dedicated to Russian warriors who fell during the assault on Ivangorod in 1704, and an alley named after militiamen and civilians who have been killed in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. Narva is home to the Swiss Lion, a memorial erected after Carl XII's victory in the 1700 Battle of Narva. There is also a monument to those who fell in the Estonian Liberation War of 1918–1920 and another one, called *Memento Mori*, to commemorate victims of the Stalinist repressive policies. There is a monument to Russian servicemen who were killed in 1704, and one dedicated to those who were killed while liberating Estonia in 1944 (this one is situated in the vicinity of Narva).

As one examines monuments in Blagoveshchensk, one notes that the quay in Blagoveshchensk, which is the closest point to China, in a way conveys the narrative in question through the monuments. One of them is a statue of a border patrol guard watching the Amur's other bank, and the other is an armoured boat reminiscent of the 1945 Manchurian offensive. The Heihe quay is home to a frontier post and a few monuments, including a stone with hieroglyphs pointing to "Russian land" across the river and a statue of a Russian-looking woman holding a Chinese-looking baby above her head.

The toponymy of the twin cities merits special attention. The names of the streets prove they share a common neighbourhood memory: Pushkin Street, Vasily Gerasimov Street, Maslov Street in Narva and Narva Street in Ivangorod. All of these streets – except for Pushkin Street – have a peripheral location. The case of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk shows how profound the spatial perception of Heihe is by the citizens of Blagoveshchensk. We identified two essential narratives about the twinhood of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe: one, Blagoveshchensk as part of Eastern Europe, and two, ignoring the very existence of the second twin city. It is interesting to see how Blagoveshchensk uses West-related ideas for public catering places and other services in town. They are often named after American and European cities and regions (e.g. the "Paris" 1930 restaurant, "Woman of Hollywood" and "Montana" clothes shops, "Cafe Savoy"), transliterated Russian words ("Tovarish" bar, "Sarafan" shop, "Carramel" tanning studio³), as well as other foreign words written in Cyrillic or Latin ("Jennifer" shop, "SharLotCafe" "Celebrity" bar, "Infiniti" salon⁴). This may be understood as the drive to identify with Europe rather than Asia and to be seen as an inherent part of it (Trenin, 2006: 169–170). At the same time, Chinese notice boards are few and far between. Most of them are found in the customs area. The Chinese cafes and restaurants do not reflect Blagoveshchensk's unique location: there is

³ *Original spelling.*

⁴ *Original spelling.*

the Panda restaurant, Mister Jackie cafe (in reference to Jackie Chan), and Hong Kong restaurant. Besides, while in Heihe the street names, at least in downtown, are also written in Russian, the situation is quite the contrary in Blagoveshchensk. The number of Chinese tourists visiting Blagoveshchensk is disproportionately small compared to the Russian tourists in Heihe. On balance then, it is difficult to record the presence of the 'Chinese neighbour' in Blagoveshchensk. This means that the Blagoveshchensk-Heihe border is marked by the Russian reluctance to promote cultural integration with China.

Symbolic antagonism in historical discourse

The interpretation of one's role in historical events is a way to denote both national and spatial identities.

In Ivangorod, the dominating idea is one of a 'fortress' established by Ivan III, who gave his name to the city, as well as the Russian 'outpost' in the northwest long before St. Petersburg came into being. Further, one of the guidebooks makes use of the metaphor "the first window into Europe" of the Kingdom of Moscow (Valishvili, 2015: 2). The example of Narva is no less vivid. In the Narva museum and guidebooks one can identify the narrative of Narva as a meeting point for diverse cultures. It can be further divided into several parts. First, the city portrays itself as a major trade hub: from the 13th to the 17th century Narva was a prominent centre of trade between Russia and Europe, which thrived in times of peace, whereas Ivangorod is mentioned as a competitor for the trade route. Second, the narrative contains the image of a victim that was often subjected to aggression and pillage by the Livonians, Swedes, Russians, Estonians and Germans, which in turn led to its decline. In other words, it focuses on the city's economic rather than the (geo-)political significance. Third, it interprets the city's role as one of a bridge. Guidebooks mention that "the border that goes across the Narva is not only a dividing line, it is also a meeting point. It is for a reason that the bridge connecting the two countries is called Druzhba (Friendship) Bridge". Moreover, the guidebook quotes one Vitaly from Vyborg (another city with a "bridge between cultures" mentality (Okunev, 2014: 72-74)), apparently a tourist, who says "The two fortresses look as if they were protecting one another. A bridge between them is like a firm handshake that connects the two riverbanks and the two peoples". Instead of antagonism between the two cities/countries/cultures, as is the case in Ivangorod, we see peaceful neighbourly relations and even cooperation.

Let us now turn to how Blagoveshchensk views its own history. The Amur Regional Museum portrays the 1689 Nerchinsky Agreement, marking the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, as a failure of Russian

diplomacy: it forced the Russians to leave the Amur's left bank and hand the land over to the Chinese emperor⁵. The main collection focuses on the defence of Blagoveshchensk in 1900, when the Yihetuan militia bombarded Blagoveshchensk, leading to mass killings of the Chinese in the city. And yet the event is depicted as a heroic act of defence by the Amur Cossacks against the insidious attacks of the Chinese who sought to grab the Russian land, while making no mention of the massacre of the Chinese. One more important topic in the museum collection is the Soviet-Japanese war of 1945, when Blagoveshchensk acted as a base for the offensive in Manchuria. The defeat of the Kwantung Army is depicted as a victory over the Asian fascist threat. The information available in Heihe is insufficient because of the city's young age. In the tourist and information discourse, Heihe's modern history is built on the narrative of cooperation and friendship with Russia.

Conclusion

Given all of the above, we can make the following conclusions. First, despite the different localisations, the two Russian cases of twin cities have much in common in terms of building symbolic relations and spatial self-positioning. Second, the Russian twin cities are characterised by constructing spatial identities through the ideas of "fortress" and "Russian outpost", while their neighbours see themselves as friendly neighbours ready for mutually beneficial cooperation, thus disregarding the different cultures and values. The similar patterns of border identity may be structured and described through the 'Us vs. Them' dichotomy, as well as leader/follower relations, symbolic resistance to cultural integration and the interpretation of one's history as opposed to the twin neighbour's.

Therefore, the Estonia-Latvia border constructs no significant mental frontier since the relations between the two cities can be explained by the opposition within one social group to the internal Other. At the same time, Russian border regions contain sustainable narratives about the barrier function (outposts), which activates symbolic antagonism to the external neighbour. It is noteworthy that neither the Estonian nor the Chinese twin follows this logic; instead, they are oriented towards cooperation and building a common local narrative without any significant opposition. In addition, this pattern is manifested in opposite institutional conditions, stressing that it reflects a special symbolic pattern of the Russian border area rather than the characteristics of its specific areas. We believe that in Russia the centre has always paid special attention to the border regions,

⁵ Based on materials in the collection of the Amur Regional Museum named after G. Novikov-Daurskij.

which first created a periphery in Russia in symbolic terms and, after that, a mental separation from the border neighbours. Such frontier areas in Russia (Kronstadt, Ivangorod, Kaliningrad, Crimea, Blagoveshchensk etc.) have developed an outpost identity that fosters stronger allegiance to the centre than other patterns would provide.

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