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Soviet Russia in a non-revolutionary Europe: borders, propaganda, and mythologies

La Russie soviétique dans une Europe sans révolution: frontières, propagandes, mythologies

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in 1917. *Revolution. Russia and the Consequences*, Herausgeber: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum - Sandstein Verlag, 2017, p. 109-122

“Природой здесь нам суждено / В Европу прорубить окно” – “From here by nature we’re destined / To cut a door to Europe wide”... Celebrating the founding of St Petersburg by Peter the Great, the poet Pushkin was the most famous of the many authors of various nationalities who, since at least the end of the 17th century, endeavoured to imagine the geopolitical and spiritual destiny of Russia, between autocracy and opening towards Europe. Returning from a Russian trip in 1839, the conservative aristocrat Astolphe de Custine had outlined the pathetic alternative that he believed threatened the balance of Europe: either the armies of despotic Russia would sweep over Europe, or the vast Empire would be shaken by a violent and fearfully contagious revolution. Yet at the outbreak of the Great War 1914, the tsars had brought Russia within the folds of capitalism, if not globalization. Since the economic boom and reforms of the late 19th century, railways were built and cashflows were higher and higher. Europe was discovering the Russian novel and the artistic ferment of the Silver Age, and socialist and anarchist ideas were flowing between the capitals. But none of Custine’s prophecies came true.

Public and political interest in this Eurasian power grew in the wake of alliances and crises – the Crimean War, the Russo-Turkish War, the Russo-Japanese War and revolution of 1905, and the Balkan Wars of 1911-12. The revolution of March 1917, which led to the fall of the tsar and cast doubt over the future of the political regime in Petrograd (as St. Petersburg was renamed since the outbreak of the war), clearly upset the balance of power in the global war. It therefore affected the vast majority of the continent that was involved in the conflict. The unprecedented emergence of a power of “workers, peasants, and soldiers” in October 1917, presented European societies with a new challenge. The new regime, based upon the rethinking of Marxist ideology by Lenin and the leaders of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, immediately set itself up as a model. It called on the whole world to follow its revolutionary example and provocatively reversed the idea of a backward Russia that had since Peter the Great and Catherine II been imitating a European model of civilization and political organization spreading from the West to the East, and from the North to the South. This paradigm shift durably changed not only the map of Europe, but also the very notion of foreign policy and of borders. The young socialist Soviet Republic developed a unique soft power that sought to spread the revolutionary mythology from Moscow, and partially succeeded in doing so.

The state and the revolution after 1917: Soviet communism's double borders

At the borders of Central and Eastern Europe a state was forming that aimed to be of an entirely new mould, both in terms of internal organization and international relations. Class-based and led by an elitist and disciplined party of fighters of the world revolution, it was a transitional state, since it was meant to dissolve upon the advent of universal socialism. The Leninist plan to create a new society was also a “no border utopia”, to use the expression of historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle¹. In 1919 the new capital, Moscow, hosted the inaugural meeting of the Communist International, also known under the Russian acronym Comintern. Drawing on Karl Marx, Lenin foresaw a crisis of imperialist capitalism that would, via the world war, lead to an all-out civil war. Militants converged in the capital of the revolution and tracked, on giant maps, the emergence of new revolutionary movements: strikes in France and in Italy, the Spartacist uprising in Germany, the Hungarian Republic of Councils and Slovakian Soviet Republic, civil war in the Baltic states, etc. The flag of internationalism was carried by foreign communist groups from Moscow and revolutionary battalions of Ukrainians, Latvians, and Poles, but also of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners who had spent time on the Bolshevik side. The constitution of 1918 offered Soviet citizenship to proletarians of any nationality living in the USSR.

Lenin and his People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs – Trotsky and then Chicherin – thus redefined nation and homeland. They refused to follow the rules of international relations, by “closing the shop” of traditional diplomacy and by publishing secret treaties. The young Bolshevik Russia nonetheless had to enter into negotiations with Germany, whose troops were at the edge of Petrograd and occupied Ukraine. It signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk at the beginning of March 1918. This brought on the hostility of the French and British, who were abandoned in the middle of the war, and whose intervention in the Caucasus and Siberia quickly transformed into a struggle against the regime and a support for “white” governments.

The Bolshevik regime's first years thus created long-lasting tensions between two conceptions of the Communist world. On the one hand, the Soviet Union was being built from Moscow, bringing a national policy to the peripheries. A part of the former Russian imperial territory was restored, with the creation of the socialist republics of Belorussia and of Ukraine, and of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The war between Poland and Russia in 1919-1921 represented a failed attempt to create a continuous socialist territory between Moscow and Germany. Between 1922 and 1924 Moscow took note of the temporary failure of European revolutions. The map stabilized. Lenin invented the notion of “peaceful coexistence” between capitalist states and the communist state, even if they were bound to confront each other again one day in a new revolutionary cycle. Europe was then lastingly divided into both two regimes and two value systems that came to be represented in maps showing a “red” area in the East. Central and Eastern Europe appeared as a

¹ J.-B. Duroselle, “Les frontières. Vision historique” (borders: a historic vision), *Relations Internationales* (international relations), 63 (autumn 1990), special issue *La Frontière* (the border), p. 229-242.

“cordon sanitaire”, according to the phrase coined during the peace treaty negotiations. Nazi plans for an ideological and racial reordering of the European landscape, the German-Soviet Pact and World War II redrew the lines. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent”, Winston Churchill exclaimed in 1946. In reality several maps overlaid upon each other in each “block”: in the West, that of NATO, of the Council of Europe and of the European Economic Community. In the East as well, the political, economic and military structure formed by the eight people’s democracies bordering the Soviet Union only appeared homogenous from afar. But no major diplomatic meeting brought the two Europes together between the Genoa conference in 1922 – which failed – and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe held in Geneva between 1973 and 1975, the date of the signing of the Helsinki Accords. The bifurcation of Europe following the October Revolution of 1917 lasted until 1989, when the Berlin wall fell and the first non-Communist government in over fifty years took power in Poland.

On the other hand, but at the same time, discontinuous communist areas developed and retreated within non-revolutionary Europe, setting up another conception of the communist world as a transnational one. It was invisible on maps because it was not delineated by barbed wire or checkpoints, but was no less clearly perceived. Beginning in the 1920s a network of communist parties developed within a complex institutional architecture linked to Moscow through the Comintern, and then the Cominform (the Communist information bureau based in Belgrade and then Bucharest) between 1947 and 1956. Until the 1980s the International Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union directly managed relations with the communist parties. Where they were legal and participated in the electoral process, communist parties created spaces within which political rules and even lifestyles intended to serve as an avant-garde of the Soviet model to be imported. “Every factory, every plant must become a bastion and fortress of the revolution” proclaimed the statutes of the Communist International and then the Red International of Labour Unions. This imaginary border first developed in urban spaces that had become “red”: Berlin, Vienna, Paris and their suburbs. As communist parties grew, especially in France and in Italy after 1945, the communist presence territorialized and expanded. Actual counter-societies were created, with street names, cultural and sporting life, rituals and emblems that came from Moscow.

This second revolutionary border also consisted of a fluid and invisible network that interlinked militants and supporters of the revolutionary model. At the end of 1917 European centres were connected with one another and the Soviet centre through flows of covert agents, and then through Comintern officials with multiple aliases and identities. The illegal flows were affected by the political geography of Europe, especially bans on Communist parties and movements by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, by several central European governments during the interwar period, by several Swiss cantons in the 1930s and 1940s, and finally by the Franco and Salazar regimes until the 1970s. The global dimension of this nomadic transnational space, of which Moscow remained

the capital, also shifted with the flows of anticolonial, anti-imperialist and antifascist militants from Europe and Asia, followed by those from Africa and Latin America. Cuba and East Berlin appeared to be worlds closer together than East Berlin and West Berlin.

Dual policy and a new type of soft power

The existence of this double border is inseparable from the diplomatic, economic and military relations between the regime born of the October Revolution and its European neighbours. In 1920 the defence of Soviet Russia was included in the “21 conditions” that Western communist parties had to abide by under the Third International. As a result the nagging issue of USSR foreign policy’s double standard was raised by contemporaries themselves and was the subject of heated parliamentary and media debates, before becoming a question of historical interpretation. Were communist ideology and the national interests of power and defence that were entirely or partly inherited from the Russian empire convergent or divergent? Was internationalist communism to serve the Soviet party-state? Was there a nationalist turning point and siege-mentality withdrawal during the Stalinist period? Should the USSR have joined “bourgeois” international organizations like the League of Nations, the International Labour Organization, and then the UN and UNESCO? Did the Soviets respect international law, especially clauses on non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations included in the treaties in which European states recognized the Soviet Union?

Relations with Moscow, the capital of both the USSR and the revolutionary space linked to the Soviet model, thus became both a domestic and foreign policy issue for European governments and public opinion. The issue was raised in terms of goals and objectives: how were the export of communist revolution and the defence of national and imperial power pitted against one another and joined together? It was also raised in terms of methods of action, since “propaganda” and “agitation” were among the fundamentals of Leninist thought and practice, and were rapidly integrated into the *agitprop* departments of the Bolshevik party and of the Comintern. Information, which had always played a key role in international relations, now no longer just covered the classical issues of strategy and economics, but also, unprecedentedly, what political science would at the end of the 20th century refer to as soft power, and at the time as propaganda and influence. In 1917 strong curiosity about the events that had unfolded in Petrograd and Moscow was apparent at all levels, in the press, in the personal journals of intellectuals like Stefan Zweig and Roman Rolland, and in the correspondence of soldiers. But in war-torn Europe communications were severed, letters were rare and censorship was widespread. Suspicion about descriptions of Russian events therefore quickly prevailed. Immediately, and for the first time in Europe, curiosity about a faraway political and social revolution that offered itself as a model for the whole world was inextricably tied to the idea of false or manipulated information.

According to Lenin, who used the underground press and radio addresses in an effort to break down what he called the “great Chinese wall” of bourgeois hostility, the public would be

manipulated by “Anglo-French imperialist gentlemen” afraid of the “germ of Bolshevism’s” promises of equality and peace². For advocates of the “cordon sanitaire” such as Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, Bolshevik leaders were misleading the peoples of Europe into a regime of anarchy and violence. The young Soviet Russia then embarked on a long campaign armed with, inseparably, power and influence. In the 1920s it built a creative cultural diplomacy that served the national and imperial interests of the USSR, both defensive and offensive, but also greatly contributed to the ideological struggle to project communism through force, conspiracy and persuasion, thus working on both fronts of the revolution. This cultural diplomacy disseminated magazines, films, posters and exhibits favourably discussing the regime’s accomplishments since 1917, and articulating the official capacities of embassies and militant networks. It drew in complex ways on the presence of communist parties and mass organizations more or less openly coordinated and funded by Moscow. Thus 1925 saw the establishment of the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS). As a parastatal organization, VOKS fostered a European network of societies of Friends of the New Russia aimed at the “petit bourgeois” who might promote a favourable image of the developing socialist regime. The idea was to channel a friendly relationship with Soviet Russia while keeping up appearances of spontaneity and independence as much as possible. Intellectuals and artists were specifically targeted through concerted actions that combined political arguments, flattery and sometimes the granting of material benefits. Simultaneously, and sometimes in rivalry, the Comintern-backed association named Friends of the USSR sought to convince the proletarians, Moscow’s class allies. VOKS was dissolved in 1957 and succeeded by the State Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (GKKS). The GKKS coordinated the action of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, which were very active until the 1980s. The USSR was a pioneer in investing in transnational media like the radio to spread propaganda. Radio Moscow was founded in 1922 and by 1939 was broadcasting in English, French, German, Italian and Arab; it would significantly expand its network by the second half of the 20th century.

The climate of Russophilia in Europe at the end of the 19th century, both the positive and hostile curiosity about an unprecedented political experiment, and the existence of domestic communism therefore do not fully explain the burst of curiosity, which was also strongly solicited and directed. Beginning in 1917 the idea took root that one had to go see first-hand in order to settle the argument, gain knowledge and form an opinion. The eyewitness became a key figure: one who could tell the truth and legitimize an opinion with lived experience, removed from ideological biases and contradictory propaganda. This desire for travel never ceased and barely eroded in the USSR’s last twenty years of existence. The flow of these first political tourists slowly grew and reached its height between the mid-1920s and the end of the 1930s – a period that the writer Arthur Koestler aptly termed the “pink decade”, during which the USSR was a major power

² V. I. Lenin, *Speech on the international situation*, Extraordinary 6th All-Russia Congress of Soviets, November 8 1918.

proposing an alternative model to both fascism and capitalism in crisis. Antifascist and pacifist organizations, and leftist sports and cultural associations formed a pool of potential visitors that was much greater than that of communist parties per se, not to mention clearly anti-communist figures who wanted to judge for themselves, such as French writers Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. The USSR attracted a considerable number of French people, Germans until 1933, the British, and especially Scandinavians. The flow reached several tens of thousands of visitors per year, withered again when Stalinist Russia during the Great Terror progressively closed its borders, and then resumed with destalinization and the development of mass tourism. The opening of the archives of organizations responsible for inviting and hosting foreigners has enabled greater insight into what might be called Soviet “hospitality techniques”, which had until the fall of the USSR been state secrets. A whole system was put in place to select visitors and guide their tours to ensure they reported the most favourable impressions and disseminated them in publications and conferences. The Central Committee of the Communist Party itself determined what contacts would be authorized for the most prominent guests. Thus Josef Stalin himself was only met by a chosen few, such as the French Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland, and the anti-Nazi German Lion Feuchtwanger. In contact with European visitors, these men and women responsible for hosting foreigners became true go-betweens living and working at the crossroads between the two Europes, between two sometimes allied and sometimes hostile political worlds, and between two social and cultural code systems. While this new elite enjoyed material benefits, access to foreign publications and at times authentically friendly and even romantic relationships with visitors, it also became a prime target of purges, of the “Great Terror”, and of counterespionage and anti-Western campaigns. In the opposite direction, from East to West, the rare Soviet visitors became more numerous beginning in the 1950s, with the development of monitored delegations and tours. Sportsmen, artists and scientists had to then become the representatives of *homo sovieticus* and ambassadors for the accomplishments of the Soviet Union, whose slogan was to “catch up and overtake” the West.

Mythography: Soviet, Russian and revolutionary worlds in Europe

The Soviets were certainly not alone in the 20th century in taking into account public opinion and reflecting on the manipulation of the masses and the power of images. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini also invited delegations of visitors to admire the accomplishments of their regime. However, the sophisticated and systematic nature of this policy of influence was unique and misunderstood by European elites. Neither intelligence services nor politicians had a full picture of the propaganda that defied borders. Furthermore, while the October Revolution had galvanized a majority of Europeans to embrace anticommunism and anti-Sovietism, their political opposition was uneven and decentralized. In areas of democracy, the reaction to Soviet propaganda in Europe depended on state anti-communist policies, but also, and especially, on political life marked by regular changes in mandates, religious traditions, popular and militant cultures, neighbouring

country issues, and collective and individual situations. The efforts of agencies based in France and Switzerland, such as the International Anti-Communist Entente, to denounce Moscow's propaganda were never systematically supported by European democratic governments. Fascist Germany and Italy during the interwar period, all of Nazi-controlled Europe, and finally Mediterranean authoritarian regimes in the 1960s – in Spain, Portugal and Greece – developed powerful anti-communist repression. However, it is not until the United States entered the fray at the end of the 1940s that a systematic Cold War “cultural counter-diplomacy” was deployed, using similar methods to those of the USSR. Secret government funding and quiet support from diplomatic missions came to buttress anti-Soviet political arguments. These efforts primarily targeted intellectual and artistic circles, using for instance the Congress for Cultural Freedom as well as written and broadcast media in both Western Europe and inside the Eastern block. Anti-communist leaflets were even sent behind the Iron Curtain by balloon.

Moscow was waging an image war. The original cultural diplomacy of the 1920s had helped create both an image of the Soviet Union and a contemporary mythology that might be defined as a body of collective representations or social imagination forming a coherent narrative. It included a temporal dimension that gave meaning to history, in order to naturalize, stabilize and transform it into a vessel of forward-looking utopian movements. It was also a localized mythology: it included a universalist dimension – the plan for worldwide expansion of the socialist world – but was rooted in the experience developing in the former Russian empire since 1917, and therefore unfolded at the two borders of Soviet communism. While its content dynamically evolved, in accordance with the internal history of the USSR, this mythology maintained its coherence. It emphasized figures over places: Lenin; Lenin and Stalin; and then Lenin again after destalinization and the return, from Nikita Khrushchev to Michail Gorbachev, to its revolutionary roots; workers, peasants, red soldiers, the young pioneers and the *komsomol*. It eliminated other elements – the victims of Gulag purges, the Baltic and Ukrainian resistance to sovietisation, for example – allowing it to be compatible with trans-European movements like antifascism and pacifism. It drew on forms (constructivist avant-garde and socialist realism), a sound universe of songs translated into all languages, a vocabulary, a syntax and logos adapted from original Marxism and Leninism.

The strength of this mythology was to offer the image of a new type of political space that was neither Russia, nor Europe, but rather the harbinger of a new civilization born of an ideology, creating a “new man”, and destined to spread beyond the borders of the USSR. This system of representations would be exported to people's democracies. It was appropriated by Western communists who melded it with the myths and symbols of the workers' movement, like the red flag or the Internationale song, which was composed during the Paris Commune. Soviet mythology promoted a ruptured timeline, based on a Marxist reading of history in successive phases, necessarily culminating in socialism and communism. The basis of this new era was the master narrative of the October Revolution, imitated after the end of World War Two by the people's democracies and the three Baltic republics now incorporated into the USSR, who rewrote the

history of their sovietisation as a popular liberation movement. The new calendar was marked by commemorative parades on Moscow's Red Square each November 7, the anniversary of the October Revolution according to the Gregorian calendar, which combined a display of ideology and of military power, as well as Labour Day on May 1st and Women's Day on March 8.

Soviet mythology was countered by anti-Soviet mythology, and the Communist utopia was countered by the dystopia of a world transitioning from an anarchic clean slate to a totalitarian dictatorship. The political and moral foundations of these hostile responses varied and were sometimes anathema to one another. Such was the case of Nazi anticommunism, guided by a nationalist and racist vision, versus European and American Cold War anticommunism, guided by a universalist and democratic vision, which proved its attractiveness with the collapse of Mediterranean authoritarian regimes in the 1970s. For all that, the interpretation of the two Soviet and non-Soviet worlds, coherent and confronted in history, always served to enhance self-image and mobilise against the enemy. Thus, in interwar Poland and Hungary the use of medieval references inherited from 19th century nationalism helped back ideological anticommunism. Unsurprisingly, the reasoning was supported by contagion and virus metaphors that were symbolized on propaganda posters by octopuses, arrows or the contagion of a red spot spreading over the map without regard for land borders. These were compounded by a fear of nuclear and bacteriological war. The rupture of 1917 was interpreted as a Bolshevik coup d'état that destroyed the very foundations of the societies and cultures of the former empire of the tsars, which emigrant diaspora claimed to be upholding. Regardless of its alliances and development, the Soviet system thus appeared to be fundamentally other, hostile and beyond reform.

Other interpretations challenged this set of representations as early as 1917 by refusing to subscribe to the idea of a coherent world born of the Revolution, while attempting to dissociate what was linked to the Soviet Marxist regime (for instance the state-controlled economy and politicized education) from the national elements that made the USSR a heir to Russia's imperial past. In these interpretations the timeline was more continuous, in line with the long history of geopolitical issues within the European or Asian borders of this continent-state. It was clearly the first – territorial – border that was mobilized, rather than the more fluid ideological border, which was likely to change. Thus, a number of European politicians – especially French ones, and German ones before 1933 and after the 1960s – saw Moscow's policy as a partial continuation of traditional Russian policy. Deeply ingrained since the 18th century, European stereotypes of the "Russian soul" or "Slavic soul" diminished the novelty of the Bolshevik regime. The "psychology of Slavic peoples", who were depicted as young, spontaneous, sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent, impervious to pain, naturally drawn to egalitarianism and even collectivism, strongly inclined towards mysticism, and passive before absolute power, was invoked to account for the history of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century. Drawing on these attributes, support for communism could be explained as a religion substituting orthodoxy; Stalin's dictatorship, forced collectivization and the development of mediocre but egalitarian "true socialism" in the 1960s could

also thus be explained. The extraordinary mobilization of the Soviet people in its fight against Nazi Germany appeared as an expression of attachment to a land and a leader rather than to an ideology.

This culturalism disregarded the specificities of Sovietized people in both the USSR and Europe after 1945. It was of a piece with the USSR's internal and external political development, which since the second half of the 1930s was marked by Russian and Slavic domination, paradoxically and pragmatically championed by the Georgian Stalin. Ukraine and Belorussia obtained UN seats after 1945, and Russian became the language of socialist civilization. This series of representations would never form a system, let alone an ideology. It allowed politicians, as well as entrepreneurs, scholars, linguists and historians to adopt firmly anti-communist positions in their respective countries while advocating the establishment of normal diplomatic, economic and cultural relations with the Soviet Union. It became possible to consider a "convergence of systems" – for example, during the NEP of the 1920s, or the reforms of the 1960s. The condition was to trust diplomatic relations and exchange protocols presented as neutral and bilateral, while willingly or otherwise ignoring the discreet influence of Moscow's soft power.

By contrast, the presence of Soviet networks of influence in non-socialist Europe was clearly denounced by militants and intellectuals who embraced a third Soviet mythology: that of the "revolution betrayed". Leon Trotsky, who was expelled from the Bolshevik communist party and then from the country, used this phrase as the title of the essay he published in 1936 to denounce the corruption of the October Revolution by Stalin and his entourage. An entire generation came to oppose Stalin and relocate to Europe and to America. Trotsky, Victor Serge or Boris Souvarine, Spanish and Italian anarchists, advanced a critique based on an idealized and peaceful representation of the revolution's first years. They argued that Soviet democracy had been betrayed by a Thermidorian and dictatorial bureaucracy walled in the Soviet fortress. The Red Terror, which had started in 1917-1918 with the *Cheka*, was attributed to Stalin. These men and women were often experienced Comintern influencers and they found little support in the bourgeois democracies whose principles they rejected. Deeply divided, disconnected from a Soviet society torn apart by Stalinism, and sometimes doubly victimized by both fascist and Stalinist repression, this lost generation failed politically. But it transmitted a vision of the Leninist October that found new life with Stalin's demise, the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist Western youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, labour "councils" and communes, and internationalism became part of what Hannah Arendt called the "lost treasures of revolution"³. The Hungarian and Czechoslovak unrest in 1956 and 1968, the emergence of a dissidence whose watchwords and forms of mobilization circulated throughout the whole Eastern block, as well as the competing models of Cuba and

³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, Penguin Books, 1963, chapter 6: "The Revolutionary tradition and its lost treasure", 215-283.

China, all contributed to rebuilding the references to October 1917 by detaching them from the Soviet model and Moscow's grip, and thereby forming one last revolutionary mythology.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989-1992 did not magically erase the legacy of over seventy years of coexistence, confrontation and movement between the regime born in 1917 and non-revolutionary Europe. The West won this unprecedented cultural contest and the war of influence and of models. Soviet mythology, with its revolutionary narrative, its heroes and its language, survived in North Korea, China, Vietnam and Cuba in a form of red kitsch that has now all but disappeared. In northwest and Mediterranean Europe the double border dissolved along with the communist parties and the erosion of socialist models, but the Marxist utopia and criticism of liberal capitalist democracies continued to draw on the founding narratives of a Leninist, Trotskyist, and Luxembourg October. Since socialist Europe's at times difficult integration into the European Union, it is communism's first border, which stabilized at the beginning of the 1920s, that has proven to be the most lasting, but it too has been challenged by the conflicts between Russia and, respectively, Georgia and Ukraine.

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