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## **Changes in the Territorial and Administrative Division of Northwest Russia over the Soviet Period**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The principles of internal territorial and administrative division (ATD) are a staple of Russia's statehood. The paper deals with the analysis of changes made to the territorial and ATD of Northwest Russia over the Soviet period (1917-1991), mainly in upper-level units (Gubernia, Oblast, Krai, and republic), and partly at the medium level, such as ouezd and okrug. The analysis presented here is heavily based on cartographic materials. The paper gives an overview of the large-scale administrative reforms of the Soviet period and determines the periods of stability and instability of administrative boundaries within the current territory of Northwest Russia. According to the analysis of the alterations in territorial and ATD made during the Soviet period, within three decades after the 1927 enlargement reform the network of the upper-level units began to mirror those of pre-revolutionary time. Since 1957, the system of territorial and ATD has been relatively balanced, with no significant changes made to it up to the present day. The results of this research will be used to construct the models of historical periodization and changes in the geography of Northwest Russia.

**Keywords:** Territorial and Administrative Units, Soviet Period, Northwest Russia

**JEL Classifications:** N9, P2, R00

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

With Russia's vastness, the territorial and administrative division (ATD) and its principles are a staple of Russia's statehood. Reforming ATD ensues a shakeup of its structure, and is caused by changes of political regimes and restructuring of regional policies and territorial governance. However, as previous Russian ATD reforms show, within a few decades the mapping returns to its prior state, similar to the pre-reform one.

Aiming to enlarge or reduce the sizes of territorial and administrative units, most ATD reforms result in the change of their numbers. Therefore, among the main quantitative indicators of ATD changes are the number of units (primarily upper-level ones) and their average territories. According to Tarkhov (2005), the quantity and dimensions of the upper-level units are largely determined by the overall size of the country. Since in Russia such relatively optimal mapping has existed a long time, any alterations

can shift the balance of its economy and the level of its spatial self-organization.

The article aims to analyze the changes made to the territorial and ATD of Northwest Russia over the Soviet period, mainly in the upper-level units (Gubernia, Oblast, Krai, and republic, and partly at the medium level, such as ouezd and okrug. Northwest Russia is understood here as the north-western economic area of Russia, embracing the city of Saint Petersburg, and the Leningrad, Novgorod, Pskov and Kaliningrad Oblasts.

### **2. CURRENT STATUS OF RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY**

State boundaries have always been a major topic in the tradition of political geography (Elazar, 1999; Taylor and Flint, 2000; Newman, 2002; Jones et al., 2004). Geographically, boundaries

are approached from traditional perspectives of cartography, history, function, geopolitics and taxonomies (Minghi, 1963; *The Geography...*, 1991), and studied with the post-modern methodology of the 1990-s (Albert, 1998; Brunet-Jailly, 2004; Kolossov, 2005). Today, the emerging new border study called limology (from Lat. Limes - border) is developing into a vast research field for many social sciences. (Kolossov, 2006).

Conducted from geo-historical perspective, the present research aims to elaborate a geo-historical periodization in the region under study. Previous studies include: A profound analysis of ATD changes from the Middle Ages to the present day (Tarkhov, 2005); an overview of ATD networks changes over the same period by Martynov (1998); the analysis of stability of political and administrative borders in the Northwest of the East European Plain (Russian Plain) (Manakov, 2002), and in the Pskov Oblast, including nearby territories (Manakov and Evdokimov, 2010). Offering a more detailed analysis, this article, however, commands previous scholarship to approach the periodization of ADT reforming in Northwest Russia.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over the Soviet period, four major stages of ATD formation in Northwest Russia were identified. The reforms continued until 1967; since that time administrative boundaries have been stable up to the present day.

#### 3.1. Co-existence of Old and New ATD Units (1917-1926)

Yet in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first projects of disaggregation of Russian ATDs emerged, to be implemented only after the 1917 revolution. On the main territory of the state, which became known as Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in 1918, old Gubernias were broken down to smaller size units. Among the new ones, there was the Cherepovetz Gubernia split off the eastern part of the Novgorod Gubernia; a neighbor to it, there also appeared the Severo-Dvinsk Gubernia in July 1918 (with Velikiy Ustug as its capital), made up of Northern and northeastern parts of the Vologda Gubernia (Administrative..., 1929).

In April 1918, the Union of Northern Communes was set up to embrace eight Northwestern Gubernias: Petrograd, Pskov, Novgorod, Vologda, Cherepovetz, Murmansk and Karelia - all maintaining their administrative independence (Tarkhov, 2005).

In June 1920, within the RSFSR a new national autonomy called Karelian Labour Commune was formed; from 1923 - the Karelian ASSR. That caused the abolition of the Olonets Gubernia, part of whose territory joined the Petrograd Gubernia. In 1924, Petrograd was renamed Leningrad and, consequently, the Petrograd Gubernia became the Leningrad Gubernia (Administrative..., 1929).

The new Soviet reform was preceded by minor alterations in the gubernial structure. Thus in March 1924 the better part of the Vitebsk Gubernia together with a few uyezds from the Smolensk Gubernia were devolved from RSFSR to the Byelorussian SSR; the Vitebsk Gubernia was therefore abolished, with its remaining three uyezds handed over to the Pskov Gubernia (Administrative..., 1988).

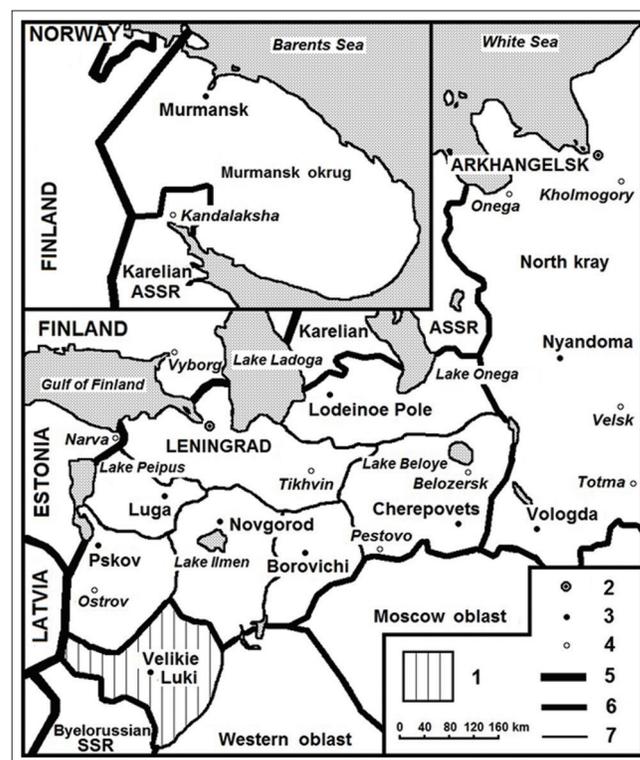
#### 3.2. The First Soviet Reform (1927-1929; Enlargement of ATD Units)

Shortly after the creation of the USSR in 1922, a new stage of the ATD reform began. In 1923, Gosplan conducted the first economic regionalization of the USSR, which, in its turn, was followed by a new shake-up of ATD network involving a significant enlargement of ATD units. The reform was conceived to replace old Gubernias with vast Soviet Oblasts according to the Gosplan-initiated economic regionalization. The Oblasts were subsequently subdivided into okrugs, rayons and selsovets (selsky soviets); gubernias, uyezds and volosts were abolished. Size-wise, okrugs became larger ATD units than former uyezds, while rayons fell in the slot between uezd and volost (Tarkhov, 2005).

In May 1927, a decision was made to unite the Leningrad, Pskov, Novgorod, Cherepovetz, and Murmansk gubernias into the Northwestern Krai - a huge territorial unit with Leningrad as its capital city. Instead of uyezds and volosts there now were okrugs and rayons. Shortly after that, in August 1927, the Northwestern Krai was renamed into the Leningrad Oblast (Administrative..., 1929).

In 1927, the Leningrad Oblast had the square of 360400 km<sup>2</sup> and included nine okrugs: Leningrad, Lodeynoye Pole, Luga, Novgorod, Borovichi, Pskov, Velikie Luki, Cherepovetz, and Murmansk. The Murmansk okrug of the Leningrad Oblast was, however, separated from its mainland territory by the Karelia ASSR (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Administrative-territorial division of Northwest Russia in 1929



1. Territory devolved in 1929 r. from the Leningrad Oblast to the Western Oblast;
2. Administrative centers of Oblasts and Krai;
3. Okrug centers;
4. Other settlements;
5. borders and boundaries as of 1929 r.;
6. Of Oblasts, Krai, republics;
7. of okrugs

To finalize the reform, in January 1929, a decision was made to abolish gubernias completely and establish Oblasts and Krai instead on the rest of the country's territory. Namely, bordering on the Leningrad Oblast, the Northern (Severnyi) Krai and Western Oblast were set up. This amendment caused the Leningrad Oblast a loss of 341400 km<sup>2</sup> of its territory, as it had to yield up the Veliki Luki okrug to this new entity (Administrative..., 1929).

### 3.3. Second Soviet ATD Reform (Disaggregation)

Phase I: 1930-1940 As those huge, multi-rayon and heavily populated territories proved hard to manage, shortly after the reform the enormous ones had to be broken down into smaller units. The process involved two stages: (1) Breaking down some of the Krai and larger Oblasts into smaller Oblasts 1934-1935; (2) final disaggregation of all large Krai and Oblasts in 1936-1938 (Tarkhov, 2005) Alongside this move, it was decided to defy the okrug link in ATDs, and in the summer of 1930 a new structure of ATDs appeared: Oblast - rayon - selsovet. As a consequence, in the Leningrad Oblast all okrgs except Murmansk were abolished and the Oblast was subdivided into rayons.

In the framework of this ATD reforming, in January 1935 a new minor Oblast was formed at the crossroads of three larger - Moscow, Leningrad and Northern - ones. Named the Kalinin Oblast, it consumed five rayons of the Leningrad Oblast. In February, in the west of this Kalinin Oblast the Velikiye Luki okrug was established – the alteration only to be followed in March by the creation of two more okrgs in the Leningrad Oblast, the Kingisepp and Pskov ones, bordering on foreign states.

In 1937, the Kalinin Oblast saw the establishment of Opochka (border) and Karelia (with Likhoslavl as its center) National okrugs. However, while the Opochka okrug in the Kalinin Oblast stayed, the Velikiye Luki Karelia okrugs were abolished in 1938.

In September 1937, the Northern Oblast was subdivided into the Archangelsk and Vologda ones, the latter acquiring also 18 rayons of the Leningrad Oblast (the former Cherepovets Gubernia's territory) (Administrative..., 2007). At the same time the Western Oblast was renamed the Smolensk Oblast.

In 1938, the Murmansk okrug broke off the Leningrad Oblast to become a self-sustained unit - the Murmansk Oblast. It was, in fact, the last step to be made in the breaking down of a large unit in the course of this reform. As a result, the Leningrad Oblast housed two okrgs and 64 rayons.

Since 1938, after the Winter War, the territory of the Karelian Isthmus became part of the USSR. In March 1940, by merging the Karelian ASSR and former eastern Finnish territories annexed by the USSR, the Karelo-Finnish SSR was set up, which was not incorporated into the RSFSR. The northern part of the Karelian Isthmus became part of the Karelo-Finnish SSR while its southern territory joined the Leningrad Oblast (Tarkhov, 2005).

In May 1940, after the second phase of the disaggregation reform was finished, the Leningrad Oblast had the area of 143700 km<sup>2</sup>, which is

comparable to some minor Oblasts such as the neighboring Vologda (150000 km<sup>2</sup>), or Kalinin (105400 km<sup>2</sup>) ones (USSR..., 1940).

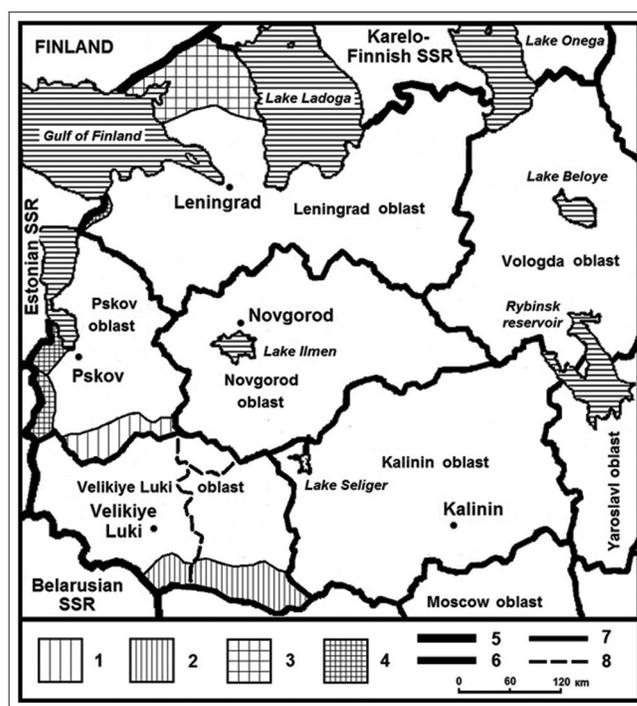
### 3.4. The Second Oblast Disaggregation Phase (1944-1957)

Although the Oblasts and Krai of the 1920s had been by and large broken down by 1941, some of the minor Oblasts were still too large to be properly managed. That is why another session of breakdowns took place by the end of World War II, involving the Leningrad and Kalinin Oblasts. (Tarkhov, 2005).

In July and August 1944, three new territorial units appeared in the North-west of Russia: The Velikiye Luki, Novgorod and Pskov Oblasts (Figure 2). The official sources claimed that the aim was to help local Soviets (councils) to boost the economy. The emergence of the Novgorod and Pskov Oblasts completed the breaking down of the enormous Leningrad Oblast of the 1920s. The Velikiye Luki Oblast absorbed the territories from the Kalinin, Smolensk and Leningrad Oblasts. However, this unit had only existed for 13 years up to 1957.

In November 1944, the area of the Leningrad Oblast was enlarged at the expense of the entire Karelian Isthmus and Ivangorod and four volosts on the right bank of the Narva river, part of the Estonian SSR (Administrative..., 2007). By 1945, the territory of the Pskov Oblast had expanded too, for it acquired some of the territory of Estonian, Latvian SSR which had been lost by Russia in 1920 in accordance with the peace treaties of Tartu and Riga (Administrative..., 1988).

Figure 2: Changes to the administrative and territorial division of Northwest Russia in 1944



The figures denote the territories devolved in 1944: 1. From the Kalinin to Pskov Oblast; 2. From the Smolensk to Velikiye Luki Oblast; 3. From the Karelo-Finn SSR to the Leningrad Oblast; 4. From the Estonian and Latvian SSRs to the Leningrad Oblast; borders as of 1945 r: 5. States, 6. USSR republics, 7. Oblasts; 8. Current Oblast boundaries

In the northern part of East Prussia which was transferred to the USSR in 1945, the Koenigsberg Oblast was formed in 1946, later that year renamed the Kaliningrad Oblast.

As a result of all those ATD transformations, by 1955, the territory of the Leningrad Oblast shrank to 85100 km<sup>2</sup>, but nevertheless it remained the largest Oblast in Northwest Russia. The Novgorod Oblast came second in terms of area - 53700 km<sup>2</sup>, followed by the Veliki Luki Oblast with 44900 km<sup>2</sup>, the Pskov Oblast with 31700 km<sup>2</sup> and the Kaliningrad Oblast with 15800 km<sup>2</sup> (RSFSR..., 1955).

In July 1956, the Karelo-Finnish SSR was abolished to become part of the RSFSR under the title the Karelian ASSR (autonomous), as it used to be before March 1940.

In 1957, after the lowest disaggregation level had been achieved, a step toward enlargement was made, and several unsuccessfully broken down Oblasts were liquidated. Those were the units with very weak centers, highly dependent on the remote economic hubs suppressing smaller capital cities. In this vein, the Veliki Luki Oblast was split between the Pskov and Kalinin Oblasts.

It was the last major change in the ATD structure in Northwest Russia, which by and large has remained unchanged up to the present moment (apart from some minor devolutions of territories, renaming, etc.). Since 1958, the territories of Northwest Russia have been fixed as: The Leningrad Oblast - 85900 km<sup>2</sup>; the Novgorod and Pskov Oblasts 55300 km<sup>2</sup> each; the Kaliningrad Oblast 15800 km<sup>2</sup>.

In 1991, Leningrad was returned its historical name Saint Petersburg, while the Oblast still retains its former name "Leningrad." The renaming was symbolic of the change of epochs, from the Soviet to the Post-soviet. In accordance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, the Leningrad, Novgorod, Pskov, and Kaliningrad Oblasts together with Saint Petersburg city enjoy the status of the entities of the Russian Federation.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Soviet-time ATD changes shows that in three decades after of the post-revolutionary enlargement reform the system of ATD by and large returned to similar to pre-revolutionary "Gubernial" situation. On the whole, the Soviet period of ATD reforming in Northwest Russia falls into four major phases: (1) co-existence of old and new ATD units (1917-1926); partial breakdown of Gubernias; (2) first Soviet reform (1927-1929) aimed to significantly enlarge ATD units; (3) second Soviet reform aimed to disaggregate Oblasts and Krai, with its first phase in 1930-1940; 4) second phase of disaggregation of Northwest Russia's Oblasts in 1944-1957.

Since 1957, the ATD system has maintained its relative equilibrium without any significant alterations up to the present moment. In the course of the Soviet era the number of upper-level ATD units in Northwest Russia was fluctuating from one in 1927-1929 (the Leningrad Oblast) to five in 1944-1957 (the Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Novgorod, Pskov and Veliki Luki Oblasts).

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