

# INSTITUTIONS OF ISOLATION

BORDER CONTROLS IN  
THE SOVIET UNION AND  
ITS SUCCESSOR STATES,  
1917-1993

ANDREA CHANDLER

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*Institutions of Isolation*  
*Border Controls in the Soviet Union and*  
*Its Successor States, 1917-1993*

Until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the Soviet Union was one of the most restrictive and powerful states in the world, and border controls were one of the most important symbols of the Soviet repressive apparatus – as the phrase “Iron Curtain” attests. In *Institutions of Isolation* Andrea Chandler traces the evolution of the USSR’s extremely restrictive border-control system.

Chandler provides a comprehensive examination of border controls from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 to the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and shows the continued importance of border controls for the newly independent Soviet successor states. She reveals the changing nature of Soviet border-control policy, from the extreme Stalinist isolation of the 1930s to liberalization – and eventual instability – during *perestroika* in the late 1980s.

Chandler argues that Communist ideology was not the only reason for the self-imposed isolation of the state and explores a complex, ever-changing set of political, inter-bureaucratic, and economic factors that combined to influence the Soviet Union’s closed-border policies. She draws on social science theories of comparative institutional change and state formation to illuminate policies within the Soviet state, which has often been regarded as a unique case.

By exploring why a political system that originally prided itself on its internationalism devoted such intense efforts to seal its society from the outside world, *Institutions of Isolation* provides a revealing case-study of the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet state.

ANDREA CHANDLER is assistant professor of political science, Carleton University.

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ANDREA CHANDLER

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*To my grandparents,  
Bram and Dorothy Chandler, and  
Graham and Mildred Millar;  
and to my parents,  
Joan Chandler and Brian M. Chandler*

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## Preface

This manuscript began as a dissertation, a dissertation in which there were many doubts, not the least of which were my own. I began the dissertation at Columbia University in 1990, at a time when Soviet border control was a decidedly unfashionable topic, and found that I met with a certain amount of scepticism. The Soviet Union, it seemed, was undergoing democratization: why focus on its methods of coercion, the tools of a former “evil empire”? Indeed, my interest in the topic had originally been sparked at Carleton University when, in the mid-1980s (the height of the so-called “New Cold War”), I began my MA research essay on Soviet Jewish emigration. Was I simply out of step with the times? Yet, notwithstanding the monumental changes in the USSR under Gorbachev, my belief was that Soviet borders offered more than met the eye and that historical exploration of this aspect of Soviet state-building could provide insight into the problems coming to the fore under *perestroika*: the Soviet Union was opening up its political system from within, but how quickly was it opening up to the outside world? Still, at the beginning I didn’t foresee just how interesting the topic would become. As *perestroika* progressed, political unrest emerged in Soviet border areas, and republics began to set up their own border controls in defence of their new claim to independent statehood. When the Soviet Union collapsed, to be replaced by fifteen independent states, I had the rare privilege of seeing my subject-matter fragment and multiply just as I was completing research and writing. The dissertation’s chronological end-point was the end of 1991; subsequently, the newly independent states’ development of their own bor-

der controls provided a fertile subject for the last chapter of this study. Consequently, the scope of my analysis here extends to approximately the end of 1993.

Following independence, the state institutions of the post-Soviet republics proved increasingly complex and differentiated but remained fragile and contentious. Border controls were no exception. None the less, today's border controls show signs of substantive change, although whether those are irreversible is anybody's guess. This is not to say that the new states have their border regulations under control or that their personnel know what the rules were: an unpleasant encounter I had with Ukrainian border guards while trying to travel to Kyiv with a valid visa in the spring of 1994 convinced me there is much room for improvement.

#### A NOTE ON SOURCES

In this study I take a historical, archival approach to the collection of evidence in order to trace the development and changes in Soviet border institutions and policies over time. I have relied extensively on published and unpublished primary sources: edited collections of documents such as the four-volume *Pogranichnye Voiska SSSR*, edited by P. Zyrianov et al., including compilers E.I. Solov'ev, A.I. Chuganov, and others; published collections of documents; Soviet laws, statutes, and decisions; newspapers and journals, including both central sources and local border-area newspapers; archives, including the Smolensk Archive materials on microfilm, the Nicolaevsky Archive of the Hoover Institution, the Bakhmeteff Archive at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, and Soviet archives, which provided insights into the real workings of the relevant Soviet state bureaucracies rather than the ideological explanations of Soviet politics common to Soviet published sources; and memoir literature and emigré sources.

The opening of the former Communist Party Archives in the fall of 1991 provided new sources of information that until then had been considered politically sensitive. All the same, the occasional gap in information existed at the time of my research on many aspects of Soviet policy, particularly for the 1930s. In contrast, the scholar interested in the perestroika and post-Soviet periods can be overwhelmed with data, as the newly independent states began to produce a large array of laws and decrees, many of which were never properly implemented. This of course makes for a certain methodological unevenness, as the availability, nature, and quality of research material varies con-

siderably across time and region. None the less, the striking feature is the continuity of the trends this evidence reveals.

As the system of Communist rule in the USSR fell, Soviet archives were greatly affected. In the past few years archives have often been reorganized and renamed. I have chosen to refer to the archives by the names they had at the time of my research (primarily spring and fall 1991), for two reasons. First, I assume that this system will provide a more accurate citation. Secondly, the upheavals in the former Soviet Union have not ended, and I see no reason to assume that the naming process will not continue in the future. It is up to scholars to be aware of changes and to follow them accordingly. The bibliography provides a complete listing of archives consulted and their various name changes.

For transliteration from the Russian, I follow the Library of Congress system, except for variations that are commonly recognized in the West (e.g., Trotsky, *glasnost*, Yeltsin, *oblast*). In the endnotes, translations of Russian source titles have generally been provided, except where they are very brief or easily recognized.

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This book began as a PhD dissertation completed in 1992 at Columbia University. I was fortunate to receive support for my doctoral studies and research from a number of sources. From 1987 to 1990 I received a Doctoral Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I received Barton Scholarships for my doctoral research and writing from the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security in 1990–91 and in 1991–92. At various points during my five years of study at Columbia I also received fellowship support from Columbia University, where I was a student in the Department of Political Science, and the Harriman Institute. My three trips to the Soviet Union during the course of my research were made possible respectively by the Variable Term Research Program of the American Council of Teachers of Russian, and a grant from the Pepsico Foundation offered through the Harriman Institute for a trip to Moscow in the spring of 1991; the Canada-USSR Academic Exchange of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada for research in the fall of 1991; and the Republican Association of Ukrainists in Kyiv, Ukraine, where I was able to do some research in the summer of 1990 while attending the International Summer School for Ukrainists. I would like to thank the Russian State Humanities University (RGGU, formerly the Moscow State Historical Archive Institute) for hosting me in Moscow on my two research trips, and the RGGU staff and faculty members, who were very helpful and kind to me.

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I would like to thank the Centre for Research on Canadian-Russian Relations (formerly Research Centre for Canada and the Soviet Successor States) and its director, Professor J.L. (Larry) Black, at Carleton University. My post-doctoral fellowship at the Centre in 1992-93 allowed me the time to consider how to turn the dissertation into a manuscript, which I continued to rewrite after I became a member of the faculty of the Department of Political Science at Carleton University in July 1993. Chapter 9 of this study is adapted from a paper entitled "An End to Isolation? *Perestroika*, Reform and the Fate of Border Control Institutions in the Soviet Successor States," which I presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Honolulu, Hawaii, in November 1993. Roger Kangas, who was panel discussant, provided helpful comments on the paper as well as encouragement before and after.

I alone bear responsibility for the content of this work and for any errors or omissions that appear.

Some of the ideas developed in depth in chapter 8 were initially explored in preliminary form in Andrea Chandler, "The Iron Curtain and Gorbachev: Recent Changes in the Soviet System of Border Control," in *Soviet Observer* (a former publication of students of the Hariman Institute, Columbia University), 1, no. 1 (Apr. 1990): 4-6.

I am grateful for the criticisms and suggestions I received from the anonymous reviewers who read either the original manuscript or the revised manuscript, or both. Their comments aided me greatly in making the necessary improvements for the revised version. I would like to

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# I The Paradox of Socialist Isolation: Ideology and Territory in the Construction of Soviet Border Controls

In 1985 the Soviet Union was one of the most restrictive and powerful states in the world, such that it was still commonly described as a “totalitarian” political system. In the short decades following the tumultuous Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 the Soviet Communist Party elite had established an impressive form of rule: the size of the Soviet state bureaucracy, its investment in military and police capacities, and its involvement in socio-economic affairs were unparalleled. Among the noteworthy features of the Soviet state were its border controls; they severely restricted its citizens’ ability to emigrate or travel abroad while also making it difficult for foreign influences or visitors to enter the country. Border controls epitomized the power of the Communist party-state, its control of both society and the domestic economy. These border controls complemented the Soviet Union’s strong territorial defences, its strict internal surveillance regime, and its state-planned economy, which asserted control over human as well as material resources; border restrictions performed both economic and internal-security functions. Border controls, as exemplified in the phrase “Iron Curtain,” were one of the most important symbols of the power of the Soviet repressive apparatus – they were one of the ways in which the Soviet state supposedly “worked.” They had a reputation for maintaining airtight, impermeable boundaries by which the Soviet state was able to prevent mass emigration, exposure to foreign ideas, and travel. By the time Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the Soviet system was widely perceived as a viable, albeit repressive, system of government. Border controls were one of

the visible images that propagated the myth that the USSR was a strong state.

Yet only six years later the Soviet Union collapsed. With the fall of the Communist system, the country split apart, and its fifteen constituent republics became independent states. As a part of this process, instability and conflict emerged on the Soviet Union's once-rigid borders, creating a situation that in some ways resembled the territorial upheaval of the young Bolshevik state after the Revolution of October 1917. The uncertain situation on the borders of the former Communist state graphically illustrated that, as the founding leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) declared in December 1991, the Soviet Union no longer existed as a state.<sup>4</sup>

If the Soviet Union during the Cold War had one of the most restrictive systems of border control in the world, this was partly because its borders throughout this century have been the site of extraordinary contestation and volatility. In view of this instability, the question of Soviet border controls as a characteristic and problematic aspect of the Soviet political system are worth examining in their own right. The Soviet Union's border controls have rarely been studied in depth; they tend to be taken for granted as an essential feature of the Communist system. Often forgotten is that aspects of the Soviet system such as border controls were distortions of Marxist ideology that ran counter to many of its original precepts. Karl Marx stressed that the modern capitalist state was essentially a repressive tool of the ruling classes and that the common interests of workers transcend international borders, themes echoed in some of Lenin's works. The USSR's border controls seize the imagination because on the surface they defied, even violated Marxist ideological principles. They represented the idea of the socialist state as a fragile piece of land whose inhabitants needed to be protected from capitalists and reactionary nationalists lurking outside its frontiers; they were symptomatic of both the political struggle at the edges of the young Soviet state and the importance that states in general at that point in history attached to such crude manifestations of strength as border controls. Far from a necessary outgrowth of Communism, border controls were one of the Soviet Union's essential paradoxes.

#### PURPOSES OF BORDER CONTROLS

This study poses two essential questions: why was the Soviet system of border control established and maintained, and how was it involved in the collapse of the Soviet Union? The formation of the Soviet border-control apparatus, a process that began with the Bolshevik Revolution and was strengthened throughout the Stalin era into the 1950s, is a for-

midable example of a new state's successful use of a coercive strategy of state building. For Soviet leaders the isolation imposed by border controls was an act of affirmation of the state. The Soviet border was closed, and the right to travel or cross the border was an isolated privilege available to a fortunate few, not a right of society as a whole.

The Soviet elite's concern with borders was not unprecedented. Uncertainty and conflict over boundaries have been recurring themes in the history of the Eurasian region since tsarist times, continuing into Soviet history.<sup>2</sup> In part this is a consequence of the vast territorial borders of the country, as Russian and Soviet leaders defined them, and cataclysmic wars that have been accompanied by rival territorial claims and mass population movements. The Soviet Union came into being in a world where borders were a source of political conflict, where control of territory and military power were considered crucial to a state's survival, and where societies were polarized and fragmented. The border became a physical symbol of resistance to the international bourgeoisie and to capitalism. To the Bolsheviks, and especially to V.I. Lenin's successor Joseph Stalin, the capitalist enemy was at the gates, and the Soviet Union's leaders knew that control of knowledge, information, and contact with the outside world was power. The Soviet Union was vulnerable at its borders, where its military security was in question, as was the loyalty of its borderland population. So it built the state from the outside in, from the border to the centre, as well as from the top of the Communist Party down to the Soviet population. In addition, the Soviet Union was trying to build an alternative, self-sufficient society. Soviet leaders believed that they needed to "protect" a society they considered too immature to be able to choose socialism of its own free will. The new state's first leaders wanted to build a totally self-contained economy, as autonomous as possible, in which all resources needed to be mobilized for the good of the state and society. No resources could be allowed to escape because the war with capitalism would ultimately be a war of attrition. Finally, control of borders was not just a triumph of military policy; it was a triumph of bureaucracy over the chaos of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. The bureaucratic priorities, rules, and procedures associated with border controls tended to become more elaborate, more convoluted, and more prohibitive over time.

Interestingly, the people who actually lived on the borders of the Soviet Union were the people the Bolsheviks considered the most untrustworthy. Border controls were in part the result of a confrontational interaction between the state and local society in Soviet border areas, often directed against peasants and other rural populations considered to be ill disposed towards the Bolshevik government. The Sovi-

et Union's international boundaries cut across and through multi-ethnic populations, dividing ethnic groups and separating Soviet peoples from those groups and power centres with whom they might have more in common than they had with Moscow. For example, border controls intercepted contact between Soviet Ukrainians and the Galician Ukrainians under Polish rule until 1939; border controls also prevented Central Asian peoples and Tatars from connecting with Muslims or Turks abroad, Belarusians from conversing with Poles, and Armenians on both sides of the Soviet border from engaging in dialogue. As Soviet territory expanded in the 1930s and 1940s, the location of the border changed, whereupon border controls were extended to new sites. This happened not just because the borderland peoples were often genuinely hostile to Bolshevism and to being part of the Soviet state but also because they were, for the most part, peasants. They were often people of non-Russian ethnicity who, in the view of the leadership, needed to be sealed off from the bad influence of their bourgeois or reactionary compatriots across the border, since these people were assumed to put ethnic identity first.

In a study of border controls it is essential to deal with the role and legacy of Stalin. There is no doubt that Stalin further restricted and politicized the Soviet system of border control. Yet Stalin did not initiate extreme border controls. Much of the apparatus was in place by the late and even the mid-1920s. The development of the centrally planned economy, the peasant resistance to collectivization, and Stalin's increasing terror against supposed political threats from the population all served to make border controls more important because Stalin considered the world outside the Soviet Union to be plotting and scheming to conquer his government from without and overthrow it from within. At the height of the purges in 1936-39 Stalin accused large numbers of people of being agents of foreign governments; any contact an individual had with a foreign country, no matter how trivial, could be perceived as proof of treason. Border controls served to police the domestic population and keep the foreign enemy at bay, yet ironically they were quickly overcome when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Even after Stalin's death, when border-control restrictions were slightly modified in order to permit a trickle of emigration and expanded travel opportunities for a lucky few, the regime continued to justify its border controls on the grounds that Soviet territory and society needed to be protected; controls were depicted as a proud symbol of the Soviet Union's ability to protect itself, both from the untrustworthy outside world and from the citizen whose motives to travel abroad were always suspect. The most rigorous controls continued in place to ensure that the right to travel and have contact with the West