

# Heterotopic encounters: meeting the Stranger on Frontiers

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**Abstract** - The Frontier of the Low Volga region has a special history that differs it from similar Frontier in Russia or for example in USA. The conquest of the Astrakhan Khanate by Muscovy changed geopolitical situation in the region but brought no changes to interethnic and gender relations. Constant migration of new ethnic groups to the region renovated the situation of interethnic and gender relations. In the Region we can find different forms of interethnic gender relations that can be characterized as a prefrontier or active frontier ones. In the pre-frontier stage the interethnic marriage is approved and is looked at as a mechanism of communication. During the active frontier any interethnic gender relations are accepted as negative and an Alien woman becomes a target of violation and rape. Due to constant mix of ethnic actors in the Region we can observe here coexistence of different forms when in one case an interethnic marriages is accepted and in another is rejected.

**Index Terms** - Frontier, Heterotopia, Cultural encounter, Stranger, the Other

## 1. Introduction

Meeting with the Other is a natural process of the Modern World when the administrative and cultural boundaries and frames are not so rigid. It is possible to state that the existence of this political, technological and cultural construction (that we call “modern world”) is possible due to that meeting with the Other who frames our world and gave to it a special impulse that has its power till nowadays. The territories of this meeting are turned into a special phenomenon that combines different cultural characteristics belonging to all actors of the meeting. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an American historian Frederick Turner formed a theory of American Frontier in which he demonstrated the significance of the territory of Wild West for the shaping the basic characteristics of American mentality, democracy, social institutes, etc. But describing the impact of the frontier on the history of USA Turner ignored a fact that the active participants of it were besides White Americans also Native Americans. For Turner the main characteristic of the Frontier was the movement of Civilization to the Wild West. The existence of free land in the West helped to low the social tension in the East due to constant westward migration of the active people in a search of best life. This idea was prevailing one for scientists of the Turner’s historical school for a long period of time in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Scholars of the new theoretical trends (like Postcolonial theory, Cultural encounter studies, Subaltern studies) destroyed that monopoly of interpreting the frontier through prism of civilization/wilderness paradigm. They let native people to tell their story of frontier from other points of view. They also turned Frontier studies from He-story to Her-story underlining in their researches the role of women in the westward

movement and the role of other minorities in that expansion to the Wild West (V. Deloria, P. Limerick and others). Their ideas were named as a New Western History.

Besides that such authors of the “Myth and Symbol school” like H. Nash Smith [1] and R. Slotkin [2] began a different methodological approach to Frontier studies demonstrating the impact of the frontier on the American mentality that expressed itself through special frontier myths and symbols.

At the same time all that different scholars haven’t brought great changes to the methodology of the frontier studies. They only changed some accents and themes but not methodology especially if we speak about Turner’s school or New Western History school. The last one rejected the ideas of American exceptionalism and the opposition of civilization and savagery. But speaking about the Frontier we should keep in mind one of the main moments of the frontier phenomena – the intercultural dialogue between all actors of the process. But till nowadays almost nothing were made concerning the laws of this dialogue. In this article we will try to analyze some typical moments, common for the process of communication between different encounters of frontier dialogue.

## 2. Methodology of the Research

The main problem in our understanding of the Frontier is a right choice of new methodology and methods. But a new methodology is not a question of perspective. The appearance of the New Western History changed nothing in methodology and especially in methods. The new western historians only tried to describe the Frontiers’ histories from perspective of new actors of the process. All we need is a new approach to the study of Frontier that would bring us to a new issue. The main idea of a Frontier as a liminality, threshold, an edge of civilization, a territory that is opposed to the center, brings us to an old idea of opposition: center/periphery, civilization/savagery or civilization/wildness. M. Foucault, analyzing phenomena of some places, proposed a special term for places that bring an idea of hybridity, where some cultural laws stop functioning bringing to life new realities [3]. Such places he called heterotopia – from Greek “topos” – place and “heteros” – the other, so heterotopia means “a place (or a space) of otherness”. Though M. Foucault elaborated this concept for such places as asylum, cemetery, carnivals, etc., nowadays there is a strong tendency to use the same term to define a Frontier territory (L. Marin, Ph. Davies, K. Hetherington, J. Faubion, U. Freitag, A. Von Oppen). The introduction of the concept of Heterotopia let the researches to avoid the strong opposition of traditional dualism of the

Frontier theory of old Turner and New Western History schools. There was no need any more to solve the problem of contradiction between the civilization and savagery, center and periphery, new comers and old inhabitants. Due to the concept of Heterotopia, the Frontier now is a place of hybridity, the place where oppositions meet. They coexist in one place where alternative reality is performed through them [4]. From opposition they are turned to juxtaposition and fusion. That brings us to another concept by M. Foucault and other postmodernists – transgression. Though transgressive behavior brings us again to the concept of boundaries (which we tried to abandon) due to the fact that the “transgression “is that conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries” [5], we can easily ignore them because this boundaries play no role in heterotopia. Transgression is an instrument to break these boundaries. The coexistence of opposites in one place gives an indulgence to an individual to exceed them, bringing to life a new reality and a new order (K. Hetherington). An individual easily moves from one opposition to another one due to the fact that there is the boundaries don’t fulfill their role any more. That brings to life new ways of intercultural communication. But at the same time, explaining the nature of their transformation the methodology proposed by M. Foucault and his followers doesn’t permit us to analyze their forms. Its only explains why they are transformed and have no interest in their form.

To understand the real meaning of frontier intercultural dialogue we have to use the methodology proposed by a Russian scientist O. Yakushenkova[6]. While analyzing the intercultural dialogue on the American Frontier of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the role of women (white and Native American) she came to a conclusion that the forms of intercultural dialogue on the Frontier differ due to the stage of the Frontier. To her mind the female role in this dialogue gives us a possibility to speak at least about 3 stages or phases of the Frontier: Early Frontier (or Prefrontier), Frontier (or active Frontier) and Postfrontier. Each phase is characterized by special forms of the intercultural dialogue that can be summed in the formula: cooperation-confrontation-cooperation or fusion-formation-reformation. The Prefrontier is characterized by a high role of a woman in this dialogue where she plays roles of a peacemaker and a cultural mediator. Her position in the society is very high due to her possibility for bringing opposition to peaceful coexistence and cooperation for the benefit of all actors of the dialogue. To illustrate this idea we can name such famous female characters as Pocahontas or Sacagawea. They can be looked at as founders or mothers of a new race. The active phase of the Frontier brings to life new forms of cultural dialogue which is now more violent. The position of woman in a society changes greatly. Especially it is true for native society whose women easily are turned from mediators to victims. They are almost not humans but only a game. The marriage with them is no more a benefit, it aren’t legitimized. The Postfrontier proposes to us a new form of dialogue -- it manifests itself through different attempts of revisionism of past history, building new

mythology, etc. A woman again plays a very important role in this dialogue, interracial marriages are again legitimized. This approach proposed by O.Yakushenkova returns us again to the methodological position of Foucault due to his view of sexuality and power. The meeting with a Stranger is very often a question of power and sexuality that doesn’t express itself openly but plays very important role in the cultural dialogue.

All this methodological positions let us build a complex system of frontier history and make different analytical inferences concerning past, modern or future characteristics of frontier territories.

The aim of this article is too demonstrate the possibilities of discussed methodology for the analyses of Sothern Russian Frontier.

### **3. Frontier in the History of Russia**

The history of Russia is a real eternal Frontier. The predecessors of the Russian State the Muscovy Duchy was surrounded by different Russian Duchies and Post-Golden Horde Khanates: Kazan, Astrakhan, Crimean Khanates. These Khanates controlled a huge territory of nowadays Central and Southern Russia. The Crimean Khanate considered herself to be heirs of the Golden Horde that, to their mind, gave them a right to invade and robe Russian Duchies. To protect their territory from invaders the Russian authorities had to build a fortification line (Zasechnaya cherta – Abatis line) that consisted of rare wooden forts and a line of abatis constructions that were effective against horsemen [7]. There were several such lines that were effective against not small groups and less effective against Tartar armies [8]. Large unsettled territories to the South of main Russian (Wild Steppe) attracted representatives of different ethnic groups who formed special frontier communities whose way of life was complied with the dangerous situation of constant attacks of different gangs of free men of different nationalities. The northern gangs (ushkuiniks from the Novgorod Republic) constantly invaded into Russian and Tartar territory for robbery and slave trade. They brought from the North-West Finnish and Karelian slaves to sell them on the Southern slave markets. In any favorite situation they robbed the local population and took slaves with them. They also constantly organized trade and hunting expedition to the East and even founded a large free town of Viatka that later became a military base for them. This Eastern and North-Eastern colonization of Novgorod free men had a special history and we will not discuss it here. We only wanted to underline that the Frontier processes were usual for the great period of Russian history in different parts of the country.

### **4. The South Russian Frontier**

The Russian inhabitants of the Wild Steppes who crossed the abatis lines could depend only on their personal abilities because nobody could help or defend them. They could survive only if they organized their life in a military way in a mode of Army life. They were ruled by a military leader (Ataman) and solved all important questions by common

meeting of all elder men. They were like military settlements that became a buffer zone between Tartar Khanates and Russian Duchies and controlled the routes between the Crimean Khanate and Southern Duchies of Riazan and Suzdal. Although their existence in the Wild Steppe had a positive effect for the protection of Russian territories they at the same time spent a lot of time in robbing all who couldn't resist them. Even when the power of Kazan and Astrakhan Khanates were destroyed and they surrender to the Great Duke of Muscovy Ivan the Terrible nothing could be done to prevent or stop raids by these gangs of Cossacks from the Don River. The Moscow government tried to bring peace and order on that territory but nothing could be done. They had to build many fortresses on the Volga and keep in them garrisons of strelets to control the trade routes on the River. Even later in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the situation hadn't become better. The complications of the trip to Astrakhan along the Volga were well described by the Holstein embassy secretary Adam Olearius. The travelers were always stressed by a fear of the Cossacks raiding in the neighborhood in search of easy target. There were numerous fortified points, e.g. Tsaritsa (near the modern Volgograd) or Chorny Yar (the north of the modern Astrakhan oblast) guarded by strelety from Moscow but they could do nothing with the Cossack gangs coming here from the Don. Even the citizens of such fortresses (and especially women) were not protected from harassments of benefit seekers. Adam Olearius describes one of such episodes happening near the Tsaritsa fortress: "Below Zariza lies an Isle of Zerpinske. ...And the Soldiers of the Garrison of Zariza sent their Cattel thither to graze. The Cossagues of those parts, having observed that the Wives and Daughters of those Soldiers crossed over to the Island without any Guard, went thither one day after them, surprised, ravished, and sent them back to their husbands, without doing them any other mischief" [9].

The Southern part of the Russian kingdom in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a real heterotopia where new cultural traditions spread. All local and new ethnic groups took part in this formation. It was a real melting pot where different ethnic groups survived in bringing their traditions to the commonly shared culture. To show the peculiarities of that local hybridity we demonstrate the situation in the former capital of the Astrakhan Khanate that was conquered by the Muscovy in 1558. Not numerous Russian population came to the Low Volga from different parts of Russia. Besides the Russians there were the Armenians, Local and Nogai Tartars, the Persians, Bukhar and Khiva Tartars, the Cherkess from the North Caucasus, some Germans and many others. The citizens of Astrakhan spoke a strange Russian language that incorporated a lot of words from different languages spoken in the town.

It was a territory where other rules defined the mundane life different from the life of the Russian town in the center of the country. Even nowadays the ethnic component of the modern town is very complicated. Seven large ethnic groups define the cultural landscape of the town sharing their ethnic

cultural heritage with other people. Several of them are not newcomers but live here for a long period of life, some of them about 3 or 4 centuries.

But if we put the above described methodology for the analyses of the Low Volga heterotopia we come to the conclusion that the Southern Russian example gives us a special type of Frontier history that could be compared with the American Frontier but is not equal to it. If we discuss the intercultural dialogue on the Lower Volga Frontier we should accept that there were no Prefrontier in its complete model. That doesn't mean that there was no Prefrontier stage in other parts of Russia but in the Low Volga example we meet the situation with an active phase of Frontier that continued for a long time. Above we described the cultural situation in the Low Volga that could be compared with the melting pot and formation of special local variant of Russian culture incorporated different cultural elements from other cultures: the Tartars, Armenian, North Caucasian, German, etc., but at the same time if we analyze the position of women – the main indicator that we chose for the defining the Frontier stage, we find a unique situation when a woman as a rule is a victim. The interethnic marriage is a unique situation and the local slave market is full of female slaves. Human life (especially of female foreigner) hardly mattered something; its value was brought to naught. These were words of travelers who were shocked with the price for children selling on the local slave market. During the Jenkinson's visit, a price for a young boy or girl on the local market was equal to a price of a bread loaf in England (6 pence) [10]. Historical material demonstrate a unique situation of coexistence several models. There were active hybridization in the region in a sphere of cultural contacts and in intercultural and interracial marriages but at the same time the position of a woman (especially a woman of other ethnic groups, not autochthonous of the region) is very low. She is a victim, a target of rape, easily killed or turned into a slave. The social opinion about her position is not on her side. So we can easily notice that two phases coexisted in the Region. In a local folklore we meet some characters whose roles were equal to the role of Pocahontas. Usually they were of Kalmyk or Nogai origin and were considered as mothers of new groups of population, but at the same time we meet many others examples of unhuman attitude to a woman of other ethnic groups. Many narrative stories of the Ural Cossacks mentioned a Tartar woman – Gugnikha as a mother of Ural Cossacks. She brought them to the Ural River and taught them to fish making fishing nets with the help of her hair. In her image we meet a typical example of a cultural hero whose role belongs to a woman of other ethnic group. In a folk memory of Ural Cossacks she turns into a patron of the Ural River fishing resources and local fishers used to drink some alcohol in her memory. An image woman whose role was a Cossack savior we meet in a folklore of Astrakhan region. According to a legend being a daughter of a Kalmyk khan she saves Russian Cossacks of the Zamian village from the Kalmyk anger in the same way as Pocahontas saved John Smith and other colonists from Indians. From that moment this Kalmyk woman was

considered to be a mother of Zamian Cossacks. There is no historical evidence of this legend because this village was organized with the help of Astrakhan Cossacks when one of Kalmyk feudal decided to stop nomadism and settle in a village for crop farming. The local Cossacks should save him from other Kalmyk and teach him to plough. Unfortunately we can't tell when this legend was born. It was written in the 90-s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The foundation of the village Zamiany took place in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was not a period of first active contacts between the Russians and Cossacks. That gives us a possibility to come to a conclusion that this legend is a pure symbolical construction demonstrating to us a role of sexual markers in the early stage of intercultural dialogue.

At the same time the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a period of numerous military conflicts between Cossacks and Kalmyk. Slaves were taken from both sides and the Russian administration always had to soften this conflict demanding from both sides to stop to revenge.

The Kalmyk came to the Low Volga region from the North-West China in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and from the first years they entered into long confrontation with local ethnic groups. They even tried to conquer the main town of the region but were withdrawn. But at the 18<sup>th</sup> century they became active supporters of Moscow government especially in their fight with Crimean Khanate and the Nogai allies.

The Don Cossacks of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as it was already said were also an active disturbing force in the region. They constantly came to the region to rob local groups or they used the Astrakhan town as a military base before their expeditions to Persia. Killing women was a common practice among Don Cossacks and we have some evidence of it in folklore and travelogues of the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## 5. ConclusionS

Does these facts demonstrate that the South Russian Frontier history developed in a different way that has no parallels with an American history? Although the Low Volga data show quite a different models of interracial and interethnic relations they are very comparable with American Frontier, especially if we take into consideration not Frontier

but Frontera (according to P. Limerick) model of the South-Western territories of the USA. In this region we meet a more complex heterotopic landscape built by numerous actor: Native American, White Americans and Mexicans.

In the situation of the South Russian the cultural landscape since the formation of Russian Astrakhan was in constant change. Every half a century it was withdrawn to the very beginning by different events: migration of new ethnic into the region (the Kalmyk in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Kazakh in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), Don Cossacks uprising in the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, active Tartar and Russian colonization in the 18 and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, etc.

There were no periods when new cultural landscape could be formed to influence the situation. It was always transformed or rebuilt due to appearance of new active actors ready to rebuild it according to their needs and traditions.

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