

## **The Edge of Eastern Eurasia: The view from the Swiss Alps**

This year was the XIth Border Regions in Transition (BRIT) conference held from September 6th to 9th at the University of Geneva and the University Joseph Fourier in Grenoble. The BRIT conference has become a major annual event at which specialists and experts can discuss and debate some of the world's most challenging border issues. It also serves as a forum to exchange different ideas and practical approaches towards resolving various border disputes across the globe. At this year's BRIT conference there was an especially strong presence from Japan and together with colleagues from South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, there were a total of six panels featuring members of the Slavic Research Center (SRC) of Hokkaido University.

On the second morning of the conference, the SRC arranged a panel entitled: 'The Edge of Eurasia: Mobile Borders between Russia and Japan?' This session had one of the best attendances at the conference with audience members drawn from all of the world's continents (the only exceptions being Antarctica and Australia). The SRC panellists were pleased to present their papers in front of the Deputy Director of the Office of the Surveyor General of Nigeria as well as senior academics from the Centre d'études Diplomatiques et Strategies, Paris; the Centre of Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg (Russia); the Institute of Research for Development, La Paz (Bolivia); Pusan National University, Korea; and the Foundation for Democracy and Development, Bangkok.

The session presented multiple historical, contemporary and geographical views of the Russian-Japanese borderlands. The papers introduced and explored various themes surrounding this dynamic and challenging border. Hiroshi Itani provided a fascinating overview of the architectural history of the city of Korsakov, on Sakhalin Island. This was followed by Professor Akihiro Iwashita's discussion of an innovative approach to the territorial issue existing between Russia and Japan. Masato Tamura provided an account of the indigenous Ainu people and the difficulties they faced caught between the Russian Empire and Japan. The final paper by Paul Richardson sought to develop the theory of border studies by using the issue of the Southern Kurils / Northern Territories as a case-study for exploring the concept of a 'hyper-border'.

Professor Ilkka Liikanen, Director of the Karelian Institute at the University of Eastern Finland was invited to chair the session. He is one of the leading specialists on border issues between the EU and the countries of the former Soviet Union, and he proved to be the ideal chair to facilitate a fruitful question and answer session. He presided over an extremely interesting discussion which provided an opportunity to share ideas about the Russian-Japanese case with scholars studying borderlands in other regions. Interesting comparisons and connections were drawn with the Peruvian-Bolivian-Brazilian border, the French-Spanish border, as well as issues over Nigeria's post-colonial borders and the Thai-Burmese borderlands.

This lively debate followed in the spirit of the entire BRIT XI conference and proved to be a great chance for scholars based in Japan to engage in discussions and to share ideas with scholars from across the world. Many of the participants at the conference expressed their appreciation at the chance to hear perspectives and views on border issues from Asia. There was also a tangible excitement amongst the delegates over BRIT XII, which is anticipated to be held in 2012 in Fukuoka and Pusan. This will be a great opportunity for borders studies in Japan and Asia to become a key part of the network of global border studies and its influence on policy making.

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