

**Vassilis Nitsiakos, *On the Border: Transborder Mobility, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries on the Albanian-Greek Frontiers*, Monograph 1, Lit Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, Berlin, 2010. 498pp. ISBN 978 3-643-10793. Reviewed by Antonia Young.**

Background research for this substantial paperbound volume was ongoing for much of the author's lifetime. He was born and spent his childhood on the Greek side of the Albanian border, mixing with the ethnic Vlachs, (the subject which dominates the book). Nitsiakos first became aware of the possibility of studying the topic in 1991, as the rigorous Communist regime in Albania started to fall. He was the right age, with the right education to seize the opportunity seriously to research key border issues at close range. He made an early study in 1994, three years after the border opened. It was of folk songs in southern Albania. In 2000, he embarked on a 2-year research project "The effects on the Greek countryside, of the settlement and employment there of foreign labour" covering a much wider area. These studies, and the copious notes he took from them, gave a strong basis for the follow-up and further research that ensued.

The academic Introduction does little to prepare the reader for the rest of a book which is in the main written in a folksy style. There is much detail of celebrations to which the author was invited, food and drink consumption, his own emotional state, and all with considerable repetition. There are many interesting life stories and personal anecdotes, as well as records of the transference of traditional customs moving across the border, often with new structural and functional features. Nitsiakos took the trouble to find people from all social strata, but there are too many comments recording the great appreciation of the author and his interests by most of the individuals and groups whom he met. For a book about borders and relationships across them the lack of *any* map is quite woeful. The study of the strong links across this historically contentious border, involves the names of *dozens* of villages (sometimes in two languages) around it. Therefore this lack of a clear map to aid the reader is *infuriating!* Moreover, unfortunately most of the wide variety of photographs, taken by the author, are of rather poor quality. There are numerous typographical errors throughout the text. Indications that the writer is not a native English-speaker suggest that an editor would have been helpful. The book has a useful 16-page bibliography.

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In the Introduction, Nitsiakos discusses the many ethnic groups in terms of ‘transnationalism’ and ‘transmigrants’. He rightly notes an increasing need to “abandon the concept of the nation-state as the basic study tool for migration” (p.34). While focused on the situation of the Vlachs (nomadic group which lived across several Balkan borders) he frequently also refers to the Arvenites (Albanian-speaking Greeks), Helliotes (Greek-speaking Albanians) amongst other, religious or ethnic groups. The national border never coincided with the cultural and ethnic borders between the populations. Nevertheless, after an exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece in 1923, people had to declare their national identity. Muslims in Albania became known as ‘Turks’—a term which is still sometimes used of them. In parallel, Muslims referred to Christians by the term *giaour* (foreigner). Later Nitsiakos fully discusses the issue of ‘Northern Epirus’ and the Epirotes—the Albanians from this region of southern Albania who wish to claim Greek identity. It is hard to clarify whether the motive for changing names was simply to gain the right to a Greek passport/work/benefits/etc. In the reverse direction, Greeks who wish to claim land in Albania they feel belongs to them by historical right, may so identify. Only those claiming to be Christians receive a welcome in Greece. Athens is “...the only European Union capital where Muslims are forced to pray in basement flats and garages in the absence of a proper place to worship” (*Guardian Weekly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2010).

Specific incidents on the border itself, past and present relate to the lax acceptance of many illegal Albanians living in Greek villages close to the border, a situation commonly known but kept secret. In fact new invisible borders seem to evolve, depending on the acceptability of those living around them. But “the border reveals the inequalities between its two sides” (p.54). Ann Kennard has identified this phenomenon very clearly, on many borders (see *Old Cultures, New Institutions: Around the New Eastern Border of the European Union: European Studies in Culture and Policy*, Berlin, 2010). When borders are dismantled, those on the more prosperous side have less and less inclination to call those on the now accessible, less prosperous side “brothers”—“thus the fall of a material border signalled the erection of a symbolic one” (p.63). Two such villages are Rehovë in Albania and Plikati in Greece. Whilst the exchange of people is mostly Albanians to Greece, exchange of goods is two-way, though of different kinds: agricultural and dairy products to Greece; manufactured and electrical equipment to Albania. Following the fall of Communism, Albanian

Vlachs, the poorest ethnic group in the region, were the first to find their way across the border into Greece; they actually served as guides to later migrants, since, as mountain-dwellers, they were already familiar with little-known paths. In the chapter titled “Transnational Vjosë”, Nitsiakos discusses these transformations of inter-local relations into transnational relations and of inter-local networks into transnational ones. He finds that many people live in both countries (transmigrants); Albanians working in Greece, but returning to Albania for family celebrations; Greeks carrying out business in Albania, but returning to family in Greece. He defines four categories amongst those who choose to live on both sides of the border, resulting in a transnational landscape, or transnational space.

There is an awareness amongst the older generation interviewees of the influence of the Ottoman Empire, for example the use of the term ‘kurbet’ from the Turkish ‘gurbet’ meaning travelling for business, was common in all the Balkan countries.

The author visited many of the abandoned small Greek churches in southern Albania, but no clear overall picture emerges of their treatment at the fall of Communism. In the chapter on Durrës, he explains how the Communist regime broke down the traditional design of villages near the border, imposing new settlements of dominant, intimidating apartment blocks and public buildings for political and social control of the populations. This change in the use of space involved destroying traditional homes with private courtyards. However, by the time Nitsiakos visited, many of these ‘modern’ buildings were falling into disrepair.

In this region, Bektashi Muslims often planted their sacred trees jointly with an Orthodox Christian priest. The Albanian-speaking villages of Himarë kept their Greek schools open until 1920, even supporting the Greek minority’s struggle and demands that the government of the time rejected. Dropull, a village Nitsiakos studied in 1991, was an example of a place suffering from massive exodus causing social and psychological difficulties for those who remained. The change in attitude to those labelled from “Vorioepirotis” (Northern Epirote), led first to social rejection, then to ethnic rejection. He also discusses fears about the tendency of Orthodoxy identifying with Hellenism and its effects.

Chapter 5 contains a commentary on the village of Frashëri (place of origin of the remarkable three Frashëri brothers so active in the 19th century *Rilindja* [Renaissance] Movement). Was it Vlach or Bektashi, Nitsiakos asks after a visit there,

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noting the lack of care given its historical importance; for example evidence of the rapid decay of the village's museum exhibits. Surprisingly songs praising heroes of the Greek Independence are sung and there are mass baptisms and name changes. Two Greek-speaking villages in the Përmet area are compared, and also several Greek villages of the frontier. In the Albanian villages, most people were very keen to be seen as Greeks. But in the Greek border villages, Albanians claiming family connections, though initially welcomed, later were often rejected for being too demanding. A very obvious difference is in the landscape on each side: on the Greek side all the fields are cultivated, whereas those in Albania are totally barren, following decades of neglect in which few were permitted access. A 20-page narrative follows of the life of a man who lived his life across the border from his family homeland; as a child before 1944, he remembered being able to pass freely into Albania.

Voskopje in the 18th Century was the largest city in the Balkans, (larger than either Athens or Sofia), with the first printing press in the region and 24 churches. It was a crossroads for the Balkans. Nitsiakos' (unfocused) chapter on Voskopje discusses what he finds there. Under Communism communications were cut and the churches destroyed or left to ruin. Recovery of this remarkable place was slow to take place, and without overall plan. Ismail Kadare remarked on an emerging contentious relationship between the Vlach and Albanian communities there. In other Southern Albanian towns with Vlach communities, Vlach citizens changed their first names under the Communist regime, to negate their ethnic background. Communist town planning altered villages, and modern motorways now intensify these changes. Many villages have suffered from mass migration; people who remain are demoralised and living in poverty.

The major rift between Greek Vlachs and Romanian Vlachs might be the subject of another book. Nitsiakos gives evidence of the attempt by Greek Vlachs to ensure that their view is the official view in Albania. He also presents an interesting historical account written by a Romanian. Currently both Greece and Romania offer scholarships to young Albanian Vlachs to study in each of their countries. Apparently there are even Albanian Vlach families who have youngsters studying in both countries. Michael Tositsas from Metsovo (in Greece) bequeathed his home town a considerable sum of money specifically to expand "Hellenism and the uprooting of the prevalent local tongue, the so-called Vlach".

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Even if “North Epirus does not consist in itself a geographical unity”, once again a map is essential in assisting the reader to understand the core of the argument. Mention of an Ethnographic Map of Northern Epirus in 1913, published in 1919 is quite insufficient. Nitsiakos comments on the deprivation, caused by the post-World War II borders. They cruelly prevented family members across the borders of this region from having any kind of contact for almost 50 years. This was also true of course for all the borders of Albania, most particularly those with Montenegro and Kosovo. The border also included the Adriatic and with Italy, these included links between many Catholic families. It is clear from extensive evidence that the Catholics were the most hated and therefore worst treated of all Albania’s religious communities under Communism (see my “Religion and Society in Present-Day Albania”, in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 14, no., January, 1999).

Overall excessive tangential writing obscures the several valuable comments and interviews throughout the book. Much of the contents of the last three chapters, concerning Vlachs on the Greek side of the border, would have served well as an historical introduction to the book. The topic of the final chapter “What is North Epirus Then?” really the basis of this book, should also have been placed earlier.

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