Septentrio Conference Series

Living the war in the Barents region 1939–1945: living conditions, childhood, sickness and nursing

Ingunn Elstad and Åshild Fause

> *"If I get together with someone who is my age and has experienced the same, we start more and more to talk about it. I'll tell you something funny, growing up we did not talk about the War. But then we were older and so we meet... So one of the ladies said: "Do you remember the big bombing?" Do you remember the big bombing? And we all remember who were involved in it, where we were, and how scary it was. We had never talked about it before. I am hundred per cent sure that we never talked about it before, even though we went to school together. And suddenly we all start talking about it. This was actually our nine eleven!"*[1]

The quotation may express something typical. When the War ended, whole populations were engaged with reconstruction and the necessity of looking forward. War experiences were sometimes so stressful that crucial events were left in silence for a lifetime. Today, however, many elderly do talk about how they lived the War, in the realization that the experiences of ordinary civilian people are indispensable parts of our common history. There is a vivid and increasing interest in civilian everyday survival and living conditions, which is particularly discernible in local history and reminiscence literature.

The project "Living the War"

The focus of the project "Living the War" is the impact of the 2nd World War on health and daily living conditions for the population in the North-Western part of Europe, today often called the Barents region.[2] The focus of the project is the northern parts of Finland, Norway and North-Western Russia. [3]

The region's political history includes war, conflicts and domination as well as co-operation. The populations have nevertheless proven inventive in making themselves understood across the borders. Civilian relations have overlapped and interacted within the region's variety of languages, ethnicities and cultures.

The project aims to highlight the ways in which people in the Barents region lived the wartime 1939–1945, by researching and disseminating knowledge about the impact of war on health and civilian life in all three countries and across the borders.

[1] Oral History Interview made by Heidi Stenvold, October 2013.

[2] Today's Barents Region is a political construct, designed in the early 1990's in the effort to establish new relations of cooperation after the fall of the Soviet union, and has six million inhabitants on 1.75 million km^2, three quarters of both belonging to Russia.

[3] Sweden was neutral during the 2nd World War, and escaped any direct ravages of War.

Septentrio Conference Series 2015 (4). http://dx.doi.org/10.7557/scs.2015.4

How did the communities meet the challenges of War and aftermath? What were the consequences for the people who lived the War in the Barents region?

The project is a cooperation between scholars of academic institutions in Russia, Finland and Norway, and represents the disciplines of history, medicine, nursing, and anthropology.[4] Some of the research has an oral history approach. This is regarded as important, since the generation that experienced the war is fast diminishing.

This volume is the second publication of the project.[5] It contains two studies about Wartime in Russia and one about Wartime in Norway. More publications of Finnish as well as Norwegian studies are planned.

Figure 1: The Barents region

War in the Barents region: A brief outline

The term 'The second World War', is used in Norway but it is not a unified concept in the region. Finland recognizes three different Wars during the years 1939–1945: The Winter War, the Continuation War and the Lapland War. The concept 'Second World War' is rarely used in Finland. In Russia, the term 'The Great Patriotic War' is often used about the Soviet war against Germany from 1941.[6]

[4] The project was established between these partners: Museum of the Post-War Reconstruction for Finnmark and Northern Troms (Hammerfest, Norway), Department of Health and Care Sciences, Faculty for Health Sciences, University of Tromsø (Norway), Department of Russian History, Institute of Social, Humanitarian and Political Sciences, Northern (Arctic) Federal University, Arkhangelsk (Russia), Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences (Finland), University of Oulu (Finland), Northern State Medical University Arkhangelsk (Russia) and University of Manchester (Great Britain).

[5] The first volume is published in Nordlit 37, 2015, http://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit .

[6] The term Patriotic War refers to the Russian resistance against the French invasion under Napoleon I. The term Great Patriotic War re-appeared in the Soviet newspaper Pravda on 23 June 1941, just a day after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The phrase was intended to motivate the population to defend the Soviet fatherland and to expel the invader, and a reference to the Patriotic War of 1812 was seen as a great morale booster.

The Winter War began in November 1939 when the Soviet Union invaded Finland, claiming territory. The war ended in March 1940 with a bitter loss for Finland. After that war, more than 400,000 people (12 per cent of Finland's total population) from former Finnish territories had to be evacuated and resettled in Finland (Junila 2012). Almost 28,000 Finns had died in the War, and the country lost large areas to the Soviet Union (Barysnikov & Manninen 1997; Meinander 2012).

In April 1940, Norway was attacked by Germany. Narvik in Northern Norway, a transit port for iron ore from Swedish mines, was a major battleground. Here Norwegian, English, Polish and French forces fought successfully, until the allied forces were withdrawn, due to the breakdown on the Continent. From June, the whole of Norway was under German occupation. German military forces were built up concentrated in the Northern Norway, particularly in the Eastern part of the county Finnmark, close to the Finnish border. The coast of Northern Norway became an important line of supply. Russian air-raids on Norwegian eastern towns were frequent.

One year later, on 22nd June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union with more than 3 million soldiers. The battles on the Eastern Front constituted the largest military confrontation and industrial superpower in history, and lasted to the 8th of May 1945. It is estimated that 26.6 million Russians were killed, among them 15.2 million civilians.

Simultaneously, Finland went to war against Soviet, in the Finnish Continuation War. German troops attacked Russia from Northern Finnish territory, close to the border of Norway. The German army headed for the strategically important Russian port Murmansk, with the aim to secure nickel mines that were important to the war industry (Jacobsen 2007). The advance was defeated by Soviet forces in a trackless terrain by the river Litza, with high losses on both sides. From 1941 to 1944, the Litza front, also called the Murmansk front, was an epicenter of war in the region (Jacobsen 2014).

From a military point of view, Finland may be considered the most important German ally on the eastern front. The Finnish public opinion welcomed the co-operation with Germans against the pressure from the Soviet Union. The co-operation with Germany was continued after the battle of Stalingrad in autumn and winter 1942–1943. Finland was dependent on import of food supplies from Germany, and could not withdraw without risking a severe shortage of food. In the summer of 1944, the Soviet Union escalated the bombing of Finnish and Norwegian cities. German troops were pushed westwards by the Russian army. Simultaneously, the Allied Powers intensified their diplomatic efforts for a separate Finnish peace with the Soviet Union. Germany was no longer able to force Finland to continue the war. Finland signed an armistice with Soviet in early September 1944, which marked the turning point of the War in the North. On the conditions, Finland lost land to Soviet and the German forces had to be disarmed or expelled from Finland and consequently from the Murmansk front (Meinander 2012). This was the Finnish Lapland War. Allies became enemies in a few days. Germany had to withdraw its forces from Finland and consequently from the Murmansk front.

Although the Lapland War was an important development of the war in the region, it was fought solely in the province of Lapland, and is not regularly included in the discussion on national Finnish experiences of war. The population of Lapland had been evacuated in advance to southern Finland and to Sweden (Vuorenmaa 1989; Hietanen 1989). When they returned almost a year later, they found their home soil laid waste by the retreating German troops.

In October 1944, the Soviet Army launched a counteroffensive westwards along the front, the Petsamo–Kirkenes operation. Despite heavy losses, the Soviet Army entered Norway and liberated the easternmost part of Finnmark (Suprun 1994). The German army retreated hurriedly through the Northern Norway. In the provinces Finnmark and North Troms, the tactics of the scorched earth was employed to cover the retreat. Houses and infrastructure were systematically burnt and destroyed, and about 50,000 of the population deported. About 20,000 managed to hide in caves and turf huts during the winter, under extremely difficult circumstances. The Great Patriotic War, the Lapland War and the occupation of Norway went on until the capitulation of Germany on the 8th of May.

The three neighbouring countries fought different wars, in shifting alliances, as enemies and allies, and over differing spans of time. In Norway, active warfare ended after the two months in 1940. The Norwegians experienced most of the war as civilians. Finns and Russians, on the other hand, were soldiers for several years, fighting some of the most terrible battles of the World War on their own soil. People were absent as soldiers, were wounded, killed, or taken prisoners of war, and families experienced the wars both as soldiers and as civilians. In this project, we are however concentrating on civilian life in the three countries and across the borders.

Consequences for civilians

Historical research has documented the region's military importance during the Second World War. Its impact on living conditions in war-torn communities has not yet received the same attention. Civilian wartime experiences are still not well known, and there is a general lack of reciprocal knowledge about civilian experiences in the neighbour countries.

At the same time, national borders were de-stabilized by invading and liberating troops and by the movements of prisoners of war and refugees. Forces and bombardments were concentrated towards border areas. New borders were drawn between Soviet and Finland. While warfare and political alliances developed quite differently in Norway, Finland and Russia, there are indications that the civilian population shared some similar experiences. For years, the number of German soldiers exceeded that of the local inhabitants, both in the province of Lapland and in the province of Finnmark (Junila 2000). Civilians were transported away and communities destroyed in all three countries.

The project aims to learn more about how people managed extreme challenges and common everyday conditions, and to explore conditions when everyday civilian

life was continued in various ways, or broke down. The long and dangerous supply lines were a common factor in the North. The war which killed and disabled individuals also disrupted supplies. In all countries, war economy and transport problems led to scarcity of food, even to famine. In the northern part of Russia, starvation was the most common cause of death during World War 2. This is one of the themes in the 2nd volume of this publication. Warfare also disrupted medical treatment, the nursing of the sick and the care for the mentally ill. As homes were requisitioned and destroyed, overcrowding and lack of essentials contributed to sharp rises in infant mortality and infectious diseases. A general lack of essentials for health care developed in the whole region, and many hospitals and institutions were destroyed or required for military purposes. Populations were evacuated and deported, refugees were hosted, and the policy of the scorched earth was implemented in parts of the region.

The relationships between war, health and living conditions are complex. People have different possibilities and strategies for surviving, allocating resources and managing their health. Individuals, families, nurses and medical practitioners worked together and separately in communities to maintain living conditions and prevent adverse effects on life and health. With the destruction of homes and communities, communal and sometimes family systems of care were jeopardized. In this region, the warfare of the scorched earth uprooted and scattered civilian populations over vast areas. By focusing on living conditions, childhood and sickness, the project may highlight the impact of healthcare and nursing and the security of civil society in time of destruction.

The Finnish Winter War may illustrate this. People along the border between Finland and Soviet Union had been evacuated to the west. From some villages, evacuation took place totally unorganized and by the civilians themselves, without any help from authorities. The harsh circumstances and frosty weather were fatal especially for small children in northern parts, and many of them fell ill or even died during the evacuation. A number of Finns, particularly families with children, fled across the border to North Norway. The cause of the Finns met with great sympathy and popular support in Norway and Sweden. When the war ended in March 1940, it had cost the lives of almost 28,000 Finns (Barysnikov & Manninen 1997; Meinander 2012). After the Winter War, more than 400,000 people (12 per cent of Finland's total population) from former Finnish territories had to be evacuated and resettled in Finland (Junila 2012).

References

Barysnikov, N. I. & Manninen, O. 1997: Sodan aattona. In Vehviläinen, O. & Rzesevski, O.A. (eds.) *Yksin suurvaltaa vastassa. Talvisodan poliittinen historia,* Suomen Historiallinen Seura.

Hietanen, S. 1989: Jälleenrakennushallitus ja keskittyvä maa. In: Hietanen, S. (ed.) *Kansakunta sodassa 1. Sodasta sotaan*, Helsinki.

Jacobsen, A. R. 2007: *Nikkel, jern og blod. Krigen i nord 1939–1945*. Oslo: Aschehoug.

Jacobsen, A.R. 2014: *Miraklet ved Litza: Hitlers første nederlag på Østfronten.* Oslo: Vega forlag.

Junila, M. 2000: *Kotirintaman aseveljeyttä. Suomalaisen siviiliväestön ja saksalaisen sotaväen rinnakkainelo Pohjois-Suomessa 1941–1944*, Helsinki: SKS.

Junila, M. 2012: Wars on the home front. Mobilization, economy and everyday experiences. In: Kinnunen, T. & Kivimäki, V. (eds): *Finland in World War II. History, Memory and Interpretations*, Leiden, Boston: Brill Academic Publishers.

Meinander, H. 2012: Finland and the Great Powers in World War II : Ideologies, Geopolitics, Diplomacy. In: Kinnunen, T. & Kivimäki, V. (eds) *Finland in World War II. History, Memory and Interpretations*, Leiden, Boston: Brill Academic Publishers.

Suprun, M.N. 1994: Litsa-frontens fall. Frigjøringa av Finnmark 1944 sett med russiske øyne. *Nordnorsk magasin* nr. 4/5 1994, p. 51-62.

Vuorenmaa, A. 1989: Aseistautuva kansakunta. In: Hietanen, S. (ed.) *Kansakunta sodassa 1. Sodasta sotaan*, Helsinki.