

INTRODUCING SVALBARD STUDIES

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Svalbard, or “cool edge” in Old Norse, is an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. It has no indigenous population and some 60% of its landmass is covered by ice. Yet its rich wildlife and mineral resources, as well as spectacular sights, have been attracting a great deal of commercial interest ever since Willem Barentsz discovered the archipelago in 1596 and named it Spitsbergen (“peaked mountains”). Initially a whale hunting base and subsequently a mining ground, a tourist destination and an Arctic research centre, Svalbard could have belonged, among others, to the Dutch, the British and the Russians (who claim to have visited it before Barentsz¹) – but ended up under Norwegian jurisdiction, upon an international approval of the so-called Svalbard Treaty.

The Treaty, signed in Paris in February 1920 by fourteen parties (such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK and the US, among others) and having been in force since August 1925, invited its signatories to develop the archipelago jointly and equally – economically and scientifically, but not militarily. Currently, there are 46 countries on the signatories’ list. Of these, only Norway and Russia (which officially acceded to the Treaty in May 1935) maintain a constant and sizeable presence on Svalbard. Since the Cold War, Russia has been testing Norway’s sovereignty over the archipelago (for details, see Closson 2018). Svalbard is also a location that confers military advantage in time of conflict, thus enhancing the archipelago’s substantial geopolitical significance. Even though polar bears on Svalbard reportedly still outnumber humans, for much of its modern history the archipelago has been a hotly contested geographical area.

The archipelago’s name can serve as an example. Barents’s companions believed that the new Arctic land was part of Greenland. The same geographical idea survived in the Russian name for the archipelago *Grumant*, attested in North Russian sources in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and probably derived from *Groenland*, the Dutch variant of Greenland’s name (Sverdrup Lunden 1980, 144–145). Today, Russians prefer using the term Spitsbergen, whereas Norwegians apply it only to the largest island on the archipelago. Strong among Russians is the conviction that Norwegian decision in the 1920s to rename Spitsbergen as Svalbard – actively promulgated, among others, by the international celebrity Fridtjof Nansen – “has been politically motivated. Its goal was to secure Norway’s ‘historical rights’ to the archipelago” (Derzhavin 2016, 151). Indeed, the term comes from the Icelandic annals of 1194, which mention “Svalbarðs fundr” – “the discovery of Svalbard” (presumably by Norwegians). It is, however, by no means certain that these words apply to Svalbard as we know it today.

In such a contentious context, it seems fairly obvious that Svalbard deserves an Area Studies field of its own. Generally speaking, Area Studies tend to focus on geographical locations where many forceful geopolitical interests intersect over a significant period of time. Suffice it to mention Middle Eastern and Central and East European Studies – but there are smaller geographical areas that have been identified as worthy of a separate Area Studies field. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Svalbard Treaty, it is time to establish Svalbard Studies (as a subset of Arctic and Northern European Studies), in addition to e.g. Cuban Studies (as a subset of Caribbean and Latin American Studies) and

North Korean Studies (as a subset of Korean and East Asian Studies). In Russia, however, the new branch of knowledge would likely be called *shpitsbergenovedenie*.

Svalbard Studies would assist scholars in bringing together Svalbard-related research that has already been carried out for decades in the spheres of (in no particular order of priority) international law, political studies, conflictology, archaeology, history, geography, sociology, heritage studies, literary and visual studies (including film), public health, urban studies, gender studies, tourism studies and climate studies (warming in the Arctic is believed to have significant impact over the climate throughout the world). This will ensure that relevant research will be truly interdisciplinary and that contrasting narratives would cross-pollinate each other instead of cancelling each other out. Geology, glaciology and Arctic biology, for example, have been playing a significant role in scientific research on and about Svalbard already, especially since the establishment of a university centre, or UNIS, in Longyearbyen in 1993. The humanities have been somewhat lagging behind, quantitatively if not qualitatively. Once instituted, Svalbard Studies should make complete the range of approaches – and stimulate their application – to learning everything there is to be learnt about Svalbardians and their very special environment.

This collection of articles is intended to give the reader a taste of things to come, without any ambition of offering a comprehensive coverage of all the main topics to do with Svalbard Studies. Based on the proceedings of the SSG/NFR-funded international interdisciplinary workshop “Svalbard and the Humanities” which took place at UiT – the Arctic University of Norway in November 2017, this special issue consists of nine articles by scholars working in Norway, Russia, Germany and Great Britain. These articles, taken together, afford a wide range of insights into Svalbard’s past, present and possible future, from medieval cartography and turn-of-the-XX-century tourism to Svalbard-related art installations and the looming conflict over biomarine resources.

Following Roberts, van der Watt and Howkins (2016, 2), who have used an interdisciplinary approach to consider “how the Antarctic has been explored, represented and imagined over time”, we can claim that Svalbard, similarly to Antarctica, emerges as “a series of representations that are always selected, distilled and packaged by humans. The process of representing [Svalbard] is inseparable from the process of imagining it” (ibid., 14), whether the representations are made by a map designer, a landscape photographer, a newspaper reporter or a risk assessor.

The articles in our special issue fall into two sections, “Mapping Attraction and Attrition” and “Projecting the Real and the Imaginary”. In the first section, Svalbard is represented in a larger context of Arctic history, politics, geography and toponymics. In area studies, these disciplines are closely related, which the opening article, by Thor Bjørn Arlov, amply demonstrates by describing the ideological context of the adoption of “Svalbard” as the official name of the Arctic territory. In the next article, Leonid S. Chekin discusses the etymology of the word “Svalbard” and its evolving forms and connotations. Chekin’s article is followed by Ulrike Spring’s examination of the emerging cruise tourism of the turn of the XX century which commodified Svalbard’s spectacular coastline. Concluding the first section, John Ash looks into the environmental, economic and political future of the Arctic, examines scenarios in which climate change may contribute to a military conflict in Svalbard, and suggests methods to manage the risks.

The second section presents more detailed studies of various media genres which focus on particular landscapes and communities, mostly within and around Soviet settlements on Svalbard. In the opening article, using the concepts of “haunting” and “ghosts”, Nadir Kinossian reveals layers of meaning in Svalbard’s abandoned cultural landscapes. Elin Haugdal continues with an analysis of post-WWII photographic images of Svalbard’s Soviet settlements (Barentsburg, Pyramiden, Grumant and Coles Bay), taken by non-Soviet visitors. Aleksandr Portsel charts the Soviet Svalbardians’ self-representation while leafing through their in-house newspaper *Poliarnaia kochegarka* (Polar Furnace). Andrei Rogatchevski examines cinematic representations of Svalbard in Soviet and post-Soviet documentary and feature films. Finally, Jan Martin Berg shares his considerable experience as a Svalbard-based art historian and curator in his “Svalbard as a Motif and a Place of Artistic Exploration: Insights from an Art Gallery Director”.

This collection of articles does not claim to take stock of the current state of Svalbard-related humanistic knowledge in its entirety. Neither does it aspire to define all the possible methods, lines and forms of future collective humanistic enquiry on and about Svalbard. Yet it does provide, probably for the first time ever, a substantial, broad, international and interdisciplinary forum for humanists with a Svalbard expertise. Let us hope that this forum will only grow over time, in terms of numbers, scope and quality.

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¹ See Starkov 1998; for a counterclaim, see Hultgreen 2002.