

MAPS AND GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES AS TOKENS OF NATIONAL INTERESTS – THE SPITSBERGEN VS. SVALBARD CASE

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Abstract

The treaty of 9 February 1920 granted Norway full sovereignty over the ‘Archipelago of Spitsbergen’, by which name this Arctic territory was known at the time. Assuming sovereignty five years later, Norway altered the official name to ‘Svalbard’. To what extent was the name-change a token of national interests or even blatant nationalism? This paper outlines the origin and usage of the place-names Spitsbergen and Svalbard in light of the area’s mapping and nomenclature and with an emphasis on national bias. It briefly discusses the different practices and principles of geographical naming. This paper proposes that the change in official nomenclature from Spitsbergen to Svalbard in 1924–1925, though partly due to justifiable practical considerations, was primarily a political act to construct national bonds with the newly won territory. Although perceived as part of a ‘Norwegianization’ process in the northern regions, the name-change itself was not intended to provoke foreign reactions, but rather to satisfy a domestic audience.

Keywords

Svalbard; Spitsbergen; history; geography; mapping; place-names

What’s in a name?

There are people who believe that features of nature possess spirit, deity or even personality. Therefore, naming places is not a trivial matter, but a profound and symbolic act in many respects. However, if we think of rivers, mountains and coast as objects and not beings, then the names we bestow upon these objects are basically labels that distinguish them from one another, that introduce a kind of order to aid recognition and remembrance. In either case, place-names have meaning and purpose.

Place-names have been the subject of extensive linguistic study and have been exploited as sources to explain origin, provenance, settlement, and economic and cultural development. According to Lawrence D. Berg and Jani Vuolteenaho, a purely linguistic approach is inadequate when it comes to naming practices. As they observe, “[...] naming a place is always a socially embedded act, one that involves power relations [...]” (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009, 9). In other words, place-names can be – and often are – politically charged.

In 1925 the Norwegian government officially gave the name ‘Svalbard’ to the Arctic archipelago that had been known as ‘Spitsbergen’ for more than three centuries. This was not well received everywhere, as might be expected. Many nations had rich traditions associated with the islands, so why did Norway risk challenge them with this renaming? Was it an assertion of national interests, or might there have been other, more practical motives? This paper discusses these questions within a historical context of geographical mapping and naming practices in general and on Svalbard in particular.

Priority, pride and prejudice

In the history of geographical discovery, the concept of priority is important (Lowenthal 1998, 173 f.; Wråkberg 1999, 114 f.). Being first somewhere also presents the opportunity to determine place-names, which is in essence and quite literally equivalent to marking territory. As map-making developed as a skill and profession in the 16th century, nomenclature became an integral part of documenting priority. Even a crude coastline sketch with a few names on it was a way of proving presence and possibly a *prima vista* – a first sighting, which in some cases could underpin a claim of priority. Of course, a fake map with invented names might also serve such a purpose; there are numerous examples of this, some of which can be found in the history of Svalbard. Detailed charting and topographical mapping of an area, supplemented by scientific exploration, would usually strengthen the sense of priority and also command acceptance by others.

Being first is – in many strands of human life – coupled with pride, be it for individuals, groups of people or whole nations. It is fair to say that pride is a potent driving force for geographical exploration. The Arctic explorer Robert E. Peary, who was possibly the first man on the North Pole, (famously) wrote to his mother in 1887: “Remember, mother, I *must* have fame” (Fleming 2001, 286). Giving names to geographical features, in particular personal names, was a way of evoking pride and constructing fame, either for one’s own sake or for the benefit of sponsors and patrons, friends and family. While such naming practices are less prevalent now than, say, during the heyday of colonialism, pride and honour in some form or other is still a factor when place-names are chosen.

Historically, priority with regard to geographical exploration and naming practices is highly relative. During the Age of Discovery, prior settlement was largely disregarded and existing local place-names either ignored or corrupted to comply with the explorers’ and occupants’ language. The concept of priority, and hence the right to give names to geographical features, was based on being the first *civilized*, as it were, persons to visit an area, or eventually to establish effective occupancy there. Naming and re-naming conflicts might arise between different Western actors, not between settlers and natives. The asymmetry of power, boosted by literacy and map production, often resulted in a prejudice against using existing place-names. These were either replaced or transcribed, sometimes into unrecognizable forms. In the post-colonial era, the restoration of original place-names has been an important element in the nation-building process in many – but not all – parts of the world. Even today, controversy exists over priority to geographical names, as between the Republic of (North) Macedonia and the Greek province of Macedonia, to mention one recent example.

Apart from the pride and honour involved, how can geographical names be tokens of national interests? Fixing names literally equals marking territory, confirming or constructing a priority, which may or may not have legal implications. To gain international acceptance of supremacy over an area, brute force is rarely enough. First discovery is one element that might be considered in favour of priority. Presence in and usage of the area over time are more important, not least in the form of exploration, scientific research and economic activity. In order to build a case for sovereignty, geographical names serve as indices of discovery, presence and usage. In the absence of permanent occupancy, populating an area with place-names can be a way of vesting interests. Svalbard – or Spitsbergen – is a case in point.

The origin of a place-name: Spitsbergen

While searching for a navigable sea route to the Far East, a Dutch expedition headed by the chief navigator Willem Barentsz discovered – and named – Bjørnøya (Beyren Eylandt) on the 9th or 10th of June 1596. A week later, coming out of the ice at 80° North, they came upon land again. Sailing southwards along the western coast, they observed a mountainous terrain with alpine peaks, which they apparently called ‘Spitsbergen’ (Arlov 2003, 42 f.).

Although Barentsz himself and four of his crew perished during a forced wintering on Novaya Zemlya, the survivors of the expedition returned safely to Holland. Their discoveries caused a sensation that spread across Europe. In 1598 both Gerrit de Veer’s account of the expedition and Cornelis Claesz’ map were published documenting the discoveries. The name Spitsbergen does not appear in either of them. De Veer does mention the naming of Bjørnøya in an illustration legend, but not Spitsbergen. On Claesz’s map, the area is labelled ‘Het Nieuwe Land’ (The New Land), while Bjørnøya is rendered as ‘t’Veere Eylandt’ (The Green Island) (De Veer 1598). The first time Spitsbergen, in the form ‘Spitsbergen’, appears in print is probably in 1612 on a map published by Hessel Gerritsz. Jan Cornelisz Rijp, captain of one of the expedition ships, stated before the magistrates of Delft in 1613 that they had indeed given the land the name ‘Spitsberguen’ (Conway 1906, 11 f.; Place-names, 401). The most important source we have, however, is the pamphlet published by Gerritsz in 1613, “Histoire de Pays nommé Spitsberghe”. It is generally believed that he had access to Barentsz’ original logbook, which was brought back to Holland after the latter’s death at Novaya Zemlya. In any event, he quotes extensively from this logbook, and the entry under June 24th reads:

[...] the land (along which we made our route) is for the most part broken, very high, and nothing else but mountains and mountain peaks, wherefore we called it Spitsbergen. (Gerritsz 1613, 8)¹

Thus, we can safely assume that Spitsbergen was in use by the Dutch from the very year of its discovery, but the place-name did not gain more or less official status until some years later. The years around 1613 seem to be a turning point, and the reason could well be national interests.

Challenges to the title

The Barentsz expedition of 1596 did not lay down a claim of sovereignty on behalf of Holland or the Dutch states based on first discovery. When bowhead whaling commenced in these waters in 1611, there was a potential for conflict. In an attempt to secure whaling for itself, the English Muscovy Company obtained royal privileges and demanded exclusivity in 1613, calling Spitsbergen ‘King James His new Land’. Rivalries between Dutch and British whalers that season escalated into a diplomatic conflict (Conway 1906). Gerritsz’ pamphlet, published in French, was a contribution to the debate. Its main purpose was to prove that the Dutch Barentsz expedition had indeed discovered the archipelago and that it had already been given a name – Spitsbergen (Arlov 1988, 23 f.).

The British made the rather preposterous claim that Hugh Willoughby had discovered the islands during his 1553 expedition. Although no evidence of discovery could be

¹ My translation.

produced, it still provoked a response from the Dutch, for which Gerritsz' little book with excerpts from Barentsz' logbook provides documentation. We see how priority – being first – had some political significance.

It is also interesting to note the British nomenclature: 'His new Land' was obviously inspired by 'Het Nieuwe Land' from the 1598 Dutch map. Adding 'King James' was of course an expression of territorial ambition. Probably from around 1610, the preferred British name for the islands was in fact 'Greenland' (Conway 1906, 347). This ambiguity can be explained in various ways. First, the British had an obvious interest in using a different nomenclature than the Dutch. By not accepting the name Spitsbergen, the British also signalled their rejection of Dutch priority. Second, there was a geographical argument. Barentsz himself probably believed that Spitsbergen was connected to Greenland in some ways. This is obvious from De Veer's account, which, on its original title page, states that "[...] this land, which we believed was Greenland, lies on 80 degrees and more [...]". (De Veer 1598)²

Until the Northern Atlantic was fully explored and charted, the concept of a connection between Greenland and Spitsbergen in the north was as good as any wishful idea of an open passage across the North Pole, or even more plausible. That this was a widespread belief in contemporary Europe is shown by the fact that King Christian IV of Denmark-Norway interfered in the diplomatic battle, arguing that Spitsbergen was part of Greenland and hence under 'undisputed' Norwegian sovereignty. At one point, England seems to have tried to buy King Christian's alleged title to Greenland, but no such deal was ever concluded. Instead, Christian tried to assert his own rights. In 1615 he even sent naval ships to Spitsbergen to enforce his authority, to little avail. The Danish-Norwegian claim of sovereignty was sporadically repeated during the following decades, but in practice Spitsbergen was recognized as a no man's land by 1620 (Ræstad 1911).

The British as well as the Danes and Norwegians continued to use Greenland as a name for Spitsbergen even during the 18th century, long after it became clear that this was an archipelago completely separated from the real Greenland. Whaling was often denoted as 'the Greenland trade' or 'the Greenland fisheries', and the ships were called 'Greenlandmen' (Jackson 1978). In some British maps and charts we find 'East Greenland' used to denote Spitsbergen, but not consistently (Conway 1906). There is certain logic to the use of Greenland as a collective name: Whaling was the predominating economic activity, and since the last decades of the 17th century, the whalers had exploited the whole area between East-Greenland and Spitsbergen during the season. Even in the Netherlands the usual term for Arctic whaling was *groenlandsche visscherij* (Greenland whale fishery), and in Amsterdam there were – and still are – *Groenlandse pakhuizen* (Greenland warehouses). (Zorgdrager 1720)³ On Dutch charts and maps, however, Spitsbergen is invariably denoted by just that name, though clearly separate from Bjørnøya (Wieder 1919).

In French and German usage, varieties of Spitsbergen seem to have been the preferred name for maps and prose, although sometimes in combination with Greenland. Friederich Martens' famous account of Spitsbergen published in 1675 is titled *Spitzbergische oder Groenlandische Reise Beschreibung*, for example. The most common Russian name for Spitsbergen, known since the 18th century at least, is 'Grumant'. From a linguistic point

² My translation.

³ The impressive Greenland warehouses are located at Keizersgracht 44 in Amsterdam.

of view the interpretation seems to be that this is a corruption of Greenland, analogous to the derivation of 'Murman' from 'Nordmann' (Norwegian) (Sverdrup Lunden 1980).

What about the name 'Svalbard'? There are no signs of it being used or even known in this period. In Scandinavia, Spitsbergen was the preferred term when referring to the archipelago proper (except Bjørnøya), whereas Greenland was used as a collective term in conjunction with the economic activity of whaling and sealing.

So far, a preliminary conclusion would be that Spitsbergen was not the only name in use in the 17th and 18th centuries. The term Greenland was indeed a competitor. However, use of either name seems largely dependent on national tradition and language. Save for the at times heated debate over priority and sovereignty ca. 1612–1620, there are few signs of vested political interests in nomenclature during this period. That changed in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Old and new place-names – practices and principles

In the 19th century Svalbard became the object of increasing interest on the part of explorers and scientists. The British Royal Navy alone organized a handful of big expeditions to the area, following the one headed by John Phipps in 1773. Explorers like Parry, Franklin and Ross, who had already made their fame in the Northwest Passage, were active on Svalbard too. Although a main motive was to reach the highest possible latitude, and preferably the North Pole itself, these expeditions also had scientific objectives including charting and mapping (Fleming 1998, 2001). The French-led and internationally composed *Recherche* expedition 1838–1839 is another example of detailed exploration and documentation (Knutsen and Posti 2002).

The result was a gradual improvement of the maps of the area and also a lot of new place-names, particularly along the western and northern coasts of Spitsbergen. While there was no systematic international cooperation on mapping and nomenclature, geographical information was indeed exchanged and shared, both through publications and personal contacts. The collective knowledge of Svalbard's geography increased vastly during the first half of the 19th century, but a lot of confusion and uncertainty remained due to lack of standardized measures, inadequate instruments and methods for mapping and navigation, and individual naming practices. Characteristic place-names from this period are those that honour the names of expedition ships and their officers, patrons and sponsors (Ulvang 2012).

The second half of the 19th century witnessed a growing number of smaller expeditions dedicated to scientific research of Svalbard itself. These kinds of studies, not least those in structural geology, required more accurate maps. Therefore, topography and geodesy held a prominent position in the expedition programs. Swedish scientists were particularly active and played a leading role (Wråkberg 1999, Liljequist 1993). The map published in 1874 by A.E. Nordenskiöld was state-of-the-art: a result of two decades of intensive Swedish research, but also incorporating prior knowledge subject to quality control. The massive Swedish-Russian Arc-of-Meridian expedition 1898–1902 produced a number of high-accuracy maps based on modern geodetic and topographical methods. The measurements covered more than 4 degrees of latitude, from the south of Spitsbergen to northernmost Rossøya (Ross Island), and a lot of pristine inland area was mapped as well (Liljequist 1993, 328 f.). Needless to say, this effort on the part of Swedish and Russian scientists resulted in a plethora of new place-names. What their superior maps probably

also did was to firmly establish Spitsbergen as the internationally accepted name of the archipelago.

The expansive mapping activities on Svalbard during the 19th century gave an impetus to discussions on naming practices and principles. As long as an explorer or expedition operated in pristine areas, the basic principle was first come, first served. The first place-name given to a geographical feature and adequately documented by a description or a map had priority. Subsequent cartographers normally respected existing names – provided, of course, that they were known. Often, the original name would be transcribed or translated to comply with language conventions; even personal names might get corrupted in this process, as there were no absolute rules of spelling. As the number of published maps and descriptions of Svalbard grew, there were increasing instances of overlapping place-names, renaming, uncertainties about exact location and so on (Wråkberg 1999, 114 f.; Place-names, 13 f.). The lack of standardization and coordination certainly represented both a nuisance and a practical obstacle with regard to map production, but was it also a sign of conflicting national interests?

A majority of the expeditions going to Svalbard in this period were either initiated by national authorities or substantially backed by public (and often private) funds. While none of them were required or instructed to claim physical territory in a legal sense, there was at least a tacit expectation that the expeditions leave behind marks of national presence. Such territorial marks might be, for example, maps and place-names, and the more, the better. Should a future situation arise where the question of priority at Svalbard was raised, then evidence of presence and exploration activity might be a political asset (Drivenes 2012, 55). Whether states or official actors actually reckoned along such instrumental lines is perhaps doubtful. However, there is no doubt that national pride and prestige is a forceful motivation, which also presupposes competition between nations. It is not unreasonable to think that this element of competition also influenced cartography and nomenclature.

Settling sovereignty: The Svalbard Treaty

As a matter of fact, the question of sovereignty *did* arise in the late 19th century and again at the beginning of the 20th century. Since the 1620s, Spitsbergen and Bjørnøya had generally been considered a no man's land, *terra nullius*.⁴ This view was challenged when Swedish scientist Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld sought royal protection for a planned mining camp on Spitsbergen. In 1871 the Swedish government dispatched an official note to potentially interested European states inquiring whether there would be objections to Sweden-Norway annexing Spitsbergen under the Norwegian flag – the two nations were united at the time. The only substantial opposition came from Russia. The Russians would rather that the area remain by tacit agreement “[...] *un domaine indécis accessible à tous les Etats*” – an undecided area accessible to all states. The Swedes subsequently put the case to rest (Wråkberg 1999, 149 f.; Ulfstein 1995, 36 f.).

Around the turn of the century, Spitsbergen became a political issue again, driven by the growing interest in exploiting industrial minerals. Private actors and companies from

⁴ Some prefer the term *res communis*, a common land, underlining the fact that it was used and exploited by multiple parties on an equal basis and not open to occupation. While *res communis* cannot be claimed by a single state, a *terra nullius* may in principle be occupied and put under national sovereignty. With regard to Svalbard's legal status prior to the 20th century, the difference of regimes has no practical implications (Ulfstein 1995, 37).

various countries engaged in mineral exploration on Bjørnøya and Spitsbergen – these were German, British, Swedish, Norwegian and even Russian and American. Their respective governments followed this activity with varying degrees of interest, but obviously with an eye to future political challenges and opportunities. The first coalmines in year-round operation were established in 1905–1906. There were recurrent labour conflicts and differences about property rights in connection with mining and exploration (Arlov 2003, Berg 1995).

In 1905 the union of Sweden and Norway broke down. One of the top priorities of the independent Norwegian government was to resolve the ‘Spitsbergen issue’. National sentiments had been blooming prior to the break-up and peaked around 1905. Annexing Spitsbergen became a national ambition, at least among activist groups. In 1908 Norway tried calling an international conference to discuss Spitsbergen. The pretext was the absence of administration and jurisdiction, which created problems for the economic activity on Svalbard, particularly coal mining. Sweden objected to this unilateral behaviour on Norway’s part, and instead three-party conferences between Norway, Sweden and Russia were held in Kristiania (Oslo) in 1910 and 1912 to prepare a draft treaty. The international conference was finally convened in the summer of 1914, without positive results. The other parties rejected the proposed joint administration of Spitsbergen by the three so-called Northern States (Berg 1995). The Great War broke out in the fall.

As the war was drawing to a close, the parties prepared for the peace conference that eventually opened in Paris in 1919. Norway prepared her demand for Spitsbergen. The pre-war diplomatic process had frustrated the ambition of full sovereignty, but now the time was ripe. The High Council of the peace conference agreed to take up the Spitsbergen issue in a separate commission and asked Norway to present a draft treaty, which was quickly prepared. Based on this draft, the Spitsbergen Commission carried out a series of meetings and consultations in the fall of 1919, and by the end of the year the treaty had been accepted by the parties present, the High Council and the Norwegian government. On the 9th of February, representatives of nine states signed the “Treaty [...] concerning Spitsbergen” in Paris (Berg 1995, Ulfstein 1995).

For the following discussion it is worth rendering *in extenso* Article 1 of the treaty:⁵

The High Contracting Parties undertake to recognise, subject to the stipulations of the present Treaty, the full and absolute sovereignty of Norway over the Archipelago of Spitsbergen, comprising, with Bear Island or Beeren-Eiland, all the islands situated between 10° and 35° longitude East of Greenwich and between 74° and 81° latitude North, especially West Spitsbergen, North-East Land, Barents Island, Edge Island, Wiche Islands, Hope Island or Hopen-Eiland, and Prince Charles Foreland, together with all islands great or small and rocks appertaining thereto (see annexed map).

We notice right away that ‘the Archipelago of Spitsbergen’ is the formal collective name of the islands and rocks within the given geographical coordinates. West Spitsbergen obviously signifies the largest island. We also note the alternative English and Dutch names of some of the islands: Bear Island/Beeren-Eiland (Bjørnøya) and Hope

⁵ Here quoted from Ulfstein 1995, appendix E. Note that the authentic text of the treaty is in English and French, according to Article 10.

Island/Hopen-Eiland (Hopen). The point is that the nomenclature was somewhat unstable in 1919–1920.

The politics of a place-name: Spitsbergen or Svalbard?

By international treaty, Norway gained sovereignty over Spitsbergen. Priority in the form of first discovery seems to have played no role in the outcome, although it is hardly coincidental that F.C. Wieder's monumental work – sponsored by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs – on the Dutch discovery and mapping of Spitsbergen appeared in 1919 while the negotiations were under way in Paris (Arlov 1988, 71–72). The Spitsbergen Commission at the Peace Conference ignored Norwegian arguments of a possible pre-Barentsz discovery and considered only legal, political, and practical implications (Ulfstein 1995, 44 f.). Giving Norway sovereignty was an act of Realpolitik.

Consequently, it was up to Norway to accept the stipulations and conditions of the treaty and eventually to assume sovereignty. Apart from ratification, there were a number of issues that had to be resolved before the treaty could be put into force. The most pressing of these were the drafting of mining regulations in accordance with Article 8 of the treaty, resolving property issues and making a law to regulate the future Norwegian administration of Spitsbergen, including jurisprudence (Johannesen 1996). It is the latter of these processes we shall be concerned with here.

It is absolutely clear that the Norwegian government had requested and received sovereignty over 'Spitsbergen', including Bjørnøya. No alternative term was proposed from Norway's side before, during or after the Paris conference. Spitsbergen was the name used in all official communication from the government as well as in Parliament (*Stortinget*) documents. The main newspapers in Norway also referred to the area as Spitsbergen on editorial level. However, the term 'Svalbard' had been circulating for quite a few years in the academic community and its popularity was picking up towards 1920 (Berg 1995, Johannesen 1996). How and when did it end up becoming the official Norwegian name of the archipelago?

Svalbard is an Old Norse term and is usually interpreted as meaning 'cold coast' or 'cold edge'. The provenance of the name, or rather what it refers to, is clouded in mystery. The term appears in a number of 13th century transcriptions of Icelandic annals under the year 1194, which simply state: "Svalbard found". There is nothing more; what or where this Svalbard is, we are not informed by this source. However, there are a few other written sources where Svalbard is mentioned, the most interesting being a set of sailing directions in the 13th century Icelandic *Landnámabók*. One of these, translated into modern English, reads: "From Langanes on the northern side of Iceland there are four days of sailing to Svalbard north in the sea". At the very least, this piece of information indicates that Svalbard was a distinct geographical feature of some kind situated at certain distance north of Iceland (Nansen 1911, 410 f.). It might have been North-East Greenland, Jan Mayen, an ice-pack – or, indeed, Spitsbergen.

These Old Icelandic manuscripts were researched, translated and published in Norway in the 1890s, when national sentiments were running high in connection with the question of the union with Sweden.⁶ As is typical of such nation-building processes, there was a tendency to look back in history for evidence of former independence and greatness, an

⁶ See Storm 1888 and 1890. The idea that Spitsbergen might be identical to the mythical Svalbard was introduced in Norway by Keilhau 1831.

example of what sociologist John Hutchinson terms “cultural nationalism” (Johannesen 1996, 22–23). In Norway, the medieval period was in vogue, and in particular the so-called Viking Age and its ‘Norwegian Domination’ (Noregsveldet). Academics picked up the references to Svalbard and identified it as Spitsbergen, while at the same time making a case for an early Norse discovery of the archipelago. The topographer Gunnar Isachsen, for instance, published an article with the telling title “On the discovery of Svalbard” (Isachsen 1912).⁷ The hypothesis gained popularity when experts like Arnold Ræstad and Fridtjof Nansen lent their authority in support of it (Ræstad 1912; Nansen 1911; Drivenes 2004 and 2012). The notion that Spitsbergen/Svalbard was an ancient Norwegian discovery – or even possession – undoubtedly boosted public morale during the negotiations about Spitsbergen’s future 1910–1914. Whether it made an impression on central government, too, is hard to know. They were in any case committed to the diplomatic and political processes.

A committee to work out laws for Spitsbergen was established in the spring of 1920 and a first draft presented by the end of the year. Interestingly, in its comments to the draft the Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed the name ‘Spitsbergen (Svalbard)’ instead of ‘Spitsbergen-øygruppen’ (Johannesen 1996, 118). After internal consultations within the ministries, a final draft was ready in November 1922 – using the collective name ‘Spitsbergen’ but omitting ‘Svalbard’ in brackets. After some hesitation, the government presented a proposition to Stortinget entitled “On laws for Spitsbergen” in February 1924.⁸ Simultaneously, however, a proposition on ratifying the treaty was put before the national assembly.⁹ Here for the first time, the Norwegian government officially introduced the term Svalbard as an alternative name for Spitsbergen, although in brackets. This was obviously inspired, if not outright formulated by the aforementioned Arnold Ræstad, an influential expert on international law with a prior career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁰ By adopting the name, whether in brackets or not, the government went a long way toward accepting and endorsing the nationalist Svalbard myth (Arlov 2011).

For various reasons the proposition on laws for Spitsbergen was withdrawn (Arlov 2011, 45 f.). When it came back to Stortinget in a revised version in the spring of 1925, the title was “On law on Svalbard”.¹¹ Stortinget passed the law in July, and though there were tough discussions and close votes on several issues, the choice of Svalbard as an official name was not controversial at all. The King in Council sanctioned the law on July 17th, and on the 14th of August 1925 the law and what was now called the Svalbard Treaty were put into force. Norway formally took over Svalbard.

Discussion

The toponymical transition from Spitsbergen to Svalbard was an internal Norwegian process. Abroad, hardly anyone had heard about Svalbard. The change of official nomenclature raised a few eyebrows and provoked some people but seems by and large to have been ignored outside Norway. Most other states and the international public continued to use Spitsbergen (or the German form ‘Spitzbergen’) as a collective name for the archipelago. So, what was there to gain or lose?

⁷ The article was originally written in 1906–1907.

⁸ Ot.prp. nr 12 (1924). Om lover for Spitsbergen, 22.2.1924.

⁹ St.prp. nr. 36 (1924). Om godkjennelse av traktaten om Spitsbergen (Svalbard).

¹⁰ On Ræstad’s active role in the Svalbard issue, see Berg 1995, Johannesen 1996, and Drivenes 2004.

¹¹ Ot.prp. nr. 48 (1925). Um lov um Svalbard.

There is no evidence that the Norwegian government consciously wanted to challenge the other treaty parties or the international community in general by the name change, which did not happen until the treaty was about to be put into force. On the contrary, the unwillingness to use Svalbard as a term in official documents until 1924 can be interpreted as an act of restraint. When the authorities eventually gave in to a popular demand, the explanation is to be sought on home ground.

First, there is a long historical line of ‘Norwegianization’ running back to 1814 and Norway’s split with Denmark. This process, which experienced a boost in the late 19th century, had both cultural and political implications (Berg 2013, Drivenes 2012). The linguistic ‘discovery’ of Svalbard in the 19th century was the result of a meticulous search for Norse, pre-Danish heritage with the intention of enhancing national self-esteem. In 1902 academic work was initiated to replace Danish administrative terminology with Norwegian words inspired by medieval terms; incidentally, this led to the choice in 1925 of the title *Sysselmann* for the highest governmental representative on Svalbard (Arlov 2011, 52–53). Politically, Norwegianization manifested itself for instance in the rather heavy-handed consolidation of national territory, not least in Saami areas bordering to Russia, Finland and Sweden. It also spilled over into an expansionist policy in the Arctic, where Spitsbergen became the first target. Historian Roald Berg, who has analysed this process in great detail, argues that the *linguistic* Norwegianization of Spitsbergen was intended to serve *political* ends, namely full Norwegian sovereignty: “[...] to make the Spitsbergen islands as Norwegian as the rest of the realm by naming it Svalbard and thus to establish the legitimacy of Norway’s sovereignty over the islands by Norwegianizing their *history*” (Berg 2013, 169).

Second, in 1920 the Spitsbergen Treaty was received with mixed feelings in Norway – partly disappointment, partly resignation. Both the public and the press were disappointed about the stipulations of the treaty that seemed to limit Norwegian sovereignty in several ways. Therefore, it was important for the government to make the treaty more palatable to the public. Endorsing the popular ‘Svalbard myth’ by taking back the old Norse name could be a way of rousing national pride and creating enthusiasm over the fact that the islands had been reunited, as it were, with the motherland after 800 years of separation (Arlov 2003, 54).¹² This is highly compatible with the notion of ‘cultural nationalism’. Although first discovery played no role in the deliberations of the Spitsbergen Commission in Paris, the notion of priority based on discovery was important in constructing the national myth.

Third, disappointment over the treaty was widespread in Stortinget as well, to the extent that the government feared a majority of parliamentarians might reject ratification. This was one of the reasons why the government delayed putting the issue before Stortinget. In the meantime, much effort was put into improving Norway’s position on Spitsbergen, particularly with regard to securing property rights for Norwegian coal companies and the State. ‘Norwegianization’ of Spitsbergen became a priority, openly stated by leading politicians. Toponymy was a part of this. While the Norwegian Mapping Authority prepared maps for the arrangement of properties by the Spitsbergen Commissioner, a special name committee was set up in 1922 to promote place-names that sustained

¹² The present author introduced the term ‘Svalbard myth’ in a radio lecture in 1994, printed as Arlov 1995.

Norwegian claims (Johannesen 1996, 100–101).¹³ We cannot exclude that the government itself willingly embraced the Svalbard myth, but neither that the name-change was intended to sugar a political pill by appealing to national feelings.

Fourth, there was a practical and pragmatic argument for a change of names from Spitsbergen to Svalbard. The argument was put forward by an influential actor in Norwegian polar research, Adolf Hoel, shortly after the treaty had been signed in 1920 (see Hoel 1920). Historically, there had been some confusion over what Spitsbergen actually denoted. This is reflected in Article 1 of the treaty, as we have seen above. Hoel reasoned that Spitsbergen by itself was not suited as a collective name for *all* the islands of the archipelago, as this might cause a misunderstanding. Instead he proposed Svalbard as a new collective name and Spitsbergen as the name of the main group of islands to the north, in which Vest-Spitsbergen is the larger. This Solomonic, albeit somewhat confusing solution would retain the original Dutch name, although within a limited geographical area. As it turned out, this solution was implemented, but later – in 1969 – modified. Today, Spitsbergen is the official name of the main island of the whole Svalbard archipelago.

Finally, to what extent was the name-change in 1924–1925 a nationalist statement from the Norwegian government? If one accepts Hutchinson's distinction between cultural and political nationalism, it can be argued that the change was primarily an expression of the former.¹⁴ The Svalbard myth originated in the 19th century and became part of the 'Norwegianization wave' that primarily was directed against remains of Danish cultural influence, particularly in the language. The development of a Neo-Norwegian language (*landsmål*), the abolishment of Danish administrative terms, the struggle to retrieve Norwegian archive material from Copenhagen, and to acquire the Danish publishing rights to the works of famous Norwegian authors like Ibsen and Bjørnson, were all elements of this movement. In essence, it was a period of national bloom and assertiveness, not one of aggressive political nationalism. Gradually, however, the policy as well as the rhetoric changed character. It is generally agreed that the infamous Norwegian 'Polar imperialism' (*Ishavsimperialismen*) started with the Spitsbergen issue (Drivenes 2004). While the ambitions to get a grip on the archipelago certainly were present early in the 20th century, and particularly after the breach with Sweden in 1905, the Norwegian interests were promoted through peaceful diplomatic processes culminating in the treaty of 1920. But in a few years, a more overt and active territorial expansionism coupled with political nationalism emerged. It manifested itself particularly in the challenge of Danish sovereignty in Greenland, which ended up in the occupation of parts of the south-eastern coast in June 1931. The territory was named 'Eirik Raudes Land', indicating that this was a reclaim of ancient Norwegian land and clearly challenging Danish sovereignty. The occupation was privately and secretly organized by radical Arctic activists, who wielded widespread support in public opinion. The Norwegian government hesitated, being committed to negotiating, but eventually sanctioned the annexation and even expanded the territory in 1932 (Fure 1996, Drivenes 2004). The occupied territories were promptly abandoned after the ruling of the

¹³ In accordance with the Treaty, Annex § 1, the Danish government was asked to appoint a special commissioner to oversee the property claims. Dr. juris. Kristian Sindballe was appointed. Norway put the Svalbard scientist and activist Adolf Hoel at his disposal, to help him – and herself – in the process.

¹⁴ See above and Johannesen 1996, 22 f.

International Court in the Hague in 1933, where Norway lost on all points against Denmark.

Although the successful solution of the Spitsbergen issue probably wetted the Norwegian appetite for further expansion in the Polar regions, it is unreasonable to perceive renaming the *terra nullius* Svalbard as expansionist by itself. The symbolism should not be exaggerated. Later attempts to gain sovereignty on parts of Greenland at the cost of Denmark, the rivalry about Franz Josef land and Victoriaøya with the Soviet Union, and the annexations in Antarctica in competition with other states represented a far greater challenge and entailed much higher political risks. It would seem *post hoc* to argue that the nationalization of a place-name in 1925 inaugurated the vigorous Polar imperialism of the following years.

Conclusion

Changing the official nomenclature from ‘Spitsbergen’ to ‘Svalbard’ was a result of internal processes in Norway that certainly had their roots in cultural nationalism and contemporary ‘Norwegianization’ trends but was not edged against foreign nations or actors. The prime motive for the Norwegian government seems to have been to rally interior popular and political support of the treaty and its enactment in 1924–1925. There were also practical arguments for sorting out confusion about place-names in the area – the responsibility for creating a coherent nomenclature naturally lies with the sovereign state.¹⁵ Thus, the name-change by itself should not be interpreted as a precursor to the later, far more aggressive Norwegian foreign policy, the next phase of the so-called ‘Polar imperialism’, which entailed the occupation of Jan Mayen, East Greenland and parts of Antarctica in the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast, the name ‘Eirik Raudes Land’, bestowed on occupied East Greenland in 1931, was without doubt a deliberate and politically motivated challenge to Danish sovereignty.

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¹⁵ Almost immediately after the Treaty was signed in 1920 Adolf Hoel and colleagues started the work of collecting and analyzing geographical names that culminated with the issuing of *Place-names of Svalbard* in 1942. More than 10,000 place-names of different origin were evaluated in the process.

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