

Svalbard Studies: Coal Mining in the Russo-Norwegian Context

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This special issue of *Poljarnyj vestnik* is based on a selection of papers delivered at the international workshop “Mining in Context: Svalbard and Elsewhere”. The workshop took place on 7-8 February 2020 in Longyearbyen to mark the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Svalbard Treaty. It was the second event in an open-ended series entitled “Svalbard Studies”. The first event in the series, “Svalbard and the Humanities”, was held on 27-28 November 2017 in Tromsø, and resulted in a special issue of the journal *Nordlit* (no. 45, 2020).

Svalbard Studies is an interdisciplinary research field that upholds a consolidated arts, humanities and social sciences approach to the issues relevant to Svalbard (aka Spitsbergen), an Arctic archipelago with a remarkable history. Initially a no man’s land, Svalbard has been under the Norwegian jurisdiction since 1920, when the so-called Svalbard Treaty was signed in Paris. The treaty was ratified five years later, allowing for an equal, protracted and significant international presence on the archipelago for economic and scientific (but not warlike) purposes. Even though Russia had been conducting its business activities on Svalbard well before World War I, it was not amongst the original signatories of the Treaty, for reasons explained below. Yet it did maintain its presence on the Svalbard islands before and after the USSR had joined the Treaty in the mid-1930s (except for much of the World War II period). The same arrangement has been continued by the Russian Federation after 1991.

The rationale for Svalbard Studies has been outlined in Chekin and Rogatchevski 2020 and will not be repeated here in any further detail. Now we shall briefly delineate the structure and content of the present thematic issue.

For the past century or so, coal mining has in many ways been synonymous with Svalbard.¹ It is fair to say that without coal mining, Svalbard would not have attained the special status it enjoys today. Without being overly ambitious, this special issue focuses on various aspects of how Svalbard-based coal mining activities have influenced culture and politics in and beyond Norway. Norwegians, Soviets and, in recent years, citizens of Russia and other post-Soviet states, Ukraine in particular, have coexisted on the archipelago for longer than representatives of many other nations. Therefore it makes

¹ For an concise yet comprehensive overview of the topic, see Hauan & Hultgren 2016.

sense to give priority to their respective input in the development of coal mining and its concomitant service industries on Svalbard, as well as to at least some of the (geo)political repercussions and artistic representations of such a coexistence.

Needless to say, it is impossible to paint a full picture of the above in an article collection, however diverse their topics. Still, the picture would be incomplete, even erroneous, were we to fully ignore the other international actors in the archipelago's coal mining business. Bringing them in, at least to some degree, is of fundamental importance, especially with regard to the early XX century, when the Norwegian and Russian presence on Svalbard was not yet dominant. Thus, Frigga Kruse's article concentrates on the (ultimately futile) attempts by British entrepreneurs to further British economic and political interests in the archipelago in the first half of XX century.

These attempts were, in particular, undertaken in Scotland because of its relative geographical proximity to Norway. By 1914, the British land claims on Svalbard amounted to "well over 3,500 square miles", while those of all other nations (mostly Norwegian) aggregated only "1,320 square miles" (Maples 1918: 9). Kruse's contribution also mentions contemporary Russian designs on the archipelago, in the form of a coal mining enterprise, established in 1913 by the naval officer Pavel von Veimarn. Moreover, near the end of World War I, a clause in a version of the Russo-German Brest-Litovsk treaty of March 1918, circulated in the West, seemed to imply that "the Germans and the Bolsheviks decided to share Spitzbergen between themselves" (Unsigned 1918, 9).

Thor Bjørn Arlov describes how and why pre-World War I plans to establish a Russo-Swedish-Norwegian condominium on Svalbard gave way, after the Great War, to Norwegian aspirations for individual sovereignty over the archipelago. These aspirations materialised partly owing to Norwegian coal mining companies urging the Norwegian government to go for sovereignty, an efficient way of protecting their business interests. The Norwegian government's subsequent subventions to these coal mining companies gave further momentum to the process of sovereignty acquisition at its final stage. Generous subsidies kept most companies afloat and ensured an uninterrupted and active Norwegian presence on Svalbard during the transitional period of 1920-25.

When the Treaty emerged, Russia had already been taken over by revolutionaries, removed unilaterally from World War I, and bogged down in Civil War. All these factors contributed to its widespread international isolation and initial non-participation in the Treaty. However, Article 10 of the Treaty permitted the "Russian nationals and companies <...> <on Spitsbergen to> enjoy the same rights as nationals of the High Contracting Parties" until "the recognition by the High Contracting Parties of a Russian government" (Treaty of 9 February 1920, p. 5). The Soviet Union was recognised by most of the fourteen original signatories only by 1933, and the country formally joined the Treaty in 1935, even though already in 1931-32 the Soviet trust Soyuzlesprom and its successor Arktikugol had bought the Grumant and Barentsburg mines and settlements from other companies, and begun developing the localities.

Turid Austin Wæhler's article analyses two novels - one Soviet, another Norwegian - set in Grumant and Longyearbyen respectively, soon after Stalin's death. Leaving geopolitics largely in the background, both books concentrate on an absolute must in mining towns, especially those located in the remoter corners of Planet Earth: health

services. The novels approach this subject through the private lives of two different families, whose key members include medical personnel. Even though the two books were written independently of each other and more than half a century apart, they have surprisingly much in common in their description of health issues in and around the mines. The only significant difference is the absence of psychiatric disorders in the portrayal of the Grumant community. Wæhler's piece provides several plausible explanations for this glaring omission.

Lisbeth Pettersen Wærp explores the notion of Svalbard as a site for a locked-room mystery arising from the archipelago's remoteness and isolation. A case in point is Monica Kristensen's (non-)fiction, represented by the works *Kullunge* (2008), *Den døde i Barentsburg* (2011) and *Kings Bay-saken* (2012). All these books have been influenced by a "whodunnit" format related to real or imaginary deaths in or around the mines of Longyearbyen, Barentsburg and Ny-Ålesund. In the three works, capitalising on her profound and extensive first-hand knowledge of Svalbard, Kristensen partly amalgamates features not only of the fiction and non-fiction genres but also – in the novel about Barentsburg – of Russian and Ukrainian communities.

The literary representations of miners and mining pose a question what makes us perceive a person as a miner, without knowing anything about their occupation or background and judging people only by their appearance. In her attempt to address this question, Svetlana Sokolova relies, *inter alia*, on a Chinese-American painter's exhibition of Donbas miners' images, on miners' portraits by two more artists, from Spain and India respectively, and on her own drawings of miners from Svalbard and Kuzbass. If a person of whatever nation dons a miner's helmet, will it be taken for granted that he or she is indeed a miner? (Gender prejudice aside, from 2015-18, Svalbard's Store Norske mining company was actually headed by a woman.)

In this day and age, when women can become miners if they so wish, mining as a profession may soon disappear from the archipelago. It is hard to predict how Svalbard will be affected by this disappearance. Such a situation makes it all the more necessary to document and study Svalbard's mining history from every accessible angle. Befittingly, the articles included in this collection jointly contribute to a methodological crossover between discourse analysis, international relations, economic and social history, medical humanities, comparative literature, locality studies, hermeneutics, art critique and art psychology. Such a practice is illustrative of Svalbard Studies' interdisciplinarity, which for better or worse has a reasonable chance of outliving mining on Svalbard.

References

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