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Russian Journalists on Svalbard in the 1930s[1]

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1. Introduction

The 1930s were the decisively formative years in the history of Soviet individuals and institutions on Svalbard. To supply the Russian North with much-needed energy resources, the USSR acquired a number of coal mines and deposits on the Norwegian archipelago, established the state-owned Arktikugol trust to manage them and, on 7 May 1935, formally joined the Svalbard Treaty. Yet comparatively few details are known about this period in the life of Russian mining settlements, especially as far as Russian sources are concerned. Speaking of the local press alone, only two issues of *Poliarnaia kochegarka* [Polar Furnace], the Arktikugol (bi)weekly produced on the archipelago in 1934-88, have apparently survived at the currently inaccessible State Archive for the Murmansk Region (GAMO), both dated October 1935 (see Portsel 2020: 140).[2] The relevant reports by the central press at the time were few and far between and have now been largely forgotten.

This article aims to contribute to the emergence of a fuller picture of the Soviet presence on Svalbard in the mid-1930s by recourse to contemporary *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* publications on the matter, supplemented where possible by alternative accounts, some of which have survived in the archives and have probably never been printed before. The focus is primarily on Barentsburg as the main Soviet activity hub throughout the 1930s. Two visits to Barentsburg are paid special attention to, those of the Soviet correspondents Lazar' Brontman (1905-53) of *Pravda* and Ezra Vilenskii (1902-44) of *Izvestiia* in July 1935 (section 2 of the article); and of a Russia-born British national, John (Ivan) Bilibin (1908-93), an employee of the *Daily Express*, in July 1937 (section 3). The official Soviet views of Svalbard, publicly expounded by Brontman and Vilenskii, are complemented and undermined here by information and opinions found in Brontman's private notes, Bilibin's manuscripts, minutes of a 1936 meeting at Glavsevmorput' (Chief Directorate for the Northern Sea Route, Arktikugol's apex entity in 1934-40) and memoirs by Soviet

[1] The transliteration of Russian words in this article broadly follows the Library of Congress system, except for the instances when surnames or company names (such as Plisetsky and Arktikugol) have acquired an established English spelling of their own.

[2] Portsel seems to have perused most issues of this periodical from the late 1940s onwards. Their digital version is now available at https://infoteka.com/resources/poliarnaia-kochegarka/ .

Svalbardians, as well as Russian émigré and Norwegian periodicals. In the spirit of microhistory, the article aims to provide a polyscopic vision of Svalbard mining settlements in the mid-1930s, with Barentsburg at the centre, when "the specific perspective of each narrative source contributes to present the same personage" – or location/community (Le Roy Ladurie 1978) or event (Stewart 1959) – "in an alternating, different light" (Ginzburg 1993: 30).

2. When the *Sadko* met the *Stavangerfjord*

Brontman and Vilenskii arrived in Barentsburg on 22 July on board the Soviet icebreaker *Sadko* while covering its high-latitude expedition undertaken in July-September 1935. The icebreaker's tasks entrusted to some thirty-five scientists were primarily meteorological and oceanographical. With the help of aircraft at their disposal, the expedition members were, for example, able to make corrections to an earlier map of Nordaustlandet. In addition, the ship was asked to verify if possible whether the so-called Giles (Gillis) Land was anything more than a phantom (Vilenskii 1935; for more details on the expedition, see Barr 1977).

In a parallel but not unrelated chain of events, Svalbard was visited by DS *Stavangerfjord*, carrying among its 750 passengers the Norwegian PM Johan Nygaardsvold, some of his cabinet members and several parliamentarians from the Storting's foreign affairs committee (for the names of VIPs on the boat, see Nygårdsvold og Mowinckel 1935; Vilenskii 1935a; and Regjeringsrepresentantenes 1935). This was the first time a Norwegian PM had ever visited the archipelago, mainly going ashore at Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund. Ostensibly on holiday, he and the other top-level Norwegian politicians wished to acquire a first-hand impression of Svalbard, in order to decide whether the Norwegian presence there merited (additional) funding for a school, a post office, a telegraph, a beacon station, a lighthouse and an icebreaker (the issues of taxation and health and accident insurance for Svalbard employees also required resolution; see Nygårdsvold og Mowinckel 1935 and Inspeksjonen på Svalbard 1935; on the lighthouse and icebreaker arrangements before WWII, see Hoel 1966: 98-112). The Soviet-run Barentsburg naturally attracted significant curiosity and had to be inspected, too.

The abandoned Barentsburg mine was bought by the Soviets from its Dutch owners NeSpiCo in 1932. Quoting the Soviet consul in Barentsburg and head of the Arktikugol mines Mikhail Plisetsky, Brontman's diary entry of 23 July 1935 claims that the agreed final price was a million gold roubles, paid out in instalments over ten years.[3] (The original Dutch investment had allegedly amounted to ten million gold roubles, and the initial asking price, to seven million.[4]) Since its takeover, Arktikugol had populated the

[3] Brontman's diary was published by his grandson in several versions, the fullest apparently being Brontman 2004. A heavily edited, much shorter variant also appeared in the journal *Pomorskaia stolitsa* (nos 3-4, 2012) and has been available online, see Brontman 2012. For a more recent republication of Svalbard-specific fragments, see Brontman 2026.

[4] Neither the price tag nor the negotiations over it were mentioned in Brontman's article in *Pravda* of 7 August 1935, when the transfer of Barentsburg from NeSpiCo to Arktikugol was described (see Brontman 1935).

settlement with ca 1800 workers, who, according to Brontman (1935), were expected to produce 340,000 tonnes of coal in 1935. "Barentsburg's coal conveyor belts are endless", declared Brontman in his *Pravda* article of 7 August 1935 (ibid.).[5] The settlement now boasted a livestock farm, a crèche, an arts and culture centre (*klub*), as well as – despite significant seasonal challenges with the fresh water supply (see Stavnitser 1948: 112-14) – a bathhouse, flowerbeds and fountains.

By contrast, if we are to believe a description of 1930s Longyearbyen (the largest Norwegian settlement on Svalbard and a Store Norske coal mining company town) by a Russian émigré contributor to the *Vozrozhdenie* daily published in Paris,[6] it looked "sad and semi-neglected" (Ne-Mo 1936: 4). According to this writer, who arrived on Svalbard in early August 1935 on board the French passenger liner *Foucauld*, Longyearbyen "consisted of a few huts, housing a telegraph and a half-ruined whaling station. […] Several large fishing boats and sloops – that's it" (ibid.).[7]

Mikhail Stavnitser (1948: 134), an Arktikugol engineer, added some detail in his memoirs: Longyearbyen's 500 miners, for years on end, were apparently restricted to their mines, canteen, poorly stocked and overpriced shop – and a church, with the priest allegedly holding a monopoly on all cultural endeavours. According to Stavnitser, music would not "be heard in Longyearbyen, unless someone would burst into a sad tune on a mouth organ" (1948: 134-35). At the same time, Barentsburg was staging amateur opera productions, such as Dargomyzhsky's *Rusalka*, in which Plisetsky's daughter Maya, subsequently a famous ballerina, made her debut as a child actress (see Plisetskaya 2001: 20). After Norwegian engineers had seen the show, their entry in the Barentsburg guest book reportedly read: "An opera near the North Pole! Only the Bolsheviks are capable of that" (Stavnitser 1948: 116).

Even though no opera was apparently performed for the Norwegian tourists when the *Stavangerfjord* anchored at Barentsburg on 28 July 1935, the Soviets still "sang, danced and played for us", a witness testified ("750 strålende" 1935).[8] Portsel and Holtsmark (2015: 121) quote from Brontman 2012 when describing a display of flags and an orchestra performance to welcome the arrival of the PM and his retinue.

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[5] All translations from Russian, Norwegian and Swedish are ours, unless indicated otherwise.

[6] Fragments from this publication were recently reproduced in "1935 god" (2025).

[7] The two articles featuring the Svalbard trip were signed Ne-Mo, which is Latin for "nobody". While clearly a reference to Captain Nemo, Jules Vernes' fictional character travelling far and wide, it is also an indication of self-deprecatory mode, fairly common for literary pseudonyms by Russian émigrés, who frequently had to grapple with a loss of status when moving to their adopted countries (see Timenchick 2016: 141-42). This makes the identification of who Ne-Mo really was rather challenging (unless the *Foucauld*'s passenger list for the voyage has survived among the Chargeurs Réunis – the ship's owner – files and could be consulted). A sizeable compendium of Russian émigré pen-names in Europe in 1917-45 establishes the genuine names of several Nemos in both Latin and Cyrillic spelling (see Shruba 2018: 304, 454) but none of them fits the Ne-Mo from *Vozrozhdenie* (who does not seem to be mentioned in the compendium at all).

[8] This may have been part of Barentsburg's standard entertainment package for tourist visitors. Ne-mo (1935a: 5) recalls: "The squeezebox was going full force. On the *Foucauld*, we had a small group of youth, not particularly well-bred but enjoying themselves non-stop. All those Totos and Mimis broke into a dance earning comments of approval from the miners. Dancing lasted for half an hour".

The guests were especially impressed with the flowerbeds, the bathhouse, the pigsty[9] and the crèche[10] (Brontman 2004). They are unlikely to have been told that many infants in the crèche (thirty-four during the latest overwintering alone) were born to single mothers, given that the men to women ratio in Barentsburg was approximately six to one and unmarried women not in a stable relationship were literally "hunted after" (Brontman 2004 and Brontman 2012). Brontman's diary entry of 26 July 1935 states that at least twelve rapes and 194 abortions took place in Barentsburg during the 1934-35 overwintering season (Brontman 2004).[11] Unsurprisingly, this information did not make it to his already cited *Pravda* article of 7 August 1935, which assured the reader that the settlement lived "like a tight-knit, friendly family" (Brontman 1935).[12]

The Norwegian journalist Arne Skouen (subsequently a film director, of the *Ni liv / Nine Lives* fame), a *Stavangerfjord* passenger on assignment from the *Dagbladet* newspaper, sensed sexual tension in the air when his attractive Swedish female companion was patently ogled in Barentsburg (she commented: "Russian wild beasts / *rysska vill'juren*", Skouen 1935). Still, referring to Barentsburg, he admitted that "the Russian town here on Svalbard is much more impressive than our own [Longyearbyen]" (ibid.) The same was confirmed by the Store Norske director Einar Sverdrup, who "had set everything in motion, even though it was a Sunday […], for [the Longyearbyen visitors from the *Stavangerfjord*] to see what goes on in the mine" ("750 strålende" 1935). Sverdrup reportedly said to Plisetsky on 28 July 1935 on board the *Stavangerfjord*: "I could not show them what you did – but we remain friends" (Brontman 2004).

Plisetsky and his actress wife Rakhil' Messerer (Maya's mother), as well as Vilenskii and Brontman, were invited to the *Stavangerfjord* by the PM as a reciprocal gesture of gratitude for the treatment of the Norwegian delegation in Barentsburg. The ministerial dinner of sturgeon, reindeer and ice cream, washed down by port, champagne and liqueur coffee, was followed by dancing (no squeezebox accompaniment reported). Messerer had to dance with almost every minister present. Vilenskii noted to Sverdrup: "They dance well here". – "Their footwork is nimbler than their minds" (*V ikh nogi vlozheno bol'she, chem v golovy*), came the reply (Brontman 2004).

Then the PM gave an interview to *Izvestiia* (an organ of the USSR's Supreme Council) – but not to *Pravda* (a Bolshevik party daily), as he did not wish to talk politics (see

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[9] Barentsburg had some 250 pigs at around that point, see Sidorov 2024: 6.

[10] The *Foucauld* passengers also saw the crèche and liked it a great deal: it had the "necessary equipment" including an "artificial sunlight" (Ne-Mo 1936a: 5), i.e. Osram Vitalux lamps.

[11] However, in a postscriptum of 28 July 1935 to his diary entry of 26 July 1935, Brontman (2004) cites Stavnitser's denial: "all this talk about rapes is nonsense" (*vse eti iznasilovaniia – chush'*).

[12] According to the minutes of a Glavsevmorput' meeting on 14 May 1936, similar information about abortions could not be published almost a year later either, in *Poliarnaia kochegarka* this time. Nikolai Ianson, deputy head of Glavsevmorput', was recorded as saying: the Barentsburg doctor Ivan Popov'ian submitted a newspaper article, which included statistical data about the most prominent medical issues in the settlement, e.g. "eighty-three abortions" in the 1935-36 season; that part was deleted, as it was nothing "to feel proud of" (Sidorov 2024: 6). The problem with unwanted pregnancies persisted for a long time. In August 1952, for example, it was noted by Communist Party officials on the archipelago that ninety-seven children were born to single mothers and eighty-three abortions were carried out "in the period under review" (Portsel 2011: 177), presumably since the revival of coal mining in Svalbard's Soviet settlements after WWII.

Brontman 2004, the entry of 28 July 1935). However, politics proved to be unavoidable, especially in the section of the interview that would not appear in *Izvestiia* (see Vilenskii 1935a) but was diligently recorded by Brontman (2004) in the entry of 28 July 1935). According to the *Izvestiia* article of 1 August 1935, Nygaardsvold expressed deep satisfaction with what he saw on Svalbard. He added: "The energy and enthusiasm of Soviet miners have attracted my attention. I send the miners my sincere greetings", and continued: "I would very much like to pay a visit to the USSR. […] Only a great country like the Soviet Union can organise such grandiose undertakings as […] the *Sadko* voyage. We follow the voyage […] with special interest, because Norwegians have also been studying the Arctic intensely" (Vilenskii 1935a).

What was omitted from *Izvestiia*'s publication was Nygaardsvold's statement that he read all there had been published about Lenin and Stalin in Scandinavian languages and in English. Also, most importantly, "for humanitarian and not political reasons" (Brontman 2004, the entry of 28 July 1935), the PM pleaded the case of Norwegian "fishermen" (actually, seal hunters, see Bjørnsen and Holtsmark 2015), who had been denied access to waterways near Franz Josef Land after its "annexation" by the USSR in 1926, even though they had been "fishing" (seal hunting) there "since time immemorial" (*iskoni*; ibid.). Nygaardsvold asked the USSR to reconsider the ban, taking into account that "Norway had done a great deal for the Soviet Union" (ibid.). This plea did not make it to Vilenskii's article. Norwegian seal hunting activity next to Franz Josef Land gradually ceased in the 1930s (for more on the Soviet-Norwegian tensions around Franz Josef Land, see e.g. Bjørnsen and Holtsmark 2015).

The word "annexation" may not have been pronounced too often at the Soviet-Norwegian official meetings in Barentsburg in late July 1935, but it undoubtedly underlay their outwardly cordial atmosphere. In his diary entry of 28 July 1935, Brontman (2004) voiced a suspicion that the real reason for the high-level Norwegian visit to Svalbard is "apparently speculation in the Nazi press that the USSR wants to seize" the archipelago. By the same token, it could have been surmised that the *Sadko* mission was not pursuing purely scientific goals. The Soviet government decree of 15 April 1926, which effectively laid claim to Franz Josef Land, treated as their own all the territories, whether already discovered or not, between the North Pole and the northernmost Soviet mainland from the Barents Sea to the Bering Strait – unless such territories had already been recognised by the USSR as belonging to another state. If the legendary Giles (Gillis) Land had been located in the course of the *Sadko*'s travels, it would certainly have been added to Soviet territorial possessions.

Whatever the hidden agendas of some passengers on the *Sadko* and the *Stavangerfjord* may have been (if any), both vessels left Barentsburg in different directions on 29 July 1935.

3. At Home among Strangers, a Stranger among His Own Folk

Two years later, in July 1937, Ivan (John) Bilibin, a British journalist and son of a famous Russian artist, arrived on Svalbard as a tourist, on board DS *Lyngen*, which served the summer route between Tromsø and Ny-Ålesund in 1934-39 and was responsible for

some of "the most joyful and popular ship visits" to the archipelago (Jacobsen 1935). Just like the Norwegian politicians from the *Stavangerfjord*, Bilibin was combining pleasure with business. An employee at Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* radio station in Leatherhead between September 1936 and March 1938, he used his multilingual skills ("perfect Russian, good working knowledge of French, fair Italian, a little German and Norwegian", Bilibin 1938) to listen to foreign broadcasts while looking for newsworthy items that could be reported by Lord Beaversbrook's media without delay.

Inspired by what Bilibin termed "the Soviet conquest of the North Pole" (Bilibin 1937), i.e. the establishment of the North Pole-1 drifting ice station in May 1937, he decided, with the approval of his senior colleagues, to spend his summer holiday on Svalbard to "glean a good deal of information about the growth of Arctic development" (ibid.). He listed the highlights of his Svalbard journey in a letter of 4 August 1937 to Michael Wardell, a manager at another Lord Beaverbrook newspaper, the *Evening Standard*:

"I have visited the Norwegian coal mines in Longyear City, I have been to the Soviet concession in Green Harbour [i.e. Barentsburg], visited the northernmost hotel in the world at New Aalesund, saw the wintering huts of the trappers in North Spitsbergen, watched a seal hunt in progress, and have taken a large number of photographs illustrating the life and scenery of the island" (Bilibin 1937a). Bilibin also met and spoke to the acting Svalbard governor Johan Andreas Irgens, the Norwegian mining engineer Harald Ross (a Store Norske employee), the female trapper Berntine Johansen – and, while in Tromsø, Trygve Sundt (a director of the shipping company that owned the *Lyngen*), and in Oslo, Adolf Hoel (head of the Norwegian Svalbard and Arctic Ocean Survey, a predecessor of the Norwegian Polar Institute).

Bilibin was keen to share with the reader the wealth of the material he acquired. His first (and likely last) Svalbard-related publication came out in the *Daily Express* on 22 July 1937 in the so-called Hickey column, named after the British lawyer and memoirist William Hickey (1749-1830) but in fact being a collective pseudonym for contributors of various gossip and oddity pieces. Bilibin's authorship is identified in Bilibin 1937a. His input is quoted below in its entirety, given the paucity of contemporary Anglophone data about Ny-Ålesund:

"World's northernmost hotel has just opened – only 650 miles south of the North Pole. It is a red wooden hut, formerly occupied by Norwegian coal miners. New Aalesund, Spitzbergen, is the name of the place. Hotel-keeper is Mrs Borgen, sister-in-law of famed Arctic explorer Adolf Hoel, proud of her kitchen.

First customers: three Finnish scientists. They are there for a month. Every 18 hours they send a balloon up into the stratosphere. Balloons are equipped with radio which automatically transmits temperature at different altitudes. Over the Arctic it's twice as warm as it is over the Equator. Finns are cheerful. Young meteorologist Niilo Raunio keeps hotel alive with rollicking songs, including Finnish version of John Brown's Body.

Next customer was a Londoner – just a tourist, there for a fortnight's holiday! He is pavement-light manufacturer John Healey. His chest is weak, he doesn't like crowds, so he always takes an Arctic holiday. His wife likes the south, so she goes there. "I came here dressed up like an Eskimo", he said, "and all I need is an English summer outfit".

Apart from the hotel, New Aalesund is uninhabited. There is a settlement of empty huts. Coal mining failed, after 13 years of struggle. Hangar from which Nobile started on ill-fated airship flight in 1928 is a giant skeleton.

Man who told me about New Aalesund landed there at midnight. The sun was high in the sky. Only a greenish shadow on the glaciers showed that it was not midday. As he crossed field to hotel, snow melted to mud below, swallow-tailed Arctic terns circled overhead, squawking and pecking angrily at his camera. It sounds an ideal retreat for tired business men. There is only one drawback. It's on the telephone" (Hickey 1937).

The article, partly functioning as an advert, was accompanied by a picture of the hotel signed "North Pole Inn: Farthest-flung tourism".[13] The picture was taken by Bilibin himself and survives among his papers at the Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/58.[14] There are many other Bilibin photographs from the Svalbard journey in the same collection. Even though not always of printable quality, they expand considerably the (somewhat limited) known Svalbard iconography of the 1930s. As far as Ny-Ålesund is concerned, there is another, larger scale picture of the hotel and its staff (**Fig. 1**), with Mrs Laura Borgen in the centre, flanked by her assistant Robert Drevon and an unidentified "Norwegian girl help" (as the explanatory note to the picture has it, see LRA MS 1425/59) – most likely Brit Hofseth (see Barr 2014: 105; Holmsen 1941; and Ryall 2022: 206-33).



Figure 1. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/59. © Ivan Bilibin

[13] On the history of the North Pole Inn (Nordpolhotellet), see Hoel 1965: 94-98; Barr 2014; and Reymert 2016: 15-18.

[14] All quotes and images from the Bilibin collection are reproduced with the kind permission of the LRA and Bilibin's heirs. Individuals and institutions wishing to use the images should contact directly and separately the archive and Bilibin's nephews-by-marriage represented by David Neil Stevenson.

There is a photograph, too, of Niilo Raunio (**Fig. 2**), who was a meteorologist at the one-month-long three-man 1937 expedition of the Finnish Geophysical Society to Svalbard (for details, see Finnish Aerological 1938).



Figure 2. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/62. © Ivan Bilibin

A photograph of Nobile's hangar (see **Fig. 3** on the next page) can be found in LRA under MS1425/63, while a general view of Ny-Ålesund (see **Fig. 4**) has been catalogued as MS1425/60.

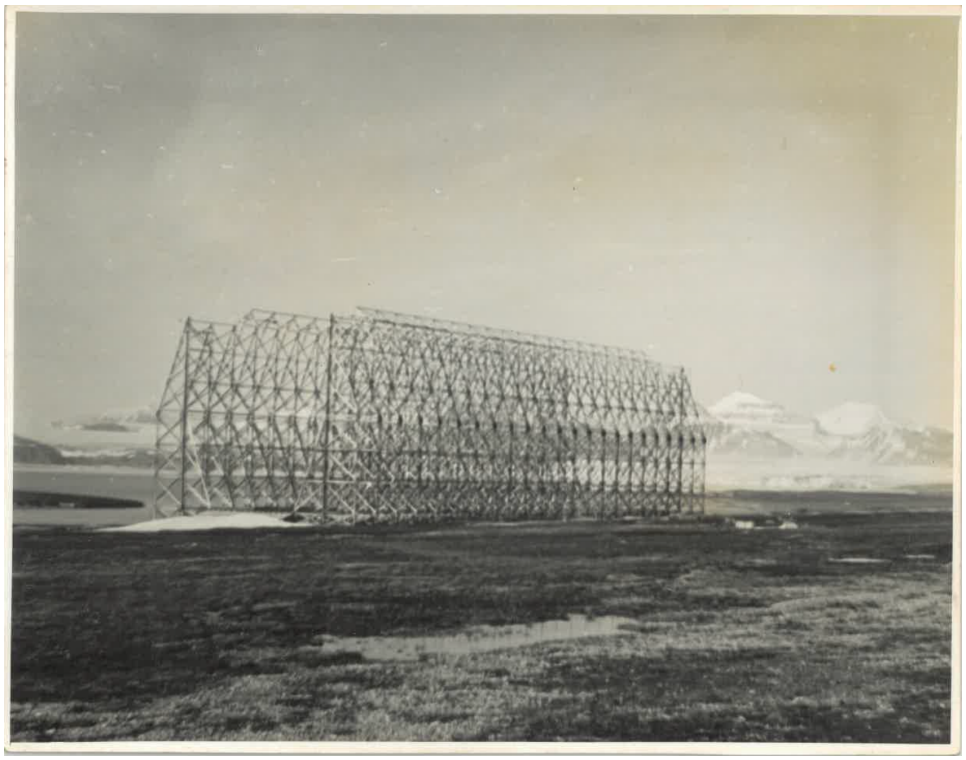


Figure 3. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/63. © Ivan Bilibin



Figure 4. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/60. © Ivan Bilibin

In contrast with what has been cited in this article's previous section, Longyearbyen is presented in Bilibin's writings and photographs as a fairly cheerful place, by comparison with Barentsburg, which he visited at the very end of his Svalbard journey "as a kind of savoury dish to cap the Spitsbergen menu" (Bilibin 1937b). While it is Barentsburg that is normally associated with the presence of children, home-grown veg and flowers, Bilibin makes snapshots of Longyearbyen hothouses (see **Fig. 5** below), admittedly less impressive than the Barentsburg orangeries (MS1425/82) – and a little boy, embodying "a picture of health" (MS1425/45, to quote from the explanatory note attached).[15]



Figure 5. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/46. © Ivan Bilibin

Bilibin (1937b) makes the following observation on the availability of produce from Longyearbyen's hotbeds, as opposed to that from the orangeries in Barentsburg (one for vegetables and another for flowers): "In Longyear City we were allowed to understand that we were to pick no flowers, and we were not offered any vegetables from their hothouses. The flowers and the vegetables were for the men and women who had to live up in the Arctic. They were grown at considerable cost, and were not to be wasted on people who in a week's time would have the whole of Covent Garden at their disposal."

In Barentsburg, however, the Soviet hospitality was "unbounded. All the women and some of the men in our party were presented with flowers from the orangery, and a

[15] At that point, only the key workers of the Store Norske workforce were allowed to bring their families to Longyearbyen with them.

basketful of tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce was sent on board our ship. It may sound mean and petty to make this hospitality, thoroughly enjoyed at the time, a subject of adverse criticism, but the fact does remain that someone had to suffer for it" (ibid.).[16]

On the issue of Longyearbyen children, Bilibin (1938a) points out that "Polar Night is a serious problem, as sunshine is essential to growth. This difficulty is overcome in Longyear City by giving the children artificial sunshine several times a week". This is an important detail, as all the previous contemporary mentions of artificial sunshine we have come across are linked to physical childcare in Barentsburg (see, however, Sandmo 2005: 155, as well as Hanoa 2017: 27, relating to Longyearbyen in the second half of 1931; for its part, Strømmen 2016: 46 talks about UV light therapy for both Soviet and Norwegian children in the 1953-54 winter season). As for the care of Longyearbyen children's "souls and minds" (Bilibin 1938a), it is placed "in the hands of the minister – incumbent of the small wooden church, which dominates the centre of the settlement. He comes and goes with the Polar Night. In summer he goes off on holiday to Norway, and the children have a holiday, too. The adults have to put up without church services till the sun sets" (ibid.)[17]



Figure 6. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/47. © Ivan Bilibin

[16] Minutes of the Glavsevmorput' meeting on 14 May 1936 confirm that the orangeries' yield in Barentsburg was not altogether plentiful: "By 1 May four cucumbers began sprouting. Each of them was given a name: Jupiter, Saturn, Mars and Venus. The entire colliery followed their growth" (Sidorov 2024: 7).

[17] The church activities, whether aimed at children or adults, could not have been described in a positive light by Soviet visitors to Longyearbyen, because of militant atheism, prevalent in the USSR's officialdom at the time. Thus, Stavnitser (1948: 134) recognised the importance of the church's role for Longyearbyen denizens yet claimed, for example, that film screenings were deliberately scheduled by the Longyearbyen priest after his sermons: to ensure a decent sermon attendance, he would shut the church doors right before the sermon began. Latecomers wishing to watch just the film would not be admitted.

Another significant difference between Longyearbyen and Barentsburg, specifically noted by Bilibin (1937b), is that "Barentsburg has voted itself to be dry, while the miners of Longyear City are allowed one bottle of brandy a month each, and beer on Sundays". (Bilibin even photographed piles of empty beer bottles in the Norwegian settlement; see **Fig. 6** on the previous page). As a result, every now and then Longyearbyen would be visited by Barentsburg dwellers for a bit of drinking.

Not only relaxation but also various aspects of work carried out by Norwegians on the archipelago were clearly of interest to Bilibin, as he met the legendary trapper Berntine Johansen (1886-1939, see **Fig. 7** below; there also exists Bilibin's photo of her cabin in Magdalenefjorden, MS1425/56), and the mining engineer Harald Ross (1908-83, see **Fig. 8** on the next page). A pioneer of female overwintering on Svalbard, Johansen first came to the archipelago in 1920 as a Store Norske administrative employee, then worked for NeSpiCo in 1921-24 and eventually took up seal hunting (for more detail, see Johansen 1940; and Ryall 2022: 62, 81-82). Harald Ross worked on Svalbard in different engineering capacities in 1931-41 and 1964-65. He features in Stavnitser's memoirs (1948: 130-32) as a capable professional, keen to learn from Soviet mining practices and even acquiring some knowledge of Russian. It is not known what exactly Bilibin talked to Johansen and Ross about, but publishing his previously unknown photographic portraits of both is clearly a bonus for anyone interested in this period in Svalbard's history.



Figure 7. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/55. © Ivan Bilibin

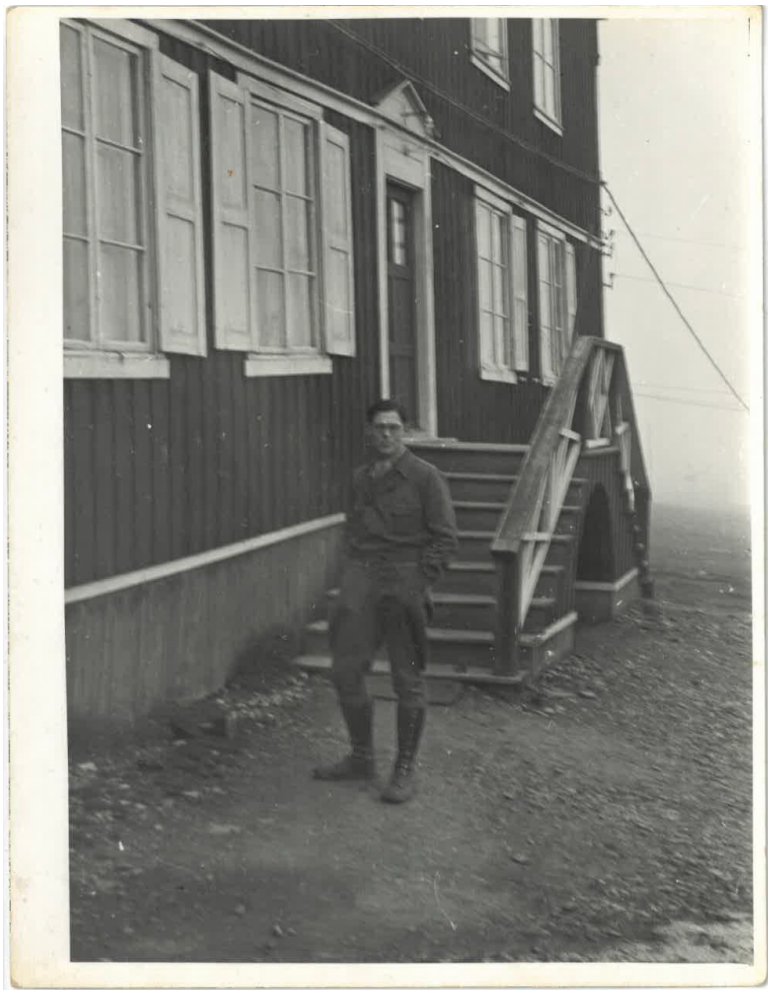


Figure 8. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/44. © Ivan Bilibin

To an even higher degree, the same applies to Bilibin's picture of Johan Andreas Irgens (1906-80), occasionally filling in as an acting governor when actual Svalbard governors had to be away from the archipelago for a substantial length of time. Little is known about him, over and beyond that he worked for a while as a secretary at the Department of Justice (see Arlov 2011: 104). Thanks to Bilibin's photo, now we realise what Irgens looked like at the time (see **Fig. 9** on the next page).[18] Thanks to Bilibin's records, we are also aware of at least one topic the two men discussed when they met in Longyearbyen. "'Do you think Longyear City will ever really be a city?', I asked Mr Irgens, the deputy governor of Spitsbergen, as I was saying goodbye to him. 'I don' think so', he replied. 'But it will grow larger than it is now'" (Bilibin 1938a).

[18] Irgens's photo at the age of forty-eight, as well as his brief CV, appeared in Ny ekspedisjonssjef 1954. We are grateful to one of our anonymous peer reviewers for pointing this publication to us.



Figure 9. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/42. © Ivan Bilibin

Yet what about Barentsburg, a "real Soviet town", as Trygve Sundt, director of the *Lyngen*-owning shipping company, called it in a conversation with Bilibin (1937b) in Tromsø, "like a conjurer producing a rabbit out of a top hat at a children's party" (thus strengthening Bilibin's impression that "Norwegians look upon Barentsburg as on one of the most piquant attractions for tourists visiting Spitsbergen"; ibid.)?

Bilibin (1937b) describes the Soviet mining settlement as an "imposing collection of wooden houses" with a large stone building among them, "the only one I saw in the whole of Spitsbergen" (this was the recently erected canteen-cum-Arktikugol HQ), and "an improvised pavement of wooden planks along the main road which saved one from having to wade ankle-deep in the mud". He and his travelling companions were shown, among other objects of interest, a fire station, a volleyball court, an open air dance platform and a cattle yard with "fifteen magnificent Friesian cows" (whose milk, however, would not be "sufficient for a population of two thousand", ibid.). On the quay, "there was a large wooden warehouse with portraits of Lenin and Marx on its front wall, and a placard with the Russian inscription: 'Greetings to the New Relay'" (ibid.).[19]

The transit from the harbour into town was not unlike a border crossing: "Under the tutelage of a guide we went up into the settlement, and passed under a big wooden arch surmounted with Soviet flags and a red five-cornered Soviet star. I remembered […] that Barentsburg is Norwegian territory. There was little around me to corroborate this piece of knowledge, and the wooden arch looked exactly like a frontier post" (ibid.). Bilibin was also taken aback to find out that "payments in Barentsburg [were] made in roubles" and there was "not a single Norwegian policeman in the town, all authority being vested in the Soviet 'consular agent'" (ibid.). For Bilibin, who was born in St Petersburg but had been prevented from returning there since the February 1917 revolution (which broke out

[19] For Bilibin's picture of the warehouse, see **Fig. 10** on the next page. The slogan in Russian says "*Privet novoi smene*" and could alternatively be translated as "Welcome to Your Next Work Shift".

during his family's stay in the UK), the sight of Soviet authorities at work must have set alarm bells ringing.



Figure 10. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/79. © Ivan Bilibin

Bilibin likely did not know at the time that Barentsburg's most recent Soviet consul, the above-named Mikhail Plisetsky, had been falsely accused of espionage and arrested on 30 April 1937, to be executed in January the following year, in the course of Stalin's purges. Yet Bilibin did notice that the atmposphere upon the *Lyngen*'s arrival in Barentsburg suddenly became tense when onto the quay walked a man whose face "strongly reminded me of some of the 'watchdogs of the Revolution, glorious workers of the people's Commissariat of the Interior', whose portraits are published from time to time on the front page of *Pravda*. A wolfish mouth and cold, soulless eyes, […] which suggest that the man has been put through some special ordeal of terror in order to inure him to the work for which he has been set apart. He was evidently 'the Jowl', which in common Russian parlance means the O.G.P.U. commissar" (Bilibin 1937b).

The commissar accompanied the *Lyngen* passengers on their tour of the settlement making sure no one went astray. The hosting itself was performed by the guide, who provided "a striking contrast to the blank-faced, robot-like workers" (ibid.).[20] To Bilibin, the guide looked like a personification of "'Happy and Prosperous Life', which is so extensively advertised by the Soviet organs of propaganda. Bubbling over with laughter, he would come up to all the members of our party in turn, and address them in Russian, which was the only language he knew. '*Nu chto, nravitsia? Khorosho zdes*', *a*?' ('Well, do you like it? It's good up here, eh?') – he kept repeating" (ibid.), ignoring the fact that almost no one understood him. Bilibin could have acted as an unofficial impromptu interpreter for his tourist group – but "after one look at 'the Jowl' I decided not to volunteer my services" (ibid.).

[20] Skouen (1935: 6) had a similar impression of Barentsburg workers' "tight, closed faces" belonging to "the living dead, sort of".

This must have been a wise decision. Ne-Mo's experience demonstrates that native Russian speakers disembarking in Barentsburg off international cruise ships[21] were treated by the Soviets with extreme suspicion.[22] When he and his wife revealed publicly that they were fluent in Russian, and began acting as voluntary interpreters for their fellow tourists, this was immediately reported by a Barentsburg dweller to consul Plisetsky.[23] Plisetsky took the trouble of seeking Ne-Mo and his wife out among their tourist group and struck up a conversation with them in a tone that Ne-Mo (1936a) defined as "distinctly unpleasant": "When did this [emigration] happen to you? Did you [leave Russia] in 1919?", i.e. during the Civil War? Ne-Mo concluded: "This was clearly a Chekist at the head of the [Soviet coal] concession [on Svalbard]" (ibid.).

In such a context, the "naïve simplicity" of Bilibin's guide, who "addressed everyone indiscriminately in Russian, may not have been so naive after all. Quite possibly he was expecting one of the party to reply to him in Russian" (Bilibin 1937b) – and thus be revealed as a potential spy and/or saboteur.

On his walk about Barentsburg, Bilibin unavoidably came across an image of the person who was singularly responsible for the extreme form of paranoid vigilance reigning supreme in the Soviet mining settlements (and across the entire USSR): "Facing the fountain is the cinema, and here I found […] a gigantic portrait of Stalin. There could be no question of the superiority enjoyed by the 'Great Leader of Peoples' over Marx and Lenin, who were relegated to the warehouse on the quay. Stalin is portrayed full length, the Napoleonic Stalin with his right arm thrust into his military great coat" (Bilibin 1937b). Naturally, Bilibin took a photograph of this portrait, too (see **Fig. 11** below).



Figure 11. Leeds Russian Archive (LRA), University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 1425/76. © Ivan Bilibin

[21] Large-scale international tourism on Svalbard in summer months was a regular occurence thorughout the 1930s. The Svalbard governor Helge Ingstad observed in 1935: "It looks as if polar fever has afflicted tourists immensely" (Isbryterspørsmålet 1935). See also Stavnitser 1948: 125-29.

[22] A contemporary instruction of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party warned Soviet Svalbardians that "among foreign tourists there could be individuals fluent in Russian but keeping quiet about it. When conversing in the presence of foreigners, communists should be careful with words" (Portsel 2012: 39).

[23] Mutual denunciations were common in the Soviet settlements on Svalbard at the time. For examples, see Portsel 2012: 39-42.

What Bilibin calls a cinema was in fact a multipurpose club housing a library and an orchestra. It offered Barentsburgians a wide programme of cultural and educational events. In January-March 1936 alone, twenty-three lectures on different topics (including political issues) and thirty socials were organised, as well as 134 film screenings (see Sidorov 2024: 7). Ne-Mo (1936a) recalls a worker's displeasure over Evgeny Cherviakov's 1928 silent drama *Moi syn* (My Son), shown in the club in August 1935: "*kartina drian'*" (this picture's rubbish).

The slogan on the club's front wall is addressed to Stakhanovites, adherents of the Soviet initiative to increase workers' productivity and overfulfill their quotas (to accelerate the process of industrialisation). The initiative has been named after Aleksei Stakhanov, a Donbas miner who in late August 1935 took just under six hours to extract 102 tonnes of coal, or fourteen times the norm – and became a role model for all other Soviet miners, their settlements on Svalbard included.[24] Bilibin (1937b) explained how the Stakhanov movement functioned: "Stakhanovites have formed themselves into a very exclusive clique, a kind of privileged class. A number of them have been imported into Barentsburg already as Stakhanovites, and they work in privileged conditions. All the preparatory work, the dull drudgery, in the coal mines is done by the 'rank and file'. Then, when everything is ready, Stakhanovites arrive on the scene and produce a record quantity of coal, for which they get paid immoderately higher wages than their less fortunate coolies. It is they who get the flowers from the orangery, the first share of the milk of the Friesian cows, and the front seats in the cinema. The result is that Stakhanovites are bitterly hated".

The Soviet miners' productivity on Svalbard was of particular importance for Glavsevmorput' (see Sidorov 2024: 8) because the Soviet settlements found themselves in a kind of competition with the Norwegian ones, where the number of miners was lower yet the output was comparable. Thus, according to Hoel (1966: 366), in 1935 in Barentsburg the population consisted of 1410 men, of whom 780 worked in the mine and excavated 349,274 tonnes of coal; while in Longyearbyen in 1935-36 there lived 575 people, of whom over 300 were engaged in the mines and in 1935 extracted 311,000 tonnes of coal (see Hoel 1936 and 1936a; Sidorov 2024: 8). Stakhanovites were meant to improve the situation.

Nevertheless, overall, the prevailing impression among Norwegians was that, "based on a sober profitability principle, [Soviet coal mining on Svalbard] is unsustainable" (Regjeringsrepresentantenes 1935), as Torgeir Anderssen-Rysst, a member of Stortinget's Foreign Affairs committee and former Defence minister, put it after his visit to Barentsburg on board the *Stavangerfjord*. Ne-Mo (1936a) felt the same: "The yield in tonnes [in Barentsburg] is clearly not commensurate with the number of miners [there]".

Bilibin (1939) had his own hypothesis to explain this discrepancy, over and beyond the presumption of sheer Soviet incompetence: "In the case of Spitsbergen, […] the majority

[24] For names of Stakhanovites in Grumant City, see Baranova 1983: 59.

of the population happens to be Russian.[25] […] One fine day in the near future the miners of Barentsburg will be called upon to decide by plebiscite that Spitsbergen is Soviet territory". Needless to say, this has never happened – but it does not mean that it could not have been done.

4. Conclusion

None of Bilibin's Svalbard-related items, whether travelogues (1937b), analyses (1939 and 1939-40) or photographs, seemed to have been printed, with the sole exception of the photograph of the North Pole Inn that illustrated a 1937 Hickey column in the *Daily Express*. The LRA files make it obvious that, in addition to the *Evening Standard*, Bilibin also approached the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, as well as the *Spectator* – to no avail. In a rejection letter of 7 June 1939, the *Telegraph* acting assistant editor J C Moncur Sime stated his reasons unequivocally: Bilibin's piece "seems authoritative and deals comprehensively with the subject, but […] is not of sufficiently popular or topical interest to warrant publication at the moment" (MS1425/102). The *Spectator* even sent Bilibin not an individual but a prefab reply, which read: "The Editor […] regrets that he is unable to make use of the enclosed MS. Its return implies no judgement on its merits" (MS1425/105).

Even though Bilibin's articles were deemed to lack a sufficiently wide appeal at the time,[26] their historical importance for a reconstruction of what life on Svalbard in the mid-1930s was really like is beyond any doubt. The same applies to the revealing fragments left out through (self-)sensorship from the *Pravda*, *Izvestiia* and *Poliarnaia kochegarka* reports but surviving in Brontman's diaries and the transcript of the top meeting at Glavsevmorput' of 14 May 1936. They have been helpfully supplemented by the semi-forgotten but perceptive Russian émigré and Norwegian press accounts, allowing the reader and researcher to peep beyond the cheerful Barentsburg façade (enthusiastically reimagined in Soviet Svalbardians' officially approved memoirs, such as Stavnitser's).[27]

Was Barentsburg the northernmost Potemkin village, or "sham" (as Bilibin 1937b defined it)? Yes and no. There is no point in denying that the farm, the orangeries, the crèche, the culture club and, above all, the coal output were real. Yet no less tangible was the sinister atmosphere that the settlement exuded despite the Soviet authorities' efforts to conceal it. Our findings merely confirm, rather than challenge, the established perception that "the Norwegian government largely chose to leave the Soviet mining communities to their own devices. […] Until the outbreak of WWII, the Soviet presence on

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[25] In fact, the ethnic makeup of the Soviet mining settlements on the archipelago varied and represented the USSR in miniature. Thus, "there was an accountant from Odessa, a wagon driver from Dagestan, a mine shaft sinker from Tatarstan and a coal cutter operator from Georgia" (Stavnitser 1948: 115). Skouen (1935: 5) mentions Tatars and Karelians as guides inside the Barentsburg mine, at a time when Store Norske mostly employed workers from Norway (see Evjen 2006: 73).

[26] What was expected of Bilibin on his Svalbard trip, was summed up by the *Daily Express* features editor John Rayner: "a leader-page article on 'Mr. and Mrs. Russian Smith at the North Pole in 2037', done in a Wellsian manner and based on impressions picked up at Spitzbergen" (Bilibin 1937). For his part, evidently talking cross-purposes, Bilibin (1937a) suggested to file copy about "Fight for the Arctic", "Down an Arctic coal mine", "An Arctic Governor interviewed", "A church which is only open in winter" and so on.

[27] According to Stavnitser (1948: 129), the most common question posed to Barentsburgians by tourists in the mid- to late 1930s was "Why are you all so merry?"

Svalbard was primarily driven by economic interests. There is little evidence that the archipelago played any significant role in Soviet military strategic thinking" (Portsel and Holtsmark 2015: 122). Yet, by including previously little known, both published and unpublished, verbal and visual material, this article adds a few missing puzzle pieces to the jigsaw reconstituting aspects of community life on Svalbard ninety-odd years ago.

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