Between Myth and Reality: Soviet Legacies in the Russian Arctic

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For centuries, the Arctic has been a source of economic and symbolic pride for the Russian state. Over one-fourth of Russia's landmass is located in the Arctic or sub-Arctic regions (McCannon, 1998, 4). In 2014, twenty percent of the Russian GDP came from north of the Arctic Circle (Laruelle, 2014, xxi), and today, ninety-five percent of the nation's gas reserves, as well as seventy-five percent of the oil reserves are located above the sixtieth parallel north (Blakkisrud and Honneland, 2006, 12). Through Soviet industrialization efforts, the Russian Arctic became the most populous northern region in the world (Reisser, 2017, 3; Bruno and Kalemeneva, 2023.). Russia is also a formidable Arctic actor in part due to geography– 53 percent of the world's Arctic coastline is under Russian control.

Today, the Arctic is warming four times faster than the rest of the world. The region, once a Cold War hotspot, was seen as peripheral in global affairs for the better part of 30 years after the fall of the Soviet Union. Yet in an era of melting sea ice, renewed militarization, NATO expansion, and rising Western tensions with an increasingly belligerent Russian state, the Arctic is drawing attention once again. Like its Soviet predecessor, today's Russia has invested billions into Arctic development and planned large-scale projects in the north, building on Soviet Arctic initiatives and carrying on a tradition of northern advancement that has existed for centuries. As the West once again faces a Russian competitor in the north, Russia's Soviet Arctic history matters now more than ever before.

Soviet Arctic imaginaries

Russian forays into the Arctic date back to the sixteenth century, when expeditions were organized to look for valuable natural resources in the north (McCannon, 1998, 12). However, pre-1917, Russian imperial incursions into the region were sporadic, poorly organized, and largely not state-driven. "The pre-Soviet colonization of the Northern territories of Russia was more or less spontaneous, directed by diverse driving forces and actors…while the Soviet stage of colonization was strictly directed from above," writes social scientist Alla Bolotova (Bolotova, 2014, 40-41). Nonetheless, natural resources in the north were always one of the main attractions that lured people into the region, and the imperial state sought to organize exploration teams to varying degrees of success (McCannon, 1998, 12).

Under the Soviet leadership of Vladimir Lenin and especially Joseph Stalin, forays into the Arctic shifted gears. Efforts to turn the Soviet Union into an industrial and military superpower led to a frenzied, state-led campaign of *osvoenie* (mastering) and industrialization, which was applied all over the Soviet lands, but particularly in the Arctic, which was seen as the perfect place to demonstrate the power of Soviet modernity and prowess over nature (Timonina, 2018). Nature and natural resources lay at the heart of the Soviet drive to conquer, remake, and modernize. The Soviet approach to nature, and especially natural resources in the north, presents an interesting paradox: during the Stalin period, the Soviet state rejected nature as a useless entity that had to be conquered and transformed, but natural resources were considered valuable and the key to the Soviet Union's industrial and military might (Bolotova, 2014, 34).

Under Stalin, "no economic plan was too ambitious, no ethnic group too backward, and no climate too severe," observes historian Yuri Slezkine (Slezkine, 1994, 187). This line of thinking was adopted by some of the best-known members of Soviet leadership. Leon Trotsky thought of nature as an entity to be conquered and manipulated – this is

perhaps one of the few things that the exiled revolutionary and Stalin agreed on. In a 1924 essay, Trotsky wrote that nature had previously controlled people and hung over them like fate, but people rose up and learned to conquer nature instead, remarking that humans had already made fundamental changes to the natural landscape all over the world. However, "the present distribution of mountains and rivers, of fields, of meadows, of steppes, of forests, and of seashores, cannot be considered final," Trotsky argued, writing that much more would change as socialist technology was expanded (Trotsky, 1924). Historian Douglas Weiner writes that in taming nature, the thinking went, Soviet people could tame themselves, meaning that Soviet society could be filtered of enemy elements, corresponding with the repression and social engineering that the state undertook during the same period. This ideology likely inspired writer Maxim Gorky's well-known quote: "Man, in changing nature, changes himself" (Weiner, 1988, 170). Writing about Karelia, an Arctic territory adjacent to Finland, Gorky stated that the conquest of nature was part of the path to create a classless society:

Stalin holds a pencil. Before him lies a map of the region. Deserted shores. Remote villages. Virgin soil, covered with boulders. Primeval forests. Too much forest as a matter of fact; it covers the best soil. And swamps. The swamps are always crawling about, making life dull and slovenly. Tillage must be increased. The swamps must be drained…The Karelian Republic wants to enter the stage of classless society as a republic of factories and mills. And the Karelian Republic will enter classless society by changing its own nature (Quoted in Williams, 2010, 187).

Other revolutionaries echoed these sentiments. "There is no land Soviet power cannot transform for the good of mankind," said Bolshevik politician Sergei Kirov (McCannon, 2003, 246). This quote outlived his 1934 assassination and was used as a slogan at the 1939 Soviet Arctic pavilion at the World Fair in New York City (Timonina, 2018). Thus, the Arctic became a focal point for the Soviet "conquest of nature," as its harsh, cold, and remote landscape was seen as the ultimate challenge in the Soviet crusade. "If the "struggle with the elements" was an integral theme in Soviet culture during the 1930s, that struggle found its highest expression above the Arctic Circle," writes historian John McCannon (McCannon, 1998, 83).

The drive to conquer and develop brought the Soviet Arctic project into the fold of socialist realism. McCannon calls the Soviet north a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate, on which the state could project its hopes, dreams, and thoughts about self (McCannon, 2003, 242, 251). Similar to many other Arctic nations, the Soviet north was characterized by heroism from the first days of its exploration. In the Soviet case, this narrative was meant to inspire citizens and show that the unruly and remote Arctic could only be "civilized" by courageous socialist efforts of the Soviet people. Sponsored by state policies and news articles, the Soviet Union experienced a "national craze" about the Arctic in the 1920s and 1930s, and Arctic explorers and industrialists were portrayed as national heroes (McCannon, 1998, 246). Newspaper articles in popular papers updated readers about the mastering of the north as seen in various Arctic missions, and composers wrote heroic songs about the northern drive (Bolotova, 2014, 47, 120).

From the earliest days of northern settlement, the Soviet state tried to replicate ordinary life in the Arctic. Arctic military bases and polar stations were stocked with products, books, sports equipment, and even musical instruments such as pianos, and "polar theaters" made up of troupes of travelling artists visited the northern outposts to perform for the people living there. Northern residents were also encouraged to hold Communist Party meetings and otherwise adhere to the tenets of normal Soviet life, and celebrations were regularly organized for popular Soviet holidays (McCannon, 1998, 246-247).

The Arctic has been a key component in state-building projects for many northern nations (Kelman, 2017, 116). The Soviet Union was not unique in this regard, but its prevailing Communist ideology, as well as its ruthlessly authoritarian leadership, made the USSR's approach to the question of "taming" the Arctic distinct and arguably more expansive than other Arctic states.

The Soviet Arctic reality

The tales of heroism were of course a facade. Taming and "civilizing" unruly regions to follow the socialist ideal also meant taming and "civilizing" people – rooting out a purported "fifth column" that sought to overthrow Bolshevik rule, and forcing people to conform to state-imposed Soviet values. The Soviet state was especially harsh towards

Indigenous groups within its borders, including communities in the Arctic. Similar to other colonial contexts, Indigenous peoples in the Soviet Union were forcibly moved, forced into sedentary lifestyles, punished for using their languages, cultures, and traditional knowledge, and had children forcibly removed and placed into state-run schools, though this was done in the name of Communism rather than Christianity (Demuth, 2020, 185). In both the Soviet Union and the West, though, Indigenous peoples were subjected to genocidal state-led initiatives tied to ideas of European supremacy. In both cases, lands belonging to Indigenous peoples were violently appropriated for state-sponsored colonial and industrial projects (Bulanin, 2020).

The Soviet state also used its considerable might to subjugate millions into deadly coerced labor. Censored from the news and hidden from the populace, Gulag forced labor camps were pivotal to the conquest and exploitation of the Soviet Arctic. The state's secret police funnelled millions of people, many of them innocent of any wrongdoing or accused of petty crimes, into the meat grinder of the Soviet state's industrial complex. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who spent eight years in the Gulag, argued that the creation of the camps was not to arrest enemies of the state, but rather to create a free and readily accessible labor pool that the state could use to plunder natural resources (Solzhenitsyn, 1973, 578).

To hasten the development of the Soviet Arctic, Promethean projects were undertaken in the north, such as building the Belomor Canal, which connects the Arctic's White Sea with the Baltic Sea, and the Dead Road, an unfinished railway running nearly 1,300 kilometers from Norilsk to Salekhard in northern Siberia. Both projects, among many others, were constructed by Gulag inmates (McCannon, 1998, 59). Major Gulag camps were also established across the Far North and Far East in places such as Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Magadan to extract coal, metals, lumber, and gold. Death tolls in the Gulag were staggering, as inmates labored in inhospitable northern conditions with poor housing and abysmal nutrition. It is difficult to estimate numbers accurately, but historians speculate that approximately 18 million people went through the Gulag system, and 1.6 million of them perished in the camps (Alexopoulos, 2017, 153-154). The camps were most active between the 1920s and 1950s. After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the camps were liberalized, and most inmates were released, but they remained a fixture of Soviet authoritarianism throughout the USSR's existence.

Many Gulag camps eventually grew into large industrial cities in the post-Stalin period (Bolotova, 2014, 43). In the early Soviet period, these efforts effectively created two Soviet Arctics and two Soviet Arctic realities: the real one, plagued by poor living conditions, crime, and accidents, which was realized through the genocidal displacement of Indigenous peoples and populated largely by Soviet prisoners, and the imagined reality described in Soviet myths of Arctic acquisition and development – the land of the future.

Realizing the Soviet Arctic myth

The Soviet Arctic reality started to look marginally more like the myth after the death of Stalin. Soviet youth, usually aged between 20 and 30, were sent to remote regions to work in industrial cities by the Komsomol, a political organization for young communists. While people sent to northern cities in the post-Gulag period saw the surrounding landscape as wild, untamed and potentially dangerous, many of them also had romanticized and idealized ideas about their role in the Soviet project, as builders of socialism (Bolotova, 2014, 47). Many people who came to the north as free civilians were young and in search of adventure, a trend that characterized northern cities for the duration of the Soviet period (Bolotova, 2014, 63). In the post-war period, workers were drawn to the north by economic benefits and living standards that far exceeded norms on the mainland.

Trud, or work, was a major tenet of Soviet values, but in northern industrial cities, the meaning of work took on a more elevated meaning, as all of life revolved around resource extraction in remote Arctic single-industry cities, or monocities. Aside from being the principal location where locals worked and made their livelihoods, the industry in question (often a factory or smelter) was the provider of all of one's worldly comforts, from shelter against the elements in the form of an apartment in the city, to the construction of community spaces such as theaters and sports arenas, to one's very social circle, as people lived and worked together in tight communities (Bolotova, 2014, 131-132). Many young people who met while working in industrial cities ended up marrying and starting families there, and those who planned to work in the north for a short period of time to receive lucrative northern benefits and

salary increases often stayed longer than they had initially anticipated (Bolotova, 2014, 193).

The prosperity did not last. Scholars estimate that approximately six percent of the Soviet GDP was spent on subsidizing Siberian industrial settlements (Hill and Gaddy, 2003), many of them found in Arctic regions. Experts argue that these expenditures could only be accomplished in an authoritarian state given the massive effort required for the construction, upkeep, and staffing of these towns and cities, many of which were not competitive in a capitalist economy (Heleniak, 2009, 135). Indeed, the cost of living was four times higher in the north than on the Russian "mainland" (Blakkisrud and Honneland, 2006, 40).

It is unsurprising that the devastation was so extreme when the Soviet system fell apart, as industrial works lost their funding and were forced to fend for themselves in an inhospitable climate of economic transition (Jorgensen, 2019). The lack of economic diversity in monocities made them vulnerable to economic shocks, and this was illustrated in the Soviet case as living conditions in these locales rapidly declined in the immediate post-Soviet period (Josephson, 2014, 335).

The Soviet Arctic legacy

The sheer size of the Soviet Union, which spanned one-sixth of the Earth's landmass, became a significant problem in the 1990s, as supplying and sustaining unprofitable, far-flung settlements became difficult and there was no more political will to keep doing it. The companies that were already running at a deficit in the north went bankrupt or tethered on the brink of collapse (Josephson, 2014, 226; Blakkisrud and Honneland, 2006, 29). The consequences of this problem were felt all over the former Soviet states, but the Russian North was particularly hard hit. The result was a mass migration of approximately 1.6 million people from the Northern regions – a 15.5 percent drop in population, as wages plummeted and industrial works went out of business, taking jobs and livelihoods with them (Heleniak, 2009, 135). Dozens of towns were abandoned when state funding dried up and businesses collapsed.

After 1991, it appeared that the Soviet experiment had failed. The Russian Arctic was in a state of decay for the better part of the 1990s. By the early 2000s, however, the price of oil rose and the Russian economy improved. Building partially on existing Soviet infrastructure, initiatives led by the enthusiastic new president, Vladimir Putin, were enacted to revitalize Russia's Arctic presence and bring it back to its former greatness, leading to a gradual resurgence in Russia's Arctic power.

Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the West made the Arctic one of the most militarized and securitized regions in the world, not least due to the sizable Soviet nuclear arsenal that was housed in Russia's Kola Peninsula. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the tensions in Arctic affairs experienced a brief thaw, transforming the region into a zone of peace and cooperation. However, in 2007, Russia planted its flag on the seabed under the North Pole, triggering what journalists called a "scramble for the Arctic" and ushering in a renewed period of tension and rivalry. Russia also began rapidly developing its Arctic regions primarily for the exploitation of valuable northern resources, often building off of what the Soviets had done there beforehand (Blakkisrud, 2020). As Arctic warming accelerated, retreating sea ice began to open access to Russia's Northern Sea Route, a maritime corridor which may substantially reduce shipping times between Europe and Asia (Bouffard, 2024). Additionally, Russia began to increase its military presence in the north, reopening old Soviet military bases that had been abandoned after the USSR's collapse and establishing new ones (Kjellen, 2022).

Conclusion

Russian Arctic power grew out of Soviet Arctic supremacy, building on decades of state-led efforts to urbanize, industrialize, modernize and militarize its northern regions. Relics of the Soviet Arctic exist all over the Russian Arctic today: Norilsk, one of the world's largest Arctic cities and metal producers, was built by Gulag inmates. The military buildup in the Kola Peninsula started in the 1930s and 1940s. The Yamal Peninsula's massive natural gas fields were discovered in the 1960s and started exporting gas to Europe in the 1980s. Russia shows no signs of slowing its Arctic ambitions. The country is building thirty floating nuclear power plants to supply remote settlements along the NSR with power. Some of these stations are already complete and in place in the Arctic, despite protests from critics

that their development will amount to a "floating Chernobyl" (Josephson, 2014, 335). Despite Western sanctions, resource extraction in the Russian Arctic continues, as do hydrocarbon exports.

In recent years, countless newspaper articles have proclaimed that a "new Cold War" is underway in the north. Some experts argue that the Cold War never ended in the Arctic, considering that most of the military installations in the region remained ready to fire on their opponents even when the region was regarded as a "zone of peace" in diplomatic circles (Huebert, 2019). While the unique ideology that defined Cold War rivalry, communism, is largely a thing of the past, a rivalry between authoritarian hydrocarbon empire Russia and more than thirty NATO states is underway today. Tensions have been exacerbated further by Russia's second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the subsequent addition of Finland and Sweden, two historically neutral countries, to NATO's ranks. Geopolitical tensions and the growing impact of climate change have brought the Arctic back into the fold of global politics. While seven of the eight Arctic states are now NATO members, Russia is still a significant opponent in the Arctic due to the sheer size of its northern coastline and the historical Soviet efforts in the region. Western states must consider these facts when crafting their own Arctic policies and attempting to manage Russian power in the north.

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