The University Centre in Svalbard
Written exam (re-sit and postponed) SH-201 The History of Svalbard
Wednesday 19th of April 2017, hours: 09.00-12.00

Permitted aids: none, except dictionary between English and mother tongue

The exam is a 3-hour written test. It consists of two parts: Part I is a multiple choice test of factual knowledge. **This sheet with answers to part I shall be handed in.** Part II (see below) is an essay part where you write extensively about one of two alternative subjects. You may answer in English, Norwegian, Swedish or Danish.

Part I counts approximately \( \frac{1}{3} \) and part II counts \( \frac{2}{3} \) of the grade at the evaluation, but adjustment may take place. Both parts must be passed in order to pass the whole exam.

**Part I: Multiple-choice test. Make only one cross for each question.**

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<td>1. Which part of today’s Svalbard was visited <strong>first</strong> by the Barentsz expedition in 1596?</td>
<td>□ Spitsbergen</td>
<td>✗ Bjørnøya</td>
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<td>2. Which species was the first the British exploited commercially at Svalbard?</td>
<td>□ Whales</td>
<td>□ Seals</td>
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<td>3. The first Norwegian wintering expedition (from Hammerfest) took place – when?</td>
<td>✗ 1794-95</td>
<td>□ 1818-19</td>
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<td>4. Russian (Pomor) trapping ended around…?</td>
<td>□ 1800</td>
<td>□ 1830</td>
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<td>5. Of which nationality was Otto M. Torell?</td>
<td>✗ Swedish</td>
<td>□ German</td>
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<td>6. When was the first International Polar Year?</td>
<td>□ 1872-73</td>
<td>✗ 1882-83</td>
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<td>7. Who claimed in 1926 to have been the first to reach the North Pole by aircraft?</td>
<td>□ Wilkins</td>
<td>□ Amundsen</td>
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<td>8. Where was the third and final so-called Spitsbergen conference (in 1914) held?</td>
<td>□ Paris</td>
<td>□ Stockholm</td>
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<td>9. When was Sysselmannen på Svalbard (Governor) established?</td>
<td>□ 1920</td>
<td>✗ 1925</td>
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<td>10. How many settlements/towns on Svalbard produced coal in the year 1930?</td>
<td>✗ 1</td>
<td>□ 2</td>
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<td>11. When was Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani nationalized by the state?</td>
<td>□ 1963</td>
<td>✗ 1976</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. How many people live in Barentsburg now?</td>
<td>✗ ca. 500</td>
<td>□ ca. 700</td>
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**Part II: Choose and answer one of the following questions:**

**A. Early scientific exploration of Svalbard**

*Describe how scientific exploration of Svalbard developed from its early beginning in the 18th century until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Discuss the role that science and scientists played in the economic and political history of the archipelago during that period.*

The concepts “research” and “exploration” are both used about scientific or science related activities in the past. What we may regard today as a pure discovery expedition might have been viewed in the past as advanced science. In this essay concerning early scientific exploration of Svalbard we will take into account that both the meaning of science and the activity itself changed profoundly from its beginning in the 18th century and until 1914.

Polar research as a specific term probably originated in Germany in the 19th century – “Polarforschung” became a scientific discipline. Today, however, we realize that polar research is not defined as a particular discipline, but is a geographical definition: research that is dedicated to polar areas of the world. Typically, it is field based, multidisciplinary,
international and very expensive. It is also typical that polar research is motivated by more than scientific curiosity – individual and national prestige, economic and political interests are also important. Here, we define scientific exploration generally as planned and systematic expeditions to investigate Svalbard mainly for scientific purposes. This may or may not include activity that can be called polar research by today’s standard. The first question is how early this activity started?

While there were voyages to Svalbard in the 17th century that yielded observations of interest to science, there are good reasons to date the beginning of scientific exploration to the mid-18th century. A good candidate for being the first scientific voyage to Svalbard is the so-called Chichagov expedition 1764-1766. Initiated and inspired by the great Russian scientist Lomonosov this expedition’s primary goal was to find a Northeast Passage across the Polar Ocean and to make observations. A preparatory expedition was sent to Svalbard in 1764 and established a base camp station in Recherchefjorden, where a crew wintered. In 1765 and 1766 Chichagov headed an expedition with three ships that went north of Svalbard, reaching a maximum latitude of merely 80º30’ North due to heavy ice. From a scientific point of view, the expedition was not very successful, but it is an example of a planned and systematic attempt to solve an important geographical problem.

Another example of early attempts is the British Phipps expedition of 1773. Like Chichagov’s this expedition also had as a main goal to reach a high latitude, preferably the North Pole, by way of ships. The commander Constantine John Phipps nearly froze in with his two ships at Sjuøyane, and thus did not reach very far north. However, during the expedition a number of scientific experiments and observations were made based on a detailed program developed by the Royal Society, and there was even a dedicated scientist on board.

In the first half of the 19th century there were a number of similar expeditions to Svalbard with exploratory and more or less scientific objectives, particularly from Great Britain. They were all organized with the help of the Royal Navy who put their ships at disposal. The Navy’s interest in exploration must be seen in a geopolitical context; as the world’s dominating naval power Great Britain obviously wanted to take a leading role also in polar exploration, including Svalbard. Thus, the scientific activity became a part of the effort to uphold and increase Britain’s hegemony.

Gradually, during the 19th century scientific exploration of Svalbard became a goal in itself – expeditions went to the area primarily for research purposes. An interesting example is the French “Recherche” expedition that visited Svalbard in 1838 and 1839 as part of a bigger project covering the whole Northern Atlantic. The expedition was multi-disciplinary and also international, in the sense that scientists from many nations were invited to take part. The Recherche expeditions point forward to international research cooperation on Svalbard, of which there are many examples.

Karl Weyprecht and Georg von Neumayer’s initiative in the 1870s to organize the first International Polar Year (1882–83) was a turning point in making polar research more focussed on science, less on heroic exploration and discovery. On Svalbard the Swedes manned the IPY station at Kapp Thordsen, with great success. Since the 1850s, beginning with Otto M. Torell, Sweden had taken a lead in scientific research on Svalbard, sending expeditions every other year to the archipelago. Pure topographic exploration gave way to more detailed studies and terrestrial research. Basic scientific phenomena were studied, for example climate, glaciation, northern light and other geophysical problems. Svalbard became an arena and natural laboratory for basic research and international scientific cooperation.

As a result of the increased activity in this first “Golden Age”, many potentially valuable resources were discovered and mapped, not least coal and minerals. This gave an impetus for commercial mineral exploration, which developed quickly in the early 20th century. In the years before the outbreak of World War I in 1914 there was a growing international interest in
developing Svalbard’s mineral resources. Many scientists were involved themselves in this activity, not only by examining and mapping mineral deposits, but also by occupying promising areas and forming mining companies. Thus, science and the scientific community played an integral and important part in the early industrialization of Svalbard. There was also an element of national competition and rivalry with regard to Svalbard’s resources, combined with national prestige. Science and scientific exploration played a role in this too as a means to underpin national interests on the archipelago. The Swedish geologist A.E. Nordenskiöld’s initiative to establish a colony on Svalbard and exploit a phosphorite deposit at Kapp Thordsen in 1871, for instance, was a direct cause to Sweden’s diplomatic attempt to annex the archipelago in 1871-1872. This attempt failed, as we know, but put Svalbard’s political and legal status on the international agenda. It was not before the end of World War I that this question was solved.

Finally, scientific exploration resulted in an increased public awareness about Svalbard, which in turn attracted and stimulated tourism that developed rapidly from the 1890s. Also, many scientists – among them Nordenskiöld – expressed concern for the wildlife and environment being threatened by human activity. The scientific community thus helped raising the question of environmental protection and probably inspired the later Svalbard Treaty in this respect.

To sum up, the scientific profile of Svalbard research has changed over time. Initially, geographical exploration and mapping was top priority. From the mid 19th century geology and geophysics were at the forefront. Resource geology became important around the turn of the century, and had political implications in the struggle for sovereignty over Svalbard.

Science has played an important role in Svalbard’s general history. It helped increase the scientific and public knowledge about the area, but has also contributed in the basic understanding of global natural phenomena like glaciations, aurora, climate and so on.

Scientific expeditions stimulated tourism and vice versa, and also gave a direct impetus to the development of a mining industry. Science was a political factor as well, for instance in connection with the sovereignty issue. Today, research and education represent one of the main pillars of Svalbard’s economy.

B. Governance on Svalbard

For some 300 years Svalbard was considered a terra nullius. Explain what we mean by this term and describe briefly the process that lead to Norwegian sovereignty on the archipelago. Discuss the form of governance that Norway introduced on Svalbard before the Second World War.

Although there are various hypotheses as to when Svalbard was first visited by man, it is a recognized historical fact that the archipelago was discovered by a Dutch expedition headed by Willem Barentsz in June 1596. Barentsz was searching for a navigable passage to the Far East north of Norway. Having met with continuous ice at approximately 80 degrees north, his expedition discovered land on their way south again. This land was what we now know as Svalbard. Barentsz himself was unsure whether this was an archipelago or a part of the European continent or Greenland. Anyway, they named it “Spitsbergen” after the pointed mountains on the western coast. On the map of the expedition that was published in 1598 the land is simply called “Het nieuwe Land” – the new land.

We have no sources to indicate that Barentsz or anyone else in the expedition made any attempt to claim sovereignty of the newfound area. Neither did the Dutch authorities, the States General. However, when the whaling activity started in the early 17th century, rivalry over hunting grounds and rights arose between the British and the Dutch. The British, who started the commercial whaling in 1611, tried to squeeze out Dutch competition by arguing
that they had claimed Spitsbergen (Svalbard) in the name of the English king James I. They also alleged – falsely – that the archipelago at initially been discovered by Hugh Willoughby in 1553. The Dutch protested against this, on two grounds. First, it was clearly proven that the Barentsz expedition discovered the islands in 1596, and second, they objected to the notion that a state could claim sovereignty over a remote area located in the open seas, far from the home borders. The Dutch here relied on the legal theories of Grotius, who defined the *mare liberum* – the open or free seas – as areas of the world that should not be subject to national sovereignty, but must be open for navigation and trade for everybody. Even the Danish-Norwegian king Christian IV intervened in the diplomatic dispute. Assuming – also falsely – that Spitsbergen was a territorial prolongation of Greenland, and on the basis of a notion that Norway had age-old sovereignty over the Northern Atlantic, he claimed sovereignty as well.

In the 1620s, when whaling was developing rapidly with many national actors at Svalbard, the diplomatic dispute was put to a rest. In practice, Svalbard was being exploited as a commons. Thus, the archipelago became regarded as a *terra nullius* – a no man’s land or a land that could not be owned by anybody. In legal terms, this means that no single state or group of states can exercise sovereignty by introducing laws and regulations, possibly barring other nations from access or exploitation of resources.

This situation prevailed for more or less 300 years. In the early 1870s Sweden took a diplomatic initiative towards other European states to annex Svalbard (or Spitsbergen, as it was called then) under the flag of Norway. Due to protests from Russia, and some skepticism in Norway, nothing came off this attempt and Svalbard retained its terra nullius status. When Norway broke out of the union with Sweden in 1905, the issue was once again raised on the international agenda. The pretext was the development of mining and mineral exploration after 1900. There were a number of incidents of territorial disputes (“claim jumping”) and work conflicts in the mining settlements that raised the problem of lacking administration and the rule of law. Also, Norway had obvious national and political ambitions on Svalbard and strove for a predominant position. Prior to the outbreak of World War I there were a series of diplomatic consultations and conferences in Kristiania (Oslo), which tried to work out an administrative solution to the “Spitsbergen issue” by way of a treaty. The first two, in 1910 and 1912, were preparatory conferences between Norway, Sweden and Russia, who had a mandate to propose a draft treaty. The draft implied a joint administration by the three states, a so-called *condominium* that did not give Norway or any other a particular role. This model was rejected by the other parties when the international conference was called in 1914. No solution was found, and soon after the war broke out and the diplomatic process came to a halt.

During the war, Norwegian economic interest on Svalbard grew, whereas other nations reduced or quit their activities. In 1918, as the nations were preparing for the end of the end of the war and an upcoming peace conference, Norway formally presented a demand on Svalbard. When the peace conference opened in Paris in 1919, the High Council decide to take up the Spitsbergen issue in a separate commission and invited Norway to propose a draft treaty. The Norwegian government did so, and with relatively few changes and amendments the Svalbard Treaty was signed on 9 February 1920, stating “the full and absolute sovereignty” of Norway (article 1).

The Treaty states the rights of Norway and the citizens of signing states, but does not regulate the form of governance and administration – that is up to Norway as sovereign to decide. Consequently, Norway had to come up with laws and regulations that reflected her responsibilities. First and foremost, this entailed the making of a framework law – the
Svalbard Law. This work actually took five years to complete, and only in 1925, on the 14th of August, Norway was ready to assume sovereignty.

The central point of the Svalbard Law was to devise a system of governance, and in particular local representation. The economic realities were such that there was a post-war international economic crisis. Most of the coal mining companies on Svalbard went bankrupt during the 1920s. Hence, the Norwegian government could hardly afford an expensive and extensive local administration, end neither was it needed in light of the diminishing economic activity on the archipelago. Various models were considered, one of which was to put Svalbard under the administration of a mainland County General (fylkesmann) and only keep a chief of police present on the islands. Other tasks would be fulfilled by the central ministries according to their competence. In the end, in 1925 when the Svalbard Law was passed in the national assembly (Stortinget), another arrangement was chosen. The Government’s high representative on Svalbard should be the Sysselmann (Governor), who would combine the functions of police chief, public notarial and assistant judge.

The first Sysselmann to be appointed was Johannes Gerckens Bassøe, who assumed his position on Svalbard in the fall 1925. He spent the first winter at the telegraph station on Finneset in Grønfjorden, working on special legislation. The following year was spent in Oslo, whereas in 1927/1928 he was stationed in Ny-Ålesund. The Sysselmann had few resources – a police officer to assist him and a small vessel. In practice he had few possibilities to actively enforce jurisdiction.

In 1928 Bassøe was appointed County General (fylkesmann) in Troms, but retained a double-duty as Sysselmann. In practice, he did not visit Svalbard again. Instead, there were authorized assistants (ssysselmannsfamilmekteg) on Svalbard during the summer season while Bassøe was formally in charge from his office in Tromso. Central government did not invest more resources than necessary in the office – the Sysselmann did not even have a permanent office and house until 1934, when finally a building was put up in Longyearbyen. From 1932, though, an assistant wintered in Longyearbyen. The primary reason was that the Soviet-Russians had started coal mining in 1931-1932, and the Norwegian government realized that it was necessary to keep a permanent presence. In 1935, the arrangement with a permanent Sysselmann was reintroduced and Wolmer Marlow was appointed. He had this post until Longyearbyen was evacuated during the war in 1941 and resigned the year after.

In spite of the fact that Svalbard had a permanent, locally based Sysselmann from 1935 and until the Second World War, there was little or no increase of resources for the office. Marlow had an assistant and a small boat at his disposal in the summer, but was otherwise locked to Longyearbyen, apart from the occasional dog-sleigh ride in the wintertime. Contact with the Russians and other actors was consequently very limited. In practice, the Sysselmann remained a “sheriff” in Longyearbyen with relatively few tasks and responsibilities. He might to a certain degree influence political and administrative authorities on the mainland through letters and reports, but the decisions were made in Oslo, primarily by the Ministry of Trade and Industries (Handelsdepartemenet), which had the coordinating responsibility for Svalbard on behalf of the Government.

In conclusion, the system of governance that Norway introduced on Svalbard in 1925 and that was in operation until 1941, was a “minimum regime”. It consisted in practice of one local person, the Sysselmann. The Sysselmann was not permanently present on Svalbard until 1935. He had inadequate resources at his disposal and was not able to establish an effective or comprehensive administration and jurisdiction on behalf of Norway. On the other hand, the
needs for such public administration were probably limited during this period, as the mining companies took care of all the practicalities of living and working on Svalbard. The main reasons why the Norwegian government did not establish a bigger and more elaborate local administration are partly the unwillingness to spend much public money in a period of economic crisis, partly the little political interest in Svalbard and partly a wish to retain central control. In practice, the Ministry of Trade and Industries took care of the governance from 1934, and before that the Ministry of Justice was in charge.

The situation changed gradually after the war when Svalbard’s geopolitical position became more acute, but the expansion of the Sysselmann’s office did not really start until the 1970s. That, however, is another story.