

1. The History of Svalbard – an introduction

Students are required to keep informed about the course activities. For all practical and administrative questions, please visit the SH-201 Canvas Room. External students <https://www.unis.no/course/sh-201-the-history-of-svalbard/>. On Canvas you will find copies of lecture slides, exercises, earlier exams and other useful information.

This course is lecture based and has ca. 250 pages recommended reading as curriculum – it is your responsibility to find and study adequate material. If you plan to take the exam you will be well advised to consult the recommended literature or similar works.

What is history?

History as a science is concerned with human communities and activities in the near or distant past. Thus, history occupies a place both in the humanities and in social science. As any academic field it is problem-oriented. Historical research will pose particular questions concerning the past with an ambition to explain, not merely describe. In principle, it is impossible to reconstruct a perfect, true picture of the past. Instead, the historian will attempt to construct an image that is as close to past reality as possible. In doing so, objectivity is an ideal, but hard to achieve.

Historians employ a variety of theories and methods, and there is hardly any one method that is exclusive to historical science. However, at the heart of historical practice lie critical study and interpretation of sources. The past leaves behind traces and remnants of human thinking and activity – documents, oral statements, pictures, objects, cultural landscapes and so on. In principle, any or all these remnants are possible sources for the study of history. The choice of relevant sources depends on the questions you seek an answer to. If, for instance, you are interested in 16th Century daily life in the British countryside, you might want to look for sources like written accounts, contemporary paintings, old maps, material evidence like tools and furniture, church registers, census data and so forth. Working with the various sources you must decide whether they are representative and reliable. Is this a first-hand account, a prime witness to an event or merely hear-say? Can we be sure that this is a truthful statement? What was the real context of this? In short, the sources must be subjected to a systematic criticism – very much like the evaluation of evidence in a court trial.

Written (and oral) sources can be descriptive or normative – or both. The difference is that descriptive sources say something about how things are or were, whereas normative sources say something about how things ought to be. For example, a statistic is a descriptive source, while a law text is clearly normative. Many sources obviously have elements of both.

One and the same source may be exploited in different ways. A written account, for example, can be used as evidence of something that happened in the past, a description of actual events. The same account can also be exploited to interpret and describe the author, for instance telling something about his or her motives, values, concepts, and the like. The bottom line is – be careful, conscious and critical when you study sources.

The colonization of the Arctic

Arctic peoples originate from Central Asia and migrated into the northern areas of present day Russia during the last stages of the Ice Age (Pleistocene), and spread out over huge territories forming different tribes and ethnic groups. At some time before or at the beginning of the Holocene epoch, possibly as early as 13,000 years ago, the first people crossed the then shallow and partly dry Bering Strait and spread on the American continent. This was probably a process that went over a long period in time, not as one big migrational wave. Some peoples remained in the northern coastal areas as the ice gradually melted away,

exploiting the rich marine mammal resources. Several different Inuit cultures developed and disappeared; it was a dynamic situation. For example, Greenland was inhabited by different cultures over time. Present day Greenlanders are descendants of the Thule people who came from today's Arctic Canada around AD 1000.

These peoples as far as we know, never colonized Svalbard. During Pleistocene there was still open water around the archipelago. Without the development of a proper ship technology Svalbard was out of reach – 500 km or more from the nearest mainland. Due to its high latitude the dark season is long. The resource basis for subsistence is limited during the winter, and seasonal migration is ruled out in this area. These are most likely the reasons why Svalbard remained uninhabited for so long.

Svalbard's history in a nutshell

There are alternative hypotheses about the discovery of Svalbard, but Barentsz' visit in 1596 is a well-documented starting point of cultural history. From a largely economic perspective the history of Svalbard can be divided into a few main phases, which to some degree overlap:

- Whaling, ca. 1610–1850: an international summer activity. Land based, coastal whaling until the end of the 17th century, thereafter open sea hunting in the North Atlantic.
- Russian (Pomor) hunting and trapping, ca. 1700–1850: Both summer and winter expeditions. Initially walrus was the main prey, later also other bio-resources were exploited.
- Norwegian hunting, trapping, and sealing, from ca. 1800: At first overlapping the Russian activity, the Norwegians gradually took over. After World War II only few wintering trappers remain.
- Scientific research, from ca. 1760: an international activity that expanded greatly from the last part of the 19th century. Today, one of the significant factors in Svalbard economy. Geological research and exploration gave rise to...
- Coal mining, from ca. 1900: initially an international activity, but from the 1930s only Russian (Soviet) and Norwegian coal mines. The year-round mining required...
- Local settlements and community development, from 1905: some of the coalmines developed into permanent or semi-permanent local communities such as Longyearbyen and Barentsburg. Consequently, there is a social history connected to these "towns".
- Tourism, from ca. 1850: Large scale organized tourism (cruise ships) started in the 1890s. Particularly in the last two decades tourism has become a major factor in Svalbard's economy.

In the economic history of Svalbard 1900 is a watershed: this marks the start of the industrial, modern age. In the political history, however, 1920 is a turning point. The Svalbard Treaty of 9 February 1920 gave Norway sovereignty, which was formally assumed on 14 August 1925. From then on Svalbard was no longer *terra nullius* – no man's land.

Food for thought

- Would you characterize the Svalbard Treaty as a descriptive or a normative source?
- Why was Svalbard not colonized in pre-historic times, and which consequences does a lack of an indigenous population have for the historical development of Svalbard?
- What could be the connection between tourism, scientific exploration, and coal mining on Svalbard?