

7. The industrialization of Svalbard: From Søren Zakariassen to Store Norske

17th century whalers were aware that coal and other minerals were available on Svalbard but did not exploit these resources. Hunters and trappers may sometimes have used local coal, and the “gentleman tourist” James Lamont dug bunker coal in Kongsfjorden and Adventfjorden for his ship “Diana” in 1869. Commercial production, however, came later, spurred by rapid industrialization in Europe.

A.E. Nordenskiöld founded the first industrial company, “AB Isfjorden”, in 1872, planning to exploit a phosphorite deposit at Kapp Thordsen for fertilizer. Production never started. In 1899 the sealing captain Søren Zakariassen mined around a ton of coal at Bohemanneset and Heerodden in Isfjorden, some of which was sold locally, and the rest in Tromsø. He also initiated several small coal companies in Norway that sent prospecting expeditions to Svalbard and claimed coalfields during the first years of the 20th century. The British Spitsbergen Coal & Trading Co. bought one of these fields on the north side of Adventfjorden and carried out the first year-round production in 1905–08. The operation then closed due to lack of resources, labour conflicts, technical and financial problems.

In the decade before the First World War many individuals and companies were active on Svalbard, prospecting for minerals and claiming areas. Since this was still a no man’s land, property rights could not be confirmed, or conflicts resolved by state authorities. One of the most expansive companies, the Northern Exploration Co. (UK), at some point claimed to “own” 10,000 km² of Svalbard and had a stock capital of 1 million pounds, but never produced any substantial amount either of coal, iron, or marble. Before 1914 only the Arctic Coal Co. (US) was able to start a sizeable production. In Longyeardalen they established a mine that eventually employed 2–300 people in wintertime and had a production capacity of up to 50,000 tons of coal per year. In 1915 the mine was closed due to the war problems.

During WW1 most of the mining activity was abandoned, but new Norwegian companies were formed in 1916–17. One of them, the Store Norske Spitsbergen Kullkompani, bought the estates and mines of ACC. After the war also Dutch (Barentsburg), British-Russian (Grumant) and Swedish (Svea) companies started mining but had to give in during the economic crisis in the 1920s. The implementation of the Svalbard Treaty and the Mining Code in 1925 provided a legal framework but did not stimulate further industrialization. After 1930 only Store Norske and the Soviet Trust Arktikugol continued coal mining – in Longyearbyen, Barentsburg and Grumant. The other mines on Svalbard had closed, permanently or temporarily.

Svalbard was evacuated in 1941 because of the war, and in 1943 German warships bombed and heavily destroyed the mines. In 1945 reconstruction started, now including Ny-Ålesund, Svea and Pyramiden. Recurring marked crises and economic problems made coal mining unprofitable, but for political reasons it was important to uphold presence – for Norway as well as for the USSR. There were no real alternatives to coal mining. In 1976 Store Norske was nationalized, and a modernization process in Longyearbyen started. From the 1990s the economy has diversified significantly. Still, coal mining was important: from 2001 Store Norske produced without state subsidies in Svea Nord but had to end production in 2015. Its last mine, Gruve 7, is bound to stop production in the fall of 2023. Russian mining continues in Barentsburg but the mine in Pyramiden closed in 1998.

Food for thought

- In what way can coal mining on Svalbard be said to have political significance?
- Think hypothetically: How would Svalbard have been today without a coal industry?