

4. Russian and Norwegian hunting and trapping

The Russian term ‘pomory means “people living by the sea”, i.e. the White Sea in Northwest Russia. Pomors originate from the south (Novgorod area) and colonized the White Sea region from the 12th century on. They developed a versatile economy consisting of farming, fishing, hunting and trade. Sea mammal hunting, particularly walrus, became a speciality for some. Following this prey, the Pomors expanded into the Arctic – the Pechora Sea, Kara Sea, Novaya Zemlya and eventually Svalbard. According to Russian tradition, they arrived early at Svalbard – or Grumant, as they called it. Archaeologist V.F. Starkov maintains they came before Barentsz, in the 16th century. Western scientists believe they came at a later stage; Archaeologist T. Hultgreen says after 1700.

There were both summer and winter expeditions. The latter probably numbered fewer men, but the activity was extensive. Remains of Pomor trapping stations are found all over Svalbard. While the summer expeditions primarily hunted sea mammals, the winterers could also hunt or trap fur animals and collect eider down and eggs. Although a few trappers stayed voluntarily or by mishap for more years (the famous Ivan Starostin stayed 39 winters, 15 of them in a row), the regular pattern was seasonal. The winterers were picked up by the following summer expedition – hopefully.

We lack information about the organization and results of Pomor hunting, but it seems it peaked before 1800. The last expedition returned in 1852. There are numerous possible explanations as to why the activity stopped, but accidents and structural changes in the Pomor economy are important. Fisheries and trade received more attention in the 19th century.

Northern Norway came late to hunting and trapping. After a few unsuccessful attempts in the late 18th century, activity picked up from the 1820s. Hammerfest was the first town to engage; after 1850 Tromsø became the leading Arctic port. There were many fatalities during the first winterings, and eventually summer expeditions became the favoured form. Sealing in the West Ice and East Ice was a far more important activity, however. Compared to these hunting grounds, Svalbard played a modest economic role.

From the 1890s winter trapping picked up again, but this time usually by smaller parties of 2–4 people. Svalbard was in practice divided into some 40 different hunting fields to reduce competition. Although there was no formal ownership, usage rights prevailed. Merchants, who in return secured a part of the catch, outfitted some of the trappers. Others were individual entrepreneurs who from time to time had to take other jobs to be able to afford a hunting expedition. Profits were low and unsure, but in the 1920s and 1930s unemployment and poverty were widespread in Norway, so the “free Svalbard life” might seem attractive in comparison.

Only a handful of the wintering hunters and trappers can be called professional, in the sense that this was their main career. 60 % of the winterers 1895–1941 spent only one season on Svalbard, and among them 6 % women.

The hunting and trapping took its toll on the stock of game. Reindeer were becoming scarce when they were protected in 1925. Other species were endangered too, but a regulation regime was slow in coming (cf. lecture 8). Until the quota system was introduced in 1970, hundreds of polar bears were killed every year. Ironically, only a quarter of these catches are attributed to the “real”, wintering hunters and trappers.

Food for thought

- What are the differences and similarities between Russian and Norwegian hunting and trapping in the 19th century?
- To what extent has hunting and trapping on Svalbard been economically important?