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Brief article

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“From Northeast Passage to the Northern Sea Route”. A New Publication on the History of the Northern Sea Route

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Abstract. The present article provides a brief introduction to the first comprehensive scholarly account in English of the history of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) from the earliest exploration to the first decades of the 21st century. It was published in October 2022 under the title “From Northeast Passage to Northern Sea Route. A History of the waterway North of Eurasia” by Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, The Netherlands. This introduction touches on a few important issues that are discussed in the volume, which is written by a team of Russian, Norwegian, Dutch and British historians and political scientists. The first stage of this project was carried through in the 1990s, within the framework of INSROP (The International Northern Sea Route Programme (1993–1999)), which was conducted by the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Oslo. As a result of their efforts four working papers appeared on the history of NSR. In the end a decision was made to develop the topic further into a collective monograph. This second stage of the project, however, started only many years later, in 2015, and was executed in the course of seven years, now under the leadership of the UiT – The Arctic University of Norway. In the present article you will find information about the contents and direction of the monograph, as well as a small sample from the book, chosen from a multitude of other themes, for the simple reason that it is relevant to the recent commemoration of 150th anniversary of Franz Josef Land’s discovery (1873–2023).

Keywords: *new publication on the Northern Sea Route, history, geography, Arctic research, international scientific cooperation*

In October 2022 the book «*From Northeast Passage to Northern Sea Route. A History of the Waterway north of Eurasia*» was published by Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, the Netherlands. This book is the first comprehensive scholarly account in English of the history of the Northern Sea Route, from its earliest exploration to the twenty-first century. It is written by an international team of authors, four Russians, three Norwegians, one Dutch and one British historian. One of the Norwegians is a political scientist. The event, which led to this publication, may be dated back to 1 October 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, made his famous speech in Murmansk where he proposed that the Arctic be made into a zone of peace through international collaboration. In this connection he offered to open the

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Northern Sea Route (NSR) up to international shipping.

The reception of Gorbachev's speech in western countries was one of wait-and-see: Was this just another propaganda-stunt from the Soviet Union, or was it a serious initiative to ease the Cold War? It turned out to be the latter, and as a direct result of Gorbachev's initiative six years later a joint multidisciplinary research program was implemented by institutions in Russia, Japan and Norway: the International Northern Sea Route Programme, for short INSROP. The overarching objective of INSROP, which was led by the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Oslo and its director, Willy Østreng, was to build an inter- and multidisciplinary base of knowledge at an international scale, encompassing all aspects involved in carrying through viable shipping operations along the Northern Sea Route [1, pp. 414–417].

The International Northern Sea Route Programme, which lasted for six years (1993–1999), stimulated the need for reliable historical knowledge about the Northern Sea Route and how it gradually has been explored through the centuries - and how this waterway was put to use. Professor Willy Østreng writes in his foreword to the above-mentioned book:

"A small, but productive multinational team of Arctic-historians – Jens Petter Nielsen (Norway), Edwin Okhuizen (Netherlands), Vladimir Nikolaevich Bulatov (Russia) and Terence Armstrong (England) - took on the job to make the first cooperative international account of the Northern Sea Route's history ever undertaken. The aim was to make this partly secret and unwritten history an integral chapter of world maritime history and available to an extended international readership. Four working papers were published during the years 1996–1998, covering the consecutive periods each respective author had been assigned¹, and a plan took form of writing a comprehensive work on the history of the Northern Sea Route. Based on a unique access to Russian archives and an overwhelming volume of new data, the team soon realized that the task was too grand to be finished within the stipulated lifetime of INSROP. For this reason, the project was put on hold until a suitable window of opportunity would open in the future to conclude what was started in the 1990s" [2, p. XII].

Only in 2015 the project was resumed. In the meantime both Terence Edward Armstrong and Vladimir Nikolayevich Bulatov had sadly passed away², and the team, now reduced to two persons, was strengthened with five new members: the above-mentioned Willy Østreng, former director of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute; Vladislav I. Goldin of the Northern (Arctic) Federal University (Arkhangelsk); Olga A. Krasnikova of the Library of the Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg; Alexander Ye. Goncharov of the Siberian State University of Science and Technologies (Krasnoyarsk); and Victoria V. Tevlina, UiT — The Arctic University of Norway (Arkhangelsk-Tromsø).

It took us six years to finish the work. Seminars and meetings between the participants were organised in different cities in Russia and Norway: Krasnoyarsk (2015), Tromsø (2015), St.

¹ INSROP Working Papers: PART I (no. 28-1996); PART II (no. 113-1998); PART III (no. 61-1996); PART IV (no. 84-1997). Published by the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Lysaker.

² T.E. Armstrong and V.N. Bulatov were both aware of the plan to publish a book, so when the project was resumed many years later, it was a matter of course that their names were included as co-authors.

Petersburg (2016), Oslo (2017), Arkhangelsk (2018), Moscow (2018), Kirkenes (2019), Murmansk (2019)³. The work with the book was not to be easy. During six years we discussed the format of the volume, its scope and contents, searched for new written sources, new maps and other illustrations from collections in different countries. As a result a book of 500 pages was born, consisting of seven parts, divided into 33 chapters. At the end of the volume there is also a chapter called "The History of the Project and its Authors", where you can learn more about the background of the project and its participants from Norway, Russia, the Netherlands or Great Britain.

There are 173 illustrations in the book, among them portraits of travellers, captains, indigenous inhabitants of the North, and also images of ships, harbours, and an abundance of old maps connected with the development of the Northern Sea Route. Among the illustrations are paintings by Aleksandr A. Borisov (1866–1934) — the prominent Arkhangelsk artist and outstanding representative of the Kuindzhi school of Russian landscape painters. Borisov's paintings appear at certain strategic points in the book and even complete it. While his contemporaries were mostly painting the countryside around Moscow, in central Russia, Borisov set out to paint the inhospitable landscapes of the Russian Arctic, opening a new chapter in the history of Russian art. The Museum of the Artistic Mastery of the Russian North from Arkhangelsk, gave us permission to publish eight of Borisov's paintings. These paintings illustrate the Arctic nature as it was understood by a Russian painter at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Interestingly enough, during this period Russia also saw a revival of official interest in the northernmost parts of the country, and a breakthrough for the idea of a waterway north of Eurasia.

Viktor Boyarskiy, chairman of the Polar Commission of the St Petersburg Branch of the Russian Geographical Society, and Honorary Polar Explorer (Polyarnik) of Russia in his foreword to the book states that the truly international team of authors «predicates a more objective examination of the history, alongside broader materials, maps and illustrations – many of them never previously published. I consider that a book of such significance will broaden the understanding of the historical role of exploration of the Northern Sea Route in developing the Arctic, and will provide a reliable basis for predicting its future» [2, IX].

From Northeast Passage to Northern Sea Route covers i.a. the slow but steady Russian exploration of the Siberian coasts through the ages, as well as the West-European search for the Northeast Passage to the Orient (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries), the Russian Kamchatka expeditions (eighteenth century), and the navigation from Europe to the major rivers in north-west Siberia (late nineteenth to early twentieth century), as well as the Russian utilisation of the sea route in the Soviet epoch and later. The book demonstrates that the exploration and early use of the NSR to Siberia was a truly international endeavour, involving not only Russian investors and seafarers, but also businessmen and shipowners from England, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries and Germany. In the end, however, the Northern Sea Route as a through traverse came

³ Goldin V.I. Sevморput': k noveyshey istorii voprosa [Northern Sea Route: to the modern history of the issue]. URL: <https://goarctic.ru/work/severnnyy-morskoy-put/> (accessed 01 November 2023).

to be used primarily by the Soviet Union, for which it became a crucial vehicle of geographical and economic integration of its vast territories.

Northeast Passage is a Eurocentric denomination which in our days has become more and more replaced by the Russocentric term "the Northern Sea Route" (*Severnnyy morskoy put*), which is more multifaceted. This later term, which came into general use in the 1930s, draws attention towards the Russian coasts, and what they have to offer, rather than towards the sea route as a through passage between the West and the East. The Northern Sea Route has clearly played an important part in forging Russia into what it is today. This was a slow process, however. First Russia had to reach all the seas that eventually came to wash "the shores of the Russian Empire": the Arctic, the Baltic, the Black, the Caspian and the Pacific. The Russian control of these coastlines was completed after a century-long fundamental process of seaward expansion within Eurasia, a process which historians have named "the urge to the sea" [3].

The Northern Sea Route has even been called "the Soviet national idea", and one important aspect of the NSR was that it could help consolidate Russia's vulnerable northern peripheries. Russia's sovereignty in the Russian part of the Arctic was, as it seemed, particularly challenged by Norwegian activity in the West, and American in the East. Even if, according to international law, it was unnecessary for the occupying state in polar areas to be present at all times in all parts of the land, it was and is a requirement that the occupying state should be able to control it permanently and effectively. In the 20th century scientific activity became more and more important in this respect and contributed for instance significantly, as A.A. Saburov writes, «to the consolidation of Franz Josef Land and Novaya Zemlya for the Soviet Union, and Spitsbergen, Bear Island and Jan Mayen for Norway. This progress was achieved thanks to the fact that scientific institutions through regular expeditions and the establishment of polar stations provided for a permanent presence on Arctic islands and archipelagos» [4, Saburov A.A., p. 14]. The military factor became significant too for Russia, in particular after 1905, when the Russian Baltic fleet was destroyed in Tsushima Strait during the Russo-Japanese War. As early as 1897, Vice-Admiral S.O. Makarov had drawn the attention of the Russian Naval Minister to the possibility of transferring units of the Russian fleet to the Pacific across the Arctic Ocean. This is apparently the earliest recorded mention of the potential military and strategic importance to Russia of the Northern Sea Route. Only after Tsushima, however, the Russian authorities started exploring the possibility of sending war ships to the east via the Northern Sea Route in the future.

One should also single out regional economic interests on the part of Northern Russia and Siberia as a driving force, and in the late Imperial period they were not necessarily identical with those of Central Russia. The Siberians were often critical of the slowness of the Russian government in developing a Northern Sea Route [5]. In order to implement this idea, regional protagonists of a Northern Sea Route tried to ally themselves with foreign seafarers or businessmen. One important question that is discussed in this volume, is the significance of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Bolshevik assumption of power for the breakthrough of the Northern Sea Route as

an important waterway for Russia. Is it conceivable that the Northern Sea Route would have become of crucial importance to Russia in the interwar period and beyond without a revolution? [6, Armstrong T.; 7, Pinkhenson D.M.].

Today the NSR is more topical than ever in history. The team of authors behind this book as such is neither for nor against the NSR as an international transit route. Our task has only been to make sure that the history of its exploration and use is thoroughly studied and made available to a broad circle of readers. History shows that the NSR has never been looked upon as something inevitable, something that should be taken for granted in the long run. Admiral Fyodor Litke, president of the Russian Academy of Sciences (1864–1882), and the well-known German geographer August Petermann were both sceptical about it, because they did not believe in the navigability of the Kara Sea. A.E. Nordenskiöld, who disproved their scepticism by sailing across the Kara Sea and all the way through the Northeast Passage in 1878–1879, could not bring himself to believe in it as a feasible international transit route [8, Nordenskiöld A.E.]. Neither did B.A. Vilkitskiy after the large scale Russian Arctic Ocean Hydrographic Expedition (1910–1915). This was the first through navigation of the NSR from the east to the west. The expedition encountered almost insuperable problems along the way, caused by ice and shallow waters, and Vilkitskiy foresaw that it would be many years before there could be a practicable transit route for naval vessels north of Siberia. And he was right. Such a transit took place for the first time only in 1936⁴.

Neither was the INSROP Programme of the 1990s clear in its conclusions concerning the feasibility of the NSR. The final report from this programme (1999) notes that: "Unless speed can be increased substantially, this will rule out the NSR as an economically feasible alternative to the Suez and Panama Canals for transit voyages" [1]. It stated further that higher speed presupposed radical improvement in shipbuilding technology and navigational systems. Global warming was as yet not ascribed decisive importance at the time, as it could be understood as natural fluctuations between cooling and warming that had been a recurring pattern throughout the age-old climatic history of the Arctic. Today the realization has dawned that the melting of the ice in the Arctic Ocean will continue, and global warming has genuinely changed the prospects for the NSR. At last it has become feasible as a international sea-borne trade route between West and East. Should we rejoice or despair? Will the NSR be sustainable in the long run when it is based on climate change, which obviously is negative and even dangerous to the planet [9, Wadhams P.]? These and other crucial questions concerning the future of the Northern Sea route are addressed in the last chapters of the book *From Northeast Passage to Northern Sea Route. A History of the Waterway north of Eurasia*.

⁴ See more: Ekspeditsiya osobogo naznacheniya 3 [An Expedition for a special purpose 3] (film January 17, 2010). URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fy_d15m27cl&feature=youtu.be (accessed 01 November 2023); Sekret'naya ekspeditsiya: OM-3. Iz dnevnika kinooperatora Marka Troyanovskogo. Muzei TsSD RF [Secret expedition: EON-3, Arktika. From the diary of the camera-man Mark Troyanovskiy. Museum of contemporary dramatic art of the Russian Federation]. URL: csdfmuseum.ru (accessed 01 November 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion we would like to bring a small sample of "From Northeast Passage to Northern Sea Route", and we chose a few pages on Franz Josef Land, due to their relevance for the recent commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the discovery of Franz Josef Land (1873-2023):

"Until about 1860 the North-Norwegian sealing vessels had hunted almost exclusively along the western coasts of Spitsbergen. During the 1860s their hunting industry started to expand, and the stocks of walrus, seals and polar bears on the Svalbard archipelago were rapidly decimated. The sealers now pushed farther to the north and east, into as yet uncharted waters. In 1865 a Russian naval officer, Baron N.G. Schilling, had suggested in a work on sea currents in the Arctic Ocean the existence of an Arctic archipelago between, and to the north of, Novaya Zemlya and Svalbard [10, Perevalov V.A., pp. 170–171]⁵. He substantiated his hypothesis i.a. with the fact that there was never pack ice along the northern coasts of the Kola Peninsula and Norwegian Finnmark. Since there could be no doubt that a sea current transported the ice from the north-east to the south-west in the Arctic Ocean, these coasts should have been covered by almost year-round pack ice, in the same way as the northern coasts of Siberia. The Spitsbergen archipelago itself could not retain ice masses of several tens of thousands square miles; so the only possible explanation was that there existed unknown territories between this archipelago and Novaya Zemlya, forming an impediment for the drifting ice [11, Schilling N.G., p. 219; 12, Horn G., pp. 11–12; 13, Kremer B.A., pp. 147–150; 14, Krenke A.N., pp. 129–130].

Only a few months later, as a result of an exploratory voyage in 1865, a skipper from Hammerfest by name of Nils Rønnbeck discovered some new land that he called North-East Spitsbergen, and which many Norwegians identify as the western fringes of the archipelago today known as Franz Josef Land. This discovery cannot be said to be well documented, and remained unknown to most Norwegian sea mammal hunters at the time [15, Carlsen E.; 16, pp. 298–299]⁶. This is evident from a newspaper article, written by the medical officer of health in the municipality of Alta and published in the newspaper *Aftenbladet* in 1871. The author was unaware of Rønnbeck's alleged discovery, but on the basis of knowledge provided to him by other sea mammal hunters in the area, he all the same suggested the existence of land between Svalbard and Novaya Zemlya. He based his theory exclusively on circumstantial evidence, namely the existence of a reindeer population on Spitsbergen Island.

The crucial question was how the reindeers originally arrived there. The only possible way from the Eurasian mainland would be over the ice from Novaya Zemlya. But the distance between

⁵ It's interesting that M.V. Lomonosov foresaw the existence of a large island or archipelago northeast of Spitsbergen in 1761.

⁶ From Elling Carlsen's book about the Payer-Weyprecht expedition, in which he participated as an ice pilot, it is clear that he was unaware of Rønnbeck's supposed discovery. For complete information on this issue, see Nielsen J.P., ed. *Sblizhenie. Rossiya i Norvegiya v 1814–1917 godakh* [Rapprochement. Russia and Norway in 1814–1917]. Moscow, 2017, pp. 298–299.

Novaya Zemlya and Svalbard is so vast that the reindeers would have starved to death on the road if we do not presuppose the existence of some islands midway, where they could have found something to eat [17, Follum L.]. So both in Russia and Norway there were people who theoretically foresaw the discovery of this archipelago. In 1870 two eminent Russian geographers, A.I. Voyeykov and P.A. Kropotkin, actually planned to send a reconnaissance expedition to look for the land that Baron Schilling had conjectured existed, but they could not secure a grant.

So, the actual, first documented discovery of this archipelago came as a result of the Austro-Hungarian Tegethoff or Payer-Weyprecht expedition, which had not intended to go in this direction. One of the aims of the Tegethoff expedition of 1872–1874 was to navigate the whole length of the Northern Sea Route, approaching it from the open waters which were thought to exist to the north of Novaya Zemlya. The plan was to spend the first winter at Cape Chelyuskin, and then continue the investigation of that part of the Arctic Ocean the following summer. During the expedition's third summer they hoped to be able to make their way along the Northern Sea Route to the Bering Strait and thence to a port in Asia or America [18, Payer J., pp. 9–12; 19, Holland C., p. 290; 20, Vaughan R., pp. 164–165; 21].

While in Tromsø, the Austrians hired the experienced Elling Carlsen as ice-pilot. None the less, only a few hours after Count Wilczek had left them on the western coast of Novaya Zemlya, the Tegethoff was caught fast in the ice, never to get free of it again. Instead of navigating the Northern Sea Route they drifted with the ice in a generally north-westerly direction until they in August 1873 became stranded on a hitherto unknown Arctic archipelago, which they named Kaiser Franz Josef Land, after the Austrian-Hungarian Emperor [22, Schimanski J., Spring U.; 23, Davydov R.A.]⁷. So, as was the case with Spitsbergen, Franz Josef Land was also discovered as a by-product of the search for the Northern Sea Route".

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