

*“Never Mind the Sun, Comrade, It’s We Who Are the Bosses”:
Time and Temporality in the Soviet Arctic in the 1930s*

by

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“We’re going to discover the North Pole.”

“Oh!” said Pooh again. “What is the North Pole?” he asked.

*“It’s just a thing you discover,” said Christopher Robin carelessly,
not being quite sure himself.*

A. A. Milne: Winnie-the-Pooh

Abstract

My thesis examines the Soviet Union's conquest of its northernmost territories, which reached its full capacity during the 1930s. It follows a special interest in the temporality of the Soviet Arctic, the relationship between Moscow and the Soviet Arctic territories, the role of modern technology, and the pioneers of the Arctic together with their relation to the Arctic nature. I argue that the development of the Soviet Arctic was accompanied and even overshadowed by its image as created in the Soviet press. Using a variety of interrelated sources, such as the Soviet journals *Sovetskaya Arktika* [*Soviet Arctic*] and the *Bulletin of the Arctic Institute*, I investigate the major attributes that were established for the mythology of the Soviet Arctic. I contrast this with how the Soviet Arctic was portrayed in western sources, namely contemporary travelogues of journalists and international scholars' works.

My analysis will show that the myth of the Soviet Arctic as constructed by the Soviet press had several functions. One was to maintain a stronger connection between the Far North and the capital. In addition, the Arctic myth was meant to diminish the perceived difference between the living standards in Moscow and that of the pioneers in their remote settlements. In the context of labour shortage, the positive portrayal of life in the Soviet Arctic was also aimed at increasing internal migration into the region. The Soviet press played a key role in this effort at normalizing the image of the Arctic in public perception, overriding previous, exoticizing tendencies.

Modern technologies such as the radio and aviation let the distance to the country's northern frontier vanish and further strengthened the mental connection of the Soviet Arctic with the capital. I will explore how the conjoint effects of the various elements constituting the myth of the Soviet Arctic affected the everyday routine of the northern pioneers. Notably, the regular radio broadcasts transmitted from Moscow organized the daily regime of the Arctic inhabitants and were meant to abolish the time gap between the two places.

The image of the ideal Soviet Arctic pioneer was part of the larger Arctic mythology. I challenge the expression “struggle with nature” that is omnipresent in the secondary literature on the Soviet Arctic. Aiming for a more nuanced view, I investigate the meaning of the word “nature” in the sources, developing a different reading of the term. Here, I will argue that the term should be seen in relation to human internal qualities and their interaction with the external world, but that “nature” was not the main antagonist of the human as commonly portrayed.

Seen together, my thesis puts into question the relationship between Moscow and the Soviet Arctic as that of a binary opposition of center and periphery, as was argued by scholars before. I also critically engage with aspects of older and more recent historiography on the Soviet Arctic that appear problematic from the point of view that my sources offer.

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1. Introduction

1.1 *The Territory of the Soviet Arctic*

It was a late night in August 1935 when Ruth Gruber, an American journalist, met for an appointment with comrade Voevodin, a Soviet economist and one of the oldest inhabitants of the city of Igarka, a brand-new settlement established beyond the Arctic circle. Gruber had stopped Voevodin in the street the day before and asked if she could speak to him some time when he was free. “Certainly”, Voevodin had replied. “Can you make it at three tomorrow morning?”¹

Contrary to what one might think, making an appointment in the middle of the dark night in the polar city of Igarka was really not a matter of conspiracy. Ruth Gruber was not the only foreign journalist who, having had a chance to visit the Soviet Arctic, mentioned in their memoirs the peculiar way in which polar inhabitants dealt with time. “People were quite indifferent to day or night”, wrote the British journalist, Leonard Matters. “While I was there, the mills ran unceasingly and the whole sense of time in detail seemed to have been lost by the people.”² In my thesis, I explore Arctic time and Arctic temporality and what the peculiarities related to the perception of time in the circumpolar region can tell about the relationship between Moscow and the Soviet Arctic in 1930s.

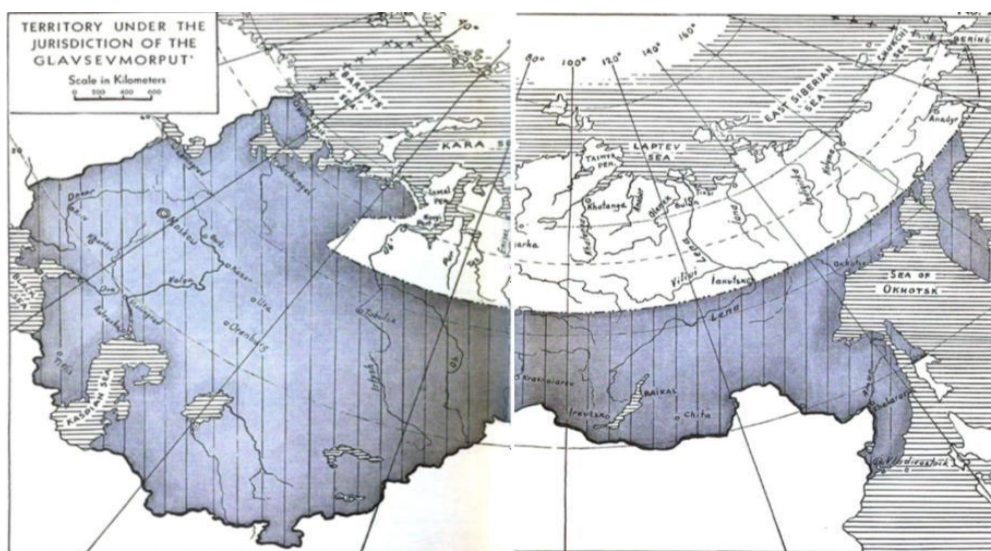
The Arctic is a territory situated on top of the globe, but what exactly should be included in this region has been an important and not at all easy question for geographers, biologists, topographers, economists, and other scientists – as well as for politicians. From the point of view of geographers, it is not accurate to simply draw a line along some degree of latitude, because the diversity of the natural conditions along the same latitude vary immensely. The English geographer, Rudmose Brown, proposes a method to define where the Arctic should begin, based on the borders of the

¹ Gruber, Ruth. *I Went to the Soviet Arctic*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939, 193.

² Matters, Leonard. *Through the Kara Sea*. London: Skeffington, 1932, 177.

area where trees are still growing.³ Thus, the territory beyond or 'above' the tree belt is to be considered the Arctic. But this does not work for the Russian North-West, because the region within the vast country which is traditionally considered the Arctic does not fit in this category. There is also a theory proposed by Nils Nordenskjöld, the Swedish polar explorer, who suggests that we can determine the southern border of the Arctic in places where the mean temperature of the warmest month crosses 9 centigrade. This theory is logical and reasonable, but in reality, the border is very unstable, jumping up and down with the inevitable variation of the climate.⁴

The Soviet government preferred to use administrative boundaries for delineating the Arctic. According to a decree of the Central Executive Committee issued on April 15, 1926, in the European part of the USSR the Soviet Arctic includes only the islands and the seas, and in the Asian part everything above 62 degrees north latitude.



On the map, the territory of the Soviet Union is grey; the white part, including the archipelagoes, is the Soviet Arctic.⁵

The region thus defined includes one third of the entire territory of the Soviet Union. The Arctic is rich in natural resources, but these are hard to extract because the land is underpopulated and

³ Taracouzio, Timothy Andrew. *Soviets in the Arctic. An Historical, Economic and Political Study of the Soviet Advance into the Arctic*. New York: Macmillan, 1938, 2.

⁴ Taracouzio, 3.

⁵ The map is taken from Taracouzio, 572–573.

the conditions are harsh. Twenty-six ethnic groups live in the Russian North. Traditionally, these people were hunters, fishers, and reindeer herders, and none of the northern tribes were settled.⁶ Even though trade with the native people had been developed to a certain extent for centuries already, the territory itself had not been studied very extensively; nor had it been properly mapped. Getting hold of the resources of the Arctic was tempting for the Soviet Union. At the end of the 1920s, it started its approach.

1.2 A Short History of the Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route

In the year 1926, the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union issued a resolution that incorporated the territory from the North Pole to the Soviet mainland into state ownership.⁷ In the same year, the committee called “Komseverput” was organized. Its main goal was to develop international trade through a transport route in the Arctic Ocean. The committee went through numerous transformations and, finally, in 1932 was replaced by the Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route (in Russian: *Glavnoe Upravlenie Severnogo Morskogo Puti*, hence known as “Glavsevmorput” or commonly abbreviated as “GUSMP”).

The GUSMP became the sole Soviet state agency responsible for the development of the circumpolar area of the Soviet Union. This encompassed numerous tasks. The Chief Directorate was responsible for exploring the mineral wealth in the Arctic region, organizing lumber trade, disseminating the communist ideology among the indigenous inhabitants of the Far North, and most importantly, managing transport and logistics across the region’s vast distances. The responsibilities and the level of autonomy of the organization were equally enormous. According to Pier Horensma, the author of the book *The Soviet Arctic* (1991), the GUSMP was less important

⁶ Slezkine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, 5.

⁷ Bugaeva, L. ‘Arkticheskii Mif v Sovetskoy Kulture i Ego Vozrozhdenie’. *Zvezda*, (2018). Accessed 1 June 2019. <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2018/8/arkticheskij-mif-v-sovetskoj-kulture-1930-h-godov-i-ego-vozrozh-pr.html>.

than a ministry but held the same rights. Other historians of Arctic exploration have called the GUSMP a “semi-autonomous republic”,⁸ “the Arctic kingdom”,⁹ a “state within the state”,¹⁰ or described it as a great bureaucratic empire within the Soviet system.¹¹

As noted before, the GUSMP’s main aim was to enable and maintain stable navigation through the Arctic Ocean along the northern coast of the USSR, that is to establish the shortest, and thus potentially the cheapest, sea route from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. For safe navigation, numerous meteorological stations that could observe the conditions along the path (chiefly, the ice) had to be built. The first polar station was created in 1923 in Matochkin Shar; in 1935, there were already seventy-two polar stations and their number grew steadily.¹²

A lot of workers were needed for developing the region. This was not only a local problem because the entire country suffered from labour shortages. The article by Donald Filtzer, *Labor Discipline*, gives an overview of the problems with labour efficiency under Socialism. The author finds the roots of the rampant inefficiency in the system as well as in the workers themselves. The extremely wasteful spending of work time, according to the author’s opinion, was caused by the following reasons in combination: the high-speed conversion of former peasants into industry workers, the labour shortage, and the bureaucratization of the system.¹³ The two biggest groups of Soviet citizens were the remaining peasantry and industrial workers. According to Filtzer’s article, the former were severely repressed by collectivization, and the latter by the not less severe pressure of industrialization. For both groups, the sudden changes were unwelcome and hard to cope with. But despite the labour shortages and other problems, in the 1930s, developing the Arctic was prioritized by the Soviet government. Special labour conditions for the workers were introduced

⁸ McCannon, John. *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932–1939*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998, 6.

⁹ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 33.

¹⁰ Taracouzio, 92.

¹¹ Taracouzio, 175.

¹² McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 46.

¹³ Filtzer, Donald. ‘Labor Discipline, the Use of Work Time, and the Decline of the Soviet System, 1928–1991’. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 50 (1996): 11.

in order to attract more people to the Far North. Ruth Gruber's observations confirm the urgent need for labourers in the Arctic: "*Here unemployment was an alien concept; everywhere I heard the cry "we need men, men, men." But women worked, children worked, everyone worked, and still the program of construction, pushing on like a steam roller, thundered for more laborers, more specialists, more material.*"¹⁴ And indeed, during the 1930s, many Soviet people with the required skills (such as for working with meteorological instruments) left the relative comfort of the big Russian cities and went to live and work in the harsh conditions close to the North Pole. In 1932, Stalin placed Professor Otto Schmidt at the head of the Arctic project, making him the first chief of the GUSMP. Schmidt was a famous mathematician, geographer, astronomer, and a celebrated Arctic explorer himself. He also had had the idea and became the editor-in-chief of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, the first Soviet all-encompassing reference work written for workers. Under Professor Schmidt's supervision, the Arctic project developed profoundly. The polar pioneer towns, such as Igarka and Dickson, many dormitories and private wooden huts for workers and their families, schools, clubs, canteens, cinemas, polar theaters, or even barber shops were built to attract new workers to the area.

After this dynamic beginning, the year 1937 was marked by a dramatic decline for the GUSMP, just as in the rest of the Soviet Union. Taracouzio, the author of the book *Soviets in the Arctic*, describes the situation in the following way. The previous year had been good for GUSMP, more than 100 ships had sailed the Northern Sea Route. Plans for the year 1937 were made in the same manner as before according to the constantly growing norms of productivity. But the weather intervened and prevented the fulfillment of the overstated plans. The winter of 1937 was harsh, no less than twenty-six ships got stuck in the ice. The accident was called sabotage and repressions

¹⁴ Gruber, 121.

were launched against the GUSMP staff.¹⁵ The GUSMP never fully recovered from this disastrous year. In 1953, the GUSMP was reformed and actually ceased to exist.

Except for Taracouzio, who argues that centralization was the highest achievement of the socialist economy, many other authors name the hyper-centralization of the GUSMP among the first reasons for why the project failed. Everything in the region from mining to the building of schools for nomads and from weather observation to the supply of the necessary goods was under the GUSMP's control. Its administration was located in Moscow. Paul Josephson, the author of the book *The Conquest of the Russian Arctic*, writes that the bureaucratic apparatus in the capital was not familiar with the local Arctic peculiarities and needs of the Arctic region. The orders made by the officials in Moscow created a big gap between the plans and reality.¹⁶ A second reason for the failure was underfunding. The ability of the Soviet Union to support the Arctic project decreased dramatically, especially after the Second World War.¹⁷ Josephson also mentions the human factor. He supposes that the realities of the harsh polar conditions together with inadequate supplies and simple living conditions tended to diminish faith and enthusiasm among the pioneers.¹⁸ McCannon, in his book *Red Arctic*, adds as another reason the high pressure from the state and GUSMP's crisis of self-identification: it was not clear for the management whether the organization was primarily scientific or an economic enterprise.¹⁹

1.3 Research Questions

So far, I have sketched out the history of the Soviet Arctic at the organizational level. I am, however, more interested in the myth that was created in the Soviet press for this territory. In the present study, I discuss questions of the perception of time and distance. What was the Soviet

¹⁵ Taracouzio, 91.

¹⁶ Josephson, 6; McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 176.

¹⁷ Josephson, 114.

¹⁸ Josephson, 12.

¹⁹ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 40, 45.

Arctic supposed to be for the citizens and what was the image of the Soviet development of the territory in the West? How did the Soviet pioneers of the Arctic understand their mission and how did they engage with the Arctic environment?

The American historian and specialist on the Soviet Arctic, John McCannon, claims in many of his publications, and in particular in the article *Tabula Rasa in the North*, that the Arctic was a place in the popular mind that symbolizes the “antithesis” of Moscow. McCannon bases his argument on the physical distance between the Arctic and the capital, and on the position of the Arctic on the edge of the map – in contrast to Moscow, which was situated in the very center of the Soviet universe or mental map.²⁰ The author also argues that the force of nature represented the greatest challenge for the Soviets in the Arctic. “The Arctic provided the ultimate battleground for the war against the environment”²¹, says McCannon, stating that the Arctic was the place where “the struggle against the elements takes place.”²²

This argument provokes two sets of questions. First, if the Arctic was not Moscow, if it stood in the opposition to the capital, what exactly was the Arctic, then? Could it be defined only negatively as “not-Moscow”? Does the Arctic fit in a clear, binary center-periphery opposition? If not, what was the relationship between the two? Second, I want to ask what the struggle against the elements that McCannon discusses actually means. The metaphor of the “struggle with nature” is an anthem of Arctic exploration. It is repeated continuously in articles and in multiple types of research from the Soviet period. But how did the people who went to the Soviet Arctic for long-term or permanent residence from the other regions of the Soviet Union actually interact with nature? I want to argue that the relationship between the pioneers and the Arctic was more intimate and complicated than the word “struggle” might suggest.

²⁰ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 91; Idem. ‘Tabula Rasa in the North.’ In: *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003, 241–56, here 243.

²¹ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 83.

²² Ibid.

1.4 Hypotheses

Based on these questions, I arrive at three hypotheses:

1. On the relationship between the Soviet Arctic territory and Moscow: The northern cities as well as the newly established polar stations were much more connected to Moscow than to the local environment.

The pioneer cities and polar bases were presented in the press as very well-organized, comfortable places in which to live and work. The high living standards and the cultural level of the life in the Arctic were continuously emphasized in the Soviet press. The message addressed at the reader was to give the impression that life in the Arctic was not different from any other place in the Soviet Union. In this context, I will argue that the function of the myth of the Soviet Arctic, as promoted by the Soviet press, was to maintain a close connection between the Far North and the capital. The texts about the arctic settlements were designed to diminish the physical as well as cultural distance and difference in the reader's mind. As a result, the positive image of the region increased labour migration to the Soviet Arctic.

2. On daily life: The newly-arrived inhabitants of the Arctic abandoned the usual circadian rhythm, a most basic natural 'law', in favor of following or belonging to the Moscow time zone and staying even more connected with the capital.

The western visitors to Igarka were struck by the fact that the pioneers of the Arctic lived according to Moscow time, i.e. four hours behind the apparent or sun time.²³ A local inhabitant once explained this to a foreign journalist like this: "Our workers want to listen to the Moscow broadcasts every day."²⁴ The desire of the pioneers to follow the Moscow schedule at the expense of the natural conditions in the Arctic region demonstrates their deep attachment to the capital.

²³ Smolka, Harry Peter. *Forty Thousand Against the Arctic: Russia's Polar Empire*. London: Hutchinson, 1937, 164.

²⁴ Smolka, 164.

Modern technologies that were brought to the Far North by the Soviets were a major topic in the Soviet press and constituted an important part of the Arctic myth. The radio connection vanishes the distance with the Northern frontier of the country and therefore strengthen the mental connection of the Soviet Arctic with the capital. The regular radio broadcasts transmitted from Moscow structured the daily routines of the pioneers and diminished the time gap between the two places. This led to Igarka being much less connected to the old Siberian towns like Krasnoyarsk both physically and mentally than to Moscow, despite the different distances involved.

3. On the common phrase “struggle with nature”, which I want to challenge: The pioneers in the Soviet Arctic did not struggle with it primarily, but in fact disregarded or neglected nature.

As previously discussed, John McCannon, in his book *The Red Arctic*, writes at length about the desire of the Soviets to conquer nature. He sees the Soviet development of the Arctic as the ultimate way to demonstrate Socialism’s eternal triumph over nature. To “conquer”, to “fight”, to “tame” – these are the verbs the author uses most when talking about the relationship between the polar explorers and the nature.²⁵ I argue that the word “nature” in the sources about the Soviet Arctic in the 1930s has a broader meaning and thus was imprecisely interpreted by the scholar such as McCannon. On the contrary, the Soviet Arctic was presented in the press as an urbanized and modernized area, so that the topos of the “wild” nature was by definition excluded from the Soviet Arctic myth.

²⁵ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 84.

2. Historiography

2.1 Contemporary Accounts from the 1930s–1950s

The exploration of the Soviet Arctic as a topic attracted historians from the west since the very beginning of the 1930s. Although the authors represent very different political views and approaches, what connects their books is a common question they all touch upon in their research: All of them were interested in why the development of the Arctic territories became possible on such a scale only in the Soviet Union.

There are many causes the authors saw for the Soviet advance in the Arctic. Although they emphasize different aspects of Soviet politics, the authors usually agree on a general list of reasons. In the earliest books, which were published before the Soviet archives were opened to researchers, the authors used publications from the Soviet press as their main sources. This is why the books by Taracouzio (1938), Seidenfaden (1939), and even the book by Armstrong, published twenty years later (1958), sound rather similar to what the Soviets presented as the reasons for their success.

The American historian Timothy Taracouzio, in his book *Soviets in the Arctic: An Historical, Economic and Political Study of the Soviet Advance into the Arctic* covers the entire history of the Arctic project. The author manifestly sympathizes with Soviet politics in the region on its own merit and especially in contrast with the previous, tsarist regime. The reason for the author's lack of critical distance could be partially explained by the limitation of the information on which he could rely. Access to the Soviet archives was denied for researchers until the 1990s. Therefore, the sources Taracouzio used were articles published by the Soviet official press agencies, such as *The Soviet Arctic*, *The Soviet North*, and the *Bulletin of the Arctic Institute*. The author believes in the veracity of the data given in the Soviet press and on this basis comes to the most natural conclusions about the high level of prosperity in the region.

In his book, Taracouzio defines three main differences between the Soviet methods of Arctic development and those of the tsarist regime. Among the advantages of the Soviets he names the enormous scale of the project. The Socialist planned economy, writes Taracouzio, allows the Soviet government to invest massively in the development of the Arctic territory. Another factor in this author's view is the inseparability of theory and practice of Soviet science. Thus, the Soviets make their scientific observations in the Arctic having in mind the economic benefits that the region could provide. As a third factor, the author names popular enthusiasm. Propaganda about the Soviet developmental program in the north made the topic of the Arctic popular both among the Union's own citizens and audiences abroad. People throughout the USSR talked about the exploration of the Arctic, so that it became a source of national pride.²⁶ Gunnar Seidenfaden, in his book on the topic, praises the technological advances of the Soviets. Writing in 1939, Seidenfaden observes that the image of the Arctic explorer had changed dramatically over the previous decades. The romance of individual heroism, according to Seidenfaden, gave way to technological achievements. The reason why it was the Soviets who made such progress in studying and developing the Arctic territory is that "it is in Russia that organization has been brought to its highest perfection."²⁷ Seidenfaden notes that the Soviets had long-term plans for the circumpolar area. In contrast to the previous government, the Soviets were interested in building permanent settlements in the Far North. In Russia, writes Seidenfaden, the development of the Arctic had changed its character: "The pioneering is not a goal for the Soviets anymore, their goal is to make the living conditions in the polar cities as high as they are in the biggest Soviet continental cities."²⁸

Nearly twenty years later, Terence Armstrong located the reason for the Soviet Union's success in the Arctic partially in its labour policy. Armstrong, too, names enthusiasm as another major

²⁶ Taracouzio, 138.

²⁷ Seidenfaden, Gunnar. *Modern Arctic Exploration*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1939, 17.

²⁸ Seidenfaden, 57.

reason for the success of the Soviets in the North, but adds that this enthusiasm had a materialistic basis.²⁹ The author refers to the labour regulations for the Arctic workers and lists the privileges workers enjoyed in the Far North. He mentions the doubled salary in comparison to Moscow and Leningrad and the longer holidays compared to the rest of the Soviet Union. What is more, according to the labour regulations, children whose parents were members of the polar expeditions received higher university stipends. Armstrong argues that these privileges made people move to the circumpolar region voluntarily and with enthusiasm. All three authors call the high level of centralization of the Soviet management a factor which had a positive influence on Soviet Arctic policy. They agree that the concentration of all management functions regarding the Arctic territory of the Soviet Union in the hands of one organization, the Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route, made the project possible. As noted before, in order to make the Northern Sea Route operational, many additional investments were needed, such as a large icebreaker fleet, meteorological stations, and also aircraft for observing the ice from above. GUSMP coordinated all these services. “GUSMP,” concludes Armstrong, “is the great bureaucratic empire within the Soviet System.”³⁰

2.2 Later Works (1990s–Present)

In contrast to the above, researches that were published later name the enormous centralization of the Soviet management among the *negative* factors which lead to the fall of the Soviet Arctic project. Pier Horensma, in his book *The Soviet Arctic*, started a new wave of interest in the history of the Soviet Far North. The author talks about Arctic exploration from a geopolitical point of view. The Norwegian-Soviet confrontation over Franz Joseph Land and the

²⁹ Armstrong, Terence. *The Russians in the Arctic. Aspects of Soviet Exploration and Exploitation of the Far North 1937–1957*. Fair Lawn, NJ: Essential Books, 1958, 174.

³⁰ Armstrong, 175, 91.

Norwegian-Danish conflict over Greenland's east-coast is discussed in detail, with the author calling them the driving forces behind the exploration of the Arctic.

The long break between the book by Armstrong and that by Horensma (published in 1958 and 1991, respectively) shows the difference between contemporary and revisionist visions of the Soviet goals in the Arctic. Terence Armstrong notes that the Northern Sea Route was a loss-making enterprise even in 1941. He does so based on a secret document called the Soviet State Plan for 1941, which was somehow intercepted by the Germans during the war. According to the document, the planned total turnover for cargo shipped via the Northern Sea Route was 240.000 tons. Armstrong states that even simple calculations prove that this amount of cargo could not have been enough to justify the expense of the icebreaker fleet that had to escort the cargo ships. Therefore, Armstrong concludes that, since for the Soviets the transportation of the cargo was not profitable, there was a long-term strategic goal to generate profit sometime in the future.³¹

Pier Horensma, however, explains it differently. He writes that the continuously increasing shipping administered by the GUSMP was meant to demonstrate to the international community the effectiveness of the Soviet occupation of the polar territory.³² Horensma rightly considers the growing presence of the Soviet Union in the Arctic as an act meant to strengthen its geopolitical position in the North. At the same time, as a representative of the new generation of researchers who had access to the Soviet archives, Horensma emphasizes the role of forced labour as a core element behind the Soviet's success in the Arctic. The author acknowledges the repressions of the 1930s and 40s as a reality of the Stalinist regime, but does not doubt that there was also a heroic element in the Soviet Arctic exploration. Like other authors, Horensma mentions labour shortage as a major problem of the USSR. He doubts that large numbers of

³¹ Armstrong, 97.

³² Horensma, Pier. *The Soviet Arctic*. London: Routledge, 1991, 50.

people came to the Far North by their own free will. The author refers to the people in the Soviet labour camps when he notes that it was “slavery which solved the problem”³³ of the labour shortage. Horensma is very critical of the Soviet ways of finding labour resources, calling it a “systematic destruction of humans.”³⁴

On the level of propaganda, the new message that the Soviets strove to communicate was that they achieved better results at Arctic exploration due to having an advanced political system. Horensma equates the role of writers under Stalin to the high party officials with the same risks and responsibilities.³⁵ An enormous number of books published in the 1930s, and among them especially those which tell about the earlier pre-revolutionary expeditions, were meant to demonstrate how long Russians had already been connected to the Arctic territories. The trope of the uninterrupted continuity of the Soviet presence in the North become particularly important for the Soviet Arctic historiography.³⁶

John McCannon, in his book *Red Arctic* (1998), claims that he is the first who studies the history of the Soviet’s Arctic exploration based on the newly-available archival documents.³⁷ In fact, although he makes some references to previously unpublished documents, most of his research is actually based on the same sources that many generations of scholars had used: namely, articles in Soviet journals such as *Sovetskaya Arktika*, the *Bulletin of the Arctic Institute*, and others. Unsurprisingly, the difference between the information published in the Soviet press and what the archival sources show is dramatic. McCannon questions the enthusiasm of the Soviet Arctic pioneers. Based on archival materials, he argues that the mood of the pioneers was the opposite of enthusiasm. While in the Soviet journal articles progress was always flourishing, the archival materials reveal a complete degradation.³⁸ The author

³³ Horensma, 55.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Horensma, 58.

³⁶ Horensma, 172.

³⁷ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 4.

³⁸ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 59.

brings pieces of evidence to the effect that the workers of the GUSMP were dissatisfied with the Arctic conditions and became heavily depressed during the long winter nights in the polar stations, with some committing suicide. Many got addicted to morphine and used other precious medicines improperly. The author provides figures detailing the enormous number of workers who died in the Arctic because of accidents or negligence.³⁹

McCannon also touches upon the question of the reasons for the Soviet Arctic project's success, identifying three. The first reason McCannon gives is the revolutionary approach of the Soviet Union to make multipurpose expeditions. The Soviet polar explorers combined geographical exploration with economic research in the area, which saved money and time. The second reason listed by McCannon is the development of polar aviation. Aviation was dangerous and expensive, but it was also a powerful tool for exploration and logistics. The third reason, which repeats the argument made by Seidenfaden, points to the permanent presence of the Soviets in the Arctic. They not only visited the region to mark it with the Soviet flag, but took up permanent residency.⁴⁰ The Soviets were proud of every child born in the area and continuously reported on the population growth in the Arctic.

Yury Slezkine's book *Arctic Mirrors* was published in 1994 and is the most widely known work on the history of the Russians in the Arctic. It is interesting that even though Slezkine's research, too, is based on the articles in the Soviet press, i.e. the sources that most scholars used before, the author followed a different research angle and reached an unprecedented level of criticism against the Soviet national politics. Slezkine focuses on the Soviet policy towards the nomads of the Far North. In 1935, the GUSMP, among its other various responsibilities, was placed in charge of both the industrialization of the Arctic and the economic, cultural, and political inclusion of the nomads in all the branches of the existing industries there.⁴¹ The

³⁹ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 48.

⁴⁰ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 26.

⁴¹ Slezkine, 281.

government planned for more local cadres in the enterprise. The task was almost impossible to complete, first of all because most of the nomadic tribes were beyond the state's reach due to their continuous migrations. The difficulties which the GUSMP administration met trying to fulfill the demands of the government are described passionately and ironically in Slezkine's book. The members of the GUSMP administration, in contrast to the nomads, are presented as incompetent and negligent.

In *The Conquest of the Russian Arctic*, Paul Josephson concentrates more on the European part of the Soviet Arctic. The book was published in 2014 and shares Slezkine's criticism, saying that the Soviet way of conquering the northern territories turned out harsh for the nomads who had been living there for centuries before the Soviets inherited the territory from tsarist Russia. Instead of listing the reasons why the Soviet project in the Arctic was successful, as several earlier authors had done, Josephson elaborates on why the GUSMP as an organization failed. First, the hyper-centralization of the Soviet system prevented the project from existing longer. The management located in the capital was not aware of the actual data about the Arctic region. Josephson states that the unwieldy Soviet bureaucracy did not design plans that conformed to the local realities.⁴² Second, the author mentions underfunding. Josephson argued that housing, food supply, and the salaries were below the expectations of the workers and were not commensurate with the harsh natural conditions of the circumpolar region and the corresponding needs. Third, despite modern technologies lying at the heart of the Arctic exploration, they were not sufficient. The quality of the equipment what the scientists used in the Far North remained far from satisfactory. The icebreakers were not powerful enough for their purpose, and the constant shortage of necessary supplies made the task of developing the territory more difficult.

⁴² Josephson, 6.

I have presented some of the major western books about the Soviet Arctic in mostly chronological order. Seen this way, they demonstrate significant changes in the attitude to the Soviet regime. The shift is especially clear in the approach to the sensitive subject of forced labour in the Arctic. Only the later researchers comment critically on the role of the prisoner-workers in the development of the region. Horensma calls them the “slaves” of the Soviet penitentiary system. Josephson, with his distinctively negative attitude towards the Soviet Arctic project, refers to them as the “innocent victims of political arrest who were accompanied by large numbers of peasant exiles from agricultural regions.”⁴³

The fact of the exploitation of the prisoners in the Soviet Arctic was already known at least from 1937, when the western journalists Smolka and Goldman published books about their trips to the Soviet North. However, Goldman writes about them in a quite neutral manner:

“The prisoners, both political and criminal, work in the ships, in road-building, about the graphite factory, in the houses, and on the experimental agricultural station. They are not allowed to handle any machinery, except when their profession demands that they should, and then only under the strictest supervision. The difference between the political and the criminal prisoners is that the latter receive pay for their work.”⁴⁴

Smolka, a British journalist, even more willingly accepts the Soviet rhetoric and talks about the prisoners of the labour camps altogether as “criminals.”⁴⁵

2.3 *The Topos of “Struggle Against Nature”*

Andy Bruno, the author of the book *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History*, is one of a few authors who sees not only brutality in the relationship between the Soviets and Nature. Although the author concentrated his interest on the European part of the

⁴³ Josephson, 9.

⁴⁴ Goldman, 60.

⁴⁵ Smolka, 160.

Soviet Arctic – namely, the Kola peninsula – his point of view on the Soviet intentions toward the Arctic nature is applicable to the entire northern region.

The question Bruno asks is what type of environment the Soviets wanted to establish in the Far North. How should the most developed parts of the Soviet Arctic ideally look like? The answer Bruno gives might suggest that the Soviets' attempts were contradictory and that their policy was unclear. According to Bruno, the Soviets sought "harmony with nature" but at the same time called for domination over it. Unfortunately, in developing this argument, the author uses an apparently made-up terminology, which makes it hard to understand. Bruno continuously mentions "harmony"⁴⁶ as a policy goal for the Soviets in the North, but he does not give references for the word in the Soviet sources. At the same time, he does not explain how to understand the word "harmony" in the context of his argument. It seems that Bruno means the attempts of the Soviets to build relatively comfortable housing in the Arctic conditions. He refers to these plans as the "new type of the industrial civilization that would be in accord with the Arctic environment", and contrasts this with the simultaneous attempts of the Soviets to achieve domination over nature, or "severing dependence on the non-human world"⁴⁷. Bruno calls this the "bipolar disposition"⁴⁸ of Soviet environmental policy. However, I myself have never seen any sources that could prove Bruno's argument of the Soviets seeking "harmony".

The second important issue in the book is that the author sees a contradiction in the Soviet relationship with nature and a rapid change in the official rhetoric on the question. I think that such a contradiction could partially derive from the inaccuracy of the translation of the word "nature" and the ambiguity of the term in the Soviet sources. The first question that needs to be answered is what the term actually meant in the Soviet rhetoric of the 1930s. Also, what is

⁴⁶ Bruno, Andy. *The Nature of Soviet Power. An Arctic Environmental History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 13, 15.

⁴⁷ Bruno, 75.

⁴⁸ Bruno, 15.

the meaning of “environment“ in this context? I believe, and this is part of the argument of my research, that the term “nature” had a complex meaning and included both nature and society. The term nature refers to both the outdoor natural environment and human collective life taken together. Later in the thesis, I will discuss both terms in detail.

A contribution by Alla Bolotova, which was published four years before the book by Bruno, actually already elaborates Bruno’s ideas. Bolotova, an anthropologist, in her article titled *Loving and Conquering Nature: Shifting Perceptions of the Environment in the Industrialised Russian North* argues that the pioneers established a special connection with the Arctic environment. The author uses the theory of the anthropologist Tim Ingold, who developed the concept of the “task space.”⁴⁹ The pioneers of the Arctic changed the environment, a formerly uninhabited place, according to their needs, and through their acting upon nature, says Bolotova, they became connected with the space. The main goal of the settlement of the Arctic, according to Bolotova, was to increase the profit from the natural resources of an underdeveloped and sparsely populated area of the country. Soviet official rhetoric proclaimed that nature had a value only as a source of raw materials. The city-forming enterprise was the major element of any circumpolar settlement, the place where the life of the city concentrated. The city-forming enterprises of the pioneer towns, such as the sawmill in Igarka or radio-masts in Dickson Island, dominated the landscape and dictated the configuration of the city. These enterprises were the places where, according to the Soviet official rhetoric, the previously useless nature was transformed into a valuable natural resource.⁵⁰

Bolotova conducted interviews with the citizens of the Arctic cities and bases her research on these oral sources. The argument she makes is that a factory or sawmill not only shaped the respective city or settlement itself but had a very strong impact on the citizens and their

⁴⁹ Bolotova, Alla. ‘Loving and Conquering Nature: Shifting Perceptions of the Environment in the Industrialised Russian North.’ *Europe–Asia Studies* 64, no. 4 (June 2012): 645–671, here 656.

⁵⁰ Bolotova, 658.

perception of nature. The workers, whose job it was to process elements of nature into valuable resources, accepted this way of looking at nature as a resource.⁵¹ However, writes Bolotova, the workers had this perception only inside the factory walls, while outside of their workplace in private conversations with the author they demonstrated attachment to the northern nature. While important for understanding the context, the question of the private attitudes toward nature is beyond the scope of my thesis. In my research, I work with the official Arctic rhetoric and its influence on the public perception of the Soviet Arctic territory. The most important argument of the Bolotova article for my research is that the pioneers of the north are always shown as urban dwellers. There is no published evidence of the attachment of the pioneers to the Arctic nature.⁵² The beauty of nature, writes Bolotova, or any quality of nature other than brutality had never been officially discussed. The Soviet citizens were presented in the press as those who inhabit an artificial environment which they constructed for themselves in the Arctic.

In my work, I question ubiquitous trope of the “struggle with nature”. Just like any expression that was too widely used, it lost its meaning and attained ambiguity. The ultimate survival of the first polar explorers was reported in the press as a struggle with nature because the extreme conditions of the northern climatic zones are hard for humans to bear. In addition, the Soviet projects regarding the agricultural development of the Arctic, as well as the building of big and relatively comfortable cities in the permafrost area, were also presented in the Soviet press as a struggle with nature. But there is a huge gradation between these examples and it is hard to accept them as equivalent. My goal is to find a more accurate description of the relationship between humans and nature in the Arctic in the 1930s. I argue that the written sources constructed the topos of the Arctic nature as a part of the larger narrative about Soviet Arctic

⁵¹ Bolotova, 659.

⁵² Bolotova, 647.

development. This topos, for reasons which I will discuss later, excludes the aesthetic aspect of the nature from the Arctic narrative.

It is interesting to note here that Greg Carleton, in his article '*Genre in Socialist Realism*' invoked a triad of main enemies of the Soviets – Nature, the Past, and the West.⁵³ While the opposition with the West is a topic too broad for the present research, and also not very present in the narrative of the Soviet Arctic, the other two elements are always in the center of the discussion. My thesis also addresses the transition from the image of the Arctic of the past as a wilderness to the Arctic of the future and thus from uninhabited, useless, empty space to a modern urban environment. Greg Carleton gives a most accurate depiction of the relationship between humans and nature in the Soviet context. He writes about the “triumph of human labour and will over the elemental forces of nature” and that “this feat served as proof that human energy could transform the environment in accordance with society's demands.”⁵⁴ I believe that the author uses the word “environment” intentionally, instead of the widely used “nature”, because this is how he “translates” the Soviet socialist realist language of his sources into contemporary terms.

2.4 Mental Maps and Temporality

The authors of the book *Maps in Minds: Reflections on Cognitive Mapping*, Roger Downs and David Stea, define the mental map as an individual cognitive construction that represents the space of one's everyday activity. By this definition, the mental map is similar to the idea of the *task space*, used by Bolotova in her research about the Arctic. The authors say that we engage with the environment through our activity and, in turn, through activity we learn about the world and construct spatial maps suitable for our individual goals. If the everyday tasks of a

⁵³ Carleton, Greg. 'Genre in Socialist Realism.' *Slavic Review* 53, no. 4 (1994): 992–1009, here 995.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

group of people are similar, cognitive maps could not only be individual, but collectively shared.

Studies of mental mapping help understand why one would like to live in one place or another. The mental map contains information on *whereness* – the spatial location of a place – and *whatness* – the reason for the map-holder to be there, defining what is located in the place.⁵⁵ The study of mental mapping provides answers to what kinds of conditions people consider as important when choosing to migrate.⁵⁶ In my research, I use the concept of mental maps, talking about how the Soviet Arctic was presented in the press. I argue that the official press had a tremendous impact in shaping the cognitive maps of the Soviet people. In order to motivate workers to move to the Arctic for long-term contracts or even permanent residency, the myth of the Arctic was created in the Soviet press. This myth represents the Arctic as a relatively comfortable place, very well connected to Moscow.

A recent contribution by Hester Blum, titled *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration*, is based on polar ephemera – i.e. written sources which have temporary value, like expedition menus, travel diaries, notes of the members of the expeditions, and most importantly, expedition newspapers. The author is interested not only in the context of the ephemera, but also in the physical appearance of the documents, and in addition in how they were produced, circulated, and stored. Blum mentions with much reason that in the polar conditions, the most destructive factor for the members of the expeditions was the absence of the usual circadian rhythms.⁵⁷ In order to keep the regime going during the long polar night, some regular activity had to be organized. By producing periodicals, the expedition members aimed at several goals simultaneously. One goal was to occupy themselves through writing

⁵⁵ Downs, Roger M. and David Stea. *Maps in Minds: Reflections on Cognitive Mapping*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 39.

⁵⁶ Downs and Stea, 16.

⁵⁷ Blum, Hester. *News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration*. New York: NYU Press, 2019, 44.

texts for the newspapers and creating illustrations. Collaborative work on the newspapers helped to strengthen the community. Moreover, the publications, which predominantly consisted of information about local events, were designed “to commemorate a temporary community formed by climatic extremity.”⁵⁸

The author is interested in polar expeditions, whose presence in the Arctic (and Antarctic) region was brief. My research, on the contrary, is focused on permanent residency in the circumpolar area. In the Soviet case of the 1930s, the press tried to normalize the severe Arctic conditions. In order to diminish the difference between the Arctic climate and the rest of the country, the inhabitants of the Soviet Arctic, in their published reports, tried to depict their living conditions in normal terms. Even when mentioning the local peculiarities such as the polar night or hypothermic conditions of the area, the Soviet pioneers added assurances that these did not affect their well-being.

Another relevant secondary source, *Bending Time* by David and Deirdre Stam, concerns itself with newspapers and their role in marking the passage of time. As the term ‘periodical’ implies, newspapers’ issues come out regularly at a certain point (of the day, the week, etc.) and inform about what has happened in the interval since the publication of the previous paper. Likewise, there is no doubt that the following issue will be there soon, at the usual, predictable time. More specifically for my context, in the case of the sailors on the Northern Route or even Arctic explorers, multiple newspapers were taken along and read on board or during the expeditions, however much outdated they were. This was an attempt at imitating the usual regularity of life, made possible because the characteristic of stability is so deeply embedded in the concept of the newspaper itself.⁵⁹ Just like even a broken watch shows the right time (but only twice a day), even outdated newspapers could serve to symbolize stability and foster homely feelings.

⁵⁸ Blum, 55.

⁵⁹ Stam, David H. and Deirdre C. Stam. ‘Bending Time: The Function of Periodicals in Nineteenth-Century Polar Naval Expeditions.’ *Victorian Periodicals Review* 41, no. 4 (2008): 301–322, here 304

3. Sources

3.1 Source types

The first type of sources that I base my study on are articles in the Soviet press, particularly in the Soviet journals dedicated to the Arctic region. One of the periodicals I use is the *Bulletin of the Arctic Institute* (1931–1936), which appeared monthly and contains information about the polar stations. The major part of its content comes in form of single-paragraph reports which predominately concern household issues and staff changes at the polar bases. Another periodical I cite is *Sovetskaya Arktika* (1935–1941). It contains reports about the new polar stations, news from the Arctic cities, statistics, and plans. The monthly circulation of *Sovetskaya Arktika* was 10.000 issues, which would be an impressive number for a similar scientific publication even today. Finally, a third publication is *Arctica* (1933–1937) – a non-periodical edition of scientific articles about topics such as the flora and fauna of the Arctic, fishing and hunting industries, ice conditions, and meteorological observations. It was designed for the international scientific community, so the articles in Russian are followed by English summaries. Articles in foreign languages, mostly in French and German, are also included together with Russian descriptions. The editor-in-chief of *Arctica* was the famous Soviet polar explorer and scientist, Rudolf Samoilovich.

The second source type are contemporary western researches about the Soviet Arctic, mainly Taracouzio's *Soviets in the Arctic* (1938), Seidenfaden's *Modern Arctic Exploration* (1939), and Armstrong's *The Russians in the Arctic* (1958). As I have already discussed above at length, these works originated in close connection with articles appearing in the Soviet press as the three authors used them as important sources of information. While all of them use the official data given by the press critically, they accepted and shared various clearly identifiable, constant elements of the Soviet Arctic 's exploration narrative.

The third type of sources are books and other documents written by Soviet authors about their experiences in the Arctic. Diaries and memoirs of polar pioneers, pilots, and ship captains were frequently published in the 1930s. The book by Danskii, *Pobediteli Arktiki [Conquerors of the Arctic]* (1934) tells the story of the Soviet steamship Chelyuskin and its heroic crew and passengers. The ship was crushed by pack ice and sank in the Bering Strait earlier in the year of the book's publication. The 104 members of the expedition organized a camp on the bare ice and survived there for two months; they were later saved by air. A year after the event, the diaries of the members of the Chelyuskin camp were collected and published in the volume *Dnevnik Cheliuskintsev [Chelyuskinite Diaries]* (1935), with an introduction by Otto Schmidt. Another work in this third category is the book *My iz Igarki [We from Igarka]*, written by young people. Referencing children's ostensible views on a topic was one of the powerful tools the Soviets used to form public opinion. In 1938, children of Arctic pioneers collectively wrote a book about Igarka, the city where they lived. They started with a letter to "their favorite writer Maksim Gorky,"⁶⁰ asking for advice on how to write the book. Gorky soon answered, and the work could start. The book consists of a long introduction with the history of the young town of Igarka and also includes the letter to Gorky and his reply. Then there follow seventy-three essays arranged thematically in nine chapters. The chapter titles – such as "In school, in the club, in the pioneer camp", "In the tundra", or "In the city" – show the clear division between the artificial and natural environments as two different zones which are to be dealt with separately.

One of the most fruitful Soviet sources on the development of the polar region is a report given by Otto Schmidt on occasion of a conference for the members of the GUSMP. The document reveals what was considered the successful and the weak points of the organization.⁶¹ The

⁶⁰ *My iz Igarki*. Moskva-Leningrad: Detizdat, 1938, 14.

⁶¹ Schmidt, Otto. *Nashi Zadachi v 1936. Doklad Na Soveschanii 13 Jan. 1936*. Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Glavsevmorputi, 1936.

conference took place on 13 January, 1936, and the report called *Our Tasks in 1936* was published soon after the conference, on 19 February, in 5000 copies.

The fourth type of sources that I include are travelogues by foreign visitors to the Soviet Arctic. In 1935, the young American correspondent Ruth Gruber made her first visit to the Soviet Union. She arrived in Leningrad in the month of July, traveled by train to Moscow and Sverdlovsk, and then by plane to the Siberian cities Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk. Then she flew further north to Igarka, where she spent three summer months. Afterwards, Gruber was taken aboard the steamship Anadyr and returned to Leningrad on the newly established Northern Sea Route through the Arctic Ocean, with stopovers at Dickson Island and in Murmansk. Next to Ruth Gruber, also many other foreign journalists were interested in visiting this miraculous project in the permafrost area, but few received the permission to visit the Soviet Arctic. The Englishmen Leonard Matters, Bosworth Goldman, and Harry Peter Smolka made their trips in 1931, 1932, and 1936, respectively. All of the foreign visitors wrote reports about their polar trips, which were published outside the Soviet Union.

The foreign journalists were impressed by the enthusiasm of the Soviet pioneers. Leonard Matters, a member of the House of Commons, journeyed by ship from London via the Kara Sea to Igarka in the summer of 1931. He was driven by his own curiosity: In his book about the voyage, Matters complains about the lack of trustworthy information available in the west about the Soviets. In his (often ironical) opinion, the western newspapers lack information about the Soviet Union so that they oftentimes spread mere rumors about the Bolshevik regime. Matters' first-hand impression was different:

*“The founding, building, and development of Igarka represent something of the courage, the energy and the nerve which modern Russia is displaying before an astonished world that has been told, over a period of fourteen years, that Sovietism means only chaos and destruction.”*⁶²

⁶² Matters, 121.

Matters travelled to the Soviet Union to see it with his own eyes and to share his experiences with the public in the west. Though Matters was not particularly fond of the Soviet regime, even so he felt the need to praise the enthusiasm of the Soviets in their approach to the Arctic:

*“Lest it should be said – because it is the fashion to scoff at Soviet effort – that the men who live the winter through in such places as Dickson, the north of Novaya Zemlya and the Taimur Peninsula, are forced to go there, it should be stated at once that in the field of scientific research Russia has frequently been ahead of the rest of the world, and to-day under the Bolshevik regime there are more men and women than ever there were to volunteer for these outposts. It might be doubtful whether all or any of them are Communists or supporters at heart of the Soviet System. That, I do not know.”*⁶³

Another western visitor, Bosworth Goldman, a young engineer from Britain, was more openly reserved towards the Soviet regime. He finds the information he found in the Soviet press contradictory and not trustworthy:

*“In London an official of the agency had told me that 14 ships had been chartered for the Expedition. This discrepancy is typical, the figures given either in Russian newspapers or books of statistics being often as unreliable as retailed hearsay; numerically, the truth about the five-year Plan will never be known even by the Government themselves, since it is sometimes in their interest to credit palpable untruths.”*⁶⁴

Goldman was 21 years old at the time, spoke Russian quite well, had an extremely small amount of money, and traveled alone on a British steamship to the Yenisei river and Igarka. During his trip, he reflected on the economic feasibility of the Northern Sea Route. Goldman believed that it was more profitable to maintain just “several icebreakers for three months”, and escort the foreign cargo ships to the lumber ports all the way through the Kara Sea, than to

⁶³ Matters, 94.

⁶⁴ Goldman, 57.

build a railway through northern Siberia.⁶⁵ After visiting Igarka, Goldman went by river-steamer to Yeniseisk and from there took the Trans-Siberian train to Novosibirsk.

Another interesting aspect of Goldman's account is that it feels as if the writer, moving further south, became less and less satisfied with the things he saw on his way. On the whole, his book appears to be the most critical out of all the four that I discuss here. A book review by an unknown author put it in drastic terms: "The life Goldman saw and shared (in the Soviet Union) has the ineffectual, half-comic horror of a nightmare. Inefficiency and insularity would seem to be the two dominant characteristics of citizens of the USSR."⁶⁶ The Soviet press, too, responded negatively to Goldman's publication. The respective article in *Sovetskaya Arktika* calls Goldman an "English scoundrel" and his book the "malicious aspersions of a British spy."⁶⁷

There are many ways to analyze and compare these various sources. They could, for a start, be divided into two groups by political orientation. I am not in possession of sources in clear opposition to the Soviet regime, but some of the ones I use here are noticeably more critical than others. My source corpus could also be divided by their language or country of origin, but this would be of limited use for my research purpose. Instead, I arrange the sources into two groups by the criteria of their interdependence. Thus, in the first group, there are the books in which locals write about their experiences in the Soviet Arctic together with books by foreigners about their personal observations about Igarka and some other northern cities. The second group of sources contains the articles in the Soviet press with scientific observations and reports from the meteorological stations together with researches by those western scholars who based their writings on these same articles. That said, all types of sources, no matter how different they are, are part of the unified textual corpus that constitutes the Arctic myth.

⁶⁵ Goldman, 42.

⁶⁶ 'Russia in Asia: Faithful Record of a Remarkable Journey, Depressing Picture.' *South China Morning Post* (1903–1941), Hong Kong, 31 August 1934.

⁶⁷ Kriukov, A. F. 'Inostrantsy v Igarke i Ob Igarke.' *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 6 (1936): 50.

3.2 Socialist Realism

Since 1934, when Maksim Gorky proclaimed it as the main artistic method of the Soviet literature at the Soviet Writers Congress, Socialist Realism has been a popular problem for literary scholars and other specialists. There are two major approaches to Socialist Realism present in the scholarship. One group of scholars sees Socialist Realism as an artistic genre, and most often as a particularly artistically poor one. These scholars, such as, for example, Gary Morson, the author of the article *Socialist Realism and Literary Theory*, worked on the characteristics of Socialist Realism and on the classification of texts. Researches of this type usually contain a list of the major features of the genre. Morson mentions essential characteristics of Socialist Realism such as the happy ending, the lack of irony, and the highly politicized content of the texts.⁶⁸ From the point of view of a westerner, Socialist Realism easily can be blamed for being ideologically charged. Morson says that Socialist Realist art is not politically or socially critical, and quotes from authorities such as Stalin often appear randomly or not very well connected to the rest of the text. To take another example, John McCannon observes that Socialist Realism features the cult of Lenin and Stalin, a keen sense of patriotism, a great emphasis on technology and industry, and above all, on heroism.⁶⁹ Another approach, and one which I find more accurate, is demonstrated by scholars such as Greg Carleton and Katerina Clark, who argue that Socialist Realism is the language of Socialism. Greg Carleton in *Genre in Socialist Realism* asks not what Socialist Realist texts look like, but how they function. Most frequently, the way to depict reality in its development in Socialist Realist texts means to depict the desired situation as the given reality. As the article on Socialist Realism in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* states, it is important to show the

⁶⁸ Morson, Gary Saul. 'Socialist Realism and Literary Theory'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38, no. 2 (1979): 126.

⁶⁹ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 108.

direction of a development, to demonstrate the future in the present.⁷⁰ Therefore, the future is often described literally in the present tense. This peculiarity was widely commented upon by the western researchers of Socialist Realism. Greg Carleton also notices the peculiar usage of grammar tenses in the Soviet texts. The present tense is widely used to describe future plans or to a situation in the past, so that the inexperienced reader of Socialist Realist texts could easily be confused.⁷¹ Mark Hopkins in *Mass Media in the Soviet Union* states that for the reader of Soviet newspapers, there is an obvious contradiction between how the Soviet press states the things are and how they really are. The author continues by saying that the Soviet press often confuses the foreign reader through its disconnection with reality. The way Soviet newspapers speak of future events in the present tense is a Soviet cultural phenomenon and a literary technique. By using the present tense, it is declared how the things should be⁷² or soon will be.⁷³

Morson, in *Socialist Realism and Literary Theory*, goes so far as to say that instead of informative functions, journalism in the Soviet Union performs magical functions.⁷⁴ He does not elaborate on this statement, but the idea of Soviet literature as a ritual was later developed by Katerina Clark. In her landmark book *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, published for the first time in 1981, Clark carried out a structural and plot analysis of iconic Soviet novels. Clark came to the conclusion that the transformation which the protagonist always undergoes is functionally similar to a rite of passage, as established in anthropology.

Socialist Realism, as defined by the authoritative article in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, is “the scientific and the most advanced method, which is inseparably connected with the

⁷⁰ ‘Sotsialisticheskii Realizm’. In: *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopedia*, vol. 52, Moskva: OGIZ RSFSR, 1947: 239–47.

⁷¹ Carleton, 995.

⁷² Hopkins, Mark W. *Mass Media in the Soviet Union*. New York: Pegasus, 1970.

⁷³ Carleton, 996.

⁷⁴ Morson, 132.

worldview of the author.”⁷⁵ In other words, if the worldview and its expression are unified, then Socialist Realism actually serves as the official language of the Soviet Union. Hence, like any other language, Socialist Realism has its ‘grammar’, its set of rules. The Soviet dissident, Andrey Sinyavskiy, was one of the few insiders who approached Socialist Realism in terms of its functions. Sinyavsky, under the pseudonym Abram Terz, wrote a deeply analytical and highly sarcastic essay titled *What is Socialist Realism*. In the text, the author explores the difference between the realists of the past, such as Leo Tolstoy and Chekhov, and Socialist Realists. He muses that the main feature of the contemporary Soviet writer is that they could see the future.⁷⁶ In other words, Socialist Realist texts are those that depict the situation in its development from backwardness to enlightenment, from illiteracy to literacy, from spontaneity to consciousness, from pessimism of the past to optimism of the glorious future in the Socialist society, and so on. The goal for any Socialist Realist author, writes Sinyavskiy, is to make the reader feel as if one more step towards the future had been made – and that this step is extremely meaningful for society as a whole, not only for the local community.

With all this in mind, it follows that a more accurate approach towards Socialist Realism would be to see it as the only possible way for the Soviet culture to express itself in each of its dimensions. How Soviet people dress, speak, think, dream, and then write articles for a Soviet newspaper is all subordinate to Socialist Realism. Carleton makes the argument that on account of Socialist Realism being a method of communication, it is not subject to a division of genres. A Socialist Realist text could be of any genre. As Carleton puts it: “Socialist Realism is situated above the formal boundaries of fiction and non-fiction ... the imaginative, the real, the hypothetical and the actual all have an equal place.”⁷⁷ In my view, this justifies the attempt to use Socialist Realist texts of different types in research equally and regardless of their genre.

⁷⁵ ‘Sotsialisticheskii Realizm,’ *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopedia*, vol. 52: 239.

⁷⁶ Terz, Abram [=Andrey Sinyavskiy]. *Chto Takoe Socialisticheskii Realizm*. Paris: Syntaxis, 1988, 14.

⁷⁷ Carleton, 1002.

My sources are different in their form, purpose, intended audience, the background of the authors, and so on. But the Soviet journal articles, memoirs of the polar explorers, the book written by children from a polar city, and even the works of the foreign journalists share the common literary devices of Socialist Realism. It is my intention in the present research to trace the common elements in the printed materials instead of their differences. Most importantly, as I will try to show below, the similarities apparent in these various source types can help answer my research questions, such as why the pioneer's temporality regime was so extraordinary that foreign visitors had to persistently mention it.

4. The Myth of the Soviet Arctic

Both Gruber and Smolka start their books with the story of how they managed to get to the Soviet Arctic. Both authors unexpectedly received personal invitations from Professor Otto Schmidt. In 1935, the American journalist Gruber made her first visit to the Soviet Union. An eminent personality herself, she had managed to write her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Cologne in one year and become a Doctor of Philosophy at only twenty years of age. Gruber was a feminist and a member of the New Jersey Federation of Women's Clubs. Her research interest was to learn about women's problems under different political regimes. For this project, Gruber was awarded a Yardley Foundation Fellowship and went to Nazi Germany, Scandinavia, Poland, and the Soviet Union to make first-hand observations about the situation of women in these countries. She arrived in Moscow and asked Schmidt, who at the time had been the chief of the GUSMP throughout several years, for an interview. At one point, Gruber asked him: "Do women belong to the Arctic?" Schmidt laughed and answered:

*"You want to know about women in the Arctic – what they are doing, how they are living. Well, they are doing everything, they're in every field. What more can I tell you... You'd have to see it ... you know we've never sent a foreign correspondent to the Arctic", he paused. 'But we can send you; we can give you your transportation and wireless facilities. You'll find your answers.'"*⁷⁸

In the same year, H. P. Smolka also was invited to a meeting with Otto Schmidt, but this took place at the Soviet Embassy in London. Schmidt had come to give a speech about the progress made by the Soviet Union in the Arctic region. He talked about how rapidly the polar towns were growing, the theatres, dance halls, restaurants, kindergartens, and clubs that had been built, and also about the cultural work for the native people of the North. Smolka noted that everything Schmidt said about the Arctic sounded too positive. At the end of the speech, he asked Schmidt if a foreigner

⁷⁸ Gruber, 14.

would have had the same impression of the Soviet Arctic. Schmidt, in front of the around thirty participants of the meeting, immediately suggested to the journalist that he should visit the region and find it out himself.⁷⁹

In the present chapter, I investigate the elements of the Soviet Arctic myth as created in the 1930s. To recall, the function of this myth was to diminish both the perceived geographical distance and to give the impression that the living conditions in the capital and the polar region were similar; with the overall goal of maximizing voluntary labour migration to the region. This positive image of the Soviet Arctic was then spread to the west by foreign journalists such as Gruber and Smolka.

4.1 Arctic Pioneers and Their Motivation

Due to the natural conditions, the Northern Sea Route was operative only during three months of a year. In July, the first Soviet icebreakers cleared a path so that the following steamships could reach their destination ports. Numerous scientific bases and skilled staff were needed to observe the ice in the area. It was reported in the Soviet press that thousands of workers and scientists from different parts of the USSR responded enthusiastically to the government's call for building new settlements in the circumpolar area and take up permanent residence.

The city of Igarka is one of the best positive examples of Soviet development in the Arctic. In 1929, one-hundred fifty men went downstream the Yenisei River by boat and reached the future city's site. In a couple of summer months, they built housing units and a sawmill in the tundra. The reasoning behind the establishment of a timber enterprise in an area with almost no vegetation was that logs from the heart of Siberia would be sent downriver, utilizing the flow of the river. In Igarka, the logs would be processed and then transported to Europe through the Kara Sea.

The city of Igarka grew extensively. After a few years, there were already more than 10.000 permanent residents. A statistical table in the journal *Sovetskaya Arktika* shows the growing

⁷⁹ Smolka, 20.

number of inhabitants. It includes data for the four years from 1929–1932, separately for the numbers of permanent as opposed to seasonal workers. The number of seasonal workers was significantly higher in the beginning, but by 1932, the difference had declined. The table also lists workers and their dependents separately. The number of dependents grew every year. It follows that works increasingly brought their family members with them.⁸⁰ Igarka was meant to be not merely a temporary settlement, but a great Soviet city in the Arctic.

In 1932, the second five-year plan announced the industrialization of the Far North as a major priority.⁸¹ The development of the region advanced rapidly. Igarka was one of seventy new settlements and forty scientific and radio stations that were constructed all over the Arctic. Dickson Island, the northernmost Soviet town, was built in 1934. There were just eight men and two huts, but according to a report in *Sovetskaya Arktika*, it soon had become a city with “laboratories, windmills, tractors, the radio, telephone, and women and children.”⁸²

As previously mentioned in the introduction, the new arrivals had economic motives to work in the Arctic: the wages were distinctively higher, and there were additional benefits. But what other motivations the pioneers might have had is harder to find out. John McCannon argues that the pioneers were predominantly those who did not fit in Soviet society and went to the Arctic to build their careers at the periphery.⁸³ In other words, according to McCannon, the pioneers were misfits or people who did not manage to live well under the rules of Socialist society. On the other hand, a recent study by Paul Josephson argues the opposite: the volunteers were either simple people seeking jobs, adventures, or devoted Communist Party members, including members of the Komsomol.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Margolin A. B. ‘Goroda Zapolyariya’. *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 7 (1937): 90.

⁸¹ Slezkine, 201.

⁸² Svetakov A. V. ‘Na Ostrove Dickson’, *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 1 (1935): 55.

⁸³ McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 48.

⁸⁴ Josephson, 9.

During the period itself, the author of an article in *Sovetskaya Arktika* wrote about the different reasons that were driving people to the polar towns like this:

*“Very different people come to Igarka. Many enthusiasts come here, like the chief of the political department Ostroumova. Many romantics come here, who want to make true their dreams about polar exotics. In Igarka, there are many people who are looking for higher wages. Also, in Igarka the labour migrants and their families settle. All these people, despite the difference in their motives and ideological and political level – they all are very active and energetic people.”*⁸⁵

Interestingly enough, the author mentions the “labour migrants” (*trudpereselentsy*): this means released forced labourers from the Soviet labour camps situated near Igarka.

Pier Horensma emphasizes the role of the press and non-fiction literature about the Arctic as a powerful tool of Soviet political propaganda. Literature was a means of communicating political values and the author sees the unique role of the literature about the Soviet Arctic in the combination of two facts: on the one hand, the topic is usually very exciting reading and has a strong emotional component, and on the other hand, it glorifies the achievements of the Socialist regime in comparison to the Capitalist enemy.⁸⁶ I agree with Horensma’s strong argument but would like to add that political propaganda was not the only the reason why the Arctic topic mushroomed in the 1930s; as we have seen, urgent economic necessity was also behind it.

Moscow was the center of the Soviet universe, writes McCannon.⁸⁷ The Kremlin was a symbol of the motherland even for citizens that had never been to Moscow. In contrast to this, the Arctic, the most distant part of the Soviet Union, symbolized the opposite. It would be ridiculous to deny that Moscow was at the heart of the Soviet culture. There was a strong connection to the Arctic, too, as symbolized by the following anecdote. The children of pioneers in Igarka wrote in a book about their city: “For you to know where this book was written, where Igarka is situated, let’s look at the map. First, find the capital of our country – Moscow. Then, let’s proceed from Moscow to

⁸⁵ Bochacher, M. N. ‘Igarka’. *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 6 (1936): 42.

⁸⁶ Horensma, 55.

⁸⁷ McCannon, ‘Tabula Rasa in the North’: 246.

Igarka.”⁸⁸ Or compare another passage, which does not attach weight to the enormous distance which separates Igarka from the capital: “It is true that Igarka is far away. From here to Moscow it is 6000 km. But it is not true that life here is bad. Our life is cultured and cheerful. We have a cinema, clubs, and a library.”⁸⁹

Passages such as these reflect a broader trend. The 1930s, as I want to argue, became a transition period for the image of the Soviet Arctic. The numerous journals dedicated to the region were tasked with changing the perception of the Arctic as a land of wilderness into one of culture, comfort, and relative accessibility in order to attract people to the region. The Soviet press was very successful in shaping the mental maps of the Soviet people. A typical article in *Sovetskaya Arktika* reported: “Igarka’s cultural life and comfort, its cozy, warm flats attract many people.”⁹⁰ The Soviet mass media created the image of the Arctic pioneer cities as a model of advanced Socialist life. In the minds of the readers, the polar stations and Arctic cities were perfectly equipped and were the most urbanized and modernized places, artificial oases of comfort within the vast territory. In the press, the high cultural level of polar life was continuously emphasized, including the availability of entertainment on the polar stations, extensive libraries, and music. The wintering on the polar stations close to the North Pole was presented as being much more entertaining than life in most of the places in the mainland.

One of the issues of the monthly journal *Sovetskaya Arktika* was entirely dedicated to Igarka and its short but glorious history. One article’s author praised the prosperity of the city and lists the benefits that Igarka possesses:

“There are regular streets, longitudinal and transverse, named after Stalin, Kirov, and Schmidt. A lot of street lights are there. The city at night is literally flooded with light. Two-story wooden houses with carvings. In the city, there are ten department stores

⁸⁸ *My iz Igarki*, 39.

⁸⁹ *My iz Igarki*, 15.

⁹⁰ Bochacher, ‘Igarka’: 43.

*and groceries, where you can find ten varieties of jam. Four clubs, a cinema, a large radio station. The Bolshevik Zapolyaria is the daily newspaper.”*⁹¹

Another article in *Sovetskaya Arktika*, dedicated to the polar station on Dickson Island, describes the living conditions there:

*“The sun is shining for twenty-four hours and the people are in action around the clock. It is now hard to believe that the polar explorers of the past starved and froze to death at the same place where nowadays a Soviet polar city is flourishing. There there a hospital, a public bathhouse, a laundry. There is a kindergarten for twelve kids, a cinema, a library with more than 3000 books. All citizens of Dickson Island are literate. In their leisure time, people organize chess competitions or skiing races ... Local newspapers and radio broadcasts are organized perfectly. An orchestra came for a tour to Dickson Island.”*⁹²

Goldman, a British journalist who visited the polar city of Igarka in 1932, confirms that for the seasonal workers the infrastructure of the city was the crucial factor in making their decision to come to the Far North for work:

*“With the exception of the workers in the sawmills and the prisoners, political and criminal, the greater part of the workers was from the interior of Siberia and came to Igarka for the season. These summer workers were glad of the change and the opportunity to earn high wages. They looked upon the town as an exciting one, with ‘beautiful clubs.’”*⁹³

Throughout the trip from Moscow northward, Gruber noticed the weather and landscape changes. She especially pointed out the artificial transformations which the Soviets brought to the vast land though technology and science:

*“It was about 7 in the evening, after a long stretch of dark, cathedral-like forest, when we rounded a hill into a blaze of electric lights. Ivan Ivanovich was beaming with pride. ‘What do you think of our electricity?’ He interrupted my surprise. ‘And that isn’t all. We have motion pictures and a dance hall too.’”*⁹⁴

⁹¹ Bochacher, ‘Igarka’: 37.

⁹² Mikula, M. M. ‘Dva Diksona’. *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 10 (1937): 89.

⁹³ Goldman, 58

⁹⁴ Gruber, 168.

4.2 Mental Maps

Downs and Stea, in their book *Maps in Minds*, write that for the process that shapes a mental map we need to know two things about a place: where it is located and what is situated in the place, or in other words, what is the reason for us to be there.⁹⁵ Creating a positive image of the Soviet Arctic was more effective as part of the government's developmental goals in the long term than the financial incentives, which worked more in the short run. This can be seen in a speech given by the chief of the Krasnoyarsk region, Valentina Ostroumova, at a local party conference. Ostroumova's main point was that only people who willingly come to the north to live and work make a real impact on the economy of the region. Those who were brought by the "mobilization" do not work as hard as they must and try to escape at the first opportunity.⁹⁶

If we compare the inner-Soviet portrayal with foreign sources, a gap is revealed between the Soviet rhetoric and the actual situation in the Arctic. During his visit to the USSR's polar region in 1936, Smolka joined a meeting of polar aviators' wives in Krasnoyarsk. The larger part of the meeting was dedicated to discussing the simple living conditions of the polar workers. A family with two children lived in a small room in a barracks. The wife of an unnamed pilot complained that her husband kept returning from his flights just for a couple of days every two weeks and that he would need to rest more in the interest of work safety. But there was no place to rest in their lodgings.⁹⁷ Interestingly, in a speech that Otto Schmidt gave at a GUSMP meeting at the end of 1935, he mentioned among the most important goals the construction of housing for the aviators in Krasnoyarsk.⁹⁸ Obviously, in the half-year between the report on this conference and Smolka's visit the situation could not be dramatically improved. But the fact that Schmidt prominently mentioned the housing problem a relatively long time before it still had to be discussed in the local

⁹⁵ Downs and Stea, 39.

⁹⁶ 'Delo Osvoyeniia Severa Dvigat' Vpered', *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 3 (1935): 12.

⁹⁷ Smolka, 61.

⁹⁸ Schmidt, 19.

Krasnoyarsk meeting indicates sluggishness on part of the GUSMP bureaucracy – or frequently shifting priorities in the plans of the organization.

5. Arctic time

The high level of urbanization and the convergence of the Arctic cities with Moscow living standards were not the only aspects which connected the Arctic area with the capital. As noted throughout this study, the inhabitants of the Soviet Arctic abandoned the usual circadian rhythms in favor of belonging to the Moscow time-zone. In what follows, I will show that factors such as the regular radio connection with Moscow helped the Arctic pioneers organize their daily routine in accord with the Moscow schedule. This helped to reduce the cognitive distance between the Arctic and the capital.

5.1 Time Jumps

The foreign journalists whose works I examined all had different opinions about the labour conditions in the Soviet Union, the living conditions in the Arctic, and about Communism as a whole. Nevertheless, all of them took note of the peculiar way in which the inhabitants of the Soviet Arctic treated time: “To tell some workers that a meeting was to be held at three in the morning would not be to surprise them,”⁹⁹ observed Leonard Matters. “A night of four hours, starting at dinner time and cut off by sunrise at the end of a theatre performance – that is the ridiculous state of affairs which the Soviet have created in their Polar city,”¹⁰⁰ wrote Harry Peter Smolka, who also shared the following impressions:

“I arrived [in Igarka] at 11 p.m. My curiosity was great, but my fatigue was greater. I had many hours of flying in bad weather behind me. As I climbed out of the machine, I asked: ‘Where is the bathhouse, and how soon can I go to bed, please?’

The man who clipped my ticket at the airport looked at me with astonishment. ‘What, you want to go to bed at seven o’clock, citizen? That is a bit early for a grown-up person, don’t you think?’

‘Seven o’clock?’ I replied indignantly. ‘My good man, your clock must be four hours slow. It’s eleven. Surely my watch is right. Look at the sky. It’s getting twilight already.’

⁹⁹ Matters, 177.

¹⁰⁰ Smolka, 166.

*'Don't you know, we do not live [according to] local time in Igarka. It's eleven o'clock, East Siberian time, all right. But this town lives like Moscow.'*¹⁰¹

The inhabitants of the Soviet Arctic felt more connected to Moscow than to the local environment. Even the Arctic settlements which were close to each other established their time relationship with Moscow, disregard the surroundings. Once again, in Smolka's words:

*"Somehow, although we had left the Yermak at 3 p.m. and been en route for hardly more than forty-five minutes, we arrived at Dickson after supper. But I had given up wondering at such magic. I knew that in the Soviet Arctic all clocks and heavenly bodies were mixed up. I asked no questions: what is the exact time, please? I moved my own watch accordingly and left it there until the next jump in time."*¹⁰²

5.2 Radio and Technology

This section is devoted to the role of the radio network as a technology which shortened the cognitive distance between the Far North and Moscow. I also argue that, for the Soviet Arctic in the 1930s, radio broadcasts played the same role regarding the structuring of time as newspapers did for the polar expeditions of the past.

The regular radio communication with Moscow had been one of the most important elements of polar life. An article in *Sovetskaya Arktika* titled *Diksonovtsy [The People of Dickson Island]* tells the story of the first years of this polar station:

*"In the summer of 1934, a barge brought the members of the expedition and the equipment to the deserted rocky shore of the polar island. While the construction workers erected the first buildings, the engineers set up radio masts to establish the radio connection with the mainland."*¹⁰³

The chief of the polar station on Cape Zhelaniya, the northernmost place of the Novaya Zemlya archipelago, wrote to *Sovetskaya Arktika* about the life of the expedition members. In his article, he also stresses the role of the radio connection to Moscow in the life of the station's staff: "We

¹⁰¹ Smolka, 164.

¹⁰² Smolka, 256.

¹⁰³ Kuligin, G. 'Diksonovtsy', *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 11 (1939): 59.

listen to the broadcasts from Moscow. It inspires us and brings cultural diversity to our life.”¹⁰⁴ In the same issue of the journal, a report from the polar station on Uyedineniya Island, in the center of the Kara Sea, informs: “We are aware of all the news from the mainland. Four times a day we listen to the radio broadcast directly from Moscow. In the evenings we exchange our opinions about the news.”¹⁰⁵ For permanent inhabitants of the most remote parts of the region, radio broadcasts were the only source of news and the only way to communicate with their families. The schedule of the connection sessions for Dickson Island in 1936 was published in *Sovetskaya Arktika*: “Moscow transmits the press review to the Arctic every day at 14:30. The family members of the workers talk to their relatives on the polar base on Dickson Island.”¹⁰⁶

In 1934, the Party and government issued a resolution to build a powerful radio center in Moscow for the purpose of connecting with the Arctic. For the government, the radio stations in the Arctic were symbols of the advancement of Soviet technology. Unsurprisingly, radio connection is among the most popular topics among the articles in the various Soviet Arctic publications.

Otto Schmidt, as the head of GUSMP, writes in the introduction to the volume of collected essays about the Chelyuskin steamship crew why the Soviet Union at the time was successful in the developing the Arctic. Only under the Soviet regime, proclaims Schmidt proudly, has it become possible to establish regular commercial sailing through the Kara Sea. It had been a dream for imperial Russia, but before the Revolution, it was impossible. To quote Schmidt:

*Using the best and the most recent achievements in science from all over the world, the Soviet researchers solved the problem of the Arctic development in a completely different way. The Soviets use a powerful technique. But what is most important is that their work was not dispersed but done according to the unified plan, which in its turn was a part of the general plan of the development of the productivity in building Socialism.*¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Makkaveev ‘Kak My Zhivem i Rabotaem’. *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 6 (1938): 85.

¹⁰⁵ Makkaveev, 88.

¹⁰⁶ Polyakov, D. I. ‘Radiosvyaz s Arktikoi’. *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 6 (1936): 109.

¹⁰⁷ Schmidt, Otto. ‘Ekspeditsiya Na Cheliuskine’. In: *Dnevnik Cheliuskintsev*, Leningrad: Goslitizdat, 1935, 4.

Danskii, in his book on the *Conquerors of the Arctic* which was published soon after the Chelyuskin steamship disaster, also praises the advanced Soviet technologies. He states that the fortunate rescue of the Chelyuskinites was possible only because, from the very first days, the necessary technologies had been mobilized with the “highest revolutionary inspiration which is only possible in our country.”¹⁰⁸ For the Soviet government, technological advances were a way to demonstrate the prosperity of its regime. The growing number of radio stations was widely promoted in the Soviet press, for example in this passage from *Sovetskaya Arktika*:

*“In the Yamal peninsula before the year 1935, there were 30 radio and telegraph stations. In 1936 there will be already 49 stations. Such a widespread web of stations maintains the stable connection between the red teepees, reindeer herds, cultural bases, fishery stations both among each other and to the administration.”*¹⁰⁹

In her book, Gruber continuously reminds the reader that she was the first foreign visitor of the Soviet Arctic. Apart from the western observers whom I mentioned above and who, like Gruber, went to the Soviet Arctic thanks to a personal invitation, others might have been there, too, at least briefly. The *Bulletin of the Arctic Institute* reports that the icebreaker steamship Malygin was chartered by the Intourist organization. The steamer departed from Arkhangelsk on 19 June, 1931, for the Kara Sea and returned on 20 August. During this trip, the ship stopped at several Soviet polar stations on the way. The goal of the expedition was to show to the tourists the Arctic nature and the Soviet achievements in the region.¹¹⁰

5.3 Future Tense

Many foreigners during their journeys to the Soviet Arctic took note that the locals never talked about the present without mentioning the future. Compared to the other visitors, Smolka was especially impressed by this speech pattern. At one point, Smolka talked to the head of the Evenki

¹⁰⁸ Danskii, R. *Pobediteli Arktiki*. Kharkov: Ukrainskii Robotnik, 1934, 78.

¹⁰⁹ Tal, E. K. ‘Radiosvyaz Na Omskom Severe’. *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 10 (1936): 109.

¹¹⁰ Vize, V. ‘Ekspeditsiya Na L/P Malygin Na Zemlyu Frantsa Iosifai Na Novuyu Zemlyu v 1931’. *Bulletin of the Arctic Institute*, no. 8 (1931): 151.

administrative district, noting that the official “was full of figures and facts. ‘The district is as big as Germany, I am the chief politician, but not like Hitler. We are building a hospital center; next year our plan is ... in the future, we are going to ... in the future ... in the future...’”¹¹¹ One of the Igarkians shared his reflections on the difference between the Soviet and the western way of thinking with Smolka:

*“‘I live in a country which changes continually. What was a dream for us five years ago, when you called our plans for construction only lies, a Bolshevik propaganda, is real to-day. What you will publish about Nordvyk as it is to-day will no longer be true when the pages of your book have come out of the printing press. When we look at a bulb we can already see the colours and enjoy the perfume of a future flower, while all you see is a dirty brown onion.’”*¹¹²

During his visit to Igarka, Leonard Matters had a conversation with Mr. Lavrov, the president of Komsevmorput. Matters asked Lavrov how many people live in the Arctic. Lavrov’s answer consisted more in information about future plans for the Arctic population than in the present situation:

*“‘Nomads and all,’ he went on, ‘our population is no more than a hundred and fifty thousand, and we can do with millions. The ten million of old Siberia live outside the range of our enterprise. Someday we shall have the five million you have mentioned. Our industries will bring them and for our industries, we want more towns like Igarka. Here we shall be able to accommodate and provide work for fifty thousand people in five years’ time.’”*¹¹³

The regular citizens of Igarka were no less enthusiastic about the future: “Now we have nothing here, Lisa would say, just a small town. But come back in five years and you’ll find Moscow. We’ll even have a subway better than in Moscow.”¹¹⁴

Smolka also visited Nordvik in 1936, where there were 116 people and four houses built from logs. The buildings stood several meters from each other but were connected by telephone wires. A

¹¹¹ Smolka, 75.

¹¹² Smolka, 138.

¹¹³ Matters, 244.

¹¹⁴ Gruber, 117.

motor-car engine worked as the power station for light, radio, and telephone. This is what Smolka noticed in the polar town of Nordvik:

“I found that everyone spoke in the future tense. ‘Next week the boat will arrive.’ ‘In two months we shall have six hundred people here and ten houses,’ ‘in the winter, a newspaper will appear twice weekly,’ ‘Next summer we will dispatch the first big load of salt, and in two years the boring towers for Nordvyk oil will be working at full speed.’”¹¹⁵

Everywhere in the region the citizens seemed to have been indifferent to the living conditions in the present. They repeat the information announced in the Soviet press and concentrate on the future. Matters recorded the words of a woman he met in Igarka.

“‘Nichevoh!’ she said. ‘We are all in the same position here and we must wait. Every year things get better. When the ships have gone we shall get things done. It won’t always be like this. The streets will be made of concrete; more houses will be built; a water supply will be installed.’ ‘Brave and patient Russian women!’” – sighs the author in reply.¹¹⁶

Gruber, too, mentions that for the people with whom she talked in the Far North, future achievements were more important than the present state. “Someday the whole world will understand our sacrifices. Someday soon, all the workers in the world will live as we live, lifted up from the darkness, free from the crushing wheel of exploitation,” said one pioneer.¹¹⁷ Another voice was recorded by Gruber as follows: “Igarka has a magnificent future. Igarka will be the Chicago of the Arctic.”¹¹⁸ Even the captain of the icebreaker Anadyr, which took Gruber from Igarka to Dickson Island, speculated about the future meaning of the Northern Sea Route: “In the near future the route we have traveled will present nothing impossible to seamen. We are making the unusual usual, and the unattainable possible within reach.”¹¹⁹ One of the women Gruber talked to in Igarka assures her that the progress in the Arctic will never stop:

¹¹⁵ Smolka, 135.

¹¹⁶ Matters, 169.

¹¹⁷ Gruber, 136.

¹¹⁸ Gruber, 203.

¹¹⁹ Gruber, 207.

*“Will it all end when we have finished this program of construction? Will we too have unemployment? No, there will be more construction. That is true Marxism. We will never have unemployment. Always there will be work, as we make this world a better place to live in. In Igarka we are building fine two-story buildings today; but tomorrow we will find them inadequate, so we will tear them down and build better ones, with four stories or maybe six. And we will have cities like Igarka throughout the Far North and workers will flock here because, as Lenin said, every corner of the Soviet Union must have the same culture and education and comforts that the central cities have.”*¹²⁰

Arctic citizens accepted and followed the agenda set up by Socialist Realism. When Gruber asked a woman about her reasons to move to the Far North, she got the following reply:

*“There has been so much sadness in the world, so much suffering and ignorance. Now we think that perhaps we can change it, that we can make people happy. The Arctic is the best example. Before, no one dared live here; the place was haunted with superstitions and hardships. But we think we can make life so good that people will live here forever.”*¹²¹

The contagiousness of the rhetoric on the Soviet Arctic was noticed quite soon by a reviewer of Gruber’s book. In his commentary, published in 1945, the author criticizes Gruber for a lack of analysis of the communist vocabulary.¹²² In the reviewer’s opinion, Gruber could not be accused of any blind obsession with communism, since her text is mostly balanced and reliable; however, greater reflectivity about the Soviet terminology would have been desirable. The author noted that Gruber called Siberia a “pre-revolutionary land of prisoners and exiles and a contemporary center of industrialization”¹²³ and that she also uses the term “kulak” for the exiles, disregarding the history, meaning, and applicability of the term. While evaluating the Soviet’s educational program for the indigenous populations of the Far North, Gruber writes that Chukchas “give up their superstitions”, meaning that they renounce their religion. Nevertheless, in conclusion, the reviewer still calls the book a remarkable source of information on the subject.

¹²⁰ Gruber, 121.

¹²¹ Gruber, 93.

¹²² Parry, Albert. ‘Ruth Gruber, I Went to the Soviet Arctic (Book Review)’. *Far Eastern Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1 November 1945), 85.

¹²³ Ibid.

Not only Gruber, but also Smolka could succumb to the myth of the Soviet Arctic myth and accepts the Soviet language, its pathos and lack of irony. At the end of his trip, he wrote: “I am back in my home in London. Behind me is a journey of almost twenty thousand miles, into an Empire of the future.”¹²⁴

6. The Meaning of the Word “Nature”

“’Never mind the sun, tovarish. If we took any notice of him, we should not be living here at all. Or we should have to sleep for three months in the winter and keep awake three months in the summer. We cannot accept all the moods of the Arctic. It’s we who are the bosses.’”¹²⁵

Thus spoke an Igarkian worker whom Harry Smolka had met. It is an emblematic passage because one of the paradoxes of the Soviet Arctic is that the pioneers, when sharing their experiences, disregard the Arctic nature or avoid mentioning it altogether.

According to Boris Groys, the goal of the Socialist revolution was to break the link between humans and nature, including human nature, and to build a new society which was to be absolutely separated from the world of nature.¹²⁶ In this anti-naturalistic attitude, the author sees the main difference between the Soviet project and most other revolutionary projects in history. The Soviet government constantly, and at different levels of their political and economic practice, demonstrated a deep, almost instinctive aversion to anything natural. The author proposes that the plans for the electrification of the country formed part of the major agenda of the struggle with nature. Among other examples for this attitude, the campaign against genetics and psychoanalysis could be named, as well as the collectivization of agriculture that was carried out in the 1930s. After all, collectivization aimed at eradicating the peasantry by destroying its traditional, deep attachment to the land.

¹²⁴ Smolka, 271.

¹²⁵ Smolka, 164.

¹²⁶ Groys, Boris. *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*. Moskva: Ad Marginem Press, 2013, 24.

It is obvious for environmental historians that “struggle against nature” as the traditional label for the Soviet environmental policy does not fit with the Arctic myth. Both Bolotova and Bruno take note of the ambiguity in the Soviet attitudes towards the environment in the Far North. As Bolotova mentions, Arctic nature was never framed as beautiful in the Soviet sources of the 1930s. Having worked with texts produced in the Soviet Union at that time, I can fully agree with Bolotova. While references to natural phenomena appear frequently in the texts, they always occur with a utilitarian purpose. Nature is mentioned either in relation to the exploitation of natural resources or in the context of studying the weather conditions of the Arctic.

An example for the Soviet attitude towards nature appears in the previously introduced speech by Otto Schmidt at a GUSMP meeting in 1935, where plans for the next year were announced and the achievements of the previous year discussed. Among other priorities, Schmidt mentions the task to increase the level of mechanization in the region and study the natural wealth of the Far North more deeply. “Without a scientific approach to the sea-hunting industry, we are risking to exterminate the natural resources.”¹²⁷

The Soviet government’s efforts to attract workers to the region by presenting it, by way of press coverage, as a highly urbanized area are also worth recalling in this context. An article in *Sovetskaya Arktika* states: “The industrial cities will widespread throughout the Arctic in the near future”¹²⁸ – not explicitly mentioning nature, but its opposite, the modern city. Aspects of nature appear in the Soviet press only as constructional material with practical utility. Consider this quote from the book *My iz Igarki*, where children write about their city: “Wherever you go in Igarka, everyone speaks about the wood. Igarka is the capital of wood processing. Houses are made of wood, roads are made of sawdust, the sawmills run unceasingly.”¹²⁹ Once again, also the western journalists adopted the rhetoric of the polar inhabitants and did not speak of

¹²⁷ Schmidt, 22.

¹²⁸ Margolin, 86.

¹²⁹ *My iz Igarki*, 10.

the Arctic nature other than in terms of already processed, artificial material. For example, Matters wrote:

*“Igarka is a timber town right through – timber wharves, timber roads, timber houses, timber for the stoves, and timber in one form or another everywhere – hundreds of acres of sawn pine planks; lakes and lagoons of floating logs, and small mountains of sawdust. The scent of pine, and the more pungent essence of sawdust – sweet and healthy – fill the nostrils.”*¹³⁰

But if nature appears in these quintessentially Socialist Realist texts only in the form of the commodified natural resources, then what can be the meaning of the expression “struggle with nature”? If there are no traces of the wild nature in the texts, what enemy was there to fight with? I would like to propose that the word “nature” in the language of Socialist Realism has a broader meaning. This meaning refers to the internal structure of society in relation to the external environment. In other words, to struggle with nature is the ability to act collectively for the benefit of society despite the severe climatic conditions of the Arctic.

An article about the pioneers on Dickson Island praises the members of the expedition: “Despite the most miserable living conditions, the Dickson pioneers were embraced by a desire to fulfill the plan on time.”¹³¹ In this passage, the impediments of the Arctic climate are overruled by the pioneers’ willpower. The stress is put on the task that the Dickson pioneers managed to accomplish, while the living conditions are just a factor that adds to the difficulty of the task and thus the heroism of its fulfilment.

A similar case becomes apparent in Otto Schmidt’s GUSMP speech from 1935. In its second part, Schmidt talks about “Our Tasks” for the following year and the problems that need to be overcome. Among the most urgent of these, Schmidt names the lack of discipline among the workers of the GUSMP. He talks about disciplinary issues at several points, such as in the

¹³⁰ Matters, 126.

¹³¹ Svetlakov, ‘Na Ostrove Dickson’: 56.

navy¹³² and among aviators.¹³³ Without going into the details about the nature of the disciplinary problems, Schmidt continues: “We should achieve in the North the same cultural, economic, and political level as in the rest of the Soviet Union”.¹³⁴ The quote demonstrates that it is not the Arctic and its nature with whom to struggle, but disciplinary issues, i. e. the problems inside the community. Indeed, the image of the ideal pioneer as promoted in the Soviet press, as a part of the wider myth of the Soviet Arctic, put nature in the same place: “The energy of the local people in the objective basis reinforced by the severity of nature, which must be reversed, restrained, in order to create in the deep taiga cultural human coexistence.”¹³⁵

¹³² Schmidt, 14.

¹³³ Schmidt, 18.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Bochacher, ‘Igarka’: 42.

7. Conclusion

“The gloom of the polar nights scares no one here. There is no gloom here. Everything is drenched in the sunshine in the summer, and in the winter, it is illuminated by the electric lights.”¹³⁶

When I encountered Ruth Gruber’s depiction of how the citizens of the polar town of Igarka managed their time, I became curious to know why the local inhabitants, according to the notes of a foreign observer, did not pay attention to the usual circadian rhythms. Soon I found similar testimonies in books by other western journalists who had visited the Soviet Arctic in the 1930s. Why did the citizens of the pioneer towns in the Far North live in the Moscow time-zone, four hours behind the actual local solar time? I started to look for answers in the Soviet sources, but not a single publication mentioned the daily routine of the Arctic pioneers. Clearly, the topic demanded a different approach – and as my research progressed, the number of questions grew like a rolling snowball. I had to expand my initial interest in Soviet Arctic temporalities and the question why what surprised visitors went unnoticed by the pioneers. In the resulting study, I divided my general topic into the following sub-questions:

In the beginning, I challenged the center-periphery opposition that is widely prevalent in Soviet Arctic scholarship. To this end, I reconstructed the mental map of the USSR’s territory as promoted in the Soviet press. I also explained why it was important for the Soviet officials to create the image of the Soviet Arctic as a comfortable and modern place. The goal of the established myth of the Soviet Arctic was to situate the area closer to Moscow in the minds of the Soviet citizens; chiefly, this was done to increase voluntary immigration to the territory.

I also commented on how technological advances such as the radio were employed to diminish the distance between the Soviet Arctic and the capital. My argument here was that the radio

¹³⁶ Bochacher, ‘Igarka’: 45.

broadcasts from Moscow were a central element that organized the life of the polar pioneers and maintained a strong connection with the center.

Finally, I addressed the relationship between the Arctic pioneers and the local environment. I discovered with amazement that there is no trace of a “wild” nature in the contemporary sources. Although the word “nature” appears in the sources quite often, it never refers to the actual wildlife. I analyzed a number of publications from the 1930s and examined the meaning of the word “nature” more closely. In this part, I paid special attention to a speech that Professor Schmidt gave at a conference of the Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route (i.e. GUSMP). The speech was devoted to the outcomes for the year 1935. Schmidt talks about the issue of work discipline among the employees of GUSMP. As it turns out, in this case, combating such issues was related in part to the task of the “struggle with nature”. The word “nature” in the source thus refers to community building, the improvement of the moral environment within society together with the living conditions, and finally, living in the artificially created environment. “Nature” in the sources literally meant “habitat”.

I discovered that in the 1930s, a turning point in the rhetoric about nature took place, changing away from its portrayal as a cruel enemy of heroic individuals, which had been in use during the earlier stages of polar exploration. In the 1930s, this meaning gave way to a rhetoric of normalization of the Arctic conditions. The Soviet press was charged with changing the public image of the Arctic as a land of death and dangerous adventures towards an energetic “land of the present and future.”¹³⁷ One of the oft-repeated statements in this line is that the lifestyle of the Soviet people in the Arctic is as normal as possible (*kak možhno normalnee*).¹³⁸

In my research, I worked with four types of sources. The articles in the Soviet press represent the official rhetoric and were the main place where the myth of the Soviet Arctic originated.

¹³⁷ Margolin A. B. ‘Igarke – Desyat’ Let’. *Sovetskaya Arktika*, no. 11 (1939): 101.

¹³⁸ Schmidt, Otto. ‘Issledovanie Arktiki v Sovetskom Soyuze’. Moskva: Izdanie Nauchno-Izdatelskogo Instituta, 1934, 22.

Contemporary research publications by western scholars were predominately based on this information, taken from the Soviet press. I also analyzed books written by inhabitants of the Soviet Arctic in the 1930s and found repetitions of the same patterns that had been established in the official channels. Books and articles written by foreign journalists who had visited the Soviet Arctic in the same decade added first-hand independent observations of the living practices of the Soviet Arctic inhabitants.

The discrepancies between the Soviet sources and western publications about the Soviet Arctic policy revealed a clash of the Soviet and the western values. The GUSMP was criticized by many westerners for the hyper-centralization of its bureaucratic apparatus, underfunding and insufficient or outdated technologies. On the ground level, western criticism relates to the poor living conditions in the pioneer towns, negligence of the local workers, and low labour inefficiency. The Soviet sources, on the other hand, emphasized the opposite: modern Soviet technological achievements as well as the concentration of all the means in the hands of the Soviet government were praised as reasons for the GUSMP achieving tremendous results in developing the Arctic. Soviet periodicals like *Sovetskaya Arktika* and the *Bulletin of the Arctic Institute* were devoted entirely to the Soviet scientific discoveries and technologies such as the Arctic telegraph and radio stations.

More so than in the differences, in my research I was interested in the common elements shared among all types of sources; in other words, what remained the same in such diverse accounts of the Soviet Arctic? I compared the content of the sources and their language and found traces of the Arctic myth created by the Soviet press in the 1930s also in the western publications. What remained unchanged in both the Soviet and the western sources was that the beauty of the Arctic was neglected and was replaced by the topic of modern technologies and popular enthusiasm.

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