

The historical formation of a transnational cooperation: The Barents Euro-Arctic region

ADRIAN BRAUN

adrian.braun@ulapland.fi

Lars Elenius (ed.); Hallvard Tjelmeland, Maria Lähteenmäki, Alexey Golubev (co-eds.); Einar Niemi, Matti Salo (asst. eds.)

The Barents Region: A Transnational History of Subarctic Northern Europe.
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Lars Elenius (Professor of History and Education, Umeå University, Sweden) the Chief Editor of *The Barents Region – A Transnational History of Subarctic Northern Europe*, in cooperation with 26 other experts from diverse scientific disciplines, outlines a research-based historical summary of the economic, societal, cultural and geopolitical development of the northernmost territories of the Nordic countries Finland, Norway and Sweden and the Northwest territories of today's Russian Federation. The time period considered in the book begins in the year 800 and concludes in 2010, even though the Barents Declaration was signed in January 1993 to institute the Barents Euro-Arctic Region. Hence the authors outline a path for the diverse ethnic groups, cultures and political systems that had lasted for about 1200 years, resulting eventually in the establishment of the transnational Barents Region.

The impetus behind this work is the need for a history book about the Barents Region that did not exist in this form earlier. This need is determined by the fact that there is an immense lack of knowledge about the Barents Region in the global community and even, for instance, in the southern parts of the Barents Region countries.

The authors follow a chronological approach throughout the book, taking the reader on a journey through the centuries of the region's history. However, their approach is

creative, and instead of simply going through the notable historical events, they set seven “turning points” involving important developmental shifts in eras of economic transformation, modernisation, growing regionalism, state expansion, urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation. These eras are presented in the first eight chapters, which are framed by a preface and introduction and a concluding chapter (Chapter nine) which summarises the content of the entire book. Each of the first eight chapters deals with a strictly defined time period: for example, Chapter one covers the years 800-1550, and the eighth chapter discusses the final years on which this study focuses, the period from 1993 to 2010.

The authors explicitly pursue a thematic variety of historical content in every chapter. They have chosen a couple of frameworks that they consider the most relevant to describe and analyse the history of the European Subarctic and Arctic. As the Barents Region was developed to strengthen economic relations and cooperation among the four Barents Region countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain, it is reasonable to highlight the economic and political developments in each chapter. The city and region of Oulu is a good example in this respect, as the authors show how this area developed into a commercial town in the 17th century, was pivotal in the tar export and shipbuilding industries for many years, and became a pioneer area in the development of Finnish information and communication technologies (ICT) in the 1980s. In the perspective of industrialisation it is well explained how, for example, in Norrböten, Sweden, and on the Kola Peninsula the extractive industries continuously expanded and how progress in the construction of new railways, waterways and roads connected the Northern territories to other parts in the world.

Another achievement of this book is the well-structured depiction of all the ethnic groups that have called the territories of today’s Barents Region home in ancient and modern times. The reader learns how the indigenous peoples, the Sámi, Nenets and Vepsians had to adapt continuously to demographic and geopolitical changes in the region over the centuries. Moreover, the book tells about other ethnic groups like the Komi, who claim to be indigenous as well, but whose official status is still pending. The Kvens, a Finnish-speaking minority in the North of Norway, are an example of an ethnic group that seeks acceptance in Norwegian society.

Other subjects that are considered throughout this work are the changing periods of trade and cooperation and, on the other hand, the periods of conflict and war. Finland

figures prominently and is always at the centre of attention, as it belonged to Sweden for part of its history, and later, as the Grand Duchy of Finland, was part of the Russian Empire (1809-1917), before gaining independence.

Economic developments and demographic changes are consistently underpinned by significant statistics and maps. Moreover, the book includes a diverse set of illustrations and photographs that present the special characteristics of the Barents Region to the reader in a vivid way.

Considering the purpose of the book, which is to address the research community in the fields of history and social sciences, as well as people who are interested in the history of the Barents Region, the work succeeds to a large extent in providing meaningful information and insights. The structure and language allow readers without a special academic background to follow the content easily and consequently gain a better understanding of the development of northern European territories. One of the major strengths of this work is, as accentuated in the title, the fact that the transnational view is perceptible throughout the entire content of the book, and the list of authors comprises natives and experts from all four countries of the Barents Region. Previous works often focus either solely on the Nordic countries or exclusively on the Russian Federation, but paying attention to all four regions in the same book has hardly been done before.

All in all, this work accomplishes the editor's goal of summarising the history of the Barents Region by describing the step-by-step convergence of events, developments and turning points over a 1200-year period to point out how the region has developed, leading to the present-day situation. In this regard, *The Barents Region – A Transnational History of Subarctic Northern Europe* is an excellent contribution to historical science and several other disciplines.