

The Impact of the October Revolution on the North-Norwegian Labor Movement

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Surprisingly few analyses of the Norwegian labor movement have been made at the regional level. Much, however, has been done at the national level, and there are thousands of publications about the local labor movement. The regional level has been squeezed between an elite perspective on the one side, and a grass-roots perspective on the other. In a country like Norway, with complicated tensions between economic, cultural and political factors (as the political scientist Stein Rokkan has shown),¹ it is necessary to understand what lies between the national and the local level. In this article, I will discuss the short- and long-term impacts of the Russian Revolution at a regional level in Northern Norway—with particular attention to the counties of Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark.

Northern Norway is interesting in this context. The great breakthrough for the Norwegian labor movement came first in Troms county in 1903. Later, the labor movement became dominant throughout the whole region and became a bastion for the movement at the national level during the 1930s. According to Stein Rokkan and in his center-periphery model, northern Norway was one of two regions that mobilized particularly strongly against the center. Western Norway's politics were determined on a cultural basis and people joined Venstre, the liberal party, while northern Norway's politics derived from class and people supported the socialist movement. At the same time, there were interesting tensions internally in the region between what the historian Nils Henrik Fuglestad has called fisherman-peasant socialism and wage worker socialism,² and

1 See Stein Rokkan, "Geography, Religion, and Social Class: Crosscutting Cleavages in Norwegian Politics," in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments, Cross-National Perspectives*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

2 Nils Henrik Fuglestad, "Omkring arbeiderbevegelsens framvekst i Nord-Norge," *Tidsskrift for arbeiderbevegelsens historie* 1 (1984): 53.

between the Norwegian majority population in the north and the ethnic minorities, the Sami and the Kvens.

NORTHERN NORWAY AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Let us turn to the topic of this article: Which impacts on the political level did the Russian Revolution have in the north? First to the short-term impacts, which are not easy to measure. How to distinguish between the impacts of the Russian Revolution and other factors influencing voters? There is no doubt that there was a radicalization in parts of the labor movement in the north in the 1910s, but this radicalization went on throughout the whole decade and cannot be linked to the Russian Revolution in particular. It was radicalization in specific areas, mainly of the syndicalist type.³ There was a clear class polarization, as we can see, for example, in a vignette in the Labor Party newspaper *Finnmarken*: “To battle! Wherever we are—outside or at home—we are in the enemy’s country.”⁴ In the city of Tromsø, the new radical direction in the Norwegian labor movement took control. The syndicalist Peder Kaasmoli was its leader—a construction worker, who became editor of the Labor Party newspaper *Nordlys* (*Northern Light*).⁵ Such pockets of radicalism were found throughout the region: in Southern Varanger in Eastern Finnmark; in Hammerfest in Western Finnmark; in Tromsø and Harstad in Troms County; and in mining communities, such as Salangen in Troms, Sulitjelma and Rana in Nordland.

However, this radicalization was independent of the revolution in Russia, and in the short term it does not seem that the 1917 resulted in any further radicalizing in the north of Norway. On the national level, the radical wing took control both of the Labor Party (in 1918) and of the National Trade Union Association (in 1920).⁶ However, the Labor Party lost some support in the

3 Einar-Arne Drivenes and Hallvard Tjelmeland, “Die Norwegische Arbeiterbewegung zwischen Region und Nation,” *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts zur Erforschung der europäischen Arbeiterbewegung* 19 (1997): 54 ff.

4 Randi Rønning Balsvik, *Vardø. Grensepost og fiskevær 1850–1950*, vol. 2 (Vardø: Vardø kommune, 1989), 117 and 162.

5 Pål Christensen, “Stormfull seilas under skiftende ledelse,” in *Flammende budbringer. Nordlys gjennom 100 år*, edited by Pål Christensen and Hallvard Tjelmeland (Tromsø: Bladet Nordlys, 2003), 142–151.

6 Øyvind Bjørnson, “På klassekampens grunn,” in *Arbeiderbevegelsens historie*, vol. 2, ed. Arne Kokkvoll and Jakob Sverdrup (Oslo: Tiden Norsk Forlag, 1990), 520–536; Finn Olstad, “Med knyttet neve,” *LOs historie 1899–1935*, vol. 1 (Oslo: Pax forlag, 2009), 255. The victory for “the new direction” in the National Trade Association, however, was partly built on a compromise.

general election in 1918, compared to the election three years before, and in the north the decline was even greater—though the Labor Party gained 44.3 percent in Finnmark and 51.1 in Troms. Nordland was also a few percentage points higher than the national average of 30.6 percent.⁷

From a superficial point of view, the Russian Revolution did not have much of an impact in either Norway as a whole or in northern Norway in particular. However, if one looks a little further ahead in time, there are some regional and national characteristics that can be traced back to the revolution and the emergence of a revolutionary state in Russia. The first clear expression of the significance of the Russian Revolution as an independent factor in Norwegian politics is the two cleavages in the Labor Party. This was the only real mass party in Europe that became a member of the Comintern in 1919. First, a split to the right occurred in 1920 (the Social Democratic Labor Party of Norway came into being), and then to the left in 1923 (The Norwegian Communist Party, or NKP, emerged). The general elections showed the relative strength of the different tendencies in the labor movement. There were regional differences, and Finnmark stands out. In the election of 1924, the year after the split in 1923, the Communist Party of Norway received 11.9 percent support in Finnmark, compared with 6.1 at the national level, while support for the Communist Party in Troms and Nordland was only half of the country's average. In 1927, after the Social Democratic Labor Party rejoined the mother party (i.e. the Norwegian Labor Party) together with a significant part of the Communist Party, the NKP's support in Finnmark was still 10.1 percent (as opposed to 4 percent at the national level).⁸

THE FOUNDATION OF COMMUNIST SUPPORT IN NORTHERN NORWAY

It is reasonable to explain this clearly stronger support for the Communists in Finnmark as an expression of sympathy for the Russian Revolution and the new Soviet state. Finnmark, after all, shares a border with Russia, and since 1905 there had been a good deal of contact with the revolutionary movement in Russia. In Vardø (eastern Finnmark), a publishing house called Murman was established by Russian revolutionaries in exile in 1905, and there was a lively

7 Drivenes and Tjelmeland, "Die Norwegische Arbeiterbewegung zwischen Region und Nation," 55.

8 *Ibid.*, 55.

Russian-Norwegian exchange of literature and ideas there until the late 1920s.⁹ General support for the communists in Finnmark was high, but in some municipalities it was even higher. In Alta, for instance, which was characterized by what the historian Henry Minde calls “slate communism,” where the combination of slate production and the fisherman-peasant economy proved to be a fertile ground for a particular kind of radicalism.¹⁰ In southern Varanger, and especially related to the miners at the South Varanger mining company, a syndicalist and communist radicalism developed that was dominant among the workers until the late 1920s. During a military strike in Kirkenes and Bjørnvatn in eastern Finnmark at the end of the First World War, troops were mobilized. Workers’ and soldiers’ councils were formed there, in line with the Bolshevik pattern.¹¹ Still in the 1930s, there was almost 10 percent support for Norway’s Communist Party in this part of Finnmark.

Such pockets of strong radicalism and communism in the period after the Russian Revolution could be found in many places in northern Norway. The most spectacular example was the rebellion in Hammerfest in Western Finnmark during the so-called great strike in 1921. This was the most comprehensive conflict in Norway until then—with all the Workers’ Trade Union Association’s 150,000 members in strike. The strike committee took full control of the city. The military was sent in. The highly right-wing organization Samfunnshjelpen brought strikebreakers in from the south. Nevertheless, the workers exercised full control over the city as long as the strike lasted, through what might be called a worker’s council.¹² The head of the strike committee was editor Sigurd Simensen, who shortly after traveled to Harstad town in Troms and established the communist newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (the *Daily News*). At the end of the 1920s, he became the vice mayor of Harstad, and after the Second World War, the mayor.¹³

9 Balsvik, *Vardø. Grensepost og fiskevær*, 120 ff., 138–145.

10 Henry Minde, *Stein og brød. Skifernæringa i Alta fram til 1940* (Alta: Alta Skiferbrudd, Alta Historielag og Alta kommune, 1983).

11 Steinar Wikan, *Grubeforeningen Nordens Klippe. Arbeiderkamp i nord 1906–2006* (Oslo: Pax forlag, 2006), 131–136.

12 Arnulf Kristensen, *Rød mai. Da verdensrevolusjonen banket på i Hammerfest* (Oslo: Tiden Norsk Forlag, 1977); Klaus Iversen, *Krise, utslettelse og nytt liv. Hammerfest etter 1914* (Hammerfest: Hammerfest kommune, 1989), 162–166.

13 Gunnar E. Kristiansen, *Sigurd Simensen. Kommunist og pressemann. En framstilling av redaktøren av partiavisene Folkeviljen (DNA) og Dagens Nyheter (NKP) i Harstad fra 1922–1931* (Master thesis, Tromsø: University of Tromsø, 2006), 42–50, 94, and 100.

Another such pocket for communist support was, as mentioned, Alta, but here the breakthrough for the communists first appeared in the 1930s. Unusually for the communist movement in Alta, the communists had a foothold in the strongly religious low church Laestadian movement. By the end of the 1930s, the communist William Granås became mayor in the municipality, following a municipal election where the communists received nearly 30 percent of the votes.¹⁴ There was also communist press in the region with newspapers in several cities in Northern Norway, such as Kirkenes, Tromsø, Harstad, Svolvær, and Narvik, in the latter case until the late 1950s.¹⁵

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The example of Alta also shows the problem of measuring the impact of the Russian Revolution. What was inspired by the revolution and what was a radicalism that had roots in other social, political, and cultural conditions? The strong radicalism among fishermen in Eastern Finnmark undoubtedly had its basis in sharp class antagonism between fishermen and fish buyers. The strength of the communists in Alta in the 1930s has to be explained primarily by the special conditions related to slate production there. The strong position of the communists in many northern mining communities can easily be explained by industry-specific conditions: miners and workers were, in general, radicals everywhere. The relatively strong position of the communists in Grane municipality in Helgeland in southern Nordland in the interwar period may undoubtedly be explained by importance of the forest industry here. It is obvious that radicalization, in northern Norway and numerous other parts of Europe, must be traced back to the experiences of the First World War in general—a war that destroyed dynasties, created a crisis of legitimacy for the ruling forces, and which had an extremely powerful effect on European youth.

However, the Russian Revolution was an essential factor in how radicalism was *expressed* after the First World War. It is important to be aware that sympathy with the Russian Revolution in Norway went far beyond the ranks of those who later became members of the Norwegian Communist Party. The breadth of this sympathy is conveyed by the fact that Norway was the only country in Europe where there was an effective general strike against

14 Minde, *Stein og brød. Skifernæringa i Alta fram til 1940*, 165; Kjell Roger Eikeseth, "Dramatiske tiår (1920–1964)," *Altas historie*, vol. 3 (Alta: Alta kommune, 1998), 185–190, 338.

15 Hallvard Tjelmeland, "Aviser som produsent og produkt av fellesskap—eksemplet Nord-Norge," *Arbeiderhistorie* (2003): 165.

intervention policy vis-à-vis Russia.¹⁶ In contrast with similar groups elsewhere in Europe, the right wing that split off from the Labor Party in 1921 because it was opposed to the party's membership in the Comintern, remained a supporter of the new revolutionary worker's state.¹⁷ As Odd-Bjørn Fure contends, it can be said that "In the defense of the Soviet state, the Norwegian Labor party and the Norwegian labor movement in general stood in the first ranks in Europe." This status was also manifested in practical measures—extensive legal and illegal transport of money and propaganda literature, with Eastern Finnmark as a key central hub.¹⁸ Otherwise, there is reason to believe that there also were influences from revolutionary Russia beyond its ideology. Ketil Zachariassen has shown how a change towards a culturally pluralist orientation vis-à-vis the Sámi minority in both the Finnmark Labor Party and the Finnmark Communist Party in the mid-1920s was, among other factors, influenced by Bolshevik policy concerning minorities in the same decade.¹⁹

AMBIGUITY TOWARDS THE SOVIET UNION

Nevertheless, it was not the Bolshevik Revolution and the Bolshevik Party that may have been the most important inspiration in northern Norway, but the state which was established as a result of the revolution—the Soviet Union. Relations with this new state changed the political culture of the north. The particularly strong wish in the north that there should be good relations to the great power in the east had a number of causes. One of them, as discussed, was the special radicalism in the north—a radicalism that became stronger the further north one went. The second cause was the long-lasting trade, going back to the eighteenth century, between northern Norway and Russian fishermen and traders on the White Sea: the so-called Pomor trade. The Pomor trade completely ceased after the Russian Revolution, but there were a deep, historical memory of these transnational contacts, memories that are still part of the collective memory in the north. It is likely that the geographical proximity

16 Odd-Bjørn Fure, *Mellom reformisme og bolsjevisme. Norsk arbeiderbevegelse 1918–1920: Teori praksis* (PhD thesis, Bergen: University of Bergen, 1984), 466.

17 Hallvard Tjelmeland, "Arbeidarpartiet, bolsjevikpartiet og sovjetstaten 1917–1991," *Arbeiderhistorie* 21 (2017): 87.

18 Balsvik, *Vardø. Grensepost og fiskevær*, 142–145.

19 Ketil Zachariassen, *Samiske nasjonale strategar. Samepolitikk og nasjonsbygging 1900–1940* (Karasjok: ČálliidLágáduš, 2014), 74 and 164; Ketil Zachariassen, "'Ingen kan komme forbi at samernes krav er retfærdige.' Arbeidarpartiet si haldning til etnopolitiske krav på 1920-talet," in *Arbeiderhistorie* (2013): 72 ff.

itself is a factor, with eastern Finnmark being the northern part of Norway that throughout the twentieth century has had the most comprehensive contact with Russia and the greatest interest in close interaction with its neighbor.²⁰ The third cause for the wish in the north of a good relationship with the Soviet Union was that Soviet Union was a great power.

In the interwar period, this was a question that had to do with the Soviet Union as a political alternative to Western capitalism. The position of the Soviet Union as an international actor was weak because of the revolution, intervention, civil war, and the Western isolation policy, but that would change. What transformed the Soviet Union's status in a fundamental way was the Second World War. In the wake of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, the Soviet Union went to war with Finland in November 1939. Both of these events weakened the reputation of the Soviet Union in Norway as a while, but particularly in the northern part of the country which bordered Finland.²¹ However, it is interesting to note that a couple of month after the German occupation of Norway in the summer of 1940, sixty-six people from the small fishing village of Kiberg in eastern Finnmark travelled to Murmansk. Several of them later joined the Soviet intelligence service as partisans, as this group of Norwegian intelligence agents in the Soviet secret service was called.²² This was mostly people who sympathized with the Communist Party. They probably considered the German-Soviet treaty a tactical alliance. At the same time, the Norwegian Communist Party was banned in Norway, thus becoming the first political party outlawed in Norway by the German occupiers.

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE ARCTIC AS A NEW STRATEGIC REGION

However, with Operation Barbarossa (the massive German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941), dramatic changes in relations between the great powers took place—changes which had enormous importance for the postwar period. In short, the Arctic and the High North became of great

20 Hallvard Tjelmeland, "Borders as Barrier and Bridge: The Norwegian-Soviet/Russian Border as a Political and Cultural Construction," in *Imagined, Negotiated, Remembered. Constructing European Borders and Borderlands*, ed. Kimmo Katajala and Maria Lähteenmäki (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2012), 176–183.

21 Sven G. Holtsmark, Mikhail M. Narinskij, Marianne N. Soleim, Sigurd Sørle, "Krig og allianse," in *Naboer i frykt og forventning. Norge og Russland 1917–2014*, ed. Sven G. Holtsmark (Oslo: Pax forlag, 2015), 229–235.

22 Hans Kristian Eriksen, "Partisanene frå Kiberg," in *Partisanbygda Kiberg. Fiskeværet mellom øst og vest*, ed. Einar Niemi (Vadsø: Kiberg bygdelag, 2007), 318.

strategic importance. Through its exile government in London, Norway became allied with the Soviet Union in a joint fight against Nazi Germany. For three years, 80–90 percent of Germany's forces were at the Eastern Front. Great Britain planned to open a second front in northern Norway, which never materialized. But fear of this prompted the deployment of a large part of the German forces to the north of Norway and the construction of military infrastructure. This activity was also due to fighting on the border area—the Litza front—and German attempts to disrupt Soviet supply lines to Murmansk.

Towards the end of the Second World War, two circumstances affected the Soviet Union's relations with Norway in general and northern Norway in particular. Firstly, the experience from spring 1944, was important when it became apparent that the Western Allies were staking everything on a continental attack on Germany—and that Norway had to stand alone with the Soviet Union in the North. As a consequence, Norway entered into identical liberation agreements with the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom in May 1944.²³ This was the start of what has been called the Norwegian bridge building policy, which was based on the country allying itself with the United States and the United Kingdom while maintaining a good relations with what would be one of the two postwar superpowers, the Soviet Union. The basis of necessity was the strategic significance of the High North that had developed during the war. The second factor which strengthened the Soviet Union's position in the North was the Red Army's liberation of eastern Finnmark in October 1944, as well as the Red Army's withdrawal in September 1945, in line with the agreement between the two states.²⁴

THE POLICY OF LOW TENSION AND CRITICAL DIALOGUE

Regional differences in opinion about the policy that Norway should adopt towards the Soviet Union appeared when the bridge policy came to an end as the Cold War began in 1947–1948. In the north, the wish to create a Scandinavian alternative to NATO, which Norway joined in April 1949, was stronger than in the south.²⁵ Support for elements of the bridge building

23 Hallvard Tjelmeland, "Andre verdenskrigen og oppkomsten av norsk brubyggingspolitikk," in *Krig og frigjøring i nord*, ed. Fredrik Fagertun (Stamsund: Orkana forlag, 2015), 53.

24 Tjelmeland, "Andre verdenskrigen og oppkomsten av norsk brubyggingspolitikk," 55 and 57.

25 Knut Einar Eriksen, *DNA og NATO. Striden om norsk NATO-medlemskap innen regjeringsspartiet 1948–49* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1972), 122 and 182.

policy that Norway continued within the framework of NATO, the so-called self-imposed restrictions, was probably also stronger in the north. The most important of Norway's self-imposed restrictions was that the country would not have foreign bases on its soil in peacetime. It is interesting to note that the Finnmark Communist Party increased its support from 17 percent of the voters at the general election in 1949 (after the party had split and halved its support to 5.8 percent at the national level) to 18.6 percent in 1953, after three years of the Korean War and pronounced polarization in world politics.²⁶ In Finnmark, from the late 1950s onwards there was a commitment to build cultural contacts with people on the Soviet side of the Russo-Norwegian border. This was an extension of national policy towards the Soviet Union to the local level, where a strategy of critical dialogue became dominant after Stalin's death.²⁷

Gorbachev's administration, which began in 1985, gave rise to new openings for contact and dialogue with the Soviet Union. This was met with enthusiasm in northern Norway, especially in Finnmark. All of the three northernmost counties in Norway entered into partnership with counties in the Soviet Union. There was a strong increase in activity in cooperation between northern Norwegian and northern Russian cities from the late 1980s, and there was a sharp rise in cultural cooperation in general.²⁸

Thus, it was firm pressure from northern Norway that led to improved contact with the Soviet Union. The pressure from the north was also a factor behind the establishment of the entity that was meant to ensure a policy of low tension and trust building in the North—known as the Barents region—after the fall of the Soviet Union. The Barents region was established in 1993, two years after Russia replaced the Soviet Union as Norway's neighbor in the North at the state level.²⁹ Ever since, contact between the counties on both sides of the border has only increased, both culturally, socially, and economically. This has been an intentional policy from the Norwegian side, but since the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the situation has changed. There is no doubt that the mood in the north is oriented towards maintaining dialogue, low tension,

26 Lars Svåsand, *Politiske partier* (Oslo: Tiden Norsk Forlag, 1985), 65 ff.

27 Stian Bones, "Med viten og vilje," *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift* 23, no. 3, 283.

28 Stian Bones and Hallvard Tjelmeland, "Avvikling av en periode," in Holtsmark, *Naboer*, 537–542; Alexander A. Sergunin, "Twin cities," in Holtsmark, *Naboer*, 537–541.

29 Tjelmeland, "Borders as Barrier and Bridge," 178 ff; Lena Elisabeth Ingilæ Landsem, *Barentsregionens tilblivelse—en studie av regionale initiativ* (Stamsund: Orkana forlag, 2013), 115 ff.

and contact with Russia, more so than in the south, where the support of sanction policies dominates.³⁰

CONCLUSION

There has existed a different political culture in northern Norway, as opposed to southern Norway, in relation to the Soviet Union and Russia from the Cold War until today. The question concerns the extent to which these differences are due to the Russian Revolution. In this article, I have defined the impact of the Russian Revolution in terms of the revolution itself, the ideology behind it, and of the state which emerged after 1917. I have tried to show that, in both in the short- and long-term, these elements had greater effects in the north than in the south. The idea of the Soviet Union, and of Russia today, as fundamentally expansionist does not fit in with the historical experience of the north. This historical experience seems to have shaped a different political culture in northern Norway and in the High North in general, by comparison with the south, regarding cooperation with Russia in the Arctic.

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30 Hallvard Tjelmeland, "Klasse eller region. Spenninga mellom sosialisme og regionalisme i nordnorsk arbeidarrørsele," in *Kollektive bestrebelser. Ei bok til Knut Kjeldstadli på 70-årsdagen*, ed. Jardar Sørvoll, Trine Rogg Korsvik, and Idar Helle, 209–222 (Oslo: Novus, 2018).

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