

RUSSIA AND THE ARCTIC

Environment, Identity and Foreign Policy

GEIR HØNNELAND

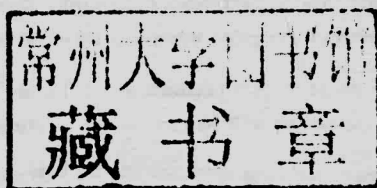
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Geir Hønneland is Director of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Norway. He has published widely on Russian politics and international relations in the Arctic, and his books have been translated into Russian and Chinese. He gained his PhD from the University of Oslo in 2000 and is one of the most respected commentators in the field of Arctic Studies.

'Hønneland vividly contextualizes different narratives of suspicion, hope and self-perception with broader frameworks of identity and Russianness. His personal tone, vast empirical data and the strong theoretical underpinning provide *Russia and the Arctic* with an identity itself. Apart from the groundbreaking knowledge that his book holds, it is also incredibly fun to read!'

Nikolas Sellheim, University of Lapland and book review editor of
Polar Record, University of Cambridge

'Geir Hønneland's book explores the narrative environment in which Russian foreign policy is elaborated, and gives us unique insight on how sensitive Arctic issues are talked about in Russia. He also convincingly demonstrates the gap between narrative and action, and between the different actors in charge of Arctic affairs in Russia. A must-read book for all those wanting to go beyond the usual, confrontational Arctic buzz and comprehend Russia's policy.'

Marlene Laruelle, George Washington University,
author of *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future
of the Far North* (2014)

'Hønneland brings depth to debates on Russia's role in the Arctic. His almost uncanny ability to put us in Russians' shoes is the most remarkable achievement of this oeuvre. As he unravels, page by page, layer by layer, the rich cultural fabric underpinning current Russian narratives of the Arctic, he takes the wind out of the sails of Arctic warmongers and doomsayers.'

Martin Müller, University of Zürich, author of *Making Great
Power Identities in Russia* (2010)

'*Russia and the Arctic* is a timely read. For those of us interested in the Arctic region and the role of the world's largest Arctic state, this is more than a reliable guide. It offers an intimate portrait of how Russian newspapers and public culture more generally engage with "their Arctic" and "their interests", and how we need to better understand in the West. Geir Hønneland shows us how Russia's policies and practices towards the Arctic are part of what we might consider a "demanding geopolitics" without demonizing Russia itself. The take-away message for me was that Russia's voice will be heard and Russia's presence will be felt in the contemporary Arctic and beyond.'

Klaus Dodds, Royal Holloway, University of London,
co-author of *The Scramble for the Poles: The Geopolitics
of the Arctic and Antarctic* (2015)

For Leah

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Source: Fridtjof Nansen Institute

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Source: Fridtjof Nansen Institute

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PREFACE

This book has been in preparation for several years. The Norwegian Ministry of Defence gave me financial support to conduct the empirical investigation back in 2010, under its international relations research programme. My master's degree student Torstein Vik Århus conducted the media search for the study the following year, which I have subsequently updated. Having just published the book *Borderland Russians: Identity, Narrative and International Relations* (2010), I was eager to expand both my theoretical and empirical coverage, as far as the relationship between identity and foreign policy was concerned. With MoD money in my pocket – yes, the Russian story-tellers cited throughout the book will have their suspicions confirmed – I planned a book provisionally entitled *Arctic Talk*.

The first few pages of a book are always the most difficult. Although I began writing full of optimism and enthusiasm in early 2011, it didn't take long – one and a half pages to be precise – before I came to an impasse. I made a new attempt in the summer months of 2012. This time, total output numbered four or five pages. But then events in the outside world intervened. In spring 2010, Norway and Russia had unexpectedly agreed on a delimitation line in the Barents Sea, after 40 years of negotiations. The Russians greeted the agreement with considerable scepticism, which I discuss at length in Chapter 3 of this book (the

Norwegians, conversely, were ecstatic). In early 2013, I came across an article in the Russian press called 'What should Putin do to get the Barents Sea back?'. I wrote an op-ed in response and gave it the same title; the article was printed in several Norwegian newspapers before being translated into Russian and posted on various Russian websites. Russian criticism of the Barents Sea delimitation agreement, I argued, was based on inaccurate assumptions about Norway's intentions in the Barents Sea region. A few weeks later, I received a 'Current Affairs and Debate Book' grant from the Norwegian Non-Fiction Writers' Association and the Norwegian Freedom of Expression Foundation to finance the writing of a short book on the topic, to be published within eight to ten months. The Russian media material could finally be put to good use. I wrote the book quickly during the summer of 2013, in the tranquil surroundings of the Department of Languages and Culture at the Royal Danish Defence College in Copenhagen. Bearing the same title as the original Russian article and my response, it was in print by the end of the year. The book was well received by reviewers and readers alike, and a second edition was ready before the summer was over. In the meantime, an English-language version had appeared under Palgrave's Pivot imprint (mid-length publication, longer than a journal article but shorter than a traditional monograph), now titled *Arctic Politics, the Law of the Sea and Russian Identity: The Barents Sea Delimitation Agreement in Russian Public Debate*.

Arctic Politics became a step on the way to the present book. That book was not theoretically framed, and only parts of my empirical material had been used. I still hoped to complete *Arctic Talk*, but had to admit to myself that the masterpiece-in-waiting would have to wait for some time yet. My *deus ex machina* became my eminent colleague and generous friend Leif Christian Jensen. In late winter 2014, he landed a contract with indie publisher I.B.Tauris for his monograph on Norwegian Arctic politics. Friends as we are, his achievement still jangled my competitive nerve, and I was good for a race. Well, he beat me to the finish. I had been writing like a man possessed throughout the spring and hoped to finish before starting on a three and a half month paternity leave that summer. With only

a chapter and a half to go, I realized it was a long shot, so I decided in May to let the material mature. Again, however, it proved hopelessly difficult to pick up the thread after a long break. A single paragraph in September joined by another in November was the miserable outcome. Spring came and I forced myself to start working the keyboard, a sentence at a time.

The resulting pages, i.e. the present book, did not turn out to be the theory-packed monograph I had originally envisaged. It is informed by theory on narrative and foreign policy, but essentially I tell the story about how the Arctic is talked about in Russia, or rather four short stories: about the 'scramble for the Arctic'; the Barents Sea delimitation line; management of marine resources in the Arctic; and East–West region building in Northern Europe. The Introduction sets the theoretical stage, and while theories on the narrative constitution of the self of individuals and states work below the surface in the case studies, I do not engage explicitly in a theoretical debate, apart perhaps from the concluding chapter where I try to adapt the stories to a theoretically relevant exposition of how public narratives make states 'ready for action' in their foreign policies.

Many people have inspired and influenced on this book – few mentioned, few forgotten. Above all, I extend my gratitude to my longstanding friend and colleague Anne-Kristin Jørgensen, whose translations of and sharp-eyed observations on the media material represent the scaffolding. (While I do speak Russian, I prefer to come to the data with fresh academic eyes, rather than after translating them myself.)

Two of my best mates at work and in life, Jørgen Holten Jørgensen and Lars Rowe, are also two of the best people to sound out ideas about 'who are the Russians?' Chris Saunders has been my English language consultant for one and a half decades now; not only does he correct my mistakes, he lets me keep my own voice – and even improves it at times. My old colleague and copy-editor Maryanne Rygg, now retired, comes into the office when I have a new manuscript in preparation – it's a real pleasure to see her professionalism at work. Finally, I wish to thank my editor at

I.B. Tauris, Tomasz Hoskins, for his unstinting enthusiasm for Leif Christian's and my work on Arctic politics, and his swift but never less than professional turnaround of our manuscripts.

I have opted for an 'easy' reference system for this book. Since it is not a legal treatise, I do not provide references to international agreements, laws and regulations. Nor is it an historical dissertation: events and facts are not substantiated by reference to archive material. I adhere in the main to the (not always particularly lucid) norms of the social sciences on source attribution. When I quote the same source several times in the same section, I note just the one reference, after the first quotation. The source of a non-referenced direct quote can be found in the immediately preceding endnote.

In my transliteration of Russian characters, I generally keep to -y rather than -i for the Russian 'short-i' (except following a vowel at the end of a name, such as Nikolai) and the letters -yo, -yu and -ya, and -e instead of -ye for the Russian -e (which is actually pronounced -ye). Hence, *Vzglyad* rather than *Vzgliad* and *russkie* instead of *russkiye*. I have also omitted the 'short-i' at the end of a word when it follows a regular 'i'. I make exceptions, however, for personal names whose English spelling is more or less standardized. I write Yeltsin instead of Eltsin and Zhirinovskiy instead of Zhirinovski (or Zhirinovskiy). For the sake of readability, not least for those without a command of the Russian language, I do not use the Russian soft sign in the English translations of the transcripts. Due to the relatively informal tone of the text, I minimize the use of capital letters for proper nouns; hence 'fishery protection zone around Svalbard' (but 'Grey Zone').

This book is dedicated to my daughter Leah, the apple of her father's eye.

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes we must change the story to accommodate the events, sometimes we change the events, by acting, to accommodate the story. (Carr 1986: 61)

The Arctic is getting warmer, in more than one way. The ice is melting and scientists are uncertain about its impact on the Arctic ecosystems. Will the Polar bear survive without the Polar ice? Will new species migrate to the Arctic once the climate gets warmer? How will Arctic human settlements be affected by climate change? But in addition to biology and meteorology, the political discussion surrounding the Arctic is also getting hotter. Who does the oil and gas in the Arctic continental shelf belong to? How will marine delimitation lines be decided? Who will control the new sea routes? Who actually owns the Arctic?

What is often referred to as 'the scramble for the Arctic' started when Russia planted its flag on the seabed at the North Pole in August 2007.¹ Many presented the event as if Russia had laid claim to the North Pole itself, though governments around the world would doubtless contest the matter. A race for the Arctic was underway, with Russia playing the wild card. Relations among the other Arctic states – Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway and the US – are excellent and cemented by a strategic alliance in NATO. Russia, on the other hand, is the successor state of the

Soviet Union, NATO's declared enemy during the Cold War. The country is often shrouded in mystery: Winston Churchill called Russia 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma' (1948: 449) – it also has an image as a northern country, with Arctic expeditions and endless Siberian forests. What people are worried about is that Russia will do as it pleases in the Arctic, international law and other norms for civilized political behaviour notwithstanding.

Much of what animates the 'Arctic buzz' is about what Russia wants. Russia obviously has aggressive intentions in the Arctic, some say, warning that one never knows what the Russians are up to. But what do they actually want in the Arctic? In this book, I approach this question through a study of Russian media discourse and political declarations. I ask how Russian politicians, journalists and others with access to the media talk about the political challenges in the Arctic. In line with theories that link narrative, identity and foreign policy – concepts that will be further explained in the following – I aim to demonstrate 'the bandwidth of possible outcomes' (Neumann 2008: 62) available to Russian policy makers in their Arctic policies. The assumption is that the way you talk constitutes who you are. Who you consider yourself to be, in turn, defines the range of possible actions – this goes for individuals and for collectives, such as states.

Narrative and identity

Identity has gained prominence as an object of study across the social sciences in recent decades, but the concept is seldom defined. Common everyday understandings are 'self-image' or 'people's perception of who they are'. In their textbook on discourse and identity, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) understand the latter concept 'in its broadest sense, in terms of *who people are to each other*, and how different kinds of identities are produced in spoken interaction and written texts' (p. 6, emphasis in original). Here they depart from the assumption that identity is something strictly internal to the subject: 'It is [often] assumed that although people may present

themselves differently in different contexts, underneath that presentation lurks a private, *pre-discursive* and stable identity' (p. 3, emphasis in original). An alternative understanding of identity is as a public phenomenon: 'a performance or construction that is interpreted by other people' (p. 4). Several 'moves' are visible here: from identity as something stable to something mutable, from something private to something social, from something attached to the individual to something created by the individual, and from something ready to be discovered by the observer to something the observer himself or herself actively interprets.

Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 17ff) note how identity was largely conceived of as an internal 'project of the self' until the second half of the twentieth century, when sociologists became more concerned with collective identities, based upon criteria such as age, gender and class. The assumption was still of identity as pre-discursive, unified and essential. For instance, this was the case for the 'social identity theory' developed in the 1980s (see, e.g., Tajfel 1982), which saw identity as 'something that lies dormant [in each individual], ready to be "switched on" in the presence of other people' (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 26). It was only towards the end of the twentieth century that this view was challenged and identity came to be seen as 'an *unfinished product of discourse*' (p. 30, emphasis in original), that is fluctuating and shaped by language and social practice. After the turn of the millennium, many observers agree that 'rather than being *reflected* in discourse, identity is actively, ongoingly, dynamically *constituted* in discourse' (p. 3, emphasis in original).

This resonates with contemporary theories on the narrative constitution of identity.² Narrative can be viewed as a sub-category of discourse. While discourse is often perceived of as wider language (and social) practice,³ a narrative is a stretch of talk about specific events and the order in which they happened. Czarniawska (2004: 17) defines a narrative as 'a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected'. Stories she views as a sub-category of narrative, distinguished by the existence of a plot, understood as 'the basic

means by which specific events, otherwise represented as lists or chronicles, *are brought into one meaningful whole* (p. 7; emphasis added).⁴ Somers (1994) argues convincingly for a reconfiguring of the study of identity formation through the concept of narrative. Leaning on criticism of the traditional conception of narrative as simply a mode of representation, she claims 'it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities' (p. 606). And further, '[We] come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*' (p. 606, emphasis in original). There are two important claims here. First, narratives are not just reflections about the world, but rather constitutive of the self. In that sense, narratives acquire an ontological dimension in addition to their traditional epistemological one. They give expression to the outside world about who people are, but they also take part in *making* people who they are. Along similar lines, Gubrium and Holstein (2009: 8) note, 'If human experience is viewed as narrative, our stories become our selves; narratives structure who we are as meaningful beings in the world.' Second, narratives are 'rarely of our own making'. Gergen (2001: 249), in a similar vein, writes: '[people] do not author their own lives'; instead, 'stories serve as communal resources' that people avail themselves of when they construct their life stories.⁵ In order to maintain intelligibility in the culture, the story one tells about oneself must adhere to commonly accepted rules of narrative construction. When we use these narrative conventions, we generate a coherence and direction in our lives: 'Certain forms of narrative are broadly shared within the culture; they are frequently used, easily identified, and highly functional. In a sense, they constitute a syllabary of possible selves' (p. 253).

Somers (1994: 617ff) identifies four dimensions of narrative: ontological, public, conceptual and meta-narratives. Ontological narratives are the stories that individuals use to make sense of their lives; they 'process events into episodes' (p. 618) in their everyday

life. Public narratives are the inter-subjective frames, attached to cultural or institutional formations larger than the single individual (typically family, workplace, local community or nation), which sustain and transform narrative over time. The third dimension of narrativity refers to the 'master narratives' in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history: epic dramas such as Capitalism vs Communism, the Individual vs Society, the Emergence of Western Civilization and the Rise of Nationalism or Islam. Finally, conceptual narratives are the concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers.

*

Many recent narrative theorists stand in debt to Carr's (1986) exposition about the relationship between time, narrative and history. One of Carr's ambitions is to challenge the prevailing assumption among historians of narrative as primarily a method to give shape to historical events, to craft stories with beginnings and ends out of the continuous flow of happenings in the world. Quite rightly, he argues, historians read into the past a narrative structure that it, strictly speaking, does not really have (since beginnings and ends are more or less randomly set), but so do we as human beings in our efforts to make sense of the world. Narrative is simply our primary way of organizing our experience of time. It is not just a tool for historians (or for the common story-teller), but our *modus operandi* as human beings when we try to come to grips with our here and now, in-between past and future. 'Historical and fictional narratives [are] not distortions of, denials of, or escapes from reality, but *extensions and configurations of its primary features*' (p. 16, my emphasis). The past and the future, according to Carr, are involved in our experience even when we are not explicitly thinking about them. Present and past function together in our perception of time, just like foreground and background or focus and horizon do in our spatial perception (pp. 21ff). Narration is not just a passive recounting of events but is informed and influenced by our knowledge of the past and expectations for the future.⁶