

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Sámi are an indigenous Northern European people whose homeland, Sápmi, extends across the territories of four states: Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. For the Sámi of the Nordic countries, a long period of cultural repression gave way to a renaissance of sorts during the last half of the twentieth century. During the last decades of the century, their indigenous rights were recognized, they experienced a cultural and linguistic revival, and popularly elected Sámi parliaments were established in each of the three Nordic states. In contrast, the Soviet Sámi had little opportunity to develop independent ethno-political organizations and were largely isolated from their ethnic kin across the Norwegian border. The Soviet–Norwegian frontier was one of only two short stretches where the USSR and NATO shared a direct land border (the other being between Turkey and the USSR), and it remained tightly sealed until 1989.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia's borders opened. In the decades that followed, the Russian Sámi attempted a linguistic revival; they began mending the Cold War scars across Sápmi and established their own independent ethno-political organizations. This period saw numerous struggles over the right to define the interests of the Russian Sámi and represent them, laying the foundations for current Russian Sámi politics.

This book tells the story of what happened once the Soviet borders opened up. In this volume, we follow the development of an ethno-political movement on the periphery of the Russian Federation: the tensions that arise when a small people attempts to organize itself, reconstitute its culture and identity and reach out across the old Iron Curtain to ethnic kin in the West. As this border has been one of the most important dividing lines in modern history, the tale of the Sámi people and their efforts to mend their divisions is a case study of not only an indigenous movement, but indeed a microcosm of Russian–Western relations, replete with idealism, opportunism, misunderstandings, cultural exchange and intended and unintended consequences.

The Russian Sámi revival has been a multifaceted one. We are particularly preoccupied with two aspects: firstly, the formation of the first post-Soviet group of Sámi leaders, whose origins are found in the Soviet Sámi intelligentsia; secondly, the consequences of the increasing contact between the Russian Sámi and their more numerous, wealthy and rights-endowed kin in the West – namely, the Nordic Sámi. These are in themselves broad fields of study, so we have narrowed our narrative down to three main themes. First, we concentrate on the initial post-Soviet attempts at linguistic revival and the close connection between this process and the emergence of a Russian Sámi ethno-political elite. We then look at the educational re-orientation of the Russian Sámi away from St. Petersburg's Herzen University and towards Sámi educational institutions in the Nordic states. Finally, we examine the founding of the first Sámi political organizations in Russia. Throughout this work, we focus on disagreements among various factions, the popular legitimacy of leaders and organizations, and problems involving the relationship between the urbanized and educated part of the Russian Sámi community and its more rural part.

Our field of study is thus Russian Sámi politics, which we define as actions linked by discourse or consequence to the situation of the Sámi people in Russia. For the purposes of this book, we also limit ourselves to the formalized Sámi ethno-political organizations on the Kola Peninsula. We try to cover both informal and formal aspects of these organizations, but we do not aim to carry out a comprehensive review of the myriad informal practices at other levels of the Russian Sámi community. As described by Yurchak (2006), such practices pervade post-Soviet society; and it would be overly ambitious to cover them all in such a volume, even for a small community like the Russian Sámi.

Our book spans the formative decades of post-Soviet Russian Sámi politics, a period that had its roots in the first signs of cultural-linguistic revitalization during the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, continued with a flurry of political activity in the 1990s, and culminated in the years around the turn of the millennium. This period is roughly analogous to the period of Russian Sámi history that Kalstad (2009: 50–55) dubbed 'the time of cultural rebirth'. According to Kalstad, this period began in approximately 1985 and ended in about 2002–03. Perestroika heralded its beginning, and its most defining event was the establishment of the Russian Sámi organization AKS in 1989, which became the hub of Russia's Sámi political life and was accepted into the cross-border Sámi Council in 1992. Kalstad considered the phase of cultural rebirth to have ended in 2002–03, asserting that a new phase had been entered – 'the return of our lands and reindeer herding' – during which time the Russian Sámi would have their last chance to return to family-based reindeer herding

(and other traditional ways of life) through the *obshchinas*, which will be discussed later on in this book (Kalstad 2009: 55–72).

Kalstad passed away in 2008 (his book was published posthumously), and we therefore cannot know how he would have viewed developments in Russian Sámi politics today. For our part, we have chosen to consider the foundation of the *obshchinas* as just one (albeit important) phenomenon in a ‘multipolar phase’ of Russian Sámi politics which began just before the year 2000. This period is different from the preceding one in that while Russian Sámi civil society had previously been dominated by the AKS, the 1998 establishment of a second organization, OOSMO, which also aimed at organizing all the Sámi in Russia and was accepted into the Sámi Council in 2000, heralded a new era in which the landscape of Russian Sámi civil society became increasingly complex.

Following the foundation of OOSMO, several important events occurred, such as the opening of a new building for the Lovozero National Cultural Centre in 2003 (the centre had originally been established in 1994), the launching of the Kola Sámi Radio, and the establishment of the first Sámi *obshchinas*: kin- and family-based organizations aimed at ensuring the rebirth of traditional economic activities (Kalstad 2009: 54). Later in this ‘multipolar’ period of Russian Sámi politics, several significant institutions were created, including an official government organ at the provincial level to deal with Sámi affairs (the Murmansk Provincial Centre for Indigenous Minorities of the North), *natsional’nye kul’turnye avtonomii* (local ‘national cultural autonomies’ for preserving culture and language), and a Sámi youth organization (*Sam’ nurash*). In later years, the Kola Sámi Assembly, an NGO-based attempt at creating a Nordic-style Sámi Parliament, was also launched; a move that was subsequently answered by the provincial authorities with the creation of the *obshchina*-based Council of Indigenous Minorities of the North (Berg-Nordlie 2011b: 62–71). At the time of writing, there are nineteen registered *obshchinas* and nine public organizations (*obshchestvennye obyedineniya*), including three national cultural autonomies (CIMN 2011a) and two structures aimed at uniting and coordinating the Russian Sámi.

Hence, from a meagre beginning in the 1980s, when no Russian Sámi political organizations existed at all, the organizational landscape passed through a phase in the 1990s in which one dominant entity existed, and ended up branching out in the 2000s into a much more diverse conglomerate of organizations and bodies, rivalling or cooperating in varying constellations.

This division of Russian Sámi political history into a pre-organizational phase, a unipolar phase (1989–1998) and a multipolar phase (1998–ongoing) is a periodization based on (and, hence, mainly relevant for) developments in civil society, official agencies and international activities.

If one were to look primarily at other sectors of Russian Sámi society, it would perhaps be more prudent to operate with different historical periodizations. For example, Konstantinov (2011: 192–198) paints a picture of the early 1990s as a time ‘when all this mess began’, based on rural people’s experience of their socio-economic situation: with the fall of the USSR, the country underwent a systemic shock, followed by an infrastructural and economic decline that hit the rural indigenous population on the Kola Peninsula hard, creating dire problems (which have still not been solved) for the land-based traditional professions of the Sámi. If we, on the other hand, look at the Russian Sámi language situation, we see a steady decline that begins long before the fall of the USSR and continues today (see Appendix 5). This book concerns the remarkable growth of Russian Sámi political activity that took place simultaneously with these negative developments. A major task of the new group of Russian Sámi politicians has been to address these issues and, as we shall see, the birth of the movement is connected particularly intimately to worries over the fate of the group’s language.

This book highlights the roots of the current civil society, which are to be found in the formative decades of the 1980s and 1990s. Disagreements and differences were also salient during this formative stage, and the events that subsequently emerged can be partially read as continuations of what happened then. Indeed, in order to understand contemporary ethno-politics among the Russian Sámi, it is vital to understand the developments during the 1990s.

Throughout this book we chart the divide between the more urban elite and the more rural groupings among the Russian Sámi, noting both the tensions and the interdependence between these two poles of the community. The ‘divides’ referred to in the title of this book, and to which the nascent Russian Sámi ethno-political movement had to adapt, were thus twofold: a divide between rural and urban Russian Sámi and a divide between the Russian Sámi and their ethnic kin in the Nordic countries. The most fundamental challenge facing the first post-Soviet Russian Sámi leaders was to bridge these divides.

As is common in the early stages of ethno-political movements, the Russian Sámi movement faced a representational problem during its first years due to both a clear gender imbalance and the complete dominance of educated, urban people among its leaders. The absence of activists and leaders emanating from the rural parts of the community constituted a considerable problem as these two opposite poles need each other: Without support from the majority of their constituency, an elite cannot legitimately promote an ethno-political project while, at the same time, the rank and file of an ethnic minority needs the intelligentsia, who possess

resources and knowledge necessary for navigating the bureaucratic and political systems of the modern states in which they live.

Before plunging into post-Soviet ethno-politics, we present an historical account of the plight of the Russian Sámi up to the time of the Soviet collapse, then outline the basic problems the Russian Sámi faced when the socio-economic system fell apart and Russia became an independent state. Next, we examine the three previously mentioned themes, before concluding with some words on leadership legitimacy and successes in this period, the effects of cooperation with Nordic Sámi actors in the educational sphere and what all this has meant for the further development of Russian Sámi politics.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the Kola Peninsula's indigenous politics underwent a revolution through the events described in this book: a multi-level mending of the divides between East and West began, the Russian Sámi developed a civil society of their own, and people gained new confidence in their own ethnic identity. Despite teething troubles, the Russian Sámi managed to set up their own ethno-political infrastructure and, in the subsequent years, actively attempted to shape their own future as part of the border-transcending Sámi people.

About the Data Gathering and Presentation

This book has been sixteen years in the making, starting with the preparations for the first fieldwork in 1996 and ending with the publication of the book in 2012. During those sixteen years, the manuscript has gone through several intermediate stages. The book is based on Indra Overland's PhD thesis and has been rewritten by the two authors in collaboration. At the empirical level, it is based on fieldwork conducted during the 1990s (Overland) and the 2000s (Berg-Nordlie). In finalizing the text we encountered ethical and methodological issues that gave rise to much reflection and debate, which we discuss in this section.

Much of the data collection for this volume was carried out through participant observation, a method that builds upon the extended presence of the researcher in the society under study, as well as the anonymization of places and people. Overland spent more than a year on fieldwork on the Kola Peninsula, divided into four trips. His interviews were carried out as informal conversations without recourse to questionnaires or other forms of script. They were recorded when the interviewees gave permission to do so, which was usually the case.

However, some public figures and leaders of organizations were sensitive to having their interviews recorded and – in a very few cases – even reacted to having notes taken. On the other hand, as Shils (1959/1973: 125)

noted, many people also gain great satisfaction from being interviewed. Numerous informants had attitudes similar to one of Barnes' (1979: 113) informants, who asked whether he thought him 'a fool whose words were not worth recording'.

At no time were interpreters used. Instead, both authors learned the language used most by the locals: Russian. Attempts were also made to learn the main Sámi language spoken on the Kola Peninsula – namely, Kildin Sámi – albeit without much success, partly because of its disuse among the Russian Sámi themselves.

Berg-Nordlie's fieldwork consisted of shorter expeditions during which individual political activists and officials (current and former) were interviewed by appointment. Informants were asked if they could be quoted with their full names, but requests for anonymity were respected. Persons interviewed in the latter round of fieldwork were given the opportunity to check their statements prior to the publication of the book.

Yet the book is not based exclusively on interviews and participant observation; it is also based on historical research using a wide array of written sources. In studies of representation, legitimacy and ethno-political leadership such as this one, the importance of drawing on all available resources and research methods has been widely acknowledged (see, for example, Medhurst and Moyser 1987: 107; Ludz quoted in Binn 1987: 223; Pridham 1987: 85–87).

In the present study, local newspapers play a particularly important role, fulfilling several critical functions. First, when discussing the activities of public figures who may be hesitant to allow conversations to be recorded, the newspapers provide extensive information about their opinions and activities. Secondly, although most of the same information is available as gossip and everyday conversation among the local population, published texts are a much more referable source of information. For example, a person interviewed anonymously may subsequently deny having said the controversial things s/he is being quoted as stating. This methodological problem is reduced significantly when the same discourses have been articulated and the same events described in publicly accessible, written documents. Allegations made in newspapers and not just in anonymous interviews also involve an ethical aspect in that they ensure that those criticized have the possibility to learn about the accusations being made and have an opportunity to counter them.

The most important newspaper as far as the Russian Sámi are concerned is *Lovozerskaya pravda*, sometimes nicknamed *Lovozerka* (e.g., N. Bogdanov 1997: 3). This newspaper, the name of which means 'the Lovozero truth', has been in print since 1935 and is by far the most comprehensive written source of information about the Russian Sámi. Large

collections of back issues are readily available from, among other places, the public library in Lovozero and the Scientific Library in Murmansk.

The issue of anonymity caused much reflection and discussion during the writing and finalization of this book. It may be difficult for other researchers to double-check research when it is based on anonymous statements. Hence, the more controversial facts related in the book are generally based on newspaper references in addition to our own interviews. As a part of this approach, we have sought to avoid quoting denunciations by anonymous informants of named private individuals.

Anonymous interviews are a better source when it comes to mapping discursive landscapes – namely, how people think and talk about certain issues or phenomena or certain categories of people. Attitudes towards ‘the leaders’ as a group of people are important in this book as popular mobilization and the maintenance of popular legitimacy are vital factors in a nascent ethno-political movement. The utilization of intensive fieldwork in diverse Sámi communities has proved to be a good source for gathering such information. Interviews were conducted in the urban centres of Murmansk Province, the main Russian Sámi town of Lovozero, as well as in smaller villages and roadless settlements on the Kola Peninsula. They have brought to this book an incomparable source of information about attitudes articulated among the Russian Sámi.

Where interviews have been anonymized, this has been done thoroughly. In most cases, only minor personal data about the interviewees are provided. In a few cases, the gender, occupation, age, place of residence or similar indicators of identity have been altered in the hope of avoiding the type of criticism levelled most famously against Vidich and Bensman, whose Springdale Study (1958) is probably the best-known case involving issues of anonymity in an academic study of a small community. The subjects were given pseudonyms, but the town in which the study was carried out was nonetheless readily identifiable, as were many of those who participated in it. Some of those who had been studied, later reacted by ridiculing the academics and their research in a Fourth of July parade (Kelman 1982: 84–85; Burgess 1995: 188; Barnes 1979: 136). In making changes to avoid the problems of the Springdale Study, we have taken care not to affect the overall picture in terms of the gender profile or other factors among informants.

Finally, a question emerges of possible damage done to individual political activists through the description of actions committed by them that may be perceived as inappropriate or by pointing out widespread negative discourses about them. The observation of people’s behaviour in the public sphere does not require their consent (Capron 1982: 215; Barnes 1979: 166). Such a viewpoint does not rest upon an argument about the implicit consent of those being studied and the benign intentions of those

studying. It is merely based on the view that the public sphere should remain open to public opinion and inspection (Medhurst and Moyser 1987: 106; Rainwater and Pittman 1967: 365; Galliher 1973).

Note that – in line with Shils’ (1959/1973: 130) definition – here ‘public sphere’ does not mean merely the sphere in which one is open to the scrutiny of society in general, as when walking down the street. Rather, the term here refers to opinions published or expressed from a position of power and/or responsibility as well as acts carried out in connection with such a position: ‘When actors become involved in government and business or other organizations where they are accountable to the public, no right of privacy applies to conduct in such roles’ (Barnes 1979: 166). Those individuals whom we treat as public figures have themselves chosen to enter the public sphere, whether by taking up official leadership posts, making public speeches, expressing strong political views in articles and interviews, representing the Russian Sámi at conferences and in pan-Sámi political organs, or applying for support in the name of the Russian Sámi and their culture.

The impossibility of hiding the identities of public figures in such small, unique places is reflected in, for example, Golovnev’s (1997: 157, 160) perceptive four-pronged study of Nenets, Selkup, Khanty and Mansi communities. Golovnev does not mention leaders by name, but describes them to a degree that allows recognition; he further makes unveiled references to the names of their clans and villages. Hence, they are identifiable in the surroundings where this matters most: at the local level. Ingold’s work *The Skolt Lapps Today* (1976) was criticized on this point: ‘There are many shrewd judgements, a few hasty conclusions and obvious prejudice against, for instance, the successful “big-men” and “speculators” among reindeer owners, against “bourgeois” values and immigrant professionals as “elite”. The eloquent local leader, unnamed but holding named posts, is denounced repeatedly, as if by a participant in the scene’ (Lindgren 1977: 494). Note that this criticism occurs on two levels: firstly, the recognizability of those against whom accusations are being made; secondly, the perception that the author himself is denouncing certain groups and activists.

In this book we identify some protagonists in the formative decades of Russian Sámi politics by their full names because attempts at anonymization would be pointless. Not only would these figures be easily identifiable anyway, but they have also put themselves in positions where democracy demands that they must be subjected to public scrutiny. On the other hand, we have no desire to denounce – or glorify – any political actors. Therefore, we have tried to be fair when relating criticism against some of them by putting their actions into context and shedding light on the opinions of all sides in these formative conflicts of Russian Sámi politics.

Reflexivity about the methods of research as well as forms of representation is not only a methodological and ethical matter, but also a theoretical one that cannot be reduced to questions of anonymity. Therefore, we also find it appropriate to note here that we have tried and – as far as we can judge ourselves – managed to strike a balance between thoroughly involving ourselves in the everyday lives of the Russian Sámi and avoiding developing personal allegiances to particular groups among the Russian Sámi. We have spoken to a large number of Russian Sámi, participated in their everyday lives over long periods of time, and taken part in political meetings, trips and conferences, but always as relatively passive and hopefully neutral outsiders. The fact that one of us is an ethnic Sámi and the other is not should hopefully also help balance and nuance the text.

As Russian Sámi politics, like most indigenous politics, is centred on the idea of cultural survival and revival, the word ‘culture’ is central to our description and analysis. Therefore, before delving into our analysis, we explicitly define ‘Sámi culture’ as the practices and symbols considered to be ‘Sámi’ by the people who consider themselves Sámi. Yet at a functional level, culture is also something more in this context: a key reference point in an ethno-political discourse. ‘Sámi culture’ is that which has to be protected, developed, treasured and supported. Without a ‘Sámi culture’ – symbols and practices that the Sámi may recognize as their own – it is assumed that the Sámi will eventually die out as an identity collective. The protection and furthering of ‘Sámi culture’ holds a central place in the political project this book concerns.