

Research in the Russian Arctic: Challenging but Rewarding Fieldwork on the Kola Peninsula

Robert P. Wheelersburg

“Amerikanskaya, finskaya mashina” (American, Finnish automobile). Hearing those words in 2003 spoken by one Russian border control officer to another was bittersweet. They meant that I would be permitted to drive my rental car through the Salla border crossing from Finland to Russia to meet my colleagues in Apatity for my fifth and final summer of fieldwork in the Imandra Lake region. After five years of fieldwork on the Kola Peninsula, and two years of archival research in Finland and Sweden, our project to reconstruct western Kola Saami herding villages was coming to an end. The fieldwork was challenging but rewarding, leading to results that documented significant changes in western Kola Saami herding villages.

The purpose of this briefing note is to recommend three steps necessary for successful and safe fieldwork in the Russian Arctic, based upon my experience. First, work with Russian colleagues who can provide language and logistical support. Second, examine archival sources outside of Russia to learn about local, regional, and national processes that influenced the region. Third, follow laws and ethical research procedures while in Russia to prevent legal troubles. These recommendations are offered with the assumption that relations will improve in the near future and western scholars will be allowed to conduct fieldwork in the Russian Arctic.

While a graduate student during the mid-1980s in Brown University’s Circumpolar Studies Program, going to the Soviet Arctic to conduct fieldwork seemed impossible. The region was relatively closed to western scholars, although the border crossing near Kirkenes, Norway had been open to commerce and Norwegian and Russian workers for several decades. My entry into the Kola Peninsula was surprising for several reasons. First, foreign armies had used the region as a corridor to threaten the survival of the Soviet Union. In late 1918 and 1919 at the close of WWI, 10,000 American and British forces invaded and occupied portions of the Kola Peninsula, taking the ports of Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean and Archangel on the White Sea. The Anglo-centric forces were there because their governments opposed the Bolsheviks and attempted to destroy the fledgling Communists before they were firmly established. Nearly three decades later, the Kola Peninsula again became strategically important because the border zones with Norway and Finland

were used as German invasion routes during the Winter War and WWII. Murmansk became the receiving port for the thousands of weapons and supplies sent by the Allies through Arctic convoys during the Lend-Lease Program. Following the war, Murmansk became home to the Russian nuclear missile submarine fleet. Thus, the strategic military importance of the Kola Peninsula was well established throughout the 20th century.

In addition, the Murmansk Oblast, including the western Kola Peninsula and Imandra Lake, is restricted because it is one of the most developed parts of the Arctic, containing some of the most important strategic mineral mines and processing plants in Russia. To the northwest of Murmansk is the town of Nikel. Nikel was within Finland until the Petsamo region was annexed by the Soviet Union following the Winter War as part of the Moscow Armistice of 1944. To the southeast lies Murmansk, an important military region with many bases and Russia's. Farther south is the Khibiny Massif that feeds minerals to the heavy industries developed by the Soviets following the October Revolution. The Severonikel plant in Monchegorsk, the apatite (used to make phosphorous) factory in Apatity, and several manufacturing plants in Kirovsk process the minerals into strategic compounds. To the west along the border is the carbonatite mine in Kovdor. The regional industrial complex is powered by the Kola Nuclear Plant and supported by a railroad (and now highway) from Kandalksha to Murmansk. Thus, the fact that I was allowed to conduct research in such an important area of the Russian Arctic was surprising, but it also presented our team with a tremendous opportunity to explore an area relatively unknown outside of Russia.

Although many scholars at R1 institutions prefer internationally-known colleagues, I was fortunate enough to secure excellent colleagues from a local institution. The larger NSF team of which we were part included two major Russian researchers from Moscow based universities, one of whom was a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. While their work in natural and science was exemplary, neither had much local experience with the Kola Peninsula. That led me to choose to work with a fellow anthropologist, Dr. Natalia Gutsol, of the Institute of Northern Ecological Problems, Kola Science Centre. Along with her former graduate student, our three-person team conducted fieldwork in the region for years free from serious problems.

As an anthropologist who had conducted fieldwork in the Nordic Arctic for over a decade, I spoke Swedish and Norwegian, along with German as an archival language. Combined with extensive interaction with local groups, local language competence is one of the defining characteristics of the discipline. It was hard for me to break that commitment toward language competency, but it is impossible to learn Russian quickly. The dependence upon Russian colleagues who spoke the language, along with competent English, worked well in the field, and allowed me to participate in the project.

If the Russian Arctic is a secondary fieldwork region and you do not have language skills, local colleagues can read the Russian sources and conduct interviews as long as there is plenty of interaction with their team members. What western scholars can bring to the research project is literacy in English, Nordic languages, and German, which make up a substantial amount of archival information produced during the closed Soviet period (and before), as described below.

Several of the local institutions where we worked possessed archival collections unavailable elsewhere that added to our team's results (Figure 1).

As to the other defining characteristic of anthropology, extensive experience with local groups, I drew on my skepticism from my education toward scholars who studied their Russian subjects from afar. Both Brown and Ohio State University (undergraduate) had excellent Russian programs, focusing on history and politics. I always asked my professors and supervisors in those programs about their actual experiences in Russia. With few exceptions owing to careers in the State Department, none had spent more than a few weeks in the former Soviet Union. Even when they went to Russia, Sovietologists were essentially escorted tourists, who were not able to pursue their personal and professional interests by setting their own itineraries. Instead, western tourists (including scholars) from the 1950s to the 1980s (the so-called "thaw" era) when millions of foreigners visited the Soviet Union, were accompanied by Intourist guides who ensured that they travelled only to areas that exemplified the ideological, economic, and social successes of the Communist regime. Since the collapse of the Soviet state, however, there is no excuse for social science research in Russia that does not include substantial local experience.

Although your Russian colleague(s) will probably know much of the local region's history where you are researching, they may have less information about regional or international events because of Soviet censorship. Gathering the information may not be easy since there may not be much available in English or other major languages (e.g., French). Luckily for our team, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish ethnographers and linguists (e.g., Friis, 1872; Halström, 1911; and Itkonen, 1948) along with nature explorers (e.g., Rae, 1881), and administrators (e.g., Engelhardt, 1899), recorded their observations about the Kola Saami herding groups in Russia during their time there (Figures 2 and 3).

Local, regional, and international events that took place from 1850 to 1945 changed Saami herding groups there so much to the point that they disappeared. Until that occurred, there is some evidence that the Kola Saami, like Saami in other countries such as Finland, retained vestiges of the traditional, if not Indigenous, socioeconomic structure the *sidda*. The *sidda* was the basic residential and kinship unit for herding groups, which determined where Saami lived, what dialect they spoke (to a certain extent), which lands and waters they exploited, and the spiritual life they shared. Sometime during the Early Modern Period (c. 1500), as happened elsewhere in Sápmi (e.g., Sweden), the Russian Orthodox Church began to administer the Kola Peninsula, drawing the Saami further under the Tsar's grip. With the literacy and organization it possessed, the Church baptized all of the Saami into the Kola Lapp (sic) Parish in the Kola district of Archangel province, which was further divided into three cantons, each containing several herding villages or *pogosty*.

Another process that changed the nature of the western Kola Peninsula was the colonization efforts by the Tsar and then the Soviets to populate the area. In the 1860s, large numbers of people were brought to Murmansk to build the naval facilities that today are an important part of Russia's strategic fleet. In the late 19th century, Komi reindeer herders were forcibly moved to the Kola Peninsula from below the White Sea due to a reindeer plague, with many of them settling in eastern Saami village areas but some mixing with western Saami. Other Indigenous groups like the Nenets also migrated into the area. The greatest influx of new settlers was Russian and other ethnicities (e.g., Ukrainian) who were removed from their homes in the 20th century to work in the mines, and to build roads, railroads, and factories. In less than 100 years, the population of the Kola

Peninsula grew from 5,000 to over one million, with over 300,000 people employed in the Imandra Lake region (Wheelersburg, et. al., 2012).

Perhaps the single action that contributed most to the destruction of the western Kola Saami was the political repression carried out by the Soviets. While it is true that other Arctic countries like the U.S. and Canada also displaced, imprisoned, and killed their Indigenous peoples, in Russia it can be argued that the repression was carried out for political reasons, not warfare, including the government instituting a centrally-planned economy. Stalin's friend and right-hand man, Sergei Kirov who was a Bolshevik revolutionary and Soviet politician, became head of the Communist Party in Leningrad, including the Murmansk Oblast. Following Kirov's assassination in 1934, Stalin brought true repression to the Kola Peninsula. In all, dozens of the Saami village leaders and family heads were killed or imprisoned because they failed to adhere to the Soviet demands that they give up private property (including herds) and enter reindeer collectives.

Finally, the last thing western scholars want is to end up in a Russian prison because of mistakes they made during their fieldwork in the Arctic. It is important to learn as much as you can about Russian laws and to follow them to the letter. For example, your visa will state which cities and localities you are allowed to visit based upon your request and its approval. The authorities will track you and check your location permissions just about everywhere you go. After driving from Kirkenes, Norway, through the Russian border station, I picked up the members of my team in Apatity, and drove to the border-zone check point near our first fieldwork destination in Kovdor, 500 kilometers distant. The border guard looked at my passport and told my Russian colleagues that "we have been waiting for this car". Five minutes later, a military vehicle with mounted machine gun, an FSB sergeant and two soldiers, and the meanest dog I've ever seen showed up. The sergeant took my passport and went into the guard shack to call headquarters, appearing a few minutes later to ask "who are these Saami people". After getting an answer from one of our team members, and calling to HQ again, he handed back my passport and said "you may go". Luckily, I had Kovdor listed on my visa as a destination, and me being there was not a problem.

Entry to the Russian border zone with Norway and Finland, an area of several kilometers patrolled by the FSB (Federal Security Service, a descendent of the KGB), is through a locally obtained visa with some exceptions. The director of the FSB, like the American FBI, is appointed and answerable only to the Russian president. The FSB is charged with counterintelligence among other responsibilities, but one of its main functions became border security after the FSB absorbed the Russian Border Guards in 2003. While this seems a bit restrictive, the result is a streamlined and more efficient method for western scholars to conduct fieldwork in the Russian Arctic. During the five years I conducted research on Kola, my research visa was issued by the Foreign Ministry through the U.S. State Department. The problem was that much of the fieldwork was located within the border zone, which was administered by the militarized border guards of the Interior Ministry who were not happy that an American was being allowed into such a strategic area.

What you don't want to do is follow the path of British adventurer Roger Took as told in his 2003 book, *Running with Reindeer: Encounters in Russian Lapland*. As outlined in my review of Took's book (Wheelersburg, 2004), in which he described himself as searching for adventure in Europe's last wilderness, Took experienced adventure, some of which was inherent in his Kola

journey, some of which he manufactured by violating several Russian laws: carrying an illegal weapon, fishing without a permit, entering closed military areas, and exceeding visa restrictions.

In sum, whether you are trying to choose a primary research area as you start your career in Arctic social science, or if you are considering a secondary culture area to attain a comparative perspective (i.e., in my case it was to attain additional coverage of Sápmi), the Russian Arctic can present challenging but rewarding fieldwork opportunities. The amount of research from the region available in English and other western languages remains limited (which this issue of *Arctic Yearbook* is helping address). Thus, the contributions you make to the literature from Russian Arctic fieldwork can be important and is worth doing for your career as well. To help ensure success, western scholars should work with Russian colleagues, examine sources outside of Russia to understand local, regional, and international influences, and learn and obey Russian laws and conform to ethical research principles.

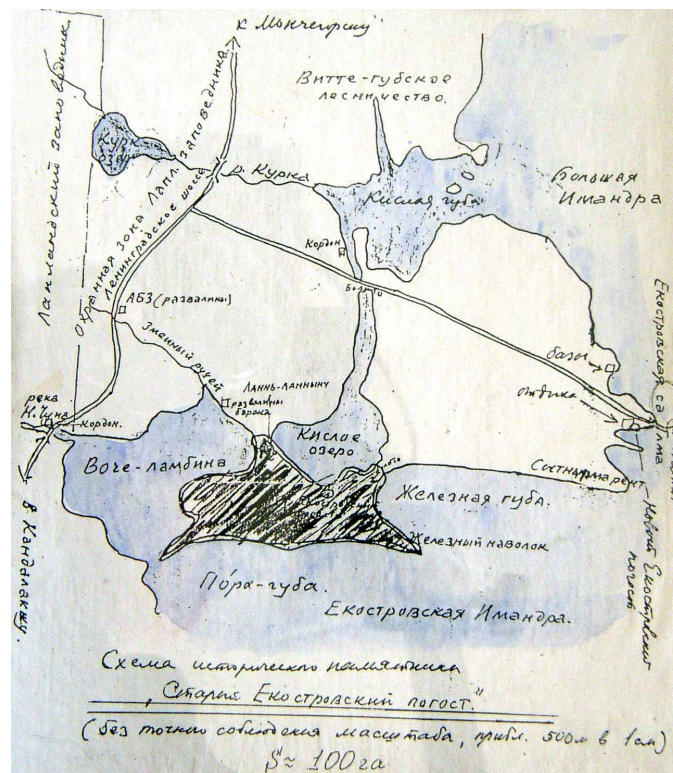


Figure 1. Hand drawn map of the Old Saami Ekostrovski Pogost. Unknown artist and date. Courtesy of the Museum of Exploration of the Great North of Russia, Apatity, Russia.



Figure 2. Ferry dock, boats, and Saami fishermen who also transported people and freight along the Kola Trakt. Photograph by J.A. Friis, 1867. The photo inscription reads “Russia, Kola Peninsula, Lake Imandra”. Courtesy of the Finnish National Library.



Figure 3. Saami family fishing salmon with a small seine. Photograph by T.I. Itokonen, 1914. The photo inscription reads, “Muurmanni beach, Kuolavuono, Graznaja. The people of Lapland pull a small salmon seine (so-called foam seine).” Courtesy of the Finnish Heritage Agency.

References

- Engelhardt, Alexander Platonovich. 1899. *A Russian Province of the North*. Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company.
- Friis, Jens Andreas. 1872. *En sommer i Finnmarken. Ryssisk Lappland og Norkareler: skildringer af land och folk*. [A Summer in Finnmark, Russian Lapland and North Karelian: Divisions of Land and People]. Stockholm: Huldegergs Bokhandel.
- Hallström, Gustav. 1922. Kolalappernas hotande extisens. [The Kola Lapps' Threatened Experience]. *Ymer*. Tidskrift utgiven af Svenska sällskapet för antropologi och geografi. [Ymer. Journal published by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography], 1911, H. 3, pp. 239 – 316. Stockholm.
- Itkonen, Tolvo Immanuel and Eeva K. Minn. 1948. *The Lapps in Finland up to 1945*. Vol. 1. Porvoo, Finland: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö.
- Rae, Edward. 1881. *The White Sea Peninsula. A Journey in Russian Lapland and Karelia*. London: John Murray.
- Took, Roger. *Running with Reindeer. Encounters in Russian Lapland*. London: John Murray.
- Wheelersburg, Robert P., N. Gutsol and L. Bromley. 2012. "Integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge & Western Science to Assess the Current State of Pre-Collectivized Sami Resource Territories on the Western Kola Peninsula," in *Sami Land Use and the Human Dimension*, edited by Peter Sköld and Krister Stoor. Umeå University.
- Wheelersburg, Robert P. and Natalia Gutsol. 2009. Traditional Saami reindeer herding village resource territories on the western Kola Peninsula, Russia. *Polar Record* 46 (238), 222– 232. University of Cambridge Press.
- Wheelersburg, Robert P. Wheelersburg and Natalia Gutsol. 2008. Babinski and Ekostroskvi: Saami *Pogosty* on the Western Kola Peninsula from 1890 to 1940. *Arctic Anthropology*, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 79 – 96, 2008. University of Wisconsin.
- Wheelersburg, Robert P. 2004. Review, "Running with Reindeer: Encounters in Russian Lapland", *Arctic* Vol. 57, No. 3 (2004): 311 – 312.