North-Norway as a Border Region during the Cold War

By Stian Bones

Introduction

The subject of my presentation is North-Norway as a border region during the cold war. What exactly is a border, and what characterised North-Norway in that respect during the Cold War? I shall try to shed light on this question from two different angles, using two different approaches. Let me turn to these approaches first.

Traditionally, a border is simply understood as «a line that separates one area or territory from another area or territory»[1]. This definition links the concept of border closely to the state, to its territory and to the concept of sovereignty. The evolution and changes of the territorial line is in the geographical discipline called boundary studies, or traditional geopolitics.[2] The field boundaries and border studies, however, are much broader than this. Today, many researchers are much concerned with how societies and cultures constitute *other* differences between people, than the territorial lines do. In this case, we talk about so-called socio-spatial differences, differences in societies and cultures – differences that don't necessarily follow the territorial lines.

I shall comment on both these approaches, beginning with the Norwegian state and the territorial line between Russia and Norway, the boundary, before I move on to the second approach – the relation between communities and borders – all seen in the context of the Cold War.

The geopolitics of the Norwegian–Soviet Boundary

---

[1] Quoted after the entry word «grense» ((boundary) in Aschehoug og Gyldendals *Store norske leksikon*.
[2] Henk van Houtum, The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries, in Geopolitics nr. 10 2005, p. 672.

In the geopolitical tradition, territories and their strategic significance are very important. Your geographical position to a large extent also determines your political position. How does the Soviet-Norwegian boundary look in this perspective?

In the period between 1944 and 47, the so-called «Svalbard-issue», where the Soviet Union aimed at a bilateral agreement with Norway, created some nervousness in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. Apart from that issue, relations between the two countries seemed quite good. The boundary line was old and well respected; – as we all know it was drawn back in 1826, and has remained ever since. After the Second World War, the boundary was demarcated, and in 1949 the two states were formally entering into a new agreement which regulated the control and supervision properly.[3]

The big issue that shattered this relatively peaceful relation was the Cold War. In 1947, Norway decided to join the European Recovery Plan (Marshall-plan), and in 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty. From 1949 until 1952, when Turkey obtained membership in NATO, Norway was the only NATO-member bordering the Soviet Union. A relatively widespread threat perception in Norway during the Cold War, held that Norway *might* be dragged into a new war as a result of hostilities between East and West in the central parts of Europe, for instance in Germany. If Norway was to be dragged into another war, this was the most probable scenario. The Norwegian authorities did not rule out, however, that the Soviet Union also might launch a local attack on North-Norway. This concern surfaced in particularly tense periods, such as 1948 (when the Soviet Union and Finland made a defence agreement) and around 1968. The main reason behind Norway's NATO-membership, was this threat perception. The Cold War had put a new pressure on Norwegian sovereignty, and on the Norwegian territory. In times of crises, the Soviet Union might be interested in obtaining some of it.

The United States' government also held this threat perception, and that's why the Americans engaged themselves in North-Norway. Norway assumed an important role for the United States in her so-called containment policy, which was directed towards the Soviet Union and her allies. First and foremost, Norway was as an important

[3] For more on this subject, see Sven G. Holtsmark (ed.), *Norge og Sovjetunionen 1917–1955. En utenrikspolitisk dokumentasjon*, Oslo 1995, documents number 288 og 302.

platform for intelligence, and it can be argued that the Norwegian Intelligence Service probably served as Norway's most important contribution to security and strength of the Western alliance. Norway was also an important factor in NATO’s so-called perimeter strategy – a network of tactical support bases around the Soviet perimeter. The result was a massive development of air fields, harbour installations, arsenals, fortifications etc. in North-Norway. Norway could not afford this military build up on her own. Developments were to a large extent funded by the United States, through the military defence aid programme (MDAP) and NATO’s infrastructure programme. On the one hand, therefore, North-Norway was of vital importance for the Western containment policy. Traditional geopolitics – territorial lines – mattered very much.

It’s also important to note that partly because of Norway’s geographical location, Norwegian authorities were keen on reducing tensions between the blocks during the Cold War. This was an important issue in, particularly from the mid 50’s, when the Nordic countries, being allied or not, tried to act as bridge-builders, worked towards nuclear non-proliferation, and were willing to criticize America, particularly for the war in Vietnam. After the threatening period from 1948 to 1951, many politicians also found it hard to believe that the Soviet Union had expansionist designs directed towards the Nordic countries. Influential political leaders in Norway spoke up for a normalisation in Norway’s relationship with the Soviet Union. This political strategy may be labelled as «critical dialogue». Norway’s Prime Minister through most of the 1950s and 60s, Einar Gerhardsen, argued that a policy based on the principles of dialogue would have a positive effect, both for Norway, and for the international development as a whole. He was the first Western state leader visiting the Soviet Union, in 1955 – and he got very well along with Khrushchev.

Other political actors than Gerhardsen were convinced that Norway would be better off if she followed an uncompromising political line towards the Soviet Union – a strategy that can be characterised as «uncompromising containment». According to this strategy, Norway had to spend more money on the military branch in North-Norway, and some of the actors on this side were also convinced it would be wise to invite NATO to an even closer cooperation in the north.

It can be argued, as I have done in my doctoral thesis, that Einar Gerhardsen's «dialogue-strategy» won most of the fights in Norway over the security policy. He, and his foreign secretary Halvard Lange, saw to it that the Norwegian security policy in the north, remained a low-tension policy. On such grounds, Norway decided that she would not allow foreign bases in Norway in peacetime; and further, Norway only had a small number of troops in Finnmark, the northernmost county, bordering Russia; and allied forces was not allowed to exercise in Finnmark; nor were they allowed to fly east of the 24° East longitude; and Norway refused to accept atomic weapons in peacetime.

Before we turn to the ideological and cultural level, let me just say that these insights from the classical geopolitical tradition, which I have presented, has had a big impact on Norwegian historiography. Culture and ideology has also played en important role in Norwegian Cold War studies, but in comparison with the geopolitical tradition, one must conclude that ideology and culture has been a bit downplayed in Norwegian international history. I believe that this will change. Let us turn to some of the questions linked to communities and borders in this Cold War-setting.

Communities and Borders

The Cold War was about much more than just missiles and tanks and strategic important territories. It was also a struggle between different social and economic systems. Odd Arne Westad, a distinguished Cold War historian, has put it like this: «[…] it was the American ideological insistence that a global spread of communism would, if not checked, result from the post-war extension of Soviet might that made the rivalry between the two powers into a cold war. To elites in the United States, the rise of the Soviet Union as a world power also meant the rise of an alternative form of modernity that America had been combating since 1917.»[4] Well, if this is the case: Where does it leave Norway? Is it so that an increased focus on ideology and modernisation processes might give a new understanding of the period?

[4] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge 2005, p. 25.

Let's start out this investigation with one word: *atlanticism*. This concept was developed in the early Cold War years, and it was coined by the Western elites, who wanted to build up a strong Western community – a sense of Western fellowship – with an identity opposing the Eastern communist states. The atlantic identity was at the same time supposed to break down the neutralist tendencies in Western Europe, which – at the time – were quite strong.

We can then move on to the Nordic countries. As you will remember Denmark, Norway and Iceland joined NATO, while Sweden remained non-aligned (with a strong military force), and Finland had to be very cautious with respect to the Soviet Union. Although I might be accused of taking things too far, it could be argued that the Nordic countries, in different ways, were in fact all «semi-allies» or «semi-neutrals», and that this had a lot to do with ideology and the specific Nordic modernisation-model, *the welfare state*.[5] Norway and Denmark can be characterised as semi-allies because of the self-imposed restraints put on their NATO membership. On the other hand, Sweden claimed neutrality, but to some extent Sweden actually co-operated with NATO, especially Norway, in her military planning; and Finland had its own security pact with the Soviet Union. Finland and Sweden were thus semi-neutrals.

What does the Nordic world-view have to do with this? When came to the visions of what a good society looked like, these countries often saw the Middle Way as the ideal. The Americans found the Nordic welfare societies, particularly the Swedish one, as examples of how a strong state's involvement in people's everyday lives destroyed the personal initiative, undermined individual freedoms, and, eventually, the moral. The Nordic model was socialism, and socialism was not good, according to the Americans. They also often criticised the Nordic states for the neutralist tendencies and for raising critical voices at America, giving the impression that the Nordic countries held a higher moral standard than the USA (which, according to the Americans was not at all true).

Finally: What about the sentiments in North-Norway towards the Soviet Union? To be short: Communism saw an ever reducing support among the population, and during the

[5] This is pointed out in Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *Scandinavia and the United States: An insecure friendship*, New York: Twayne 1997.

1950's, the Norwegian Communist Party was close to being totally removed from the political map. The Labour party was the most powerful political party in Norway, and North-Norway was one of its strongholds. The Labour party stressed over and over again that the alternative roads to a modern society – for instance the communist road – was in fact a dead end. But the Labour party *did* underline and recognise the giant technological leaps and great societal changes that had taken place in the Eastern European countries – in particular in the Soviet Union. Thus, it became an important issue for the Labour Party-press in Northern Norway to prove that the growth and modernisation of the homeland had progressed even further.

There was, however, a sentiment among the people living in North-Norway which encouraged the Cold War-strategy of Einar Gerhardsen. Most important was the fact that several ethnic groups did cross, and do still cross, the boundaries – especially the Sami peoples and the Kvens. In addition, people in North-Norway had been used to trading with their Russian neighbours, and even through the deep Cold War years, these memories never faded away. There seemed to be a genuine desire to open up the borders more, both the physical and symbolic ones, and eventually that wish came through.