

The Barents region. A transnational history of subarctic northern Europe. Lars Elenius (editor). 2015. Oslo: Pax. 528 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-82-530-3651-9. NOK 349.

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The Barents region: a transnational history of subarctic northern Europe, edited by Lars Elenius with the co-editors Hallvard Tjelmeland, Maria Lähteenmäki and Alexey Golubev, is a massive 'research-based history' (page 26), written over a decade by twenty-seven contributors, that covers 1200 years of what we today call the Barents region. The book is, however, much more than a history of 'making' the Barents as a political region – formally established in 1993 in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and comprising the northern parts of Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia –: it is an attempt to construct a transnational history of peoples that have inhabited the Euro-Arctic north.

The chapters of the book narrate a detailed chronological history of the region around seven 'political turning points' (page 446). Out of them, some are rapid and profound in their impacts; meanwhile, others are portrayed as more gradual in their causes and consequences. The authors 'start with the history of independent ethnic groups in a common area, move on through the era of building strong nation states, empires and super-powers and end with today's striving for a new kind of global ethnic independence' (page 26). In practice, this is done through chapters addressing the themes of *The dawn of state formations 800–1550*; *Social integration and state expansion 1550–1809*; *Transformations of borders, economic systems and communities 1809–1905*; *Different roads of modernization 1905–1939*; *The impact of World War II 1939–1955*; *Strengthening the Northern Dimension 1955–1970*; *Urbanisation and growing regionalism 1970–1993*; and *Globalisation and transregional cooperation 1993–2010*.

Together, the chapters portray a Barents region shaped by shifting borders, a 'changing ethnic mosaic' (page 205), the gradual introduction and expansion of state mechanisms, institutions and infrastructure and the church as well as international influences and ideals. However, in these detailed

portrayals the north is not uniform; instead, great attention is devoted to differences *within* the northern region which has been left aside from national history narratives which themselves have remained isolated from each other by barriers posed by languages, perspectives and the geographical borders of the nation-states.

While *The Barents region* is primarily intended as a textbook, the authors do not underestimate their readers: equally regions, borders, ethnicities and histories are considered as entities that are '*constructed and construed*' (page 32). The concepts that are applied are dealt with in a wonderfully reflexive manner, the choices that have been made are provided justifications for and the motivations and challenges associated with the massive enquiry are openly laid out for the reader to assess. The language in the book embraces the uncertainties that are inevitably associated with writing a history of any kind: expressions such as 'appears to have been' (page 37), 'several possible interpretations' (page 67) and 'hypothesis has been put forward' (page 44) are frequently used, although to a considerably lesser extent in the latter content chapters of the book. The authors do, however, point out that the history recounted in the book is 'a construction of the twenty-first century, created out of today's morality and values' (page 445): in another place at another time, the history of the subarctic Europe might have been told very differently.

From the viewpoint of a reviewer actively engaged in following contemporary debates over the Arctic region, the most fruitful contribution of the book as a whole is the way in which it puts several ongoing 'new' developments into an historical context. References to the Barents region as 'a source of raw materials which were largely exported' (page 138); the uneasy political positions of indigenous populations and ethnic minorities; changing relations between different livelihoods; cross-border cooperation and people-to-people contacts; and the ways in which international events and matters inevitably influence northern developments are not only made at every high-level Arctic conference arranged today: the very same phenomena are also referred to *throughout* the 1200 years of regional history covered in this book (Hanna Lempinen, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, PO Box 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland (hanna.lempinen@ulapland.fi)).