

# Double beds that give Nato bad dreams

**James Fox reports from Spitzbergen on a subtle Soviet takeover bid**



Strategic Spitzbergen . . . and one of the women arriving

LAST December 23, Ottar Saeboe, the airport manager at Longyearbyen, the tiny capital of Norway's Spitzberg archipelago, was standing on the tarmac in the frozen polar night watching the unloading of the monthly Russian Aeroflot plane from Murmansk.

He saw something which to anyone but the Norwegian Government and Nato observers was an unremarkable, if somewhat comical sight. Four Russian women climbed out of the plane; and on to the runway there also emerged, without even a crate to disguise them, four double beds. Mr Saeboe was first surprised, then alarmed and immediately telephoned the governor of Spitzbergen, Leif Eldring, who contacted the Aeroflot station manager at Longyearbyen. The manager said that the women were the wives of four of the six Russian staff stationed with Aeroflot at Longyearbyen and admitted that they had come to stay.

Whatever comfort their wives bring to the Russians in the arctic winter, the Norwegians see the incident of "the wives" as a provocation that could ultimately affect the global balance of power on Nato's northern flank.

When the airport opened last September, Aeroflot signed an agreement after long negotiations in which it was made clear, "especially in the Russian text" as local humour puts it, that five single flats would be made available with one flat for a married couple. (The Russians had originally asked for accommodation for 20 Aeroflot employees.)

The local SAS (Scandinavian Airline System) office is manned by only one woman for the weekly flights from Oslo, and she seems to have time weighing heavily on her hands. As all the technical work, the loading and the unloading are done by Norwegians, there is literally nothing for six Russians to do between the monthly flights.

On Friday the Norwegian civil aviation authority finished the draft of a second letter to Aeroflot, apparently restating that the Russians have broken the agreement.

The fact that such an apparently trivial incident could cause such a controversy is built into the growing strategic sensitivity of Spitzbergen.

Since the Cuban missile crisis of the Sixties, the Russians have built at great speed perhaps the largest single concentration of military hardware in the world at their naval base at Murmansk, eastwards along the coast from the North Cape.

The Soviet Northern fleet there comprises an estimated 180 submarines, half of them nuclear-powered, and 500 surface ships, with land-based missile sites and airports to defend them. Svalbard, the Norwegian name given to the whole archipelago, lies directly on the Russian access route to the north Atlantic and towards the United States, and is on the flight-path for the planes and missiles. Thus it is especially vulnerable.

The Russians have a long history in Svalbard—a Viking name meaning literally "the gold coast"—beginning early in the eighteenth century with hunting expeditions for reindeer, polar fox and polar bear, and including the chaotic international scramble for coal which led to the Treaty of Svalbard in 1920 in which Norway was given full sovereignty over the islands. It was agreed under the treaty, signed by 42 nations, including Britain, the US and China, that the signatories would have equal access to the island and its resources and that it would never be used for warlike purposes.

The Russians never liked the treaty, which they nevertheless signed in 1935. In 1944, they put pressure on the Norwegian government to replace it with a Russian-Norwegian condominium. This move surprised the Norwegians, and in 1947 they decided against any renegotiation.

Having failed to negotiate control, the Russians switched tactics and, it seems, have gradually tried to expand a de facto control over the islands. Only Norway and Russia have found coal mining economical. Already this provides the Russians with twice the island population of the Norwegians.

The Russians are in the exclusively-Russian communities of Barentsberg and Pyramiden in the east of Spitzbergen. Except for occasional football matches and skiing competitions, the Norwegians at Longyearbyen see little of their Russian counterparts. Despite their numbers, however, the Russians mine only 350,000 tons of coal a year, compared to the Norwegians 560,000 tons.

The Norwegians admit that they cannot exercise any real administrative control over the Russian mining towns nor, because of darkness, bad weather and poor communications can they see whether Russia is breaking any of the regulations which the Norwegians have imposed to maintain their responsibility under the treaty.

But they see a gradual chipping away by the Russians of the Norwegian sovereignty, usually in small infringements, such as the wives episode. One subtle method of Norwegian control is by environmental regulations brought in recently to preserve the fragile arctic flora and fauna which had been over-exploited for centuries. Sudden noises can cause the flight of nesting birds, leaving their eggs free for predatory gulls, so all flights, including helicopters, must be cleared with the authorities at Longyearbyen.

The Russians, who have built a surprisingly large base for their five helicopters in Barents-

berg, ignore the regulation. Vehicles must keep to recognised roads, as any tracks on the frozen ground will remain there for decades. The Russians seem to ignore these strictures too, and also object to safety regulations for oil drilling.

THE "WIVES" incident came against a background of wariness of Russian intentions. The governor of Longyearbyen, Mr Eldring, a quiet, studious man who sits in a small, book-lined office—with a copy of The Russian Secret Police on the bookshelf—said that the Russians had applied for their wives to come in last November and were told to take the matter up with Oslo.

Nothing was heard until the women arrived at the airport on December 23. "I am very disappointed with the procedure that the Soviet air company has followed," said Mr Eldring. "Whether or not it was meant as a provocation, it certainly looks like one."

The Russian timing was interesting. Exactly a week earlier the Norwegian parliament unanimously agreed to a proposal for strengthening Norway's control over Spitzbergen in view of its growing strategic importance. The Russians were singled out as the major obstacle. One of the first measures will for the Norwegians to get a helicopter of their own so they can see for

themselves whether the regulations are being broken.

A senior official in Oslo said: "Conflicting economic interests would have repercussions in the field of security and our ability to maintain control of Svalbard is the basis for avoiding such conflicts."

Although the Norwegians do not want to dramatise the wives incident, they feel it draws attention to the Arctic's relatively new role in international politics and particularly the importance to the region of détente. They are also deeply aware of the dangers to peace and to their own economic future if the Barents Sea was opened up for oil development by anyone of the signatories to the Svalbard treaty.

One reason for Norwegian caution towards the Russians is that the two countries are at present negotiating their con-

tinental shelf boundaries northwards from their common border into the Barents Sea. This is vitally important to both for future oil exploration and for the fishing industry. The two sides are haggling over an area the size of the North Sea.

The winter in Spitzbergen is forbidding. Because of the impossibility of going out of doors for long periods (partly for the real fear of polar bears, who killed one man in 1971 and attacked another three this Christmas), the Norwegians feel it is especially unnatural for the Russian couples to be cooped up in rooms of less than 100 square feet without contact with the local community.

One local official said: "Perhaps the Soviets want to do what they like here. I don't think in their minds they really believe in Norwegian sovereignty."

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