

## EUROPE'S NORTHERNMOST FRONTIER

*By John J. Teal, Jr.*

THE Spitsbergen archipelago—the northernmost frontier of Europe—was proclaimed an integral part of the Kingdom of Norway on August 14, 1925. This was in accord with the Paris Treaty of 1920. The nations which signed the Treaty, among them the United States, hoped that by awarding the area to Norway they would put an end to ancient conflicts, and that its future would be secure in the hands of a peaceful country. They made but two major stipulations: that the signing nations should have continued access to their economic interests there, and that the archipelago, to which the Norwegians gave its Norse name Svalbard, was not to be fortified.

For a quarter century Norway has scrupulously honored the treaty. No fortifications have been built in Svalbard. But today the Norwegians there are outnumbered three to one by Russians who have been sent into the region, ostensibly as coal miners, since 1947. Secrecy surrounds the Russian activities. However, coal mining is obviously not the only activity of the Soviet settlers; although there are three times as many Russians as Norwegians, they succeed in producing only a third as much coal—about 100,000 tons a year. The Russians are established about Isfiord, the main settlement area, in such a fashion that they could take over Svalbard “any morning before breakfast.” These developments have been little remarked upon, but they are noteworthy, for an attack on unfortified Svalbard would directly involve the United States under the terms of the Atlantic Pact.

Svalbard, which in old Norse means “land with the cold coasts,” comprises a number of islands roughly 39,000 square miles in area, or one-fifth the size of Norway, lying 360 nautical miles off the north coast of Scandinavia and within 600 miles of the North Pole. It straddles a branch of the Gulf Stream, and as a result for six months of the year West Spitsbergen, the main island, is in contact with the rest of the world by open water—a unique attribute among Arctic areas. Svalbard is less than an hour by air from northeast Greenland and within three hours by plane of more than half the north Asiatic coast. It is thus of commanding importance to Russia's northern sea route, which ex-

tends from Archangel to the Bering Straits. German efforts to establish a naval base in the islands in the Second World War attest to their importance in relation to Atlantic Ocean and Norwegian sea routes. And Svalbard's strategic importance for European air routes is readily disclosed by the fact that London, Berlin, Moscow and the industrial heart of the Soviet Union are all nearly equidistant from it.

## II

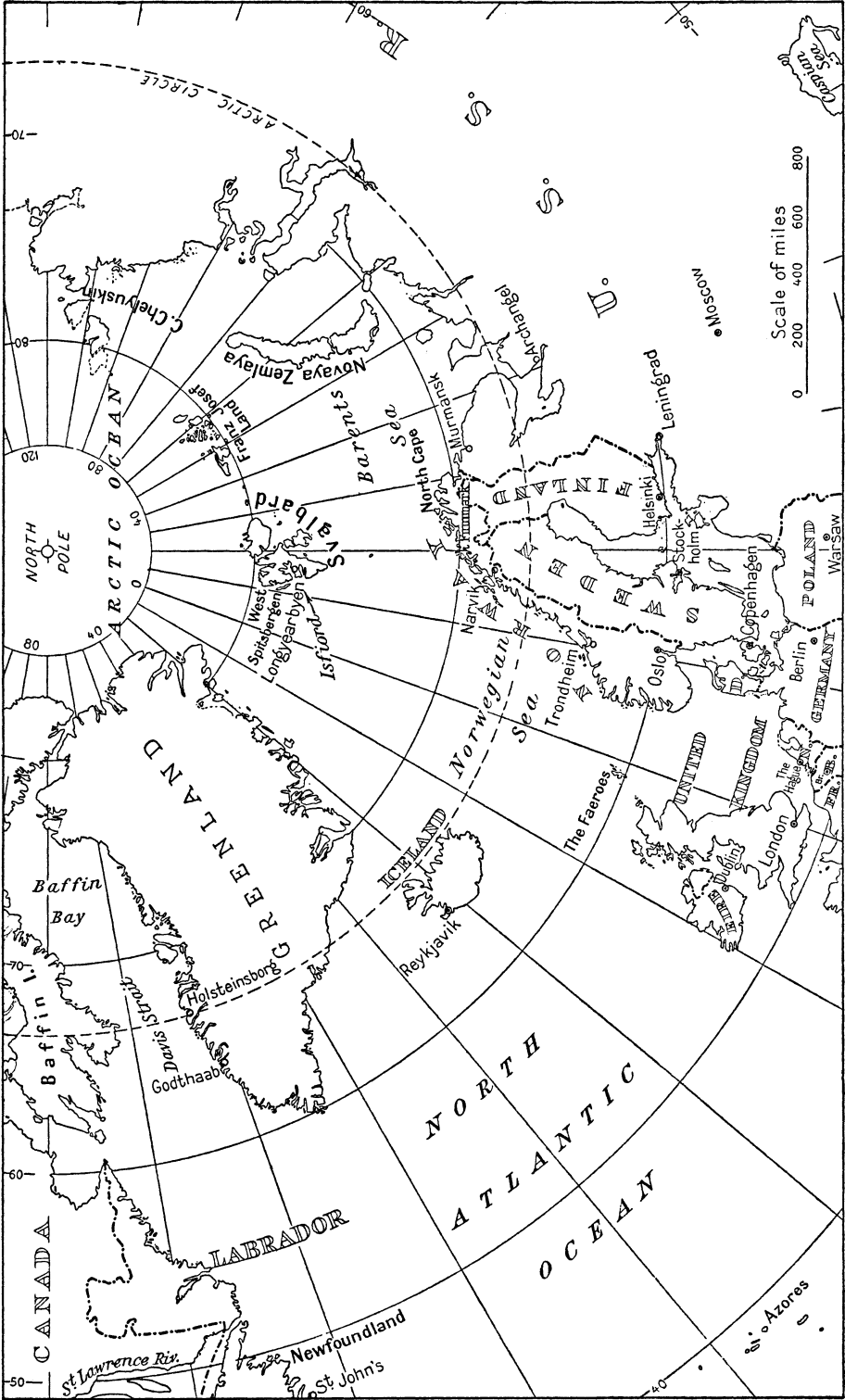
West Spitsbergen, largest and most settled of the islands, and most accessible by water, is a place of jagged mountains, inundated by fiords which lead either to broad valley river systems or glaciers. However, there are many flat or rolling regions, totally ice free, especially on the western and northern coasts. The many streams fed by melting snow run shallow because just under the earth's surface there is a layer of permanently frozen ground 300 to 900 feet deep. Northeastland, 15,000 square kilometers in area, is roughly three-quarters covered by glaciers which on the south and east form an almost unbroken stretch of ice along the sea-coast. White Island, the easternmost section of Svalbard and but 100 miles from Franz Josef Land, now held by the U.S.S.R., is a huge glacial dome with but two small points which are ice free. (It was on one of these points that the remains of the balloonist, André, and his companions were found 30 years after their mysterious disappearance in an attempt to reach the North Pole.) Access to both White Island and Northeastland is made very difficult by pack ice in all seasons of the year. Other islands, such as Barents Island, Edge Island, King Karl Land (the breeding place of polar bears and their only sanctuary in the world), are ice free but of only passing importance. Bear Island, lying half way between Spitsbergen and Norway, is chiefly a flat plateau surrounded by cliffs which make its approach hazardous and spelled the doom of the coal company operating there.

The climate of Spitsbergen is not more severe than that of many north temperate areas, and compares directly with that of the Varanger Peninsula in northeastern Norway. As in the rest of the Arctic there has been a general warming of the climate during the past 50 years, resulting in a retreat of the glaciers and the spread of vegetation. There were times in the distant past when Svalbard was a temperate, almost a tropical place. Occasionally the fossil skeleton of a saurian lizard may be found.

As one walks along the glacial moraines or the beaches it is possible to pick up fossil leaves and large pieces of fern. These plants are responsible for the wealth of Svalbard, for they have created the seams of coal, estimated as enough to supply Norway (which has no other coal) for 4,000 years at the present rate of consumption. Other minerals, such as gypsum, asbestos, zinc and iron have also been located. The coal is most abundant in the areas about Isfiord, and can be seen blackening the sides of mountains up every valley in the central part of the island. Although the individual seams are usually quite thin, the mining conditions are ideal since the temperature inside the mines is a uniform 24.8 degrees F. throughout the year, cold enough to keep the loose rock frozen and obviating the need for extensive wooden supports. It also does away with the need for artificial ventilation and prevents flooding. The coal is a fine steam coal with a relatively low ash content.

In summer, even on the northern coasts and islets, there are carpets of yellow poppies, purple saxifrage, Arctic cotton and other flowers. In Isfiord and King's Bay the inhabitants turn out their cows and horses to graze in the valleys. Musk-ox and hares were introduced from Greenland by the Norwegian Government in the 1920's and the former seem to be thriving. Though land mammals are scarce on Svalbard, the eroded cliffs are rookeries for a sea-bird population estimated at upward of 100,000,000. The coasts are dense with plankton. Auks, dovebies, guillemots, fulmars, puffins and gulls fill the air, and there are eider ducks, geese loons and phalaropes. Of the 54 species found, two, the ptarmigan and the snow sparrow, stay throughout the year. The rich bird life has for centuries supplied a readily available food supply, and eiderdown has been a source of income.

The early Vikings, who purposely sailed to certain northern lands and were blown ashore on others by chance, probably knew of Svalbard, and the busy sealers of the north surely came upon it. These Arctic lands were claimed by name by early Norwegian and Danish kings. Recently discovered records show that Svalbard was known and visited by a number of Norse voyagers in the sixteenth century, but its "official" discovery is credited to William Barents, in 1596. Henry Hudson also came across Svalbard, in 1607, while searching for a northern passage to the Orient. He wrote of the great number of whales which abounded in its fiords. Almost immediately the Dutch and English whalers,



and to a lesser extent the Basque and Danish, swarmed to Svalbard to take advantage of the incredibly rich and easy catches, and to engage in bitter rivalries over whaling rights. In some years the Dutch cities sent more than 300 ships, and the Dutch whaling town of Smeerenburg, on the northwestern corner of Spitsbergen, was said to have had a population of 10,000. Busy streets, rows of frame houses, smoking vats of boiling blubber, a bakery with a bell to announce new batches of bread, a fiord cluttered with hunting boats killing and dragging the whales ashore characterized the summer scene. After a century of such hunting the whales thinned out and avoided the closed waters of the fiords, and today only an immense graveyard and grass mounds remain to remind one of the frenzied industry.

Before fiord whaling was abandoned, however, Russian hunters began to arrive in large parties which stayed the year round to collect reindeer hides, foxes, seals and polar bears. They called the country Grumant, thought to be a colloquialism for Greenland. Quite often they were sent out by Russian monasteries and lived in large communities. Sturdy, ingenious and superstitious men, they knew how to adapt themselves and worked a rich trade in furs. These men were virtually the only inhabitants of Svalbard for more than a century, and the remains of their hunting stations, their tools and their crosses may still be found. In the nineteenth century they were gradually supplanted by Norwegian hunters who very often murdered them and stole their year's catch.

### III

For three centuries, in spite of various claims, Svalbard had remained a *Terra Nullius*, outside the web of sovereignty. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, two new factors, coal and strategy, set the scholars of all the interested nations to digging up records of discovery and advancing proofs of rights. John M. Longyear, head of a Boston engineering firm, purchased lands in Svalbard in 1907 and made the first serious effort to mine coal. He was soon sending coal shipments to Norway from his camp, Longyear City, now called Longyearbyen—the capital of Svalbard. The success of his mine stimulated companies from Norway, England, Holland, Sweden and Russia to stake out claims, and the "Spitsbergen boom" was on. Some of these companies settled down to serious production, but the majority pro-

duced mainly wild reports of discoveries and unfulfilled promises to stockholders. Since there was no protecting government and Svalbard knew little or no law, claim-jumping and gun battles were the rule, to an accompaniment of diplomatic notes among the foreign offices.

The Germans were the first to perceive the strategic importance of the islands. They had been the first to exploit the tourist possibilities of Spitsbergen and for years had sent luxury liners north on summer cruises, often loaded with rather ludicrous tourists who dined on caviar and champagne while clad in furs and armed with daggers. Not all of the tourists were ludicrous, however. Naval and military men from the Kaiser's services made the trip, noting with interest the many fine fiords so suitable for submarines and other naval units, and so commandingly placed in regard to the Norwegian Sea and the North Atlantic. Their reports captured the imagination of authorities at home, and soon weather stations staffed by military personnel sprouted, and Zeppelin and others conducted detailed scientific observations. Fortunately, when the First World War broke out air warfare was undeveloped and steps were taken to forestall German use of Spitsbergen as a naval base.

Meanwhile the Norwegians had determined to bind Spitsbergen to their kingdom. They offered the earliest reasonable claims of discovery, their hunters were there in force, their sealers and whalers used the islands as stations, they had done considerable mapping and scientific work, and geographically they were closer than any other nation. During the war the American coal company, crippled by strikes of Norwegian workers, had been forced to sell out to the *Store Norsk Spitsbergen Kulkompani*. As final arguments the Norwegians had installed sailing markers and beacons, a postal service and a powerful radio station. They claimed preëminent interest.

The English, who had persisted in erroneously referring to Spitsbergen as Greenland until a very late date, based their case upon royal declarations made during the height of the early whaling period but later abrogated, and upon extensive mining claims, mostly staked out by questionable stock companies. The Swedes based their claim upon several operating mines and the unchallenged fact that they had done the greatest part of the scientific investigation. Russian claims, never formally advanced and often officially denied, became muffled in revolution.

After the First World War the Norwegians, now almost alone in the field, redoubled their efforts, always in their statements referring to the archipelago by its ancient Norse name. Their merchant marine had performed valuable service in the war, and they asked the sovereignty of Svalbard as a reward. The treaty Powers at Versailles, realizing the need to extend law and order to the Arctic land, and at the same time wishing to neutralize it, agreed to Norway's request. On February 9, 1920, the Svalbard Treaty was signed by Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Great Britain and her Dominions, France, Italy, Holland, Japan and the United States. A waiting period of five years was prescribed to allow for the adjustment of claims and for the only other interested party, Russia, then unable to sign because of civil war, to give her approval. In 1924 Russia gave her full approval, though she had not been consulted during the drafting of the treaty, and the next year King Haakon proclaimed Svalbard an integral part of the Kingdom of Norway. But in awarding Svalbard to Norway, this treaty had invoked the debatable principle that a nation does not have the right to take steps for the defense of its territory. No doubt the Powers thought that they were thus dedicating the islands to perpetual peace; actually this provision of the treaty produced a soft spot in an immensely important strategic area and invited the critical situation which exists on Svalbard today.

#### IV

The Norwegians assumed their duties with enthusiasm and carefully kept their pledges. The Norwegian Polar Institute sent expeditions north annually. The Norwegian mine at Longyearbyen steadily expanded and the Government bought up the claims of defunct companies from other nations. The big Swedish coal mine in Braganza Bay sold out to the *Store Norsk Spitsbergen Kulkompani*. The English companies, after a postwar flurry, backed out of the field. Then the Dutch mine in Green Harbor was offered for sale. There were no buyers, not even the Norwegian Government. Only Norwegians remained on the islands; and then suddenly the Russians came back.

The original motives for Russia's decisions to reopen her old mines were logical and valid. Her historic effort to gain an ice-free outlet to the seas had failed, and the application of national self-determination had separated her from all her Baltic ports except Leningrad through the creation of the independent

nations of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Her only recourse was the development of a shipping route along the Arctic coast of Asia, the Northeast Passage. Five of the world's largest rivers flow from her interior into the Arctic Ocean and are natural highways for the development of vast new territories. Along these rivers and at their mouths timber and mining cities mushroomed, largely due to an easily procured and inexpensive supply of labor. Some have reached a population of 100,000. A railroad was built to Archangel on the White Sea, forming a connection in the west with a comparatively ice-free port.

To bind all these Arctic rivers and resources together a concerted attack was made upon the problem of ice navigation from Archangel to the Bering Straits. The Northern Sea-Route Administration was formed and given unlimited backing; and with courage and scientific skill it broke a workable trail and kept it open with massive icebreakers. The Soviet Union takes great pride in the expansion of this route and the volume of traffic which it carries, and the pressure for improvement has never been relaxed.

Among the first major problems of this route was fuel for the ships. Russia then had no northern coal supplies and she hoped that her mines on Svalbard would help meet the demand. Large numbers of men and women miners were sent to Barentsburg; other Isfjord mines were opened at Coles Bay, Grumantbyen and Pyramiden. Barentsburg was a fine town with cattle, warm houses, schools and pictures of Lenin and Stalin which could be seen for miles off shore. A moderate amount of coal was mined, but it never was sufficient for the needs of the fast-growing Northeast Passage. Soon, however, the Soviet Union opened mines with unlimited reserves on the Arctic mainland and there was no longer an economic purpose for operation of the Svalbard mines.

After the German invasion of Norway in the Second World War, the Norwegian mines served as a staging route for escaped Norwegians bound for England. The Germans, with an eye to the potentialities of Svalbard as a submarine base athwart the shipping route to Murmansk and Archangel, sent a fleet of warships consisting of the *Tirpitz*, the *Scharnhorst*, nine destroyers and some submarines into Isfjord and King's Bay, and shelled and burned all of the mining communities. At the same time they established meteorological stations at various hidden points



throughout the islands which sent back daily weather reports.

The Norwegians who were on Svalbard when this attack occurred had been rendered defenseless by the 1920 treaty and were unable to return more than small arms fire, although guns emplaced along the mountain walls of the fiords might have replied effectively to the attack. Heroic efforts were made to evacuate the population on the *Empress of Canada* and various colliers. But a number of the men stayed behind to form the nucleus of a Norwegian garrison, and, operating from mountain huts and on skis, eventually sought out and destroyed most of the German positions in a series of bloody battles in the Arctic winter. Relief from German pressure came to Svalbard only with the development of full-scale Allied invasions further south. The experience impressed upon the Norwegians the strategic importance of the islands and the dangers of their defenselessness.

In the autumn of 1944 the Soviet Government, demonstrating considerable opportunism, addressed a note to the Norwegian Government in London requesting treaty revisions to correct Soviet dissatisfaction with the 1920 agreement, which it insisted, did not properly safeguard its economic interests. More significantly, the note requested a discussion of common measures for the defense of the island group. Fortunately, the Norwegians were not duped. Though it was true that the Russians had not been consulted about the treaty in 1920, the fact remained that the Soviet Union had ratified it in 1924 and had again affirmed it without reservations in 1935. Secondly, it was obvious that, at the end of 1944, the Germans were no longer a threat to Svalbard and that the Russian desire to introduce military equipment there had some other end in view. There were then no Russians on Svalbard, and Russians had played no part in the Svalbard fighting against the Germans.

The Norwegian Government reminded the Soviet Union of its unqualified agreements to the 1920 Treaty, and said that it would be impossible to hold unilateral discussions or to make unilateral revisions of a treaty to which many parties were members. Since Japan and Italy were signatories, discussions of any type were patently impossible at the time. If such discussions were ever to take place they could in no way touch upon the matter of Norway's absolute sovereignty over Svalbard.

Again in 1946 the Soviet Government requested discussion and revision of the treaty, and Norway informed the other signa-

tory nations. In January 1947 word of this request spread about, and the London *Times* published an account of Soviet plans to fortify Svalbard. The effect was immediate, and the press and public opinion, particularly in Norway, registered a resounding protest. *Pravda* replied that the Soviet Government sought no favored position but was concerned with the best interests of all the signatories. The Norwegian Government replied in forthright terms that common defensive measures had been made unnecessary by the end of the war, and further that consideration of such a topic would violate the Government's traditional policy of not discussing questions of a military nature concerning territory under Norwegian sovereignty with any single state. However, the Government would be quite willing to discuss economic readjustments, *i. e.* such matters as taxes and improvement of facilities, with those most interested.

The Russians have never requested such readjustments, but in 1947 they sent their miners back to Svalbard and began an intensified development of their properties. Extreme secrecy prevails in their operations, but two salient facts are obvious: that the mines are unproductive; and that the amount of construction in which the Russians are engaged, and the number of Russians in the archipelago, are out of proportion to the possible requirements of coal mining.

Had the Norwegians acceded to Soviet demands for unilateral treaty revision and joint defense, the 1920 Treaty which gave sovereignty to Norway would thereby have been abrogated. The Soviets might then have declared Svalbard once more *Terra Nullius*, have arranged and claimed paramount interest, pronounced the islands within the Russian sphere of interest, and in due course incorporated them in the Soviet Union. Or the U.S.S.R. might simply have assumed the legality of fortifying her settlement in Svalbard, confident that once that had been accomplished, control of the island group would in practice have been achieved. However that may be, she has now ceased to talk about the matter.

There are only a handful of Communists among the Norwegian miners and they are the butt of ridicule because the Russian authorities will not permit them to enter the Soviet mines. The Norwegians speak often of such things as that several of the Russian mine directors are military pilots; that Russian ships, presumably sent to carry away coal, arrive fully laden; that

abandoned mine-shafts, inaccessible to the Norwegian inspector, make excellent arsenals; that the Russians drive away all visitors and keep to themselves, though indulging in a good deal of night travel. Most interesting of all, perhaps, they remark that the Russian miners are chiefly young men of military age, not at all typical of a mining community. In a way such intelligence is superfluous, however, because it is obvious that the Russians could seize the unfortified Norwegian community, outnumbered as it is three to one, at any time. It may be that the Soviets hope to provoke the Norwegians to some fortification which will automatically break the 1920 Treaty. But the Norwegians will not fortify, or break the treaty.

## v

After the postwar Russian complaints had died down, but were still fresh in mind, the Norwegians entered into preliminary discussions for the formation of a Scandinavian defense union. Among the primary reasons why these negotiations broke down was the refusal of the Swedes to include Svalbard in any such arrangement. Recourse was later had to the larger and more effective Atlantic Pact, by the terms of which Svalbard, as a part of Norway, is included. But until recent developments in Korea, most small nations were still uncertain about the willingness of the United States to act in the event of aggression. The Norwegian Government was wary of the situation on Svalbard and strove to divert attention from the archipelago. It lost an opportunity to publicize to all the world that Svalbard was part of Norway when it shelved the plan to have the King attend the 25th anniversary celebration there. The anniversary was barely mentioned by the Norwegian press.

The situation at Svalbard is further complicated by the implications of the so-called "sector principle" for the parcelling out of the polar regions, a compound of shortsightedness and folly inspired by a fifteenth century Papal Bull and seized upon as a means of slicing up the polar regions like pies among various nations. The entire theory is the very negation of the idea of a boundary—which as Isaiah Bowman once said "has to be here, not hereabouts"—but a number of nations have convinced themselves that they can acquire polar territory by the easy device of an agreement to distribute slices rather than by the accepted procedures of discovery and effective occupation. By such means

they can reserve to themselves unused lands which might otherwise be occupied and made productive by the nationals of other countries. Fortunately, the United States has wisely and vigorously opposed this scheme, although it has been offered slices in both polar regions.

The "sector principle" applies in different manners at each Pole. The Antarctic is divided into arbitrary slices roughly paying homage to discovery and the amount of attendant publicity. The absurdity is heightened by the facts that many slices overlap, some are too thin to hold a road, and virtually nothing is known about the commercial or strategic value of any of them.

In the Arctic, where the possibilities of commerce and settlement and the strategic significance of the area are known, the principle offers even more invitations to trouble. Here the slices are determined by lines running north to the Pole from the eastern and western boundaries of the nations surrounding the Arctic Ocean, and include the whole area between. The Soviet Government has endorsed the principle enthusiastically, and laid claim to an enormous area which embraces sea and lands which other nations had discovered, scientifically investigated and utilized. For examples, the U.S.S.R. took Franz Josef Land, discovered by Austrians, explored by nationals of many countries (not including Russia) and used commercially by Norwegians. In driving out the Norwegian sealers and hunters the Soviet Union refused even the protection of acquired economic interests that it demands from the Norwegians on Svalbard. The story of Wrangel Island to the east is largely the same. The Russians have closed the high seas to sealers, fishermen and all traffic, and have frequently arrested strayed foreign crews and confiscated their ships.

The last war moved the Russian land boundary many miles to the west in northern Europe. As a result a direct line from the Russian-Norwegian border north to the Pole cuts off a good section of Svalbard. The Russians assert that they divert the line so as to exclude Svalbard, but not its surrounding waters. Thus, encouraged by the fatuous "sector principle," they are able to lodge another threat to the security of Svalbard.

## VI

There is an unhealthy fatalism today in Finnmark, the northern province of Norway. Every building there was burned to the ground by the retreating German Army. The Russians came no

further west than the Tana River, and behaved well, but in eastern Finnmark they claimed that the Norwegian territory they occupied was rightfully Russian since it was bartered away by the former Archduchy of Finland without Russian consent. Having lodged their claim they withdrew to the Norwegian boundary, but not from northern Finland which they took by conquest. Here they drove out the Finnish population, took over the big Finnish nickel mines and other industries, maintained a large army, and converted a wilderness border into a heavily manned military position. Where once the good neighborliness and cooperation of the Arctic ruled between Norwegian and Finn there has been a steady succession of border incidents. In Sr Varanger and the Pasvik Valley the Russians have organized Norway's largest concentration of Communists. The people of Finnmark, who have been busily engaged in reconstruction since the war, point to the East and shrug their shoulders. They know that if war comes they will be overrun virtually without opposition. The importance of Svalbard in relationship to the defense of Finnmark need hardly be emphasized. The part that it might play in the Russian submarine program which, under the guidance of captured German experts, includes experiments in northern waters from Europe to the Bering Straits is also apparent.

One final aspect of the situation in Svalbard should also be noted, namely, the possibility that the Soviets might gain possession of Svalbard simply by economic means. Norway has no coal of her own other than that brought from Svalbard, and is forced to rely heavily upon the import of Polish coal. Recently that Polish coal has been made so cheap that the Norwegian coal company on Svalbard, faced with high labor and transportation costs, cannot compete with it. Should the Norwegian Government fail to give the company economic support it will collapse. Then almost automatically the Russians would be in sole occupation of Svalbard. Norwegians point out that the islands would be a much less tempting target if other governments which are signatories to the 1920 Treaty were to encourage the establishment of commercial enterprises there. Its diverse resources offer a number of fields which might reasonably and profitably be developed.