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Travel Article from Murmansk, the nuclear port which is the setting for THE JESTER IN MURMANSK



## Darkness over Murmansk

**Murmansk was somewhere out there in the midst of the dragon's breath. Murmansk, the biggest city north of the Arctic Circle. Murmansk, the home of half a million severely tested people on the edge of the world.**

*by Jens Henrik Jensen*

I arrived right in the icy breath of a monster.

Hidden somewhere out there in the darkness, the beast had coughed up a load of thick and soupy mist over my destination. The beast, one of these magnificent creatures with a split tongue and seething nostrils that once ravaged sea charts at a time when the world was flat as a frying pan and ended in an edge. Out there where the dragons guarded the end of everything.

Maybe it was the fog, or maybe the traps of the icy pavement which required my full attention. At any rate, I did not see her, the old lady. After the 28-hour train ride from St. Petersburg, my thoughts were everywhere and nowhere. One stubborn northbound journey through the thick conifer forests and birchwoods of Karelia, through swamps, past gloomy looking lakes and across rivers as black as night. A calming and rhythmic ride on the railway to the north where an exhausted sigh from the train could only mean that the ride was over. Murmansk was somewhere out there in the midst of the dragon's breath. Murmansk, the biggest city north of the Arctic Circle. Murmansk, the home of half a million severely tested people on the edge of the world.

On this particular day, the old lady sits on the stairs of the 24-hour shop – just like she did yesterday and the day before. The coat she wears is full of holes and she is covered in blankets. On her lap, she has a newspaper and her hope for the day: three dry flatfish. I do not know how business is going. She must fear the answer herself, for it is winter in Kola. Yet another cursed winter.

If the old lady bothered to look up toward the highest of the rocky hills surrounding the city, she would see a huge statue lit up by floodlights. The 16-meter statue is a soldier wearing a helmet and a long winter coat and carrying a shotgun on his shoulder. Alyosha, the people of Murmansk call him. Way up there, he stands looking stonefaced to the west. That was where they came from, the Germans from Norway. During World War II, the Germans bombed Murmansk mercilessly in a devastating attempt to win the city and the strategically important and ice free harbor. Three quarters of the city were destroyed, but Murmansk never surrendered.

### The World's Largest Nuclear Dumping Ground

Now Alyosha guards his city. An eternal flame burns by his feet in memory of the ones who gave their lives in the Great Patriotic War. However, the times are changing. Even an eternal flame does not last forever. The times are tough and the city council has to cut down costs. Therefore, Alyosha only feels the warmth of the flame on particular days. Exposed as he is up there, he may very well be the only comfort for the people of Murmansk. Around here the world is out of order.

After the disintegration of the USSR and the openness that followed, the facts - like the cold - slowly crept under the skin of the people living on the Kola Peninsula. Now, everyone here knows they live on top of the world's largest nuclear dumping ground. They live, love and die as neighbors to the biggest atomic threat on earth. In fact, the peninsula and its apparently pure and clean environment hides the truth: that the world's largest concentration of radioactive waste is right here. Some of it comes from civilian power and production plants, but the majority of the massive amounts of radioactive material comes from the Army. Especially from the North Fleet of the Russian Navy.

The headquarters of the North Fleet is in Severomorsk, 30 kilometers from Murmansk. I do not see it from up here, though. I overlooked the old lady with the fish and now reality deceives me again here by Alyosha's boots. I do see the river, the cranes standing side by side on the harbor and I see gray concrete houses. The remainder of my horizon consists of bulging massifs of shiny white snow. The Lord must have been freezing, and the Arctic wind must have taken all mildness with it when all this was created.

As darkness falls, a lonely coaster is on its way towards the ocean. All of a sudden, a snowstorm starts gaining momentum. Alyosha's collar is up, but he is still gazing westward. Does he know what is hiding out there?

Everything is now white around me. All contours have disappeared in this borderland near the beginning of the world. A land marred by secret submarine bases in fjords and bays, and by hidden fleet facilities built in rock walls and underwater tunnels. The destiny of the Kola Peninsula was decided by history. The Cold War could not have found a more ruthless land for its curse.

### Stalin Created the North Fleet

The North Fleet was established in the summer of 1933. Josef Stalin visited Poljarnyi, a seaport by the mouth of the Murmansk Fjord. During his visit, he decided that he wanted to conquer the Arctic Ocean. Before the start of the Second World War, the fleet was rather small, but in order to protect the Murmansk convoys that were carrying supplies from the western allies, many new ships were built during the war. However, most of the new ships were sunk during the war, too. After the war, the Soviets evaluated the situation. At sea, they were inferior to the American Navy. This was a critical situation, as the war had shown that sea power – especially underwater – was essential. Therefore, a substantial development of a new fleet began on the Kola Peninsula – with almost sole emphasis on submarines.

On December 21, 1952, the Soviet Union decided to build nuclear powered submarines. In reality, this strategic decision put a curse on Kola. The Russians were three years behind the Americans. On April 4, 1957, the two nuclear reactors on the K-3 Leninskij Komsomol submarine were started and it headed towards the Malaja Lopatka base in Severomorsk-7, now Zapadnaja Litsa, where it was stationed.

Between 1950 and 1970, the North Fleet grew from being the smallest to being the biggest and most important of the four Soviet fleets. About two-thirds of all nuclear submarines in the Soviet Union were stationed in the north - the rest with the Pacific Fleet. The remaining fleets - the Black Sea Fleet and the Baltic Sea Fleet - never held any of the nuclear monsters permanently.

During the Soviet era, the state covered all costs of the fleets, and the North Fleet never had any financial problems. That has now changed. Today, the North Fleet resembles the old lady with the fish – it is out of money.

At the time of writing, about 130 of all 247 Russian nuclear submarines are out of service. 88 of them are kept on land at North Fleet bases. Of these, 52 still carry nuclear waste. According to the START-II Treaty, 150 submarines are to be completely out of operation by the year 2000. Only two of them are completely dismantled by now. The rest are temporarily stored in bases and wharfs. Every now and then, it is even necessary to add air to some of these in order for them to stay afloat.

As the snowstorm continues its blitzkrieg against Murmansk below me, I think about my train ride up here through Karelia. I think about the Polish sausage with the big lumps of fat I was cutting slices off with my pocketknife so that my travel companion and I could put something on our bread to go with the vodka. That is how it is done – using the “sausage method”. You take a nuclear submarine, cut it up and toss the slice with the rocket section over your shoulder. Then, you casually weld the two other parts together and you have a roll of floating junk - often including a reactor and fuel rods.

The images I get from this include monsters rather than sausages. Stalin’s North Fleet and many of its monsters are now relics of the past. The future again belongs to the dragons of the old sea charts. Their man-made copies are stored side by side on bases and wharfs.

They have been slaughtered. Their fire is out, but the reactor hearts are still in their bodies, and their coolingwater is their infested blood.

### Massive Dumping in the Barents Sea

As sudden as it came, as surprisingly fast, the snowstorm is over again. Alyosha is looking in the direction of the Andrejeva Bay in the Litsa Fjord, only about 40 kilometers from the Norway border. Here, almost 21,000 fuel elements - the equivalent of 90 full submarine reactors - from submarines are stocked. The total amount of radioactivity in this waste equals 5000 French nuclear test bombings on the island of Muroroa, according to the Norwegian environmental organization, Bellona. The fuel elements are stocked in large refrigerated basins close to the shore. The problem is that they crack and that radioactive water has leaked directly into the bay.

Since 1959, Russia has dumped more than twice as much nuclear waste into the ocean than all other countries put together. Throughout the years people have tried to hide the waste. The North Fleet, along with the Murmansk Shipping Company (owner of several nuclear driven icebreakers) have carried out substantial nuclear waste dumping. Liquid waste in the shape of coolant from reactors has mainly been dumped in five sections of the Barents Sea. Other types of waste, such as polluted equipment and reactor cores, were dumped into the Kara Sea - close to the East Coast of Novaja Zemlja.

Officially, the dumping was concluded by 1992. However, that statement has been met by much skepticism. Bellona is convinced that dumping is still taking place. As neighbors to the waste stock in the Andrejeva Bay, the Norwegians have a natural interest in the environmental problems on Kola. However, Bellona finally irritated the Russians enough for the former KGB, now the FSB, to take action. The Bellona offices in Murmansk were searched and Aleksander Nikitin, a former submarine captain who had helped Bellona gather information about the North Fleet, was arrested. This happened in February, 1996. Initially, he was in custody for 11 months. Later, he was told not to leave St. Petersburg before the case was over. Nikitin is charged with espionage and treason because he gave away what is claimed to be state secrets for the Bellona report, "The Russian North Fleet – Sources of Nuclear Pollution". After it was published, the report was confiscated and forbidden in Russia. Nikitin's defense claim that the information had already been previously published.

The case against Nikitin may have ended by October 29 last year. After two hours of consideration, the Judge of the St. Petersburg Court rejected all claims and evidence of the Public Prosecutor. For the first time ever, a Russian court rejected the KGB and its predecessor, the FSB. The intelligence service spent 3 years preparing the case, and now, it may all turn out to be in vain.

1998 was a year marked by a diplomatic crisis between the two northern neighbors, Norway and Russia. Bellona was always a thorn in the side of the Russians, but the dispute escalated when Norway expelled two Russian diplomats and declared that three others were not wanted in Norway. This was a result of a complicated spy case. A Norwegian citizen had happily told the media that he was a triple agent originally hired by the Norwegian Police Intelligence to spy on the Russians. Russia immediately retaliated by

expelling a diplomat from the Norwegian Embassy in Moscow, as well as the popular Vice-Consul in Murmansk.

Everything ended on a diplomatic and positive note, when King Harald and Queen Sonja of Norway went through with their official stay in Russia where they visited, among other places, Murmansk.

### The Land of Fire – Another Extreme

On such a stormy day it seems reasonable to ask how close to the edge of the world one has to travel to meet true peace in an unpolluted environment. If earth really is as round as they claim, I should be able to jump out from this statue here in Murmansk and slide down the globe until I ended up at the end of the world – for a happy return. A few years ago, I visited the last city of the world, Ushuaia, by the Beagle Canal in Tierra del Fuego, also known as the Land of Fire, in Argentina.

Many cities around the world claim to be either the first, most white, the last or the highest. Maybe the Argentinians should join them and rename Ushuaia the “first city” instead of the “last city”. Depending on which way your nose is pointing, it seems reasonable to claim that the world starts at the South Pole as much as at the North Pole. As a fact beyond dispute, I would say that the end of the world feels much closer in Murmansk.

Yet, the Land of Fire also had its share of disputes. Argentina and Chile are notorious rivals and have often argued about some unimportant rocky islands near Cape Horn. During the Falklands War between Argentina and Britain, Chile’s President Pinochet was happy to welcome British intelligence officers near the Argentina border in Chile.

North or south? Beginning or end? The rivalry down there is certainly serious. So is the pollution, which has reached southern waters just like it has reached Kola. Down there, the important shell fishing industry is suffering due to poisoning. As with radioactivity, you do not actually see it, but it is there. Somewhere deep down below.

Up here, a nuclear catastrophe is barely imaginable. The fantastic view prevents the curtain from falling. I turn my back on the patient Alyosha and start walking downtown again. Once more the sky turns dark and it starts snowing. Down by the lake, a brave winter swimmer is crawling back out of the water. The all-year swimmers call themselves the Walruses around here. Mrs. Walrus probably has other things on her mind than the threat from submarines right now.

### Today’s Radiation Count

The other day, I had an appointment with the local representative of Russia’s premier environmental authority, the Federal Committee for the Protection of the Environment. Ljudmila Amosova sat crouched in her small office, but the glow in her black eyes was intense as she spoke:

- There is no need for us to exaggerate or dramatize the situation because the reality is bad enough. In her quiet and calm manner, she pointed out that a nuclear catastrophe in Kola would affect the Barents Sea as well as all of Scandinavia. The price for the most necessary security facilities is at least one billion dollars.

Near the city center, I hear music from a certain movie about a sinking ship. It is, of course, Celine Dion and the title song from Titanic. The local football team is warming up for the game against Severomorsk, listening to Celine Dion and wearing gloves and winter hats. Everyday, on the local TV station, football players and everyone else are able to see the latest radioactive radiation count in the area. The count doesn't worry people too much here and now. It must be worrying enough that the station finds it worthwhile to report it.

Yesterday, my interpreter told me that no one could afford to move away. Her husband is an engineer and he has not been paid for the past five months. He is just one of many, and salaries are supposed to be better here than elsewhere in Russia. Many years ago, an attractive bonus, the polyarki, was what made people move up here in the first place. However, rising prices have decreased the advantages of a higher salary.

The young couple has a three year-old daughter, who could do with a better start to her life. She is not feeling too good at the moment. Poor health is something the people of Murmansk have had to get used to.

- Living up here is not healthy, as Larissa the interpreter puts it.

- It is the climate and the pollution. Kola has more cancer cases than anywhere else. Did you know that? The bone structure of newborn babies is not fully developed and the little ones weigh less here than they do in other parts of Russia. Did you know that?

No, that I did not know. Yet, in the past few days I have put all these outrageous facts together. It is as if all curses decided to meet up here on the edge of the world. As a matter of fact, the amount of radioactivity is not what causes the numerous cancer cases. They are caused by the largest nickel and copper works in the world, which are situated around the industry towns of Zapoljarnyi, Monchegarsk and Nikel. These works let out clouds of, among other things, sulphur. The particles are so big and heavy that they most often land within a radius of 20 to 30 kilometers from the plants. If you need clear evidence of the harm this does to the environment in the area, take a walk in nature's cemetery. All vegetation is burnt and trees are naked and black all year around.

Not surprisingly, the Norwegians are worried. Through the Barents Council, they have initiated a program for improved environment protection in Murmansk. Results of the pollution are evident as far away as in the eastern part of Finmark in Norway. The concentration of nickel and copper in the vegetation is 10-20 times higher than in southern Norway and increasing amounts have been found in reindeer, elks and birds.

### Fishermen Prefer Norway

I walk on along the railway track on the edge of the enormous and restricted harbor area. The harbor is the heart of the city and the city is important because of the harbor. Perhaps the harbor also constitutes the main hopes for the future of Murmansk? However, it is very quiet here on a Sunday and I know parts of the answer to the question, too. Even though Murmansk has five enormous fishing fleets, no fish are coming in at the moment. No fish means no work. The fleets prefer to unload in Norway where the prices are higher. It is cheaper to bunker, and visiting a Norwegian harbor is far less bureaucratic. Naturally, the Norwegian fishermen aren't too happy being put under pressure by the Russians. The county of Murmansk recently took steps to force the fleets back to Russian harbors.

The other day, I talked to a friendly Vice-Governor, Igor Tjernysjenko, over a cup of tea in his office in the administration complex at Lenin Prospekt, and he told me:

-We cannot watch silently as Russian fishermen are making big money selling Russian fish in Norway while workers in the fishing industry are unemployed and hungry.

The Vice-Governor looked like he meant it. Just like he did when, one winter after the breakdown of the Russian economy, he asked the world for help before a severe lack of food would cripple the city. The main part of the unemployed and retirees here have less than 200 DKK (around 25\$) per month and their situation is considerably worse during the winter.

The likewise hospitable Lieutenant Colonel, Aleksander Brujev, was not too hopeful either, but he did emphasize that the situation in Murmansk is stable:

-Of course we have our problems, but there is no rise in crime. We have a lot of organized crime and the gangs fight each other, but they are not interested in escalating the situation, and it looks like they have a cease fire. Nine to ten people are killed in Murmansk every year. The latest happened – of all places – in my hotel, the Arktika. The hotel Security Manager, who had been with the militia, opened a package. He should not have done that as it contained 200 grams of TNT. The case remains unsolved so far. To my question about the rumors that the Mafia from St. Petersburg and Moscow is starting businesses in Murmansk, the Lieutenant Colonel firmly answered:

- No, we do not have any problems of that kind.

Rather, the problem is the lack of modern equipment, better cars etc. Before I left, he handed me the official calendar of the Murmansk Militia and a plastic pen as a memento.

-I am sorry that the calendar is from last year... We cannot afford a new one..., the Lieutenant Colonel apologetically smiled.

### Introducing the Phone Book

It occurs to me that I am walking along, absent-mindedly trying to think of some experience of the past couple of days, a glimpse of hope, some positive development that explains why half a million people live here. Maybe they do not live here happily, but they still live here. There is plenty of food – if you have money that is – and there is freedom of speech. However, words do not fill your stomach, so to the poor, food is probably more valuable than freedom of speech. The fascinating tundra is close by with its fine fishing waters. Yet, what does that mean if you do not feel really free? Then, I recall an obscure detail. My travel companion, an experienced correspondent, pointed out the fact that hotel rooms now keep phone books – even up here in the far north. “That would never have happened before,” he said. There were always telephones, but no book of numbers to call. However, except for the fact that The Yellow Pages have finally arrived in Murmansk, I give up.

I also visited the Regional Medico-Legal Office in a ramshackle of a building. Luckily, a new one is being built, but that will probably not effect the depressing character of the work they do. The friendly Manager, Mr. Gusjev, told me that an increasing part of the job is dealing with autopsies in connection with vodka poisoning. These deaths occur because far from all vodka bottles actually contain vodka. More and more, this leads to lawsuits and more work for the Medico-Legal experts. Quite tragic, one might say.

### Trapped in Darkness

Darkness has descended over town. This natural phenomenon may be the last in the long line of curses up here. Even light is unequally distributed. In summer, there is a period where the sun never sets. Instead, it just wanders restlessly from one corner of the world to another. In the winter, on the other hand, there is a period where the sun never shows itself. The phenomenon is called “polarnye nochi”, polar nights.

- Darkness is not good for people, is it? I get depressed every time it comes. Everybody feels it. When I get up in the morning it is dark, when I am at work it is dark and when I go home it is dark. I hate the dark period. I am convinced that the darkness is one of the reasons for the health problems up here. It weakens the immune system. And summer is too short to recharge our batteries. This year we did not have any summer at all.

My interpreter, Larissa, is trapped in the darkness.

On my way home, I pass the old lady again. I am not able to see if she has sold anything, but I doubt it. Tomorrow she will try again – and the day after. Surrender seems unthinkable on the edge of the world.

### Post Script

On January 2, darkness loosened its grip on Murmansk after 25 days without as much as one glimpse of daylight. However, no one expects brighter times. The toughest part of the long winter is still ahead, and this winter has already been described as the harshest winter in Russia since World War II. Therefore, the relief work convoys from, mainly, the Norwegian Red Cross are more needed than ever before. Maybe last winter was an omen for Murmansk. Then, even the inner part of the normally ice-free fjord filled with ice sheets, up to 80 centimeters in thick. That had not happened for as long as anybody could remember.

It seems that on the edge of the world, everything is out of order.