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A Heterotopia in a Space-Time Warp: (Re)programming Popular Memory in Two Russian Films about Svalbard

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For Tore Nesset, an intrepid polar dweller and Svalbard travelling companion

Abstract

The article analyses two films by Mikhail Malakhov Jr., *Poljarnyj meridian* (2017) and *Arxipelag* (2021), about the Russo-Swedish Arc-of-Meridian expedition to Svalbard in 1898-1902. The theoretical framework blends the heterotopical and heterochronic approach à la Foucault with the cultural memory discourse, represented by, among others, Rosenstone, Cento Bull & Hansen and Wijermars. An attempt is made to find out how and why the films, to a different degree, misrepresent both the expedition itself and the commemorative journeys that retraced it in 2014 and 2016.

1. Heterotopia and Plausibility

Heterotopia is a term originally coined by Foucault (1984: 49) to describe sites that are at once illusory and actual, same but different, "lieux sans lieux". In film studies, it has come to signify a place that is "created out of real but incompatible spaces and existing outside the normal political, cultural, or even physical order" (Mazierska 2012: 501). Financial and/or logistical considerations in the filmmaking process often lead to one location standing in for another, such as, for example, Ireland representing Scotland in many scenes from *Braveheart* (USA 1995, dir. Mel Gibson), a heroic adventure set in the thirteen century AD and displaying "a complete disregard for historical context"

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(Ewan 1995: 1220). Should anyone be surprised that films about Svalbard (sometimes referred to as Spitsbergen), a spectacular yet remote Norwegian archipelago with a sparse infrastructure, are not always shot on Svalbard, sacrificing authenticity for the sake of cost-saving measures and safety regulations?

A multiple viewing of Norwegian, Dutch, French, Czech, Polish and Soviet/Russian moving pictures about Svalbard (several dozen overall, made since the 1930s) demonstrates that, as a rule, documentaries tend to be filmed on the archipelago, while fiction films do not.[1] The small size of documentary film crews, as well as the expectations of verisimilitude strongly associated with the documentary film genre, account for this tendency. However, a habitual suspension of disbelief, necessary to become immersed in a fiction film's screenplay, makes palatable the absence of genuine Svalbard visuals in an invented or semi-fictional story about the archipelago – especially for those viewers who have never set foot there.

It would be interesting to compare and contrast a documentary and a fictionalised film treatment of the same real-life events that took place on Svalbard in a not so distant past, to ascertain which role (if any) an authentic location may play with regard to cinematic plausibility (understood here according to Hitchcock, as a property more common among documentaries than fiction films[2], partly owing to the use of authentic – i.e. not imitated – locations[3]). Such an opportunity presents itself in the form of two cinematic versions of the Russo-Swedish Arc-of-Meridian expedition (1898-1902), filmed by the same director, Mikhail Malakhov Jr, first as a documentary called *Poljarnyj meridian* (Polar Meridian, 2017) and later as a science thriller titled *Arxipelag* (Archipelago, 2021; co-directed with Aleksej Tel'nov).

2. The original Russo-Swedish and the commemorative Russian Arc-of-Meridian expeditions

The Russo-Swedish Arc-of-Meridian expedition to Svalbard was organized at the turn of the XX century to measure sections of the meridian curve "as far north as possible", in order to "more clearly reveal the flattening of the Earth toward the North Pole" (Liljequist 1993: 334), hypothetical at that stage. To accomplish this, over two dozen beacons had to be erected on Svalbard's mountain plateaus, from Little Slate Island in the north to Mt Keilhau in the south, within eyesight from one another. The region's remoteness, difficult ice conditions and unpredictable bouts of bad weather (even in

[1] It has to be said, however, that in some fiction films it is Svalbard that stands in for other parts of the world, e.g. Greenland in *Na białym szlaku* (Poland 1962, dir. Jarosław Brzozowski and Andrzej Wróbel) and *Kjærlighetens kjøtere* (Norway 1995, dir. Hans Petter Moland).

[2] Cf.: "if you're going to analyze everything in terms of plausibility or credibility, then no fiction script can stand up to that approach, and you wind up doing a documentary" (Truffaut 1969: 109).

[3] Cf.: "In the documentary the basic material has been created by God, whereas in the fiction film the director is the god, he must create life" (Truffaut 1969: 110).

summertime) made this a logistically challenging and expensive enterprise, only affordable and achievable if the expedition costs and tasks were split. The Swedish project initiators (whose arc-measurement plans had been first tried out in the early to mid-1860s) chose to team up with their Russian colleagues, partly because of the two countries' prior successful scientific collaboration and mutual geographical proximity to Svalbard (Sweden was then in a union with Norway), partly because Russian geodesists had the necessary training – and partly because Johan Oskar Backlund, head of St Petersburg's Pulkovo astronomical observatory, where much of the required expertise concentrated, was Swedish.

It took the joint expedition longer than expected to complete the beacons' installation and the corresponding measurements, with the initial and additional funding secured thanks in particular to the royal patronage on both sides (by Crown Prince Gustaf and HRH Konstantin Konstantinovich respectively). The northern section of the beacon row, from Little Slate Island to Mt Chernishev (Tsjernysjovfjellet in Norwegian), came under the Swedish responsibility, while the southern section, from Mt Chernishev to Mt Keilhau, was taken care of by the Russians (see **Fig. 1** in the Appendix). Both parties overwintered only once, in the 1899-1900 season, in two different camps. The Russians managed to finish their part of the mission in three summer seasons (1899-1901), while the Swedes – who had tougher weather and terrain conditions to negotiate – needed five seasons overall, counting the initial reconnaisance trip (1898-1902). A further decade and a half had passed until most of the expedition's multivolume and multilingual proceedings were published (for more on the Russo-Swedish Arc-of-Meridian project, see e.g. Liljequist 1993; Wråkberg 2002; and Shabalina and Kazakova 2022).

Over a hundred years later, this formidable scientific exploit inspired two commemorative expeditions under the aegis of the Rjazan' branch of the Russian Geographical Society. The expeditions were organised and led by the Rjazan' dweller Mikhail Malakhov, an experienced polar traveller and physician. Together with a small cohort of like-minded adventurers, he set out to retrace the Arc-of-Meridian itinerary and revisit all the beacons in both Russian and Swedish sections of the enterprise. Climate change notwithstanding, the ice conditions on Svalbard did not allow Malakhov to fulfil his objective in one go, in summer 2014, and he and some of his team had to come back two years later. Both expeditions were filmed by his son Mikhail Malakhov Jr to eventually form the *Poljarnyj meridian* documentary (Innoko Films, Russia, 2017).

3. Poljarnyj meridian (2017)

The documentary alternates the footage of Malakhov's expedition with animation sequences that portray the original expedition through the eyes of one of its key

participants, the astronomer Aleksandr Vasil'ev (1868-1947). Vasil'ev's memoirs (1915) served the Malakhovs as the principal source of information about the Arc-of-Meridian venture. A useful book, it suffers, however, from the occassional attempt at self-aggrandizement, at the expense of the Swedish contribution to the venture's success.

Thus, speaking on behalf of the Russian expedition team, Vasil'ev (1915: 10-11, 61, 82, 128) states that the tasks assigned to it were the hardest to accomplish; that it found the necessity to follow the initial Swedish lead a burden; that prefabricated Swedish metal beacons (unlike Russian cairns, built from locally found stones) proved unsuitable for Svalbard's weather (which delayed the project delivery for the Swedish side); and that after 1900, Russians began dominating the expedition-related decision-making process. In fact, as specified in a recent Norwegian re-examination of the Arc-of-Meridian efforts, "there is nothing to suggest that the quality of Swedish and Russian work differs from each other" (Arlov and Reymert 2020: 22).[4]

Besides, according to Vasil'ev, the Russian unit did its work on Svalbard (which did not formally belong to any particular nation until 1920, when it became Norwegian) "for their country's honour" (1915: 2), rather than in the name of science. Raising the Russian imperial flag on Mt Chernishev, at the point where the Swedish and the Russian beacon rows come together (see **Fig. 1**), is meant to provide an emotional and ideological highlight of Vasil'ev's narrative (1915: 110; see also pp. 103 and 119).

It is precisely this flag, made of metal for durability, that Malakhov's team aims to find more than a hundred years after it had been erected – and successfully does so at the end of the documentary. However, anyone who was able to read a full Russian-language account of the 2014 expedition on Malakhov's personal website m-malakhov.com (now defunct), would discover that the flag location was actually visited one of the first, not last (see the Appendix for **Fig. 2**, in which Stage 1 of the journey is marked in blue). The difference was clearly necessitated in order to generate a dramatic onscreen climax for the commemorative expedition's pursuits, yet those aware of Malakhov's actual itinerary may find themselves observing a kind of time warp. This

[4] All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

observation also confirms yet again (if any additional proof were required) that the word "documentary" does not automatically mean "factually accurate".

Other instances of time warp-inflicted inaccuracies involve the film's assertion that after the establishment of Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard in the 1920 treaty, "the USSR as an heir to the Russian Empire retained the right to exercise economic activity" on the archipelago. The problem with this utterance is that before 1920 Svalbard was a poorly regulated no man's land where economic activity could be engaged in by just about anyone with the will and means to do so, irrespective of nationality. Only in 1935 did the USSR formally join the Svalbard Treaty, which permits its signatories to carry out economic activity on the archipelago under the Norwegian jurisdiction.

A significant share of *Poljarnyj meridian*'s inaccuracies can also be attributed to heterotopia. Although shot for the most part on the archipelago, a comparison of the expedition's real route with what the audience is shown and told on screen, sometimes results in a cognitive dissonance. For example, as the documentary's narrative would have us believe, after visiting Longyearbyen, Barentsburg, Grumant and Pyramiden, the yacht Prolific (which carries the commemorative expedition) allegedly sails north to Ny-Ålesund, whereas in fact it went south towards Sørkappøya. Then suddenly the expedition examines the Arc-of-Meridian beacon on Kapp Lee (Edgeøya), which is hundreds of miles away on the diagonally opposite side southeastward from Ny-Ålesund, across land and water.

It is obvious that such a confusing representation of Svalbard is a byproduct of Malakhov Jr's desire to cram several commemorative journeys into one shortish narrative (*Poljarnyj meridian* lasts only forty-four minutes). Thus, a time warp (or a heterochrony, in Foucault's parlance) begets a heterotopia.[5] Yet the film's limitations of length are not the only reason for spatial disorientation here. To promote a questionable claim that Svalbard had been discovered and lived upon by the Russian Pomors before Willem Barents's well-documented sighting of the archipelago and naming it Spitsbergen in 1596,[6] *Poljarnyj meridian* repeats the antiquated legend that Svalbard's pre-Barents appellation was "Svjatye russkie ostrova", or Holy Russian Islands. Actually, this (distorted) placename has nothing to do with Svalbard and derives from

[5] Cf. "Heterotopias are most often linked to segments of time — that is to say, they open onto what could be called, by pure symmetry, heterochronies" (Foucault 1984: 48).
[6] For a summary of the claim, see e.g. Zinger 2014: 14, 100-16; for a summary of counterclaims, see e.g. Arlov 2003: 53-54.

the Norwegian islands of Sandøya and Røst, mislabelled on Mercator's 1569 map of the world as Santi and Rustene (see Čekin 2020).

Poljarnyj meridian strives to emphasize a continuity of the Russian presence on Svalbard from medieval times to the present day using the Arc-of-Meridian story as an example. This geopolitical subtext, however, is partially obscured and partially compensated for by the stunning visuals of Svalbard's spectacular land- and seascapes, as well as its rich wildlife exemplified on screen by Arctic foxes, reindeer, walruses, little auks and polar bears, all filmed from a reasonably close distance.

4. *Arxipelag* (2021)

Alas, Svalbard *per se* does not feature in Malakhov Jr's fiction film version of the Arc-of-Meridian tale. His 2021 *Arxipelag* (100 minutes; co-directed with Aleksej Tel'nov, head of the LenDok studio specializing in documentaries but occasionally branching out into fiction films) was made in the Gulf of Finland (see Snegirev 2021), i.e. not anywhere near Svalbard, and confined to a considerably flatter coast- and skyline. As a consequence, not much visual respite is available to counterbalance the film's dominant geopolitical agenda, centering on the battle of various states for the yet unclaimed portions of the Arctic.

Obviously concerned that watching how the meridian curve is measured will not guarantee a mesmerizing experience for the viewer, Malakhov Jr and his co-scriptwriter Svetlana Salikova dramatize the plot with a number of action flick clichés – such as love interest, drug addiction, mysterious instances of sabotage and a precious stone hunt – which have little if any relation to reality and do not add up. The love interest has Vasil'ev (played by Dmitrij Palamarčuk) torn between Daša (Tat'jana Čerdynceva), the daughter of his boss the geologist Feodosij Černyšev (after whom the above-mentioned Svalbard mountain is named; Černyšev's part is played by Vladimir Steklov) – and the French journalist Liliane (Marina Petrenko). While Daša remains in St Petersburg, Liliane comes to the Arc-of-Meridian Russian camp on foot, apparently trekking from the Swedish camp nearby (in truth, the Swedish camp was located in Sorgfjorden, more than three hundred miles to the north from the Russian base in Hornsund, as the crow flies; walking such a distance on one's own, through a desolate and dangerous wilderness in poor visibility, was completely unthinkable).

Liliane is said to be the last person who interviewed the Swedish engineer S. A. Andrée before his ill-fated 1897 attempt to reach the North Pole in an air balloon, with Svalbard as a departing point. According to the script, she also visited the place where Andrée and his companions died, looking for Andrée's diary and the diamond that he

allegedly took with him for luck – but she failed to find any. (Actually, Andrée's last abode happened to be on Kvitøya, or White Island, over three hundred miles towards north-east from Hornsund; this was not discovered until 1930, though.)

It does not take a polar historian to guess that Liliane could not have possibly existed. She has been invented by the scriptwriters without any pretence to plausibility. Although in XIX century women did very occasionally take part in scientific expeditions to Svalbard (suffice it to mention Léonie d'Aunet, who accompanied her boyfriend, the painter Francois-Auguste Biard, on board the *La Recherche* vessel in the late 1830s), the Russo-Swedish Arc-of-Meridian project was an exclusively all-male affair. To explain the anomaly of Liliane's presence on Svalbard, women's fight for equal rights is invoked. Liliane says that voting rights for women have recently been introduced in France. This in fact did not occur until 1944. It is hard to avoid an impression that the Arc-of-Meridian expedition has been placed by *Arxipelag* in a temporal and spatial fantasy warp.

This impression is further augmented by *Arxipelag*'s claim that the Russian Arc-of-Meridian base is reusing the Svalbard site where Lieutenant Nemtinov's sailors set camp in 1764 and Brigadier Čičagov landed in 1766. In truth, the mid-XVIII century Russian overwintering camp was constructed in an altogether different place, in Bellsund, over fifty-five miles away from Hornsund. Yet Malakhov Jr and Tel'nov tamper with the historical reality because they wish to illustrate that Russians have been coming to the same Svalbard location for centuries. A stone-made Pomor idol at the entrance to the cinematic Arc-of-Meridian Russian base serves a similar purpose, too, providing a visual reference to the already mentioned and widely shared Russian belief that Pomors' presence on Svalbard pre-dates Barents.

It is not enough for *Arxipelag* to try and foster in the filmgoer the notion of Svalbard as an intrinsically Russian territory that should perhaps at some point be reclaimed, in the "Svalbard naš" / "Svalbard is ours" mode, likely motivated by the "Krymnaš" / "Crimea is ours" meme that emerged after the 2014 Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula. The audience quickly discovers that the Russian cutting-edge scientific mission on Svalbard is in jeopardy. The film portrays a secret agent of an unnamed German-speaking foreign power, tasked with disrupting the Russian work on the Arc-of-Meridian calculations, for reasons that are never clarified. The viewer must assume, I suppose, that it is simply in the nature of some Western states to undermine whatever Russia is doing, so that it does not become too influential on the international arena.[7]

[7] The secret agent's role is played by Igor' Somov. He is Russian but betrays his Motherland and fellow crew members to feed his drug addiction.

5. False memories of Svalbard

Arxipelag is neither the first nor the last grossly imprecise fiction film on a historical topic, and as such should not be taken too seriously. Yet, together with its documentary counterpart *Poljarnyj meridian*, it is symptomatic of how history is sometimes represented on screen both in Russia and elsewhere, and deserves additional contextualization and interpretation.

As Robert A. Rosenstone notes (2001: 50), historical "films are inaccurate. They distort the past. They fictionalize, trivialize and romanticize people, events and movements". This rule extends to documentaries, too, if they belong to one of the two mainstream subgenres of historical film: film as drama and film as document. Both are "linked by [the] notion of the screen as a window onto a realistic world" and "a linear story that is unproblematic and uncontested in its view of what happened and why" (Rosenstone 2001: 54, 56). From this standpoint, *Poljarnyj meridian* and *Arxipelag* can be seen as manifestations of a two-pronged strategy, chasing different audience segments in order to maximize the viewing figures for Malakhov Jr and Tel'nov's reenactments of the Arc-of-Meridian expedition.

Poljarnyj meridian has been screened at the regional branches of its sponsor, the Russian Geographical Society (see e.g. Regional'nyj lektorij 2024). *Arxipelag* first made an appearance at several film festivals (garnering prizes at, among others, a Northern Character festival in Murmansk and an all-Russia Shukshin festival in Barnaul/Srostki). After its underwhelming performance at the box office *Arxipelag* also featured on TV, including the Naš kinopokaz and Xit channels. In line with other countries (see e.g. Kaes 1992: x), Russian fiction films, especially if shown on television, reach a wider public than many documentaries.

Cinema has a powerful ability "to influence perceptions and mould opinions" (Kaes 1992: xi), which can be used by political authorities to advance a specific agenda. The nation's past in a screen format therefore often represents an attempt at manipulating the public mood, rather than merely informing people about a particular historical event. According to Naomi Greene (1999: 10), under such conditions, "whatever the stance a film takes toward the past, […] it is a stance that sheds light on the present". If, like in Putin's Russia, the main goal of governmental memory politics is "the restoration of national pride" (Wijermars 2019: 6), then film and television together – being highly efficient "for the transmission of historical and political myths" (Greene 1999: 4) and thus the media in which Russian "state efforts to control public opinion are most pronounced" (Wijermars 2019: 3) – are routinely engaged, to borrow a phrase from Foucault (1975: 25), in "reprogramming popular memory […], so people are shown not what they were but what they must remember having been".

The official memory politics is never a unidirectional top-down process. It coopts grassroot initiatives in the same way that demand generates supply. Malakhov Jr, a professionally trained filmmaker with a degree from the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, got involved in the Russian memory politics by virtue of joining, as a videorecordist, his father's commemorative expeditions to Svalbard, undertaken as part of a fashionable trend of collectively visiting sites of someone's historic deed, be it war efforts or polar travels, to give vent and boost to patriotic sentiments (see e.g. Istoriko-memorial'naja 2015; Vserossijskaja 2020; and Po sledam 2022).

An extra emphasis on "archives" and Vasil'ev's "diary" as Malakhov Jr's sources about the Arc-of-Meridian expedition (see Bloxin 2017 and Xaknazarov 2021), while only Vasil'ev's memoirs (a somewhat less reliable genre) appear to have got used, indicate Malakhov's intention to proceed, as it were, "from archive to canon" (Wijermars 2019: 21). His desire to let as many people as possible know, through cinematic means, about the Arc-of-Meridian remarkable undertaking has led to overselling it by grossly exaggerating what was actually accomplished, in both the documentary and (especially) the fiction film version of the events.

Thus, *Poljarnyj meridian* claims that the commemorative expedition visited "forty-two geodetic milestones", allegedly established by the original expedition – which is almost twice as many as there had really been (twenty-six in total). For its part, *Arxipelag* features expedition members' violent disagreements over the sudden need to overwinter, apparently caused by the difficulties of finding a place where the Swedish beacons can be seen from (in fact, the decision to overwinter in 1899-1900 had been made well in advance). Some Russian crew members are so unhappy about the idea that they burn down the dog kennel with some dogs in it (to try and abort the mission prematurely), and then proceed to killing one another over the argument whether the mission should continue. None of this, of course, ever happened. Yet, as Stephen M. Norris (2012: 5) explains with regard to the atmosphere in which Malakhov Jr's two films were made, "remembering the past was not about getting it right; […] [since at least the early 2000s], Russian remembrance used the past as a means of projecting present-day pride" – even though in the case of *Arxipelag*, it remains unclear how much pride can be inspired by the allegedly selfish behaviour of some of the Arc-of-Meridian expedition's Russian members.

Malakhov Jr and his film crew become accomplices in the Kremlin's memory policies because their Arc-of-Meridian project is driven by desire to promote a worthy but marginal narrative by attempting to place it at the centre of the wider public's attention. In this, Malakhov Jr acts as a "memory sponsor" (Wijermars 2019: 23), who has to create a "memory cluster" (Wijermars 2019: 33), or several different media versions of the same historical topic, to increase his chances of success. This is exactly

why he (as the sole principal champion of the cause, who holds the required media skills) employs both the documentary and the fiction film genre devoted to precisely the same subject – a rare occurrence among film directors.[8]

Yet the wish to progress from a documentary to a fictionalised coverage of the Arc-of-Meridian expedition could only materialise with a budget to match. *Poljarnyj meridian* was funded by the Russian Geographical Society, but the means at the Society's disposal fell short of the amount necessary for the fiction film (even though some Society contribution to the making of *Arxipelag* did become available). Malakhov Jr and Salikova applied to the Federal Russian Ministry of Culture's financial support for *Arxipelag*, which was duly granted.[9] As Salikova explained in an interview, "we had sought subvention because our film's theme belongs to those that state would subsidise" (Bloxin 2017). This state subsidy changed the status of the Arc-of-Meridian film project from relatively independent to state-aligned. Since 2014, it has been impossible for recipients of state grants for filmmaking to display in their products anything that could be construed by the Kremlin as disloyalty to Russia (see e.g. Kločkova 2014), understood as disagreements with the Kremlin itself.

Not that Malakhov Jr's loyalty to the Kremlin's historical discourse had ever been in doubt to begin with. Wijermars (2019: 4-5) identifies three aspects of contemporary state-driven Russian memory politics: 1) continuity of Russian history; 2) palimpsestic layering ("how contemporary memory culture […] engages with and builds upon previous symbolic practices and their visual, narrative and material traces"); and 3) reclaiming lost traditions of remembrance. All three can be found in both films under review. The alleged Russian presence on Svalbard since the depths of time is a reflection of the first aspect. The second aspect is implemented by repeated references to Vasil'ev's 1915 book serving as the cinematic palimpsest's original layer, providing Malakhov Jr's with the bulk of information about the Arc-of-Meridian expedition, prioritising the expedition's Russian input over the Swedish one and honouring this input with a photograph of the Russian imperial flag hoisted over the archipelago's soil. The third aspect can be seen in the two films said to be rescuing from unjust oblivion the Russian scientists' heroic feat of valour (see Xaknazarov 2021 and Sazonov 2021), and paying tribute to this feat by raising the Russian national flag of today above the same Svalbard location as almost a century and a quarter ago.

Needless to say, flaunting a flag over a certain territory can be interpreted as staking a claim to it. Similarly, erecting cairns on Svalbard can be seen as marking one's own territory (Svalbard was still a *terra nullius* at that point). This process of territorial

[8] Cf.: "Cultural memory has to be actively and repeatedly circulated for a given interpretation of history to gain or maintain dominance" (Wijermars 2019: 29).
[9] Forty million roubles out of the total budget of over sixty million, see Xaknazarov 2021.

acquisition (i.e. making Russia even greater) is repeatedly undermined by the intrigues of an unknown Western power which employs a saboteur among the expedition members. In other words, *Arxipelag* follows a widespread plot formula for filmmaking in Putin's Russia, described by the film critic Daniil Dondurej thus: "foreigners are extremely dangerous, border protection is the chief task" (V poiskax 2006: 5). It seems that in this day and age it is hard to be a Russian filmmaker without cultivating an anti-Western conspiracy theory or two. Given that Malakhov Jr's story is set in the past, it conforms to, assists and advances the Russian government's "strategy of memory politics [which] has aimed to create a continuous narrative of a Great Russia […] that has been under constant threat from domestic and foreign enemies" (Wijermars 2019: 2).

Such a narrative can be classified as an antagonistic mode of remembering, fostered by populist neo-nationalists (just like the Kremlin and its staunch supporters today). According to Cento Bull and Hansen (2016: 391, 393), "the antagonistic mode is linked to the dominance of the territorial nation-state", reimagines "territory in exclusionary terms" and constructs "rigid symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'them'". The mode "relies on heritage as monumentalism […], as well as a Manichean division of the historical characters into good and evil. It also relies on celebratory, glorifying or nostalgic narrative styles" (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016: 390). It goes without saying that scenes with a flag proudly flying next to a Russian-made cairn on Svalbard, as well as suggestions of a foreign wrongdoing to jeopardise a heroic mission, place the two films by Malakhov Jr firmly within this remembering mode.

6. Conclusion

Malakhov Jr's noble impulse to visualise the story of the Russo-Swedish Arc-of-Meridian expedition for the benefit of wider audiences has fallen victim to a common recipe for Russian cinema's commercial success, available since the late 1990s, namely "merging the past with contemporary patriotism" (Norris 2012: 4) in its nationalist pro-Kremlin variety. While the documentary *Poljarnyj meridian* did not play fast and loose with the facts too much, and was actually filmed on Svalbard, the depiction of the expedition in the fiction film *Archipelag* has done a major disservice to the turn-of-the-century scientific endeavour by associating it with drug abuse, subversive activity, xenophobia, arson and murder.[10] The absence of real Svalbard in *Arxipelag*'s visuals may be explained by budgetary discipline and Covid pandemics, yet it contributes to,

[10] This would have perhaps been less damaging, had access to the genuine story in Russian for the general reader been easier: the 2016 Russian translation of Arlov 2003, which includes an authoritative section devoted to the expedition, has a print run of only 3000 copies and been sold out long since. Other Russophone academic publications on the topic (see e.g. Tret'jakova 2021 and Filippova 2023), as a rule, hold a narrower focus and are even harder to come by.

and is symptomatic of, the overall implausibility of the film. Thus *Arxipelag* becomes yet another Russian/Soviet fiction film about Svalbard that has not been shot on Svalbard (such as Iurii Egorov's 1954 *More studenoe* and Mikhail Kalatozov's 1969 *Krasnaja palatka*; for details, see Rogatchevski 2020). An authentic Russian fiction film about Svalbard is yet to be made.[11]

[11] This article has been written as part of the research project "Memory Politics of the North, 1993-2023" (NORMEMO).

7. Appendix

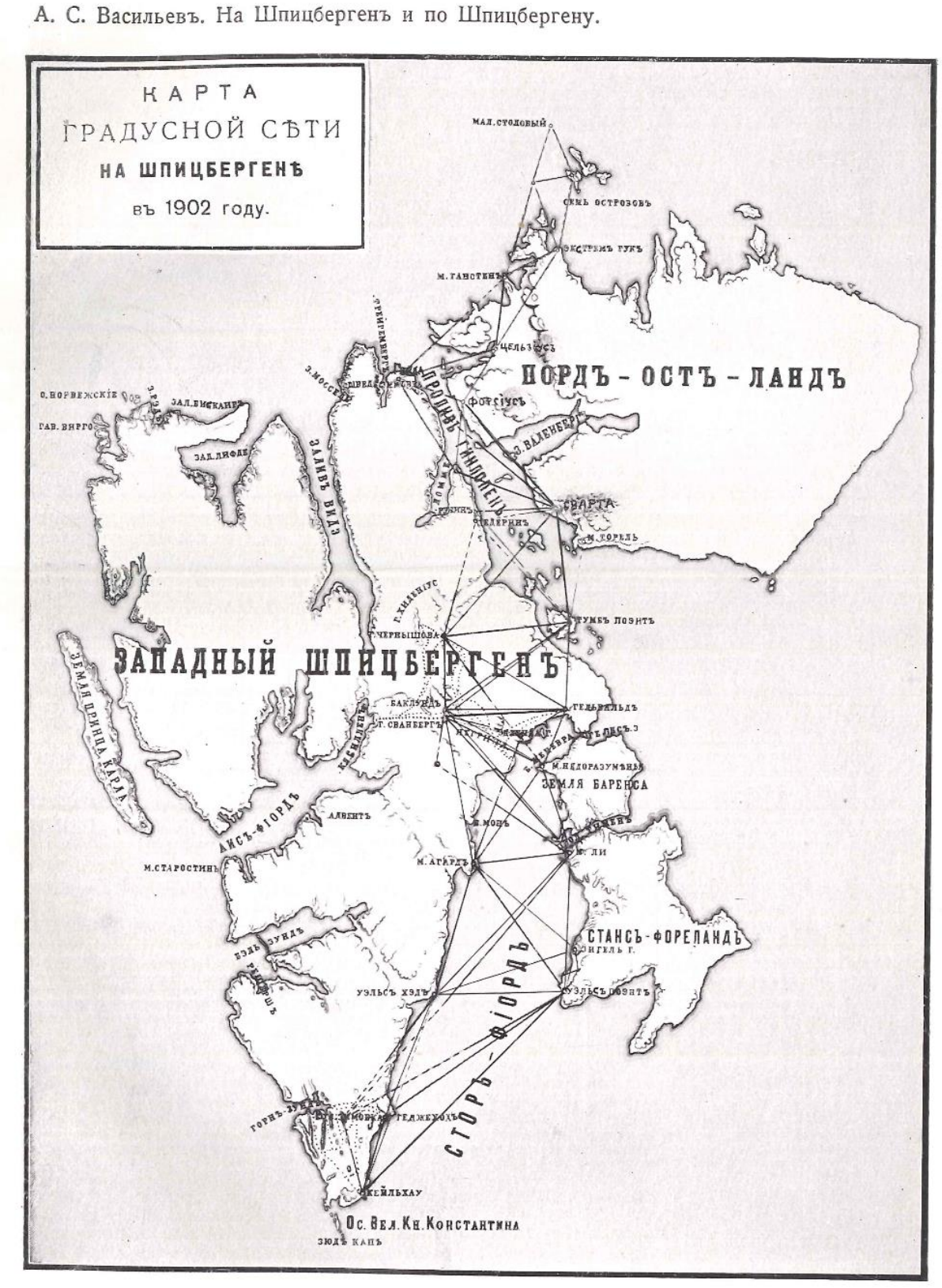


Figure 1. Vasil'ev 1915, an insert between pages 8 and 9

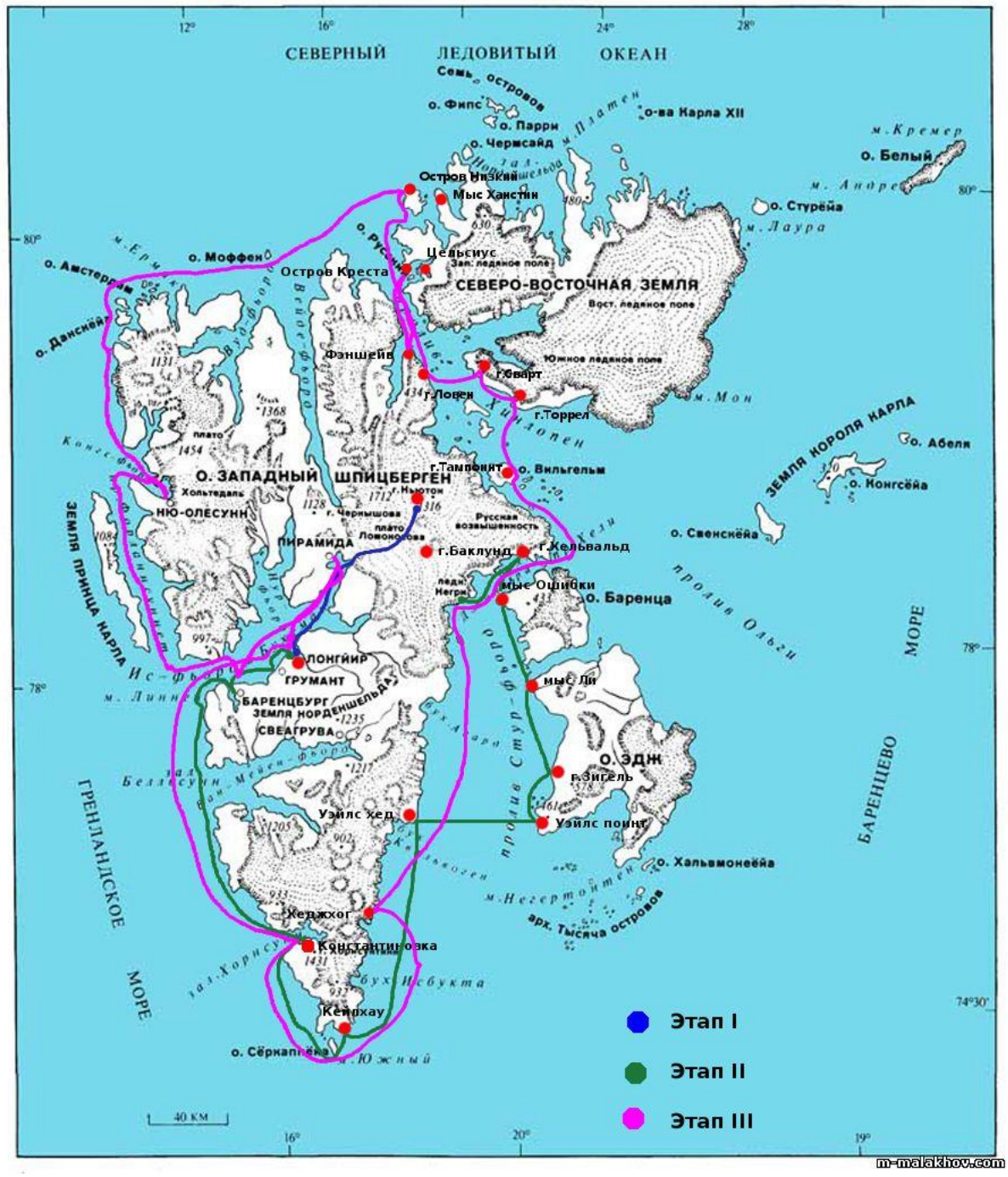


Figure 2. A screenshot from the website m-malakhov.com, now defunct

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