Europe and Russia: Freeze of the Century, 1999

Europe’s year of the avalanche
‘White death’ claims 70 lives in the Alps

- Mar 8, 1999

Russia’s deep freeze
In the Far North, the hardest winter in a generation
- Jan 25, 1999

In Europe’s Arctic Zone, the Freeze of the Century
- Jan 29, 1999
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Compiled by Our Staff From Dispatches

OSLO — The northern fringe of Europe suffered its coldest weather of the century Thursday, and some Arctic regions of Russia have been gripped by a deep freeze as well.

In the Arctic stretches of Finland, Norway and Sweden, temperatures dipped under minus 51 centigrade (minus 60 Fahrenheit) Thursday.

That is too cold for mercury thermometers, which freeze at minus 39 centigrade (minus 38 Fahrenheit) and requires the use of alcohol-based thermometers.

At those temperatures, warm water tossed into the air outdoors will freeze before it hits the ground, as a Norwegian television station demonstrated for its report on the cold weather.

Northern Finland set a new national record for the second day in a row when the temperature fell to minus 51.5 centigrade (minus 60.7 Fahrenheit) during the night in the town of Pokka. It was slightly warmer in the Norwegian town of Karasjok, with an overnight low of minus 51.2 centigrade (minus 60.2 Fahrenheit), just shy of Norway’s record cold of minus 51.4 centigrade (minus 60.5 Fahrenheit) set in January 1886.

“This is a record for the century,” said Sigrid Naess, who monitors the official temperature in Karasjok, a town in Finnmark Province, Norway. “You just have to dress warm and build a fire in the fireplace.”

Electric power failed in many towns in Arctic provinces, leaving people shivering inside their homes, although virtually all homes also have fireplaces or other forms of heating.

Alfred Jacobsen, 86, measured freezing temperatures indoors because his house in Mehama, Norway, was without power. “It was full winter inside,” he was quoted as telling the Oslo newspaper Verdens Gang.

In Finnish Lapland, about 5,000 people lost their electricity because power lines could not withstand the cold. “The metal power lines simply stretched and snapped under the pressure” from the cold, said Arto Miettinen, of the regional power company.

Compared to Norway and Finland, the night’s low for northern Sweden was a relatively balmy minus 48.7 C (minus 55.7 Fahrenheit) in the town of Valkeakoski.

That was still cold enough to stop passenger trains in northern Sweden, since the air brakes used to stop them do not work at such low temperatures. Because air contracts in the cold, at extremely low temperatures there is not enough pressure to push the brakes.

The cold snap, which may last through the weekend, was brought on by cold air coming from Siberian regions of Russia. News reports said temperatures as low as minus 55.6 centigrade (minus 68 Fahrenheit) were recorded in Siberia this week.

The Russian Weather Service said the deep chill was unusually long. “It’s one thing to cope for a day when it’s minus 50 outside, but it’s a different thing altogether to spend several days in a row like that,” a meteorologist said.

In some parts of the Kola Peninsula near Russia’s border with Norway, the temperature fell at night to almost minus 56 centigrade (minus 69 Fahrenheit) in one village this week — the lowest in more than 100 years.

The meteorologist said a cyclone was bringing warmer weather and that temperatures would rise slightly Thursday and Friday as the cold front headed toward Western Europe. (AP, Reuters)
Russia’s deep freeze

In the Far North, the hardest winter in a generation

BY CHRISTIAN CARYL

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ALATKA, RUSSIA—This is a strange and terrible winter in northern Russia, with strange and terrible tales to match. Inmates in a prison in the Kolyma region were marched through the snow and locked in the basement of a hotel, the only place for miles around that still had heat. An entire village on Cape Schmidt, along the coast of the ice-locked Arctic Sea, had to be evacuated to a military base after running out of fuel. Northerners tell of deserted settlements burning in the night, set on fire by the last person to leave, and of abandoned factories cannibalized for scrap metal and firewood.

Here in Palatka, teachers have gone on strike, not because they haven’t been paid for months—like many other workers across Russia—but because it is below freezing in their classrooms. “There’s no fuel. We only have enough left for a few days,” says Lyudmila Odynets, a graceful blond in her early 50s who edits the local newspaper. The central heating plant in the town of 10,000 people stopped sup- plying hot water weeks ago; a thick layer of ice has built up on the inside of windows in Palatka’s homes. “For a while people were using electric heaters, but now the electricity is cut off for seven hours each day,” says Odynets. “Life here was never what I would call easy. But at least we had a life.”

This winter, thanks to fuel shortages and Russia’s continuing economic crisis, the 12 million inhabitants of the 28 territories that make up Russia’s Far North are hard put just to survive. Outside shabby, cookie-cutter apartment blocks are clotheslines on which wet items freeze.

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CHRIS ANDERSON—AURORA
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MAP BY RICHARD GAZE FOR LON&WR
rather than dry. Inside, children wear mittens to bed. But the stark landscape, visible in slanting sunlight for only about three hours a day, is misleading. Underneath the snow and ice, the Far North hides astounding natural wealth: It accounts for 60 percent of Russia's exportable raw materials, including petroleum and precious metals.

Still, the region has never been able to subsist on its own. For food, fuel, clothing, and manufactured goods, Northerners depend on government subsidies and a fragile supply line stretching across thousands of miles of tundra, forest, and ice-choked waters. This winter may be somewhat colder than usual. But that's not the main problem. Hardship has struck because shipments that were supposed to be delivered during the warm summer months—the only time when the region is easily accessible—did not arrive in many communities.

The big hurt. Last summer's economic crisis is partly to blame. Russia's public finances still have not recovered from August 17, when the government of then Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko defaulted on some of its debts and devalued the ruble. The economy has shrunken relentlessly in recent years, and there is no recovery in sight—the gross domestic product fell 5 percent in 1998 and is forecast to drop an additional 3 percent to 9 percent this year. The value of the ruble on international currency markets has plunged so low that Russia's state budget is the equivalent of $26 billion per year—substantially less than the U.S. government spends per week. About 42 million Russians, or 29 percent of the population, now live below the official poverty line.

All of Russia is hurting economically, but the Far North, which is especially dependent on state spending, is hurting most of all. One sure sign is depopulation.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the area around Palatka had a population of 29,000. Now it's 17,000. The surrounding Magadan Region, an area larger than Texas and California combined, has lost a third of the 390,000 inhabitants it had a decade ago. Many more would leave if they could, but housing is in short supply across Russia, and the costs of moving are prohibitive for many families with children or elderly dependents. In Palatka, says Odynets, "the people who are capable of working are the ones who tend to leave first. The rest stay behind."

It's a pattern repeated
throughout the Far North, and the demographics are devastating. According to the Red Cross, average life expectancy in Chukotka, which borders on the Magadan Region, may be as low as 34 years. So many young people are moving away that the population of the North is aging more rapidly than the rest of Russia, which compounds the Far North’s dependency on government handouts.

All this suggests that the roots of the Far North’s crisis lie deeper than the events of last summer. “Today the problem has only been aggravated. It was already a problem in Soviet times,” says Ilya Rosenblum, a mining tycoon in Magadan, which like all of Russia has a thin layer of rich entrepreneurs. In the old days, Moscow’s central planners treated the Far North more like a foreign colony than a part of Russia. Magadan was the hub of a gigantic network of labor camps filled with the victims of Stalin’s terror, who were forced to mine gold and other metals.

After the dictator’s death in 1953, the Kremlin shifted toward a more humane system: It lured workers to the North with extra pay and privileges. A network of transportation subsidies met the exorbitant costs of shipping fuel and food to regions that were frozen solid much of the year. It was a wasteful approach, but it worked after a fashion. Still, the Kremlin’s basic attitude toward the North remained neglectful. “They always treated us like a marginal population,” says Odynets. “People always lived here temporarily. Everyone always thought they’d be leaving at some point. And the politicians ... figured they could do what they wanted with us.”

The big money. Palatka was the site of three labor camps, one of them reserved for women. A crude wooden watchtower still stands on the edge of town. But today Palatka is better known as home to the recently opened Kolyma Gold Refinery, where 100 workers use state-of-the-art U.S.-made equipment to process raw ore and pour molten, raspberry-colored metal into molds. In a vault deep inside the heavily guarded plant, the workers stack gold ingots embossed with a company stamp. But few Palatkins have ever seen the ingots—or felt any economic benefit from them. The mining company that used to be the town’s biggest employer shut down two years ago, and its former workers are still waiting for back pay. Many residents receive their salaries in the form of food coupons that can be used only in local stores.

The feeling that they have been lured, entrapped, and now abandoned is widespread among Northerners. It provides the background music for politicians who beat an anti-Moscow drum. The central figure in the Magadan Region is Gov. Valentin Tsetykov, ironically a veteran of Moscow insider politics who returned home to the Far North a few all the taxes they owe to Moscow, either. And, when the central government sends subsidies to the provinces, it has no effective way to ensure that local administrators spend the money for its earmarked purpose—an invitation to misuse, if not corruption. A recent federal investigation, for example, concluded that the Kolyma Gold Refinery was built in part with funds earmarked for social programs and public-sector salaries.

Butkeev argues that increasing the amount of the money transferred from Moscow won’t solve any problems: “It’s like trying to pour water into a barrel that has a hole in the bottom.” Not surprising-

A boy in Magadan. Some schools have closed because there is not enough fuel to heat them.

years ago when it became clear that power in Russia was flowing out to the regions. He is competing for control over natural resources with the central government, which is loath to give up any revenues in its current fiscal straits. Officials in the regional capital of Magadan speak diplomatically of “self-sufficiency” rather than “independence” from Moscow. But the governor boasts that Moscow has to play catch-up after he has forged ahead with initiatives that flout national legislation.

Some decentralization may be a good thing for Russia. Yet the push for self-reliance is problematic. “It’s true that Moscow hasn’t fulfilled all its obligations” to far-flung regions, says Vladimir Butkeev, who represents Magadan in the national parliament. “But the regions didn’t collect
Europe's year of the avalanche

'White death' claims 70 lives in the Alps

By Susan Ladika

LANDECK, AUSTRIA—Around the ski resorts in the Austrian Alps, avalanches are so common that the mountainsides are criss-crossed with protective fences of heavy steel, and the winding roads are covered in many places with reinforced concrete roofs. Here in the Paznaun Valley alone, more than $60 million has been spent on avalanche protection over the past 40 years, giving human beings a growing sense of control over the forces of nature.

No more. The 16-foot-high wall of snow that rumbled off a mountain and smashed through the ski village of Galtür last Tuesday was a freak. Records dating back to the 17th century show no major avalanches ever hitting that part of the valley. "No one was evacuated, because no one had expected this," said Wendelin Weingartner, governor of the Austrian province of Tirol.

But the very next day, in the midst of an intensive rescue attempt, another deadly avalanche plowed into the neighboring village of Valsur. Together, the two snowslides killed 37 people—including at least 19 foreign tourists—and pointed up the danger of building ever more vacation homes to accommodate ever more skiers in search of bountiful snow for six to eight months a year.

Usually, ski resorts and operators pray for snow. This winter in Europe, they are praying for it to stop. Massive snowfalls—up to 6 feet in a day—combined with winds of up to 175 miles per hour have produced an avalanche of avalanches throughout the Alps, killing more than 70 people in Austria, France, Switzerland, and Italy. Last week, 100,000 people were snowed into homes and hotel rooms in Switzerland. In the stricken Paznaun Valley, about an hour southwest of Innsbruck, helicopters ferried in supplies and flew out some 10,000 stranded tourists. No one could say exactly how much snow had fallen because the measuring instruments were buried by it.

Back-country skiers and adventurers including Ernest Hemingway have long prized the village of Galtür for its isolation and rugged surroundings. A picturesque cluster of chalets and churches, it has just 700 year-round residents, but scores of family-run inns fill up each winter, boosting the population to 3,000.

For the first night after the avalanche, bad weather prevented rescuers from reaching the village, and residents and tourists alike dug through the snow with shovels or bare hands, frantically searching for survivors. The snow was piled up to 30 feet high, and deeply buried avalanche victims usually suffocate within 15 minutes. A visiting Belgian police officer struggled with tears as he described uncovering six dead bodies, including a child.

In neighboring Valsur, however, there was one ecstatic moment: a 4-year-old boy found alive 1½ hours after being buried in the snow. Instantly dubbed the "Miracle of Valsur," the child's survival restored rescuers' spirits and a skiing nation's confidence that there is such a thing as good luck as well as bad.