A REPORTER AT LARGE

RUSSIA'S ESPIONAGE WAR IN THE ARCTIC

For years, Russia has been using the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, which borders its nuclear stronghold, as a laboratory, testing intelligence operations there before replicating them across Europe.

By Ben Taub

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"The whole Russian plan is that, if things really heat up with NATO, they need to create a buffer" to preserve the capability to carry out nuclear strikes, a regional counterintelligence chief said. That buffer starts in Kirkenes. Photographs by Paolo Pellegrin / Magnum for The New Yorker

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It was polar winter, one long night. The lakes had frozen in the Far North, and the foxes and the grouse had shed their brown fur and feathers in favor of Arctic white. To survive the months of snow and ice, predators resort to camouflage and deception. But so do their prey.

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In the small town of Kirkenes—in the northeastern corner of Norway, six miles from the Russian border—the regional counterintelligence chief, Johan Roaldsnes, peered out his office window at the fjord below. There were eight Russian fishing trawlers docked outside, housing at least six hundred Russian sailors.

The phone rang. The caller was a government employee who worked at the local port. It was not uncommon for Russian trawlers to stop in Kirkenes, but some of these were not among the usual ships. One of them, a fish-processing vessel named Arka-33, had docked weeks earlier and hadn't left.

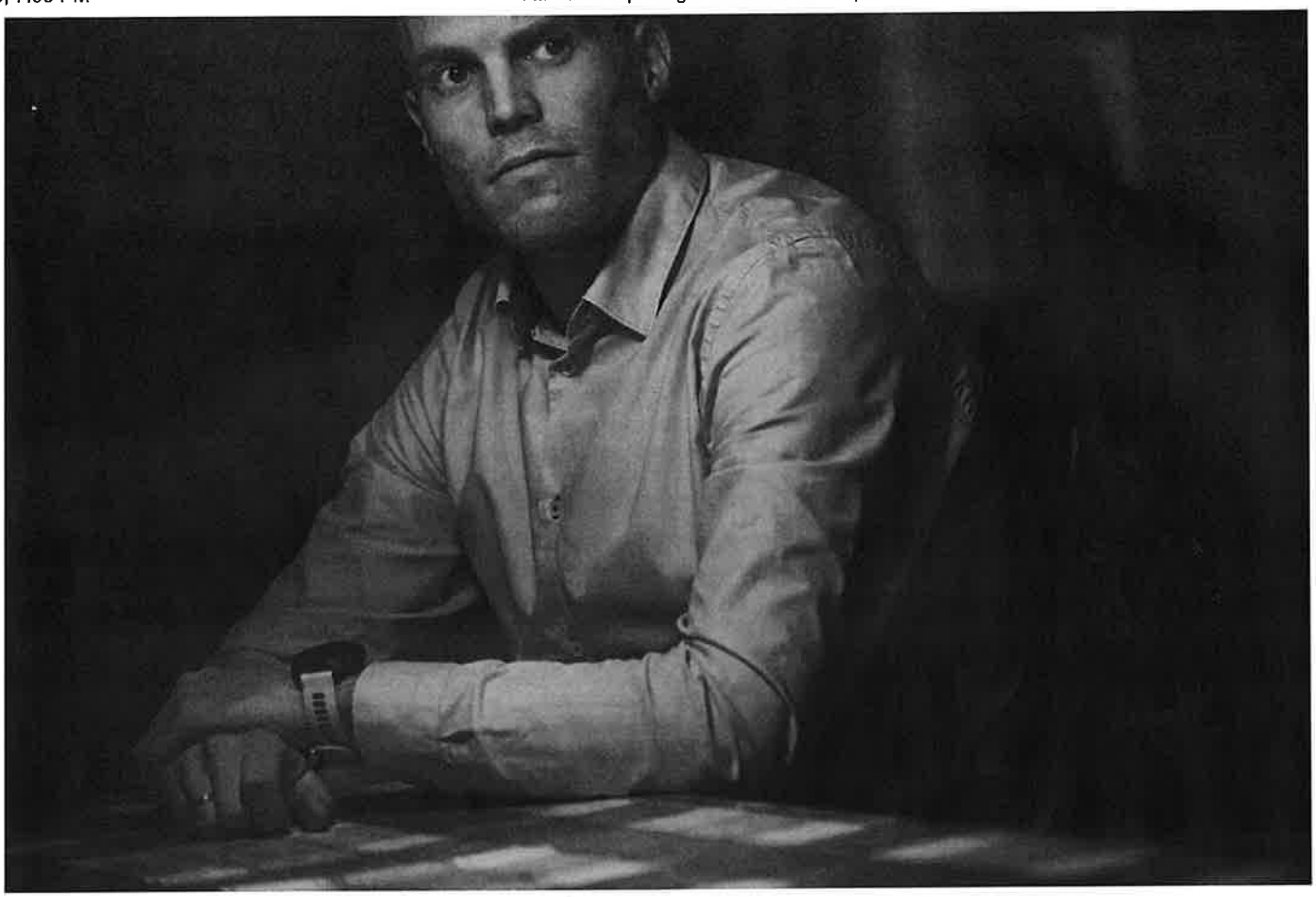
"Seems a bit much," the caller said.

"Might be," Roaldsnes replied. Uncertainty was his profession.

He walked out of his office, into the cold, and past the church from which the town had taken its name: Kirkenes, "church on the promontory." There were two clocks on the spire. They showed different times, neither of which was correct.

It was late December, 2022, almost a year since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Roaldsnes had not seen the sun in a month; it wouldn't rise again for another. Locals call these months the *mørketid*—the dark time. Most of the time, you can't see what's around you, even if you know that it's there.

Arka-33 was larger than many buildings in town. Before docking, its captain had given only the required twenty-four hours' notice to Norwegian port authorities. The ship belongs to a Russian crab-fishing company whose C.E.O., according to the OpenSanctions database, used to run at least two private security companies. His wife—who was previously listed as C.E.O.—is a member of the Russian parliament and appears on various sanctions lists. As Roaldsnes drove through the dock yard, he noted that Arka-33 was moored in a position that is used by the Norwegian military's primary electronic-intelligence-collection vessel when it stops in Kirkenes.



"What's the new threat that we don't see?" Johan Roaldsnes, the head of counterintelligence for the region, asked.

A fishing boat was no longer just a fishing boat, in the eyes of Norwegian authorities. That summer, the Russian government had declared that commercial vessels could be co-opted by the military for any purpose. The fjords of Kirkenes open up to the Barents Sea, just a few miles from where the Russian Navy's Northern Fleet has engaged in espionage and nuclear-war preparations since the earliest days of the Cold War. Locals in Kirkenes, a town of thirty-five hundred people, noticed that Russian fishermen were younger than those who had come before the war in Ukraine, and that they sometimes did physical-training exercises on the decks of their ships.

Russian sailors carry handwritten seafarer passports. "You don't actually *know* who is on board," Roaldsnes told me. "If you do a deep dive on a bunch of sailors, you will eventually find somebody linked to the Northern Fleet."

Recently, crew on a vessel that had been associated with the destruction of subsea communications cables had steered a motorboat into restricted waters near a Norwegian Army garrison. Were they testing their equipment, or the speed of the Norwegian response? A search of two trawlers had revealed radios that could tune into military frequencies which are used by the Northern Fleet. I asked Roaldsnes whether the trawlers were effectively functioning as intelligence vessels. "No, they're fishing vessels," he said. "Well . . ." He winced, and rephrased his assessment: "They fish."

For the past few years, civilian life in northern Norway has been under constant, low-grade attack. Russian hackers have targeted small municipalities and ports with phishing scams, ransomware, and other forms of cyber warfare, and individuals travelling as tourists have been caught photographing sensitive defense and communications infrastructure. Norway's domestic-intelligence service, the P.S.T., has warned of the threat of sabotage to Norwegian train lines, and to gas facilities that supply energy to much of Europe. A few months ago, someone cut a vital communications cable running to a Norwegian Air Force base. "We've seen what we believe to be continuous mapping of our critical infrastructure," Roaldsnes told me. "I see it as continuous war preparation."

The aberrant trawlers left as quietly as they had come. Roaldsnes had spent Christmas privately agonizing over the possibility that there was a special-forces unit scattered among the ships. Was this a dry run for a potential attack? Or was the threat mostly imaginary—a "wilderness of mirrors," as a former C.I.A. counterintelligence chief once described such things?

After a decade in the P.S.T., Roaldsnes considered it professionally important to never fully make up his mind. Counterintelligence, he later told me, "is like playing tennis without seeing your opponent or whether it's actually a ball being served to you. It might behave as a ball. But, when you get close, it's an orange."

Most Western governments do not appear to think of themselves as being at war with Russia. Russia, however, is at war with the West. "That's for sure—we are saying that openly," the Russian representative to the United Nations recently declared. Most attacks are deliberately murky, and difficult to attribute. They are acts of so-called hybrid warfare, designed to subdue the enemy without fighting. The strategy appears to be to push the limits of what Russia can get away with—to subvert, to sabotage, to hack, to destabilize, to instill fear—and to paralyze Western governments by hinting at even more aggressive tactics. "They do it because they can do it," an air-traffic controller told me, of an electronic-warfare attack that imperils civilian aviation. "Then they deny everything, and they threaten you, saying that, if you don't stop accusing them of what you know they're doing, bad things will happen to you."

Ever since Russia annexed Crimea, in 2014, its military and intelligence services have been experimenting with hybrid warfare and influence operations in Kirkenes, treating the area as "a laboratory," as the regional police chief put it to me. Some attacks were almost imperceptible at first; others disrupted everyday life and caused division among locals. To understand what was happening in her district, she started reading Sun Tzu.

Then, in early 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The conversations inside Roaldsnes's office, in Kirkenes, took on an existential tone, because Vladimir Putin has shown himself to be willing to risk it all over relatively small, strategically important areas. The Article 5 policy of collective defense states that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all. But would the United States engage in thermonuclear war over a sparsely populated swath of Arctic Norway?

Countries throughout Europe now acknowledge that their people and infrastructure are under ceaseless attack. Yet each incident is, by itself, below the threshold that would require a military response or trigger Article 5. In recent months, agents of Russian intelligence are believed to have assassinated a defector in Spain, planted explosives near a pipeline in Germany, carried out arson attacks

all over the Continent, and sabotaged subsea cables and rail lines. A Russian operative injured himself in Paris while preparing explosives for a terrorist attack on a hardware store, and U.S. intelligence discovered a Russian plot to assassinate the C.E.O. of one of Europe's largest arms manufacturers. Poland's interior minister said, "We are facing a foreign state that is conducting hostile and—in military parlance—kinetic action on Polish territory." Every European country that borders Russia is preparing for a wider war in the event of a Russian victory in Ukraine. Poland and the Baltics are digging trenches at their borders and fortifying them, often with antitank obstacles known as "dragon's teeth." Finland cast aside seventy years of neutrality and nonalignment to join NATO; Sweden cast aside two hundred.

A Norwegian outpost that overlooks the border with Russia.

Russia's low-grade attacks are accompanied by threats of nuclear annihilation, both by Kremlin officials and by pundits on state television. In May, the Russian military carried out an exercise in which it practiced initiating a tactical nuclear war. In the context of nuclear escalation, Kirkenes is in one of the most strategically sensitive regions on earth. The other side of the border is the Kola Peninsula, which is filled with closed military towns and airfields, nuclear-weapons storage facilities, and nuclear-submarine ports. "Within a radius of, let's say, two hundred kilometres of this table, there could be a thousand nuclear warheads," Thomas Nilsen, a journalist in Kirkenes, told me, over a dinner of reindeer and arctic char. Russia is also using the Barents Sea for research and development of new delivery systems for nuclear weapons, including a subsea nuclear torpedo that could flood a coastal city with a radioactive tsunami, and a nuclear-powered cruise missile with global reach.

"The Kola Peninsula is their strategic security against the West," Roaldsnes told me. "The whole Russian plan is that, if things really heat up with NATO, they need to create a buffer," to preserve the capability to carry out nuclear strikes. "That means the ability to control their closest neighboring territory"—the region that includes Kirkenes—"and control access to the waters, to prevent anyone from getting close." The goal is "the ability to deny access to the Barents Sea," to protect the Northern Fleet.

But the control of territory is not only a matter of weapons systems. It's also about people. And here, at the point of contact between NATO and Russia's nuclear stronghold, it seems that the Kremlin is quietly waging a parallel battle for public sentiment in a small fishing town, geographically isolated from the rest of Norway and the West. As Sun Tzu writes, the path to victory is to win first, and then go to war.

In March, 2022, a few weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, I set off for northwestern Norway to attend a NATO military exercise called Cold Response, in which some thirty thousand troops were practicing Arctic warfare. The exercise involved a staged invasion of Norway, with the Nordic nations defending the area as soldiers from the U.S., Britain, France, and other NATO countries attempted an amphibious assault from the sea. Although no one officially acknowledged it, each country was practicing its likely role in the event of a Russian invasion—and sending a message about NATO unity. "What we are trying to do here is to make sure that there will never be a war in Norway," one of the top commanders told me. "And the deterrence part of the operation is not really effective if we are the only ones who know it."

The Russians were invited to send observers to the exercise, partly as a gesture of transparency. They declined, but that doesn't mean they weren't there. During the exercise, men with Eastern European accents reportedly tried to buy Norwegian military I.D.s from drunk conscripts at a bar. (During another NATO exercise, a