

FSU Historian's Arctic research has him sitting on top of the world

October 29 2008



Arctic iceberg. Image: Florida State University

It's one of the coldest and most remote areas on Earth, but the Arctic region has long held great strategic interest for a number of nations. Now, a Florida State University researcher is leading an international team that is working to produce one of the most comprehensive histories to date of the northernmost part of the world from the late 19th century to the present.

Ronald E. Doel, an associate professor of history at FSU, is the project leader of "Colony, Empire, Environment: A Comparative International History of Twentieth Century Arctic Science," a \$1.1 million project funded by the European Science Foundation. Nine historians from seven nations -- the United States, Canada, England, Norway, Denmark,

Sweden and Russia -- are working on this innovative research effort.

"What we're doing is looking at the Arctic from a comparative international perspective," said Doel, who also has received individual funding from the National Science Foundation's Office of Polar Programs. "There have been a lot of histories written from one national slice or another -- a Canadian history of the Arctic, a U.S. focus, a Russian focus. We have nine members in seven countries, all looking at the Arctic, all talking with one another, beginning to develop a different kind of story that joins the voices together to fill in holes in individual narratives."

Doel said that he and his colleagues are focusing on how perceptions of the Arctic have changed from the period of colonization to the time of the Cold War, when the region's military value became one of the main concerns -- particularly for the Soviet Union and the United States. The historians' research will take them all the way up to the modern era, a time of increasing autonomy for some of the Arctic's indigenous people. (For example, Canada established Nunavut, now the largest of its territories and provinces, in 1999. The new territory's population is composed mostly of native Inuits.)

Another part of the work that Doel's team is doing involves the history of science and technology in the Arctic, as well as how people once thought about the environment and how that thinking has changed over time.

"One of the things I often ask my freshmen in class is, 'When was the first time that the Pentagon got interested in climate change and global warming?'" Doel said. "The brave students say maybe the 1980s; most say the 1990s. But one of the documents we got from the archives shows that one of the first in-depth discussions of polar warming occurred in the Pentagon -- it was labeled secret at the time -- in 1947. And the

concern at that time was not over sustainability or the kind of concerns that motivate many currently, but, rather, national security interests. What happens, for example, if the growing season becomes longer in the Soviet Union? What happens if the harbors are ice-free for many more months out of the year? Will that increase the Soviets' strength in the world?"

Doel said that one of the more interesting developments to come out of the project has been the rare opportunity for historians to work together.

"Unlike scientific researchers, historians tend to be lone wolves, working in comparative isolation," he said. "One of the best memories I've already taken away from this are the long evening discussions with the Norwegians and the Swedes and Russians, each of us discovering something we never would have been able to know had we been working in our archives back in our home countries. It has been a marvelous collaborative experience and something that we're hoping to share with our graduate students."

Members of Doel's team, who previously met in Greenland, have just returned from a conference in Iceland. Doel hopes that they will have another opportunity to get together at a Russian conference next year. He says the group's long-term goal is to publish their research in a book that will "join the voices together" to fill in holes in individual narratives.

"Ultimately, I would love to see one of the very first internationally collaborative histories in which authors are able to tell a unified narrative of this fascinating region," he said. "Of being able to talk about the connections between Arctic researchers in Canada, for example, and how their experiences differed from those in the Soviet Union and other countries at the time. When the United States got very interested in the polar regions during the Cold War, what was being discussed in the major capitals of Europe, in Oslo and in Stockholm? We can now get at

that by looking at the archives of the major players in this story. And for the first time, historians are able to get together as a group, collaboratively talk about those stories, and produce a narrative. That's really quite new."

Source: Florida State University

Citation: FSU Historian's Arctic research has him sitting on top of the world (2008, October 29) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-10-fsu-historian-arctic-world.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.