
The Cold War

Module 10 - Akshayuk Pass Expedition



Resolute Bay, 1953 – shortly after the Inuit from Inukjuaq and Pond Inlet were relocated.



“The experiment we are making this year is to transfer a few families from Port Harrison and Pond Inlet to Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island and Craig Harbor and Cape Herschel, on Ellesmere Island. The primary object is to find out how Eskimos from overpopulated southern areas can adapt themselves to conditions in the high Arctic where there is at present no Eskimo population.”

- Acting Deputy Minister, Department of Resources and Development, Government of Canada, August 1953.

TERRA INCOGNITA

As the i2P expedition team treks through the Akshayuk Pass, the question should be asked, “Whose land are we on?” The answer, however, is not as straightforward as one might imagine.

When you look at a standard world map, all the land on the globe is allotted one color or another, and each colored area of land has a name assigned to it – which indicates the country that governs that land. There are no tracts of land on the map that are not colored and do not belong to an assigned country. This was not always so. In fact for some people the thought that land could be owned was completely foreign.

As we learned in module 4, human beings spread around the world from an original base in Africa. As they migrated and settled, they earned their livelihood from the land, either by hunting, fishing and gathering food, or by growing livestock and crops. Depending on the lifestyle of the people in a given region, the manner in which they used



Figure 1: A Map of the world dating from 1599. What is particularly instructive is that the shape of most continents is quite accurate with the exception of the Arctic region of North America that is not filled in. The land in that area remained a mystery. Unknown lands were referred to as Terra Incognita (author: Edward Wright - public domain).

the land differed significantly. Those who grew crops and livestock lived sedentary lives and tended to take ownership of the land. Those who hunted and gathered their food tended to live nomadic lives and did not take ownership of particular tracts of land.

As nomadic hunters the Inuit did not adopt the practice of owning land, nor did they make maps and or develop a written language. They recorded their history in words and stories that were passed down verbally from generation to generation. The Europeans on the other hand did take ownership of land, as well as having organized governments, making maps and recording their history in writing. Hence, true to their practice at home, when European explorers arrived in the Arctic, they planted flags in the earth and took possession of the new land on behalf of their home nation. They did so unilaterally, evidently not stopping to consider the rights of the Inuit who had lived there for centuries. Imagine wandering over to your neighbour's land, sticking a flag in the earth and declaring yourself master of the terrain?

Class Exercise:

Who does the land your house or apartment sits on belong to? Who owned it before the current owners? Who owned it 300 years ago?

Although we may like to think that this practice of seizing land reflects a bygone era when there was far less consideration for human precedent and ancestral land rights, recent history illustrates how political forces have continued to shape the fate of the Inuit people.

THE COLD WAR COMES NORTH



After the Second World War (1939 – 45), a period of worldwide political tension developed that pitted the United States and other western nations against the Soviet Union and their allies. This period in history is called the Cold War and lasted from 1945 until 1991. Although one would not intuitively expect it, the Cold War has had an enduring and sometimes tragic effect on the lives of the Inuit in Canada's North.

During the Cold War there was the perceived threat by the United States that the Soviet Union would attack them with nuclear missiles. The most direct path between the Soviet Union and the United States was over the Arctic. As a consequence, for the American government the Arctic became a very strategic location. Worried about the 'Soviet threat' they invested heavily in the Arctic, creating air force bases in the far north, and

building a series of radar stations that stretched from Alaska, across the Canadian Arctic to Greenland. The purpose of these radar stations was to detect any missiles being launched from the Soviet Union, and the system was called the Distant Early Warning Line (Dew Line).



Figure 2: The Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line sites built across Alaska, Canada and Greenland. Note that there were sites built near Qikiqtarjuaq at the north end of the Akshayuk Pass (image courtesy of US Air Force).

The construction of Air Force Bases and the DEW line brought unparalleled activity to the north, and with it money and jobs for local people.

In turn, the Government of Canada felt threatened by this ‘foreign’ interest and activity in the Arctic and turned its attention to the region. Canada was almost 100 years old at this time, yet the Inuit were not subject to the same treatment as other Canadians, and for the most part had been largely left to their own devices. The government decided that if the Canadian Arctic was indeed part of Canada then they needed to begin providing basic housing, health and social services to the Inuit. This led to a building boom in the north and the establishment of the current day Inuit villages. According to Billy Etoangat at Parks Canada, in Pangnirtung there were just two Inuit families living in the community until 1966, when the government began building pre-fabricated houses. After that, families in the area that had continued to lead traditional nomadic lives began

relocating to Pangnirtung. This same process occurred right across the north, leading to a wholesale change in Inuit lifestyle – from nomadic to sedentary.

THE RELOCATION

Of further concern to the government of Canada was that there were very strategic islands in the Arctic that were uninhabited. Concern was expressed that if there were no Canadians on these islands then they could possibly be claimed by other nations. Henry Larsen, the head of the northern detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) at that time, suggested that by moving Canadian Inuit to these strategic locations that Canadian sovereignty would be well served (see: [Relocation](#))

This led in 1953 to the infamous “experiment” referred to in the opening quote of this module that saw the relocation of Inuit from traditional hunting lands to remote areas in the high Arctic. Specifically 8 families from Inukjuaq were moved almost 2000 kilometers north to the high Arctic and placed in two locations; Resolute and Grise Fiord. Another three families were relocated from Pond Inlet on Baffin Island.

Did You Know?

Grise Fiord is North America's most Northerly community. It has a population of 141 people. The Inuit name for Grise Fiord is Ajuittuq, which means the place that never thaws out".



Figure 3: Location of Grise Fiord (Wikimedia Commons)

Unfortunately, the Inuit themselves were not clearly willing participants in this *experiment*. Although there are records that indicate the families who were relocated volunteered to go, some survivors of the relocation claim the government forced them. Also unclear is what the Inuit families were promised and whether or not these promises were kept. The families believed that they were going to get new housing and excellent game to hunt, but both were scarce in their new home. Those relocated suf-

ferred much from cold and hunger after their move, as the shelter provided was substandard, and they had to adjust to a new ecosystem without the traditional game they had hunted in their old home. They also were told they could return home after a year if they wanted to, however once they were relocated no offer of assistance for them to return was provided. The Canadian government has since acknowledged that the preparations for the relocation were poor and that the families did suffer hardship and loss during the first years in the high Arctic.

Class Exercise:

Have your students consider in what way their government affects their daily lives. Whereas some of the Inuit were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to a distant place, how does your government affect you? Does it influence where you live, what you eat, your health care, whether you are at war?

TRADITIONAL LAND

Over fifty years have passed since that relocation. The Cold War is over and the DEW Line is being dismantled. The American government has long since abandoned its military bases in the Canadian Arctic, but, unfortunately, left behind are toxic chemicals at many of the

old sites. These pollutants, as we learned in module 5, are now entering the sensitive Arctic food chain.

In 1993 the Government of Canada issued a report called “*The High Arctic Relocation: A Report on the 1953-55 Relocation*,” in which it recommended a cash settlement and apology to those affected. The government has paid 10 million dollars to the survivors and families, but no apology has ever been issued.

With dwindling world oil and gas supplies and large untapped resources in the Arctic (see module 8) Arctic sovereignty is becoming a hot issue once again. This was highlighted by the recent actions of the Russian government who used a nuclear submarine to plant the Russian flag into the seabed at the North Pole (see [North Pole flag](#)).



Figure 3: Russian flag being planted at the North Pole by a Nuclear Submarine (courtesy AP).

So it appears once more land in the Arctic is being sought, this time for natural resources. Hopefully this time lessons from the past will ensure more respectful treatment of the land and the people of the north. In 1993 the government of Canada signed an agreement with Inuit groups in the north called the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement that awards the ownership of traditional lands to the Inuit. In the new spirit of cooperation, and in the face of the rekindled debate on sovereignty, at least one individual is championing a new way of looking at this old problem. Paul Kaludjak, president of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc which manages Nunavut Land Claims Agreement is advocating that the Inuit and the Canadian Government work together to assert sovereignty over lands that have been the Inuit homeland for centuries.

Although some of those relocated to Grise Fiord and Resolute ultimately returned to their original homes, many families remain. To commemorate this unfortunate episode in Canadian history, the Arctic Exile Monument Project commissioned northern artists to create monuments to commemorate the sacrifices made by Inuit who were relocated to Grise Fiord and Resolute. These monuments are scheduled for unveiling in the communities in the summer of 2010.

Video Link:

Panoramic video of Grise Fiord – the most northerly community in North America:

[Grise Fiord](#)