

When the land became a testing range

Nausta, Udtja and NEAT

Lilian Mikaelsson

Lilian Mikaelsson comes from a reindeer herding family, Forest Saami, and is also proud owner of some reindeer with her own mark that used to belong to her grandmother on her father's side. She holds a BA of Art Education from Bildlärarinstitutionen, Konstfack, for children up to age of 19. She has worked for many years as an art teacher in the public school. Lilian Mikaelsson has done two separate college courses at the Theological College, in "Racism and discrimination" and "Indigenous and Minorities rights." She has been engaged in NGO's and activist movements like the Fourth World Association, Latinamerican groups in Sweden and also served as chairperson in the Saami assoc., in Stockholm and as vice president in the National Association of Saamiland, Same Átnam. In the Stockholm area, during many years and on many occasions she has played a part in innumerable seminars, demonstrations and culture events regarding Indigenous and especially Saami rights. She has been involved in Indigenous exchanges between Sweden and Bolivia (Kawsay) and in Colombia with The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC).

Today, Lilian Mikaelsson is deputy member of board of the Saami Council, a Saami organization (an NGO), with Saami member organizations in Finland, Russia, Norway and Sweden. She is responsible for the Web site for Silbonah Sámesijdda where she also serves as a deputy member of the board. In 2013 she was a candidate for the political party Min Geaidnu (MG) in the Saami Parliament elections in Sweden.

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Abstract

The information in this article was presented at the RE-Mindings Symposium, by Lilian Mikaelsson. The symposium presentation was further developed into an article through collaboration with May-Britt Öhman and the editors of this symposium report. The presentation was also made at NAISA, Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Annual Meeting in Saskatoon, June 13-15, 2013, at the session Decolonizing Sápmi: Archeology, Food Security, and Struggles against Mining and Militarization, organized by May-Britt Öhman. Lilian Mikaelsson demonstrated how the Swedish Nation-State has used the North, and lands of the Indigenous Saami, as a testing ground for military purposes.

Although terms and compensation have been negotiated between Saami reindeer herders and the Swedish military, the Saami have not been treated as other citizens of the Swedish Nation-State. These problems have further increased when foreign armies have leased the land for training and weapon testing. At the heart of the problem of the North – Sápmi/Sábme – is the way that it is viewed from the eyes of the Nation-State, which does not pay particular interest to the actual conditions under which the Saami operate or the culture by which they live. The information which is not otherwise referenced in this article is provided by Lilian Mikaelsson.

The Land as a Testing Range

The Vidsel Test Range, also known as *RFN – Robotförsöksplats Norrland (Robot Testing Ground Norrland/North)*,¹ was established during the 1950s on land primarily used by three Saami villages – Udtja, Turopon and Luokta Mavas. The testing grounds also coincide with Udtja Nature Reserve, an area extending over 15,000 square kilometers. The government agency *Administration for Defense Material* (Försvarets Materielverk, FMV) is responsible for the activities of RFN. The main purpose has been to execute military weapon tests but was initially also



Lilian Mikaelsson making a speech in Luleå during a manifestation by OFOG [Anti-war organization practicing civil disobedience] at International Action Camp 2011 as a reaction to NATO's participation in military training on Swedish territory. Private collection.



Monument donated in the 1960s to Vidsel Village in which the Vidsel base and its personnel from Linköping [Air Force] and Trollhättan [SAAB] settled. Photo by Lilian Mikaelsson.



Sunset at Naustajávri (Nausta lake). Photo by May-Britt Öhman.

planned for the construction of the first Swedish atomic bomb.

There is some literature available on the impacts of the Vidsel Test Range – RFN – on the communities that were forced to relocate and on the impacts on the communities that are still around. However there has been no major investigation in these matters. It is sort of a hidden history that mainly only the people that are related to this place know about.² So far no research has been made in regard to the environmental impacts on the lands and waters.³

Back in the 1950s, Saami Rights were practically non-existent – some concerns and privileges were honored but were confined to specific traditional vocations like reindeer herding. Once the Swedish State had decided to establish RFN, the process to empty the area of its people began. The populace did not receive support from *Sámiid Riikasearvi* (SSR), the national reindeer herders' organization – all were left to negotiate conditions on their own with the State.

From a Saami perspective, little consultation or dialogue had existed between the State and the inhabitants affected by these decisions. The village Nausta was emptied, bearing resemblance to what has in history by labeled as *forced relocation*. Udtja village, where the herders lived, managed to stay. As the reindeer herders of Udtja depended on these pasture lands, the State made some adjustments to allow for the village to maintain their livelihood. For example, when the testing was carried out, herders and families had to temporarily abandon their homes and land; in return, the military refrained from exercises in May and June, when the reindeer calves are born, and also during the hunting seasons in autumn and winter.

This agreement with Udtja on the part of the State has resulted in several observers considering the establishment of RFN as not having had major negative impacts on the livelihood or reindeer herding of Udtja village. A seemingly reciprocal relationship of giving-and-taking has developed over the years between the military and the Saami inhabitants, so as to minimize disturbance for all concerned. Herders receive economic compensation whenever the testing hinders their work; at times herders receive helicopter assistance for searching areas to ensure that the herd is outside the designated point of shooting.

Since the late 20th century and up to the present date, RFN operations have changed. Operations have expanded to include training grounds for foreign armies as well as companies for testing weapons. The land is advertised on their website as an area with unique conditions optimal for military exercises:

- 24 hours of daylight during summer and 24 hours of darkness during winter,
- Geography and climate resembling parts of the world where war is currently being waged
- It is uninhabited land.

Here we are presented with the relationship of the Swedish State towards the people living in the North – a people of no importance. Udtja Nature Reserve and its surrounding populace are regarded as an uncivilized periphery, existing only by its means of serving the center – the Nation-State of Sweden.

Since 2004 the war exercises have included armies such as the NATO Response Force, the U.S. Air Force and the British Air Force along with weapon manufac-

turers such as Alenia Aeronautica and SAAB. There have also been co-exercises between the Swedish military, European armies and NATO countries. According to figures from FMV, the activities of foreign customers have increased by over six hundred percent in recent years. That is an immense amount of activity.

Sweden finally recognized the Saami as an Indigenous People in 1977.⁴ According to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, Indigenous Peoples have special rights.⁵ These rights relate, in particular, to self-determination, as well as land rights to areas traditionally belonging to Indigenous Peoples. The implications of these rights, and of relevance for our discussion about RFN and its Saami inhabitants, are that:

- Military activities shall not take place in the lands or territories of Indigenous Peoples, unless justified by a relevant public interest or otherwise *freely agreed with or requested by* the Indigenous Peoples concerned.
- States shall, prior to the use of territories for military activities, undertake effective consultations with the Indigenous Peoples concerned through appropriate procedures and, in particular, through their representative institutions.

Therefore, it has not been sufficient to simply inform the concerned Saami villages about the activities of RFN; negotiations should have been conducted between



View from Naustapuoda, the Nausta mountain, lakes and waters within the closed area. Private collection.



Forest Sami hut at Udtja Village. Photo by May-Britt Öhman.



The Udtja village. The houses are maintained by their owners who have access to their houses freely only in June and September, as no military activities is then allowed due to reindeer herding activities (calving in June, marking and slaughter in September. The rest of the year the owners need to call in to make sure no military training is planned, no more than a day in advance. It is very difficult to plan for staying in the area as the military training has precedence and all inhabitants have to adapt to this. Photo by May-Britt Öhman.



Locked gates at the entrance of the FMV test field – Nausta and Udtja – entrance only available to members of the Sami communities and thus owners of house that remain within the area. Photo by May-Britt Öhman.



House in the evacuated Nausta village. The houses have been remodeled and are now used as guest houses at different training sessions. Photo by May-Britt Öhman.

FMV and the Saami Parliament. On the other hand, the Saami Parliament, along with SSR since the 1950s, has failed to give this issue the attention it requires. Furthermore, whatever reciprocal relationship previously honored between the military and the Saami at RFN can no longer be said to exist at the beginning of the 21st century. In 2007 a local newspaper interviewed Saami herders from Tuorpon Saami Sijdda, who reported that military aircrafts had flown several times over the herds. Several female reindeer were pregnant and, as the airplane repeatedly passed overhead and in close vicinity to the dwelling ground of the herd, the reindeer panicked. In the chaos, reindeer were trampled and wounded by each others' horns, which resulted in spontaneous abortions of calves. Several more reindeer had to be put to death once it was all over (NorrbottensKuriren 2007-05-28). The agreement between the Swedish State and the Saami community had been broken, which had resulted in damage and losses for the Saami that economic compensation cannot restore.

It is not only the rights of local inhabitants, but the nature itself that has been affected by the presence of RFN. The RFN test range area at Udtja contains many lakes, and both the Lule and Pite rivers are downstream from these lakes and receive their waters from them. As of yet there have been no official investigations in regards to if, and how, toxic materials or heavy metals are present in the water as a result of RFN's activities in the area. However, what is known is that the area is repeatedly subjected to the shooting of rockets and other projectiles. As much as RFN may have altered or damaged the environment surrounding Udtja, one of the ironies is that the surrounding environment's old-growth, biologically balanced forests would probably not have been preserved unless the test range had not prevented further industrial exploitations.

Notes

¹ Cf. website of Vidsel Test Range [Accessed Aug. 10, 2013].

² Cf. Sommarström, Bo. "Udtja - reindeer pastoralism within a missile range." In *Saami cultural research in Sweden 1990 /compiled and edited by Roger Kvist*. 1991, p. 5 ; Sommarström, Bo & Westman Kuhmunen, Anna. *Udtja: en etnologisk dokumentation av en skogssameby*. Åjtte, Jokkmokk, 1997 ; Andersson, Olle. "Ett nytt hot mot samerna [A new threat to the Sami]." In *Samefolkets Egen Tidning*. 1959:8, p. 59-60 ; "Robotskjutfältet [Robot shooting range]." In *Samefolkets Egen Tidning*. 1960:2, p. 12.

³ See article by Eva-Lotta Thunqvist in this publication.

⁴ The Swedish Parliament, Riksdagen, stated in 1977 that the Sami have a specific position as an Indigenous People in Sweden. For details, see Gov. Proposition 1976/77:80, bet. 1976/77:KrU43 s. 4, rskr. 1976/77:289.

⁵ <http://social.un.org/index/IndigenousPeoples/DeclarationontheRightsofIndigenousPeoples.aspx>.



Lilian Mikaelsson at the RE:Mindings Symposium. Photo by Tor Lundberg Tuorda.



*Fia Kaddik in her "mixed" Sámi dress.
Photo by Fia Kaddik.*



*Cecilia Persson performing at RE-Mindings.
Photo by Tor Lundberg Tuorda.*



Liselotte Wajstedt at RE-Mindings. Photo by Tor Lundberg Tuorda.



Marie Persson and Fia Kaddik leaving the University Main Hall after a day of discussions at RE-Mindings. Photo by Tor Lundberg Tuorda.