



The doctor Leiv Kreyberg visited Bjørnelva shortly after it was liberated. (Photo: Leiv Kreyberg, National Archives of Norway)

Project Nordland Railway

For several years, Norway and Russia have worked together to shed light on the history of the captivity and forced labour of Soviet prisoners of war (POW) in Nordland during World War II. Many of the POWs worked on the construction of the railway, which was being extended to Kirkenes at the time. More than 50 POW camps were established along this section alone, which is exposed to very harsh weather and sparsely populated. These POWs suffered extreme hardships and many died, but they did important work on part of Norway's infrastructure that is still in use today.

In 'Project Nordland Railway', Norway and Russia work together to document, tell and commemorate this story. Some of the ways they do this are by conducting archival studies in Norway and Russia, archaeologically documenting the POW camps, reconstructing memorials, charting and surveying

built-up structures and providing information via signposting and publications.

BJØRNELVA

An important part of 'Project Nordland Railway' is the establishment of a memorial at Bjørnelva POW camp in the Saltfjellet mountain range. The camp is located near the E6 and its remnants are still visible in the landscape. This is where the story about the construction of the Nordland Railway will be told. Both road and railway pass by the site, which has a car park and a scenic overlook. The memorial site at Bjørnelva is expected to be completed in 2021.

Bjørnelva POW camp was established during the construction of the railway section over the Saltfjellet mountain range to Fauske and northwards. The camp was one of the worst, due to miserable conditions

and an extremely harsh climate. The camp is remote from human settlement, so there was no hope of getting help from kind-hearted locals. More than 200 POWs died in just one year here in the Saltfjellet mountains.

The Bjørnelva POW camp was built in May 1944, and the POWs' work over the summer and into autumn was mainly to do the hard manual labour for the railway: digging and hauling refill. The prisoners were used to keep the mountain pass open during the winter.

The prisoners who survived until May 1945 erected two memorials for their dead comrades. The graves in which they buried their dead were initially moved from Bjørnelva to Hestbrinken at Storjord farm in autumn 1945, and then moved again to Tjøtta during the so-called Operation Asphalt in 1951. It is believed that a few mortal remains can still be found in the Saltfjellet mountains.

As early as 1950, one year before Operation Asphalt, the memorials at Bjørnelva were blown up by Norwegian authorities. The ruins of the memorials are still visible today outside the camp area.



The exploded memorial at Bjørnelva prisoner-of-war-camp on Saltfjellet. The site has been left untouched since 1950.

(Photo: The Directorate for Cultural Heritage)

Project Nordland Railway decided to tell this important story about the Bjørnelva POW camp, in memory of the events that took place here and to commemorate the many POWs who died.

DUNDERLAND POW CAMP

Dunderland POW Camp is situated in Rana Municipality, south of the Saltfjellet mountain range. This was also a POW camp along the Nordland Railway. All barracks and built-up structures are gone, but their remains are clearly visible in the landscape. The Helgeland Museum has made it possible to visit the camp by building paths and a scenic overlook and erecting information signs. A memorial was also erected on this camp's burial site in May 1945 to commemorate the fallen soldiers. After the graves were moved to a mass grave after the end of the war, the area was converted into arable farmland by a local farmer, who moved the memorial to the edge of the field inside a forest grove at the same time, where it has been ever since. Project Nordland Railway has re-erected the memorial and erected a sign with the names of everyone who died here.



Project Nordland Railway: the captivity and forced labour of Soviet POWs during World War II.

The project is part of the Norwegian-Russian environmental protection cooperation between Norway's Ministry of Climate and Environment and Russia's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

Funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Project manager: the Directorate for Cultural Heritage.

Russian partner: the Likhachev Russian Research Institute for Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Other partners: Arkhangelsk University, Regional Museum in Arkhangelsk, the State Institute for Art Studies in Moscow, the Narvik War and Peace Centre, Nordland County Municipality, Nordland Museum and the Helgeland Museum.