

BODIL BIØRN'S PHOTO COLLECTION FROM ARMENIA

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The National Archives of Norway, Wikimedia Norge

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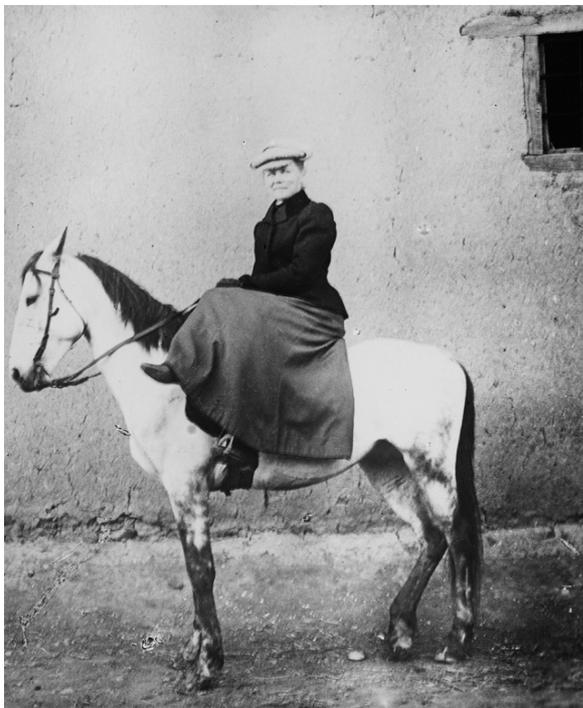
1. Introduction

This paper will present a joint project between Wikimedia Norge, Wikimedia Armenia and The National Archives of Norway.¹ A collection of 181 historic photographs from The National Archives were digitised and the photographs with descriptions were uploaded to Wikimedia Commons.² The photo collection was originally created by Bodil Biørn (1871–1960), a Norwegian missionary and nurse who in 1905 was sent to the Ottoman empire to work among the Christian Armenian people. During the digitisation project the photo descriptions were transcribed in Norwegian from its original format into digital text and then translated to English and Armenian.

In this paper the authors will analyse gains and challenges when working together with volunteers and how this affects the possible dissemination and re-use of photographic collections from archives, museums and libraries. By sharing the photographs on Wikimedia Commons under a CC by SA 4.0 license the Bodil Biørn collection is free for use on any language edition of Wikipedia and by any other project online and offline.³ A selection of the photographs will be exhibited in The Genocide Museum in Yerevan, Armenia, in a collaboration between the museum and Wikimedia Armenia, in 2018. This collection of photographs made over 100 years ago have thus travelled from Armenia to Norway and back again to Armenia, the place where they once were taken during dramatic historical times.

The project aimed at highlighting a women's perspective in history and her documentation of the lives of children and women. On Wikipedia there is a gender gap in terms of both editors, who are contributing to the site, and in content, i.e. who does the editors write biographies about. There are far more men who are editors and far more biographies about men. The narrow diversity of the Wikipedia editor community has the potential to introduce systemic biases such as gender biases into the content of Wikipedia.^{4[1]} The ambition of this project is also to help reduce this gender gap in history writing in general and particularly on Wikipedia by making Biørn's photo collection available digitally.

The Women Missionary Workers which Bodil Biørn belonged to, was a rather radical organisation for its time, with women on all levels of the organisation, also in management. The attendance records from meetings show that the members were women from all over Norway but mostly from upper class or upper middle class backgrounds. With her camera, Bodil Biørn took photographs of the Armenians and Kurds she met and worked with. She wrote down names and short comments about the people in her photo albums and also directly on the lantern slides. These historical documents might be the only traces left of these Armenians, many of them children. This is what makes Biørn's photographic records so important. The photographs, in combination with her handwritten comments, bear strong witness to the atrocities that she observed and provide an insight into the suffering the Armenian people which took place over several years.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bodil_Biørn_-_fo30141712180042.jpg



https://no.wikimedia.org/wiki/Prosjekt:Bodil_Biørn#/media/File:Landsbykvinner_med_barn_-_fo30141712180023.jpg

Image description: Original caption (translated): Villagers bring their children to us in Mush.

Partners in the project

The National Archives of Norway is a government agency under the Ministry of Culture. The authority of the Director General and The National Archives of Norway is vested in the Archival Act of 1992. The tasks of The National Archives are

- To preserve archival material from state institutions
- To make this material available for public use
- To control the work on records administration within the ministries, regional and county authorities
- To contribute to the preservation of private archives

Wikimedia Norge and Wikimedia Armenia are independent organisations, recognised as chapters by the Wikimedia Foundation in the U.S.A which runs the various Wikimedia projects. Consequently, Wikimedia Norge works nationally towards the same goal as the Wikimedia Foundation and other chapters, e.g. Wikimedia Armenia, around the world. The goal is expressed as follows:

Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. Millions of people use Wikipedia every day and Wikipedia is among the 5 most visited websites in the world.⁵

Wikipedia is one of several Wikimedia projects. Examples of other large Wikimedia projects are Wikimedia Commons (media file repository), WikiSource (an online [digital library](#) of [free content](#) textual sources) and Wikidata. Wikidata is a free, collaborative, multilingual, secondary database, collecting structured data to provide support for Wikipedia and Wikimedia Commons, WikiSource and several other Wikimedia projects.

Archives and the Wikimedia projects

The collections in archives, libraries and museums represent an essential resource for research, teaching and cultural and social development. The collections represent our history, culture and identity and are the basis for ongoing interpretation and understanding.⁶ Many different institutions, especially archives, libraries and museums around the world work with local Wikimedia communities in partnerships to create and share digital collections on the different Wikimedia projects: Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons and Wikidata being the most used. The collaboration between The National Archives of Norway and Wikimedia Norge is an example of a partnership between an archive and Wikimedia communities in Norway and Armenia.

In Norway the government has expressed explicit guidelines and expectations to The National Archives concerning the digitising of archives and online availability. In 2009 the government of Norway published a *National Strategy for Digital Preservation and Dissemination of Cultural Heritage*.⁷ The report emphasised the production of digital content and development of digital services related to cultural diversity in Norway. According to the strategy, digital technology should be fully put to use as an instrument for making cultural heritage widely accessible to everyone. The development of digital services related to the cultural diversity in Norway would provide better access for more people to relevant

information of high professional quality and help bring about a more just and democratic information and knowledge society.

In 2017 The Office of the Auditor General of Norway submitted a report to the Norwegian parliament regarding the current status of the digitisation of cultural heritage in Norway.⁸ The report concluded that most of the cultural institutions had failed to reach the goals outlined in the 2009 strategy. However, seen from an archival institution's point of view, the digitisation, registration of metadata and publishing of digital content is challenging and time-consuming work. Cooperation with volunteer communities like the ones contributing to the Wikimedia projects is therefore highly desirable in terms of increasing the speed and volume of the digitisation and dissemination of archival sources, like photographs.

Partnerships between Wikimedia communities and archives, libraries and museums may focus on different Wikimedia projects, like for example Wikipedia, Wikidata or WikiSource. In the case presented here, the collaboration was about a photographic collection and the obvious choice was to share digitised photographs and transcribed photo descriptions on Wikimedia Commons and leave it to volunteer communities to disseminate the photographs on the different Wikimedia projects in different languages. Wikimedia Commons is a media file repository making available public domain and freely-licensed educational media content to everyone, in their own language. It acts as a common repository for the various projects of the Wikimedia Foundation. The repository is created and maintained, not by paid archivists, but by volunteers. Wikimedia Commons uses the same wiki-technology as Wikipedia and everyone can edit it. Unlike media files uploaded to other projects, files uploaded to Wikimedia Commons can be embedded on pages of all Wikimedia projects without the need to separately upload them there.⁹

2. The collaboration between The National Archives of Norway and Wikimedia Norge

The collaboration between Wikimedia Norge and The National Archives started with The National Archives employing a Wikipedian-in-Residence in 2015. A Wikipedian-in-Residence is a person with in-depth knowledge about Wikipedia and the other Wikimedia projects. Her or his role is to enable an institution or organisation and its members to contribute to the Wikimedia projects and often act as a liaison between volunteer communities and professional staff members. The Wikipedian-in-Residence guided staff at The National Archives on how to edit Wikipedia and how to use the other Wikimedia projects. For The National Archives, having a Wikipedian-in-Residence was useful, first and foremost in terms of establishing contact with the Wikipedia community and to learn more about how Wikipedia and the other Wikimedia projects work. It was essential to establish trust within the institution regarding how the Wikimedia projects could offer possible positive effects by having archival content spread to a large international audience, as well as how the quality control work in crowdsourced systems and the potential of having volunteers engaged in for example the adding of metadata. In the last couple of years The National Archives and Wikimedia Norge have collaborated in different ways; in hosting big and small events, organising online editing contests on Wikipedia, conducting guided tours in the archives and workshops for editing Wikipedia.

The National Archives has also created a tool for bulk uploading of photographs to Wikimedia Commons. The photographs were uploaded from The National Archives' Fotostation database by Riksbot, a robot programmed in Python inhouse by National Archives staff. The bulk upload to Wikimedia Commons started at the same time as The National Archives began systematic digitisation and publishing of photographs online. The National Archives of Norway have added more than 10,000 photographs to Wikimedia Commons for public use.¹⁰ The photographs come from different parts of the collections, mostly from the image archives collected by different governmental agencies.

The Bodil Biørn project started after Wikimedia Armenia, Wikimedia Norge and The National Archives organised a cross-national online editing contest on Wikipedia. When working with text and written articles about Armenia and Norway on Armenian and Norwegian Wikipedias, the idea came to expand our international collaboration and work with Bodil Biørn's photographic collection and making the photographs and photo descriptions accessible online and in multiple languages. The photographic collection depict a part of both country's history that is not well documented. The photographs were well suited for uploading to Wikimedia Commons because they could be shared under a free license. According to Norwegian copyright law the duration of copyright for photographic images expires 15 years after the creator dies.¹¹

Before the impact of the project is analysed in section 4 of the article, section 3 of the article, will provide the reader with an introduction to the history of Bodil Biørn and the historical importance of records contained in the archive of Women Missionary Workers.

3. From the archives

Bodil Biørn and her work in the former Ottoman empire

Bodil Biørn (1871–1960) was a Norwegian missionary and nurse. In 1905 she was sent to the Ottoman empire by a missionary organisation called Women Missionary Workers to work among the Christian Armenian people. The mission organisation Biørn worked for had provided her with a camera to take with her on her journey. For the first years she lived in the Mezereh region in Eastern Anatolia. In addition to the city of Harput, Mezereh was an important centre for Christian protestant missionary activities as early as the 1850s. Biørn worked as a nurse at the Danish orphanage in Mezereh together with three Danish missionaries. As a nurse she worked both for the Christian and the Muslim part of the population. After a while, she also began outpatient nursing. The needs in the slums around the city were great. In addition to nursing, she worked hard to learn the Armenian language. In Mezereh she also met the Swedish woman Alma Johansson who would be a close colleague some years later.¹²

In 1907 Biørn moved to Mush (Muş), a mountain area in Eastern Anatolia. Around 1900, about 25,000 people lived in the area. It was a mixed population with both Christians and Muslims; Armenians, Kurds and Turks.

Biørn worked together with the German couple von Dobbeler who worked at the mission station in the city of Mush. In addition they employed some Armenian assistants, teachers and maids. The Swedish nurse Alma Johansson arrived here in 1910. When the German

couple returned home in 1911, the two Scandinavian women were the only Western people left in the area. Biørn was now the leader of a mission station with 150 children, divided into two orphanages, one polyclinic and after a while also a school with more than 100 pupils.

In 1915 the Ottoman government started a systematic extermination of Armenians. Biørn prepared the orphanage to face a war situation. They hid away winter clothes, bedding and supplies in fear of confiscation. Several Armenians were driven out of their homes and sought refuge and protection at the mission station. Here they got food and some money that would allow them to go to a safer place.¹³ The entire Armenian part of the city was destroyed by the Ottomans. Some Armenians managed to escape into the mountains, others to cross the border into Persia or Russia. Some were deported, but most of the Armenian people were killed just outside the city of Mush. The orphanages were taken by Ottoman soldiers and burned down.¹⁴

The number of casualties in the massacres is still unclear. Some historians estimate the number of deaths to be about 500,000, others say 1,5 million. 29 countries today recognise the attacks against the Armenian people as a genocide. Others claim that there is no basis for using this term as it has not been documented that the process was based on an overall intention or plan to eradicate the Armenian people. Bodil Biørn's accounts are clear evidence that the deportations and murders of the Armenians in Mush were carried out on orders from the city administration and there is no doubt that the Armenians were the stated goal of the operations.

Biørn barely escaped after nine days on horseback but remained in the region for another two years under increasingly difficult working conditions. For a period of time she went back to Norway. Until she retired in 1935 she worked for Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon.

The archive of Women Missionary Workers

Bodil Biørn worked for a missionary organisation called Women Missionary Workers. It was established in 1902 modelled after the pattern of Danish and Swedish sister organisations. Since the organisation was dissolved in 1982, its records were transferred to The National Archives of Norway for preservation. The archive contains attendance records, correspondence, accounting, member protocols and copies of the member magazine editions from its inception. The archive also holds 1379 photographs (including duplicates).

In 2005 The National Archives of Norway for the first time published an online exhibition based on Bodil Biørn records. The exhibition was published on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the commemoration of the genocide against the Armenians. The exhibition received a lot of attention, both nationally and internationally. It became clear that these nearly one hundred years old documents and photographs were of great importance for the public today. When these documents became available for a new and international audience their historical significance undoubtedly increased. A new version of this online exhibition is available on the web pages of The National Archives.¹⁵

Since the exhibition was launched in 2005, The National Archives has had regular requests for high-resolution copies of these photographs from the archive. Although copies have been delivered many international users have not been able to access the written descriptions following Biørn's photographs as she wrote these in her own language, Norwegian. As such one dimension of the records has to a certain extent been lost. What gives these photographs their value and makes them particularly meaningful, is Biørn's own comments in relation to the pictures. The handwriting was often hard to decipher and therefore also to translate into English.

4. Challenges and outcomes of the project

In this section the challenges and outcomes of the project from the point of view of a national archive, two non-governmental organisations and crowdsourced volunteer communities will be analysed. Because the project has finished just recently this article will focus on what the project partners learned and achieved during the project period. Hopefully the experiences accounted for in this article can help foster other collaborations between archives, Wikimedia affiliates and crowdsourced volunteer communities.

After funding was secured by Wikimedia Norge from The Arts Council of Norway in December 2017, the project was completed in three stages during a time period from January 2018 to August 2018:

1. The National Archives did the digitisation of the photographs and uploaded them to Wikimedia Commons
2. Wikimedia Norge organised the transcription of the photo descriptions and translation to English
3. Wikimedia Armenia translated the photo descriptions from English to Armenian

Throughout the project period all project partners involved shared updates about the project on social media and in press coverage in Norway in Armenia.

The digitisation of Biørn's photo albums

The volume of Biørn's photo albums is quite modest: four relatively thin photo albums with a total of 110 pages containing photographs and handwritten descriptions and about 200 lantern slides, most of them from The Ottoman Empire and Syria. At the beginning of the project period in January 2018 photographers from The National Archive photographed both the album pages and the lantern slides, using a Phase One camera and a light box. Only to a little extent did they process the pictures, but rendered them the way they appear today. Some of the photographs were in a quite bad shape whereby the contrast had faded, the colour turned yellow, or there were scratches on the surface. In particular was this the case with the pictures in the albums. The lantern slides were in a much better condition. Both has handwritten comments, but the comments in the albums are more detailed. Some of the motives on the photographic prints and lantern slides are identical but with slightly different handwritten comments attached.

The photographs were published online with a minimum of metadata. It was an advantage to have the photographs available digitally when working with the transcriptions. The

transcriptions were done by a paid volunteer from the Wikimedia community well known to the staff at Wikimedia Norway from her internship as a bachelor student in archive, library and information studies. She worked with the transcriptions under guidance from staff at The National Archives. The work took place in their reading room when using the original documents and from elsewhere when using the digital copies. This part of the project had to be done during the office hours of The National Archive and was not a task that could be done by crowdsourcing and volunteer efforts. The paid volunteer teamed up with a staff member from Wikimedia Armenia to get support and advice from the Armenian volunteers on how to transcribe the names of persons and places correctly.

Once the transcriptions to Norwegian and translations to English were done, staff and volunteers from Wikimedia Armenia translated the text to Armenian. A project page was set up on Wikipedia to communicate and keep track of the progress for staff and volunteers.¹⁶

During the project 181 photographs were made available online, both on the archive's own publishing platforms¹⁷ and on Wikimedia Commons¹⁸, under a free license for anyone to download. The National Archives could have made the photographs available only on their own publishing platforms, and not on Wikimedia Commons, but then the photo descriptions would only be shared in Norwegian. On Wikimedia Commons the photographs so far have photo descriptions in Norwegian bokmål, Norwegian nynorsk, English and Armenian. The photo descriptions may also be translated to any other language by volunteers.

Wikimedia Commons and volunteer engagement

On Wikimedia Commons the photographs are available in an environment with an international user group, both of readers and editors. The photographs may be used in all 300 languages of Wikipedia to illustrate relevant articles. In this way, material from The National Archives can reach new users. All photographs are tagged and linked with The National Archives of Norway as the source. Perhaps most importantly, the photographs of Bodil Biørn and the story about her stay and work among the Armenian people reaches out to people who have largely been affected by the events she documented. The cooperation with Wikimedia Armenia has played an important role in this, and also the cooperation with the Armenian Genocide Museum.

The National Archives, in this way, has made it possible for the photographs to be used in various outreach projects without themselves playing an active role in these projects. The actual dissemination role is largely left to others, but The National Archives plays a role as an institution that facilitates access to archival records and the dissemination of these records. However, such a role also requires an acceptance that they do not control any messages being conveyed by users nor can they be held responsible because the archival institution is not directly involved in the outreach projects. The National Archives responsibility is to make their collections available with correct metadata attached and by carefully choosing how the material should be licensed to ensure the best possible use of it. The transcriptions of the photo descriptions in this project were done in collaboration between the paid volunteer from Wikimedia Norge and staff at The National Archives. The National Archives were however not involved in the translations done to English and Armenian but relied on the quality that

the crowdsourcing and quality control on the Wikimedia projects offer when it comes to translation of text.

The first challenge in a collaboration between a cultural institutions and Wikimedia affiliates and volunteer communities are often the encounter with staff at the cultural institution itself. Many professionals are skeptical about volunteers being involved in this kind of work. They fear poor quality and may think it is difficult to let go of control. A change of attitude is often required within the institutions. Trust have to be built within the institution to the volunteer community. Events where both staff and volunteers can meet, get to know each other and share ideas and thoughts are important. Starting with small projects may be advisable. In The National Archives there is a great willingness from the management side to collaborate with volunteer communities. This is also a way of reaching new audiences and users of the archive's collections. Of course, this way of thinking is connected with available economical resources and the ability to get things done with the help of crowdsourcing and without spending money. However, working with volunteers requires their resources in the form of training, guidance and quality assurance.

The second challenge one should be aware of is that volunteer engagement is not something you can plan for in the way it's done in a professional environment with deadlines, physical meetings, phone and email contact and agreed upon achievement of objectives. The involvement is determined by the interests and spare time the volunteers have. That means that collections culture institutions share on the Wikimedia projects may not trigger a lot of interest right away, but will very often do so over time.

For The National Archives it has been of great value in this project to work with enthusiastic volunteers from the Wikimedia communities who have knowledge about geographical locations, names and spellings, culture and living, characteristics of different groups of people etc. What is a foreign culture from a Norwegian point of view, is to many of the contributors something they detailed knowledge about. It would be very time-consuming for the archive's curators to acquire the same knowledge when transcribing and translating the photo descriptions. In this way the volunteer engagement is a great resource for adding accurate metadata and context to the photographs and the volunteer contributions are of great importance. Some of them are even personally connected to the project, as Armenians or descendents of Biørn, and have a great interest in making these documents known for a broader audience.

The Armenian genocide is a controversial topic and Biørn's photographs are hence documentation of a controversial historical events. When The National Archives published the online exhibition in 2005 they faced reactions. Immediately after the online exhibition was published, The National archives got a letter from the Turkish Embassy. They opposed the use of the term genocide of the massacres against the Armenians and the fact that an institution as The National Archives, as a government entity under the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, presented the genocide as a historical fact. The Director General at The National Archives at the time chose not to remove the term genocide from the text in the online exhibition.

Volunteers also had some concerns about the political aspects of this project and possible consequences if they got involved. These concerns disappeared when it was explained that

Riksbot at The National Archives would be the uploader to Wikimedia Commons. This was not a task delegated to volunteers. One of the 5 pillars of Wikipedia is a neutral point of view. That means articles should have an impartial tone that document and explain major points of view, giving due weight with respect to their prominence. Articles should characterize information and issues rather than debate them.¹⁹ This project's objective was to make Biørn's photo documentation available for the Wikimedia projects and every other project or study who can have use of them, but how the photographs are used is entirely up to the user, as long as they give appropriate credit to the work.

5. Next phase of the project

The feedback from volunteers in Norway and Armenia, academics in the humanities in both countries and the interest from the general public in social media and press is that Biørn's photo collection gives new important reflections on a part of history that is not that well documented. The interest from volunteers may be related to the nature and character of the material. Some of Biørn's photo documentation is from what today is a part of Syria and her photographs are a reminder of the dreadful situation in Syria today.

The National Archives and Wikimedia Norge plan to continue the project if funding is secured. The next phase of the project will be to digitise, transcribe in Norwegian and translate to English and Armenian extracts of the letters Biørn wrote for publication in Women Missionary Workers member journal, and also an unpublished 10 page recap Biørn wrote in 1944 about her experiences. The letters and recap will complement the photographs made available in this first phase of the project.

1 The project was conducted from January 2018 till August 2018 and was cofunded by The Arts Council in Norway.

2 The photo collection on Wikimedia Commons:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikimedia_Norge_Bodil_Bjørn_project

3 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> This license means users are free to share and adapt the material as long as they give appropriate credit to the work.

4 <https://arxiv.org/abs/1501.06307>, It's a man's Wikipedia? Assessing Gender Inequality in an online Encyclopedia Wagner, Claudia; Garcia, David; Jadidi, Mohsen; Strohmaier, Markus (May 2015). "[It's a man's Wikipedia? Assessing Gender Inequality in an online Encyclopedia](#)". Proceedings of the Ninth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media. Retrieved 30 August 2018.

5 <https://www.alexa.com/topsites>, retrieved 29 August 2018.

6 Report No. 24 (2008–2009) to the Norwegian Government: National Strategy for Digital Preservation and Dissemination of Cultural Heritage,

https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/f3f0e538cc704abda770db1ef2c5399b/en-gb/pdfs/stm200820090024000en_pdfs.pdf: Page 7, retrieved 29 August 2018

7 <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-24-2008-2009-/id555254/>, retrieved 29 August 2018.

8 <https://www.riksrevisjonen.no/rapporter/Sider/DigitaliseringKulturarv.aspx>, retrieved 29 August 2018.

9 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Welcome>, retrieved 29 August 2018.

10 Wikimedia Commons category for The National Archives: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Files_uploaded_by_Riksbot/Arkivverket, retrieved 30 August 2018. The total % image usages of the category used on all Wikimedia projects are: 11 %.

11 Law on copyright, chapter 1, § 1. https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2018-06-15-40/KAPITTEL_1#KAPITTEL_1, retrieved 29 August 2018.

12 Inger Marie Okkenhaug (2016): *En norsk filantrop, Bodil Biørn og armenerne 1905-1934*. Chapter 5, page 41-29.

13 Johansson, Alma 1930 (1979): *Ett folk i landsflykt: ett år ur armeniernas historia* i Okkenhaug, Inger Marie: *En norsk filantrop*.

14 Biørn, Bodil *Armenia og armenerne*. Upublisert manus, datert oktober 1944.

15 <https://www.arkivverket.no/utforsk-arkivene/nyere-historie-1814-/norske-kvinner-dokumenterer-folkemord>, retrieved 30 August 2018.

16 https://no.wikimedia.org/wiki/Prosjekt:Bodil_Biørn, retrieved 29 August 2018.

17 <https://foto.digitalarkivet.no>, retrieved 30 August 2018.

18 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikimedia_Norge_Bodil_Biørn_project, retrieved 29 August 2018.

19 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars, retrieved 29 August 2018.