

The Microecology of Coastal Village Resettlement: Ecology, economy, and cultural change on the Chukchi Peninsula, Russia

Tobias Holzlehner, University of Alaska Fairbanks

Moved by the State: Perspectives on Relocation and Resettlement in the Circumpolar North
ESF EUROCORES Programme BOREAS & National Science Foundation



Introduction

State induced resettlement policies intertwine political macro processes, local communities, and cultural and ecological change in the uprooted landscape of relocation. This research investigates a case of forced relocation, which effected several villages around Chukotka's East Cape, in Northeastern Russia. From the 1930s to the 1960s the inhabitants of mainly native coastal villages have been subjected to relocation policies enacted by the Soviet state that left dozens of settlements and hunting bases deserted.

Industrial impacts and forced relocation altered the ecology of and the access to subsistence areas in a permanent way. Taking a microecological approach by focusing on the interaction opportunities of a specific place (Horden & Purcell 2000: 80), this project examines the effects and reactions of Arctic coastal communities to sudden ecological and rapid economic change. Extraordinary resilience as well as novel strategies of coping with Sovietization, subsequent loss, and industrial collapse created new forms of communities. The revitalization of traditional hunting technologies and the resettlement of formerly abandoned native villages is only one aspect of the current realities that gave rise to new forms of habitation in the ruins of a volatile past.

Village relocations

The effects of the Sovietization of the Russian North were reverberating through the very fabric of the affected communities, with often disastrous results. Since the beginning of the 1930s, coastal villages predominantly inhabited by native Chukchi and Siberian Yupik were officially deemed unprofitable, subsequently closed and their inhabitants relocated to newly founded settlement centers. These state-enforced relocations of native communities, which peaked during the 1950s and 1960s, led to a creeping depopulation of a coastline, whose intricate settlement history traces back for thousands of years (Krupnik 1993).

The Soviet's focus on large-scale industrial operations left little space for indigenous economies based on traditional social units. These economies were termed as "inefficient" and the corresponding localities, native settlements near traditional key resources, were declared "unprofitable" (Slezkine 1994: 340). Between 1937 and 1953 the total number of villages on the Chukchi Peninsula was reduced from 90 to 31 (Krupnik & Chlenov 2007: 62). At the beginning of the 21st century, 12 villages remained.



Puoten, prehistoric settlement(s) and former reindeer herder camp

Puoten

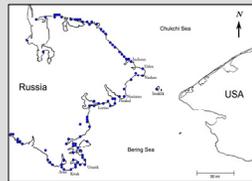
The Bay of *Puoten* was historically used as a seasonal reindeer herder camp, fishing, and seal hunting site. Historic and pre-historic settlement structures line the shores and a now abandoned Soviet border guard station guards the entrance to the bay. In the past, graphite was extracted inland from *Puoten*, the color pigment used as face paint at funeral rituals or as an ointment. Before the Russian Revolution, American geologists extracted graphite from shaft mines in the surrounding mountains. A horse trail leading to the mines is still visible. During the first half of the 20th century, *Puoten* was a camp site of Chukchi reindeer herders. The bay is locally known for its warm microclimate, wild onions, fishing and seal hunting. *Puoten* is occasionally used as a storm shelter for boat parties traveling along the coast and a hunting cabin provides basic shelter. Nowadays, *Puoten* is an abandoned place. Due to its relative long distance to larger villages, the site is visited only occasionally by fishing and hunting parties. According to local hunters, the absence of human subsistence activities has led to an increase in wildlife populations (fish, seals, and birds) in the area surrounding the bay.



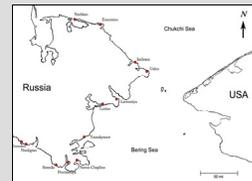
Acknowledgements

This material is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0713896. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Historic villages



Contemporary villages



Industrial ecology

The native coastal population of Chukotka was subjected to a twofold loss in the 20th century: the large-scale, state induced closures of many native villages, the subsequent, resettlement of the population to centralized villages, and the following collapse of the Soviet economy and infrastructure. The traumatic loss of their homeland and the vanishing of the socio-economic structures that had replaced traditional ways of living sent devastating ripples through the socio-cultural fabric of native communities (Krupnik & Chlenov 2007).

Collectivization of local economies and the industrialization of sea mammal hunt fundamentally changed and replaced traditional subsistence practices. The traditional mixed economies of the indigenous population, which used the different resources in seasonal cycles over much larger territories, were rigidly centralized and their pastures or hunting grounds allotted to the state collective farms. Shift work in processing plants and predetermined catch quotas replaced traditional subsistence activities. The native reindeer herders and sea mammal hunters were incorporated into collective farms and the productive economic unit now became the work "brigade," where social ties based on kinship were replaced by economic relationships (Schindler 1992). Industrial space encroached on indigenous space and the village relocations were an intrinsic part of it: the introduction of coal fired heating plants severely disrupted walrus rookeries in the vicinity of historic settlements and village closures removed many villagers from their traditional hunting and fishing grounds and relocated them to locations where direct subsistence resource access was often limited or scarce.



Inakhyk, contemporary hunting base and Soviet era whale processing site

Differing logics of space usage collided during the Sovietization and industrialization of the Russian North (Sorin-Chaikov 2003). Native coastal settlements were located close to preferred subsistence sites. Maximum access to subsistence resources, like drinking water, sea mammal migration routes, salmon runs, or plant gathering sites, were traditionally key in choosing the optimal place for a settlement site. The Soviet era brought a diametrically opposed spatial logic to the region. For the Soviet economic planners and engineers, maximum maritime infrastructural access to villages and state enterprises was one of the prime motivators for the concentration of the native population in centralized villages. The proximity of deepwater ports or servicing facilities for barges and trawlers and a suitable terrain for house constructions were dominant factors in the choice for new settlements. Indigenous economic space was thus replaced by an economy that was based on a fundamentally different utilization of space (Holzlehner, in press).

Chaplino

The former Eskimo village of *Unazik* (*Chaplino*) was the largest settlement on the Chukchi Peninsula at the turn of the last century. Its peculiar location at the end of two conjoining sand spits that point into the currents of the Bering Sea and a large fresh water lagoon gave the settlement its reputation as a prime subsistence site. *Chaplino* and its predominantly Eskimo population played a pivotal role during the 19th century as commodity brokers between international whaling ships and groups of reindeer herding Chukchi further inland. The settlement was officially closed in 1958, a border guard station was erected at the former village site, and its inhabitants relocated to the newly planned village of *Novoe Chaplino*, 20 miles further inland. The resettled population found itself in a new environment that offered by far less opportunities for subsistence activities. Local hunters still describe the bay as a "dead bay" in respect to subsistence activities and lament the long distances they have to cover nowadays to reach profitable hunting or fishing sites.



Histories and Futures of Relocations in Alaska and Rural Chukotka
(Project webpage)

<http://www.alaska.edu/mov/ac>



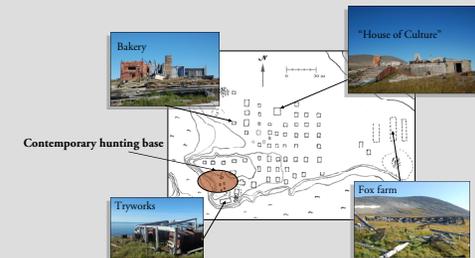
Lavrentiya, administrative center of the Chukotka region

Re-settlement

The new economic and political environment after the demise of the Soviet Union combined with local resilience have created original solutions to overwhelming problems. After the failed experiment of large-scale social and cultural engineering, the depopulated coastal landscape with its abandoned settlements represents new points of anchorage for partial re-settlement and revitalization movements. Embedded in the landscape and local ecology, the revitalization of traditional sea mammal hunting allows for some people to escape the shattered utopia of Soviet modernization. Formerly abandoned village sites that are now used as hunting camps represent a contrasting cultural space for indigenous people to the quandaries of post-Soviet village life. The peculiar topography and ecology of those hunting camps make them attractive places with distinct qualities. The formerly abandoned and now partially resettled places play a paramount role in the restructuring and revitalization of hunting traditions, which are essential for the physical and cultural survival of Chukotka's coastal villages.



Nuniamo, officially closed 1977, but contemporarily used as a hunting base



Nuniamo

The mixed Eskimo and Chukchi settlement of *Nuniamo* was officially closed in 1977 and the population relocated to the adjacent settlements of *Lavrentiya* and *Lorino*. Yet, already in the mid-1990s people began to utilize the old settlement as a hunting camp on a semi-permanent base. The new camp is spatially removed from the old settlement, perched between a bluff and the former blubber processing plant with its outlying traditional meat caches. Several ecological factors supported this re-settlement and underscored the importance of *Nuniamo* as an ideal sea-mammal hunting spot: close access to a freshwater source; the bluff above the camp makes for an ideal spotting place for sea mammals; migrating walrus stop at the small bays around *Nuniamo* cape on their annual migration along the coast; during stormy days walrus seek shelter in the relative calm bays around the cape. In addition, *Nuniamo* offers a contrasting cultural space, where communal work is dictated by an individual timeline, and family and friendship groups cooperate in hunting, building and plant gathering.



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