The Curse of Social Engineering: Settlement structures, urbanization and native economies in Chukotka

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The 20th century was for Russia a time period of deep-seated changes, revolutions, and systemic collapse. Especially in the Russian North, centuries old traditions and subsistence practices were replaced by new cultural and economic patterns, which accompanied and implemented the Soviet Union’s master plan of a new society for all of its citizens. The industrialization of the Soviet Union was a total social fact, to paraphrase here Marcel Mauss, which fundamentally affected native and non-native communities in a long-lasting way. In Chukotka, Russia’s easternmost region, the inhabitants of predominantly native coastal villages at the Bering Strait were subjected to relocation policies implemented by the Soviet state that left dozens of settlements and hunting bases deserted. The state-enforced resettlement 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. On the Chukchi Peninsula alone, more than 80 settlements were abandoned or closed in the course of the 20th century. Traumatic loss of homeland and the vanishing of traditional socio-economic structures, which had replaced traditional ways of living, sent devastating ripples through the fabric of native communities, with often disastrous results on societal health. State enforced resettlement policies intertwine political macro processes, local communities, and cultural and ecological change in the uprooted landscape of relocation. Industrial impacts and forced relocation altered the ecology of and the access to subsistence areas in a permanent way.

The native coastal population of Chukotka was subjected to a twofold loss in the 20th century: the large-scale, state induced and enforced closures of many native villages, the subsequent, resettlement of the population to centralized villages, and the following collapse of the Soviet economy and infrastructure. 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, where social ties based on kinship were replaced by economic relationships. Industrial space encroached on indigenous space and the village relocations were an intrinsic part of it. For instance, the introduction of coal fired heating plants in coastal villages 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.
The resulting spatial anomy is particular visible as an effect of the native village relocation in the Russian North, where differing logics of space usage collided during the Sovietization and industrialization during the 20th century. 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.

The village relocations were part of a larger struggle over environment and space that exposed the fundamentally different spatial strategies and logics of the Soviet state and native communities. To trace the interaction between communities, local ecosystems, Soviet state building and collapse, I suggest here a political ecology approach to state-enforced community relocations, focusing on the unequal distribution and costs of changes in environmental conditions. Central to the argument is the observation that political forces play an important part in environmental access, management, and transformation.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, access to resources in coastal villages of Chukotka changed significantly. During the Soviet period, Soviet settlers and administrators were key brokers of resource access (food, fuel, etc.), while the native population was at the very receiving end of a long supply chain. As brokers between the State and the indigenous population, Russian settlers were instrumental at the center of the economy. Yet, the retreat of the state and economic collapse in rural and remote Chukotka, exasperated by the outmigration of many Russians, led to a socio-economic inversion of this hierarchy. With the collapse of industrial sea-mammal hunt and commercial reindeer herding, and in absence of basic provisions, Chukotka’s coastal communities witnessed a revitalization of subsistence practices. Sea-mammal hunt and fishing were crucial for the survival of many communities during the arduous 1990s. Individual native hunters and cooperatives thus became central players in a post-Soviet informal economy and Russian settlers were suddenly in a position of dependency on local resources and facilitators.

The breakdown of the Soviet Union and infrastructure in its remote periphery regions created new local opportunities as well. Formerly relocated and abandoned coastal villages became a focus of local hunters. 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 a partial re-settlement and for revitalization movements. The logic of subsistence practices and a longing for the lost places draw groups of people to the old sites, with the effect that those former settlements are now almost continuously (re-) inhabited by rotating groups of hunters during the
summer and winter. Embedded in the landscape and local ecology, it allows some people to escape the shattered utopia of Soviet modernization.

In 2000, Roman Abramovich took over the position of Chukotka’s governor from his predecessor Alexander Nazarov, whose mismanagement of the region’s resources and ostensible corruption was blamed by many local residents for Chukoka’s misery during the 1990s. During Abramovich’s term (2000-2008), Chukotka experienced an immense influx of money and infrastructural support. Main beneficiary was the region’s capital Anadyr. In the course of a few years the city, which had lost more than a third of its population since the beginning of the 1990s, was subject to a complete overhaul. Moscow designers in unison with Russian alpinists refurbished the exteriors of the ubiquitous Soviet apartment blocks into colorful facades. The local airport was lifted from a post-Soviet ruin to international standards. New kindergartens, convenient stores, and galleries mushroomed in a city that was known for its bleak character. Chukotka’s capital is now rebranding itself on numerous placards suspended across streets and buildings as a “City of Childhood” or “City of Dreams”. It nowadays houses one of Russia’s most modern hospital complexes, including a state-of-the-art maternity clinic. These infrastructural development efforts partially trickled down to the village level. Hunting cooperatives were supplied with boats and outboard engines and a major reconstruction program erected prefabricated houses and clinics in the coastal settlements, improving greatly the weathered and crumpling village infrastructure. The construction boom of the last years attracted many foreign workers from the former Soviet republics, Serbia, and Turkey. Yet, after Abramovich’s resignation in 2008, the influx of money into Chukotka dwindled and time will tell how sustainable the infrastructural infusions of the last years actually were.

Politics interact with a landscape and the bodies that inhabit it. The resettlement policies enacted by the Soviet Union initiated a struggle over environmental access and settlement space. Fundamentally different relations to space and environment were set against each other in the course of the village resettlements. Local voices, which expressed skepticism in light of changing subsistence regimes, were silenced by a State discourse of progress and development, which related to Chukotka’s coastal space and maritime environment mostly in terms of infrastructural access and control. Chukotka’s resettlement history is set in a contested landscape, where “local theories of dwelling” collided with governmental ideas of proper housing and settlement structure. With the coastal village resettlements and economic consolidations, the Soviet development strategy inscribed a building and settlement plan into Chukotka’s society with little consideration of local sentiments and subsistence strategies. Economic and infrastructural changes were planned and implemented from outside and local communities had to comply with the newly made world. The opposite is true for the settlement and building structure of traditional villages, which evolved in close interaction with the environment, its peculiar coastal topography, and subsistence opportunities.

Following a microecological approach, the web of interaction between native villagers, landscape, productive opportunities and the state becomes apparent. The peculiar littoral culture of coastal villages where proximity to the sea and its resources were paramount in the location of a particular settlement was superseded by a coastal
culture of maximum infrastructural access and economic output implemented by the Soviet state. In this paper I argue that to adequately address the recent effects of urban planning initiatives and village renewal strategies, which were initiated by Abramovich, one has to look beyond the mere architectural and industrial makeup. Similar to the Soviet urbanization and industrialization of the High North, recent urban planning initiatives have to be addressed as a total social fact, with their very own intertwined architectural, spatial, social, and economic dimensions.