

The Christian Environmental Ethic of the Russian Pomor

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Only a century ago, Orthodox crosses dotted the frozen beaches of the White Sea. From Arkhangel'sk to the tip of Novaia Zemlia, and all along the shores of the Kola Peninsula, wooden monuments with the tented roofs and carved death's heads of funeral markers identified the land as Christian territory, although the miles between the nearest church and permanent settlement required many days' travel (Efimenko 69). In the second quarter of the twentieth century, the Bolsheviks went about tearing down these emblems of religious belief; but even before then, English fishermen found reason to remove the crosses when they encountered them, for these crosses were not only expressions of Christian faith, but also property claims (Vekhov 9). The crosses had been put in place over the centuries by the Russian Pomor, seafaring Slavs, who used the signposts to demarcate the boundaries of their ancestral fishing grounds.



Figure 1. Pomor crosses on Kolguev Island in the White Sea. Photograph by author.

The Pomor stand apart from their Great Russian cousins for a number of reasons; but the most intriguing of these differences is the completely different daily lifestyle and economic strategy that they evolved after migrating to the Far North.¹ The

¹ Because of the cultural commonalities linking the Pomor to Great Russians, most anthropologists classify the Pomor as a sub-ethnicity of the Russian people, rather than as a full-fledged ethnicity or a mere tribe (See T. B. Bernshtam, *Pomory: formirovaniie gruppy i sistema khoziaistva* and *Russkaia narodnaia kul'tura Pomor'ia v XIX- nachale XX vv.*).

forbears of the Pomor first arrived on the shores of the White Sea in the twelfth century after exploring the rich hunting and fishing grounds to the northeast of their home city of Novgorod, the most prosperous and influential town in northern medieval Russia (see figs. 2 and 3). When the political power of Novgorod waned in the fourteenth century, its trade networks disrupted by the Mongol invasion, the links between the center and the periphery became frayed. As a result, the temporary settlements of the hunters and fishermen became permanent, and the settlers themselves became more independently minded and self-reliant. By the time the Muscovite princes re-established external political control over the Far North in the seventeenth century, the settlers had taken on a name for themselves—the word Pomor, or “seaside” in Russian—and had developed an economy based on a form of maritime hunting and gathering.² Finding that traditional agriculture did not produce reliable harvests at their extreme northern latitude, the colonists instead came to rely upon seasonally available marine resources. Occasionally throughout the year, the men left their families and homesteads behind and ventured out to sea, following the herring runs from November to January, the seal migration from February to April, hunting walrus in June and July, and finally netting salmon and cod in the late summer. The rhythms and restrictions of agricultural life came to belong to places left behind; instead, as one observer put it, the Pomor “began to identify themselves with freedom of the sea” (V. Anufriev, “Sud’ba pomorov” 50).



Figure 2. The White Sea and surrounding landforms.



Figure 3. Northwest Russia.

Relatively isolated from the Russian metropole and sources of central authority, the Pomor also developed local variants of the cultural institutions and practices inherited from their Great Russian ancestors: a distinct dialect of the Russian language, a

² The Russian historian Sergei Platonov first established that serfdom, the central institution of Russian society in the medieval and imperial periods, never played a part in the villages of the Russian Far North (see Platonov).

local customary law that allowed widows to inherit property at a time when women lacked this right elsewhere in Russia, and a unique architectural style for churches based on tent-shaped roofs.³ Perhaps the most historically significant of these differences, however, was the form of Christianity practiced by the Pomor. Although Russian Orthodoxy has famously been described as a syncretic faith, with survivals of Slavic paganism co-existing with official Christian doctrine in the thoughts and practices of ordinary believers, Pomor Christianity provided an even more prominent and accepted place for animist beliefs.⁴ Scholars of the Pomor have identified as central to Pomor culture a concept called “sacral geography.” These scholars argue that the Pomor, because of their exposure to the highly variable and unforgiving polar climate, invested the natural world with religious meaning, seeing in the landscape signs of an active struggle between good and evil. Sacral geography had a significant impact on the way that individuals experienced personal religious matters, but it had another consequence: the mythopoeic quality of the Pomor worldview led to perceive a landscape that was alive, and in turn helped them to create and abide by a meaningful environmental ethic. As a result, the Pomor represent a relatively rare example of a people who made conscious efforts to conserve resources precisely because of their Christian religious beliefs. In both the late tsarist period and the early Soviet period, the Pomor repeatedly resisted calls to intensify their economic activity, insisting that increased hunting and fishing would disturb the metaphysical and ecological balance of the White Sea ecosystem, and providing evidence, at variance with Lynn White's thesis in “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” that Christian belief can indeed give rise to an environmentalist consciousness.

Although the article is very brief and more than forty years old, Lynn White's “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” continues to exert a remarkably strong influence over the scholarly understanding of the relationship of Christianity and environmentalism (White 1203-1207). Since the article's publication in 1971, nearly every work touching upon the effect of religious belief on the natural world has discussed White's contention that the Judeo-Christian tradition, because of its anthropocentrism, its teleological component, and its emphasis upon man's duty to subjugate creation, has bred into Western civilization a deep antipathy to the natural world.⁵ (Indeed, so great has been the impact of White's article that the prominent ecophilosopher, J. Baird Callicott, credited White with “implicitly set[ting] the theoretical agenda for future environmental philosophy” [Callicott 65].) White argues

³ For thorough discussions of the Pomor dialect, see Krysanov et. al. 366-385 and Gemp.

⁴ The Russian word for this syncretism of paganism and Christianity is “dvoeverie,” or “dual belief.” See Rock and Levin.

⁵ Catherine Keller suggests that the continuing relevance of White's article can be explained by the fact that Christians felt sincerely stung by its observations; she talks about the debate that Christians, “either defensively or guiltily, cannot let go of” (Keller 82).

that the Judeo-Christian concept of an end to history, an idea utterly foreign to the ancients of East and West alike, encouraged in the minds of Westerners an expectation of progress, which then translated into increased exploitation of natural resources. Yet, these increased levels of exploitation would not have been possible were it not for the extremely central position of humanity in the Judeo-Christian universe—White claims that Western Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has even seen. Noting the tendency in the Book of Genesis to afford “no item in the physical creation [with] any purpose save to serve man’s purposes” (White 1206), White suggests a direct connection between Biblical attitudes and the later growth of science and technology, systems built on the assumption that physical matter is dead, devoid of or lacking inherent value, and thus eligible for any manipulation humans deem fit. In short, White links modern environmental destruction to Christianity’s successful displacement of paganism, a cultural shift which “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (White 1205).⁶

The groundbreaking quality of White’s article has not protected it from wide-ranging and sometimes vituperative criticism.⁷ The critiques can be grouped into two basic categories: historically-grounded examination and exegetical analysis. Members of the first group find fault with the highly schematic character of “Historical Roots,” arguing that White’s generalizations about East and West, about pre-modern and modern, are too simple or too vague to function as explanations. The ecologist and microbiologist, Rene Dubos, for instance, pointed out that the ancient non-Christian cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia succeeded all too well in disrupting ecosystemic balances; Nebuchadnezzar and Hadrian exploited the cedars of Lebanon without compunction (Dubos 158-161).⁸ Likewise, Robin Attfield examined White’s claims about the invention of the eight-oxen moldboard plough in Northern Europe around the seventh century BCE, and expressed doubt about the metaphysical significance that White assigned to the innovation, meanwhile reasonably asking how a religion in existence for seven hundred years could possibly be to blame for the emergence of a technology almost a millennium after its foundation (23-24).⁹ Other critics referencing the historical record find point to the many influential Christian theologians and saints, including Basil the Great, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Benedict, and Francis of Assisi, not to mention latter-day supporters of ecological

⁶ As Roderick Nash notes, White could have provided supporting arguments that he did not mention: the traditional Christian view of the wilderness as a cursed place, or the Christian focus on the relative unimportance of the ephemeral, terrestrial world when compared with the hereafter (Nash 91).

⁷ An online bibliography of the “Lynn White Controversy,” as the author of the website calls it, demonstrating the number of publications challenging White’s ideas, can be found at <http://ecoethics.net/bib/1997/enca-001.htm>

⁸ Clarence Glacken also explores this theme in *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*.

⁹ Other authors who take White to task for a lack of historical nuance include Moncrief, Marangudakis, Whitney, Passmore and Thomas.

thinking like John Paul II, who wrote positively about the non-human world and offer proof that the Judeo-Christian ethic is wholly compatible with sympathy for nature.¹⁰ Critics in the second group adopt an exegetical approach and accuse White of distorting or misrepresenting the true meaning of Biblical scripture; and thus misconstruing the true meaning of Christianity. For instance, Jayapaul Azariah and Darryl Macer argue in “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis in East and West” that the King James version of the Bible, upon which White relies, mistranslates the Hebrew word *radah* from Genesis 1:28 as “dominion over nature,” whereas, they contend, “partnership” is a closer equivalent (125).¹¹ There has developed among exegetes a “stewardship school,” scholars who either interpret Genesis differently, or who acknowledge that the Book of Genesis, Psalm 8, and the Pauline texts may contain an element of anthropocentrism, but who maintain that the correct interpretation of other verses, such as many references to the Land of Israel as holy, or the obligation in Leviticus 25 for animals to rest on the sabbath, yields a decidedly greener vision of Christianity.¹² (There has emerged recently one additional challenge to White: empirical studies of the environmental opinions of believers who show that belief in Christianity does not appreciably influence one’s environmental outlook or behavior, whereas other factors, including one’s level of education, do [Truelove and Joireman 806-821]).

Conspicuously absent from critiques of White’s argument, however, is any indication that Christianity ever helped to encourage active and meaningful pro-environmental behaviors among its adherents. While numerous examples exist of Christianity serving to aid environmental destruction, perhaps foremost among them the way that medieval monasteries interpreted Genesis 1:28 to affect a “great age of forest clearance” across northern Europe,¹³ rarely encountered are scholarly descriptions of a Christian group choosing to enact conservationist or preservationist policies rooted in their religious beliefs.¹⁴ Such a lacuna matters because, at one level, the degree to which Christianity has led its followers to actual behaviors, rather than merely enable a hypothetical compatibility of the set of beliefs with environmentalism, is the important consideration. As Roderick Nash writes,

¹⁰ Scholars who make such arguments include Livingston and Santmire.

¹¹ Jeanne Kay, in “Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” adopts a similar approach to Azariah and Macer. See *Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader*, Martin D. Yaffe, ed.

¹² The collected volume *Christianity and Ecology*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, and the English journal *Ecotheology* are sources for the extensive scholarship of the stewardship school. See also Bredin, Horrell and Minter and Manning.

¹³ See Glacken. Other works which discuss the profound impact of medieval monasteries upon the landscape include Roland Bechmann, *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*; K. J. Kirby and C. Watkins, *The Ecological History of European Forests*; Ellen Arnold, “Engineering Miracles: Water Control, Conversion and the Creation of a Religious Landscape in the Medieval Ardennes;” and Richard C. Hoffman, “Chapter 3: Medieval Christendom in God’s Creation: Environmental Continuities, Coevolutions, and Changes.”

¹⁴ One might argue that the Amish pursue an environmentally sustainable lifestyle based upon religious precepts, but the relatively low environmental impact of their economic choices is epiphenomenal.

White knew the relevant question as not, what does Christianity mean? but what did it mean to a particular society at a given time and place? His approach, in other words, was pragmatic: How was the Judeo-Christian tradition used? [...] He agreed that there was a biblical basis for environmentalism. But his point was that for nearly two thousand years the Christian tradition had not been so construed. (Nash 89)

White despaired that the history of Christianity, unlike the Zen Buddhist tradition, offered no instance, aside from the isolated case of St. Francis, of any believer who chose to moderate resource consumption due to a sense of moral obligation to non-human entities. Yet the historical record yields at least one such example: the Pomor of the Russian Far North, freed from the constraining influence of a religious central authority, developed precisely such an environmental ethic, one based upon empathy toward the natural world, and defended it resolutely for decades until Stalin's plans for economic modernization finally destroyed it as a functioning moral code of conduct.

The foundation for the Pomor protection of wildlife lay in their idiosyncratic perception of the landscape, an outlook that possessed pagan attributes but recognized no non-Christian deities.¹⁵ Scholars of Pomor culture emphasize the centrality of physical geography in creating the cultural landscapes that shape everyday life—that is, the way that specific places contain within them cultural values and meaning. A familiar illustration of this concept is the role that Broadway, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, and the former site of the World Trade Center play in the lived experience of New York City, not only as physical locations, but as places with historical and cultural meaning (Zamiatin 24). However, for the Pomor, the key locations that help produce the mythical understanding of the world are not human constructs such as bridges or buildings, or even conspicuous landforms such as mountains, but rather natural phenomena in the landscape—the sun, the sea, the sky, and the weather—that can and must be read for signs of God's absence or presence (V. V. Anufriev, *Russkie pomory* 62-80). According to the most accomplished expert on Pomor culture, Nikolai Terebikhin, this intent observation of the natural world for indications of God's favor created a "sacral geography," and a belief among the Pomor that the natural world was a living embodiment of God's will (Terebikhin, *Metafizika severa* 145-183).

The metaphysical and symbolic system that the Pomor created to interpret the natural world, as Terebikhin describes it, is complex and sometimes abstruse, but an easily explicated element of Pomor sacral geography, and one that helps demonstrate the unique blend of animism and Christianity, is the meaning of the winds (Terebikhin, *Sakral'naia geografiia* 11-28). The Pomor perceived the world as consisting of two

¹⁵ Although the Pomor specifically rejected pagan beliefs, deities, and territories as unclean, Terebikhin claims that the Pomor veneration of St. Nicholas as the god of the sea and the patron saint of most Pomor churches essentially continued an earlier tradition of recognizing Volos as the god of the old Russian north. See Terebikhin, *Sakral'naia geografiia*, Chapter 1 (8-54).

spaces: a central, holy Russian space where the redeeming power of Orthodoxy predominated, and a surrounding peripheral zone populated by pagans. As Peter Savvich Efimenko, the first ethnographer to study the Pomor, reported, the Pomor saw “on the eastern side of their land a warm side, where lived Orthodox Christians, and beyond them Arabs, pygmies and one-legged people—and to the west, non-Christians, Germans, English, and French” (Efimenko 186). The winds were thought to carry spirits from their place of origin in addition to bringing the weather, and thus were regarded in very personal terms, with personal names and stories for the winds that blew from each direction.¹⁶ From the northwest, where the dangerously effective Laplander shamans lived, blew the *poberezhnik*, an ill-tempered wind that was said to bring illness and bad luck. The northeasterly *polunochnik*, blowing in from the Arctic, brought fog and ill-will while taking boats; the Pomor said that once it had begun to blow, it never stopped. The western wind, wrote the Pomor folklorist, Mikhail Prishvin, was the wind of the Antichrist (Prishvin 179). Conversely, the winds that blew in from Christian lands were favorable omens. From the southeast, the direction of Muscovy, blew the *obednik*—a good wind, thought the Pomor, with a beautiful wife and the good manners to quiet down by dinner time (Lisnichenko 33). This geography of the sacred also had a three-dimensional quality: when Pomors returned from the “German” lands to the west or the “islands of death” to the north, they said they were going “up to Russia” (Podvysotskii 24).

In addition to cardinal directions, Pomor sacral geography also ascribed transcendent meaning to the physical world itself, and as a result, according to Terebikhin, routine journeys to the sea possessed metaphysical as well as economic import. Although the sea, as noted by the famous Russian semiotician, Boris Uspenskii, was equated with death in early Slavic culture, for the Pomor the meaning of the ocean was more complex. For the seagoing Pomor, the ocean was a manifestation of indifferent (but not hostile) fate, a field of chaos devoid of God’s grace (Uspenskii 36). Their primary tool in their struggle with the anarchic force of death was the boat, which was regarded with a respect bordering on reverence: when a boat foundered at sea, its replacement was given the same name, emphasizing its immortal ability to mediate fate. Pomor folk poetry saw boats as microcosms of the world, sailing through danger on the way to safety, and often likened the pilot of a ship to Jesus, the mast to the Father, and the sails to the souls of believers, filled with the Holy Spirit (Selivanov 20). If the land symbolized safety and the sea peril for the Pomor, then islands were outposts of death

¹⁶ Although the names for these winds originated with the Pomor, they eventually found wider acceptance, especially in Siberia, where the names sometimes no longer made literal sense. For instance, the Pomor word for a southwesterly wind, the *shelonik*, was adopted by settlers elsewhere in Russia, despite the fact that it was named for the River Shelona, located to the southwest of the White Sea. See Rasputin.

for the Pomor, places outside of the division of the lands and the waters. The Pomor used them only as graveyards, although the Orthodox Church famously chose islands in the White Sea as sites of monasteries. For instance, the Solovetsky Monastery is the most famous of a number of holy sites designed to overcome the death associated with islands in the culture of northern Russia. In short, Pomor culture superimposed Christian soteriology onto the landscape around them, thereby enchanting the world.

However, the Pomor personification of the landscape, although animist, was explicitly non-pagan. The sea was not ruled by a hostile god, but rather represented a place where Providence did not rule. Likewise, the winds themselves carried no will of their own, but rather derived their power from the Christian divine essence (or lack thereof) in the places where they originated. The crucial quality of winds was their connection with the Holy Spirit, and thus with the hope of overcoming death—the *polunochnik* and the *poberezhnik* arrived on the shores of the White Sea after blowing across land that God had forsaken, whereas the eastern wind (the *stok*), breezing in from familiar waters of the White Sea which fed the Pomor, was associated with life.¹⁷ In sum, sacral geography mapped the Christian doctrine of everlasting life directly onto an active and alive landscape. One observer of the Pomor has claimed that their outlook placed them in a “dialogue with nature” (Baiburin 8). Accordingly, the natural world represented more for the Pomor than merely a source of sustenance; it provided indications of God’s intentions for the fate of each individual, and it therefore deserved deference.

The importance of sacral geography in Pomor cultural life might demonstrate nothing more than a hypothetical compatibility between Christianity and environmentalism, were it not for the sustained record of the Pomor rejecting calls to intensify the exploitation of natural resources, defending instead their traditional methods that corresponded to their understanding of the moral economy. Local business leaders in the last decades of the tsarist era urged the Pomor to adopt more modern methods so as to increase the economic productivity of the White Sea. However, the Pomor refused to adopt newer technologies and methods, frequently employing rationales that were implicitly or explicitly environmentalist.¹⁸ The best example of this

¹⁷ The identification of the easterly direction as the direction of Christ is not peculiar to the Pomor. Most Christian churches face east. The idea that the east is the direction of life, however, took on greater resonance for the Pomor, precisely because the sea that sustained them lay to the east. For the Pomor, to die at sea was not to perish, but to rejoin nature and hence gain everlasting life. The Pomor as a rule did not say that someone died at sea, but rather that “the sea took someone.” See Terebikhin, *Sakral’naia geografiia*, 14-29.

¹⁸ It should not be thought that the conservationist attitudes of the Pomor were held by all inhabitants of the White Sea region; by no means did more recent immigrants to the area observe the same restrictions. Upon arriving at his new post as governor of Arkhangel’sk province, S. D. Bidikov toured the region and compiled his impressions into a published report. Whereas the non-Pomor inhabitants of the Murmansk coast “caught as much as they could, paying no attention to the fact that their predatory

phenomenon is the resistance offered by Pomor fishermen to calls for more aggressive methods of fishing. Local economic leaders, worried that “the trend of recent years has shown the Russian fishing industry in a sharp decline”—especially when compared with foreign countries—watched with mounting frustration as the native population adhered to more passive measures instead of maximizing output (III-y Vserossiskii s”ezd 34). The Pomor preferred fishing methods that brought the animals to their boats, rather than chasing the stock. They favored long-lining—the placement in the water of a long rope with dozens or hundreds of hooks attached, which was then reeled in after a certain amount of time—as well as snares and traps (see Figures 4 and 5). The result was a remarkably stable harvest of fish from year to year. According to Soviet accounting, the take of salmon remained in a relatively narrow range between 1875 and 1918, aside from a brief spike in 1898-1899, despite the fact that the Russian domestic population soared during the same period (see Figure 6). These conservative practices, however, did place the fishermen at the mercy of the behavior of the fish, and at a distinct disadvantage to the Norwegian and English fishing trawlers that began to exploit the White Sea in the winter of 1906 (I. Anufriev 48).¹⁹ Once foreign craft appeared on the White Sea, there emerged a struggle that lasted for decades, between proponents of economic modernization on one side and Pomor resistance on the other.



Figure 4. Longlining (Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennykh Imushchestv)

The conflict came out into the open in the first decade of the twentieth century, when economic and intellectual leaders of Arkhangel’sk began to upbraid the Pomor publicly for a lack of industry and to lobby for the adoption of more efficient fishing techniques. In 1909, the educated and well-connected stratum of Arkhangel’sk, including the vice-governor of the province, formed a new public association, the Arkhangel’sk Society for the Study of the Russian North (ASSRN), dedicated to the maximization of

actions were destroying their future prospects,” the Pomor “halted their catch long before the fish had been exhausted.” See Bidikov 51, 59.

¹⁹ Technically speaking, Russia had treaties in place to protect domestic fishing interests, but the tsarist government chose not to enforce these measures for fear of alienating their allies.

the output of the region. The published proceedings of the society's meetings and commissioned reports testify to the wide gulf between the worldview of the Pomor and that of the economic elite. In one of the society's earliest publications, one of the members described the Pomor as "situated in a state of extreme backwardness," and hence as "enemies to any kind of progress whatsoever" (Kamenev, "U pomorov" 15). Specifically, the journal frequently criticized the Pomor for their lackadaisical fishing methods. One such report referred to the Pomor boats, their nets, and their longlines as "primitive" and "antedeluvian," and urged the Pomor to adopt Norwegian methods instead (Kamenev, "Iz zhizni" 18). Yet the Pomor, explained another article, could not be convinced to take the initiative:

In our waters, cod and other fish are so abundant that it might be possible to employ not hundreds of workers, but tens of thousands. Yet nothing is being done. Why is it that the Pomor are not catching cod in great quantities, but instead seem satisfied with catching small amounts of salmon for sale and smaller fish for their own use? (Zograf 23)

In the second year of its existence, the AASRN began to convene conferences of scientists, government experts, and industrial leaders, not only to foster debate and issue resolutions, but also to reach out directly to the Pomor, who might otherwise not hear about the society's activities. At the 1910 conference, held in January, the assembled experts prevailed upon the Pomor to "replace the outmoded tools of their trade with improved ones, such as have already been accepted abroad," urged the use of purse nets and the elimination of the proscription against *kil'not* nets, recommended the replacement of rowboats with motorboats, and offered to arrange favorable loans so as to allow this to happen ("Zhurnal obshchevo sobraniia" 3).²⁰ Yet the Pomor showed no interest in the suggestions and refused even to respond. The president of the section for fisheries, N. A. Smirnov, noted that in preparation for the conference, survey forms had been circulated among the Pomor in October 1909, but lamented that not a single reply had been received from Arkhangel'sk and Mezen'sk districts, the most populous areas in the province. As a result, the society could reach no conclusion on this question ("Protokoly sektsii" 5).

²⁰ Purse nets are large circular nets that are stretched out beneath one boat by another, and then are gathered up toward the first boat like a purse, capturing all the fish in the water beneath. *Kil'not* nets, according to Mynikov, were "small standing nets designed for the catching of salmon near the coast" (399).

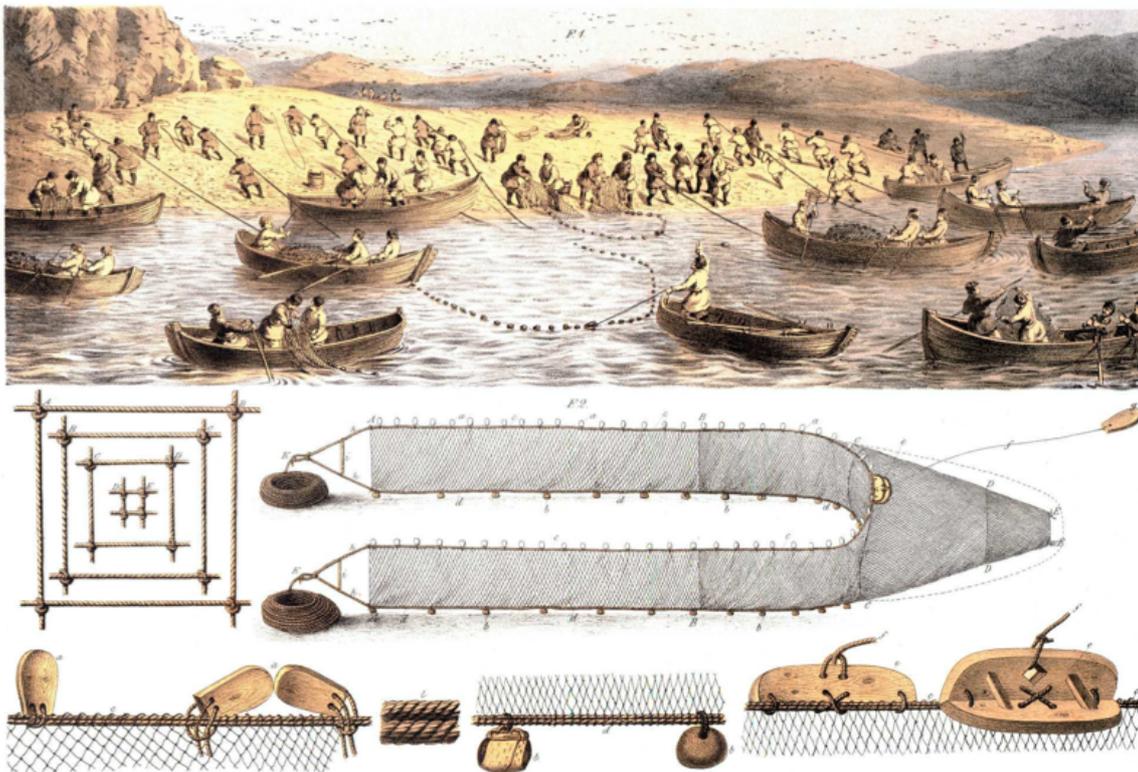


Figure 5. Hauling in snares (Ministerstvo Plate A.III.a.3.)

The society continued to hold public meetings and publish its bimonthly journal, and by 1913 the Pomor began to respond with their own forms of organization, still offering resistance but also providing reasons for their position. On December 1, 1913, there was convened a Pomor Fisheries Conference, with fifty attendees, including seven members of the ASSRN (“Pomorskii rybopromyshlennyi s’ezd [1] 129). One speaker spoke out in opposition to the planned application of purse nets by claiming that “trawlers, sometimes lowering their purse nets to the very bottom of the sea, bring up not only fish, but mussels, mollusks and plants, and thereby destroy the food supply of the valuable fish. Where the trawlers have been, the fish disappear” (“Pomorskii rybopromyshlennyi s’ezd” [2] 168). The congress passed a resolution calling for the banning of all trawlers within twelve miles of the coast. At other times during the conference, Pomor fishermen claimed that the trawlers working with purse nets tended to take all the fish from the water column, young and old alike, whereas the traditional methods took only the older fish, thus allowing the population to regenerate. These arguments did not persuade the members of the ASSRN to abandon their plans for economic modernization, but neither did the ASSRN succeed in convincing the Pomor to change their preferred methods. Instead, the debate remained at a rather distant, rhetorical level for the remainder of the tsarist era. There were moments when the conflict burst into violence, such as when a group of Pomor fishermen burned down two whale-processing factories on the Kola Peninsula, driven by the belief that the removal

of whales from the marine ecosystem depressed the fish harvests, but in general the dispute remained peacefully unresolved (Suslov 25).

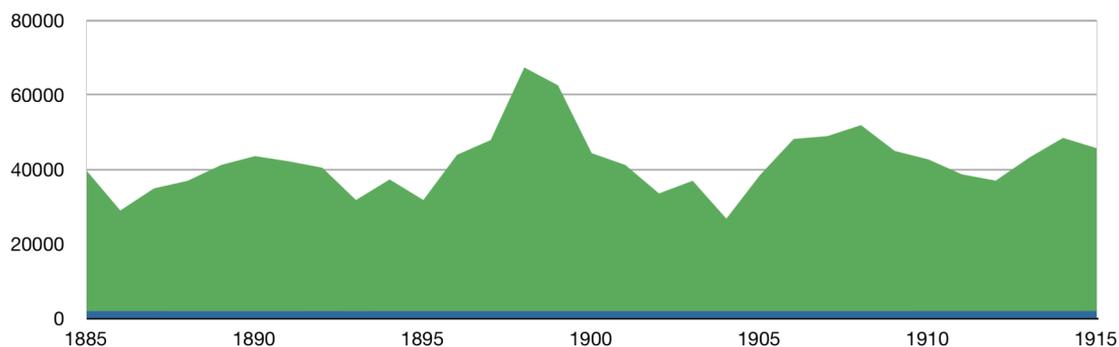


Figure 6. Annual catch of salmon from the White Sea, 1885-1915 (Aleev 50).²¹

The twin revolutions of 1917, and the ensuing civil war, brought communism to Russia and hence an end to the pressure from business leaders, but after Soviet control over the Far North was reestablished in the mid-1920s, the communist leadership began to agitate for nearly the exact same changes recommended by the capitalists. However, the Soviets pushed for changes much more actively, and the direct interaction of Soviet fisheries experts with the Pomor made the incompatibility of sacral geography with economic modernization much more clear. Prior to the revolution, the Pomor—when they chose to respond to criticism at all—objected to economic modernization on ecological grounds, but during the Soviet period, the influence of the Pomor religious outlook on their view of ecology found more explicit articulation.

The Soviets embarked upon their attempt to modernize the Pomor almost immediately after consolidating power in the Far North, but their first attempt resulted in almost complete failure. In 1924, notices began to appear in economic journals, seemingly verbatim copies of those published by the ASSRN, complaining about the Pomor approach to resource extraction. “The untouched riches of the White Sea are beginning to attract attention,” announced the journal *Severnoe khoziaistvo* (*Northern Management*). The responsible party, it was claimed, was the Pomor, who preferred primitive tools to purse nets and motorboats, and who were “demonstrating no initiative whatsoever in their search for fish” (K., “Netronutyie bogatstva” 71). Even when provided with access to steam-powered icebreakers, the typical Pomor fisherman “equipped his boat like his grandfather and rejected those comforts afforded by the ships,” (L., “Koopratsiia zverboev” 3) since the Pomor often argued that motorized boats scared away fish (Strogova 2). Scarcely helping matters were state policies which allowed fishermen using mechanized methods to keep less of their catch than those

²¹ All harvests are measured in *poods*, an old Russian unit equivalent to 16.8 kilograms, or 37 pounds.

using unmechanized.²² The Soviets believed that the solution to the problem was a thorough revision of state policy, and especially the application of collective labor, since the traditional, “cabal-based” system favored the well-off, who were not interested in expanding output (Griner, “Organizatsiia rybakov” 11). Beginning in 1925, they sent political commissars from a new trade union agency, *Promsoiuz*, to the fishing villages to incite the fishermen to join *artels*, or labor collectives.²³

Although the Pomor willingly formed into *artels*, and *artel* membership reached 80% within two years (GAAO f. 266 op. 4 d. 46 l. 70),²⁴ this had frustratingly little effect upon the way that the Pomor went about their work, because Pomor fishermen had always worked collectively, either in permanent groups based upon the family, or in temporary groups based on acquaintanceship (Okorokov 35-44). In most cases, the Pomor simply renamed their traditional working groups and carried on as before; one reporter noted that it was a common occurrence for “entire villages, and sometimes even entire districts,” to register themselves as *artels*, after which they continued to conduct their affairs autonomously, and carried on with the political and management structure that had existed previously (Griner, “Kooperirovat’ li” 14). Accusations were levied in the press that the new collectives did not sell their goods to the state, but to private speculators—“the cooperative works only as a trading place for the rich merchants,” complained one report (Av—v 6). But most troubling, fishing technology and fish harvests did not significantly increase after the first attempt at labor reform. In 1926, sailboats still outnumbered motorboats among the Pomor 965 to 30, a ratio unchanged from the years before the collectives (Dits 43), and by 1928, the number of motorboats had shrunk to only six (Kuznetsov, “Ob obucheniiia” 85).²⁵ A frustrated fishing inspector noted that the Pomor “still employed the same primitive measures, completely dependent upon the fortuitous appearance of fish near the shore (Kuznetsov, “Nazhi dostizheniia” 27). The 1927 take for salmon was 37,500 pods—no higher than the year before, and well within the historical range shown in Figure 6 (Krechkov 29). The Party expressed repeated frustration with this state of affairs, but fearing that more thoroughgoing state control would be too expensive, they did not force the matter (GAAO-OSPI f. 1, op. 1, d. 1469, l. 120).

The effort to force the Pomor into *artels* did change matters, however, by increasing the level of communication between the villages and the government: the new

²² The earliest rules applied by the Arkhangel’sk soviet allowed owners of sailboats and rowboats to keep ten percent of their catch, while motorboat owners could keep only five percent. Gosudarstvennyi archiv Arkhangel’skoi oblasti (GAAO) f. 150 op. 3 d. 10 l. 20.

²³ Gosudarstvennyi archiv Arkhangel’skoi oblasti, otdel sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (GAAO-OSPI) f. 394, op. 3, d. 1, ll. 2-3.

²⁴ Another sign of the acceptance of the new labor collectives was the growing share of produce sold by collectives. By 1927, 48.1% of the fish harvested in the White Sea came from cooperatives, and 28.7% from private vendors; by 1928 these numbers were 69.8% and 14.1%, respectively. See Vyklovyskii 71.

²⁵ The number was still only ten in 1930; see “Treska mnogo, a treski malo” 5.

artels were obligated to meet with *Promsoiuz* officials occasionally, and the resulting meetings revealed in greater detail the objections of the Pomor based in sacral geography. Numerous government reports testify that the Pomor believed the use of purse nets would disturb the ecological balance of the White Sea, most specifically by adversely affecting the beluga whale, a small, dolphin-like toothed whale that inhabits the Arctic and North Atlantic Oceans. The Pomor told government officials that they thought of the beluga as a “holy animal,” and that it helped them by chasing fish into their nets (Zhilinskii 16). Specifically, Pomor fishermen believed the belugas patrolled the mouths of gulfs and corralled the fish toward the Pomor nets. If adopted widely, circular nets would collect fish too efficiently and leave no food for the belugas (Kuznetsov, “Sel’danoi promysel” 2). This conception of fishing differed completely from the one held by the Soviets. In the Pomor arrangement, humans were supposed to wait and take what nature provided, acting only as a part of larger system, whose every component had value. Accordingly, the Pomor avoided hunting belugas. While Pomor hunters reported 26,000 seals taken in 1909 and 50,000 in 1915, they killed only 18 belugas in 1909 and 55 in 1915—and they considered eating its meat to be taboo (Fogel’ 56).²⁶ Ideas about the moral economy are not easily changed.

In 1929, as part of Stalin’s nationwide push to place all food production under direct control of the state, the Soviet government dedicated itself to reorganizing Pomor society once more, this time much more comprehensively, so as to change the Pomor value system. Even in 1928, before the process of agricultural collectivization had begun in the rest of Russia, there were hints that the government intended to introduce new policy; ominous reports began to appear in the Arkhangel’sk press, warning that class enemies had taken control of the *artels*. An article in the newspaper *The Wave (Volna)*, entitled “Under the Mark of the *Artel*,” alleged that “under the screen of the *artel* system,” the Soviet government had “made prosperous independent households, who kept the best for themselves and gave the worst to the poor” (Sergeev 2). The Pomor were again depicted as uncultured, “alienated individuals,” employing “primitive, irrational, and unwise” methods (E. 2). They persisted in donating to the church what they called “God’s share” of their catch, when the Soviet officials implored them to invest in motorboats instead (Kuznetsov, “O strukture” 62-63). Worse yet, also beginning in late 1928, the word *kulak*—Russian for “fist,” and connoting in the Soviet context a class enemy—appeared in the popular press and in transcripts of Party meetings with greater frequency. The *artels* were said to be riddled with *kulaks*, since the organizers in 1925 had merely tried to encourage maximum participation. One article claimed that “the cooperatives combine into one pile the poor peasants and the kulaks,

²⁶ The decree making beluga licenses free can be found in GAAO f. 282, op. 1, d. 288, l. 1.

since the only requirement for joining is the payment of a membership fee” (Gaidar 4).²⁷ Similarly, the official government policy that assigned fishing parcels to those able to afford to pay an annual rental fee, it was alleged, barred entry to the indigent while allowing the *kulak* to buy up extra parcels (Gaidar 4). As well, the fishing methods remained far too passive for the Party’s liking, with the Pomor laying out nets and waiting a number of days rather than chasing schools of fish, and explaining poor catches by saying “that the fish had disappeared” (GAAO-OSPI f. 64, op. 1, d.19, l. 2).

There then commenced a more thorough and effective alteration of Pomor society, focused on creating new state-centered labor units—a process called collectivization—and on removing the stratum of society that observed and enforced the Pomor environmental ethic—a process known as dekulakization. The former was accomplished by nationalizing all fishing equipment, while the latter was accomplished by assigning every owner of a boat *kulak* status, regardless of other economic indicators, and removing them from the Pomor village. Prior to 1929, the regime did not automatically assign *kulak* status to boat owners; individuals could own boats capable of carrying relatively large loads (as large as five to ten thousand pods, or eighty to one-hundred-sixty thousand kilograms), and even hire one or two shipmates, without arousing the suspicion of the government (Romanov 4). However, subsequent to the official dekulakization decree for Arkhangel’sk district, issued on November 14, 1929, any owners or renter of “sailboats, motorboats, and other large boats,” as well as anyone who had hired more than one worker, was henceforth made subject to the criminal code (Kakhutov and Baklach 4). Private ownership of the tools of the catch, including nets, snares, and rigging, was similarly criminalized. However, in practice, the dekulakization decree was interpreted much more loosely. As one memoir recounted, family composition weighed heavily in the application of the rules:

The local authorities from the party cell prepared lists of the poor, middle, and well-off farms. The families without a head-of-household were considered poor. Those families with heads of households and with fishing equipment were classified as middle peasants. Anyone owning a boat with a deck was considered a *kulak*. (Krysanov 17)

A subsequent revision to the order, issued on January 20, 1930, indicated what would become of the dekulakized: they would be deprived of their possessions and resettled

²⁷ The term “*kulak*,” as many historians of the Soviet Union have observed, lacked any objective definition. In time, it came to connote anyone who lacked a pro-Soviet attitude.

elsewhere (GAAO f. 1533, op. 2, d. 2, ll. 90-91).²⁸ The destination for the dispossessed was never specified and never needed specification, because nearly all of the targeted families successfully interpreted the warnings and fled before resettlement, much to the consternation of the authorities.²⁹

The displacement of the boat-owning class was accompanied by another policy that helped remake the structure of Pomor culture: the shuttering of the churches. Throughout the White Sea region, authorities visiting the villages to enforce the collectivization and dekulakization orders also chased away or shot the local clergy while converting the village churches into clubs and kindergartens, and the church bells into dinner bells. In one instance, the authorities forced the village priest to stand before the congregation and admit that he had intentionally deceived them, and then leave for the city (Krysanov 242). On another, the authorities promised to pay a generous reward to anyone willing to chop down the crosses from the church steeples and deliver them to the village Soviet, although no one accepted the job (Krysanov 272). In all cases, the collectivization effort was aimed at changing not only the economic system of the fishing villages, but also the belief system that informed that economic system.

Collectivization, dekulakization, and the closure of the churches combined to dislocate Pomor society almost completely, as well as severely disrupt the economy of the White Sea region, and the fishing industry in particular. With the boat-owning, managerial stratum removed, the knowledge about how to organize daily work on the boats, and the value system that informed that knowledge, was lost. At the simplest level, the labor force had dwindled by a huge proportion, either due to dekulakization or people simply choosing to leave the village; on the Murmansk coast, 450 fishermen reported for work in 1930 rather than the 2000 of the year before (Kozhevnikov 2). At a deeper level, the absented people were precisely those who had previously built new boats and repaired those that had broken, and there then ensued a widespread boat shortage, leading to wasted workdays.³⁰ Furthermore, the workers suddenly thrust into supervisory positions more often than not followed the example set by the boat-owning class. According to the Party newspaper for Arkhangel'sk from early 1931, "the

²⁸ Exactly where the dekulakized families were to go was not indicated, although what they could take with them was specified: a suit of winter clothes, one of summer clothes, two pair of underwear, bedclothes, tools, and no more than 500 rubles.

²⁹ A report from the local government authorities to the regional level complained about the fact that the *kulaks* were escaping before they could be removed: "Because of the strengthened pressure on the *kulak*, the *kulak* element is trying to get away from the village, to the timber mill, or to the Murman coast [the northernmost region of European Russia, and the least settled], where he has the possibility of being more successful" (GAAO f. 1533, op. 3, d. 25, l. 24). The local government asked for permission to recover the refugees, but subsequent reports show that all but a few got away (GAAO f. 1533, op. 2, d. 13, l. 1).

³⁰ In Onega district, for instance, to the west of Arkhangel'sk, the state ordered twenty five boats—ten delivered by June 1, ten more by June 28, and the final five by July 25. None of these were delivered, leaving the 126 fishermen of the district waiting on the shore. Lobanov, Rych'evskii, and Baryshev 2.

methods of the catch among [the fishermen] now are passive. The fishermen, not having scientific-based data about the migration of the fish, leave their nets, sit by the shore and wait for the catch. It is needed to end decisively this grandfatherly method, waiting on ‘perhaps’” (“Tresku mnogo, a treski malo” 5). Fishermen attending a Party conference in November 1930 claimed that any failures were not their fault, since “the methods of our forefathers are still the accepted rule” (GAAO f. 1533, op. 5, d. 1, l. 3). Again and again, the Party officials for fisheries management met and insisted on the need to find “practical measures for the replacement of passive catching of fish with active” (GAAO f. 1533, op. 3, d. 2, l. 72). The widespread confusion resulted in years of economic disarray. The regional government called the fishing industry, having filled a fifth of its quota for 1930 and a quarter of its annual quota for the summer 1931, a “shameful failure,” and threatened to arrest the members of cooperatives who failed to meet their quotas.³¹

Given how dire the situation appeared in 1930 and 1931, it is remarkable how quickly the White Sea fishing industry reached and surpassed its previous levels of production, with the new Soviet environmental policies in place. One villager explained that after collectivization, the fishermen “plundered everything, and took everything that they could haul away” (Krysanov 152). Motorboats began to appear on the White Sea; whereas in 1928 there had been six and in 1930 ten, by the end of 1930, there were seventy-nine small motorized boats on the water, and more every year, pursuing the fish with purse nets (“Tresku mnogo, a treski malo” 5). In 1933, for the first time, the White Sea fishery met and exceeded its quota, and in the years to come did so on an annual basis (GAAO-OSPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 31, l. 200). Furthermore, the new quotas were ten times larger than the harvests of the pre-revolutionary era. By the mid-1930s, the old Pomor environmental ethic had been successfully displaced, the “passive” methods of waiting for nature’s gifts replaced with mechanization and industrialization.

The story of the Pomor suggests that there exists no inherent conflict between Christianity and environmentalism, and that the historical tension between them described by Lynn White may be due to the characteristics of the centralized form of Christianity that gained dominance in Europe, rather than the doctrines of Christianity themselves. The Pomor practiced a version of Christianity that, although self-consciously Christian and non-syncretic in its hostility toward nearby pagan people, resembled paganism because of its animistic regard for the natural world. Equipped with this “Christian animism,” the Pomor were able to develop an alternative environmental ethic that not only comported with their Christian faith, but more precisely grew directly out of their Christian understanding of the world. It should be mentioned that

³¹ GAAO f. 1533, op. 5, d. 1, l. 47 contains figures for the 1930 season; GAAO f. 1533, op. 3, d. 3, l. 10 contains the figures and description for 1931.

the Pomor sacral geography was unique to their culture, and more importantly, that it evolved in a place far removed from central authorities. It is very likely, given the lack of similar ethical systems in Christendom, that Pomor sacral geography would have been targeted by the Church as dangerous heresy and rooted out, had the Pomor lived in a less remote location. Nevertheless, the emergence and persistence of sacral geography in the absence of pressure from a central authority highlights the ability of Christianity to accommodate environmentalist attitudes and practices. The determining factor in anti-environmental attitudes may not be the ideological content of the Christian ethos itself, which after all is connected to a vast and diverse historical tradition, but rather the presence of entrenched institutional interests that stand to benefit from increased levels of resource exploitation. The Pomor were able to institute and observe an environmental protection scheme during that time when they lived in a distant corner of the Russian Empire, but when the world trade system expanded to embrace the White Sea, the Pomor began to feel pressure, first from local business leaders promoting capitalism and then Soviet officials promoting communism, to abandon the system. The example of the Pomor calls into question Lynn White's claim that the Judeo-Christian ethic carries within it an antipathy toward the natural world, and yet the uniqueness of Pomor environmental protection, as well as its ultimate demise, also demonstrate how fragile the combination of Christianity and environmentalism is—fragile, but not impossible.

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