This volume presents a case study of the social and cultural transformation processes that the Vepsians, an indigenous minority group in Northwest Russia, experienced during the early stages of Soviet modernisation in the late 1920s and 1930s. The early Soviet implementation of modernisation policy, which included political terror as a major component, is explored through three concepts: ‘Sovietisation’, industrialisation, and collectivisation. These conceptual lenses are applied to the case study, revealing the multi-layered and nuanced consequences for Vepsian society that have continued to affect this small indigenous group until the present.
INDIGENOUS SOCIETY IN TRANSITION IN NORTHWEST RUSSIA: THE FATE OF THE VEPSIANS UNDER MODERNISATION
Natalia Taksami

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the process of erosion of the Vepsians, an indigenous minority group in Northwest Russia, their society and culture during the early stages of Soviet modernisation. Industrialisation, collectivisation, and sovietisation informed the country's mainstream state politics after the end of the 1920s. Throughout the country the tool of Soviet modernisation was terror. This tool served a political agenda and provided free labour for major construction sites. The local population was deeply involved in this process. I use a case study method and apply a theoretical approach based on modernisation theory to evaluate it.

The 1930s, with their associated large-scale industrialisation accompanied by centralised collectivisation, alongside the struggle against the 'backwardness' of indigenous minorities, had a destructive impact on people's traditional daily activities. Seasonal activities were now a daily part of the planned economy, economic activities were no longer gendered, and the use of forced labour on neighbouring construction sites brought changes to rural life.

The application of modernisation theory to indigenous minority groups has enabled researchers to define the Soviet industrialisation mechanisms which threatened the existence of native ways of life. It has also challenged the widespread opinion that administrative re-bordering and assimilation processes were particularly significant factors in the population's decline. Various groups within the Vepsian population experienced various influences because they inhabited areas of strategically important natural resources. This assists in identifying and evaluating the effect of modernisation processes when the presence of the indigenous population was not taken into account.

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perspective concerning similar processes which happened throughout the country.

Keywords: USSR, indigenous groups, Vepsians, modernisation, assimilation, industrialisation, collectivisation, cultural modernisation, sovietisation, forced labour, Gulag, terror
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TIIVISTELMÄ


1930-lukuun liitettyä suurimittaisesta teollistumista seurasi keskitetty kollektivisointi, jonka rinnalla taistelu alkuperäisvähemmistöjen ‘takapajaisuutta’ vastaan toi tuhoisan vaikutuksen ihmisten perinteisille päivittäistoiminnoille. Kausittaiset toiminnat olivat suunnitelmatalouden päivittäisiä toimenpiteitä, taloudellinen toiminta ei enää ollut sukupuolisidonnaista, ja pakotyön käyttö ympäröivillä rakennustyömailla toi muutoksia maaseutuelämään.

Modernisaatioteorian soveltaminen alkuperäisvähemmistöihin on tuonut tutkijoille mahdollisuuksia määrittää Neuvostoliiton teollistumisen mekanismeja, jotka uhkasivat alkuperäisiä elämäntapoja. Se on myös haastanut laajalle levinneen mielipiteen, jonka mukaan hallinnollisten rajojen uudelleen määrittely ja yhtäläistämistoimet olivat erityisen merkittäviä tekijöitä populaation vähenemisessä. Vepsäläisten joukossa monet ryhmät kokivat monenlaisia vaikutteita, koska heidän asuttamansa alueet sijaitsivat strategisesti tärkeillä luonnonvara-alueilla. Tämä auttaa identifioimaan ja arvioimaan modernisaatioprosessien vaikutuksia, koska alkuperäiskansan populaation läsnäoloa ei oltu otettu lukuan. Tämä tapaustutkimus vepsäläismateriaalilla osoittaa valtakunnan laajuisten, keskitetyn teollistamisen
vaikutukset yksittäiseen etniseen ryhmään, ja tarjoaa uuden näkökulman koskien samantyyppisiä prosesseja, joita tapahtui ympäri maata.

Avainsanat: Neuvostoliitto, alkuperäiskansat, vepsäläiset, modernisaatio, yhtäläistäminen, teollistuminen, kollektivointi, kulttuurinen modernisaatio, venäläistäminen, pakkotyö, Gulag, terrori
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In my professional career I have made a long journey in studying the fates of ethnic minority groups over the decades and centuries. On the different stages of this journey I have been most fortunate to be guided by some unique academic professionals. All these people shared their knowledge of and their inspiration in the study of ethnic issues with me; they also shared with me in one way or another the changes that Soviet-Russian science has been undergoing in recent decades.

Besides my father, the late Professor Chuner Taksami, who was my main teacher and advisor, I was supervised by such outstanding scholars as the late Professor Aleksandr Gadlo, of the Department of Ethnography and Anthropology of Leningrad State University, and the late Professor Lydia Black, of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Alaska Fairbanks in the USA.

My professional journey would never have been so full and exciting without the friendship and support of my senior Canadian colleagues, Alice and Dennis Bartels, and my lifelong American friends and classmates, Sarah McGowan and Michele Morseth, and Professor Hiroshi Nakagawa and his family from Japan. My love for my new country Finland has deep roots in very close friendships with people who have preserved the Finnish scientific tradition and knowledge, the family of the granddaughter of the first Finnish ethnologist, Samuli Paulaharju – the late Sirkka and the late Unto Vuojala and their daughter Terhi Vuojala-Magga. The history of our families’ friendship proves that through generations and centuries, through time and space from Finland to Africa, the Soviet Union and back to Lapland, and despite borders and regimes, human values remain universal and there are no ‘minor people’ or ‘minor cultures’.

I began and completed my present research in the field of Human Geography concerning the transition experienced by the Vepsian ethnic group during the first decades of the Soviet state only by virtue of two wonderful supervisors and two foundations. The first part of my research success I owe to my supervisors from the HiMa Department of the University of Eastern Finland – Professor Ari Lehtinen and Adjunct Professor Paul Fryer. I am very grateful to my pre-opponents, Professor Mark Bassin (Södertörn University, Sweden) and Professor Markku Kangaspuro (Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki), for their constructive suggestions and remarks on my research.

I must mention that it was Paul Fryer who opened the world of Finnish universities to me, encouraged me to gain new academic experience, supported and guided me step by step through all the stages of PhD life, and never allowed me to give up as I laid my theoretical path through all its facts and nuances. Dr Fryer is one of those rare people who dedicates his life to his students, their interests, and their studies, no matter how demanding his other academic duties may be. Dr Joni Virkkunen, then Head of the VERA graduate school, opened the opportunity for
me to apply for funding and to become an employee of the Karelian Institute of the UEF.

As I have mentioned, the other part of my success belongs to two foundations, Erasmus and Onnenmäki. Sometimes life gives us outstanding chances: during the first year of my studies I was awarded an Erasmus scholarship for PhD research. My Finnish PhD career therefore began in Turku at the University of Turku’s Department of European Ethnology, by invitation and under the supervision of the Head of the Department, Professor Helena Ruotsala. My first correspondence with the Department of European Ethnology and my first year in this country would never have been as easy without the constant help, kindness, and support of the Department’s Timo Virtanen.

The Onnenmäki Foundation has supported my research over many years, including financing the field trips. My research could not have been competed without fieldwork. I want to thank with all my heart my respondents in the Leningrad Region and the Republic of Karelia, especially Aleksandr Bzhukov, Petr Vasiliev, and Victor Trifoev. Some of my respondents also became very good friends in everyday life: Olga Obukhova, Dasha Obukhova, and Zhenia Foteev.

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Joensuu, 25 August 2017
Natalia Taksami
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GLOSSARY

BBK – Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kombinat (internal police department (OGPU/NKVD) enterprise)
dekulakisation – expropriation of kulaks
First Five-Year Plan – industrialisation programme, 1929-1932
GOELRO – State Commission for the Electrification of Russia
Gulag – Chief Administration of Prisons (OGPU/NKVD)
ITL – corrective Labour Camp
kulak (pl. kolkhozy) – collective farm
kulak – prosperous peasant (regarded by Bolsheviks as exploiter of poor peasants).
lespromkhoz – timber-industrial enterprise
NKVD – People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs
OGPU – Unified State Political Administration (central political police)
okhodnik – peasant working for wages outside a village
Politburo – political bureau of the Party’s Central Committee
sel’sovet – rural soviet (lowest administrative unit)
SLON – Solovetskii Camp of Special Designation
Solovki – islands in White Sea, used as prison
soviet – elected body with administrative functions
sovkhоз – state farm, employing waged labour
trudodni (labour days) – unit of payment for kolkhoz work based on time worked, weighted by job
USLON – Administration of Solovetskii Camps of Special Designation
VSNKh – Supreme Council of the National Economy
VKP(b) – All-Russian Communist Party
INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the transformation of the traditional life and everyday economic activities of an indigenous minority group in Northwest Russia under the pressures of Soviet modernisation – industrialisation, collectivisation and sovietisation – initiated by the country’s mainstream state policies in the late 1920s and 1930s. I use the case study method and apply a theoretical approach based on modernisation theory to reveal various aspects of this process. I argue that forced industrialisation had a much more serious effect on the Vepsian population than scholars had previously thought. It created a double burden for indigenous locals, who were expected to fulfil the requirements of a planned economy and to adjust to a rapidly changing social environment. Socialist modernisation, complicated by the specifically Soviet modernisation tool of concentration camp labour in peacetime, resulted in an invisible, but persistent, assimilation and erosion of this minority group.

1.1 INDIGENOUS GROUPS UNDER CENTRALISED INDUSTRIAL MANAGEMENT

In recent decades several works addressing the problems of the indigenous peoples of the former Soviet Union have been published that have underlined the destructive impact of the policy on various ethnic groups. Traditionally, the term ‘sovietisation’ was meant to include processes of collectivisation, administrative re-bordering, and assimilation (Koreneva & Fishman 2008, 2009; Pimenov 1989).

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of thousands with the designation ‘for special use’, assuming that policy-making structures would take indigenous needs into account. It will probably remain impossible to read these memoranda, but this enormous archive of fieldwork reports was written and has been seen by former generations of Soviet ethnographers. The turning point for Northern minorities policies came in 1990 (Howitt 2001, 31–34), when discussion of Soviet policies towards indigenous peoples, and especially the fate of ethnic minorities, became possible.

The majority of scholars have focused either on cultural modernisation or on the shortcomings of domestic nationalities policy (Klement’ev & Shlygina, 2003). What distinguishes my approach is its focus on the stream of Soviet modernisation (through industrialisation, collectivisation, sovietisation – the ‘building of the new Soviet person’, and assimilation) with the purge as a tool. Industrialisation was the most important factor in the erosion and destruction of Vepsian society.

This case study is focused on the Northwest Russia macro region (map 1). More specifically, my research covers the territory of the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad Region, the area settled by the indigenous Vepsians. There is also a Vepsian population in the Vologda Region, but its density is very low and dispersed. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this indigenous population followed a pre-industrial way of life, in spite of the fact that its proximity to the Russian central urban areas and certain natural resources (for example, mining resources) affected their economic activity prior to the rapid Soviet industrialisation of the 1930s. During the twentieth century everyday activities were transformed by the progress of modernisation and Russia’s new economic realities.

Since the nineteenth century Vepsian settlements had always neighboured Russia’s industrial cities. The different industrial sites were concentrated in the St Petersburg area. Being the main centre for electrical engineering, armaments, and naval shipping, “of the 358,000 industrial workers employed in the region in 1915, 181,000 worked in metalworking and engineering, and a further 42,000 in the chemical industry; the region manufactured 36 percent of all Russian engineering products” (Davies 1989, 25). Whereas prior to rapid industrialisation the Vepsian areas neighboured the industrial areas, from the end of 1928 the industrial centre began to encroach on their land – the Svir’ river section of the White Sea-Baltic Canal and two hydroelectric power stations. The 1920s and 1930s saw traditional ecological and land-use systems replaced by a centralised command system, which directed all aspects of peoples’ lives, and which was based on a unified system of collective farms serving as Soviet economic units. The areas settled by the Vepsian peoples were reorganised to bring people into the new collective structures, and indigenous subsistence activities, including

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agriculture, hunting, and fishing, were radically affected by the new Soviet state’s
new economic structure. Besides the reformation of the agriculture itself, which
replaced a communal system with collective farms, the new Soviet state announced
a ‘Great Turn’ in industrialisation that aimed to transform an agrarian country into
an industrial superpower. From the end of the 1920s the state employed specific
modernisation tactics and methods – the call for industrialisation, the initiation of
five-year plans, collectivisation, and a strict command-administrative system in the
spirit of ‘military communism’ – and had succeeded in this by the end of the 1930s.
The price for the Great Turn was paid in various ways by the entire Soviet
population, regardless of its location, density, ethnic identity, or proximity to urban
areas.

In 1929, before rapid modernisation began, and thereafter it was claimed that the
ethnic minority groups of the Russian Northwest were practising a traditional use
of nature. However, now that they were involved in the state economic planning
process, they no longer lived in isolation. Industrialisation had a marked effect on
people’s everyday life and economic activity; and local rural groups were faced
with the industrial requirements of forestry planning and were required to host
numerous prison camps on their territory. Moreover, the 1920s were the time of the
Great Turn. The Vepsian population of the Leningrad Region was settled in the first
territory to be involved in this process – the territory along the River Svir’ (map 2).

Throughout the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first centuries the
changes experienced during the Great Turn continued to shape the development of
Vepsian lives, as it did every ethnic minority across the territory of the former
USSR. However, there remains much that we do not know about this period, as
countless archived documents are as yet unpublished, including old newspapers
from the 1920s and 1930s and stories which still belong to indigenous peoples’
collective memories. The history of these peoples cannot, therefore, be seen only
through the prism of rural development and transformation, whatever the territory
they inhabited.

The phenomena of sovietisation (‘building the new advanced Soviet person’) and
collectivisation (the switch from private to collective property in agricultural
activity and the struggle against prosperous farmers and their households) have
been for the most part the focus of history or historical and political geography. My
research deals with the same events during a particular period of Russian history
by analysing indigenous systems in the traditional economic lifestyle, households,
and land use. In the former Soviet Union this means the economy of daily life
followed by ethnic groups prior to the socialist revolution in 1917 and up to the
1920s. Everyday lives and the land use practised by a certain ethnic culture were
based on centuries of experience and activity in a particular natural environment.

This research sees indigenous groups under the changes and influence of
modernisation as subjects of human geography. The extent of this change and
influence would be difficult to exaggerate: they bring together place, space, and
time. My case study locates the Vepsian place within the Soviet space in a particular historical context, while history shows its transformation in the same space over time. “By virtue of its interest in the origins or antecedents of phenomena and their evolutionary process, historical geography contributed both implicitly and explicitly to the contemporary interrogation of modernity as a socio-spatial phenomenon. The profound transformation in society and its territorial organization indicated by the notion of modernity have long been taken for granted” (Bassin & Berdoulay 2004, 77). Scholars have for the most part observed the uneven distribution of modernity’s benefits in the mental or cultural life of a certain region. “However accurate this assumption may or may not have been, they were able to document thoroughly the spatial dimension of social modernization” (Bassin & Berdoulay 2004, 77). In being strongly influenced by post-modern and post-colonial studies, representation has at its most basic been understood as the manufacture and manipulation of geographical images for sustaining the social and political hegemony of western civilisation. “The ‘imaginative geographies’ which resulted were directed outwardly, towards the non-European colonial periphery, and a body of historical-geographical research has argued that stylized geographical representations of this periphery were fundamental to its actual appropriation and control by the West” (Bassin & Berdoulay 2004, 76).

Human geography affords a perfect lens through which to view the details of these transformations at every significant stage of (Soviet) modernisation, with industrialisation playing the primary role in the long-term weakening of minority cultures. Here it should be stated that methodologically my qualitative research shares much with ethnography. Human geography defines the methodology of my case study research and the choice of respondents.

This attempt at a human geographical, as opposed to an ethnographical or historical, analysis of an indigenous group is informed by the following:

*When regional geographers saw their discipline as, at most, law-consuming, those of the new persuasion aimed at producing their own laws, which could be used to explain particular regional outcomes. These changed means to the geographic end were rapidly accepted in many branches of human geography, particularly in those topical specialisms dealing with economic aspects of contemporary life. They were soon accepted in the growing field of contemporary social geography, but were ignored in historical geography and almost completely shunned in cultural and regional investigations (Johnson & Sidaway 2004, 62).*

Applying the materials of the first half of the twentieth century (alongside a survey up to the present day) creates a broad perspective. The indigenous group under investigation is not settled in isolation somewhere in a distant periphery, and nor does it (nor ever did it) practise particular occupations in its use of nature. It is a typical indigenous group in Northwest Russia. Before the 1920s part of its territory
belonged to the capital region, and its daily occupations closely resembled the dominant population’s. The Vepsians thus experienced the pressures of industrialisation at their most acute. Many aspects of indigenous daily life were drastically affected. The population became involved in mainstream domestic political changes. The picture of how all the elements of indigenous life reacted to changes is complex. Such an analysis (or assessment) suggests new possibilities for a greater understanding of the social changes that affected other ethnic groups in the country.

Throughout the world in the twentieth century access to natural resources for industrialisation was an important factor in the industrialisation and geographical expansion of industrial countries (Howitt 2007, 24). In the first decades of the twentieth century the USSR’s ethnic minorities were no less affected by this process, bringing industrial societies into contact with local indigenous communities. “Expanding industrial societies rapidly appropriated the lands, resources and even lives of tribal people at the frontiers” (Howitt 2007, 24). The relationship between industrial incomers and native society brought with it various social impacts such as racism, intolerance, and ignorance; despite the emergence of a new cultural politics of difference, paternalism, ignorance, and misunderstanding continues today” (Howitt 2007, 24). These still characterise the relationship between the dominant state and ethnic groups, especially minorities, while research into the sustainability of ethnic cultures has been incorporated in the ideology of industrialisation and development. The Vepsian case proves and supports this. The general trends of Soviet modernisation experienced by the Vepsian population resembled the experience of other Soviet indigenous groups. However, it is the task of human geography to reveal the importance of the Vepsian population’s geographical location on the map of Soviet industrialisation, and the latter’s role in the erosion of Vepsian culture.

From the end of the 1920s the Vepsians, along with other Soviet ethnic groups, were excluded from economic decision-making and experienced state modernisation in various forms: population resettlement for various economic reasons, change in the occupational social structure, the hosting of major construction sites, and numerous forced-labour camps. My research will analyse the impact of the Soviet modernisation pillars of industrialisation, collectivisation, and sovietisation on the Vepsians.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research question concerns how the Soviet modernisation campaign of the late 1920s and 1930s affected the long-term survival of the Vepsian ethnic group. This research seeks to explain how modernisation actually worked, the mechanisms that
resulted in ethnic destruction, and the features of modernisation that had the most destructive social impact on society.

Like other ethnic groups in the former USSR, the Vepsians experienced drastic political and economic changes in the late 1920s and 1930s. This period was the starting point for the long-term weakening and erosion of every non-Russian culture in the Soviet Union. Minority peoples shared a common fate in population decline, and the loss of native languages and the everyday practical knowledge gained over centuries. Decades of modernisation critically diminished the total Vepsian population.

Today the Vepsians have been accorded socially, politically, and economically important official statuses: they are recognised as an indigenous minority of Russia, as well as an indigenous minority of the North, Siberia, and Far East of the Russian Federation. In the register of indigenous minorities of the North, Siberia, and Far East of the Russian Federation there are forty ethnic groups with a population of less than 50,000 living in the same territories as their ancestors. The register states that these people practise “traditional everyday economy and crafts, and preserve their ethnic self-identity”. In 1997 the Karelian Vepsians were designated a native ethnic group of the Barents Region; in 2000 the Vepsians were designated an indigenous minority people of the Russian Federation; in 2006 they joined the list of indigenous minorities of the North, Siberia, and Far East of the Russian Federation.

“In [the] 1930s Stalin’s move away from special attention to indigenous issues toward international integration through Russification” (Kaiser 1994, 95) at a time of forced industrialisation excluded the indigenous minorities from any discussion. For example, researchers have been unable to find a single document on the status of Vepsians in the region during the industrialisation period either in the Communist Party archive or in the Vologda state archive (Petukhov 1989, 59). The resulting ignorance has had a severe impact on the displacement and deterioration of native communities.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

My research’s historical-geographical methodology accords with Bassin’s characterisation that “historical geographers responded to broader disciplinary priorities by seeking to incorporate new and popular methodologies to address their own historical interests, or alternatively exploring the historical dimension of research themes from other parts of the discipline” (Bassin 2004, 73). My research is qualitative, using ethnographical methods and including work on archival materials, periodicals of the period, fieldwork interviews, and participant observation. Archival sources are based on materials from the Leningrad Regional State Archive in Vyborg; local newspapers from 1929-1931 were studied at the National Library of Russia’s Department of Periodicals in St Petersburg; fieldwork
was undertaken on trips to the towns of Vyborg, Podporozhie, and Lodeynoe Pole and the Vepsian villages of Vinnitsy, Kurba, Miagozero, and Voznesenie in the Leningrad Region, as well as Sheltozero and Drugaya Reka in the Republic of Karelia.

All my archival work was undertaken in Vyborg. N. N Volkov has also assembled some archival materials on the Vepsians at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in St Petersburg, but they are not extensive and have already been published. By contrast, the Leningrad Region State Archive in Vyborg holds materials on the Soviet modernisation of agriculture in Vepsian regions, daily work by members of collective farms, and some witness accounts of repression and forced labour punishment of the Vepsians never previously used in research.

I was able to visit the archive in Vyborg through the auspices of the Helsinki-based Finnish Historical Society. A local woman arranged my first interview with a Vepsian, and this was the initiation of my snowball sampling. I used this method to avoid clichéd interviews with well-known Vepsian researchers or public persons. I wished to avoid the stream of Soviet and post-Soviet ethnography limiting my vision with its well-beaten tracks in indigenous culture research, which has been influenced by collectivisation and Russification. I wanted to meet ordinary people where they lived and in their everyday lives, and to see the transformation of Vepsian daily life through their eyes, their family histories, and childhood memories. Although the focus of my study is on the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the same processes in the modernisation of Vepsian society continued after the Second World War. My informants’ immediate memories were therefore relevant. Secondly, memories of previous generations’ experience of difficulties have been preserved by their families. Thirdly, it took a while for the modernisation of rural life initiated at the beginning of the 1930s to take full effect in remote Vepsian villages. I was able to obtain interesting and important material about traditional everyday life and its transformation from informants born as late as the 1950s.

While I was interviewing and corresponding with respondents on the Vepsian issues of the 1920s and 1930s, I was introduced to some interesting cases from the 1950s, 1960s, and even the present which were relevant to my research, even though they fell outside its time frame. To maintain the target historical period, these materials have been included in an Epilogue.

My trip to Vyborg changed how I started my snowball sampling from the way I had envisaged in my early fieldwork planning. The initial idea was to find respondents when visiting the small local museums of Vepsian culture in the rural settlements of Alekhovschina and Kurba in the Leningrad Region. The museums have websites, so I had already been able to contact them. However, the Vepsian respondent I met in Vyborg became the gatekeeper for all my subsequent fieldwork. Communicative and well educated, she was very proud of her Vepsian identity and wanted to share her contacts with all her relatives. One group,
including her own parents, had moved to Vyborg in the 1960s and still lived there. Another group, who were so-called Oiat’ Vepsians, lived in the Leningrad Region. Some lived in Podporozhie, but kept silent about their ethnic roots. Although they were pure Vepsians, they presented themselves as Russians. With the help of this extended family I got to know their life, both urban and rural, and their feelings about their people. With their help I made a trip through living and abandoned villages, I visited the last Vepsian in Miagozero, which they now call ‘next to nowhere’. On the way to Miagozero I also visited Vinnitsy, the modern centre of Vepsian culture, and held meetings, prearranged by my hosts, with Vepsian representatives – authors of locally self-published books and local cultural activists (museum keepers and initiators of local events).

Here I should also mention my respondents of non-Vepsian origin. In preparing my fieldwork trip I had found a book about the flooded settlement of Ivina on the internet, and I contacted its author and the author of its preface – a local historian who was an active journalist, the administrator of the “Svirskie Berega” group on the “VKontakte” social network. He had a fund of knowledge about Podporozhie and Lodeynoe Pole, their history and everyday life. He was the principal correspondent for Leningrad Regional TV and the author of five books on local history. He was a leading activist, preserving the memory of local Gulag camps and the location of abandoned barracks. Half-Vepsian, half-Karelian, he did not himself provide me with my snowball chain, but became a very important person for my research. His knowledge about the Gulag period of local history was a primary inspiration for most of my present publication, because he was the only contact who was able to demonstrate the tight connection between local and existing camps as industrialisation tools, apart from the books of I. Solonevich, a former prisoner, who escaped from the Podporozhie Gulag to Finland and published a book about the area’s Gulags.

However, my interest in Gulags received a very cautious reaction at Memorial’s archive for the Leningrad Region. In spite of the fact that I knew that Memorial’s archive held materials on an expedition to the site of the Svir’lag corrective labour camp (mentioned in Iofe’s publication about the Svir’lag (Iofe 2001)), I was not invited to visit their archive. This was during a period (June 2015) when the Russian authorities were monitoring its activity. The keeper of the Memorial Library and Archive told me that the Archive was now closed to outside visitors, and that only material on the library shelves was available. My desire to see materials in the Memorial Archive was prompted by my interest in exact camp locations: if Memorial had conducted expeditions to that area, they would have the maps. But it was not to be.

Instead of allowing me access to the Archive, the keeper gave me the contact details of the Memorial representative who dealt with the locations of the prison labour sites of the Leningrad Region and the Republic of Karelia. Unfortunately, this woman was in the same situation as I was: she too had been looking for
relevant maps everywhere without success. In her correspondence with my Podporozhie gatekeeper, she had asked about the locations of sites that had been communicated to her orally.

It later transpired that I had no need to access the Memorial Archive. Information on expeditions was available on the internet, and their fieldwork was done in places members of Memorial themselves remembered as prisoners and witnesses, and had found in looking for memories of the barracks they had occupied in their search for closure. Nevertheless, I am the first researcher to analyse the published Finnish map of Podporozhie (Koskenala), *Kiellettyt salainen kartat*, which shows the barracks in the territory of Podporozhie (Martimo, Pekkanen & Tarkka 2009).

Later in Vyborg I conducted an interview with the close relatives of my gatekeeper. They were prepared to talk for hours about their childhood, about family stories, about collective farms, and their escape to become workers or bookkeepers in Vyborg. They were open, talkative, happy to share their memories, and willing to speak about any topic that interested me.

I arranged my trip to the Karelian Vepsians through the Institute of Geology of the Karelian Science Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which had organised a conference with the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment in Joensuu. An interview with a person responsible for all mining permits in the Karelian Republic provided me with information both on the structure of mining planning in Vepsian settlements and on interaction with the local Vepsian population, which was extensively involved in the industry. Here I found a new snowball chain, because I had already spoken by phone with one mine owner and had been invited to his mine to interview the quarry director and some workers. They spoke willingly but cautiously, probably because of their awareness of controversial ecological topics. The ecological movement is very active in the region.

On my way to the Rybreka quarry in the large Sheltozero settlement, instead of the meeting I had planned with the director of the Vepsian museum, I met another local Vepsian respondent. This young man was serving a group of children at a traditional Vepsian bakery while the director was busy with a masterclass with the children for whom this catering had been arranged. He gave me an interview and put me in touch with his family in Rybreka, which had deep roots there. I interviewed his grandmother in a large traditional house that had been built centuries ago for a large family, but which was now home only to her and her grandson.

During my interviews I met no one unwilling to talk about their life in collective farms or about their family. I visited old Vepsian homes, ate traditional baked food, and subsequently conducted an extensive correspondence with almost all my respondents. I am very grateful to all these people who have preserved their history and shared their life stories with me.
I was inspired to use old local newspapers as another research source by a Karelian Institute project. This did not disappoint: the Russian National Library houses a collection of the principal Vepsian Soviet administrative centres’ newspapers, printed in Lodeynoe Pole, Podporozhie, and Shëltozero. Although such research requires much time and patience to sift through the fog of ideology, old newspapers can sometimes surprise the researcher with their unique testimonies.

As a second-generation researcher of the Northern peoples, I had a varied background where my present research was concerned. I also experienced the modernisation process during my childhood. This gives me a better understanding of the ‘sovietisation’ process I have studied. Born in Leningrad to a mixed family, in kindergarten, in primary school No. 24, and in secondary school No. 11 I was always ‘different’ from the 900 other Russian students. In the 1990s my father’s colleagues from Japan and my own classmates in the USA often remarked on the fact that I did not know a single word in my father’s Nivkhi language, and asked why I identified myself as Russian. I had no answer – I just knew I was. ‘Russian’ to a large degree had replaced ‘Soviet’.

The present research topic differs greatly from my previous research on indigenous issues. At first it seemed impossible because the indigenous issues of the Soviet period were now viewed so differently. My earlier work and studies in the 1980s up to the 2010s in the core Leningrad organisations, at the Museum of the Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR (now the Russian Ethnographic Museum) and the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, had involved the study of traditional cultures. The study of traditional cultures at the Department of Ethnography of Leningrad State University and the Ethnic Theory of Sociology during my Candidate Degree studies at the Faculty of Sociology of St Petersburg State University did not provide me with an outside vision of the Soviet modernisation processes. My US Master’s Degree in the 1990s only briefly afforded a different vision of the ‘modern-traditional’ relationship. Nevertheless, I present my research here; it seeks to uncover some previously hidden issues in the field of indigenous studies.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The first chapter presents research questions and research methodology. Chapter 2 is devoted to modernisation theory in its Marxist practice, Stalin’s implementation, and its application to a single indigenous group. Chapter 3 introduces the case study, giving an overview of the Vepsian ethnic group, its ethnic territory, and daily economic activities from before the end of the 1920s up to the present. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss three pillars of Soviet modernisation – sovietisation, industrialisation, and collectivisation – as applied to the Vepsian population.
Chapter 4 addresses social and cultural modernisation among the Vepsians; chapter 5 examines the effect of the Soviet industrialisation launched in 1929 on the Vepsian communities and their daily activities; chapter 6 reassesses the impact of collectivisation’s tight connection with industrialisation on the Vepsian population. Chapter 7 summarises the research stream. Chapter 8 presents conclusions. Chapter 9 is an Epilogue.
2 MODERNISATION THEORY

2.1 THEORY OF MODERNISATION

The aim of this chapter is to trace the latest trends in modernisation theory; to reassess the discussion of the specifics of the Marxist-Leninist vision of modernisation as mobilisation, its combination of mobilisation with the class struggle, and the use of purges as a modernisation tool; and to uncover the process of sovietisation policy towards the state population generally and the ethnic groups of the Soviet Union in particular.

2.1.1 Versions of modernisation

To paint the background of the transformations experienced by the case-study group during the first years of Soviet modernisation, it is first necessary to understand the basic principles and presuppositions of modernisation theory in general. The aim of the chapter’s first section is to introduce the basic foundations of modernisation theory and the theoretical basis for national modernisation, which will prepare the ground for a subsequent more specific analysis of Soviet modernisation.

Modernisation is a broad term used “to describe the intellectual, political, social and economic changes that distinguished the modern world from ancient and medieval times” (Hoffman 2003, 7). It can be defined in terms of two features common to all modern political systems: social interventionism and mass politics (Hoffman 2003, 7). In its turn modernisation is understood as “a type of social change, a process of transformations to social, economic and political systems, and the rapid change of human society since the Industrial Revolution, or the frontier changes of modern civilizations” (He 2010, 6). The policy implications of modernisation vary in different countries, stages, and fields. In the mid-twentieth century modernisation theory became the core of the policies of the developing countries. It influenced such processes of their economic development as the driving of industrialisation, the mechanisation of agriculture, and the rise of urbanisation. Systematic modernisation research and theories are the basic components of modernisation science. It influences human societies in different regions, their development, interactions, dissemination, and antagonisms. The independent study of modernisation is a new interdisciplinary science. Modernisation science includes not only the study of modernisation (He 2015, 41); it covers changes in modern civilisations, principles of national advancement, international competition, and differentiation. Although there is no single interpretation of the term ‘modernisation’, it has a number of theoretical meanings. Its task is “to move from model and deduction to contemporary history and
Modernisation science is also a knowledge system. It consists of seven parts (He 2015, 63): general theory; the history of modernisation; stage-specific modernisation; level-specific modernisation; field-specific modernisation; sector-specific modernisation; and modernisation policies. Basic research studies identify the world frontier of human civilisation and explain the laws which govern changes to it. It begins in the eighteenth century with the Industrial Revolution and the works of the Scottish political economist Adam Smith. The nineteenth century brought an expansion of the Industrial Revolution and works by British political economist David Ricardo and German philosopher Karl Marx. The twentieth century saw the transition of modernisation, and modernisation studies was incorporated in the social sciences or the humanities, involving such fields of study as politics, environment, economy, society, culture, and environment. In the twenty-first century it is forming its own paradigm and analysis structure.

Modernisation has been explained from three perspectives (He 2015, 61): its basic and theoretical meanings, and its policy implications. Its basic meaning includes an understanding of the act or process of becoming modern or meeting modern demands, or the understanding of a state with modern characteristics.

“The experience of modernity at the turn of the twentieth century is closely related to the second Industrial Revolution as technological and conceptual changes are informed by and inform different and alternating temporalities, experiences, and interests” (Schleifer 2000, 121): it therefore transforms the experience of time and space. During the last decades of the twentieth century modernisation as a theory was evaluated as a product of the post-Second World War period (So 1990). Classical modernisation theory was developed in the late 1940s as an interdisciplinary research framework which studied “the conditions for, and possibilities of democratic reconstruction in Western Europe and the Far East” (Müller 1995, 267). This process was described as a dual revolution in behavioural methodology and the concept of system. In the 1950s, as European colonial empires in Asia, Africa, and Latin America disintegrated, modernisation theory arose from evolutionary and functionalist theory, both of which provided the basis for a new social order.

Modernisation is often associated with an evolutionary approach:

Unlike Marxism, which viewed social change as being driven by the contradiction between the productive forces and the ownership of means of production, modernisation is an evolutionary theory, best known in the work of Talcott Parsons. Societies develop, it is contended, not through class struggle, but through the actions of people striving to adapt to, and to improve, their economic, political and social environment (Lane 2006, 52).
Evolutionary theory assumed that social change was unidirectional: human society invariably moved in one direction from a primitive to an advanced state, and the fate of human evolution was predetermined. The evolutionary process was a priori seen as good, because it represented progress and civilisation. In the evolutionary process social change was seen as peaceful. In its turn functionalist theory contributed such concepts as system, the functional imperative, homeostatic equilibrium, and pattern variables, along with a vision of human society as a biological organism, which can be studied as such (So 1990).

Evolutionary theory influenced the foundation of the main directions of modernisation theory as follows:

Modernisation is a phased process (from primitive through advanced modern stages); it is a “homogenizing process”, producing tendencies toward convergence among societies; it is a Europeanization (or Americanization) process (since those are the most advanced nations in the world); it is an irreversible process (once Third World countries come into contact with the West, they will not be able to resist the impetus toward modernization); it is a desirable progressive process; it is a lengthy process, taking generations to complete (So 1990).

This classical version of modernisation theory has become the object of the critics of both evolutionary and functionalist theories. Critics have challenged the evolutionary assumptions of unidirectional development in Western civilisations. In criticising the functionalist influence, attention has been paid to the assumption of an incompatibility between tradition and modernity, and whether traditional and modern values are in fact mutually exclusive. Since Third World countries have heterogeneous value systems and their cultural systems are replete with conflict, the functionalists hold to the misleading view that societies in the past were peaceful and stable.

These classical modernisation researchers (Rostow 1960; Parsons 1960) were criticised for formulating their arguments at such a high level of abstraction that it was hard to know which country and which historical period they were discussing. Their arguments were anchored to deep generalisation, their propositions were beyond limits of time and space, and they adopted a cross-national method. Critics of the classical modernisation school have pointed to its misleading evolutionary and functionalist assumptions, methodological problems, and ideological biases.

If, in the late 1960s, little attention was paid to these critics, by the late 1970s their criticisms began to be taken seriously, and the modernisation school modified some basic premises, in the process creating ‘new modernisation’ studies. Since that period the critics of early modernisation arguments have yielded to the mushrooming of new modernisation theories (He 2010, 5). Like classical modernisation studies, these new theories focused on Third World development, and the analyses in these studies were conducted at the national level. The studies
aimed to explain that development occurs mainly through internal factors such as cultural values and social institutions.

The contemporary new modernisation school has avoided treating tradition and modernity as exclusive concepts. It holds that tradition and modernity coexist, and the beneficial role of tradition is emphasised. The methodology has changed: studies have tended to focus on concrete cases. It is now taken for granted that Third World countries can pursue their own paths of development, whilst not denying the role of external factors. This school suggests (e.g. He, Martinelli) that the revision of classical modernisation theory is going in several directions. Aspects of classical modernisation theory under re-examination include: modernisation seen as a historical necessity; tradition as a barrier to modernisation; modernisation as irreversible; modernisation as linear; modernisation as Westernisation or Americanisation; and modernisation as the end of historical development.

J. Scott has stated, in reference to the grandiose and utopian plans for a new society applied by the Soviets, that the term ‘high modernism’ would be more appropriate than modernism (Scott 1998, 88). “Where utopian vision goes wrong is when it is held by ruling elites with no commitment to democracy or civil rights and who are therefore likely to use unbridled state power for its achievement.” (Scott 1998, 89). Critically, an understanding of “high modernism implies a truly radical break with history and tradition” (Scott 1998, 93).

The concept of high modernism does not contradict the application of a universal theory of modernisation. It is a vision of “great paradoxes of social engineering at odds with the experience of modernity generally” (Scott 1998, 93). Since modernisation science is interdisciplinary, it borrows its research methods from different fields of study. General research methods of modernisation science may include observation, survey, simulation, hypothesis, quantitative and qualitative analysis, and case study. From the natural and social sciences it borrows various research methods, starting with the frontier analysis of modernisation and continuing with the analysis or interpretation of modernity and the analysis of particularity and diversity.

One of the essential features of revised modernisation studies is an interest in modernisation’s mechanisms. The specific features of every single case of modernisation give us a picture of its mechanism and its elements.

The modernisation of civilization contents is an essential part of the modernisation process. Civilization contents include all sorts of civilizational elements, such as behavior, structure, institutions, and ideas. Generally, the modernization of civilization contents is a composite process of the alternate innovation, selection, diffusion, and the withdrawal of civilization elements; it includes the two-way circulation of the innovation, selection, and diffusion of civilization elements and the reversible withdrawal of civilization elements, which together form a hypercycle (He 2010, 91).
Modernisation entails the global extension of human civilisation. The borders of civilisation are constantly dynamic. Modernisation science’s attempts to form a picture of the borders of a civilization have to be complex. Human civilisation has to be seen from various perspectives, and research questions are defined according to the research’s purpose. A country is usually taken as a basic unit in the research, but research can also be extended to other levels such as world and region (He 2015, 37). Modernisation science deals with issues of national development and advancement. It shows the national policy, and how the country should progress and become advanced. In the present research the study of a particular ethnic group’s fate is strongly linked to the development of a region, and the region’s economic, political, and social changes depend on the general changes of modernisation on a nationwide basis.

The development of human-centred theories since the mid 1960s (Hubbard 2005, 33) has allowed geographers to closely examine Marxism and its interpretation by Lenin. “While this offered a good description of the unfolding geographies associated with a parallel process of modernization and urbanization, in the English-speaking geographical community these ideas seemed to make little headway. In other fields, however, Marxist ideas were to prompt the formation of new labour organizations, trade unions, and protest groups united in a process of class struggle” (Hubbard 2005, 45-46). Some modernisation theory concepts were adopted by geographers in the 1960s and 1970s (Warf 2010, 309). The special focus of their research was the dissemination of modernity’s social processes through the development of the economic infrastructure of developing countries. As I will show, this was the case where the Vepsians were concerned in the 1930s. In 1929 the Economic Council of the Russian Federation adopted a law establishing a new form of the timber industry in forested regions of the country (Postanovlenie ekonomicheskogo Soveta RSFSR, 1929), which had until that point been a seasonal Vepsian activity. The establishment of industrial timber economic units (lespromkhozy) as separate independent economic entities in various Vepsian areas (the Leningrad Region, Karelia, and later in the Vologda Region) affected not only the seasonality of the timber industry and introduced social interaction with incoming workers and competition with collective farms for labour (there were cases of workers escaping from kolkhozy to work in lespromkhozy), but also created a new relationship structure within the Vepsian community.

2.1.2 National differences in modernisation

In narrowing the focus on modernisation to a single state with its own Marxist-Leninist path, this section illustrates the place of national states in modernisation theory. “[T]heories of modernization are fundamentally theories of the transformation of national states … [W]hatever else it may be, modernization is a type of social change which is both transformational in its impact and progressive
in its effects” (Tipps 1973, 202). Tipps (1973) stresses that these transformation processes are both extensive in their scope and a multifaceted process. They can influence every social institution of society: the transformation of one institutional sphere tends to produce complementary transformations. The assessment of the scale of modernisation’s application varies: some associate it with industrialisation or economic development; others define it as society’s increasing control over the natural and social environment. It can be seen as a transition from primitive, subsistence economies to technology-intensive industrialised economies (Tipps 1973, 203). Thus, the terminology of modernisation theory began to acquire a more neutral tone: ‘modernity’ replaced ‘civilisation’, ‘tradition’ replaced ‘barbarism’. Before Tipps (1973) Cyril Black (1964), using the example of the Soviet state, had asserted that political revolution by its nature would be a feature of modernisation in the years ahead.

When modernisation is seen through a series of images of societies, cultures, historical trajectories, and the strong passions of hope and despair, one arrives at the discussion of its place in the social sciences. “Modernization is the sort of idea that crosscuts all of the established branches of social science, and it is studied by all of them – anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, geography, and history” (Nash 1984, 1). In its wider application outside the academic sciences, modernisation is an ideological, political, bureaucratic myth and messianic idea. Scholars of the nineteenth century declared that the European experience, including the Soviet experience, reached modernity with a different mix of coherence ratio; this experience became a model for developing nations.

All nations participate in modernisation. Developing countries follow advanced examples, advanced countries seek to sustain their advancement. “Modernization is not only a process, but also a situation” (Martinelli & He 2015b, 2); it includes both its advanced levels and catch-up processes. Works on the theory of modernisation agree on the periods of its development. They start with the change from the agricultural basis of a country to an industrial one; the industrial economy and society are then replaced by knowledge-based ones.

The first stage has been identified as classical modernisation; the second has been variously interpreted as post-, continual, or reflexive modernisation. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ‘modernisation’ had two basic meanings: an act, behaviour, and process satisfying the state’s present needs; and, when certain characteristics and needs were met, it was seen as a largely social phenomenon (He 2010, 5).

At the national level modernisation includes the development and transition of national civilisation. Therefore, in the international context the modernisation movement is compared to a ‘marathon’ of national development, “in which the countries running ahead become developed countries while the rest become developing countries, and cultural diversity exists across time and space” (Martinelli & He 2015a, vii).
In the discussion on the uniformity or diversity of modern societies two main views dominate: the so-called ‘liberal historicism’ and the ‘multiplicity of modernities’. The former simply “elevates the experience of a single country to the status of the world historical yardstick” (Martinelli 2015, 6). The latter focuses attention on the modern multiplicity of cultural patterns in a global civilisation. In most developing countries there are “greater similarities with already modern countries and other modernising ones than with those of the past” (Martinelli 2015, 6). Each country takes its own unique route to modernisation. This route is defined by the place of a given country in the economic and political world structure. To a large extent it also depends on the global division of labour and the distribution of power.

The various paths of development for different countries and regions have created the theoretical approach of ‘multiple modernities’ in relation to global modernisation. This ‘multiple modernities’ approach stresses the differences of the modernising societies in their adaptation to the modern conditions. Modernity is seen as a cultural path for each society, not as a condition or institutional reality. The history of modernity “is a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs” (Martinelli 2015, 5).

Theorists taking the multiple modernities approach stress that there is no need to link it with post-modernity, in spite of the fact that, chronologically, these stages of modernisation theory development may be connected. They prefer the notion of ‘alternative modernities’, which focuses on creative adaptations. Creative adaptations in their turn are not a matter of adjusting the form or recoding the practice to “soften the impact of modernity” (Martinelli 2015, 14). They point to the ways in which people question modernity.

Another important feature of modernisation to discuss is the question of its side-effects. This is especially pertinent to the Soviet processes and tools of modernisation. During the evolution of modernisation theory, and as early as the classical theorists’ formulations, scholars have been aware of modernisation’s side-effects, dysfunctions, and pains. “Marx raised the theme of alienation, Durkheim of anomie, Weber of the iron cage of bureaucracy, Toennies of the lost Gemeinshaft, Simmel of the hypertrophy of stimuli and impressions in urban life, Ortega y Gasset of the degradation of mass culture, Habermas of the colonization of the lifeworld by bureaucratic systems” (Sztompka 2015, 28). Later, the themes of war, genocide, terrorism, ecological destruction, the depletion of natural resources, pollution, and climate change arose. All of them belong to the list of consequences of modernisation’s historically specific modes. In any modernisation process this balance between positive and negative, function and dysfunction, must be considered. At a more general level modernisation causes comprehensive, rapid, and often unexpected social change.

In recent decades several directions of “neo-modernisation analysis” have been developed (Tiryakian 1995, 254). One is ‘reflexive modernisation’, which pays...
special attention to the possibility of the ‘creative (self-)destruction’ of an entire epoch of industrial society. Destruction is the victory of Western modernisation. In opposition to ‘simple’ modernisation – the replacement of traditional by industrial social forms – reflexive modernisation studies the replacement of industrial social forms by another modernity (Beck, Giddens & Nash 1994). This is a new stage, at which progress becomes self-destruction. It is not a class struggle, but a modernisation, a reshaping of industrial society. It breaks up the contours of industrial society and opens pathways to another modernity (Beck, Giddens & Nash 1994, 3). This reflexive modernisation has been seen as the consequence of the antagonism between Marxists and functionalists. However, it is difficult to judge which process might be seen as the ‘self-destruction of society’. The purges, as an essential element of Soviet modernisation, were indeed destructive, but it is certainly debatable whether they were a core element of planned modernisation or simply a ‘form of another modernity’ – that is, destructive a priori.

Another concept of neo-modernisation analysis is the concept of a risk society, which involves the epoch-making and systematic transformation of three areas: resources of nature and culture, social ideas of safety, and processes of individualisation (Beck, Giddens & Nash 1994, 7). In summarising other theories of neo-modernisation, it is necessary to outline the main social issues discussed. Any social change should be seen by social actors (collectives and individuals) as a new possibility. This general metatheoretical grounding brings it into the sphere of a ‘voluntaristic theory of action’. A second approach presents societies as groups of actors whose goals and values frame new lines of development on the spatial-temporal horizon: “The more inclusive are collective decisions and commitments as to the collective trajectory to be pursued, the more likely will modernisation succeed” (Tiryakian 1995, 255). However, there is no guarantee of harmony between cultural, political, and economic values and available resources.

Another approach to neo-modernisation suggests that modernisation is not a single process of system transformation. In any society some actor groups may consciously pursue, and some may reject, paths of modernisation. The process of modernisation involves short-term costs and sacrifices. This view will be more precisely discussed later through the theoretical works of McDaniel (1991). “Processes of modernisation, while historically patterned, are adaptable to a variety of settings” (McDaniel 1991, 21) in a single country. “Modernisation is neither uniform throughout a given sociocultural system nor a continuous stage” (McDaniel 1991, 20) In my Vepsian case study I define the directions and mechanisms through which modernisation affected an indigenous group. In a large country with more than a hundred indigenous peoples the modernisation process took its own course. It is therefore difficult to apply a mechanism of modernisation from other groups directly to Vepsian society. However, as features of state-centralised policy, industrialisation, collectivisation, and sovietisation are constant.
In all modernising societies there is a tendency to rationalise state power and to extend it into new areas of social life. Modernisation and economic growth can no longer be seen as spontaneous phenomena or as a consequence of the actions of social groups. They should instead be seen as state projects, directed and determined by the regime. It is its political structure which “gives such a distinctive cast to autocratic modernization” (McDaniel 1991, 70).

The theory of modernisation could be seen as characterising actual historical developments and historical processes. Modernisation as seen in actual historical processes is described in the subsequent empirical chapters. These two approaches are not in opposition. Rather, they demonstrate the specifics of the reality of modernisation in certain national conditions. Indeed, the modernisation discourse is ambivalent: in practice a seemingly universal process will produce deviations and mutations.

2.2 SOVIET MODERNISATION DEBATED

In some works Soviet modernisation has been called a ‘social mutation’ or a conservative modernisation. This mutation was “instrumental” and was expressed simply by “adding sickle to hammer” (Vasiliev 2006, 6). To understand this mutation it is necessary to define and analyse the elements of Soviet modernisation which emerged from its Marxist transformation, Marxist-Leninist practice, and Stalin’s modernisation via rapid industrialisation. Debates about the Soviet modernisation process’s theoretical basis have been taking place now for almost a century, representing various visions of its goals and methods.

The Soviet and post-Soviet study of domestic modernisation has been varied, ranging from a complete denial of modernisation processes in the country to a suggestion that there was a hidden, Soviet-specific, modernisation. The aim of this section is to trace how the foundations of Soviet modernisation were transformed from a Marxist approach to the industrialisation based on Stalin’s purges. “Across the centuries Russians have articulated, through a process that may be called the interpretation or construction of geographical space, a variety of highly contrasting geographical or geo-political self-images: visions, in effect, of Russia as a particular sort of geographical entity… once created they nevertheless carried a certain aura of objectivity and so appeared to be incontestable in a way that no other factor could be” (Bassin 1991, 2). The way Stalin’s policy managed this geographical space during the 1920 and 1930s reflects an application of modernisation theory.

2.2.1 The Bolsheviks’ modernity

An analysis of the debates concerning the goals, history, and specifics of Soviet modernisation offers two contrasting visions of the phenomenon: the internal
vision (of Soviet and post-Soviet scholars) and the external vision. If the latter follows various streams of modernisation science and its variability in the international context, the former has traditionally been formed by Soviet social theory, based on Marxist-Leninism. Post-Soviet social theory has been unable to develop a critical vision of Soviet modernisation and largely continues the traditions of its predecessors.

There are several theoretical works on Soviet modernisation that were basic for my case study. An analysis of the Bolsheviks’ perception of modernity is presented by Rittersporn (2014): for the Bolsheviks modernity was more than merely a tool for the creation of the world they sought. “They equated modernity with a collectivist, consensual, and self-governing polity integrated through commonly shared ideals, as well as by the relationships that strict scientific management and highly developed economy were supposed to establish” (Rittersporn 2014, 250).

The consequences of the complex and paradoxical social and economic transformation of rapid Soviet modernisation are described and discussed in works by Davis (1989, 1998). The implementation of an anti-capitalist urban revolution in a country with a relatively weak capitalist system, the weakening of the peasants, and the decline of the commercial sector were tightly bound features of Bolshevik modernisation (Davis 1989, 456). The material of the case study demonstrates how this mechanism influenced rural households in practice.

In researching Stalin’s economic methods – the financing of industrial expansion and economic modernisation – I based my study on Chubarov (2001). They are viewed in parallel with Russia’s pre-revolutionary past. Under Stalin “capital was forcibly squeezed out of the reluctant population, mainly the peasantry, through the arbitrary price system. … The collectivization of agriculture enabled the state to exercise direct administrative control over large collective farms, whose profits could be ploughed back into the construction of new industrial plants” (Chubarov 2001, 9). The author contends that this radical and unprecedented policy, as with many other features of Bolshevik strategy, may be traced to the serfdom and village traditions of the past.

The view of Soviet economic modernisation between 1928 and 1984 presented by Autio-Sarasma in Kangaspuro & Smith (2006, 104) defines the various modernisation processes and the role of Western technology in them. Concerning the 1920s and 1930s, Autio-Sarasma studies Stalin’s vision of modernisation as industrialisation, and its need to create a “technological base and increase the labour productivity in the main sectors of economics through ‘replication, modification and scaling up of existing Western models’” (Autio-Sarasma 2006, 109). Rostow (1990) presents another view: “Socialist countries have, indeed, demonstrated that they can operate a modern economy; but they have paid a heavy price in ‘jobbing, careless, and ineffective’ enterprises and for the lack of strong individual incentives. And some have even turned to forms of competition to
stimulate sluggish economies overburdened with heavy, self-serving bureaucracies” (Rostow 1990, 120).

Detailed research on the processes in the agricultural sector of the Soviet economy has been undertaken by Conquest and Fitzpatrick (Conquest 1986, Fitzpatrick 1996). Conquest’s study of the collectivisation and repression of the peasantry between 1929 and 1932 covers the entire Soviet Union. “Collectivization meant the effective abolition of private property in land, and the concentration of the remaining peasantry in ‘collective’ farms under Party control. These two measures resulted in millions of deaths…” (Conquest 1986, 4). This work differs from previous ones in that it presents the facts of history “to register in the public consciousness of the West a knowledge of and feeling for major events” (Conquest 1996, 5).

Fitzpatrick (1994), in researching Stalin’s rural policy, examines the strategies Russian peasants used to cope with the state-inflicted trauma of collectivisation, and their attempts to modify the kolkhoz system through strategies of resistance (Fitzpatrick 1994, 4-5). Hughes (1996) sets the goal of breaking the paradigm of bipolarised state-peasant relations under Stalin in seeking an understanding of “the impact of the Stalin revolution on the Soviet countryside” (Hughes 1996, 6). After the grain crisis of early 1928 the Bolshevik regime aimed to prevent future difficulties by improving state organisation and management of the countryside. “The goal for the Stalinist wing of the party was to stabilize grain collection, subdue the countryside and secure a ‘captured’ peasantry for the state” (Hughes 1996, 7).

Hoffmann (2003, 2011) presents a multifaceted analysis of the specifics of Stalin’s policy, dismissing the idea that Stalinism represented a retreat from socialism. “Far from being a partial retreat or a return to the prerevolutionary past, Stalinism remained, for both Party leaders and the Soviet population, a system dedicated to socialist ideology and progress towards communism” (Hoffman 2002, 3). All the fundamental elements of Soviet socialism (the role of the Party, the planned economy, and state ownership of the means of production) were maintained and even strengthened during Stalin’s modernisation. Rittersporn presents another view of Stalinism: “[A]lthough rarely defined in any precise manner and very often reduced to a vague synonym for ‘autocracy’ or ‘tyranny’, [Stalinism] has thus come to cover everything that happened in the USSR during the last fifteen years of Stalin’s life. ... [I]t defines a political attitude rather than any characteristic of the Soviet system” (Rittersporn 1991, 183). A distinction certainly needs to be maintained between Stalinism as practised by Stalin and ‘verbal Stalinism’ as a ritualised official discourse (Rittersporn 1991, 184).

Gregory and Stuart (1980) argue that “there is no socialist paradigm; instead, the economic theory of socialism must be gathered from various sources. One is the Marxist-Leninist view of socialism and communism and the role of the state. Another is the socialist controversy, a debate over the relative merits of socialism as an economic system” (Gregory & Stuart 1980, 146).
There is no single opinion among historians concerning the different aspects of the Purges. “[The] Soviet regime was from its inception a ‘terror’ state” (Goldman 2007, 2). Goldman (2007) offers a comparative analysis of the interrelationship between Soviet power and civil society, terror and modernisation, state initiatives, and social or community interests. Rittersporn argues that the purges were not a punitive exercise from above, but rather a battle within the apparatus (Rittersporn 1991, 184). Hoffman (2011) explores both the conceptual and practical prerequisites for the forms of state violence (large-scale deportations, incarcerations, and executions) employed by the Soviet leaders in seeking to answer two questions: “How did political leaders come to categorize their population and presume to solve political problems through social excision?”; and “Where and when did technologies of social isolation, such as concentration camps, develop?” (Hoffman 2011, 240). Hoffman examines how Soviet leaders carried out “such massive programs of state violence, including bureaucratic, judicial, and police structures that allowed them to deport, incarcerate, and execute large numbers of people and how these practices became attached to Soviet leaders’ goals of refashioning society” (Hoffman 2011, 241). These techniques of social categorisation and excision did not themselves cause violence; violence was the result of the dictatorial force of Party leaders’ decisions.

Another important work on Soviet modernism is “Seeing Like a State” by James C. Scott. He describes high modernism as a “sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied usually through the state in every field of human activity”, through enthusiasm, revolutionary hubris, and the promotion of a new cultural identity (Scott 1998, 90-92). Lenin’s high-modernist outlook was based on the belief “that the science of dialectical materialism gave the party a unique insight into the revolutionary process and entitled it to claim the leadership of an otherwise disorganised and ideologically misled working class”, looking forward “to refashioning the human material that came under their purview” (Scott 1998, 157). Soviet modernisation may be categorised as high modernism: authoritarian high-modernist states attempt to impose, and succeed in imposing, such doctrines as quasi-civil war conditions, socialist transformation, and certain social arrangements on their populations (Scott 1998, 219).

Getty (2013) analyses the similarity of Bolshevik modernisation with modernisation in other countries: “One could point to many historical cases in which a self-conscious modernizing elite consciously uses certain tools to effect a transformation. In many modernizing Asian, African, and Latin American countries, the army fulfills the same functions. … Throughout history, elites have done very similar things” (Getty 2013, 17). It has become a commonplace of modern history “for revolutionaries to start with a powerful transformational mission but to degenerate after taking power into privileged bureaucrats and even hereditary elites” (Getty 2013, 17).
Soviet modernisation largely used the language and symbolism of nationalism developed by Lenin and Stalin to mobilise the masses “to make the necessary sacrifices to realize the new socialist and supranational society” (Smith 1993, 150). Works by Kangaspuro pay particular attention to the nationalities question in the USSR, where both large ethnic units such as the national republics and ethnic minorities are concerned, through the study of centre-periphery relations. The effects of assimilation, Russification, and sovietisation on small minorities are still under discussion. One view is presented by Bartels and Bartels (1994), who see the early Soviet policy towards northern peoples in large part as an attempt to provide northern groups with the elementary features of socialist nations (Bartels & Bartels 1994, 13).

It is difficult to argue that Soviet policy towards northerners, especially during its early and later phases, was aimed at Russification, since Soviet policy involved creation of written forms of northern languages and educational programs in northern languages during the 1930s and expansion and revitalization of such programs in the late 1970s and 1980s (Bartels & Bartels 1994, 5).

However, the bibliography of Soviet modernisation presented here requires some qualification. The external, Western, scholar’s view of Soviet modernisation differs from the internal one. It offers more generalisations than does the internal view. Some details may also be missed because they are unsaid and unpublished, especially when they concern local rural situations. Marxism is seen as a modernising ideology, and Lenin is seen as a faithful follower of Marx in “embracing both modernity and science ... as the proper way ... towards modernity” (Weeks 2011, 128-129). It was the Communist Party itself, rather than industrial workers and peasants, that was at the vanguard of the Revolution and pushed the USSR towards modernity.

Before the Soviet experience of an entirely new kind of modernity, modernisation had always followed liberal and capitalist lines. Historical debates concerning the collapse of tsarism refer to the “failure of its political system to adapt to the needs of a modernizing society” (Davis, Harrison & Wheatcroft 1994, 4), but are divided concerning the reasons for this failure. Capitalist modernisation had always “gone hand-in-hand with constitutions, parliamentary democracy, and individual rights. Now the Bolsheviks wanted to create an entirely new kind of modernity, based on state control of the economy, a one-party system, and collective rather than individual social identities” (Weeks 2011, 130). There were no historical examples of such a change. Furthermore, the process of Soviet modernisation was accompanied by much human suffering.

Soviet Marxists saw human progress as achieved via the growth of the forces of production. This included capital not only in the form of machinery, but also in the form of labour. The advance of the forces of production suggested that, at each
stage of history, the social and political order should evolve into a new social class, eventually replacing capitalism with socialism.

In following Marx, the Bolsheviks believed that their victory was the first victory of the world proletariat, that the planned economy would replace the market and money would cease to exist, and that classes and nation-states would disappear. Soviet modernisation may also be classified as a modernisation project: such an approach views Bolshevik modernisation as a special instrument of the modernisation process. This force moved Soviet modernisation onto a new track. Socialism required the overcoming of the country’s backwardness, which represented a new type of modernisation, hidden behind Bolshevik slogans and Marxist ideas of creating a new society. For example, Davis (1989) stresses that by the end of the 1920s the Bolsheviks had a strict plan to develop industrial policy and the Soviet economic system so that both ideology and their experience would influence their economic decisions. “Bolshevik confidence in the economic power of the centralized state was perhaps derived more from the Russian past than from Lenin or Marx. But their willingness to abandon the market in favour of planning through administrative orders found support both in Marxism generally and in its Leninist variant, which placed social and economic relations rather than the market mechanism at the centre of economic analysis” (Davis 1989, 465).

In the Bolshevik understanding of future nationwide socialism the idea of this specific capital source played a central role. It included general nationalisation, the socialisation of the means of production, the nationalisation of economics, the centralised distribution of material goods, a Communist Party monopoly of state power, the prohibition of opposition, and the dominance of the Leninist vision of Marxist ideology. At the same time, there was no clear policy concerning the transition period. The Communist Party programme reflected Lenin’s idea that during the transition period the state could function as a network of producer-consumer communes, united in one cooperative. The product produced in a commune would be locally consumed, thus avoiding the market.

Before the Revolution Russia had been an agrarian country. It is indisputable that the state needed a prolonged transition to nationalised and mechanised agriculture on a large scale. The Bolshevik move towards modernisation included such important features as “integrating societies and generating consensual practices through administrative, agricultural, industrial, and commercial technologies, as well as through the behavioral models they shape and values they imply. One cannot stress enough the Bolsheviks’ eagerness to develop or import technical and managerial know-how” (Rittersporn 2014, 262). Nevertheless, they also understood the important role of technological processes and labour control.

The 1917 Revolution anticipated that the positive results of political modernisation would become the premise for Soviet modernisation in general, and that subsequent revolutions in other countries would support the country’s further economic strengthening and would help to eliminate its economic and social
backwardness. This assumption proved to be true: earlier modernisation had been a strong impulse for further industrial development; by 1914 the country had experienced rapid economic growth. “Most dramatic of all was the transformation of large-scale industry, marked by the emergence of a more modern fuel economy, a modern iron and steel sector, as well as new industries such as chemicals and electrical engineering” (Gatrell 2006, 31-32). This modernisation was sustained in part by foreign investment. For the Bolsheviks this level of industrial development was supplemented by capital – the monopoly of economics and the centralisation and concentration of production and capital. Labour mobilisation served as the basis for these initial accumulations.

In the 1920s Stalin outlined his perception of what needed to happen: the working class should refashion the peasantry’s psychology in the spirit of collectivism. The peasants themselves should be concerned with the development of agriculture as an industry. This industry would provide them with machines, tools, fertilisers, and electricity. Only this state-proletariat compulsion could provide the necessary balance in the modernisation process. State enforcement was therefore justified by economic expediency. State compulsion was the only control of the mainstream economy. The peasantry was mobilised as a labour force.

The rules of the newly modernised society were as follows: there would be no private ownership of tools and the means of production; all property would be held in common; there would be no social classes; industrial and agricultural workers would manage themselves as a free association of workers; the national economy would follow a plan and be based on modern industrial and agricultural techniques; there would be no difference between town and village; products would be distributed according to people’s needs; and the person would be freed from concerns about provision. This last point represents the only mention of the individual in the process of modernisation.

In 1920 the 9th Party Congress announced the militarisation of the economy, which also included forced labour, initially for convicts, and subsequently for everyone as socially useful work. Priority was given to mobilisation in transport, the provision of fuel, raw materials, and food, and then to the development of machinery. Centralisation and total nationalisation were seen as the means to pursue the shortest route to socialism. Military communism entailed: a state monopoly of manufacturing; consumer communes; centralised provision; free allocation; the prohibition of trade and the market; the diminution of money circulation; and a policy of equalisation.

Two principal features of Soviet modernisation (especially in the 1920s and 1930s) merit special mention: mobilisation and colonisation. I have already examined the first as a driving force in industrialisation; it is now necessary, in addressing the issues of the indigenous population, to discuss a second element of modernisation generated by military communism – industrial colonisation. Industrial colonisation was essentially connected to the mass use of unqualified,
mainly rural, workers. This was an essential feature of industrialisation without a market, a system that entailed “working in vain, and plundering human labour and natural resources on a gigantic scale” (Kemularia 2006, 7). The questions of colonisation and the indigenous population are connected not only in terms of cheap labour, but also in terms of the mastering of new territories, and will be discussed later.

The state was motivated to undertake forced modernisation by the need to survive when it was surrounded by capitalist European states. Forced modernisation required the concentration of copious material and physical resources. The mobilisation regime declared there was no other choice than to use force against the population, and this required enormous management.

Soviet modernisation is essentially a catch-up model, and may be seen as a response to the challenge of capitalism. The utopian character of Soviet industrial modernisation is evinced by its slogan of “catching up and overtaking” Western development. “The importance of advanced technology has been a persistent Soviet theme ever since the revolution. … The resolution of the fourteenth party congress in December 1925 proclaimed that ‘our socialist industry should be developed on the basis of a more advanced technical level’” (Carr & Davis 1969, 441). By 1927 references to advanced technology had become a cliché in all Soviet pronouncements on industrialisation (Carr & Davis 1969, 441).

The starting point for Soviet economics was centralised planning. It was the result of the Soviet state’s hierarchical authority structure, which consisted of enterprises, associations, ministries, and the central planning agency. State ministries were organised around specific industries or branches of industries. Each ministry was responsible for the entire output of an industry, a system which contributed to the development of monopolies. “In practice, the system never worked quite as described, and, particularly in the Soviet Union, an enormous network of bureaucrats in government and industries and the Communist Party acted to coordinate its activities and relieve bottlenecks. … As a result, the economic plan, which was supposed to govern production, underwent continuous modifications” (Bosworth & Ofer 1995, 7).

Economic modernisation was tightly connected to the strengthening of state power and the Communist Party. Theoretically, the establishment of industrial culture had to be accompanied by sociocultural modernisation. However, such a strategy contradicted the existing administrative-command system of management. Society’s self-development was excluded. The post-Soviet scholar sees this underestimation of its internal contradictions and the idea of the supremacy of central governance as the weakest elements of Soviet modernisation: “During the years of the first five-year plans the transformations in Russia were grandiose to the same degree that the methods applied were unique in their cruelty and madness” (Vasiliev 2006, 341). As a result, Soviet modernisation had a limited and
contradictory character, and all mechanisms of self-development were replaced by the application of force.

The specifics of the Soviet modernisation of the 1920s and 1930s have often been discussed in terms of two mutually defined processes: collectivisation and industrialisation (Conquest, Hughes). The importance and priority of one of these components has been under constant revision: “It has often been thought that collectivization, considered as a means of extracting grain and other products from the peasantry, was a source of the funds necessary for industrialization ... But recent research ... seems to indicate, that wholly against expectation, there was a definite ... input from the industrial into the agricultural sector over the years 1928-32, rather than the other way round ...” (Conquest 1986, 170). Hughes continues to see collectivisation as dependent on industrialisation: “It was the resolution of the peasant question which shaped the entire modernization process in Soviet Russia, for collectivization subordinated the peasant economy to the demands of the state-led rapid industrialization which was the foundation of the Stalinist state” (Hughes 1996, ix).

Rapid industrial expansion began in the autumn of 1924, inspired by VSNKHa (Vysshii sovet narodnogo khoziaistva) – the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy) – and GOSPLAN (the State Planning Committee of Council of Ministers of USSR). Both organisations prepared drafts of the first five-year plan completed in the spring of 1926. “In the course of 1925 and 1926, the party in a serious resolution declared its commitment to the course of planned industrialization and sketched out its principle features” (Davis 1989, 46). Ideology led the country’s modernisation and industrial development, and the Communist Party was both the initiator of and a key structure in this process.

Soviet modernisation had a contradictory character: it was limited exclusively to economic modernisation, which became industrialisation. The Soviets rarely used the term ‘modernisation’ (Kangaspuro & Smith 2006, 12), and by the 1970s and 1980s the term ‘technological progress’ was in everyday use. The Soviet equivalent of ‘modernisation’ was ‘economic and social progress’. The Economic Geography curriculum in Soviet secondary schools reflected only this understanding. However, Vasiliev (Vasiliev 2006, 6-7) takes a wider view, seeing it as the borrowing and adoption of selected technological (largely military-industrial) achievements from more advanced countries in exchange for the export of raw materials and raw products, with a simultaneous tightening of the exploitation of the population by archaic methods and the growing centralisation and bureaucratisation of the leadership.

Industrial workers were the main beneficiaries of the Revolution. Yet by the mid-1920s workers had lost the right to strike (Davies 1998, 26). “In the period 1928-65 the number of people employed in industry, construction and transport increased nearly sixfold, from 6,554,000 to 38,932,000” (Davies 1998, 38). At the same time as the construction of modern capital goods industries was proceeding
rapidly, the agricultural sector was declining. “The relation between agriculture and industry was the central preoccupation of the authorities. The towns depended on the peasantry for their food, and the needs of the town would necessarily grow with the expansion of industry” (Davies 1998, 27). The change in the socio-economic structure of the countryside (Davies 1998, 27) and the countryside’s obligations towards cities made the situation in agriculture very difficult. This will be clearly seen in the case study, when the burden for the peasantry will be discussed.

Bolshevik ideology was also a ‘Janus-faced ideology’ (Kangaspuro 2006, 44). It originated “from two main components: from ideas of modernisation and the linear development of the world (a sort of Bolshevist zapadnism) and from the traditional Russian Slavophil ideas on community ‘obornost’ and ‘narodnost’” (Kangaspuro 2006, 44). The stereotype of a besieged fortress became an ideological cliché which is still used, even today. During the 1920s and 1930s the international-communist core principle was gradually replaced by elements of ethno-Bolshevism, with the central press defining the Russian nation as ‘great’, ‘senior’, the ‘first among equals’. The Bolshevik understanding of world revolution and the recognition of its failure exacerbated the cruelty and aggression of Soviet domestic policy.

2.2.2 Stalin’s model

To a large extent the success of Soviet modernisation (generally through industrialisation) was the result of ideological factors. The Stalinist industrialisation model was one in which “politics, as a rule, had an absolute priority over economics” (Borodkin 2008, 88). In their interpretation of Marxist theory concerning the initial stage of building new economics the Bolsheviks relied on the motivation of the labour force: duty before others; ethical and moral considerations; and workers’ consciousness in the process of constructing a new type of society. Reality showed that subjective and objective circumstances meant these could not be taken as the basis for economic accounting.

The interrelation between the government and society is described by one post-Soviet scholar as the “genesis and institutionalization of a totalitarian ideology ... and political and ideological sameness” (Kemularia 2006, 20). The main discussion concerns the dilemma of whether the totalitarian regime typifies the governance required during a period of catch-up modernisation. The foundation of a new society is held to require the preservation of strong power. The idea of the avant-garde and Russia’s exceptional revolutionary role in world history is a doctrine in most contemporary Russian studies. This idea of exceptionality, implanted by ideology, forcefully supported a mythologising of the Soviet population’s consciousness that over-simplifies the world and sees only a conflict between the forces of light and darkness.

3 ‘Soobornost’: unity in church community and secular life; ‘narodnost’: the specifics of a nation.
If the non-involvement of the rural population in the system of modernisation required repression and cultural revolution, the method applied to the working class was enslavement. “During the 1930s state legislation excluded the possibility for the working class to participate independently in the modernisation process, [and] the ... mechanism of its enslavement was adopted” (Kemularia 2006, 11). The state began to withdraw passports from workers and office personnel in the defense, coal, and railway industries. These passports were replaced by special identification cards which limited social possibilities.

Post-Soviet modernisation theory holds that there was no single initial state plan for Soviet industrialisation methods: “By 1925 (the year of the 14th Congress of the VKP(b) [the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)] there was no clear understanding of the pace and methods of industrialisation. The dominant tendency of the ‘character’s direction to modernisation’ therefore only emerged in April 1929 with the adoption of the optimal version of the first five-year plan” (Kemularia 2006, 8-9). The same tendencies applied in the decade that followed. The period of Stalin’s industrialisation is also seen as a type of social utopia, as a “modelling of social structure, based on the critical denying of property and power” (Vasiliev 2006, 7). “While competition with the West became a driving force, the Bolsheviks’ utopian vision also led them to look beyond existing models” (Kangaspuro & Smith 2006, 12). It is a feature of the type of thinking which defines the image of the world in connection to a social ideal that the achievement of this ideal is impossible in contemporaneous conditions.

“Stalin’s Purges can be seen as an example of a modern 20th century ruler’s unprecedented access to resources and technology which enabled him to wage external and internal wars to control and if needed suppress his subjects” (Kangaspuro & Smith 2006, 13).

Social violence and coercion were doubly tied to economics: they were both its function and an influence on it. Violence was both a destructive force and a factor in organisation and construction. State power announced itself in “concentrated and organised common violence” (Vasiliev 2006, 87), where political power as concentrated violence was an economic force that compelled non-proletarian elements into the new social-industrial system.

The scale of the purge as a tool for Soviet industrialisation is sometimes not fully understood by Western scholars. It is admitted that “in all industries the variant of American or European technology adopted in the Soviet Union in practice used far more labour per unit of capital than in their Western equivalent” (Davis 2006, 78). In the early 1930s the Soviet Union depended largely on imports of equipment for its iron and steel plants and its power stations, but, by the later 1930s, most such equipment was manufactured inside the USSR.

Stalin’s modernisation has been seen through the prism of power. Every aspect of it served the same purpose: the control and leadership of rural communities. The destruction of village leadership caused organisational change through
collectivisation. “By a strange logic, a middle peasant could become a kulak by gaining property, but a kulak could not become a middle peasant by losing his. … He was ‘essentially’ a class enemy, a sub-human” (Conquest 1986, 120).

Because Stalin’s repressions as a tool of modernisation were carried out in the name of socialism, they seriously affected the standing of the Soviet model of socialism. The question of the ‘Great Terror’ and its causes has therefore been at the centre of political and historical debate ever since (Priestland 2007, 1). Four streams in such discussions may be identified. In the first the logic of Marxist utopianism led to repression and Stalin was simply inspired by Marx and Lenin. “The Terror was the culmination of this process, part of ‘the natural logic of the system’, and was designed to complete the destruction of everything that might resist the domination of Stalin and the state, including the autonomy of the family and the individual” (Priestland 2007, 5). A second view denies that Marxism was responsible for the Terror and asserts that the culprit was Stalin’s distortion of it. Third, some insist that political violence was ‘ideology’ or ‘psychosis’ and had nothing to do with either Stalin’s or the Bolsheviks’ ideas. Finally, some stress that Stalin’s unique approach represented a response to the political and economic structures around him that was designed to control the regional and bureaucratic apparatus (Priestland 2007, 3).

The transition from rural to urban life has been seen as one of the main vectors towards a new life (Vishnevskii 1998, 78). Only an urban environment could afford an education to the new participants in modernisation. Concentrated violence was also directed inwards, which affected workers’ self-organisation and compelled them to exercise self-discipline. Violence was thus applied in two directions, towards both non-proletarian and proletarian strata. Proletarian violence against non-kulak peasants (seredniaki, middling peasants who owned a property but who were not as prosperous as kulaks) was a feature of the struggle against private property to educate and involve the peasantry in Soviet construction. Forced discipline was therefore inherent to the state’s policy.

There is no single opinion concerning the reasons for the evolution of Marxist-Leninist ideology during the Stalin period, because “various influences in determining the complex of decisions … led to the transformation of the Soviet system at the end of the 1920s” (Davis 1989, 464). “Bolshevik ideology and political practice, the Russian heritage, and the imperatives of industrialisation all played a significant part. … Leninist ideology was not the decisive factor. … Nor does the heritage from the Russian past provide a sufficient explanation” (Davis 1989, 464). However, Stalin’s ‘special’ model of modernisation was not unique. Historians have highlighted other examples: “Other countries with quite different histories – including Cuba and China – have developed political and economic regimes similar in important respects to the Soviet system of the 1930s and 1940s” (Davis 1989, 464). “The importance of Marxist-Leninist ideas and institutions, and the influence of a disruptive Marxist-Leninist form of mobilization, is also suggested by the
similarities between mobilization campaigns in the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s and 1960s” (Priestland 2007, 416).

The same concern is related to the issue of Stalin’s personality and its role in the transformation of the initially Marxist foundations of state functions. The place of the despot was a classical theme in the works of the Enlightenment. Montesquieu, Condillac, and Turgot all emphasised the despotic ruler’s dependence on his surroundings. They concluded that “rulers must be ‘enlightened’ for their decisions to be translated into effective policy” (McDaniel 1991). The discussion of autocracy has been connected to the thesis of internal contradictions. Marx, along with other theorists of the capitalist state, “has identified tensions between the ideological presuppositions of capitalist democracies and their institutional realities” (McDaniel 1991). Dilemmas inherent in autocratic modernisation were sharper than in other cases because of “arbitrary personal rule and modern institutions” (McDaniel 1991, 96). Autocracy is an inherently weak political model: it inevitably divides regimes and weakens society’s ability to change. Despotic individuals “have played a major role in the history of many industrializing countries in the twentieth century, both communist and non-communist, as well as in some advanced industrial countries” (Davis 1989, 464).

"Historians of the ‘Stalin’ period, the ‘Mao’ period, the ‘Hitler’ period and the ‘Nkrumah’ period are each tempted to explain their period in terms of the accident that a particular tyrant managed to grasp the levers of power, but the common institution of despotism calls for an analysis which does not depend on individual personalities (Davis 1989, 464)."

Modernising autocracies are sensitive to internal conflicts within regimes. Autocratic regimes attempt to create an urban industrial society within a web of intractable contradictions. The lack of a consecutive policy calls for a certain vision of the state in the eyes of all social groups. The Soviet regime, whilst declaring its classless character, inevitably but ineffectively acted to protect the interests of elites: “They sponsored modernization, but sought to keep much of the traditional social structure and system of political authority intact” (McDaniel 1991, 228).

Western scholars pay much attention to such features of modernisation as public education and women’s rights. In the 1920s, despite the tight budget, the state spent large sums on literacy campaigns. Soviet education fought against ‘religious prejudices’, and special groups such as the League of Militant Atheists attacked both faith and believers. Peasant women could get an education and reject patriarchal authority, but “[t]he transformation of peasants into workers, an increasing role for women in the workforce, and the physical displacement of large parts of the population all presented challenges for which the state was not altogether prepared and which resulted in substantial changes to culture, living practices, identity, and beliefs” (Kangaspuro & Smith 2006, 13) It is important that
scholars consider the real scale of the forced resettlement of population groups, which was undertaken for political and industrialisation reasons as the most essential factor in further embedding social, political, and cultural change in the country.

During the Soviet period discussion of the issue of unskilled labour and its role in rapid industrialisation followed state policy: before 1931 the use of prison labour was denied; after 1931 its practice was acknowledged in every sector of the economy except export industries. Post-Soviet research has exposed the entire mechanism of rapid industrialisation in detail in demographic and other population studies and in works on the economics of forced labour.

Political economics enshrines the concept of non-economic enforcement, where job execution relies on personal dependency, direct violence, the threat of violence, and punishment. In practice, in contemporary history there have been few countries “where they were applied on such a large state scale as in the Soviet Union during Stalin’s rule” (Borodkin 2008, 17). For decades any economic interaction between the individual and the state was ‘voluntarily compulsory’ (‘dobrovol’no-prinuditel’nyi’). Furthermore, and for a similarly protracted period, this compulsory interaction was closely connected to the distribution system.

This Bolshevik vision of military communism brought two principal features to the Soviet modernisation process. The first appeared with the drafting of Soviet labour legislation adopted in the 1920s, which was to define the position of the country for decades as set apart from the rest of world. Political criminals were judged to be socially dangerous persons and their crimes were assessed according to the political threat they posed to society (Borodkin 2008, 19). I will refer to this later in reference to the large number of unguarded criminals who were settled in rural districts among the indigenous population.

The second feature was the role played by the Gulag system as the main state labour force. OGPU (the Joint State Political Directorate) was the supplier and owner of labour in the country. Forced labour was in extreme demand during the forced industrialisation of the first five-year plan. Gulag prisoners were sent to places that were unattractive to contracted workers. The five-year plans required a large pool of labour resources at newly established construction sites. These sites were to become outposts for the further exploration of new territories. At the end of their prison term former prisoners were settled in these territories. In this way the state controlled forced colonisation.

Not without reason post-Soviet researchers have frequently linked the need to explore for new natural resources and establish new construction sites for enterprises with the expansion of repression. In the literature about the Gulag there are two opinions: one says that prison labour construction sites “were arranged to cope with the increasing number of prisoners, the other that the intensification of repressions depended on a lack of labour for the planned tasks” (Borodkin 2008, 22). There is no documentation to support either opinion.
What is documented is that, by 1932, the NKVD (the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) had become the sole principal operator of all state forced labour: “The camps became the dominant type of forced labour. At that time the differences between forced labour camps and previous forms of imprisonment gradually vanished … which led to the foundation of a common Gulag system under NKVD supervision” (Borodkin 2008, 23). Thus, numerous ‘special settlements’ were also transferred to OGPU’s jurisdiction. The OGPU, NKVD, and MVD (the Joint State Political Directorate, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs) became economic institutions. Officially, this labour force system existed between 1929 and 1960, but by the 1960s the number of such camps had diminished.

In stressing this feature of Soviet industrialisation I do not wish to exaggerate the scale of forced labour. By 1939 the total number of imprisoned persons was 3.1 million (out of a total population of 167 million). However, if “we count workers at construction sites, in industry, in transport, and other sectors … every tenth worker of the country belonged to the Gulag” (Borodkin 2008, 25). The availability of forced labour allowed the state to solve one of the most complex tasks of industrialisation, the sourcing of workers for heavy non-mechanised jobs and construction planning for engineering projects.

For example, concerning the Svir’ river section of the White Sea-Baltic Canal (BBK) construction sites in the Leningrad Region – to be discussed later – the specialists arrested and assigned to work were placed in special prison camps in the region’s countryside, and if needed “several other suitable persons [would] be arrested according to plan [budet doarestovano]” (Baron 2007, 135). In the later history of the Soviet state this BBK approach of organising engineering labour in closed camps evolved into closed engineering agencies (sharashkiny kontory) all over the country which served its modernisation goals. Specialists from every prison camp were sent to the sharashki, which were special construction institutes where prisoners were the main labour force (Kopelev 2001, 5). “Everything was arranged very simply … Professors, skilled engineers, and inventors were spoilt people. They desired high salaries, personalised positions, and academic privilege. ... This meant that the engineer living in freedom was unable to work to their full capacity and strength” (Kopelev 2001, 6).

Paradoxically, however, prison labour was never included in plans for the economy, whether regional or state. Irrespective of its scale it remained an unspoken, dark feature of industrialisation. Concerning the region studied by this research, Baron has stressed that the government of Karelia refused to integrate the BBK’s labour force in the regional economy, and has underlined their failure to include the camps’ statistics in their general plans (Baron 2007, 171). This is illustrated by the contemporary official press, which reported economic success and construction site ‘victories’ with no mention of forced labour.
It is possible to agree and disagree with the general Western thesis that “[i]n many ways the economy of the USSR of 1928 was not terribly different from the Russian Empire of 1913: most Soviet citizens lived in the countryside; industry had recovered to the 1913 levels but had barely advanced beyond them; transport and agricultural methods remained backward” (Weeks 2011, 133). Such a generalisation (in speaking, for example, of the industrial element of gross national product in comparison with Russia before 1917) seems inappropriate, because the social and political system involved in industrial development (in human labour, planning, etc.) had considerably changed in both urban and rural areas.

The idea that important modernisation initiatives only began with the first five-year plan in 1929 mistakenly assumes they represent the advent of a new form of labour. Indeed, the advent of rapid industrialisation simply legalised pre-existing patterns of forced labour. This can no less be applied to the situations in both industry and agriculture, especially given that agriculture was now also treated as an industry. This idea, and the statement that the brutal collectivisation campaign belonged only to the period between 1929 and 1930, can be criticised. As my research will show, changes to rural life were in fact introduced earlier.

The chronology of Soviet rapid industrialisation should be underlined here. 1929 was declared the year of the ‘Great Turn’. Although collectivisation had been announced in 1927 at the 15th Congress of the Communist Party, only in “spring 1929 was it accorded energetic action, and [only] in the autumn of the same year … [did the] collectivization movement … [gather] conspicuous momentum” (Hindus 1988, 63). This announcement heralded the liquidation of the kulaks and the achievement of total collectivisation. Another point needs underlining here – the use of forced peasant labour alongside prison camps. Although the historiography acknowledges July 1929 was when approval for the use of arrested peasants in forced labour camps was given, and “when the government ordered the OGPU to establish timber camps in remote regions” (Hughes 1996, 201), contemporary press reports refute this: forced peasant labour from Vepsian villages was used at Svir’ construction sites as early as 1927 (Babkin 1927, 3). My research therefore shows that the general chronology does not support the idea that collectivisation was dependent on industrialisation.

The idea of rapid industrialisation based on free labour and the “heated atmosphere of mass enthusiasm or, if one prefers, of mass hysteria” (Weeks 2011, 135) is a general and persistent falsehood. The phenomenon of mass hysteria may be viewed as having the same violent and humiliating basis as a contemporary Soviet newspaper report which wrote of the ‘great desire’ to inform everyone of the success of the forest transportation industry, while the workers themselves were producing a ‘newspaper’ about their work on a strip of birch without ink (Splavnye dela 1928, 3).

Post-Soviet modernisation theory perfectly substantiates Soviet forced modernisation. By stressing the special quality of Soviet modernisation, post-Soviet
scholars support the concept of multiple modernities and national modernisations in which the existence of a universal sample and of a lineal development are denied. Another Soviet modernisation issue is the attention paid to the individual as an element of the modernisation process. In Stalin’s socialist modernisation,

*Everything served the main goal – the construction of an industrial basis for the economy. The needs of the industrial period defined both the construction of the economy’s material-technical basis via the reconstruction of national economics and industrialisation and the large-scale cultural revolution (the elimination of illiteracy, the foundation of a state system of education, mass education in the natural sciences and technical knowledge, the formation of a new intelligentsia) (Vasiliev 2006, 11).*

The cultural revolution was focused on the reconstruction of ideology. The “cultural basis of society was [therefore] technocratic; in this system a person could not be the subject of modernisation” (Vasiliev 2006, 11). The cultural revolution aimed to transform individual persons, who were now required to follow socialist ideology. This was seen as the precondition if this new type of state organisation were to surpass Western capitalism.

The victory of socialism in the Soviet country was announced by Stalin in 1934. It was a period of new economic planning, accounted for in five-year plans and in the completion of collectivisation in the agricultural sector. The main remnants of capitalism were declared as defeated. “The achievement of socialism permitted the use of traditional institutions and culture to support and further a new order” (Hoffman 2003, 4). Soviet leaders used various ways of categorising the population to coerce their own population.

*Nineteenth-century disciplinary developments, including those in economics, demography, psychology, and criminology, made it possible to identify groups and type individuals who allegedly posed a peril to the political or social order. These disciplines also replaced the traditional metaphorical relationship between the individual and society with a conception of individuals as component parts of the overall social body – a concept that implied that an individual’s illness or deviance might infect society as a whole (Hoffman 2011, 242).*

Soviet society could be healthy only if it was populated by new Soviet persons, and “the Bolsheviks, invoking a revolutionary mandate, were fully prepared to use state violence to refashion society” (Hoffman 2011, 267). This policy was aimed at all social strata, irrespective of ethnic identity.

Based on the understanding of modernisation as a universal process which varies according to historical and national conditions, Soviet modernisation – ‘forced modernisation’ – serves as a critical approach to modernisation theory in
general. Subsequent empirical chapters demonstrate the complexity and possibility of modifications in modernisation theory in general.

2.3 MODERNISATION AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

As the present research deals not with an abstract population of a particular modernising region’s transition to the ‘new Soviet person’ but with an ethnic group with specific ethnic features, the Soviet state’s strategy towards such groups requires outlining. Only the resolution of this multilayered complexity can provide a proper foundation for the case study’s theoretical approach in studying the fate of an ethnic group during the complex process of national modernisation. The mechanism of the transformation of this group’s life can only be revealed through the multifaceted theoretical prism of Soviet modernisation.

2.3.1 The new Soviet person

“Modernization is a growth in capacity to apply tested knowledge to all branches of production; modernity is the social, cultural, and psychological framework that facilitates the application of science to the process of production” (Nash 1984, 6). It operates at both cultural and societal levels. At the cultural level modernisation involves a value system that is searching for new knowledge. This value system is integrated into the central areas of society. At the societal level modernisation implies the openness of political and class groups to an acceptance of the risks and consequences of innovation. The social structure of modernity is oriented towards spatial, social, and cultural mobility.

Following the specific criteria “pertinent to the modern condition, Soviet society can be understood as part and parcel of modernity. It was directed by an interventionist government claiming to privilege scientific norms, industrialism, efficiency, cultural homogenization, public welfare, mass production, mass consumption, and mass culture, and it favored people who did their best to develop a truly Soviet personality” (Rittersporn 2014, 250). In its modernisation policy, in addition to industrialisation and urbanisation, Stalin’s government was committed to social transformation and the creation of the new Soviet person. “This attempt at social and human transformation contrasts sharply with the social conservatism of tsarism; it presents a particular Soviet version of the more general Enlightenment impulse to remake and improve society. Stalinist propaganda relied on some traditional institutions and appeals, but ... it did so for distinctly modern mobilizational purposes” (Hoffman 2003, 3-4).

Social modernisation and transformation required an understanding of how people’s thinking and behaviour might be changed. “Reformers across Europe sought to ‘civilise’ the masses through productivity campaigns, housing
inspections, temperance movements, and primary education” (Hoffman 2003, 8). The Soviet authorities promoted personal hygiene, sobriety, literacy, and mass politics. “Soviet society was modern because citizens were counted and categorized, socialized by schools and the health system, employed in industry, adhered to some idea of the regime’s norms, cultivated their selves to internalize officially upheld values, got hold of consumer goods, risked being moved around or decimated by the energetic government, and enjoyed movies” (Rittersporn 2014, 250-251). In this sense Stalinist values should be seen as part of broader European trends (Hoffman 2003, 8). For the Bolsheviks modernity was more than merely a means to remake their world – “They equated modernity with a collectivist, consensual, and self-governing polity integrated through commonly shared ideas” (Rittersporn 2014, 251). During the first five-year plan industrialisation “cultural policy was distinguished not by a new cultural program but rather by the speed and militancy with which officials pushed modern cultural norms” (Hoffman 2003, 40).

“Scientifically determined norms, as well as economic modernization and industrialization, had done much to destroy village traditions by the twentieth century. It is therefore ironic that modern states in the interwar period began to promote traditional symbols and culture as part of official propaganda” (Hoffman 2003, 8). It was no secret that there was a short period during the Second World War when Stalin appealed for the support of the Orthodox church, and priests were sent to the army to offer moral support. This simply confirms that Stalinist values “should be seen as part of broader European trends” (Hoffman 2003, 8). Traditional institutions and symbols not only served the instrumental purposes of political and military mobilisation, but were also used to pursue the ideal of social unity.

Marx’s prescription for the violent dispossession of the exploiting classes was also seen by the Bolsheviks as a step towards social unity. The Stalinist leadership sought to eliminate all ‘enemies of the people’ and ‘anti-Soviet elements’, at the same time as Party leaders were employing traditional symbols in an attempt to unite the population behind the Soviet government (Hoffman 2003, 9-10). The formation of the new person differed from similar processes in other modernising European states in only one respect: in contrast to liberal idealism the new Soviet person had to be able to sacrifice his or her personal interests for the interests of the collective.

This emphasis on awakening humanity was associated with the transformation of economic relations and the abolition of private property. “In Marx’s vision, described in The Communist Manifesto, the advent of communism would free people to pursue a range of activities that would restore the organic wholeness of their personalities and allow them to realize fully their humanity” (Hoffman 2003, 46). Indeed, “what distinguishes Marx from the other classical growth economists is the Hegelian philosophic framework on which he built and the view of the individual in relation to the society it incorporated” (Rostow 1990, 121).
A substantial growth in the social infrastructure was another feature of the Soviet 1930s. In education employment increased more rapidly than in industry. A four-year education became almost universal during the first five-year plan (1928-1932), and by 1939 a seven-year education was almost universal in the towns (Davis 1998, 46). Adult education also became an important feature of the period, encompassing mass literacy campaigns and special academies for the higher education of industrial managers (Davis 1998, 46).

Evolutionary theory, essential for modernisation theory in its initial stage, is neglected in current understandings of modernity, which state “that the breakthrough to modernization is a genuinely revolutionary process, radically transforming all aspects of life, and that today modernity is becoming global, and, second, that multiple paths toward and through modernity are taking place in the contemporary world” (Martinelli 2015, 9). It is somewhat difficult to discuss the application of this theory to different regions and countries. Different approaches provide us with both culture-neutral and culture-specific visions of modernity. “An acultural theory describes the transition to modernity in terms of a set of culture-neutral operations” (Martinelli 2015, 9). These are viewed as an input which can transform any traditional society. A critique of this idea is that diverse non-Western encounters are not uniform. It suggests that “structural aspects of modernisation such as industrialisation, urbanisation, social and geographic mobility, modern institutions like the democratic nation-state, and the liberal market economy, or the research-oriented university are closely linked to profound cultural changes in Western culture” (Martinelli 2015, 10). When and if these changes take place in non-Western cultures, they cannot be separated from their cultural roots. The processes of modernisation in Vepsian society were difficult and damaging. They were based on three main pillars: industrialisation, collectivisation, and the social-cultural sphere. The last could be classified as the most resistant to Soviet modernisation. The Vepsian’s transformation by sovietisation was not a straightforward process, because they constituted a rural community with deep cultural roots and tight social relationships. All three pillars ended in large-scale assimilation processes which resulted in the decrease of the population without completely expunging the culture and language.

In this approach the cultural and institutional aspects of modernity are seen as unified within each culture. This therefore contradicts acultural theory: “modernity cannot be understood unless its grounding in profound cultural changes is recognized” (Schmidt 2007, 195). “European modernity was not simply a package of technological and organizational developments; it was intimately linked to a political revolution, to an equally important transformation of the nature of scholarly and scientific practices and institutions” (Martinelli 2015, 10). All the main Stalinist features in the process of creating the new Soviet person (cleanliness, sobriety, literacy, readiness to sacrifice his or her interests) presented a particular version of modernity – a set of norms, values, and state practices was the Soviet
response to the modern world, along with the ambition to rationalise and reorder society that was reflected in wider European intentions. “And the Stalinist use of traditional institutions and culture for modern mobilizational purposes similarly reflected the more general demands of mass politics after the First World War. Stalinist culture was a particular Soviet incarnation of modern mass culture” (Hoffman 2003, 10). To create such a new person, the Soviet authorities relied on their control of the living environment and education.

No less important is that the new Soviet person was seen by Soviet ideology as a person thinking and acting in awareness of his or her role in building socialism. This was supported by education, propaganda, and newly established Soviet social events and customs. The communist authorities were constantly working on the awareness and consciousness of Soviet citizens. It should be recognised that the Soviet authorities, as the executive governmental organs, were responsible for the state’s economic development, while it was the Communist Party and its organs that controlled the ideological and propaganda mechanisms necessary for the creation of the new Soviet person.

The creation of the new Soviet person was a strategy complemented by repression and labour concentration camps. These camps became appropriate places for transforming both political prisoners and criminals into advanced Soviet persons. The case study’s examples will provide more materials concerning this issue, but here it is necessary to identify this Soviet phenomenon’s foundations. “By the end of the Civil War, Soviet officials had already begun to tout labor camps as a means to reeducate class enemies and social deviants. Labor was seen as transformative – a means to alter the bourgeoisie’s relationship to the means of production and hence to instill in them a proletarian consciousness” (Hoffman 2011, 265). Labour camps had reading rooms and educational programmes designed to re-educate prisoners and make them ‘conscious’. It was declared that prisoners’ participation in the first five-year plan would help them to “recognize the importance of their labor to society and hence help them develop a new consciousness” (Hoffman 2011, 266).

The existence and varieties of multiple modernities are explained by different cultural codes, and multiplied by each nation in the system of global economy. It is the national government that initiates and leads modernisation in each country, and nation-states continue to be key actors in global politics. Nation-states are capable of some degree of creative adaptation to common global trends. There are as many roads to modernities as there are different cultures.

The first five-year plan became a transitional period – a time for building the socialist economy and forging the new Soviet person. “Now the New Soviet Person could become a reality. ... Soviet workers could finally realize their full potential, both in industry and in life. Here was a promethean leap forwards not only in terms of industrial progress but in terms of human development” (Hoffman 2011, 229).
2.3.2 One among multiple modernities

Because the Russian Empire was large, its ideology as espoused by its elites tended to vary,

*as many of them saw their empire as based on Russian peasant migration and cultural cross-borrowing and assimilation. ... It was also a multiethnic, multiconfessional empire with a far more diverse population than that of Western European countries. Russian officials undertook measures similar to those of European colonists to catalogue the peoples they conquered, but their concerns with ethnic categorization extended to the entire population, including nationalities living in areas such as the western borderlands, that had been a part of the Russian Empire for centuries (Hoffman 2011, 250).*

Following Marx “both as real/existing political ‘nation states’ and as the subjective sources of affective group identity, nations were stigmatized as reactionary ‘remnants’ of capitalist civilization which would have no place in the socialist order of the future” (Bassin & Kelly 2012, 3). The Bolsheviks also followed Marx in the belief that “bonds of class solidarity would quickly and definitively replace those of ethno-nationality”. The reality of managing the required more “conciliatory approach [was] such that the concept of ‘socialist nations’ was accepted by the political leadership of the Soviet Union” (Bassin & Kelly 2012, 3).

The revolutionary communist state “felt it necessary to make important concessions to the principle of nationality within both the Party organization and the Constitution” (Smith 1993, 147). Following Lenin’s decision to recognise the right to self-determination, the “Soviet leadership set about restructuring the Soviet state as a federation of national republics, each based on its language and culture, organizing all categories of population into recognizable ethnies, selecting, fusing, even inventing appropriate languages and ranking them all in a hierarchy of ethno-national size and strategic importance” (Smith 1993, 147).

Stalin and the Party elite acted both pragmatically and ideologically in building a modern communist utopia. The flexibility of the ideology’s superstructure may explain reverses in strategy and method. “A modern ideology does not guarantee modernity” (Getty 2013, 20). Soviet Marxism mediated between the pre-modern and modern. “Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology could accommodate such ancient Russian beliefs as a sacramental cult of the leader’s personality, the notion of government as inalterable truth, the intolerant belief in opposition as sinful heresy, and utopian belief in a future millennium” (Getty 2013, 21).

Access to resources for industrialisation was a motivation for the intensification and geographical expansion of the industrial economy, and brought industrial societies into contact and conflict with indigenous populations. In exploring the foundations of the interrelation between industrial economies and indigenous
populations, theoretical approaches by both Howitt and Kymlicka find their roots in Marxist economy. Marxist scholars “have never dealt adequately with nationalism, which was supposed to disappear as workers realized their common interests with workers from other nations” (House 1993, 145). The Soviet experience suggested “that even revolutionary ‘invented traditions’ must harness or forge (often both) a national cultural and political identity” (Smith 1993, 149) if they want to influence deep national roots.

Modernity has been compared to waves washing over traditional cultures, one after another, bringing them unavoidable and irresistible consequences and new practices. The structural processes of modernity create a specifically modern culture which differs from both previous and non-Western cultures. Because modernisation theory aims to capture the whole system of modern society and “all aspects of the dramatic change processes that give rise to its emergence, the literature on multiple modernities focuses almost exclusively on cultural factors and the ways these are believed to frame politics and the political order (as though modernity was identical with its polity or with the modern state)” (Martinelli 2015, 12).

In Stalin’s 1923 report (Doklad o natsional’nykh momentakh v partiinom i gosudarstvennom stroitel’stve na XII s’ezde RKPB. 23 aprelia 1923) the national question in the USSR was tied to the colonial question, and a debate on the form of nationalism (Great Russian vs local) began. “The relationship between Russians and non-Russians in the state was linked to class difference between the two, the Russians dominant in the proletariat and non-Russians overwhelmingly made up peasants” (Kaiser 1994, 106). The only one way to modernise non-Russians was to make them sociocultural and economic equals with the dominant Russians. This could be done “through korenizatsia or ‘indigenization’ of local political apparatuses of party and state” (Kaiser 1994, 106). The functioning of these social institutions at local level afforded control over indigenous groups through ‘nationality soviets’, ‘aboriginal or indigenous (tuzemnye) soviets’, ‘tribal (rodovye) soviets, and ‘nomadic (kochevye) soviets’ (Kaiser 1994, 109-110). This phenomenon can be viewed through the same prism as the colonial policy of Western states.

In the 1930s the process of korenizatsia included the introduction of literacy to all ethnic groups. The creation of written languages created a debate among the Soviet educational authorities about whether the Latin or Cyrillic alphabet should be used for northern languages, including the Finno-Ugrian languages, and among them Vepsian. It was argued that “the Latin alphabet would be more appropriate in the world communist society that was soon to come. Consequently, Latin letters, with some phonetic symbols, were used in the first northern-language primers and other publications” (Bartels & Bartels 1994, 53). Later the Latin alphabet was replaced with Cyrillic to conform with Russian.

Smith states that the Bolsheviks put territoriality at the heart of their nationality policy (Smith 2013, 73). Furthermore, “[a]lthough the policies of nation-building,
federalism and korenizatsia which emerged were put in place, they faced enormous opposition and the development of the Soviet nations in the 1920s did not proceed smoothly or without opposition” (Smith 2013, 72). These processes certainly varied from region to region. The nationalities policy of the 1930s affected every ethnic group. The Vepsians regard this as an important period of ethnic revival. An analysis of this case suggests a contradiction of the processes of expansion of Vepsian territory via industrial projects.

It was the Communist Party, not the state, that acted to create the new person. “The Communist authorities made great efforts to eradicate illiteracy by establishing schools where students were taught in local languages. Gradually, secondary and higher educational establishments were also set up with teaching in local languages. All this helped expand the non-Russian educated elite and led to a flowering of literature, the arts, and science in some of the republics and national autonomies” (Chubarov 2001, 66).

Marxism perceived small nationalities as backward and stagnant, and minority rights were explained in terms of commitment to internationalism. “Marxists often view cultural or national divisions as temporary stopping-points on the way to being citizens of the world” (Kymlicka 1996, 5). Small ethnic groups were expected to disappear during the assimilation. They were supposed to dissolve into big nations, without the benefit of any minority rights. In communist-socialist ideology this denial of minority rights was explained by the idea of internationalism: when the proletariat had no nationality, it was international.

Thus, socialist internationalism led to a denial of the rights of minority cultures (Kymlicka 1996, 5). Progress and civilisation required the assimilation of ‘backward’ minorities into ‘energetic’ majorities. There are as many models of the co-existence of ethnic groups in one state as there are of multi-ethnic states, and the former may vary within the territory of the same state following its transformation. The friendship of peoples became the new slogan: “In countless programs and proclamations, the Soviet Union celebrated folkloric elements, previously condemned as the residues of backwardness, as the expressions of culture, ‘national in form, socialist in content.’ Folk dances and music, national dress, epic poetry—all the manifestations so beloved by nineteenth-century nationalists – were honored and celebrated in the Soviet twentieth century as the exotica of the Soviet family of nations” (Weitz 2002, 12). Yet Russian culture was seen as a model for other nationalities.

In such an analysis two extremes, assimilation and separatism, frequently feature. To understand the Marxist view concerning non-historic nations and the national question in general, the analysis should start with the issue of ‘progressive centralisation’. The “idea of progressive centralization as the economy develops from a lower to a higher stage is at the heart of Marx’s and Engels’ analysis of the national question. It is therefore hardly surprising to find that Marx and Engels regarded every form of nationalist ideology and activity as aimed towards the
formation and consolidation of national states” (Nimni 1996, 66). Later it was classified as the “structural need of the bourgeoisie to build a national state” (Nimni 1996, 66). Within the nation the continued existence of cultural and ethnic factors was also seen as structural needs.

Sometimes sovietisation and consolidation are seen as intertwined and complementary: “The Stalinist version of Sovietization took precedence over consolidation. Northern peoples were increasingly drawn into Soviet institutions, such as collective farms, technical institutes, schools, and pedagogical institutes, even as northern-language-education programs were neglected and certain ‘national’ regions were abolished. But some of the institutional mechanisms for promoting consolidation remained” (Bartels & Bartels 1994, 59).

The most important conclusion we can draw here is that small ethnic communities are backwards and reactionary relics which have to disappear and open the way for social progress and the development of a national state. Ethnic groups – in Marxist theory ‘non-historic nations’ – are ‘peasant’ nations, unable to generate a bourgeoisie, develop a state of their own, exist in a mixed area, or are too small to create an internal market. “These unfortunate national communities (‘ethnographic’ monuments in Engels’ words) must culturally and politically perish in order to make way for the unifying role of the bourgeoisie” (Nimni 1996, 67).

Moreover, these small, culturally diverse, ethnic groups were often seen as a threat to political stability. “[I]n the period from 1937 to 1953 the Soviet state also defined certain nations as suspect and dangerous, and those unreliable characteristics were seen to inhere in each and every member of the group” (Weitz 2002, 12). This suggests that there can never be such a thing as a “multicultural welfare state’, or a welfare state which respects diversity” (Banting & Kymlicka 2006, 3). Ethnic diversity makes it more difficult to sustain a unified state policy. This presupposes that it is “inherently difficult to generate feelings of national solidarity and trust across ethnic/racial lines, and that the very presence of ethnic/racial diversity erodes the welfare state” (Banting & Kymlicka 2006, 3). These ethnic complexities may not just “erode the welfare state”, but also slow the process of its required rapid industrialisation.

The Soviet state “brought change to all Soviet peoples, including northern and non-northern groups. ... While traditional occupations of northern peoples had been collectivized and mechanized, so had the traditional occupations of Russians and other non-northern groups” (Bartels & Bartels 1995, 4). However, in the industrialisation process small ethnic minorities had a minor role, for they had no involvement in national political discussions. Minorities were only ‘subjects’ of the NKVD, along with natural resources. Very often their territories were classified as unsettled, or necessary for colonisation. This colonisation was launched on June 11 1929 by the Council of People’s Commissars, which adopted a decree on forced labour use in the Russian North, the Urals, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Russian Far
East. The scale of colonisation becomes obvious when maps of ethnic group territories are compared with maps of the Gulag’s main locations.

2.4 SUMMARY

Soviet ideology acknowledged that, although it aimed to catch up with Western development, the USSR was taking its own route, the direction and scale of which did not fit the European formula of progress. Soviet modernisation included the quest for ways to make the economy generally more productive and to deploy more effective technologies, and may have been motivated by economic and military needs. However, the Soviet Union was not unique, either in the sense of its despotic role in modernisation (Davis 1989), or in the sense of the place and functions of revolutionary elites (Getty 2013). Similarities are seen in different periods of the modernisation process. “One could look at the relative backwardness of Russian economic and political development in the early twentieth century and imagine these elite practices as entirely appropriate in many times and places, quite regardless of what the Bolshevik revolutionary said” (Getty 2013, 17). The Bolsheviks kept the benighted “dark masses” (Getty 2013, 16) out of politics, except in rhetoric, stressing that the situation was exceptional, as was their role in modernisation. The symbiosis between ruler, oligarchs, and clan and the practice of personalised politics lost its cause-and-effect character, became a habit, and therefore a culture. “These understandings and practices were embedded in Russian history, whatever the prevailing ideology, religion, or state program” (Getty 2013, 19). The years of forced Soviet industrialisation were years of social upheaval on a scale previously unwitnessed in modern Europe. However, it can still be compared with processes in other countries. “The disruption of lives of the peasant population which accompanied industrialization has a certain analogy with the enclosure movement in Britain. But is was an upheaval compressed into a few years instead of decades or centuries” (Wheatcroft & Davies 1994, 67). The elimination of the kulaks as a class has been compared with the policy towards Scottish highlanders (Wheatcroft & Davies 1994, 67), with the distinction that the Soviet peasantry was instantly “hurled into a much more mechanised agriculture and into a social system analogous with serfdom” and “simultaneously most peasants were required to change drastically their methods of earning their living” (Wheatcroft & Davies 1994, 68).

The idea of labour as redemptive was not specifically Marxist or Soviet: “French penal reformers in the nineteenth century, for example, had promoted agricultural prison colonies in the interior of France as sites where convicts would make an economic contribution to society but would also attain spiritual redemption through labor” (Hoffman 2011, 267). The Soviet concentration camp labour system was intended to transform the ‘parasitic classes’ who, it was alleged, had
previously exploited others. “For them, forced labor provided a means to transform their consciousness and to instill a sense of proletarian identity that would allow them to transcend their petty, selfish instincts and join the socialist collective” (Hoffman 2011, 267).

Soviet concentration camps therefore acquired a new function: whereas other countries used concentration camps in colonial conquest and wartime, the Soviet authorities employed prison labour during peacetime. Soviet leaders “did so not just to contain perceived threats but to reshape society” (Hoffman 2011, 267). “While the practice of isolating segments of the population in concentration camps had its roots in colonial warfare and the First World War, the idea of applying this technique to reeducate an entire social class was something new. Soviet leaders thus institutionalized wartime practices and applied them to a peacetime program of social transformation” (Hoffman 2011, 267).
3 THE VEPSIANS AT THE ONSET OF MODERNISATION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

“People lived in these areas for centuries. Why wouldn’t they live here, when the place was so fertile: forests full of game, rivers, and lakes full of fish. The location was good too: there were no earthquakes, no floods, no sand storms, no tornados, and none were expected.”

Vepsian poet Nikolay Abramov, 2011

In writing about the Vepsians of Northwest Russia and Karelia, I review the socio-economic and political processes they have undergone in the course of modernisation during the last century. I see Vepsians as one of dozens of other minorities of the Russian North that have been affected by the main currents of Soviet modernisation, namely sovietisation, industrialisation, and collectivisation. This introduction to the case study aims to provide a precise ethnic group background so that in the subsequent discussion of the pillars of modernisation – sovietisation, industrialisation, and collectivisation, both through state and local policy – their influence on people in their everyday lives will be seen.

This introduction presents: the current location of the Vepsians, as supported by my fieldwork, and the Vepsian territory before 1930, based on published sources; a brief description of Vepsians as an ethnic group; a survey of the twentieth century and current ethnographic works on Vepsian life; and a general picture of Vepsian domestic life.

Geographically, the Vepsians are connected to Europe, specifically, in Northwest Russia and the Republic of Karelia. My fieldwork focused on the most densely populated Vepsian areas and took in the Leningrad Region and the Republic of Karelia, which are populated by Leningrad Region Vepsians and Onega Vepsians, respectively. My fieldwork did not extend to the Vologda Region, due to the low density of Vepsians there. However, Vologda Region Vepsians are at times discussed in my research. The current work refers to regional Vepsian groups as Leningrad Region Vepsians, Vologda Region Vepsians, or Onega Vepsians.

As the focus of the present research is the 1920s and 1930s, discussion will mainly be of Leningrad Region Vepsians and Onega Vepsians. The administrative boundary between Vepsians in the Leningrad and Vologda Regions is largely irrelevant to the research period, which will be explained later in this section. Furthermore, to avoid terminological confusion, I intentionally avoid further division in my research of Vepsians into Oiat’, Piazhozero, and Kuisko-Pondala.
Vepsians, as is done in Russian ethnographic literature (Pimenov & Strogalschikova 1989, 4).

Based on my fieldwork, and in speaking about Vepsians today, I cannot simply follow Soviet ethnographers, linguists, and their successors, who see the Vepsians as a purely rural population, living in traditional housing, and maintaining some traditional activities and folklore. In the late 1960s and 1970s, when passports became available for members of the kolkhozy, many Vepsians left their native settlements to move to the cities. Vepsians from Vyborg told me: “We have so many relatives there [in Podporozhie] – pure Vepsians. In Podporozhie half the population are Vepsians” (Nikolay, interview, 2015). In the 1960s, when the collective farm system was replaced by the ‘Soviet farm’ (sovkhоз) system, and those units gained permission to issue passports, the easiest way for young people to leave their village was to enrol in industrial colleges and then remain in the cities for work upon graduation. In the 1950s and 1960s life in the villages seemed so hopeless that people left for Podporozhie “taking just one cow” (Lena, interview, 2015). Relatives and friends helped each other establish themselves in urban life.

For these reasons it is now easy to interview Vepsians of different generations in St Petersburg, Vyborg, and Petrozavodsk. They speak willingly about their time in their native villages and share their memories. They speak Vepsian and often openly identify as Vepsians. Although they have moved to the city with relatives or neighbours and established a stable community, they are happy to interact with Vepsians who moved from other Vepsian regions. “Here in the countryside near Vyborg there is a settlement, Druzhnosel’e, where the entire population came from Vologda. Komsomol’skoe and Druzhnosel’e are there. They are all Vologda Vepsians” (Liudmila, interview, 2015). Leningrad Region Vepsians who settled in Vyborg happily interact with Vepsians originally from Vologda.

3.2 CASE BACKGROUND

Despite being located in the Leningrad Region, rural Vepsian settlements are only theoretically accessible. Today, as a century ago, most Vepsian rural settlements, or what is left of them, are hard to reach. Vepsian villages in the Leningrad Region can only be reached by car from St Petersburg, Lodeinoe Pole, or Podporozhie. Daily bus connections exist only on the St Petersburg–Lodeinoe Pole–Podporozhie route. A weekly connection to the Vepsian villages exists from Podporozhie. Vepsian villages on the other, right, bank of the River Svir’ can be reached from Podporozhie by private motor boat. Ordering a taxi from Podporozhie to the Vepsian villages is impossible because local taxi dispatchers do not even know these villages. Beyond Vinnitsy, the area lacks mobile phone coverage.

The Onega Vepsians are in a far better situation, with regular bus connections, of an hour’s duration, to Petrozavodsk. They can reach the Vologda Region
Vepsians using the Petrozavodsk–Vytegra bus route. Significantly, there is no direct transport connection between the Leningrad Region and Onega Vepsians, because of the poor road conditions between Voznesenie and Sheltozero. Regular buses connect the Onega and Vologda Region Vepsians via Voznesenie along the southern shore of Lake Onega. Voznesenie, a large settlement on the River Svir', is now a boundary point between the Karelian and Leningrad Region Vepsians (Strogal’schikhova 2014, 13).

Vepsians are an ethnic minority of the Baltic-Finnish language group in Northwest Russia. They have been called a branch of the Baltic Finns (East Carelia 1934, 44). They were recorded in the Novgorod chronicles as Ves’, and their population had contracted to 25,600 by the 1978 census (Taagepera 1999, 133). By 1989 only 6,350 considered Vepsian their primary language.

This ethnic group is now called Vepsian; nevertheless, this is not the only name for the group. “The Russians call them Tchuds, and further south Tchuhars, names which they apply to various Finnish peoples…” (Homen 1921, 122). The name Vepsian became common in scientific literature at the beginning of the twentieth century: “[P]reviously it was ‘north Tchudish’ in scientific works” (Homen 1921, 122). A list of ethnic minorities (Ianson 1929, 11) classified them as an ancient Finnish tribe, known under such other names as Chukhary, Chud, and Kaivany, and as people living in remote and swampy terrain (Ianson 1929, 11).

The common “Vepsian” (Vepsian: vepšlāžed) label for the Vepsian population throughout their territory and in official statistics was only established at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, during the period of national state building (Pimenov & Strogalschikhova 1989, 7). They do not differ from Russians or Karelians in physical appearance. For non-linguists, Vepsian (a member of the northern group of the Baltic-Finnish language family, close to Karelian, Izhora, and Finnish) could be described as follows, even today: “Finnish ears soon get accustomed to this language, however, and soon notice that in point of fact it is very closely related to Carelian” (Homen 1921, 122).

In my initial definition of Vepsian territory I follow Semenov:

The borders of their (Vepsian) territory were, in the west, the southern shore of Lake Ladoga and the Volkov river (five villages with Vepsian names), in the east, as far as the White Sea, and, in the north, it bordered with Finnish tribes, known by Novgorod citizens as Zavolotskaia Chud’. The centre of Vepsian territory was the area of the Tvertsa, Mologa, and Sheksna rivers (Semenov 1900, 106).

The Vepsians were known as a trading people who were active in the trade between East and West. They also actively maintained so-called ‘silent trade’ with the Zavolotskaia Chud’.
Mainov (1877, 42) clearly stated that the southern border of Vepsian territory was the Oiat’ river.

In the nineteenth century the Vepsians settled areas that extended much further north from their current territories (Strogalschikova 2014, 38; Mullonen 2003, 342-349). Scholars assume that in the first half of the first millennium the Vepsians’ ancestor tribes settled the area between Lakes Ladoga, Onega, and Beloe. “In the latter part of the first millennium of the Christian Era ... the Carelians and Vepses gradually populated the tract between lakes Ladoga and Onega” (East Carelia 1934, 35), the “Mezhozer’e” or “inter-lake area” (Strogal’shchikova 2008, 8). Nowadays “the traditional Vepsian settlement territory has shrunk greatly and occupies a narrow strip on the southwest shore of Lake Onega and the central part of Mezhozer’e” (Strogal’shchikova 2008, 9), the main northern border follows the River Svir’, and the geographical centre of the Vepsian territory is the Vepsovskaia Upland. It extends southwards from the Leningrad and Vologda Regions (Strogal’shchikova 2014, 9).

Sources from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries very clearly state that Vepsian settlements occupied a contiguous territory. This territory was on both sides of the River Svir’, in the Lake Onega shore region, as far as Vytegra and the Vologda Region in the east, and as far as Tikhvin, the Leningrad Region in the west. The Vepsian settlement of both banks of the River Svir’ is of great significance in understanding the scale of industrial influence on Vepsian life.

A Finnish source of 1921 describes the Vepsian territory as a narrow strip of the Lake Onega coastline (in Finnish, the villages of Khimjoki, Kaskeza, Kalajoki, and Soutjärvi), a large area south of the Svir’, near the head of the River Oiat’, and, southwards, in the gubernii of Onolents, in Tikhvin and in Belozersk. In the north-eastern direction the last group of Vepsian villages was on the road between Vytegra and Kargopol (Homen 1921, 122).

In my research period, the 1920s and 1930s, the Vepsian territory was described thus:

[The Vepsians] settled chiefly in the area between lakes Valgetjärvi (Bjelozero) and Onega, the eastern valley of the Sviräri and all along the south side of the Sviräri from Ladoga to the vicinity of Tikhvin. In East Carelia the Vepses settled on the south-west shore of Lake Onega, near the source of the Sviräri. Here they form a separate
district, the District of Soutjarvi, where they lead a relatively primitive existence (East Carelia 1934, 44).

Official statistics based on the Soviet census state that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the maximum number of Vepsians recorded was 33,000, in 1926 (Ianson 1929, 6; Strogal’shchikova 2008, 10).

The Vologda Region Vepsians and their place in the present research should be briefly discussed. The Vologda Region as an administrative district was founded ten years after my research period, in 1937. The Vologda Region was allocated some parts of the Leningrad Region and a part of the former Severnaia Region, lands settled by the Vepsians. An administrative boundary separated the Leningrad Region Vepsians from those of the Vologda Region (Petukhov 1989, 59). In other words, centres densely populated by the Vepsians, such as Oshta, Babaev, and Cherepovets, were transferred from the Leningrad to the Vologda Region. My research therefore refers principally to the Vepsians of the Leningrad Onega Regions, as they were known in the 1920s.

In 1937 the Oshta Vepsians of the Shimozero area in the Leningrad Region, numbering between five and eight thousand (Petukhov 1989, 59) became Vologda Region Vepsians. In the 1960s the abolition of the large Vepsian Shimozeria district, one of the centres of Vepsian culture, and the resettlement of the population to various districts in Russia destroyed Vepsian centres in Vologda Region.

The road signage situation in the former Vepsian settlements of the Babaev district, Vologda region, is described by researchers thus: “On the Vepsovskaia Upland … there are few roads, and they are not marked on maps. … The roads are not bad, but at the same time there are no road signs” (Zheltov 2005). This indicates the strategic importance of this area because of its functioning prison and the probable existence of strategic facilities.

Most of the Vepsian population is settled at the conjunction of the boundaries of Lodeinoe Pole, Cherepovetsk, and the Leningrad Region, in rural and swampy territories. Most Vepsians are in the Lodeinoe Pole district (16,484 people), where they inhabit the Vinnitsy, Oshta, Oiat’ districts; in Cherepovetsk they inhabit the Efimovo and Shol’sky districts (5,357 people); in the Leningrad Region, they inhabit the Kapshinskii district (2,202 people) (Ianson 1929, 12).

Vytaera is a regional administrative centre, and the Vologda Region Vepsians’ Oshta sel’sovet, or rural administrative unit, formed part of it. The latter was abolished in the 1960s. The largest Vepsian villages in the Vologda Region are now Timoshino and Piazhelska, with a population of 200.

After the abolition of the Vepsian villages in the Vologda Region, the formerly prosperous Vepsian territories of Shimozeria have not even been referred to as formerly Vepsian. Moreover, they are not even referred to as inhabited. A
population that was in 1932 classified as a well-preserved group is now, following
large-scale forced resettlement, not mentioned at all. “As a result of historical
events, dispersed in isolation, separated from other peoples by numerous lakes,
rivers, hills, and forests, they have preserved, with the persistence inherited from
the Finnish peoples, their specific ethnic traits, and even their language, albeit
strongly influenced by Russian, to this day” (Makar’ev 1932, 3).

The Vepsian population is today linked to just two locations: the Onega
settlements, and the Leningrad Region settlements south of the River Svir’
(Mullonen 1989, 85-86), administratively part of the districts of Tikhvin, Lodeinoe
Pole, and Podporozhie. Of the eastern border of the Vepsian territory, which almost
vanished in the Vologda Region, scholars noted that in the “ethnic contact zone ...
the Russians’ ethnic territory expanded drastically due to the assimilation of
Vepsian settlements” (Iliukha & Mullonen 2008, 105).

As mentioned above, various historical sources contain names of now non-
existent Vepsian settlements which are not mentioned by any Vepsian researcher.
Population data for Shimozeria, Ivina, Kushtozero, Pelkaska, Pustynka, and other
places from Russian national censuses from the late nineteenth century to 1926 can
exhibit hidden population trends. Current politically correct publications on the
Vepsians merely mention that those settlements, each of which was actually a
group of smaller settlements, “have emptied in the past forty-five years” (Iliukha &
Mullonen 2008, 104), without specifying the reasons.

In 1925, in an article entitled “Cartography and illustrations in regional history”,
V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shanski declared that regional history should begin by
mapping the region, and that maps and illustrations should comprise at least half of
all texts. In the following decades Soviet historians and geographers, especially in
the European part of Russia, did not follow this recommendation, however: “[B]y
then existing maps had become obsolete, and the composition of new ones met
with insurmountable difficulties. One of these was rooted in the start of the spread
of the forced labour camp system in these regions; it became impossible to get
reliable information or take photographs” (Koreneva 2009, 122). In seeking to
understand transitions in everyday Vepsian life and get a general picture of
Vepsian territory, I therefore searched all possible published sources, looking for
and copying the names of settlements known to be Vepsian so as to draw new
maps.

Soviet and post-Soviet ethnographic perceptions of the Vepsians and Vepsian
everyday life published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries simply
cite the limited ethnographic material from the 1930s or cite each other. The
coopying from work to work of a mistake in a source, featuring Rozov’s 1931 article,
is regrettable. The description of the 1920s and 1930s is simply supplemented with
fieldwork material on traditions maintained, types of housing, feasts and
ceremonies, songs, language, and folklore. The descriptive and theoretical approach
is narrow, yet full of detail and classifications.
Works on Vepsian ethnography and cultural issues are numerous. For example, on the Karelian groups of the Onega shore Vepsians alone there is a long list of materials by K. K. Loginov, entitled “Ethnographic Data on Vepsians in the Scientific Archive of the Karelian Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences” (Loginov 2011, 120-163), which could be used as an index of all relevant ethnographic materials in Karelia. The main works worthy of mention are Heikkinen & Mullonen (1994), Pimenov (1965, 1989), Strogal’shchikova (2008, 2011), and Vinokurova (1999, 2006).

The main topics of Vepsian ethnography are everything that is seen as an element of a ‘traditional’ lifestyle: archaeology, ethnic development, regional dispersion, economic instruments, language, musical and folkloric traditions, etc. Strictly speaking, this mainstream approach treats the Vepsians as if they were an isolated population, removed from national political processes which merely slightly influenced the diminishing elements of their traditional everyday lifestyle, as if the state influenced everyday life via just one or another national policy.

Oral sources state that during the twentieth century Vepsian families were large, with between five and eight children on average (Lena, interview, 2015), both prior to the Second World War and up to the 1960s. Speaking about the 1920s a 68 year-old respondent said: “Families had at least five or six people. My mother’s cousin, my aunt, gave birth to 14 children, and only one survived before the war. … My mother was the eldest of eight” (Vera, interview, 2015).

### 3.3 EVERYDAY OCCUPATIONS BEFORE 1930

Most publications on Vepsian ethnography, when dealing with the period before the Soviet modernisation of the late 1920s, start with the fact that the life of the Vepsian peasant was restricted by the rural commune. “The commune managed the division of land, collective construction, reconstruction and agricultural works, hiring for jobs, and so on. It owned harvesting and fishing grounds and forests… Large families spanning three or four generations were preserved by the Vepsians until the mid-1930s” (Strogal’shchikova, 2014, 99). Semenov (1900, 456) and twentieth-century Soviet ethnographers such as Pimenov (1957) note clearly that there was no everyday economic activity which could be characterised as authentically Vepsian. All activities could be practised by other ethnic groups, and were practised by Russians.

The Vepsian lifestyle and economic activities depended completely on the natural environment: short summers, long winters, poor soil, forested lands, marshes, lakes, and rivers. Therefore, in describing Vepsian economic activities I rely on descriptions from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, materials from Vepsian newspapers of the 1920s, and some comparative material from my fieldwork interviews.
The aim of this chapter is not to provide microscopic descriptions of all possible economic activities of the Vepsians up to the 1920s. Instead, this kind of survey feeds into the subsequent discussion of the influence of modernisation on all facets of life, and on all minor economic activities at all levels of participation in the economy.

Indigenous everyday activities included slash-and-burn farming and seasonal activities. Major seasonal activities included timber forestry (logging and floating), quarrying, and hewing. Then there was the manufacture of wares from glass, wood, leather, stone, and tin, stove installation, cooping, and harness-making. Families supported themselves through hunting, fishing, and gathering berries and mushrooms.

The ethnographic literature does not explain or analyse the transformation in Vepsian agriculture after 1930. This painful long-term transformation is not mentioned at all. There is a single mention of the fact that until the 1920s the Vepsians practised three-field and slash-and-burn farming, after which these practices gave way to multi-field farming. However, this transformation process was in reality much more complicated for all Soviet ethnic groups.

The literature states that the Vepsians practised various types of agriculture: slash-and-burn (Strogal’schikova 2014, 100) and three-fields (Beznin 2005). During the first half of the twentieth century the ratio of agricultural systems (three-fields to slash-and-burn agriculture) was different in various parts of the territory. The ratio also varied over time.

The existence of both systems is attested to by newspapers from the end of the 1920s. At the turn of the century Semenov wrote that the Vepsian territories were similar to the Russian agricultural regions. In the Ononets gubernia and in some places in the St Petersburg gubernia stone-age agriculture was widely practised, known as ‘forest-field’, or ‘liadinnaia’ (forgotten field with a young forest), or the slash-system (Semenov 1900, 137). All were characterised by cutting and burning the forest to create a field, and turning the fields back to forest. In the Ononets gubernia the most popular was the ‘forest-field’ system, conditioned both by the abundance of forest and the shortage of arable soil, as the terrain was rocky, marshy, and forested. After the peasants were allocated land within certain boundaries by the state, the number of ‘liadinnaia’ plots decreased, and the traditional ‘slashing’ agriculture died out. The plots in the forest were mainly used for such northern crops as barley and turnip. Further south there were also oat and spring rye, and further south still winter rye, flax, and summer wheat were grown. Other sources, however, mention that the Vepsians did not work with flax because of the climate. Semenov noted that flax could be grown on burnt forest plots or agricultural lands if the soil had been richly fertilised and had been under clover.

On newly burnt areas people cultivated turnip, and in the second year some crops, for example, rye. In the third year the slashed territory was either left fallow or given over to oats, without the expectation of a large harvest. In the 1920s new
plants came to the Oiat’ villages. Gardens grew “potatoes, then onion, and a little swede and cabbage. Carrots, beetroots, and cucumbers were almost absent. ... In Shimozeria cucumbers had been planted since 1924, at a time when they were unknown in the Oiat’ region. ... Still, the number of vegetables in the region was quite limited for a long time” (Beznin 2005). Potatoes became a staple for Vepsians of all regions, but ethnographic notes by Fomin (Svetliak), in the newspaper Krestianskoe slovo, show that introducing potatoes to the Shimozeria Vepsians was not easy. “Potatoes were called ‘devil’s eggs’, which led to the ‘potato strike’. Even though this opinion about potatoes is now outdated, this useful root crop is not widely cultivated, perhaps because the clay soil does not produce a good crop” (Svetliak 1927d, 2).

St Petersburg gubernia was a cattle-rearing area. This involved growing fodder on agricultural lands which used crop rotation. By the turn of the century the peasants started grass cultivation. The soil of this region was poor in nutrients. There was a direct connection between agricultural results and cattle, as the lack of cattle manure called for the use of human dung, peat, and turf. Human dung was widely traded along the River Neva and around the Gulf of Finland. In Vepsian agriculture, peat was widely replaced by cattle manure.

Before the 1920s cattle-rearing was traditionally poorly developed because of the lack of pasture, with cattle being mostly important as a source of fertiliser. The scale of cattle-rearing prior to the 1920s varied by territory. There is no data on large prosperous farms, however: poor soil, both for crops and hay, was the problem. In some Vepsian villages there were cattle, horses, sheep, goats, and poultry, but in some there were no cattle at all. With regard to cattle-rearing, the following citation from 1931 illustrates the lack of grass fields:

_Farmland in the village of Shokozero are poor both in crop fields and pasture. Hay is gathered on the marshlands, and from the sedge and sedge-moss on the banks of rivers and lakes. Often one must mow hay standing ankle-deep in water. The hay can only be removed in winter, and until winter it stays there, placed high on the built wooden crossbars, called zarody locally. As the hay is rigid and nutrient-poor, it needs to be prepared in large quantities_” (Agapova 1931, 157).

Agricultural modernisation and the centralised Soviet economy brought compulsory agriculture and cattle-rearing to the Vepsian territories. A Soviet scholar has pointed out that the Onega Vepsians still had low cattle headcounts, and “the only poultry they have are chickens; there is no waterfowl at all, even though they would seem to be very convenient because of the nearby Lake Onega and the large number of small inner lakes” (Pimenov 1957, 158).

My interviews with Leningrad Region Vepsians showed that in the second half of the twentieth century the milk industry had become relatively developed. “Those were the largest sovkhozy. ... There were up to a thousand head of cattle in each
village. ... Mother said that under Khrushchev they also planted maize. ... But every single household had a cow. ... As children we would stand behind the fence counting the bulls; in each [sovhoz] there were nine or ten of them” (Lena, interview, 2015). Even the distant Vepsian villages like Miagozero had a small creamery: “It produced milk, cream and butter ... sometime in the sixties. Butter came in round containers. ... Milk was separated and taken to Ózëra, where the butter was made” (Liudmila, interview, 2015).

In some areas, for example among the Leningrad Region Vepsians, both men and women knitted wool with needles. These tools are now on display in the museums of Podporozhe and Kurba. This occupation is a rare example of an ethnic trait which differentiates everyday Vepsian life from that of the Russians.

Seasonal or migratory work had a special place in the Vepsian economy, regardless of the location of the group, as it does in my work. Two essential seasonal activities for the Vepsian economy were forestry and quarrying. Semenov (1900) ranks forestry as the most important local economic activity. The forestry or timber business encompassed felling, preparation, and trade of firewood and other forest materials, and transportation and log driving. This domestic industry was equally accessible to peasants with and without horses. Those with horses mainly looked after transporting wood to the log-driving departure points, while those without horses were engaged in felling. The bulk of this kind of work was done during autumn and summer, as these seasons were not busy for peasants. In the Vepsian territories these activities were popular because of the abundance of forests and waterways for log driving.

Peasants in some places caught the driftwood that came loose from the log driving. This driftwood was bundled and sold back to the same wood dealers. Sometimes workers were hired for this. My analysis shows that Vepsian forestry work was seasonal or migratory work and done by men. A Soviet ethnographer has even mentioned this in his description of Vepsian traditional life: “To earn money to buy the bread brought by traders to the settlement of Voznesenie, Vepsians left to earn money from migratory work (burlakod). There was not one family from which somebody did not leave for migratory work in the summer. It is noteworthy that Vepsian and neighbouring Russian areas had migratory work seasons lasting from May through to the middle of November. Even during the hay harvest migrant workers did not return home to work the family land. Because seasonal work was done by men, all the agricultural work was left for women. ... Those men (a small number) who did not leave were laughed at” (Pimenov 1957, 159).

River transport and cab driving were the second most common type of seasonal or migratory work. The riverboat business involved three types of people: the boat owner, the waged worker on the boat, and the barge hauler. Waged workers loaded, reloaded, and unloaded the boats. All these activities were widespread among the Vepsians, and generally in all areas dense with waterways. In 1898, for example, in the Voznesenie district of the Vepsian settlements, barge haulers were
officially replaced by horses. This horse business had to follow strict regulations concerning prices, in accordance with the four agricultural seasons. Before this, the barge-hauler occupation had weak price regulation and very low pay. The cab driving business was more developed in the districts close to towns and cities, especially regions without railways stations in the countryside around St Petersburg. “The Svir’ feeds many people: one man works as a pilot, another as a steamship captain, another as an ordinary sailor. The fields go dry when their owner does not cultivate them. In the fields, only women work, but they do not even work – they struggle. Those who are more prosperous, captains or pilots, hire day-workers from among the poor for land cultivation and crop harvesting. In the village there are a few widows who struggled with their own land and then became day-workers” (Aristarov 1929, 2).

Old newspapers contain unexpected reports of a seasonal activity – pearl fishing in the River Svir’. In 1927 a long newspaper article, “Our peasant’s migratory jobs. Pearl fishing” (Promysly 1927, 2) was published. This ended with the canalisation of the River Svir’, when river-based economic activities ceased. Surprisingly, works on Vepsian ethnography do not describe this activity.

Published sources, press, and ethnographic materials show that migrant workers were occupied in earthworks, the manufacture of wares from glass, ceramics, wood, leather, stone, and tin, stove installation, cooping, and harness-making. A respondent from Podporozhie said that in the 1930s his grandfather escaped execution by the local authorities for providing boat transportation across the Svir’ to everyone, including labour camp escapees, only because he was a high-class shoemaker. “He was famous throughout the whole region for making nice, durable boots which did not get wet, even in the marshes. … The local authorities appreciated such masters and tried not to destroy them” (Pëtr, interview, 2015).

The location of certain natural resources influenced such activities as pottery. In Nadporozhie pottery began as an industry around 1865. “The first potter was Efim Agapitov. Before this craft emerged wooden utensils that were in general use. In Nadporozhie there are now twelve potteries, the potters work as craftsmen, and it is a pity that they do not unite into one organisation; then the business would develop more rapidly. As an organisation, they could purchase machines like the ones Fok has at his factory, or they could build an entire factory” (Svetliak 1927a, 2). The same article comments that Fok was a private businessman who had a ceramics factory near Nadporozhie. He supplied the entire St Petersburg market with his production.

Before it was industrially harnessed and canalised, the River Svir’ was called a ‘provider’. Every household on the Svir’ depended on the river and its economic activities. Almost the entire population was involved in preparing firewood for the 10,000 steamships which navigated the river annually (Pëtr, interview, 2015). There were also rich fishing resources. The closure of fishing resources and activities to the local population after canalisation was a direct environmental impact of
industrialisation. The diet of both Svir’ and Onega Vepsians included fish in various forms. Dry fish replaced flour because of the lack of grain. Fishing was less important for the other Leningrad Region Vepsian groups: “Fishing was only for ourselves. There we did not have such a fish-rich lake. The collective farm owned a net and there was some net fishing” (Nikolai, interview, 2015).

Farming is known as a prime Vepsian economic activity, yet the forestry and fishing industries were very important for the Karelian Vepsians. On May 7, 1931 in the “Resolution by the Karelian Regional Committee of the Communist Party on the Struggle with Capitalist Elements and Collectivisation Tasks”, Karelian Vepsian settlements were classified as “Group IV of mixed economy regions, which have all three types of economy (agriculture, forestry, and fishing in equal proportion)” (Ivnitskii & Makurov 1991, 135). These activities were seasonally distributed and structured by community so that labour was always available and profit shared between households.

When Vepsians were asked about their traditional food, they replied that the land was so poor that traditional food was “orach (lebeda) and unpeeled potatoes” (Liudmila, interview, 2015). This is what people remember from their childhoods in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. One women said of her childhood in Miagozero in the 1980s and 1990s: “When we wanted something good, aunt Vera would take an axe and cut a birch; it would fall down, she would chop it with an axe, and she would scrape it with a wooden scratcher into a water can. Shkvarki was sweet birch bark juice. We ate it with a spoon, all from one dish” (Olga, interview, 2015).

At local industrial construction sites bread and salted fish were delicacies in the 1930s and 1950s. This is explained by this region’s constant bread shortages. “Therefore, up to the mid-twentieth century people were baking bread half-and-half with pine flour” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). Salted herring was often brought to construction sites. This part of the Leningrad Region was so poor and remote that when, after the war, some local shops started selling tomato paste, people did not initially buy any because they did not know what it was or what to do with it. It experienced a sudden boom in popularity when its application as samovar polish was discovered. (Pëtr, interview, 2015).

Even later, in the 1970 and 1980s, Leningrad Region villages were poor producers of cabbage, for example. Russian researchers refer to the success of Soviet agriculture and the positive results of using new chemical fertilisers (Egovor 2014, 70) for vegetables after the 1960s. However, this overlooks the deficit in vegetables. In the 1980s a resident of Leningrad visited Alekhovschina, Leningrad Region. She knew this region, especially Niubenichi, very well as for decades the Leningrad Forest Technical Academy had sent its students there to work the land. In the 1950s the local collective farms had some potato fields. The Forest Technical Academy students had to harvest the potatoes. They never knew who had planted them, as the local population had nothing to do with those fields. She had been there a few times for this potato work, and now she wanted to see the changes. She
did not find any changes, except for the impossibility of visiting Niubenichi due to the poor roads. She stayed in Alekhovschina and went to see people in the chainaia or tea shop. This tea shop was full of people. Suddenly somebody shouted, “It’s arrived!”, and the tea shop emptied in a moment: it was a car with cabbages for sale (Marina, interview, 2015).

Before the changes brought by modernisation at the end of the 1920s the Vepsians’ economic activities were varied. Despite the poor soils and cold climate there was a certain amount of agriculture and cattle-rearing. The proximity of St Petersburg/Leningrad made migratory labour possible. Some of these activities, such as agriculture, forestry, and mining, were transformed by modernisation into large-scale industries; some, such as fishing, and cattle-rearing on individual farms, reduced in scale; while some, such as migratory work, disappeared. There was not a single activity, however, that was not influenced by modernisation.

### 3.4 SUMMARY

The Vepsian territory before 1926 was contiguous, stretching from the chain of Onega settlements in the north covering both banks of the River Svir’, in the east, to settlements in Vyegra in the Vologda Region, and in the south, to part of the Tikhvin district of the Leningrad Region. By the research period some of these territories had been settled by pure Vepsian populations, but some (including the River Svir’ area) were settled by mixed populations, consisting mainly of Vepsians, Karelians, and Russians. It is therefore incorrect to call the Vepsians of the 1920s and later a purely rural group. In the 1960s and 1970s rural-urban migration, following the granting of passports to collective farm workers escalated this process. When the Vepsians are not viewed as a simply rural population, the view of the effect of modernisation on this ethnic group in all three directions – sovietisation, industrialisation, and collectivisation – changes significantly. As an essential part of Vepsian culture, traditional occupations unite the ethnic group via communally established everyday activities and community ties.
4 PILLARS OF MODERNISATION: ‘SOVIETISATION’

4.1 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MODERNISATION

Since the Soviet Union was the first socialist state in the world, its leaders had no example to follow. “Marxism provided a basic outline of the socioeconomic principles that would underlie a socialist society – class warfare with the agents of capitalism, collective ownership of the means of production, and the abolition of private property. But Marxist doctrine did not provide a concrete set of cultural guidelines for life under socialism” (Hoffman 2003, 4).

“Marx had held that the prerequisite for the establishment of a socialist society was the existence of a modern industrial economy employing a class-conscious industrial working class. But Communist power had been established in a peasant country” (Davies 1998, 30). The Soviet leaders therefore concluded, that the communist political superstructure must itself build a modern industry and society.

The process of the establishment of a new Soviet culture and new values was complex. All matters, including cultural issues, were in the hands of the supreme political council of the ruling Communist Party, the Politburo. The Politburo “set up a network of institutions and control mechanisms to oversee cultural production and the promulgation of official norms and values” (Hoffman 2003, 5). Therefore, the Soviet culture was shaped by “social scientists, medical researchers, pedagogues, artists, and censors” (Hoffman 2003, 5).

“We are accustomed to the idea that the First Five-Year Plan laid the foundations for Stalinist industrialisation, just as collectivization laid the foundations for Stalinist agriculture. It should surely be recognized that cultural revolution was an equally important part of what has been called the ‘Stalin revolution’” (Fitzpatrick 1978, 11). In other words, discussion of Soviet modernisation would not be complete without the study of social changes – the process of sovietisation.

Modernising changes in the life of society could not be limited simply to industrialisation and collectivisation influences. New policy in social and cultural life was at the core of Marxist-Leninist materialism, dividing ‘material foundations’ (material’naia osnova) and ‘spiritual culture’ (dukhovnaia kul’tura). The material foundations of society’s existence were accomplished through a social-cultural superstructure. The previous superstructure of the capitalist base had to be eliminated and replaced by a socialist superstructure. “Old political, legal, and other institutions, consequently, have been supplanted by new, socialist institutions” (Yurchak 2006, 44). “The disappearance of the metadiscourse on ideology affected all spheres of cultural production in the Soviet Union. It had a
particular impact on the nature of ideological language and ritual” (Yurchak 2006, 47). This new Soviet spiritual culture had to be mastered. “Culture was something to be mastered, like virgin lands and foreign technology. But what was culture? In the 1920s, there had been heated arguments among Communist intellectuals on that question” (Fitzpatrick 1999, 79).

The creation of the new Soviet culture therefore had to influence all layers of society. It had to include all forms of societal life from new institutions to new education and new ideology. It has been outlined above that a similar process of modernisation was familiar in many other parts of the world. Thus, “the Soviet civilizing mission was construed in very similar terms to that of other European nations among backward native peoples, although it should be noted that in the Soviet case the ‘backward elements’ included Russian peasants” (Fitzpatrick 1999, 80). This fight against backwardness was directed at the rural population, including Russian peasants and non-Russian ethnic groups, regardless of the size of their populations, that is, whether they were ethnic minorities or large groups.

This modernisation in social and cultural institutions posed new challenges and caused unstable balances, because “one of the central paradoxes of the Soviet system was that social and cultural modernisation ultimately outstripped economic modernisation, for which the centrally planned economy proved effective at one stage but obstructive later on” (Kangaspuro & Smith 2006, 13). The same imbalances were seen in the social life of rural people. For example, on the one hand, modernisation had to be easily understood by peasants, communicated in their language, on the other, Russian became the only language for sovietisation.

Modernisation in national politics was part of the modernisation of the social and cultural superstructure. “There were two main objectives to involving the representatives of the minority nations into their ‘own’ Republic’s governance: the first, to obtain the (minority) population’s consent for the new regime and integrate it into the state building process, and second, to transform the old social and political relations and establish a new Soviet order” (Kangaspuro 2006, 46). This modernisation in national policy varied from the korenizatsia policy of the 1920s and 1930s to the unification of nationalism, when Russians became the core nation and politically defined Soviet supra-identity in the 1930s and later (Kangaspuro 2006, 46).

“Official disregard for the integrity of the cultures and identities of the Soviet nationalities was succinctly expressed in the Stalinist dictum ‘national in form, socialist in content’. National identities would be tolerated, that is to say, only to the extent that they could be shaped and controlled by the central authorities” (Bassin & Kelly 2012, 4). Marx’s principle that class solidarity should override tribal bonds was still alive.

The task of modernising society and to “civilise the ‘backward’ peasant minority nationalities” (Kangaspuro 2006, 47) defined the korenizatsia period of the 1920s. “Optimistic prognoses concerning the future of peoples were connected to the
policy of the national-state building in the 1920s – first half of the 1930s. … [T]he status of the ethno-territorial unit was supported by the policy of korenizatsia conducted up to the middle of 1930s” (Klement’ev 2007, 12). “Both federalisation and korenizatsia represented elements of the equalisation aspect of Soviet nationality policy, which clearly accelerated the pace of nationalisation and an emerging ‘sense of exclusiveness’ regarding the indigenes’ perceived standing in their own homelands” (Kaiser 1994, 95). According to this policy, by the end of the 1920s the Vepsians of the Leningrad Region were seen as an ethnic minority, and in the Leningrad Region 90% of the Vepsian population were united in ethnic regional and rural councils (Klement’ev 2007, 12). There were also further plans for the foundation of other Vepsian ethnic regions.

“From the 1930s all Soviet citizens were required to maintain a sort of dual identity that was inscribed in their internal passports: on one level as Soviet citizens but more especially as members of a specific nationality who belonged to a particular national territory” (Bassin & Kelly 2012, 4). This first level, Soviet citizenship, was seen as an affective attachment to local nationality identities (Bassin & Kelly 2012, 5).

According to the decisions of the 2nd All-Russian Congress on work among ethnic minorities in June 1928, the interests of ethnic minorities were not only taken into consideration; rather, the larger work of the Communist Party was planned to improve all aspects of their lives. It included assistance both in economic and cultural development, and in rapid land reorganisation (Ianson 1929, 65). “[t]o establish a more differential approach in serving every single nationality, taking into consideration specifics of their lifestyle, and the economic and cultural level of their development … [and] [t]o continue to separate ethnic minorities into special administrative-territorial units, in order to complete this process in 1930” (Ianson 1929, 66).

In the Leningrad Region the book Natsional’nye men’shinstva Leningradskoi oblasti (Ianson 1929) was published with the aim of ensuring the successful modernisation of national policy. This volume provided a detailed analysis of ethnic groups living in the Leningrad Region, their ‘cultural level’, the location of their main settlements, their economic activities, and social-professional strata (Ianson 1929, 5). This analysis was done in order to “adjust corresponding Soviet organs to serve them and to engage working minorities in everyday activities” (Ianson 1929, 5). “The practical adjustment of the Soviet apparatus to serve minority interests, careful attention of Soviet organs to this work, and the engagement of the wider minority population in Soviet construction will result in the further cultural-economic rise of ethnic minorities” (Ianson 1929, 34). The main specific characteristic of modernisation policy among ethnic minorities of the Leningrad Region was the dispersive settlement of most representatives of ethnic minorities among the Russian population.
The following were emphasized as special achievements in work with the indigenous population of the Leningrad Region by 1929: the official work of 28 rural councils (sel’sovety) was translated into the national languages; meetings and councils in national rural councils were held in native languages; and court departments for ethnic minorities served them in their own languages (Ianson 1929, 29). “In 1928 and 1929 the Regional Department of Public Health planned practical actions to serve indigenous minorities, especially culturally backward ones. Of the planned ones, some are already fulfilled: for the Vepsian population of Efimovskii District (Cherepovets okrug) an emergency department has been opened, and in the same district one medical assistant clinic has been transformed into an emergency department” (Ianson, 1929, 32). Similar changes were listed for other settlements.

One of the most important tasks of the Communist Party was to arrange executive and communist organ elections in the region. To engage ethnic minorities in the elections of 1927 and 1929, the campaign had to be conducted in their native languages. To do this, work on literacy in minority languages was intensified. In 1929 in the Leningrad Region the entire election campaign, consisting of various meetings, was held in minority languages (Ianson 1929, 33).

In this sense the process of introducing Soviet ideology, policy, societal life, and culture among Vepsians was similar to the other ethnic minorities of Northwest Russia. To serve an accelerated modernisation these processes had to be done in the Vepsian language. Local citizens remember this being discussed, and it was covered by newspapers in the early Soviet years.

Repeatedly I had to participate in the meetings (get-togethers) of the population not only in my own village, but also in the neighbouring villages of Afonino and Fenkovo, with the representative of Raikom and Raisispolkom⁴, Andrey Ivanovich Khokhlov, who had belonged to the Party since 1924 and who worked at the raifo⁵. He took me with him, not only as a companion, but because my presence was necessary – it was not safe to travel to villages as an activist, especially in the evening; it was also most important that these villages, as well as the majority of other villages, except Vinnitsy, Gonginichi and Chikozero rural councils, were settled exclusively by Vepsians, many of whom did not speak Russian or understand it (Lodygina 2010, 21).

Speeches by Raikom or Raisispolkom representatives were usually followed by questions and discussion in Vepsian.

In 1931 the demand for the Vepsian language was topical for the construction of the ‘new life’ and necessary for the introduction of Soviet policies, including collectivisation. The issue was covered in newspaper articles about the necessity to speak Vepsian during the re-election campaigns for the sovety (councils): “Speak

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⁴ Regional Committee of the Communist Party and Executive Committee of the Communist Party.
⁵ Regional Department of Finances.
clearly and understandably for everyone – do not ignore the national language of the Vepsians” (Sheltozero 1931, 1).

In this period the leadership in collective farms was often filled by people sent by the Communist Party from central cities and towns – the so-called people “from the raion” (district). “Speaking at the congress against the candidacy of Ryabinkin, who was nominated by VKP(b) as head of the RIK (the Regional Executive Committee), Petrik said: ‘Ryabinkin is not Chud’ (the native population of that region is Chud’): he would not be able to sense the needs of the population; besides, he is rude and in Gornee Sheltozero he threatened that if 700 rubles in agricultural taxation were lacking, it would be necessary to put the guilty in prison...” (Makurov 1997, 98).

One of the most important tasks of modernisation through sovietisation was the elimination of illiteracy among the non-Russian population through teaching in the native language. In 1931 in the Leningrad Region work began on the written Vepsian language, training teachers for Vepsian schools, and for the management of such schools. In February 1931 the first Vepsian written language was created in the Latin alphabet, and in 1932 the first school textbook was published. During the period of the existence of the written Vepsian language about 30 textbooks were published, mainly translated from Russian (Klement’ev 2007, 13).

By the end of 1932 school education in Vepsian had started, and “by 1935-36 this process was completed, providing primary and secondary education in the Vepsian language” (Klement’ev 2007, 13). After 1932 the Lodeinoe Pole and Domozhirovo teaching colleges, as well as intensive courses, were preparing teachers for Vepsian schools. Educational policy in the Republic of Karelia differed from that in the Leningrad Region. The Vepsian schools of the Leningrad Region began teaching in Vepsian only in 1937.

This process was interrupted in 1938, when teaching in native languages was abolished both in Karelia and the Leningrad Region and those national schools were accused of nationalism. The main school subjects, except history, culture, and language, were taught in Russian (Klement’ev 2007, 13). These sovietisation processes also included the prohibition of the use of Vepsian at official meetings.

By the end of the 1930s all these activities were ended and revived only in 1989 (Zaitseva 2003, 352). The reasons for the unsuccessful policy of ‘korenizatsia’ are indicated in foreign policy decisions.

According to the principles of the ‘korenizatsia’ policy in Karelia its application to Karelians and Vepsians did not fulfil the main aim towards non-Russian peoples, which was the creation of a written language and the development of a culture based on native languages. Foreign policy was a determining factor. On the eve of the Second World War this territory was seen as a possible theatre of military operations. National schools and national-territorial constitutions, especially for the representatives of the national minorities perceived as potential enemies in the approaching war
– the Germans, Finns, and the peoples related to them – were eliminated as a preventative measure against the ‘fifth column’. Living on the border was already a basis for repression, in particular in the form of forced relocation (Strogalschikova 2016, 101).

“The move away from korenizatsia and toward international integration through Russification in the latter part of the 1930s was in large part a reaction by the central authorities against rising national territoriality and separatism” (Kaiser 1994, 95). Russian ethnographers (Klement’ev 2007, 13) call this first period ‘the period of Vepsian national rebirth’ (Klement’ev 2007, 13). My research shows that it would be more proper to call this period ‘the first stage of sovietisation’. All social and cultural changes in Vepsian society were necessitated by the requirements of the Soviet state and Soviet modernisation. The driving forces for linguistic, educational, and cultural changes originated in the needs of Soviet modernisation and the state’s political structure. The second stage of sovietisation turned out to be markedly consequential for many of the country’s ethnic minorities. For the Vepsian population it brought drastic changes to the existence of their society.

4.2 EROSION OF SOCIETY

The role of assimilation in the path of the development of indigenous communities has been evaluated by anthropologists with regard to different periods of history of aboriginal groups. In the twentieth century, for example, it has been noted concerning the industrial development of Canadian indigenous groups that:

> it seemed clear, however, that both separatism and assimilation were undesirable and unworkable. … [A]s the separatist alternative meant giving up the products of modern industrial society, few aboriginals would have preferred it. At the same time, assimilation seemed impossible, not only because white racism would not have permitted it but also because many aboriginals did not want to abandon their native languages and other aspects of their traditional cultures (Bartels & Bartels 1995, x).

Such attention to assimilation is impossible in the case of Soviet society. Under the centralised policy of building a new culture, the erosion of traditional society and assimilation happened in everyday life and economic activities.

This erosion was so present in the everyday life of Soviet indigenous groups that foreign scholars sometimes even classified it thus: they “did not face the false choice of assimilation or separation. They could pursue industrial or other non-traditional occupations in their own regions without giving up their language and culture” (Bartels & Bartels 1995, x).
...The process of the Russification of villages near Voznesenie was completed after it had lost its role as an important trading centre on the Svir’ river during the Soviet period. This role was transferred to Lodeinoe Pole. Gradually it led to a divide between the Onega Vepsians and the Vepsians living above the Svir’ river. Before the 1950s Vepsian settlements located beyond the Svir’ river made up a solid ethnic unit (Strogal’schikova 2014, 13).

This might be seen as mutually beneficial political correctness in application to the process of cultural erosion, and as avoiding the real scale of the process. Furthermore, my research aims at defining the tendencies of the influence of Soviet modernisation on indigenous groups throughout the USSR – being involved in directions of modernisation (industrialisation, collectivisation, sovietisation) and being pressed by newcomers (the system of prison camps and their successors). And “assessing gains and losses from assimilation or non-assimilation is, like the concept of structural/cultural integration, inadequate for dealing with relations between northerners and non-northerners during the Soviet period. ... This focus misses the fact that the traditional cultures of all national and ethnic groups were radically changed as a result of Soviet state policy” (Bartels & Bartels 1995, 4). Indeed, we can apply the notion of assimilation to Soviet processes only when taking into consideration mainstream sovietisation and the building of the new person regardless of his or her present status, former background, and ethnic belonging. All were consumed by the Soviet modernisation avalanche.

This does not mean, however, that this type of assimilation was more moderate or secure than the concept of assimilation used, for example, by North American social scientists. This North American vision states that “the concept of assimilation focuses on what an assimilated group retains or loses from its traditional culture and what it gains from or contributes to a ‘dominant’ culture” (Bartels & Bartels 1995, 4). In the USSR the indigenous minorities were the ones to suffer destruction in the first place (Bartels & Bartels 1995, 4).

I deliberately do not stress that this was cultural destruction; on the contrary, it was a set of complex destructive processes under the cover of modernisation. These complex processes included industrialisation, collectivisation, and the ‘building of the new person’. However, the result was that at ground level it led to the erosion of ethnic groups and large-scale invisible assimilation – both in statistics and in real life.

Here are a few words about some different views of the new Soviet person that the Vepsians had to deal with. The effect on ethnic minority groups from the industrial applications of the Gulag system was a reality from the 1920s to the 1960s, regardless of the location of exploration, the density of the local population, their lifestyle, and level of ‘civilisation’. On the large scale the camp structure’s influence on rural settlers is hard to exaggerate. It was the White Sea-Baltic canal which gave the Russian language the term ZK (‘zek’), meaning prisoner,
‘imprisoned canal army soldier’ (zakluuchennyi kanaloarmeets), and the term perekovka (‘reforge’) in the 1930s. A ‘reforged’ prisoner was not simply a conscious and reformed former criminal, but rather a new Soviet person, perfected for the socialist system.

“In the First Five Year Plan period, the term ‘cultural revolution’ was used in a special sense, different from earlier or later Soviet usages. … The aim of cultural revolution was to create a new ‘proletarian intelligentsia’. The method of cultural revolution was class war” (Fitzpatrick 1978, 8). For example, the campaigns for the mass education of peasants were carried out simultaneously with collectivisation (Fitzpatrick 1979, 296-297).

“This cultural revolution was quite unlike Lenin’s understanding of the process as graduate and nonmilitant” (Fitzpatrick 1978, 8). Stalin’s first important thesis on the national question defined the nation as an “historically evolved, stable community of people, occurring on the basis of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (Stalin 1946, 296-297).

For the Vepsian population the process of social and cultural modernisation via the policy of korenizatsia ended with administrative changes in 1937. In September 1937 the Northern Region was divided into the Arkhangelsk and Vologda Regions. The Eastern and Northeastern districts of the Leningrad Region were transferred to the Volodga Region. Among these districts there were 9 rural districts (sel’sovety) with Vepsians as the dominant population. This amounted to almost 8,000 people (Klement’ev 2007, 13). Subsequently, in May 1938 in the Leningrad Region all national-territorial units were abolished, being considered artificially created. In the Republic of Karelia the Sheltozerskii district, settled by the Vepsians, was eliminated in 1956 (Klement’ev 2007, 13).

These general facts concerning the creation and abolition of national districts do not provide a picture of everyday Vepsian social and cultural life. As I have already cited, the volume on the indigenous minorities of the Leningrad Region, published in 1929, outlined the major complexity for the modernisation of indigenous groups because of their low population density, distant settlements, poor connections between the settlements, and dispersed settlement among the Russian population. Therefore, neither process was easy – to introduce modernisation massively to the entire Vepsian population whether in Vepsian or, after the abolition of national districts, in Russian. It was not so easy to push the process of sovietisation through, given the situation in some distant Vepsian villages.

In the 1920s many Vepsian villages were divided into two parts: one part belonged to the landlord and the other to the peasants. For example, as late as 1927, ten years after the October Revolution, the Vepsian villages of Nadporozhie were described as follows:
In smoke-houses people had splinters of light, did not know Russian, had never heard of such things as a samovar. In the old days the main activity was agriculture on slash-and-burn plots, which were becoming permanent agricultural lands. The entire village was divided into two parts: the landlord’s (with serfs) part and the free peasants’ part. It may sound strange, but this division lasted until the October Revolution, and still persists (Svetliak 1927a, 2).

In 1928 another local newspaper published a piece on a similar topic. “In earlier times the small village of Vonozero (Podporozhie district) was divided between two landlords into two landlord parts” (Koptilkin 1928, 2) (this settlement no longer exists). A publication from 1929, twelve years after the October Revolution, tells us more about such division:

It is necessary to say that Shamenichi is a real home for the gentry. Noblemen are packed in here at every step. More than half the population are noblemen. However, the noblemen are very poor, and the surname is the same for everyone – the Neelovs. … There was also one specific thing which distinguished these noble Neelovs from the very poor peasants from Tenenichi. The Neelovs had their own small forest cottages. Meanwhile, the Tenenichi peasants lacked arable land. Altogether these had generated an age-old strife. There were occasions of intermarriages between them: they married, became godparents, and yet some remained ‘noblemen’ and others ‘coarse peasants’. The Neelovs accepted the October Revolution badly (Ershov 1929, 1).

This publication is an interesting description of contemporary pure Vepsian society and the interaction within it. The article continues:

Eleven years of Revolution has passed. … Life is going differently. The city is a neighbour. Svir’s-stroi has construction sites nearby. … In the meantime, in Tenenichi and Shamenichi, nothing has visually changed. Shamenichi noblemen, now former noblemen, have ‘honey’ curtains in the windows. In the evenings, through them the light of ‘honey’ icon lamps can be seen” (Ershov 1929, 1).

This description gives a picture of the starting point for modernisation in rural districts of the Leningrad Region.

Soviet modernisation was introduced to Vepsians who still had a different attitude towards life. In 1929 the Vepsian researcher Svetliak stressed the importance of the ‘Red Corner’ place for public gatherings and the invention of a new Soviet lifestyle in Oiat’. It seemed necessary because “in the jungles of Shimozeria, in Siargozero village in Oshta district, people still believe in the power and mercy of Elijah the Prophet, and recently, in 1928, they sacrificed to him (according to pagan custom) their sheep, and like in old times, this pagan
procedure was attended by the priest, who received a bribe for his participation” (Svetliak 1929, 4). A similar description of Vepsian life was made in Liugovichi: “Eighteen kilometres from Lodeinoe Pole on a wide beaten track at the edges of a rather large lake there are several villages of the old churchyard, making one settlement. ... Eleven years after the October shake-up, somehow they miraculously contrived to conserve their godliness and their shabby former lifestyle” (Prokhozhii 1929, 4).

The realities of Vepsian life in the 1920s emerge from another article, calling on the native population to adopt a progressive lifestyle: “Siargozero, think again! Drop the pagan ritual of sacrifice” (Siargozero 1926, 3), stated an article about sheep sacrifice in Siargozero village on the feast day of the Prophet Elijah. A short description of these elements of local practices is called for to complete the picture of the unbridgeable gap between everyday Vepsian household activities on the one hand, and invented economic systems, linguistic misunderstanding, everyday life practices, and the new Soviet lifestyle on the other. This gap is impossible to escape or to overcome.

Modernisation, introducing new social and cultural life, came to the Vepsian villages with industrialisation, collectivisation, and the large-scale flow of newcomers for new (large construction sites) and old (forestry and mining) economic activities. As discussed in previous sub-chapters, this interaction was different. In the Soviet tradition, a Russian ethnographer (Egorov 2014) describes the enthusiasm and happiness of young Vepsians leaving for woodcutting work in the 1930s, “in order to have fun, to communicate with fellows from other, sometimes far distant, villages, to make new friends, and to earn real money” (Egorov 2014, 100). This time was known as the beginning of the wide structure of Svir’ camps for forest husbandry. Vepsian villages were happily opened to newcomers with an unfamiliar Russian and urban culture (Egorov 2014, 100). The word ‘newcomers’ is interesting here, since the villages often neighboured concentration camps (Bazhukov 2013, 10). Furthermore, neither before nor after the Second World War were members of collective farms eligible for any other payment for timber work than by the labour-day (trudoden’) accounting system. In 1931 the forest industrial economic units (lespromkhozy) were founded. “In the lespromkhozy the work was regularly paid. But part of the forest was assigned to collective farms. ... Collective farm members continued to receive labour-days, depending on the amount of work done” (Viktor, personal correspondence, 2016). Sometimes a labour-day could be replaced with a voucher for a piece of bread, but the piece was too small to satiate hunger.

Researchers cite the “Kolkhoznik-lesorub” newspaper (“The Collective Farm Worker-Lumberjack”) of the Efimovsky district as a principal source. A Russian ethnographer (Egorov 2014) tells us about the establishment of new settlements for forest workers who came from all over the Soviet Union. It is hard to argue with this point – prisoners from the Solovki, Gulag and Svir’lag camps, spread all over
the Vepsian lands, did indeed come. Russian and Vepsian cultures both benefited from this forestry-based communication: “It brought mutual enrichment of cultures and mutual influence in folklore, traditional worldviews, and beliefs” (Egorov 2014, 101).

The ‘new settlements of forest workers’, as they were called, are described as being located in a number of Vepsian places. They could be reached by narrow-gauge railways. People working here were ‘voluntary arrivals’. This is hard to refute. In 1929 the Lower Svir’ Hydropower construction site was begun with free voluntary arrivals’ labour, but by 1930 it became obvious that the hard soil, absence of machines, and low productivity of free labour would be unable to complete the station in any planned term.

Changes in the management of the Vepsian Onega mining settlements also brought a lot of newcomers from all over the USSR, supporting the Russification of the local population through the decades. Nowadays, the population of Sheltozero, previously known as a Vepsian settlement, is no longer purely Vepsian (Baba Zhenia, interview 2014). It took decades for modernisation and sovietisation to reach every Vepsian settlement. Unfortunately, it brought a total erosion of the Vepsian culture: little is left of the Vepsian everyday life from before 1929. This erosion is seen in language, self-identity, every small economic activity, and the way they were practised before and after Soviet modernisation. This is widely discussed in the works of those who seek to maintain and preserve Vepsian identity.

The Soviet education system established boarding schools in rural districts throughout the country. Here there is no point in evaluating this kind of education system; it exists all over the world in different conditions and forms. The Vepsian experience followed the experience of other Soviet indigenous groups.

*Boarding-schools and culture bases were important instruments of consolidation since they promoted literacy in particular northern languages and served as foci for “national” political organization. They also promoted Sovietization in so far as they exposed northern children and adults to the new Soviet way of life. (Bartels & Bartels 1995, 48).*

My fieldwork materials contain interviews about the Vepsian boarding schools of the 1960s. Children spent five days a week in the boarding schools, leaving school on Friday after classes and coming back on Sunday evenings.

All subjects were taught in Russian and it was forbidden to speak Vepsian. But the children spoke among themselves secretly in Vepsian (Liudmila, interview, 2014). Two girls of the same age originally from the same village had entirely different feelings about the school. For one of them life without her mother and grandmother was torture (Valentina, interview, 2014). Another loved the school and her life there: she had friends, food, and understanding teachers. At weekends
at home she had to work hard, helping her parents and siblings in everyday work for the *kolkhoz* and family. The parents of this large family worked hard (her father as a cowherd, her mother at the timber works) and the children had to help the parents from four in the morning (Liudmila, interview, 2014).

Decades of miserable life in rural settlements, along with hunger and poverty, resulted in things that used to be a part of Vepsian traditional life vanishing. A small example of the disappearance of beliefs is taken from my fieldwork interview with urban Vepsians who completely identify as such. In discussing hunting, respondents appeared to be fully aware of the beliefs of their ancestors. They said that it was forbidden to hunt bears or hares, but, in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s “all were hunted. Hares were hunted in winter. It was taboo to hunt elk. But on the sly all species were hunted. We needed to eat. Hares were caught alive and put in the chicken coop. … We closed the doors, cooked, and sat and ate with the doors closed” (Liudmila, interview, 2015). Hares were put in the chicken coop to hide them from other people. The countryside was a living foodstore for a large family. People also hunted bears. “There was one hunter, who lived not far from our house, Grishin Nikolai, Aunt Shura’s husband – he had slaughtered forty bears. And the fortieth bear … crushed his head and killed him” (Nikolai, interview, 2015). This gives a view of the contradiction between Vepsian knowledge of beliefs and the need to provide for Vepsian families in native villages – a real example of the erosion of Vepsian culture. There can be no simple answer to the question of how and why it happened. It was caused by modernisation through sovietisation. But the modernisation influenced the ethnic groups in a complex way from three different directions.

### 4.3 SUMMARY

The process of sovietisation woven into the net of modernisation, seen through the prism of one ethnic group’s fate, allows us to reveal the invisible mechanisms of such a well-worn notion as assimilation. After the end of the 1920s the Vepsian population declined drastically: it was not the result of the extinction of the ethnic group, the absence of ‘Vepsians’ in passports’ listed nationalities, or the outcome of the Soviet language or nationalities policy. It was a long-term process of the involvement of Vepsian ethnic groups in the modernisation stream on an everyday basis.

The process of sovietisation, initiated with special attention paid to ethnic groups’ particularities and needs, including work on written languages, at the turn of 1920s and 1930s, was short. Due to other needs of modernisation, it was halted before it could be completed. These other needs of modernisation gave priority to industrialisation and the mechanisms of an effective labour force, causing
specifically ethnic features to vanish on the path to a new Soviet life as new Soviet citizens.

When I interviewed the mother, grandfather, aunt, and uncle of my respondent’s daughter in Vyborg, who is in her twenties, it became an event. Although she sees them almost every day and is their only granddaughter, she knew nothing about their Vepsian life and their rural Vepsian past. After my interview she seemed to be in shock, and she thanked me for opening something that she had never known. Of course, she is half-Russian. But that is where the Vepsian roots end, and the map becomes empty of Vepsian locations.
5  PILLARS OF MODERNISATION: INDUSTRIALISATION

5.1  THE FORCE OF INDUSTRIALISATION

In my Vepsian case study industrialisation, as one of the pillars of modernisation, is seen in two roles: industrialisation through the ambitious new Soviet construction sites, which arose on Vepsian territory at the end of the 1920s, and the transformation of the pre-existing mining industrial activity among the Karelian Vepsians that predated the Soviet modernisation of the 1920s by decades. While the Vepsian population was involved in the first exclusively as forced labour or in the course of their kolkhoz duties, while bearing the burden of neighbouring prison camps on their territory, involvement in the second was voluntary, and practised for decades.

First, the present sub-chapter provides the background for the role of large construction sites in the Soviet modernisation of the Svir’ region. Vepsian territory became an experimental region for the use of prison camps labour in construction. Second, this sub-chapter provides an understanding of the interrelation between the local population and the Gulag system, which later covered the whole country as a network of ‘advanced industrialisation’. Third, it studies the transformation of mining activities in the Onega settlements of the Karelian Vepsians.

Industrialisation through the new Soviet construction sites had the most serious effect on the life of the Vepsians. Among the large construction sites on Vepsian territory, as outlined in the handbook National Minorities of the Leningrad Region by P. M. Ianson (1929, 11), were the two Svir’ river hydroelectric stations, the White Sea-Baltic Canal, and the Cherepovets Metalurgical Combine.

In the stream of forced Soviet industrialisation the cities and main economic areas had a leading role (Poliakov 2000, 219). At its initial stage most industrial cities were located in the old industrial and trading centres of Russia (Poliakov 2000, 220). But the rapid pace of industrial development, outlined by the first five-year plans, did not take into account the real capabilities of the country (Poliakov 2000, 221). At the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s, therefore, industrialisation was intended for the exploration of economically undeveloped areas, especially areas with tough climatic and natural conditions, through the establishment of industrial construction sites (Borodkin 2008, 21). The local population had to adjust not only to the new state’s economic policies and the transformation of everyday activities due to new plans and economic structures, but also to the establishment of new construction sites and the presence of newly arrived labour.

Much is now known about the forced labour system, with ‘regime’ issues described in recent publications (Borodkin 2008, Khlusov & Dmitrienko 1998,
Svir'stroi as an administrative town. … A stone sauna will be built for transport activists who belonged to the five thousand large new industrial enterprises were constructed:

Among them there were such industrial giants as the Magnitogorsk and Kuznetsk metallurgical combines, the Moscow and Gorkiy car plants, the Ural heavy machinery plant, the Moscow ball-bearing plant (GPZ-1), the Stalingrad and Cheliabinsk tractor plants, the Rostov agricultural machinery plant, the Cheliabinsk ferro-compositions plant, the Ural wagon construction plant, the Berezniki nitrogen-fertiliser plant, the Voskresensk chemical combine, the Sverdlovsk electric lamp plant, the Ufa motor plant, and many others. Simultaneously during that period there was a reconstruction of old enterprises: new factories and more advanced equipment were installed and technology was modernised. Such branches of industry as energy, ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgy, and the chemical and petrochemical industries were completely renewed (Zhiromskaia 2000, 219).

These first years of Soviet modernisation through industrialisation brought a great change to the development of the Vepsian region. The initial construction works on the Lower Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station were launched as early as in the end of 1927. There was a Resolution on launching the Svir’ construction announced by the government (Postanovlenie STO 1927, 1) and a declaration of construction foundation, promising that construction would begin in the spring of 1927 (Svir’stroi nachnem 1926, 1); actual work began in 1928. There are also some earlier relevant dates. In 1923, at a meeting of river transport activists who belonged to the People’s Commissariat of Transport Routes, there was a report on works for the Svir’ dam, initiated in 1919 (Pëtr, personal correspondence, 2016).

Construction sites on Vepsian territory required substantial state aid. “STO [Council of Labour and Defence] declared it necessary to start the construction of Svir’ Electric Station during the coming year, based on a reduction of the amount of expenditure on other construction sites, but without a reduction in the size of construction works” (Postanovlenie STO, 1927, 1). The total construction site budget is unknown due to later NKVD construction management, but for 1928 it was framed as 550,000 rubles (550 tysiach 1927, 1), and for 1929 as 5,000,000 rubles.

Iakovlev 2005; Kondrat’eva 2009; Zhiromskaia 2000), but the issue of the impact of forced labour camps on local populations is still unknown and ignored.

In 1929 the economy became totally state-owned. Over ten years every electric power station was reconstructed, twenty new thermal power stations and ten new hydroelectric power stations were built in accordance with the GOELRO (electrification of the Soviet Union) plan. In 1935 the USSR took first place in electrification in the world. Undoubtedly, the price for these achievements was very high. The year 1929 was the year of Stalin’s Great Turn, heralded by Stalin’s article “The Year of the Great Turn”, which announced rapid modernisation through industrialisation and collectivisation (Nazarov 2011).

In the USSR during the first and second five-year plans alone more than four thousand large new industrial enterprises were constructed:
(Svir’stroi 1928, 2). By 1932 the twin construction of the Upper-Svir’ power station was estimated at 7,000,000 rubles (O Svir’stroe 1932, 4).

The primary plan of Svir’ river industrial transformation relied on the use of machinery in the process of construction. “In the next few days the large-scale preparation works for the Svir’ construction site will be started... In the autumn all groundworks will be finished with the aid of dredgers” (Svir’stroi 1927, 1). The Svir’stroi office started to send the first orders for the completion of the Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station to the Leningrad plants. The order for gateway equipment, at a cost of 1,250,000 rubles, was shared between the “Red Putilovets” and Izhor plants (Zakazy Svir’stroia 1927, 1). “The building of a railway line which will connect the Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station and the Murmansk railway has been started near Yanega station [between Lodeinoe Pole and Svir’stroi]. Seven of the newest American machines have been sent to prepare the works site. Digging of gateways is progressing rapidly. The dredger has started digging the gateway ditch” (Na Svir’stroe 1928, 6). As is now known from documents, memories, and museum photos the only machinery was primitive picks and wooden wheelbarrows (called ‘Mercedes’ by camp prisoners).

Local Lodeinoe Pole and Podporozhie newspapers at the end of the 1920s show the gap between Soviet plans and the reality of the construction process. People read about new houses for construction workers, while the real construction workforce was living in tents. On one hand, we read: “It is necessary to provide construction workers with housing and everything necessary for housing. Two towns will be built – a town for workers with capacity for 3,500 people and office employees, barracks, and an administrative town. ... A stone sauna will be built with a capacity of 95 persons per hour. ... Besides a dredger, there will be excavators in use. ... There is an agreement with Lodeinoe Pole Industrial Combine for the supply of 500,000 cubic metres of sawn timber. Lumber (logs) will be bought from various organisations. This year there will not be much labour – 1,000-1,200 persons. ... There will be workers from Volkhovstroy and Kaluga, and carpenters from Cherepovets” (Svir’stroi 1928, 2). After this publication there was no further information in the press concerning the actual situation regarding equipment, which in reality was disastrous.

In the present sub-chapter’s introduction I classified the participation of the Vepsian population in large construction sites solely as penitentiary prison labour. It should be acknowledged that the initial plan of industrialisation was different from using a labour force. In 1928 the construction site employed workers from the local population as contract labour, but the lack of financing and harsh conditions later brought changes. The same year a local newspaper published a letter from Svir’ contract ditchers from local villages who were employed as seasonal workers: “On May 16, according to a request from the Svir’ construction site, the labour market sent a group of diggers to the construction site groundworks. Work was provided, as agreed, to the ditchers, but there was an error in the payment of their
wages: they were named ‘unskilled workers’, and the payment was based on this. … Seasonal workers are simply wasting their summer season” (Arestov 1928, 4). The construction site itself was described as follows:

**On the bank of the river, at the neighboring construction site, there are no houses or buildings. There is only forest, marshes, bushes, and fields. … Only on the other side of the river is there a settlement, Nigezhma, which functions as a trans-shipment dock. In winter Nigezhma is also silent. The place is wild and deserted. And here, on this precise site in five years – by 1932 – there will be a powerful hydro-station** (Voitenko 1927, 2).

According to the press and official reports it is obvious that the construction relied only on free contract labour with junior mechanics and did not proceed to schedule; this became clear after approximately a year. For example, in 1928 the article “At Svirstroi” (Na Svirstroe 1928, 6) explained the work done by inhabitants of the village of Tervenichy for the Svir’ construction site: they dragged the logs by hand to the construction site. There was no spirit of enthusiasm supported by American machinery. Initially at the construction sites, newcomers were contract workers and locals had work duties from their collective farm units. The “scope of work was tremendous. It was a chance to earn money. … In 1926 there were still hired workers at construction sites …” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). These contract workers were relatively well paid. There was only one problem: there was nothing to buy. “It was impossible to buy anything with this money. People had packs of bills. People were made to participate in state loans and lotteries” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). This explains the fact that local newspapers from this period are full of advertisements for state loans and lotteries, and reports from the collective farm administrations on the totals of state loan payments.

In practical terms within a year the labour situation had changed on the Canal. It became obvious that the task was far too complicated: it seemed impossible to attract a volunteer labour force quickly. The state turned prison camps into prison labour camps and made them extremely flexible economic structures, responsible for the main construction sites. “The was also dekulakisation, confiscation of grain, and so on. Locals still remember how they were taken to work under the Maxim gun” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). This indicates that the practice of the Solovetskii forced labour camp was used in the Leningrad Region before the purge became a common tool to accelerate modernisation throughout the country.

However, where the most important facts of Vepsian history and the role of industrialisation in it are concerned, scholars should keep in mind dates as early as 1923, when the Solovetskii prison camp began using imprisoned labour. This was the period when Vepsian settlements started to experience the impact of industrialisation. The move to the planned economy also changed the settings of the centre/periphery relationship (Autio 2002, 326). “Solovetsky may not have been
the only prison in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but it was their prison, the OGPU’s prison, where the OGPU first learned how to use slave labour for profit” (Applebaum 2003, 42). It was the SLON (Solovetskie lageria osobo zamnenienia) system which was widely used in the territory from Solovki through Medvezh'egorski up to the Leningrad Svir' river region for timber works. Furthermore, locals were imprisoned with prisoners from elsewhere (Babkin 1927, 3). The Gulag camps became the third prison administration in the Leningrad Region in the Svir' district. Although the literature on the Gulag documentation of its Leningrad Regional structure in the territory of Vepsian settlements is quite sparse, I was still able to conclude from the evidence that a three -camp system operated in this limited region, with a fourth camp, Vytegorlag, on the way to Vytegra.

In Vepsian villages the following expression is still used: to be taken “to the construction site to prison”. “At that time, for any transgression, such as being late to work or something else, people were taken to prison. However, they were not sent to prison, but to the construction site. ... Our father died early. ... Somehow, I heard that father had worked on the roads, and in general labour on the Canal for six months” (Vera, interview, 2015). The respondent spoke about her father being imprisoned on the Canal, yet she spoke vaguely and attempted to avoid any possible questions about family repressions.

The Svir' construction site located on Vepsian territory was the first in a series of “great construction sites of socialism”, as they were called in the Soviet period. Its first year of existence demonstrated the inability of the Soviet system to succeed in this modernisation effort by relying only on contracted free labour. The transfer of construction work from the local population of Russians, Vepsians, Karelians, and others to the prison-camp labour system was not accompanied by a loud public announcement. However, this process marked the beginning of a tendency to use forced labour as a tool for industrialisation. The Vepsian territory was the first location where this was tried – and the Vepsian people became its first witnesses. Of course, it should again be stressed that by the end of the 1920s these villages were no longer purely Vepsian, but already had a mixed population of Vepsians, Russians, and Karelians (Zhukov 2011, 165). The construction site directly affected everyday life of the settlements.

The issue of camp labour was taboo for the general population. Even today the museums of local history in Podporozhie and Lodeinoe Pole mention it superficially. I was able to find only a single mention of Svir’stroii forced labour in the ‘free’ press. An article entitled “How the construction works on the Svir’ will be done” mentioned a “new system” which was now responsible for construction. “It is possible that the works at Svir’ itself will be assigned to a special organisation” (Kak budut 1927, 2). I use the term ‘free’ press here to mean the press that was available for citizens on a daily basis. Newspapers by and for prisoners should also be considered, since there was an enormous number of prisoners. There were also
some newspapers published for the Svïîr’ construction site. At this stage of my research I am not using this material since it requires additional work, and these prison periodicals are not stored in an open section of the Russian National Public Library. Finding them would constitute separate research.

In May 1929 the political secretariat (Politburo) of the Communist Party adopted a Resolution “On the use of criminal prisoners’ labour”, which was followed and supplemented by several other resolutions. These resolutions were the practical counterpart to the main document, setting locations for new prison camps and their financing. On November 6, 1929, to make this Resolution legal, the Central Executive Committee and Council of People’s Commissars made changes to the “Basics of Criminal Legislation of the Soviet Union and Union Republics”, adopted in 1924. This new document contained the punishment of “imprisonment in penitentiary labour camps in distant areas of the USSR” for a period “from three to ten years”. This was the first time that Soviet legislation had referred to penitentiary labour camps (Khlusov & Dmitrienko 1998, 4). On April 6, 1930 the Council of People’s Commissars adopted the “Provision on Penitentiary Labour Camps”, which became a ‘legal’ instrument for putting political and economic pressure on the population which is now widely known as the Gulag.

The OGPU (the secret police agency – later the NKVD) and the Gulag created a widespread network of concentration (penitentiary) camps for the exploration of huge territories and for heavy industry construction sites. The population of these camps increased very rapidly. According to a report by People’s Commissar of Domestic Affairs Igoda (Khlusov & Dmitrienko 1998, 7), the Gulag population was increasing by 10,000 monthly. By 1929 at the Svïîr’ construction site there had been “full provision of staff” (tens of thousands of prisoners working every day).

In January 1929 it was widely announced that the Svïîr’ construction site would not recruit any more workers as there were no jobs available. “Because of a large influx of unemployed persons to our region to get a job with Svïîr’sstroï, the Regional Department of the Builders’ Union announces that at the moment there will be no opening of vacancies at Svïîr’sstroï; it is therefore impossible to get a job. Besides, in Lodeinoe Pole and neighbouring villages, as well as at Svïîr’sstroï, there is no housing for entrants at all” (Na Svïîr’sstroï 1929, 6). It is worth mentioning again that here I am speaking about local villages, including Vepsian ones. Moreover, in 1932, whilst planning the twin Svïîr’ power station, officials admitted: “[A] ... large influx of labour should be expected. What do we meet people with? There is no housing for workers, no shop, no canteen, except a poky one which can serve a maximum of 400-500 persons. There is no place for education, no place for social organisations. Presently there is only a single Building Committee, which works ‘on foot’ wherever it finds shelter” (Ovod 1932, 4).

On May 5, 1930, the Politburo of the Communist Party adopted a decree “On the Canal”, containing the main aims and schedule of the construction works. The works on the deepening of the Svïîr’ riverbed for canal construction were planned
for 1931 and to be completed in two years (Baron 2007, 131). On May 26 1930 the Special Committee of the secret police adopted an important decree: the OGPU became responsible for the provision of all labour both for the southern part (including the entire Svir’ section) and the northern part of the White Sea-Baltic Canal. In 1931 Medvezh’egorsk became the “administrative centre of the OGPU’s Karelian operations, superseding USLON and the Solovetskii ITL in importance and size of population (by now most prisoners in the region had been transferred from the islands to the canal construction)” (Baron 2007, 132). The OGPU was responsible for the entire construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, which lasted 21 months; 143,000 prisoners were working on it daily (Baron 2007, 133).

Much has been said above about the burden of industrialisation on the Vepsian villages of the Leningrad Region. The situation of the Karelian Vepsians should now be described. From the late 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s Karelian Vepsian villages were involved in the construction of the Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station and the White Sea-Baltic Canal, providing them with stone from the mines along the shores of Lake Onega. They also took part in obligatory timber work on collective farms.

The leaders of the White Sea-Baltic Canal (Russian abbreviation: BBK) project recognised its own economic task as follows: “In an exceptionally short period, the BBK OGPU must fulfil the gigantic work of assimilating and exploiting the natural resource of Karelia and putting to maximum use those wide opportunities which the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Water Route opens for the region, must create a series of new large-scale hydrotechnical installations, hydroelectric power stations and industrial enterprises, develop mining and extraction of mineral resources, construct socialist towns etc” (Baron 2007, 136).

The industrial influence on Vepsians in general outside this historical timeframe is also closely connected to the industrialisation of the Vologda Region some years later. A dense network of prison labour camps covered the Vologda Region. According to my respondents, at least one prison camp still functions there (Natasha, interview, 2015).

It is important to recognise the extent of the White Sea-Baltic prison management of the territory, the local population, and natural resources from the state documents of that period. On August 17 1933 the secret document “Resolution of Soviet of Peoples Commissars of USSR No. 1174-384c ‘On the White Sea-Baltic Enterprise’” “declared the full powers of the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU) and its construction sites over the local territories, natural resources and economic activities, which now became a subject of the forced-labour economic enterprise”. Paragraph 6 of this resolution stated that the White Sea-Baltic Enterprise managed by the OGPU, “was entitled to colonisation of the adjacent region, in particular, by settling it with forced labour settlers, based on the decree on forced labour settlers; … exploration and exploitation of all industrially important mineral ore resources, extraction and processing of stone and other
construction materials; construction of the Svir’stroi No. 2 hydro-technical unit; expansion of forest resources and the fishing industry, management of agriculture and the hunting industry; construction and management of sawmill and wood chemical enterprises of paper factory” (Iakovlev 2005, 54-55).

Paragraph 7 of the same document “entitled the enterprise to manage all companies, located in the area of exploration, necessary for enterprise goals, listed in Paragraph 6. Paragraph 8 freed all enterprise transactions from any taxes and charges up to January 1, 1936” (Iakovlev 2005, 54-55).

The document creates the strong impression that it is dealing with an unsettled and therefore economically unexplored (in the sense of agriculture, fishing, hunting, and other domestic practices) wild area. There are no instructions concerning policy towards local communities. The local Vepsians, who had settled these territories for centuries, are not mentioned at all. However, as has already been pointed out, where forced labour punishments and imprisonment were concerned there were no exceptions for the local population. It worked alongside imported forced labour at the local construction sites.

The local newspaper in Lodeinoe Pole described the imprisonment of local peasants in 1927 as follows: “Citizens are sent to Svir’stroi for forced labour according to a court decision. … But the administration of Svir’stroi does not comply with the exact period for forced labour and does not release them in time. Here is an example. Worker Nikitin was sentenced to forced labour works from October 13 to November 13. He worked until November 15, and would have been forced to continue working if he had not protested. … He had to make the hard journey back to Lodeinoe Pole for an inquiry, and was happy that he was allowed to do so. Otherwise, they could have said, ‘You aren’t allowed to go, you’re a prisoner’ – period” (Babkin 1927, 3). Imprisoned labour was used at construction sites as early as 1927, while the official decree on the provision of forced labour was adopted only in 1929.

As an illustration of the fact that the Svir’lag prison held both prisoners from outside the region and local Vepsians, I was told that in Zasosie village, Slantsy district, in 1937, the entire male population of the village was arrested according to a false denunciation, and the majority of them were taken to Svir’lag (Pëtr, personal correspondence, 2015).

In 1931 the Lodeinoe Pole newspaper published detailed “Instructions” by the Head of the Podporozhie Department of Corrective Labour Works: “Every office worker, worker, and kolkhoz member named in the Letter of Notification is to be called for corrective labour works and is subject to special control” (Dolganov 1931b, 4). These “Instructions” clarify how all corrective labour procedures were applied to locals. Another confirmation of the imprisonment of all locals, including Vepsians, is found in the article “Freed ahead of time” (Dolganov 1931a, 4): Nikolai Vasilievich Shishkov from Pid’ma settlement was freed from prison due to his
“conscientious and honest attitude to work”. The decision was taken by the Podporozhie Expert Commission.

As part of their collective farm work, Leningrad Region and Onega Vepsians were obliged to provide stones for the White Sea-Baltic Canal and Hydroelectric Power Station, cutting stones and carrying them in baskets to the river. The biography of one family member from Ivina settlement, Vasilii Petrovich Fershukov, relates: “In the 1930s he worked in the camps as a free labour desiatnik [team leader]. When they offered him [the job], he first refused, but he was told that, if he refused to be a voluntary labourer, then he would become a forced labourer” (Bazhukov 2013, 239). Another villager, Ivan Sergeevich Dmiritchenko, was arrested by “decision of three” on July 28, 1927 “for conducting anti-Soviet activity” as the son of a kulak, with a punishment of three years in prison. However, in 1937 he was already the Chief of Prison Camp No. 6 of Lodeinoe Pole “Ozertsy” of of the Leningrad Administration of the NKVD (Bazhukov 2013, 318). Today his granddaughter is proud of the position he attained: “We still have a picture of that time in our family: my grandfather, handsome, dressed in a leather jacket, in calf boots [the classical attributes of a Red commissar] is among his Red Army comrades in front of the barracks” (Bazhukov 2013, 319). This again shows that the boundary between freedom and prison was illusory at that time. But ‘grandfather Red Comrade’ is still much better than ‘grandfather repressed peasant’.

The geography of prison labour camp construction sites defined the territorial economic zones of the former USSR:

*The system of prison location defined Soviet citizens’ territorial mobility; later, after the Iron Curtain was opened a little, it also defined the mobility of foreigners. The location of Gulag facilities served the following purposes: to mobilise economic resources and manpower to reduce the technological backwardness with leading countries and for the construction of competitive enterprises for the military-industry complex; second, to explore necessary natural resources and new territories to increase the production of metal and other materials; third, to develop military and other infrastructure to settle and equip the territories along the USSR’s external borders (Kolosov & Polian 2009, 23-24).*

All the ‘great construction sites of socialism’ relied on forced labour – a cheap source of labour deprived of civil rights.

By the middle of the 1930s the Gulag was not simply a provider of labour but an agency of industrial activity in various branches of industry from forestry to experimental construction initiatives (Kolosov & Polian 2009, 27). By the end of the 1930s the NKVD, besides being an organ of punishment, had become an economic ministry. In the case of the Vepsians it is important to emphasise that “by the beginning of 1934 almost half of all prisoners were shared between three giant
The Karelian Vepsians were not as affected by the Gulag prison management due to their location. As I have already stated, the Karelian Vepsians, along with the Vepsians of the Leningrad Region, were expected to provide stones for the construction sites at Svir’. In the Karelo-Finnish SSR at the end of the 1930s and 1940s the forced labour camps were as follows: the Segezha forced labour camp for the construction of the Segezha timber and paper combine and the Segezha hydrolysis plant; the Kondopga sulphite-spirit plant; the Keksgolm forced labour camp, which reconstructed enterprises transferred from Finland to the USSR to Finland; the Matkozhna construction site and forced labour camp; and the Pudozh forced labour camp, which constructed a metallurgical combine (Upadushev 2012, 91). In 1937 “the Head of Belomoro-Balt Combine haughtily declared: ‘Karelian organisations – Gosplan and others – are offended by BBK. Why should they be interested in how many prisoners we have? ... I reply: ‘As far as you’re concerned, they’re just another category of worker. You don’t need to know how many prisoners we have, it isn’t interesting’ (Baron 2007, 143).

There were also five camps in the Vologda Region (their effect on the Vepsian population will be discussed later): Cherepovetks forced labour camp, which was building a metallurgical combine; and Vytegra, Opoki, Sheksna forced labour camps and Znamenitlag, which were building the Volga-Baltic and North Dvina waterways (Upadushev 2012, 91). The camps had branches – forced labour camp points and forced labour camp agencies, frequently located dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of kilometres apart (Zhiromskaia 2000, 315).

It should be mentioned that among the historians of forced labour camps there is no single understanding of a cause and effect connection between the intensification of Soviet industrialisation and the rapidly growing structure of concentrations camps (Borodkin 2008; Khlusov & Dmitrienko 1998; Iakovlev 2005; Kondrat’eva 2009). At the same time as the existing camp structure was expanded, new transit camps were rapidly being established. While precise data on camp and transit camp locations is lacking, general information on the Gulag (Smirnov, 1998) reveals the rapid organisation of transit camps to the south of Vytegra, between Vytegra and the southern shores of Lake Onega, which were known as being settled by Vepsians.

The distinction between Svir’lag and Svir’stroi is sometimes blurred by researchers (Baron 2007, 134), who mistakenly suggest that the purely timber-oriented Svir’lag provided labour for the Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station and the White Sea-Baltic Canal. Some of the latest research has also mistakenly suggested that Svir’lag (Baron 2007, 134) was responsible for the southern sector of the White Sea-Baltic Canal. But the main purpose of Svir’lag, founded in 1931, was very simple – to provide Leningrad with firewood by harnessing local timber stocks. “From this point of view the Svir’ district of the Leningrad Region was the most
promising, having at its disposal large timber areas and two transport systems for timber transportation: the Leningrad-Murmansk railway and the Svir’ river, providing water delivery of prepared timber to Leningrad. The district was not provided with human resources or a developed infrastructure; these shortcomings had to be compensated with a newly established camp with the cheap forced labour of prisoners” (Iofe 2001, 29). The camp had 23 electric power stations and its own river fleet of 19 boats and three barges. To avoid economic boycott by Western countries, timber was exported under the cover of the ‘decorative’ organisations Sevzapasles, Kooples, Lenles, Lengortop, and others. Officially, the construction of the Svir’ hydroelectric power stations (Svir’stroje) received wooden materials from the Lodeinopol’skii industrial combine, and in turn the combine bought it from “various” (Svir’stroje 1928, 2) organisations.

Svir’lag’s timber activity covered almost the entire Vepsian territory in the Leningrad Region. “In 1932 Svir’lag consisted of three camp departments with centres in Vazhiny (No. 1), Tokari (No. 2) and Ostrechiny (No. 3). … By 1935 it consisted … of industrial camp departments: 1st branch – Svir’stroje station (later Lodeinoe Pole station), 2nd branch – Revselga station, 3rd branch – Ostrechiny settlement, 4th branch – Pogostie station, 5th branch p/o Vazhiny – Grishino settlement…” and independent camp locations in Lodeinoe Pole, Mandrogi, Viazostrov, Kanoma, Zaostrovie” (Iofe 2001, 30).

Based on all outlined sources I am able to list the chronology of all three prison camps that operated simultaneously in the territory settled by the Vepsians. Solovetskii camp (SLON) existed from October 13, 1923 to December 4, 1933. The White Sea-Baltic prison camp existed from November 16, 1931 to September 18, 1941. Its economic activities included timber and timber rafting, provision of services for the White Sea-Baltic Canal, exploration of adjacent territory (timber works), fishing, etc. (Smirnov 1998, 162). Svir’lag (Svir’ camp) was founded on September 17, 1931 and closed in July 1937. It was founded as a subsidary of the Gulag. Its main activities included firewood production and consumer goods. Referring only to Svir’lag data about timber production, “sometimes, the number of prisoners was up to a hundred thousand. It can only be imagined what a huge number of VOKR [prison guards] and volunteers were involved in the guarding and management of works in the camp” (Gorcheva 2009, 102).

It is worth repeating that from the 1920s until the 1960s the fear of an export boycott created a widespread practice of disguising camp labour products under the name of a ‘paper’ organisation, so that the real source of production was invisible. The functioning of these three systems in one location is attested to by I. Solonevich’s recollections of his ‘assignment’ between these three systems. His camp assignments changed officially, although he remained in Podporozhie: “From Moscow, from the Gulag, there was a telegram: the location of Pogra camp with its population and inventory is now a subject of the Gulag. … It is not easy to escape from the high hand of the Gulag as was possible from Svir’lag to the White Sea-
Baltic Canal camp, or from the White Sea-Baltic Canal camp to Svirlag” (Solonevich 1958, 258).

The existence of these prison camps on territory occupied by Vepsians, Russians, Karelians, and others affected the life of these peoples in many ways. The lack of guards and arrests among locals often had the effect of making their contacts direct. These newcomers can be characterised as follows:

“Victims of the Gulag”, “martyrs of the Gulag”: these expressions might give the reader the impression that the camps were filled mainly by honest, conscientious, and decent persons who were persecuted by the communist regime for political reasons. V.T. Shalamov put it this way: ‘Stalin’s scythe was indiscriminate: the camps were full of not the best humans, not the worst ones, but not the best ones.” From the first years of the Gulag’s existence the real power over the imprisoned belonged to the criminals (Ivanova 2009, 174-175).

All aspects of camp life were regulated by the criminals themselves. This had the tacit support of the camp authorities. Inside the camps prisoners killed each other without reason and without punishment. Their terror spread outside the camps, too. As I have mentioned, all the camps were in inaccessible areas where the state could save on guard expenses. Memories and official evidence show that in rural areas the imprisoned could in many cases move freely around the territory outside the camps, sometimes even living freely in the local villages.

This was scarcely restricted before 1939, but after 1939 it was restricted by special instructions. “The instructions peremptorily prohibited all the imprisoned, without exception, to live outside the zone in the villages and in private apartments. … However, these norms were observed practically nowhere” (Ivanova 2009, 169-171). Earlier in the second chapter I described the specifics of Soviet legislation on criminal punishment, when severity of punishment depended on the degree of a crime’s political nature. Thus, “in the 1930s as a result of such politics and pressure on the courts 20% of murderers, 31% of rapists, 46% of robbers, and 70% of thieves were sentenced to non-guarded forced labour, while those sentenced for political crimes were sent to isolated and guarded prison locations” (Borodkin 2008, 20). In some cases the lack of guards, and in some, of legislation itself, made direct contact between prisoners and the local population possible.

Three camp systems on both sides of the Svir’ river from Lodeinoe Pole to Onega (and after the Second World War, up to Vytegra), with numerous camps and their personnel made for numerous newcomers on previously prosperous Vepsian land. The scale of newcomer numbers can be judged solely from the following numbers: “It (Svir’lag) was founded in 1931 and existed until July 1937. About 40,000 prisoners were preparing wood for Leningrad heating; about 10,000 were producing consumer goods. The number of prisoners was growing every year. ... It
is known that sometimes the number of prisoners approached 100,000. One can only imagine what a large number of volkhrotsky [guards] and civilians were involved in prison security and management of camp labour. Camp civilians settled in the villages and used their cultural institutions and schools” (Gorcheva 2009, 102). The number of civilian families, therefore, also needs to be considered.

All over the country the system of Gulag camps brought terror and fear. Gulag criminal law covered the regions of exploration; dozens of ethnic minorities suffered and experienced it. But in ethnographic literature there is no other term for them than ‘newcomers’. The image of newcomers is routinely mixed with ‘free exploration’ by Russian enthusiasts. Even in distant regions in the Soviet Far East, the northern natives were forcibly driven away together with their reindeer herds to help the provision of Dal’stroi (the NKVD Far-Eastern Construction Trust); afterwards they had to settle in newly founded kolkhozy and were not permitted to return to their native lands (Burtin 2013).

The local rural population had to experience the same inhuman conditions as the prisoners. There is a rare case where information about this was published during the entire Soviet and post-Soviet period: “Report by A.Y. Vyshinskii to I.V. Stalin and V.M. Molotov on February 19, 1938: ‘The 5th route of the Dal’lag timber works was completed by prisoners who terrorised locals to such an extent that the population refused to go to the USSR Supreme Soviet elections unless the “prisoners” were removed or the state provided security for locals’” (Ivanova 2009, 166-167). This situation was typical of distant rural areas for decades, regardless of the ethnic make-up of the local villages. Even in the 1970s an experienced fellow ethnographer and colleague used to complain about the danger of unguarded prisoners while doing her fieldwork in the villages of the Russian Northwest (Anonymous, personal communication).

Composing a general picture of the influence of industrialisation through forced labour on the rural Vepsian settlements is like assembling a puzzle made from facts and memories. Being himself a prisoner on the White Sea-Baltic Canal on Vepsian territory and working in the census allocation department, I.L. Solonevich wrote that the real number of small and very small prison camps, both in sovkhozy and in towns, was unknown. Between the White Sea-Baltic Canal and Svir’lag, that is, in Vepsian territory, “there are about two dozen medium-sized camps” (Solonevich 1953) that are of interest. It is not difficult to imagine the density of the camps and their closeness to the local villages. Solonevich also writes about the situation in the Republic of Karelia: “The camp had swallowed the republic, taken over its territory and – following Stalin’s order on the foundation of the White Sea-Baltic Canal – usurped all the economic and administrative functions of local government” (Solonevich 1953).

According to I.L. Solonevich, during the existence of concentration camps in the region the local population faced extreme poverty. He writes about Podporozhie at the end of the 1920s: “You can see that a while ago it was a rich settlement. There
are two-storied houses, made of yard-long logs, decorated roof ridges, and shabby paint on the shutters. The Svir’ peasant was well set up. Now his kids are running around the concentration camp, begging prisoners for break leftovers, herring heads, inedible camp soup…” (Solonevich 1953). Even though the Svir’ camps were closed by the 1940s, the memory of the prisoners lives on in Vepsian villages across the generations. “The epoch of collectivisation began in the Podporozhie district in the late 1920s. … There was a lack of provision in the villages, because the private economy households had been destroyed” (Bazhukov 2013, 74). A similar description of the conditions in which local people had to live was given in connection to Svir’lag: “Locals of the older generation reminisce about the good food provision of the camp population (in comparison with the local population)” (Iofe 2001, 37). Hard as it is to imagine, conditions outside the Gulag camps were often worse than they were inside.

The presentation of industrialisation and exploration in inaccessible areas differs from the well-known stereotype of optimistic Russian newcomers to the construction sites during the first five-year plans. Nevertheless, this fictitious image remains popular in Russian ethnography: “Young people gladly joined timber works, because it brought new experiences; they could communicate with fellows from other, sometimes distant, villages, make friends, and earn ‘real’ money. … The timber industry helped to spread Russian, and, widely, elements of urban culture in the southern Vepsian region” (Egorov 2014, 100-101). A certain stereotype of industrialisation persists in the common memory. This kind of stereotype pays little heed to the fact that it was difficult to attract any volunteers to work in unsettled forests, canal construction, or the exploration and excavations of mineral deposits at short notice. Deportation of prisoners to inaccessible regions allowed for savings in guarding expenses and the hiding of exploration objects from unnecessary interest. Stalin’s regime exploited cheap forced labour to solve the problem of the lack of natural resources and the absence of modern industry.

It is important to take into account that others were drafted into forced labour and victims of repressions. So-called ‘special settlers’ were placed in thinly populated rural territories to work in agriculture or forestry. “Aside from them (prisoners) there are other more of less imprisoned population strata. For example, when I was on the BBK (White-Sea-Baltic Canal) there were 28,000 families of so-called ‘special resettlers’ – Voronezh Region peasants, sent to Karelia together with whole villages for resettlement under White Sea-Baltic Canal control. They were in a much worse situation than prisoners since they had families and no food ration” (Solonevich 1958).

Another category was administrative exiles, resettled on order. This was a type of pre-war deportation, without any provision from the state, in which people had to survive as they must. Furthermore, there were “free resettled” peasants, commonly resettled together with the whole settlement to lands that were “inconvenient for exploration”, but they were not monitored by the police.
(Solonevich 1958). There were also non-repressed forced labour or planned recruited labour migrants (Kolosov & Polian 2009, 23-25). In total there were no fewer than a dozen (Ivanova 2009, 163) different Gulag regimes for imprisonment. I treat all of these as forced labour.

It does not need to be said that throughout the existence of prison labour camps on Vepsian territory, relations between the local population and prisoners from the nearby camps were very complicated. Legal regulations for workers from economic unit (collective farm) administrations simply stated that escapees were to be returned. “The local population, if they returned someone who had escaped from the camp, was rewarded with ten metres of good textile and a box of food products...” (Pëtr, interview 2015). This was the case in the Svir’ district.

I was told of a similar case in Karelian Vepsian settlements. The grandmother of my young Vepsian respondent told him a story about her mother, who had met an uslonets in the 1930s between the Onega Vepsian villages of Drugaia Reka and Kaskesruchei. “He told her not to say a word to anyone and went away. Great-grandmother ran and told the local authorities. The man was caught; at identification she confirmed that he was the man. In the end he said to her: ‘I’m sorry I let you go. If I knew you’d betray me, I would have killed you.’” (Zhenia, interview, 2015).

“Since her childhood my mother, born in 1931 in Lodeinoe Pole, had kept in her soul troublesome expectations of disaster when hearing the word ‘uslonets’. She told me horrible stories of uslonets violence against peasant families in the distant pre-war years, and about their depressing communication with her father, when they needed a boat to go down the Svir” (Pëtr, personal communication, July 2, 2015). He always helped them. “I still regret that I did not write down the memories of one old lady who shared her sorrow with me. Her husband was kept on trumped up charges in the Podporozhie Department of Svir’lag for several months. Then he was freed. The night before his release prisoners slaughtered him (her husband), because the life of this miserable man had been lost in a card game” (Pëtr, personal correspondence, 2015).

The famous Vepsian poet Nikolai Abramov (57, Petrozavodsk) wrote: “I know this word from my childhood, in Vepsian – uslonc (singular). In the village children were often scared that the uslontsy would come and take them away” (Nikolay, personal correspondence, 2015). Undoubtedly, nowadays the word uslonets is no longer a purely Vepsian notion. It is a local notion. It originated in Vepsian villages on both sides of the Svir’ river. Preserved in oral family tradition, in recent decades it has become a narrated heritage of the local population, assimilated by the Karelians and Russians. However, this image is unknown to descendants of the prison guards and other assisting services, whose younger generations are well represented in Podporozhie and Lodeinoe Pole. “In general, in Podporozhie there are several descendants both of prison guards and prisoners. Where else could they move to? It happens that they are children and grandchildren of those who were
watching and those who were imprisoned. It is such an interesting mixture of people...” (Pëtr, interview, 2015).

The term that emerged, uslontsy, became part of history. Nowadays the term is used to mean a ‘stranger’ or former prisoner. “The camp [Svir’lag] was founded on the basis of the 9th and 10th timber processing prison camp departments of Solovki ITL OGPTU [correction labour camp of the united state political administration], which was earlier called USLON OGPU [administration of Solovki special purposes camps]. The settlers of the Svir’ region therefore called the former prisoners of Svir’Lag [and prisoners generally] ‘uslontsy’” (Iofe 2001, 27).

Gradually, this collective image permeated everyday speech as the figure of an unknown stranger, possibly a former prisoner. “Such people – escapees from various prisons – were called ‘uslonets’ in the singular in Vepsian and ‘usloncad’ in the plural” (Zhenia, personal communication, October 27, 2015). And for people in their thirties and younger this word’s origins have been forgotten. “My dad calls people who look like zeki [former prisoners] ‘uslonets’, and now I know why” (Vadim, personal communication, July 2, 2015).

The shared memory preserves the knowledge of the exact location of the barracks in the towns and forests, and the location of unknown common graves. “In Lodeinoe Pole the prison barracks could be seen on the territory of the former timber combine. At the location of the former wood-chip workshop pieces of plank-beds in the brick wall and inscriptions of Svir’lag prisoners could be found. … Within a few dozen metres of the Svir’ timber plant a common grave for Svir’lag prisoners was found, and it was not commemorated in any way. … The locations of prison barracks are still remembered by Podporozhie old-timers. Barracks were located mainly along the bank, many near the present common sauna. …” (Pëtr, personal communication, 2014).

Here, memory does not match the official version of history. Local officials do not like local historians because they call for repentance; local citizens do not like them because they are scared of what they know. Official sources today support the following view: “It is still necessary to establish who and for what reason was imprisoned here” (Danilovich 2015). While ethnographers continue to speak only about lost traditions (Pimenov & Strogal’shchikova 2008) and geographers about the “great construction sites of the first five-year plans” (Egorov 2014), at the local level the shared memory preserves knowledge about and details of the real cost of the construction sites – both for prisoners and locals. People do not like to talk about repressions and prison camps, and they are still very careful in mentioning repressions in their family or local camps. “There were repressions [here]. … This fact is still hidden. People were very afraid. … She [my aunt] still can’t tell the truth. … It is a shame…” (Valentina, interview, 2015).

A local historian of the Svir’ region, Pëtr confirms the difficulty of interviewing his neighbours about the prison camp period. “Ask any Podporozhie citizen: practically no one knows anything and they don’t want to say anything, … I found
an old woman who worked as a guard in the prison camp. ... Yes, she is local. ... She said: ‘I’m able to reassemble a gun with my eyes closed’. But I was in a hurry. I visited her again two weeks later, and she said: ‘I remember nothing. I can’t tell you anything.’ Previously [she] had said: ‘Yes, I worked at a prison camp, in the observation tower, and given other such details…” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). Pëtr happened to meet this old woman when he was involved in some social work bringing gifts to old people. The reason she told him such details the first time they met was because “she had just buried her grandchildren and was in a distressed state” (Pëtr, interview, 2015).

The wartime stories about the local labour camps overlap with the stories about the Finnish army. In June 2015, standing on the bridge above the Lower Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station, I was told a war story about the place. “In 1941, when the Finns arrived here suddenly, the most politically dangerous prisoners were here. And it became clear that there was not enough time to evacuate them. And all of them, about a hundred persons, were transported to the other bank. They were all prepared for shooting, and the Maxim machine gun was made ready. The Finnish military intelligence forces fought them off” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). Even in the prison camps criminals and political prisoners were kept alongside each other: during the Second World War applications for the front were accepted only from criminals, never from political prisoners. The political prisoners were executed.

This story about the Soviet ‘politicals’ grows more complicated. The majority found service in the Finnish army. “I was in contact with one of them. By the way, after the war he returned and was a prisoner in the camps. Later he lived in Lodeinoe Pole. He was one of those who had fought on the Finnish side. He even told stories of shooting our soldiers” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). After he returned, he worked at the dock, earlier know as the ‘zaton’ – the backwater. This man showed me all the Finnish bunkers, which are in excellent condition. Known only to local historians, they are future research objects for Finnish military history.

In a 2013 TV programme about the Svir’lag excavations a local man from the Vepsian settlement of Vazhiny, I. Shlepakov, said that the concentration camp was not far away from his home in front of the Vazhiny church. In 1931, he remembered, about a hundred prisoners were placed in tents there. Around Vazhiny there were several camp locations.

The entire story of the camps’ locations, structure, and labour is very complicated and has led to a great deal of research into their functioning and history. However, no precise maps are available. Access to the archive of the Headquarters of the Branch of Solovki Camp and Svir’lag, in Lodeinoe Pole, is officially closed with the designation “burnt in wartime”. Nevertheless, regional documents concerning the earlier period, prior to Svir’lag, are available at Lodeinoe Pole. It is claimed that the Svir’lag documents were burnt to avoid a large public response after Solonevich’s publication in 1953 (Pëtr, interview, 2015). In 2009 the collection of “Maps of Eastern Karelia, 1941-1944” (Martimo, Pekkanen & Tarkka
2009) was published in Finland. It is based on Soviet maps of 1930 and do not give full locations of barracks for prisoners. The map indexes contain no symbol for prison barracks. However, the location of barracks in sites in Podporozhie are shown. I have therefore provided the Podporozhie map with highlighted barrack areas in my illustrations.

Some words should be said about the Vologda Region Vepsian territory. The largest metallurgical combine in Russia, the Cherepovets Metallurgical Combine – nowadays called SeverStal – was launched in 1955. The Combine itself occupies a large territory and the population of the region, both rural and urban (Vepsians), is tightly connected to its infrastructure. Its history began when the Gulag labour force opened a new branch in Cherepovets, Vologda Region, in 1937. This forced labour was used for the construction of the Cherepovets Metallurgical Combine, as well as railways and subterranean roads, plumbing, and housing. The forced labour system in the region grew. In 1940 a new camp in Vytegra initially consisted of 10,253 prisoners, but by June 1941 it housed 34,738 prisoners (Konasov 2007, 67). These prisoners lived in tents and built barracks for themselves and incoming batches of prisoners. “By December 1940 all of the new contingent was placed in seven locations. … District No. 7 with its centre in Ozhta had a special task: by the middle of 1941 there had to be an electric power line from station Svir’-3 up to the settlement of Kardanga in Vytegra district. This construction district was equipped by unguarded prisoners, because it was extremely difficult to guard a forest track of many kilometres when prisoners were working in small teams” (Konasov 2007, 67).

After the 1920s and 1930s this Oshta was known as the most prosperous of Vepsian villages. The Oshta villages belonged to a large and prosperous group of villages known as Shimozeria. Newspaper reports exist about Vepsian agricultural difficulties in Oshta (Osinin 1929, 2) and Vepsian pagan rituals (Svetliak 1929, 4) observed in the Oshta district. The fact that ancient Vepsian villages existed alongside numerous unguarded prisoners requires no further comment.

In concluding this section with a description of the forms and mechanisms of industrialisation on Vepsian territory, I should mention that the flow of newcomers did not end with the completion of the White Sea-Baltic Canal in 1933 or the Lower Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station between 1933 and 1935. The state operated on the territory with the same intensity and force until the 1960s.

It is not important here to list all the industrial projects and tasks that had to be accomplished in the region during the Soviet period – from the Upper Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station, the Lower Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station, to the endless works to widen and deepen the Svir’ river for new and larger ships. What should be stressed is the persistently high flow of newcomers to the region: prisoners, guards, special settlers, civilians, and, later, contract workers. From this large but unaccounted number some left, and some stayed permanently, composing the local population today.
5.2 ONEGA MINING

This sub-chapter on the Karelian Vepsians under Soviet modernisation has two goals. First, it examines the specifics of modernisation’s effect on the Onega Vepsians. Second, it shows that the response to modernisation varied from one group to another – even within a single indigenous unit – under different historical, geographical, environmental, and political conditions.

The effect of modernisation through industrialisation on the Vepsians should be seen not only in connection with the series of great construction sites but also with the transformation of Vepsian industrial activities and practices over a long period. The Onega Vepsians experienced modernisation alongside the other rural populations of the Republic of Karelia. The fate of the Onega Vepsians differed from that of the Leningrad Region Vepsians because they belonged to different administrative units. The presence of mining resources defined how modernisation affected the population.

The development of Onega mining occupies a special place in the course of Soviet modernisation and industrialisation. In one sense it represents an exception to the general picture of the effect of industrial projects on the Vepsian population, because there has been a long history of mining in these Vepsian settlements. Stonecutting is an age-old craft of the Vepsians (Makar’ev 1932, 15).

By 1930 the number of Vepsians in Sheltozero, Karelia, the centre of the Vepsian mining industry, was 8,590 (Karhu 1934, 157). Prior to the 1920s stonecutting and stone extraction had been practised by the Vepsians seasonally; now, in the course of Soviet modernisation, it became full-time industrial employment. The region’s industrial development also affected the local infrastructure of settlements: the villages of Zhitnoruche, Ropruche, and Rybreka united and formed the Rybreka settlement. Local quarries now employ hundreds and pay taxes which support the local regional budget. In my fieldwork among Leningrad Region Vepsians respondents said the only way to revive the Vepsians would be to create jobs in the villages, but the timber industry is run by strangers and employs strangers (Lena, interview, 2015).

To evaluate the influence of modernisation, it is necessary to understand the major industrial specifics of the area. “At the end of 1924 the quarrying of gabbro and diabase was launched in the village of Rybreka to provide cobblestone for road construction in Moscow and Leningrad” (Shekov 2006, 35). In April 1925 700 people were already employed in this. In the 1930s there were about 2,000 workers at the Onega mineral administration. Almost the entire Vepsian population of the Onega settlements belonging to the chain of mining settlements was employed in the industry.

The Karelgranite Trust was founded in 1926. Its purpose was “to quarry granite at Goltsy and Nemetskaa Gora, potstone … at Listia Guba, quartzite at Shoksha, and sandstone in the Brusnenskoe and Kamennii Bor deposits” (Shekov 2006, 35).
By 1929 Karelgranite had reached and started mining on the Onega shore next to Vepsian settlements. The plant was the second largest stone chippings producer in Europe. At the end of the 1930s a factory school, offering qualifications in stonecutting, hewing, and holing, was opened.

The subordination of quarrying companies in the 1920s and 1930s is a complicated issue. According to data on industrial production in Karelia between 1924 and 1927, the extraction industry had the following share of production, subordinate to the Karelian Republic and belonging to the Karelian Republic (not the USSR): between 1924 and 1925 it was 32%, between 1925 and 1926, 21.7%, and between 1926 and 1927, 25.4% (Baron 2007, 70).

As of late 1926, for example, while the Karelian government exercised sole authority over the quarrying trust Karelgranit, it had only a shared interest in the silicates mining trust Karelmursilikat, which it operated jointly with the Northern Society, the Murmansk railway and the All-Union Syndicate for the Silicates Industry. Other mining organizations were entirely beyond its control: Russian Semi-Precious Stones (a central state trust), the Onega Diabase Works (under the joint authority of the Moscow and Leningrad Departments of Municipal Economy), the Shokshin Works (under the Moscow Department of the Municipal Economy) and several quarriers for pot clay (used in brick manufacture, operated by the Institute for Applied Mineralogy and Metallurgy) – were not subordinate to Republic authorities (Baron 2007, 68-69).

The full citation above is necessary because in the case of Kareligranit, Onega Diabase, and Shokshin, works and pot clay resources were placed close to Vepsian settlements.

Between 1882 and 1929 a Geological Committee was supposed to manage all resources. Between 1929 and 1931 it was replaced by the Main Geological-Explorative Headquarters of the Supreme Council of the National Economy. Mined products were not only used for road construction in the cities. Onega coastal villages also provided stones for the White Sea-Baltic Canal (BBK) construction sites (Pëtr, interview, 2015 and Shekov 2006, 35).

Documents and publications demonstrate that: “The BBK had the role of a regional planner, being granted an exclusive right to exploit the Canal and local natural resources; therefore, neither institutions nor private persons without a special permit from the Council of People’s Commissars could interfere in the Combine’s administrative economic and strategic activity” (Borodkin 2008, 181). Gathering and preparing stones became a general duty for all peasants as part of their work on the kolkhoz. Local villagers carried stones in baskets, and from distant quarries narrow-gauge wagons were used (Pëtr, interview, 2014). As cited earlier, until nearly 1960 the Soviet Union’s major natural resources, with their enterprises and construction sites, were subordinate to the NKVD.
The Karelian Vepsians experienced the influence of rapid modernisation (industrialisation, collectivisation, and sovietisation) with the other rural populations of the country. However, three things distinguished the modernisation mechanisms from those affecting the Leningrad Region’s Vepsians: their settlements were removed from the major industrial construction sites; there was pre-existing and stable mining activity; and there was no resettled forced labour because of the border’s proximity.

In straitened years Vepsian peasants disappointed with their kolkhoz plot could turn to the stone industry as an alternative form of economic support: “In Sheltzero region, based on kolkhoz land division and the giving of valuable land plots to edinolichniki (private owners), many private owners – middle-level and poor ones (in total about 40 households) refused to cultivate the land and left to work in mining extraction, explaining that labour for cultivation of these plots would not be paid and the summer would go for nothing” (Makurov 1997, 135).

As has already been stressed, the Onega Vepsians were subjects of a different administrative territory, the Karelian Republic. This accounts for the difference in legislation and launching of the modernisation policy from the Leningrad Region. On February 8 1930 the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Karelia adopted a local resolution on measures for the liquidation of the kulaks as a class. The beginning of dekulakisation was scheduled for April 1930 (when the timber season was completed).

Changes in Karelia in social data at the beginning of the 1930s were similar to the changes in the Russian European North in general. “In the Karelian Republic there were about 80 forced labour settlements apart from the forced labour camps of the White Sea-Baltic Combine of the NKVD. They were placed great distances apart from each other in various districts of the Republic (Sheltzero, Pudozh, Kondopoga, Zaonezhie, and other districts). Furthermore, these settlements had very small numbers, with populations from 15 to 200; only some had a population of more than 200” (Zhiromskaia 2000, 292). Aside from these forced labour settlements, the forced labour camps and camp stations of the White Sea-Baltic NKVD Combine covered a major part of the territory of the Karelian Republic (mainly in the Medvezh‘egorsk, Pudozh, and Onega regions) (Zhiromskaia 2000, 316). At the same time there was a difference in absolute numbers. Between 1931 and 1932 the Karelian Republic received 33,100 newcomers, whilst the Leningrad Region (apart from Leningrad itself) received 296,600 prison labour migrants (Zhiromskaia 2000, 226).

The location of prison camps in Karelia, the provision of construction with labour and construction materials (stone), collectivisation, and mass arrests were all of a similar nature to those in other Vepsian settlements. On January 7 1930 in a Circular Letter of the Karelian Prosecutor’s Office to the district prosecutors and investigators about bringing kulaks and wealthy elements into line with their timber obligations, the Vepsian villages of the Karelian Republic are listed along
with other settlements with certain norms for timber production (for example, for Sheltozero, this norm was 225 m³ per person) (Ivnitskii & Makurov 1991, 15).

Published materials concerning Karelian timber often follow the same tradition of stating the importance of timber works for the Karelian economy but rarely identifying the reason the profit was not going to the inner economy of the Karelian Republic. “In 1931 Karelia lost its economic autonomy when the budgetary rights of Karelia were taken away by the centre” (Laine & Ylikangas 2002, 77). It is hoped that the present work answers this question. While recognising the importance of canal construction – “[The] BBK was under the jurisdiction of the NKVD and it became the centre’s main focus of investment in Karelia during the second five-year plan” (Laine & Ylikangas 2002, 79) – it should be obvious that regional forestry was entirely under the jurisdiction of the NKVD, not limited by BBK interests. It provided labour and it managed the profit.

Returning to the issue of the initial unity of all Vepsian settlements it is worth repeating the current situation that:

[T]he chain of Vepsian settlements which was spread along the southwest shore of Lake Onega, deeper into the Vepsian territory, was interrupted only near Voznesenie, at the beginning of the Svir’ river from Lake Onega. … Nearest to Voznesenie, from the side of Karelian Vepsian settlements, the villages of Uritskaia (Perpakod), Vo-lodarskaia (Kukagi”), Gimreka (Himjogi), Shcheleiki (Vehkaiselg) earlier belonged to the Sheltozero-Bereznaia volost’ of the Petrozavodsk uezd and made a united group of Onega Vepsians. After 1924 a large part of the Vepsian villages of Sheltozero-Bereznaia volost’ was transferred from the Leningrad gubernia to the Karelian ASSR; the rest, part of Sheltozero-Bereznaia volost’, later became the periphery of the Leningrad Region. This decision was taken to maintain the Leningrad Region’s administration of the Svir’ river territory. Besides Voznesenie, in the rest of the Vepsian territory between the villages there were no Russian villages as ‘dividing lines’ (Strogal’shchikova 2014, 12).

This means that the assimilation brought from outside by stone enterprises had no significant effect over a hundred years.

There was a prison in the eastern part of Karelia from the Second World War up to the mid-1950s. In Rybreka a Vepsian lady said: “There was a camp here for some time. When we were graduating from school, the seven-year school, there was a camp here, maybe around 1953, but not after that. It was moved somewhere, to Vytregra or somewhere else” (Baba Zhenia, interview, 2015). Thus, the Vepsian story continues: according to my general research on Gulag camp locations the majority of these prison camps were moved to the Vologda Region, i.e., to Vepsian land.

The difference in the mechanisms of modernisation between the Leningrad Region’s Vepsians and the Onega Vepsians and the distant results of this modernisation can be seen today. The current situation of the Vepsians in the
Republic of Karelia (initially geographically a minor part of all Vepsian territory) is characterised thus: “In Karelia there was also a stable tendency of reduction of the Vepsian population, but not to such a high degree as in the Leningrad and Vologda Regions…” (Strogal’shchikova 2004, 202).

The modern Vepsian population of Karelia makes up more than half the entire Vepsian population: there are 3,423 Vepsians in Karelia and 5,936 in the Russian Federation. The Rybreka settlement, with Vepsians as the majority population, is settled by 800 people. The majority of the male population works at the local quarry. Almost all settlers work in various stone-processing services, and the main company is called Karelkamen’, which replaced Karelgranit. The main difference between these two systems, one of which replaced the other in the 1990s, is that during the Soviet period Karelgranit, together with the local timber industry, comprised a unit called the Department of Labour Provision. This Department of Labour Provision (Oldel’ rabochego snabzhenia, ORS) supplied these Onega mining Vepsian settlements with a wide range of special products and goods from Leningrad. “Our ORS had Leningrad provisions. The lespromkhoz was also earlier an ORS. Our lespromkhoz was located between Sheltozero and Matveeva Sel’ga” (Baba Zhenia, interview, 2015). Thus, throughout the Soviet period, because of the locally specific industrial importance of mining, the Onega Vepsians had jobs and even special provision.

Today, according to legislation of the Russian Federation, the territory of these gabbro and diabase quarries is rented by private business for a certain period, similar to the rent of timber areas. At present, there are about twenty quarries, fifteen of which are functioning, stretching from Robruchei to Drugaia Reka (Vitalii, interview, 2015). Most of their production is of rough stones for the cemetery business and the transportation of stones to St Petersburg, Moscow, and throughout Russia. This tradition arose in Russia in the so-called ‘rakish nineties’, when rival gangs throughout the country vied for business influence. The mass cemetery culture created a new style of big black stone monument, resulting in the Onega quarries experiencing very high demand (Vitalii, interview, 2015). The red stones, also extracted here, are in less high demand in Russian cemeteries than they are in Germany. For some years at the turn of the century stones were exported there.

An interesting tendency is seen in the employment of local Vepsians by the new mining companies. Quarries come and go, and ownership changes. Vepsians are employed by mining companies alongside with newcomers, but they have to conform to safety regulations (in other words, alcohol consumption is forbidden). Highly educated mining specialists are needed. Local young Vepsians from these villages can receive mining qualifications in Petrozavodsk and return to work in their native villages. This began in 2005 and has successfully continued since Petrozavodsk University had the first graduations from its mining courses.
5.3 SUMMARY

Construction sites in the regions of Vepsian settlement became experimental areas for rapid modernisation through industrialisation with purges as a tool. The White Sea-Baltic Canal and the Lower Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station saw the instigation of a successful Soviet experiment with forced labour which changed the industrial development of the country in the following decades. Under forced modernisation the Vepsians as an ethnic group did not experience direct genocide or mandatory resettlement: they stayed on their native land in their indigenous settlements. Modernisation came to their land. It came with the waves of newcomers – hundreds of thousands of prisoners, guards, special settlers, civilians, and contract workers. After years in the territory many stayed, drastically changing the population’s composition, making it predominantly Russian.

Modernisation through the pillar of industrialisation lasted for decades and continues today: the flow of newcomers brought by the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal was motivated by the needs of the firewood and timber industries. A dramatic point in Vepsian history was the physical destruction of the Vepsian territory by flood and resettlement, which was necessary to empty the territory. Even in the ‘peaceful’ period of the 1960s and 1970s, after the repressions and the Gulag enterprise had ended, the Vepsians were not offered a single official plan of resettlement from their native lands. People from the emptied territories made their own decision to leave. Only some chose to continue rural life in other Vepsian settlements. Today the towns along the Svir’ river are in large part settled by descendants of Gulag guards, special settlers, and pure and mixed Vepsians. But even pure Vepsians would never confess to a stranger that they are Vepsians. They call their children Russians.
6 PILLARS OF MODERNISATION: COLLECTIVISATION

6.1 COLLECTIVISATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

In considering the Soviet period in the history of regional ethnic groups, collectivisation is seen as the only principal regulating factor. The Vepsians in the 1930s, among numerous other ethnic groups in the former Soviet Union, are seen only through the prism of collectivisation – a process which undeniably affected the entire rural population. “The aftermath of the social shock of the 1930s (dekulakization, repressions), followed by the wars against Finland (1939-1940) and the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), had a very negative effect on the demographic structure of the Vepsian population” (Strogal’shchikova 2014, 200).

However, in the stream of Soviet state modernisation priority was given to industrialisation, which even the study of collectivisation could not ignore. It is therefore almost impossible to posit an impact based only on collectivisation without reference to industrialisation, even in rural communities. The Vepsians, settled as they were in the capital industrial region, could not experience collectivisation alone.

Vepsian agriculture experienced double pressure from industrialisation – from new construction sites and from forestry. The latter, seasonally combined with agriculture, was a long-established economic activity. This section seeks to reveal the mechanism of the dual influence of collectivisation and industrialisation, as they provoked and complemented each other, on the Vepsians. At the same time, the process of sovietisation can be seen at work in both processes – for example, in the use of Vepsian or Russian, as discussed in section 3.2.1.

The collectivisation experienced by the Vepsian population closely resembled the experience throughout Russia. During the Soviet modernisation of the 1930s the idea of organising collective and state farms as new units of production was designed to solve the problem of shortfalls in state procurement of grain. Large units of production and industrial enterprises affording access to mechanised equipment were seen as far more efficient than the traditional strip farming practised by peasants. The kulaks, the most prosperous farmers, had to be eliminated as a counterweight to Soviet power. Collectivisation and dekulakisation were intertwined processes.

“The twentieth century saw peasant Russia experience three drastic disruptions in the agricultural economy: the even redistribution by the Land Decree of 1917 as the cause and consequence of the Bolshevik victory, the establishment of the mandatory kolkhoz regime as a collectivisation experiment in the 1930s, and then the
collapse of the insolvent *kolkhoz* at the beginning of the 1990s when the rural population was accustomed to it...” (Denisova 2009, 143). It is now widely understood that the Soviet modernisation of the rural economy in the 1930s was a tragedy for the rural population. “Envy of prosperous neighbours and the possibility for enrichment at their expense through resettlement and looting of their property motivated many of the poor in adapting to their new *kolkhoz* life” (Denisova 2009, 143). My material shows that in the collectivisation process the Vepsian rural population experienced no less and no more than all Soviet villagers experienced during the 1920s and 1930s.

During the 1920s the peasants were divided into classes. According to Stalin’s decree of 1929, the first class of peasants consisted of most independent villagers, ‘kulaks’. They were executed. The second class was resettled to distant and undeveloped areas – the ‘kulak deportations’ to special regime labour settlements. Peasants who worked for the state were classified as ‘people of lowest rank’. This was reflected in the passport system, and peasants were not entitled to passports or to travel until the end of the 1960s. The transition from the policy of restriction and extrusion to the policy of liquidating the kulaks was announced by Stalin in 1929 at the Conference of Agrarian Marxists. The new policy was adopted on February 1 1930 in the decree “Concerning measures to strengthen the socialist reconstruction of agriculture in the regions of full collectivisation and in the struggle against the kulak” (*Sovet narodnykh komissarov SSSR* 1930). This act officially allowed Regional and Local Executive Committees of the Communist Party and the authorities in Autonomous Republics “to apply all possible measures for the struggle with kulaks to the regions of entire collectivisation”, up to the confiscation of kulaks’ property and eviction from the region.

The decree of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party on January 30 1930 “Concerning events aimed at the liquidation of kulak households in the regions of total collectivisation” (*Politburo tsentral’nogo… 1930*) became the main document on dekulakization. The kulaks’ means of production, economic and residential buildings, companies, feed and seed stocks, and cash were confiscated and transferred to indivisible *kolkhoz* funds as a membership fee from farm labourers and paupers, except for the portion paid as the kulaks’ debt to the state and cooperative. The Vepsian territories (in the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad and Vologda Regions) was subject to ‘full-scale collectivisation’ (*’sploshnaya kollektivizatsia’*) (Ivnitskii 1991, 51).

The struggle for collectivisation took various economic and social forms. To save their lives, some kulaks were prepared to abandon their property: “In Sheltozero region, where the scale of collectivisation was at its largest, the kulaks were the source of furtive gossip that ‘the Communists were driving peasants into *kolkhozy* because a large disaster, hunger, was expected in 1930. ... In some places, for example in Sheltozero, Sennaya Guba, and other places, kulaks offered the monopolization of their property to the *kolkhozy*, while not announcing their
intention to join *kolkhozy*” (Ivnitskij 1991, 52). The attitude to the equalising of living standards and economy among the Vepsians was similar to that of millions of other peasants all over the country: “My dad stood firmly for the old ways. He is afraid of the staff of the *kolkhoz* – all the poor are gathered together, and for ten families there are only two horses. Dad does not believe in the *kolkhoz* members’ strength – their own land has been abandoned” (Aristarkhov 1929, 2).

The agricultural changes brought by the new Soviet economy were composite and its main directions may be characterised as follows. Collectivisation introduced new processes such as ‘zemleustroistvo’ – the process of land management whereby every plot was distributed between the members of the *kolkhoz* – to rural economies. As applied to Vepsian land and households this new land management followed the following pattern: 1. a new way of cultivating the soil was introduced; 2. new types of arable farming were implemented; 3. new soil processing techniques were introduced; 4. intensive agriculture in places where agriculture had not been widely practised was emphasised; and 5. allotments of land, including the so-called Lenin’s allotment, belonging to the *kolkhoz* were created.

I am not suggesting that the new land division was inapplicable to old types of agricultural systems, but the introduction of a unified approach and new agricultures often failed to correspond to the climate and natural environment in certain areas. The implementation of *kolkhoz* plans was complicated by the introduction of new types of plants unsuited to the climate, terrain, or utilised approaches.

The *kolkhozy* were expected to promote advanced approaches to soil cultivation against those that had been practised for centuries. Newspapers of the time contained such sentiments as this: “It is enough to live the old way! Our fields have to provide double the crop. Down with the three-field-system!” (Rabotnik 1927, 2). Nevertheless, in some cases people continued with old methods of cultivation up to the 1970s (Liudmila, interview 2014).

In 1927 people could resist agricultural innovations that did not correspond to local soil types, and were even able to discuss the state’s agricultural politics in the newspapers. In the articles “Peasants discuss slash-and-burn agriculture. Slash-and-burn agriculture is necessary” (Anukhin 1927, 2) and “I vote for slash-and-burn agriculture” (Vedekhov 1927, 2) people wrote: “Slash-and-burn agriculture is needed. ... Slash-and-burn agriculture is not a marauding extermination of forests: cut timber becomes firewood, slash-seedings give rich crops. This increases the productivity of agriculture. I vote for slash-and-burn agriculture”. The articles were published alongside this editorial comment: “Slash-and-burn agriculture brings much more harm and losses than it does advantage, because it destroys forests on large territories and then, after a short-period of use (two or three years), it makes them wastelands” (Ot redaktii 1927, 2). A good example is given by the situation in the village of Vonozero: “The October Revolution came. In Vonozero new houses, log-framed in all colours and with planed roofs, appeared. There is no
lack of land or firewood. ... Vonozero has everything, but there is not enough education. However, slash-and-burn agriculture has been abolished” (Koptilkin 1928, 2). New life, new culture, and progress were associated with the abolition of slash-and-burn agriculture.

However, the necessity of keeping slash and burn agriculture was described in the article “Some more about slash-and-burn agriculture” (Eshche o podsechnom 1928, 2). To prove its necessity the author gives a detailed description of how to choose the correct locations and scale. Moreover, newspapers from 1929 attest to the fact that, despite land re-planning, the former type of agriculture remained in use: “In the village of Niubenichi in the Oiat district land planning was undertaken between 1924 and 1925, but a three-field system is still dominant” (Perekhodim, 1929, 2). The official version of new economic life differed from the reality. In my fieldwork I discovered that daily agriculture often followed the slash-and-burn approach. In speaking about the 1950s and 1960s – and even later – in Miagozero a respondent said that their household was allowed to seed only barley and plant potatoes. The family did their farming in the old way: “...[I]n the forest, on a small hill, we cut the trees up to the roots, and then totally burned the area and turned it over with a wooden plough. Then we planted turnips. We never had large fields to cultivate before. After such ash-soil enrichment the grain grows like a forest. And they did the same every year in other places” (Liudmila, interview, 2015). Liudmila explains this contradiction between the declared new agricultural policy and the domestic reality: “People survived as they could. That could be illegal. The collective farm managers knew, but the higher authorities didn’t, what was going on somewhere in the forest” (Liudmila, interview, 2015).

Kolkhoz planning was complicated by the policy of planting new crops which had never previously been grown in an area because the soil was too poor. “As a consequence of the introduction of large amounts of vegetables and potatoes the balance of working labour is critical. ... There have been unhealthy episodes, reflected in the escape of kolkhoz members from intense harvesting operations”6. Collectivisation introduced new tools along with new agricultural methods to people whose main occupation had never been agriculture: “... [P]easants ... [who had] mainly worked at seasonal jobs ... 118 ploughs and 97 harrows [having been bought], are seeding various cultures: vica (Vicia villosa), clover, and turnip” (A.G. 1927, 2).

In 1928 the newspaper published in Lodeine Pole announced new forms of land-planning, in which it was necessary to unite all sparse plots, spread over a wide territory, into a solid territory to unify soil processing. While affirming the need for intensive agriculture, the newspaper acknowledges the poor quality of the soil and the complicated distribution of plots that was the result of the terrain’s features: “Frequently one can see plots where, to process the soil, the peasant has to lift the harrow and harrow edgewise. It is impossible to introduce full-scale crop

6 GKU LOGAV. f. P-3463, op. 1, N 449, P. 117, from 17.05.1932.
rotation on such a plot. Even using the usual seeding process, half the seeds would end up on the neighbour’s plot. It is difficult to use a harrow on such a plot – not to mention a seeding machine. The other difficulty is plots that are far away, which are unprofitable for fertilising and processing, and which are poorly cared for” (Cherez zemleustroistvo 1928, 2). New agricultural planning was aimed at uniting plots for processing by heavy machinery.

The burden of compulsory agricultural labour tempted people already busy with seasonal work to abscond from the settlements. “Prior to the war of 1914 the peasants of Shustruchei village (Voznesenskii district) practised agriculture on a small scale. They were mainly involved in seasonal work as loaders, hook-workers, and workers on boats. During the war, and during the first years of the Revolution, they tried agriculture. But now, as life is improving, many want to escape from the peasantry and begin work elsewhere. They think agriculture is lacking in opportunities” (A.G. 1927, 2). In 1927 in the Lodeinoe Pole district press people were trying to convince planners that it was unprofitable to focus on agriculture and even to place agriculture and forestry on an equal footing in regions where environmental conditions made forestry the most important economic activity.

This understanding of economic priorities applied to all regions settled by the Vepsians. “According to data supplied by agricultural and forestry specialists every 100 hectares in our region includes 64 hectares of forest and 5 hectares of agricultural land. The rest, 31 hectares, is clearly constituted by unexplored and unmanageable lands. In a peasant’s budget income from agriculture makes up only 32½%; the rest, 67½%, is made up by other activities, among which forest work constitutes more than 60%. Forestry income contributes the largest share of agricultural taxation” (G.M. 1927, 2). Complex changes in agriculture were further complicated by new forms of forestry organisation.

In this way the modernisation of agriculture aimed to facilitate a new organisation of labour, alongside the utilisation of new technology. Agricultural innovation brought many technological changes to Vepsian agriculture. Unfortunately, these changes were inflexible and did not correspond with the natural features of the soil and terrain of Vepsian settlements. Some Vepsians continued secretly to practise the abolished slash-and-burn agriculture up to the 1960s. It is therefore important to underline that none of the modifications modernisation brought was able to cause serious damage to Vepsian society.

6.2 NO-SHOW BALANCE: AGRICULTURE – FORESTRY

In the Vepsian collectivisation process (dekulakisation, repressions, and deportations) the encounter with industrialisation is especially visible in the forestry industry. Modernisation affected the balance between agriculture and forestry in Vepsian daily life.
This new balance proved a disaster for the local population. Both activities had been practised by the Vepsians for centuries. Before the end of the 1920s their seasonality and labour structure were strictly regulated by the commune’s economic life. Modernisation changed the relationship and rotation of agriculture and forestry. The impact affected both Vepsian society and natural resources.

The destructive effect of collectivisation brought an end to the balance between these two activities, creating economic problems in the daily lives of the Vepsian population. If the seasonality of economic activities had been observed, these problems would not have arisen. With the abandonment of seasonality in forestry, the rural population was left with two full-time activities that were given equal priority. Agriculture was now held to be as important as forestry, while the latter became an all-year round activity because of the special value of the timber products of the Leningrad Region and areas close to the Finnish border.

Prior to the mass repressions which made free speech impossible, discussion concerning the relationship between forestry and agriculture in the everyday economy of kolkhozy took place in public. In 1927 the Lodeinoe Pole newspaper published a large report entitled “Which is more profitable – agriculture or forestry?”. The following quotation from this report communicates something of the sorrow that was to come:

…”[T]here is a question before us: is it possible that in our district agriculture and forestry can develop equally, not disturbing each other and not competing with each other? Comrade Trirogov says it is possible, because agricultural and forestry work are seasonal in character: agriculture requires intensive work in summer, whereas forestry requires it in winter. This is not true. The development of agriculture will inevitably bring a need for labour in both summer and winter, and the same will happen with forestry. The lack of labour in forestry is obvious even now… Is it profitable from the state’s point of view to develop agriculture in the whole district while the conditions for this are so poor, and to withdraw labour from forestry while hiring in labour for forestry from outside, because forestry has state priority in our region and cannot be halted? One should not forget that our peasants, who have grown up in the forests, are typically qualified foresters, who will be difficult to replace with immigrant workers (G.M. 1927, 2).

Forestry, as outlined above, was now an all-year round activity (Pimenov 1963, 47); but it had also lost its gender-specific character. From the establishment of the kolkhozy, women were required to work in forestry alongside men. Many publications have discussed the role of women in the construction of socialism, and this applied no less to the heavy jobs entailed by unmechanised forestry and timber rafting. Researchers have occasionally written about the incapability of the local populations of the Leningrad Region and Karelia to meet forestry targets because of
low population density (Iofe 2001, 27-29). However, this seems an over-simplified view, divorced from historical context.

Timber work was terribly arduous. For example, both men and women were required to do log driving in the spring standing in icy water: “As Tatiana Kostina-Mokeeva asks … how did we manage, knee-deep in icy water, taking one timber at a time to Palozero?” (Viktor, personal correspondence, 2016). Vepsians from the Nezhma settlement remember that the army began to do the timber work only in the 1950s (Viktor, personal correspondence, 2016). According to an agreement with the collective farm, military builders cut timber and bought it from the farm. It was only then that members of the collective farm were paid in money instead of grain.

Where the Karelian Vepsians are concerned, it should be mentioned that when “the shift to the planned economy took place, Soviet Karelia was already part of the economic specialisation system and had been assigned the task of providing timber to meet local demands as well as the Soviet Union’s export and domestic requirements” (Autio 2002, 321). The centralisation of the 1930s meant a loss of economic independence for Karelia. Due to financial constraints “prison labour was employed extensively in Soviet Karelia in the early 1930s, in spite of the fact that the local government maintained that the measures could not satisfactorily solve the labour shortage…” (Autio 2002, 323).

In the ethnographic literature about the Vepsians the abolition of the timber industry’s seasonality has been discussed only once, and only in connection with the Onega Karelian timber-workers: the international “composition of timber-working groups appeared gradually, along with the process of rejection of seasonality (until approximately the middle of the 1930s timber work was done exclusively in winter), and the organisation of permanent professional timber workers” (Pimenov 1963, 47).

Before the 1920s in Karelia timber forestry was practised by temporary units of two or three closely related families, referred to as ‘family cooperation’. In the 1920s work was done by units of three people – two cutters and one carrier). This represented a change in the system of family cooperation (Pimenov 1963, 49). At the beginning of the 1930s industrial forestry brought with it large teams of workers. Later these teams were assessed to be unsuitable and low-productive, and were replaced by a small team system in 1957 (Pimenov 1963, 50). These small units – known as ‘arteli’ (cooperatives) – were acknowledged to be highly flexible and effective for timber work.

As has been mentioned, women and men now did the same work as men in all areas, including log driving. It was especially arduous for women, who not only had to stand for hours in freezing water, but also had to catch and pull heavy logs to the shore. As kolkhoz members women could not avoid this previously male ‘contract’ job. Women complain about this in the local newspapers of the period. In the previously discussed 1926 Shokshozero census 88 men and 97 women (Rozov 1931, 165) were shown to be employed in timber work.
Before the forced labour industrial timber exploration of the region began, in defending the interests of forestry in the face of the new agricultural policies, the Vepsian forest territories were described as follows: “Up to now, when we speak about the forest economy, we mean the state forest fund. In our region there are also 31 hectares of undesignated land. ... There is such a lot of this kind of territory in the region! So the forest economy and industry can increase the income of the local population as well as the income of the state and the local budget without having to build factories or plants or mechanising timber works and transport” (G.M. 1927, 2). The article’s author suggested that the local forest business should be organised for the profit of the local budget. In practice this did not happen. Forestry and agriculture each had to occupy 100% of the Vepsians’ time, profit was centralised, and forestry labour shortages were supplemented by ‘special’ labour.

However, the timber industry rapidly grew in importance. Cities and construction sites needed timber and firewood, and they were also in demand for export. The great need for further forest exploration, primitive machinery, hard labour conditions, and the high demand for timber created a complex relationship between kolkhoz and forced-labour production. The terminology remained the same, but the meaning changed: ‘seasonal’ activities were no longer ‘seasonal’, but were undertaken throughout the year. They were no longer undertaken to supplement incomes, but became an essential element of the kolkhoz’s economic plan, assigned to both men and women as kolkhoz duty in addition to their regular agricultural labour.

Difficulties in meeting the targets of this policy saw the adoption of Central Executive Committee decree No. 10 “On seasonal jobs”, issued on June 30, 1931 (Tsentr’nyi ispolnitel’nyi… 1931). It should be noted that this legislation owed nothing to the daily reality, because the state and kolkhozy were unable to meet their assigned obligations. The decree declared privileges for kolkhoz members as seasonal workers – all state-contracted kolkhoz members working in timber, log driving, peat harvesting, fishing, and other seasonal work were freed from making payments from their wages to common kolkhoz funds. To provide kolkhoz members who were seasonal workers with kolkhoz money and a share of common funds, they were given work on the kolkhoz immediately upon their return from seasonal work. In the first case a portion of the distribution of kolkhoz by-products was reserved for kolkhoz members who were seasonal workers according to fixed prices and in a fixed amount equal to other highly productive kolkhoz members. Employable family members of seasonal workers participated in kolkhoz work on a collective basis (Tsentr’nyi ispolnitel’nyi … 1931).

Thus, kolkhoz members were required to undertake agricultural work and meet state forestry plans (designated as seasonal works, in spite of the fact that they were undertaken throughout the year) at the same time. The kolkhoz appointed workers for seasonal jobs and promised the provision of food to their families. If a seasonal worker’s family did not have enough food, when kolkhoz surpluses were distributed
“the governing body of the kolkhoz … [was] obliged to provide the family with food and forage in the same amount as to hard-working kolkhoz members, based on the same prices in cash; the families of kolkhoz members … [received] kolkhoz assistance (as provided by the inventory for the cultivation of domestic gardens, carts, etc.) equal to that of other kolkhoz members, and a daily allowance of 2 rubles and 50 kopeks when travelling, etc.” (Tsentr'al'nyi ispolnitel'nyi… 1931). In practice, however, these families never received such assistance.

The generally poor economic situation in the kolkhozy made it impossible for seasonal work to fulfil this ideal picture. Kolkhoz members who worked seasonally had none of the privileges provided by legislation: “2. In the timber industry kolkhozy fail to implement the plans. 3. There are no cases in which organised seasonal workers are provided with privileges”. The Vepsian territory is specifically mentioned in this context: “In the Babaevskiy region the plan was not fully implemented in log driving, timber work, and harvesting (and no privileges were provided)”.

Because of the planning overlap in agriculture and forestry, both economic activities failed. “As early as the beginning of June the Presidium of the Podporozhie region provided rural councils with set tasks to provide log-driving stations with labour, but at the end of August rural councils had still done almost nothing in this respect: only some had sent a few persons to log-driving stations by the end of August. Vazhiny log-driving station was expecting 500 workers by August 27, but received only 35. Píd’ma log-driving station also failed to receive the full complement of workers. Gomorovichi and Píd’ma rural councils were to send 200 persons, but only 87 of them were working. Miatusovo rural council stands out in providing 7 seasonal workers to the labour force, who worked at Píd’ma log-driving station until August 15 and then disappeared in an unknown direction” (Dat’ rabilu 1931, 3). It is significant that the situations reported here were in the summer, when agricultural labour was also greatly needed. In large areas of the Vepsian-settled Leningrad Region only 12.6% of summer forestry tasks (in both timber and firewood sectors) had been met by September 1. The plan execution report stated: “Absolutely nothing has been done where Kiselevo and Podporozhie timber works are concerned” (Prislech’ k ovtetstvennosti 1931, 3). Thus, collective farms were not even close to meeting the forestry targets required by the state.

The competition for manpower between the forestry and the kolkhozy resulted in kolkhozy having to rely on the labour of children and the elderly: “Concerning the agreement of mutual assistance between the timber industry enterprise and the kolkhozy … The kolkhoz has revised its position on the allocation and use of labour: the kolkhoz plans to maximise the use of female labour and half-time teenagers and elderly persons”.

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7 GKU LOGAV. f. P-3463, op. 1, N 449, P. 8, from 17.07.1931.
8 GKU LOGAV. f. P-3463, op. 1, N 449, P. 11, from 17.07.1931.
9 GKU LOGAV. f. P-3463, op. 1, No 449, p. 6, from 28.09.1932.
“In 1930, the state sought to impose an industrial regimen of labor in the village through the division of labor, the institution of piecework and the labor day, strict labor discipline, socialist competition and shock work, and a variety of other, often far-fetched utopian schemes” (Viola 1996, 210).

In every interview I undertook, in various Vepsian locations, I learnt that forestry was a persistent everyday obligation both before and after the Second World War. All the parents of my Vepsian respondents had worked hard in this industry as part of their collective farm duties. “My father used to go away on timber work. When he returned, I remember he used to bring cod, and white and black bread. And I remember he used to come on horseback during the night, and mother would wake us up and we would eat salted cod” (Vera, interview, 2015). Vera’s father was later executed – something she preferred not to discuss.

Soviet modernisation also brought over-planning to other branches of the economy, for example, to the fishing industry. Kolkhoz members were simultaneously employed in various activities. It should be remembered that these activities were especially hard during the first years of rapid modernisation, and they were further complicated by mass poverty and starvation. Economic hardship and labour shortages created competition for labour between kolkhozy and the state.

In fishing areas … there are cases when kolkhoz members are deployed in work that has no connection with fishing, for example, in agriculture, construction, log driving, timber work, and so on. This disrupts the work of fishing units and teams in kolkhozy. The Regional Kolkhoz Union prohibits District Kolkhoz Unions and Directional Boards of kolkhozy to deploy kolkhoz members who are fishermen … to works unconnected with fishing10.

Rapid modernisation thus not only affected industrial populations, but also created a heavy burden for those in rural areas. Under the new regulations their work and responsibilities depended on both kolkhoz plans and state tasks. These duties were imposed in various areas at the same time: in industrial projects (collecting stone for Svir’ construction sites), forestry, agriculture, fisheries, and, where the Onega Vepsians were concerned, mining.

Proximity to Leningrad defined the Vepsian economy, which was to a large extent based primarily on agriculture and forestry (the preparation of firewood for cities) long before Soviet modernisation was launched. Both these activities were regulated by seasonality and gender division. Forestry was a male activity during the winter season. Soviet modernisation abandoned forestry’s seasonality, promising that kolkhozy would provide food and forage to the families of those who had been deployed in forestry work all year round. In practice, however, such families remained in poverty. It became increasingly difficult to deploy kolkhoz members to forestry. People preferred to escape to jobs in the cities.

10 GKU LOGAV. f. P-3463, op. 1, N 563, P. 1, from 28.09.1932.
6.3 DEKULAKISATION AND OUTMIGRATION

Collectivisation consisted of two periods: the period of voluntary collectivisation before 1929 and the period of total collectivisation, which included mass ‘dekulakisation’: the execution and deportation of the kulaks, and the transfer of their property to the kolkhozy. “In the village setting, the term was originally a sobriquet for a ‘tightfisted’ peasant, a village exploiter, generally a moneylender or a trader” (Viola 2007, 5). In time, with the influence of the Russian Marxists, the term came to mean a “harbinger of village capitalism”, and “the kulak began to stand for the prosperous peasant, if not the village capitalist exploiter” (Viola 2007, 5).

The period of voluntary collectivisation in Vepsian villages is illustrated by a description of the situation in one respondent’s family: “In those years I was a member of the sel’sovet. … I was expected to be the first to join the kolkhoz, and that’s what I did. … Eight families out of twenty in the village joined the kolkhoz. … When I came home, father met me with a pair of tongs, declaring ‘from today you are no longer my son.’ … Later every member of my family joined the kolkhoz …” (Lodygina 2010, 24).

After collectivisation had become mandatory throughout the country in 1929, a group of three people (a ‘troika’) could issue a condemnation for execution, imprisonment, or deportation. This group was comprised of the First Secretary of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party, the Head of the Regional Administration of the NKVD, and a prosecutor. Condemnation was rapid, because no court was needed. A huge number of documents concerning dekulakisation and the deportation of Vepsians from their native villages in the Leningrad Region are held in the Leningrad Region State Archive in Vyborg. Documentation on the dekulakisation of the Vepsian settlements in the Leningrad Region covers the period between 1930 and 1934, month by month, year by year, district by district, and the peasants and farmers – several hundred thousand names – who were convicted and exiled. The years between 1930 and 1932 are covered in documents by district; the years between 1932 and 1934 are presented in unified information on these districts.

The heavy burden on labour caused by rapid modernisation caused peasants to seek an escape from this life. Many left their villages without any offer of employment, pretending that they were engaged in seasonal work, but in reality hoping for a new life somewhere else. “Some kolkhoz members, honestly or otherwise, left to work in lespromkhozy (timber-industrial enterprises), which were established in September 1931. In lespromkhozy salaries were paid consistently” (Viktor, correspondence 2015).

11 GKU LOGAV. f. P-1397, op.1 No. 122. 01.1932. 86 lists; GKU LOGAV, f. P-1397, op.1 No. 129. 24.03.1933-21.11.1933. 116 lists; GKU LOGAV, f. P-1397, op.1 No. 141. 01.01.1934-30.12.1931. 120 lists.
12 GKU LOGAV. f. P-3463, op. 1, No. 449, p. 117, from 17.05.1932.
The harsh economic conditions of the end of the 1920s resulted in people looking to support themselves through non-agricultural work. Depending on the specific economic circumstances of their region, Vepsians sought to escape by moving to urban construction sites, working in quarries in Karelia, or moving to Siberia with their families.

The proximity of construction sites on the Svir’ river also provided an opportunity to escape:

In Vinnitsy district prior to the war the population was 11,800, which provided enough manpower for the kolkhoz. Many men were permitted by the kolkhoz administration to leave to work in forestry. Families that for some reason did not want to join the kolkhoz moved from the district to new construction sites (where their labour was in demand) – first, to the construction of the Svir’-3 station, and when it was completed many moved to Podporozhie to work on the construction of the Svir’-2 station (Lodygina 2010, 25-26).

Seasonal work played an especially important role in the decision to escape the collective farm. Collectivisation and sovietisation had brought a new understanding of seasonal work as migrant labour (‘otkhodnichestvo’). This topic, as well as others previously discussed, has been of little interest to ethnographers writing about collectivisation among ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the change in understanding of seasonal activities clearly reveals the core of collectivisation in state policy and everyday life.

Three seasonal activities were recognised as the most important by the new Soviet economy: forestry work; fishing; and quarrying. The importance of fishing diminished with the loss of fishing grounds due to river construction sites. Quarrying was under new management, becoming an independent branch of industry (separately from both seasonal temporary jobs and kolkhoz plans), and is discussed in the section about Karelian quarrying.

Modernisation resulted in voluntary resettlement in other parts of the country, including distant Siberian regions. Russian ethnographers have highlighted the importance of such resettlements on the basis of contemporary ethnographic material (the memories of present generations of settlers). They have to admit, however, that there is no data on the early resettlements of 1911. “The first official data on the Vepsians of the Irkutsk Region appears in the 1939 census” (Strogal’shchikova 2014, 97). No documentary proof of these resettlements exists for the period prior to the 1920s.

At the end of the 1920s people sought to escape collectivisation by finding other employment. In the Kemerovo Region the Vepsian population, “according to information received from the offspring of the first settlers, [arrived between 1927 and 1928] … having left Efimovskii in the Boksitogorsk district of the Leningrad Region. The main reasons for resettlement … were poor crops, starvation, and
collectivisation” (Strogal’shchikova & Zaitseva 2008). Strogal’shchikova and Zaitseva focus on the Kemerovo and Irkutsk Regions. According to the same source there are no documentary or secondary proofs available concerning the dates of and motives for resettlement. Fifteen families returned to Vepsian territory. Those escaping collectivisation to Siberia were unlucky: in the 1930s in Manilovkoe three collective farms were established. In 1938 they were united into one kolkhoz.

The situation in Siberia becomes more interesting at the end of the 1920s. The scale of resettlement to avoid collectivisation became so large that the state had to legislate against migration. In 1928 local newspapers published articles about this:

*Lately, because of the rainy summer and lack of bread among Shimozero peasants (Oshta Region), there has been talk of resettling to Siberia. It is said that it is impossible to improve the economy in Shimozero … and therefore we should move out. This opinion needs to be resisted for this reason: on resettlement the whole household, built over decades, will be abandoned, while everything needs to be built again on arrival. … New kolkhozy will need to be established. … Resettlement will bring no advantage. We should fight for the improvement of the economy here. Flexible and collective labour will bring a high increase in crop yields (Osinin 1929, 2).*

At the time the press suggested that whole families were leaving their homelands, selling their property, and departing for nowhere “to mysterious, unknown places, to Kuban, Siberia, Turkestan. …” (Na plotakh 1929, 2). This voluntary resettlement was seen as the only way to escape collectivisation and hardship. However, my field material contains only accounts of forced Siberian resettlement, after which those resettled tried to return home. My respondents stress that such resettlement could never have been voluntary, because the region and its population were so distant and backwards that people would never have considered undertaking such a long journey.

Current ethnographical descriptions of Vepsian resettlement in Siberia (Strogal’shchikova & Zaitseva 2008) do not correspond with the actual processes of dekulakisation and ethnic or regional deportations. The facts show that only prior to 1929 was voluntary resettlement from Vepsian villages to Siberia possible. Such resettlement came to an end with the collectivisation policy to eliminate the kulaks. In 1930 the Irkutsk Region (referred to by ethnographers as the main area of Vepsian resettlement in Siberia) was one of nine major kulak resettlement zones (Hughes 1996, 198-199). Hughes (1996) presents a table “Siberian OGPU statistics on the deportation of Category Two kulaks, to February 1930” (Hughes 1996, 200), which shows that in 1930 298 families, 1397 persons in total, were deported to the Irkutsk Region. There was another wave of deportation in 1935 from the Leningrad Region to Western Siberia (Baron 2007, 168), where there are known to be communities of Vepsians in Kemerovo and other locations.
Almost everyone I interviewed knew someone who had returned from Siberia having been deported there. “There were two women. ... One was Serafima Nikolaevna Golubela. ... They were repressed in 1937 or 1939, I don’t know. They owned a mill. ... That’s why they were repressed, and the whole family was taken to Tiumen’” (Valentina, interview, 2015). After the war they returned to Shondovichi. This woman, Serafima, reported that at the new place they had not experienced the starvation of the war, but that when they returned they experienced it to the full extent.

One of my respondents, in talking of the starvation in the villages in the post-war period, stated that when the bread was being half-baked with fodder and no one could even dream about sweets, his grandmother had returned from Siberia, where she had been deported with her repressed husband. “Mother went to meet her by sledge with a horse. I still remember how they entered the house with several sacks of flour and many other provisions and sweets. It was the first time in my life I had seen the large bags of sugar she was taking out of her bag” (Viktor, personal correspondence, 2015). Furthermore, it is difficult to identify a period when a large number of Vepsians were deported. My respondent continues: “In October 1941 Maria Nikitichna Rakhmanova, wife of the repressed man Vasily Stepanovich Rakhmanov, was exiled to Siberia. Other families were deported from Nemzha at the same time (to Kirikovy and Pankrashevy)” (Viktor, personal correspondence, 2015).

The stories I heard about Siberia all concluded in the same way: that nowhere did the Vepsians suffer such starvation as they did at home. With all its complexity rapid modernisation failed to take into account the conditions in which the rural population was living. The use of purges as an instrument for accelerating state development resulted in hard conditions for the peasant population in general and the Vepsians in particular. However, the state still had to combat the tendency to move away from rural settlements. Modernisation improvised new methods to influence this: outmoving was forbidden and a passport system was introduced. Collective farm members could not get passports.

On February 1 1930 the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars adopted a decree forbidding kulaks from getting rid of their property and moving away from their region without a permit: “1. It is everywhere forbidden for kulak households to move away and sell their property without special permission from the Regional Executive Committee; 2. Regional Executive Committees are strictly obliged to totally confiscate the property of kulaks who do not observe the present regulation and to undertake other repressive measures up to confiscation of property in case of property being on sale” (Ivnitskii & Makurov 1991, 20). In this way modernisation quickly penetrated every sphere of Vepsian life.
6.4 SUMMARY

The study of the destructive influence of collectivisation on ethnic minority cultures is a beaten path in ethnography and anthropology. However, as an essential element of rapid Soviet modernisation, it cannot be viewed apart from its other pillars – industrialisation and sovietisation. The last of these I consider the tight mutual dependence of all three modernisation components, which cannot be studied in isolation.

Through collectivisation modernisation affected Vepsian society in many ways. The order to change technology in soil processing to new forms of collective work and the tight combination of agricultural work with forestry planning were combined and new forms of cooperative labour assigned. There was therefore no way for the Vepsians to practise their former soil processing, and nor could they any longer exercise choice in the crops they planted or the livestock they raised. The traditional Vepsian seasonality and gender roles were now impossible. However, what was most destructive to Vepsian society was the double burden of the requirements to undertake agricultural work on the kolkhozy at the same time as year-round forestry work which provided neither food nor income.
7 DISCUSSION

In studying the initial features and mechanisms of Soviet modernisation as it applied to one of the country’s ethnic minorities, my research also reveals the causes of the destruction of an ethnic group. For decades the issue of ethnic culture loss has been discussed mostly in terms of the anti-minority policy. My research shows that damage to ethnic cultures was caused by the mechanism of Soviet modernisation itself, based on three pillars: sovietisation, industrialisation, and collectivisation. These pillars influenced Soviet ethnic groups unevenly; the level of domination depended on many factors, including a minority’s location. However, it is important to underline that no ethnic group’s fate was unaffected by all three pillars of modernisation, even if the degree of this influence differed in each case.

The theory of modernisation, when applied to my research, is broad and multivalent. In relation to the empirical material it calls for a deep discussion of the ways in which the universal modernisation theory may or may not be applicable to the research: it is a widely ambivalent discourse. An examination of the empirical material concerning the Vepsians between 1929 and 1931 shows that Stalin’s vision of Marxist modernisation – forced modernisation – forms part of the critical vision of universal modernisation theory. The ‘high modernism’ doctrine is applicable to the entire history of Soviet modernisation in general, when throughout the twentieth century the state accumulated its total control of resources and developed unlimited state interventionism and the ability to shape a malleable social organism. Indeed, high modernism did not necessarily deal with forced labour, while modernisation in Vepsian territory between the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s was inherently tied to a forced labour force.

The absence of general Soviet anti-minority or race extermination policies provided no security to, and did nothing to promote the functioning and development of, ethnic minorities. There was no consideration of their interests and ethnicity, and they were destroyed by a mainstream modernisation policy that aimed to create a new Soviet society, the new Soviet person, and an advanced industrial environment.

The establishment of a new type of state required decisive and intense action in every sphere of life. In expectation of the advent of the era of international communism, and in involving every part of the population in building communism, the Soviet state introduced the policy of *korenizatsia*, supporting and developing literacy for pre-industrial societies, based on the Latin alphabet. The policy was initially promising, and this period is known for its flowering of Soviet ethnic cultures. In the case of the Vepsians this period lasted a decade.

The absence of a clear political plan for the Soviet state if the doctrine of international communism failed was a weakness of the Soviet policy of the 1930s (Hoffman 2002). But if the solution for ambitious industrial plans was found in the
form of cheap, almost free, forced labour in peacetime to meet the most demanding challenges of modernisation, unresolved national issues were put aside.

It is a stereotype that after the abolition of *korenizatsia* an improper national policy was undertaken (Klement’ev 2007; Pimenov 1989). This is supported by various Soviet acts and decrees during various historical periods, but it is very difficult to trace any proven such stream in actual Soviet national policy.

The state machinery was incapable of keeping pace with the rapid launch of modernisation, although the Soviet ambition was to catch and overtake the West. Soviet modernisation began late. It had to overcome the industrial and technological gap with advanced Western countries in one decade. The initial plan was to involve all social strata of the country in modernisation, relying on their awareness and understanding of the necessity for rapid change. But there was not enough time, and there was no alternative short-term plan for how to adapt every ethnic group to the new Soviet conditions. It was easier to construct an image of the new Soviet person, based on Russian identity.

This new image was inflexible: people could either be ‘built’ according to this standard or ‘reforged’ by the punishment system. ‘Reforged’ people were freed and awarded medals. They became exemplary citizens. The only one way for a member of an ethnic minority to become a proper Soviet person was to join the majority.

By the end of the 1930s all work on ethnic minority literacy and education had ceased. Russian was now the only language of Soviet modernisation in the territory of the Russian Federation. Vepsian survived only in rural districts and in families. People hid their ethnic identity when they came to cities.

The advanced new Soviet person spoke only Russian. My personal experience is that in mixed families in large cities children were forbidden to speak other languages at kindergarten or school to ensure they would not have an accent in Russian and would later be classified as Russian in their passports.

It was their geographical location that brought the Vepsians into the vanguard of Soviet modernisation. It played a crucial role in the cultivation of modernisation in daily life. At the end of the 1920s forced modernisation arrived in cities and in their rural settlements, and they were required to implement its demands. Stalin’s construction sites, built on the purges and forced labour enterprises with their network of camps, brought many newcomers into indigenous Vepsian territory. With the firewood and timber industry they brought prisoners, guards, special settlers, civilians, and contract workers to stay for decades or permanently. The Gulags initiated exploration of low-population density areas near cities and established giant construction sites. Newcomers settled in the towns and rural timber centres of the Svir’ district cities, establishing a new ‘local’ population.

The 1920s and 1930s in Russian history are known as a period of rapid Soviet modernisation. Industrialisation, collectivisation, and sovietisation were its pillars, and have been previously studied by different branches of Soviet and post-Soviet science as separate and independent processes that affected the Soviet population.
The study of sovietisation as the process of creating the new Soviet person with the desire for a happy Soviet future, for example, has never been examined through the prism of industrialisation or collectivisation. My case study demonstrates the impact of modernisation on an ethnic group. Within its mechanism all three elements are tightly interconnected. It is all but impossible to identify which was most important or to order them chronologically.

Today industrialisation can be identified as the Soviet modernisation process that probably achieved most. However, this was only at the cost of collectivisation, repression, and the erosion of non-Russian cultures.

Undoubtedly, for local populations in any part of the Soviet Union the process of collectivisation was no less impactful than was industrial construction by Gulag camp labour. Collectivisation, industrial projects, and sovietisation brought irreversible changes to Vepsian society, and all were characterised by an atmosphere of terror. Yet these processes were tightly interconnected. All served a single goal of the state, its drive for industrialisation. Local populations were not simply the victims of force, but also its participants. They were not only neighbours and observers: in some cases they were provisioners for or prisoners in concentration camps.

During the first decades of the twentieth century the Vepsians, who for the most part occupied the Leningrad Region, found themselves in the vanguard of industrialisation because of their geographical location. “According to the data of the All-Union census of 1926 there were 1929 urban centres in the country. Of these, 1240 were in the Russian Federation. Inside the Republics these were distributed unevenly in different regions. ... In the Leningrad-Karelian region there were 113 [urban centres]” (Zhiromskaya 2000, 219). This was the highest number after the Central and Ural regions. The population experienced many changes in their lives and economic activities.

Visible modernisation came to the Vepsian lands with industrialisation. The great construction sites on Vepsian territory, cited by the handbook “National Minorities of the Leningrad Region” by P. M. Ianson (1929, 11), were the two Svir’ river hydroelectric stations, named the Lower Svir’ and the Upper Svir’, the Belomor-Baltic Canal, and the Cherepovetsk metallurgical complex. “Most of the Vepsian population is settled in rural and swamp territories at the borders of the Lodeinoe Pole, Cherepovetsk, and Leningrad regions. The majority is located in Lodeinoe Pole (16,484), where they are settled in Vinnitsy, Oshta, and Oiat’; in Cherepovetsk, in Efimovo and Shol’ski (5,357); and in the Leningrad Region they are found in Kapshinski (2,202)” (Ianson 1929, 12). The Vepsians were typically a rural people, almost absent in the cities. Agriculture was the main economic activity, with fishing and forestry as seasonal additions. Ianson classified the Vepsians as culturally backward: they practised extensive agriculture, more than 90% of households using the three-field system, and they also practised the slash-and-burn system on a large scale.
Industrialisation and collectivisation accompanied modernisation in societal and cultural life. It would be wrong to separate the modernisation of societal and cultural life from the processes of collectivisation and industrialisation. It is also a simplification to describe the initial stage of sovietisation in the 1920s and 1930s as “a revival of Vepsian culture” (Klement’ev 2007, 13). This ‘revival’ served the clear purpose of the modernisation of the country and its political system, not simply the interests of the indigenous group.

Modernisation resulted in the large-scale assimilation of the Vepsians in Russian society. The Vepsian ethnic group still exists because the process of Soviet modernisation and sovietisation was not completed. However, the erosion of indigenous society and culture did not begin in the 1930s; its initiation coincided with the foundation of the Soviet state. In the decades that followed it took different forms and mechanisms. Some have been discussed outside the time frame of the present research.

Modernisation had a less drastic and tragic impact on the Vepsians of Karelia, who were already engaged in industrial activity, than it did on the Vepsians of the Leningrad Region. Nevertheless, the radical change in the management of the mining industry opened the community to newcomers and created a situation where everyday communication was less with other groups of Vepsians in Vosnesenie than it was with Russians. Vepsian society had to adjust to new conditions, whether as the result of forced or peaceful industrial transformations.

Different minority groups in the territory of the former Soviet Union suffered different fates, and all experienced the three pillars of modernisation in different ways. Minorities in territories distant from the cities or from giant construction sites experienced industrialisation to a minor extent and differently from others. In these groups collectivisation exerted the dominant influence of modernisation. Nevertheless, no ethnic minority group’s transformation during the Soviet period can be seen apart from Soviet modernisation as a whole.

The Vepsians’ fate was special. All three pillars of modernisation caused irreversible and catastrophic assimilation. People did not disappear. There was no mainstream targeted anti-minority policy against Soviet ethnic minorities in general or the Vepsians in particular. If there had been, there would have been a strong revival of ethnic groups during the peaceful years between 1960 and 1980. Instead, there was a constant and drastic decline in the number of Vepsians, from 16,374 in 1959 to 5,936 in 2010.

As I have already stated, however, the processes of modernisation varied from ethnic group to ethnic group. They varied also between groups in the same ethnic group. Newcomers were working among the Onega Vepsians in the mining industry even before the modernisation of the 1920s had been launched. Their numbers increased with the new mining management structure. For example, today the population of the Onega Vepsian settlement of Sheltozero is no longer only Vepsian. People who have worked at the mine for a long time prefer to live
there. Here, the relationship between Vepsians and the newcomers working alongside them in the mining industry is decades-old, and has not compromised the traditional Vepsian way of life. This is in contrast to the situation in the Leningrad Region. The result is that a single group – the Onega Vepsians – constitutes more than a half of the total Vepsian population.

Soviet modernisation brought the Vepsians and other Soviet minorities education, healthcare, the opportunity to work in plants and factories, and new forms of agriculture and agricultural mechanisation. However, it also brought a new understanding of what is advanced and normal, and what is backward and abnormal.

For the most part the processes launched at the end of 1920 became permanent and unalterable for the Vepsians. People with a non-Russian ethnic and pre-industrial background could not walk towards the communist future quickly enough. To accelerate the process of modernisation they and their problems were quickly brushed aside, left to find their way themselves, and to build relationships with newcomers. They were left to survive with their culture as large numbers of newcomers arrived in their indigenous lands.
8 CONCLUSIONS

When the map of Vepsian settlements in 1926 is compared with the current locations of the Vepsian ethnic group, a single question arises: where did all these people go? The present research suggests that the answer is complicated. As I have already shown, there was no targeted destruction of the Vepsians as an ethnic group. Newcomers settled in their territory, they were affected by the course of rapid modernisation, industrialisation came to their region in the form of giant construction sites and timber works as an additional daily obligation of the kolkhoz, the network of prison camps extended to their territory, and their native language was gradually replaced by Russian. Today we can observe that in only a few decades this ethnic group, settled in Northwestern Russia, declined drastically in population and lost hundreds of rural settlements.

Even if only the closing down of regional centres like Oshta in the 1960s and the flooding of a large territory at the source of Svir’ river, which alone fragmented the Vepsians’ connections with each other within their ethnic territory, are considered, the question remains: where did the population go? After the calmer years of Soviet history – the period of stagnation between the 1960s and 1980s and up to today it would be reasonable to expect the stable development of the Vepsians, if not a complete revival at least in terms of population. But the decline in the Vepsian villages of the Leningrad Region is unrecoverable.

It would be too simple to say that the reason was simply industrialisation or collectivisation. The correct answer should include the complex net of Soviet modernisation processes and their outcomes and shortcomings in their entirety, experienced by the Vepsians from the end of the 1920s. Every ethnic minority on the territory of the Soviet state was affected differently.

However, in the Vepsian case all three pillars of modernisation were tightly interwoven. These pillars denuded the Vepsian territory. The displacement and erosion of society led to assimilation, which in its turn was the result of the complex of processes associated with modernisation. Put more simply, the impact of modernisation had various elements, from the formation of a general Soviet attitude that saw ethnic groups as backward to the policy of resettlement.

Decades after Stalin – the most controversial period in Russian history – attempts are being made to evaluate and re-evaluate the Soviet past. The main debates are concerned to compare his policy’s positive and negative outcomes. Where domestic policy is concerned, much is said about Soviet success and achievements in modernisation and industrialisation. My study does not question the Soviet industrial success, but nor does it question the high price the population had to pay for it in the Purges.

The role of sovietisation here is especially important. The introduction or even production of the new Soviet person, especially as it related to ethnic groups, their
place and role in modernisation, and the need to catch up with the more advanced Soviet-Russian majority were decisive. Little is said about the creation of the new Soviet person in the prison system’s ‘reforging’ of people. The standards and values of this process of sovietisation, as well as the perception of the backwardness of ethnic minorities, are still alive and constitute the modern mentality in Russia. My fieldwork clearly demonstrates this in the case of the Vepsians. Over the decades the stereotypes of ethnic groups as being far removed from modernisation has remained unchanged.

The state’s work with ethnic groups began successfully in the mid 1920s with the introduction of a new nationalities policy, a literacy campaign, and a drive for school education in distant areas and in native languages. By 1937 this process had been halted, reversed, and abandoned. Construction and technologisation were seen as much more important tasks to realise. The new person continued to develop within a Russian vacuum, in which only the features of Russian ethnicity were regarded as progressively national.

After the mid-1930s Soviet modernisation lost one of its elements – the sovietisation of ethnic groups. All the other elements connected with industrialisation and agriculture continued to develop. This was an irreparable loss. Ethnic groups, who needed to make up a large gap to comply with the ideal of the new Soviet person, no longer received state support and had to survive by themselves. They had either to assimilate and accept their new lives or remain hopelessly wedded to the past. The mid-1930s were the turning point for the development of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. Along with the other ethnic minorities Vepsian culture no longer accorded with the Soviet model.

Stalin’s formulation “socialist in content and national in form”, which he outlined in his 1925 lecture “The Political Tasks of the University of the Peoples of the East”\(^{13}\) was his formula for the human culture of the Soviet future. Unfortunately, in practice Stalin’s policy took the opposite course. Ethnic elements became a cover for unified Soviet values.

The present research is at one and the same time about the Vepsians and all ethnic minorities. The theory of modernisation as industrialisation, collectivisation, and sovietisation, with terror as a tool, was applied to every ethnic group in the former Soviet Union. Soviet industrialisation was not confined to construction sites. It managed both intensive and extensive exploration of natural resources and the construction of a transport system throughout the country. Imposing the map of the great construction sites of the Great Turn of the 1930s on a map of ethnic groups’ current locations, if applicable and permitted, and comparing it with a third map of the regime’s forced labour camps would visually document modernisation’s impact on native groups from the 1920s to the 1970s. An application of the same theoretical approach to the period between the 1960s and 1990s might give a new momentum

to ethnic studies. Large numbers of the rural population continue their daily lives affected by their experience of the industrial projects of the present and past.

Some concluding words should be said about the current situation in the settlements which until the 1930s were known as Vepsian. In every settlement – from towns to almost deserted villages – the number and conditions of the population directly depend on the transport infrastructure. The biggest Svir’ river towns, Lodeinoe Pole and Podporozhie, as well as the Onega Vepsian settlements in the Republic of Karelia, contain significant industrial complexes operating in mining, timber, cellulose, and heavy and light industry. This provides the local population with both industrial and social-administrative employment.

After the closure of the sovkhozy in 1990 and the establishment of a new forestry system the Vepsian settlements lost many kinds of employment. Only the elderly with pensions and the middle-aged unemployed, sharing their parents’ pension, live in dying villages. Since 2006 a new forestry policy has seen forests, which were previously state property controlled and managed by the state’s forestry units (leskhozy), distributed to leaseholders with a maximum lease of 49 years. The new leaseholders are not interested in how their production is embedded in wider social processes. Many ethical consequences are invisible to them. The industry operates in traditional territories that have been settled for centuries, with no contact with the locals. Besides unemployment the new system has made the sourcing of firewood by locals difficult. The legislation states that new leaseholders have a social responsibility towards the local population, which is completely dependant on firewood. In practice locals have to buy firewood at the commercial price. To meet their social responsibility, leaseholders provide locals with forest land. The receiver has to hire workers for the work involved in the preparation of firewood.

My research question was: how did the Soviet modernisation campaign of the late 1920s and 1930s affect the long-term survival of the Vepsian ethnic group? It has shown that in the 1920s and 1930s all three pillars of modernisation – sovietisation, industrialisation, and collectivisation – were equally responsible for the destruction of the Vepsians as an ethnic group, causing further erosion and large-scale elimination through assimilation. The processes launched in the late 1920s became irreversible and affected the Vepsians for almost a century. As early as the 1930s and 1940s the changes in Vepsian life and community wrought by modernisation were so serious that one researcher, who visited the Vepsians in the 1930s and 1950s, described them later as follows: “I understood on the first day of my visit that they are not the familiar Vepsians I had previously known. In every respect one can feel the closeness of the city and the foundations of the elimination of ethnography” (Vinokurova 1999, 15).

More broadly the question arises as to the extent the same mechanisms of destruction are applicable to the fates of other Soviet ethnic minorities in the 1930s and later. Each case must be viewed separately, with a detailed study of every facet
of the effect of modernisation. Rapid forced modernisation was undertaken throughout the country, but the role of all three pillars differed from region to region and from one group to another. They were present to a different degree in the fate of every ethnic group; as already mentioned, my research shows that even the tribes of the Far East were required to support forced labour industrial construction sites.

Even within the Leningrad Region the impact of all three pillars of modernisation on the Vepsians was different in the late 1920s and 1930s. The results can be seen today: some settlements remain proudly Vepsian. However, the present course of modernisation and the unemployment situation in the region may become critical for locals.
9 EPILOGUE

THE PHANTOMS OF IVINA AND SHIMOZERIA

In analysing the changes brought by Soviet modernisation to the Vepsian lands, my most complex task was to keep the research within a strict historical time frame. Vepsian modernisation did not end in the 1930s, and each Vepsian case took its own course. There were two cases of modernisation, or high modernism, that should be mentioned in this Epilogue, which show the stream of the ethnic group’s transition.

Ivina and Shimozeria are two Vepsian regions in which settlements vanished because of Soviet industrialisation. This is relevant to the present research because these two cases to a large extent explain changes in the map of the Vepsian territories from the 1920s to the present.

The Svir’ construction site became a long-term state project that included decades of works on widening and deepening the river, and the construction of the Upper Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station in the area of Porporozhie, the Ivina reservoir, and the Upper Svir’ water reserve. The construction of the Upper-Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Station called for the construction of reservoirs. Many small and large settlements along the Svir’ river were therefore demolished and flooded.

The official version, exhibited in the local museum and in the virtual Museum of Energy, says that all houses were moved up the riverbank. From this point the story of these settlements goes in two directions. Some houses were indeed moved and reassembled further along the river. Today in Podporozhie the local Vepsian houses (and I stress here that they are Vepsian – those whose families have lived there for many decades) are easily identified: their houses are built in new streets, breaking up the old town plan. A section of the exhibition in the local museum is made up of photographs of these moved houses.

But there is another unwritten and unofficial story about these flooded Podporozhie districts and the other settlements along the Svir’. For some reason it was impossible to provide total resettlement and move all the houses and every village. To this day along the Svir’ river there are the remains of old houses: notched logs, islands of driftwood released from the bottom of the river, and sometimes fragments from cemeteries. The number of flooded villages and the scale of flooded lands is so great that the Lower and Upper-Svir’ Hydroelectric Power Stations have had to construct safety barriers and installations, one of which filters drifting house logs and redirects them to timber processing.

Only elderly locals remember the destruction of dozens of settlements. But the local ‘miracle’ of ‘drifting islands’ is well-known among tourists all over Russia. People come to the Svir’ to see it and to try their fortune by gathering berries on such drifting islands or catching fish in a well (a so-called ‘window’).
The Ivina settlements were located on the right bank of the Svir’ river, connecting the Vepsians of the Leningrad Region and the Karelian Vepsians of Lake Onega. Given that there were up to a couple of dozen Vepsian villages, there was a large territory and a relatively large population. Their disappearance, together with the demise of the Vepsian population along the Svir’ river, had a decisive effect on the Vepsian population as a whole. It was the product of both mechanical (due to flooding and partial resettlement) and ideological (due to repression) impacts.

Today, researchers of Vepsian history question the purity of the Vepsian population in Ivina (Bazhukov 2013), suggesting the possibility that there is also a Karelian population there. Vepsian identity is not obvious in Ivina, because “today these people identify themselves as Russians and are ashamed of their roots; this is the result of Soviet politics” (Pëtr, interview, 2015). The Ivina case concerns a significant number of old settlements under one umbrella named ‘Ivina’ and the life of the region before its flooding.

The Vepsian presence in the region can be documented, however: “[T]he territory of the Onega Vepsians in the Petrozavodsk uезд was wider and extended to the Svir’ river in the south and Ostrechinki and Ivina in the west” (Ioalaïd 1989, 78). The minor River Ivina, located in southern Karelia, flows into the Svir’ river close to the Vepsian border between the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad Region. It is close to the border of the present-day Voznesenje settlement. “For centuries Ivina gave water and provisions to thousands of people who lived alongside it. … In this settlement I was born. … My ancestors, peasants, approximately ten generations back, cultivated the soil, fished, cut and drove the timber, and raised their children and grandchildren here” (Bazhukov 2013, 9). The history of Ivina is another history of industrial tragedy.

In the 1930s there were twelve Ivina villages: Shestakova, Bubnova, Kalinskaia, Mit’kina Gora, Verhovie, Fershukova, Mishevskaia, Kara, Pogost, Deriabova Gorka, Kashina, and Yashozero. Kashina was the most distant, fifteen kilometres from the other villages. It was also the only one to survive. Administratively, Ivina belonged to the Olonets gubernia and later to the Leningrad Region (Lodeinopolskii district and later Voznesenskiy district). Ivina was connected by road to Yashozero and also to Sheltozero (populated by Karelian Vepsians). The history of this formerly prosperous settlement is also closely connected to the geography of the Gulag camps (Bazhukov 2013, 99) which at one time neighboured the Ivina villages.

When Ivina was flooded in 1940 its inhabitants were resettled on the Karelian Isthmus. It was a very painful process. In 1941 the resettled families found themselves besieged. Only a few survived, in Petrozavodsk, Kondopoga, Ladva, and Podporozhie. Fourteen kilometres from Ivina there was the large Ostrechiny settlement, consisting of twenty villages located on both sides of the Ostrechinka river. There were other villages on the Ivina river which did not belong to the Ivina settlement: Kriukova, Mitkina, Ekhino, and Kniakheva. There were other villages united under the name of Muromlia (Bazhukov 2013, 99). All these villages were
flooded and were not resettled. Officially, four sel'sovety were destroyed: Ivina, Koselga, Muromlia, and Baranovo. Like Ivina, in 1940 their populations were moved to the countryside of the Leningrad Region, and the majority died during the siege of Leningrad.

In the most recent data for this territory there are no traces of the Vepsian villages:

… [I]n 1951 the Ivina reservoir was constructed, with a total area of about 500 km2. It stretches … from north to south for 25 km, and from east to west for almost 20. The depth of the reservoir is mainly about 3 m, but in the region of the old Svir’ watercourse it is more than 10 metres deep. In the northern part there are drifting islands formed from former marshes. On them one can collect plenty of cranberries and cloudberries. The reservoir is rich in fish, and not infrequently 10 kg pike and pike perch were caught (Vasiliev 2010, 21).

The long history of the modernisation of central areas of the countryside along the Svir’ river reveals a tight connection between state industrial projects and the life of the local indigenous population. The river’s strategic importance and its industrial development affected the Vepsian population in different ways. Resettlement brought both cultural destruction and the end of the links between the Vepsians of the Leningrad Region and Karelia.

More generally, in the 1960s the widely applied Soviet policy of village resettlement changed many rural lives. “While resettlement may have been viewed as a means of encouraging both consolidation (i.e., drawing together isolated segments of smaller northern groups) and Sovietisation (i.e., improving access to Soviet institutions and the Soviet way of life), it also created some situations that worked against both of these processes” (Bartels & Bartels 1995, 60-61).

Sources from the end of the nineteenth century and even from 1930 describe Shimozeria as a large Vepsian centre and an intensive concentration of the Vepsian way of life. Shimozeria’s geographical location is very important. It is in the middle of the Vepsian hills, on the border of all three regions: the Leningrad Region, along the Vepsian Forest nature reserve; the Vologda Region’s Vyegra district; and, not far away, the Onega shores, where the Karelian Vepsians lived. The closure of such an important centre of Vepsian territory decisively ended the Vepsians’ unity. This led to the current situation, in which scholars speak only of three separate groups: the Oiat Vepsians, the Onega Vepsians, and the Vologda Vepsians. In 1930 the Vepsian population of Shimozeria was 4,936 (Makar’ev 1932, 5).

Shimozeria is known to Vepsian researchers through the detailed study of the region by A. V. Fomin14, whose works are published under the name Svetliak. In July and August of 1926 he collected material on the Shimozeria Vepsians in the

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14 Alexander Vasilievich Fomin-Svetliak, born August 20, 1867 to a Russian family, collaborated with the writers Anton Chekhov and Dmitrii Grigorovich.
Ozhta district, later published as a collection of articles in the Lodeinoe Pole newspaper *Krasnoe pole* in 1926 and, in Lodeinoe Pole and Vy whole, *Krestiansko slovo* in 1927. His publications give a rich picture of everyday Vepsian life as seen by an outsider: “The majority of peasant families are poor. They live literally half-starving, living tightly together in one-room homes of eight to fifteen people of both genders and all ages in impossible conditions” (Svetliak 1927b, 2). “People live in thick, dark forests, sit on clay, run cooperatives, and travel to the city…” (Svetliak 1927c, 2). Fomin-Svetliak was particularly concerned to describe the Vepsian settlements: in 1921 he established the Naturarii museum in Lodeinoe Pole at his own expense, and from 1925 he ran the regional *Nash krai* museum in Lodeinoe Pole. His publications have provided generations of Russian ethnographers and folklorists with material on Vepsian life and traditions.

This is one of many occasions in the history of the Vepsians in which Russian ethnographers have admitted the negative effect of routine resettlement on the population: “The mostly destructive influence on the ethno-territorial unity of narodnost’ was caused by the forced resettlement of a large number of Vepsians in 1958 and 1959 from their original places of habitation in Shimozeria (Vy whole, Vologda region). Settled in territories close to the Onega Vepsians, the Vepsians of Shimozeria had also been a link between the Oiat and Kuia-Pondala Vepsians…” (Pimenov & Strogalschikova 1989, 5).

The years between 1956 and 1958 saw the final destruction of the Shimozeria settlements. Data from the second half of the nineteenth century show a large Vepsian population in the region:

…”In the second half of the nineteenth century in the Shimozeria volost’ of Lodeinoe Pole uezd, Olonets gubernia in the First Shimozeria Commune … there were 15 villages, settled by 665 persons of both genders, and in the Second Shimozeria Commune (the village of Pelkasska and neighbouring villages) there were 13 villages and 666 persons. At that time Kushtozerie, Undozerie, and lezhezero belonged to the Ko-shtug volost’ of Vy whole uezd as independent communes. Undozerie Commune was especially large: it contained 20 villages settled by 1,037 persons. Meanwhile, Kushtozerie Commune, with 15 villages and a population of 852, and lezhezero Commune with 10 villages and 607 persons, were densely populated as well. … At the begin-nning of the twentieth century, however, in the village of Konets (Fominskaia) alone, which was one of the Shimozeria villages, there were 90 households, and in Pelkasska village, according to local knowledge, before the war there were 70 to 80 households in three villages in Pelkasska, with a population of about 300 to 400. … Nowadays, there is not a single person here (Beznin 2005).

“Most of the Russian-assimilated Chud’ lived in the Vy whole uezd on the southwest coast of Lake Lacha – 6,033 persons” (Ioalaid 1989, 79). “At the end of 1937, nine rural communities with Vepsian populations, approximately 8,000 persons in total,
were turned over to the Vologda administration. The Shimozeria Vepsian population numbered more than 5,000” (Klement’ev 2007, 59).

In the 1960s six rural communities (sel’sovety) with a population of about 6,000 were resettled. “People had lived in these districts for centuries. It was natural that they did: the ... forests were full of game, the rivers and lakes full of fish. ... The authorities assumed that it would be more profitable to remove numerous Vepsian settlements of the Vytegra district of the Vologda Region than to start construction and reconstruction of roads, power lines, and rural infrastructure” (Abramov 2015). This is still the official reason for rapid forced resettlement. This reason is supported by the geographers of St Petersburg State University in my 2015 interview. However, if the lack of infrastructure was the main reason, the evacuation would not have been accomplished so quickly.

This reason for the closure of the Vepsian settlements is supported by official records: “In 1953 the Vologda obkom [regional committee] of the Communist Party studied the question of the ‘means of support for the Oshta region’ ... to organise the regional government of agriculture and harvesting during September of the following year and to study the question of the advisability and possibility of resettling these kolkhozy and providing the Regional Executive Committee with its proposals. ... In two years the Oshta district was closed down. ... In the autumn of 1959 the last Vepsians of the Shimozeria district left their villages” (Klement’ev 2007, 59-61).

Some researchers account for this as follows:

*The decision of their resettlement to the regional centre, Oshta, was taken not only to reduce road and social institutions’ maintenance expenses in the villages distant from the regional administrative centre, but also with the intention of reviving the Oshta settlement, which had been ruined and depopulated during the Great Patriotic War. But only some of the Shimozeria Vepsians resettled in Oshta; others, with goods, chattels, and cattle, resettled in Oiat, and still other Onega Vepsians left their ethnic territory via trails and pathways known since ancient times, for the cities and towns of the northwest (Strogal’schikova 2014, 13).*

Witnesses tell another version of this story:

*The great evacuation was started suddenly. Through the kolkhoz Party agencies there came horrible news – everyone had to leave within a year, ... The elderly wanted to stay in their native places, but there was an order ‘to empty the territory’. It is difficult now to imagine the shock that villagers experienced in leaving their homes. People left everything: houses, outbuildings, barns, gardens, household equipment. ... There were almost no roads in these regions. Some people did not even get a horse for resettling, and people left on foot, with bags on their shoulders.*
There were rumours about resettling: 1) the empty territory would be used as a military base; 2) due to the low profitability of the local kolkhozy, the population would be resettled to enlarge the neighbouring kolkhozy. … In fifteen to twenty years no trace of the village was left… (Abramov 2015).

In private correspondence the same person, knowing that I work in Finland, assured me that “there are too many myths and legends about this resettlement. People were not resettled against their will. … People decided themselves to move to other districts” (Nikolai, personal correspondence, 2015). The contemporary political situation makes people very wary of expressing their interpretations of their past.

Another anonymous witness writes on his blog:

Until the 1970s or the beginning of the 1980s I lived in Borisovo-Sudskoe; my father worked there. … He travelled by motorcycle to the Onega shore. … Concrete roads were planned and made for the manoeuvres of the air defence complex … for the protection of Leningrad (near Borisovo there were a few military units). … There were rumours that between Babaevo and Borisovo or in the Suich marshes there would be a graveyard of hermetic containers full of radioactive waste.

This comment, signed by the username Diabaz, is supported by the materials of my fieldwork: the resettlement was called for in plans for a new military base (Pëtr, interview, 2015). This was known by the local population and the information spread to the Vepsians of the Leningrad Region.

One Vepsian writes in her book about the 1950s: “‘Grandma, do the visitors from cities speak our language?’ I asked Grandma. … ‘Don’t Vepsians live in the whole world? Doesn’t everyone know our language?’ I asked. ‘No, Valin’ka. Only in our region, and in Karelia, and also in Shimozero’” (Lebedeva, 2015, 125). This dialogue shows the unity of the Vepsian lands before Shimozero was closed.

The Vepsians of the Leningrad Region always had connections with the Volodga Vepsians. Besides old family ties the Soviet regime created a new type of persistent communication between groups, in this case between sub-groups of one ethnic entity. This new type of communication has never been the subject of research. Nevertheless, it certainly existed. The last decades of Soviet history are often called ‘the period of deficit’. This deficit was in provisions and goods, and different regions of the country had different items in the shops. Thus, connections between regions and relatives helped families (as well as whole villages) get various items unobtainable in their district from the shops in other regions. Within the group all information was therefore shared.

Off-road travellers comment that the situation with the roads in Shimozero today is strange. There are no roads to former villages, but there are roads in terrible condition for timber transportation by heavy trucks, and there are unnamed
concrete roads in perfect condition which are not marked on the map and whose destination is unknown.

People resettled in various regions of the country. Today it is impossible to trace them. If the older generation still keeps its connection to its Vepsian roots and community, the younger generation identifies as Russian. They know that their grandparents or even parents came from these Vepsian villages, but they do not themselves identify as Vepsians. The long history of Soviet modernisation, from 1930 until today, has affected two or three generations. Almost every Vepsian family was touched by the state’s call for transformation and to build a new Soviet life. They are not ‘lost generations’; they are simply different, and no longer identify themselves as Vepsian.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. THE MAPS

Map 1. Vepsian territory highlighted in the map of Europe. Present location of Vepsian settlements and Vepsian territory in 1926
Map 2. Territory settled by Vepsians in 1926 with the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal (construction started in 1927), prison labour camps (identified from a published map of the Gulag) and the Nizhnesvirskaiia hydroelectric station (construction started in 1927)
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Map 2. Territory settled by Vepsians in 1926 with the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Canal (construction started in 1927), prison labour camps (identified from a published map of the Gulag) and the Nizhnesvirskaia hydroelectric station (construction started in 1927).

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Map 3. Vepsian territory from 1926 to the present, with the closed and abandoned locations of Shimozeria and Ivina.

Map 3. Vepsian territory from 1926 to the present, with the closed and abandoned locations of Shimozeria and Ivina.
APPENDIX 2: THE ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Svir’ riverbank reinforced by stones carried in baskets by labour camp prisoners. 02.06.2015

2. Barrack accommodation in Podporozhie built in the 1950s, with adjacent barrack walls of the late 1920s. 03.06.2015
1. Svir' riverbank reinforced by stones carried in baskets by labour camp prisoners. 02.06.2015

2. Barrack accommodation in Podporozhie built in the 1950s, with adjacent barrack walls of the late 1920s. 03.06.2015

3. Building of the headquarters of prison labour camps (in 1930s) in the centre of Podporozhie, present.

4. Illustration by B. Krylov: “Military campaign of Lodeinoe Pole communards and komsomols in Svir'skoe. Dinner at abandoned cemetary” (Krest'iansko slovo. Lodeinoe Pole, 1928 No. 48)
5. Lower Svir’ Hydroelectric Station, Podporozhie. 02.06.2015

6. Ferry crossing at Voznesenie, linking the Vepsians of the Leningrad Region and Karelia. 04.06.2015
7. Entrance to the Karelian mining site Rybreka – Drugaia Reka, managed by the “Interkamen” company. 30.09.2015

8. Onega stones being transported from Rybreka to St Petersburg and beyond. 30.09.2015
9. Approximate location of prison labour camps barracks in Podporozhie. (*Kielletyt salainen kartat* 3, map 6750/60)
This volume presents a case study of the social and cultural transformation processes that the Vepsians, an indigenous minority group in Northwest Russia, experienced during the early stages of Soviet modernisation in the late 1920s and 1930s. The early Soviet implementation of modernisation policy, which included political terror as a major component, is explored through three concepts: ‘Sovietisation’, industrialisation, and collectivisation. These conceptual lenses are applied to the case study, revealing the multi-layered and nuanced consequences for Vepsian society that have continued to affect this small indigenous group until the present.