

From: dwaugh@u.washington.edu

Author's Subject: new book: Okladnikov on Mezen villages

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Nikolai Anatol'evich Okladnikov writes local history of the Russian far north, with several books on, especially, the Mezen' region, published in recent years. Here is the latest one, published with the financial support of a local business [ZAO "Kompaniia 'Kaiur'"] and, apparently, the regional administration:

N. A. Okladnikov, *Mezenskie derevni. Istoricheskie ocherki*. Arkhangel'sk: "Pravda Severa," 2012. 370 pp. + plates. ISBN 978-5-85879-766-1.

This is in effect a small encyclopedia of the villages in the region around the Mezen' River, divided into four main sections (Lower Mezen'; Mezen' tributary Pyoza; Along the Kuloi, its tributaries Soiana and Nemniuga; the winter shore of the White Sea), and within each section further divided into towns that "still exist" and those that do not. Brief chapters on the overall history of the colonization of the region and on its administrative changes preface the collection of historical sketches of each town. Okladnikov has clearly done a huge amount of archival work. For each section (or village, depending on the quantity of material), he lists sources (there are no footnotes). The sketches generally include all the key moments of what can be established about the growth and/or decline of the settlement, with sequences of cadastral data on the number of households and inhabitants, information on administrative re-structuring, on community facilities etc. We can trace here the history from founding through collectivization, the reconfiguration of the economic units into "joint stock" companies after 1991, then the collapse of most of those a few years later. In most cases, the populations dwindle; villages that once had a school no longer do; electrical power, if it exists, is provided by a diesel generator. There are lots of black-and-white photos, most printed decently on ordinary paper, some in a section of plates on glossy paper. They include both contemporary views and archival ones. There is a detailed foldout map of the region in color (a section of a 2008 topo), as well as smaller sketch maps locating the villages described in each chapter.

While obviously one can find a lot else (for example in Bill Brumfield's meticulous documentation of the architecture and history of so many of the northern villages), this book should be of great value for capturing what remains in a landscape that is rapidly changing as the old generations die, the young ones move away, and then the villages simply decay into the tundra. Anyone who has traveled in the countryside of northern Russia in recent years (I saw the same thing in the region north of Kirov in 2003) will have witnessed similar sights: the wonderful, large old log houses, the parish churches or commemorative crosses, the "black bath" houses, with the buildings that have now been abandoned collapsing, and the others home to only a few

remaining year-round inhabitants who probably depend heavily on support of relatives who have moved off into the larger towns. These are the villages that may be inaccessible for several months of the year when the roads to them turn into quagmires.

We can be glad that a serious effort is underway to document what is left; one comes away from the book feeling that one has, at least for a moment, been transported through time for a walk through this countryside in some earlier century, even if then much undoubtedly would have seemed more alive.