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Efforts to Restore the White Sea Fishing Fleet in the Initial Period of the NEP

Tatyana I. Troshina¹✉, Dr. Sci. (Hist.), Professor

¹ Higher School of Economics, Management and Law, Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov, Naberezhnaya Severnoy Dviny, 17, Arkhangelsk, Russia

¹ tatr-arh@mail.ru ✉, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5517-5949>

Abstract. The recovery period of the early 1920s in Soviet Russia coincided with the search for new forms of production management and was complicated not only by economic devastation, but also by the difficult international situation, political and economic blockade of the country. Under such conditions, the long overdue task of modernization of fishing and fur-trading was solved in the Arkhangelsk province, which first of all required providing the fishermen with the newest vessels. Lack of coal did not allow using steam vessels in full measure in the fishery; purchase and construction of vessels at foreign shipyards were also difficult. Therefore, it was decided to restore peasant shipyards as a temporary measure, centrally organizing the construction of small fishing vessels under the supervision of qualified technicians. The models used were Norwegian-built sailing, rowing and motor vessels, which were considered to be the most suitable for fishing in the White Sea and Arctic Ocean. The difficulties that the economic institutions had to face during the transition period (from war communism to the new economic policy) are considered in this article with the help of a large set of archival and published sources. The transition to the use of trawlers and icebreakers is explained not only by the tasks of modernization of the fishing economy, but also by the revolutionary ideology: to prevent conditions for the emergence of a prosperous layer of the Pomor population, which included shipbuilders and shipowners.

Keywords: 1920s, Arkhangelsk province, White Sea fisheries, fishing fleet, peasant shipyards, Soviet power, managerial decisions, military communism, new economic policy

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The so-called “broken” rhythms of Russian history do not allow the development process to be completed, interrupting it either with “stagnation” or revolutionary change. Peasant shipbuilding can be referred to such “unfinished” innovations of folk technical creativity.

The history of Pomor shipbuilding during its heyday has not been neglected by research attention [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]. The present article offers a look at the short period of restoration of the almost forgotten occupation in the 1920s.

By the beginning of the 20th century, a significant part of the Pomor villages reoriented from marine fisheries to trade operations with Norway. For trade, even during coastal navigation, and for the fisheries that continued to exist, ships were ordered from the still existing centers of Po-

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mor shipbuilding (in the villages of Patrakeevka, Zimnyaya Zolotitsa, Koida, Vorzogory, Syuzma and others) [6, pp. 24–25] or were purchased in Norway, where they switched to motor deck fishing vessels and got rid of outdated ones: “For 100–150 rubles, the fisherman bought an old yola¹ with all the equipment in Varda and, repairing it from year to year, fished on it for a dozen or more years.” Due to cheapness of Norwegian fishing vessels, Pomor small boats were gradually displaced and “there was an appearance of transition to a “newer” type of fishing vessels” [7]. At the same time, there was an orientation (following the example of England and some other European countries) towards the use of large sea vessels; in terms of fishing, the future was seen in minesweepers (for fishing) and icebreakers (for hunting). During the First World War, the few remaining peasant shipyards fulfilled orders for the construction of large barges to transport military cargoes along the Northern Dvina and other river systems.

This orientation acquired practical forms at the end of the war, when trawl vessels and icebreakers began to be transferred to fishing artels and cooperatives. However, the Civil War actually eliminated not only the centers of peasant shipbuilding, but also the Pomor fisheries themselves, since sea navigation remained unsafe and the mobilization of the male population became massive.

After the end of the war, which lasted for several years (from 1914 to 1920), the general economic devastation and the economic blockade on the part of Western countries required the restoration of not only the Pomor fisheries, but also the practice of building small sailing fishing and transport vessels, since the lack of coal did not allow widespread use steamships and icebreaker fleet. Besides, fishermen, especially hunters, were convinced that “wooden vessels are more reliable for navigation in ice than iron ones” [6; p. 25]. There were also more serious doubts about the expediency of using the icebreaker fleet: “...fishing from icebreakers in the close confines of the White Sea, with the enormous costs of their maintenance, cannot recoup the expenses... the results will eventually be unprofitable. It’s better to switch to small vessels...” [8; p. 86].

However, it became difficult to buy them in Norway. The introduction of a monopoly on foreign trade operations led to the cessation of the import of old yolas, and those already purchased deteriorated and became unusable. As a result, if in 1913 the fleet of the Arkhangelsk Pomors (engaged in the Murmansk fisheries) consisted of 1116 vessels of various types, then in 1923 there were 891 ones (244 karbasses, 301 shnyaks, 433 sail-rowing and 5 motor yolas, 85 sailing and 21 motor boats). In 1924, there were already 807 vessels [7].

The policy of nationalization of the main industries required the organization of centralized construction of fishing vessels for “state fishing”. Even during the period of “peaceful respite” (in 1918), the Provincial Food Committee, in order to provide the population with fish (the purchase of which in Norway was difficult due to the lack of currency and goods for barter exchange), “organized the construction of up to 30 pieces of open boats, which turned out to be completely un-

¹ Yola is a Norwegian fishing vessel without a deck.

suitable for fishing” [7]. Attempts to organize own production later were also not very successful². It was decided to return to the handicraft production of fishing vessels, obliging peasant craftsmen (during the period of military communism) or giving orders favorable terms for them (during the early NEP stage).

In the first days after the restoration of Soviet power in Arkhangelsk, in March 1920, the provincial authorities took up the task of reviving the national economy and solving the issue of food supply for the population. An audit of fishing vessels was carried out. It turned out that “the vessels were dilapidated, not repaired, no new vessels were built”, and “the small shipbuilding plant in Onega was completely ruined...”³. L.B. Krasin, who was abroad and engaged there in the whole complex of works to attract foreign capital for the restoration of the economy, negotiated with British shipyards on the construction of fishing vessels, including for the White Sea area, which were “ready to take installments for 25–30 years”, providing a loan on very difficult terms and, as Krasin wrote, “doubtful, but with its help the economy will rise...” [9; p. 38, 39]. In the meantime, efforts were being made to raise steamships sunk during the wars (“but there had not yet been a technical inspection, and it was not possible to say whether they would be suitable for further navigation”), and the search for craftsmen for artisanal “construction of small ships from available material” began⁴.

Since the shipbuilders belonged to the “wealthy” stratum, the authorities’ demand to restore peasant shipbuilding under the conditions of war communism took rather harsh forms. In March 1920, a circular letter was sent to Pomor villages: “To all revolutionary committees and executive committees, and if there are none, then to zemstvo councils. The villages of the coastal ocean region are subject to: preparations for fishing at the most accelerated pace, and all large owners are required to repair their vessels. According to information, vessels are not being repaired and are not being prepared for fishing. This is a crime against the Soviet Republic. The perpetrators will be punished by revolutionary law. <Since> small handicraft shipbuilding has to be encouraged, arrange the matter so that there are as many small vessels as possible. ...On the issue of food, we hope to provide increased rations, tea and sugar. We will provide financial assistance”⁵. They urged to organize shipbuilding and fishing artels, since it was believed that with this form of labor association, the “owners” would be deprived of the opportunity to “exploit the sea workers”. It was the artels that created more favorable conditions for profitable orders and the provision of food rations.

There was a rather cumbersome bureaucratic system of management of peasant shipbuilding at the state and provincial levels. The shipbuilding department of the Arkhangelsk Provincial

² In 1923, the Arkhangelsk “Oblastryba” built six motorboats on its own at the Arkhangelsk shipbuilding plant transferred to its management, “but the matter did not come to fruition, and [the vessels] were handed over to the fishermen” [3].

³ State Archives of the Arkhangelsk Oblast (SAAO). F. 655. S. 1. C. 3. S. 3.

⁴ Ibid. S. 3.

⁵ SAAO. F. 884. S. 1. C. 5. S. 6.

Economic Council (the so-called “Sudostroy”), to which all local shipyards and boathouses, the entire available stock of materials and rigging were transferred, turned out to be ineffective. According to information of the head of the trawl department of the Regional Directorate of State Fisheries Enterprises (“Oblastryba”) V.S. Griner⁶, “in 1920–1921... they produced a dozen and a half more or less unsuccessful boats” [7].

In 1921, the Council of Labor and Defense issued a decree “On the organization of wooden shipbuilding”, according to which “the disposal of shipbuilding materials and other resources, and the resolution of other issues” was transferred to a commission of representatives of the Supreme Council of National Economy, People’s Commissariat for Lines of Communications, Glavleskom, Glavryba, etc.⁷ Corresponding powers were given to their local authorities. The functions of the Arkhangelsk Shipbuilding were transferred to the Northern Region Shipbuilding Administration (Sevkomsudostroy), established in October 1921. According to local authorities, “due to ... transfer of all wooden shipbuilding to the People’s Commissariat for Lines of Communications (PCLC), 90% of the time was spent on internal departmental struggle, since the PCLC did some work on barge construction, but was not interested in commercial shipbuilding, only interfered, delaying specialists and workers...”⁸. Due to local circumstances, issues of commercial shipbuilding were transferred to “Oblastryba”, which began organizing the construction of ships at various sites, including small vessels.

The general mismanagement inherent in the period of war communism led to the fact that the vessels under construction, which were indiscriminately nationalized (based on the order of the Arkhangelsk Provincial Revolutionary Committee of March 20, 1920), turned into “long-term construction”. As we can assume, there were many such cases. The archives preserved correspondence on the statements of the most active owners of nationalized property, who tried to restore their rights after the transition to the NEP, when it was explained that a Pomor peasant could regain his ship or karbass workshop if it was the only source of livelihood for him and his family. Many people managed to get their property back, but not all.

The story of the construction of a two-masted fishing vessel by a peasant of the Patrakeeenskaya volost I.I. Antufiev demonstrates the ordeals that Pomor shipowners had to face⁹. He started the construction in February 1920, two weeks before the change of power in Arkhangelsk. The Soviet authorities immediately cancelled the White government’s financial support (“chaykovki”), and there was nothing to finish the construction with. Antufiev applied for a loan from the Shipbuilding Department of the provincial Economic Council and continued construction with the 100 thousand rubles received on credit in Soviet banknotes. He, being a captain, was “mobilized” to the fishery. While he was at sea, the artel hired by him was also sent to other works un-

⁶ Griner V.S. – head of Sumskaya (Arkhangelsk province) seafaring school; in 1920 – head of the trawl subdivision of the Oblastryba. In 1929 he was repressed (10 years in camps).

⁷ Izvestiya VTsIK. 1921. 4 Aug.

⁸ SAAO. F. 150. S. 3. C. 523. S. 47.

⁹ Ibid. C. 569. S. 85-111.

der labor mobilization. Antufiev hired a ship master A.G. Titov, who agreed to complete construction. But in November 1920, Sudostroy, on the basis of a loan issued to Antufiev, suspended the owner completely from managing the construction, even without compensation for expenses incurred. The case went to court, which in May 1922 declared that the nationalization was correct, since the applicant “has another ship that can serve him for his livelihood” ¹⁰.

It was not possible to find out from the documents the fate of the unfinished vessel. But it would not be surprising if it suffered the same fate as other property, such as a karbass workshop in the village of Kehta ¹¹, which was dismantled shortly after nationalization “as unnecessary” and taken to Solombala for a shipyard. “Oblastryba”, having inherited the property of “Sudostroy”, quite often put up for auction nationalized vessels standing idle and gradually deteriorating ¹².

Simultaneously with such treatment of the received property, work on the establishment of local commercial shipbuilding was carried out quite actively. The V provincial Congress of Soviets (January 1921) adopted a resolution on this, based on the central orders. The focus was on the construction of sea boats for the fisheries. On this basis, smaller shipbuilding centers were almost closed. “Oblastryba”, which was organizing the construction of vessels for marine fishing, “had to take under its protection the artels of karbass workers located up the Dvina”, since “due to local conditions, in summer the only type of transport is karbass” ¹³.

Fishery shipbuilding was concentrated in a few relatively large locations:

- The “Central Arkhangelsk Shipyard” (in Solombala) was engaged in small and medium repairs of trawl vessels (converted from minesweepers left in the port after the First World War) and manufactured boats for them. The lack of necessary rigging prevented the construction of sea boats. To solve this problem, block and sail workshops were set up. In addition to sails, the sailing shop sewed special clothes for fishermen.
- The Kehot shipbuilding station carried out “according to approved drawings” the construction of new types of seiners, half-deck fishing vessels and sea karbasses. In winter, work was carried out in the boathouse and in the workshop for small vessels.
- The Mudyug shipbuilding center started building deck boats and cutters for the hunting industry ¹⁴. The Syuzemskiy, Onega and Kaninskiy (Mezen) shipbuilding centers started building seiners and half-deck fishing vessels. A deck boat was laid down in the Laiskiy Dock ¹⁵.

An important circumstance was that shipyards sought to adapt for the construction of fishing vessels according to Norwegian models. Over the previous decades, the Norwegians almost completely “occupied” not only the fishing industry (and the Pomors were engaged in delivering

¹⁰ Ibid. S. 111.

¹¹ Ibid. S. 461-464.

¹² Ibid. S. 287.

¹³ Ibid. C. 523. S. 47.

¹⁴ Cutter — a sailing (single-masted) vessel for fishing in coastal and shallow sea areas.

¹⁵ SAAO. F. 150. S. 3. C. 523. S. 25-27.

fish from Northern Norway for the Arkhangelsk market), but also shipbuilding: with a few exceptions, shipowners bought Norwegian yolas and boats, specially adapted for fishing in the White Sea. In the initial period of NEP, specialists from provincial economic organizations regularly travelled abroad to purchase vessels¹⁶, which were also used as a model for their own shipbuilding. At the provincial level, the question was raised about the need to “get drawings of boats for herring fishing in Norway and start building them in Arkhangelsk”¹⁷; in the village Kehta on the Northern Dvina “on the model of the Norwegian yola... under the guidance of a shipbuilding technician, 7 pieces were built, [to which] an engine can be adapted” [10].

In 1922, 17 boats were ready for launching, but “they have no engines. These boats are designed for longline fishing in the ocean and are completely unsuitable without motors, because fishing is good in calm weather, and then they will not work under sails. Moving a boat 10 miles with oars is unthinkable.” “Oblastryba” tried to resort to a proven method: to “register motors” (that is, to requisition them from private owners for the needs of local industry), but did not achieve “positive results” — there were no motors in Arkhangelsk, even those in need of repair. “The acquisition in Petrograd, apart from significant correspondence, sending special agents and spending money, also did not give positive results”. It had to be stated that “there is no need to talk about the motor fishing fleet yet”¹⁸.

The lack of engines was the biggest problem, but not the only one. Shipbuilding faced the issue of labor shortage; craftsmen were constantly diverted to other works. There was no material for making sails (they were sewn from captured English tents). The difficulties faced by the organizers of commercial shipbuilding are evidenced, for example, by the fact that they had to urgently “organize” a “coal miners’ artel to obtain coal for forging work”¹⁹.

In the conditions of the developing NEP, it was also necessary to close unprofitable production facilities. Already in March 1922, the work “on liquidation of shipbuilding in Onega shipbuilding region of the Arkhangelsk Oblastryba” was carried out. It was proposed to sell the existing vessels, 5 undecked and 6 decked boats, to Murmanskryba, and if the price does not suit them, look for other buyers, for example, fishing cooperatives. At the same time, “payment is exclusively in kind”: flour, tea, sugar, cod fish. They demanded 3.2 tons of fresh cod or haddock, or 2.4 tons of salted fish for an undecked boat²⁰.

The short period of restoration of peasant shipbuilding occurred during the last stage of the implementation of the policy of war communism and during the initial period of the new economic policy. Let us illustrate the events of economic transformations in the context of transition from administrative-command forms of management to the use of market mechanisms using the example of the Syuzemskiy shipbuilding center.

¹⁶ Ibid. C. 569. S. 790, 828.

¹⁷ Ibid. C. 3-a. S. 1-4.

¹⁸ Ibid. C. 523. S. 47.

¹⁹ Ibid. S. 49.

²⁰ Ibid. S.40.

The promise of increased rations for shipbuilders inspired the Pomors, and in the spring of 1920 an artel was created in Syuzma. Building wooden ships remained a traditional occupation for the Syuzma people. Even when the demand for them decreased, craftsmen remained, fulfilling small orders in parallel with other peasant occupations (which provided not so big, but reliable income). They hired local apprentices to help them, and the tradition of craftsmanship did not die. Timber was rafted down the river, nails and sailcloth were imported from the town. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was no forge in Syuzma, but a blacksmith from the nearest settlements (most often from Nyonoksa or Una settlements) was hired for the time of boat building. There were other conditions for building small fishing vessels here: “up the Syuzma River, five or more miles away, crooked timber and small timber are harvested, 15 miles away — medium-sized timber, 20 miles away — construction timber. There is also an abundance of various emery stones”²¹.

The creation of the artel, conditioned by a strict directive from the center, met the interests of the population of Syuzma, whose food situation was characterized as “catastrophic”, and who appealed to the authorities with requests to provide them with at least some work²². In the conditions created as a result of deindustrialization, the population switched to self-sufficiency, engaging in coastal fisheries and agriculture, which was unproductive in local conditions, but still provided a certain amount of necessary products; they did not risk being diverted to shipbuilding without food supplies. And when the promised rations were not provided, the people of Syuzma returned to agriculture. The revived shipbuilding acquired the same forms of mismanagement as many other activities restored through labor and horse-drawn mobilizations.

G.G. Kramarenko, a technician-instructor sent to inspect the Syuzma shipyard, described what he saw as follows: “due to the food crisis, the local population suspended work [on the construction of sailing ships]. Unfinished ships are lying unsupervised on the shore, as well as wood material. Iron and other construction materials are stored in poor condition. The blacksmith from Una village with all his tools has also left Syuzma. There is no person responsible for storage...”²³. Members of the artel, referring to the lack of promised food, constantly “asked for leave” for haymaking and other peasant work.

Kramarenko noted that from the technical point of view, all the conditions for the construction of small sailing and rowing vessels are available here. The most painful issue was “personnel”. The usual method of hired labor (labor mobilization) at that time was useless here, since the shipbuilders were “old people and half-disabled”, exempt from them “by decree”. The carpenters available in the village, mostly self-taught, but “some are truly talented craftsmen”, turned out to be already involved in the transportation of goods or in fur-hunting artels. However, as the seconded specialist summarized, “if food were to be provided for a family, almost everyone in the

²¹ *Ibid.* C. 320. S. 13.

²² *Ibid.* C. 740. S. 19.

²³ *Ibid.* C. 320. S. 13.

population of Syuzma, which is in such need of bread, would be willing to join the [shipbuilding] artel. The craftsmen, though old, could supervise the work of carpenters, who could be assembled up to 35 people. Another 20 peasant men and women could be engaged in harvesting, rafting, transporting timber, heating a steam room, doing riveting, tarring and other types of less skilled work. A blacksmith from Una, very old (over 70), “with a good ration, he would also go to work in Syuzma with all his tools”. In addition to food, leather shoes for woodcutters were required, as well as the delivery of rivets and nails, which were impractical to produce locally and had nothing to be made of. It was also proposed to transfer builders to contract work, which, according to the technician-instructor, would increase labor productivity “by 4–6 thousand percent”, since there would be a personal and collective interest in the results of the work, “reduce clerical red tape and unnecessary staff for control, accounting, supply, etc.”²⁴.

Indeed, at the general meeting, the peasants announced that not only the carpenters, but all 45 members of the local hunting artel would begin work, but only after receiving enhanced rations and a “decent bonus”. Together they promised to complete the construction of two flat-bottomed fishing boats²⁵ within two weeks and re-equip several prepared boats into seine boats²⁶.

“Oblastryba” also entered into agreements with other shipbuilders. For example, in February 1922, an agreement was concluded with the karbass artel in the village of Kehta for the construction of a seine boat, the payment for which was agreed upon in the form of food equivalent (rye flour, salted fish, textiles, salt, sugar, tobacco and shag) 225 rubles in gold²⁷. At the same time, an agreement was concluded for the construction of two fangsboats²⁸ with two Solombala boat masters (V.V. Katyshev and P.E. Shestakov) “from ready-made material according to the design and drawings of the mechanic-instructor Kramorenko”, who provided technical supervision of the construction and “dismantling of the vessel on site”. The craftsmen asked for 300 pre-war rubles (4.5 million in Soviet banknotes of 1922) for the work, also preferring to receive payment in the form of food and consumer goods²⁹.

As the general economic situation in the country and in the region improved, “state fishing” began to be carried out on large steam vessels. However, economic and cooperative institutions continued experiments in the construction of small fishing vessels for sale to Pomor artels and individual industrialists.

In 1924, the Kehotskaya artel received an order from Oblastryba to build seven Norwegian yolas (an old yola was brought from the Murmansk coast as a sample). “Despite the sample, the craftsmen made a number of deviations, and although the yola turned out to be suitable for fishing, they did not quite correspond to the Norwegian type” [7]. And the cost of production was

²⁴ Ibid. C. 320. S. 1306.

²⁵ Dora — flat-bottomed fishing boat with a wide stern, common on the coast of the White Sea.

²⁶ Seine boats — boats from which the seine was cast.

²⁷ SAAO. F. 150. S. 3. C. 1. S. 579.

²⁸ Fangsboat — a fishing motor or rowing vessel for harvesting sea animals, as well as for carrying passengers.

²⁹ SAAO. F. 150. S. 3. C. 1. S. 570.

quite high, which did not attract fishermen. They tried to sell yolas by installments, but this turned out to be unprofitable for the government agency due to regular late payments.

They also tried to supply local fisheries (both state-owned and cooperative or private — “handicraft”) with vessels through purchases from the traditional supplier, Norway. Before the revolution, old sailing ships were “utilised” by selling them to Russian Pomors during the transition to motor fishing vessels. In 1920, proposals began to be received “for the sale or lease of their fishing motor boats to Russian industrialists”³⁰, which was explained by the economic crisis in Norway (caused, among other things, by the cessation of Russian purchases of Norwegian fish [11]). An opportunity arose to purchase large hunting vessels from the Norwegians for fishing in the White Sea. According to the head of “Oblastryba” M.K. Derzhavin, they “are happy to sell ships at half price” due to the Soviet side strengthening the protection of its territorial waters, which created difficulties for the Norwegians to fish there. (However, after the creation of the Norwegian concession and permission for 55 Norwegian ships to fish in northern waters, prices increased again: “Before this agreement, vessels in Norway cost 30 thousand kroner, now the price has risen to 90”) ³¹.

Taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the NEP, various organizations began to buy ships in Norway for the purpose of their further resale or rental to Pomors. From 1922 to 1924, Murmansk organizations purchased several dozens of motorboats, yolas and listerboats from Norway³². The Karelian Agricultural Bank bought 5 yolas in 1925. However, it was not always possible to generate income; lack of funds did not allow the Pomor artels to purchase vessels; if they bought them in installments or on lease, they often delayed payments.

It was more important for the Soviet economic authorities to organize local shipbuilding. It allowed not to spend foreign currency and reduced the cost of fishing vessels due to the use of cheaper labor and raw materials.

A new yola with a lifting capacity of 2.4 tons “with anchor and chain” built in Varda cost 720 rubles; payment for delivery to Murman and other expenses increased the cost by another 50–100 rubles. Built by local craftsmen, it cost 650 rubles. [7]. However, the relative cheapness was only at the Arkhangelsk shipyards, which built ships by order of Murmansk organizations, and was explained by the use of “handicraft labor” of local artels and craftsmen. In Murmansk, the construction of fishing vessels was unprofitable: the cost of timber and the price of labor here was 1.5 times more expensive. In addition, “when starting a business on the basis of an enterprise” (which involved payments for social insurance, the trade union, the maintenance of managers, vacation payments and other compensation to workers), it was impossible to compete with artisans, and the cost of yola was more expensive than purchasing it in Norway (850 rub.)

³⁰ Ibid. C. 20. S. 87.

³¹ Ibid. F. 150. S. 3. C. 740. S. 3-5; SAAO. F. 893. S. 1. C. 48. S. 140.

³² Listerboat — an open sailing and rowing fishing vessel.

However, commercial success, which was hoped for in the initial period of NEP, was not the main issue for the Soviet state. Handicraft fishing, including handicraft shipbuilding, was perceived negatively by the ideologists of the new system. Discussing the project of the “Northern Joint-Stock Fisheries Company”, they noted the need to “paralyze the action of private capital in the North”, for which purpose “to allocate funds for the purchase of the entire artisanal fishery. ...The budget of a handicraft industrialist (Pomor) is so small that, of course, if there is a demand for labor from the Society, he will willingly exchange shnyaka and yola for a trawler, herring and hunting steamships, where he will consider himself safer and real earnings will be much higher” [12, p. 89].

Wooden shipbuilding, taking into account the needs of the local population, remained in the European North of Russia for quite a long time, gradually acquiring more and more “ethnographic” and “museum” forms. “Motorboats”, “kazankas” and other metal vessels have become more preferable both for fishing and for transporting passengers on any water bodies — along the sea coast and on small rivers and lakes.

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