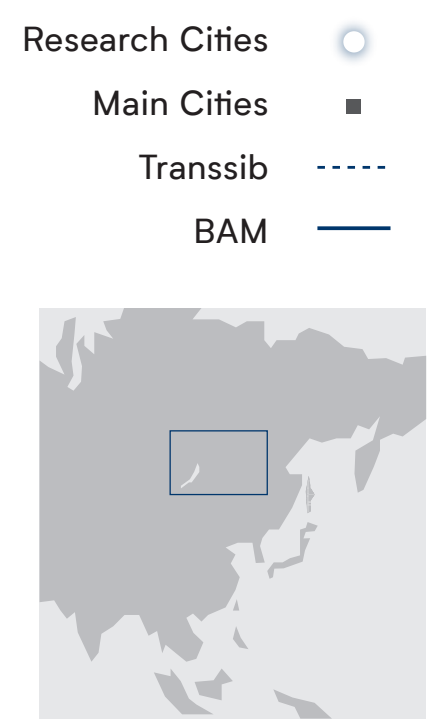


(Post-)Soviet Infrastructure: Social Dynamics and Identity Politics along the Baikal–Amur Mainline, East Siberia



RESEARCH TOPIC:

The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) is one of the longest northern railroads in the world, crossing six regions in East Siberia and the Russian Far East and the last socialist megaproject (so called “project of the century”). While the first railroad projects were discussed in the 19th century the majority of the mainline was built for resource extraction and internal colonization of the region between 1974 and 1984. This large-scale infrastructure reconfigured geographical, cultural and social spaces and shaped local communities by drawing Soviet migrants “BAM builders” (bamovtsy) to the region and involving indigenous Evenki people in different ways. I argue that Soviet modernization promises, memories and ideologies still fuel post-socialist identity politics and social relations making the BAM an affective infrastructure.

AIM

This project aims at exploring large infrastructures as an articulation of Russia’s state modernization projects and identity politics in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Drawing on the case study of the BAM construction and its current reconstruction project BAM-2, this research aims at a comprehensive study of entanglements of different groups and stakeholders with the BAM infrastructure and bridges discussions on socialist and postsocialist ideologies and identities with the anthropology of infrastructure and development.



METHODS AND FIELD SITES

Ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation and interviews) and work with archival records is complemented with content analysis of policy documents and local press materials. The qualitative data are also triangulated with statistics and results of a survey on mobility. While the major anthropological fieldwork is conducted in select towns and villages along the BAM, additional information is requested in libraries, archives, statistical bureaus and companies’ offices in East Siberia and in Moscow.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In my research, I raise the following specific research questions:

- How did the BAM construction shape new identities and communities in the Soviet period?
- In which ways has the railroad infrastructure affected indigenous and local people and involved incoming migrants?
- What is the role of Soviet myths, ideologies and memories in the current processes of identity building and politics of emotion?
- Which affective and material continuities and ruptures could be identified between the socialist BAM and its reconstruction program BAM-2?

FINDINGS

- BAM project has shaped culturally diverse and socially dynamic local communities with multiple groups and identities
- The railroad remains a container of social memory, especially for bamovtsy whose identities and emotions are re-articulated at public events devoted to the BAM
- Some Evenki communities who have been exposed to ambiguous effects of the BAM see advantages of being remote from the railroad infrastructure
- Indigenous identities have been re-negotiated in the course of changing lifestyles and mobilities along the BAM
- The program of modernization of the railroad BAM-2 reveals a number of continuities with the socialist construction project that are being used as a discursive resource in the current politics of emotions and identity building



Bamovtsy at a meeting. Source: Museum of BAM Construction, Tynda



Evenki reindeer herders cross the rails. Source: Museum of Exploration of South Yakutia, Neriungri



A train arriving at the railway station Larba. Photo: Olga Povoroznyuk

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