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Introduction

The Project of the Century

WITHIN ONLY TWO DECADES, the assessment of the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway (BAM) and its effects on the Soviet Union transformed radically. In 1974, Leonid Brezhnev addressed the Seventeenth Komсомol Congress: “The Baikal-Amur Railway will transform the cities and settlements of Siberia, the North, and the Far East into high-culture centers while exploiting the rich natural resources of those regions!”¹ By 1993, however, the *Moscow News* told a different story: “What is the railway like today? It is in a state of ruin and desolation. Rarely does a train whistle disturb the surrounding silence. The stations are deserted. The passenger terminals, beautiful structures built from individual designs that were chosen in competitions, are neglected. The settlements built by envoys from various republics of the former USSR have fallen into decay. Each year the number of residents dwindles—they keep scattering in all directions.”²

The chasm of social and political change that these assessments bracket proved more vast than even the four thousand kilometers of harsh Siberian terrain traversed by one of the most ambitious public works projects ever conceived. The BAM was so important to the entire leadership of the Soviet

Union that it tirelessly poured massive resources into a project doomed to crumble almost immediately upon completion.³ The Soviet Union used the railway to bolster collective faith in the command-administrative system as well as to improve the economy. The personal influence of Brezhnev represented a strong force in the push to popularize the project. In its heyday, BAM represented the quintessential Soviet big engineering project, as the nation's scientists, journalists, academics, and propagandists extolled the railway's virtue as the USSR's first step toward realizing a utopian society. BAM was the last example of Soviet "gigantomania". Like its many predecessors it shared a massive allocation of human and material resources, a highly inefficient utilization of them, and a general disregard for any impact on the environment. The project represented the government's attempt to exploit the USSR's vast natural resources for propagandistic and economic reasons.⁴ As one in a long progression of Soviet colossal schemes that the party used to herald the accomplishments of state socialism, BAM was the final expression of post-Stalin Prometheanism, in which the conquest of nature through technology was seen as a panacea for various political, social, and economic problems.⁵

Although the project achieved little in terms of tangible accomplishments, the propaganda effort created by the Soviet state to cast BAM in a favorable light was one of the most significant, if not the greatest, achievement of the eighteen-year Brezhnev period.⁶ The resources employed to portray BAM as an epic victory of humankind over nature, a forum for ethnic cooperation, and a catalyst for the economic development of the USSR's eastern reaches equaled and occasionally surpassed those used to build the railway itself. In fact, the propaganda system created to promote BAM touched the lives of more Soviet citizens than its actual construction. Interviews with BAM participants stress the propagandistic nature of BAM rather than its concrete accomplishments.

Interestingly, although never publicly conceived as such by the state, the railway served as a place where Soviet youth could express themselves with relative freedom. This situation was the product of a number of factors. One was that the project's great distance from the centers of state power in the European part of the Soviet Union and Moscow in particular allowed the BAM labor population the space to voice a number of taboo ideas. They could engage in behaviors that were antithetical to official Soviet notions of civil obedience. These behaviors included, but were not limited to, expressions of national identity from a variety of non-Russian ethnic groups that resided

both inside and outside the Soviet Union, a voicing of environmentalist and ecological tendencies that in some cases exceeded the scope of what the state allowed, philosophies of women's liberation and expressions of gender equality, and even widespread participation in criminal activity ranging from petty theft to rape and murder.

One of the most intriguing aspects of BAM is the stark contrast between the project's public portrayal in official media outlets and the private impressions of the railway held by those who worked it. Among other things, this disparity reveals the regime's fundamental lack of understanding of one of its most important constituencies—the next generation of Soviet youth, which the project was intended to motivate. Exploring the disparity between BAM propaganda and BAM reality deepens understanding of the social dynamics of the Brezhnev era and beyond. BAM was not simply a microcosm of the Soviet Union during this period; rather, it provided a venue in which behaviors and attitudes that defined public and private discourse throughout the Brezhnevian USSR were magnified to a considerable degree. As such, the history of the Brezhnev years generally and BAM specifically cannot be defined solely as products of an era of stagnation (*zastoi*), as some Gorbachev-era, post-Soviet, and Western observers have characterized it.⁷ The BAM project illustrates a multiplicity of dynamic tendencies that shaped this critical period in Soviet history.

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and subsequent Russian Civil War, the newly created Soviet Union maintained the imperial-era emphasis on railway construction and added a new push to mobilize the populace toward achieving a common goal of constructing socialism.⁸ A series of ambitious undertakings drew international attention to the Soviet Union's program of rapid industrialization. This was particularly true in the case of Magnitogorsk, a steel-making complex that was built in the southern Ural mountains from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s.⁹ Describing Magnitogorsk, American socialist and Magnitogorsk welder John Scott remarked that “in Russia . . . the world's most gigantic social experiment is being made—amidst a galaxy of picturesque nationalities, wondrous scenery, splendid architecture, and exotic civilizations.”¹⁰ The construction of Magnitogorsk provided the Soviet Union with a steel-producing capacity that soon rivaled those of the United States and Western Europe. An integral part of the authorized propaganda campaign behind the Magnitogorsk and other contemporary efforts was the official apotheosis of Stalin himself, in which the mass media portrayed the Soviet

dictator as a modern-day Prometheus who successfully harnessed the power of nature for the good of all Soviet people.¹¹

During the Stalin years, such construction schemes as the Turkestan-Siberian Railway (commonly known as Turksib), the Moscow metro system, and the Belomor (White Sea) Canal in the northwestern part of the USSR closely integrated the country's rail and water transport networks, albeit with substantial human and material costs that the Soviet government had no qualms in accepting.¹² Also during this period, the Dneprostroi dam and hydroelectric project brought flood control and cheap power while fostering a sense of inclusion among the thousands of young Soviet citizens who had tamed the wild Dnepr River with tractors and "socialist fire."¹³ Each of these efforts helped to augment the Soviet Union's industrial capacity and advance the careers of those Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) members who managed to avoid the Great Purges of the 1930s and emerge as the country's new leadership.¹⁴ Two of these surviving managers were young CPSU members Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev.

The Khrushchev-era Virgin Lands Campaign, which sent young Soviet men and women to introduce mechanized agriculture to the republic of Kazakhstan and other areas of the USSR, pointed to the state's sustained interest in extending its control over nature but represented a distinctly different type of mass mobilization project than the costly and ultimately successful endeavors of the Stalin era.¹⁵ Although Turksib had successfully connected the burning deserts of Soviet Central Asia and the frozen tundra of Siberia, the Virgin Lands Campaign ran into difficulties after initially delivering bumper harvests from the steppe soils of Kazakhstan. In the mid-1960s, the state promoted Sibiral, a plan to redirect the paths of several major Siberian rivers to control flooding and provide water for the parched cotton fields of Soviet Central Asia. A number of fantastic schemes were proposed, including the use of nuclear weapons to reverse the flow of the Irtysh and Ob rivers in an effort to bolster the flow of the Amu Darya River, which leads to the Aral Sea.¹⁶ The government's primary motivation for such a radical plan as Sibiral was that it could provide an economic stimulus for the USSR's impoverished Central Asian republics. By the mid-1980s, however, a series of technical glitches and environmental concerns doomed the project, and the state officially abandoned Sibiral during the late Gorbachev years.¹⁷

Long before BAM came to be known as the "Project of the Century," earlier projects of Russia's imperial and Soviet eras laid the groundwork for

Brezhnev's folly. BAM's legacy begins with the construction of the tsarist Trans-Siberian Railway in the late nineteenth century. Begun in 1891, the original route of what would eventually become the 5,772-mile Trans-Siberian Railway was completed in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War.¹⁸ With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the tsarist government relocated the railroad around the southern shore of Lake Baikal beginning in 1916 as a replacement for the Trans-Siberian Railway's original and vulnerable course through northwestern Manchuria. That area had been held by Japan during a war with Russia in 1904 and 1905 and would again fall under Japanese control in 1932 as a part of the Japanese imperial protectorate of Manchukuo. Part of this original section of the Trans-Siberian is now known as the Trans-Manchurian Railway, which splits from the Trans-Siberian Railway at the city of Taishet in Irkutsk Oblast (region) and ends at the Chinese capital of Beijing, nearly six thousand miles from Moscow. Another section, known today as the Trans-Mongolian Railway, begins at Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Russian Federation's Buriat Autonomous Region, and runs to the Mongolian capital city of Ulaan Baatar.

The BAM of the 1970s and 1980s was not the first undertaking to carry the name Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway. In fact, it was the third such project. Built between 1932 and 1941 and 1943 and 1953, respectively, these endeavors stretched from Komsomolsk-na-Amure in Khabarovsk Krai (region) to Sovetskaya (also known as Imperatorskaya) Gavan, also in Khabarovsk Krai.¹⁹ These railroads were built by labor camp inmates, military personnel, and in the case of the 1943–1953 project by thousands of German and Japanese prisoners of war.²⁰ It is estimated that perhaps 150,000 of these forced laborers died during construction of the railway, which was abandoned after Stalin's death in March 1953. The idea of restarting the BAM project would not again gain official favor until the Brezhnev era.

In contemplating a third BAM attempt in the late 1960s, the state hoped that a completed BAM would serve as the prototype for further conquests of the Soviet Union's vast and resource-rich northeastern frontier in the twenty-first century.²¹ The project's boosters within the upper echelons of the CPSU, who were in their forties and fifties at the outset of BAM, came of age during the so-called Stalin Revolution. Spurred by the "great purges" of the Stalin period, this was a period of sweeping economic, social, and cultural changes in which a new and younger cohort of Soviet citizens, many of whom had little or no direct experience in the Bolshevik Revolution, were molded into

the nation's elite administrators, academics, and military officers.²² As a product of that era, BAM's advocates sought to organize and motivate a new generation of young people to serve as the labor force for this fresh attempt to open Siberia's vast natural resources to exploitation. The railway's planners were also eager to establish a secondary lifeline between the European USSR and the nation's eastern reaches in the event that the Trans-Siberian Railway fell into the hands of the Chinese or another rapacious enemy of the Soviet Union.

After several years of planning within official circles, the Komsomol (the Party's youth organization) and the USSR Academy of Sciences announced plans to begin construction of a new BAM in the early 1970s.²³ As opposed to previous undertakings, this incarnation of the railway would be the responsibility of and under the direct supervision of the Komsomol, rather than the Party itself. With the beginning of construction in March 1974, the Soviet Union witnessed a mobilization of the nation's youth in a colossal struggle between humans and nature in a distant sector of the country that had not been seen since the Virgin Lands Campaign some twenty years before. With BAM, the state asked the youth for self-sacrifice and "fraternal cooperation" to achieve a common goal of the Soviet people—the economic and social strengthening (*ukreplenie*) of the Soviet Union. By constructing a "Second Trans-Siberian Railway" (Vtoroi Transsib) between Eastern Siberia and the Far East, BAM's supporters intended to exploit the vast natural resources of Siberia and the Soviet Far East and also to bring "civilization" to some of the USSR's most desolate regions.²⁴ Soviet citizens would hear these proclamations repeated numerous times between 1974 and 1984 as the state lionized BAM as "the project of the century" (Stroika veka) and "the path to the future" (*Put k budushchemu*).²⁵

BAM Basics

The Brezhnev-era BAM railway eventually stretched some 2,305 miles (4,234 kilometers) and was built on some of the planet's most inhospitable terrain. It runs some 380 to 480 miles (610 to 770 kilometers) north of and parallel to the Trans-Siberian Railway. During the period under examination in this book, the region crossed by the railway's tracks was referred to as the "BAM Zone" (Zona BAMa). This region includes those areas within the watersheds

of Lake Baikal and the Amur River, the latter of which forms a major part of the contemporary Russian border with China.²⁶

Approximately 1.2 million square miles in area, the BAM Zone is crisscrossed by a number of formidable Siberian and Far Eastern rivers, including the Amgun, Bureia, Kirenga, Lena, Olekma, Selemdzha, Vitim, and Zeia. The area presented geologic, seismic, climatic, and epidemiological challenges to its would-be conquerors, as much of the region is composed of taiga.²⁷ Within this area, BAM begins at the Eastern Siberian city of Taishet, located to the northwest of Lake Baikal, and moves east across the Angara River at the city of Bratsk, whose hydroelectric station was made famous by the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko in his 1967 work *Bratsk Station*. The railway then crosses the Lena River on its way to the city of Severobaikalsk, at the northern edge of Lake Baikal. BAM then crosses the Amur River at the city of Komsomolsk-na-Amure, and it terminates at the Far Eastern port town of Sovetskaia (Imperatorskaia) Gavan on the Pacific Ocean. Today, the railway includes 21 tunnels totaling 29 miles (47 kilometers) as well as more than 4,200 bridges totaling approximately 260 miles (approximately 400 kilometers). Of the railway's total length, some 913 miles (1,469 kilometers) of its track was electrified as of 2007.

In its heyday, BAM represented the quintessential Soviet “big science project,” as the nation's scientists, journalists, and academics produced a volume of scholarly literature extolling the railway's virtue: it would be the USSR's first step toward realizing a utopian society in the early twenty-first century.²⁸ During the Tenth Five-Year Plan (1976–1980) and beyond, BAM's proponents boasted that the railway would open the entire eastern third of the Russian republic to economic development. BAM was one in a long progression of Soviet colossal schemes, most notably the Virgin Lands Campaign and the Soviet space program, which the party used to herald the accomplishments of state socialism.²⁹ The Soviet Union employed BAM to improve the economy as well as to bolster collective faith in the command-administrative system. The personal influence of Brezhnev, who was a keen supporter of the project, represented a strong force in the push to popularize BAM. Although no definitive figure of BAM's cost exists, the general consensus in the scholarly community is that the Soviet Union built the railway for between fifteen and twenty billion U.S. dollars (in 1980 money) and that approximately one percent of the USSR's annual gross national product was devoted yearly to its construction from 1974 to 1984. The expenses associ-

ated with moving approximately 300 million cubic meters of earth, as well as building thousands of bridges and nearly two dozen tunnels, contributed greatly to the railway's high price tag.³⁰

More than any other factor, BAM's large construction force (known collectively in Russian as *bamovtsy*, best rendered in English as "BAMers") was defined by its youthful composition. Between 1974 and 1984, BAM construction involved more than five hundred thousand people, approximately two-thirds of whom were members of the Komsomol. Soon after it began, the Communist Party designated the endeavor as an "All-Union Komsomol Pacesetting Project" (Vsesoiuznaia Komsomolskaia udarnaia stroika). This appellation meant that from an organizational standpoint, the Komsomol was responsible for organizing both the labor and the political activities of those Soviet youth deemed worthy of membership in the young people's organization. In addition, the youth league was charged by the Party to oversee all BAM construction and place its own administrators and members in prominent positions throughout the project's bureaucracy. The burden of staffing and running BAM ultimately proved too onerous for the Komsomol to handle successfully.

This BAM labor pool also included some professional railway workers and soldiers in the Soviet armed forces. Although military personnel were employed in the construction effort and by some post-Soviet newspaper reports accounted for around 25 percent of the railway's labor force, the exact numbers and activities of draftees on BAM have been difficult to document.³¹ In contrast to the projects of the Stalin era, in which forced labor was used frequently, no prison labor was used in the construction of the third BAM. This fact was revealed in a remarkably candid statement from Brezhnev, who stated that "BAM will be constructed with clean hands only!" (of course, this meant that the BAM construction force would not include coerced labor). Research indicates that Brezhnev's categorical statement remained true throughout the construction process.³²

From an ethnic standpoint, the majority of BAM workers were Russian, as the proportion of ethnic Russians remained at around 60 percent throughout the decade.³³ While many of these individuals hailed from the USSR's Russian Republic (RSFSR), a number of ethnic Russians who worked on BAM came from a number of the other fourteen Soviet republics, most notably Belorussia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. As for the non-Russian BAMer population, it was highly diverse. Youth from such far-flung areas of the So-

viet Union as Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, and Uzbekistan came to work on the railway along with thousands of young people from a number of nations in the Soviet Union's global spheres of interest. These included representatives from the Warsaw Pact nations (particularly Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Poland), as well as other such Soviet client states as Angola, Cuba, Mozambique, and a number of nonaligned nations like India. Women represented some 40 percent of the BAMer population, nearly half of whom were under twenty.³⁴

Why would anyone want to work on such a difficult and poorly managed project? There were a multitude of reasons, which in some cases included a genuine desire by BAMers to advance the state by participating in the signature endeavor of their generation. This motivation was more common than some Westerners might expect, as the Soviet Union had always possessed individuals who expressed true faith in the state, at least in public. However, interviews with a number of BAM participants reveal that although many of them initially possessed genuine enthusiasm for building BAM, they soon lost that sentiment after seeing the project in the flesh.³⁵ But there were other reasons a person might want to work on BAM, including a desire for financial gain. Those who completed a tour on the railway received triple pay and were promised future vouchers for new apartments and automobiles, which were almost never received, however. Finally, in many cases, some young *bamovtsy* had a burning desire to leave their homes and seek out adventure (and often trouble) in a place far from the strictures of the nation's more established communities.

Promoting BAM's Construction

In the mind of Soviet officialdom, BAM would restore national pride and prove to the world that the USSR was still capable of completing a large-scale public works campaign through a massive mobilization of human and technical might. Unlike its predecessor, the tsarist-era Trans-Siberian Railway, BAM would be laid down with "Leninist enthusiasm" through the barren taiga toward the promised land of Communism.³⁶ Indeed, both economic and strategic concerns pushed the Soviet leadership to promote BAM. Brezhnev conceived of the railway as *the* project of the era of "developed socialism." What was "developed socialism" and why did Brezhnev link himself so

closely with this concept? After the 1936 Soviet constitution declared that socialism had already been achieved, Stalin's successors (including Brezhnev) coined this term. The notion was created to explain the Soviet Union's development after Khrushchev's proclamation that the USSR would reach Communism by 1980, which of course it did not. Rather than repudiate Khrushchev completely, Brezhnev and his cadres used developed socialism to indicate that the USSR was still on the path toward Communism, despite Khrushchev's unattainable deadline. Such unattainable deadlines came to characterize BAM—the project was plagued with a series of embarrassing missed deadlines.

Brezhnev, who was now the *primus inter pares* within the Soviet government, adopted the railway as his pet project. In his mind, the undertaking served several purposes. Past experience showed that involvement in a major project of this sort could help to legitimate the regime in the eyes of a new generation. The railway had the added benefit of deflecting attention away from the government's crushing of the so-called Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and its ongoing attempts to silence dissent. For Brezhnev, the technical and social exigencies of building the "path to the future" (*Put k budushemu*) were problems to be solved as BAM construction began, not before.

Armed with the general secretary's personal seal of approval, the Komсомol (with the support of the USSR Ministry of Transportation) began mustering and dispatching groups of inexperienced and untrained youth to the distant BAM Zone without having carried out sufficient geologic and topographic surveys of this rugged area of North Asia. The necessity of providing such critical information to those who actually built the railway was only an afterthought in the rush to complete BAM by 1984, a promise that Brezhnev repeated several times before his death in November 1982. In the aftermath of Khrushchev's declaration that the Soviet Union would achieve communism by 1980, Brezhnev could not afford for BAM, one of the most prominent symbols of his "scientific-technical revolution" (which had actually begun during the Stalin years) to be behind schedule. This movement, a common propaganda theme throughout the Brezhnev years, stressed technological upgrading and increased scientific education among managers and workers to overcome shortcomings in planning and production.

Party and state economic officials in both Moscow and the BAM Zone viewed the railway as an economic panacea that would convert the Soviet Union into a transport conduit for goods traveling between its Eastern Eu-

ropean allies and the burgeoning Pacific Rim economies, thus making the USSR an indispensable link in the movement of raw materials and finished goods across Eurasia. BAM representatives hoped that the railway would allow vast quantities of Soviet petroleum and timber to be shipped to the energy-hungry and resource-poor Pacific economies, while providing the USSR with high-quality consumer products, especially electronics, from East Asia. Many journalists and Communist Party officials based both in the European USSR and in the BAM Zone itself viewed technology in general and the railway specifically as part of the officially promoted scientific-technical revolution. Proponents of the project boasted that the railway would allow Soviet citizens to exploit the riches of Eastern Siberia and the USSR's Far East. In addition, *bamovtsy* would also be molded into model Soviet citizens in the process of building the railway.³⁷

The regime undertook BAM to ease tensions among a number of potentially disaffected groups, including youth, members of minority ethnic populations, and women. BAM was to be the thread that would bind these loose elements of Soviet society into a tightly knit cloth that would ensure the Soviet Union's long-term survival. That this grandiose undertaking ultimately failed in this ambition is by now self-evident. But that failure is far from the most interesting aspect of the story of BAM. Rather, the compelling aspect of BAM is found in those who labored to blaze its path across the subarctic taiga and to a future Russia that they could not begin to imagine.