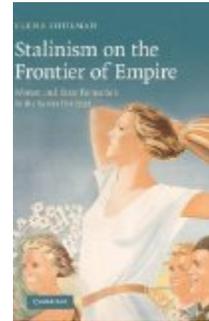


Elena Shulman. *Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire: Women and State Formation in the Soviet Far East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiv + 260 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89667-2.

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## Go East, Young Woman: The Khetagurovite Campaign in the Soviet Borderlands

The frontier as a theme in the development of Russian history has proven a useful means of analyzing the expansion of the state. Infusing gender into the picture of Soviet frontier-building, as Elena Shulman has done in this book, brings new light to our understanding of Stalinism as it operated on the periphery of Soviet society. Shulman applies the concept of frontier both to the physical expanse of the Soviet Far East as well as to the social and political landscape of the Stalinist system by examining the women (and a few men) who placed themselves at the forefront of efforts to settle and develop these borderlands as part of the Khetagurovite Campaign of 1937-39. In the first scholarly study of this movement, this book seeks to demonstrate that the Khetagurovites were significant to the extension of Soviet state power in the frontier of the Far East. For the state's part, mobilizing women for migration and settlement into the Far East was perceived as extremely useful. As with Stalinist industrialization and collectivization, female participation was seen as essential in this process of expansion and colonization. And as arrests associated with Stalin's repression increased, so too did the demand for workers in the vast labor camp system that dotted the Far Eastern landscape. (In fact, the NKVD became the largest employer in the region during the late 1930s). Even more, in the "wild" borderlands where unchecked masculinity had predominated since the imperial period, the Soviet state hoped the presence of women would have a civilizing effect in the Far East. The women of the Khetagurovite campaign fit nicely into the Bolshevik drive to assert

mastery over nature as well. Thus, while Shulman detects similar tropes of frontier lore present in American traditions, she clearly discerns the uniqueness of the Soviet experience. What she finds is that "Stalinism on the frontier was an exaggerated version of practices and policies associated with Stalinist rule" (p. 4). For female volunteers, participation in empire-building offered women "the greatest potential for realizing their aspirations for respect, autonomy, and incorporation into the narrative of history-making exploits" (p. 18). Simultaneously, however, "the social dislocation inherent in migration dramatically increased women's vulnerabilities" (p. 184).

Shulman's narrative follows the enthusiastic settlers who were inspired by Valentina Khetagurova's appeal in *Kosomol'skaia Pravda* in 1937 to join her in transforming the Far East. Approximately 250,000-300,000 individuals responded to the call, and 25,000 women and 5,000 men were ultimately selected and sent into the borderlands between 1937 and 1939. Most were young, under the age of thirty, and very enthusiastic about the prospect of going to the "exotic" Far East. Many were members of the first generation raised under Soviet power and imbued with strongly idealistic notions of constructing a brave new world. A number of the women also saw their participation in the Khetagurovite movement as emancipatory, providing them with new opportunities and freedoms. Patriotic enthusiasm and the will to transform the harsh landscape were not enough, how-

ever, and ultimately, the Khetagurovite campaign was declared a failure after a mere three years. While the migrants possessed great optimism and adventurous spirits, they faced extreme privation and hardship. The climate of the region was extreme—winters were bitterly cold and summers brutally hot. Nearly devoid of infrastructure, the territory experienced shortages of everything, from housing to basic necessities. The understaffed and undersupplied authorities were unable and, at times, unwilling to do much to improve the living conditions of the Khetagurovites. Without pre-established social networks, the migrants often could not procure necessary resources unavailable through normal channels. Some ended up jobless and homeless. A number of the women fell victim to sexual predators in the local administration, who took advantage of the women's lack of protection and limited ability to secure jobs, living quarters, and sustenance. Khetagurovites were also exposed to close attention from the state security services, leading some into the labor camps and others into complicity with Stalinist repression as agents of the NKVD. While some of the migrants did remain in the Far East and forged new lives for themselves, many others were unable to withstand the difficult conditions and returned to their previous homes. A few would find life so hopelessly unbearable that they chose to end their own lives.

Khetagurovites did not have the desired “civilizing” effect on the Far East. The young women had great difficulty integrating with the local population. Aside from the native peoples who had lived in the area for centuries, the region was also inhabited by large numbers of single male laborers, criminals, and victims of forced resettlement. Both the tsarist and Soviet states had used the borderlands for labor camps, but the numbers of prisoners increased dramatically during the period of Stalin's Great Purge (1936-38). However, those sent to Far Eastern camps tended to be disproportionately “social” rather than “political” criminals. In fact, the region had earned a very negative reputation, not only because of the inhospitable physical environment, but also because of the high percentage of prisoners and ex-prisoners living there. Tensions between settlers and locals were high. The latter could not understand why women would voluntarily choose to live in such a place and mockingly referred to them as “svistogurovki” (pointless and false ones). Many believed they came because they were social outcasts from their own communities or, unable to secure suitable marriage partners back home, had come to the Far East to seek husbands among the predominately male population. The sexual

activities of Khetagurovite women, regardless of whether they were by choice, earned them a reputation for loose morals. Nor were the women accepted into the workplace by locals. They were derided when they entered traditional male fields, consistently underpaid, and continually viewed with suspicion. Men were especially resistant to Khetagurovite women placed in positions of authority.

Despite its lack of overall success, Shulman maintains that the Khetagurovite campaign demonstrates a number of important aspects of the development of the Soviet state and society and gender roles in this period. Most significantly, she offers the movement as evidence that previous scholarly approaches toward explaining the success of the Stalinist system are inadequate. The view that Stalin effectively destroyed the hopeful optimism of early Bolshevism and turned the Soviet population into a generation of self-serving opportunists motivated by fear of the terror fails to account for the genuine aspirations of the Khetagurovite women to contribute to the building of socialism in the Far East and the lack of any hint of desire for personal aggrandizement or gain on their part. At the same time, Shulman argues that the Khetagurovites confound the school of thought contending that Stalinism had strong psychological and emotional appeal and thereby created a new devoted and loyal generation. Not surprisingly, she finds examples of both those who remained dedicated to the system and convinced of its correctness as well as those who experienced profound disillusionment. Ultimately, her argument rests on what the women chose to tell us, and there may have been significant self-censoring. As the author herself asserts, “whether the women thought Stalin was an omnipotent leader or that everything was going well in the new socialist state is impossible to say” (p. 11). The overall impression that one gets from the examples provided by the author is that the Khetagurovites who went and stayed in the Far East believed strongly in their “socialist mission” and remained committed to it. Those who left were disillusioned with the conditions they faced in the borderlands, but seemed to attribute these failures to the deficiencies of the region and the local population, not to the ideal of socialist construction.

Shulman also challenges the notion promoted by some scholars of the period that the 1930s signaled a turn backward for women and a fossilization of gender roles. While the state increasingly promoted pronatalist policies and encouraged more “traditional” roles for women, many women balked at these trends. Khetagurovite women often seized the opportunity to act more inde-

pendently. A number of them chose to express their newfound freedom through their sexual behavior. From the high rate of separation and divorce, frequent remarriage, and numerous incidences of short-term relationships among Khetagurovites, the author concludes that women seemed to take the institution of marriage and sexual interaction less seriously. However, such actions were not generally condoned and even women who had been subjected to sexual harassment and abuse were often blamed for allowing themselves to be victimized, for using poor judgment. Instead of being perceived as sexually emancipated, the Khetagurovite women were condemned for behavior still seen as “immoral.” Women were increasingly labeled as responsible for maintaining their sexual purity, which reflects the general state attitudes seen in legal changes that outlawed abortion, made divorce exceedingly difficult, and removed many of the measures requiring men to be accountable for their paternity. They were also seen as primarily responsible for the success of marriage, despite the multiple factors working against it: extreme mobility, material hardship, and lack of social support networks. These factors seem less than advantageous to women, yet Shulman implies that they were able to overcome them and forge new gender identities. This emancipatory effect seems somewhat overstated, however, since despite their efforts, there was significant resistance to this kind of activity for women.

Seeking to demonstrate that women possessed a degree of agency within the Stalinist system, Shulman analyzes the construction of the myth of the settlement campaign. She finds that the state directed, but was not solely responsible for or in control of women’s efforts to mold themselves as builders of socialism. In fact, she attributes considerable agency to the leaders of the movement, especially Valentina Khetagurova, and asserts that they were able to capitalize on the situation to bring themselves into the limelight. The author suggests that the initiative for the campaign came largely from Khetagurova herself. She based this conclusion on the fact that “no resolution or directive outlining plans for a campaign to attract female migrants to the Far East has been located” and thus “subsequent accounts reveal the haphazard way this campaign began and hence the opportunities for an articulate woman with an active patron to grab the spotlight in the Soviet system” (pp. 99-100).

While this is really lack of evidence rather than substantive support for her claim, it is plausible. Yet she fails to assert this beyond the implications for the construction of Soviet celebrity. There is very little analysis of the Khetagurovite campaign on an organizational level. When there is discussion of Khetagurova and other leading figures in the movement, the narrative reveals more frustration and inability to undertake any real independent action on the part of the Khetagurovites. They were often confounded by a bureaucracy composed largely of callous and/or privileged men living a precarious existence through the uncertainty of the terror. More often than not, local party, industry, and NKVD bosses were threatened by women who demanded change or attempted to assume positions of authority and thus were largely unwilling to devote woefully thin resources to ensure the campaign’s success. The fact that this did not deter all Khetagurovites and turn them into self-serving opportunists seems to attest to the power of their ideological commitment. One is left with the question of whether the campaign was a the result of individual initiative reflecting assumed state goals or a conscious effort on the part of Soviet leadership to employ gender in a “civilizing” way.

Although one might question the extent to which Shulman proves her contentions concerning interpretations of the nature of the Stalinist system and gender roles in the 1930s, the book makes a solid and important contribution to Soviet history. The author’s command of the secondary literature on nearly every important aspect of Stalinist society in the 1930s is impressively comprehensive and she sets her work firmly within the scholarship on Soviet social and cultural history. The research is equally impressive. Shulman combed extensive archival sources, including copious records of the Khetagurovite Committee and the official agencies and organizations involved in the resettlement project, innumerable communications between the migrants and various government organs, as well as the writings of some of the participants in the movement themselves, to paint a vivid picture of their experiences. The book demonstrates that women’s participation was important to the process of state expansion into the periphery of empire, even if it was not enough to overcome the tremendous obstacles inhibiting success.

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