



Christopher J. Ward. *Brezhnev's Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. 218 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4372-3.

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Railroad Building and Soviet Politics

Christopher J. Ward's examination of some social dimensions of the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) during the general secretaryships of Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov is revealing. This study provides fine-grained detail—from archives and published Soviet and Russian sources—about the often dysfunctional behavior of members of the workforce and administrators on the project, as well as opportunities afforded to participants and discrimination against them. Ward's account also examines the growth of an ecology movement—and the development of official policies to protect aspects of the ecosystem in the “BAM Zone.” He discusses perceptions of the Soviet Union produced by delegations of BAM workers traveling abroad and foreigners' involvement with the railroad. Because the All-Union Leninist Youth League (Komsomol) had major responsibilities for a substantial portion of the employees and for supervision, much of the focus is on the organization's members and activities.

A significant portion of Ward's information is drawn from the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History. However, his evidentiary base is richer still, for he has worked in four additional national archives in Moscow and the provincial archive in Irkutsk. His bibliography includes a full collection of books and articles about the railway, especially during the phase of construction from 1974 until 1984, when the final tracks were connected. The author also draws on interviews.

Throughout the book, Ward refers to the technical difficulties of completing the BAM and to the arduous living and working conditions. Begun in 1932, building of this railroad north of the Trans-Siberian had used large numbers of prisoners, but the undertaking was stopped after Joseph Stalin's death and restarted more than twenty years later. In fact, the last tunnel on the BAM was only completed in 2003.

At the same time, the author emphasizes the

“utopian” dimension assigned to the project once it was re-inaugurated during Brezhnev's term in office. He references official policy and a large number of propagandistic statements. Moreover, he includes stories of idealistic recruits to this showcase scheme, of those who received awards for their efforts, and of heroes.

Ward's central theme is the contrast between reality and official discourse. Moreover, he frames his analysis of life and labor on the railroad in terms of activity that the Soviet regime could not or did not control. Ward's chapters dealing with crime and the behavior of “BAMers” on trips outside the Soviet Union are especially telling in this respect.

Yet perhaps more important are the discussions of the role of official agencies in perpetuating patterns of treatment that directly contradicted not only propaganda lines for the BAM construction scheme but also the official ideology generally. A chapter on the experience and role of women discusses their relegation to more menial and service jobs, lower rates of pay, and at times disrespectful treatment. One chapter, “National Differentiation and Marginalization on the Railway,” demonstrates that those of Slavic ethnicity received preferential treatment, and that participants in the BAM project in a number of instances lived and worked in national enclaves. This discussion is especially important in showing that membership in various national groupings had unequal consequences in the lives of Soviet citizens and in suggesting some sources of support for devolution and the breakup of the USSR.

The author portrays initiatives and concerns about the preservation of the ecosystem which contrasted with an official ethos that in the past had privileged industrializing development over safeguarding nature. However, his explication is also fascinating, because it is replete with examples of the Komsomol and government agencies' undertaking programs to harness these con-

cerns and to safeguard natural resources, such as water and soil. Ecological interests and demands formed a significant strand of popular activism during the Mikhail Gorbachev era, but the fact that there was apparently at least some responsiveness by the regime to issues raised about protecting the environment of the BAM Zone is suggestive of possibilities for bureaucratic representation and political entrepreneurship that were present in the Brezhnev era.

Quite interesting to scholars of the late Soviet era should be the documenting of bureaucratic behaviors by different parts of the Komsomol as well as bureaucratic conflicts among various Soviet agencies. Significant is the apparent erosion of authority of the central administration that led to subnational Komsomol organizations sending unqualified individuals and criminals as part of their contingents for the BAM labor force. Diminution of institutional authority is one facet of explanations that have been proposed for the dissolution of the Soviet system.[1] Ward's work provides further evidence of a trend developing before Gorbachev proposed political reform

at the January 1987 Communist Party Central Committee Plenum.

On several grounds, the author concludes that the BAM undertaking was a failure—because the railroad was not fully completed in 1984, because it was little used in 1993, because the endeavor's salutary economic impact was slight, and because a society far from transformed came into existence along the line under construction. His book, however, enriches scholars' understanding of ongoing processes of political and social change.

Note

[1]. See, for example Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Wisla Surawska, *How the Soviet Union Disappeared: An Essay on the Causes of Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Gerald Easter, *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 167-170.

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