

# (Re)Constructing the Baikal-Amur Mainline

## *Continuity and Change of (Post)Socialist Infrastructure*

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### **Abstract**

The construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) in East Siberia and the Russian Far East in the 1970s and 1980s was the largest technological and social engineering project of late socialism. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the BAM was dogged by economic bust, decline, and public disillusionment. BAM-2, a recently launched state program of technological modernization, aims to complete a second railway track. The project elicits memories as well as new hopes and expectations, especially among “builders of the BAM.” This article explores continuity and change between BAM-1 and BAM-2. It argues that the reconstruction efforts of the postsocialist state are predetermined by the durability of the infrastructure as a materialization of collective identities, memories, and emotions.

### **Keywords**

Baikal-Amur Mainline, change, continuity, infrastructure, postsocialism, reconstruction

During the construction period, there was a lot of attention on the BAM; in the turbulent 1990s, it was forgotten and ignored because of the lack of funding and development. No one cared about it until the 2000s . . . Now they are building the second track and people are coming here . . . the BAM is regaining popularity.

—SL, RZhD company manager, Yuktali, 2017<sup>1</sup>

The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) is a railway line built in the 1970s and 1980s in the northern areas of East Siberia and the Russian Far East. Construction of the BAM was the largest engineering project of the late Soviet period, accompanied by communist propaganda, a mass population influx, and the formation of new groups and identities. The project was filled with the myths and promises of modernity. By the end of the construction, however, which almost coincides with the end of the socialist era, economic bust, infrastruc-



tural decline, public disillusionment and criticism clouded the BAM project. The 1990s were marked by the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Dramatic political, ideological and economic transformation left behind unfinished infrastructure projects.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, the Baikal-Amur Mainline is among the longest northern railroads in the world. Its main track, stretching for over forty-three hundred kilometers, cuts through the taiga of six northern regions of East Siberia and the Russian Far East, while its twelve-hundred-kilometer extension, the Amur-Yakutsk Mainline (AYaM), leads to the southern parts of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The railroad infrastructure encompasses over two hundred stations and traverses sixty-five villages and towns. The BAM is the backbone of regional development and the main job provider in most of the single-industry towns along its way. The railroad network connects mineral deposits and remote settlements with district and regional centers. It serves primarily for the transportation of cargo—natural resources (timber, oil, coal, metal ore) and, to a lesser degree, foods and goods.

Soviet engineers designed the BAM as a fully electrified two-track railway line. Yet, while the electrified segment of the railroad extends from the BAM's starting point in Taishet to Taksimo, the second railway track was laid only along the oldest railroad segment between Taishet and Ust'-Kut (see Figure 1). BAM-2 is a recently launched state program of technological modernization of the railroad fueled by renewed resource extraction interests. It aims to complete the originally designed second railway track and full electrification of the BAM. The project involves the state-owned monopoly Russian Railroad Company (Rossiiskie Zheleznye Dorogi or RZhD), numerous construction firms, and “BAM builders” or *bamovtsy*, former migrants who were drawn to the region to participate in the construction project. It evokes memories and emotions associated with the socialist-era BAM project, as well as hopes and expectations for completion of the original Soviet construction plans and community development. However, a new way of organizing labor, nontransparent funding and management schemes, and unequal power relations, where non-local interests dominate over the needs of local communities, seemingly feed into another cycle of public disenchantment, especially among *bamovtsy* involved in BAM-2.

This article, drawing on a comparative case study of the socialist BAM construction project and the postsocialist reconstruction program BAM-2, aims to explore continuity and change in the transition between these two projects by focusing on the railroad infrastructure, which consists of construction plans, material objects, organizations, and individual human actors. While doing so, I will ask the following questions: How do the legacy of the Soviet regional development programs and the materiality of the built and unfinished infrastructure of the railroad impact its post-Soviet reconstruction program? What is the role of propaganda and myth about the BAM in mobilizing labor



**Figure 1.** Map of the Baikal-Amur Mainline showing field sites and double-track sections. Permission granted by Alexis Sanco-Reinoso.

resources and shaping collective identities and emotions around BAM-1 and BAM-2? What can we learn about continuity and change from ethnography of the reconstruction works that focus on the (mal)functioning of the infrastructure of the BAM under postsocialist conditions?

The research presented in the article draws on ethnographic fieldwork I have been conducting in the region of the Baikal-Amur Mainline since 1998. In addition, this article builds on twelve biographic interviews and three focus groups with BAM builders, as well as eleven expert interviews with specialists in local administrations and employees (managers, heads of subdivisions, and trade unions) of the national railroad company RZhD. The majority of the experts also identified themselves as *bamovtsy* who either directly participated in the BAM construction or come from BAM builders' families. These interviews and focus groups, along with ethnographic observations, were gathered in the railroad towns of Tynda, Novaia Chara, Severobaikalsk, Yuktali, Neriungri, and Berkakit between 2016 and 2019. In addition to the ethnographic qualitative data, official information provided by regional subdivisions as well as by the central office of the RZhD company in Moscow, policy documents concerning the realization of the reconstruction program BAM-2, and materials of the local and regional press were used in my analysis.

## (Post)Socialist Infrastructures: Materiality, Identity, and Emotions

According to a popular definition, infrastructure is matter that “enables the movement of other matter.”<sup>3</sup> The word “infrastructure” was adopted in English from nineteenth-century French civil engineering. Back then, it, in fact, referred to the organizational work required before railroad tracks could be laid. By the late twentieth century, it had turned into a generic term widely used in international development and in social theory.<sup>4</sup> Social scientists, including anthropologists have been using the analytical lens of infrastructure in writing about modernity, development, and modernization. For example, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, drawing on their ethnography of road construction in Peru, argue that infrastructures like roads and railways are archetypal technology of post-Enlightenment, emancipatory modernity that “enchant” with the hopes and dreams of development.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, as the authors write elsewhere, roads promised are never quite the same as those delivered, because they are, in essence, risky ventures full of uncertainty and surrounded by stories of corruption, embezzlement, and shady dealings.<sup>6</sup> Railroads, typologically and functionally similar infrastructure objects, are even more potent expressions of modernity. In the world history of industrialization, colonization, and formation of nation-states, railroads figure as symbols of power,<sup>7</sup> stitching together vast territories of rising empires.<sup>8</sup> Soviet railroad projects with their underlying ideology and practices of high modernism<sup>9</sup> symbolized and enforced state power in remote parts of the empire.<sup>10</sup>

Socialist economic, political, and cultural forms have endured in post-socialist Eastern Europe and beyond.<sup>11</sup> In Russia, despite political shifts and socio-economic transformations, the Soviet modernization project with its socialist plans, ideologies, and identity-building policies continued well into the post-Soviet period.<sup>12</sup> Demographic and socio-economic decline, degradation of infrastructure, and “fuzzy” (nontransparent or mixed) forms of property<sup>13</sup> characterize the postsocialist development of frontier regions. While the current regional development strategies reveal path dependency on the Soviet industrial plans, massive state investments in infrastructure have been substituted by targeted private funding. Companies’ investments and benefits from resource extraction “fly over” local communities producing “modernization enclaves”<sup>14</sup> in landscapes of uneven development.<sup>15</sup>

In her famous article on ethnography of infrastructure, Susan Leigh Star noted that infrastructures, be they optical fibers or railway lines, do not grow *de novo*, but are built on an installed base.<sup>16</sup> While infrastructures have to wrestle with the inertia of that underlying base, they are, in fact, dynamic material objects going through different cycles of transformation. Ruin and retrofit are among the key paradoxical qualities of infrastructure, where ruination suggests its degenerative quality and retrofit an attempt to test its solidity.<sup>17</sup> Ruination or a breakdown of once taken-for-granted, state-supported com-

munal infrastructure, as was the case with the thermo-electric station in a Siberian city in 2003, help to rethink the relationship between the postsocialist state and its citizens.<sup>18</sup>

Stephen J. Collier argues that infrastructures emerge “as privileged sites where the relationship between neoliberalism and social modernity can be reexamined.”<sup>19</sup> His research in a provincial city in post-Soviet Russia showed the vital importance and durability of Soviet material structures, bureaucratic routines, and resource flows. The material setup of such mundane infrastructure as heating systems restricted attempts to “unbundle” those systems. As a result, marketization reforms took the shape of a selective intervention to reprogram key nodes in the system while leaving much of its structure intact.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov shows how infrastructural ruins (in the form of abandoned roads, development plans and ideas) in Siberia reveal the paradoxical continuity of Soviet modernity, with its promises and failures, and serve as a foundation for new state construction projects.<sup>21</sup> Following Collier and Ssorin-Chaikov, I show how temporal, geographical, and affective dimensions of BAM infrastructure are rooted in the Soviet modernization project and construction plans. In fact, the socialist-era BAM and its current reconstruction program reveal ideological continuity with Soviet development plans. At the same time, the materiality of the railroad infrastructure (e.g., the foundation laid for the second track, unfinished infrastructure objects) predetermines and constrains the ongoing reconstruction program.

Collective emotions, elicited by state actors and institutions, are crucial in structuring political fields, subjects and objects, and come to be invested in particular sites, such as material infrastructure and projects.<sup>22</sup> In the countries undergoing rapid postsocialist transformation, public images and emotions from the socialist era still shape social life and provide a moral framework in which power relations between actors are being discussed and played out. For example, nostalgia, mistrust, fear, and anger juxtaposed with joy, pride, enthusiasm, and hope have been leitmotifs of postsocialist memory narratives and the politics of emotions in Eastern Europe.<sup>23</sup>

The term *postsocialist affect* has been used to describe how the collective emotions of the builders of apartment blocks in postwar Vietnam were “harnessed by the state to produce new, feeling subjects committed to the work of socialist nation-building.”<sup>24</sup> In her study of urban infrastructure redevelopment, Christina Schwenkel focuses on the materiality of buildings as conduits of socialist ideologies and emotions. She illustrates how the bricks of old apartment blocks, “harnessed political passions . . . that over time came to signify unfulfilled promises of the socialist state and dystopic ruins that today stand in the way of capitalist redevelopment.”<sup>25</sup>

Similar to the socialist generation of construction workers and urban residents in Vietnam, builders of the socialist BAM fill the old rails and surrounding landscapes with nostalgic memories of their lives inscribed in the

country's landmark construction project. The collapse of Soviet socialism, which coincided with the official end of BAM construction, engendered a public disenchantment and pessimism that was projected onto the railroad as the landmark of the socialist epoch. The renewed public attention on the BAM and investments in its technological modernization, fueled by resource extraction interests, evoke new hopes and expectations anchored in Soviet modernity as an open-ended process.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the infrastructure of BAM assembles rails, people, machinery, construction plans, ideologies, and emotions extending beyond a single historical epoch or political regime. This article demonstrates how Soviet ideologies, memories, identities, and emotions are embedded in the material structures of railway tracks, stations, and towns.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, it seeks to explore the materiality of the railroad and unpack the Soviet modernization myth and ideology in the context of post-Soviet transformations by focusing on ethnography of reconstruction works.

## BAM-1: The Soviet Construction Project

The history of the BAM starts with early plans dating back to the nineteenth century and continues with the first railroad sections built under the Stalinist regime in the 1930s. While the major part of the mainline was built between 1974 and 1984, some sections and infrastructure objects, such as tunnels and bridges, were put into operation as late as 2003. Built within the industrial program of “mastering the North” with the primary goal of resource extraction and regional development,<sup>28</sup> it represented a grandiose and final Soviet “project of the century.”<sup>29</sup> The late socialist BAM was glorified in public discourse, media and popular literature as a symbol of human achievement in the “conquering of wild nature,” “bringing civilization to remote corners” of the country, and constructing the “Soviet man.”<sup>30</sup>

The “myth of the BAM,” with its promise for a better life, was used as part of Soviet propaganda in the labor mobilization campaign.<sup>31</sup> In 1974, the Communist Party’s youth organization Komsomol announced the launch of BAM construction. Soviet slogans urged young people to “rally together” and build the BAM in the spirit of “self-sacrifice” and “fraternal cooperation.” In addition to ideological propaganda in mass media, material stimuli (high salaries, access to scarce goods) also played a role in attracting a mass inflow of laborers, including young engineers, drivers and construction workers, to the region.<sup>32</sup> Public heroization of the BAM project and the builders’ labor added to the social prestige of the *bamovtsy* as a socio-professional group. The application of special knowledge and expertise in everyday labor during BAM construction was publicly acknowledged and financially encouraged. According to engineers who worked on the railroad construction, the BAM was a test

ground for brand-new technologies and engineering solutions and an opportunity for professional growth:

I was attracted [to the BAM] mostly by the fact that it was a new region, a new engineering solution . . . that was challenging. I attended a university course in Marxism and Leninism and listened to radio programs [about the BAM] that were on all day long. There was some kind of fascination . . . Why can't I participate in this grandiose construction project? That seemed interesting and great! (VF, BAM builder, engineer, Severobaikal'sk, 2017).

BAM construction yielded not only the tracks and railway stations but also a series of settlements, ranging from villages and towns with populations of 4,000 to 70,000 residents, such as Severobaikal'sk, Novaia Chara, and Tynda, to big cities such as Komsomol'sk-na-Amure with its population currently exceeding 260,000. The labor mobilization campaign attracted multicultural populations from different parts of the Soviet Union to the construction site. Soviet nation-building policy officially aimed at supporting cultural diversity in its ultimate pursuit of forging the "Soviet people."<sup>33</sup> The architectural design of railway stations and urban infrastructure, containing ethnic ornaments and symbols, with signs in the local languages of the peoples of the USSR, officially aimed to represent the ethnic and territorial diversity of the country. At the same time, the fact that the main stations and cities along the BAM were "assigned" preferentially to construction organizations from Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia revealed the hidden hierarchies of Soviet nationalities policy.<sup>34</sup> Thus, for example, the key cities of Tynda and Severobaikal'sk, informally known as "the capitals of the BAM," were built by engineers and construction workers from Moscow and St. Petersburg respectively (see Figure 2).

While ethnicity played a certain role in residence patterns and social relations along the BAM, it was mostly an emerging sense of belonging to local communities and communal labor during the construction of the railroad that

shaped the identity of *bamovtsy* and consolidated them as a group. *Bamovtsy* made the built and social environment of the newly emerged communities in the BAM region, similarly to Russian settlers in Chukotka or Soviet migrants in industrial frontier regions.<sup>35</sup>

The majority of BAM builders, especially, those recruited to the construction site by Komsomol, were men in their twenties and thirties who of-



**Figure 2.** The railway station in Severobaikal'sk, symbolizing a ship's sail and designed by engineers from St. Petersburg. Photo by author.

ten started their families in the region. Similarities in age and in educational and professional background, as well as overlapping residential patterns, collegial relations, and marriages with other BAM builders or indigenous residents helped them to build strong social networks and integrate into local communities. Currently, *bamovtsy* remember the construction period as the golden days of the BAM and their own lives filled with joy and enthusiasm.

There was enthusiasm. We had a musical band here. I was also part of it. We were dancing and singing. It was very interesting. There was an idea. There was construction. Only youth gathered here. Teams came here from Ukraine and Belorussia. That was so interesting! In the first year, a lot of people got married . . . (NK, BAM builder, retired, Tynda, 2016)

## BAM-2: From Decline to Reconstruction

The political and socio-economic crisis following the dissolution of the USSR has resulted in a sharp decline in living standards, population flight from the North, and public disenchantment. The late Soviet BAM project was criticized in the media as “the road to nowhere” due to the fact that, during the bust period of the 1990s, the railroad was heavily underexploited. High maintenance costs no longer covered by the state resulted in infrastructural decline. While some fragments of the BAM declined without proper repair and renovation, sidings leading to mineral deposits were completely abandoned to decay. Many ambitious urban construction and development projects announced in the BAM’s heyday were not implemented because of the economic crisis.

Today, foundations of unfinished apartment buildings dot the contemporary cityscape in Chara, while the decaying foundation of a shoe factory in Tynda reminds the city’s residents and visitors of unfinished Soviet construction plans.<sup>36</sup> Over 50 percent of the housing stock in Tynda and Chara is decrepit. Many builders of the BAM never received their promised apartments and continue to live in rotten temporary housing. The same is true for bridges and roads connecting district centers with other BAM towns and villages: due to the socio-economic bust, many bridges were never finished and service roads were never paved. Recently constructed apartment blocks rising up next to unfinished and abandoned foundations of public buildings and other decrepit infrastructure constitute the disparate built environment along the BAM. In interviews with *bamovtsy*, the pervasive sense of the incompleteness of the BAM is strongly associated with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the subsequent socio-economic crisis:

It was a turn of events. In that period many construction sites were left unfinished. As far as the BAM is concerned . . . one of them was, of course, the dissolution of the USSR with its negative consequences. If the state had lasted five more years, it would have done good for our town and for the whole region.

First of all, the unfinished objects like this building . . . would have been put into operation. That would have improved our living conditions in the future. (focus group with BAM builders, Novaia Chara, 2016)

Since the early 2000s, the country and the BAM region have experienced economic recovery. Cargo turnover along the BAM increased by 51 percent in the period 2006 to 2015.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, in 2014, the Russian government launched BAM-2, a state program of technological modernization aimed at boosting the cargo capacity of the railroad. The ultimate goal of the project is to bifurcate the functions of the BAM and the Trans-Siberian Railroad (Trans-sib): the former is to specialize in the transportation of cargo while the latter will focus on passengers and, additionally, on agricultural and fish products.<sup>38</sup> The project, supported by the National Welfare Fund, the federal budget and RZhD, is prioritized in national and regional development plans. According to RZhD, which is mainly responsible for administering the program, 462 kilometers of main track, 45 switching tracks, and 51 railway stations are to be built by 2020, with a total investment of 304.1 billion rubles shared between RZhD (135.3 billion), the National Welfare Fund (119.3 billion), and the federal budget (49.5 billion).<sup>39</sup> While the reconstruction program does not foresee the construction of a second track along the BAM's full length, it includes full electrification of the railroad and completion of old and new infrastructure objects (tunnels, bridges, etc.) with the purpose of increasing carrying capacity. The goal is to have the BAM transport natural resources (coal, timber, and rare metals), extracted in the vast region it traverses, toward the sea ports and border-crossing points in the Far East, and from there to supply the Asian markets (see Figure 3).

The official launch of the program BAM-2 in 2014 coincided with the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the beginning of BAM construction. Both events were accompanied by media campaigns, including the pro-

duction of dedicated popular literature, coffee table books and encyclopedias of the BAM project. They obviously aimed at reconstructing the glorified image of the BAM as an embodiment of state power. Relying on propaganda slogans of the late socialist-era BAM, media discourse seemed to be aimed at reawakening patriotic feelings, enthusiasm and pride suppressed during the 1990s wave of public criticism



**Figure 3.** At a railway crossing, Kuvykt, 2017. Photo by author.

towards the railroad. References to the BAM as “a great construction site,” “a railroad built with love”<sup>40</sup> and “a path to the future,” biographies of BAM construction workers and organizations, as well as archival photos depicting milestones of the construction process and everyday life during BAM-1 filled the pages of the regional press.<sup>41</sup>

The popular term “BAM-2,” associated with the rhetoric of the “second life” or the “second wind”<sup>42</sup> of the railroad and the region, literally refers to the construction of the second track. Indeed, BAM-2 reveals striking continuities with BAM-1 not only on a discursive, but also on bureaucratic and material levels. It is, in fact, a continuation of the Soviet regional development program of “mastering of the North” that tied the construction of the BAM to so-called “territorial industrial clusters,” centers of resource extraction and processing.<sup>43</sup> Thus, potential and ongoing development of the largest deposits of coal, gold and rare metals discovered in abundance in the region has informed the current strategies of regional development and railroad reconstruction.

According to local administrations and RZhD, the Soviet construction projects have remained almost unchanged: the ultimate goal of BAM-2 is the completion of the second track and of the full electrification of the railroad. In fact, the second track was constructed between the points of departure and delivery along selected railroad segments that already had strategic importance for cargo capacity during the BAM-1 era. At many sections of the railroad, one can find abandoned but still durable overhead wire supports and roadbed filling that had been prepared for the second track—the self-evident physical path-dependency of the rails. These material remains, as well as engineering surveys from the late socialist period, facilitate the laying of the second track and the construction of supporting infrastructure such as bridges, tunnels, and electricity lines. At the same time, not all of the initially planned infrastructure will be completed within the scope of the reconstruction program.<sup>44</sup>

However, when it comes to the actual benefits for local communities from BAM-2, increasing volumes of raw materials flowing to China by rail are expected financially to bring the locals nothing but modest revenues for the transit. In contrast to BAM-1, BAM-2 does not foresee investments into urban infrastructure and social services in the settlements that once emerged together with the railroad. While federal investments in community development dry up, local revenues from exploitation of the railroad and resource extraction are not sufficient to fill the budget gap. In order to compensate for the high construction and maintenance costs of existing infrastructure, local authorities often apply to extractive companies operating in the region for funding. However, their support is officially recognized as voluntary, and federal administrators do not anticipate any regular revenues from mineral extraction flowing to local budgets. Thus, the current social programs of extractive companies in Kalarskii District are limited to occa-

sional one-time funding of social and cultural events and selected construction and renovation projects. In Tyndinskii District, the Petropavlovsk and Priisk Solov'evskii companies make more visible investments in the social infrastructure of BAM communities.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the potential and actual ecological impacts of logging and resource extraction cause public concern and complaints by local residents against turning northern Siberia into a new resource colony.

Currently, *bamovtsy* constitute the majority of the local population and shape the social environment in which the technological (re)construction of the railroad is carried out. They are a heterogeneous multi-generational group whose identity has been transforming from a professional to a territorial one. Still, the core group of *bamovtsy*—“the veterans of the BAM”—are a cohort of professionals and workers who were involved in the construction process from the early days of the project and who are often members or activists of BAM builders’ societies and NGOs. Definitions of “the real *bamovtsy*” can be based on such criteria as the time of arrival to the region (e.g., those who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s to build the railroad and the cities from scratch); the current place of residence (those who remained in the region after the end of the construction); a particular set of moral values; or long-lasting professional, social, and emotional entanglements with the railroad:

The word *bamovtsy* has a magic effect. When I meet a new person and, in a conversation, it becomes clear that we are *bamovtsy*, we know that we both share a particular set of qualities. We will feel a lot of trust to each other because this term describes our personal traits . . . In my book I have the poem “*Bamovtsy* is our nationality.” It [the nationality] doesn’t have a definition of its own. It characterizes a personality. (TNV, BAM builder, poet, activist, Severobaikalsk, 2017)

The launch of BAM-2 caused a variety of collective emotions among *bamovtsy*: from optimism, pride and hope, to doubt, criticism and disenchantment. Interviews with RZhD experts and local officials tend to reflect the propagandistic discourse of the BAM-2 with its overly optimistic future visions of the railroad and the whole region. Rarely providing grounded argumentation, this discourse is emotionally charged and appealing:

The [Soviet] plans will be implemented, believe me! The people who developed them were not fools, were they? Can you imagine what a mad enthusiasm they had? They could walk barefoot in winter! (VT, head of the railroad depot, Novaia Chara, 2016)

In biographic interviews with *bamovtsy*, general expectations of the reconstruction program are rather moderate. They are often implicitly associated with the promises of unfinished Soviet construction plans and alternate with more realistic assessments of the current situation:

I think that if the second track is laid, the railroad hubs, the depots, and the turnover will grow. In this connection, there will be some development in the town, because people who will be coming need to live here. It means there should be conditions created for this . . . It seems to me that the construction [of the second track] will be going in parallel with the existing track. It takes large-scale construction for growth and upsurge. (GL, BAM builder, retired, Novaia Chara, 2016)

Regardless of what kind of vision *bamovtsy* interlocutors may have of the future of the BAM region and their home communities, most of them can draw a rather clear distinction between the current reconstruction program and the socialist-era BAM:

The region will develop—and it is developing now. It means there will be jobs . . . The railroad bed filling is being made. But it [BAM-2] will not resonate as the first BAM construction did. Passenger and cargo trains are passing. They make a gap in the schedule and prepare the roadbed. It is all going slowly. (NK, BAM builder, retired, Tynda, 2016)

## Reconstruction Works

The reconstruction process on BAM-2 involves RZhD, construction companies, *bamovtsy* and shift workers, as well as trains, tracks, and construction machinery. Following the institutional reform of 2003, the railroad was transferred to RZhD, while responsibility for the BAM communities, including housing and public organizations, was delegated to local administrations. RZhD has the legal status of a joint stock company, but in fact it is a fully state-funded and vertically integrated organization. This hybrid legal form, established when property was placed by the state under RZhD trust management, puzzles experts and the wider public alike, because nobody is sure to whom the company belongs. In reality, the main owner of the BAM (and most of the other Russian railroads) is the state, which invests money in the infrastructural modernization and maintenance and supplies RZhD's charter capital. RZhD acts as the main juridical person responsible for the realization of the program of modernization of the BAM and Transsib.

RZhD human resource policy aims to attract skilled workers and managers to its local offices in the BAM region. High salaries, a number of social benefits and, in rare cases, an opportunity to receive corporate housing make the work at RZhD prestigious for local residents. Not surprisingly, not only some *bamovtsy*, but also their children and grandchildren work for RZhD. In fact, *bamovtsy* dynasties are the company's social capital and original brand. At the same time, the company's attempts to attract specialists from other regions cannot prevent the continuous population loss that is occurring. The same RZhD managers who may promote BAM-2 in the beginning of inter-

views, later express concerns about the lack of experts working on the rails and the disconnect from the central parts of the country:

People are fleeing from the BAM region. They closed the school and the hospital . . . The infrastructure of the settlement is totally wasted! Although now the BAM is getting a “second wind,” with the second track and passing loops being constructed, I wonder who will be left to maintain all this? There are no roads, no bridges: you can get here in winter only when the rivers are frozen. Only trains keep us connected . . . It will be hard to draw youth to this region. (SL, RZhD company manager, Yuktali, 2017)

In the post-Soviet period, labor recruitment practices used by RZhD have increasingly favored the shift work method. This trend has become especially obvious in the process of implementing BAM-2. The federal funds allocated for the implementation of BAM-2 are centrally transferred to RZhD, the main responsible body, which then contracts larger and smaller construction companies. The latter might bring their own shift workers and machinery or subcontract local construction organizations that have the necessary labor resources and equipment. The majority of the shift workers involved in reconstruction works consist of poorly qualified men from other regions of Russia or from post-Soviet countries. In many cases, subcontracting construction companies transfer their labor resources to BAM-2 sites from other finished construction sites.

Most of the companies implementing the BAM-2 program are based in other cities of the country (e.g., in Belgorod, Sochi, Krasnodar, and others). While construction workers may arrive from one city or region, track maintenance cars and other equipment may be rented out and brought by the companies from other regions. Still, most companies come to BAM-2 with their own equipment and housing infrastructure that facilitate autonomous life. They accommodate their shift workers in trailers in industrial settlements during the summer—the only season when reconstruction works are feasible

and least costly, considering the local climatic conditions.

Only a few local railroad construction organizations hired by RZhD for the implementation of BAM-2 are survivors from the times of BAM-1. Among them are BCM, the largest transportation construction and engineering company, and BTS, a company specializing in the construction of tunnels. These organizations, consisting pri-



**Figure 4.** Reconstruction works along the BAM, 2017. Photo by author.

marily of *bamovtsy*, represent a pool of qualified labor resources. A few managers and high-skilled specialists who used to work on BAM-1 also received posts within the framework of BAM-2.

Companies submit tenders to apply to work under the reconstruction programs. In 2014, RZhD invited bids for the reconstruction of multiple costly infrastructure objects along the railroad. BCM, a descendant of a large-scale Tynda-based organization with the same name, which once did construction on BAM-1, won the competition for the reconstruction of the railroad's eastern section. BCM, similar to other general contractors, has a few minor subcontractors. Subcontracting firms are usually responsible for the construction of smaller railroad segments and are expected to organize the workflow at the local level and to purchase and deliver building machinery and materials.

There is a clear dividing line between *bamovtsy* and shift workers involved in the reconstruction works on BAM-2. *Bamovtsy* are both local residents and professionals who have the knowledge, professional skills, and ingenuity required to build tunnels, cities, and bridges and to lay rails in difficult mountainous landscapes under the challenging climatic conditions. By contrast, shift workers are temporary residents coming from other, primarily southern, regions with different environmental conditions. In addition to that, they often have previous experience in other construction industry segments, which predetermines their skill set and limited knowledge of the railroad reconstruction process. Last but not least, *bamovtsy*, in contrast to newcomers, have a particular emotional and mnemonic entanglement with the railroad that reaches back to the time of the socialist construction project BAM-1.

Those *bamovtsy* who are involved in the reconstruction work in one way or another express more criticism and pessimism in relation to BAM-2 than their counterparts who observe the process from afar. Their critical remarks about the reconstruction program are concerned with the lack of professionalism of the shift workers, financial mismanagement, and a lack of proper organization of the reconstruction work. These issues are considered in the larger context of postsocialist transformations:

I think that one of the biggest problems for our state and for us, construction workers, is the degradation of the construction sector in recent times. They have destroyed the largest working construction teams. And what we can observe now is theft, disorder, and defect . . . And the state cannot or does not want to cope with this problem. (VK, focus group with BAM builders, Severobaikalsk, 2016)

The story of Sergei provides a glimpse of the reconstruction work from the emic perspective of a *bamovets* participating in the program BAM-2. Sergei was born in the city of Omsk in Siberia and then moved to live with his father in Ukraine. There he met his future wife Elena and soon the young family, inspired by the Komsomol, went off to build the BAM. They moved from one

construction site to another before finally settling in the town of Yuktali. Both spouses remember life in the region during BAM-1 as the golden age of the whole region. They enthusiastically and nostalgically recall the milestones of the railroad construction process inscribed in the landscape and associated with the major events of their family life (construction of the first house, birth of the children, and so on):

I remember every kilometer of the track I laid and the day when my son was born. On that day, the track-laying machine reached Yuktali (earlier there was a maternity hospital there). It was a big event. The machine stopped in front of the windows of the hospital to celebrate the mothers with newborn children. (SM, BAM builder, Yuktali, 2017)

Sergei got involved in BAM-2 as a dedicated *bamovets* and an experienced professional, proud of his achievements on BAM-1 and believing in the continuation of the Soviet construction plans. According to Sergei, financial reasons played a role in his decision to join BAM-2; however, his enthusiasm for completing the BAM was his overriding motivation. The Moscow-based company responsible for laying down the thirty-kilometer segment of the second track and the reconstruction of the railway station at Yuktali was to deliver work worth 1.7 billion rubles in 2017. In July of the same year, when I met with Sergei, the reconstruction work was still at the preparatory stage. The responsibility for remaining issues was delegated from top management down to Sergei's subcontracting enterprise in Yuktali. Nevertheless, the Moscow-based manager called several times a day to "control" the situation.

They tell me to spend 240 million in August. I say: "Are you crazy? I have not even gotten the machinery yet!" They keep telling me that they sent the machinery two weeks ago. And this was three weeks ago! (SM, BAM builder, Yuktali, 2017)

The long-distance chain of command does not properly connect the political and financial center in Moscow with the remote railroad town of Yuktali. Moscow-based managers seem to lack the expertise that *bamovtsy* and some other local residents have—knowledge of the landscape and climatic conditions, as well as engineering skills to dig the soil, lay new tracks and start an engine at low temperatures.

The distribution of finances is another item of discord between Moscow and Yuktali. The Moscow-based firm does not pay its bills and seems to economize on essential things, such as accommodation for shift workers and railroad security services ensuring the safe delivery of building machinery. As a result, the delivery of the equipment is delayed and subcontractors are often concerned that it has been stolen en route.

After three months of hard work at his own subcontracting firm and negotiations with Moscow, Sergei did not receive his salary. While talking about

BAM-2, Sergei, overwhelmed with exasperation and resentment at the time, lost the ability to speak. Elena, with her voice filled with sorrow and disappointment, commented:

We are completely shocked. It [the reconstruction program] was promoted and associated with the fortieth anniversary of the BAM construction. And now this Moscow firm . . . just drives everyone crazy. I know only one thing: the money has already been stolen. This is so sad! (EM, entrepreneur, Yuktali, 2017).

## Conclusion

The socialist BAM was a large-scale infrastructure project involving extreme forms of technological and social engineering. The BAM harnessed feelings of enthusiasm, pride and patriotism that continue to be associated with the railroad's construction and feed identities and memories of the *bamovtsy*, the migrants who came to the sparsely populated region to build the railroad and towns along its way. The BAM that historically shaped local communities continues to be a formative infrastructure. The current socio-economic role of the railroad institutionally represented by RZhD is hard to overestimate. It provides employment, maintains the population in remote places and serves as a framework of transportation and regional development.

In this article drawing on a comparative case study of the socialist BAM project and its current reconstruction program BAM-2, I traced the continuity and change of the railroad infrastructure that assembles construction plans, individual human actors and organizations, material objects, as well as identities and emotions. I have shown how Soviet development programs, as well as existing, but often unfinished, infrastructure objects (the railroad bed filling and overhead wire support for the second track, abandoned buildings in railroad towns), predetermine the material path-dependency of the reconstruction program. My ethnographic materials also illustrate a certain degree of discursive and ideological continuity between BAM-1 and BAM-2. The myth of the BAM as the central part of the propaganda campaign that surrounded the Soviet construction project has survived, at least on the pages of newspapers and other mass media. It was a useful instrument of the Komsomol labor mobilization and remains part of the idealized collective memory of the BAM construction among the *bamovtsy*. At the same time, it no longer has the same effective mobilizing power over local communities that have been experiencing dramatic socio-economic transformations throughout the post-Soviet period. The ethnography of the reconstruction work helps to explore the functionality (and malfunctioning), durability and transformation of the BAM as an infrastructure that stretches beyond a single construction site or historical period. Such attention focused on infrastructure unpacks the myth of the BAM as a Soviet ideological construct and a propaganda resource and, at the

same time, examines the durability of material objects as an embodiment of collective memories, identities, emotions, expectations and disenchantments.

Following Collier,<sup>46</sup> I argued that the reconstruction and development efforts of the postsocialist state are predetermined by the material and bureaucratic constraints of its socialist infrastructure. The tracks, tunnels and bridges being completed under BAM-2 follow the original plans of the 1970s and 1980s. As such, the existing material infrastructure enables but also constrains the reconstruction project. At the same time, socio-economic change, institutional reform and new political regimes and actors characterize the postsocialist BAM-2 program. The fact that neither the state nor the private companies represented on BAM-2 anticipate providing social programs or investments in the construction of new housing, or to help secure basic social services in shrinking settlements along the BAM, mark the most dramatic difference between BAM-1 and BAM-2.

Publicly voiced hopes and expectations of BAM-2 among *bamovtsy*, the carriers of the social memory of the BAM construction, are still affectively anchored in the promises of Soviet modernity with its unfinished construction plans. However, interviews with *bamovtsy* involved in the reconstruction work show a growing disenchantment and nostalgia for the socialist BAM in the context of rapid postsocialist socio-economic transformations that negatively impact local communities. Thus, boom and bust, construction-decline-reconstruction, and enchantment and disenchantment seem to form the life cycle of the infrastructure of the BAM as a materialization of collective identities and emotions and an open-ended (post)socialist (re)construction site.

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## Notes

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1. In order to protect the anonymity of informants, only initials of the names of people are provided, followed by the person’s profession and the location and year of the interview. For the same reason, in one case, the name of a company was left as an abbreviation only. All interviews were conducted in and translated from the original (Russian) language by myself.
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reported that positive expectations (66 percent among Evenki and 75 percent among other indigenous groups) prevailed over concerns about degradation of the lands and subsistence activities (Vladimir I. Boiko, *BAM i Narody Severa* [Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1979], 103. My more recent research in Evenki communities along the BAM showed disenchantment, discontent and hidden forms of resistance to the construction project among indigenous residents, especially those involved in traditional land use practices (Povoroznyuk, 2011).

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38. Decree of the Russian Government, 17 June 2008, *Strategiya Razvitiya Zhelezno-dorozhnogo Transporta v RF do 2030 goda*, no. 877-p.
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44. For example, the once projected but still unbuilt *Mokskaiia* hydroelectric power plant at the Vitim River was intended to be the main source of energy supply for BAM construction. Currently, this construction plan seems to be abandoned or deferred to the indefinite future. Engineers working on BAM-2 think that implementation of this project would have facilitated the full electrification of the railroad (which is on the agenda of BAM-2).
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46. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social*.