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Review of Brezhnev's Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism, by Christopher J. Ward

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Ward, Christopher J. *Brezhnev's Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism*.

Pitt Series in Russia and East European Studies. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. xii + 218 pp. \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-8229-4372-3.

This excellent monograph details the construction of one of the largest public works projects of all time, the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) Railway, between its inauguration in 1974 and its official completion in 1984. The last instance of "Soviet gigantomania" and a pet project of Leonid Brezhnev, the BAM project spanned 2,300 miles and ran 400 to 500 miles north of and parallel to the Trans-Siberian Railway. With 21 tunnels and 4,200 bridges, BAM consumed 1 percent of the Soviet GNP each year for more than a decade. Intended to exploit the natural resources of Siberia and become a major conduit of trade between Eastern Europe and the Pacific, BAM was envisioned as a demonstration of ideological fervor and Soviet prowess during the post-Khrushchev era of "developed socialism." It would usher the USSR triumphantly into the twenty-first century.

That the project failed to achieve its goals is suggested by the book's title. In fact, BAM was a disaster from start to finish, and even beyond. One of the author's major themes is the profound discrepancy between the image of BAM projected in its massive propaganda campaign and the bitter reality as experienced by those closest to it. The undertaking was supervised by the Komsomol, which tried recruiting young laborers with appeals to their party allegiance or sense of adventure, although many signed up simply to take advantage of the triple hardship pay. In the end 500,000 people toiled on BAM in the most inhospitable terrain and in the absence of the most basic amenities; young workers were commonly dispatched to the BAM zone without any background information or technical preparation. Petty crime, alcoholism, and graft were rife, but such activity usually elicited no more than a slap on the wrist. Authorities also tried selling BAM as a solution to the "women's question," but female recruits seeking equality and heroism were relegated to menial jobs and baby making, not to mention discrimination and sexual assault. Similarly disillusioned were workers from the non-Slavic parts of the Soviet Union, who found that Russians ruled the roost even in the wilderness. Recruits from the other parts of the world, including the Eastern Bloc and Latin America, were segregated from native BAMers, who, it was feared, would convey an all-too-accurate impression of the project.

In short, BAM was a microcosm of contemporary Soviet problems that the project not only failed to address, but in some respects exacerbated. A particular source of tension was the conflict between those who extolled the railway as the triumph of *homo Sovieticus* over nature and the scientists and academics who were appalled by BAM's rape of the environment and who expressed their concern in print or through legal organizations. The environmentalists made little headway at the time, but they helped nurture a growing ecological consciousness in Soviet society, one of BAM's few positive outcomes.

Brezhnev's Folly benefits from the author's thorough familiarity with rich archival materials as well as personal interviews. He has organized the book thematically, much of it revolving around the laborer cohorts from within and outside of the Soviet Union who signed on to the project. While the approach is sensible, it sometimes results in repetitiveness. The work is compact, and the writing admirably craftsmanlike. One might have wished for separate, fully developed chapters focusing on the construction process and the particulars of everyday life in the BAM zone rather than encountering such information in dribs and drabs around the edges. These relatively minor criticisms aside, the book is a revealing and multifaceted analysis of a little studied topic from the late Soviet era. It deserves the attention of every specialist in modern Russian history. And it is perfectly complemented by *The BAM Zone: Permanent Residents*, the 1987 documentary directed by Mikhail Pavlov that inspired the author to undertake this account in the first place.

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