

IREX  
Elena Shulman  
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## **Research Report**

### **Topic of Research:**

“Pacifying a Marvelous Land: Gender, Terror and Settlement in the Soviet Far East, 1937-1941.” My research centers on a Communist Party program known as the "Khetagurovite Movement," that coordinated efforts to encourage young activist women to permanently settle in the so-called "socialist frontiers" of the Soviet Far East. This gender-specific appeal to women as a force of frontier transformation occurred while the Far East was suffering the brunt of the Politburo's extreme xenophobic anxiety amid the general upheavals of the late 1930s. The campaign began in the winter of 1937 and aimed at ameliorating a demographic imbalance in a strategically important border region that suffered from labor shortages and underdevelopment. Public texts stressed that this influx of women would not only encourage men to settle down to a more subdued family life, but their "womanly" touch would ensure the final conquest of socialist civilization over unruly wilderness. Those who initiated the campaign were unprepared for the massive response that quickly followed. In two years, over 20,000 women moved to the area, and hundreds of thousands of others wrote letters asking to be included in the movement.

### **Relevance and contribution to the field:**

This research will provide new information on women's experience in the Far East and, more generally, it will address issues in Soviet women's history of the 1930s and early 1940s. Thus far, only a handful of scholarly works have looked closely at gender, and women's experiences in the Communist Party and Komsomol, or women's activity in trade unions or other organizations in the 1930s and early 1940s. Even fewer works that combine a socio-cultural perspective with discourse analysis have ventured through the 1940s and beyond. The materials that I have collected during the course of my research will allow me to not only describe a previously little known program aimed at the mobilization of female patriotism but will also aid in developing a broader understanding of Soviet society during this crucial pre-war period.

### **Approach and research methodology:**

My approach and methodology is highly contingent on the type of sources that were available to me in Khabarovsk and in Moscow. At the State Archive of the Khabarovsk Region (GAKhK) I found a variety of sources relating to the Khetagurovite movement. Many of the documents were products of Party and Komsomol resolutions and reports on the progress of the settlement program. There were also numerous letters from participants. Some were letters asking to be included in the movement and others were letters of complaint from women who had already come and were unhappy with the situation that they found once they settled. There were also memoirs of Khetagurovites written in the 1970s that were submitted to the archive. These types of letters written by participant during the 1930s and in memoir form will allow me to analyze the self-representation and strategies of participants through discourse analysis. Official resolutions and internal reports will allow me to reconstruct how and why the Stalinist bureaucracy initiated and supported this program as well as its responses to eventual failures to fully take advantage of patriotic fantasy among thousands of young people enflamed by the prospect of their own frontier adventure. The connection between this sort of patriotic fantasy and the settlement of the Far East is also reflected in the materials that I gathered in Moscow at the Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI). RGALI had a collection of

letters written to Vera Ketlinskaia, the author of a popular novel, Muzhestvo. The novel, published in 1938, describes the building of Komsomol'sk-na-Amur and elicited hundreds of letters from the readers who also expressed their desires to join others on this frontier. In the same archive, I also looked at the documents related to the making of a movie loosely based on the Khetagurovites, entitled Devushka s Kharakterom. This material, as well as newspaper articles about women on the Far East that I collected while in Khabarovsk, will be the basis of a chapter on the public representation of women in the Soviet media.

At the Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki (RGAE), Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), and the Tsentral'nyi arkhiv dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii (TsKhDMO) I found a variety of sources that will allow for an analysis of the way the Party and the Komsomol channeled and monitored female activism within their organizations, and in the society as a whole. I found materials in the Procuracy fond at GARF and in the TsKhDMO that directly related to issues of violence against activist women and to sexuality and debates on communist personal morality. I also looked at a number of women's memoirs in the Memorial archive. I wanted to work with material from women who spent time in the GULAG to gain a broad sense of women's experiences under the Stalinist system.

#### **Research findings and preliminary conclusions:**

The "Khetagurovites" publicly crystallized a template for womanly patriotism in the pre-war period and established viable models for female heroism during the Second World War. The very process of voluntary migration to the Soviet Far East publicly marked them as national patriots and offered them a venue to attain the status of heroines in a culture of military bravado. The evidence that I have collected also demonstrates the relevance of Soviet women's relationship to symbolic and real geographic space as a marker of their commitment to socialist state building. Much of my evidence points to an atmosphere of discrimination and harassment aimed at activist women by male peers and superiors and the variety of coping responses to this contradiction between the Soviet rhetoric of gender equality and personal experience. I intend to continue investigating the meaning of female patriotism within the context of socialist empire building and will seek to place it within a comparative global historiography.

#### **Suggestions for future research agenda:**

Clearly, more research must be carried out on women and gender in the 1940s and beyond. The 1930s are a difficult period for archival research on women if the researcher is based only in Moscow where the Communist Party Central Committee sector on Work Among Women is missing from the former Party Archive. Also, it must be made clear that work in the Tsentral'nyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh dvizhenii Moskvyy (TsAODM), where local Party and Komsomol materials are located is extremely circumscribed by the archival administration's long-standing denials of access to those materials for foreign scholars. Thus, researchers working on topics of social history or gender have to plan their case study projects in other regions of the former Soviet Union.