

# Railroad rhythms and gendered labor: professional and family lives of workers on Baikal-Amur Mainline

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*Paper for the conference “Gender shifts and Resource Politics in the Arctic”,  
22th February 2017, Uppsala*

# Research focus

Russian Railroads Company (RZhD) impose rhythms on its employees through labour organisation

Workflow rhythms are further translated into RZhD workers' household rhythms ->

Analysis of gender-specific professional and family roles of RZhD employees

# Research questions

- What can we learn about role of the state, gender inequality and power relations through studying RZhD rhythms imposed on women and men?
- What role have the BAM history and contemporary RZhD regulations played in shaping gendered occupations?
- How have RZhD rhythms impacted configurations of gender roles and practices in railroad workers' households?

# Approaches

*Rhythm*: defines (co)presence of certain actors in certain place, ensures the sociotemporal order (Zerubavel 1981) -> Role of schedules and shift work at RZhD

*Anthropology of infrastructure*: social agency of infrastructures as projects of modernization and political transformations (Harvey and Knox 2011) -> BAM history and gendered labour at the railroad

*Postsocialist feminist studies*: “gender order” (Ashwin 2000), public/private (Gal and Kligman 2000) -> women’s “double burden”, blurring borders between professional and family realms

# Baykal-Amur Mainline (BAM) Region



# Field sites and data

**Field sites:** BAM cities Tynda, Ust-Kut and Severobaikalsk

**Data:**

- interviews with RZhD workers and their spouses (8), former BAM builders (16), and local residents affected by the railroad
- archives
- participant observation
- statistics on demography
- municipal and RZhD reports



# BAM history

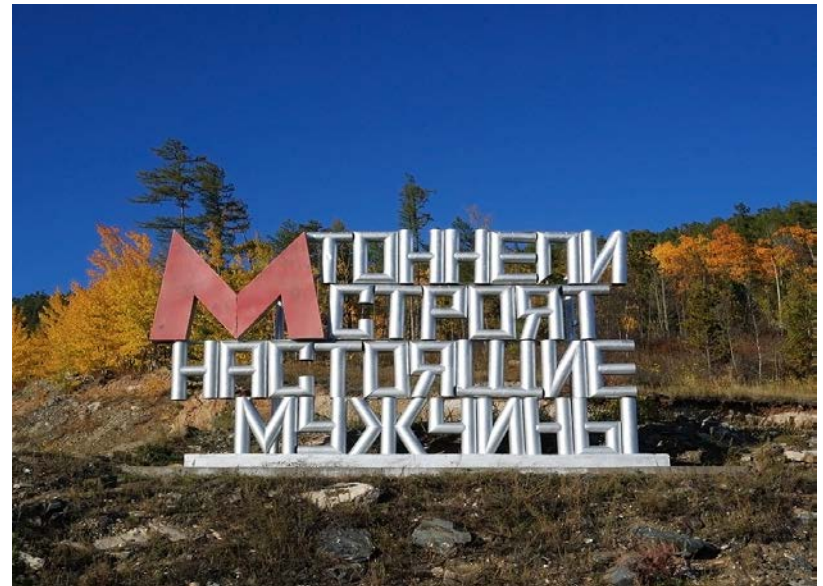
- built in 1974-1984 as the last communist mega-project for resource extraction
- crosses over 200 railroad stations, 60 towns in 6 federal subjects
- in 1997 transfer of railroad maintenance to Russian Railroads Company (RZhD)
- community dependence on railroad and extraction
- centralized planning and management in Moscow; “semi-military” organization





# Gender at the BAM construction

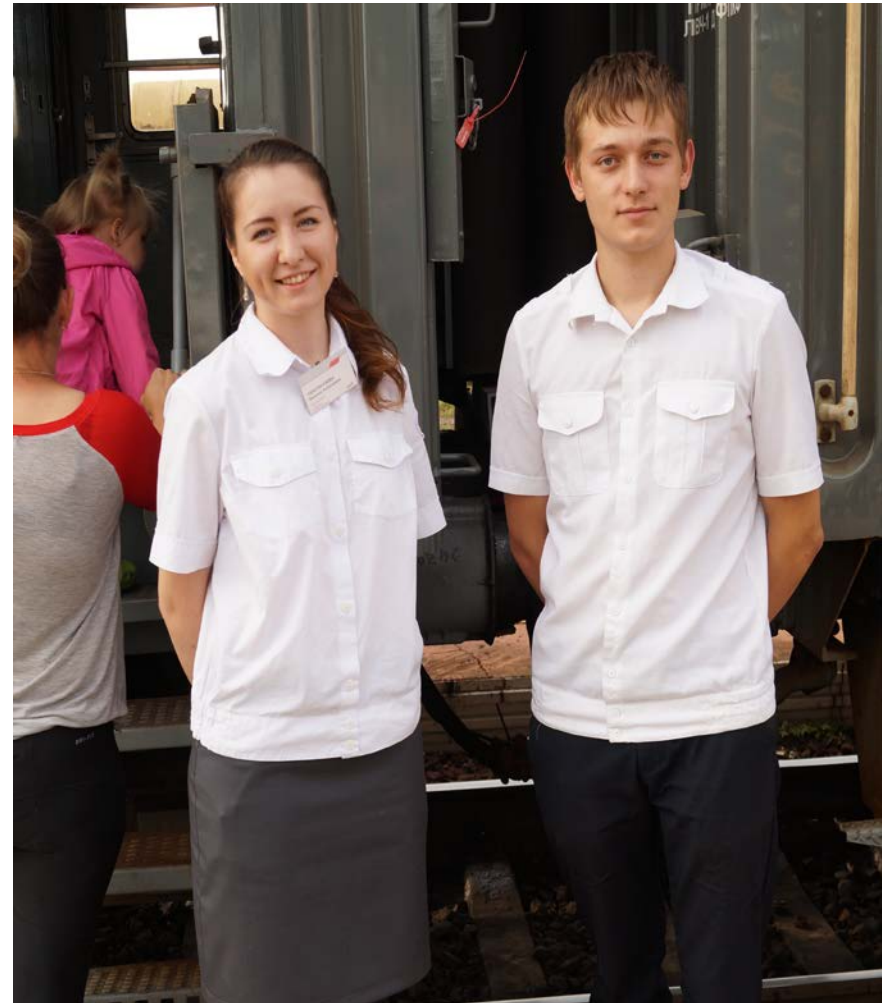
- **BAM as a communist construction site, Komsomol propaganda and material stimuli in labour recruitment**
- builders: young migrants from the USSR; over 60% men
- **Soviet gender policies: women encouraged to take part but as men's "assistants"**
- **men's heroization and women's self-sacrifice discourses**



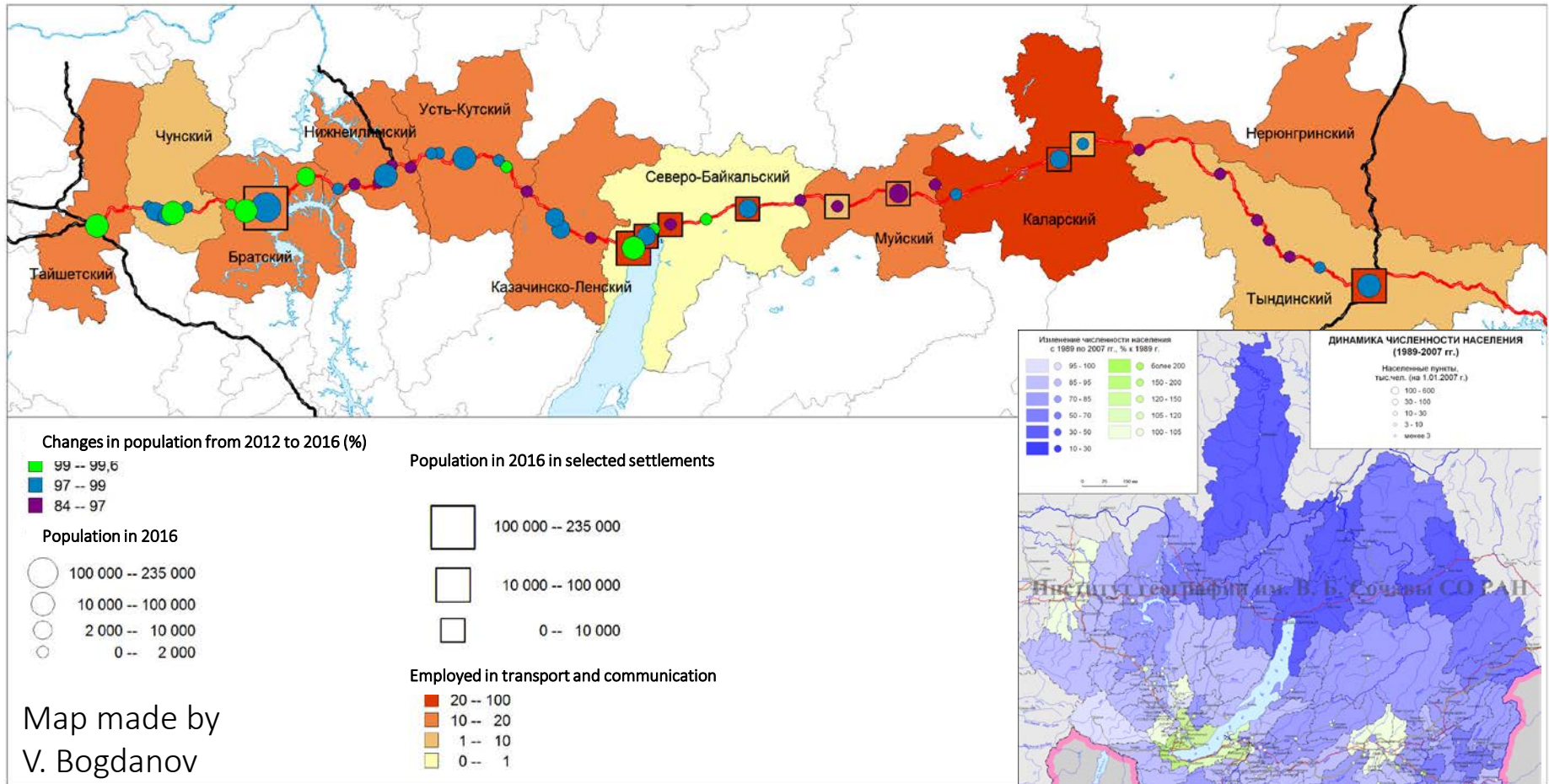


# Gendered labour at RZhD

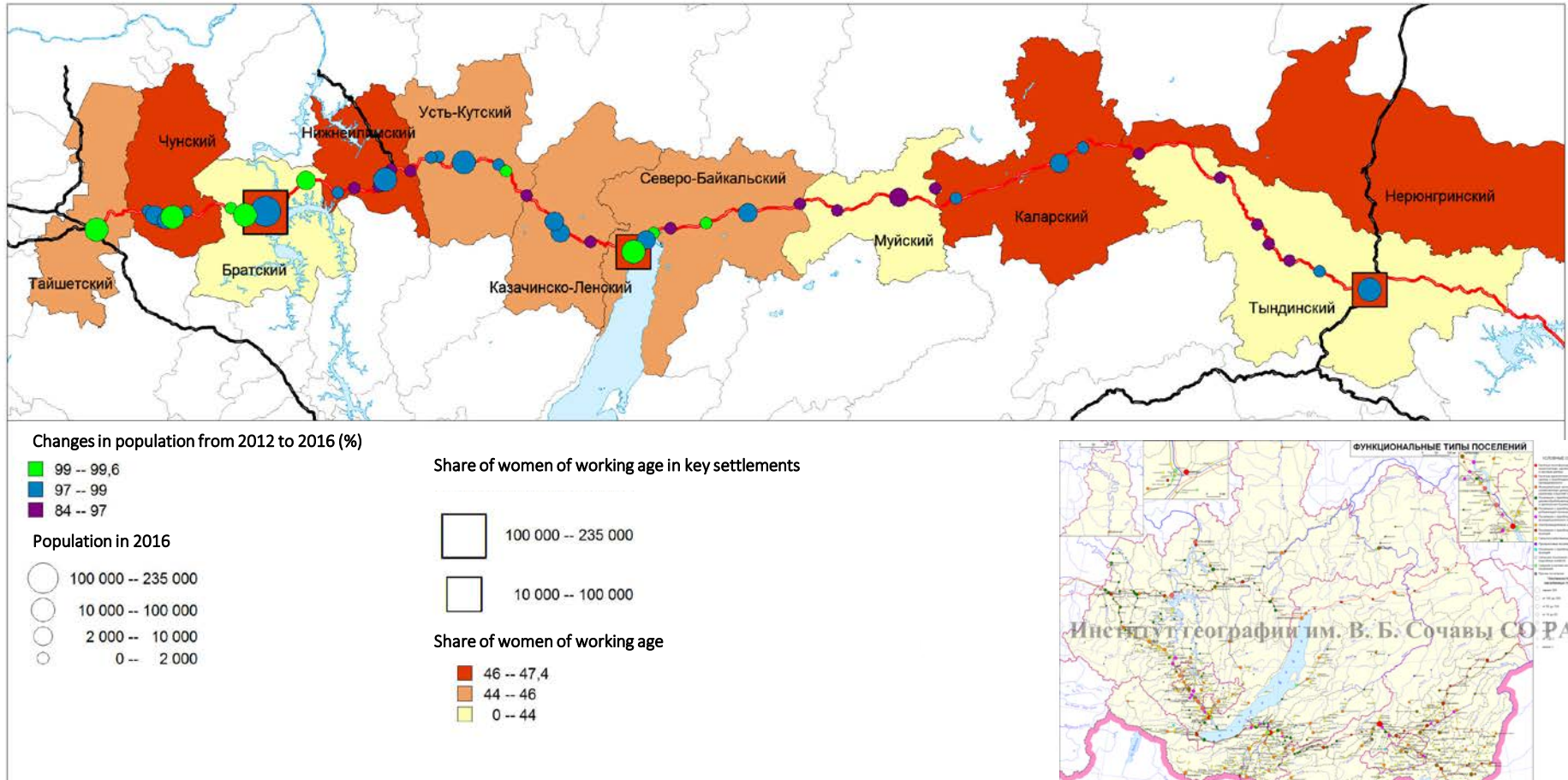
- women constitute 35% of employees and 55% of qualified labor
- 31,3% women vs. 68,7% men hired in 2014
- “ideal” RZhD worker at the BAM: young unmarried man (lacking facilities for families)
- male-dominated occupations: railroad maintenance and exploitation (technician, mechanic, engine driver)
- female occupations: traffic control (i.e. signal operators) and services (i.e. train attendant)



# Population loss and employment in transportation, 2012-2016



# Share of women of working age



Map made by  
V. Bogdanov



# RZhD rhythms and gender asymmetries

## Stereotypes of occupations:

- Men: hard physical and more technically challenging work, with unpredictable schedule and night shifts, long commuting to workplace:

“No, there is no women. Because it’s difficult. It seems like he is simply in the cabin. But in fact, if the train stops, he repairs everything by himself”.

- Women: more predictable schedules

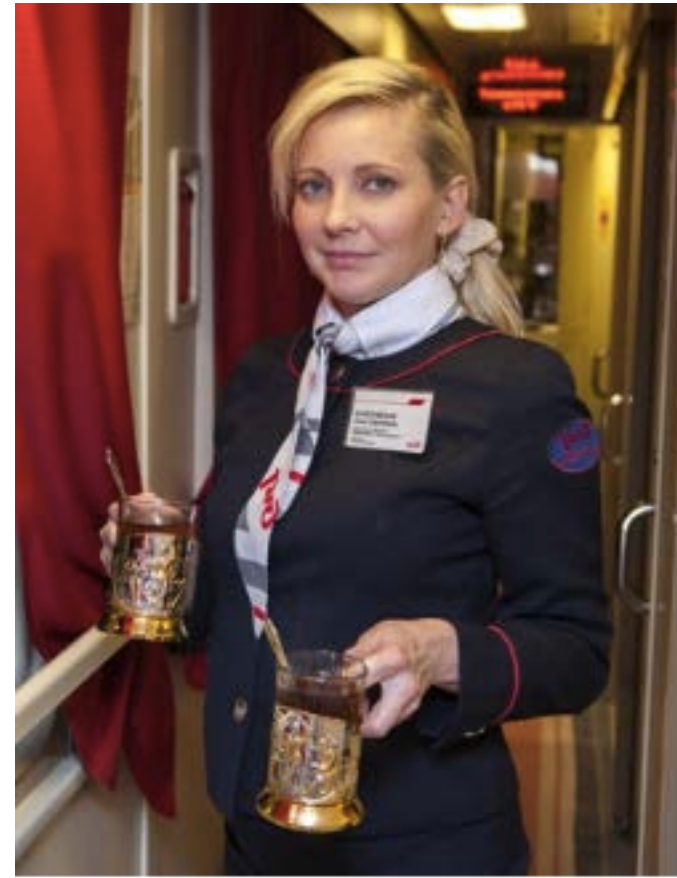
## Gendered practices:

- physical work and longer working days among women:

“We had female railroad maintenance workers. It is a difficult and very hard work. First of all, there is a special sledge hammer in order to nail tie cotters. And a chipping hammer! Our youth, poor, they would insert that hammer and would not be able to pull it back. Because it was so heavy. And their knees were all bruised, our youth. It was very tough”.

- “Double burden”: female employees expected to take care of their male peers:

“You will not clean the floor after 14-16-hour work-shift. You go to banya, eat, and sleep. She cleans up the floor, prepares banya, you might say, she arranges our everyday living”.



# Gendered labor at home

- RZhD employees: men spend more time at work and less involved in domestic sphere than women:

“In social media I saw the status: "husband - railroad worker is like a house spirit: comes late, rattles with the pots in the kitchen in the dark, and disappears in the morning”.

- RZhD families: childcare functions are delegated from state to private sphere (relatives, neighbors) due to non-standard work schedules:

“It was easy before when the kindergartens were our own. You could call there and announce the working day and they worked at the weekend. And what to do with a child now if a young mother doesn't have a mother, a father, a grandfather, or a grandmother? Should she bring her child with her? And what work she will have? What efficiency?”

# Workflow and household management

- men - no time for family:

Q: how people with families handle such schedule?

A: I don't know about others, but my wife didn't flee from me

Q: when do you spend time with children? At the weekends?

A: we split our weekend: people work every day, day and night, weekends and holidays. Usually we have one rostering, the head of station comes every day in the morning and has a lot of selector meetings. They last the whole day and you can't leave"

- railroad worker's wives take over family and household responsibilities:

"Children are on the mother, the father rarely spends time with them... He always thinks about work. Even on vacations the first half of time is spent on calling somebody at work, receiving calls, he is always pre-occupied with the work.

Q: Do you cook for him?

A: Sure. He takes two thermoses with him in his special bag: with hot food and tea. The bag is heavy, and he walks with it for 10 kilometers. Once they were not picked-up on time and their soup got frozen in the thermos."



# Conclusions

- Historical continuity in gender aspects of labor recruitment and management between BAM and RZhD
- Reconfigurations of private and public realms, esp. in childcare and household management
- (Post)soviet gender order: discourses and stereotypes of gender roles vs. changing practices
- Male and female occupations: blurring borders
- Rhythms: railroad direct impact on men; women as mediators between work and family

# Acknowledgements

- Austrian Science Fund (FWF), project Configurations of 'Remoteness' (CoRe): Entanglements of Humans and Transportation Infrastructure in the Baykal-Amur Mainline (BAM) Region
- Museum of the BAM construction (Tynda), Railroad Museum, Severobaykalsk
- RZhD company
- Informants and local partners