Transportation infrastructure in historical perspective:
settlement and mobility in the BAM Region

The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), the longest railroad in the Russian North and a grandiose industrial project of late socialism, has received a lot of scholarly attention regarding its construction history and subsequent social and economic impacts. What has remained under-researched, though, is the larger historical context of settlement and mobility in the region.

From the late 19th century onwards, the Transsiberian railroad (Transsib) impacted traditional transportation and facilitated Russian colonization and commerce in the region. While the Soviet period was a time for a number of social engineering experiments, the BAM project drastically changed mobility and demography of the region causing diverse population movements between the 1970s and the 1990s. As a result, the railroad, designed for resource extraction purposes, has become an important social agent and a means of cargo (and, to a lesser degree, passenger) transportation.

This paper is based on locally collected archival and statistical records and fieldwork conducted in three districts of the central BAM Region, Eastern Siberia, in 2013 and 2016. By comparing data regarding transportation, mobility, demography and infrastructure from the late 19th century to the present day, we believe that we can arrive at a soberer evaluation of the "after-effects" of the BAM than a perspective that starts only in the 1970s. Our paper is intended to answer the following questions:

- How did the settlement structure of the BAM region change over the last two centuries and which role did the railroads play in it?

- How do the dramatic population changes of the last 40+ years look within a larger temporal perspective?

- Where have the centers of population, political power and commerce been located in relation to the BAM and the Transsib since the late 19th century?

- What are the current functions of the BAM within the regional transportation system?