

# **Exhibition Catalogue with Descriptions**

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# Picturing the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM): Infrastructure, Resources, and Mobility in Siberia

Siberia holds a special place in the popular imagination – romantic images of undisturbed boreal forests and of simple life styles alter with dark notions of exile and slave labor, for some a place “between heaven and hell”. The industrial development of Siberia, which had been in full swing at least since the days of Stalin, typically is not prominently associated with Siberia. Our exhibition intends to fill this gap by focusing on aspects of the built environment that resulted from the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM). This large-scale transportation infrastructure was built in the 1970s and 1980s to extract and transport resources out of the northern parts of East Siberia and the Russian Far North.

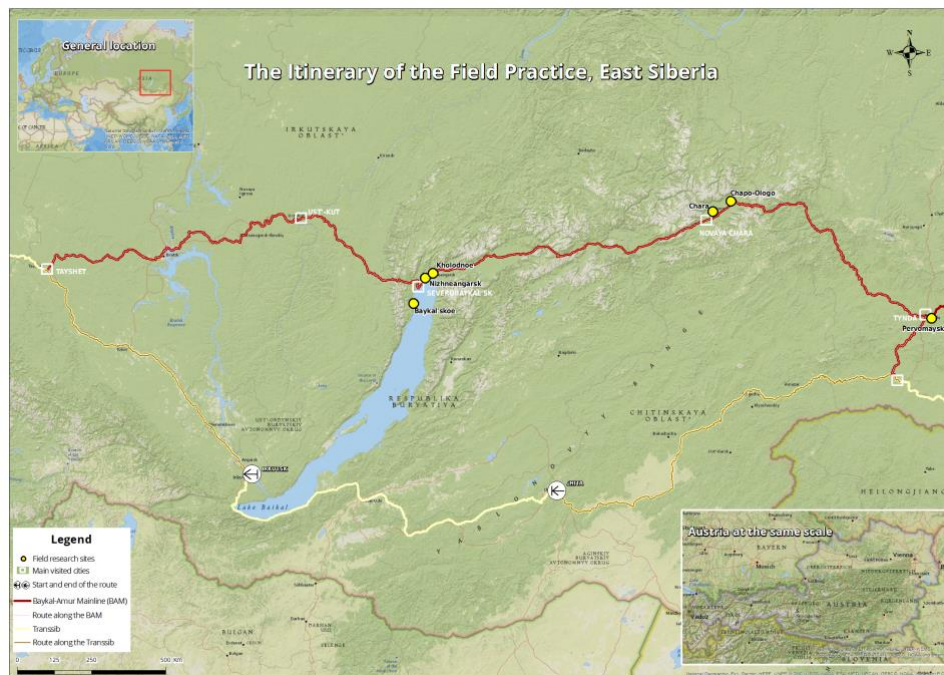
The territory traversed by the BAM is bigger than most countries in Central Europe and the distances between settlements are enormous. While the railroad line might be the defining infrastructure object of the region, it is by far not the only one. This means that lots of preparatory work – such as the building of energy lines and the construction of haul roads, as well as supporting infrastructures along the way – was needed before the first train could pass through the BAM region. In this construction process, the railroad transformed the taiga landscapes, resulted in dozens of cities, towns and other infrastructures and shaped local communities.

Thus, the built environments visualized in the frames to follow can also be seen as cascades of infrastructures, connecting resources, people and the railroad. The BAM is an important means of passenger connection in this vast, hard-to-access, and sparsely populated region although other individual means of transport (from cars to reindeer) are used as well. It is also a lifeline and a supply road for its local communities, that is for the towns and cities along its way as well as for settlements located off the railroad but still dependent on it. Additionally, it is a line of prominent railway stations and monuments, the architecture of which is loaded with memories and ideologies of the construction period. Finally, the BAM is an infrastructure of overlapping social networks of its indigenous and migrant populations representing cultural diversity of the region.

The transportation infrastructure of the BAM as the central topic of this exhibition also constituted the enabling device of our “being there” as humans and as anthropologists. This means that we could not have traveled to Siberia without the railroad line, on the one hand, and that we would not have been able to fully involve anthropologically with our “subjects”, on the other. Thus, mobile ethnography on the train (or train anthropology) became one of our main and most productive fieldwork methods as reflected in some of the frames. At the same time, informal communication and activities off the train enhanced immersion of our group into the lives of the people we met in communities along the way.

Finally, East Siberia depicted in this exhibition would not be possible or would be very different without the BAM. In a similar way, this exhibition could have looked differently if most of the photos were not taken from or in the train. This should serve as a reminder that the built environments along the BAM constitute only a narrow corridor beyond which other human and more-than-human life worlds extend.

# 1) The BAM Story



Map of the Itinerary of the Field practice in East Siberia. The short descriptions of this Exhibitions are augmented by QR Codes to more extensive texts which elaborate on the content of the displayed pictures. (Alexis Sancho-Reinoso)

The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) is a gigantic infrastructure project consisting of 4,300 km of tracks, with a history going back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Tsarist Russia. Construction itself started under the Stalinist regime in the 1930s, but the major part of the enormous extent that the BAM is associated with today was implemented between 1974 and 1984. However, some infrastructure objects were finished even later. For example, the Severomuysk tunnel was completed only in 2003. In one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects in human history, the Soviet Union implemented its programme of “mastering of the North”. This effort was undertaken mostly to extract natural resources such as oil, timber and gold that became economically more appealing due to advancement of technology.

Communist propaganda and the “myth of the BAM” helped to recruit masses of people from Soviet republics and cities for this “project of the century”. In the course of this construction process, over 60 towns and settlements were established along the newly built railroad tracks, in some cases in proximity to already existing ones. These settlements previously had been only sparsely populated, primarily by indigenous people that settled there before the arrival of the railroad. Soon BAM builders (*bamovtsy*) came to be the majority population, who during the course of the construction formed a separate population group with a distinct identity and culture.

## 2) Introducing the *Feldpraktikum*



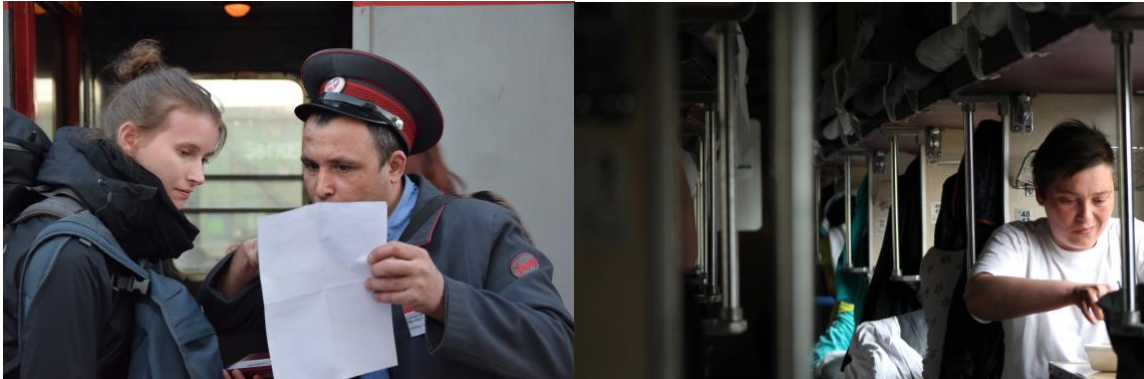
Picture 1: Railway tracks on the way to Mururin Pass, the highest point of the terrain traversed by the BAM (Stefan Sametinger)

Picture 2: Our group at a railway crossing near Chapo-Ologo (Mark Kirstätter)

This photo exhibition is a product of a *Feldpraktikum* that was conducted in May and June 2018 in East Siberia as part of the Master's curriculum in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. The *Feldpraktikum* was inspired and supported by the research project "[Configurations of 'Remoteness' \(CoRe\) - Entanglements of Humans and Transportation Infrastructure in the Baikal-Amur Mainline \(BAM\) Region](#)" (a project lead by Prof. Schweitzer focusing on the entanglements of different groups of people with railroad infrastructure under conditions of remoteness). The central motivation of the exhibition is to give a glimpse of the participants' fieldwork experiences gathered over three weeks of travel.

The students spent over 90 hours on the various trains from their starting point in Irkutsk to their final destination in Chita, doing surveys, interviews, observing and participating in the daily lives of travellers, commuters and train attendants. More extensive research was conducted in four major communities along the route, namely Ust'-Kut, Severobaykal'sk, Novaya Chara, and Tynda. Shorter visits and excursions were made to nearby villages, including Chapo-Ologo, Pervomayskoe, Kholodnoe, Nizhneangarsk, Baykal'skoe and Chara for specifically arranged interviews with indigenous people and Russian settlers living in the region. Material was gathered for a variety of individual research topics under the umbrella of infrastructure, including mobility, identity, tourism, food supply, traditional knowledge, train stations, monuments, mobile banking and sociality on the train. Data collection was accomplished by prearranged interviews, town hall meetings and round tables with experts and local residents, visits to local museums, city tours, questionnaires and spontaneous interviews.

### 3) Riding the BAM



Picture 1: Getting on the train: A conductor checks the ticket of a group member and instructs her where to go (Sigrid Schiesser)

Picture 2: BAM: Life in *platskarta* (3rd class carriage) (Alexandra Stieger)

The experience of taking a train for such a long duration is very different from any train travel which we had experienced before. The enormous distances between villages or towns are hard to grasp by looking at a map. It is apparent that the first train ride was an exciting moment for us. You cannot just board the train and be on your merry way. You have to check in with the conductor of your wagon who diligently checks your ticket and passport.

Other social and technical skills of travelling by train had to be learned, some seemingly banal as how to easiest get into the top bunk. In this situation anthropological observation skills – sitting, watching and asking -- helped. Another thing to get used to, was the lack of private space, especially in *platskarta* (3rd class carriage). This meant learning to reconsider the boundary between the public and private spheres. The bed is a private area – we recognized that because everyone asked our permission before sitting down. And the table, which was mostly stuffed with a lot of food, and the corridor were public areas. The bottom bunk is both public and private depending on the time and the particular social context. There are many interactions between people on the BAM, involving sharing food, drinks, stories and playing. People in your bunk became your travelling companions and it was obvious that these spatial situations brought people together, which makes the train a perfect infrastructure to observe and conduct interviews with people. Most of the people enjoy the beautiful scenery of the landscape. It is considered that one has time for talking, sleeping or to calm down. It is a kind of “liminal” period, which is different from daily life.

## 4) The BAM as a Lifeline



Picture 1: Novaya Chara - Supplies are unloaded (Sigrid Schiesser)

Picture 2: Skovordino - Bus Stop: While the train infrastructure is usually well maintained, local infrastructure can be a bit more basic (Alexandra Stieger)

The train is an integral part of people's lives. On our first train ride from Irkutsk to Ust'-Kut, we talked to a woman and her child. She prefers to take a 27-hour train journey and a detour rather than a 16-hour bus ride. Because going by bus means a long, bumpy trip on gravel roads, whereas the train offers a smooth ride, all kind facilities and a chance to relax. You can go to the restaurant, you have a bed to sleep, you can chat with your neighbor, and buy food from the vendors at the stations. Another important aspect is that the train delivers goods, via the Trans-Siberian Railroad, either from the East or the West, and then on via the Baikal-Amur Mainline into the areas we visited. The train is perfect for transporting large volumes. But also smaller volumes for market booths or small stores are often transported by the BAM, and then picked up by the shopkeeper by car or small truck. The further you travel away from the BAM, the more difficult it gets to transport goods. Consequently, the further away from the BAM, the more expensive goods get.

We experienced the bad condition of the roads first-hand while visiting villages that were not directly located along the BAM. Not only are the roads mostly gravel, but the paved roads in the towns are also in extremely bad conditions due to poor maintenance and challenging climatic conditions. Some of the villages are only reliably accessible via train. Novaya Chara, for example, is a town along the BAM; a haul road running parallel to the tracks and connecting the town to other settlements, is in a very bad condition.

## 5) Cities and Towns along the BAM



Picture 1: Severobaykal'sk - The monument to *bamovtsy* erected in 2014 in honour of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the construction of the BAM, facing the train station and the Baikal Lake. The monument consists of four railroad workers in their uniforms walking along the rails (Susanne Pessentheiner)

Picture 2: Baykal'skoe - Settlement at the shores of the Baikal Lake that used to have a collective farm. Some of the inhabitants still produce food and goods for their own consumption and sell the surplus in the next larger town of Severobaykal'sk (Alexandra Stieger)

The BAM towns were established as the railroad construction progressed. The towns live because and through the BAM, the train stations can be seen as the heart and lifeline of the towns. The BAM and identity of the *bamovtsy* shapes the face of the towns through design of urban architecture, as signifier and monuments. They stand as landmarks and the more sophisticated station buildings represent the origins of the people that constructed them. For example, the train station in Severobaykal'sk represents the railroad construction brigades that arrived from Leningrad.

The BAM construction also affected settlements that are not located directly along the tracks. Most of state collective farms and villages in East Siberia were in places where the chosen forms of agriculture or hunting were possible before the BAM. The region saw an outflow of people once the BAM construction was finished, as some of the workers returned to their places of origin. The increased freedom of movement and the harsh conditions that followed the collapse of the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s led to a swift reduction in population. In some settlements, more than half of the inhabitants migrated to economically better situated areas.



## 6) Getting Resources to the BAM



Picture 1: Staraya Chara - a truck transporting ore is making its way along a gravel road through the Kodar Mountains (Tatiana Evseeva)

Picture 2: Ust-Kut' - a transportation hub for trucks, railroads and ships all year round. This picture was taken from a harbor of the transportation company "Alrosa Terminal" and shows the shipment of coal along the river (Alexandra Stieger)

The train has a vital role for transportation of all kinds of goods – from resources to food. But first they have to be transported to the train. In many cases, extracted resources are transported from mines to the railway line by trucks.

Ust'-Kut is the main transportation hub trading center for the western part East Siberia and is often called the "Gate to the North". Products arrive there by train and are transported further north via rivers. Rivers are insofar important as there are either no roads at all or only privately owned ones, e.g. roads belonging to resource extraction companies. In the summer, goods are easily forwarded by ships, whereas in winter, the frozen rivers are used as so-called ice roads. An increasing problem is the deforestation along the rivers, which erodes the river banks. This leads to lower water levels and consequently to a decrease of the freight that can be transported aboard ships. Some villages, though, are isolated during the months of floating river ice. Using rivers is still the cheapest way of transportation, even though less goods can be transported now when oil prices are rising. This means the costs of transportation and therefore of the goods transported will eventually rise too.

## 7) Resource Extraction along the BAM



Picture 1: Ust'-Kut: Workers are unloading coal from a railway carriage in the river harbor (Alexandra Stieger)

Picture 2: Severobaykal'sk: Loaded rail carriages are waiting for departure to their destination (Elke Leichtfried)

One of the original goals of the BAM construction was to provide access to the resources of East Siberia. These include timber, gas, coal, iron, copper, and other renewable and non-renewable resources. This has been partially realised with the construction of additional lines branching off the mainline to provide access to deposits.

The development of resource extraction in the region is pushing the transportation capacity of the BAM to its limits. This led to a new plan to construct the second rail track along many parts of the BAM, something that had been part of the BAM construction plans since, at least, the 1970s. The state and the Russian Railways Company (RZhD) see this as a possibility to relieve the Trans-Siberian Railway, which is also reaching its capacities. The plan is to divide passenger and container traffic between the Trans-Siberian Railway and the BAM respectively.

## 8) Individual Traffic



Picture 1: Staraya Chara: Motorbikes are an attractive alternative to cars as they deal better with worn-out roads (Tatiana Evseeva)

Picture 2: Ust'-Kut: Urban town scene. Due to extreme climatic conditions roads are in a constant state of disrepair (Alexandra Stieger)

People in the region use the trains of the BAM for their long-distance travels. Shift-workers who pass through BAM towns such as Ust'-Kut have to travel onwards by plane, helicopter or other vehicles to get to remote areas in the North. In villages, motorbikes are still an important means of transportation.

The extreme climate in the region impacts the road condition: roads in northern East Siberia require a lot more maintenance work than elsewhere. However, the funding for such roads is frequently lacking, especially if the road has no or limited economic importance for the federal or the regional government. This circumstance leads to poor road conditions in most parts of the region. Still, people are reliant on their cars for short-distance travelling and commuting, as the public transport system, apart from the long-distance train network, is unreliable. In some towns, regional commuter trains used to serve or still serve local needs for short distance passenger transportation.

## 9) Performing Diversity



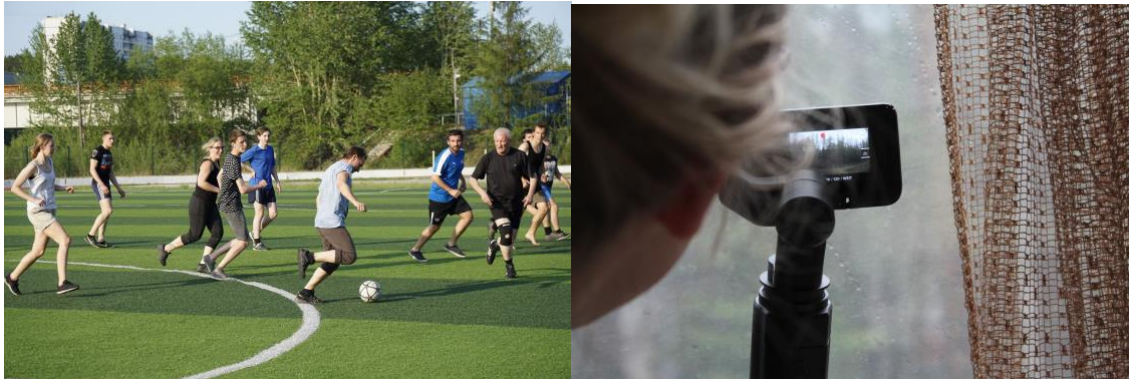
Picture 1: Students of the Far Eastern State Transport University in Tynda welcoming our group (Peter Schweitzer)

Picture 2: Pervomayskoe: Evenki Greeting Ceremony (Elke Leichtfried)

The BAM is not only the dominant symbol of the recent past, it is also an important industrial complex pointing to the future. The need to sustain and develop the railroad and meet the needs of the extraction industry translates into railroad related professional schools of higher education. Most of the students in the Far Eastern State Transport University in Tynda, the capital of the BAM, come from families of railroad workers and are oriented towards the BAM for job opportunities in the future. The first image depicts the Russian ritual of greeting guests with salt and bread. While the student on the left wears a school uniform, the other lady, a member of a folk ensemble, wears a female “traditional” costume with an ornamented hat. Such a Russian folk dress is part of many public performances and a symbol of Russian ethnic culture, which is dominant in the country as a whole, as well as in the region of the BAM.

Evenki and other Tungusic groups constitute the main indigenous groups of the region, living primarily in villages lying off the railroad. During late Soviet times, state policies towards the indigenous peoples of the North resulted in their cultural assimilation (in essence, Russification). Initially created to offer systematic education for children of indigenous nomadic families, boarding schools, for example, had a negative impact on indigenous ways of life and cultural continuity. Children were separated from their families, which for many resulted in the loss of their native languages and skills required to live a traditional way of life based on reindeer herding and hunting. The second image shows a greeting ceremony performed for us on the occasion of our visit to the village of Pervomayskoe. Here, cultural performance can be seen as an expression of indigenous self-representation in present-day Russia, where political dimensions of indigeneity become increasingly problematic. At the same time, this greeting ceremony - a reconstruction of earlier practices - is performed for visitors (be they Austrian students or Evenki from another region) at cultural events of different scales.

## 10) About Methods



Picture 1: Students of the Far Eastern State Transport University in Tynda and the University of Vienna mix for a friendly game of soccer (Susanne Pessentheiner)

Picture 2: A student is filming the vast Siberian landscapes as part of the movie “Encounters along the BAM” (Alexandra Stieger)

Doing ethnography is a process of capturing and representing other people’s knowledge and experiences, whereby the ethnographer’s own experiences are always part of the process. Using multiple methodological tools is very beneficial for fieldwork as this mix produces various perspectives. In the context of increasing interconnectivity and mobility, ethnographers are taking their methodologies to multiple places (mobile and stationary alike) and spaces.

For this research, mobile ethnography and multi-sited ethnography were perfect methodological tools to observe the BAM, as most of the research was done during train travel and at the multiple stops. The field sites included large towns, small villages, and indigenous communities. Most of them were connected to the BAM in one way or another, thereby influencing the methodologies used. Mobile ethnography includes participant observation as well as walking, moving and travelling with people. This makes a wide range of observational and recording techniques and tools necessary, like participant observation whilst interviewing, following the thing or sensing the field. Visual methods were an essential part of the research trip as they helped reflecting and remembering situations and resulted in an ethnographic film. It gives an impression of travel and everyday life along the BAM.

## 11) Reflections on/from the Field



Picture 1: Tynda: Our group posing for a picture by the monument to Tynda. (Sigrid Schiesser)

Picture 2: Tynda: Catching the next train (Sigrid Schiesser)

The city of Tynda is known as the capital of the BAM and was modeled after Moscow, as locals proudly remember when we pass by some of the city's highest panel blocks. For us it was also the first place where we easily found couchsurfers, an active English learning club and enjoyed a live-music event. There is no question that we broke all the basic laws of fieldwork: we stayed too short to build real relationships, too few of us spoke Russian and we always stuck out as foreigners due to our behaviour, language and the size of the group. During our three weeks of fieldwork we had rather limited time as we covered about 3,500 km, with one native Russian speaker for every 3 students trying to cover their own different questions and interviews requests. Traveling in a group of up to 20, we ourselves were often attracting more attention than our research questions. As a result several articles about us were published in local newspapers while we were still in Russia. A local TV broadcaster accompanied us during a city tour and we were invited to introduce ourselves and our research topics in several city administrations, local councils and institutions of higher education.

We did our best though - in order not to stand out and have more contact opportunities with people outside of our group. Thus, for example, during long train rides we always tried to split and spread out so there were only small groups in one wagon. This dispersion tactic helped us to get into contact with other railway travelers. One of our group participants retells her encounter with a passenger on the train in the following way: "On one of these occasions I met Tatiana who was the same age as me and it seemed we had a lot in common. I was excited to ask her about so many things but before I could decide where to start, she did. It turned out interest in other peoples was definitely something we shared. There was so much Tatiana wanted to know that I could hardly answer a question before the next emerged. Tatiana wanted to know about education, marriage, family planning, laws, feminism, how Russia is perceived from the outside... " Before asking questions, be prepared to answer some!

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