

*Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire: Women and State Formation in the Soviet Far East.* By Elena Shulman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiv plus 260 pp. \$79.00.)

In 1937, at the height of the Soviet terror, a Communist youth league activist and wife of an official in the Soviet Far East wrote to a central newspaper to invite young women to volunteer to join her to help build socialism on the easternmost frontier of the Soviet Union. In the next three years, over 300,000 women volunteered, and about 25,000 were chosen to lend their skills and labor to the construction of farms, schools, administration, and industry of the Far East. They received the name “Khetagurovites,” after the woman who issued the original call, Valentina Khetagurova. This deeply researched and exquisitely argued book uses the phenomenon of the Khetagurovites to explore a number of key issues in the history of the Soviet Union, and it makes major contributions to our understanding of state-building, empire, gender, and sexuality in the context of the Soviet experiment. Above all, the book successfully punctures arguments about a “great retreat” to a pre-revolutionary domesticity in the 1930s, and instead offers a compelling picture of women who enthusiastically seized the opportunity to test their mettle in difficult conditions and to contribute to the common effort of the construction of socialism.

The setting of the book on the “frontier of empire” permits Elena Shulman to explore important questions about the nature of the Soviet empire, which she argues was distinctive precisely because of the roles played by women. Unlike women in

traditional colonial settings, they were not sent to the Far East in order to keep Slavic men from mixing with native women. (Mixed marriages, including Khetagurova's own, carried no stigma.) Women were sent because their labor was critically needed in this sparsely populated but militarily vulnerable outpost of Soviet power. Nor did they volunteer in order to find themselves husbands, although the harsh material conditions they found there pushed many into marriages that could provide convenient economic security. Shulman acknowledges the great paradox that these women who sought adventure and purpose in the Far East traveled parallel routes with the many thousands of victims of Stalin's purge, destined for the Gulag, and she notes with empathy that many of the Khetagurovites found employment in some of the Gulag agencies. She addresses squarely the question of support for this carceral regime, offering this case study as a way to understand whether the Soviet Union was "a weak system, with a despot ruling by force over a cowed population, or whether the regime made great headway in structuring individual identity and mobilizing thousands to expand state power across Eurasia despite obvious failures and abuses" (11-12). The answers are complex and ambiguous. Shulman does these ambiguities full justice in the six rich chapters that make up the book, but in the end, she argues for agency and empowerment rather than victimhood.

Following a magisterial introduction that addresses many threads of scholarship on these issues, Shulman opens her investigation with a synthetic chapter on women and Soviet power, creating a clear picture of the social milieu and political context

that would produce Khetagurova's call. Another chapter, based extensively on documents from the Khabarovsk regional archive (along with wonderful photographs), sets the economic and social stage: building socialism in the Far East presented many of the same challenges that faced the constructors of Magnitogorsk and other industrial centers: Shulman perhaps exaggerates the uniqueness of the impact of harsh climatic and economic conditions on the response of workers sent to build: turnover, for example, was endemic everywhere in the USSR in these years.

A biographical chapter on Valentina Khetagurova herself contextualizes the heroine as a Soviet celebrity, whose elevation to stardom parallels in some respects that of the coal miner Aleksei Stakhanov. Shulman stresses the image of Khetagurova as an activist patron, who also emerged as a model of a successful Soviet marriage of equals. A chapter on the recruitment of Khetagurovites probes more deeply into the role of gender in settling the frontier: a woman's touch would be needed to civilize the rugged woods, not through marriage but through their own ethic of service. An analysis of the letters of these women volunteers emphasizes their genuine patriotism and enthusiasm for participation in the great national project. Gender also comes into focus in a chapter on the problematic relations between the sexes on the frontier. Khetagurovites ran the risk of being labeled "loose women" on the move, but Shulman sensitively explores the dilemmas of these New Women having to choose between respectability through unwanted marriages, which often took them away from the Far East and out of the work force, and an exhilarating

independence that was precarious both economically and sexually. A final chapter explores the responses of the Khetagurovites to these conditions through their letters and local debates. Many were disappointed with demeaning assignments and the isolation of life and work in small settlements of the Far East. Conflicts arose between the interests of the Khetagurovite Committee to recruit volunteers and the wishes of local enterprise managers to select their own staff. The Committee itself drew censure for its failure to respond adequately to all 300,000 volunteers, and the Khetagurovite movement was officially abandoned at the end of 1939.

Although short-lived, the Khetagurovite movement displays, through the lens of historian Elena Shulman, important insights into the development of Soviet society. The Far East is represented as not only a frontier between the Soviet Union and its enemies, but a contact zone within the punitive state, where free and patriotic employees supervised, mingled with, and sometimes joined a growing prison labor force. These Soviet patriots set out to colonize and civilize *space*, not people, unlike colonial settlers in other places. Above all, through sensitive reading of the voices of these young women themselves, Shulman conveys both the dilemmas facing the New Soviet Women but also their pride and desire for meaningful participation in a project in which they ardently believed. This is a superb book that deserves a place in every college and university library, and on all reading lists for the history of Russian and Soviet gender and empire.

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