Introduction: “Engendering the Soviet Empire”

And

“Women as Soviet Empire Builders in the late 1930s”

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Good Bye Young Women! 1938 Music by Isaak Dunaevskiï and words by L. Levin

Наступает очередь звонкой весны.
Юный собирайся поток!
Преданные дочери нашей страны
Едут на Дальний Восток.

Припев:
До свиданья, девушки! Поезд скоро, девушки.
Слышишься прощальный гудок.
Напишите, девушки, как живете, девушки,
Как вас встретил Дальний Восток.

Много будет пройдено новых дорог,
Много километров путей.
Провожает Родина вас на Восток,
Славных своих дочерей.

До свиданья, девушки, до свиданья, девушки!
Слышишься прощальный гудок.
Поезд скорый, девушки, он домчит вас, девушки,
В наш советский Дальний Восток.

Сквозь края и области мимо полей
Двухнедельный путь ваш далек.
Славою и доблестью песни своей
Радуйте Дальний Восток.

Припев.

On the scale of things, the lines from a popular 1938 Dunaevskiï’s 1938 tune appear quite unremarkable. The Soviet Union was in the grips of widespread Stalinist terror; society was on the tail end of radical transformations wrought by years of wars, collectivization, a Cultural Revolution, Five Year Plans and on the precipice of a cataclysmic war. What does a song about a trainload of young women heading to the Soviet Far East have to do with any of these grand traumas and weighty questions of Soviet history? But a second look from the prism of gender should elicit more than a passing interest. Why immortalize this particular journey in a song? How common was it for locomotive to head toward the Pacific Ocean bearing a large and organized contingent of women? What can this seemingly
inconsequential relic of officially sanctioned popular culture reveal about the workings of the Soviet regime or its ability to shape the way people identified with its goals? Specifically, how much can a second look tell us about the practices of empire building and frontier settlement in the late 1930s?

In fact, this tune was part of a much larger Soviet publicity fanfare surrounding an appeal made by Valentina Khetagurova, a Komsomol activist and wife of an army officer stationed in a remote settlement. Khetagurova called upon young women to join her on a distant frontier. She invited women specifically to take a direct role in building and defending the Soviet Motherland along its borders with Manchuria and the Pacific Ocean. The resettlement campaign that followed was officially known as the Khetagurovite Campaign to Settle the Far East. Three hundred thousand volunteered and about 25,000 women from central Russia, Byelorussia and Ukraine bordered trains to join in the struggle to tame nature and fight the predations of Japanese “militarism” on the shores of the Pacific. The Khetagurovites and others like them manned the cadres of state bureaucracy, served as agents of Soviet modernity and helped to extend Russian cultural dominion into one of the remotest corners of the empire. Although the departure of thousands of young people for voluntary settlement of Far Eastern borderlands was a well known episode for contemporaries, the campaign is virtually unknown in western historiography. More importantly, the campaign is not the only ‘blank spot’ in the historiography of Eurasian empire studies. Women and gender as a constitutive part of empire building have thus far remained understudies and under theorized topics.¹

My thoughts, outlined below and followed by my original paper submission, were prompted by the suggestions of those who have organized this conference on “Orienting the Russian Empire.” After submitting my paper on the Khetagurovite program, I was asked to speak on the concept of “engendering” empire “in terms of masculinizing or feminizing.”² This rather substantial task fell to me because I would be the “single paper addressing gender” an interdisciplinary conference on empire. The fact that I was the only discussant with a gender topic is extraordinary if we turn to the experiences of colleagues in other fields as British, Dutch or French imperial histories.

In the last several decades, scholars in a variety of other fields have generated numerous studies that scrutinize the workings of gender, class and race in the practices and structures of empires.
Research agendas, conference presentations and publications with gender and empire as central themes have become virtual subfields with their own textbooks for classroom use as well as vast reading lists of monographs and edited volumes especially in the case of the British Empire. No such dynamism or hefty body of secondary literature on gender and empire exist for the Eurasian field. Obviously, the dearth of presentations that engage in some way with questions of engendering empire in Eurasia is not an isolated shortcoming of this particular conference, but an indicator of the state of our field.

The productive interest among historians of Britain in the multivalent workings of empires at the core and the periphery reflects a consensus that empire was “not just a phenomenon “out there” but a fundamental and constitutive part of English culture and national identity at home.” If we are to refer to the Soviet Union, as has become common in the last decade, as an “empire” then we would be well served to look more closely at how empire not only played out in political debates and administrative practices but how it “entered the social fabric, intellectual discourse and the life of the imagination.” We can pursue this agenda further through an inquiry into the ways gender ideals informed empire building practices and how they were in turn reshaped by Russian rule in Eurasia.

We can no longer explain the small number of studies exploring women’s roles in Russian or Soviet empire building or lively debates on engendering the Eurasian empire by pointing to problems of archival access. The absence of women from the narrative of Russian rule in Eurasia is explicable by the fact that, “Women are typically construed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency.” However, common sense dictates that women, both Russian and non-Russian were present as actors, subjects and symbols at every consequential juncture although they have remained unrecognized in studies of complex responses to Russian rule in the twentieth century. This is not a state of affairs that is unique to the Soviet case. In studies of nationalisms and colonialism, a focus on intellectuals, soldiers and bureaucrats leads to obfuscations of women’s agencies and shrouds the role of both masculinity and femininity in delineating the boundaries of nationhood, claims to autonomy and access to power.

I am not simply asking that women be added to the mix for a fuller story. Rather, I hope to engage the participants of this conference in a dialogue that includes gender as a tool analysis in the
study Soviet empire and Russian society. The study of empire and nation-building through the lens of gender can produce more nuanced pictures of the way unequal relationships and power were understood, enforced and articulated. Meanings, values and idealized roles assigned to sex differences often appear to delineate access to power, describe difference and marginalizing otherness. These categories are particularly powerful because they purport to be “objective” descriptions of “eternal”, “natural” or “biological” urges and destinies. Thus dichotomies of masculine vs. feminine work to naturalize hierarchies when applied to those who fall out of the boundaries of hegemonic categories whether they are individuals, groups or nations, just as much as gender ideals establish and naturalize boundaries and inequality between men and women. In the case of empires and nation-building projects, “[G]ender difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men. Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit.”

My own research has focused on those who were actively seeking opportunities to become “border activists” in promoting Soviet values and defending the Motherland from foreign and internal enemies. Thus, I have drawn some comparisons with studies of European women’s symbolic roles and activities in building and maintaining other colonial empires. While there are some significant similarities in the way women participated in empire building in the Soviet/Russian and other cases, there are also substantial and revelatory differences. The following is in no way an exhaustive list or a full exploration of any single theme. Although the Soviet case is unique for a myriad of reasons, a comparative framework generates questions which facilitate inquiries “engendering” the topic of Russian rule in Eurasia.

Women and the question of engendering empire productively complicate the categories we deploy. For instance, how are participants at this conference defining “Russian” or the significance of Russian national identity in the work of Soviet empire building? Can we assume that all Russians had the same access and privilege as members of the hegemonic ethnic or national group? Anne McClintock, among many others has argued that “All nations depend on powerful construction of gender. Despite nationalisms’ ideological investment in the idea of popular unity, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalize of gender difference. No nation in the world gives women and
men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state.”

Did Russian speaking women arrive with the same authority as Russian speaking men on the peripheries? What kind of gender specific adjustments did women make to find a place in their new surroundings? Could young settlers of both sexes make open claims to the superiority of their ethnic group in reinforcing hierarchies and promoting their own power at the expense of native populations? Did the provenance of Russianness offer Russian women a higher status than native men which often happened in other colonial contexts?

There is a good deal of evidence from the Khetagurovite campaign that “Russian” national identity offered very little status to migrant women in the 1930s. The Far East appeared in publicity and cultural productions as an empty land where settlers struggled with nature and tested their own resolve. There is no evidence in the case of the women who migrated to the Far East that they were explicitly enjoined to civilize or convert natives to a superior creed. They were expected to have a salutary effect on other Slavic men living in army barracks and industrial dormitories. It was argued that men behave better in the presence of women and that women would inject a measure of order and cleanliness into the rough Slavic male culture of new settlements. Although such intentions and expectations of women’s special roles were prominent themes in publicity, their actual standing and means to implement these changes were extremely limited. After many arrived, they found themselves marginalized and ignored in the context of other social and political dynamics.

In the case of the Soviet empire we cannot assume that Russians were the only agents of empire building. In fact, many of those who went were not ethnic Russians. Among volunteers for work on the Far Eastern periphery, a large proportion bore Ukrainian, Jewish or Byelorussian last names or identified themselves as such. The Far East had been a destination for Ukrainian peasant settlers since the 1860s. This mix of Eastern Slavs and Jews among those who were instrumental in securing Soviet power on the peripheries should complicate any discussion about “Russian” rule in twentieth century Eurasia. The story of the volunteers reveals the way women attached themselves to a Soviet identity, an identity through which women could be incorporated into the story of Soviet nation building rather than exclusively within Ukrainian, Russian or Byelorussian nationalism.
Concerns about race and biological determinism were not preoccupations of Soviet officials as they were for other imperialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because “Soviets acted upon the belief that nationalities like classes were socio-historical groups with a shared consciousness and not racial biological groups.” This sets the Soviet empire far apart from other modern empires and produced different politics surrounding reproduction and sexuality. In most imperial contexts, the choice of sexual or marriage partners was of great concern among white settlers and imperial administrators. Often white women were brought to colonial outposts to keep white men from mixing with native women. In other contexts, white women themselves called for greater participation on their part in imperial ventures to insure the purity of their race or cultural distinctiveness outside the metropole. This was not a prominent theme in the Soviet case. Valentina Khetagurova rose to stardom in part because of her connection to a strategically important frontier and in part because she, as an ethnic Russian, was married to a Northern Ossetian Red Army officer. Their marriage exemplified the melding of ethnic groups into one patriotic Soviet identity and was praised and rewarded by the regime. This sanction rather than punishment for mixing ethnic groups reflects the desire of Bolsheviks, as well as many pre-revolutionary intellectuals to facilitate “integration and fusion of Russia’s different nationalities into a single nation (единий народ) within the current state borders, united above all by a common history of living together.” The visage of a Russian and Ossetian coming together on the shores of the Pacific Ocean in a productive and reproductive relationship operated as a metaphoric and actual realization of this fusion.

Soviet women were not expected to police racial boundaries. This stands in stark contrast with the racial politics motivating migration of young German women to the borderlands of the Third Reich described by Elizabeth Harvey. Soviet women were not motivated by racial dictates to sort those unworthy of life from those ordained to dominate others. The Khetagurovites did come to police the social boundaries between trustworthy Soviet citizens and those who ostensibly belonged to irreconcilable ideological communities. So, while there were never legal barriers or prohibitions on ethnic intermarriage there were problems for Communist or Komsomol members who socialized with or planned to marry someone who belonged to a politically suspect category.

It often fell to German, British or French women to reproduce nationality on the peripheries by transmitting “ethnic symbols and ways of life to other members of their ethnic group,…[and] to serve as
Soviet women did not engage in similar reproduction of ethnic difference in part because ‘Soviet’ was not a nationality and in part because of women’s status in the Communist system. Soviet high culture, although to some degree on the way to becoming a national identity, could not function as other nationalisms in embodying women as symbolic repositories of traditions while assigning progress and modernity to men. The Soviet Union could have no such clear gendered dichotomy to buttress its national myths. The traditional Russian peasant woman was an unacceptable symbol for nostalgia until the Second World War. This makes the case of the Soviet Union in the 1930s much more complicated. There was no mythical mother figure that gave birth to the Bolshevik revolution. The mythical figure of the Motherland in the guise of a peasant woman did not appear as a prominent icon until WWII. Until the mid 1930s, women’s status in the Soviet Union was one of formerly oppressed groups that were being emancipated by a socialist state dedicated to progress and modernity. Most women, except for a small core of dedicated revolutionaries like N. Krupskaia and intellectuals, were deemed potentially backward and in need of enlightenment. The supposed propensities of women to cling to traditions were not esteemed by Communists but rather reviled.

By the mid 1930s, with the “Woman’s Question” supposedly resolved, women came to represent modernity and Soviet achievements in Stalinist iconography. Progress and modernity were vested in both Communist men and in ‘New Women’ like Valentina Khetagurova willing and able to demonstrate patriotism in the context of either labor achievements or in securing Soviet civilization in far-flung regions. The new Soviet woman who rushed to the frontiers did not stand for a Russian ethnic difference and they were not asked to defend or spread Russian neo-traditional culture in the peripheries. While the ‘New Woman’ did not embody ethnic differences on the frontier, she vividly exemplified a rupture between ‘backward’ women who stayed close to the home or village versus the mobile, modern woman who traversed wide open spaces and sought out rugged adventures along side of men.

Often "Gender and nation are social constructions which intimately participate in the formation of one another: nations are gendered, and the topography the nation is mapped in gendered terms (feminized soil, landscapes and boundaries, and masculine movement over these spaces.)" The example of the Khetagurovites turns some of these concepts on their head. The Soviet Far East appeared in popular imaginations and official representations as a thoroughly masculine space. The
Khetagurovites presented a case of female movement across this space. Their geographic mobility and the long train journey across Eurasia played central roles in the publicity surrounding their resettlement and figured prominently as points of wonder and pride in memoirs written years later. Women’s arrival and heroic sacrifices in this space were presented as a new chapter in bringing social stability and long term security among settlements buttressing the Soviet Union’s territorial claims in the face of an expansive Japanese Empire. After years of “imagining” Siberia and the Far East as rugged masculine adventure zones, newspaper coverage of the Khetagurovites; theatrical productions such as *Tanya* (1937); films like *Komsomol’sk* (1938) and *Girl with a Character* (1939) were foregrounding female characters and constructing “hybrid places – both masculine and feminine.” Such shifts in the engendering of adventure spaces took place in British cinema after WWII. It is unlikely that the construction of “hybrid” places in Soviet adventure films signified anxieties similar to those prompting such shifts in Britain ten years later.

How do all of these agendas and insights from other fields apply to the case of empire building and women in the late 1930s? The story of the Khetagurovites began on 5 February 1937, when *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, the national newspaper of the Soviet Communist Youth League, published a lengthy article. The article, formulated as a letter to the readership, was authored by Valentina Khetagurova, a youth league activist and wife of an army officer living on a far flung frontier. Her tone sparkled with an odd aura of optimism and light hearted adventure. It was peculiar. This was, after all, nineteen-thirty-seven, the zenith of Stalinist terror. The letter had to jostle for attention amidst that day’s ominous news stories and proclamations decrying the machinations of “enemies of the people” and arrests of formerly prominent Communist party chiefs and industrial bosses. Nevertheless, diligent readers digesting reports of forthcoming trials and militarist predations in Europe and Asia would also eventually find on the bottom of page 2, “Join Us in the Far East! Letter of Valentina Khetagurova to the Young Women of the Soviet Union” where Khetagurova beckoned:

Young women! Sisters-Komsomolki! Far in the east, in the Primor’e and Priamur’ taiga we women, together with our husbands and brothers, are reconstructing a marvelous land...Millions of brave people struggle there, in the east, with the impenetrable taiga. They are taming the mountains, the forests and the rivers. But we have few capable hands. Every person, every specialist is on call. And we need many more people to pacify nature, so that all of the region’s riches can be exploited for socialism... We just need people – brave, decisive and selfless...Wonderful work, wonderful people and a wonderful future await...We are waiting for you, our girlfriends!
Several days after this publication, letters from volunteers inundated the newspaper's editorial offices. What began as an engaging article about a young woman's life in the Far East quickly turned into a very real resettlement program. Her invitation effectively tapped into the imaginations of close to 300,000 who wrote in to volunteer over the next several years. Its message profoundly changed the life course of approximately 25,000 volunteers who were selected to follow Valentina Khetagurova's example. In honor of Valentina Khetagurova, those women who came to the Soviet Far East between 1937 and 1939 were officially known as Khetagurovites. Such migrants were instrumental in the extension of Soviet state power across the Eurasian landscape and the expansion of Russian cultural dominion in the borderlands. These women's stories, recovered from archival letters, party documents, memoirs, press coverage and films, are highly revealing on several levels.

This voluntary resettlement campaign, the surge of enthusiasm among young women and their subsequent fates are entry points for raising and answering questions in Soviet history through the prisms of gender politics and women's experiences. Their dramatic stories raise a series of questions beginning with why and how did the regime target women for Far Eastern migration in 1937. What does this campaign reveal about Soviet empire building practices? How were attitudes about Soviet empire building manufactured and internalized? The campaign also raises questions about the ways gender ideals animated and were in turn reshaped by practices and institutions of Soviet empire building. The answers illustrate a great deal about the evolution of women's relationship to the modernizing Soviet state and their status in a society that simultaneously promised equality while denigrating traits associated with femininity. The following discussion is part of a larger inquiry that traces women's responses to changes in officially sanctioned archetypes of womanhood, sexuality, and patriotism in a period that seemed to herald a return to traditional Russian values known in the west as the Great Retreat.

The Far Eastern landscape, pristine, primordial and simultaneously vulnerable to enemy predations, functioned as a congenial space for dramatizing patriotic fantasies. Events and conditions along the borders of the Soviet Union garnered increasingly greater prominence as topics in purely agitational speeches, articles and editorials in newspapers and as subjects of film, literature and song in the late 1930s. It was in this period between 1936 and 1939 that the Soviet Far East came to play a
dominant role as a stage for dramatizing threats to national integrity and a spawning ground for a crop of heralded patriots who struggled against a chaotic natural world while directly participated in securing Soviet territorial claims. Such heroes either contributed to border defenses or fortified the nation’s might by their very presence in a forbidding environment where they endowed former culturally and ideologically marginal spaces with elements of the Soviet modernizing project.  

The Far East's gender ratio, seventy three women for every one-hundred men in 1937, produced a set of dilemmas that did not exist in other areas of the Soviet Union. The visible absence of women tended to add an air of impermanence and ambiguity to the Soviet claims on the Far East because women’s presence as wives and mothers often functions to “mark” the boundaries of the nation in patriotic discourses. A deficit of women affected family and community formations and proved detrimental to the function of industries and regional institutions. The dictates of full scale industrialization in the 1930s made the absence of women in the labor force a matter requiring attention at the highest levels of the Stalinist regime. More trained women would solve a cadre shortage produced by the re-gendering of the Soviet labor pool that designated certain professions such as elementary school teachers and typists exclusively female occupations. A chronic shortage of cadres plagued every organization and industry but certain sectors were particularly reliant on trained female labor. Industries, bureaucracies, party institutions, and the NKVD needed experienced accountants. Towns needed librarians, teachers, and nurses. Neighborhoods and factories needed staff for their cafeterias, stores, laundries and public baths. Authorities in Moscow were well aware of this cadre crisis and that it undermined settler retention efforts. However, men were no longer trained in sectors such as retail trade, early childhood education, accounting, food services, communication and a whole host of other "lower service personnel" positions deemed exclusively female. This state authorized gendered division of labor became an unforeseen impediment to Far Eastern development.

Hundreds of thousands of people volunteered for migration in response to such publicity. Why? What were the cultural and emotive dynamics motivating Soviet voluntary migrants and young women in particular to embark for a precarious life thousands of miles from home? In what ways were representations of the Far East gendered in official propaganda and popular beliefs? Documents produced for and by those who participated in this migration process—including official publicity materials
and letters and memoirs of settlers—illustrate how the gendered aspects of official discourses on Soviet civilization building and frontier life structured men's and women's self-image and expectations. In addition, letters written in response to mobilization campaigns lend themselves to an examination of reader reception and a better understanding of how men and women digested official messages and deployed them in their displays of patriotism. The dream of frontier exploits effectively struck a chord among young women because it was one of the few spaces where womanly virtues seemed to be a decisive force in history and in revolutionary struggles against nature.

These gender ideals forged in the tumultuous pre-war years continued to structure attitudes of many for decades to come. Women sought frontier adventures because it was the most explicit conduit for establishing self-worth in this political and social system. They craved postings to a frontier where they could be both real and “symbolic border guards.”

In their imaginings, their very presence, as representatives of emancipated womanhood and as active agents of the Soviet system, would indelibly mark the borders of the Soviet national collective. They would defend real borderlands from foreign enemies while helping to expose internal ones. However, being a symbolic embodiment of Soviet national aspirations carried a heavy price that included intense scrutiny of personal behavior and participation in a system of repression and terror. Many of these would-be-empire builders were not prepared to pay that price. Their experiences encapsulate both the positive potential intrinsic to the Soviet regime's programs for female emancipation and the simultaneous dangers and disappointments inherent in conforming to a regime so deformed by paranoia and ruthless exploitation of its own people.

The success of the publicity campaign that ensued after the publication of Valentina Khetagurova's call-up should be understood as a product of several factors. In part, the text itself evocatively tapped into widespread attitudes and myths about the Far East. The promises held out by Khetagurova found fertile soil among a reservoir of young female activists eager for a chance to prove themselves in heroic arenas. The other important ingredient was Valentina Khetagurova herself. The letter was a personal appeal from a figure who not only touted the importance of the Far East for national defense but whose life story embodied a newly emerging model of womanhood. Valentina Khetagurova was an important public figure and part of a coterie of female notables feted in the pre-World War II period. Her debut as a heroine out of a symbolically rich frontier heralded the ascent of a new model of
womanhood intrinsically affiliated with the Soviet state as a Eurasian power. Khetagurova’s Soviet ‘personality,’ increasingly confident in enunciating women’s special contributions and dynamism from geographic and social mobility was displacing older models of female revolutionaries/intellectuals and backward/oppressed peasant women. A study of her notoriety also illuminates previously unexamined facets of women’s labor and organization on the peripheries of the empire in coordination with the Political Administration of the Red Army.32

One of these earlier sanctioned and valorized models was that of the female revolutionary whether she had come from the stratum of intellectuals or was a worker activist. Either way it was a model of self-abnegation for Marxist and international revolutionary causes with an almost total disinterest in accoutrements associated with femininity or domestic comforts. These archetypes were particularly prominent in the Communist Party Sector for Work among Women [Zhenotdel] but by the mid-1930s their star was fading. These figures were leaving the public stage because of their advancing age and because their generation became suspect during the purges that began in the mid-1930s.

Two other archetypes with negative connotations informed official policy and dominated cultural representations of women. One archetype was that of the backward and oppressed woman, usually associated with the peasantry or non-Slavic peoples of the empire. Ostensibly more conscious comrades toiled to enlighten and liberate these benighted and ignorant women and draw them into the collective project of building socialism. In the 1930s, these figures were still potent symbols of the progress made by the victory of Communism in liberating the most oppressed by Tsarism and capitalism.33 The second and more problematic figure was that of the petty-bourgeois [meshchanka] woman. She was solidly associated with the relics of pre-Revolutionary society, lacking interest in socialism, inaccessible and potentially harmful to the society as a whole through her pernicious influence on husbands and children. The archetype of the meshchanka became an elastic label assigned to women who through apathy, antipathy or by virtue of difficult economic circumstances failed to engage in public life. None of these figures offered compelling role models for a generation of women anxious to fit in as they reached adulthood at the end of the 1930s.
Women’s symbolic roles were shifting as public culture changed from an emphasis on socialist revolution to a reverence of military bravado and impending war. Gender boundaries simultaneously expanded and took on greater rigidity particularly for women in younger age groups as they entered the labor force in the 1930s. Urban, educated and celebrated women like Valentina Khetagurova, an indisputable product of the Soviet system, increasingly eclipsed the older archetypes. The women who answered the call up of Khetagurova proved eager to fit the new mold because it offered a sense of potency and belonging to a grand narrative of Soviet empire building. Those who wrote about their experiences forty years after they first set off for the Far East considered this migration a worthwhile act of patriotism that gave their life meaning.34

Valentina successfully came across as a representative of a newly emerging generation that had fully grown up under Soviet power. Her contemporaries and later commentators recognized that Valentina was a persona “with whom a whole epoch in our country is forever tied.” 35 Her personality was at the foreground and made knowable not by recounting her achievements, but by displays of her temperaments, tastes and humor. According to Tatiana Fedorova, another prominent figure from the 1930s who subsequently developed a friendship with Valentina when they were both Supreme Soviet Deputies, “There is much to be said about her, our famous Valia because this would be the story of young women of that now distant time, about their dreams, their ambitions, about the makings of a Soviet woman’s personality.”36

The new archetype of Soviet womanhood worked outside of the domestic sphere and simultaneously drew gratification from family life. She enjoyed public acclaim although she was not supposed to seek it out at the expense of male egos. This new heroine was geographically mobile. She also appeared literally in a different environment. Her story played out on a backdrop of wide open spaces and dramatic natural settings where she operated as a multidimensional professional, activist and personable friend. These theaters for dramatizing facets of Soviet womanhood differed considerably from the symbolic and real confines of factory shop floors, podiums and kitchens figuratively populated by older, static and humorless archetypes of Soviet laboring women. New Soviet women such as Valentina Khetagurova and other well known female notables such as Tatiana Fedorova were also linked vertically to other women through tropes of sisterhood, collective identities as “daughters of the Motherland” and
friendship. This was another departure from the representation of women in the early Soviet period whose bonds with one another ostensibly flowed from class allegiance or shared occupational categories.

Valentina represented a new generation and embodied the tropes of this fully Soviet cohort. She was not the object of successful efforts to enlighten or to train. Rather she took her place in socialist construction without prodding. Valentina was born in 1914 into the Zarubin family in St. Petersburg. Four years later her father, a factory worker was dead, leaving behind a widow and four children just as the Civil War began to wrack its havoc. Valentina stressed her working class background and her impoverished childhood without a father. As a teenager she thrived on multiple tasks. She studied at night and worked during the day, played sports and participated in several organizations. Khetagurova studied drafting in the evening at a technical school in 1931-32 while working in a machine building plant during the day. Although she claimed to have been happy in Leningrad, real gratification eluded the young Komsomol member. “Magnitka, Dneprogas, uninhabited spaces beyond the Urals beckoned to us. We were sure that our hands were needed in precisely those places.”

When her Komsomol cell was ordered to drum up three volunteers for Far Eastern work, Valentina jumped at the chance. Her decision was an act of insensitive disobedience. It was also a trope depicting a rupture between the status of young women in “the past” staying close to home and family and a new generation breaking out of protective boundaries at any cost. Valentina’s older sister had died during a study-related trip to a construction project and the tragedy weighed heavily on the family. Others tried to dissuade her, reminding her about the inevitable grief her departure would bring to her mother. Moreover, people tried to dissuade her from this plan with stories about dreary isolation and dangers of life in the wilds. The seventeen year old only grew more thrilled at the prospects. Cognizant of the potential blow to her mother, Valentina nevertheless volunteered for the Far East without her consent. The district Komsomol organization leaders, clearly relieved to be able to fulfill their quotas did not ask for parental permission. Fearing that her mother would be crushed if she thought her daughter was voluntarily abandoning the family Valentina claimed she was involuntarily ‘mobilized.’ The ruse was quickly discovered. Shamefaced at having deceived her mother, Valentina nevertheless did not abandon her plans. However she swore that their separation would be temporary and that they would eventually live together for the rest of their lives. This was a promise she was able to keep. Later as a married
woman, Valentina brought her mother to live with the family in the Far East. Such devotion to her mother and desire to live together were not just expressions of sentimentality and family bonds. Valentina acknowledged that many of her later achievements were made possible only by the presence of her mother who took care of her small children and ran the household while her famous daughter traveled extensively and worked.

After settling these irksome family issues, young Valentina, with a group of thirteen others, boarded a train bound for the Far East. The train journey and her adventures reaching her new home play a prominent role in her narrative. Valentina remembered her “modest” send-off in the spring of 1932. She also felt it necessary to point out that there was no greeting party for her group in Khabarovsk. The fact that Khetagurova later helped to organize festive greeting parties for ‘young patriots’ did not interfere in her desire to stress the purity of her own aspirations. The homage to patriotism and the lack of fanfare surrounding her departure underscored that migration to the Far East was an exemplary act of sacrifice for the cause of national defense. “We believed that great deeds in honor of the Motherland awaited us. This faith did not proclaim itself with loud declarations but dwelled in our hearts. Patriotism, as wisely noted by L.N. Tolstoy – is a chaste emotion.”

Her new employer was the engineering section of the Special Red Banner Army of the Far East (OKDVA). In their administrative offices she and the two other young women in her group were offered jobs in their city offices while the men were assigned to remote destinations. The women protested that they “did not come all this way to sit in an office.” Valentina felt compelled, in her later years, to justify this militant reaction to such distinctions in assignments between men and women. She explained to the potentially bewildered readers of the 1980s that “In those days we fiercely reacted to the smallest manifestation of unequal rights with men.”

In the dormitory where her group stayed, the young women heard stories of pristine wilderness and great potentials of an obscure but strategically important settlement called De-Kastri where “important things are being initiated.” The women were determined to see the place for themselves and demanded this assignment. The commanders were sure that the young women would make a quick get away once they took good look at “a real bear’s corner” (an isolated area). There was a brief standoff and a gleeful triumph. Khetagurova also remembered the men’s cagey smirks as they relented to the
young hotheads. To underscore the point that women were just as capable as men and perhaps even more committed to their mission, Valentina recounted a distasteful incident when she passed a group of men abandoning a project in the wilderness. They shouted to the women to turn around and go home otherwise they would “perish without earning a kopeck.” Disturbed by the cowardice of the weak willed and avaricious men, she moved on. After a grueling journey in a variety of river crafts and on horseback, she fell asleep in her new home in De-Kastri, a dugout lit by a contraption made up of castor oil and potato skins.

Shortly after arrival, Valentina made herself indispensable to the tiny settlement. Her high energy and enthusiasm established her at the center of settlement life. Although she was a new arrival, membership in the Komsomol and status as a volunteer empowered her to plunge into every aspect of public life since “We Komsomol members ‘got into’ everything.” In her recollections as well as in her speeches and articles in the 1930s she dwelled on the difficult conditions of life and work as well as her amazement at the “highest moral qualities of people of my generation.” In her understanding of Komsomol culture “no one was indifferent” and all of her activities exemplified the activism ethos of the Komsomol. Besides working as a draftsman she took on so many other projects that “it was impossible to list them all.” Some of her activism took the form of common sense suggestions. “Instead of continuing to live in barracks overrun by cockroaches, she suggested moving to tents while the barracks were disinfected.” Other initiatives reflected how well Valentina had internalized the communist zeal for organizing and formalizing leisure and perhaps monitoring venues of expression. “Instead of just singing songs, Valia insisted that locals organize a drama circle.” Her propensity to volunteer and high degree of involvement were recognized and further bolstered. Only just having turned eighteen, she became a deputy in the settlement’s soviet. Energetic, selfless and “into everything” she epitomized the Komsomol heroine of the early 1930s as they joined the ranks of shock workers and trained to use a submachine gun.

Photograph 1: The Khetagurov couple in 1935.
Valentina’s choice of marriage partner also made her stand out from the others and may have contributed to her eventual selection as a representative of modern Soviet womanhood. After all, the intermarriage of different ethnic groups was a symbol of the brotherhood of nations that was at the center of Soviet national identity. Her future husband, Georgii Khetagurov had his own revolutionary story to tell. Born 1903 Georgii was the son of a Christian Northern Ossetian railroad mechanic on the Voenno-Ossetin road. True or not, Georgii made the claim that his father was involved in the Caucasian revolutionary underground. To underscore his impoverished but radical pedigree Georgii recalled that, “Our homely dwelling, made up of rocks, was a conspiratorial meeting place for many years. When I was very little we were sometimes visited by our distant relative Kosta Khetagurov – the famous Ossetian poet.” After completing church school, Georgii worked in a zinc mining concession owned by a French company and a variety of odd jobs in Vladikavkaz. Under the tutelage of an uncle, Georgii joined a red partisan unit fighting against white Cossacks in the Kassar Valley. Georgii formally enlisted in the Red Army’s Second Caucasian infantry regiment in 1920. He joined the Communist Party in 1921 while taking Red commander courses in Piatigorsk. By the time he met Valentina, Khetagurov had accumulated a reputation and awards for exemplary service in conflict with Chinese troops over the Chinese Far Eastern Railroad in 1929, receiving the order of the Red Banner.

Georgii status as an exotic “other” among his fellow officers provided plenty of material for friendly ribbing. Many of his friends in the officer corps called him Khatabich because “he looked and walked like the fairy tale hero.”45 ‘Khatabich’ was the old “Oriental” magician from the film fairy tale Starik Khatabich. ‘Khatabich’ hardly signified a valiant military hero. He was rather a kindly genie who flew on rugs and granted wishes. ‘Khatabich’ most of all implied a quixotic character. The nickname suggests that Georgii came across as a person who had been taken from a ‘traditional’ context and functioned as best he could in the supposedly ‘modern’ world of Slavs and Communists.46

Valentina was also prone to stress his “otherness” by remarking on his special skills on horseback and his agility with swords and dances associated with mountain tribes in Southern Russia and Georgia. For instance, when asked to describe her first impression of Khetagurov, Valentina told a reporter that she remembered seeing not only a “good looking Dzhigit – but one that danced the lezginu
like a master.” Fedorova, the family friend did not forego the mention of his “sparkling dark Caucasian eyes.” These qualities of otherness, apparently made him all the more alluring to the Russian women.

Photograph 2: Valentina Khetagurova next to Stalin on Pravda’s front page, Pravda, 24 December 1936

Even the story of their romance as told by Georgii contains this contrast between his own ‘traditional’ proclivities and Valentina’s emancipated disposition. Georgii explains that soon after being posted in De-Kastri a group of engineers arrived from Leningrad. “Among them was a vivacious young women Valia Zarubina, the daughter of a Putilov factory worker.” Soon after meeting Valia their friendship turned into love. “I offered Valia, as they use to say in the past, my hand and heart. She started laughing, and then said seriously, ‘I did not come here for this.’” Georgii explained that Valentina belonged to, “That renowned generation of Soviet youth who built Magnitka and Dneprogas, Komsomol’sk-na-Amure, our first tractor and shipbuilding plants. These youths and young women considered all personal concerns secondary because they were so taken with enthusiasm for labor.” This may explain why Valentina skipped over the incident that was otherwise well known in her circle. Valentina finally relented and married Georgii Khetagurov in 1933. Valentina’s marriage presents one of the many ironies in her life story. The fact that she invited young women, in part to encourage men to stay and form families in the Far East, contrasted sharply with her own reaction to Khetagurov’s marriage proposal.

Who really came up with the idea of encouraging female migration and how it was realized reveals the haphazard way this campaign began and the opportunities for an articulate woman with an
active patron to grab the spotlight in the Soviet system. No resolution or directive outlining a plan for a
campaign to attract female migrants to the Far East has been located. It is probable that none existed.
Khetagurova claimed that the idea to attract more women was spawned after, “We saw the usefulness of
our work, we felt the necessity of our presence here in this distant garrison. We noticed that just our
being here improved the mood of soldiers.” 51

According to Fedorova, the call-up was purely Khetagurova’s idea and stemmed from a concern
with family formation as well as the need for cadres in female dominated professions.

Together with her husband and friends she often thought about the seriousness of the Far East to
national defense. Many soldiers and officers having served their time would stay here in this
marvelous region forever but one has to start a family – that’s life. Besides this, how many
female laboring hands are needed for the Far East! There are advertisements in schools, clubs
and construction projects: we need teachers, librarians, cooks, hairdressers…That is when Valia
had an idea to call young women to come to the Far East – the Komsomol and Party organization
heartily supported her. 52

Photograph 3: The female notables: Pasha
Angelina, Khetagurova and Tatiana
Fedorova ‘On vacation,’ 1939. 53

Once the Khetagurovite
campaign took on a life of its own,
Valentina Khetagurova was positioned
within the ranks of other well-known
female stars of Soviet production and
achievement. In the opening address to
a regional Khetagurovite conference, the
speaker asserted, “This country, comrades is proud of patriots like Maria Demchenko, like Valentina
Khetagurova, Pasha Angelina, Polina Osipenko, Dusia Vinogradova, Tat’iana Fedorova and hundreds of
others like them.” 54 Publicity about the activities of famous Soviet heroines created the impression that all
of the famous women made up an intimate community. 55 The representation of Khetagurova along with
other female notables was a common practice in public culture in which prominent female heroes were
presented in relationship to one another. These virtual communities conveyed the impression of a female
sphere where ordinary women could turn for support and understanding.
In some instances famous female heroines developed genuine long lasting friendships. The friendship between Fedorova and Khetagurova was well known. The emphasis on a woman’s sphere and women’s networks is redolent in Fedorova’s story about her first encountered with Khetagurova. They were introduced by an even greater elder female figure, Nadezhda Krupskaia, in the Kremlin during the first session of the Supreme Soviet.\footnote{56} The photograph depicting three female notables ‘on vacation’ is illustrative of these themes in a new backdrop of open spaces, relaxed camaraderie and mobility associated with Khetagurova as a frontier heroine.

Articles written about Valentina Khetagurova stressed her humility despite the fact that she was “one of the most famous women of the Soviet Union. As a young woman she received hundreds of letters and telegrams per day. Her name does not leave the pages of newspapers.”\footnote{57} Evgenii Petrov (the famous writer of the Ilf and Petrov fame) assisted in the manufacture of Valentina Khetagurova as a Soviet celebrity. He met Khetagurova while on tour in the Far East in 1937. His article extolling her virtues simultaneously applauded the ability of Khetagurova to resist becoming “dizzy” from the “huge and deafening fame” and at the same time reinforced her fame by comparing her to famous western movie stars. Khetagurova’s ostensible capacity to handle the fame exemplified a general ability of “our” young people not to let “popularity ruin them.” This resilience was “understandable” in a generation that had grown for twenty years under Soviet power to become “spiritually pure and unspoiled.” In other countries, “Any kind of movie star popularity would immediately mean furs, diamonds, personal yachts and villas – the noses of those women instinctively turn up to the sky, the eyes squint, as though the famous one has become nearsighted, her walk loosens.”\footnote{58} Khetagurova in contrast, carried her fame with the “dignity of a philosopher. This is not an act. There’s not the slightest hint of posing.” Although on the inside Khetagurova enjoyed her popularity, “You would not notice this on the outside. It is difficult to retain mental equilibrium, when a person experiences fame. It is even harder not to display real or imagined superiority. This is evidence of great tact.”\footnote{59}

It is easy to forget that Valentina Khetagurova was only twenty-three years old when she became a national celebrity. Although young, she was able to make an impression on those who mattered and was genuinely popular among Komsomol activists. She used to her advantage all of the markings
entitling her to full belonging in the Soviet collective: A working class and Komsomol pedigree, an exotic
married name and a record illustrative of an eagerness to sacrifice in name of the Motherland.

While campaigns to mobilize workers and heroic exploits were common, none of the well-known
campaigns carried the name of a woman before or since Valentina Khetagurova arrived from the taiga.
She had become a modern Soviet heroine for young women who sought adventures and recognition for
their labors and activism. Those who migrated operated under the conviction that a prominent person like
Khetagurova was more than just a spokesperson. Rather, they saw in her a female patron that
understood their needs. Khetagurova responded to this pressure by getting involved when she could.
She was not an inert pawn displayed by the propaganda establishment for its own ends. Valentina took
advantage of the opportunities available and inflected her own ‘personality’ into the making of a Soviet
heroine.

Khetagurova presented a model of a successful marriage. She was not a dependent or
submissive appendage. Rather, driven by her own ideals she appeared as a partner of G. Khetagurov.
Such public partnership between revolutionaries and their wives had been common and acknowledged
practice among the Bolshevik leadership. The examples of Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaia and
Voroshilov’s wife, who worked as an auxiliary to the army during the Civil War established the honorific
apellation “helpmate in struggle” [boevaiia podruga]. Khetagurova was also an exemplary “helpmate in
struggle.” Whether those who followed her call-up could reproduce such relationships became a topic of
great concern.

The image of a woman who could do everything but who asked for little in return was dramatically
reinforced by events in the 1940s. When World War II began women of her generation volunteered for
active duty; fought in partisan units; carried the tremendous burdens of the home front; rebuilt the
ravaged country and cared for the wounded men who made it back. Khetagurova belong to a generation
that having survived the ‘golden’ 1930s and WWII lived to see a lifetime’s work destroyed and long held
ideals debased. In the early 1990s, she expired simultaneously with the Soviet empire she had a hand in
building.
This story brings into focus the rise of a new model of womanhood based on an explicit link to Soviet civilization building on the peripheries. Khetagurova’s invitation to create a new society on a blank slate of wilderness was a genuinely popular sentiment that served the interests of the Communist party in the immediate pre-war years. The search for recognition and a space where they felt needed suggests a profound sense of social isolation experienced by young women in a society that promised equality but denigrated traits and labor associated with femininity. Despite or perhaps because of the Far East’s aura of danger and challenge, young women were determined to play a role in the construction of a new Motherland and the defense of the nation. Demonstrable sacrifices for the national good promised to bestow upon them the kind of social worth they missed and craved. Women as actors and ideological constructs promoted and shaped Soviet nation building.

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2 Private communication with conference organizers, 5/8/2006


7 These formulations are indebted to the work of Joan Scott who posed two connected propositions in her seminal work on gender as a category of analysis. “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based upon perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 42.
9 Female “border activists” are the subjects of Elizabeth Harvey’s study of young women attracted to work in Nazi occupied Poland. Elizabeth Harvey, Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
12 Women in a variety of positions and in many empire building contexts acted as the “kinder face of the imperial mission,” while working toward conversion of natives. Phyllis M. Martin, “Celebrating the Ordinary: Church, Empire and Gender in the Life of Mere Mari-Michelle Dedie (Senegal, Congo, 1882-1931),” Gender and History, 16, no. 2, (August 2004): 290.
17 Elizabeth Harvey, Women and the Nazi East.
19 Women’s status as symbols of modernity in the late 1930s is described by Choi Chatterjee, Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910-1939 (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).


23 The source base for a study of Soviet era migrations and gender dynamics on the Far Eastern periphery is varied and rich. The bulk of archival materials relevant to this topic are in the holdings of the State Archive of the Khabarovsk Region in the city of Khabarovsk (GAKhK). The bulk of documents related to the Khetagurovites are located in the Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Khabarovskogo kraia (GAKhK) which now includes documents from the former Partiinyi arkhiv Khabarovskogo kraikoma VKP(b)-KPSS (PAKhK). Holdings from the former Party archive are designated as GAKhK P. There are also relevant documents in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), State Archive of the Russian Federation (GA RF), Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), and the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), all located in Moscow.

24 For more on this see Emma Widdis, Visions of a New Land. Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

25 Although forced labor was widely exploited in the area, they were not expected to be the first line of defense in case of war or to serve as the backbone of long-term demographic growth. The area contained approximately 300,000 prisoners and special settlers in 1939 V.B. Zhirmauskaia, Demograficheskaia istoriia Rossii v 1930-e gody. Vzgliad v neizvestnoe (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001), 72-73.

26 Figures from Nina I. Dubinina, Dal’ne-vostochnitse v bor’be i trude. Istorietschekii ocherk, 1917-1941 (Khabarovsk: Khab. kn. izd-vo. 1982), 102. This ratio was similar to the urban ratios in 1923.

27 For a discussion of women’s bodies in struggles over national identity and territory see Mostov, 89-110.


29 This regendering of the Soviet labor force by governmental fiat is the topic of Wendy Goldman, Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Goldman charts the emergence of this gender based division of labor and argues that it was “planned from above, by the state…regendering the economy beginning in 1930.” Ibid, 171

30 For a list of professions reserved for women see Wendy Goldman, Women at the Gates, 283.


32 These forms of organizing women were initially linked to the Zhenotdel and then took on a life of their own becoming the Movement of Officer’s Wives of the mid 1930s. The subject of the Zhenotdel in the 1920s and the Movement of Wives in the mid 1930s have been some of the most fully developed in the field of Soviet women’s history. See Carol Eubanks Hayden, “The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party,” Russian History 3, no. 2 (1976): 150-173; Beatrice Farnsworth, Aleksandra Kollontäi: Socialism, Feminism and the Bolshevik Revolution (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Barbara Evans Clements, “The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel,” Slavic Review 51, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 485-496; Wendy Goldman, “Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of the Proletarian Women’s Movement in the USSR,” Slavic Review 55, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 46-77; Michelle Fuqua, The Politics of the Domestic Sphere: The Zhenotdel, Women’s Liberation, and the Search for a ‘novyi byt’ in Early Soviet Russia (Seattle: Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies University of Washington, 1996).

33 This is an argument most fully elaborated by Choi Chatterjee, Celebrating Women.


Valentina delayed further study after completing school because “she had to help her mother. She went to work as a draftsman in an institute.” Khetagurova omitted this explanation from her story. T.V. Fedorova, “Sluga naroda” in Naverkhu Moskva (Moscow: Sov. Rossiia, 1975), 6.


Ibid.

Ibid., 128.

Ibid., 129.

Fedorova, 6.

Fedorova, 7.

“A ‘Dzhigit’ is a horseman. The ‘lezginka’ is the traditional folk dance of the Lezgin, one of the ethnic groups of present day Dagestan. It is both a couples’ dance and a male solo dance, often performed with a sword. The man, imitating an eagle, falls to his knees, leaps up, and dances with precise steps and strong arm and body movements. When the dance is performed in pairs, couples do not touch; the woman dances quietly as she watches the man's performance.”

Fedorova, 6.

G. Khetagurov, Ispolnenie dolga (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1977), 5.

Photo of couple in-lay 96-97.

Kochukov.


While both her husband and friend Fedorova included the story of her initial refusal of the marriage proposal, Valentina never mentioned this vignette. Fedorova writes, Georgii “fancied the smart and serious Valia. When he tried to court her she angrily told him that ‘We did not come here for this.’” Fedorova, 6


“Stenogramma kraevogo soveshchaniia khetagurovok – Ovchinnikov, 15 September 1938,” GAKhK P, f. 618, op. 1 d. 325, l. 9ob.


This meeting subsequently led to a lifelong relationship built on a rapport of sharing both “joy and grief.” Khetagurova and Fedorova accepted an invitation in 1973 for sightseeing and festivities as “Komsomol veterans” from the Kamchatka Komsomol to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. Fedorova, 6. Photograph of Fedorova, Angelina and Khetagurova Ibid. 31.