Introduction

On February 5, 1937 *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, the national newspaper of the Soviet Communist Youth League, published a lengthy article formulated as a letter to the readership. It was ostensibly penned 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 lighthearted adventure. It was peculiar. This was, after all, 1937, the nadir of Stalinist terror. The letter had to jostle for attention amid that day's ominous news stories and proclamations decrying the machinations of "enemies of the people" and announcing the 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, at 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 Priamurskaia 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![1]

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.

[1] Valentina Khetagurova, "Priezzhaite k nam na Dal'nii Vostok!," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, (*KP* hereafter) February 5, 1937. Valentina Khetagurova (1914–1992).

Its message profoundly changed the life course of approximately 25,000 volunteers who were selected to follow Khetagurova's example. In her honor, those women who went 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 Eurasia.

This book is about the women who yearned to join the ranks of Soviet frontier builders. Their stories, recovered from archival letters, party documents, memoirs, press coverage and films, evocatively illustrate the role of frontier Stalinism in structuring gender ideals and the place of gender in determining the meaning of Stalinism. All these materials exponentially enrich the precious little we currently know about Soviet women's roles in state formation and life on the peripheries, as well as self-perceptions and attitudes among the first female cohort reared wholly under Soviet power.

Tragically, as their stories will make clear, the history of the Khetagurovites is embedded in the history of Stalinist repression. The women wandered into a social landscape rife with hatreds and suspicions born of forced population movements and escalating purges. Everyone struggled to survive the social and environmental by-products of central planning geared almost exclusively toward the development of an industrial-military infrastructure to the detriment of every other need. The resulting absence of basic necessities impacted women in a myriad ways because they were expected to carry on with all household chores and child care even if they worked full-time and took on heavy workloads in public organizations such as the Communist Youth League and Communist party.

In many instances, the stories of the migrants and their ultimate fates in the region are intimately linked with the history of the Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps (GULAG), not only because some of the women migrants eventually worked for the repressive organs of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), or actually found themselves on the wrong side of the wire in a labor camp, but also because most of the female migrants entered a zone structured by conditions peculiar to this society. As Oleg Khlevniuk has argued, the history of the GULAG is not just the history of totalitarianism or forced labor, it is "the history of . . . creating a distinct social milieu of convicts and their guards and prosecutors. It is the history of a specific camp culture and mentality, which strongly affected the culture, traditions and worldview of Soviet society at large."[2] Thus not only did this periphery reflect larger

[2] Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the GULAG: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, trans. Vadim Staklo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 8.

processes in the rest of Soviet society, but the relationships and practices evolving here reverberated in the rest of the country. Unfortunately for historians, archival sources that can tell us about the social world and the milieu of the region are extremely rare, in part because sources containing such information were systematically destroyed by decree.[3] The materials generated for, by, and about female migrants offer unusual entry points into this frontier of Stalinism.

To think of this region as a "frontier" illuminates its history and Stalinism in surprising ways, even as American historians continue their crusade, more than a century long, to define, debate, denounce, and redefine the term.[4] "Frontier" in this book denotes a sparsely populated region in the grips of acute demographic, social, political, economic, and ecological transformations engendered by its status as a borderland of an expanding

[3] *Ibid.*, 3. Studies of special settlements and the GULAG's societies are just beginning to appear. See Lynne Viola, *The Unknown GULAG: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Iu. N. Afanas'ev et al. (eds.), *Istoriia stalinskogo GULAGa: Konets 1920-kh–pervaia polovina 1950-kh godov*, 7 vols. (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2004–2005); Oksana Klimkova, "GULAG: Ot mifotvorchestva k izucheniiu," *Ab Imperio* 3 (2005), 501–528; Kate Brown, "Out of Solitary Confinement: The History of the GULAG," *Kritika* 8:1 (2007), 67–103; and Stephen A. Barnes, "Researching Daily Life in the GULAG," *Kritika* 1:2 (2000), 377–390.

[4] The literature on the topic of "frontier" in North America is vast, beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1894). Subsequent studies include Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950); William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (eds.), *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988); and Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1973); Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1985); Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992). For some recent attempts to synthesize, evaluate, or challenge the concept and the myths that surround it, see Gregory H. Nobles, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); Richard W. Etulain (ed.), "Myths and the American West," *Journal of the West* 37 (April 1998), 5–107; and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Field-Testing the New Western History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000). For other recent works that place women at the center of frontier history and demonstrate the interconnections between gender, class, and race in experiences of the frontier, see Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage (eds.), *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1615–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Albert Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999). Turner's "frontier thesis" has been applied to Russia. See Donald W. Treadgold, "Russian Expansion in the Light of Turner's Study of the American Frontier," *Agricultural History* 26:4 (1952), 147–152, and Mark Bassin, "Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': The Nationalist Significance of Open Spaces," *Journal of Modern History* 65:3 (1993), 476–511.

empire. Thus "frontier" by such a definition is an environment and society shaped by violence, forced population movements, and subjugation of outsiders. "Frontiers" as concepts also play a variety of roles in cultures beyond the geographic spaces of borderlands. In political and cultural discourses, including Soviet culture in Stalin's time, "the frontier" proffered fantasies of discovery, progress, reinvention, freedom, and adventure. State-sanctioned histories and cultural representations present its settlement as expansion without imperialism. Despite the odious realities of these zones and the gulf between frontier tales and frontier life, the "frontier" was also a space portending real mobility for migrants and a crucible of complex regional identities. Mythologies surrounding frontier settlement and its heroes often appear in gendered representations of national character.

The female migrants' stories vividly encapsulate patterns of thought, behaviors, beliefs, and life trajectories of women born in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As this cohort reached adulthood, they not only survived a calamitous series of events, they also helped to shape and took part in practices within what we now call Stalinism. "Stalinism" among historians of the Soviet Union, just like "frontier" among historians of North America, is a highly controversial and expansive term that has engendered fiery debates. The term "Stalinism" in this book is indebted to the definition offered by Sheila Fitzpatrick, who employed it "as shorthand for the complex of institutions, structures and rituals" that defined the social, economic, ideological, and political landscape of the Soviet 1930s.[5] "Stalinism on the frontier" connotes an ideological, cultural, political, and economic system emphasizing, at all cost, rapid economic development, extraction of natural resources and militarization of sparsely populated borderlands in response to real and perceived threats on a distant periphery. The use of prison labor and forced population movements in achieving these goals were intrinsic to the workings of the Stalinist system on this frontier because of its difficult climate, insufficient infrastructure, and perennial labor shortages.

Stalinism on the frontier was an exaggerated version of practices and policies associated with Stalinist rule such as terror; untrammeled power of the security police; centrally planned production and distribution;

[5] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3. In the context of her own work on the history of everyday life in urban Soviet Russia, Fitzpatrick defined Stalinism as "Communist Party rule, Marxist-Leninist ideology, rampant bureaucracy, leader cults, state control over production and distribution, social engineering, affirmative action on behalf of workers, stigmatization of 'class enemies,' police surveillance, terror and the various informal, personalistic arrangements whereby people at every level sought to protect themselves and obtain scarce goods, were all part of the Stalinist habitat" (3–4).

corruption; chronic shortages of goods and housing; absolute monopolization of all public and political life by the Communist party and Stalin's version of Marxism. It was also a world of its own, presenting a poor example of totalitarian control not only because of its distance from Moscow and Stalin's gaze, but also because of its historic role as dumping ground and sometimes refuge for criminals, political prisoners, and nonconformists of all stripes well before the Bolshevik Revolution. It teemed with transients and laborers from all over the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. It was populated by Soviet soldiers, Soviet Koreans, and Soviet indigenous peoples of the North.[6] It held great allure for adventure seekers, gold prospectors, and wilderness enthusiasts. While the worst aspects of Stalinism were magnified here, for thousands in other parts of the Soviet Union, this poorly known and distant region resonated with promises of belonging, heroism, and collective accomplishments.

"Some distant planet"

Seventeen-year-old Ania Alekseeva and her friends in Moscow were diligent readers of the youth paper in the winter of 1937. When they came across Khetagurova's public call to action, they "rushed" to apply. Other young women, such as Communist Youth League activist Efrosina Mishalova working at an orphanage in eastern Ukraine, were also caught up in the excitement of a colorful and purposeful life on the frontier.[7] They imagined the Far East as "some distant planet."[8] The region located along the Pacific Ocean might as well have been another galaxy for teenagers from Moscow or Ukraine. Stretching about 3,000 miles from north to south, the Arctic Ocean is at its northern limits where Alaska rests across the Bering Strait. The Amur and Ussuri rivers demarcate much of the Far East's almost 800-mile border with northern China.

[6] Some of the major indigenous groups in the Far East are the Nanai, Udehe, Ul'chi, Nivkhi, Uilta, and Ainu. For more on the subject of indigenous peoples of the Soviet north, see Iuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[7] When Efrosina Mishalova noticed Khetagurova's letter that February, she read it "ten times and could not sleep till morning. I hurried to find literature about the Far East. I called the district library and asked them to show me everything they had on the Far East: books, newspapers, songs, poems, and plays." Holdings from the former Communist party archive, now under the auspices of the State archive of the Khabarovsk Region, are hereafter denoted as GAKhK P. Memoir of Efrosina Mishalova, "Vospominaia o moei miloi zadornoi trudnoi i schastlivoi komsomol'skoi iunosti [Remembering my dear, fervent, difficult and fortunate Komsomol youth]," February 18, 1976, GAKhK P, f. 442, op. 2, d. 284, ll. 85–85ob.

[8] Memoir of Ania Alekseeva, GAKhK P, f. 442, op. 2, d. 283, l. 14.

Korea and the Sea of Japan border this region on the southeast. Administrative boundaries have undergone frequent reconstitution since the region came under Tsarist control in 1860. By 1906, the Amur, Primor'e, Kamchatka, and Sakhalin oblasts (similar to a county) had come under the Priamur governor-generalship and were collectively known as the "Far East." During the late 1920s and most of the 1930s, the region was called Dal'krai, administered by the Far Eastern Regional Executive Committee (Dal'kraiispolkom). The Dal'krai in the late 1930s included the Amur, Kamchatka, Ussuri, northern Sakhalin, Primorsk, Kolyma, and Jewish Autonomous oblasts. In late 1938 Dal'krai was reorganized into the Primorsk Region and the Khabarovsk Region. Women like Alekseeva and Mishalova for the most part eventually settled in the Far East's southern zones and in or near the towns of Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, Komsomol'sk-na-Amure, and Blagoveshchensk (see figure 1: "Map of the Russian Far East").

Climate and geography conspire to make life in the Far East a challenge. Along its southern periphery in the Vladivostok area, temperatures are considered mild, but as John Stephan, a leading historian of the Far East phrased it, summer humidity "rivals that of Calcutta."[9] In the interior temperatures tend toward the extremes, with global cold records in the north where "steel cracks like glass" and hot summer temperatures in the south "known to carbonize roof shingles."[10] The area is rich in fish, wildlife, minerals, and timber, but it is also gripped by permafrost and riddled with marshlands that necessitate special adaptations to building and provide abundant breeding grounds for all manner of biting insects and hardy mosquitoes (colloquially referred to as "fascists" by longsuffering residents). Difficult climatic conditions and inhospitable soil meant that most Russian and Soviet settlements had the potential to thrive only in the south near the volatile border region. In the Soviet period poor transport links resulted in widespread malnutrition and scurvy during winter on large construction projects for industries such as those in Komsomol'sk-na-Amure. The extreme climate and primitive living conditions were not a secret to the Soviet reading and filmgoing public, having been the backdrop of stories intended to demonstrate the heroism and resolve of Soviet frontier builders.

Alekseeva's father was distraught at her rash decision to volunteer for such a life without his permission, and he warned her that she was heading to a place of "pure suffering."[11] But she was adamant. "We very much

[9] John J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 9.
[10] *Ibid.* [11] Alekseeva, 101.

1. Map of the Russian Far East in the twenty-first century.

wanted to try out our own strength; prove that we were not afraid of anything."[12] The allures of its distance and "rumors about all kinds of difficulties: scurvy, harsh climate, a life in tents and lean-tos" captured imaginations.[13] Mishalova was elated when she received an official invitation to fulfill her fantasies of moving to "Kamchatka or Sakhalin . . . where there were mountains, the taiga, and water and where it was difficult to travel from place to place . . . or at least to Komsomol'sk-na-Amure. I dreamed of working where it was very difficult."[14] As a one-time homeless urchin, she recalled, with some sense of irony, that the other teenage

[12] *Ibid.*, 14. [13] Memoir of Polina Bazarova, GAKhK P, f. 442, op. 2, 283, l. 97.
[14] Mishalova, 86.

girls "were envious that I was an orphan [and] that I could go wherever I wanted, that I did not have to ask anyone for permission or explain myself to anyone."[15] Everything she knew about the region she picked up from movies and books such as *Japan's Secret Agent, The Border Under Lock*, and *The Enemy Will Never Cross the Border*.[16] The prospect of being called up for a higher cause and the opportunity for public displays of self-abnegation in a perilous zone were powerful draws for such urban teenagers. Attempts to dissuade the teenagers from joining up because they were the "weaker" sex were counterproductive. Bazarova and her girlfriends became all the more stubborn when well-meaning relatives exclaimed, "Where are you heading? Lads can't endure it over there!"[17] In fact, they had good reason to worry and probably a much better sense of what lay ahead.

Another of those who read Khetagurova's article was Klava Novikova. Her mother had died giving birth to her in 1921, and in the course of collectivization in the late 1920s her father was executed for being a kulak (a "strong" or well-off peasant) in their village in the Kursk oblast. Novikova was adopted by strangers, completed seven grades at school and went to work in a factory. For years she was ashamed and afraid to tell anyone that she was the daughter of a kulak. In the 1930s it seemed to her that she had to "make amends to our great country" for her family's "indelible guilt," so Khetagurova's invitation to work for the Motherland struck a chord.[18] Aged eighteen, Novikova volunteered to join the builders of Komsomol'sk-na-Amure.

The Komsomol'sk she encountered in 1939 consisted of "barracks, the taiga and dreams."[19] Eventually, she married a "good lad" and had a son, Valerii. Fifteen days after his birth in 1941, his father left for the war front. Alone with an infant, with no relatives to help her, Novikova worked during the day at an exemplary construction site and at night collected undergarments from neighborhood men to launder for a kopek a piece. Because there were too few places for children in the city's crèches, she had to leave her infant alone at home, wrapped tightly and next to a stove to keep from freezing while she worked. Then came what seemed to be a stroke of great luck: she got a job as an accountant at a produce store. But after only a month on the job, she was accused of embezzlement, like many "small fries" who were caught taking home crumbs to feed hungry "tots." She received a sentence of seven and a half years to be served in

[15] *Ibid.*, 89. [16] *Ibid.* [17] Bazarova, 97.
[18] Ekaterina Sazhneva, "Zhili-byli samurai so starukhoi," *Moskovskii komsomolets*, November 16, 2005, *www.mk.ru/numbers/1912/article64683.htm* (2 of 9).
[19] Aleksandr Iaroshenko, "Klaudia i Iasaburo," *Amurskaia pravda*, March 25, 2004. *www.amurpravda.ru/articles/2004/03/25/4.html?print* (1 of 8).

the labor camps of Magadan, where she "worked as a medical orderly in the sick ward, thank God; it was a good job, not like work felling trees, but in a warm place: my job was to collect samples of phlegm and bodily fluids from prisoners to test for tuberculosis, gonorrhea, and syphilis."[20]

Novikova survived this "hell, and did not crack, I never even said one swear word there."[21] Upon release, she returned to her home in Komsomol'sk to find that her husband, who had returned as a war hero, had married another woman and that her son barely knew her, having been raised by strangers. Others close to her wondered out loud why she bothered coming back. She cried, decided that it was her fault that she had become a stranger to her family, steeled herself to carry on, and went in search of a new life.

Volunteers?

The campaign's success in attracting women like Alekseeva, Mishalova, and Novikova and their attitudes to the world they encountered in the Far East exposes a stratum in Soviet society receptive to official exhortations to build and sacrifice in the name of socialism and patriotic sentiments. A closer look at this stratum, for the most part neglected by scholars, enriches ongoing debates in the Soviet field about women's status under Stalinism. This book also illustrates some of the ways Stalinist society worked, particularly whether and how this regime engendered belief in its mission or whether the totalitarian system relied solely on coercion and passive acquiescence.

Those who subscribe to the idea that all Soviet citizens were oppressed by a terrorist regime see every instance of volunteerism and public expressions of approval as either charades by individuals out to prove their loyalty because of fear or outright falsifications by officials to obscure the truth about wholesale disaffection with the Communists.[22] These scholars contend that the Communist regime was illegitimate and

[20] Sazhneva, "Zhili-byli samurai so starukhoi" (3 of 9).
[21] Iaroshenko, "Klaudia i Iasaburo," (2 of 8).
[22] Among those who see all public displays as charades is Jeffrey Brooks in *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For the school of thought stressing resistance and lack of belief in the system, see Jeffrey Rossmann, "The Teikovo Cotton Workers' Strike of April 1932," *Russian Review* 56:1 (1997), 44–69, and Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Marshall Poe (eds.), *The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History* (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2003). Stephen Kotkin argues that people wanted to speak the language of the regime and to belong, but this willingness to believe in socialism did not preclude dissatisfaction and resistance to some aspects of the state. see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

unpopular.[23] This fragility in turn generated a reliance on violence and intimidation by ideologues already prone to disregard laws and human rights in pursuit of utopian dreams or boundless power. Others contend that public expressions of support were part of a subterfuge by those who were engaged in impostures or cynical manipulation of slogans, not so much out of fear and certainly not as expressions of real belief in socialism, but in order to secure a slot in an order of estates rather than "a system of social relationships generated by a regime of production."[24] Influential historians, including Fitzpatrick, see the system as a total failure held together by a mixture of inertia, status anxiety, coercion, and rewards for a loyal few.

Fitzpatrick and others, without recourse to debates about the legitimacy of the Bolshevik Revolution or the feasibility of socialist systems in industrial societies, propose that the economic disasters created by Stalin irrevocably warped the dreams espoused by Russian revolutionaries to perfect humanity and forge a new type of social being. What resulted, they argue, was indeed a new person. However, this New Soviet Person was of a different caliber only in that they had incredibly honed "skills" necessary for the "hunting and gathering of scarce goods in an urban environment."[25] Without a doubt, this shoe fits – to a certain extent. However, there is no place in this portrait for those who were not cynical, self-serving, or Communist fanatics. Given such explanations, one is left wondering how a system so utterly reviled by its own citizens survived for another fifty years.

The debate about the nature of Stalinism, voluntarism, and the individual's relationship to the state is far from settled. Lynne Viola's work on the "25,000ers," the factory workers sent to administer newly formed collective farms in the early 1930s, illustrates that among certain groups there was a real commitment to Stalin's policies in the countryside and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for a greater cause.[26] More recently, advocates of the so-called "Soviet subjectivity school" insist that the regime was strong and had a powerful psychological and emotional hold over society.[27] This regime, they argue, was robust not because it

[23] See Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), arguing for illegitimacy. On widespread dissent, see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–41* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[24] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22.

[25] Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 2.

[26] Lynne Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[27] Works associated with the "Soviet subjectivity school" include Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University